### Heart Full of Gasoline

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#### Summary

Jaime Lannister is a Formula 1 driver with a sordid past, dubious future, and nothing left to lose as he hits the far edge of his career. He thinks all he wants is the world championship title he’s never quite been able to reach and to finally give up smoking. What he finds to his great surprise is what he really wants might be Brienne Tarth.

Brienne Tarth is an unknown mechanic eager to make the jump to the big time of Formula 1. When Jaime hires her as Chief Mechanic for his team of misfits, she discovers she’s ready for the work, but is she ready for Jaime?

#### Notes

Welcome to the world's longest author note! Here's the actually important paragraph: Many thanks to the twitter folks who answered my F1 questions, of which I had many. Extra
super-duper special thanks to BrynnMck for being excited about and helpful with every section I send her, for providing extremely thoughtful and just right advice when I need it, and for always being my favorite person to share a fandom with. <3 This fic LITERALLY would not have happened without her and her patience and her insight and her soothing of my worried mind; and even if I had managed to somehow do it without her, it would have been at least 75% worse. All remaining problems and errors are mine alone. Title and initial lyrics from The Local Strangers' “Gasoline,” which is a beautiful song I highly recommend you listen to while reading this or just in general.

And here’s the rest:

Formula One is a very European sport, but my Westeros is pretty Americanized (including the spelling of tire and using IAF instead of FIA). I could only exhaustively dive into one major thing and it ended up being every detail about F1 since that's more pertinent to the story and also Westeros isn't real.

That being said, I have taken both some major and minor liberties with F1 to fit story needs including ignoring entire bits of traditional pre- and post- race activities (i.e., no national anthems) because they didn't feel right. But I tried to hew closely in spirit if not in every detail. If you're a stalwart F1 fan and are offended by something I changed or messed up: I'm sorry. You don't have to yell at me in comments you can just seethe quietly at me through the screen, I'll feel it.

Westeros in this story is equivalent technologically to 2019 real world, and I have cherry-picked many cultural references from our world while jettisoning entire swathes of our cultural car knowledge like Ferrari and McLaren and Mercedes and so on. Why did I do this? To make my life easier, you might say, but I say AUs are an alchemy of many choices through the entire writing process, made to balance the feel of the fandom world with our own while making it easy for the reader to fall into this carefully combined mix, and this one is no different. And also to make my life easier.

I'm well into writing this and know exactly where it's going (FINALLY; it took me so long to settle on the ultimate path, as Brynn can attest) and will be posting once every two weeks as I write the rest and also edit (and re-edit, and re-re-edit) existing, non-published chapters. I have done the math of how much I have to write between every two week posting and it is doable. Once I get near enough to the end that I have a little room, I'll change to once a week posting but I don't want to back myself into an unattainable corner right from the get-go.

The length of this author note should give you some idea of how long my chapters are going to be. I hope you enjoy the story!
From the outside, Selwyn's Garage looked like every other middle-of-the-road auto shop Jaime Lannister had ever seen. The biggest thing going for it was that it wasn't in a strip mall.

“Small mercies,” Jaime said to the gray exterior. His fingers slipped to his back pocket out of habit, searching for his cigarette case and finding only a pack of gum. “Crap,” he muttered, shoving it away again. He'd already been through four pieces on the trip over trying to distract himself; a fifth would just seem pathetic.

The garage occupied a decent-sized building that looked like it used to be a warehouse. There was another warehouse next to it, some sort of office supply storage from the looks of it, with the utterly bland name of Supply Depot. Across the quiet street were more warehouses for varying goods and the road dead-ended in an empty gravel lot that was littered with cigarette butts and dog shit.

Jaime squinted at Selwyn's again and wiped the rain from his face. He had it on good authority from Varys – who hadn't been wrong yet – that Stark Racing was sniffing around this exact garage looking for a new mechanic, the shop's namesake, a quietly well-regarded man from around the lower circuits, and Jaime would never let Robb Stark win any prize without fighting him to the bone for it. The question was, was there really a prize worth winning inside this dull building? Jaime's research had assured him Selwyn knew his stuff, but F1 was leagues away from even F2.

Tugging his leather jacket up against the cold winter wind and rain of Tarth, Jaime strode inside, the bell on the door chiming brightly as he entered. The familiar smell of motor oil and rubber hit him, putting Jaime instantly at ease. He'd been swimming in these scents for most of his life, a sweet and acrid musk that settled his body and reminded him of a thousand other moments in garages all over the world.

There was a TV in the decently sized waiting area, turned low to a sports channel, a row of air fresheners hanging in dozens of designs in a rack by the window, and a big counter with a worn but clean steel gray top directly in front of him. There was no one at the counter, but someone's rock music poured in from the open door leading back to the bay, the whiz-clank of power tools keeping a syncopated beat.

“Hello!” he shouted, ignoring the shiny silver bell with a Please ring for service! sign taped underneath it. “Selwyn Tarth?”

The power tool stopped and the music shut off and Jaime called “Hello?” again in the silence. He heard a low, quick conversation and then one of the tallest men Jaime had ever seen came ducking under the doorjamb, wiping his hands on a clean rag. He was taller than Jaime by several inches, broad shouldered with a stomach that jutted out a bit from his jumpsuit, blue eyes, a silver beard, and a surprised look on his face.

“Jaime Lannister?” the man said, and if he didn't seem thrilled to see Jaime, at least there was not the mix of disgust and distrust Jaime was used to.
Jaime's Lannister Corp Racing crew was a motley group that needed a spark to bring them all together or Jaime would never get below a three second pit, and without that he had no hope of winning the World Drivers' Champion title. The title had eluded him, always a half second behind, for too many years and his reflexes weren't getting any better the longer this went on. At thirty-five he wasn't ready for retirement, but racing was an endurance sport that took more to endure with every passing season. A faster pit, a smarter mechanic, these were things worth driving to sleepy warehouse districts for in the too-brief off season. He might not be able to get this mechanic based on reputation alone, but with the money of Lannister Corp at his back he could convince almost anyone of anything.

“Are you Selwyn?” Jaime asked. The man nodded and held out his hand. Jaime stared at it, and then back up at the man before shaking his hand. Jaime had stopped initiating even this most basic etiquette shortly after Aerys, when everyone started snubbing all his efforts to slide back in to the racers' inner sanctums. The number of people in racing circles who made the first move to him these days were vanishingly few and if there was life outside of racing circles, Jaime didn't have the time or inclination for it.

Selwyn's hand was strong as expected, thick-fingered and confident. His handshake didn't pull any macho bullshit, either, just a few quick pumps and then he was done, simply giving Jaime a polite greeting and not some sort of sizing up. It was refreshing.

“Tarth,” Jaime said, “like the island.”

The big man shrugged. “Old family ties. These days I don't own much more than this shop.”

“It's a nice-sized space you've got here.”

“We do all right for ourselves. You dropping something off?” he asked, his deep voice curious as he peered easily over Jaime's head to the parking lot. Jaime had come in a simple luxury sedan and Selwyn looked disappointed when he saw that and not some F1 beast lurking on the asphalt.

“Here to pick something up, hopefully,” Jaime said. “Or someone, rather. I'm looking for a mechanic.”

“You've come to the right place. What do you need?”

“I hear you have experience with Formula cars?”

“Mostly lower class ones, yes. Was an IAF Formula 2 mechanic for some years, did some Westeros and Dornish F3 pit work when I started out. I did F1 for half a season with Griffin but my wife died and I had to come home.” He pointed at a framed photo behind the counter and smiled proudly like he was pointing out a child. “I did build that beauty a couple years after, though.”

It was clearly an F1-ready car, glinting blue and gold in the sunlight, the ocean stretching out in the distance behind the car like a postcard. “How's she run?” Jaime asked.

“As good as any test machines on the circuit, I'd wager. Though nowadays she's only used to teach engines, not test drives.”

“Shame,” Jaime murmured. That car would have looked stunning coming around a hairpin turn. He shook his head a little and turned back to Selwyn, found the man watching him calmly. There was something steady about Selwyn Tarth, a core belief in his eyes that if everyone just took a breath then everything would be fine. Jaime felt himself relaxing. Selwyn would be an ace chief mechanic, could likely direct a quick and efficient pit crew and if he'd built his own F1 then he
knew the intricacies of the regs. “How’d you like to come work for the Lannister Racing team?” Jaime asked, trusting his gut and jumping straight to the question.

Selwyn lifted a bushy eyebrow. “Doing what?”

“Being my number one mechanic. I need someone who can bring down my pit times and who knows the engine well enough to keep it tuned and getting better through the season.”

“You don't know anything about me, Mr. Lannister.”

“I've got great instincts.”

“Typical driver talk,” Selwyn drawled and Jaime grinned.

“So what do you say?”

“I'm afraid I say no, Mr. Lannister.”

“That's only because I haven't told you how much I'm willing to pay.”

Selwyn chuckled. “Money might open my ears a little more, but it won't change my mind. I had Stark's team in here last week poking around, offering money, too.” Jaime's smile slipped from sincere to falsely charming, hiding his disappointment. Varys had gotten the right information, it seemed, he'd just gotten it too late.

“When do you start for them?” Jaime asked.

“I'm not working for them, either. I don't want to live that life, Mr. Lannister. Too much travel, too much stress. I'd miss my shop.” Selwyn shrugged. “And I'll tell you the same thing I told the Starks: it's not me you want anyway.”

“No?”

“I did good work back in the day, but now the real magic is-”

“The music fan,” Jaime jumped in.

“The same.” Selwyn smiled softly, almost sadly, and curiosity had Jaime peering around Selwyn's shoulder to see who was back there that had made him look like that. “The Stark contingent wasn't interested, though, said she didn't fit their culture.”

“She?” Jaime asked, frowning.

“My daughter, Mr. Lannister. She's a better mechanic than I ever was. She's basically grown up in this shop.” He nodded at the F1 picture. “She built that with me when she was as high as my waist, does most of the teaching on it now herself, adjusting it with the new regs every year. She's been fascinated by racing since she was a baby.”

Jaime's heart beat excitedly. The Stark team and their sponsors had a very tightly controlled image they even required of the pit crew, but Jaime had no such constraints. In fact the more outlandish his crew, the better. His sponsors loved Bronn's relentless cursing, Podrick's wide-eyed, almost cherubic competence. A female chief mechanic could bring in more everything: more money, more publicity, more forgiveness from race judges that seemed, to a man, to despise him still.

“I'd love to meet her,” Jaime said, keeping his voice cool and quietly interested.
Selwyn looked back towards the door. “I know you're eavesdropping, girl, come on out,” he said lovingly, hardly needing to shout with the natural carry of his voice.

There was nothing for a minute and then Jaime heard a tool being set down and Selwn's daughter walked into the front room.

She was taller than Jaime too, though not as tall as her father. Her shoulders were broad like Selwyn's, her hands as big. She had sweaty, straw-colored hair that she'd too aggressively pressed down against her head, forming a shapeless bowl with the occasional strand poking out. There was a dark grease stain on one of her cheeks that made it look like there was a hole there, her thick lips were pressed together nervously, and her nose and freckled skin looked like she'd been in a losing fight with the road at least once and probably multiple times. She had all of Selwyn's staid features and none of his friendly charm and the combination was off-putting; except for her eyes, which were the color of Selwyn's F1, the part where the sun was hitting it and you could barely look straight into the blue it was so brilliant.

Jaime was able to look long enough to see the familiar sheen of disgusted recognition, though, and he felt his jaw clench. What right did this beast of a woman have to judge him?

“Brienne, this is Jaime Lannister.”

“I know who he is,” she said, her tone as blunt as her big teeth.

“Mr. Lannister, this is my daughter, Brienne,” Selwyn went on, ignoring her rudeness. “Best mechanic in all Westeros.”

“Is that 'best' like the diner down the street that has the 'best coffee in King's Landing' sign they printed themselves?” he asked, driven to snark by her narrow-eyed stare.

“You came to us,” she spit out. “You tell me.”

He huffed, trapped by the truth of it. “Your father says you're a good mechanic.”

“The best,” Selwyn said again. “I'd stake my garage on it.”

Jaime lifted an eyebrow. For a man like Selwyn Tarth, that was a statement of belief that couldn't be overlooked. Brienne, for her part, was red as a stop light.

“Hush,” she murmured to her father, though she gave him a small, pleased smile that Jaime was embarrassingly jealous of. The only time Jaime had ever smiled at his own father like that was when he was a toddler who didn't know any better what kind of man Tywin Lannister was.

“This is all very sweet,” Jaime snipped, “but what's your actual Formula experience?”

“I've been an avid watcher my whole life. I helped build and currently maintain a functional F1 vehicle so I know all the technical requirements, and I've worked on a few F3 teams, including Renly Baratheon's back when he was in it. I know my way around every engine that's ever come into this garage. And I've even done some test driving.”

“You have? How did you fit in the cockpit?”

“How do you fit in your helmet?” she parried.

Selwyn grunted and Jaime couldn't tell if it was disapproval or amusement. “So you want me to hire you as the number one mechanic for a professional F1 racing team because you're, what, a
good fan and a decent mechanic?"

“Mr. Lannister-”

Selwyn held out his hand and they both stilled. “Mr. Lannister,” he said, and though his tone was not as sharp it felt crushingly heavy with disappointment. “You were willing to hire me for a goodly sum of money based purely on your instincts. What do your instincts tell you about my daughter?”

Jaime shoved his hand through his wet hair. He kept it short during the season so his helmet fit better but here in the off-season he'd let it grow out some and he tugged it now as he studied the absurdly tall woman before him, treating her like she was a car going through scrutineering. She straightened, not wilted, under his intense stare, which he grudgingly had to respect. Where Selwyn was ease and rounded shoulders, his daughter was as implacable and hard as stone, her big hands fused to her hips in a gesture of defiance. Her grey jumpsuit was mostly shapeless, the hint of small breasts, the suggestion of strong thighs underneath, nothing that would distract from her unfortunate face. At least Bronn wouldn't be distracted by her. As long as he doesn't look into her eyes, Jaime mused, looking into them now. His life was mostly red and gold and black, with green in flashes. There was nothing in his world that looked like the color of her blue eyes, and the uniqueness of it made him feel like he'd regained some sense memory he hadn't known he'd lost.

“My instincts tell me she'll be a pain in my ass,” he finally said, shaking his head. “But you vouch for her?”

“I do,” Selwyn said immediately. “She knows her stuff, and she'll be a good leader. And we'll return any money you pay her if it doesn't work out.” Brienne stiffened at that but didn't disagree.

“A money-back guarantee on a mechanic? How quaint.” He glanced at Brienne. “You know about me.”

“Yes.”

“You don't like me.”

She hesitated. “I don't know you.”

Jaime snorted. “That hasn't stopped anybody else. You don't respect me, then. You think you know what happened on that track.”

“The committee cleared you,” she said, though she didn't sound entirely convinced of it. “You drive recklessly. You're rude to interviewers. There are plenty of other reasons to dislike you.”

That elicited a sharp, startled laugh from Jaime that echoed in the lobby. He couldn't remember the last time someone hated him for his personality and not what they thought he had done. It was as refreshing in its own way as Selwyn's handshake had been. “Fair enough. You think you could overlook all that? You're not going to sabotage my car if I hire you, are you?”

Her wide mouth gaped open, her brows knitting furiously. “How dare you even suggest that! I would never put a driver in danger; I'd sooner not take the job. If I work for you, I work for you, regardless of what I think of you personally.”

For no reason at all, he believed her. He held out his hand. “Okay then.”

Brienne stared down at it, looked back up at him and those sparkling eyes were round with disbelief. “What, really?”
“Yes, really.”

“How much will you pay?”

“Are you-” Jaime dropped his hand and glared at her. “You think anyone else is going to hire you to be a head mechanic on a pro team?”

Fire flared in her eyes. “I don't need a pity job, Mr. Lannister. I'm just fine working here or F3 for the rest of my life.”

“That's a lie. If you love racing as much as you say, you want this job. F1 is the only one that matters.”

She chewed her lip, but lifted her chin and became a mountain. “I deserve to be paid what I'm worth, Mr. Lannister, especially if I'll be leading a Formula One team.”

Jaime exhaled loudly and glared at Selwyn, who only looked proud and amused. The man was probably just thrilled to get rid of this stubborn lugnut of a daughter, Jaime thought darkly, doubting his instincts already. But if Selwyn was all Jaime believed him to be, then the daughter he supported so firmly was as safe a bet as Jaime could make these days. Being unable to find crew he could trust from inside racing's nepotistic network made chance-taking a requirement. Luckily for him, he loved a good risk.

“Fine,” Jaime said. “You tell me what a fair chief mechanic rate is and I'll take ten percent off for your lack of experience, with a bonus for each race we win. Deal?”

Brienne looked at her father, who nodded encouragingly. “Deal.” She held out her hand to shake and Jaime took it. It was similar to shaking Selwyn's, though less confident, like she wasn't sure how much strength to use, and where Jaime's thumb touched the back of her hand it was smooth, not hairy. He rubbed his finger along the skin, surprised by the patch of softness in a woman that seemed otherwise so rough. When he looked up at her, a nervous young woman's face had been carved out of the stone.

“You'll work the full season,” he said, not letting her hand go yet, “starting next week.” She tugged gently at his hand but he only gripped hers tighter. As commander of over a thousand pounds of pure acceleration, his grip strength was hard to beat, and not even tall, strong Brienne Tarth could easily break his hold.

“I have to make sure my father-”

“I'll be fine,” Selwyn cut in. “I'll help her get her things together. You'll be paying for her move, of course.”

Jaime glanced at Selwyn and let go of Brienne's hand. “Of course,” he said dryly. “And you'll sign an NDA saying you won't take any of what you've learned and use it to make a profit for two years after you're done with Lannister Racing. That includes working with a competitor's team in that time.”

“Is that really necessary?” Brienne asked.

“My lawyers won't let me hire anyone without it.”

“I thought it was your team,” Brienne said smugly.

“I thought you were ready to be a professional,” he snarked back.
“We'll have our lawyer look it over and sign it,” Selwyn said, stepping in again. Jaime wondered how they were going to make an entire season of this without the man to mediate for them.

“Good.” Jaime looked around the shop. This had all passed more quickly than he'd expected and it felt wrong to just leave now, blowing in and out like this was just a pit stop. Besides, he needed a better measure of his new mechanic's abilities if he didn't want to put up with Tyrion's dead-eyed stare or Bronn's obnoxious commentary for the next week. “Any chance I can get a look at the car?” he asked Brienne.

She glanced at Selwyn and he shrugged. “Sure. This way,” she said, turning abruptly and leading him behind the counter into the big garage bay. There was an old sedan up on a lift at the far end and a truck with its hood popped in the middle, the latter of which Selwyn returned to. The roll-up doors were pulled down most of the way against the chill, but a cool wind still snuck in through the small gap, stirring a cloth fallen onto the floor. Their footsteps echoed in the quiet as Brienne led him to a door at the far wall. With practiced movements she opened it and switched on the light, then stepped to the side. “In there,” she said, shoving her hands in the deep pockets of her jumpsuit.

Jaime had to brush past her to enter the room and discovered as he did that she smelled of motor oil and sweat and soap. Inside the room was another section of warehouse big enough for two cars but only a single machine sat in the middle, gleaming under the lights, pulling all attention its way. He approached the car slowly, tilting his head this way and that to take all of it in, crouching down by the front right tire and reverently reaching out to smooth his hand over the front wing. The tires were last years soft compound, made for speed. Jaime leaned forward and peered down the length of the car, past the driver's cockpit to the looming hump of the engine intake, then he walked alongside the car, letting his fingers walk the path his eyes had taken. “Beautiful,” he murmured before straightening by the rear wing.

“Can I see the engine?” Jaime asked, looking up to find Brienne's cheeks were flushed patchy red.

She nodded silently and hurried over, opening it up for him. Jaime knew engines well enough to know this one was well-cared for and well within specifications for racing, and it would keen like a woman on the edge as it took off from the starting line.

“I'd love to take this for a spin someday,” Jaime said, glancing at his new mechanic.

“There's a track in town.”

“Evenfall, I know it. Near the the hill with that old castle that belonged to ancestors of yours, I believe.”

Brienne shrugged. “Dad says it's ancient history, but we do get free weekday runs because of it.” She stared down hard at the car, and her hair slipped free of its firm bowl, falling past her ear. “You raced there back when you were driving F2. It was the first time we'd had one on that track.”

“I remember. Were you there?”

She nodded. “You won.”

“I won a lot of F2 races.” He smirked at her. “And now we're going to win a lot of F1s, right?”

“Mr. Lannister-”

“Jaime,” he said. “You're not going to need to be so formal on the asphalt.”

She pressed her lips together. “I haven't signed anything yet.”
"You will." Brienne's eyes darted to him, bright and blue and suspicious. He frowned. "Don't look at me like that, it's not a threat. This car has been upgraded to last year's regulations and judging by what's on that bench over there," he nodded at a crowded but still organized-looking bench that went the length of the wall, "you're ready for this year. You'd be the first woman as a chief mechanic in F1 ever, inspiring a whole generation of girls. You're not going to let this dream go, even though you have to deal with me. That's all I'm saying."

"I should get back to work," Brienne said, turning her distracting eyes back to the car. "Thank you for considering me, Mr. Lannister."

"Jaime," he reminded her. "And don't thank me yet. You haven't met the rest of the team."

That night, back home in his roomy penthouse in King's Landing, smoking a cigarette he knew he shouldn't have, Jaime stared at the contract Tyrion had sent over for him to read and approve before they took it to Brienne. His father would make the final signature on behalf of Lannister Corp Racing, but Jaime had asked Tyrion to let him get a review before everything was finalized. It was nearing midnight and the letters were jumping around the page more than usual as Jaime's eyes started to water. He gave up trying to make sense of the legalese and signed off on it, then shoved the papers aside.

What in the seven hells had he done?

He'd plucked an inexperienced mechanic out of some island in the Stormlands and given her - her - the responsibility for making sure the extremely fast death machine he raced wouldn't fail him, that's what he'd done. Jaime threw back the rest of the whiskey he'd been trying to savor and sighed. He hadn't even been drunk or high when he'd done it, which is how he made most of his worst decisions.

"Fuck," he said out loud and then repeated it when he noticed his phone ringing and saw who it was.

"Late for you, isn't it?" Jaime said by way of greeting.

"I heard you took a trip today."

"Varys is a good lapdog."

Jaime could almost hear Tywin's sneer. "What inane thing are you doing with my money now?"

"It's not your money, it's Lannister Corp's money, you just oversee it."

"Jaime."

"I secured the last piece of the puzzle that's going to let us win."

"What is it this time? A hair coach?"

Jaime glared at his empty whiskey glass and stalked over to the cabinet to refill it. "Look at you, father, making jokes so far past your bedtime."

"You're very rude for someone who relies on me for his job."

"You're very arrogant for someone who would have to rely on Lancel if I left." Jaime took Tywin's bitter silence as a win. "You'll be getting a contract to sign and then you can see what I've done next week."
“So you do remember preseason work starts next week.”

“Amazing, isn't it? Almost like I'm a professional.”

Tywin sighed. “Go to sleep, Jaime. I'm not the only one getting older.” He hung up and Jaime considered throwing his phone at the wall, but he'd broken his last phone that way just a couple of months ago and didn't want to give Tywin the satisfaction of making him buy another one so soon.

Jaime stubbed out his cigarette and downed another glass of whiskey before readying for bed. Tywin needed Jaime for this season, but it was feeling more and more like his patience with his eldest son had dried up. There were promising drivers in F2 and Lannister Corp had enough money they might be able to lure away one of the established F1 drivers instead, especially if Jaime were no longer on the team, hanging like a cursed millstone around everyone's necks.

He was more than aware of the terrible things people whispered about him at media events, the things angry competitors shouted barely audible over the whine of the engines when Jaime cut too close or nudged too hard. *Fuck them and fuck father, too*, Jaime thought. He would show them all, as long as Brienne Tarth was everything he hoped she would be.

It was that thought that kept Jaime tossing and turning until nearly dawn.

When Brienne returned to the garage after Jaime left, her father didn't say anything, he just turned her music back up and they worked peacefully through the afternoon with the weight of Jaime's offer hanging over them. A few more customers came by, one with a flat tire that needed a quick patching, their elderly neighbor in for his every three months oil change, a young woman bringing the used car she wanted to buy in to be checked out. Brienne took that one eagerly, walking her through everything she was doing while the girl, barely even in her 20s as far as Brienne could tell, watched with interest.

“You're good at that,” her father said once the woman had left looking pleased.

Brienne shrugged. “It's just a car check, Dad.”

“I mean the teaching part.” He looked down at his hands as he wiped them on one of the pile of rags they had stowed about the shop. “Could reach a lot more people with the F1 job.”

“I'd be too busy for any of that. Anyway I've been thinking about it and...it's not right for me.”

“Why not?” Selwyn set the rag down and studied her with eyes that had not gone soft with age. She tapped one finger on the workbench, adjusted one of the screwdrivers so it hung straight. “I'm busy here.”

Her father snorted. “I'll pass on that lie.”

“There's never been a woman as chief mechanic, why would they start with me?”

“Why not?” He took her hand in hers. “You're easily as talented as any man. You've got Formula experience. And they have to start breaking down those glass walls sometime.”

Brienne sighed and looked down at their hands, the way they looked so much alike in strength and size, though his were showing signs of age. “I have F3 experience, but none in F1. Lannister wanted you, anyway, not me. You forced him to ask me.”

Selwyn stiffened and looked offended. “I did no such thing, young lady. He asked to meet you,
which I know you heard.”

“What was all that stuff about the best mechanic in Westeros, though?”

“It was the truth. You've a gift with vehicles, Brienne, especially race cars. You know how they work, how they run happiest. You love it, I see it in your face every time we go to the track to drive or even just to watch. I don't know why you never went back to F2 after those first months,” and he paused as though this would suddenly be the day she would tell him about the worst two months of her life, before he continued, “but F1 is your dream and you have to go for it. If you hate it, you come back home knowing at least you tried. There's always a place for you in the shop, any time, you know that.”

Brienne squeezed his hand and let it go, hugging herself against the evening chill creeping in under the roll-up doors. “I can't trust Jaime Lannister.”

“You don't have to, you only have to trust his car and the other mechanics. Besides he may have searched us out but it's Twyin Lannister that will make the deal. You just keep your head down and focused on the vehicle, give Lannister as wide a berth as you need to, and you'll be fine.” He headed for the front to lock it. “The decision is yours, daughter, you just need to make it.”

They cleaned and closed up the shop while Brienne mulled all of it over. She loved cars, the way they sounded and smelled, how she could understand and connect to them better than she could most people, and race cars were her passion. Her brief experience in F2 may have ended in frustration and embarrassment, but it hadn't changed her heart. But what her heart wanted now would put her back into a circle she had fled from with her pride barely intact, and she'd do have to do it with a man known more for his tragic failures than his grand successes. For the thousandth time she wondered if the commission had got it right, if Jaime Lannister could possibly have caused a fatal racing accident on purpose. What would it mean to work with a man who might have that in him? Would having her dream within reach be worth twining her reputation even lightly to his?

She stared up at her dark ceiling for hours that night, wrestling with hard questions and impossible answers, tempted onward by the shining light of what she wanted so near.

Brienne spent the rest of her week in a harried daze. There was packing to do, and shopping for clothes more appropriate for the warmer winter of King's Landing, not to mention making sure she finished up any urgent work at the garage so she didn't leave her dad in the lurch. He put out a call to her uncle Endrew to fill in for the next few weeks until her father could find a replacement for her, but Brienne still felt guilty for leaving. The life of a Formula 1 team was nonstop from winter testing through the last race at the end of November, and she wouldn't see her dad or her beloved island at all until the August break. She remembered how difficult the half year seasons with Formula 3 had been, and they'd had a race here midway through. This would be many more months on the road working much longer hours with the most notorious man in racing. Every second she wasn't preparing to leave, she was desperate to stay.

When the papers had shown up, hand-delivered by a bored courier, Brienne had read them over the shoulder of their lawyer and family friend, Goodwin, regretting ever agreeing to this. Months and months of having to put up with a smartass that she'd barely lasted five minutes with before she'd wanted to smack him. Months and months of having to watch his annoyingly handsome face as he hungered over cars the way other men did women. Not women like her, of course, but she'd seen it happen to others. She tried instead to think of the girls he'd said she would inspire, of the dream that had always been just out of reach for so long.
“What do you think?” she'd asked Goodwin, hoping there would be some reason besides fear to not sign.

“Looks solid. Lays out the terms clearly, the sum is what you'd agreed to, end of contract is end of the racing season or earlier if both parties – you and Lannister Corp – agree, at which point you give up the money they've paid you.” Goodwin glanced at her. “You're sure you're okay with that clause?”

“It's part of why he hired me.”

“It does say if they fire you without your agreement, you keep the money you've earned and what you would have earned for the rest of that month.”

A small gesture, but Brienne appreciated it. Goodwin finished reading and then handed her the pen. “In my professional opinion, it's a solid deal.”

“And your personal opinion?” Selwyn asked from where he was chopping vegetables in the cozy kitchen.

Goodwin shrugged. “Jaime Lannister is a damn good driver, but you know his record as well as I do. The man drives reckless and attracts trouble.”

Brienne sat down in an empty chair and sighed. She'd had this conversation with herself every hour since he'd left their shop and her father had put the decision in her hands, and she'd come to the same conclusion every time: the opportunity, even as disagreeable as Jaime Lannister was, outweighed the risk. “I can't pass this up. It's the only way I'll ever get this experience.”

“Just make sure you don't pay too much for it.” Goodwin shoved the papers her way and Brienne exhaled shakily as she signed. “And the deed is done,” Goodwin said.

His tone was light, but Brienne's hand didn't stop trembling until much later that night.

“You're sure you won't come with me?” Brienne asked her dad one last time in the waiting room of the ferry terminal.

Selwyn smiled warmly at her, cupped her cheeks with his big hands. “I'd just slow you down. You're going to be amazing, but you're going to need every ounce of focus to do it.”

Brienne nodded and let him tug her into his strong arms. She would miss the way it felt like he was protecting her whenever he hugged her, his arms the only place she'd ever truly felt safe. She pressed her face down into his shoulder. “What if-”

“No more what ifs, girl.” His deep voice was a low rumble, connecting his heart to hers. “Don't be afraid – of hard work, or failing, or even Jaime Lannister. You can conquer all of it.” She exhaled shakily and he kissed the side of her head. “First you have to not miss your ferry, though.”

She smiled into the soft flannel of his shirt and then pulled out of his arms. “I love you, Dad.”

“I love you, too. Call me when you get into your apartment. And send me pictures! Send me all the pictures you want.” He gestured with his new phone. “I'll show everybody here.”

Brienne waved to him as she hefted one giant duffle bag and rolled another huge piece of luggage behind her, and she waved to him from the outside deck of the ferry, and she kept waving as Tarth disappeared behind them, heading for her new home.
January (Part 2)

Chapter Summary

“That was my only first place finish that season,” he said from behind her, and Brienne whirled, startled. He’d come in through a side door she’d ignored, and he was leaning casually in the doorway, arms and feet crossed, watching her intently. His golden hair fell slightly over eyes that still held the same bitterness, but lacked even the minor softening of the triumph now. Jaime had been a bit bedraggled back on Tarth, handsome enough but muted somehow by the rain and her shock. Here on his own turf, dressed in comfortable jeans and a black t-shirt with Lannister Racing scrawled on the front in blood-red, the full impact of him was briefly overwhelming. She'd read countless messages on social media and fan boards of women – and men – all too eager to throw themselves at the feet of the so-called Kingslayer. But that was when he was villainously charming; what would they think now that he simply looked villainous?

Chapter Notes

I unexpectedly finished the chapter I was working on a week early, so have an update a week early! This is the longest chapter of the fic so far, and will probably be the longest of the whole story, just to set expectations. They'll mostly be about half this long and two weeks apart. :)

The ferry deposited her at Storm's End, where Lannister Corp had sent a towncar to drive her the rest of the way to King's Landing as part of the promised move. It was a couple hour's journey but the driver just nodded his head in greeting and let her rest, so she dozed, waking occasionally to look out the window and wonder what she'd gotten herself into. Someone from the company had also selected the apartment for her, which had been both worry and relief. When the towncar pulled up to the curb in front she realized the worry had been unfounded. She was in a nice enough area with streetlights and minimal litter and it was within walking distance of a little grocery and drug store and a few cozy-looking restaurants. The apartment itself was fine; there was a main room and a bathroom and, unexpectedly, a separated bedroom, plus a kitchen big enough for her. It wouldn't fit anyone else when she was in it, but she didn't anticipate she'd be having anyone over. She knew no one in King's Landing and she'd be far too busy to have out-of-town guests, as few as there might be. The apartment would fit her for the year ahead.

It was furnished with a cheap couch, a full-size bed, and a dining room table with two chairs. There were paper plates and plastic utensils in the kitchen, plus major appliances and some basic needs like paper towels and toilet paper. Everything else she was going to have to provide. All in all she had to admit it was a fair deal.

On the table was a laptop with a yellow sticky note attached to it that read 'Call me. - JL' and his phone number and nothing else. Brienne frowned down at the abrupt message. Call me. Like she would jump whenever he snapped his fingers. Technically, he wasn't even her boss, Tywin
Lannister was. As the one signing her check it was Jaime's father she ultimately had to impress, no matter what the contract said. But it couldn't hurt to try to start out on the right foot with Jaime.

After setting her things down, texting her dad a quick note to let him know she'd arrived, and using the bathroom, Brienne put the number in her cell phone under Jaime's name and called him.

“Yes?” he said after two rings, terse and annoyed.

“Mr. Lannister?”

“Yes, what do you want?”

Brienne glared at the note on the laptop. “It's Brienne Tarth. You demanded I call you.”

“I demanded-” he snorted into the phone and she grimaced at the burst of noise. “You mean I left you a note asking you to call.”

“Askin suggests there would be a 'please' or even a 'will you' in the sentence, not just 'call me.'”

“I'm sorry I wasn't sensitive enough for your delicate feelings. I'm sure I'll have plenty of time to ask you to please change my tires when I'm in the middle of a race.”

If Brienne's annoyance was a laser she would have burned a hole through the sticky note, her laptop, the table, and all the way down through the apartment building with it. “Mr. Lannister-”

“Jaime,” he said, and then in a mocking voice, “please.”

“You asked that I call,” she ground out. “What do you want?”

“I want you to know where to show up for work tomorrow.”

“Tomorrow?”

“Is there a problem? Big plans already?”

Her whole body was tight, clenched around the phone. “No. Tomorrow is Sunday, I assumed I would have a day to get some food and other things for my apartment, get settled.”

“The rest of the crew started today. You're already late.”

“You said I could arrive today.”

“You could. You would just be late.” Brienne exhaled heavily into the phone and tried very hard not to cry. It was only one day into living her dream, she would not let him ruin it so soon. “First day is just getting to know you bullshit, though,” he went on, “I didn't go, either.” There was a feminine giggle in the background that was definitely not him. “But I'll be there tomorrow, nine am, and so should you. You're calling from your cell phone?”

“Yes,” she managed, somehow even closer to crying now that he'd so carelessly brushed away the worry that he'd caused with his first pronouncement.

“I'll text you the address and the password to get into that laptop. It has this year's regs – I know you've read them, but read them again – plus information specifically about the Lannister cars. I want you sharp and ready for tomorrow.” There was a muffled noise and then Jaime's voice low and seductive and not for her, “I'll get to you in a minute,” followed by another background giggle. “You will be ready, won't you?” he asked in the phone again, and all of the seduction was gone.
“I will.”

“Good. Don't make me regret this, Tarth. I'm counting on you.” His voice went husky again on that, but not seductive; instead there was something deep and needy behind it, a desperation he could not entirely keep at bay. “See you in the morning. Nine am.” And then he hung up.

Brienne tossed her phone on the table and winced when it bounced. She should be more careful; she couldn't afford a new one yet and she suspected she was going to want to throw her phone a lot in the coming months. The screen lit up with a new text message with the address of the garage, the password to her laptop, and NINE AM in all capital letters. Briefly she considered throwing the phone again, but instead found some bread in a cabinet and cheese in the fridge and sat down with her meager meal, the laptop shining brightly long into the evening as she studied for tomorrow.

The alarm wailed loudly at way-too-early o'clock and Brienne desperately groped around and snoozed it while she tried to remember where she was. She had her own pillow but the sheets felt and smelled different and the mattress was decidedly not hers. When she rubbed her eyes and pried them open, she looked around the small room of her new apartment and remembered the devil's bargain she'd made.

“For the girls,” she mumbled to herself.

Her eyes were gritty and dry from reading until past midnight, and she peered through the smallest slits she could as she navigated the unfamiliar space to her bathroom to splash water on her face. Her hair was a mess and one cheek was bright red and creased, the other pale. Brienne sighed and got ready, still not entirely sure yet the best way to get to the garage. At least she'd left herself some bread and cheese to gnaw on over breakfast.

At seven thirty, bus route in hand, Brienne headed downstairs and saw the towncar from last night parked at the curb. Unsure, she hesitated and a tall, scarred man extricated himself from the driver's side. It was not the man who had picked her up yesterday.

“You the mechanic? Brienne Tarth?” he barked, his voice loud in the early morning quiet.

“Yes?”

“Lannister sent me to pick you up.”

“Why didn't he tell me that?”

“The fuck should I know? Ask him.”

Brienne eyed the man as she pulled out her phone, tried to keep him in her peripheral vision while she texted Jaime.

'Did you send someone to drive me to the garage?’

He responded quickly. 'Yes. Clegane, but we all call him the Hound. Thought you two would hit it off, you have a lot in common.'

Brienne glanced at the tall, ugly man and she flushed all over. She typed 'fuck you' but didn't send it, turning her phone off instead. “What's your name?” she asked the man, still reluctant to get into a car with him. She'd had self-defense classes, worked out regularly and prided herself on her own strength, but this man would be dangerous even to her.

“Sandor Clegane, but no one calls me that. Are you coming or what?”
“I can see why you're in the service business,” Brienne muttered, deciding to trust him. Instead of coming around to open her door Sandor just got back in the car and she shook her head and let herself in the back.

“I don't chat,” he said, starting the car and pulling out into the road without even seeing if she'd buckled.

That was fine with her, so she stared out the window, getting a better view of King's Landing in the morning light. It wasn't a bad place, at least here. Crowded with apartment buildings, delis, little shops. It reminded her of downtown Tarth, if downtown Tarth had built on top of itself for another fifty years. There were a few people out walking their dogs or jogging, but it seemed most had decided weekend mornings were for sleeping, like normal people. Sandor didn't turn on any music and, as promised, didn't talk, he just stared straight ahead, two big hands on the wheel, and wound his way expertly through the streets.

When he parked in front of a one-story office building half an hour later, Brienne frowned at him.

“Are we picking up someone else?”

He looked at her in the rearview mirror, his eyes indicating how much of an idiot he thought she was. “This is your destination.”

They were in a completely plain business park and though the words Lannister Corp Racing stood tall and deep red along the side of the building, she still didn't quite believe him.

“I'm supposed to go to the official garage, not the administrative offices.”

“You think they didn't tell me where to drop you?”

“No,” she said slowly, “but-”

“Lady, just get in the fucking building,” Sandor sighed.

“Will you be driving me home?”

“If I'm lucky,” he said, all sarcasm, and Brienne wondered if it were a job requirement for working with the Lannisters.

“Do I call you, then?”

“Nah, I'll be here when it's time.”

Brienne got out of the car, her purse, laptop, and balled up coveralls clutched tightly under her arm, and Sandor drove away as soon as she'd shut her door again, leaving her alone in the mostly empty parking lot. There was a single flashy sports car parked in the spot designated 'CEO' and nothing other than the birds with her.

The outside of the building was mirrored glass that Brienne purposefully did not look into as she aimed for the front door. She tugged it open and stepped into a spacious, sparkling clean lobby. It reminded her of a car dealership more than anything; there was a long, curved wooden desk in front, currently empty, and plush leather chairs for visitors. On each side were towering trophy cases filled with awards over the years and behind the desk the wall was tastefully crowded with photos of cars, drivers, and momentous moments in Lannister racing history. With the drive she was an hour early, so she spent some time examining each photo, which they'd arranged chronologically from left to right. She watched Jaime Lannister grow from a bright-eyed, excited
youth in junior karting to the cynical, world-class driver he was today in the span of a few minutes. The shift was most noticeable around the second third of the wall, when he'd returned to F1 after the Aerys incident.

She remembered being a young teenager and reading the headlines in horror when it had happened, though none of those headlines were given space here. 'Kingslayer,' they'd called Jaime, for having killed his own teammate Aerys Targaryen at the height of Aerys' reign over F1. Aerys had flipped his car, ten times end over end, in a spot which at the time had had no cameras. There'd been spectators of course, and their opinions had been split down the middle: half thought Jaime had rammed Aerys on purpose, half said it was entirely an accident. The Formula 1 commission had been unable to come to an agreement either way beyond recklessness, so Jaime had been penalized the full twelve points, keeping him out of the last race of the season and ensuring he would not win the world championship that year. Then, as though that wasn't punishment enough, they'd dismissed him back to F3 at the end of the season, claiming he was still too young and hadn't had enough track experience to compete safely at such a high level.

Aerys had died on the track, a spot still memorialized by fans with flowers every year during the race. Brienne had cried at the news, at the tragedy of such a talent dying so pointlessly, of two men having the best racing seasons of their lives ruined in a single moment. Though she was as uncertain as everyone else about what had happened, she trusted the racing commission and their judgement, but Jaime's behavior since then had done nothing to endear him to anyone. He could have been grateful to have survived; he could have applied himself with humility and an eagerness to learn; he could have even admitted he'd made a mistake and apologized. He did none of those things, and every year the whispers got louder.

Brienne studied the picture of Jaime at his first race after they'd finally let him back in F1, when he'd joined the F1 Lannister Racing team for the first time. He'd won, but there was no joy in his celebratory picture; it was all bitter triumph, his eyes a dare to the world to try to take it from him.

"That was my only first place finish that season," he said from behind her, and Brienne whirled, startled. He'd come in through a side door she'd ignored, and he was leaning casually in the doorway, arms and feet crossed, watching her intently. His golden hair fell slightly over eyes that still held the same bitterness, but lacked even the minor softening of the triumph now. Jaime had been a bit bedraggled back on Tarth, handsome enough but muted somehow by the rain and her shock. Here on his own turf, dressed in comfortable jeans and a black t-shirt with Lannister Racing scrawled on the front in blood-red, the full impact of him was briefly overwhelming. She'd read countless messages on social media and fan boards of women – and men – all too eager to throw themselves at the feet of the so-called Kingslayer. But that was when he was villainously charming; what would they think now that he simply looked villainous?

"You had bad luck that season," she said, trying to connect.

"Mm," he said, gracefully pushing off from the doorway with one broad shoulder. He stood next to her, his glance taking in the photos. "Yes, bad luck keeping a team who was bitter about Aerys."

Her brow furrowed as she watched him examining himself. "Your crew sabotaged you?"

"I don't have proof but I know they did." She must not have hidden her disbelief because his jaw tightened when he glanced at her. "I replaced all of them," he said grimly, "except Bronn and Podrick. Bronn's too greedy to betray me and Podrick's too naïve. The season after that was chalked up to bad luck, too. All three engines wrecked before the halfway point of the season? Astonishing. I let them go, too. Again, except Bronn and Pod. Luckily for them I've lost since then because the only people we can rely on are also mostly shit and the officials have made actual
rules because of my blocking and passing techniques. There's a reason I had to go all the way to Tarth to find a chief mechanic.”

“Mr. Lannister-”

“Jaime,” he said, turning on his heel, lifting his chin to meet her eyes. “Gods you're taller than I remembered.”

She flushed. “I know you're taking a chance on me. I won't betray that trust.”

His eyes flickered brightly, but brief, like something inside him had been lit afire and then quickly smothered. He did have lovely eyes, green and gold, but they were too hard and sad to meet for long. “I know you won't,” he said quietly. Then he shook himself a bit, and smiled sharply. “Besides, I have a money-back guarantee. Come on,” he headed back to the door. “Let me show you around. I suspect you've never seen a garage like this before.”

An hour later she knew he was right. Walking through the door from the lobby into the spaces hidden behind the walls and opaque windows was like stepping into Oz. Brienne tried to contain herself on the tour, but she failed five minutes in when her mouth dropped open at seeing the engineering room filled with computers and 3D printers and whiteboards that were half full. The space was huge and still packed with stuff, including multiple engines they used for testing and a wall just of giant computer screens.

“Racing isn't just a machine and a mechanic and a driver anymore,” Jaime said dryly as they entered the race day room that looked more like mission control than something as terrestrial as car racing.

“It wasn't even in F3. We did our work in a much smaller space but there were still more computers than wrenches. I knew F1 would be different, but...”

“But you didn't know.”

She glanced at him, but he didn't seem annoyed. “I had no idea.”

“Wait until you see the wind tunnel.”

Jaime took her through the rest of the spaces, showing her the wind tunnel as well as the body work area and rows of cubicles where people, including herself, would stay long into the night figuring out how to get him one tenth of a second faster.

“There's a whole other building behind us but it's mostly for marketing, travel, other administrative stuff. This spot is yours,” he said, pointing to a cube in the corner. There was a desk wth just a monitor and a few cords. “My office is right across from you. You can just plug your laptop in and you'll be up and running. Guard that laptop with your life. It's got all our info on it.”

She clutched it tighter to her chest as Jaime walked her through the spaces rattling off names she'd have to relearn later and talking about the intricacies of what they all did with a confident matter-of-factness she respected in spite of herself. He wasn't interested in just jumping behind the wheel and leaving everything else behind, as other drivers she'd known had been; he was involved in every aspect of what went into race day. Brienne vowed to learn as much as she could, too. She would keep up with Jaime Lannister if she had to spend the next year on three hours of sleep a night to do it.

Eventually he paused at a big steel door with a high-tech lock and grinned at her. “I'll get you
added to the system so you can access this room. Right now only Lancel, his race engineer and chief mechanic, and I can unlock this door.”

“Not your father?”

He smirked. “Twyin Lannister doesn't care to get his hands dirty with the details. He just likes to show up for pictures.” Jaime tapped in a code and pressed his finger to the pad. The lock blinked green and there was an audible click before Jaime turned the handle and opened the door, ushering her in ahead of him.

The room was dark until Brienne stepped inside and lights turned on, first right above her then flickering on into the distance, ten sets of them in a space as big as a small plane hangar. If stepping into the engineering area had been stepping into Oz, then this was ascending to the seven heavens themselves. Brienne halted a few steps in, her eyes hot with tears that she furiously blinked back. She would not cry in front of Jaime, no matter how overwhelmed she was to be here.

There were neat stacks of fat tires, benches filled with polished tools, several partial engines on blocks, spare body parts, and more, everything all perfectly organized and labeled. A gleaming black stand with computer screens on four sides stood in the middle looking like something out of a science fiction movie with its various cords and keyboards. And on either side of that island were two cars sparkling under the lights. She recognized the red and gold Lannister colors from hundreds of races. They hadn't made any significant changes to their livery in a decade, but they didn't need to; their colors were so ingrained in every fan's mind with power and wealth and winning it would be idiotic to lose that recognition.

“Lancel's is the one on the left,” Jaime said and she nodded.

“31. His apartment number growing up.” Jaime made a surprised sound. “I told you I was a fan, Mr. Lannister.”

“And my number?”

“You're number 8, chosen to honor Arthur Dayne, the greatest racer of all time.”

“Greatest for now.”

Brienne shifted nervously under his intent stare, looked instead at his car. Dayne's number had gone unused after his retirement, even after the standard two-year embargo, as though everyone had been waiting for Jaime to claim it when he hit F1 the first time. Brienne had seen enough interviews with Jaime to know how much he'd respected Dayne and she'd often wondered how many people they'd had to bribe to keep the number free then and again after he'd been kicked back down to the lower circuits. She wondered how many people now hated seeing Jaime in a car bearing Dayne's number and memory.

Brienne walked slowly over to Jaime's car, hesitating before touching it. She glanced over her shoulder at him. “May I?” she asked, and he nodded.

“You'll be in charge of her,” he said seriously as Brienne brushed her hand over the long edge of the front wing, as she moved to peer inside the cockpit and examine the steering wheel littered with buttons, as she pressed both hands flat to the intake and breathed it in. “You'll be responsible for taking her apart and then building her before each race. You need to know every part.”

“I look forward to it,” Brienne whispered. Jaime appeared next to her and when she looked over he was smiling softly down at the car. He met her gaze and for a fleeting moment Brienne thought
that smile was for her, too, and she felt warm all over, until he looked away again.

“Take a look around and get to know where everything is. Once the others get here,” he checked his watch, “in ten minutes, we'll do introductions and jump right in. We've got car launch in less than a month but tire choices were released for the first tracks this morning so we'll be focusing on that today to ease in. It'll still take all day, though; Bronn likes to argue for no good reason except hearing the sound of his own voice.”

“Can't you tell him to be quiet?”

Jaime laughed, a genuine booming sound that filled the echoing space and made it seem warmer. “Get to work, Tarth. There'll be a pop quiz later.”

He was still chuckling as the door closed behind him.

Jaime waited for the others in his office, reviewing the tire choices and current car specs and trying to forget the look on Brienne's face when she'd seen his car. He'd never seen anyone love his car as much as he did, and it had for a too-long second unmoored him to share that feeling with another human being. The crew was solid and dedicated and he trusted, now, that they worked their hardest on his behalf, all wanting to be a part of a winning team. But he'd never seen what he felt in his heart in someone else's unbearably expressive eyes. It made his skin itch, his fingers and lips anxious for the familiar feel of a cigarette. He grabbed a lollipop instead.

“Focus,” he muttered around the sweetness, reading the tire choices again, imagining they were bathed in blue.

A few minutes later he heard the rest of the crew starting to filter in, Bronn's smartass comments already spilling out into the hallway. The crew's chatter felt like the tide coming in, restless and eager to get going. Jaime had loved that feeling a long time ago, when the start of a new season didn't feel like slamming his head against the wall of a racing world that wanted nothing more than to keep him out. He felt a dormant flutter in his stomach now that had him rising quickly from his desk to meet the crew in the hallway.

“Welcome to the preseason, gentlemen,” he said as they came near.

Bronn, in the lead, halted. “Boss.”

“Everybody have a good break? Get some rest?”

They glanced at each other, perplexed, and Jaime couldn't entirely blame them. He'd been relentless the last few years, more interested in what the team had learned during the offseason then how they were feeling.

“Are you drunk?” Bronn asked.

Jaime huffed a laugh. “Not yet. Good coffee, I guess.”

“Is the new mechanic here?”

“She's already with the cars.”

“I told you!” Bronn crowed, slapping Podrick hard on the back. “This fucker thought I'd made that up to take the piss out of him.” Podrick shrugged and smiled gamely. “Still trying to quit smoking?”
Jaime smiled around the lollipop. “Tyrion keeps telling me one day I'll set all that explosive fuel on fire and have no one to blame but myself.” Bronn laughed and Jaime led them back to where he'd left Brienne.

He hesitated at the door and narrowed his eyes at Bronn. “Don't get us sued for sexual harassment, will you?”

“Me? I'm a fuckin' angel.” Jaime stared blandly at him. “Fine, fine, I won't treat her any different than I treat ol' Poddy.”

“That's what I'm afraid of.” Jaime unlocked the door and stepped inside. He saw Brienne rise from where she'd been crouched way at the back of the space, looking at the equipment there. As she stood to her full height he heard Bronn suck in a breath.

“Didn't tell me you hired a fuckin giant,” Bronn said, his voice thankfully quiet. “She related to Tormund?”

Jaime ignored him. “Tarth!” he called. “Come here and meet the team.” She walked over, nerves and courage all over her freckled face. “Gentlemen, this is Brienne Tarth, our new chief mechanic. Tarth, this is my part of the Lannister Corp crew; everyone else doesn't show up until Monday. Bronn Blackwater will be your number two, you'll be working closely with him.”

Bonn stepped forward, his hand thrust out. She shook it and met his forthright stare. “I don't care that you're a woman. Do you have any experience doing this sort of thing?”

“Some,” she said.

Bonn grunted. “Chief mechanic means everything about the car goes through you.”

“I know.”

“You think you can handle it?”

“I can,” Brienne said, and although her voice was firm, Jaime didn't like the look in her eyes. Bronn must not have either because he made a noise and turned away. She glanced at Jaime and he lifted one shoulder in a shrug. He wasn't going to be able to convince the team to trust her; she'd have to earn that herself.

“Hello,” Podrick said, stepping forward and shaking her hand. “My name is P-P-Podrick. N-nice to meet you.” He smiled warmly and Jaime saw her relax a little, enough that she got through the rest of the twenty person crew without any other questions like Bronn's.

“Everybody go get changed, we're talking tires today but if Bronn shuts the fuck up long enough we'll start inventory and regs review,” Jaime said, twirling the lollipop between his fingers before sucking on it again.

As the team filtered back to the locker room to change, he glanced at Brienne and she was staring at him, wide-eyed and red-faced.

“You okay, Tarth?”

“Yes,” she said, “I mean no. I need a place to change.”

Jaime realized there was no separate locker room for women. There was a bathroom, but it felt rude to shove his chief mechanic into a stall. “There's a gym and locker room in the other building, but
you can change in my office today,” he said. “Store your things there, I'll get you access to that lock, too.”

Brienne bit her big lower lip. “Will I be getting a women's locker room in this building at some point?”

“You can't just change in the office?”

She bristled. “I can but why shouldn't I get the same accommodation as the men?”

“Because there's one of you and twenty of us.”

“If you were a woman, you'd be fine changing in someone else's office all the time?”

Jaime grunted. “I knew you'd be a pain in my ass,” he muttered. “Fine, we'll get a locker room set up for you, but I can't promise anything soon.”

She nodded a little. “Is there a uniform I'll be wearing? I brought my coveralls.”

“We'll do sizings later this week for everybody. Those will be fine for now.” He deposited her in his office. “You can leave your stuff on that chair. Don't touch anything.”

Jaime shut the door behind him and stood at the window for a moment, watching her look around his office, taking in the books in his tall bookshelf, his bare desk, the wall covered with photos of his cars through the years. The cars seemed to call to her and she leaned nearer, using her height to her advantage to get closer without having to move. Jaime couldn't stop staring at her hapless face, the way the tightly held barriers slid away and let the young woman peek out, curious and excited, the joy of someone brushing up against a long-held dream. He found he was leaning forward with her until she straightened and stretched her arms over her head and he desperately thought to himself look away but the lift of her shirt revealed the pale strip of skin of her muscled stomach and he was trapped by it. She glanced up and jumped when she met his eyes, yanking her shirt down and going red from temple to chest, racing below the neckline of her shirt.

“What are you doing?” she shouted through the glass and he knew he should apologize, should explain he wasn't in the habit of watching unsuspecting women.

He should, but he didn't. Instead he smirked arrogantly and waved his lollipop at her creased brow. She strode furiously to the window and pulled the blinds shut while he tried to ignore the bitter disapproval in her big eyes.

Brienne did not look at him for most of the rest of the day and Jaime left her alone, engaging her when he genuinely needed the input of his chief mechanic, but letting her set the pace. She spent most of her time talking to the rest of the team, getting to know them and how they operated and by lunch she'd memorized everyone's names. They spent most of the day arguing about how many of each tire type they needed for the first half of the season and by the time afternoon was turning into early evening, Jaime needed a drink, a smoke, and to not be in the same room with any of these people.

“Let's call it early today,” he said just as Bronn was winding up for round three on why Pentos was not the place to test the limited durability of the C5s and they weren't going to race more than a couple laps on those so why the seven hells would they need eight tires, Pod.

Bronn gestured out the wall-sized windows. “The sun hasn’t even set yet.” They'd moved out of the garage to one of the nice conference rooms sometime after lunch when Jaime had realized the tires
would in fact take all day.

“Yes and I don't want to watch it with you.”

“You should start smoking again,” Bronn muttered. “You're cranky enough when you are.”

“Go home, Bronn, remind Lollys why she won't miss you once the season kicks into gear. You can stay til midnight tomorrow to make up for it.”

Bronn flipped Jaime off and then turned to Brienne. “You want to come grab a drink with me and the boys?”

She glanced at Jaime and he plastered an unbothered smile on his face. “I won't be there, don't worry. If I'd been invited he would have said 'the boys and the asshole.'”

It perplexed her, he could see, the way he and Bronn talked to each other. She'd likely imagined a serious, studious crew that worked hard and played little, just like he suspected she lived her life. So dour, his new chief mechanic, so focused and stubborn. She'd talked Bronn down from two different tire choices, a feat even Jaime hadn't managed in a single day.

“I really should get settled in,” she said softly.

“First drink of the season is a tradition, chief. We won't keep you out too late.”

Jaime watched her, the way her homely face ran through expressions like a billboard. He had the sudden terrifying worry she wasn't even old enough to drink, that her height and her strength had hidden her real age, but surely Tyrion would have done that research on his own and he hadn't said a word about that at least.

He'd had a lot of other words about the rest of it, though.

“I suppose a drink would be nice,” Brienne finally said and smiled tentatively, a flash of her big teeth poking out briefly from her lips.

The crew walked out and separated, the men to the locker room and Brienne to Jaime's office, and he pulled a piece of gum out of his mouth and chewed it like it would make a cigarette magically appear. He'd wanted nicotine gum but his doctor had suggested he just abstain entirely, knowing Jaime had no capacity for moderation.

He wandered the quiet halls. This would be the last time they'd be this way in daylight until the season was over. Even in August when Jaime and the crew took a break, there was usually someone in the building, fine-tuning an engine piece here, testing out a new wing there. It was quieter but not like this.

“She's tall,” Jaime heard Bronn say as he neared the locker room. In the stillness, even small sounds carried. “Big hands. Gonna be hard for her to get in some of those engine parts.”

“Old Giantsbane does fine and he's at least as big as she is.” That was young Lucion Lannister, some distant cousin that Tywin had found when Jaime had demanded the entire crew be replaced. Many of the pit crew were related or owed his family for one reason or another, but they'd all come with relevant credentials. Racing ran deep in the Lannister bloodlines and relationships.

Jaime hovered outside the door, curious to find out the crew's initial impressions. “I don't get how she's chief mechanic if she has no experience,” Willem Lannister, one of Jaime's other cousins, whined. “It's not fair.”
“You think you can build a whole car?” Bronn said, his voice dry. “You can't even get a tire on right.”

“That was one time!”

“It's a fuckin' tire and we practice constantly, it shouldn't have even happened once.”

“I-I-I look f-forward to w-working w-w-w-with her.”

“She's too big and ugly for you to fuck, Pod, she'd swallow you whole,” Willem's twin brother, Martyn, said. Jaime bristled, but Bronn spoke up before he could move.

“Shut the fuck up, Martyn. That's your new chief mechanic.”

“She's not too big for Lannister,” Willem said, dropping his voice but not enough to hide it from the hallway.

“He doesn't have to hire someone to fuck them, asshole,” Bronn said.

“You know how fragile his ego is. Maybe she resisted his charms and he had no choice,” Martyn replied.

“That doesn't explain you,” Jaime said snidely as he barged in on their conversation. Willem at least had the decency to look embarrassed; Martyn glared back like a petulant teenager. “I've watched enough tapes to know you're the slowest part of the crew. Do you think the only reason I keep you two useless bags around is to fuck you? Or is it your mother you think I'm after?” They tensed and he saw Martyn's hands tighten into fists. First day of the season and Jaime already wanted a fight. But even his sponsors wouldn't like him punching his own men. “I wouldn't do that to your poor mother, though, she's already been burdened enough by having you two. Now stop gossiping about your new boss like a pack of old men and get the fuck out of here.”

Martyn grabbed his stuff and stalked out, banging his shoulder into Jaime's on his way. Willem scurried after, shamefaced, and the rest followed, most eyeing him warily, though Podrick gave him a warm smile and patted him on the same shoulder Martyn had hit.

Bronn pursed his lips. “She's going to have to fight her own battles.”

“I know, but she wasn't here to fight this one.”

“You think so?” he said, nodding at something behind Jaime, and when Jaime turned to look there was Brienne hovering in the doorway, pale and hurt, her eyes downcast.

“Shit,” Jaime muttered, and Bronn slipped by them both.

“We'll wait for you in the lobby,” he told Brienne as he walked by. “Don't let them keep you from coming with us.”

She nodded silently.

“Tarth.”

“I know how to handle myself,” she said in a stronger voice than he'd expected.

“We're all professionals and supposedly adults. If they have something to say, they can say it to your face and we'll deal with it there. I hate gossip,” he said, his own vehemence surprising him.
“You shouldn't have hired me.”

“Quitting already?”

“No,” she said firmly, and she lifted her head, her blue eyes bright as halogens. “You shouldn't have, but you did and I agreed to it and I knew to expect this. But there’s nothing you can do about their stupid talking without turning the team against you. Don't do that.”

“Don't do...” Jaime's brows drew together. “Are you mad at me? For protecting your honor?”

“My honor? You didn't step in until your name came up.”

“How much did you hear?”

“Enough to know you didn't bother to defend my skills.”

He hated that she was right. They’d worked together less than a day and she'd been right more times than he cared to admit. It was a good quality in a chief mechanic and a damned annoying one in a person he was trying to help. “You should go, they won't wait forever.” He brushed past her and her soap scent and her big eyes, then paused at the door. “I wasn't spying on you earlier, or trying to be creepy,” he said.

“Well, don't do it again,” she said. And then, unexpectedly as he started to leave, added “good night, Mr. Lannister.”

“Jaime,” he only replied, walking out the door.

Bronn, Podrick, and the others were chatting when Brienne entered the lobby, and it died down when they saw her. Bronn nudged Willem with his elbow and the man stepped forward, clearing his throat.

“Sorry what I said about you,” he offered, and if he didn't mean it, he was a good liar. Martyn just folded his arms over his chest and stared her down.

“Sorry you have such an ass for a brother,” she told Willem, and the other men erupted in laughter as Martyn's face went tense and tight.

She'd likely find reason to regret that later with Martyn, but she'd broken the tension for the rest of the men and they all shuffled together out of the complex into the darkening evening. Sandor was waiting, leaning back against the towncar, his arms crossed over his chest.

“One second,” she told the crew before hurrying over to him. “We're going drinking,” she said. “I don't think I'll need you to drive me home tonight, I can just get a cab.”

“Great, count me in.” He pushed off of the car and ambled over to the crowd where he was greeted with a rousing course of “The Hound!”

Brienne blinked after him. This entire crew was going to take getting used to, she thought, though none more than Jaime himself. She trailed after the group as they walked along the quiet business park to a small shopping center packed with restaurants and bars a few blocks away.

The Jaime Lannister that Brienne the Fan had known was a brash, reckless, arrogant man with deep appetites for speed, drinking, and women by all accounts. The Jaime Lannister that Brienne the Chief Mechanic had found today was arrogant for sure, but more bitter than she had ever realized, more committed and knowledgeable than she could have ever imagined. Arguing with Bronn about
tire choices had felt like exercising, difficult but only because it was building new skills. Arguing
with Jaime had been frustrating and maddening and utterly, annoyingly, invigorating, especially
when she'd gotten him to agree with her.

Brienne kicked a rock into the street, smiled at Pod when he glanced back to make sure she was
following. Jaime had been watching her in his office, leaning towards her with a look on his face
she couldn't hope to understand. But then he'd sucked on that gods-damned lollipop half the day
and when she looked at him she'd been unable to focus on anything but his lips made red from the
candy. So she'd just not looked, ignoring him except where they absolutely had to talk. She'd been
as inappropriate as him in her own way, and she would not let it happen again, either.

Podrick fell back to walk with her. “Everything okay?” he asked, speaking slowly and measured.

“I'm tired,” she admitted. “It's been a big day.”

“I remember my first day. It was w-worse than yours.” He took a breath, kept speaking in a way
that drew the words out so he was almost singing them. His voice was lovely, rich and warm. “My
stutter g-gets worse when I'm nervous. Or have to keep up with everyone else. My first day I was a
target.”

“You started after he came back didn't you?”

“That was my f-first year.”

Brienne thought of the pictures she'd seen, of how much younger and happier Jaime had looked
before the accident. “You must have been young.”

“Eighteen. I couldn't even drink,” he sing-songed.

“How did you get through it?”

“J-Jaime. He had everybody s-sing-talk for a week. Once they got used to hearing it, knew h-how
much effort it takes, they backed off.” He leaned in conspiratorially. “Bonn has a-a-a terrible
voice.”

Brienne laughed, the loud rolling sound she tried to keep smothered most of the time. The men in
front looked over their shoulders at them.

“What lies are you telling her, Podrick?” Bronn yelled back and Pod just shrugged, grinning.
“Don't listen to him, Chief. He takes so long to talk he has extra time to think about his stories.”

The group arrived at the sports bar and filtered inside. Brienne held the door for Pod, who smiled
shyly at her. “Thank you for w-waiting for me t-to talk.”

“Any time,” she said sincerely. “And if I get impatient going forward, just poke me a little.”

“W-will do, boss.”

**Boss.** She supposed she was his boss, the boss of all of them. Brienne watched as some of the large
group peeled off to the bar while the rest found tables to push together. It wasn't too busy here
given it was a Sunday night and most people were at home with their families, getting ready for the
work week. These men would become a surrogate family for the season, side-by-side day in and
day out, sharing hoped-for triumphs and probable defeats. All of them doing it for Jaime.

She thought of the way he'd smiled so gently at the car before everyone else had arrived. That
smile had been the one from early in his career, before the accident that had killed Aerys and turned loose Jaime's demons. It was a smile she wanted to see again.

No, she told herself firmly. There is no softness to that man. But when her thoughts wandered relentlessly towards Jaime and the idealistic young man that he had once been, she eagerly grabbed the tall glass of beer Podrick passed her way and gulped it all down to the sound of cheers.

Brienne woke up at ass-early-o-clock Monday morning in her new bed and regretted every drink she'd had the night before. She had swiftly forgotten about Jaime, but she'd also forgotten how loud she got when she was drunk, as well as almost everyone's names and, she realized now, some parts of the evening. The Hound did end up driving her home and also made sure she got into her apartment, complaining the entire time.

“You know Lannister doesn't pay extra for this,” she recalled him saying when she'd gotten too dizzy to walk up the stairs unassisted. It was a good thing he was bigger than her.

He'd left her at the door and she'd managed to get to her bed and collapse into it and now her mouth and brain both felt like something furry and long dead had taken root and she definitely did not have any aspirin or decent food to eat and this morning was going to be a nightmare.

After a warm shower that eased a little of the headache, Brienne pulled on clothes and brushed her teeth and stared at the tiny amount of bread and cheese left for breakfast. She wrapped them up in a paper towel and shoved them in her purse, deciding to save them for lunch instead, and went downstairs to see if the little store across the street was open. Sandor was already at the curb.

“You look like as much shit as I expected,” he said. But he held out a steaming cup and a greasy bag that smelled like bacon and her stomach rumbled so she decided to forgive him.

After she'd taken a sip of the coffee and a bite of the food she sighed gratefully. “Did you wait here all night?”

“No. But we're going to need to set a regular pick-up time, I'm starting to get weird looks from the cops.” Brienne smiled and he only grunted. “Get in the car and don't spill anything or you have to clean it up.”

Sandor produced a couple of aspirin as well and by the time they arrived at the Lannister Corp building she felt almost recovered. She could at least convince Jaime she was operating on all cylinders. She was pretty sure.

They were even earlier than yesterday and not even Jaime's car was in the parking lot. Sandor handed her a key ring with three keys on it.

“Lannister wanted me to give this to you yesterday. Opens up the front door, the inner door to the working area, and the door to his office. I'll text you my number later. Give me a half hour notice before you need to leave, anywhere, any time.”

“Are you my personal driver?”

“Order of the boss.”

“What one?”

Sandor grinned and it was not friendly. “Not allowed to share that. Just know you don't pay for my services, but I'll come when you call. Tips are appreciated.”
Brienne gripped her purse and was doing a mental calculation of how much money she had, divided by how far he'd driven her, when Sandor burst out laughing.

“Gods you're too naïve, lady. They're going to walk all over you.” Still chuckling he climbed into the car and drove away.

“Thanks,” she muttered to the empty parking lot and then let herself into the building. Brienne wandered the hallways, repeating names to herself, making a mental map of where each general area of the building was, touching photos with gentle fingers as she passed. There was history in these walls, ghosts of all the workers and the weight of everything they'd learned and shared throughout Lannister Corp's racing past. Now all that knowledge and history was hers to direct to a car that was as much an engineering marvel as an airplane.

She stopped in front of Jaime's office and peered through the window, found it empty as she'd expected. Brienne unlocked his door and turned on a tall floor lamp to get a better look at his bookshelf. There were books on racing, of course, biographies and technical manuals both, but also a section for philosophy and another on leadership. Brienne grabbed one written by his own father and started reading, settling into the surprisingly comfortable executive's chair behind Jaime's desk.

Brienne was well into the book, taking mental notes about the kind of man Tywin Lannister seemed to be, when the door to Jaime's office suddenly opened. She let out a small surprised yelp and dropped the book to the table and when she looked up she felt her whole body flush red. Jaime stood in the doorway wearing only a towel low on his hips and a frown on his face.

“I thought I told you not to touch anything,” he said, his hair wet and slicked back, the warm light of the floor lamp caressing the muscles of his chest. The sparse hair there was a dark gold and still damp from the shower he'd obviously just taken, and it disappeared under the towel in a line she found herself wanting to follow. Brienne closed her mouth and looked down at the book on the table. Tywin Lannister glared at her from the back cover, as though he was aware of the sudden rush of inappropriate thoughts she'd just had about his son.

“It's just a book,” she said to herself and Jaime both.

“Yes and it's just mine.” There were soft footsteps and she smelled Jaime's clean soap scent, something pleasantly musky, before he stopped in front of the desk, picking up the book. “Why this one?”

“I wanted to get to know how your father thinks,” she said, staring intently at the dark wood of the desk and not anywhere near Jaime's half-naked body, though it was still clear as a photograph in her mind.

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“An impossible task.” There was a dark note to his voice, like the bitter aftertaste of an old wine and she risked a glance up, hurrying past the dip of his hipbones and his pink nipples and the swoop of his shoulder, to his face. Jaime was glaring down at Tywin's picture, clenching the spine of the book so tightly she could see the indents of his fingers. He lifted his eyes to hers and she felt pinned to the chair as surely as if those strong hands held her there. “Find anything you like?” he asked and it took her ten seconds too long to figure out he was referring to the book and not himself.

“Um, not really,” she managed, knowing her face was hopelessly red. Jaime tossed the book behind him on another chair and smiled, a slow curve of his lips.

“Still have a hangover from last night?”
“What? Did Bronn say something?”

“No,” he said, “I did receive an unexpected text message a couple of hours after you left here, though.”

Brienne's hand went to her phone and then the memory of what had happened popped up, summoned from the gray haze of the evening. They'd been several drinks in when Brienne had been telling Bronn, Podrick, and Sandor about how Jaime said she and Sandor had a lot in common when she'd remembered the 'fuck you' text she'd typed and never sent.

She was pretty sure it was Sandor who told her to send it, and it had seemed like an excellent idea at the time.

“Mr. Lannister-”

“No, I'm sure I deserved it, given I wasn't even sure which of several things it was for.”

“I shouldn't have sent it though, I'm sorry.”

“Well, don't do it again,” he said, parroting her own words from yesterday. “I'm going to get dressed and then we can set you up with access to the garage.” He came around before she could scramble out of the chair and she was trapped between the lamp and his big, warm body. He bent down near her legs and opened the bottom drawer, pulling out a rolled up bundle. The long curve of his back, arched like some golden wing, was almost unbearably tempting to touch, so she gripped the arms of the chair more tightly and leaned back and away from him.

“What are you doing?” she asked, desperate.

“I needed a change of clothes from my desk.”

He stood and then leaned across the table directly in front of her, so his towel-covered thighs hovered near her as he grabbed a lollipop from a mug in the shape of some flat-nosed cat breed filled with them.

“Don't you have clothes at home?” she asked accusingly. He had no right to be so handsome and so close to her. He'd probably not even been home, but been out with one of the many women he was always rumored to be sleeping with. She stared at her own hand on the chair, gone white with lack of blood.

“Late night,” he murmured, standing back up and grinning down at her as though her heart wasn't racing faster than any engine. “Meet you at the door in ten.” Jaime unwrapped the lollipop and stuck it in his mouth and Brienne decided, as she watched him saunter out of the office, that maybe the little girls of the world would be better off being inspired by someone who wasn't rendered speechless at the sight of a little chest hair.

She rubbed both her hands down her face and exhaled. “Focus,” she told herself, though mostly what she was focusing on behind her closed eyes were the way his shoulder muscles had stretched and contracted right under her nose. “I am here to work,” Brienne announced to the empty room. “To learn what I can and build a resume for somewhere else and then get the seven hells away again.”

She just had to get away before she made a fool of herself in front of Jaime.

Jaime was a fool.
After Brienne had left with Bronn and the others the night before, he'd paced around the empty building, unreasonably mad at not being invited, too, even though he'd refused his crew's invitations for years. He'd invited himself over to Tyrion's instead; Tyrion, however, had had the audacity of not being home.

"Where are you?" he'd asked into the phone, and Tyrion had laughed in his ear.

"Out trying to get laid, big brother. Sounds like you should try it, too."

"Don't you have work tomorrow?"

"I do, and I'll be much happier about it if I get laid tonight. What about that new mechanic of yours? Tried her out?"

"I didn't hire her to fuck her," Jaime had said, incensed.

"The Hound says she's ugly but very tall, do you think she'd be interested in a man my size? I could be just the right height for her, you know. Tongue-level."

Jaime had hung up without another word and left in a pique, getting on his motorcycle to drive away the restlessness. The hills around the outskirts of King's Landing were a welcome, winding challenge that he knew would be deserted at night. There were few lights outside of the solitary beam of his headlight and the half-moon, but he took the corners tight and fast, their twists familiar to him from endless nights like this, wind rushing over his body, the growl of the engine between his legs deeper than his car's. He loosed the throttle and leaned into the curves and focused only on the road unfolding in his small light in the darkness. Halfway through the night when he'd stopped by the side of the road to relieve himself and pop in a new piece of gum, he'd seen the message from Brienne and gaped at it.

"Fuck me?" he'd said to the crickets and the stars. He tried to imagine the very serious Brienne Tarth cursing at him in person, those words falling from her thick lips, and he wondered if he should have fucked someone tonight instead, maybe Melara since he'd just been with Taena. They were both always willing and welcoming and the constant crunch of racing season activities would be here soon enough to make those opportunities rare. But it was already after midnight and getting to either of their houses would put him after three in the morning, so he pushed on to Rosby.

Rosby had greeted him as the sun peeked over the horizon, a town much smaller than King's Landing, just a pit stop on the way to something bigger. Jaime stopped to gas up his bike and stared down the main road back out of Rosby, the one that would take him to Antlers or Maidenpool and from there wherever he wanted to go, him and his motorcycle and the uncomplaining road, just for a few days. But his father would take his missing even a single day of preseason as reason enough to yell about his every failure for a month; multiple days may finally convince him to cut Jaime loose and he wasn't ready to capitulate to Tywin Lannister. Not when Jaime could feel in his bones this season could be something remarkable.

So Jaime had turned his motorcycle back towards King's Landing and driven straight to the garage. He hadn't even realized Brienne was there until after he'd had his shower and he stood outside the office, watching her through the window. She'd been so intent on what she was reading, her brow furrowed in concentration, her long, thick fingers surprisingly delicate as she turned the page. What he should have done was leave her be and put back on the clothes he'd worn last night.

Jaime was terrible at doing what he should.

Now he was suffering for it, unable to stop thinking about her in his chair, him kneeling at her feet.
When he'd bent down to get his clothes he'd been distracted by how much leg she had, unable to even fit both of them under his desk so the one nearest Jaime had been bent and slightly opened. An invitation in a willing woman, but he suspected Brienne would have dropped dead of embarrassment or disdain before she meant it for him. It didn't stop him thinking about the possibilities, though. Jaime ground down on his lollipop while Brienne hovered over the lock putting in her fingerprint.

“Will you stop chewing on that?” she muttered, not even looking at him. “You sound like a wood chipper.”

He chomped down, cracking the candy into shards in his mouth and she glared at him over her shoulder. “What's the matter, Wrench, sensitive ears?”

Brienne went stiff. “What did you call me?”

“Wrench, like you're a wrench in my ability to have a good day.”

“My name is Brienne,” she grumbled, focusing on the door again. It clicked open and dragged both of them back to the most important matter at hand: Jaime's car.

“Always close the door firmly behind you,” he told her as he pushed past her to get inside first.

“I see the honeymoon phase is over.”

“We're not married, Wrench, we're partners.”

She frowned at him. “Isn't that basically the same thing?”

Jaime snorted, threw the now barren lollipop stick in the trash. “Not in my experience. Come on, I want you to do a review and tell me what needs to be adjusted for this year's regs.”

Brienne approached his car as reverently as the first time and Jaime felt that same warm punch in his chest at the way her face opened and poured out her admiration for his beautiful girl. He'd never call the car that in anyone's hearing, but on race day, just before the engines roared, he'd mute the mic and whisper it to her like an invocation. His new chief mechanic seemed to be feeling the same if the way she ran her hand over top of the intake was any indication.

They worked placidly enough for awhile, Brienne walking around the car, opening it up to examine it more closely, always with deft and gentle hands. She would briefly call out a change to him and he'd put it in the laptop before watching her again. Brienne had questions, too, thoughtful and probing ones and he was glad when Bronn came in to take up answering them. She was sharp and in an hour was already a level deeper than he felt comfortable tackling alone.

Jaime left them talking chassis and found the building had filled up while he and Brienne had been with the cars. Engineers and mechanics and even a few executives, all ready to start another season. He nodded to those who were his own crew and the rest he blew past. They were hired by and worked for his father and they were not on his side, no matter what Tywin Lannister told the media about 'one team' and 'we all fight for each other.' They were the ones who would use their data reports on race day trying to get him to slow down so Lancel could have a lap just to help Lannister Corp climb up the constructor rankings, no matter what it did to Jaime's race.

Lancel himself was glad handing away Jaime saw, and when their eyes met over the cubicle walls he shot Jaime his fakest smile.

“Cousin!” Lancel shouted, everyone looking up. “Happy first day of the preseason!”
“Second day for me,” Jaime drawled back without stopping.

Lancel's smile turned bitter for an instant. “Heard you got a new number one mechanic. She any good?” he asked, giving the words a lascivious undertone.

“Best mechanic in Westeros,” Jaime said firmly.

“Mm. I've never heard of her.”

“You're just there to block other cars for me, so I wouldn't expect you to.”

Lancel glared at him and Jaime smiled sweetly before finally reaching his office door and escaping inside. He watched Lancel go back to glad-handing with a new tightness to his thin lips. Jaime muttered a quiet curse before closing the blinds on the whole charade. He'd hear about this later from his father and uncle even though it was nothing anyone who'd been on the team last year would be surprised by.

Jaime spent the rest of his day locked in his office, going through emails and appointments, watching his calendar fill up with public appearances, test days, fittings, training sessions, meetings with sponsors, and the thousand other non-racing activities required of a professional driver. All he really wanted was to get back to his car, sit with his team and go over the details, argue with Brienne over the minutiae while her blues eyes went from eager to enraged and back again.

There was a knock at his door and he saw Brienne through the window as though he'd summoned her.

“Come in,” he called, closing his laptop and settling back in his chair. His stomach rumbled, reminding him he'd worked through lunch.

“I hope I'm not interrupting you.”

“You are but I needed an interruption. How's it going?”

She handed him a sheet of paper with neat writing covering most of it. “We made some last decisions on the tires and wanted to run them by you. Bronn is out talking to engineers about changes to your car, some from the new requirements, like the new light, some things he thinks could be fixed from last year.”

“You've been productive.”

Brienne frowned down at him. She really was startlingly tall, especially when he was seated. He wondered how it would look from the car, where he was even lower to the ground. “I came here to work, Mr. Lannister.”

“It was just an observation,” Jaime said, lifting an eyebrow. “When are you going to just call me Jaime, Wrench?”

“When you call me Brienne. They provided lunch for us,” she continued. “Did you get any?”

“No, mom.”

Her cheeks reddened, but she held out a waxed paper square. “I saved you a sandwich,” she muttered.

Jaime took it and felt like a heel. “Race weekends I have a routine but the rest of the time I forget
“I'll keep that in mind,” she said and he knew somehow she would and it made him shift in his chair, uncomfortable with the small act of thoughtfulness. As she'd said back on Tarth: she didn't even know him. He was desperate for a cigarette, for the feel of smoke held for a long moment in his lungs choking out all the good air, anything to distract himself from the quiet purr in his heart.

“You don't have to watch me eat it, I am an adult,” he said sharply.

Her eyes flashed. “Adults take care of their basic needs.”

“I'm sure you floss twice a day and never leave the toilet seat up.”

“I'm sure you're wearing week-old underwear.”

“Your a terrible bore. No wonder your father was eager to pawn you off on me,” he said and she went rigid and almost purple and he had the briefest sense he was in danger of getting punched in the face.

He did not spare a thought for why that idea excited him.

“Bronn wanted you to give us your concurrence on the tires tonight,” she said between clenched teeth. “We're meeting in conference room two to finish talking about large scale timelines for the car launch. You can drop them off there.” She turned her tall body in a smooth motion and barely slowed down to open and then slam the door shut again behind her.

“Perfect start to the season,” Jaime muttered. He grabbed the sandwich and got back to work, each bite tasting like a reprimand.

The rest of the week went no better. Every time he swore he wouldn't pick at Brienne, the second she opened up even a little to him he would snap at her, like her kindness was a poison. She was everywhere, as she should be, and even though he tried to escape by studying last year's performances and taking interviews on the phone, they ran into each other constantly; twenty times a day where Jaime could prove just how much more of a jerk he could be.

She held the door open for him one morning and he called her “my knight in shining armor” in a sarcastic tone that made her growl. She offered to walk him through what the engineers had been doing with the airflow valve and he snapped that he didn't need her to translate for him to dummy driver speak. When he walked down the hall, head down over a track report that he really could have used her input on, she'd asked how he was and he'd snarled “fine” in a tone that held no politeness and had made her swallow hard and snap back “I was, too, until ten seconds ago.”

Jaime was getting sick of himself and she must have, too, because her kindness had been entirely absent the last day, just a cold, professional wall and 'Mr. Lannister' delivered in a cold, professional voice.

He worked late, got in early, and by Friday night was a disheveled, exhausted mess slumped over the laptop in his office as he watched everyone else shutting down their computers for the night. Jaime wanted to go to the gym in the other building, but he'd discovered on Wednesday Brienne used it after work, so he decided to wait in his office until she was likely to be gone. He was definitely not hiding and he would yell at anyone who suggested it.

As his laptop clock turned to seven pm, Bronn came in without knocking and glared down at him. “What the fuck is wrong with you?”
Jaime blinked and held out his hands. “Where do I start?”

“Don't give me that shit. Why are you treating Brienne like you’ve got a personal vendetta against her?”

“I'm not-” but he stopped because he and Bronn both knew he'd just be lying. “I don't know,” he said instead. “Doesn't she irritate you?”

“She's a fuckin' mechanical genius, Pod already follows her around like a puppy, and she treats the rest of us respectfully even though gods know they don't deserve it. What part of that is irritating?”

Jaime glared out the window at her empty desk. “The rest of it. She argues constantly.”

“Isn't arguing your love language?”

“She brought me a sandwich!” Jaime said, as though it didn't make him sound like a three-year old having a tantrum.

“Sounds terrible for you.”

“She must want something,” Jaime protested.

“She wants you to eat, you stupid cunt.”

“Did you just come here to harangue me?”

“Yes!” Bronn leaned down, putting his hands flat on Jaime's desk. “I don't know how you managed it, but you found a real diamond here. Don't break her before she gets a chance to shine.”

“I really enjoy these talks. Anything else?”

Bronn glared down at him, but stood again and crossed his arms over his chest. “Any leads on a race engineer?”

“What do you think?” Jaime grumbled. “Who wants to spend that much time with me?”

“Not me, that's for fucking sure. But I know someone who would.”

Jaime smirked at Bronn. “By the time Pod told me what I needed to hear I'd be three laps around the course.”

“Not Pod, you dipstick. Brienne.”

“Make her race engineer? Are you really that desperate to be chief mechanic?”

“I don't want that kind of stress. Why can't she be both?”

“Aren’t you the one that told me one minute ago to not break her? She has no experience at that level. It's bad enough I've yanked her from F3 to this.”

Bronn lifted an eyebrow. “If you'd get your head out of your ass for one second you'd see that jump has been little problem for her.”

“She can't be chief mechanic and race engineer anyway.”

“Why not?”
“No one's ever done both in a single season. It's just not how this works.”

“Yes, because that's what everyone thinks when they hear your name: Jaime Lannister, Conformist,” Bronn said dryly.

Jaime pursed his lips. “I will find a race engineer and it will not be Brienne Tarth.”

“It's your call, boss.”

“It is,” Jaime insisted. “Mark my words, Bronn, I'll have a lead on a race engineer by Monday.”

Bronn snorted. “Okay, boss.” He headed for the door. “Good night, boss. Don't forget to eat, boss.”

“Stop calling me that!” Jaime shouted after his disappearing form. Bronn flipped him off through the window.

Jaime opened his laptop and then almost immediately slammed it shut again. “Fuck,” he said to the room. How was he going to find a race engineer – the person he'd be most tightly tied to the entire season – when everyone he'd even looked at for the role had put up Not Interested signals? Race engineers didn't just grow on trees or appear in random mechanic shops. They required a special blend of people and technical skills as well as grace under pressure and the ability to make fast decisions that were almost impossible to find.

Jaime imagined Brienne for a moment as the only voice in his ear as he was in the thick of a race, his sole link to the team and the world outside of his cockpit, feeding him data points and racing suggestions and encouragement. Would she be able to take in all of the different teams' input and pick what mattered most? Would she push back against Tywin's edicts to put Lannister Corp before Jaime's own dreams? Jaime pressed his fingertips into the smooth wood of his desk. She'd probably just berate him for not making a clean run.

“It will not be Brienne Tarth,” he said to his empty office, and opened up his laptop again to email a fresh set of contacts for leads.

Brienne slept in Saturday until the now luxurious hour of seven-thirty in the morning and woke feeling groggy with more sleep than she'd had for a week. Since the Sunday night drinking session she'd spent her evenings poring over technical manuals, regs, and the wealth of past Lannister Corp experience documented in neatly arranged files. Bronn had put together what he considered critical knowledge for her but Brienne had ranged further, wanting to know as much as possible.

It didn't make a damn bit of difference to Jaime. Every time she was friendly towards him, every time she made a helpful suggestion, every time she was anything except reserved and professional, he'd snarl or snark at her and call her 'Wrench' until she'd wanted to push him into the path of one of the big trucks that occasionally rumbled down the road outside. He didn't treat any of the rest of the crew like that; he wasnt friendly to any of them but he wasn't as biting, either, and even his clear hatred for Lancel was more a clean sword's edge than what he did with her. With Brienne it was smartass comments meant to push her away, even when they'd shared a moment of connection over something about the car only a moment before. It was exhausting.

She'd known he would be difficult based on the interviews she'd watched through the years; she had not expected him to be so personally obnoxious. It was annoying that the obnoxiousness didn't make him any less handsome, either, as though it added that alluring flash to his bright green eyes or the sharpness to his predator smile.

“What am I doing?” Brienne sighed to her ceiling, before rolling out of bed for a leisurely shower.
and breakfast. She'd squirreled away the free food they offered all week so that she'd been able to make it to today, her first official day off. She had a list of chores as long as her arm, starting with a visit to the market for fresh food.

When she got out of the shower, there were a series of texts from Jaime.

'Are you there?'

'Call me asap'

'Wrench?'

'You better be dead or my father will kill you for not showing up'

Brienne frowned. She knew today was an off day, the guys had not stopped talking about their plans all afternoon as they hunched over small engine parts and diagrams.

'It's Saturday' she texted back. 'No work for me.'

His response was swift. 'Do you actually read your email?'

A cold chill washed through her and she hurriedly opened her laptop. Busy with her studying and the meetings with the team, Brienne had let her mail reading slide until this weekend, assuming if there was anything important someone would just flag her down in person, which had proven to be true so far. Scanning subject lines quickly, she saw a calendar invite from Wednesday that she'd blown right by, and when she opened it her heart sank. It was an invitation to attend Westeros Sports Network's 'Meet the Team' taping for Lannister Corp, and there was her name on the Required line. She glanced at the time and the location and groaned, already texting Sandor that she needed him, fast.

'Five minutes away' he texted back and she thanked the Seven as she rushed around finding the cleanest outfit she had left – laundry had also been on her To Do list today – brushed her teeth and hair and glared at her reflection in the mirror. She should have made it a clause in the contract that she wouldn't have to do any interviews. She didn't have the quick wit for print or the face for TV. Why had she even been invited? Chief mechanics almost never did interviews, and certainly not this early in the season. A shiver of nerves and fear went through her. What if this is all some joke? a dark thought warned her. Like before.

Griffin team may have thought her a freak, but she'd come to them first. It beggedared belief that Jaime Lannister would go out of his way to seek her out uninvited, pay her good money, get her an apartment, and give her access to his car and his team's secrets just to make fun of her publicly, when he hadn't even known she existed before a few weeks ago. Had it really only been that long?

Her life was already so different here that Tarth felt like a nostalgic dream and not the home she would return to in a year.

'On my way' she sent Jaime after she'd thrown herself into Sandor's car outside.

'Tell the Hound to hurry. Lancel's almost done and then Tywin and then us.'

If Sandor were any sort of dog today, he was a greyhound, zipping and careening through the sleepy Saturday morning streets of King's Landing like chasing a rabbit. They got there ten minutes before even her wildest expectations and she could have kissed him in relief if he'd have let her. As it was he just grunted at her effusive thanks and sped off again as soon as she was out the door.

Brienne pressed a hand against her jumping stomach and hurried inside. The receptionist looked
happy to see her, but she was the only one as make-up and hair hustled her into and out of their chairs and to the associate producer who glared at her and shoved her over to Jaime.

Hair and make-up and been kind to him, and the shadow of a beard was so perfectly formed on his sharp jaw she wondered if someone had painted it there. In his crisply pressed tan slacks and black polo shirt open at the throat he was almost impossible to look at, like some creature from fairy tales that blinded people, except with handsomeness not ugliness.

That, she thought glumly, was more her deal.

“Morning,” he said when she halted. He looked her up and down with a discerning glance, and quickly looked back towards Tywin who was wrapping up. “Good choice.”

Brienne had selected a women's jumpsuit of deep blue that she knew complimented her eyes, brought some color to her pale skin, and made the most of her legs, which she'd often thought were a hit or miss body part; sometimes she thought they looked long and elegant and the rest of the time she felt like an overly tall flamingo. But it was the nicest outfit she had outside of the black cocktail dress she'd bought just in case. The make-up lady had applied a pale rose blush to her cheeks and darker lipstick that brought out the thickness in her lips in a way that made Brienne self-consciously press them together to make them smaller.

She watched Tywin as he finished his interview, curious about the man who'd invoked such a strong response in his own son. He looked to be in his late 50s and athletically built, with the same strong nose Jaime had, his hair shaved close to his head in the manner of a man who didn't have time or inclination for the disorder and nuisance of hair styling or aging. Everything about him was tightly controlled, and his ramrod straight posture in the interview chair didn't make him look uncomfortable, it made him look like a lord being tended to. There was no softness to him at all, even as he thanked Melisandre for the interview.

“What do we do?” she whispered as Tywin stood and took off his microphone.

“You didn't talk to PR did you?”

Brienne made a face. “When would I have had time?”

“Just answer the lady's questions and try not to give away any of our secrets.” Jaime straightened when Tywin walked up. “Father.”

“I hear you're giving up smoking. You should talk about that if you think you can actually do it.” Tywin gave Brienne a once over similar to his son's, but his green eyes entirely lacked Jaime's natural warmth. “You're a tall one. The new mechanic.”

“Yes, sir. Thank you for the opportunity.”

“That was all Jaime's doing. I would have hired someone with more experience if they would have agreed to work with him.”

Jaime went as tense as an ignition coil and, she imagined, just as ready to spark. “You insulted both of us in one swipe, father. Well hit.”

“Don't take it so personally.”

“With you? I never do.” Brienne could see Jaime's jaw clenching underneath the stubble. “I'm sure Lancel will appreciate you talking him up so much, even though he'll never live up to it.”
Tywin looked unamused, his features carved from ice. “I'm used to family members never living up to my expectations,” he said. “Ms. Tarth.” He nodded his head curtly and stalked away, people clearing a path before him without a word.

Jaime stared at his back, daggers of fury and hurt. “Is he what you expected from the book?”

“No,” Brienne said quietly. “He's much worse.”

Jaime's chin came up and he looked at her, startled, his eyes searching hers. The pain dimmed, the tight lines of his forehead smoothed, and Brienne felt pulled in by the warmth he'd seemed so desperate to deny her this week unless they were talking about his car. Jaime swallowed and she was distracted by the movement of his tanned throat.

“Jaime Lannister!” A familiar voice cut between them, followed by a beautiful woman with long, shockingly red hair. Melisandre van Houten, lead Formula 1 reporter for WSN, floated over, took Jaime's hands in hers and kissed him on both cheeks.

“Melisandre,” he said, giving her a charming smile. “It's good to see you.”

“That would be a first for you, darling. Are you going to behave yourself today?”

“As long as you don't give me a reason not to.”

“So no, then.” She turned and took one of Brienne's big hands in her two much smaller ones. “Brienne Tarth. I have been so looking forward to meeting you.” She smiled and it looked sincere.

“I'm excited to be here; I've watched you for years,” Brienne said.

“Not too many years, I hope,” Melisandre said with a throaty laugh. Brienne had always wanted a laugh like that, sexy but still welcoming. “Come, let's get you set up. We don't usually have mechanics for this segment, but Jaime insisted we invite you.”

Brienne glanced over at him and he shrugged. “I hate doing these alone.”

They got settled in the chairs with their microphone packs and the make-up woman came over one more time to frown at Brienne's face and try to salvage something, wiping off some of the lipstick and applying a thick eyeliner. She stepped back, tilted her head, and nodded, looking pleased. “Great eyes,” she said before disappearing again.

When Brienne looked over at Jaime he was watching her intently, his lips slightly parted. “Is it terrible?” she whispered.

“No,” he whispered back. “She's right.”

The associate producer called them to attention, interrupting any further discussion, and they were off.

“Welcome back to Meet the Team: Lannister Corp Racing. Our next guest is one of the most talented and infamous drivers in the entire sport, Jaime Lannister. Welcome, Jaime.”

If she hadn't been sitting right next to him, Brienne likely would never have known the way his whole body had tensed at Melisandre's introduction, and his roguish smile betrayed none of the feelings she'd seen as his fingers had tightened almost imperceptibly on his knees. “Always a pleasure,” he said lightly.
“We have an unexpected guest with you today, and someone whose mere presence is already making news in racing circles: your new chief mechanic, Brienne Tarth.”

Brienne swallowed and nodded. “Thank you for having me,” she said quietly, trying to ignore the cameras and the bright lights already making her sweat.

“Brienne, you're the first woman chief mechanic in Formula One history, and it seems like you've come out of nowhere. Tell me how you got here.”

“Well, I do have some experience in F3,” she started, awkward, wishing she'd prepared at all, when Jaime stepped in.

“Lannister Corp were not the only ones interested in Brienne,” he said. “Robb Stark knew how good she was, too. We just managed to convince her it was better to join a winning team.” His smile was bright and slightly feral.

Melisandre lifted one elegant eyebrow. “I see the competition is starting early this year.”

“I always play to win.”

“And you think Brienne will give you the edge you need to finally win the World Championship you've spent so many years failing to achieve?”

Jaime's jaw clenched. “I think everything will come together for us this year.”

Melisandre glanced down at her notes, looked back up, and smiled. “It seems like you're missing one last piece of the puzzle. Once you select someone, you'll be on your fourth race engineer in five years. Do you think that turnover has affected your ability to make it all the way to number one?”

“No,” Jaime said tightly. The ease and charm had drained entirely from him and he had the furious look of a cornered lion with nothing to do but fight. “I think bad luck and bad hiring decisions have been our biggest problems.”

“You don't think your own driving and copious penalties have had any impact?”

Brienne leaned forward. “I've been a Formula One fan my entire life,” she said before Jaime could speak. “I used to watch Arthur Dayne as a child and I remember how he handled his car. I'm sure you remember his famous White Harbor loss years ago?”

“And Jaime won that race,” Melisandre said, her eyes widening again with understanding.

“Exactly. I don't know what he was thinking of course, I was just an observer then, but I saw right
away what should have happened and didn't because of positioning and select use of braking. That was all due to his driving.”

“Well,” Melisandre said, leaning back and looking pleased, “it looks like you chose your new mechanic well, Jaime.”

Brienne chanced a look at him, expecting to see him annoyed she'd interrupted or blandly teasing for her using her fan knowledge in his defense, but instead he seemed thunderstruck, as though she'd just appeared next to him out of thin air like some magician's trick.

“Indeed I did,” he said, his voice soft. He shook himself a little and smiled at Melisandre, a warm, sincere curve of the lips that made his eyes glow in the lights, made Brienne's heart glow inside her. “Indeed I did.”

The rest of the interview was uneventful, Melisandre asking generic questions about plans for the car launch, expectations of the season, and searching for any bit of news they would let slip. Jaime, relaxed and in control again, answered almost all of them and Brienne was happy to let him, chipping in only when he encouraged her to speak. Once it was all done, Brienne stood quickly and Melisandre hurried to her.

“You were wonderful,” she said, taking Brienne's hands again. Her nails were smooth and red against Brienne's pale, rough skin. “That bit about comparing Jaime to Dayne will be on every racing site for weeks.”

“Oh,” Brienne said; she felt Jaime watching her again. “Thank you for the interview,” she directed to Melisandre.

“I'd love to talk with just you at some point, get more into being the first woman chief mechanic. It's an important milestone for the sport.” Melisandre leaned forward and lowered her voice conspiratorially. “All of us ladies in racing are secretly rooting for you.” She squeezed Brienne's hands and turned to Jaime. “Keep this one around, she's the best part about your team.”

“People keep suggesting that,” he said with a throwaway grin. But when Melisandre bid them farewell, he turned to Brienne, his features pulled tight. “Why did you do that?” he asked. He wasn't angry but he wasn't happy either; there was something dark and wild to him, his muscles tight.

She frowned. “I'm on your team, Mr. Lannister. It's my job to defend you.” He stared at her, his eyes deep and grasping, and she looked away, afraid to venture too far into them. “It was the truth, anyone could have seen it,” she added hurriedly. “If there's nothing else here, I really should be going. I had plans for today.”

Jaime was quiet for several seconds. “Don't let me keep you,” he finally said, sounding more like himself and when she glanced at him again, the sharp-edged wryness was back in his smile. Brienne relaxed seeing it. “See you Monday, Wrench.”

Brienne thought of the look in his eyes all weekend and as she was falling asleep Sunday night in clean clothes and with a full stomach, she realized why she couldn't let it go: Jaime had been, in that instant, hopeful – and terrified of it.
January (Part 3)

Chapter Summary

“Focus,” Jaime exhaled loudly, a reminder he was tired of giving himself around her. Brienne was still annoying and her lips were too big and she disliked him; nothing good would come of imagining anything more. He adjusted his shorts and added extra weight to his sets until he was covered in sweat, breathing hard, and too exhausted to be thinking inappropriate thoughts about Brienne Tarth.

Chapter Notes

I finished another future chapter in one week instead of two! Some of the upcoming chapters are going to be big emotionally so those will take the full two weeks which means I won't post these finished chapters for two weeks so I don't get backed up later, but here's the next chapter a week early again.

Jaime spent all weekend in a haze. Between drinking, smoking two ill-advised cigarettes, chewing more gum than an adult man should, and staring blearily at his laptop as he followed endless trails trying to find his next race engineer, finally leaving his apartment Monday morning felt like emerging from a strange, smelly chrysalis. Jaime left an extra large tip for his cleaners and then went straight to the gym. When he arrived, already dressed in workout shorts and a Lannister Racing t-shirt, he saw Brienne inside doing pull-ups.

Brienne, who had haunted him all weekend with her sincerity and her belief. She had defended him without hesitation. He hadn't had to order her to, or beg her. She’d just done it, because Melisandre had been wrong and she couldn’t let that lie.

She was using the tallest bar and still she had to have her feet curled up behind her when she lowered herself using her long arms. Her back was to him and he allowed himself just a moment to admire the broad muscles there, the way her biceps went round and tight as she pulled herself up and then how they lengthened letting her body back down. She’d looked nervous under the lights, throwing herself in front of Melisandre's insinuations, but here she looked in total, confident control. She had a nice ass, too, he could see now that she wasn't in a jumpsuit or baggy pants, and her legs were all pale skin and long, shapely muscles. The blood in his head started rushing downward so he tore his eyes away and slammed the door shut and she dropped quickly from the bar.

“Mr. Lannister,” she said, breathing hard. Her blue eyes shone in her sweaty, blotchy face. “I thought you worked out at night?”

“I thought you did, too,” he said. “Will you at least drop the 'mister' part? It reminds me of my father.”

Brienne pursed her lips but she nodded. “Very well,” she agreed, and he felt buoyed by such an easy win first thing in the morning. “Did you have a nice weekend?” she asked, cautious, and he
felt guilty again for how he'd treated her last week.

“It was a weekend,” he said. “The interview airs tonight.”

“So soon?”

“Melisandre wanted to get it out there so she pushed us up to be the first one.” Jaime smiled triumphantly. “You've already helped me beat Robb Stark and we haven't even gotten on the track yet.”

Brienne went lightly red down her neck and looked away. “The track is where it really matters,” she said quietly.

Jaime rolled one shoulder in a shrug and side-stepped to the mat to bend down and touch his toes, starting his brief stretching routine. He rubbed his hands down his calves to ease the tightness and exhaled slowly, the burn fading away. “Car launch in three weeks. Will we be ready?”

When she didn't answer right away he turned his head and tilted it up – and up, and up – her legs to her face where she was blinking at him and chewing her bottom lip furiously. He stood too quickly and felt slightly dizzy.


“I'm fine, it's fine.” She was even redder now and it disappeared down beneath her tank top. “I just remembered I need to answer some emails before work about launch preparations. I'll see you later.”

Brienne turned hard on her heel and hurried for the women's shower, leaving Jaime with the empty gym and his own confusion. She'd clearly not been telling him the truth; even a week in he could tell she was a terrible liar, too dedicated and good-hearted to be as devious as all the other people he knew. For a brief, spiraling moment he considered following her, demanding to know what was really going on, but he might catch her undressing, probably down to her sports bra and panties and even he knew that was wrong, though he felt his cock stir when he imagined her bright and furious eyes when he barged in. As staid as Brienne might be, she wouldn't meekly flee or demure or even throw herself at him. What she would do was stand and push back and get his blood pumping with her stubborn, freckled face, her thick body mostly exposed.

“Focus,” Jaime exhaled loudly, a reminder he was tired of giving himself around her. Brienne was still annoying and her lips were too big and she disliked him; nothing good would come of imagining anything more. He adjusted his shorts and added extra weight to his sets until he was covered in sweat, breathing hard, and too exhausted to be thinking inappropriate thoughts about Brienne Tarth.

They didn't cross paths again until later that afternoon, when Jaime's uncle Kevan called a meeting in the big warehouse space for the entire Lannister Corp team. Everyone had started last week but Kevan had been on the last leg of his vacation so his welcome to the season speech was today.

Even in the middle of the crowd, Brienne stood out and Jaime pushed his way to stand next to her. She glanced over at him when he arrived, his shoulder lightly brushing hers given the tight quarters.

“Hope you're ready to go on stage, Wrench. They're going to want to present you,” he murmured and her eyes went big and round.
“No one told me that,” she hissed.

“They're not known for being considerate.”

Brienne pushed her hair back and down, tucking it behind her ears, which only made her awkward features stand out more. “Can't I just stay here and wave?”

“If you pretend your leg is broken.” She looked so nervous and uncomfortable he added impulsively, “I'll go up with you.”

“Can you do that?”

“I'm Jaime fucking Lannister, Wrench, I can do whatever I want.” He smiled brightly at her and was rewarded with a slight crinkling of her eyes as she smiled a little back.

The crowd shifted and went quiet as Kevan took the stage, microphone in hand. He was all round curves where Jaime's own father was sharp lines, but they had the same calculating green eyes. “Welcome to the new season, everyone!”

Around Jaime, everyone clapped and cheered, even Brienne. He folded his arms across his chest in silence and she shot him a quick, disapproving look.

Kevan droned on for awhile about everything good from last season, not even mentioning Jaime's name at all, though he dropped Lancel's several times. Jaime gripped his own upper arms with tighter and tighter fingers. Brienne shifted next to him and he could feel her trying not to watch him and his reaction. Her pity only made him angrier.

“With all the good we've done,” Kevan said, “Lannister Corp Racing is poised now to have our best season yet. The World Champion Constructor title is in our reach!” The crowd cheered loudly again, Kevan beaming out at them. “We've got mostly the same fantastic crews from last season,” he paused to let them applaud themselves, “and added some new faces to tip us over the edge. There's one in particular I'd like to introduce you to today, our new chief mechanic for car number 8, the first female chief mechanic in Formula One history, hired by Twyin Lannister himself,” Jaime ground his teeth, “Brienne Tarth! Brienne, come on up here!”

She looked to Jaime again and he nodded, gesturing for her to precede him. He followed in her good-sized wake and watched the faces as he walked by, noting how the women were whooping and beaming at her, many of his crew were doing the same, and almost everyone else watched with suspicion or downright derision. When he looked up at Kevan, his uncle was practically salivating as she walked up, though Jaime knew it had nothing to do with Brienne's looks or skills, but what she would do for the company's reputation and publicity. Jaime wanted to drag her from the room back to her shop on Tarth and leave her there with her dreams and her innocence. But she was already on stage and they'd signed a contract and he could only be at her side to shield her from the worst of it.

Kevan finally noticed Jaime had come all the way on stage with her and he lowered his microphone while Brienne waved shyly at the crowd as the applause died down.

“What are you doing?” Kevan whispered furiously.

“She is my Chief Mechanic,” Jaime said loudly enough for the room to hear. The last applause ceased abruptly. “And I was worried you'd forgotten my name since I hadn't heard you say it once, dear uncle.”

There were a few laughs, the loudest from Bronn. Kevan narrowed his eyes but he plastered a fake
smile on his face and spoke into the microphone again. “Who could forget you, Jaime? What year is this in your second try at F1, nephew?”

“Five long, long years as part of your team, uncle.” He saw Brienne watching them with wide, concerned eyes. “We're not here to talk about me, though.”

“That's a first.” The room erupted in laughter and Jaime forced himself to join them, although what he really wanted was to shove Kevan off of the stage and hope his uncle broke several somethings when he hit the floor. “But my nephew is right, today we wanted to introduce Brienne and give her a chance to say a few words.”

“I really couldn't,” she demurred, her cheeks going as red as the Lannister Corp colors.

Kevan forced his microphone into her hands. “Come on, the ladies are waiting.”

Brienne looked helplessly at Jaime and he frowned. “Just say a few words,” he said quietly. “Anything at all and be done with it.”

She brought the microphone too close to her lips and when she spoke it was loud and echoed in the big room and everyone flinched. “Sorry,” she said, modulating her voice. “Thank you for the opportunity.” She started to lower the microphone and Jaime gave her a quick roll of his hand, indicating she should say something else. She was definitely going to need some PR training soon.

“Um, I look forward to working with you all and helping make this the best season ever,” she added, and the room applauded at the rote pablum. But Brienne was smiling and so was Kevan as he took the microphone back.

“Wonderful, thank you, Brienne. Dear friend of the Lannister Corp, Melisandre Houten, interviewed Brienne, Tywin, and our drivers for her 'Meet the Team' show and that is airing tonight on WSN! We'll make sure everyone gets home for the repeat viewing at least.” The crowd laughed knowingly. “I won't take up much more of your time today. I just have two last reminders: we'll start our regular weekly recap meetings after the first preseason race, and don't forget our big car launch after-party in two weeks. Someone needs to keep Amory from getting into the wine again, eh, Lorch?” Jaime rolled his eyes at the friendly hooting and laughter that accompanied it. Amory Lorch was one of his father's men, mediocre at his job with an ego that outstripped his skills and an appetite that outstripped anyone else's in Lannister Corp. “Good man, good man,” Kevan was saying. “Alright everyone, back to work. What do we say at Lannister Corp?”

“Howeas roar!” the crowd shouted back. Jaime glanced at Brienne, who'd remained onstage with him and Kevan. Her face was guarded but her eyes were shining as she looked out over the crowd. He scanned the crowd, too, saw a few men from Lancel's pit talking quietly with Martyn, their gazes flitting like nervous birds to Brienne and away again, and he resisted jumping down from the stage and proactively banging their heads together. Brienne had said she could handle it and he had bigger problems right now than a handful of gossiping douchebags.

But he kept an eye on her as she tromped down the stairs and re-joined his team, receiving backpats and good-natured ribbing from them as they all headed back to the garage to work, Martyn lingering at the edge in silence.

As promised, Brienne and the crew stayed late into the evening working hard on getting ready for car launch, but Sandor dropped her off at her apartment with enough time to take a shower and get some food before she collapsed on her small couch and tucked her feet up under her. She'd texted her father earlier to let him know about the interview and he'd sent her fifty texts as he watched the initial showing, telling her how good she looked, how smart her answers were, how much he
missed her but how happy he was she was there. Brienne had read the messages in the stall of the bathroom and barely held back tears.

Now, alone in the dark with just the quiet noise of the pre-show commercials turned low, Brienne wished more than ever he – or anyone – were here with her. Loneliness had been a companion but never a problem on Tarth. Islanders were fiercely protective independents, happy to take care of each other in a pinch and then leave each other alone when help was no longer needed, but there were always people nearby and Brienne had known their familiar faces her whole life, even if she'd had few she would call friend. And her father had been there for her and Galladon since her mother had died; even with his rotating girlfriends he was as constant and trusted a presence in her life as the Evenstar had been to her seafaring ancestors. Here in King's Landing, she could barely see the stars. Here, there were more people but they all felt further away, strangers that looked at her and saw only a freakishly tall, ugly woman in a sport that barely acknowledged women existed as more than sexy props. She hadn't missed the skeptical, condescending stares from the vast majority of the crowded room at Lannister Corp earlier that day, even though they were, supposedly, all one team. She was dreading the car launch afterparty, and the coming race days when her crew would start colliding with the other teams'. Especially Griffin's.

"It will be fine," she said to her empty apartment, and tried to distract herself by reading through her texts again. She noticed the last one she'd sent to Jaime, her drunken 'fuck you' that he'd shrugged off with surprising good humor that was even more surprising given the week that had followed. They'd held to a sort of uneasy truce today, mostly because they'd barely spoken except for the team meeting. Even after she'd hurried from the gym, flustered like some groupie by the sight of his muscled body going through routine stretches, he had gone up on stage with her to provide support. He'd hovered a bit the rest of the afternoon as they worked, and every time she looked at him he was watching her, though every time she caught him he only smirked and looked away.

For a fleeting moment she considered calling him, and then shook her head at herself. He'd done more of these interviews than any racer alive given his long career and notoriety; what would he care about her first one? He'd likely just make fun of her for making a big deal out of it and she couldn't take that tonight.

The familiar music of the show started and Brienne gripped her hands together tightly half in front of her face, barely able to look at herself as the interview began. But as she watched over the ridges of her knuckles, she had to admit her eyes did look nice with the eyeliner, distracting the viewer at least a little from how ungainly and uncomfortable she looked in the chair, or how big her hands were, or why on earth she gestured so much when she had so little to say. At least she didn't dwarf Jaime. He looked collected and handsome, though she noticed again the tension in his strong hands, the way he shifted in his seat at questions he didn't like, and the strange look he'd given her after her comparison between him and Dayne.

Half an hour later the interview mercifully ended and her phone lit up with messages. One from Podrick that said 'YOU DID GREAT!!!!' followed by an emoji of a corny-looking man throwing confetti; two from Bronn that said 'good interview Chief' and 'Dayne should have won that race, good call' that made her smile; another from her father that said 'I watched the repeat viewing! And recorded it too! We're getting a group together to watch it tomorrow!'; and a last, unexpected, message from Jaime, which she read almost tentatively. 'You did great' it said, 'made me look good' followed by a winking emoji. She blinked at it, uncertain how to take the last part when a follow-up message from him popped up as though he'd felt her confusion from miles away. 'I mean your story. You looked ok.'

"Thanks?" she said out loud to her phone.
It flashed again, another message from Jaime. 'You looked good. Blue is a good color on you.'

Brienne flushed and texted a quick 'thank you' response to all three of her coworkers before calling her father. He answered on the second ring.

“Darling!” She winced a little as his loud voice echoed over the line. “I saw your interview! Did you get my messages?”

“I did. I can't believe you stayed up to watch it again. You really think it was okay?”

“Are you kidding? It was fantastic. You looked so poised, and that thing about Dayne, that was so smart.” Brienne smiled softly at the floor. “I'm glad you called, I didn't want to bother you while you were still settling in but I'm really curious about how it's going.”

“It's harder than I expected,” she admitted. “But the crew is solid and they listen to me.”

“They'd be fools not to.”

Or just like most other men she'd met in her life, she thought. “We're preparing for car launch right now. It's a little over two weeks away.”

“Argella's going to come over and help me watch it online.”

Argella was their neighbor's daughter, a young whiz with technology who'd also helped Brienne's father with his new cell phone. “Tell her I said hi.”

“I will. When can you send me pictures of the car? Everyone's asking.”

“Not until launch day. They're very particular about what can and can't be shared. I'll find some time to take pictures of the outside of the building, though, and my desk.”

“I'd like that.” There was a brief pause and then he asked, “how has it been working with Jaime Lannister?”

Tumultuous, was her first thought. Aggravating. Annoying. An hourly roulette of whether he'd be nice to her or not. But also inspiring, the way he committed to the details. Exhilarating, when he took one of her suggestions after a long argument. And in those moments when their shared admiration of the car bound them together, it was the closest she'd ever been to feeling truly understood by someone other than her father.

“Complicated,” was what she told her dad now.

“Mm,” he grunted. “Remember he's just the driver. You're the chief mechanic, you own that car.”

The drivers she'd worked for had been like that in F3, but that was not how Jaime operated at all. His car was like an extension of him, a child, or a lover perhaps. Brienne remembered the way he'd drawn his fingers down the length of her car on Tarth, and the hairs on her arm stood up. “I have another early day tomorrow, I should get going,” she said, and a yawn cracked her mouth wide as though she'd planned it.

“Are you eating well? Getting enough sleep?”

“I'm doing fine, Dad, I promise. It's only been a week.”

“I know what the job is like, Brienne, what the demands of it are. You have to treat your body like any athlete – enough sleep, healthy food, exercise.”
“I'm getting plenty of exercise, they have a gym onsite.”

“Drink lots of water.”

“Dad,” she said with a laugh. “Stop. I can take care of myself.”

“You may be chief mechanic to them but you're still my daughter,” he said, his voice gruff and warm with love, and Brienne closed her eyes as though darkness would hold it closer. “Anyway,” he continued, “go get some sleep.”

“Good night, Dad.”

“Good night, darling. Call any time.”

She smiled again but as soon as she hung up, the emptiness of her apartment swarmed over her and took her smile with it.

Tuesday morning, there was no one else in the gym the entire time she was there, and when she walked into the offices a few of the engineers she'd never even talked to before greeted her, but there was no tart “morning, Wrench,” from Jaime and it irritated her that she felt its absence.

When she and the crew met to plan for their first pit stop training sessions, Podrick greeted her with a smile and a chocolate donut that looked like a tire.

“You were a-awesome,” he said cheerfully. “I told my m-mum I worked with you and sh-she wanted an autograph.”

Brienne's laugh ceased abruptly when he presented her with a printout of a screen capture from the interview to sign. “Oh gods,” she murmured covering her face with her hands. He'd got one where she was leaning forward slightly, one big hand waving to the side, looking like she was going to fight Melisandre. “Why on earth did you pick this shot?”

“Y-y-you look like a warrior. I like that ab-bout you.” He ducked his head, smiling shyly and she wanted suddenly to give him a hug. Instead she took the picture, asked for his mom's name, and signed it.

Bronn and the others filtered over, most of them congratulating her, although she could feel Martyn's disdain when he uttered, just loud enough he had to know she would hear, “she only got the interview because she's a girl.”

“And you're only here because you're a Lannister,” Bronn said cheerfully. “Now shut the fuck up and get the test room ready. All by yourself,” he added when Willem started off with him. “There's a good lad. The rest of you go check your email and take a piss, we'll meet in the test space in ten.” When they'd filtered off, he turned to Brienne. “What's your plan, Chief?”

“My plan?”

“For Martyn. He doesn't like you.”

“I'm aware of that,” she said dryly. “My plan is to do my job and make sure he does his. I don't need to be liked.”

“Good, because he's not the only one who doesn't,” Bronn said, blunt as usual.

“You don't have to like me, either.”
“Oh I like you fine,” Bronn said, “and so do most of the crew. Willem might like you better if it weren't for his cunt of a brother.” Brienne had ceased being surprised by Bronn's language and harsh judgments two days into working with him. He leaned forward and lowered his voice. “Lancel's crew talks pretty loud, though, and Martyn's listening. So are some of the engineers.”

“Talking doesn't bother me,” Brienne said softly. She'd heard enough taunts her whole life that she couldn't remember the last time someone had come up with something original. If she'd let those words stop her, she would have become a cave-dwelling recluse on Tarth years ago. “I just want everyone to work hard, I don't care if they call me names when they do it.”

Bronn considered her, and if he were some other person she might have said he looked sad. “You deserve better than that,” he said simply and shrugged, “but it's your life. I'm here if you need me to knock some courtesy into someone.”

“Thank you.” Brienne offered a quick, closed-mouth smile. “I need to go check email.” She hesitated and then asked as casually as she could, “is Lannister here today?”

“Which one?” he said with a barking laugh. “Can't take a shit without running into a Lannister here. But assuming you mean Jaime Lannister, I haven't seen him. The weeks before car launch the drivers are usually off getting exams and filming promotions and other poncy shit, he shouldn't be here much the next couple of weeks, if we're lucky. Pain in the ass always thinks he has better opinions about his car's engine than the actual mechanics.”

They started walking towards the cubicles together. “In my experience that's unusual.”

“It is. Unusual and damned annoying. I don't sit in the car and tell him how to drive, do I?”

Brienne coughed. Bronn had in fact told him exactly how to drive last week when they were talking about the track at Harrenhal and why they needed so many soft compound tires. “You take those corners like shit on the hards. If you had softs you could start your turn later,” Bronn had said.

“I start my turn when I need to and use the hard braking to refill the KERS.”

“But the softs would reduce the need for braking at all.”

“I'm sorry, how many years of driving experience do you have again?” Jaime had said and Bronn had grimaced but stopped arguing.

Bronn glanced at Brienne now and chuckled. “Your non-agreement is noted,” he said. “Me and Lannister go way back, even before the accident.”

“Really? You were on his team then?”

“I was on Aerys’.”

“Oh.” She stared down at the boring beige carpet. “That must have been wonderful, working for Aerys before...before.”

Bronn snorted. “You only say that because you never met him in person. I didn't talk to him much, I was just a tire man back then. He didn't deign to talk to us except to yell at us for not going fast enough. But even then Lannister wanted to know what was happening at every level, though he was a lot more of a shit about it.”

“That's hard to imagine,” Brienne muttered and Bronn laughed loudly.
“Age has made him bearable. Though not to you, I suppose.”

“No, not to me.”

“Mm.” Bronn halted at the entrance to his own cubicle a row over from hers. “My advice is you give him twice as much crap as he gives you until he realizes what an idiot he's being.”

“I don't know. I don't have your history with him. I've been here less than a month.”

Brienne thought of cold-eyed Tywin Lannister and grimaced. “Does Tywin even pay attention to what we're doing?”

“Only that we're winning. Mostly he's Jaime's problem, thank the Seven for that.”

Brienne moved around to her own cubicle and stared at Bronn's head bent over his laptop, using two fingers to hunt-and-peck type. Aerys had been his driver once upon a time, and rude or not, when you worked for a team that team became your life as long as you were with them. But here he was now with Jaime, even when the specter that Jaime had purposefully caused Aerys’ accident had never been totally exorcised. How did he look Jaime in the face every day, knowing what might be true and could never be proven except by Jaime himself? How was she going to do it? “Bonn,” she said, unable to swallow back the question, needing to hear his answer. She waited until he looked up. “Do you think he did it on purpose? The crash?”

Bonn's face shuttered, his brown eyes hardening. “You're new so I'll let that go, but if I find out you're asking anyone else that question, you'll discover just how much influence I have.”

Swallowing hard, Brienne nodded and sat down at her laptop, her face hot, Bronn's non-answer hovering between them.

The engineers were finalizing the last details before she and the team could finally put the car together for launch, so they spent the rest of the week in a blur of learning the complicated ballet of pit stops in preparation for the winter testing. Brienne had worked pits before, but every team had their own nuances, and it was those nuances where time would be gained or lost. Bronn kept her at a distance for a day or two, but the time crunch and the nature of their work together had him bringing her dinner by the middle of the week when she didn't have time to even leave the garage.

They slotted her into every role so she could see how they worked, had her taking off and putting on tires for so many hours Wednesday afternoon that she could barely lift her arms on Thursday so they put her on front jack until her back and shoulders were tight and her legs ached from standing. Every night she stayed up late catching up on what everyone else already knew from years of experience, and she was up early every morning to study tracks, past Lannister pits and races, and the nuances of every rule and regulation.

It wasn't just her work and her studying that kept her busy. Melisandre had been right that they played the interview clip everywhere; for a few days Podrick sent her links to blog posts debating whether what Brienne had said was even true, until she'd had to firmly tell him she didn't want to read anything else about herself. Her dad's forwards had been even worse. He didn't even read most of them first, just emailed her links whenever he found her name and after the third one insulting her looks and her lack of experience she auto-deleted anything he sent. The next day he sent her an email with 'SORRY!!!!!!' in the subject line, swearing he had no idea those men were saying 'such terrible, untrue things.' On top of that was a flood of media requests from networks and newspapers all over Westeros and beyond. Brienne ignored every one, putting up an out of
office notice that all questions should go to their communications team instead.

The only person it seemed she didn't hear from was Jaime. He was never anywhere she was and she was too busy to tell if he was even in the offices at all.

By Friday afternoon Brienne was weary and looking forward to a quiet weekend, likely the last one she'd have until the mid-season break. When she entered the garage for their final day of pit work, Bronn assigned her to the pneumatic tool. It was like a barely controlled bomb in her hands when she tested it before using it on the wheel.

“This has more power than I've used before,” she said.

“Every team has their own version. More air means more speed, just have to be strong enough to hold onto it,” Bronn explained.

“Not a job for a woman,” Martyn said. He was in charge of the pneumatic on the right front tire.

“I can do it,” Brienne said through clenched teeth. “Put the tire on.”

Martyn threw it on and Brienne jammed the pneumatic gun against the wheel nuts and held on as it whirred them into place in less than a second. She jerked the tool back off again and then smiled at Martyn, feeling almost feral in her success. He glared down at her.

“Now do it ten times,” he demanded.

They practiced taking the wheel on and off over and over, ten and then twenty and then thirty times in a row until her hands were all aching tendons and tender blisters, her knees sure to be purpled with bruises in the morning from pressing into the concrete, and Martyn was sweating and red-faced.

“That's enough,” Bronn barked as Martyn went to grab the tire yet again. “I think she's got it.”

The air gun clattered to the ground from Brienne's hands and she stood slowly from where she'd been alternating crouching and kneeling, her back screaming at her. She tried not to groan and instead exhaled in short puffs through her nose. Bronn looked her over and then addressed the team. “Next week is build week so get your useless asses out of here and cleaned up. I want to see you at dawn on Monday.”

Brienne let everyone else leave first before allowing herself a loud, pained moan when she and Bronn were alone in the room. He shook his head.

“Sounds like you should go home and take a hot shower.”

“That sounds amazing,” she sighed. “But I have to check on build progress.”

“Build progress will wait. Shower first, Doctor Bronn's orders.”

She snorted but her body was like one giant, clenched muscle and even that hurt. “Fine,” she said. “Shower first.”

Brienne walked stiffly back to her desk and packed up her things to take them home. It was quiet in the offices, almost everyone either in the engineering and test rooms this early in the evening or gone home themselves to relax for one of the last Friday nights they'd have free. Sandor sent her a response saying he'd be there in a bit, and she headed for the front door to wait in the cool, early evening air. It never got too cold in King's Landing, especially inland where it was more protected
from the sea winds, though she missed the taste of salt on the air, still half-expecting it every time she stepped outside.

She rolled her neck in a slow circle and massaged her own shoulder with weakened hands, not wanting to tighten up any more than she already was. The doors opened behind her and whoever it was stopped in silence. Her neck itched under the weight of a heavy stare. Brienne wasn't surprised to see Martyn when she looked, hands on his hips and his face twisted and ugly with anger. The two men from Lancel's crew that stood just behind him were unexpected though. They were all still dressed in their jumpsuits, which meant they'd probably followed her out here. The tense muscles she'd just released in her neck went steel again.

“What do you want?” she asked sharply.

“You shouldn't be here,” Martyn said.

Brienne took a long, slow breath, mostly to calm herself. “I'm just waiting for a ride.”

He sneered. “I mean with Lannister Corp. A woman with no experience and no connections? You must have fucked somebody to get this job.”

“I'm here because I'm a great mechanic.” She flexed her fingers slowly at her side.

“That's not what I heard,” one of Lancel's lackeys leered. He had thin brown hair pulled back in a short ponytail and a scraggly beard.

“Then you heard wrong,” Brienne said firmly. She'd had this same conversation when she'd first joined Griffin's team, though there it had happened in the garage, where there'd been more people and she hadn't been worn down and aching. Though she'd only been rising to his challenge, their afternoon practice had filled Martyn with jagged edges, pushing at the boundaries of his skin like rocks ready to tear open boats too near the shore. She glanced around casually, found the area quiet and empty and wasn't sure anyone would even hear her if she yelled. If she needed to punch her way out of this, she'd have to do it alone.

“Look at her, no one would fuck her anyway.” That was the other Lancel crew member, an older, bald man with tattoos creeping out from under his sleeves and collar.

“Is it my height or my shape or my face that makes me particularly unfuckable?” Brienne asked, pleased with how disaffected her tone was. She had learned early the best way to disarm her bullies was to use their weapons against herself, though sometimes the cut was deeper when she was wielding the sword on her own tender skin.

They hesitated, and she took the opening of their uncertainty to straighten to her full height. The three men tensed.

“Bronn's not here to defend you,” Martyn hissed.

“I don't need help defending myself. You think I haven't met dozens of men like you, all too scared and weak to not be intimidated by a girl being as good or better than them? I bet you wouldn't even fight me on your own.”

Martyn stepped nearer and time slowed down, her senses sharpening so she could see the sweat beading at his hairline, hear the crack of Baldy's knuckles, the distant hum of the highway. Brienne clenched her hands into fists at her side, balanced lightly on the balls of her feet.

“You think you're better than me?” Martyn asked in a low, furious tone.
She briefly considered her answer and decided she had little choice but to see this through if she weren't going to give him ground, and she'd frankly rather get beat in a fight than let him think he'd cowed her. She could use Martyn as a shield from the other two if they tried to all attack her at once, but they looked less eager to join him than they had a moment before. It seemed bitterly fitting that all the macho posturing she'd talked her way out of in the past would finally come to blows on Jaime Lannister's team. “I do.”

The front door banged open just as Martyn started to move and he stumbled to a halt, his hands halfway up, grabbing empty air. Brienne glanced past him and the others and saw Jaime there, eyes widening briefly.

“Am I interrupting something?” he asked, taking them all in. He shoved in between Lancel's two men to stand just off Martyn's shoulder, his gaze on Brienne.

It was Martyn who answered him. “No.”

“Because it looks like this might be my kind of dance, and Tarth doesn't seem to have a partner.” Jaime's voice was light, but it promised violence.

“Just working out some things,” Martyn said, stepping back and away from them both. He never stopped glaring at her, his anger boiling up in lines around his eyes and all along his forehead. “We're done for now.” He barely even looked at Jaime as he turned and pulled the door open again, Baldy and Scraggly leaving with him. When the door shut behind them and it was just her and Jaime in the deepening twilight, Brienne realized she was trembling slightly as the adrenaline receded and she sat down heavily on the curb before her tired legs gave way.

The last time Brienne had been in a fight was the year after Galladon died. The boys had been mad at her because she'd beaten them so often at karting, and she'd just been mad because the world had taken away almost every person she'd ever loved. It had felt good letting all of it go with her fists, though the broken nose hadn't helped her looks. When she came home covered in bruises and blood her dad had panicked and pulled her from karting and she never officially competed again, a seething ache that had dulled with time and her mechanic work.

She felt Jaime's stare but couldn't meet it, instead focusing on her knees and willing them to be still. Time picked up again, whirring too fast for her to catch hold.

“What the hell was that?” he demanded.

“Nothing,” she muttered. She'd been through enough moments like this before that she knew telling anyone about it only made things worse.

“Looked pretty tense for nothing.”

“Like Martyn said, we were just working out our differences.” Jaime stood in front of her and she stared at his calves, caught sight of the tips of his fingers as he drummed them against his thigh.

“You have to tell me if he does something,” Jaime said quietly. “He's Kevan's son so I can only do so much without any official report.”

Brienne's head shot up, and she was briefly surprised by the concern in Jaime's eyes. “Don't tell anyone. Please,” she added when he started to speak. “They were just dumb threats.”

“He looked like he was about to swing at you.”

She gestured briefly at herself. “Do I look like I can't take a hit?”
Jaime wasn’t amused. “He can’t just get away with attacking other team members.”

“Haven’t *you* hit team members?”

“Not for a long time,” he muttered.

“Don’t do this just because I’m a woman.”

“You stubborn-” Jaime exhaled loud through his nose. “Why do you antagonize me?”

“Antagonize *you*? You can’t even call me by my name.”

“You can’t even accept a little help when you’ve been threatened.”

“Nothing happened. What do you think they’re going to do if I report it? His story backed by his two friends against mine with no evidence? You think that will help me fit in better, if I make a big deal when he didn’t even swing at me?”

“I’d back you up.” Jaime lifted his chin and looked every inch the rich, arrogant driver he was.

“Because your reputation is so stellar.” His whole body tensed and he crossed his arms over his chest, briefly distracting her with the round hill of his biceps under his t-shirt. She wished he would leave. She wished he would comfort her. She cursed herself for her own weakness. “He won’t get away with it entirely,” she said, hearing the slow drawl in her own voice as the week’s ferocious activity caught up to her. “I’ll talk to Bronn about it; I know he’ll believe me and he can apply some pressure without anything having to be official.”

Jaime grunted and sat down next to her on the curb. She watched him from the corner of her eye, noticed the thicker growth of beard on his face, his long and shaggy hair. He patted his pockets, sighed, and pulled out a stick of gum. He looked as tired as she was.

“You should practice your pit stops,” she blurted.

He stopped with the gum halfway to his mouth, like a scene from a sitcom. “Excuse me?”

“Your pit stops.” Her cheeks were hot but she pressed on. “I’ve been studying them this week, and we’ve been practicing in the garage. You don’t stop where the team is. They lose half a second, easy, just moving back into position with the tires.”

“So it’s my fault we can’t get below three seconds?”

“It doesn’t help,” she said defensively.

Jaime sighed and popped the gum in his mouth. “It’s fucking annoying how often you’re right.”

“You hired me to help you, Mr-.” She pursed her lips. “Lannister.”

“My father hired you, I just recruited you.” His eyes were hard and faraway in the dim evening light.

“You weren’t always on this team,” she said, tentative. “Did he recruit you?”

“I’m a Lannister,” he said, as though it answered her question. Brienne frowned at him and he smiled, brief but charming, a brisk wind blowing away any further probing. “You were ready to throw down when I opened the door.”
She blinked warily. “Yes.”

“Your stance is pretty good. You’ve had training.”

They were at the edge of the building’s lights and the night was getting darker around them, the shadows compelling more from her than she usually gave, the exhaustion lowering her guard. “When I was first trying to get into F3 my dad made me take classes since I’d be traveling and he was worried about me. Then I kept at them for a few years longer because... I liked them.” What she’d liked was how it made her body feel powerful and in control and not just at the whim of her too-long limbs, though she couldn’t bring herself to share that with him.

“Have you had to fight anyone?” His eyes were intense on hers, greedy for her secrets; a gravitational pull that seemed almost impossible to refuse. A beam of bright light cut between them before streaking over her face and she winced and looked away. Sandor’s car pulled to a stop in front of them and the passenger side window rolled down.

“I’m only driving her,” he announced, before rolling the window back up.

Jaime stood smoothly while Brienne struggled to her feet, ignoring his proffered hand. “I can do it,” she muttered.

“You’re moving like a ninety year old in a twenty-something’s body. You’re sure he didn’t hit you?”

Brienne rolled her eyes. “I’ve just put in a week’s worth of hard physical labor, you should try it some time.”

He shifted closer to her, eyes bright. “You think I don’t get physical?” he asked and she blushed, looking away.

The passenger window rolled down again. “You coming or what?”

“Yes, sorry,” she pulled open the door to the back and slid in.

“Hey, Wrench,” Jaime said, holding the door open to keep her from closing it. “If you do ever need someone to back you up, you can always tag me in.” She nodded a little and he let her pull the door closed in silence.
February (Part 1)

Chapter Summary

Restless, miserable, and drunke than he first thought, Jaime pushed his way through the crowd to where Brienne and Tyrion were still together talking animatedly.

“Wrench!” Jaime roared as he strode up, and they lifted their heads in perfect synchronization, though the resemblance stopped there. Tyrion looked amused and curious while Brienne looked both mad and nervous.

“My name-”

“I know your fucking name.” She glared at him and her body tensed under her stupid dress; a warrior readying for battle in flimsy, revealing armor. She looked fragile wrapped in just the simple cloth; didn't she know it wouldn't protect her?

Chapter Notes

A pause here to thank BrynnMcK (again, some more) for her help in this chapter in particular. It was quite different the first time I wrote it and she was smart enough to realize it wasn't right. She spent the beginning of this week doing the same for a future chapter I'm working on and so she needs to be heralded for her continued amazing support. Thank you all for your support of this fic as well! I was so worried no one was going to want to read a story about racing. :)

The last week before launch passed too quickly to get her hands around more than flashes of it. There were long hours bent over building an entirely new car on top of the old chassis; early morning meetings where they argued with the engineers about introducing yet another new change; and too many trips to the vending machine for sugar breaks.

“Will they start the car?” she asked Bronn Wednesday night as they both shoved down small powdered donuts during a brief break.

“Your guess is as good as mine, but it has to at least look like they could,” he'd said with a shrug. He grimaced at his donut and threw it in the trash. His goatee was dusted white with powder. “Back to work.”

At the edges of the moments sliding one into the next was Martyn's shadow. He didn't threaten her again, talked to her only when he couldn't avoid it otherwise, but she turned more than once to find him staring balefully at her from across the room.

“Everything good?” Bronn asked Friday morning, wiping his hands with the last clean rag in the garage. He wiggled his fingers at Martyn and the other man turned away.

She hadn't told Bronn about what had happened between her and Martyn the week prior in the hope
it would all just blow over in the storm of activity. “It's fine,” she said blithely, picking up a wrench and thinking of Jaime.

As Bronn had hoped, she didn't see Jaime the entire week, not even in the gym. The light to his office was dark every time she had a minute to look, though those minutes disappeared entirely by Thursday. She left at ten one night, midnight the next, Sandor answering her call no matter when she made it. He wasn't cheerful, but he didn't complain any more than usual, and when she fell asleep in the backseat on the way home on Friday, he didn't even say anything about the drool she left on the headrest.

Car launch day had her up with the sun even though the actual event wouldn't start until later that afternoon. They'd timed it to begin immediately after the Starks' was over in order to eat up any extra news cycles, and she and the team had a few last adjustments to make before the car was transported onsite. The threat of the Starks having a better car launch drove the entire Lannister Corp team more effectively than any punishment or reward. The teams had a long history as foils for each other – the serious, stodgy Northmen against the wealthier, flashier southern Lannisters – but Brienne hadn't realized how much that competition had seeped into the very foundation of the building until by the end of the week whenever someone even mentioned the Starks she found herself grumbling along with everyone else, though she'd happily cheered for Stark drivers in the past, including Robb.

When Brienne stepped out of her apartment Saturday morning, Sandor had an unexpected gift of coffee for her, though as usual he got into the car without opening her door. So today was special, but not too special, apparently.

“Will you be going to the launch?” she asked as he drove through the quiet Saturday morning streets.

“No.”

“Don't you want to see the new car?”

“No.”

“What about the after party, are you going to that?”

“No.”

Brienne took a sip of the coffee and gasped at the strength of it. “Do you even like Formula racing?”

Sandor's eyes flickered up to hers and then back down to the road. “No.”

She shook her head and stared out the window, watched a young girl climbing into a big pick-up with her dad in front of a diner. The loneliness that work had briefly subsumed burst free again, a deep ache of missing her father, her small place on Tarth, the weathered face of the waitress at her favorite hole-in-the-wall fish restaurant. Jaime's provoking barbs.

Brienne jerked her head back. I don't miss Jaime, she protested to herself. I just miss when the work wasn't so all-consuming.

If she spent most of that Saturday waiting to hear his voice, certain he would finally be back today, that was just eagerness for the launch, for sharing with her car's driver what she and the crew had been working so hard on.
But Jaime never showed up and by the time they were manually rolling the car into the transport truck her stomach was in too many knots to care. Brienne moved from tire to tire once the car had been settled, making sure nothing was scratched or knocked off, that the wheels were set in place and locked down, that the steering wheel was firmly attached. Bronn stood at the entrance and watched her.

“Didn't you just help roll this thing up here yourself? It's fine.”

“I have to be sure,” she said, distracted. Was that a smudge over one of the sponsor's logos? She licked her thumb and rubbed it off, like a mother to her dirty child's face.

“It's fine,” he repeated. “We've gotta get going, it's going to take you twice as long to get it back off here and onto the stage.

Brienne pressed her hand to the car's side, not wanting to leave it even for what was the shortest transport of the entire season. She turned her back to Bronn and leaned down as though she was looking at something in the cockpit and whispered, “safe journey” to the car before standing and hurrying out.

“Did you talk to the car?” he asked her as she strode by. Brienne flushed and ignored him. “You're as bad as Lannister,” he groused.

They beat the transport to the small arena they were renting for the launch and Brienne had time to change into her official Lannister Corp Racing Team red and gold jumpsuit before she rushed to check over the car one more time – every piece was still in place and there were no new dirt spots – and help roll it again off the truck and to a small dais in the basement.

“So what's the plan exactly?” she asked Bronn as they watched the arena crew remove the ramp and start tethering the car down with cables hidden with clever lighting and shadows.

“Who cares? My job was just to get it here and to clap and wave when they do their bullshit 'here's the pit crew none of you give a shit about' moment.”

They filtered out with the rest of the crew to their designated area off the side of the stage, and Brienne looked all around with wide eyes as the audience settled, chattering excitedly. The arena had been transformed into the perfect picture of Lannister Corp elegance. There was a stage at one end and jutting out perpendicular from it into the crowd was a longer stage that looked like a car-sized catwalk. People wandered and shook hands around it, journalists taking pictures and fighting for the best positions, and it reminded her of a pier at home, the ocean waves eddying back and forth. The back of the main stage had a huge screen that had the Lannister Corp Racing logo on it: a roaring lion's head in gold. The last touch were rich red curtains on either side of the screen hiding the backstage area from the audience's sight. Brienne's breath quickened as the lights dimmed and the audience went quiet in anticipation.

The plan, it turned out, was five minutes of Tywin welcoming everyone to Lannister Corp's fiftieth car launch, then half an hour listening to Kevan give an exhaustive history of Lannister cars and engines accompanied by video and pictures on the big screen while Brienne shifted in the uncomfortable folding seats they’d set up for the pit crews and tried not to look around too much for Jaime. He hadn't even come down to see what his car looked like and she was starting to worry something had happened to him since she'd left him at the curb. She was about to lean over to Bronn to ask him where Jaime was when Kevan said, “before we get a look at what you all really care about,” there was scattered laughter from the audience, “I want to introduce our drivers for this year. Come out here, gentlemen!”
Unlike the pit crew, Lancel and Jaime were in dark, tailored suits, and though the suits matched, the men couldn't have looked more different in them. Lancel looked handsome enough, his blond hair slicked back, his smoothly shaven face split with a wide, charming smile. The suit was tailored to him but he moved awkwardly in it, tugging at his buttoned collar. If he was like a well-dressed and perhaps slightly smarmy Maiden's page, then Jaime was the tempting golden demon that tried to lure young women away.

Jaime's suit moved with him, pleasantly tight across his broad shoulders and snug around his muscular thighs. He'd cut his hair since she'd seen him last, cropped close but still stylishly messy, and he'd shaved off his stubble to match Lancel's clean-cheeked look, although where Lancel looked younger and more innocent, Jaime's jaw seemed almost violently sharp without the shadow or a smile to soften it. Jaime glared at the audience as they applauded him and Lancel, and he scanned the pit crew on the opposite side briefly before looking their way. His eyes found hers almost immediately and Brienne held her breath until he gave her his familiar smirk before moving on. She exhaled slowly, her heart beating as fast as the audience's applause.

“It's time for the real star of the show,” Kevan said and the lights in the arena dimmed, leaving only a few bright red spotlights aimed towards the middle of the long stage. Pulsing music thrummed loudly through her body and smoke machines went off on the floor, long white arms reaching out and curling around the edge of the stage. “This year's Lannister Corp Racing Formula One vehicle!” Kevan shouted.

A circular hole opened in the middle of the stage and the car slowly peeked over the edge of it, lifted from below on its dais while the lights swooped crazily, joined by gold flashes synchronized with the drumbeats and a sea of balloons released from above into the audience. The audience cheered wildly, everyone leaping to their feet and Brienne and the pit crew stood with them. She'd seen all types of car launches, from the smaller companies just debuting at preseason runs to Sunspear Motors and their penchant for outdoor, fireworks-filled extravaganzas, but knowing what had gone into getting the car here today, Brienne hadn't realized both how much and how little this meant.

“Balloons,” Bronn said, leaning past Brienne to talk to Podrick. “I told you it'd be fucking balloons this year. You owe me fifty.”

Podrick shrugged and when he met Brienne's furrowed stare he grinned. “I-I bet it w-would be confetti.”

Jaime was staring at her again and Brienne felt her cheeks redden when he directed his applause towards her and the crew.

The rest of the launch involved photo ops of the drivers together and separately next to the car and Kevan throwing a brief shout-out to the crews. The lights swarmed over them when he did, and Brienne and the others gave small nods and waves to the politely applauding audience before it went dim again.

“Shortest one yet, you think?” Bronn asked Pod, who nodded glumly.

Kevan thanked everyone for coming, Tywin strode back onstage and stood near Lancel while Jaime turned on his heel and disappeared to the back, and then the lights came on and the media and audience were ushered out as the car was cautiously lowered back into the underground area.

“Now what?” Brienne asked Bronn, who stood and rubbed his lower back.

“Now we get the car back home and the real work begins.”
“Don’t forget the p-p-party!” Podrick reminded them cheerfully.

“I don’t think I’m going,” Brienne said. She had hoped she could spend the evening doing laundry and going to bed as soon as she was tired, which would probably be right after dinner. They had to be in the garage tomorrow to start preparation for the preseason and she needed a break from all things Lannister, even if just for a night.

“You have to go.” Jaime appeared at the end of the row, his arms crossed over his chest. Bronn shoved past him and Brienne strode forward hoping he’d move but Jaime just stood there, tall and handsome and smelling of some soft, rich cologne. It was vexing.

Brienne frowned at him. “No, I don’t.”

“It’s part of the job. You have to smile for the cameras, just like me.”

“Since when are media ops part of the mechanic’s job? If you need someone up there, get a race engineer.”

She could almost hear Jaime grinding his teeth. “I haven’t signed one yet.” From behind Jaime, Bronn snorted. “Even if I had, they’d still want to show you off, too.”

“I’m not one of your cars. I don't belong to Lannister Corp,” she growled.

“I don’t think you read your contract close enough, then.” He said it lightly but neither of them could deny the heavy burden of its truth. They'd both signed their lives away, not just to the sport but to Lannister Corp in particular. “I'll be there, too,” Jaime offered.

“How does that help?”

“I could keep you company when you get sick of these two,” he indicated Bronn and Podrick.

“I don’t want your company,” she snapped, willing it to be true, and his head jerked back like she’d slapped him.

His eyes narrowed. “Fine, then I can be there so people don't have to look at just you.”

Podrick gasped behind her, and Brienne swallowed down the hot rush of anger and disappointment rising in her throat. Instead of trying to find words she shoved past Jaime and strode from the arena, Jaime’s “Wrench, wait” chasing after her.

“What the fuck was that?” Bronn asked as they watched Brienne stalk away. Jaime's shoulder throbbed where she’d pushed him aside.

“I was trying to help.”

“Well you cocked it up.”

Jaime glared at him but didn't dispute the fact. She'd looked like a knight of old facing down Martyn, ready to withstand the onslaught of his fists, but Jaime's words had made her white-faced and wounded-eyed, and the rigid line of her back as he'd called out to her was as loud as a curse.

Podrick shoved past him, too, giving Jaime the angriest glare he was certain the boy was capable of, and Jaime was briefly impressed at the ferocity of it. It had been a month and Pod was already as loyal as a rescued dog to Brienne. At this rate she'd be able to lead most of the crew in mutiny against him soon. Even now, though, aching and angry as she may be, he knew she wouldn't do
that to him. Back in Selwyn's garage he'd seen the unvarnished truth in her eyes that he could trust her. She'd proven it already in the interview with Melisandre, and with how she worked hard for his team every day no matter how terrible he was.

What he didn't understand was why it made him so furious that she was who she'd promised to be.

"You still need a race engineer," Bronn said, staring at him intently.

"What does that have to do with anything?"

"She's not gonna do it if you keep on like this."

Jaime turned on him. "I'm not going to ask her to be my race engineer!"

"Who are you gonna ask then? Me? My answer's no."

"I'm not-" Jaime pressed the heels of his hands into his eyes. "I still have some leads."

"Do you now. Who?"

"I'm keeping them secret," Jaime muttered and he and Bronn both knew how stupid that answer was.

"Your secret list of race engineers, hm?" Jaime glared at him and Bronn shook his head. "I just hope Brienne Tarth's name is on that list or you're f**ked."

The party was in full swing by the time Jaime arrived. He hadn't changed or picked anyone up or even done any interviews to excuse his late arrival; as the night crept nearer he'd simply sat on the hood of his car in the far edge of the parking lot of the hotel and smoked, waiting for either his anger at his father or his fear of pissing him off to win out.

From his vantage point, Jaime could see everyone else arrive. There were a whole parade of Lannisters that filtered in, as well as the lampreys that were always attached to them. His crew appeared in ones and twos, more Lannisters, more lackeys, Bronn sticking out like a sore thumb as he always did in these situations and yet Jaime was glad to see him there. Clegane's car pulled up and Jaime stubbed out his cigarette as he watched Brienne let herself out of the back. The media waiting outside went wild when they saw her, cameras flashing in the growing darkness, but Brienne only ducked her head and nearly ran into the safety of the hotel.

So she had come after all. Jaime exhaled slowly, releasing like so much smoke the worry that he'd finally driven her away.

Jaime hurried across the parking lot, slowing to a casual saunter as he neared the entrance and the press noticed his arrival.

"Jaime!" "Mr. Lannister!" "This way, please!" "Smile for us, Jaime!" Their shouts overlapped into a familiar chorus and he gave a brief wave but didn't pause for photos.

As he neared the ballrooms they'd rented for the party, the swirl of music and chatter grew. This was a tasteful affair, as all of Tywin Lannister's parties were. The music was classical, the wine and champagne were expensive and free-flowing, and the food consisted of bite-sized gourmet delicacies that you'd have to eat an entire platter of to be full. It was a party thrown purely to show off Lannister Corp's – and Tywin's by extension – wealth.

Even in a sea of blonde Lannisters, Jaime found Brienne as soon as he stepped inside. She was on
the far end examining a perfectly modeled ice sculpture of the car, gaping and pointing out details with Podrick. Jaime wove through the crowd towards them, shrugging off both the fake smiles and suspicious glances of those he passed, until Brienne and Pod turned to leave the table and noticed him walking up. Their pleasant talk halted and their faces transformed into twin glares reminiscent of high school kids from movies. Though Jaime supposed he was the Mean Girl in this case and Brienne was the plucky heroine with her best friend.

Brienne turned away from him almost as soon as she saw him, her simple black cocktail dress swishing around her knees as she did. It was strange seeing her in the dress when he’d gotten so used to her in her jumpsuits, and it made the party feel like a surreal dream. He saw with surprise that she was wearing heels, low ones that were just high enough to pull her calves long and tight as she walked away. Podrick folded his arms across his chest and stood in Jaime's path.

“Good evening, Podrick,” Jaime tried, smiling warmly at the younger man.

“W-w-what do you want?”

“I just want to be sure everyone's enjoying the party.”

“We're f-f-fine.” Jaime glanced over Pod's head and saw Brienne waiting a distance away, watching them. Her black dress made her pale skin seem almost translucent under the sea of freckles; he suspected if he looked hard enough he’d be able to trace the intricate highways of her blood vessels down her chest. She had no makeup to offset anything about her face, though her eyes were as electric blue and expressive as ever, and they were billboards proclaiming loudly how unhappy she was to see him.

“Did you try the carpaccio yet?” he asked Pod. “It looks delicious.”

“D-don't try t-to ignore w-what happened.”

“You mean my chief mechanic and I having a small disagreement?”

Pod's frown deepened. “I'm s-s-serious, Jaime.”

Jaime glanced up at Brienne again, who'd drifted closer clearly trying to hear what they were saying. “Is she going to apologize first?”

“Apologize?” Brienne had apparently gotten near enough. “For what?”

“I recall you saying you couldn't bear to spend even a single second with me.”

“I did not.” Her brow furrowed in a way he was becoming well-acquainted with.

“No, you were much pithier.”

“Ah, there she is!” Jaime groaned as first his brother's voice, and then his brother, joined them. “The inestimable Brienne Tarth.” Tyrion's head tilted at an angle that must have hurt his neck to take her all in. Though he had mismatched green and black eyes and mismatched blond and black hair and wasn't at all what Jaime would call attractive, Tyrion still had a compelling charm to him that worked wonders with women. Tyrion stuck out his hand and Brienne bent down a little to shake it.

“Hello?” she said, clearly having no idea who he was.

“Tyrion Lannister, Jaime's little brother in every meaning of the word except the most important,”
Tyrion said, giving her a roguish smile. Brienne's cheeks went pink at the innuendo. "I've been looking forward to meeting you. Jaime's told me almost nothing about you except how wildly competent you are."

Did she look...pleased? Jaime gave her a little nod when she glanced his way.

"Do you work for Lannister Corp, too?" she asked Tyrion.

"Much to my father's dismay," Tyrion said, lifting his glass in a sarcastic toast. "I helped draft your contract."

"Oh. Well. Thank you. I'm happy to be a part of your brother's team," she said politely.

"You'd be the only one." Tyrion took a long drink of his champagne, staring up at Brienne over the rim of his glass as he did, and Jaime felt the strangest desire to stand in-between them, blocking his brother's view. "You are remarkable," Tyrion continued. "Does the height run in your family or are you an outlier like me?"

Jaime studied Brienne, saw her soften a bit at the shared understanding of their personal uniqueness in the world.

"I get it from my father," she said, smiling gently at Tyrion. "He's taller than I am."

"Is he taller than the Hound?"

"Possibly. Sandor doesn't usually get out of the car so I'm not sure."

"Sandor?" Jaime scoffed. How had she connected with everyone else in his life but him? Surely he'd spent more time with her than Clegane, but she still couldn't bring herself to call him 'Jaime.' "Does he know you call you him that?"

"He does," she said, her voice flint, her features stoic again as she looked at Jaime.

Jaime knew Tyrion was watching them with calculating eyes, taking in everything he needed to know in the simplest exchange. Growing up with his brother had been at least fifty percent honing his ability to keep even the tiniest secrets from Tyrion's piercing mind.

"Remarkable," Tyrion said again, taking another drink. "I see your beautiful hands are empty, Ms Tarth, can I get a drink for you?"

Brienne flushed again. "Just water is fine."

"Nonsense. You can't make it through an entire Lannister party with no alcohol. That's not an attack on you, that's just science." He gestured with his glass at the nearest bartender, who seemed to not only notice Tyrion, but understand what he meant and also care enough to start pouring the drink. Jaime pressed his lips together. "Have you been introduced to everyone yet?"

"No, I really just came to see what it was like, I'm not planning on staying long."

"Ah ah ah," Tyrion tsked. "You're the first woman chief mechanic in Formula One history and you belong to Lannister Corp. You've got to make the rounds. But luckily for you," he gestured for the waiter who'd arrived with her drink to hand it to her, "you've got me to do the honors. We'll make a fine pair, don't you think?"

Brienne looked panicked for a second and Jaime stepped in. "You're half as tall but you're twice as
“pushy as father, Tyrion. Leave her be.”

“It needs to be done. Might as well happen on the arm of someone who understands why it’s an awful chore.” Tyrion held his arm up awkwardly, elbow at the height of his shoulder, and Brienne touched her hand to it. It looked ridiculous and sweet and Jaime briefly imagined yanking them apart when Tyrion smiled victoriously up at him. “Off we go to war, my lady. I'll start with the nicer ones first so we can ease into it.”

Jaime shoved his hands into his pockets and glared after them, watching as Tyrion led her to his aunt Genna first, before the crowd flowed to fill in the space they'd left and he could only see Brienne's head as Tyrion led her to the next person.

“You still have to apologize,” Pod sing-sanged next to him. Jaime growled low in his throat and the younger man's face paled and he skittered away.

Jaime couldn't avoid his own responsibilities after that, and he spent the next hour making pointless small talk with people who secretly and not-so-secretly hated him, a too-brief interlude with Genna where she made him feel like he wasn't actually the worst Lannister, and an interaction with Bronn that consisted entirely of Bronn asking him if the secret list of race engineers was password-protected or just written down somewhere while Jaime barely resisted throwing his drink in the man's smirking face.

He did not, for even a second, forget about Brienne. At one point her laugh rang out like a loud, pealing bell and Jaime wanted to run to the her side of the room to see who had made her laugh like that. It was absurd in every way that his annoying, bull-headed, unforgiving chief mechanic haunted him through the entire soiree, but he couldn't make himself stop being aware of her. He just needed to apologize, that was all, and then he could leave the party and go to the arms of one of the women who didn't make him want to run his car into a retaining wall out of spite.

Restless, miserable, and drunker than he first thought, Jaime pushed his way through the crowd to where Brienne and Tyrion were still together talking animatedly.

"Wrench!" Jaime roared as he strode up, and they lifted their heads in perfect synchronization, though the resemblance stopped there. Tyrion looked amused and curious while Brienne looked both mad and nervous.

“My name-”

“I know your fucking name.” She glared at him and her body tensed under her stupid dress; a warrior readying for battle in flimsy, revealing armor. She looked fragile wrapped in just the simple cloth; didn't she know it wouldn't protect her? Around them it grew quieter as the other, mostly-as-drunk partygoers sensed a storm brewing.

"Then use it.”

"I'll call you what I like. You can't argue me out of everything.”

"I'm just doing my job.”

"You don't have to be so...so tall. And competent.”

"Is that what your problem is? That I'm bigger and smarter than you?"

Jaime's hand went tight around the thick glass of the whiskey tumbler he'd moved onto after the
champagne and wine. His feelings were swirling as much as the drink in his trembling hand. “You've got a lot of nerve acting like you know everything when I'm the one who found you in some faraway garage.”

Brienne shifted, crossed her muscled arms over her mostly flat chest. “You forget that the Starks showed up first.”

“Yes and they took one look at you and ran.”

“Jaime.” That was Tyrion, his voice hard. “You're drunk. Go home.”

The music continued to play loudly in the sudden silence of their half of the room. “So magnanimous tonight, Tyrion. Did you share with her what you told me? Something about being tongue-level?”

Now they were both glaring furiously at him, though Brienne was sparing some of hers for his brother.

“What's going on here?” The controlled voice of Tywin Lannister dropped down like an icy blanket on the fire that was threatening to explode. Jaime shut his eyes, but opened them again when he felt his body sway dangerously.

“What's going on here?” The controlled voice of Tywin Lannister dropped down like an icy blanket on the fire that was threatening to explode. Jaime shut his eyes, but opened them again when he felt his body sway dangerously.

“I expected one of my sons to be foolishly drunk tonight, but I didn't think it would be you,” Tywin said sharply, holding Jaime in place with just a look. “You're an idiot.”

Jaime thought, and then felt an appropriately idiotic grin slide over his face. Tywin huffed in disgust as though he'd heard every word and turned to Tyrion.

“I know you are but what am I? Jaime thought, and then felt an appropriately idiotic grin slide over his face. Tywin huffed in disgust as though he'd heard every word and turned to Tyrion.

“Do not fraternize with the workers. I know you can barely keep your pants on in the best of times, but leave her out of it. And Ms Tarth,” Jaime saw Brienne go stiff and straight, presenting herself bravely for his father's dressing down. “Whatever you've done or are doing with my sons, it must be professional at all times. I know you have very little actual IAF experience, but I did not think I would have to explain to you that you're a role model and even though you would not be my choice, you represent Lannister Corp to a media and fanbase that is, unbelievably, desperate to get to know you. I am paying you to do good work and to keep Lannister Corp out of the gossip pages, not whore yourself out to my sons, do I make myself clear?”

There was a familiar flare in her blue eyes and for a long, endless second Jaime felt words of warning collide in his throat, knowing if he couldn't stop her she'd get herself fired then and there. But she just nodded, once, as sharp as a salute, and Tywin lifted an eyebrow and turned away. He paused for a moment next to Jaime and whispered harshly, “go home immediately,” before disappearing back into the crowd.

Jaime stuck his tongue out at his father's back before facing Tyrion, ready to commiserate, but Tyrion was still glaring at him. “What?” Jaime asked, perplexed, until he saw Brienne staring at him, too, eyes bright with unshed tears, her chin trembling. Jaime's heart tightened and he discovered there was room for new and painful regret on top of all the other razor-sharp shards he'd
collected through his life. The room was floaty, the noise muted and bubbling like he was underwater. Brienne turned and he was stuck in slow motion as he reached out to keep her from leaving angry yet again.

Bronn grabbed his arm.

“Given how shitty your every attempt at being a decent human has been today, let's just get you home and try again tomorrow,” he said, tugging Jaime away.

“Wait,” Jaime said, trying to resist as the room kept swimming around him. He tried to count back through the number of drinks he'd had and lost track after four. “I didn't apologize,” he said, looking over his shoulder to find Brienne, failing to fight Bronn's relentless pull away from her.

“Put it first thing on your To Do list tomorrow. Ah fuck,” Bronn muttered and then Cersei was there, green eyes narrowed dangerously.

“Dear sister,” Jaime said, tugging at his collar, thinking of Brienne.

“What is wrong with you?” she hissed.

“Pretty sure I'm drunk,” Jaime said loudly.

Disdain dripped from Cersei's every perfectly-sized pore. “Not surprising given the company you keep.”

“Hey now, I had nothing to do with this,” Bronn protested.

Cersei ignored him. “Who is that woman you and Tyrion were fighting over? Is that the mechanic everyone's blathering on about?” Raised in a racing family, married into a racing family, and still Cersei could barely bring herself to be civil about the sport that defined Jaime's life. Too loud, too dangerous, too dirty, too much time and attention away from her, especially when there was so little space for a woman in the sport. His twin had never even tried to understand that side of him, she'd just judged him and pushed him away as soon as he'd decided he was, in fact, not her mirror. Cersei had always treated his love of racing as his greatest flaw and she'd grown to aggressively hate it the more he'd devoted himself to it. She'd spent the last twenty plus years furiously punishing him for it, until they were more enemies than twins.

“We weren't fighting over her,” Jaime said.

“She's so big and unattractive. Nothing like your usual tarts.” One of those tarts was Melara, who had been Cersei's best friend once upon a time until she'd also decided Cersei couldn't control her life. Melara and Jaime had reconnected a couple of years ago when they'd run into each other by chance, and they'd kept each other on speed dial for nights like this, when they needed someone who would understand when the other person didn't stay for the morning.

“Unless you want your brother to vomit all over those expensive shoes, we best be on our way,” Bronn said grimly, and though Jaime knew he was making up an excuse to leave, it was starting to feel like maybe vomiting on someone's shoes was going to be an inevitable end to the evening. Cersei flinched away and watched them go with her nose wrinkled in disgust, Jaime waving cheerfully at her as Bronn dragged him out of the room. Bronn grabbed a water bottle as they walked by the outgoing table and shoved it into Jaime's hand. It was cold and wet from the ice bath it had been sitting in, and Jaime pressed it to his forehead gratefully.

“You drive yourself?” Bronn asked when they were back in the night. He'd diverted Jaime to a side entrance, where no media were waiting to get pictures of the drunken party-goers as they left.
Bronn patted down Jaime's pants, grabbed his keys, and texted someone quickly while Jaime gulped down the fresh air. The alley smelled like garbage and old socks, but it was better than the swirling cacophony of expensive perfumes they'd emerged from.

"Hound's gonna drive you home," Bronn said. He looked up from his phone. "You're gonna drink that water, fill it up and drink it again, go to sleep, and come in tomorrow ready to eat whatever shit Brienne throws at you, do you hear me?"

"I don't understand her," Jaime said, staring unseeing at the water bottle in his hand.

"She makes perfect sense. You don't understand how to deal with someone who doesn't want anything from you besides respect."

"She's so..." The crackle of the plastic bottle was loud as he squeezed it.

"Honest?"

"Obstinate."

Bronn laughed bitterly. "You should talk. She's gonna quit, you know."

Jaime blinked, once and then again, trying to grab hold of the sudden thread of anxiety unspooling inside him. "She can't."

"She can and she fucking will if you don't stop this." Bronn stared out into the night. "She asked me about the crash. If you did it on purpose."

The cracked concrete of the alley seemed to be shifting under their feet. "What did you say?"

"I said she shouldn't ask again."

The Hound's car pulled up to the alley entrance and Bronn pulled the door open for Jaime and bodily shoved him inside.

"What do you think happened?" Jaime asked once he was collapsed in the back seat of the car, Bronn staring down at him through the open door.

"I think most days I know, but then sometimes..." he shrugged. "You're great at racing, but you're a fuck-up at everything else. How do I know who showed up to the track that day?" He slammed the door shut before Jaime could answer.

It took another three glasses of whiskey once he got home before Jaime finally passed out on his couch, a repeat of his and Brienne's interview with Melisandre easing him into the black.

Brienne stood outside the Lannister Corp Racing offices the next day, the early morning sun weak through the haze, and debated about whether this would be her last time here.

The car launch party had ended in disaster, caused, as she should have expected, by Jaime, this time drunk and angry for reasons she still couldn't figure out. She hadn't stayed much after Jaime's ignoble exit, but even in those last twenty minutes, Tyrion had avoided her while the rest of the Lannister family and hangers-on watched her with gossip-hungry eyes, whispering and gesturing with their elegant flutes of champagne. They'd been polite enough when Tyrion had introduced her around, though Brienne had easily seen the scorn and insincerity behind their smiles. She'd been almost relieved when Jaime had shouted for her, until she'd seen the hurt gliding unexpectedly over his face.
A stunning woman with golden hair and Jaime's green eyes had sauntered up to her a few minutes after Jaime left, and gave Brienne the most degrading once-over she'd ever experienced.

“Brienne Tarth,” the woman said in a voice of poisoned honey. “I've heard so much about you.”

“Who are you?” Brienne asked, tired of trying to be friendly to these people.

“I see both of my brothers have failed to mention me,” she said, the sweetness turning sour in a flash. “I'm Cersei, Jaime's twin sister.”

That explained the looks. Brienne could see the same ironic detachment that Jaime used as a shield, although Cersei's looked like she wallowed in it. “Great,” Brienne had said, looking for Pod. She found him coming out of the bathrooms on the other side of the room and tried to catch his eye.

“I hope you aren't going to dirty the Lannister name,” Cersei said and Brienne dragged her attention back. “It would be unseemly to find out you were screwing Jaime or Tyrion.”

“I'm a mechanic,” Brienne ground out, sick of defending her skills to everyone. “I'm only here to work on the car.”

“Mm. Make sure you keep it that way.”

Pod had apparently gotten her signal because he appeared then, glueing himself to her side, and Cersei drifted away without another word, though her insinuations lingered. Pod tried to distract Brienne with stories about dumb things he'd done when he first got into racing, but his desperate, stumbling chatter couldn't help her outrace the shame and embarrassment that followed her around every lap of her life, no matter how hard she tried to beat it. The music and the crowd had pressed in on her from every side, boxing her in. She'd needed to escape but when she texted Sandor he'd replied he was busy and that she could either wait an hour or find another way home, which was how Brienne had ended up on a bus in the middle of the night in her cocktail dress, avoiding the creepy stare of a man four rows ahead of her, and trying not to cry.

Now after a night of almost no sleep and a breakfast of only coffee, she'd taken the first bus at dawn to the offices, hoping it would give her focused time to think about whether she could stand another ten months of this – of long, hard days, of belligerent team mates, of Jaime and his awful family – or if Goodwin was right and she'd have to pay too much for this chance.

“Maybe exercise will help,” she sighed, unlocking the office doors and heading for the gym through the empty hallways. The dignified significance of the place, the history and fame, called to her in the quiet as it always did, but it was getting harder to hear it over the constant rush of rejection she faced at every turn. Rejection of her skills, of her hard work, of even her looks, though that shouldn't matter to her any longer. It didn't, mostly, except when it came from Jaime.

Jaime fucking Lannister. Brienne slammed the locker shut and marched into the gym, going immediately for the weight bench. She'd thought they had come to an understanding after the interview, but apparently they'd just been graced with distance and not any real change. He was as mercurial as the storms on Tarth but even less predictable and she couldn't deal with it for a whole year, not when their days would be so consistently entwined.

Brienne pushed her body to its limits for an hour, until she nearly collapsed off of the treadmill, sweating all over, heart pounding in her chest, but her mind finally quiet. She cooled herself down with a rinse before treating herself to the sauna.

She opened the sauna door and a blast of warm, humid air crept down her throat, soaked into her
body from the inside out. She shut the door behind her and sat on the smooth, heated wood of one of the benches, closing her eyes in relief. The air was thick and she was already sweating a little, her muscles melting pleasantly. Brienne leaned her head back against the wall and her tension released into the silent room. If this was her last day, she'd take full advantage of the benefits before she went.

She was drifting on a sea of steam and heat when a rush of cold air blew in and continued to blow as whoever it was he held the door open. Brienne frowned and opened her eyes to see Jaime standing there with bleary eyes, unkempt hair, and wearing only a towel. He looked wrecked and ragged as he finally shut the door and shuffled into the room to sit down on the opposite side of the sauna from her, but it was still impossible to ignore the smooth shift of his muscles under golden skin, a god brought low by the weakness of his humanity.

Brienne casually tightened her own towel around her body as her stomach swooped and jittered. Jaime leaned his head back against the wall, watching her with half-closed eyes. “I didn't think you'd come back.”

“I don't know why I did. All you do is insult me.”

“I intended to apologize last night.”

She gaped at him. “You can't be serious.”

“I did,” he insisted.

“Bullshit,” she said and he winced.

“I did,” he said again. “I fucked it up, but I didn't accost you just to get in another fight.”

“Then why did it happen?”

“I don't know!” he said, dragging his hand through his hair.

Brienne closed her eyes. She was so tired, her energy dissipating with the sweat, dripping out of her and evaporating on the floor.

“You said you'd defend me,” she murmured, the words slipping out. “Who's going to defend me from you?”

She heard Jaime shift in the muffled quiet, opened her eyes to find him staring down at his hands. This whole thing had been a mistake. Anything she'd really wanted had never been hers, not once. Why would it be different now? “I should leave,” she said quietly, not sure if she was thinking of the sauna or King's Landing entirely.

“Please don't.” His voice was as soft and thick as the air. “I'm sorry. I'm sorry I'm such an asshole.”

“We don't have to like each other, Lannister, but I won't be disrespected. I can't stay here just because you're desperate. I can't let your awful history bring me down.”

“My awful history.” Jaime laughed, as jagged as crumpled metal. “My finest act you mean.”

“How can you say that? Accident or not, you killed a man.”

“I know! For the gods' sake, I know. You think I don't carry that with me every fucking day? That I don't see his destroyed car every night? I killed Aerys Targaryen.” The words were heavy with the
weight of his regret, his body slumped under it. “You think I caused the crash on purpose.”

Brienne remembered Bronn’s flint-eyed glare when she’d asked him what he believed. Impossibly that had been two weeks ago. She felt like she was floating, untethered in time. “The IAF—”

“Fuck the IAF. What do you think?”

He looked dangerous now as he leaned avidly towards her, his hair slicked back, eyes dark and piercing in the dim light of the sauna. The curve of his muscles was as tight as the parabolica in Braavos.

“I-I don't know.”

“You think I could have.” He was too close, pressing in on her as much as the air, though he hadn't moved at all from where he sat across the room.

“Yes,” she admitted.

He nodded a little and deflated again, like her admission had pricked him and his pride had rushed out.

“I didn't mean to kill him,” he said quietly and went still. She wanted to lie down but was afraid she'd fall asleep and the thick air would suffocate her.

“What happened, Jaime?” she asked instead, sure he would ignore her, but his head jerked up, startling her with its suddenness.

Jaime's eyes burned desperately. “I only meant to stop him. He would do anything to win, he told me enough times. There'd been other accidents that season – do you remember?”

She wrapped her arms around herself, pressing her damp towel against her chest, her fingers digging into her own arms. She could barely remember her name in this moment but it hit her, suddenly, that season years ago when she’d been a young teenager and it was just her and her dad watching race days together, and she still believed that drivers were brave, honorable heroes. There had been other accidents that season, she recalled now. Terrible ones. “Brandon Stark,” she said aloud. His car had exploded in a fireball that had left him horrifically burned; if not for Aerys it would have been all anyone remembered from that year.

“Yes,” Jaime said urgently. “His was the worst. He never went back to racing after that.”

“No one was penalized—”

“They couldn't prove it any better than they could prove mine. You think they were going to risk hamstringing Aerys? After Dayne left he brought in all the fans and money, until me.”

Brienne grimaced. It was too much, she was too tired to hear all this now, but she had to know. “It doesn't make any sense. Why would Aerys do that?”

“He wanted to win. Everything he was, every part of his black soul was twisted toward it. Losing wasn't an option, losing to men he didn't respect unthinkable. He'd tell me all the time that he'd win at any cost. That wasn't a wise mentor sharing stories and advice, he was warning me. I was good enough to beat him that year, especially with Stark out of the running for the championship, and he was telling me he would never let that happen.”

“But how do you know he did it on purpose?”
"He admitted it. This was before cell phones were everywhere so they managed to keep it out of
the news but Aerys drank, he did drugs. The only day of the week he wasn't on something was race
day, and then it was the adrenaline that fueled him. Monday night after Brandon's crash we were
late in the office, I thought to prepare for the next week's race, but he made me watch the replay.
He'd been snorting something, too much of it. He was laughing." Jaime's face was twisted, full of
agonized hatred and Brienne couldn't tell if it was for Aerys or himself. "He rewound it over and
over; the crash, the fire, and he laughed the whole time, pointing out where he'd done it, saying
how he'd never had such a good result before. We still didn't even know if Stark would survive
then. 'I hope you all burn,' he told me." Jaime's voice was hoarse and it hurt just to hear him drag
the words from wherever he'd been hiding them deep inside. "The next day he didn't even
remember we'd talked and I thought...maybe I had imagined it. Maybe I had misunderstood him.
Maybe it was just the drugs talking. Then a few races later I saw him going for Selmy. I saw it and
then I saw Stark's crash again and I knew-" Jaime swallowed and stared hard at the ceiling. "They'd
changed the kerbs for the first time that year. You know the problem with the early kerbs?

She nodded. They'd often been built too high and they became launch pads for lightweight, super-
fast Formula cars.

"I figured I'd just nudge Aerys, maybe make him spin out a little. If I'd paid more attention, if I'd
been more focused, maybe..." Jaime thudded his head against the wall once, hard. "The IAF were
furious and when they came for me I didn't know what to do. They wouldn't take my calls even
before the crash. They were thrilled to send me back down to F3, to keep me out as long as they
could until even they couldn't deny me any longer."

"Did you tell your father?"

"I tried," he said, dark and bitter and sad. "He said if I was smart I would accept the penalty, keep
my mouth shut, and not ruin my career. At least I know he was wrong about that; I ruined my
career anyway."

"Why didn't you tell someone else?" Brienne managed, the words swallowed by the thick heat of
the sauna.

"Who would have listened? I was some punk, arrogant kid to all of them. They would have said I
was jealous, that I was just trying to steal the championship. IAF didn't even investigate Stark's
crash, they called it a terrible tragedy and then gave Aerys a fifteen minute interview where he
pretended to care about Stark and how he'd appreciated having a real challenger and Brandon
would be missed. After Aerys' crash they put more cameras in at every track, because they
regretted that they didn't have enough footage to show I'd done it on purpose. IAF and the media
had labeled me reckless and troublesome before I even sat down at the wheel of my first F1
practice. And I couldn't have been the only driver who knew about all the things Aerys was. He'd
had other teammates before me. Why would they care now?"

The season Aerys had died, he'd been the biggest racing star in the world. She tried to imagine
young upstart Jaime Lannister coming forward, claiming his own teammate had caused the
accidents of his competitors, that Aerys was a man driven over the edge out of a single-minded
need to win.

She wouldn't have believed him either, not back then.

"I believe you," she said now, and Jaime sagged back against the wall like his bones had been
made of this secret alone. She felt faint herself, the heat suffusing her blood. "Does Bronn know all
this?"
He looked at her from under long eyelashes. “No one knows but you.”

Brienne wanted to yell at him – Why me? Why me? Why me? I don’t want this. I would have done the job either way. But that was a lie. She’d been ready to run from this, from him. Jaime had carried the weight of all of the racing world's contempt for sixteen years, knowing he'd never intended it, knowing his agonized silence was saving the reputation of the terrible man he had killed. If he could bear that, then she could bear this. “Then I won't share it,” she said.

“Thank you,” he rasped.

He looked cleansed, his forehead smooth. For the first time since she'd met him, Jaime's eyes were calm. The sauna seemed suddenly too small and too hot, the air clogging her lungs.

“I should go,” Brienne said, standing quickly and swaying on her feet. Jaime was at her side in an instant, his hands strong on her bare arms; she didn't know if his palms were just that hot or if they felt that way because they were pressed so firmly against her skin. His fingers were gentler than she expected.

“Easy, Wrench,” he said from far too close.

“My name is Brienne,” she managed through the thickness in her throat.

“Are you okay?”

“I'm fine.” She clenched her eyes shut and discovered enough energy to pull free of Jaime's grip and open the door, sucking in the cold air and feeling it wash away the lightheadedness, drive some energy back into her numb body, steer her safely away from the weight of Jaime's admission. “See?” Brienne knew she must look awful, hair sweaty and matted to her head, skin flushed red from the heat. In contrast, Jaime was the definition of glimmering with sweat; a sheen that traced the lines of his muscles, the shadow of his hips peeking over the top of his towel, that made his body seem to glow in the reflected light from the hall. “I just need some water and sleep. I'm going to head home and do the rest of my work today from there. Give my apologies to Bronn.”

She was half out of the door before he said, “Brienne.”

Her name on his tongue felt like she'd touched a charged car and it shivered through her. She glanced back at him over her shoulder.

“Will you stay?” he asked.

There was a joke or an accusation on her tongue – or a question, dark and twisted: was he relieved that Aerys had died? – but she just nodded at him before escaping from the sauna's heated grasp.
February (Part 2)

Chapter Summary

He made a noise that was somewhere between disgust and despair and turned until she grabbed his arm with her strong hand. “What?” he snapped.

“I know what happens on the track is on you. But pit stops are on me and the crew. Getting the car ready and in top shape are on us, too. You don't want to talk about it, but I know you know how important your race engineer is or you wouldn't be looking so hard. The whole race isn't on your shoulders alone.”

“That's not what the fans and the bloggers and the sportswriters think,” he said bitterly.

“Fuck them.” Jaime blinked, surprised. Even Martyn hadn't driven her to curse. “You can only take the car so far by yourself. Isn't that what the last few years have proven, over and over?”

“Then I guess I'm fucked,” he said on a hoarse laugh. “Because nothing has changed.”

She squeezed his arm warmly. He'd forgotten her hand was still holding him; it felt natural to have it there. “Yes it has,” she said, “you have me.”

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Winter testing was in Sunspear, as it was every year. Though calling it winter testing when Sunspear was drenched in eternal summer always felt odd to Jaime, but after leaving behind rain in King's Landing he was happy to feel the sun on his skin as he stepped onto the tarmac. His uncle had chartered a small jet so the Lannister Corp drivers and executives could arrive in appropriate style, and cameras waited behind a low fence to capture every minute of it. Jaime settled his sunglasses on his face, waving to them. He felt loose and relaxed, the lightest he'd been at winter testing in years. Maybe ever.

Brienne, as promised, had returned to work Monday morning. Jaime had waited in his office, staring out the window at her empty desk and not daring to hope until she'd walked in, greeted Bronn hunched over his laptop, and set her things down. She'd turned then to look through Jaime's window and when he met her eyes, she'd nodded once and gotten to work.

Jaime had exhaled loudly in his office and done the same. The days before winter testing were nonstop for everyone and he and Brienne only passed each other in the halls, occasionally asking a question about the car – where did he want the steering wheel positioned? What was her plan for emergency front wing replacements during a race? – only to hurry off to their next task. Jaime was polite through every interaction, no matter how he wanted to settle into old habits, and after a few days she didn't tense when he walked up. After a week she even started greeting him in the mornings.

It still amazed him that he had told anyone, let alone her, his secret and been believed. Through the
years Jaime had imagined telling a hundred different people in a hundred different ways and every
time it ended with disbelief and rage. Brienne had listened, tested him against his story, and found
him to be true.

Since then he felt like he'd lanced an infected wound and all the contamination was leaking away.
He still felt tender and raw, didn't want to poke at it or show it to anyone else, but for the first time
in over fifteen years there was the possibility that the too-deep valleys carved into his heart might
heal at least enough to scar. All thanks to Brienne Tarth. Tall, strong, dedicated Brienne, with
freckles, he'd discovered, that covered her shoulders and back and chest, and legs so long even the
Lannister Corp luxury towels barely fit her.

He wondered what she was doing now, how she was liking her first trip with the team. The crew
had all taken a bus down days earlier with the car-hauler and for a brief moment Jaime had
considered going with them. It would have been more entertaining than the dreary, cheerless plane
ride he'd just been through.

“Mr. Lannister!” “Kevan, just a few questions!” “Lancel, give us a quote!” The media were
popping off lights and requests even though they'd been told ahead of time this wasn't an interview
opportunity. He saw Kevan and Lancel give them waves and keep moving and Jaime was seized
by a wild flash of disobedience. He hated having to perform for the media as part of his contract,
but he loved fucking with Kevan more.

He altered course to head straight for the small crowd, who grew more insistent as he approached,
grinning at them and trying not to laugh when he heard Kevan's muttered “what in the blazes is he
doing?”

“Mr. Lannister!” A young man caught Jaime's eye, waving frantically. He was extremely skinny
with short brown hair and an honest-to-the-gods little spiral-bound notebook like a reporter of old.
Jaime recognized everyone else clumped here from years of media scrums but this fresh-faced
youngster stood out.

“Who are you?” Jaime asked, directing his attention to the young man and earning a nervous smile.

“Josmyn Peckledon, sir. Most people know me as Peck. I've got a Formula 1 news blog and I help
the IAF arrange Grid Kids.”

“Grid Kids?” Jaime squinted, trying to recall the name.

“Yes sir, it's the program the IAF started last year where we bring kids who are doing well in their
karting careers to meet professional drivers and be a part of the pre-race grid ceremony in most of
the cities.”

“Ah, yes.” Jaime tilted his head down to peer at Peck over the top of his sunglasses. “That's why
there's all those kids there all the time now.”

“Each driver can have their own kid assigned to them in different cities, they sometimes do
interviews or will show the children around. The kids love it.”

“Does Stark do it?”

“Robb Stark? He has, yes, sir. A few times. Your teammate did it last year, too.”

“Did he?” Jaime glanced over his shoulder at Lancel and Kevan who were hovering, uncertain
about whether they should follow Jaime's bad example, or if they'd look worse not engaging when
he had. He looked back at Peck. “Why haven't you asked me?”
“Y-you?” The young man's eyes went wide.

“Afraid I'll corrupt the youth?”

“Oh no, no sir. We asked you last year, several times, but...”

“But I ignored you.”

“Well.” Peck went red. “The last time you told me to, uh, go screw myself.”

Jaime laughed and nodded. “That sounds like me. Tell you what – try me again this season. I might surprise you.” He pushed his glasses up enough to wink at the assorted media, and then sauntered off, leaving Kevan and Lancel whispering furiously in his wake.

The track at Sunspear was one of the easier ones on the schedule, and one that Jaime had driven hundreds of laps around in his career, both in the flesh and in virtual practices, but he never missed the chance to walk the asphalt and feel the road with his own feet, re-acquaint himself with each curve and straightaway, start planning potential overtakes and braking times before he'd even sat down in the car.

When he arrived at the track the Sunday before the first practice runs of the season, he saw the imposing roaring lion's head of Lannister Corp Racing was already in place on top of their mobile command center. As he hurried towards the garage where they were keeping the test car, his heart hurried, too, eager to see his beautiful girl.

Brienne was standing still in front of the command center, hands on the hips of her jumpsuit, her whole face contorted in thought as she stared at the door.

“You have to pull it open, not push,” he said as he walked up, startling her.

“Jaime!” she gasped, clutching her hand to her chest. Jaime felt a small thrill that she'd used his name when caught offguard. After the one time in the sauna she'd been back to 'Lannister' all week.

“Everything all right?”

“Yes, yes. Bronn dropped some news about the air intake numbers before he dashed away.”

“The car's running okay?”

Brienne glanced down at him but her mind was already back on whatever Bronn had told her. “Oh, hm, yes. Trying to make some adjustments, that's all. She'll be ready for test driving tomorrow. Lannister,” her voice and eyes sharpened and Jaime unconsciously straightened at her tone. “Who's doing the test driving?”

“Me and Lancel, though he hates it. Complains nonstop, lap after lap, about how boring he finds it. But to fully test it we need two drivers and my father doesn't believe in test drivers.”

“What? Why not?”

“Only the driver can know if his car is ready,” Jaime said in his worst impersonation of his father. Brienne's lips twitched. “What really happened is the last time we had test drivers a few years ago one of them crashed and father was so furious he swore never to use them again.”

“Seems a bit dramatic.”
“Tywin Lannister is a melodramatic old cunt and don’t let anyone tell you otherwise,” Bronn said, coming up behind them.

Brienne looked around as though she expected Tywin to pop up behind a bush. “Bonn, please.”

“He’d admit it if you asked him. Though I wouldn’t ask him. Did you tell them about my idea?”

“Not yet. I was running through it in my head, I think you're off a bit. If you'll excuse us, Lannister?”

Jaime nodded and left his mechanics arguing over the details of his car, ducking behind the privacy screen that kept prying eyes from seeing into each team's garage before they were ready. The area was relatively quiet at the moment, just a few of the crew looking at screens and working at benches. He shot Podrick a brief smile when the young man waved but it was the sleek, shining body of the car that Jaime was after. She sat quietly today, getting the last tweaks and bolts needed before she'd be allowed to roar along the track tomorrow. Jaime pressed his hand to the smooth carbon fibre body and ran his fingers over the Lannister logo. He crouched down to examine the front wings, to draw his palms over the nose, poke his head in the cockpit and examine the safety belts and slot for the steering wheel. Everything looked in place as far as he could tell, though he knew the engineers and mechanics wouldn't consider the car done until the season was over.

“Everything up to spec?” Brienne asked as he studied the new lights on the back.

Jaime glanced across the length of the car to where Brienne stood at the front, her arms crossed over her chest, her teeth making indents in her lip. She was nervous about his opinion, he realized. “Looks good,” he said. “I look forward to seeing what she can do.”

Brienne nodded, tucked a clump of hair behind her ear. “I do, too. We've stuck to the regulations, of course, but there's been a few small innovations the team has made even since last dynamic testing and I'm excited to see what they do.” She blinked those blue, guileless eyes at him. “Who should we connect your mic to as your race engineer?”

Fuck.

The search for a race engineer had fizzled out nearly a week ago when Jaime's last lead had vanished with the smoke of the last cigarette he was definitely going to have. Since then he'd decided the best tactic was just to ignore it, which standing here now seemed like one of the stupider decisions Jaime had ever made.

“I'll let you know tomorrow,” he said, hoping his tone was more 'totally in control of things' than 'totally fucking lost.'

“What about Theodian?”

“No,” Jaime said firmly. Theodian Wells was Lancel's race engineer and even if he wanted to do it, Lancel would refuse to let him and enjoy every second of it.

“You can't just pick some random person off the street.”

“I'll have someone,” Jaime insisted. Brienne looked like she was about to protest so he asked, “do you want to walk the track with me?”

Her eyes narrowed. “Why?”

“As you so kindly pointed out, I don't have a race engineer yet and I could use a second pair of
eyes.”

“We have to finish getting the car ready.”

“There's a whole team responsible for that. It's a three mile track, it'll take two hours at most. One hour if you can keep up with me.”

He relished the competitive fire that lit her eyes. “That will be no trouble at all.”

In the end it took just over an hour. Not because of Brienne's speed – Jaime had to hustle to keep up with her when she got going on the straightaways – but because they spent so much time talking about how to attack the race. Brienne had an amateur's eye and asked amateur questions but they pulled Jaime back down to earth and made him think about the race in a way he hadn't in a long time. It also allowed him to point out nuances even fans in the grandstand couldn't see and that sparked further questions from her.

They walked slowly back down the pit lane towards the Lannister Corp Racing garage as the late afternoon light warmed to gold.

“Why didn't you become a race engineer in F3?” he asked as they walked by the screened garages of Nightfort Racing and Dothrak Racing Team.

“That's not funny,” she said, frowning.

“I'm not trying to be funny,” he said. “It's a serious question.”

“I don't have the face for media and men don't want a woman like me telling them what to do.” I would, Jaime thought. “What if someone offered it to you, would you take it?”

Brienne eyed him warily. “I don't know. It requires such an ability to quickly understand the data, to coordinate with everyone.” She looked away again. “I get flustered. But-” she stopped, both speech and feet, and stared at the privacy barrier they were in front of.

The stylized logo of two white griffins fighting were scattered all over the red background of the screen, and Brienne appeared transfixed by them.

“Wrench?” Jaime asked, trying to figure out what had stopped her, until he heard the sound of Renly Baratheon's voice and she flushed red. Renly emerged from behind the screen of Stag Motors, the garage next to Griffin's, laughing gaily at something his teammate Loras had said. Loras was staring at Renly with the same uncritically adoring look that Jaime now saw Brienne was.

Oh. Jaime bristled as he realized why his chief mechanic looked more like a teenage fan than the bullheaded woman he knew.

“Jaime Lannister,” Renly said when he noticed them. His hair was as black and smooth as the softest tires, and he had it pulled back today in a short ponytail tied with a golden ribbon. Renly was smiling, big and friendly and welcoming, and even his blue eyes seemed sincere when he looked at Brienne and held out his hand. “You're the new Lannister mechanic. Welcome to F1.”

Jaime wanted to bite his head off when Brienne returned his smile shyly as they shook hands. “Thank you.”

Loras looked her up and down with a raised eyebrow on his too-pretty face and then smirked at
Jaime. “Casting a wide net for crew these days. Too bad it hasn't snagged you a race engineer, too.”

“This is why you don't win races, Loras. Too busy worrying about me and not enough time worrying about why you're so bad at tire management.”

The younger man tossed his head dramatically, his brown curls swaying around his cheeks. But before he could respond, Renly shifted and drew everyone's attention. “You look familiar,” he said to Brienne. “Not just from the WSN interview, though I admired you on that.” Brienne looked like she might internally combust from the compliment. Jaime had told her she'd looked good and he'd gotten only a perfunctory 'thank you' text.

“I worked on your team for a bit back in F3.”

“Really?” Renly laughed and then shrugged. “I guess that must be it. You'll forgive me, I hope, there have been so many crew through the years.”

“It's fine,” she said demurely and Jaime wanted to shake the temper back into her.

“We have to go,” he said abruptly. Brienne frowned at him and he glared back. “Weren't you the one telling me you had a car to finish building?”

“Of course,” she said, and he was relieved to see she was annoyed under the confusion.

“Nice to meet you, Brienne. Again!” Renly laughed some more, his teeth gleaming in the afternoon sun.

Jaime imagined them falling out one by one as he and Brienne strode back to the Lannister garage in silence.

“No fucking way.”

“It's a test run, Bronn, it's not even real race engineering.”

“When you do it.”

Jaime grimaced as he zipped up his driver jumpsuit. After his and Brienne's encounter with Renly yesterday, Jaime had gone back to his hotel to catch up on messages and come up empty yet again on potential race engineers. Now it was officially the first day of winter testing and he was desperate. “I can't drive and sort data.”

“How have you not found a fuckin' race engineer yet?”

“I don't know, how have you not figured out how to use social media?”

“I know how to use it, I just choose not to,” Bronn said. “Hashtag cutting the cord.”

Jaime stared blandly at him. “That's not what that means.”

“Fuck off.” Bronn poked him in the chest. “My answer is still no.” He looked over Jaime's shoulder and shouted, “Chief! Our driver wants to ask you something!”

“I'm going to kill you,” he mouthed to Bronn as Brienne hurried over. Bronn just grinned.

“Yes?” she asked. She looked harried, a handful of wrinkled papers in one fist, her gaze already
sliding back to where she'd been.

“Everything good?” Jaime asked, stalling. He imagined he could feel the rush of wind from Bronn rolling his eyes hard at his back.

“They're getting the car started in a minute, engine's been heated and oil is prepared. There's no sign of Lancel yet, does he come in late?”

“It's not unusual on test weeks. He has the afternoon shift so he tends to make a big to do of his mornings.” Bronn slugged Jaime in the shoulder blade and Jaime yelped. “Listen,” he said, frowning briefly behind him. “I need someone to fill in for this week as a sort of race engineer while I run the test laps.”

Brienne's brow furrowed. “I suppose we can spare Bronn. I could take his spot in the pit crew for now. They were hoping to get some real practice in though.”

“No Bronn, Wrench. You.”

“Me what?”

“I want you to do it.”

She laughed, a big, honking sound that Jaime wanted to hate but couldn't. “Oh,” she said, quieting down. “You're serious.”

“Just for winter testing, and just for a few days until I get an engineer signed.”

“He has a secret list,” Bronn piped in, and Jaime briefly considered elbowing him in the stomach.

“I...I guess I could,” she said. “Once the car's on the track I should be focused on performance but since it's just testing—”

“Exactly. Good, glad to have that settled,” Jaime rushed over her to avoid Brienne talking herself out of it again. “Looks like they're ready for me. Don't forget to get your headset connected to mine. Talk to you later.” He nearly ran for the car just a few feet away, jumped in as soon as they'd gotten her roaring and rumbling.

Podrick strapped Jaime in, helped him get the steering wheel attached and settled, and tapped the top of Jaime's helmet when he was good to go. Someone pulled aside the privacy screen, letting sunlight and the noise of the gathered media pour into the bay and Jaime took his first official drive of the season.

He gave a quick wave to the fans and then all his attention was on his car, the tires rolling swift and confident under him, the slight rattle of the light body. The car was made for high speeds and it felt oddly uncomfortable in these slow position drives. All the tension and worry and frustration of the seasonal break rolled off of Jaime as he pulled into the pit lane and sped up, the engine eagerly leaping into action. The cockpit was where he belonged, the steering wheel perfectly shaped to his grip, the road curving invitingly before him, and all the people who wanted things from him, things he didn't want to or couldn't give, faded away.

When Jaime was younger, before he'd even made it into F2, he read an interview with Arthur Dayne that he'd cut out with a pair of new scissors that he'd bought along with all of Tyrion's other supplies for the upcoming school year. Dayne had been on summer break and they'd asked him if he was looking forward to going back. “Racing is life,” Dayne had said. “Anything before or after is just waiting.” Jaime had touched that slip of interview so many times over the years that the
newspaper had crumbled into nothing, but he would remember those words the rest of his life.

“Testing?”

The voice sparked unexpectedly in his ear, and Jaime's shoulders tensed before he realized it was Brienne, and his body relaxed back into the seat as he curved smoothly around the first turns going only half-speed, weaving back and forth to warm the tires.

“Wrench,” he greeted her, smiling at the empty road. Her sigh seemed to caress his ear through the speaker.

“Don't forget these get recorded and shared,” she said, her tone a school teacher's reprimand.

He liked when she sounded that way. “I didn't forget, Wrench. Tires feel good, can I pick up speed?”

There was muffled conversation on the other end and then her voice alone in the car with him, strong and sure. “Go to three-quarters, take it easy on the first three turns and then press tighter on four through seven.”

“Got it.” He did as she directed, curving slow and long on the first turns, pulling them tighter, applying the brakes harder on each consecutive turn, until he was humming along at 160 miles an hour and feeling like he was home.

“How's she handling?” Brienne asked as he passed the pit lane again.

“Perfectly. Can I push her harder?”

“Give it a few more full laps at this speed first. We want her to breathe a little.”

“She's happiest when she's faster.”

“Well it's the beginning of her season, too. Don't push her yet,” Brienne said firmly.

Though he was itching to take his car to the edge, Jaime did as he was told. After two laps of silence from Brienne, Jaime said, “how do you like being a race engineer?”

“I'm not a race engineer,” she said immediately. She must have been paying close attention to his drive and not off chattering with everyone back at the garage.

“This is what race engineers do,” he said, feeling warm. “Direct drivers, talk us down from making bad decisions. Or busting our ass when we do.”

“Are you going to do that soon? I've been itching to yell at you,” she said, her tone unexpectedly joking. Jaime grinned around his mouthguard.

“I see this promotion has already gone to your head.”

“I had room, unlike some people.”

Jaime laughed, the sound rebounding in his helmet. He wouldn't have expected Brienne to be so easy on the line, but for the next hour she wove smoothly from commanding with directions to lobbing back his bantering. By the time she called him back into the garage – “box this lap,” she said, “and try not to run over Stark on your way, he's out doing press” – he was sweating from the Dornish heat and the rumbling comfort of her voice in his ear.
After he'd parked where directed and disconnected his steering wheel so he could step out of the car, Jaime looked immediately for Brienne, ready to continue their back-and-forth. She was standing with her back to him, still wearing the headphones and talking to Kevan. Jaime frowned. Kevan looked like he'd swallowed a bushel of lemons.

“Everything all right, uncle?” he asked, hurrying over. He was ready to step in if Kevan was harassing Brienne for being on the headset.

“Lancel's sick, he can't drive.”

“He can pick up extra laps tomorrow then.”

Kevan shook his head. “For two weeks. He's been hospitalized with severe food poisoning and dehydration. They think he's also got some local disease.”

“He's been here a day,” Jaime said. “What did he get up to last night?”

His uncle glanced uncomfortably at Brienne and then back to Jaime with a nervous smile. “You know how you drivers are.”

Brienne stiffened. Jaime knew exactly what she was thinking and it galled him that it had been true once when he'd been young and foolish and wanting to fit in with the older drivers. But it wasn't true now and he needed her to know that. “Whatever do you mean, uncle? I went swimming at my hotel pool last night, had room service, and then got a full night's sleep. Is that how we are?”

Kevan's pursed lips looked like the puckered center of an orange. “It doesn't matter,” Kevan said. “What matters is you are our only available test driver.”

“I can't do six hours a day.”

“You don't have a choice. You have to step up for the team.”

“For the team?” Jaime snarled. “The team that's been happy to throw me under Lancel's wheels in order to get higher in the Constructor ratings?”

“It's the sport, Jaime. Sometimes you have to give a little so we can all win.”

“Uncle-”

“I can do it.” Jaime stilled as Brienne spoke.

“Pardon?” Kevan asked, not even acknowledging her with his eyes.

“I can test drive. I have the proper license. I've done it before.”

That did bring Kevan around, and Jaime, too, to take her in and the way she'd formed into the unperturbed statue he'd met that first day back on Tarth. This woman wouldn't be stopped by the mere flesh and weak arguments of Kevan Lannister.

“I know Tywin doesn't trust test drivers but this car has been under my oversight and I feel a great sense of responsibility and ownership for her. I'm near Jaime's size so you wouldn't have to adjust the cockpit or the ballast much either.” She lifted her chin. “I'm here already. If we try to find someone else it will waste our limited testing time.”

Kevan's mouth opened and closed like a fish desperate for water and he looked at Jaime as though Jaime were going to argue against her.
“Sounds like she's solved your problem,” Jaime said cheerfully.

When they relayed the news to Bronn he looked immediately like he was going to make some smartass comment, but on Jaime's stern look had instead gotten to work finding a helmet to fit her. Pod had hopped around excitedly then run off to get the car ready for Brienne's extra length. Jaime didn't begrudge her the slight adjustment she needed to the cockpit, especially since her height seemed to come mostly through her ridiculously long legs.

Kevan had wandered away muttering to himself after Jaime's pronouncement and Brienne had just stood there when Jaime told the rest of the crew as well. She was still standing there with their departure, looking more stone than skin.

“You're not having second thoughts already are you?”

Brienne blinked and her face twisted, her big lips pulling into a disapproving grimace. Her broken nose made her look awkward, her broad forehead masculine. But her eyes were bright as stars, more compelling than her unwieldy features could ever be.

“I'm not,” she said, and then the grimace turned back up into a small, anxious smile. “I'm excited.”

“You look terrified.”

“I'm excited,” she repeated and he suspected she was trying to convince herself that was what that feeling was.

“We just need rotations. Stark will be on the track for awhile with you and probably Renly, too, but most of the others tend to go out for short bursts and come back again. Our practice routine is that I handle the speed tests and Lancel does the slower endurance runs. You're just taking his part.”

“What if I crash the car?” she whispered.

“You're not going to crash the car.”

“But what if I do?”

“Brienne.” She startled, and dragged those captivating eyes away from the terrible future she was imagining back to reality with him. “If you crash the car, we'll just engage our money-back guarantee.”

Brienne stared wide-eyed and then laughed once, a high, sharp bark, and shook her head. “You're a terrible coach,” she said, but the anxious stasis she'd gotten looped in was gone, her shoulders round and easy under her jumpsuit.

Bronn returned with an extra helmet and mouthguard, Pod had gotten the car started again, and the two of them whisked Brienne away to get her ready. They gave her Jaime's neck protection and helped her get into the car, her big frame filling the seat even more fully than his did. He imagined her legs would have to be pulled up uncomfortably, and made a mental note to give her frequent breaks so she didn't hurt her knees. Podrick loosened the belts to get them around her body and then buckled her in securely, talking quietly to her while Brienne stared goggle-eyed out from the helmet opening. With just her eyes peering through she looked younger, and with the afternoon light bouncing off of metal and making them sparkle, he thought she could almost be beautiful.

As he'd done with Jaime, Pod tapped Brienne's helmet, but she sat there after he'd stepped away, looking around as the car rumbled hungrily for the road.
Bronn gestured with his hand. “Drive, for fuck's sake,” he told her and she nodded and the car jerked forward, slowed, then rolled to a smooth release speed as she headed for the pits. The media were snapping photos feverishly from outside the garage.

“S-s-she needs someone on th-the mic.”

“I'll do it,” Jaime said quickly, grabbing the headset she'd put down earlier. He pulled it on and tapped the microphone to life. “Wrench, can you hear me?”

There was a little startled gasp and then, “Jaime?”

“You need a guide and I figured I could return the favor. How's it feeling?” He glanced at the screen, saw her rolling slowly down the pit lane.

“Powerful,” she breathed over the line.

“You haven't even hit three digits yet. Give her some gas and move more quickly out of the box. I want you at a hundred by the first turn.”

“You're sure?”

“You've done this before,” he said, calm and sure. She sounded like a skittish foal, ready to bolt back for safety at the first sign of trouble. “This is no different than F3, just a little faster. Stark just went by and you've got a big clear space that has your name on it, but you've got to jump into it soon.”

“Okay.”

She continued to drive slowly and he said, “Any time, Wr-” cut off by the car leaping suddenly forward and hurtling onto the main track. Brienne laughed breathlessly in his ear.

“Holy shit,” she said as she took one corner and then the next.

Jaime felt his smile go so wide his cheeks hurt. “That's more like it.” He watched the car from every angle they had on their many screens, studied her like he would any other competitor. She was slow on the corners through the first lap, and swerved too much when Renly came speeding out of the pit lane on her second, but as she settled in, he saw her pressing at the edges of the turns, exploring hers and the car's limits and comforts. The speedometer crept up to 110, 120, and Jaime let it, curious to see how far his ultra-responsible chief mechanic would take it.

At 140 he heard her mutter a curse and then the speedometer dropped back down to hover around 100 again.

“Why, Brienne Tarth, do you have a speeding problem we should know about?”

He swore he could hear her blushing over the line. “I was just trying to keep up.”

“You're getting two more teams on the track with you in a minute – looks like Oberyn is coming out for Sunspear first and, huh, Ramsay Bolton is driving for Golden Company.” He muted his mic and glanced over at Bronn. “Where's Harry?”

Bronn shrugged. “Haven't seen much of him since Roose Bolton bought up the company. He's pushing his son to be number one driver.”

“Over Harry? He's got ten years experience on the kid.”
“The man paid for it, he can do whatever he wants,” Bronn said, shrugging.

Jaime shook his head and unmuted. “Watch out for the Golden Co car, Bolton can be reckless.”

“Got it,” Brienne said. “Is Griffin coming out today?”

There was a thread in her voice Jaime couldn't peg. She sounded almost worried. “Probably.”

“Do you know who's driving for them?”

Jaime frowned at her car on the monitor. “No.” He remembered how she'd looked at Renly. “Why? Got another racing crush you want to meet?”

She was quiet for five seconds, ten, long enough that the snarky question settled like a lead balloon between them.

“I could introduce you,” he said reluctantly.

“No,” Brienne replied swiftly. “Forget it. I was just curious.”

He took her through the paces for the next twenty minutes, keeping her hovering at 110, having her do some weaving as he slowed her down again. The vivid excitement of those first minutes had dissipated entirely, whether because she was focused or she was upset he couldn't tell by just her terse responses.

“We're going to have you pit and the crew is going to treat it like it's mid-race, so just pull in and sit there until I tell you otherwise. You can show me how to stop since I'm apparently so bad at it.”

“You are,” she grumbled, but she sounded normal again so he just smirked and let it go.

The car drove in and she stopped expertly on the line, much to his annoyance. But he still loved watching the pit crew perform their carefully synchronized chaos, even after all of these years of being in the middle of it; in mere seconds old tires were yanked off, new ones shoved on, the pneumatics whirred loudly, and the car dropped to the ground ready to roll out. Theodan, who had showed up during Brienne's laps, hit the timer and curled his lip in disgust. “Almost four seconds,” he announced. “Too slow.”

“Car was too heavy with the new deadweight,” Martyn said, and Jaime was relieved to see none of his pit crew laugh, not even Willem, although some of Lancel's did.

“Leave the car there and come back in. I'll take another round,” he told Brienne before he carefully laid the headset down and walked over to Martyn.

The other man puffed up and the garage grew tense and quiet. “Chief mechanic, race engineer, now test driving,” Martyn said when Jaime was close enough. “Really sleeping- I mean skipping her way to the top, isn't she?” he drawled.

“You know what I like about you, Martyn?” Jaime said with a casual smile. Martyn eyed him suspiciously. “I like how good it's going to feel the day I get to finally punch you in your smug fucking face.”

“You don't punch people when no one is watching?”

Jaime was ready to tear Martyn down to his brand new sneakers, but Brienne shoved her way
between them. “You were slow on the pneumatic,” she told Martyn.

“What?”

“Our pit times are still too slow and I could feel it when I was sitting in the car. Your tire went on last. They had to wait for you to let the jacks go.”

Martyn sneered. “You're just an expert on everything in this garage, aren't you? You gonna help me piss next?”

“If it meant you wouldn't get it all over the seat every time, I might.”

There was a low rolling chuckle from the some of the other men. Jaime noted his crew was assembling behind Brienne, Lancel's behind Martyn. But he also saw media peering inside, trying to hear and see what was happening. He heard the click of a few cautious cameras, no one sure if this was going to be newsworthy or not. Kevan had disappeared, which meant it was up to Jaime to make sure it was not.

“Bronn,” he said quietly. “Go pull the privacy screen back, will you?”

The man nodded and hurried off while Jaime re-positioned himself between Brienne and Martyn, forming a tight triangle of the three of them.

“We'll get more reps for the pit crew this week and then do a rundown of everything over the weekend, find out our weak spots and fix them,” he said. “Martyn, you should check that your pneumatic is working like it should be.” When Martyn just stood there, eyes narrowed, Jaime said, “go. Now” in a tone that brooked no further disobedience. Though his fists wanted Martyn to push it, the man stalked off instead.

Once the tension and the gathering had filtered away, Jaime turned to Brienne. “You're probably right with your assessment, but that was dumb.”

“Excuse me?” she said, offended. “You were about to punch him.”

“I wasn't,” he half-lied. “I just said I wanted to.”

“I'm worried he's going to sabotage your chances,” she said quietly. They both looked over at Martyn, who was sullenly doing as Jaime had asked, making as much noise as possible while doing it.

“I'll talk to Kevan but unless we can prove it, I have to keep him. Not a lot of other people willing to be on the Kingslayer's team.”

Brienne lowered her voice even further. “Why don't you tell everyone? It's been sixteen years, I'm sure-”

“No. I don't need people's pity, if they even believe me. The IAF is just as likely to exile me as listen to me, and I don't want to give those vultures,” he gestured at the privacy screen hiding them from the media now, “any scraps. I can do this on my own.”

“On your own with an entire fleet of people holding you up, you mean.”

Jaime tugged at his short hair in frustration. “There's only one person behind the wheel on race day. Me.”
“And your race engineer.”

He made a noise that was somewhere between disgust and despair and turned until she grabbed his arm with her strong hand. “What?” he snapped.

“I know what happens on the track is on you. But pit stops are on me and the crew. Getting the car ready and in top shape are on us, too. You don't want to talk about it, but I know you know how important your race engineer is or you wouldn't be looking so hard. The whole race isn't on your shoulders alone.”

“That's not what the fans and the bloggers and the sportswriters think,” he said bitterly.

“Fuck them.” Jaime blinked, surprised. Even Martyn hadn't driven her to curse. “You can only take the car so far by yourself. Isn't that what the last few years have proven, over and over?”

“Then I guess I'm fucked,” he said on a hoarse laugh. “Because nothing has changed.”

She squeezed his arm warmly. He'd forgotten her hand was still holding him; it felt natural to have it there. “Yes it has,” she said, “you have me.”

There was a roaring in his ears like the sound of a crowd on race day and all he could feel of his body was where Brienne still touched his arm. Her hand slide down to cradle his elbow and even through the thick fabric of his driving suit he could feel her heat pulsing through to his skin. Under his frozen stare she went red from hairline to neck and when she pulled away he swayed a little towards her. With her hand removed the roaring died down and the sounds of the garage bullied their way back in: the ring of tools, the whirring of Martyn's pneumatic, Bronn and Podrick arguing over something unimportant.

“That probably doesn't help,” she said in a tone tight with embarrassment. “Never mind.”

Jaime's brain wasn't working right. All he could seem to do was stare at her, marvel at the way her flushed cheeks seemed to make her remarkable eyes stand out even more. Brienne's lips thinned out as she smiled small and uncomfortably.

“You should get back in the car. I can have Bronn on the headset this time.”

“No,” he said, finally finding words. “I want you.” Her eyes widened and though he would have thought it impossible she went as deeply red as his car. “On the headset,” he added hastily.

“Of, of course,” she stammered.

She left him standing there and he didn't move at all until Bronn walked up and shoved his helmet into his chest.

By the end of the day, word had gotten around that the Lannister Chief Mechanic was doing triple duty and when Brienne pulled into the pit lane after her last lap, the area was packed with racing insiders and journalists, so many that they flooded into the onlooker staging areas of the teams next to them, Direwolf on their left, Golden Company on their right.

She wished she could just drive straight into the garage but it was far too crowded so she halted outside and focused intently on unbuckling herself and unhooking the steering wheel so she could get out. The cockpit was slightly too small for her and she was sure the pictures they would take when she had to clamber out of it were going to be mocked relentlessly all season. But then Jaime was there, helping her out and up, and watching her with a question in his eyes.
"Brienne! Over here, please!" "Let's get some of you two and the car!" "Is Lancel coming back tomorrow or will you be driving again?" "Brienne!" "Have you driven before?" "Would you rather be a driver?" "This way, Brienne!" "Take your helmet off." "Is this a permanent change?" "Brienne!"

There were too many of them all talking too loudly at the same time, too many faces and arms and elbows as they shoved at the fences someone had hastily set up. Jaime patted the side of her helmet to get her attention back on him. "Go get cleaned up and come back," he directed her through the headset he still wore, his low voice cutting through all the noise. He pushed her gently towards the garage.

"I thought you hated this part," she said.

"I'll manage." He turned towards the media and gestured at his car. "Isn't she a beauty?" Brienne ducked her head and hurried inside while he distracted the crowd with his thousand watt smile and reflective charm.

Safely ensconced in the back of the garage, Brienne pulled off her helmet and unzipped the top of her jumpsuit while she watched Jaime handle the crowd with ease. The headset was loose around his neck now, the top part of his driver suit folded down over his legs to show the standard white Nomex undershirt all drivers wore. He talked about their first day of practice, spending more time on the feel of the car, the team's hopes for the season, and their best wishes for Lancel than on Brienne.

Pod hurried over holding out a fresh towel and water. "Y-you could escape out the p-p-paddock."

She smiled gratefully and took the water first, gulping it down. Even though she'd been on the track this last rotation less than an hour she was sweating and slightly dehydrated. The combination of the full-body jumpsuit, thick helmet, and heat of the engine pouring into the cockpit made the interior temperature hover at dangerous temperatures, broken only by the wind whipping past as she hurtled around the track.

"I shouldn't abandon Jaime to them," she said once she'd downed the bottle. Brienne patted her face dry, grabbed a second water bottle Pod produced and spilled some of it over her head to slick her hair back with. She would never look good fresh off of the track – and nowhere in the same league as Jaime, who seemed suited to sweaty hair and glowing skin – but she at least wanted to not be blotchy-skinned and messy-haired when she faced the cameras again.

Brienne squared her shoulders. "Good enough?" she asked Pod, who nodded with an encouraging smile.

"L-let him lead," he advised. "He hates it but he's g-g-good at this."

She nodded and walked slowly back to Jaime and the crowd, feeling their energy turn as one towards her, like a tsunami gathering itself.

"Brienne," Jaime said, gesturing for her to stand at his side. "Feeling recovered?"

"Yes, thanks," she said, hating the nerves loud in her voice.

"Brienne!" One of the local Sunspear sports anchors was waving expectantly at her, a cameraman standing behind him. "This is your first time in Formula 1. How's it been?"

"Overwhelming," she said truthfully, and the man chuckled.
“How did you get picked to test drive today?”

She glanced at Jaime who fielded the question. “Myles, I answered that already. Lancel's sick and we can't hold up testing waiting for him to work all that Dornish wine out of his system.” There was scattered laughter.

“How will you be test driving again tomorrow?” Myles directed towards Brienne again.

“I suppose that's up to Kevan,” she said.

“You're also Jaime's race engineer, is that correct?”

“No,” she said, firm. Jaime tensed next to her. “I'm just helping during testing. A direct line to the driver is helpful to get a good feel for the car. So does driving it, actually.”

“We have more work to do, guys, are we done?” Jaime asked the assembled crowd. That just seemed to spur more questions, all shouted at once.

“Ms Tarth, please,” cut through on top of it all and Brienne scanned where the request had come from, saw Melisandre's bright red hair. She nodded at the other woman and everyone else settled down. “Thank you. My research shows you were on Griffin’s team in Formula 2 but left after only a couple of months without any public reason why. What caused the abrupt departure and do you think you have the stamina to make it through an entire F1 season?”

There was an interested murmur from the gathering and Brienne could feel Jaime watching her curiously but her tongue was too thick to talk around and her throat seemed to have forgotten how to work. She wondered frantically how much Melisandre actually knew, could tell nothing from the professional blandness of the woman's smile. For a second everyone disappeared and there was only the remembered shame: a crushed rose, lips curled in disgust, mocking sneers. She should not have come here. Not to this crowd of hungry ears, not to Sunspear, not to Lannister Racing. It was safe on Tarth in her father's garage and nowhere else.

Would they show this on repeat, too, her cut down by a simple question?

“She'll make it through just fine,” Jaime said and she grabbed onto his voice like a lifeline. “She's out-working me and still has energy after to put up with you lot. That's enough for today.” He touched her arm gently, like she was a wounded animal, and she thought maybe she was. “We need to go to the debrief,” he said speaking slow and steady. His eyes were so warm, as green and comforting as the meadow near her home where she spent long summer days playing alone away from the schoolyard taunts of the other children.

He led her away from the crowd who called after them, disappointed. When Brienne glanced back, the rest were leaving but Melisandre stood at the fence with a narrowed, speculative gaze.

Jaime didn't ask her what had happened and she was more grateful for that than for anything else he'd done for her so far. Instead he took the lead on the debrief, coordinating with the engineers and pit crew, making sure Martyn sat on the opposite end of the table from her, until Brienne didn't feel like everyone could see her embarrassment written on her face and she was able to participate in the discussions. They talked and argued and drew on whiteboards until someone – she suspected Podrick as he never missed a meal – had takeout brought in from a local Dornish restaurant. There were beers, too, and by the time they were done, the team was cheerful and looking forward to another busy day tomorrow.

Brienne avoided Bronn's invite to taste the nightlife in Sunspear and couldn't help smiling as he
lassoed Pod into it instead, the younger man sighing but unable to hide his excited grin.

“Eight am tomorrow,” she reminded them as they left, giving her a wave. It was dark now and even the media had given up for the night. A few other teams were filtering out, too, but except for security guards and a lone janitor, Brienne was alone. Jaime had disappeared earlier when they'd descended into the last mind-numbing details of the engine and car construction. He'd stayed much later than any driver had need to, but she still idly wondered if he'd just left to hit the clubs before everyone else.

Though the track was closed it was still lit brightly, empty silver bleachers sparkling under the white lights. She wandered out of the garage, across the service lane and the fast lane, to the Lannister Corp gantry along the pit wall and climbed inside. The Lannister gantry had a row of six red stools with low backs, a line of computer screens below eye-level and another above, and plexiglas windows in the middle that let the crew see with their own eyes the state of the track, the weather, and how the cars were handling the road. She sat down in one of the seats that would be occupied by an engineer on race day and pressed her fingers to the glass behind which she could see the start/finish line. In a few weeks they'd be back here and racing for real, all the testing, fiddling, training, and late nights coming down to the starting lights going out and the cars all leaping forward as one ravenous pack. This was where Theodan and Jaime's race engineer would sit, along with Kevan and some of the other performance managers, to keep a close eye on the race. She'd be back in the garage with the pit crew, watching from the television screens scattered around.

The pit wall was the best seat in the house, as close to the action as you could get without sitting in the driver's seat. Maybe someday, she thought, staring at the pole markings on the asphalt.

“You did well out there, today.”

Brienne snapped her head up, saw Jaime standing at the edge of the gantry holding two cans streaked with shimmering drops of water.

“Sorry, I thought you heard me come up,” he said.

“I was just...” she shrugged. “I didn't hear you.” She moved to get out of the seat and he motioned for her to stay, taking the seat next to her; it would likely be Theodan's on race day.

“Ginger ale?” he asked, holding out one of the cans. “Not very dashing, I know, but I'm on race diet now and I don't want to piss off the trainers this early in the season.”

She took the offered can and they popped the tops in time, drank together in the quiet. “I didn't see you smoke all day,” she said after she'd taken a long swallow.

“Only one piece of gum, too. The driving distracts me. I do most of my smoking in the off season.”

“You shouldn't smoke at all.”

He rolled his eyes and she watched him take another long swallow, the way the lights beaming through the opening between the two sets of screens highlighted the sharp lines of his jaw, shadowed the curve of his throat. “You shouldn't nag people.”

“I'm not nagging.”

“You nagged me about my corners today.”

“You were reckless on four and five.” She pointed past the pit wall to where they could barely see
the middle of the track. “It's just winter testing, not a real race.”

“Is that why you drove so slowly?”

“You told me to drive slowly!” She glared at him but his eyes were bright, gently teasing, and she huffed a breath. “You're very annoying,” she muttered and that only made him grin at her.

“Why didn't you ever try driving professionally?” he asked abruptly.

Brienne took a sip before answering. “You've been in those cockpits, it's a tight fit for me.”

He looked her body up and down and she felt her cheeks grow hot under his direct stare. “I fit,” he pointed out, “and you're not that much bigger than me. You don't need any ballast.”

Brienne snorted. “Silver linings, I guess.” She took another drink. It was so quiet out here, all future potential and past dreams swirling together in anticipation and memory. The ginger ale fizzed in her stomach. Jaime waited for her answer, patient for once. “My brother died when I was young, a few years after my mom,” she said quietly.

“Was he a driver?”

“He was a teenager, but he'd been great at karting and he was good enough to be a test driver for some of the F3 teams even at that age. He didn't die on the track, though. He was driving a drunk friend home from a party and the brakes gave out. They'd been replaced the day before and the mechanic had fucked it up.” Her big hand, already swallowing most of the can, crunched it a little. “It's the most routine work in the world, but if you do it wrong, people can die. I thought...” she looked down, chewed on her bottom lip.

“You thought you could protect somebody else,” he said, and she nodded at her feet.

“It's a dumb reason.”

“It's not,” he protested. “Did you ever want to drive?”

“I did, once. I get enough from test driving when they come to Tarth. It's safer and...and I do love being a mechanic. I love having my hands elbow deep in an engine and I love solving the puzzle of finding that weird knocking sound the owner knows is there but can never make happen on command.” Her cheeks flushed again but it was pleasure now. “Being in the pit as the cars are going by, that adrenaline when we see the car rolling in, knowing we’re part of what's going to get you to the end faster and safer, it's addicting.”

“Driving is even more addicting.”

Brienne deflated, the memory of her dad's face when they'd gotten the news about her brother as vivid as the day it had happened. “More dangerous, too. I couldn't chance it with my dad. I'm all he's got.”

“You can't live your life for your father. Trust me, I know that better than most.” She gathered her courage to look at Jaime but he was lost in his own bitter sea.

“I can't imagine you doing anything for anyone,” she said, trying to be light-hearted but he frowned at her and she realized belatedly she'd upset him even more.

“I gave you a job, didn't I?”
“You needed a mechanic, that wasn't exactly a selfless act.”

“You think Renly would have given you the same opportunity if he'd needed a mechanic?”

Brienne finished her ginger ale and stood. She didn't have the energy to deal with Jaime Lannister's moods tonight, especially not when her memories of the Griffin team had destabilized her so severely hours before. “I need to get back to the hotel,” she said. “And by the sounds of it, so do you.”

“I don't need a den mother,” he said.

She was ready to snap back when someone just outside the gantry cleared their throat. “Um, Ms Tarth?”

A skinny young man stood there with a small notebook in his hand and a nervous smile on his face.

“Yes?”

“Ms Tarth, my name is-”

“Peck,” Jaime said, standing next to her. “I'm here, you don't have to bother Ms Tarth.”

“Oh.” He glanced between them, his eyes darting like little fish looking for food. She'd played for hours as a child with fish like that, had laughed when they'd nibbled her fingers. This young man's fresh face reminded her of those innocent days and she felt herself liking him already. “I, I mean it's good to see you again, Mr. Lannister. But I came looking for her.”

“How can I help you...?”

“You can call me Peck. I actually was hoping you'd do something for my girlfriend. She was so excited when she heard I'd be here with you, she was beside herself when the word of your hiring got out. We've watched that interview you two did at least twenty times.” Brienne felt herself growing redder with each adoring sentiment and though she expected Jaime to be annoyed he was smiling when he nudged her.

“You've got a fanbase,” he said happily.

“Quiet. What can I do for your girlfriend? What's her name?”

“Pia. She'd be over the moon if you signed something for her. Probably kick me out of bed so she could sleep with it,” he said, and his roguish grin charmed her completely.

“Of course.” Brienne glanced around, looking for something to sign, and to sign it with.

“Here.” Jaime pulled off his Nomex undershirt and handed it to her. “That way it's a two-for-one, my shirt and your signature.” In the bright track lights Jaime's well-defined muscles looked like art being lovingly presented. Oh gods look away she begged herself, forcing all of her attention on the white bundle he was holding out and determinedly not at the arm – or the bare chest the arm was attached to – that was holding it.

Brienne grabbed the shirt and looked desperately to Peck, who patted his pockets and pulled out a Sharpie. There was nowhere to sign the shirt and as she tried to lay it flat enough in her other palm to sign, Jaime turned around and bent over slightly.
“You can use me,” he said, his voice distressingly low with amusement.

She licked her dry lips and laid the shirt on Jaime's broad back, felt his muscles twitch underneath her hand when she smoothed it out against him, her fingers lingering only a second too long where the shirt edge met warm skin. They were only inches apart as she leaned over a little to sign the shirt, their long bodies curved at the same angle. He smelled good this close, not the distancing cologne from the launch party but earthy and of the track, scents that triggered a flood of the best and worst moments of her life. She signed her name neatly across the chest of the t-shirt, as well as 'For Pia' and 'thank you' and then gently lifted it off of Jaime's back again and stepped out of the radiating heat of his body. Brienne folded the shirt so the words were on top before she handed it back to Peck.

He read the inscription and smiled brightly at her. “She's going to flip out,” he said excitedly. “Thank you so much!” Peck looked like he wanted to hug her so she held out her hand, which he shook aggressively. Jaime laughed softly next to her. He had not pulled his jumpsuit up. “Thank you again, Ms Tarth. Good luck with the season. We'll be rooting for you!”

“What about me?” Jaime asked indignantly as Peck hurried away.

“You can pull up your suit now,” she said, trying to sound disinterested. “There's no one here to impress any longer.”

Jaime's mouth twisted. “Not even you?”

“You can't impress me with your muscles, Lannister. Only your driving.”

“Then I guess I'll have to drive my best this season.”

“I guess you will.” The Sunspear night was warm and humid on her suddenly sensitive skin. She could see Jaime's chest rise and fall with his breathing but even that couldn't fully distract her from the intensity of his stare, though the small drop of sweat that trickled into the hollow of his throat did its best. Brienne broke first, turning away. “I really do need to get some rest,” she said in a voice shakier than she liked. “We've got a mechanics' meeting first thing in the morning and I was hoping to get some laps in the hotel pool.”

“Did they put you up somewhere decent?” He sounded as unaffected as she'd expect. A man like Jaime would only cause others to lose their senses, not lose them himself, especially not for a woman like her.

“Decent enough,” she said, aiming for and mostly hitting his level of ease. “Not quite as swanky as you drivers, but we don't need to be coddled.”

“Coddled? Do you know what time I had to get up this morning to meet the physical trainer?”

“Do you know what time I had to get up this morning to work out without a physical trainer to help me?”

“You still don't like me.”

“Well, I don't dislike you,” she allowed and Jaime laughed, sounding genuinely pleased.

“I'll take it. Goodnight, Wrench.” He stood with his hands on his hips, bare shoulders glinting under the track lights.

“Goodnight, Lannister.”
She climbed down from the gantry and headed for the garage again and somehow resisted looking back to see if he watched her go.

The days passed quickly as more fans, the rest of the teams, and increasingly nosy journalists arrived in Sunspear for winter testing. The full weight of Lannister Corp Racing's engineering team bore down as well with suggestions, changes, critique, and so much flow-viz paint Jaime got dizzy from the fumes one afternoon.

“Then stop huffing it,” Bronn only said when Jaime complained about the fifth application to the sides that day.

They had long hours at the track for four days and then had three days off to process everything, during which the pit crew mostly spent their hours relaxing and getting crisped at the local beaches while Jaime did photo shoots, physical training, and sessions with the engineers talking about tire management and racing modes. Then the long weekend was over, washed away under the burden of doing the engagement work of two drivers with Lancel still recovering at the hospital. Another four days of racing, studying, interviews, and signing autographs followed and winter testing ended and Jaime still did not have a designated race engineer.

He and Brienne had taken turns driving and being each other's quasi-race engineers for all the test days, and he'd grown comfortable having her in his ear while he traveled the circuit, but she never asked to make it official and he avoided asking her in return. He felt no need to press his luck when everything was working so smoothly in this in-between state and opening day was still two more weeks away. Besides she was almost smiling at him now and she volleyed constantly with him on the headset, regardless of which one of them was driving. Jaime's favorite part of being a Formula 1 driver had always been those hours alone on the track, him and the road and the singing of his car. Even as a much younger racer he'd mostly ignored his engineers, trusting his own instincts more than their data-heavy, team-focused worldview. He'd certainly never bantered with them, and wouldn't have even considered reaching out to them first to ask their opinions.

Brienne is different, he thought the last afternoon of winter testing as he watched her climb out of the car and take the towel and water from Podrick, smiling at the young man in thanks. She'd grown increasingly comfortable driving each day and she looked like a natural rubbing the towel over her hair, the thin blond strands pressed sweatily against her cheeks as they talked about her last run.

He had, he feared, been staring at her too much the last two weeks. Ever since that night in the gantry when her eyes had grown so overwhelming he could have been swallowed whole by them; when she'd rubbed her hand over his back and he'd felt it shiver down to his feet. He'd been moved by her story about her brother; had fallen asleep that night thinking of how awful it would have been if Tyrion had died, too, leaving him with only Cersei and their father. Brienne had waded through a flood of loss already, it was no wonder she was so serious and dedicated.

Jaime found himself eager to know more about her, to try to worm his way into her graces the same way Pod and Bronn and even the Hound had. She seemed so nervous under his attention though, and he didn't want to scare her off; it had been difficult enough attaining polite colleague status.

But he automatically homed in on her every time he entered a room. She was inevitably the tallest person around, and he seemed to be able to hear her voice no matter where she stood. She had good input on the engineers' suggestions and whenever he needed backup on an idea he could look to her for her support, or at least her thoughtful disagreement. For as busy as Jaime was in any particular moment, he never seemed to be too far from Brienne, even if she was just in his thoughts.
He sauntered over to her and Podrick now. “Congratulations.”

Brienne’s brow creased. “For what?”

“You completed your first Formula 1 winter testing. Now the hard work really starts.”

“They said that after car launch.”

“It doesn’t get any less true.” The media scrum were calling to them and Jaime gestured their way. “Shall we do this one more time?” By silent agreement he’d managed to keep her out of these uncontrolled media opps after she’d gone as white and silent as a ghost the first day under Melisandre’s questions – questions which Jaime desperately wanted the answers to, though he was willing to wait until she was ready to give them. His own research had turned up exactly what Melisandre had said: Brienne had been hired to be part of Griffin’s Formula 2 team and had worked hard for just over two months only to leave the team without any public reason why. That was five years ago and she’d not been back to professional racing until now. He wondered idly if Red Connington knew what had happened. He and Hyle Hunt would have been the Griffin F2 drivers at that time. Jaime didn’t care much for either man, but to be fair he didn’t care much for most people in racing.

“Brienne?” he asked.

She took a deep breath and nodded. “I’m ready.”

They walked over shoulder-to-shoulder and as the noise increased he could feel the tension pouring more intensely off of Brienne. He wanted to squeeze her hand to let her know he’d handle it, but she’d likely bolt if he did, so he took a half step ahead and smiled for the cameras. He and the media hated each other, but at least they could all be civil about it.

“Everyone have a good winter testing?” he asked them. There was a cheerful response from the crowd of journalists and fans, and he saw Peck shoving his way near the front.

“Peck,” he said, “you first.”

The reporters from the more established orgs looked annoyed but Peck flipped open his little notebook and got his pen ready. “How do you feel about the car this season, Mr. Lannister?”

“The engineers and mechanics have done an incredible job making an already fast machine even faster. The handling is smooth and she rides better than ever. I feel they’ve put us in a great position to win. Myles.”

“Have you talked to Lancel?”

“I’ve been letting him recover. We want him ready for race day, he didn't need me hovering around.” Jaime felt fairly certain his smile looked sincere and not forced, but he couldn’t resist adding, “I need someone to block Stark around the corners for me after all.”

Melisandre waved her hand and Jaime shot Brienne a quick glance before nodding at the WSN reporter. “What’s on your mind?” he asked her.

“You had an unusual winter testing given you still have no race engineer. It’s getting awfully close to the first lights out to not have one. Are you going without this year? I’ve heard reports you may have a secret list you’re picking from.”

Jaime could hear Bronn laughing at him in his head, could feel Brienne waiting for his response.
They'd had two productive weeks working together, and she hadn't said no outright when he'd referenced the idea back on that first day. She did not, in fact, dislike him and he liked having someone on the team that acted like his equal and not a fearful subordinate or angry competition. Bronn, as much as Jaime hated to admit it, had been right from the start: she was his perfect match as a race engineer. It felt like such a natural resolution to the problem that fighting it only embarrassed him now in retrospect. Never one for small gestures, Jaime smiled at Melisandre and said, “Brienne Tarth will be my race engineer.”

When he turned to grin at her, he saw her pale face had gone completely white, her mouth dropped open in shock. He felt like one of those poor idiots who asked their girlfriend to marry them on the Jumbotron and she clearly was saying no in front of fifty thousand people.

“Does she know that?” Melisandre asked wryly.

“I, I, uh,” Brienne blinked furiously and Jaime could feel the fragile foundation they'd built start to crumble away like sand.

“We haven't worked out the details yet,” Jaime said, smiling with a smooth confidence he in no way felt. “She is after all my chief mechanic, too, but she's done good work as both roles this preseason and it doesn't make sense to overturn a smoothly sailing boat, does it?”

“Mm,” Melisandre said, still watching Brienne's reaction. Jaime couldn't do the same, was afraid if he did he'd see she was furious with him and he'd hated that feeling back at the launch party. He had no other secrets to lay bare for her that would mitigate the fact that he was still a selfish asshole.

“Speaking of which, we have our final day debrief we need to get to. Thanks everyone, we look forward to seeing you at the opening race!” Jaime spun on his heel and walked away, hoping Brienne would just follow, relieved when she did. He ignored Bronn's knowing smirk as they stalked by him on the way to the paddock.

Jaime and Brienne both silently accepted the pats of congratulations as they wove their way through the crew until Brienne grabbed his arm and yanked him into an empty meeting room and slammed the door.

“What the fuck?” she demanded. Jaime swallowed and forced himself to look at her. Her mouth was twisted tightly and though her eyes were startlingly bright under the fluorescent lights she didn't look upset so much as in nervous shock.

“You've been doing it for two weeks now.”

“You said it was just for testing! What happened to your list?”

“I went through it weeks ago. No one wants to put up with me,” he said, trying to keep things light.

“What makes you think I want to do it?”

Jaime teetered on a knife edge, knowing if he said the bitter words that poured from the wound in his heart he chanced driving her away for good. He grit his teeth and forced the cruelty back for once in his foolish life, instead reaching for the much more vulnerable truth. “I need a person I can trust,” he said, not quite able to meet her gaze. “I trust you.”

It was quiet then, an expectant pause that pressed against his tongue, made him want to rush forward with denials and insults to fill the space and form a protective moat between them.
Brienne spoke first. “I need to think about it,” she said and Jaime exhaled softly.

“All right. I'll need to know soon,” he said.

“That's fair.” She fidgeted with the zipper of her jumpsuit. “What if I say no?”

“Then you remain as chief mechanic and I figure out something else.”

“You won't fire me?”

He frowned. “Of course not.”

Some fear he hadn't noticed in her suddenly eased and she relaxed before him, dropping her hands to the side. “Then I'll think seriously about it. Though I don't know why you'd want me, I have no training or experience. Surely there must be someone else like me you could find.”

“There are no others like you, Brienne.” She flushed and he had the urge to see if her skin was warm under the redness that somehow made her freckles more prominent. That would certainly send her running, if not punching him deservedly in the face. He willed his hand to stillness at his side.

“They're waiting for us at the debriefing,” she said weakly.

“Of course. I'll handle any questions about the race engineer position.”

“Try not to commit me to anything else.” She gave him a brief, wry smile that put him at ease.

He opened the door and gestured for her to precede him. “After you, my lady.”

“I think I prefer 'Wrench',” she muttered as she walked by, going red again. Jaime just grinned at her back and tried to ignore the hope fluttering in his heart.

Chapter End Notes

Arthur Dayne's "racing is life" quote comes from current F1 Redbull driver Max Verstappen, who is in many ways what 17-19 year old F1 driver Jaime Lannister was probably like. Also I just realized today that posting on Sundays means I'm posting on race days, which feels appropriate.
March

Chapter Summary

He'd answered on the second ring, though his voice was groggy. “Wrench?”

The clock had read 9:33pm. “Are you sleeping?”

“I'm old, so sue me.” She heard him shifting around and studiously did not picture him lying tousled in bed, probably only in very expensive underwear. “Is something wrong?”

Unless he slept naked, his body long and golden on silk sheets. “No, it can wait,” she'd said hurriedly.

“I'm already awake, you may as well not waste the fact you pulled me from a perfectly good dream. Unless you'd like me to tell you about it?” His voice, even warmer through the phone than through the crackling headset of the car, shivered down her spine.

Chapter Notes

Posting a few days early this week as I won't have time on Sunday. I didn't finish writing my chapter for the week, but I'm gambling on myself being productive over the US holiday coming up (and also I've got the next five chapters done so I've got some buffer).

Thank you all for your lovely comments so far! I honestly will go back and read them a couple times in-between posting chapters to keep my energy up, it means a lot. <3

ALSO, don't miss this gorgeous edit private-witt on tumblr made for the story! I love it so much.

The flags representing each team snapped brightly in the wind, overseeing the massive crowds that had descended on Sunspear for the first race of the season.

Brienne had been to races before, mostly at the lower levels although her father had sprung for a trip years ago to King's Landing that she'd never forget, to watch the final Formula 1 race of the season. They'd been swept up in the pageantry and sheer size of it all and had settled at one of the track corners where you could lay out a blanket and make a day of it. Brienne still remembered the feel of the wind as the cars had sped by, the happy chattering of families all around them. She'd watched dozens of races on television as well, so the number of people should not have surprised her, but viewing them from pit level was an entirely different experience.
Sunspear held eighty thousand people scattered along the full length of its track, and there were at least another five thousand with VIP access camped out in the middle greenery. The roar reminded her of the ocean on a stormy day, swelling and crashing in a rhythm only nature could predict. There were whole sections coordinated in the colors of each team, their logos on shirts, hats, jackets, even people's faces: a bellowing golden lion for Lannister Corp, a snarling white wolf for Team Direwolf, the surprisingly ferocious kraken waving its arms on the black of Kraken Team's flags. The greatest number were the red suns burning across a sea of gold waving in the breeze, representing the home team of Sunspear Racing.

Oberyn and his teammate, Addam Marbrand, had been out doing FanZone meet and greets most of the morning and the drivers from other teams were using some of their pre-race time to meet fans in their colors at the fences, signing autographs and taking selfies. Jaime was one of the few who didn't; he just gave a perfunctory wave as he hurried by and disappeared into the garage. Brienne intended to go with him – some of the jeers from the already-drunk male fans were loud in her ears – except she couldn't ignore the small group of teen girls screaming her name even more loudly.

When Brienne wandered over they were beside themselves with excitement.

“Oh my gods, we love you!” one girl squealed as she held out her racing day program. Brienne blushed and quickly signed it.

“I can't believe you're a race engineer, I always wanted to be one but I never thought it would happen,” another said, who bent over so Brienne could sign the back of her shirt.

“Keep at it,” Brienne said as she carefully signed 'Brienne Tarth' so it was legible. “A woman can do anything in Formula 1.”

The girls beamed at her, and Brienne felt their energy coursing through her until she was smiling back at them, not caring how she looked when she did. One of the girls stuck out her arm and held out a permanent marker.

“Please sign my arm, Ms Tarth?” she asked, eyes wide.

“I suppose. But don't tattoo it. You're much too young and tattooing someone's name on your body is a guarantee for disaster.”

“Do you have a name tattoo?” one girl asked just as another one said, “do you have a boyfriend?”

Brienne shook her head briefly as she was signing. “I don't have either.”

“Do you have a girlfriend?”

She smiled a little. “No. I have my work. It keeps me very busy.” She didn't bother to add that she'd never had a significant other; no sense telling the girls what they would surmise themselves later just by recalling how she looked, how she moved.

After the girls thanked her and wished her luck, Brienne turned to find Jaime leaning against the opening to the garage and watching her with eyes lit with a pride that she assumed was for himself for picking her in the first place.

The night after Jaime had presumptively announced she'd be his race engineer, Brienne had called her father from her hotel room. He'd been relentlessly in favor of it, of course, claiming it only made sense.

“I can't be a real race engineer!” she'd protested. “I don't have an advanced degree. I don't have
experience. I don't understand all the data they talk about. I just know driving and the car.”

“That's all you need to know,” he'd said.

“Don't be silly, Dad. Lannister knows more than I do about these things. And he's much better handling the cameras in his face all the time. He should be his own race engineer.” Even as she said the words, Brienne had been struck by a sharp bolt of inspiration. “I'll call you back later,” she'd said abruptly to her father, before dialing Jaime.

He'd answered on the second ring, though his voice was groggy. “Wrench?”

The clock had read 9:33pm. “Are you sleeping?”

“I'm old, so sue me.” She heard him shifting around and studiously did not picture him lying tousled in bed, probably only in very expensive underwear. “Is something wrong?”

Unless he slept naked, his body long and golden on silk sheets. “No, it can wait,” she'd said hurriedly.

“I'm already awake, you may as well not waste the fact you pulled me from a perfectly good dream. Unless you'd like me to tell you about it?” His voice, even warmer through the phone than through the crackling headset of the car, shivered down her spine.

“Absolutely not,” she'd said, throttling the pleasant shiver to a halt. Jaime chuckled low on the other line. “It's about being your race engineer.”

“Oh?” He sounded hesitant.

“I have conditions.”

“I see.”

“We have to share the responsibility. I simply don't have the experience and knowledge to be a good race engineer right now, no matter how desperate you are for one. But I can help make decisions for you, help with track walks and planning, configurations of the car. I won't do any pre-or post-race media sit-downs, though.”

“That's fair, though I don't know if I can promise you won't do any. How am I supposed to parse all the rest when I'm also busy driving?”

“I don't know that yet. We'll have to work it out. Maybe pick the things that matter most to you and ignore everything else.”

There was a loud snort over the phone. “Father and Kevan will love that.”

“I don't really care,” she'd said, and Jaime had been quiet for a long, heavy moment. “Of course I'll work with the team,” she'd added. “But as your race engineer I care about your race.”

“Those conditions will work just fine,” he'd said, all the teasing and haughty confidence gone from his tone.

“You're going to have to find a new Chief Mechanic. I recommend Bronn; he's doing a lot of that work anyway.”

“No, I want it to be you.”
“Lannister, I can't—”

“You can. We'll shift some things to him but you can do it. You can do anything, Brienne Tarth. I fully believe that.”

Brienne was certain he could hear her blushing through the phone. “Well, all right. We can try. But if I'm doing both, I expect to be paid more.”

Jaime had laughed then, a happy cascade that didn't make her feel foolish, but appreciated. “I'll work it out with my father first thing tomorrow. We're keeping the money back guarantee, though.”

“If you must.” Brienne had smiled into the speaker. “I suppose that's all for now, then.”

“I suppose so.”

She'd been oddly reluctant to let him go, but she had nothing else to say that couldn't wait for tomorrow, and the two weeks they had until the first race of the season. “I hope you get back to your dream.”

“I suspect I will,” he'd said, his voice as smooth as a casual drive on a sunny day.

They'd spent the two weeks since side-by-side for hours each day, working through shorthand, plans, the information Jaime needed and what Brienne felt comfortable providing, and always coming back to the car and how to get to the brink of performance without pushing too far.

In qualifying the previous day, they'd gone over that edge and Jaime had been out in Q1, starting at position 18 on race day. He'd been cranky that evening, disappearing after a terse interview with the media. She'd not seen much of him this morning either and having him watching her with the girls now she could only stare at her feet so she wouldn't have to see any scorn for her newbie ways.

“The fan club grows,” he said as she strode past him behind the privacy screen.

“At least I stop for mine,” she muttered. She knew he heard because he went stiff and straight, but he headed for his personal room at the back instead of engaging. “Don't forget driver's parade” she'd called after him, but he didn't even slow down to acknowledge her.

“How's it going, Chief?” That was Bronn, currently overseeing some last preparatory activities to get the car ready to start.

“Do you have fans?” she asked curiously.

Bronn smirked. “A few. I don't sign autographs, but I do leave them happy.”

Brienne rolled her eyes and Podrick came up next to them. “D-don't listen to him. H-h-his biggest fan is his m-m-mom.”

“You're a real smartass this year, you know that? I don't like it.”

“M-maybe you sh-shouldn't have t-t-taught me then.”

“I don't think it was my doing at all.” He gave Brienne a significant look.

“Me?” She said, genuinely surprised. “I didn't teach him to be like that.”

“You didn't have to. His snarkiness goes up in direct relation to whether you're nearby or not.
Seems young Podrick uses his tongue as a shield, dented though it might be.”

When she glanced at Pod, he was red, his round cheeks looking like two small apples. “I-I-I can stop if you w-w-w-want,” he told her.

“I think it's very sweet,” she said, squeezing his shoulder gently. “Besides, gods know Bronn of all people deserves it.”

“That's very unfair. I'm a fuckin' paragon of virtue.”

“Then I'm not sure you understand what either paragon or virtue mean.”

Bronn grinned at her and clapped her on the back. “You've loosened up. Just make sure you give Jaime as much shit as you do us or he'll get insufferable during the season. Remember Steelshanks Walton?” Pod groaned and nodded. On Brienne's confused look Bronn added, “he was Jaime's race engineer, what, two years ago? All the different ones run together a bit. They didn't get along and he never tried to advise Jaime, just let him run whatever race he wanted, except for when Kevan came down like a ton of bricks on them both. I could barely keep from punching Jaime in the face most races with how hard he was on the car. He retired from more races that season than any other. He goes too hard when someone isn't reigning him in.”

“Has anyone ever successfully reigned him in?”

Bronn's mouth twisted, his brow furrowing. “Come to think of it, no.” He shrugged. “Well, good luck.”

He and Pod deserted her for their work, Bronn's careless well-wishes popping like bubbles.

Surely he was just messing with her.

Nonetheless she headed for Jaime's driver room and knocked once on the closed door with a pit in her stomach, opening it before he could say anything. He glared at her from the small couch when she entered.

“What do you want?” he said around a huge mouthful of gum.

“How many pieces are you chewing?”

“Four sticks. I used to smoke before races to calm down. One piece wasn't working.” She had no idea how he managed to get words out when there was so much gum in the way.

“That's disgusting,” she said.

He smiled, his cheeks puffed out on either side like a chipmunk. “You're the one who barged in here. I could have been naked.”

“I would have preferred that,” she muttered, but that only made his misshapen smirk widen. “I came to remind you that I am your race engineer, so you have to listen to me today.”

Jaime grabbed a nearby tissue and calmly spit out the gum wad, balling it up. “Is that so?”

“Yes. I won't be like Walton.”

“You've been talking to Bronn.”

“Maybe.”
He gave her an unimpressed side-eye and threw the gum ball away. “Did Bronn also tell you that the only time Steelshanks ever gave me advice that didn't come from Kevan, he suggested I try to push Stark into the apron at turn four when there wasn't an apron there and it would have caused a crash or worse?”

“He didn't,” she admitted.

“I'll listen to you,” Jaime said, “because I trust you're smarter than Steelshanks.” He stood then, folding his arms across his chest; his tight undershirt clung to his muscles. “Don't prove me wrong.”

“What if I tell you something you don't want to hear?”

“I guess we'll have to see what happens, won't we?” he said, his voice low. Brienne searched his eyes, as green and distant as the old-growth forests in the valleys of Tarth; and as filled with a long and sometimes painful history.

There was a knock on the door and Brienne took a step back as Jaime said “come in” without looking away from her.

Tywin Lannister opened the door and glanced between them. “Were you meeting?”

“Just working out a few last details. Come to wish me luck?”

“From eighteenth position? Luck wouldn't help you even if you had an experienced race engineer.” Tywin's face held nothing but disdain, not just for her, but for his own son.

“At least you can be on your way again now that you've done your disappointed fathering.” Jaime turned his back on Tywin, bent to grab an energy drink from the small fridge next to the couch.

“I came to talk to you about your role on this team. I had thought to talk to you alone, but it will be good for her to hear it, too.” Tywin didn't even spare her a glance as he continued. “Lancel is our focus this year. Our strategy lies with him.”

“Your strategy is going for last in the Constructor Championship?”

“You have been an inconsistent mess since you came back to F1.”

Brienne shifted, ready to leap in but Jaime cut her a look that stilled her. “I'm the best driver on the field and you know it,” he said, turning angry eyes to Tywin.

“The best driver on the field would have a World Championship by now.”

Jaime's whole body went tight, she could see the muscles of his forearm straining. “If you'd have put the weight of this team behind me even once-”

“I've done it the last four years and you have squandered it every time.”

“Are you sure you're not getting confused with my time in karting? That's the last time I remember you actively supporting me.”

Tywin's lip curled. “I would have done it your first time in Formula One if you hadn't gone with the Targaryens.”

“Ah, the great betrayal. It always comes back to that.” This had the feel of an argument whose tracks were so well-worn they'd gotten stuck in them. “Would you be less mad at me if you'd just
had a chance to beat me when I was with Dragonfire?"

“Why do you always think I’m mad at you? You had everything – the privilege of a racing family, natural talent, a love for the sport that pushed you further. And here you are now, with that woman and your crew of throwaways and you expect me to take you seriously enough to be angry?”

Brienne swallowed down the fury she felt simmering low and hot in her chest when she met Jaime's gaze just over Tywin's shoulder and saw the single, small shake of his head. Every line in his face seemed to have been carved deeper just from this one conversation; she didn't want to make it worse for him, but she wasn't going to be able to remain quiet much longer. She wondered if the elder Lannister even remembered she was still there.

“Get out,” Jaime spat at Tywin.

Tywin half-turned towards the door and jolted a little when he saw Brienne was still standing just behind him. She planted her feet, glaring at him as he waited for her to get out of his way. She would have stood there until the last race of the season had ended rather than give him ground, but he merely smirked – a shadow of Jaime's own, harder and colder by far – and moved around her. Tywin stepped out the door and then looked back at both of them.

“The team is behind Lancel. The strategy will be for him and if you know what's good for your career, you'll support it.” He slammed the door behind him, leaving his suffocating contempt with them in the small room.

As though ropes that had been binding him were suddenly loosed, Jaime spun and threw his energy drink hard at the far wall where the plastic exploded and red liquid splashed as bright as fresh blood all over the publicity posters from seasons past, dripping to the floor.

“FUCK!” he shouted, his hands tangling in his hair and pulling tight for a minute. “Fuck that fucking cocksucker!”

Any of the ease and excitement she had seen in Jaime in the last few weeks was entirely gone and he reminded her of a caged lion, pacing and furious and trapped. If he carried this with him to the track it would be a disaster. Had Tywin known this would be his response? Could he have done this on purpose to his own son?

“Jaime,” she said, quiet and calm. Jaime kept pacing back and forth, muttering curses, but he looked her way with eyes so bright she wondered if he was on the verge of tears. She had to get him back from this dark edge. “We can get you into points position today.”

That brought him to a halt, eyeing her warily. “I'm starting at p-18.”

“By turn three you'll be in p-12.”

Jaime looked at her like she'd sprouted her own set of racing wings. “That's impossible.”

“It wasn't impossible for Arthur Dayne. I thought you were as good as him?”

He looked mad still, but focused now, not chaos on the brink of spiraling out of control. “I am.”

“He did it, here, in his fifth season. You've got both Nightfort and Dothrak cars right in front of you, and your car has better acceleration than any of theirs so that gets you to P-14 before you even hit the first turn. Hyle Hunt,” she managed to get his name out without her voice shaking, “is in front of them and he always takes turns too wide, so if you get on the inside of him you'll be in P-13 by turn 1, turn 2 if needed. Daario is after that and he drives too aggressively whenever he's not
in the top ten. By turn three he'll have locked his wheels at least once and you can pass him.”

Jaime had gone entirely silent and was staring at her like she'd saved him from drowning. Brienne flushed and looked away. It was easier to withstand him when the whole of his emotions were held back by the wall of sarcasm and detachment; like this he was almost unbearably attractive, the hard lines of his bitterness softened into something appealing and warm.

“Fuck,” he said again, but this time it was quiet and he sounded impressed.

“Anyone could see it,” she said haltingly.

“No, not anyone. You.” Jaime shifted closer.

There was another knock on the door and Brienne quickly said “come in!”

It was Bronn, who glanced between them and lifted an eyebrow. “Time for driver's parade and then you need to get suited up, weighed, and in the car and we need Chief to go over a few last items.”

Brienne nodded and followed after Bronn, though she hesitated at the door. “Don't listen to Tywin,” she said, glancing back at Jaime. “Listen to me. You can do this.”

Jaime smiled a little, an endearingly uncertain twist of his lips. “I believe you.”

Jaime was restless and distracted after Brienne left with Bronn, but not because of what his father had said – those were words he'd heard before even if they never stung any less with repetition. He was unable to stop thinking about Brienne, about the fierce fight in her astonishing eyes when Tywin had been there, how Jaime had known she would have done something foolish just because she was mad on his behalf. It was not the first time, either, which meant it was just who Brienne was and that was something he couldn't seem to get his mind around. What kind of person would throw away their entire dream – even after she'd been so oddly adorable signing autographs for those girls – for a disgraced driver whose own team wasn't even behind him?

It was the kind of person that fit in more awkwardly with Lannister Racing than an actual alien would have. The kind of person that Jaime had thought Arthur Dayne had been, before Aerys had shown that people like that didn't actually exist, they were all made up by carefully controlled media and money paid to the right people at the right time. The kind of person that should have nothing to do with Jaime Lannister.

Jaime went through his pre-race regimen in silence, from the interminable drive around the track for the traditional drivers' parade, waving at the fans while ignoring the scattered conversations and barely hidden contempt of the competition; to standing in line to get weighed per regulations; to putting on his safety equipment, his earpiece, and his flame retardant head covering without snarking at Bronn once. When Jaime pulled his helmet on the noise of the garage went muffled and with the visor down his isolation was complete; hi-tech plastic and fabric in layer after layer separating him from the world, cocooning him with just his thoughts and the steadily growing excitement. Race day was an adrenaline surge unlike any other and climbing into the car, pulling out onto the grid to get into position was like a roller coaster clacking its way up the first hill, except this roller coaster was entirely under his control.

He parked at p-18, got out to survey the long double line of cars he'd have to get through just to get to tenth and a single point in the standings. The engineers swarmed over his car one more time and Jaime fought the familiar snarl that always lingered in his throat when they came to tweak and touch her one last time before it was just him and the car once more. He scanned the area for
Brienne, found her surrounded by engineers, too, the men talking at her while she studied something on one of the screens in the gantry and made notes.

Someone tapped Jaime's helmet and Bronn was there, pointing at the car. “Formation lap,” he said and Jaime climbed back in as the crew pulled the tire covers off and scattered like ants blown away by a strong wind.

The safety car led the field one last time around the track, every driver weaving their rumbling race cars back and forth to warm up the tires, engines all straining like horses eager to go faster.

“Radio check,” Brienne said in his ear, sounding nervous. He felt the tension in his shoulders ease a little at her voice.

“I hear you, Wrench. Ready for this?”

“Are you?”

“I'm always ready for race day.” That was as real and true as the thrumming beat of his heart.

“Remember what we talked about. Points today, even if it's just one.”

He nodded a little and the cars returned to their positions at the grid and the tens of thousands of fans went quiet, a thick, tense hush laying like a blanket over everything. The crews had retreated to the garages and the gantries, and the starting lights became the only markers in Jaime's world. He revved the engine as each circle lit up one by one, held his breath in the endless stretch of waiting for lights out, and then exhaled explosively when they did and the entire field leapt forward as one to start the season.

The first lap of the race went exactly as Brienne had predicted, though Daario locked up around the second turn, not the third, and Jaime had passed him even sooner than she'd suspected.

“Great job,” she said as he started his second lap. “Let's get to tenth.”

Lancel had started at p-3 so Kevan seemed willing to leave Jaime to run whatever race he wanted from his position at the back, Brienne's information coming without any interference from the Lannister Corp team in the cadences they had worked out. Jaime had told her he only ever cared about who was in front of him unless he was in first, so she gave him a constant reminder of who the next two cars were at the start of each lap or when he passed someone. She shared track conditions, including a surprisingly alert early notice about marbles from Daario's overly aggressive cornering that was slowly shredding his tires onto the road. Jaime hit p-10 thirteen laps in and Brienne cheered in his ear.

When he fought to ninth four laps later she nearly deafened him with her shout of excitement. Jaime gritted his teeth around his mouthpiece and watched Loras' car fall behind him.

Halfway through the race he had battled his way to p-7 and she called him in for a pit stop. “Box this lap,” she urged even as he crept up on Renly Baratheon ahead of him.

“I've almost got him.”

“And your tires are nearly done. Box now and you'll get the advantage. None of the cars in front of you have gone in yet. With how you're running today you might even have a shot at podium if we do this right.”

He ignored the instruction. His tires were fine and he was determined to show her he could pass
Renly, that he was better than this driver that Brienne turned into a shy flower over. “Not yet,” he said, pushing harder.

She exhaled loudly into the mic and it sounded like the storm he knew would be waiting for him at the end of the race. Jaime gave Renly a small wave when he passed him on the next lap.

Ten laps later, his tires shot, Renly soared by him on fresh tires and returned the wave. When Brienne ordered him again to box, Jaime pulled in without protest, and they had him back on the road a little over three seconds after he’d stopped, but he’d fallen back to p-10.

“You've still got points,” Brienne reminded him as he tore out of the pit lanes to rejoin the race.

“I want more.”

“Just make it to the end of the race. Twenty laps left.”

“Anyone else still need to go in?”

“Stark and Renly both already did, and so did Lancel. But there are a few ahead of you who haven't, you may have a chance there,” she allowed.

Jaime's fingers tightened on the wheel.

The last twenty laps passed in the familiar tunnel vision that every race he'd ever been in came down to. The world didn't shrink so much as disappear, an indistinct blur on either side of him, the dark asphalt and bright sky ahead the only things he focused on, occasionally disrupted by one of his competitor's cars as colorful and unique as birds, and as easily devoured. Even Brienne had gone mostly quiet in his helmet, just announcing who he was coming up on and how many laps were left in a steady countdown.

“Last lap,” she said eventually and there was excitement in the simple words.

He gave the car even more power, pushing her as hard as he could, willing her to just a little more, just a little longer. Euron Greyjoy was ahead of him in his black and gold Kraken. He'd pitted two laps earlier than Jaime had and even that small amount of wear was enough.

“You've got him,” Brienne urged breathlessly as Jaime crept nearer. Euron swerved trying to cut off his pass and Jaime fell back a little before pressing again. When Euron made the exact same maneuver on the second attack, Jaime smiled to himself. He fell back one more time before surging forward a third time and as soon as Euron started his same protective swerve Jaime was already in the space he was abandoning to try to block Jaime's car; Jaime used the DRS and jumped ahead of Euron.

“Yes!” Brienne cheered. “Well done!”

Jaime smiled, feeling warm and accomplished, and as he crossed the finish line with Euron still behind him Brienne said, her voice as light as a young girl's, “well you got points.”

He slowed for the cool-down lap and the world came rushing back around him, snapping into place. People were cheering, and some of them seemed to be cheering him. “Where did I end up?”

“P-5.”

“You're shitting me.” Even Dayne hadn't made that jump; he'd only gotten to p-6.
But Brienne was laughing, a cheerful waterfall of noise that filled his head, washed through his whole body and pushed out the tension as he took the corners gently and headed for the parc fermé. He banged the side of his car in excitement, and then smoothed his hand over her as apology. Jaime muted the mic and whispered, “awesome job, girl.”

When he finally got out of the car and pulled off his helmet and protective covering he had drivers hovering around him as though he were one of the podium sitters.

“Spectacular racing today,” Renly said, clapping him on the shoulder. Even Loras nodded in agreement. The Dothrak team both pounded Jaime on the back before heading over to the top three. Renly was flashing the blindingly bright smile that suggested that all that was between them was camaraderie and not years of Loras hissing *Kingslayer* and Renly ignoring Jaime entirely.

“Tell your race engineer thanks for having you box late. You might've beat me, too, if you'd gone sooner,” Renly smirked.

“She did want me to go sooner,” Jaime said. “So you have me to thank.”

Renly laughed and slapped his shoulder again. “Jaime Lannister admitting fault. Will wonders never cease?” He and Loras left him then, too, and Jaime noticed Addam standing a distance away, in between him and the group of actual winners. They had been close as brothers once, before Aerys and the turning point around which every good thing in his life had twisted and disappeared, even his best friend.

They hadn't even talked directly to each other since last year, when they'd ended up at an interview table together and avoided questions about their friendship growing up in karting circles and how that friendship had faded in the intervening years. Once their shared interview had been over, Addam had tried to talk to him but Jaime had been in the middle of a slump brought on by penalties and bad decisions and all he had to give was bitterness. On the asphalt now, Addam just stared at him before leaving the track. It was better than the angry hurt from their last conversation, Jaime supposed.

He turned to the top three, Robb, Oberyn, and Lancel, who were still accepting congratulations from their crews and the other drivers. Jaime ignored his own teammate and walked directly to Robb, who watched his approach without smiling. The last time they'd talked had been last year's season finale, and Jaime had been as sharp and cruel as his father.


“I'll take the thirteen spot jump.”

“Maybe if you qualify better you'll be with me on the podium by the end of the season. You can help me celebrate my world championship.”

“It's only the first race of the season, and yet you're so certain of a championship.”

“The only thing I'm certain of is I can beat you every time, Kingslayer.”

Jaime felt the dark tendrils creeping out of his heart. *Kingslayer. A man without honor. The most penalized driver in IAF history.* He thought of Brienne laughing happily as he'd crossed the finish line. “I've got nineteen more races to prove you wrong,” he said, pushing the bitter response away. Jaime smiled and tapped his forehead jauntily before heading for the post-race weigh-in and rehydration rooms. For once, he knew Robb Stark's silence was surprise, not fury.
Brienne's hands were stinging from the amount of high-fives she'd given the rest of the crew after Jaime's remarkable climb to fifth. She'd believed he could make tenth, but any more than that seemed miraculous. What it really was was Jaime's skill, the team's work on the car, a little bit of luck and, she thought allowing herself a brief indulgence, her support getting him the information and engine configurations he needed to make the most of what he took on the track.

It was bright out in the lanes where all the pit crews had emerged, talking and laughing, calling out insults and congratulations to other teams. Brienne had been dreading this part for days now, because all the race engineers were congregating in one area to wait for the drivers while the pit crews mingled somewhere else. It was a boys' club filled with men who either didn't know her and didn't care to or already disliked her because she wasn't one of them. Theodan was there, talking with Oberyn's engineer, but when he saw Brienne he immediately looked away without including her. They'd talked not at all during the race, even though they sat next to each other in the gantry. He hadn't been cruel, he'd just acted as though she didn't even exist.

But Theodan was the least of her worries. She would take his purposeful indifference over the jagged-edged swords Griffin's engineers had wielded against her in F2. Seeing them again – Dunsen who worked with Red Connington, Ambrose with Hyle Hunt – Brienne's stomach twisted into a mess of sharp pains and sharper memories. She'd been on Connington's team, but that hadn't stopped Hyle's from taking their own interest in her as well. This was what had kept her up most of last night: the anticipation not just of seeing all of them again since she'd left so hurriedly years ago, but having to talk to them like none of it mattered because there were media swarming in the crowd as determined and obnoxious as ants and as eager for any morsel they could find. Brienne refused to let her past humiliation become the story of her time with Lannister Corp Racing.

There was a flash of red hair and she sucked in her breath, holding it tight until the crowds cleared and she could see it wasn't Connington at all, but a man almost as tall as her and easily as broad, with a big, bushy beard that seemed anxious to grow out into the world. He was wearing a Direwolf Racing jumpsuit and a shockingly vulgar leer on his face as he looked her up and down. Brienne glanced around, looking for someone to attach herself to so she wouldn't have to talk to this man, when a much shorter distraction caught her eyes. It was a young woman with grey eyes, brown hair, and a stubborn chin, and she was marching directly for Brienne.

The young woman halted and stared up at Brienne with eyes much more calculating than her youthful features would suggest.

"You're that Lannister mechanic-turned-engineer," she stated matter-of-factly.

"I am. I'm sorry, who are you?"

"Arya Stark." Arya stuck out her hand and Brienne shook it, found her slender fingers were surprisingly strong.

"Related to Robb Stark?"

"His sister. What are you doing working for Lannister Corp?"

Brienne decided to respond as directly as Arya had asked the question. "Your brother's team wouldn't hire me."

Arya sighed, a sharp, exasperated sound that Brienne found oddly charming, though she hid her smile. She suspected Arya Stark would not appreciate being found charming. "He's an idiot. I'll have to go knock some sense into him." She tilted her head thoughtfully. "I'm glad you're here in F1, even if it's for the wrong team."
“I'm happy to be here.”

They stared at each other, a mismatched pair – Arya short and dark, Brienne tall and pale. She could hear cameras clicking and knew the headlines would somehow reference the two women from rival teams as being in a catfight even though they were only talking.

“Do you work on your brother's crew?” Brienne asked, genuinely curious.

“Work for Robb?” Arya laughed darkly. “Not with his sponsors. I do work for Direwolf, though. Engineering intern. I'm graduating from college this year with my degree.”

“It must be nice to have a family already in racing.”

“I don't want to work for them. People will think I only got the job because I'm a Stark. They already think that about the internship.”

Brienne nodded in commiseration. “Everyone thinks I only got this job because I'm a woman.”

“Fuckers. Seeing you here gives me hope that maybe someday we'll have an all-girls Formula 1 racing team. We can have some make-up brand as our sponsor. Paint the whole thing purple and slap lipstick kisses all over it.”

A laugh bubbled out of Brienne's constricted chest and she forgot about Hyle and Connington and even Jaime for a moment. “Gods can you imagine? They'd let us by because they were afraid to be seen next to our car.”

Arya's lips twisted into a sharp wolf's grin. “We'd destroy them.”

“Destroy who?” Jaime asked, coming up on them unexpectedly. Brienne's face went hot and she glanced at Arya, but Arya was facing him down with the same undaunted confidence with which she'd approached Brienne.

“You,” the young woman said, lifting her chin.

Jaime smirked at her. “You Starks are so full of confidence for so little reason.”

“I forget, who won the World Championship and Constructor's Championship last year?” Jaime's smirk slipped and seemed to suddenly appear on Arya's face. “Just wait until we hang tampon curtains as our privacy screens,” she added knowingly. “Good luck, Brienne, though not too much luck. We'll talk later. Not a lot of us women here on the asphalt.”

Brienne bid Arya goodbye and she and Jaime watched her go with their arms crossed over their chests in mirrored poses. Jaime leaned a little towards Brienne and asked, confused, “tampon curtains?”

“Don't worry about it.” She turned to face him, and was caught by the beaming light in his green eyes. “Congratulations! You did it.”

Jaime raised his eyebrows. “We did it. You were exactly right about the race start. I wouldn't have gotten those first positions if it weren't for you.”

There were cameras all over, official racing team employees whose sole job was to document every moment of the season, as well as the usual army of media on the lookout for news. From the number of them swarming nearby, they had found some here. A video camera was a few feet away, filming them.
Brienne knew she was red and sweaty and she scrambled for something to say to get Jaime's and
the cameras' attention off of her. “You could have passed Renly, too, if you'd pitted earlier.”

That had clearly not been the right thing by the way Jaime's face fell and then hardened into much
more familiar lines. “Yes, well,” he said, running his hand through his hair and making it somehow
look even better, “you need to get the team faster at the pit stop.”

“We were under four seconds.”

“Everyone ahead of me is under three.”

“Lannister-”

“Jaime,” Kevan interrupted, walking up to them. He gave the cameras a significant look and
Brienne ducked her head nervously. “That was a good run. You earned some unexpected points for
the team.”

“I earned them for myself,” Jaime said between clenched teeth.

“I'm sure you'd keep them from us if you could,” Kevan said dryly.

“I'll make that recommendation for next year's regulation changes.”

Kevan rolled his eyes and turned to Brienne. “You were right about the pit stop. Hopefully your
driver will listen to you next time. We can talk more at the debrief.” He gestured at the cameras.
“No need to give all our secrets away, eh?” The journalists laughed a little, a knowing murmur that
did not feel entirely friendly.

“We'll pick this up later, Wrench,” Jaime said, turning from the cameras' hungry eyes. With his
back to most of them he said in a voice directed just to her under the din, “head for the paddock.
Media's more tightly controlled there.”

He moved off with Kevan and though most of the media followed after, Melisandre remained
behind. “Brienne, how was your first race?”

Melisandre had asked it casually, but Brienne noted that her phone was recording. “It was
exciting.” Brienne said.

“Were you disappointed to see Lancel back in action?”

“Why would I be disappointed?”

“You did get to drive for him in winter testing. Were you hoping you'd get the chance to race
professionally?”

Brienne couldn't even dignify that with an answer. “I should get back for the debrief.”

“I talked with some of the folks from Griffin,” Melisandre said quickly, and Brienne's insides went
to concrete. “They remember you working there, but they won't comment on your departure.
Would you like to address it?”

“No,” Brienne said through dry lips.

Melisandre hit a button on her phone. “I will find out,” she said, not unkindly. “Wouldn't you
rather control the message yourself?”
“Why does it matter? It was years ago. It wasn't even F1!”

“Your past makes you who you are today. Surely you must recognize that, given who your driver is.”

“Jaime isn't just his past. You saw him drive today.”

“He was unusually controlled. Not like him at all.”

Brienne frowned. “He drove smart and when the situation called for it he pressed the edges.”

“This was one race against years of evidence he is not this man.”

“I know he is,” Brienne said, too fast and too fierce. Melisandre lifted her perfectly styled eyebrows and then glanced down at her phone. When Brienne followed her gaze, she saw that Melisandre had been recording the whole time. “I have no further comments.”

“I don't need any,” Melisandre said and then did turn the recording app off, smiling warmly at Brienne as though they were good friends. “You still owe me that sit-down interview,” she said.

“What?”

“You promised at the beginning of the season. I'll be in touch. Good luck on your next race!”

Brienne could only stare, dumbfounded, as Melisandre headed to the group clustered around the Stag Motor drivers. She looked around for someone to share her confusion with, but she was alone, a wide circle around her as everyone else talked with media or friends or friendly rivals from other teams. Most of the Lannister Corp, Direwolf, and Sunspear crews were all out by the podium waiting for their drivers to be awarded for first, second, and third place and the people left here were already planning for parties that night that she wouldn't be a part of before heading home tomorrow.

She brought out her phone and thought about calling her dad to anchor her when she felt someone watching. Brienne looked up and saw Hyle Hunt, his plain features twisted in consideration, and she froze under his stare, knowing she was going red and unable to do anything about it. But he just nodded and then turned back to his companions, leaving her blessedly alone.

Brienne breathed a shaky sigh of relief and escaped, finally, to the paddock where she waited in the quiet for everyone to return and tried not to think about the last time she had seen Hyle.

By Tuesday everyone was back to work and busier than ever. Brienne spent most of the day stuck in the engineering room listening to them argue over how much a .1 degree of angle adjustment on the front wing would make to the car's speed. She cared about the answer in theory, but the practicality of figuring it out was slowly driving her mad.

That evening she wandered back to her cubicle with her brain still trying to dig out of the avalanche of numbers they'd given her, and when she saw Jaime's light was on she walked in without knocking to commiserate with him. As she did, she heard her own voice saying, “I know he is,” before Jaime slammed his laptop closed.

Brienne halted abruptly. “Sorry, I should have knocked.”

“It's fine. I thought you weren't doing interviews?”

“I didn't know she was still recording,” she said, her cheeks heating. Jaime looked down at his
“closed laptop, one hand smoothing over the top of it. “Was it a video?”

“No, podcast.”

“Well, that's good at least.”

“Did you need something?”

Brienne shifted awkwardly as she realized she didn't, really. She'd just come in to share her afternoon with Jaime because she knew he'd understand; he'd make some snarky comment that she never would have put words to and it would have been just right, funny and not too mean, a release valve for the stress of their long hours day after day. “I, uh,” she said, “was just seeing if you needed anything. I was going to head home.”

Jaime glanced to the practical black sports watch that still looked expensive on his strong, tanned wrist. “Eight pm and going home already, that's early for you isn't it?” He grinned, taking the sting out of it.

“I thought I'd see how drivers live,” she said and his grin widened. “Goodnight, Lannister.”

“Goodnight, Wrench.” She was halfway through the door when he said, “wait, I do have one thing.” Brienne looked back at him. “Did you mean it? What you told her?”

She thought about what she'd said to Melisandre when she thought no one else had been listening. “I did.”

Jaime nodded, like he'd expected that answer and yet it still surprised him, and she closed his door softly behind her.

Brienne had thought the two weeks between Sunspear and the second race in Myr would be leisurely compared to races later in the season where they would have only one week between, but she hadn't counted on the fact that the team used the extra week and weekend to pack in more work on the car, more practice in the pit, more interviews and fan meet-ups and planning for mid-season when the days would come even faster and harder and preparation made all the difference.

Not to mention they had to fly this time instead of drive because this race was across the water, which complicated everything: plane tickets, hotels, transporting the car to and from the airport. It was a logistical nightmare of which Brienne had only a small part and still she was exhausted by it. But she had never been to Myr before and though she was weary stepping off the plane, it was quickly overtaken by excitement.

Myr was a city of artisans and fisherman; a more advanced and worldly mirror of Tarth in its way, though here there were a hundred religious institutions, whereas on Tarth most people either worshipped the Seven or the sea, or both. The pageantry of Formula 1 had gripped the city and they'd rolled out literal red carpets for the arriving teams. Each member of the crew was given a small sample of Myrish lace with their team's logo worked in the middle of it. Bronn grunted at his and asked for wine instead, and the woman handing out the samples had only smiled and promised there would be plenty of wine later. As they were escorted to the Lannister Corp bus, Brienne heard the strains of “Seasons of My Love,” a song by what was likely Myr's most famous export, the pop star Serala Darklyn. That song had been everywhere five years ago, even on Tarth, and she was not surprised to find they were still embracing it today. Serala didn't put Myr on the map – they'd been famous for their lace and their glass and their spiced wine long before that – but she did drag them into the present and remind Westeros that popular culture didn't stop on their shores.
That hour between getting off the plane and getting on the bus for their hotel was the most she saw of Myr for the next few days until after the Saturday qualifying runs, when Lannister Corp held their first team dinner of the season. They'd bought out one of their famous restaurants on the waterfront, *The Spirit of Myr*, renowned for its fresh seafood. The owners had cleared out the entire bottom floor and put in several large tables, as well as a few standing tables around the edges for appetizers ahead of time. They'd hung golden lights all around the room and were piping in classical Westerosi music.

Brienne smoothed down her black cocktail dress as she walked in, Podrick and Bronn on either side of her. The team had all been bussed from the hotel to the restaurant, everyone dressed in party wear. Podrick was wearing black suit pants, a white shirt, and a badly-tied deep red tie while Bronn was in a well-worn brown suit she imagined he had just for occasions like this.

“I'm not gonna re-tie it,” Bronn said for the third time, completely avoiding Podrick's big puppy eyes. “You're old enough to know how by now.”

“M-my mum couldn't teach me and you know my d-d-dad isn't around.”

“Your sob story is no reason to not know how to tie a tie,” Bronn grumbled, but he yanked Podrick near by the arm and went to work. “I'm not doing it next time,” he said, even as Pod looked at Brienne and winked at her.

She caught sight of Jaime on the other side of the room, looking aristocratic and handsome in his sleek navy-colored suit and jacket, the white of his shirt bringing out the brightness of his smile. He looked over and caught her watching him, patted the arm of the man he was chatting with – she thought he was one of the executives she tried to mostly stay away from – and headed their way.

“You clean up nice, Wrench,” Jaime said when he'd neared.

Brienne's face grew hot. “It's the same dress I wore at the last party,” she said.

“I was a lot drunker at that party,” he said, sounding almost embarrassed. “Wearing the same thing has never stopped Bronn, anyway,” he added. Bronn stuck his middle finger up and beelined for the bar. Podrick straightened his perfectly tied tie and nodded at Jaime and Brienne before going the opposite direction to the appetizers.

“Are there many of these events? I didn't exactly pack for parties.”

“Not for you,” Jaime said, gesturing for her to follow him to the bar as well. “I have a whole rack in my closet just for suits for all the functions I have to go to, though. My father demands elegance in everything we do. Wine or cocktail?”

“Wine, I guess. White.”

Jaime ordered a glass of white wine for her and red for himself and tipped the bartender when he presented the drinks. “My father isn't even in Myr. But he has to make his presence felt.”

“He must have been overbearing to grow up with.”

He snorted. “You could say that. Here, you can ask my brother.” He gestured with his wine glass at Tyrion who was headed their way.

“Brienne Tarth,” Tyrion said gaily. He took her big hand in his two smaller ones and kissed the top. “What a pleasure to see you again. Rumor has it you played quite the role in my brother's good fortune last week.”
“Well, he did the driving.”

“Humble, too. How refreshing.” Tyrion ordered two more glasses of the red.

“Thirsty tonight?” Jaime asked.

“No, just preparing for Cersei.”

Jaime glanced up at the door and groaned. “Shouldn't she be with her husband's team?”

“And miss an opportunity to prove herself useful to father as a spy?” Tyrion asked, droll.

Brienne took a sip of her wine and looked around for an excuse to leave, but Cersei had seen them already and leaving before she said hello to the other woman walking towards them would likely look even worse. She took a bigger drink of her wine to steady herself.

“Jaime,” Cersei said, kissing his cheek. “Tyrion.” He just smiled at her and held out the full glass of wine which she took with an arched eyebrow.

“And you,” Cersei said to Brienne, “I've entirely forgotten your name.”

Brienne gritted her teeth and managed a tight-lipped smile. “Brienne,” she said. “Have we met before?”

Cersei's perfect red lips twisted upward in what might have passed for a genuine smile if her eyes hadn't been so dark and hard. “Cersei Lannister-Baratheon. You must have been quite drunk the last time we met, no wonder you've forgotten.”

“Cersei,” Jaime said, his voice a warning.

“You've climbed your way up the ladder since the launch party,” Cersei went on, ignoring him. “Race engineer now. What a remarkable leap.”

“She's earned it,” Jaime jumped in.

“I'm sure she has,” Cersei said in a tone that suggested Brienne had earned it in his bed. Brienne swallowed down her anger and the last of her wine, and set her glass down on the bar.

“I'm hungry,” she said and Tyrion took her hand immediately.

“Let me introduce you to the best appetizers money can buy.” Tyrion tugged her away, leaving Jaime and Cersei behind. “I'm sorry about our sister,” he said quietly when they were over by a plate heaped with beautifully prepared oysters.

“Is she always like that?”

“Terrifying and cruel? Yes.” He selected an oyster and sucked it down. “At least in my experience.”

Brienne watched Cersei and Jaime talking, the tight line of Jaime's jaw, the unhappy tilt of his mouth. “His experience, too, from the look of it.”

“He tells me she wasn't always this way, just since I was born, so I really couldn't say. But even if she was at one time not awful, that time has long passed even for him.”

“Then why does he still talk to her?”
Tyrion took another oyster. “She's his twin. He thinks the person she was is still in there.”

*Because the person he was is still in him,* Brienne thought. She glanced at Tyrion and his mismatched eyes were calculating. “How are the oysters?”

“Delicious.” He handed her one on a napkin. “You should try them. They're quite the aphrodisiac.”

She nearly choked on the one she'd been eating. “What?”

“Surely you have some eager Myrish hunk waiting for you? They're very devoted fans here.”


Tyrion grinned at her. “One 'no' would have sufficed.”

“How could you think that? Look at me.”

“Look at me,” he retorted. “You think I don't have a woman waiting for me back at the hotel?”

Brienne gagged at him and the host for the evening called them all to the tables for dinner. Tyrion winked at her and gestured to the tables. “Dinner awaits, my lady,” he said.

They filtered over and negotiated for seats, Brienne ending up with Tyrion on one side and Podrick on the other, with Bronn, Willem, and Martyn across from them. Jaime and Cersei had ended up at a completely different table with Lancel, Kevan, and the rest of the executives. As the first course of lobster bisque was served, she leaned over to Tyrion.

“Don't you want to sit at the table with Kevan and the others?”

“Absolutely not. This table is much more my speed. Besides, then I wouldn't be able to sit near you.”

Brienne offered a small, uncomfortable smile. Tyrion was flirtatious, had been both times they'd met, but it felt insincere, an effect he automatically put on instead of just talking. “Jaime and I were speaking about your father earlier,” she said, trying to skip past the useless flirting.

Tyrion's spoon hesitated on his way to his mouth before he finished slurping down his bisque. “My sincere apologies.”

“That's not the f word I would have used.” He nodded at the server to clear his small bowl away and covered her hand with his. “What about you, Brienne? Jaime tells me he found you on Tarth. I assume given your name that's a family legacy. Were you born on the island as well?”

“Yes. I've lived there my whole life. Until now I suppose.”

“A rarity.”

She shrugged. “Islanders tend to stay close to home.”

“Do you have any brothers or sisters? Hopefully better ones than mine.”

Brienne glanced at the other table again, saw Jaime was intent on his bisque while Cersei, Kevan, and Lancel talked around him. “I did,” she said quietly. “My brother, Galladon, died when I was younger.”
“I'm sorry,” he said sincerely. “Do you remember him?”

“I do.” Brienne let the server clear her bowl and place a salad with small shrimps scattered on top in front of her. “Not as much as I want to, though.”

“I know the feeling,” Tyrion said. He stared distantly at his salad for a moment before smiling brightly up at her. “Let's not ruin our meal with useless regrets. You sound like you need more wine.” Tyrion gestured for the sommelier, who came back with a bottle of white, poured them each a glass and set it down on the table.

“I'll be taking that,” Bronn said happily, drinking straight out of the bottle.


“You can still have some,” he said, holding the bottle out to Podrick, who grimaced and waved it off.

They cheerfully bickered and talked through the salad, main course, and into dessert, Tyrion throwing in with them repeatedly, even Willem getting in on it. Martyn spent most of his meal talking with the other end of the table, but Brienne caught him glaring at her once or twice before quickly looking away again.

She only met Jaime's eyes once, just after dessert was set down and Brienne had taken a bite, her eyes sliding closed as the rich triple chocolate mousse cake melted on her tongue. When she looked around to share her glee, she caught Jaime staring right at her with bright eyes. He smirked and touched the side of his mouth with the tip of his finger. Brienne wiped at her own mouth in the same place, found chocolate there that she cleaned off hurriedly on her napkin, knowing she was blushing again. She mouthed 'thank you' silently to him and he blinked, licked his lips, and nodded at her before Cersei tugged on his arm, drawing his attention away.

Kevan stood, clinking his knife loudly against his glass. Once they'd all quieted down he said, “Thank you all for coming to the first team dinner of the racing season!” There was a small round of applause in response. “As you know, Tywin couldn't make it for the trip to Myr but he wishes you all a good race tomorrow. We're in excellent position thanks to our drivers' qualifying runs today. Jaime of course is starting at p-5 and Lancel is at p-2.” The applause was louder that time. “We just wanted to thank you all for your hard work to get us to the start of the season, and we'll have another one of these at the end in King's Landing to celebrate winning the Constructor's Championship!” That set the room off in a loud series of cheers and hollering, Brienne joining them. “Hope you all enjoyed your meal. Make sure you finish up as we'll be heading back to the hotels soon for the night.”

“Finally!” Amory Lorch belched, the engineers around him laughing.

“Yes I'm sure many of you have other engagements waiting,” Kevan acknowledged. Brienne grimaced at the lecherous grin on Amory's face. “We still have a race day tomorrow, though, so I hope you all, especially our drivers, won't be up too late.” Lancel accepted the executives' back pats with a sly smile; Jaime just seemed annoyed by the whole thing.

“Alright everyone, what do we say at Lannister Corp?”

“Hear us roar!” they shouted back, except her part of the table which was much quieter.

“Embarrassing,” Tyrion muttered, downing yet another glass of wine. “Well, I don't have to wait for the bus, so I am off to my...engagement a little early.” He pushed his chair back and gave
Brienne a short bow. “You should take advantage of the very friendly people of Myr, Brienne. They won't disappoint you.” He gave her a sideways smile and wandered off, waving to Jaime and ignoring Cersei entirely on his way out.

“How he gets so many women is a damned mystery,” Bronn said.

“Because of how he looks?”

“Because of what a puffed up prick he is.”

Brienne snorted. “He doesn't seem as puffed up or as much of a prick as some people.”

“Are you insulting our driver? Because if you are, you're absolutely right.”

She hadn't been, she realized. Jaime had an ego, that was true, but the more time she spent with him the more she realized he wasn't a prick so much as sharp-tongued and angry with good reason, softened occasionally by his love of the sport. “I was talking about Tywin,” she said, pitching it just for Bronn, who laughed loudly.

“You're learning, Chief. Hey Pod, what did Tywin say about you when you first arrived?”

“Th-that my hands w-w-were slower than my tongue.”

“That was it! Gods that man can cut a person down faster than anyone I've ever met. Cersei's a close second. Miracle that Jaime and Tyrion turned out even half as normal as they did. Normal by Lannister standards, at least.”

“Do my ears deceive me?” Jaime said in a deep, amused voice from behind Brienne. She straightened at the sound and the belated waft of his expensive cologne. “Is Bronn Blackwater complimenting me?”

“Don't let it go to your head, it was only in comparison to Tywin.”

“Say no more.” Jaime took the seat Tyrion had left open next to Brienne. “Did you enjoy the rest of your meal or just the dessert?” he asked, grinning. There was some color in his cheeks from the wine he'd had, and he leaned back in his chair, the top buttons of his dress shirt undone, his eyes glinting.

Brienne flushed and folded her hands on top of the table. “It was all fine.”

“Fine? This is the best restaurant in the city. Chefs pay to interview here.”

She shrugged. “I prefer the seafood on Tarth,” she admitted. “It's simpler but it's more my taste.”

“Simple over extravagant, hm? That sounds like you, Wrench.”

“Everyone is allowed their opinions, Lannister.”

“I was allowing you yours, even as wrong as they are.”

Brienne glared at him. “I would put the best place on Tarth up against here any day.”

“You're that confident?”

“I am. I'll take you sometime so you can see.”
“I’d like that,” he said and Brienne’s brain rewound what her mouth had angrily offered, and she couldn’t meet his amused smile for another second.

“Not that we’ll have time,” she said hastily. “In fact we should probably get back now. Want to be well-rested for tomorrow.”

“No ‘engagements’ for you tonight?” Jaime asked, watching her. He was still leaning back in his chair looking relaxed, though his voice wasn’t.

“Of course not,” she mumbled. “I expect you do though.”

“You expect a lot of things about me that are wrong.” He stood and winked at her. “I won’t begrudge you this one, though. I am quite handsome.”

Brienne closed her eyes and laughed softly. “Gods, I take back what I said about you not being as puffed up as your father.” When she opened her eyes again he was still smiling, but it looked strained.

“I better leave before I’m even more of a disappointment, then,” he said. He inclined his head and turned to go and Brienne was left with the feeling she’d hurt him, though she wasn’t sure how.

On Sunday Jaime showed up at the track on time and with a professional smile and he seemingly managed to avoid her until she knocked on the door of his ready room.

“Ready for race day?” he asked when she entered.

“Yes. I thought we could talk about your strategy one more time.”

“If you want.” He made space for her to sit on the opposite chair and engaged attentively with her on the plan. Then he checked the time and said he was sorry but he needed to get ready for the race and he’d check in again before he got in the car. It was all very pleasant and felt entirely wrong. Jaime wasn’t pleasant. He was obnoxious and stubborn and demanding and decidedly not pleasant. Brienne stood outside his room wondering what the hell had just happened.

There wasn’t time to worry about it as the pre-race routine kicked into high gear. Before she could take a breath again he was already weaving back and forth on the formation lap.

“Radio check,” she said.

“I hear you.”

“Good luck today.”

“I don’t need luck,” he said and there was the arrogance she was familiar with. Brienne smiled in spite of herself.

“Not when you have me,” she agreed, relieved when he laughed low.

There was ultimately a little luck involved; Jaime was penalized three seconds in the pit after a reckless move that Brienne bit her tongue on but filed away for the post-race debrief, and a crash by Lancel in the last ten laps brought out the yellow flag and saved Jaime from losing any of his previous advantage, which meant he still managed to come in p-3 this time, his first podium finish of the season. The pit crew rushed out to the barriers to meet him as the top three – Oberyn in p-1, followed by Robb and Jaime – came in to the parc fermé and parked behind their position signs.
Jaime climbed up out of his car and shook his fists excitedly, before heading over to the crew to high-five them, except for Pod who gripped him around the waist and squeezed. When Jaime got to Brienne he lifted up the shield covering his eyes and she was struck by the way they shone, the edges crinkling with happiness.

“Well done,” she said and he nodded. They didn't hug or high-five or even shake hands, they just beamed at each other until Kevan shoved forward for a fist-bump Jaime returned unenthusiastically.

“I'll see you from the podium,” Jaime said, muffled through the helmet, before Kevan ushered him off to get water, weighed, and cleaned up before the ceremony. Brienne high-fived Bronn and Podrick again and then went with them to the crew area in front of the high stage where the top three would receive their race trophies and champagne.

“You may want to stay farther back if you don't want to get sprayed,” Bronn warned her and Brienne recalled how often drivers would drench the entire crew instead of just each other with the huge champagne bottles. She nodded and lingered at the back, out of reach of all but the most aggressive droplets and waited eagerly for the ceremony to begin.

“Brienne?” someone said, and she turned to find Hyle standing there, his plain face smiling.

“Hyle,” she breathed, glancing around. “What are you doing here?”

“Just watching the ceremony. I usually do from back here. Don't like to get wet unless I'm the one doing the spraying.” He was so nonchalant, as though he hadn't been a part of her humiliating retreat from Griffin.

“What are you doing here by me?” she insisted.

“Saying hello, I thought. It's been awhile.”

That isn't my fault, she wanted to yell at him, but she just nodded.

He glanced up at the still-empty podium and then back to her. “Congratulations on your role. Seems you two are a good team.”

“We're doing fine,” she said.

“Good. It's good to see you again.”

“Is it?”

“Of course.” He frowned, like he was confused by her reticence. “The ceremony will start soon and I'm sure you'll want to enjoy your first podium experience. We'll have to talk later.”

Brienne remained quiet and Hyle half-shrugged and wandered back to where a few of the other drivers were gathered around. She tried not to stare at them but she couldn't help wonder if their quiet conversation was about her. If he was telling them how he knew her, the cruel trick he'd been a part of. If they would laugh even now at the ridiculous girl she'd been, someone in her early twenties who still believed a man might be interested in her even though she looked as she did, even though her entire past suggested that was absurd.

She didn't stay to find out, instead watching the ceremony on one of the TVs inside the paddock where Hyle and the memories that trailed him couldn't quite reach.
April

Chapter Summary

Jaime forced himself to watch the road and not the woman – *my race engineer* he reminded himself – next to him. He'd had to do that more frequently lately, especially since dinner in Myr two weeks ago. He was fairly certain he'd never seen anyone shift so quickly from unwittingly sexy to incredibly adorable as fast as she had eating that dessert, and whenever he had a moment that wasn't jam-packed he would find himself thinking about the way her eyes had fluttered closed and her mouth had gone slack with pleasure. Sometimes even when he should have very obviously been thinking about anything else.

Chapter Notes

I have been so enjoying the sudden flurry of fic updates from my JB subscriptions that I figured I'd join in on the fun of Ficsgiving and post early again this week for those who may need the distraction or have the extra time for fic reading (US readers, I'm looking at you). Also this is one of *my* favorite chapters and I've been looking forward to sharing it, and I finished this week's chapter AND managed to miraculously avoid tragic computer/story loss from an unexpected hard drive failure this week so I'm enjoying the win. This is, so far (I'm six chapters ahead in writing this), the shortest chapter, but it's still 6k. I hope you enjoy. ;)

“It'll be fun,” Jaime said, waving the box under Brienne's nose. “It's not like we have anything else to do today.”

She gestured to the two-inch stack of printouts she was going through, each page more densely packed with numbers and notes than the last. Jaime made a face.

“There's not one thing in there that's going to make a bit of difference on the track tomorrow. They red-flagged quals, we've put the sandbags up in the garage, and now the whole day awaits us.”

Brienne sighed. “But why *that*?”

“Would you rather go bowling with the crew?” He could tell immediately by the way her nose scrunched up that the answer was no, but she pretended to consider it.

“Is there beer?”

“I can get beer,” he scoffed. “Gulltown's finest. I mean you can sit alone in your hotel room staring at page after page of,” he squinted at the upside down papers, “restructuring of the intake to increase aerodynamic flow as measured in pounds per square inch, or you could come build a really cool model of Dayne's first championship car with me.” He shook the box under her nose again, the pieces clicking together cheerfully.
“You're still very annoying,” she grumbled, but she gathered up her papers and tucked them into her big shoulder bag.

“I'll even let you talk about the strategy for tomorrow if you let me do all four wheels.”

“Gods,” she laughed. “Fine, it's a deal.”

The local driver they called to come take them to the hotel greeted them with a silent glare as they hustled into his backseat, water dripping everywhere. It was already a downpour in Gulltown and the worst of the storm hadn't even hit yet. If Jaime hadn't talked Brienne into it in the next fifteen minutes, they might have just been stuck at the track. He rubbed his hands over his head, slicking back his hair, and glanced at her in the seat next to him doing the same. The tip of her nose was red from the cold and her pale lashes looked dark and long with the rainwater, making her blue eyes glow.

Jaime forced himself to watch the road and not the woman – my race engineer he reminded himself – next to him. He'd had to do that more frequently lately, especially since dinner in Myr two weeks ago. He was fairly certain he'd never seen anyone shift so quickly from unwittingly sexy to incredibly adorable as fast as she had eating that dessert, and whenever he had a moment that wasn't jam-packed he would find himself thinking about the way her eyes had fluttered closed and her mouth had gone slack with pleasure. Sometimes even when he should have very obviously been thinking about anything else.

Fortunately for both of them, he was still Jaime Lannister, disgraced Formula 1 driver that was little better than his father, and she was the extremely dedicated and hard-working Brienne Tarth, which meant there was no awkward sexual tension on her part so he could tuck his away more easily. Or so he'd thought until free practice yesterday when she'd done her first radio check early in the morning and he'd almost weaved his car right into the wall in surprise. Had her voice always been that husky?

Jaime stared out at the rain running in a solid sheet down the window and wondered what the fuck he was doing inviting her to his hotel room to build a model car, except he was actually looking forward to it. They'd both been running non-stop since Myr – since well before, really – and it would be a good opportunity for him to get to know her better. A solid relationship between a driver and his race engineer could make or break the chance for p-1 and though he knew Brienne had a brother who'd died and she really liked triple chocolate mousse cake, he didn't know much else about her, while she knew the biggest secret he had.

He tipped the driver quadruple for the mess and the trouble, signed the back of an old envelope the man had when he realized who Jaime was, and then ushered Brienne into the fancy hotel lobby and up to his room on the top floor. The elevators were glass-fronted and she stood looking out as their elevator rose without stopping, her marvelous eyes round as she took it all in.

“This is a lot nicer than the crew hotel,” she said when the elevator dinged pleasantly and the doors opened to a quiet floor with only three doors: one to the left, one to the right, and one at the end of the hall.

“This floor is a lot nicer than the rest of the hotel,” he admitted. He went to the left door and then pointed with his thumb behind them. “Lancel's in there. Kevan's at the end of the hall.”

“This entire space is just for you?” she said as she walked into the living room with its L-shaped overstuffed couch, elegant glass coffee table, and huge TV screen. There were two other doors inside, one for the large bathroom and one for the bedroom that was probably the size of her entire hotel room.
“Kevan likes the drivers to be comfortable,” he said defensively.

“I'm sure you like it too.” Brienne went to the huge picture window and looked out on the waterfront of Gulltown.

“It's hard to turn down the view,” he agreed, coming to stand near her at the window. The rain and heavy clouds hid much of it, but Jaime could make out the gray swirl of the sea, a few ships bobbing dangerously in their berths.

“Reminds me of Tarth.”

“Which part?”

Brienne pressed her fingers to the glass briefly, leaving a smudge behind. “The storm. My dad used to take Gal and I to the top of Evenfall Hill in storms like this. 'It's just water' he'd tell us, no matter how cold it was or how hard the wind was blowing. 'We're surrounded by water you can't be afraid of it.’” Brienne looked at Jaime and her eyes reminded him of the sky, not the sea; as vast and warm and deep blue as the middle of summer. “We stopped doing it after Gal died. We stopped doing a lot of things.”

“It sounds like you have good memories, though.”

“I do,” she said, and she smiled a little and set her balled up jumpsuit down on the nearby table, the long-sleeved shirt she'd been wearing underneath stuck by rainwater to every line of her muscled torso. “I'm dripping all over this very plush carpet.”

He grabbed two large, indecently fluffy towels from the bathroom and the two bathrobes as well and came back. “You can change into this if you want or you can just use the towel, whatever you like.”

Jaime tried not to be disappointed when she only took the towel, but he followed suit, patting himself dry and then sitting on the couch in slightly damp jeans. “You ready for this?” he said as he poured out the pieces from the box onto the coffee table.

“That's a lot more pieces than I thought it would be.” She grabbed the instructions. “Do you have all this other stuff, too? A hobby knife, paint brushes, sandpaper?”

He reached around the edge of the couch and brought out a plastic bag loaded with modeling tools and set it down on the table. “Ta-dah.”

“Then let's get to work.”

Brienne immediately started pulling all of the tools out of the bag and organizing them on the tabletop while Jaime started trying to fit pieces together.

“You can't start building until everything's prepared. What if we're missing something important?”

“That's very diligent of you,” he said, tugging the instruction sheet to his side.

“I wasn't done with that.” She tugged it back her way.

“It's my model.”

“For Sevens' sake, are you eight years old?”

Jaime glared at her but he let her finish her preparation until she indicated they had all the pieces
they needed and they could get started building.

“Have you always been like this?” he asked as he finally started cementing the inside of the car together.

“Have you?”

“Answer my question first, Wrench, and then I’ll answer yours.” He focused intently on the car, the perfect tiny details of the seat and the chassis.

“As far as I can remember I have,” she said, sanding off the next piece for him so it fit smoothly. “I was a little more reckless before Gal died, but I was also a child. That comes with the territory.”

He slid his gaze to her briefly before focusing on the car again. “I can't even picture you as a child, let alone a reckless one.”

“What, I just stepped straight out the sea like the Maid?”

“I'd have gone with the Warrior but yes. Just one day – poof! A fully formed, overly serious young woman from the waves.” He grinned at her but she was staring down at her hands, her brow furrowed.

“What about you? Have you always been this arrogant and infuriating?” she asked.

“Your honesty is appreciated,” he said dryly. “Many people would say yes, I have been. I like to think at least at some point I was charmingly boyish.”

“You're still childish.”

“I said boyish.”

“Hm.” She handed him the next piece and they worked in silence for a few minutes, Jaime putting the car together as Brienne handed him each thing he needed just as he needed it.

“What about your sister?” Brienne asked, the words tentative. “Has she always been...like she is?”

Jaime grunted. “Certainly since our mother died. Tyrion thinks she must have been like this before then and I was just too young to see it but I don't think so. Not that it matters, I suppose, since she is who she is now.”

“How did your mother die?”

He set the car down for a moment and stretched out his fingers. “She died giving birth to Tyrion.”

“Oh.” Brienne blinked, looking sad, and she touched his wrist gently. “I'm sorry.” Jaime felt a bright flash of anger spiral out inside him from the place where her fingers were cool on his skin; of course she would be sorry over the death of a woman she didn't even know the name of, when he hadn't considered for a second saying the same to her about her brother. Yet she had the gall to call him infuriating.

“It was a long time ago,” he snapped, harsher than he should have, and she pulled her hand away again, leaving only the ghost of her touch behind.

Jaime picked up the car, getting them back to work. Brienne didn't try to comfort him again, even when he cut himself on the hobby knife ten minutes later. She just watched him suck on his finger, go look for the first aid kit and put on antibiotic ointment and a band-aid with one hand.
“Should we stop?” she asked once he’d finished. The band-aid was crooked and he should have asked her to put a new one on but he couldn't.

“We're not done building yet. Are you hungry? We can order room service.” She chewed her bottom lip, looking like she wanted to say yes but thought for some reason she shouldn't. “Have you ever had room service in a top floor luxury hotel room? We get special menus.”

“Really?”

He nodded and pointed to a thick book by the TV. “Go pick what you like, the company will pay for it.”

Brienne flipped through the book for a minute, punctuated occasionally by little delighted gasps that were doing nothing for Jaime's attempt to think of her only as his race engineer. He briefly considered 'accidentally' injuring himself again on the hobby knife as a distraction when she turned, grinning. When she smiled like that, genuinely pleased with herself and what was happening, her face transformed from its awkward collection of mis-matched pieces to make her look young and happy and someone he was very glad to know.

Someone he was very interested in knowing better.

“We should order,” he said hurriedly, and they did: Brienne ending up with a salad, an appetizer, a gourmet burger, and a dessert there was no possible way she could finish, Jaime sticking to his trainer's prescribed demands of grilled chicken and the local seasonal vegetables. When he'd finished ordering, he turned to find her sitting on the couch, delicately examining the half-done car.

“How old are you?” he asked suddenly and she glanced up at him, her brow furrowed.

“Why?”

Jaime swallowed, trying to buy himself a moment to figure out why he'd ask that question out of nowhere. “Just curious,” he settled on.

She frowned. “I'm twenty-seven.”

He nodded. “Do you want to know how old I am?”

“You're thirty-five. Your birthday is in July.”

Right. She'd been a fan before he'd hired her. She had claimed it was a selling point. “What else do you know about me?” he asked curiously, was amused when her cheeks immediately reddened.

“Your favorite drink is Dornish wine, your favorite food is your family's cheesy potato recipe, your favorite color is gold,” she rolled her eyes a little at that and he tried not to be offended, even though he'd only said it because he'd never really had a favorite color and he thought his father would appreciate it. “You started professional karting when you were eight, though you'd been doing it for fun before that, and you were the youngest racer to ever enter F1.”

“That's quite impressive.”

“I know about more than just you,” she said tartly. “I'm a fan of the sport, Lannister, you're just one part of it.”

“What's Lancel's favorite color?” he asked and when she didn't answer he smirked. “It's red.”
“I know even more about Renly Baratheon,” she said and a flare gun of annoyance went off inside him.

“Renly Baratheon is lucky his teammate is in love with him because he'd be second string with anyone else,” he snarled.

“He's what?”

Her eyes were very big and very surprised. “Welcome to the insider's network,” Jaime said. “This is where you learn all the things you wish you didn't know about the drivers.”

“I didn't know he-” she clamped her mouth shut and set the car down.

“Does it offend you?”

“No, of course not. I just always thought, well.” She shrugged. “Are they...together?”

“Renly and Loras? Not officially. Baelish thinks it wouldn't be good for the sport.”

“Because they're both men?”

“That's part of it. Mostly because they're on the same team. Nepotism doesn't bother Baelish but intra-team romance is abhorrent to him.”

Brienne's face was scrunched in confusion. “But why? That makes no sense.”

“On the contrary. Family members have a long history of fighting each other on and off the track. Lancel and I are not the only driver pair in F1 history who've been related and still hate each other; we're not even the only ones this season. IAF loves the drama it creates and so do many of the fans, frankly. But two drivers in love? One who clearly cedes ground to the other? Offensive, apparently. Not fighting fair. Unties the terribly complicated knot at the center of every F1 team: two drivers who are teammates and competitors both at the same time. If the drivers are working together to a single goal, it would feel like the constructor had an unfair advantage.” He shrugged. “That's the thought anyway.”

“Have there ever been any others?” she asked and he chuckled a little at her unwilling curiosity.

“Not that I'm aware of. I thought perhaps Dayne once, but,” he shook his head a little. “He was just married to the sport.”

“Like you?”

Jaime tilted his head and considered her. “Not intentionally.”

“I mean you've never had a steady public girlfriend,” she stammered, getting redder with every word. “Or boyfriend.”

“Maybe I've had a secret girlfriend, or boyfriend.” He knew he shouldn't tease her but she was blushing so hotly he couldn't help himself. “Maybe both.”

“You don't have to tell me,” she said staring very intently at his feet. “Can we finish the model?”

“But don't you want to know?”

“No.”
“Suit yourself.” He came around the coffee table and sat next to her where she was stiff and still red on the couch. “Where were we?” Mutely she shoved a piece towards him and when he took it from her the tips of their fingers touched with a small shock. Jaime ignored it and the brief responding flash of heat from somewhere below his waist and focused on the car again.

“What about you?” he asked after a minute, when everything had settled. “Any secret girlfriends or boyfriends?”

“No,” she said softly. He glanced her way and decided not to press it further at the sad look in her lovely eyes, and they worked in silence until room service knocked on the door.

“I've almost got this,” he said, “can you get the food? Make sure you add a big tip when you sign for it.”

She nodded and handled the delivery, the waiter just leaving behind the two-layered cart loaded mostly with her plates. They ate while they talked strategy for the demands of the unusual morning qualifying session tomorrow followed by the regularly scheduled afternoon race, and Brienne ate nearly every bite to Jaime's impressed amazement. She seemed to enjoy every bite, too, licking her lips so frequently he was sure she must have noticed him staring at them.

Once she'd finished off the dessert she looked out the window, where the worst of the storm was already easing and more of Gulltown peeked through the low clouds.

“I should get back to my room,” she said.

“We haven't finished the model. You can't leave when it's almost done.” He tried not to look too desperate, but he didn't want to spend the rest of the afternoon and entire evening alone watching whatever movies he could find on the hotel cable. He wanted to spend more time talking with Brienne; he'd found out her age and almost nothing else except that she had a crush on Renly Baratheon for unknown reasons, she loved food, and she blushed with delightful frequency.

“Alright, but just until we finish the model. Then I do need to look at those printouts, no matter what you think. Plus I haven't done my workout today.”

“You could do it here with me.” Her eyes leapt to his, startled. “The gym here is probably much nicer than the one at your hotel.”

“I don't have my workout clothes with me.”

“I have extra.”

She flushed. “They probably won't fit,” she said, quiet. “I'm bigger than you.”

He thought for a moment to deny it but she was likely right and he didn't want to insult her with lies about something that didn't bother him anyway. “Next time, then.”

Brienne nodded and handed him the penultimate piece of the car. “Let's finish.”

They did, faster than he wanted, talking off and on about the previous race and the lessons they could take to the one tomorrow, and when the car was drying on the coffee table, Brienne stood and gathered up her jumpsuit and bag.

“You're right, that was fun,” she said. “And the food was way better than they have at our hotel.”

“Thanks for the help. I'm not sure I would've finished it without you.”
“You would have. It just would have taken you longer, and some of the pieces might be wrong.”

He laughed. “You're okay to get back?”

“The hotel's just down the road, and I've missed the rain.” She only had eyes for the last of the storm outside. Jaime considered for a wild moment asking to go with her, seeing what it was like as the rain fell cold on their skin, the wind pushing as they walked. He imagined it was much like arguing with Brienne: challenging, and revitalizing.

“See you on the track,” he said, not having a plausible reason to even ask. Brienne nodded and slipped quietly from his room.

Though she was the steady voice in his ear through qualifying and a thrilling result of second place the next day, Jaime did not see much of Brienne herself. A quick check-in in the morning, a last review of strategy before the race, and then an unsatisfying high-five when he'd celebrated his p-2 finish with the crew in the parc fermé. She disappeared after that, even though he looked for her from the podium. Surely her height would have made her stand out even in the small sea of Lannister Corp, Direwolf, and Sunspear uniforms, but he couldn't make her out anywhere.

Lancel had come in p-10 mostly due to a flubbed pit stop and his own bad decision-making trying to recover from it and Jaime suspected his cousin's helmet lying upside down on the ground where he'd hurled it was the reason they were doing debrief tomorrow instead of immediately post-race. Which normally would have suited Jaime fine, except he'd been hoping to see Brienne and make sure he hadn't done something during their afternoon together that had caused her to avoid him. She'd seemed all right when she left, and she'd sounded normal over the radio today, but her absence was noticeable.

Jaime rolled his eyes at himself in his bathroom mirror. “Nothing is wrong,” he told his reflection. “You don't need to see her twenty-four hours a day.” Though he'd gotten used to the six or seven they'd often spend near each other.

Irritated at himself and her, Jaime changed into a simple black dress shirt and slacks and went down to the hotel bar to have a few drinks and catch a recap of the day's racing on the TV there. He was pleased to see none of the rest of the Lannister Corp stuffed shirts were here and Lancel was probably still sulking in his room. He was less pleased to see some of the other drivers had had the same idea as him: Connington and Hunt from Griffin, Euron Greyjoy from Kraken, and Ramsay Bolton fresh from his p-9 place for Golden Company. If Viserys had been there, too, it would have been his perfect top five of drivers he most wanted to avoid.

There were talking loudly at a pair of high tables, the corpses of several rounds of drinks already littering the area. Jaime hesitated in the entrance, seriously reconsidering how much he needed a drink, when Ramsay looked up and waved him over.

“Kingslayer!” he yelled across the moderately crowded space. “Come here!”

Jaime wondered how pathetic it would be to pretend he suddenly had an urgent call when Ramsay shouted for him again, garnering the attention of most of the room. It was the exact opposite of what Jaime wanted, so he hurried over hoping to keep the man quiet.

“Not here to intrude,” Jaime said when he was at their tables. “Just came for a quick nightcap.”

“Not going to watch yourself, pretty boy?” Euron asked, gesturing at the nearest TV which was showing the race.
“Already saw it from the cockpit.”

“Lannister is too good to drink with the likes of us, we didn't even get any points today,” Connington said in a voice that was only half-joking.

“Speak for yourself, I got two,” Ramsay boasted.

“Oh fuck off,” Euron grumbled. “Fuck, I'm out of beer.” He tried to pour the empty pitcher into his glass and groaned. “Fuck! We're all out of beer. You're up, Hyle.”

Hyle Hunt grimaced but scooted around Jaime to head to the bar to re-order. “You want anything?” he asked on his way.

*May as well get a free drink out of having to spend any time with these assholes. The best whiskey they've got."

Hyle didn't hesitate at what that would add to the order, just nodded and sauntered off while Jaime idly watched the race recap and kept barely tuned in to the others' conversation.

“Anyone could get points in that car, they're pouring money into it.”

Ah, that familiar argument. They weren't entirely wrong, though Jaime knew none of them would make top five regularly, and never top three, even if they did have his car.

They flashed a brief clip of Brienne on the screen, headset on, listening to something one of the engineers was telling her and then talking to Jaime over the mic. He wondered what moment that was, was tickled to actually see her in action, the way her brow was furrowed so seriously and her long fingers pressed against her headphones. Though he heard her every word, he hadn't gotten to actually see her doing the job and his focus on post-race video was always on the car and the track. He'd have to see if he could get them to add a bit more of Brienne in the review cuts at the office.

“Gods there she is again,” Connington said in a tone that immediately brought Jaime's attention around. “Good thing you only have to listen to her and not look at her, Lannister.”

“She's a good engineer,” he said through clenched teeth.

“If you say so. Didn't you hire her as a mechanic?”

“She proved herself worthy of the promotion.”

Connington leaned forward, his long red hair falling loose over his shoulders. “How'd you get her to put out?”

“What?”

“Your engineer. I heard she was in your room yesterday.”

Jaime's jaw twitched, his fingers curling slightly at his sides. “We were only going over strategy for the race. Seems like you could have done more of that yourself.”

“That's a good cover story. She was on my team back in F2, you know? Ugly as shit but she's good with the cars and eager to please. She'll do anything you ask. Well, almost anything,” he laughed, more ugly than Brienne could ever hope to be, Euron and Ramsay laughing with him like well-trained curs. Jaime's hands were in tight fists now and he could feel his heart pounding in his head.

“Though we tried,” Connington went on, oblivious to Jaime's daggered stare. “Girl like that, you'd
think she'd be desperate for it. I mean the boys used to call her the Beast.”

Jaime punched Connington, a brutal uppercut that sent the other man out of his stool and collapsing to the ground, glasses falling and shattering on the floor around him and the other bar patrons leaping from their seats in surprise.

Chest heaving, Jaime took a step nearer Connington, who cowered on the floor, blood streaming from his mouth, and held up a hand to try to protect himself from Jaime's fury.

“Her name is Brienne,” Jaime snarled, and Connington nodded quickly, wincing and whining with the movement.

Hyle stood a short distance away gaping at them, a pitcher of beer in one hand, Jaime's whiskey in the other. Jaime grabbed the whiskey from the shocked man and downed it, then threw the glass on the ground at Connington's feet, causing him to flinch and huddle into a ball to protect himself from the fresh shards of glass.

“Thanks for the drink,” Jaime said before striding out of the bar and back to his room. His hand was already throbbing and he knew he'd have police knocking on his door soon enough asking about the incident, which meant he'd have to get Kevan and ultimately his father involved to start the process of paying people off to keep it out of the news. It was going to be a long, aggravating night that would inevitably end with a lengthy dressing down from his father.

But he thought of Brienne working for that repulsive fucker Connington – her mysterious departure from Griffin team after only a couple of months suddenly very clear – and the nuisance of dealing with what he'd done seemed entirely worth it.

Brienne woke up Monday morning to a text on her phone from Podrick that was a link to some gossip site and ten surprised face emojis. Curious, Brienne clicked on the link as she lay in the comfortable enough hotel bed, knowing she had some time until the team bus left for the trip back to King's Landing.

The headline in all caps read HEAR HIM ROAR: 'KINGSLAYER' JAIME LANNISTER ATTACKS 'RED' RONNET CONNINGTON IN HOTEL BAR! and Brienne sat up abruptly and scrolled down. There was a picture immediately under the headline, clearly taken from some third party's phone, that showed Connington sprawled on the floor with blood on his scared face, glass all around him, and his hand held up protectively. Jaime stood over him in all black, lights highlighting the golden shine of his hair, tall and angry like a vengeful god. His strong hands were fisted and held half-up and ready to punch Connington again. What the hell happened? was Brienne's first thought. This picture should be in a museum, was her second as she saved the photo to her phone.

She read the short paragraph underneath looking for details.

*Only three races into this year's Formula 1 season and the competition is already heating up! An alert bystander sent us this photo, taken just after Lannister Corp Racing's Jaime Lannister had punched Griffin's Ronnet Connington in a hotel bar Sunday night. Also known as the infamous 'Kingslayer,' Lannister left immediately after the incident. No charges were filed and it is unknown why Lannister went after Connington. The two have little prior history together and neither Griffin nor Lannister Corp Racing commented when we reached out. Lannister's race engineer, Brienne Tarth, once worked briefly with Connington in Formula 2, and rumor has it she spent the rainy day off with Lannister. Could these things be related? One thing's for sure: Lannister's aggressiveness isn't just on the asphalt!*
Brienne stared at the photo for another five minutes, soaking in every detail until she could have sketched it from memory if she knew how to draw, and then texted Podrick.

'What happened??'

'No one knows,' came his quick reply. 'Kevan is pissed'

Brienne nodded. She expected he would be; Tywin even more. She arranged to meet Pod downstairs for a short breakfast before they had to board the team bus home, and quickly packed. Should she text Jaime, too? What could she even say – good morning, did you punch this random driver because of me? It was absurd to think he would have; she was fairly certain he hadn't even known she'd been on Connington's team, let alone the terrible prank they'd played.

When she'd put in her application to be a part of Griffin's junior engineers program, she'd been twenty-two and still full of hope. They'd called to tell her she was hired and she had jumped excitedly around the house, leaping into her father's arms and laughing in disbelief. She remembered clearly what it had felt like to arrive for her first day on the job, walking through the double doors with a griffin embossed in the glass of each, and introducing herself to the other new hires.

The first day with Griffin had been the best of her time there, though she hadn't known it in the moment.

Back then, every day seemed better than the last. There had been the usual looks and comments the first week, as she expected, but by the second week she'd seemed to have won them over with her skills, and the men who had mocked her the week before were seemingly warming up to her with time. She suspected now that that was the week Hyle and his buddies had come up with the idea of the bet.

Each week a new man would join the small circle that paid attention to her suggestions, that shared snacks with her and talked about their own experience, even some of those who'd been around much longer, like Dunsen and Ambrose. The work kept them all busy and Brienne was too naïve to realize what was happening and when after a month and a half the first man asked her out, she was so surprised she automatically said no.

He'd looked disappointed, which she had not expected. Disappointed to not go out with her? In high school and college, boys had been disappointed just to be paired up with her on projects. Her only sexual experience with a partner had come as a result of a mutually drunken hookup that had been a lot of fumbling, little pleasure, and never talked about or attempted again. The following week a different Griffin crewman asked her out. She said no again and kept her head down, but no one seemed offended, they just kept talking to her, trying to draw her out, giving her small gifts and courtesies.

When Hyle Hunt asked her out after two months of listening attentively to her input and giving her extra time explaining how things worked, she had blinked owlishly at his plain, hopeful face and said yes. He'd looked so pleased when she did, and they'd scheduled for a week later after a series of practice runs and mechanical changes that would eat up all their time. Brienne had nearly floated around the garage that week, the smiles of her fellow mechanics following her around.

Then, the day before her date with Hyle, Connington had come into the garage with a single red rose and while everyone else stared and whispered, he'd gone to one knee and held it out to her.

“Brienne,” he said, his voice echoing in the cavernous space, “I know you've said yes to Hyle, but I want you to go out with me instead.”
After that had come the first, cruel titters of laughter. An alarm rang deep inside her, some innate understanding that this wasn't right, that none of this had been right. But she'd wanted to listen to her heart more than she wanted to listen to the bells ringing loudly in her head and so she'd quietly said, “I could go out with you both” and the dam that had been holding back their mockery and their disgust finally broke and Connington had stood, laughing viciously. He threw the rose at her feet and shook his head.

“I can't do it,” he'd howled, his face as red with laughter as his long hair. “I can't do it. You win, Hyle. I forfeit. I don't know how you managed; I can barely even look at her.”

Brienne had fled from Griffin and never returned.

One of the receptionists, a kind-faced woman who had treated Brienne well enough from day one, returned Brienne's things and shared what she had learned: that some of the crew had come up with a bet to try to get her to go out with them and the man that succeeded would win the pot and bragging rights around the garage. She'd also said that the team principal, Randall Tarly, had simply shaken his head when he found out and told them not to do it again. That night he sent Brienne an email firing her from the program for “not being able to perform the requirements of the role.” Brienne had deleted it without a word. Though her father had been stunned to hear she was leaving, he must have seen the agony on her face when she stepped off of the ferry because he’d simply hugged her tight and welcomed her home, only saying he had missed her, only asking what she wanted for dinner.

If Brienne had been older, if she'd listened to the little voice after the first man had asked her out, she would have known, would have cut them off before it had spiraled out of control. At least they weren't talking about it now to Melisandre and it could remain in her past where she had gratefully left it five years ago.

But seeing Jaime towering over Connington terrified on the floor, something inside of her trembled with relief.

Brienne didn't see Jaime until that afternoon when everyone had returned to the offices for the Monday debrief. She caught him in the hallway, the knuckles of his right hand wrapped in clean white gauze. They stopped in front of each other while others walked hurriedly by, coworkers on their way to their own activities.

“Hello, Lannister,” she said.

“Hello, Wrench. Was the bus ride home okay?”

“Smooth enough.” She glanced down at the bandage and then back up at his face. “Is your hand okay?”

“It hurts,” he said, flexing the fingers a little, “but I'll be fine to drive.”

“Is Tywin mad?”

Jaime grinned, quick and bitter. “Isn't he always?”

She wished she could ask him directly what had happened, if he had done it for her, but she was too afraid of the answer even as she needed to know. Jaime flexed his hand again and she reached for it, gently pulling it closer so she could look at the bandage to make sure it had been applied well enough. He let her do it, watched her with dark and interested eyes as she tenderly touched the ridges of his knuckles hidden like hills under snow.
“Is there anything I should know about last night?” she asked, trying to be casual, trying to make it seem like a question any race engineer would ask their driver. His fingers moved against hers, warm and strong.

“Connington's an asshole,” he said in a deep voice. “He deserved it.”

Brienne glanced at him again and was struck silent by the intensity in his face, his green eyes as bright with fury as they'd been in the photo. He curled his fingers into hers.

“I'm sure he did,” she said hoarsely. “I'm glad you're not too injured. You shouldn't punch people.”

“Some people need punching.” He smiled at her and there were bells again; not the loud and dreadful ones from years ago but something that chimed light and hopeful and fluttering like her belly. *I am still a naïve fool* she despaired, and she let his hand go. It hovered for a moment between them before drifting back down to his side.

“If that's all, then we should get back to work,” she said striving for business-like and falling far short.

“We should.”

For a moment neither of them moved, and then they both moved at once, awkwardly trying to pass each other on the same side so Brienne's hands came up against Jaime's chest to keep from walking right into him, his hands coming around her elbows to steady them both.

“Sorry,” she said. She took a step back and his hands tightened for a moment against her arms before letting her go. Her palms could still feel the cool fabric of his shirt. “You first,” she said, gesturing for him to go.

He smiled tightly and moved past her and she watched him walk a few steps before turning around.

“You know you're better than them, right? In every possible way.” He gave her a small, encouraging smile before hurrying off. Brienne stood in the hallway long after he'd disappeared, her head filled with the echoes of bells.
“Jaime,” that was a different voice, “what happened with Red Connington?”

“Next question,” Jaime had said.

There were others directed to Robb and Lancel and then someone else shouted, “come on, Jaime, why did you punch a fellow driver?”

“No comment.”

“Did he say something about you?” Lucas Corbray, a sportswriter from the local paper, asked.

“No comment.”

“Was it something to do with Brienne Tarth?” Melisandre asked in a tone that sounded like she already knew the answer.

“No fucking comment,” Jaime had spit out, and the tide turned back to the race.

Chapter Notes

I had a VERY productive break and managed to get two chapters done, so you get two chapters this week. The upcoming stuff I have to write is going to take longer than usual, though, and with the holidays on top of that I’m not sure I will be able to keep up my current productivity. I will do what I can to keep to the once a week posting schedule, but I may have to slip to a two weeks between posting schedule for December. I'll have a better idea in the next week! I'm still 5 chapters ahead, which is easing my anxiety. Heh.

Today was the last F1 race of the 2019 season, sadly, but if you're interested in learning more, Netflix's Drive to Survive season 1 is really interesting and presented in a way people new to the sport can comprehend. (Plus you'll discover I have lifted some events from that as inspiration for this fic. *g*) I also watched The Art of Racing in the Rain' yesterday and it's about racing and how great dogs are and it definitely made me cry on an airplane.

Jaime thought he had suffered the worst of his father’s fury when he’d been called into Tywin’s expensively decorated office and yelled at for fifteen minutes about how disappointing he was as a son, a driver, and a man. The race the following week in Braavos proved that a Lannister always pays his debts, even if the time and form of payment was not their choice.

He and Lancel had been fighting for p-1 the entire race and then fifteen laps from the end Brienne
had come over the radio and in a dull voice said, “they want you to box.”

“Now? I'm in first. The race is nearly over.”

“They want you to get a new set of softs and go for the fastest lap time instead.”

“No,” Jaime said as his hands clenched so tight around the steering wheel his fingers ached. “Fuck that. I want first.”

Tywin's voice cut between them, an unwelcome invasion. “We've given you your orders, Jaime. We need a 1-2 finish and you have the older tires. Box this lap.”

Tywin Lannister didn't have to ever say the word “or,” it was always there in his demands: do what I've said, or I'll make your life miserable. No one asked Tywin “or what?”.

Jaime slammed his hand on the wheel but boxed as directed, was in and out of the pit stop at exactly three seconds and though he did get the point for fastest lap time that day, he came in p-2 after Lancel. When he'd climbed out of his car, his pit crew were not celebrating the way Lancel's did; Brienne looked stricken, apologized before he could even take his helmet off.

“It's not your fault,” he told her, but the disappointment lingered in her eyes. He continued to tell her over the following week, but she stayed even later at the office, hunched over her laptop when it was already dark outside and he was heading home; and she got him up early to do runs on the virtual trainer, taking notes and looking pale and intent. None of it would have made a difference against the obstinance of his father, but it drove her nonetheless.

Which was why when Jaime edged past Robb Stark for p-1 at the Eyrie two weeks after Braavos, he knew he would refuse to give it up no matter what his father did. When he crossed first under the checkered flag, Brienne was leaning over the pit wall with the others, cheering and looking relieved as he zoomed under them.

In the parc fermé he leapt out of the car and ran to his crew, high-fiving most of them until Podrick leaned over the low barrier and hugged Jaime so hard he gasped. “Help me” he mouthed at Brienne next to Pod, but she just shrugged and kept smiling, her big teeth stretching her face adorably wide. Bronn and the others swarmed him while Pod held on, patting him on the back, shouting at him through his helmet, and for a moment it was like fifteen years ago when a win was all sweetness and no sour, until he caught Martyn behind the others, glaring like they'd lost.

Finally extricating himself from Pod, Jaime turned to Brienne and she patted him awkwardly on the shoulder.

“Come up on the podium with me,” he said on the spur of the moment.

“I can't.”

“You can. Kevan will be there.”

“He has to, he's team principal.”

“Then come with him. It's our first win, you've earned it.”

But she was shaking her head before he even finished the sentence. “I can't,” she said, firm.

“At least promise me you won't disappear to the paddock.” She looked surprised and he shrugged. “I look for you,” he explained.
“All right,” she said, so soft he couldn't hear it, could only read it on her lips.

In the post-race podium finishers’ room Jaime discovered Lancel had dropped to third and Robb had gotten p-2. They all took off their helmets and protective gear, each chugged a bottle of water and ate some of the snacks provided, their bodies vibrating with exhaustion and adrenaline mixing in a heady cocktail. Kevan was there for both Jaime and Lancel, but he mostly just hovered near Lancel, who was darting angry looks Jaime's way. Cameras captured all of it, their constant presence as standard a part of F1 as the cars.

“Partnership going well, I see,” Robb said as he wiped the back of his neck with a wet towel. He inclined his head towards Lancel and Kevan.

“We took p-1 and p-3 so good enough.”

“I almost had you on turn 12.”

“But you didn't, did you?” Jaime took a final swallow of his water and set the empty bottle aside. “Maybe try harder next time,” he said, patting Robb on the shoulder as the announcer called them to the stage.

He climbed onto the podium and saw a split sea of red and black jumpsuits below, Lannister Corp and Direwolf near each other but not mingling. Behind them were the fans, cheering and waving their hats and flags and t-shirts in excitement. But like she'd called his name, Jaime's eyes went straight to Brienne in the middle of the Lannister Corp team, clapping and beaming up at him, keeping her promise as he'd known she would. She was as reliable as the sun and her face shone as brightly.

They handed Jaime his trophy – the Eyrie's was shaped like a crescent moon – and a giant bottle of champagne. He set his trophy down and shook up the bottle with two hands while they awarded a trophy to Kevan as principal of the winning constructor, another to Robb for second, and finally one to Lancel for third. Grinning, Jaime popped the cork when they'd finished and sprayed his bottle down on his crew, soaking them with alcohol that would dry sticky and sweet. The crew hollered and cheered, and when he was done, they were all wet, even Brienne, her straw hair plastered messily to her face, her freckled cheeks reddened and gleaming, and unbidden he had the sudden image of tasting the drops that gathered and dripped along the line of her jaw.

Fuck, he thought, hurriedly setting his bottle aside to pick up his trophy and hold it strategically in front of him. It was one thing to admire her – my race engineer he frantically reminded himself – it was another altogether to fantasize, even briefly. She deserved better than that. She deserved better than him leering at her while she worked so diligently on his behalf. The occasional friendly smile just meant they didn't actually hate each other, nothing more.

He needed a release that would not make the rest of the season incredibly awkward. They were heading back to King's Landing tomorrow; he'd text Melara as soon as he got in.

First, he had to make it through the Amber Lounge party being held that night in High Hall next to the track. High Hall was a huge room with floor-to-ceiling glass walls on every side that stood at the top of a tower of condominiums. The view was breath-taking – the lights of the Vale twinkling all around them, the track laid out like a child's perfect toy below. Spectators could watch the race from up here for an exorbitant amount, and Jaime suspected it was probably the second best seat in the house after the one behind the wheel.

When he entered it was to cheers loud even over the pounding music, and a swarm of celebrities and fans who had paid top price to mingle with the drivers and their crews. Jaime signed their shirts
and programs and three women's chests and reminded himself how much they were paying him to be there, wondered if Brienne had been asked to show as well.

He'd been whisked away to interviews and photos after the podium, which had at least quickly killed his erection. The lights in the media room were bright and hot, and the air was thick with sweat from the reporters and bloggers packed into the seating area.

“Mr. Lannister,” someone had called out once he and Robb and Lancel had been seated.

“Which one?” Jaime said to laughter.

“Jaime,” that was a different voice, “what happened with Red Connington?”

“Next question,” Jaime had said.

There were others directed to Robb and Lancel and then someone else shouted, “come on, Jaime, why did you punch a fellow driver?”

“No comment.”

“Did he say something about you?” Lucas Corbray, a sportswriter from the local paper, asked.

“No comment.”

“Was it something to do with Brienne Tarth?” Melisandre asked in a tone that sounded like she already knew the answer.

“No fucking comment,” Jaime had spit out, and the tide turned back to the race.

By the time he'd escaped that nightmare there'd been Lannister Corp photos and signing of a used tire for an auction and his Nomex shirt for the company's archives, and Kevan had sternly informed him he was going to the party and Brienne had already disappeared.

He thought of her wet-faced and smiling and decided it was probably for the best.

Now that he was here at the party, though, he wished she would show up. At least I’d have someone I like talking to, he thought, surveying the room. The prospects of an enjoyable evening were slim at best; Lancel was here tonight, too, with Theodan and Kevan, as were Robb and his teammate Jon Snow, and even Nightfort's drivers, Janos Slynt and Alliser Thorn, had come, though the crowd of groupies around them was noticeably less thick.

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Fortunately for all of them none of the drivers from the bar the other week were here, but Viserys was and his glare was like a laser beam even from across the room where he was talking with his teammate Daario and two women with very tight shirts and short skirts. When Jaime had first gotten into F1 he'd gone home with a few women dressed the same after events like this, hating it but wanting to fit in with the older drivers. After his dismissal back to F3 they'd disappeared with everyone else and that, at least, had been a relief. Since his return they had started to filter back, but he'd mostly avoided events like these since then, and the ones he did attend he always left drunk and angry and alone.

No reason to think tonight will be any different, he thought as he extricated himself from the fans, begging off due to thirst and heading for the bar. He craved something hard and burning but he ordered lime and club soda, knowing his trainer would get a full report of what he consumed. As he stared grimly at the drink being poured, he felt someone come up next to him and was startled to see Addam.
“Jaime,” the other man said with a cautious smile.

“Addam,” Jaime said just as cautiously. “Lime soda?”

Addam's smile settled as though it meant to stay and he nodded. “Congratulations on your win.”

“Thanks.”

They stood side-by-side staring forward in uncomfortable silence until Addam had his drink in hand. “You seem more relaxed tonight,” he said.

“Winning helps.”

“I've forgotten what that's like.” Addam gave a rueful chuckle. He gestured to a small standing table nearby and for a moment Jaime hesitated before finally following. It had been so long since they'd talked to each other without a sea of reporters nearby. Jaime realized he had missed it. Everything he'd lost because of Aerys had accumulated into a giant pit in the center of his chest; he'd never taken stock of what the parts were that had made up the painful whole.

“You're driving well so far this season,” Addam said into the silence. “Focused.”

“Things have been working in my favor.”

“New crew can do that for you. Seems you reached a long way out for yours.”

“The distance was worth it.” Jaime took a drink and decided to take the goodwill Addam had extended. “How's it going with Sunspear?”

“Good enough. Oberyn's the lead there, of course, but I'm given my due.”

“You took p-7 today, that's not bad.”

“I can do better,” Addam said, fierce for a moment in a way Jaime remembered from dozens of post-race talks. Addam had always been harder on himself than anyone; had always felt there was no reason he couldn't beat Jaime if he just applied himself more.

“You can,” Jaime agreed. “But not better than me.” It slipped out, a dormant habit he hadn't thought of in fifteen years. A familiar riposte from before when they'd been more likely to be in each other's faces than this distant and polite awkwardness.

Addam grinned. “You're driving better but you're still an arrogant prick.”

“I'm sure my crew would agree with you.”

“You still have Bronn?”

“Of course. Who else would take him?” Addam laughed a little, a sound as familiar to Jaime as his own. He felt the weight of every wasted year between them.

They'd come up through junior karting together, each other's fiercest competition and closest friend. It had been Addam who had encouraged Jaime to make the early transition to F3, the almost immediate leap to F2, who had come over to Jaime's house when they were seventeen and brought ridiculously expensive alcohol he'd stolen from his family's cabinets in order to celebrate being picked for Dragonfire's coveted F1 seat the following season. Addam had filled the hole that Cersei's turning away had left in his life, until Aerys.
After the crash, Addam had visited Jaime once to see how he was doing, but the doubt on Addam's face when Jaime had sworn it was an accident had felt like a knife to the heart, slicing away the last beating parts to be burned as thoroughly as if Aerys had had his way. Though Addam had reached out a few times after that, Jaime had been a whirlwind of fury and focus, all his will trained on getting back to F1, everything – and everyone – else be damned. They hadn't seen each other again until ten years later when Jaime finally returned to F1 to find Addam was his teammate at Lannister Corp.

Addam had been civil, but Jaime could barely look at himself in the mirror those early years, let alone the best friend he'd pushed away so resolutely. After a single year as teammates, where Jaime thrashed about while he struggled to find his bearings, Addam had eagerly left for Sunspear to partner with Oberyn Martell. A second betrayal as far as Jaime had been concerned when it happened, but seeing Addam now, the black wound in his soul having started to clear, he couldn't blame the man for having looked for calmer roads.

"Your new race engineer seems to have helped."

"Brienne," Jaime said. Brienne who had believed him in that too-close sauna, when she had no reason to listen.

"She's an unusual choice."

"I'm not sleeping with her," Jaime growled and Addam's brows lifted.

"I didn't say you were. I just meant she was so far outside of racing circles I'm surprised Tywin agreed to it."

"He didn't have much choice. Not many crew left in racing who will work with the Kingslayer."

Addam frowned. "They'd work with Jaime Lannister."

"Jaime Lannister was 19 years old the last time they saw him in Formula 1. It's just the Kingslayer now." He downed the rest of his drink, hating that it wasn't actual alcohol.

"I see you're still using that as a shield." Addam set his drink on the table with a solid thump and Jaime could feel him pulling away again, the brief peace breaking under their feet.

There was a flurry of activity near the entrance and when Jaime glanced over he saw Brienne's tall form being surrounded by cameras and eager fans. Her face was a mask but he knew her furrowed brow and tight, pursed lips well enough to see how anxious she was. He tensed, wanting to swoop in and protect her even though she seemed to hate it when he tried.

"That's her isn't it?" Addam casually asked. "I'd like to meet her."

Jaime cast him a grateful look. "I'll go get her," he said. He pushed through the crowd of fans – much bigger than Viserys had received, Jaime noted with wicked pride – and he could tell the moment she saw him because her whole body relaxed, her eyes lighting at his approach. Jaime couldn't recall anyone ever being so happy to see him, even if it was just for an act of chivalry. He took a quick breath before he grabbed her wrist.

"Sorry everyone," he told the group, "my race engineer needs a drink and I promised to introduce her to someone. Maybe later." He gently tugged her after him, creating a path through the disappointed crowd.

"Ugly fucking bitch," someone muttered and Jaime turned sharply, glaring at the faces, trying to
find the one who had said something, but none of them gave up their secrets. There were a few
men grouped together that looked like they could be the perpetrators, but Brienne had twisted her
wrist to grab him and was tugging on his hand now, pulling him away. “Leave it,” she whispered
harshly, so he did. They held onto each other for several steps after they were free of the small
crowd before she dropped his hand. His arm tingled.

“Thank you,” she said quietly. “I hadn't intended to come but Kevan said I needed to for the
company.”

“Kevan's full of shit.” Brienne frowned to where Kevan was currently laughing about something
with a woman Jaime didn't recognize and he added, “but I'm glad you're here.”

She looked back, startled, a small, pleased smile on her thick lips. “You were right, I could use a
drink.”

“Can I introduce you to someone first?”

Brienne smoothed down the blue flannel button-down she was wearing, clearly a men's style,
tucked her thin hair behind her ear. They were hopeless gestures, small things that wouldn't change
the size or look of her, but they were tics he'd grown fond of and he found himself smiling. The
blue of the shirt brought out her eyes, anyway, and that was all anyone needed to notice about her.

“I promise you look fine,” he said. She blushed but straightened.

“Allright. You do remember my name, don't you?”

Jaime laughed at the unexpected joke, the droll tone of her voice. His heart and step felt lighter as
he led her to Addam, who watched them closely as they approached. Jaime waited for
Connington's disgust or Martyn's disdain in Addam's eyes, but Addam just looked intrigued.

“Addam, this is Brienne Tarth, my race engineer. Brienne, this is Addam Marbrand, my, uh.” He'd
been about to say friend, but that label had fallen off from disuse years ago. “We used to be
teammates.”

“I remember,” she said, holding out her hand. Addam shook it and smiled warmly at her, and Jaime
saw the blush bloom like flowers in her cheeks; he'd always been more smooth than Jaime around
women, his easy charisma winning them over. “Your first year back. It's nice to meet you, Mr.
Marbrand.”

“Please, call me Addam. Putting up with Jaime means you've earned the honor more than most of
these lackwits,” he said, grinning.

“It's been no trouble,” she mumbled, so clearly lying that Jaime couldn't stop from laughing.

“You're a shitty liar, Wrench. Addam knows how terrible I am, you can be honest.”

“Wrench?” Addam asked curiously.

“A friendly nickname,” Jaime said.

“You said it was because I ruined your day.”

“It's friendly now.”

“You still think I ruin your day.”
“Only sometimes,” Jaime said, smiling at her, “but it's worth it.”

He could feel Addam's curious stare and Jaime picked up the empty glasses to distract them all. “Refill?”

“None for me,” Addam said.

“I'll take one, thank you.”

Jaime nodded and hurried to the bar to get two more drinks. “Give mine a good shot of vodka will you?” he asked the bartender, who grinned and went to work. While the man readied the drinks, Jaime looked back at the table, saw Brienne making some shape with her hands, the long fingers forming and re-forming as she described whatever it was to Addam. He seemed to be paying close attention to what Brienne was saying, treating her as he would any male race engineer. It was a relief, Jaime realized, to know at least in his past he'd had a friend who was a decent person even if he couldn't claim Addam as friend still.

A photographer approached the table and Jaime stood abruptly from where he'd been leaning on the bar. The man said something that had Brienne turning crimson and shaking her head furiously. Jaime grabbed the drinks and hurried over.

“-my girlfriend,” Addam was saying.

Jaime set the drinks down loudly, the liquid sloshing over the edge of each to splash onto the table. “What did I miss?” he asked.

“Harlan here works for – what site is it again?”

“Formula 1 Fan Site,” he said. “I was just asking if she was Addam's girlfriend.”

“What kind of a fan doesn't know the first woman race engineer?” Jaime sneered.

Harlan's looked unimpressed. “My beat is fan photos not the crew. Besides she might be dating him, I don't know.”

Brienne's whole face was red now and she looked apologetic. “I'm sorry, Addam, I hope-”

“Sorry?” Addam shook his head and briefly covered her hand. “No apologies necessary, Brienne. Mr. Hunter made an honest mistake.”

Jaime felt his jaw clench. Addam always had been the calmer of the two of them, except that one time when they were twelve when he'd punched Jaime for forcing him off the track. He had won the sponsorship Jaime had been desperate for, and Jaime had let his emotions drive his race as he always did. “She's not dating anybody, she's here because of her work,” he snapped. “Did you need something else?”

“Well can I get a picture of her then for the site? Seems like she's important.”

“Ask her, you idiot, not me.”

Hunter looked like he wished he had gotten any other beat on the planet than this particular table. “Lady-”

“Ms Tarth,” Jaime interrupted.

“Just Brienne is fine,” she said, sounding both annoyed and embarrassed. “I don't know, I don't
want to be singled out.”

“Then what about a picture with your driver? Which one is it?”

“It’s me you incompetent fool,” Jaime said tightly. “She’s my race engineer”

Harlan glanced at Brienne and looked like he felt sorry for her for that being the answer. Brienne put on a resigned, tight-lipped smile. “Can you two stand next to each other? Over by the window so we can see the lit up skyline behind you?”

Jaime stalked over to the window with the others following, including Addam who seemed more amused than anything. Brienne stood next to Jaime, the two of them side-by-side, her hands clasped awkwardly in front of her, her chin pulled down. It would be a bad picture, and it didn't catch her eyes at all. Jaime considered what to do for a moment as Harlan readied his camera.

“Can you two, like, look at each other or something?” Harlan asked. “Give it some interest?”

I could kiss her, Jaime thought foolishly for a moment, there on the cheek where the last pink was fading under the crowd of freckles. That would certainly get a reaction. Instead he turned towards her and said, “hey, Wrench” and when she glanced up Jaime went on his tiptoes, lifted his chin and grinned down at her. She rolled her eyes in automatic response, barely restraining a smile as though she didn't want to encourage him. Jaime heard the camera click a couple of times and lowered back to his regular height.

“So vain,” she said on a long-suffering sigh.

“Did you get it?” Jaime asked Harlan, who nodded. “Is that it then?”

“I guess.”

Addam held up Harlan a moment to shake his hand and thank him for his time before joining Jaime and Brienne at the window. “You haven't changed in twenty-five years,” Addam said, shaking his head.

“A good driver is consistent, isn't that what you always say?”

“I do, but you never listen.”

The easy rejoinder died on Jaime's tongue as Viserys and Daario stepped into their small circle. Addam stiffened in a mirror of Jaime, and Brienne glanced between all of them, uncertain.

“Kingslayer,” Viserys said, his voice dripping with honeyed scorn.

“I admire you for showing up at an event when you didn't even place top fifteen, Viserys. Takes courage,” Jaime said, shoving his hands in his pockets.

Addam shot him a frustrated look and Jaime rolled one shoulder in a shrug. Addam had been mad at him for a decade; what was one more reason for disappointment?

“If you can keep coming back to F1 after losing year after year, I can manage one event,” Viserys said.

“Jaime,” Brienne said suddenly. “Kevan reminded me before I came here that we needed to talk to him about tomorrow morning and I have to leave soon. Can you come with me?”

Viserys looked like he wanted to make some snide comment so Jaime cut him off by saying, “a
winner's work is never done” and following in her wake.

“You made that up about Kevan, right?” he asked quietly.

“Of course I did. We can't have you punching a second driver in as many weeks.”

“I wouldn't hit Viserys.”

Brienne stilled for a moment. “I don't believe that.”

“I wouldn't,” Jaime protested. “I might want to do it, but I wouldn't. He's a complete ass but I did kill his father. I've hurt him enough.” Unexpectedly Brienne's eyes went soft, lit from within like a warm lamp.

“You're a very surprising man sometimes, Lannister.”

“Keeps people from having too high expectations of me,” he said, and though he tried to throw the words away they ricocheted and fell hard with the truth.

Brienne opened her mouth, ready, he was certain, with some piece of wisdom that would cut straight to his core and leave him laid more bare before her as she slowly filleted him apart one revelation at a time. He couldn't bear losing another protective layer tonight surrounded by so many other people who still hated him. “I don't care if Viserys is watching” he said before she could speak. “We don't have to do this.”

“I was just trying to help.”

A desperate darkness surged up inside him. She was always helping him, with his father, with other drivers, with the work that had been his heartbeat for as long as he could remember. He hated how much he'd grown to need it, need her, in his life when he could do so little for her in return. He couldn't even give her her job; that was ultimately his father's doing. Jaime bit so hard on his lip it ached, barely containing the unnecessarily cruel words that beat against his teeth. The least he could do was not insult her for being her, for being kind.

“I guess we don't have to,” she said to his silence. The worst part was the disappointment that dimmed the light in her eyes. She was disappointed in him, he knew; another mark against him, to join the crowded tally she must surely be keeping.

They stared at each other in the middle of the party, so close he could have reached out and pushed her away, or grabbed her and pulled her against him. He wondered if she would still taste like the champagne or if it had all washed clean.

“I-I should go,” she said.

“I suppose you should. See you at the office.”

Brienne nodded mutely and as she turned the lights lingered long enough on her face he could see her chin wobble briefly before she strode off, her head held high.

Addam came up on his left, folded his arms across his chest and watched Brienne go. “Still a lady-killer, I see.”

“I'm not trying to pick her up, she's my race engineer.”

“So why don't you treat her like that?”
Jaime frowned at the other man. “I'm not any different with her than with Bronn.”

“Then your relationship with Bronn has changed considerably in the last five years.”

“Fuck off,” Jaime groused. Addam smirked and the ground that had broken apart between them before seemed to solidify again.

Addam glanced at his watch. “I’ve got to get back to the hotel, I'm flying early tomorrow. It was good to see you, Jaime,” he said sincerely.

“You too.” It had been; they had almost seemed like friends again.

“It doesn't always have to be like this,” Addam said, his voice soft but intense. “You're more than just one terrible act. I think your race engineer sees that.” He squeezed Jaime's shoulder. “You should try to see it, too.”

In his hotel room later that night, Jaime brushed his teeth and stared at himself in the mirror, and tried to see the man he used to be.

The party had been a mistake, Brienne thought Monday afternoon. They were back in the office, practicing pit stops to try to finally crack the three-second threshold that lingered just out of reach, but she kept finding herself back at the party.

“Ready,” she said, dragging herself to attention. She held the stopwatch up and on their nods shouted “go.” The crew leapt into action and once they stepped away she clicked it off and grimaced. 3.25 seconds. They were getting slower.

“Take five,” she said, “then we'll do it again.”

Before most of them had even left the room her thoughts had already drifted back to the night before, pulling it apart for the tenth time. Kevan had requested her attendance in a way she could not say no to, but it had been a mistake to go nonetheless. In general he was always hinting at more from her: to do more media, to make a bigger deal of being the first woman, to give more credit to Lannister Corp Racing for hiring her, but every time she thought about taking Melisandre up on her interview request or mingling with the fans in unprotected spaces, all she could hear were the barely hushed up comments about her looks; all she could see was the smug contempt on their faces that a woman would dare to excel in a man's sport. She'd foolishly hoped Jaime would be there even though he almost never went to these, and seeing him pushing through the crowd to get to her had flooded her body with unexpected relief.

Jaime’s coming for me, she had thought, her wrist burning when his fingers slid around it.

Be careful what you wish for, she'd been thinking as she left Jaime boiling over with a desperation she couldn't understand. He'd been so mad when she'd only wanted to help, as friends should help each other. Perhaps her mistake was thinking they were friends. They'd been working well together for weeks now, an easy give-and-take that extended to success on the track. Jaime listened to her in a way no one but her father ever had. Even Bronn still had to be reminded of her role sometimes, but Jaime always treated her as an equal. She knew his most closely guarded secret, and though she hadn't told him hers she suspected he knew something of what had happened with Griffin. He'd invited her to spend an entire red-flagged Saturday in Gulltown together to build a model, for the gods’ sake. What in the world was this but friendship?

Maybe he had caught her staring avidly at him when he was sweaty and smiling after free practice. Maybe she had not hidden as well as she’d thought the way it had felt when she’d held his injured
hand in hers. Maybe he'd seen her enraptured by the saved photo of him standing over Connington, those long minutes where she imagined he had done it for her, like she was some petite maiden that men would fight for and not...who she actually was.

“Can we start?” Bronn asked, and Brienne startled. She brushed her sweaty hair from her forehead and nodded. They'd all filtered back to the space while Brienne had been lost in thought yet again.

*Focus,* she commanded herself.

She decided to focus on Martyn, inevitably the last tire man to step away and the most likely culprit behind their slowdown. He'd gotten more sour the further they got into the season, and it had begun to extend to more than just her. Martyn was snappish with everyone including his brother, and Willem had given up trying to change his moods. Whatever was going on with Martyn, it was affecting his work and the crew's cohesion.

“One more time,” she told them and they groaned but got in position. “Go!”

3.30 this time and she shook the innocent stopwatch in annoyance. “Martyn,” she snapped. The man didn't even look her way.

Brienne stalked to him and said, louder, “Martyn. Is your tool working?”

“You want me to show you?” he asked, his tone full of ugly insinuation.

She cursed her reddening cheeks. “You know what I mean. We were even slower that time and you're always the last person up.”

“You want to try it?” he asked and it still felt like innuendo but at least he wasn't leering at her.

“Fine, let me see if it's calibrated correctly.”

Martyn held the pneumatic gun sideways towards her. Brienne grabbed it with one hand and before she could get the other to stabilize it, Martyn pulled the trigger.

The pneumatic went off like a bomb in her hand and it fell with a crash as she wailed in pain and collapsed to her knees on the floor next to it. In between one painful heartbeat and the next, Podrick came flying out of nowhere and tackled Martyn to the hard concrete and then the fire burning up her wrist consumed her.

Shouting burrowed through the white-hot agony and Brienne blinked and gasped from where she was hunched protectively around her wrist to see Bronn holding Willem back while Pod and Martyn rolled around trying to land punches on each other.

“What-” she said, trying to speak though her lungs could barely get a breath. When she tried to move to stop the chaos that was quickly enveloping the crew, she could manage only to one knee before the agony was too much.

Squinting through her blurry vision, Brienne saw Cleos Frey and Lucion pulling Podrick and Martyn apart, trying to avoid their fists waving violently, desperate to strike.

“Let me go!” Pod shouted, his stutter disappearing with the adrenaline, pulling one arm free before Bronn abandoned Willem to help contain Podrick.

Then Jaime was there, looking confused and furious as he crouched down next to Brienne.
“What happened?” he asked intensely. “Are you ok?”

“It's my wrist.” She wiped her face with her uninjured hand and choked back tears. “The pneumatic got me.”

“I s-s-saw the whole thing,” Pod said still ferociously struggling between Bronn and Lucion. “M-M-M-Martyn did it on p-purpose. He p-p-pulled the trigger j-j-j-just as she r-reached for it.”

Brienne glanced at Jaime and felt a chill go through her. His face was eerily calm, the mask of the Kingslayer. Over his shoulder, Lancel and his crew filtered in, murmuring curiously.

Jaime turned his head to the side to address Martyn, but his eyes never left Brienne's. “You're fired, Martyn.”

“You can't fire me, I work for Tywin. I'm Kevan's son,” Martyn said through a mouth filled with blood.

“Then quit.”

“Fuck you.”

Jaime's eyes were bright and glittering as streetlights on a midnight road as he slowly stood, the shadow of what he'd done to Connington, to Aerys, hovering over him like dark wings. He faced Martyn and Brienne whispered, “Jaime, please. It's not worth it.”

His back was as unyielding as the concrete she was sitting on, holding her throbbing wrist against her chest. Jaime took another step nearer Martyn.

“If you don't quit, then you'll have to take an extended medical leave,” Jaime said softly.

Martyn swayed a little and still looked for a moment like he would attack; by the way Jaime's body tensed she suspected there was a part of him that wanted Martyn to. But instead Martyn spit a glob of blood on the floor, glared at Brienne, and pushed his way out of the crowd of onlookers. The two men from Lancel's crew that had been with Martyn when he'd threatened Brienne the first time followed after him, muttering and shooting both Jaime and Brienne ugly looks.

“Does anyone else need to quit now?” Jaime said, his voice rebounding against all the walls, filling the space with his barely controlled rage. He turned his head to glare at Willem, who only stared down at his own feet. “Good.”

Jaime turned back to Brienne, knelt down next to her. “Let me see it,” he said, gently touching her wrist. Even that small pressure made her hiss with pain and he jerked his fingers away. “Pod, take Brienne to whoever's on-call for first aid and see if she needs to go to the hospital. Get yourself looked at, too.” She couldn't escape the gravitational pull of Jaime's eyes, the swirling ice and fire in them. “I should go with you,” he murmured.

“I'll be fine.”

Jaime's jaw twitched, something deep and hurt flaring, but he nodded and gently helped her stand with Bronn's assistance. Podrick took her arm even though he had one eye already starting to swell shut and a trickle of blood dripping from his nose down his lip. They limped off, Brienne moving slowly to keep from jostling her injured wrist, Pod because of the hits he'd taken.

“I didn't know you even knew how to fight,” she said, trying to keep things light through the pain as they walked from one building to the other, ignoring the shocked looks from passers-by.
“I d-don't.” He smiled sideways and then winced when it pulled at a cut on his lip.

“Did you really see him do it?” she asked.

Podrick couldn't quite meet her eyes. “I-I-I know he did.”

“That's not a yes,” she said and Pod just ducked his head. “Thank you, though. For taking my side.”

Pod's hand tightened on her elbow and they shuffled in companionable silence the rest of the way.

An hour later they left the infirmary bandaged and thoroughly checked out. Jaime was leaning against the wall sucking on a lollipop, apparently waiting for them. Brienne stared somewhere around his collar and lightly covered her thickly bandaged wrist with her other hand. He glanced briefly at her before focusing on Podrick.

“You look like you lost,” Jaime said, all casual lightness.

“Y-y-you should see th-the other guy.”

Jaime grinned as reckless as a little boy. “We don't ever have to see him again; he already put in his resignation. Kevan's accepted it, although he wants to talk to you both. I put him off until tomorrow, said you needed some rest and recovery time.” He turned his attention to Brienne, and he pushed off of the wall. “Did they take care of you? Is it broken?”

“Just sprained. It's a very state-of-the-art medical area for a business.”

“We get more injuries than you'd think here and if we can get fixed up onsite we'll work longer according to my father's thinking.”

“That's dreadful,” Brienne grimaced. “I suppose that means we should get back.” They'd given her extra-strength ibuprofen but her hand still throbbed, hot and angry under the bandages. “I do need to put more ice on it tonight, though.”

“No more work for either of you, I sent the whole crew home.”

“But we leave for Pentos in a week.”

“A few more hours of work on a Monday after race day isn't going to make a difference. Come on.” He started walking towards the main doors expecting them to follow. Podrick just shrugged when Brienne looked his way and then went after Jaime.

When they stepped into the sunlight out front, Sandor was already waiting there with his car.

“Thank you for calling him,” Brienne said.

“I didn't call him for you. Hound, you're taking Podrick home today.”

“ Heard what happened,” Sandor said, opening the back door for Pod to get in. “Tell me what you did on the drive, lad, and I'll tell you all the places you went wrong so you're ready for next time.” Podrick smiled bashfully as he got into the car.

Once the door was shut, Sandor turned to Brienne. “Your hand okay?”

“It will be.”

“I expect you'll be wanting to come back to work tomorrow then.”
“Of course,” she said, frowning. “It's just a hand.”

Sandor grinned, a feral split of his twisted lips, and Brienne realized she'd never seen him look actually happy before. “You're tough. That's good. But don't expect any special treatment,” he said, his tone almost charming.

“I would never,” she said lightly.

“Can't be having you get a big head.” He nodded at her and got into the driver's seat and it was only as he started pulling away did she realize that her ride home was leaving.

“Oh! Wait!” she called out after his quickly receding taillights. “I guess I'll take the bus,” she sighed.

“Do you really think I'd send Podrick home with the Hound and leave you on your own?” Jaime asked, sounding genuinely hurt.

Brienne blinked at him. “I didn't really think it through. Is he coming back, then?”

“No, Wrench, I'm driving you. My car's over here.” He left her open-mouthed as he headed for his sports car; she would have been less shocked if he'd just announced the sun was purple and his car was made of cheese.

Jaime unlocked his car and opened the passenger side door. “Well?”

Her head ducked, Brienne hurried over. “You don't have to do this,” she said; his fingers tightened on the edge of the door.

“Just get in the car.”

“I can take the bu-”

“Get in the blasted car, will you?”

Brienne glared at him. “You're even less hospitable than Sandor.”

“We're a perfect match then, Wrench, because so are you.”

She pursed her lips but clambered awkwardly into the car. Jaime took the elbow of her injured arm to stabilize her, careful not to touch or jostle her wrist. His fingers were gentle even though his face was hard with frustration. He slammed the door once she was tucked in and Brienne struggled to get the seatbelt with one hand as he threw himself into the driver's side.

“Got it?” he asked once she'd clicked in and she just nodded and stared out the window. He huffed, a sharp blast of annoyance, and started driving.

“I can give you directions,” she said after a minute as the car purred into weekday traffic.

“I already know where it is.”

They were quiet for several more minutes until Brienne reached over and turned on the radio. Jaime frowned at her.

“What are you doing?”

“Putting on some music,” she said, searching for a rock station.
“Can't bear to talk to me?”

Brienne furrowed her brow. “You seem too annoyed to talk.”

“I'm annoyed because you never want my help!”

“You never ask to help you just assume I'll be okay with it!”

They glared at each other for a brief moment before Jaime turned his attention back to the road. “I thought we were getting along,” he grumbled.

“We were.”

“Then why are we arguing now?”

“Because you're stubborn.”

Jaime laughed loudly in the car, filling up what space was left in the small interior that wasn't overwhelmed by their two big bodies. “That's rich coming from you.”

Brienne turned up the music instead of answering and he just shook his head, his strong hands confident on the wheel. She did her best to not stare at them, but it was hard to ignore the tendons stark under his golden skin, the way he would rub his palms occasionally over the leather in a soothing motion. She imagined him doing that to his F1 wheel. To her.

Flushing, Brienne looked out the window at the city speeding by. She knew better than to even skirt near a fantasy so absurd she'd have better luck sprouting wings and flying away. They weren't even friends, apparently, just coworkers who spent hours a day one-on-one, hung out when they had free time, and sometimes told each other dark secrets in saunas.

Jaime parked in front of her apartment building and when he shut the radio off the silence was startling.

“Thank you for the drive home,” Brienne said, still looking out the window. She fumbled getting her seatbelt off and the door open and Jaime exhaled loudly and got out. He helped her out with the same tender efficiency he'd helped her in and then closed her door, the car beeping when he locked it.

He took a deep breath. “Can I help you get settled in your place?” he said with determination.

“Inside my apartment?” she asked, knowing the blood was returning to her cheeks.

“Unless you live in that alley over there, then yes.”

“It's really-” she stopped herself at the way he flinched as though her denial was a physical blow. Let him help you she told herself firmly. “That would be nice, thank you,” she amended.

Jaime nodded once, but he looked relieved.

As she slid her key into the lock she panicked for a second that her apartment would embarrass her, but as she tentatively opened the door it wasn't messy or compromising; the worst thing about it was how sterile it looked. She ushered Jaime in and she could see him noticing it, too.

“Let me just set my things down,” she said quickly before he could make some smart-ass comment. He glanced briefly through her open bedroom door and then went into the kitchen.
“I'll make you dinner,” he said like that was the most natural thing in the world for famous F1 star Jaime Lannister to say.

“Do you know how?”

Jaime rolled his eyes and opened her fridge. “I can at least fry some eggs or something. Which is good because the state of your supplies is horrifying.”

“I usually go shopping on Monday nights,” she said defensively.

He slammed the fridge shut and opened the freezer. “Change of plans: I'm ordering too much takeout and then you can have leftovers that are easy to reheat. First,” he rummaged around, “an ice pack.”

Brienne set down her coat and her bag, unzipped the top of her jumpsuit and slowly pulled her arm free, wincing every time she had to tug the fabric across it, and let the top half of her suit fall to her waist. The tank top she always wore underneath was sweaty and she wanted a shower but Jaime was standing there in her kitchen moving with easy confidence, going through her drawers to find a towel and a plastic baggie as though he had nothing better to do than be there helping her. He looked calm, his short hair a little messy, the only lines on his face the beginning of crow's feet around his eyes. The t-shirt he wore, deep red except for the white block lettering of his sponsor, curved warmly over his muscular chest and shoulders, the bulge of his upper arm. For such a domestic scene, her body responded like he was naked instead.

“There we go,” he said and he held up his ice pack proudly, though when he looked her way the smile dipped from his face and Brienne folded her arms over her chest in embarrassment.

“Thank you,” she said.

“You're welcome,” he said, his voice low, registering somewhere deep in her belly. Brienne looked down at her feet, feeling even more awkward. She knew she shouldn't twist his politeness into something sensual, but it was hard not to when he looked like that, when he came around the kitchen to take her hand and gently press the ice pack to it, so near that his breath brushed warm against her bare shoulder. Brienne shivered a little, goose bumps running down her arm.

“Too cold?” he asked.

“No. I mean yes, I should change. I can order takeout, you don't have to.”

The plastic baggie crinkled as his fingers gripped it harder for a moment and then he let her go and she regretted opening her big mouth. He looked hurt as he ran his hand over his hair and sighed. “I can take a hint. Think you'll ever like me?” he asked, his joking tone ragged around the edges.

Brienne looked down at the ice pack he'd put together for her, thought of him offering to get her food, driving her home. She had wanted to help him when he had been hurt at the Amber Lounge party and it had felt much like he looked now; perhaps he really did consider her a friend, too.

“I like you now,” she said, touching his shoulder gently. Jaime's head jerked up and he searched her eyes.

“Okay then,” he said, and the smile that followed his words was heartbreakingly sweet. “You can't take that back when you're not distracted by your wrist tomorrow.”

“Don't give me a reason to,” she said, grinning a little. She yawned suddenly, started to stretch her arms and grunted with pain. “No stretching. Check,” she muttered.
“I should let you rest,” Jaime said as he turned abruptly away. “You're sure you don't need me to order some food?”

“I can manage a call with one hand.”

He smirked and even without saying a word Brienne had a vivid image of the dirtiest interpretation of that statement, and felt her whole body go hot.

“Then I'll leave you to it,” Jaime said. “Goodnight, Wrench.”

“Goodnight, Lannister. Thank you.” He nodded and shut the door behind him. Brienne called the nearest Pentoshi place and ordered enough food for three people, then carefully changed her clothes, catching the scent of Jaime's soap in the air.

We are at least friends, she thought as she sat on the couch later watching the recap of Jaime's win the day before. She did not think of his strong hands so soft on her wrist. She did not imagine them hard on her elsewhere. At least we have that.
June

Chapter Summary

"Can I treat you to whatever's leftover in the cafeteria?"

Brienne made a face, sticking out her tongue in a way that was unbearably cute. “I'd rather just get food when I get home.”

“It's Monday night, you don't have any food.”

She blinked at him, startled. “You remembered it's my shopping day.”

Jaime shrugged uncomfortably. “It's a weird day to go shopping, of course I'd remember.”

“I think I'm going to go do that, actually, if we're done?” she asked as she stood to her full height, towering over him in his chair. He very firmly squashed the image that immediately rose up of them posed like this in his bedroom.

Chapter Notes

Even though I've gotten very little writing done this week, I'm going to be super busy this weekend so I'm posting this week's chapter now in the hopes that what time I can scrounge together in the next few days I'll be able to use to focus on finishing my chapter and knowing I've posted this week will encourage my brain to keep going. Fingers crossed.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

'Haven't seen you in awhile; coming over soon?'

Jaime frowned down at his phone, his finger hesitating over it as he considered his response. He hadn't seen Taena – or Melara – for months, he realized; since at least back in January before the start of the preseason. They had no expectations of each other, but over five months since their last interaction was an unusual stretch. The last time he'd been with either of them was the night Brienne had called him after her arrival in King's Landing.

Busy, he told himself, sending a quick message saying everything was fine and he'd be in touch.

Brienne, his traitorous thoughts chimed quietly.

There was a knock on the door of his office and he knew it would be her without having to look; she had a heavier hand than the rest of his team and she did an economical double-tap the same way every time.

“Come in.”
Brienne smiled a little as she entered, her big blue eyes bright and happy to see him, as they had been nearly every day since he'd left her apartment after Martyn injured her wrist. During the race in Pentos they'd bantered at a lightning pace while he'd sailed to p-1, bringing him within eight points of Robb for the world championship. They still argued constantly but now it felt familiar and comfortable and not the antagonistic picking at each other from when she'd first joined the team.

They were friends, he knew, and he hated it.

Jaime had always failed at friendship and having hers felt like he was a toddler plucked down alone on a tightrope with the world's most expensive and fragile vase. A single misstep and it would all crash around them, and Jaime excelled at missteps.

But the alternative was not being her friend and even he wasn't that masochistic.

So he smiled wide at her when she came in and felt a little thrill when her thick lips curved to mirror his.

“I've got the Roost footage ready for study, do you have some time? Your calendar looked clear.”

“Let me check,” he said, opening up his laptop. “How's the wrist?”

Brienne brushed the store-bought brace she'd picked up two weeks ago when the onsite nurse had told her the worst of the swelling was past. Kevan had simmered with quiet fury as she and Podrick had told their story with Jaime in the room to back them up, but Jaime honestly hadn't been able to tell whether he was mad at them or at Martyn. Either way, Martyn hadn't come back since that day and his father had found someone to replace him that was due to start tomorrow. Goat or Hoat or something, Twyin had said, poached from Ramsay Bolton's team at someone's recommendation. Jaime didn't really care as long as the man listened to Brienne and worked harder than Jaime's miserable cousin. Being down one crew hadn't hurt them in Pentos, but they'd benefited from multiple yellow flags and Robb having an off day at qualifying. Griffin's Roost was a deceptively difficult track and they would need every hand on deck to win there.

“It's getting better. Hardly even twinges anymore except when I try to move something heavy.”

“Good,” Jaime murmured, reflexively scanning his new emails before he peered mischievously over his laptop at Brienne, who had taken the empty seat across from him.

“What?” she asked, narrowing her eyes.

“Guess what finally got published?” He spun his laptop around and pointed to the email Pod had sent to both of them.

“Oh gods,” she groaned. “I'd forgotten we even took that photo.”

“We have to look at this before we look at the track.”

“Noooo,” she moaned.

“It'll be great.” Jaime clicked the link and gestured for her to come around the desk. Brienne heaved an enormous sigh but she stood, her expressive eyes unable to hide their anxious twinkling. The article loaded – Women of F1 it was titled, but the pictures were mostly the wives and girlfriends of the other drivers, though there was a photo of Arya Stark glaring into the camera at the track in Braavos. He clicked next and blinked at the photo of himself and Brienne.
“What in the seven hells?” he muttered.

Brienne leaned over his shoulder, her straw hair falling free from behind her ear and brushing his temple. “What's wrong with it?” she asked nervously.

“Look at you. They've airbrushed you.” He studied the changes, growing angrier with each one: they'd straightened her nose, hidden her freckles, and smoothed out her skin. They couldn't hide her height, but she looked less bulky and more elegant.

“Just because you don't need airbrushing doesn't mean the rest of us don't,” she said.

“You don't need airbrushing! It's not you. It should look like you.”

“Jaime,” she said, standing abruptly and he knew without looking she was flushed, her cheeks patchy with color. “Of course they're not going to just leave me like this,” she said softly.

“Like what? Tall and strong and covered in freckles?”

“It's fine,” she squeaked.

“It's not,” he ground out. But she was fidgeting now, and she moved back around to the other side of the desk, all of the light from just a minute before gone, so Jaime let it lie. “Let's do the track review,” he said and though she nodded and opened up her own laptop to start the first videos, she was subdued for the next hour.

After they watched the first ten turns so many times in a row Jaime was certain he'd be dreaming of them that night, he leaned back in his chair and stretched. “I'm calling it,” he said. “We can pick up the back half tomorrow.”

“I don't have any plans, if you want to just push through.”

“Absolutely not.” He checked his watch for the time and lifted an eyebrow. “Did you even have dinner before you came here?”

“No. Did you?” she asked, a challenge.

“No. Can I treat you to whatever's leftover in the cafeteria?”

Brienne made a face, sticking out her tongue in a way that was unbearably cute. “I'd rather just get food when I get home.”

“It's Monday night, you don't have any food.”

She blinked at him, startled. “You remembered it's my shopping day.”

Jaime shrugged uncomfortably. “It's a weird day to go shopping, of course I'd remember.”

“I think I'm going to go do that, actually, if we're done?” she asked as she stood to her full height, towering over him in his chair. He very firmly squashed the image that immediately rose up of them posed like this in his bedroom.

“For now.”

Brienne nodded and bid him goodnight, and Jaime pulled out his phone again, staring at the message from Taena. He should text her, spend a couple of hours between her soft thighs, and stop thinking about his godsdamned race engineer for one night.
Hours later, alone in his own apartment where he'd ended up instead, he cursed his foolishness as he had his very last cigarette on the balcony and stared out at the city lights that twinkled with the same compelling brightness as in Brienne's eyes.

“I can't get out of sixth gear.”

Brienne glanced between monitors, pressed her headphones closer to her ears. “You're stuck in sixth?”

“Can shift lower,” Jaime said over the mic, “but not higher.”

“Shit,” she said. “Give me a minute.”

They were in the home stretch of the race at Griffin's Roost and Jaime was in first but Robb Stark was coming up fast and now Jaime was stuck at below top speed. If he came into the garage for a pit stop the race was lost; he'd be lucky to even get points given how tight the field was and how much work would potentially need to be done to get the car running smoothly again. But leaving him out there meant Robb would draw ever closer, and there were just enough laps left that the Direwolf driver would likely pass.

Griffin's Roost was one of the newer IAF tracks, but they'd built it in a small strip of land called the Griffin's Throat that made for a compact, twisting maze between craggy juts of rock that pushed the drivers and their cars to their limits. It was also one of the most difficult tracks to overtake on because there were so few straightaways and the ones they had were relatively short. There was always the chance that if Jaime drove perfectly, if he didn't lock his tires once, if he never gave Robb the inside space on the turns, he could hold the other car off long enough to pull it out.

Brienne studied the overall numbers of the car, checked Jaime's and Robb's positions again on the screens, and then took a breath. Kevan would want him to box, play it safe and try to get back to p-5. But that wasn't Jaime's way, and, Brienne had discovered, it wasn't her way either. She knew he could do it, she just had to make sure he knew it, too.

“Stay out,” she told him over the mic.

“What?”

“Stay out there. There's not enough time to bring you in and you've got a good lead.”

“What the fuck am I supposed to do about Stark?”

“Ignore him. You finish this race strong and you can win it. All you have to do is be perfect.”

“Is that all?” he said dryly, and she smothered a grin, uncomfortable with showing too much emotion with the cameras just a few feet away and trained on her. She still wasn't used to the amount of video they took just of her face, but at least she was able to mostly ignore it now.

“What's the matter, Lannister? Can't drive one tiny little perfect race?”

“You know I can't,” he said and his tone was light but she knew he meant it.

“I'll bet you you can.”

“What are we betting?”

He was driving clean, but she saw in the alternate track views that Robb continued to creep up on
his position. He had two laps at most before things got serious, and then just five laps after that that he would have to hold onto for p-1.

“If you lose this race, you have to not argue with me about pit stops at Riverrun in two weeks.”

“And if I win today?”

“Then you win,” she said. “And I'll let you push me in the winners’ pool at Lannisport next month.”

“You're assuming I'll win at Lannisport.”

“Yes.”

His chuckle was low and strained. “I feel like I'm getting swindled but I'm too busy to figure out how. Deal.”

Brienne nodded and rubbed her hands over her hot cheeks, knowing the audio and the cameras had picked up every moment of that exchange. She rewound it quickly in her head, decided she had stayed on the side of friendly banter, and watched the last laps of Jaime's race.

Robb took an extra lap to come up behind Jaime and with four laps to go she said, “he's behind you. You've got this” with all the confidence she had in Jaime's incredible skills. There was no man on the track today that she would have trusted to do this besides him, and few in all of racing's past. Robb Stark could smell blood on the air and he came hard again and again, only to be cut off by a perfectly timed turn or a weave that took away just enough space that Robb couldn't overtake. Brienne barely breathed for the last minute of the race, her eyes glued to the screen as Robb nudged and pushed and desperately tried to find a path around Jaime's slower car.

On the penultimate turn, Jaime cut across the apex in a curve as beautiful and smooth as the crest of a wave, making Brienne's heart clench, and then Robb's tires locked as he pressed too hard trying to catch up, and Jaime pulled a half second ahead, the car soaring under the wildly waving checkered flag while Brienne and the crew that had poured out of the garage to watch from the wall screamed and hugged each other, jumping up and down.

“Holy shit! Holy shit!” Brienne yelled, first as she pounded Bronn on the back and then again as Podrick wrapped himself around her for a quick, fierce hug. On the nearest apron Jaime turned celebratory donuts, tires squealing, the taste of rubber filling the air. The crowd was wild, the Lannister red and gold section throwing hats and shirts and programs in the air.

As Jaime pulled his car into the parc fermé, the crews swarmed the barriers, shouting and cheering him as he undid his steering wheel and hopped up on top of the car, his arms raised in victory. Jaime jumped down as elegant as any lion, and pulled off his helmet and neck brace, tucking them under his arm. He aimed straight for Brienne, his whole face bright and shining as the sun, and for a moment she couldn't breathe. Even sweaty and clearly worn out from the intensity of the race, he was as beautiful a man as she'd ever seen. Her body leaned towards him as he came nearer, her heart pounding.

“I won,” he said, beaming at her.

“I told you so.”

Jaime laughed, a booming waterfall of golden sound. “And now I get to push you in the pool.”

“You have to win there first,” she said archly. His happy grin reminded Brienne of the pictures
from when he was young, but the force of it on his older, handsome face was tenfold.

Bronn punched Jaime on the shoulder and his grin scrunched into a grimace before the rest of the crew lapped forward and took Jaime away to celebrate with him. She watched him enjoying himself and her heart beat soft and warm in her chest with pleasure.

“I can't believe he fucking did it,” Arya Stark said from behind Brienne.

Brienne turned to smile down at her. They'd run into each other on several tracks, and Arya always had a bluntly astute opinion to give about the race and the men around them. “I knew he could.”

“You were the only one. Direwolf was celebrating until the last lap.”

“Race isn't over until the flag.”

“I tried to tell them, but they don't like to listen to young women.”

Brienne nodded sympathetically. “Most of them don't listen to older women, either.”

“Jaime does,” Arya said, watching Brienne so closely that Brienne's neck itched as she felt a flush rise to the surface.

“He does. That's why I'm his race engineer.”

“This is the best he's ever driven, you know. Even from before.”

“It's all coming together for him,” Brienne said weakly.

“Why don't we hear more about you? You're the real reason behind it, everyone knows it. Do the reporters not want to listen either?”

“They won't stop listening,” Brienne said. “I don't like doing interviews. I get nervous. I say the wrong things.”

“You did fine at the beginning of the season, that one with Melisandre.”

“Jaime handled most of that. Though she did ask me to do a one-on-one,” Brienne admitted.

Arya looked annoyed that Brienne hadn't already leapt at the chance. “You should do it! You have to get the respect you're due.”

Brienne chewed her bottom lip. The crews and cameras ebbed and flowed around them, two rocks in a steady stream of activity. “It's not that simple,” she said quietly.

“What if we did a Women in F1 interview together with her then?”

“You and me?”

“Do you see any other women out here?” she asked, gesturing at the sea of men around them. There were women engineers on some of the other teams, but Brienne had the most visibility of any woman in the sport that wasn't a reporter, and Arya's connection to her family gave her more than most. Rumor had it she also had been the initiating mind behind Direwolf's new wing design, which had given their team better downforce than anyone else in the field. Brienne had peered intently at the Direwolf cars over and over trying to figure out how they'd achieved it, but whatever it was was too subtle to see from a distant inspection.
“I'll see if she's interested, I guess,” Brienne said. At least having Arya there meant it was less likely Melisandre would poke and prod at Brienne's time with Griffin, and she could make avoidance of that topic a requirement for the interview at all. “I'll let you know.”

They were exchanging numbers in their phones when Hyle walked up, his sweaty brown hair smoothed back from his high forehead. “Ladies,” he said in a cheerfully patronizing tone.

Arya looked up and gave him a look so intensely unwelcoming that Hyle's step stuttered, his open smile drifting for a moment before he reeled it back again. “What do you want?” she asked in a tone as lethal as her stare.

Hyle swallowed hard. “Just to talk to Brienne. If you have a minute?”

“The trophy presentation will be starting soon,” Brienne said.

“It will be quick. But it is private.”

Arya glanced questioningly at Brienne, and then shrugged when Brienne nodded at her. “Don't forget to ask Melisandre,” she said as she was leaving. “You deserve it!”

Brienne ignored Hyle's obvious curiosity. “What do you want?”

“I know this isn't a great place for this, but you're hard to pin down. I just wanted to apologize, for what happened at Griffin.”

As always happened when she thought of Griffin, Brienne was transported back to that cold garage, and the rose Connington had thrown at her feet, a petal lying torn off next to it. But this time, she recalled him on the floor of the bar, too, looking as beat up as his rose. Even coming here to Griffin's Roost hadn't been as agonizing as she'd expected when she'd seen it looming on the schedule. After the initial nerves when she stepped off the bus, she'd been too busy to give it much thought until Hyle appeared. “Why?” Brienne asked now, scrambling for calm.

“You ran out of there pretty quick and never came back, so I assume you felt hurt by our dumb joke,” he said, clearly confused.

“That's not—” She shook her head. “I mean why now?”

“It's not like we run in the same circles, when would I have done it before now?”

“Maybe the last time you talked to me? Or you could have emailed me five years ago when it actually happened!”

Hyle's lips thinned but he nodded. “Fine, I could have done it years ago. I honestly didn't think you'd still care.”

“You asked me out as a joke, Hyle, you all did. That stays with a person.”

She could see it in his eyes: you're being too emotional and why are you not accepting my apology but his mouth said, “you're right. And that's why I'm here now.”

“Fine, you've apologized.” Brienne glanced to the podium a short distance away; the crowd was already gathering underneath it, anxious for the ceremony to start.

“Ok,” Hyle said slowly, clearly waiting for more from her, but Brienne just met his hazel-eyed stare and remained quiet. He would get no forgiveness from her today, not when she only wanted
him and the memories he carried with him gone. “I'll see you around the track,” he sighed and
Brienne didn't even bother to watch him go. But she didn't feel settled again until she saw Jaime on
top of the podium, smiling down at her.

Brienne didn't see Hyle again for three weeks, and she didn't think of him once. They were too
busy for one thing; Riverrun was the next race after Griffin's Roost and their only goal was to get
Jaime in a position to win and pull ahead in the World Championship title race. When he actually
did, he'd been so ecstatic he jumped the barrier into the pit crew's arms, and they'd surfed him over
to where Brienne was standing, waiting for their usual post-race smile and appropriately distanced
fist-bump or high-five.

Except this time Jaime had regained his balance, grinned, and hugged her. Which had been fine in
the moment, if surprising, the ball lightning energy of him swarming over and through her before it
was gone again when he let go and moved on to shaking Kevan's hand next to her. She'd blinked
and chalked her breathlessness up to the excitement of his win.

But then she showed up Monday afternoon for their scheduled planning meeting and though he
only said “Short prep week this week” in a business-like manner when she walked in, her first
thought wasn't “let's get to it, then” or a sarcastic “good afternoon to you, too,” but wondering what
his soft t-shirt would feel like against her cheek. It startled her so badly she didn't say anything at
all until he said, “hello? Radio check?” and she flushed and rolled her eyes.

“Sorry, I was thinking about that awful joke you told me on lap 32 yesterday.”

“Aawful?” he said, feigning offense. “Parc fern! That's hilarious!” Then he turned the monitor
towards her with the track already onscreen and they got to work as usual, her brief mental
indiscretion forgotten.

The rest of the week went much the same.

Everything would be normal, the two of them working side-by-side arguing over his cornering
choices and then she'd think about laying her head on his shoulder and it all suddenly became too
much for a moment until the ghost of his arms around her, strong and sure and warm, had
disappeared again.

What the fuck? she thought.

Brienne had admittedly not hugged many people in her life, but even she knew this was absurd. It
was just a hug. There had been nothing special about it; she and Pod had hugged just the week
before and she hadn't spent all week struck by him when he handed her a screwdriver.

Get it together, Tarth, she ordered herself, and she did. Mostly.

Until that weekend at The Twins – which had been a breeze thanks to Ramsay managing to
completely ruin Robb's race with a crash on the first lap – when Jaime flew under the checkered
flag at p1 and drove to the parc fermé and Brienne had butterflies as she watched him pull off his
helmet and grin at her. Anxious, excited butterflies that felt like they were driving their own F1
race in her stomach.

Jaime went straight to her and wrapped his arms around her again, her own arms sliding perfectly
into place in return, and she realized exactly how well they fit against each other, like their bodies
had been poured from molds meant to be welded together to make the engine whole. This wasn't
the comfortable embrace of excited friends, this was like coming home to Tarth after the worst
experience of her life, when the sharp sea spray and cool wind and sunny forests had enveloped
and settled her. Jaime smelled like dirt and sweat and gasoline and it had taken every ounce of willpower to not cling to his strong shoulders and bury her nose in the side of his neck and breathe him in.

This was decidedly not the way a race engineer should feel about their driver. Even Lancel hugged his crew when he finished top three, and no one saw Theodan following him around with big puppy dog eyes.

Brienne had learned distance – emotional and physical – were the best defense from the cruelties of the world, but the concept seemed alien to Jaime. He was always too close: his emotions too close to the surface, his body too close to hers, his blinding smile too close to convincing her he saw her as more than just his friend.

They needed that distance now. Space. A heart condom.

When she walked into his office Monday after the win and found him there with a clothes box in his hands and a hopeful, nervous light in his eyes, Brienne suspected her heart condom was about to spring a leak.

“What's that?” she asked, cautious.

“It's for you.”

“Why?”

Jaime rolled his eyes. “Can't I get my race engineer a present? We're ahead in the championship race and that is in no small part to you.”

A thank you gift. She should have known. “You didn't have to, you already pay me to do just this thing.”

“I don't pay you, my father does,” he said, the corners of his mouth dipping down. “Will you just take the gift already?”

Brienne sighed but took the present, opened the unwrapped box with only the slightest tremor in her hands. Inside was a silky pool of royal blue fabric, and Brienne pulled it out, the dress unrolling in her hands, the skirt flowing like a waterfall to the floor.

“It's beautiful,” she said, confused. “But why did you get it?”

“Because I'm asking you to come to an event with me and I thought the bribery would help.”

“I have a dress.”

Jaime gave her a dryly amused stare. “Yes, a single dress. I thought you might think it was fun to have a second one.”

Brienne's fingers curled into the cloth. “I'd rather have that new Arthur Dayne book and time to read it,” she muttered.

“I don't think you looked all the way in the box,” he said with a sly smile and when she tugged the tissue paper aside she saw Arthur Dayne's book underneath.

“Oh, she thought, her heart stumbling a little before she could right it again.

“I can only give you the one, though. Time off is harder to come by.” She blinked at him, so
thrown by his gift she didn't know what to say. High spots of color appeared on his cheeks; he even blushed attractively. “It’s okay if you don't like the dress, I can take it back,” he said. Brienne glared down at her own feet in their men's size work boots peeking out under the rich fabric in her hands.

“It's just...I can't wear something like this,” she said, holding it up against her body. “I know what kind of comments I'll get if I do.”

“You shouldn't care what people think about you. Except me, of course,” he added, a teasing light in his face.

“How would you know?” she asked sharply, and he gave her a quiet look that knocked the anger out of her. For most of his adult life he'd born the weight of a truth that was the least of what he was, just like her. Of course he'd know.

“It will look nice on you,” he said, soft, and she felt her face heat. “Perfect for the occasion.”

“What is this event?” Brienne asked, suddenly suspicious.

“It's tomorrow night.”

“That doesn't tell me what it is.”

Jaime tugged at the tissue paper, his fingers crinkling the corner. “You may have seen the invitation that went out, about my father's 60th birthday party.”

“Oh no.”

“I have to go or I risk squandering any goodwill we've managed to gain this season. I figured since I have to go,” he glanced up at her from under his unfairly long lashes, “maybe you would go with me.”

This was the exact opposite of putting more space between them. This was essentially a friend date. “Jaime-”

“Things are more fun when you're around, Wrench.”

“Even at birthday parties for tyrants?”

Jaime grinned like a mischievous boy. “Especially then.”

She absolutely should not go, the more rational and wiser part of her brain warned her. It would not help at all with the distance her heart needed to defend itself. She should not go, but she wanted to, because she liked spending time with Jaime. He was still aggravating, but in a way that now inevitably ended with him making her laugh. He was still egotistical and selfish, but she knew how much of that was a response to hurt as was her own polite stoicism. Though the want of it occasionally bubbled up inside her, Brienne knew what was between them could never be more than friendship and surely knowing that going in would protect her if his eyes went too soft or his smile too warm.

Jaime watched her expectantly, and it was the knowledge that if she said no and gave him the dress back he'd force her to keep the book and probably give her the evening off to read it that had her sighing in acceptance.

His whole face lit up, knowing he had her. “I hope I don't regret this,” she muttered, running the
smooth fabric between her rough fingers.

The next race was up north in Winterfell but it wasn't for two weeks, so Tywin Lannister had taken the power move of inviting every other racing team to King's Landing in the middle of the season to celebrate himself. Sandor dropped Brienne off in front of the same hotel where they'd had the car launch party, and she breathed through the memory of Jaime drunk and angry, of Cersei and the rest of the Lannisters' cold disdain. *It will be different this time,* she assured her racing heart, and as though he'd heard her, Jaime was there. He looked stunned at the sight of her, his eyes gleaming.

“You look great,” he said, offering her his arm.

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“You look great,” he said, offering her his arm.

“Thank you.”

“I have impeccable taste.”

Brienne laughed aloud and shook her head. She had to admit he couldn't have chosen a better design or size for her. It fell all the way to the floor with a fashionable but not too low vee in the neck that made her small breasts seem like a benefit and not a flaw. The sleeves were long and slightly gauzy, covering and softening her too-muscular shoulders and arms; the skirt had a slit up to mid-thigh, though it flowed enough she could hide it when she stood still; and even she couldn't deny the color suited her eyes. Brienne gingerly took Jaime's arm and let him lead her in as cameras flashed all around them.

They followed the signs through the lobby to the huge ballroom, which was crowded with what looked like most of the racing community. Drivers and crew and executives were all dressed in their finest, holding drinks and small plates filled with expensive food while a band played light jazz music. The space had been decorated in gold: golden flowers in crystal bowls on the tables, golden silk drapes along the walls, golden lights glimmering through the room. Jaime let go of her arm as they entered and she felt suddenly alone though he was still standing right there.

“Now what?” she asked, looking around for Connington, wondering if he'd even show.

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“Now we deal with my brother,” he said, nodding at Tyrion who was navigating the crowd to get to them.

“Brienne!” he said, ignoring Jaime. “That dress is incredible on you,” he said with a low whistle, and Brienne felt the heat rush over her face and down her neck.

“Jaime got it for me,” she said weakly.

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“Did he really?” Tyrion lifted his eyebrows and glanced at his brother. “That's a surprise. I'm afraid I'm behind the curve now. What can I get you, Brienne? A drink? A snack? An excuse to leave early so you don't have to suffer the rest of our family again?”

“Tyrion,” Jaime said, frowning.

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“Don't say that,” Jaime said fiercely.

“It's okay,” she said. “He's not wrong.”

Jaime grimaced and shoved his hands in his pockets. “I'm going to get a drink. Do you want something?”
“Dry martini,” Tyrion said and laughed when Jaime glared at him.

“Just some water for now, please.”

“Water, got it. You get your own drink,” Jaime said to Tyrion before he left them alone.

“Siblings,” Tyrion said with a small smile. “So troublesome.”

Brienne swallowed down the sudden grief that rose up from where it normally lay dormant, as persistent as the famed White Walkers of children's horror stories. Even all these years later she would sometimes miss her brother or her mother so intensely it was as though they'd died only the day before. Galladon would have been thrilled with her new job, would have begged to go with her to this party, and would have made friends with everyone he met. If only he'd had the chance.

“My apologies, I didn't think,” Tyrion said quietly.

“It's all right.” Brienne smiled to herself. “My brother and I used to kick each other trying to make room for our legs on the couch. I'd usually win and then he'd take all the blankets down with him onto the floor. I'd get so mad at him but I didn't want to give up my hard-won couch, so I'd cover myself with the pillows. Then of course he'd sit on me complaining about the lumpy couch.” She laughed a little and blinked, returning from their warm living room back to this coolly decorated party.

“It sounds like you had a good relationship,” he said, tentative.

“We were like any other siblings, I suppose. I loved him even when I hated him. You have siblings, you know.”

“With Jaime, yes. Cersei and I only have the hate part.” He shrugged. “I should warn you she's here tonight.”

“I assumed she would be.”

“She's with Robert, so she's in a particularly spiteful mood. I'd steer clear of her if I were you.”

Brienne couldn't imagine Cersei being more sharply bitter than she'd been in their previous, brief encounters and she nodded. “I'll keep that in mind.”

“You should steer clear of Jaime, too,” Tyrion went on, watching her intently.

“What?”

“The racing community is small and full of gossips. People will assume the most salacious outcome of everything. They'll talk. Jaime doesn't care about his reputation and his honor is long since in disrepair, but yours is not, and neither is Lannister Corp’s.”

“But nothing's going on, I'm just his engineer.”

“He bought you a dress, he took you to his father's birthday. I'm sure he'll plan to spend much of the evening by your side. Don't leave with him tonight, unless you want people to think you're going to his bed.”

Brienne blushed hotly and she looked down at their feet. “I would never,” she murmured. But she knew Tyrion was right; half of the people she met assumed they'd already had sex and that was why she was his race engineer at all, even though they'd barely even touched each other until
recently. Now that they were friends it would only set tongues wagging harder.

She glanced up and saw Jaime was returning with three drinks. He was waylaid by one of the Lannister Corp higher-ups and he rolled his eyes at them over the man's shoulder.

“I don't mean to worry you,” Tyrion said. “I'm just trying to watch out for the company, and for your career. You're very good, Brienne, I'd hate to see you fail because of Jaime's recklessness.”

“I appreciate your concern,” Brienne whispered. Jaime extricated himself and returned to them and she took the water with a shaking hand, draining it quickly.

Jaime laughed when she was done. “Don't make me go get another one already, Wrench.”

“It's fine.” She looked around desperately for a reason to leave, saw Arya off a little ways talking to another young woman. “I'm going to go say hi,” she said.

Jaime followed her line of sight. “Ah the Stark girl. I'll go with you, she's a hoot.”

“No,” she said, and then added quickly when he frowned, “I should branch out on my own. You don't have to babysit me all night, I know other people want to talk to you. Look, there's Cersei,” she added when she felt the woman's narrowed-eyed glare. “I'll see you around the party.”

Brienne hurried off, leaving Jaime looking confused behind her. Tyrion was right, she couldn't let his nearly puppy-like friendship make people assume the worst for either of them. Brienne would never let herself be driven out of her dream job by the gossip of the obnoxious crowds, but there was no reason to make things harder for either of them while she was here and surely Jaime would want to immediately squash any rumors that he was with her; he'd been quick enough to do so with the team when she'd first arrived.

As she neared Arya, the smaller woman looked up and smiled wide. “Brienne! Holy shit look at you.”

Brienne tugged at the leg slit to hold it closed over her leg and smiled shyly. “Hello. You look wonderful.” She did, dressed in a sharply cut gray men's suit that matched her eyes with a thin black tie hanging loose around her neck, her brown hair loose around her head.

“Smash the patriarchy,” Arya grinned and the other young woman she was talking to, tall and slender with bright blue eyes and auburn hair in a stylish up-do, shook her head. “This is my sister, Sansa.” Though she tried to hide her shock, Brienne knew she'd failed when Arya laughed. “Don't worry, we get that reaction all the time.”

Sansa smiled, a gentle, pretty curve of her lips, and held out her hand. “Brienne Tarth,” she said knowingly. “It's wonderful to meet you.”

Though her hand was delicate, her grip was strong. She looked as fragile and elegant as a bird but there was the same raptor's light in her eyes that reminded Brienne of Arya. “It's a pleasure to meet you. Are you involved in your family's racing team?”

“Only tangentially. I'm a fashion designer, so I provide some suggestions whenever they want to update their uniforms.” She took in Brienne's dress and nodded. “That dress does suit you well. You should wear silver heels with it next time.” Brienne had only had her black flats, but the long skirt hid them well enough.

“Heels? I'm too tall already.”
“Yes, so why not make a statement about it?”

Brienne shook her head, blushing. “I'm not one for statements.”

“Your being where you are in F1 is a statement.”

“I'd rather just focus on the work.”

“Exactly,” Arya said. “Stop worrying about how people are dressed, Sansa.”

Sansa rolled her eyes. “I'm just giving her some advice. She's got lovely legs, if you don't mind me saying, and the heels would help highlight that.”

“I don't really want people looking at my legs.”

“It's too late for that,” Sansa said, nodding, and Brienne turned to discover the red-haired crewman from Stark's team was openly admiring her.

“Ugh, Tormund,” Arya said. The man tugged on his ill-fitting suit, smoothed a big hand over his wild hair, and started towards them. “Run,” Arya whispered but Brienne just stood there, awkward and stuck.

Tormund had eyes only for Brienne, smiling widely at her. “Good evening,” he said. “You haven't had a chance to meet me yet, but I know you. You're Brienne, the Kingslayer's engineer. I'm Tormund. Some call me Giantsbane.”

“Or Giantsbutt,” Arya said, and Tormund glared at her.

“Ignore her.” He took Brienne's hand without asking and brought it to his lips, kissing her open-mouthed and wet on the top of it. She glanced at Arya over his bowed head, who made a gagging motion. “I've been wanting to meet you,” Tormund said as he stood. “I was hoping to talk to you this evening.”

Sansa tugged on Arya's arm. “Come on, let's leave them to get to know each other.” Arya looked apologetic but she left with her sister anyway. Tormund stepped closer.

“You stand out in the pits. So much woman in that jumpsuit.”

Brienne's face twisted. “Uh, that's not—”

“I speak too freely, I know. But surely you understand how attractive you are.”

“There's no need to be rude,” she said fiercely, and Tormund blinked, surprised.

“I'm being honest. So many women you could break just looking at them funny, but not you.”

Brienne shut her eyes, feeling uglier than ever. Only men who thought she'd put up with their roughness were ever even remotely interested in her. She would never find a man who would give her softness instead.

“Excuse me,” a familiar voice said, and Brienne's eyes flew open to see Hyle Hunt there. “Brienne, sorry to interrupt but can I talk to you?”

“She's talking to me,” Tormund said, bristling.

Brienne glanced between them, wished for a moment that Jaime would come over but he had his
back to her and was talking with Cersei and her husband. “I can talk for a minute,” she said, deciding on the bad option she at least knew. Tormund grumbled and stalked away and Hyle snorted.

“You're welcome,” he said and Brienne stiffened.

“I didn't ask for your help.”

“You didn't have to, your body was yelling for it.” He looked her up and down with curiosity, a look she was all too familiar with from when she'd gone to her only school dance: why are you even wearing a dress? it said; why are you trying to be womanly? “You look nice,” he said out loud.

She tucked her hair behind her ear and looked somewhere near his shoulder. “Thanks. You don't have to stay, I can take care of myself.”

“I did actually want to talk to you, but,” he looked over towards Jaime, “not here. Can we find somewhere more private?”

“Why?”

“It's about work, I promise. Look, we can just head over towards that back wall, there's a quiet place there and we don't have to leave the whole party.” He pointed towards an alcove tucked into the corner of the room, where there would be enough room for them to talk and some distance from the band and the chatter of the guests.

“All right,” she assented, following him, holding her skirt as closed as possible as she walked. There was room in the alcove for four people, but it still felt uncomfortably close being here alone with Hyle. Brienne hugged her arms over her chest and stared at him. “So what do you want?”

“I want you to join my team.”

She gaped at him. “Are you serious?”

“ Entirely. I know this is a weird place to ask but it would have been weirder on the track, trust me.”

“Jaime's winning. Why would I leave a winning team?”

“He'll fuck it up, Brienne, he always does. You deserve better than going down in flames with Lannister.”

“I deserve better?” she spit out, shocked and furious. “Where was that when I was on Griffin? I deserved better then, too.”

“You did. I'm sorry.”

She glared at him, annoyed with his immediate apology. “Why do you even want me? You have a race engineer.”

“I do. But I need a new mechanic and you have enough experience now I could hire you.”

“So you're trying to poach me after Jaime already took the chance.”

“A chance he had to take, even you know that.”

“Forget it,” she hissed.
“I know you're still mad at me and that's fine, but at least consider it. The offer will be open for a little while. I just hope you take it before Lannister ruins your chances.”

She wanted to shove him; her hands tensed, ready for it, not caring what he would do to her career when she did, when Jaime appeared in the alcove.

“There you are, Wrench,” Jaime said, glancing briefly at Hyle. “Was just seeing if you needed another drink yet.” He searched her face, his eyes full of questions.

“A drink would be good.” She glared one last time at Hyle and he just shook his head.

“Think about it,” he said quietly, pushing past Jaime to leave the alcove.

“Hope I didn't disturb anything romantic,” Jaime said, his tone unexpectedly bitter.

“You didn't.”

“What did he want?”

“It's none of your business,” she snapped. Every part of her was on edge like she was too-aggressively cornering around a hairpin turn, the wheels barely holding on.

“Was it personal?” he pressed, eyes glittering.

“It was work-related.”

“Then it is my business.”

“I don't work for you, remember, I work for your father.”

“You're my race engineer. We're a team,” he said, his voice heated and hurt. She remembered the first day of pre-season, when he'd told her how his other crews had betrayed him.

She took a deep breath, exhaled slowly, bringing everything back under control. “Hyle asked me to work for him. I told him no right before you showed up.”

Jaime exhaled, too, and nodded, the lines on his forehead easing. “Thank you,” he said and she smiled a little, accelerating out of the turn back onto smooth road.

“For telling you or for saying no?”

“Both.” He shifted nearer and the alcove felt suddenly far too intimate. “It means a lot.”

Brienne swallowed dryly. Jaime was in a perfectly tailored dark suit, wearing a tie she realized now that matched the color of her dress, and she had the not unwelcome image of pulling him even closer with it.

He licked his lips, a quick slide of his pink tongue over their softness. “As pleasantly removed as this alcove is,” he said, his voice resonating deep inside her, “we should probably rejoin everyone else. Unless you're ready to leave? We haven't had cake yet but I can take you home if you want.”

Tyrion's warning was loud in her ears. “No, that's okay. Sandor will give me a ride in a bit. I was going to go say hi to Pod and Bronn.”

“Okay. We can see if Pod conned Bronn into doing his tie as usual.”
“I can go alone.”

Jaime’s smile wavered, wobbly as a loose hubcap. “Do I stink or something?”

“No,” she said quickly. He smelled amazing, if she were honest; he was wearing some fresh and earthy cologne she hadn’t noticed on him before but it suited him well. It reminded her of Tarth, when the sea wind blew in over the meadows. “I just don’t want you to think you have to hang around with me. I can manage on my own. Gods know I’m used to it.”

“This isn’t a burden, Brienne. I asked you to come with me.”

Hearing him say her name made her heart pound; he was always so gentle with it on his tongue. “You were just being nice,” she protested.

“By making you attend a party you didn’t want to go to?”

“People will talk,” she blurted out and he straightened, his head pulling back. “About us,” she added miserably. “If we spend too much time together. You know how people are, what they already think about me. I don’t want to make it worse for either of us.”

“I don’t care-”

“I do. This job is everything I never even dared to dream about and if people think I only got it because you...because we...” she shook her head fiercely. “I don’t mind being your, your friend and your race engineer, but I can’t just ignore the reality of what people think even if it’s wrong. I don’t have a rich father to pay off gossip magazines.”

His cleanly-shaven jaw tightened under his golden skin and she wanted to soothe away the tension there so much it nearly knocked her down.

“You’re right. I don’t want to ruin your reputation,” he said and she regretted ever agreeing to coming here with him. It wasn’t his fault she had so little self-control where he was concerned. “Mine has nowhere left to fall.”

“That’s not true.”

“It is and you know it. Isn’t that why Hyle asked you to work for him? I’ve been winning. I’m ahead in the World Championship points. He wouldn’t have even considered it if you were working for Robb Stark. Not even if you were working for fucking Euron or Loras. Why would anyone possibly want to work for the Kingslayer?”

“You’re a good driver, Jaime.”

“I’m the best.”

“Maybe.”

He snorted. “See? You love the truth.”

“That’s why you trust me. And why you listen to me. I believe in you, I believe that you’re more than the Kingslayer. That’s why I’m staying. But I have to watch out for myself, too. I want to build a life in Formula 1. It’s not either of our faults that people can’t look past who we are, but that doesn’t mean I can ignore it.”

“Would you let Bronn drive you home?”
Brienne's brow creased. “What?”

“Tonight. If they offered, you'd let Bronn or Podrick drive you home, wouldn't you?” She opened her mouth to protest but she couldn't when she knew the truth. He smiled, bitter. “So it is my fault.”

“Jaime-”

“It's fine. I shouldn't have-” he stopped himself, looking down and away for a moment that felt like a lifetime. “I don't blame you,” he finally said, quiet. “You have to protect yourself. You've got too much possibility ahead of you, and we have a lot of months left. If we win the World Championship it will change your whole career.” He smiled at her, but it was a dim shadow of what she was used to. “Let me escort you out of this alcove at least, it will look less suspicious. I'll head home after that.”

“You don't have to.”

“I showed my face long enough to mollify my uncle. My father of course is impossible to please.” He gestured for her to precede him. She wanted to apologize but she wasn't even sure for what. Everything both of them said had been the truth. Mostly the truth, she thought, thinking again of his arms around her in their shared excitement, of him standing over Connington, of how he'd gotten her the perfect dress and the book she wanted; as she stepped out of the alcove she pressed a fist against the hard knot in her chest.

“Jaime,” she said as he joined her and then stopped. What could she say? She'd wanted more distance, and Tyrion had been right to remind her she needed it for more than just her heart. “I'll see you tomorrow,” she said, the words weak and useless.

“Good. We have a lot of work to do for Winterfell and I still need my race engineer's help.”

The pain behind her ribs eased a little. “Bright and early,” she agreed. She left his side for Pod and Bronn, but she watched him make his goodbyes to Tyrion and Cersei, watched him look around the party at the entrance to the ballroom and catch her staring. He smiled a little, nodded once, and then was gone.

Chapter End Notes

This is what I was using as Brienne's dress:

Also Jaime's experience with the inability to shift was taken from Daniel Ricciardo's race last year at Monaco (https://www.autosport.com/f1/news/136340/ricciardo-we-got-home-just-using-six-gears), but it's happened other times in F1 as well, like when Schumacher came in 2nd at the Spanish Grand Prix in 1994 with only fifth gear. F1 is WILD y'all. Take the end of this year's Brazilian Grand Prix, for instance. No one saw that coming.
July

Chapter Summary

When Cersei was one wineglass too many in at family get-togethers, she would sometimes call Jaime “the stupidest Lannister,” but he'd never felt like it was true until the alcove at his father's party when Brienne had worn the dress he'd carefully picked out and gently – rightly – pushed him away.

He hadn't known at first all that he had wanted, until there'd been a moment in the alcove when her lips had parted just a little and he had realized-

Nothing, he told himself fiercely. We're just friends.

Chapter Notes

SO. Due to some (positive) change in circumstances this weekend as well as realizing that the chapter I was working on actually needs to be split into two chapters which means I did in fact finish my chapter requirement for the week, combined with the fact that I've been wanting to share this particular chapter for awhile, I decided to post again because I have exactly as much patience for waiting as Jaime does. Two chapters a week is DEFINITELY not going to become a thing though because I need that four-to-five week chapter padding to give myself enough comfort that I can continue to meet a chapter-a-week posting schedule until I finish writing. I'm also hoping that I can get a bunch of writing done at the end of December to put me 6-7 chapters ahead; I'm betting on myself.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

When Cersei was one wineglass too many in at family get-togethers, she would sometimes call Jaime “the stupidest Lannister,” but he'd never felt like it was true until the alcove at his father's party when Brienne had worn the dress he'd carefully picked out and gently – rightly – pushed him away.

He hadn't known at first all that he had wanted, until there'd been a moment in the alcove when her lips had parted just a little and he had realized-

Nothing, he told himself fiercely. We're just friends.

It wasn't his fault that the long, pale line of her leg slipping out from the slit in her dress had sent his mind and body into a tailspin as she'd let herself out of the car. Even friends could have fantastic legs.

No, the fault was entirely with the second hug they'd shared. That had been where it all went wrong.

He hadn't planned on hugging her the first time; he'd just been happy and it had been a spontaneous
response to seeing her there looking happy for him, her face glowing like a beacon calling him home.

But at The Twins, as soon as the checkered flag came down his first thought was for Brienne and she'd welcomed his embrace with a nervous, hopeful smile, her arms folding around him like they'd been made for it and Jaime had wished for a long, heated moment that they could have stayed wrapped around each other late into the evening. Even through the post-race weigh-in and podium ceremony and interviews, at the back of his thoughts was the constant, pleasant memory of her body pressed too-briefly against his.

A smarter Lannister would have immediately distanced himself. Becoming friends, rediscovering his long-dormant better nature, those had been difficult bridges he was not sure he'd make it safely across a second time if – when – the nearness of his heart tripped him up. But, no. He'd bought her gifts and invited her to his father's birthday and then been keenly aware of every eye that followed her. First that obnoxiously overbearing Direwolf crewman had swarmed into her space and then Hyle Hunt had whisked her off to a dark corner to do who knew what. Jaime had waited as long as he could not hearing a word Tyrion was saying before he excused himself to go find out what they were up to.

It would have hurt less if they had been kissing. At least that he would've had a fighting chance against; there was no way Hyle was a better kisser than he was and the wall of that alcove would have been the perfect place to prove it. But there was no argument Jaime could muster against the state of the world and the sorrier state of his own reputation holding Brienne down. She deserved better than being saddled with Jaime Lannister, Kingslayer and all-around selfish jerk.

It he'd been anyone but himself, he might have encouraged her to go to Hyle's team now, or right after the last race before summer break, where he'd have had a few weeks to lick his wounds and find someone else who could never live up to her. Anything to keep her from getting stuck down in the mire with him when this fairy tale season inevitably came crashing to a stop.

But he wanted her goofy smile and her mesmerizing eyes and her sharp barbs and her ephemeral Brienne-ness in his life as long as he could cling to it. And if it meant he'd have to be her friend-but-not-too-much while he occasionally needed to lock himself in his office until his inappropriate erection calmed down, then he would do it and consider himself lucky.

The morning after the party, he'd run into Brienne in the hall and her cheeks had reddened and she'd tucked back the hair that never stayed where she wanted it and his heart had swelled and then clenched hard in his chest.

"I've got another joke," he'd said and her shoulders had relaxed a little as she rolled her eyes.

"Save it for the track, Lannister."

"It's really good."

"I really doubt that."

"Come on, don't you want to hear a joke?"

"Fine."

"Janos Slynt's driving." She'd looked expectantly at him and he'd frowned. "Get it? His driving is a joke."

"Oh for-" Brienne had started back down the hallway, shaking her head.
“It's funny!” he'd called after her retreating form. When she'd flipped him off he'd felt the tightness in his chest release. Jaime had already spent a good portion of his life feeling like he was badly juggling chainsaws. How much harder could it be juggling his feelings for Brienne with the reality of their relationship?

“Fucking impossible,” Jaime sighed now, rubbing his eyes and shutting off his computer for the night. He'd lost hours today brooding over his race engineer and they had another early day tomorrow prepping for the next two races, two of the most challenging Grands Prix on the circuit: Winterfell and Lannisport.

Winterfell was a northern town known for its relentless winters, mosquito-filled summers, and intense love of locally crafted everything, from beers to barstools. It was the polar opposite of the only other race in July, the Lannisport Grand Prix. Lannisport was the original home of IAF and a glittering, sunburned jewel of a city that promised every panacea for your troubles for the small price of brand new ones.

Both cities had wildly different tracks that required totally different approaches both in the mechanics of the car and how they were driven. The Winterfell Grand Prix was many drivers' dream: built under the supervision of Direwolf Racing and the Starks who owned it, it had one of the longest straightaways in all of Formula 1, a design built for soft tires and high speeds, the premier track for generating downforce, which of course was Direwolf's strength. Winning on that track required keeping up with a company that spent all year preparing for it. Lannisport was a city track and required a picture perfect qualifying run for the best starting position and a tense, exhausting race to make it seventy-eight laps without crashing through the narrow turns and tunnels.

Thinking about Brienne was not going to help him win either one of those races but he clearly wasn't going to stop doing it tonight. He may as well do it at home with some alcohol and maybe one more cigarette. His very last secret pack was down to the remaining few sticks, but with Brienne out of reach he could at least allow himself this indulgence.

Most everyone else had gone for the night, though as Jaime wound through the hall he saw several engineers still hunched over desks, some talking quietly, fingers tapping on their keyboards. As he stepped through the doorway into the front lobby, Jaime noticed two figures standing near each other outside, just out of the reach of the streetlight so that he didn't realize it was his father and uncle until he'd opened the doors.

The summer wind ruffled warm and gentle over his skin, bringing their conversation with it. “You have to do something about this,” his father was saying. Kevan nodded before meeting Jaime's eyes. His uncle's mouth dropped open in what looked almost like fear. Tywin turned his head a little as Jaime hesitated uncertainly behind them.

“That's all for tonight,” his father told Kevan, and the other man gave Jaime a weak smile.

“Late night, nephew.”

“You too, uncle” Jaime said, suspicious.

“Work never ends for the team principal, of course. I'm surprised to see a driver here, though.”

“That's because Lancel doesn't like to work. He could do with a few late nights himself.”

Kevan half-chuckled and half-grimaced. “I'll make the suggestion.”

“Goodnight, Kevan,” Tywin said, his voice a sharp tug bringing Jaime and Kevan both to attention.

“Goodnight, Tywin. Jaime.” Kevan hurried off to his car and Tywin stepped into the lamplight, watching Jaime carefully.

“Shadowy night meetings suit you, Father.”

Tywin's mouth thinned. “You're number one in the World Championship standings.”

“Did that hurt you to say it out loud? I forget, where’s your preferred driver? Is he even top ten?”

“We made a choice based on what was best for Lannister Corp.”

“You made a choice based on who you hated less. How is that working out for Lannister Corp?”

“You've done enough to keep us competitive,” Tywin said, though it looked like it hurt him to admit it. “Now if you'd just give Lancel some consideration—”

“No,” Jaime interrupted, furious. “You are not going to take the championship from me so you can win some meaningless Constructor title.”

Tywin lifted one stern eyebrow. “Who provides the car that lets you win? Pays for your crew? The materials and engineers? You couldn't win without me, and that knowledge destroys you.”

Jaime's breathing came hard and he wished for a moment Brienne was there. Not to step in, but so he could draw strength from the outraged support he would see in her eyes. “Without me you'd have only Lancel and not even be top five. It appears we need each other, no matter how much both of us hate it.”

“There are other drivers,” Tywin said in a tone as dark as the night at his back.

“There are other teams,” Jaime countered. They teetered on the edge of this conversation, Jaime keenly aware that the next words either of them said could have him adrift in the middle of the best season of his life. “But it's so much trouble to switch horses mid-stream,” he added through clenched teeth.

Tywin's lips turned up in a bitter smile. “Luckily for both of us.”

“I wouldn't call it luck.”

“I didn't say it was good luck.”

Jaime put his hands on his hips and stared up at the sky, looking for stars obscured by a thin wisp of clouds and too much city. “Will you be changing the team's strategy?” he asked the darkness. Even asking felt like too much vulnerability at the feet of his cold predator of a father.

“Why change what's working?” Tywin said.

Because I'm your son, Jaime wanted to say, the words beating loudly in his heart. If he'd known when he was seventeen that his father would still hate him almost twenty years later because of the choice he made, Jaime might never have joined Dragonfire in the first place. How different his life might have been if he'd just waited the extra year for Lannister Corp's second seat. He could have been World Champion many times over, getting ready to retire as a beloved and celebrated driver.
Or perhaps he'd be dead instead of Aerys, killed in a fit of jealous rage by the King of F1. Would the fans have wept over him then? Would they have ostracized Aerys instead?

Brienne would still be in her father's garage, listening to rock music and thinking her time with Red Connington's F2 team and people's old sedans were as good as it was ever going to get for her. All her skill, all her loyalty and hard work and passion for racing would have remained hidden on Tarth, doing no one but her father any good.

“I won't sacrifice this season for you,” Jaime told his father.

“Then you better hope Lancel doesn't put in too many late nights trying to catch up.”

“If that's all it takes, I should be fine. Lancel only wants to work hard enough to be famous.” Jaime grinned, felt the mean slash of it twisting his face. The man he became whenever he was around his father was always the worst version of himself.

“Perhaps he should kill someone, too.”

No matter what Jaime's worst version of himself was, though, it was never as bad as his father's.

Jaime turned on his heel to escape to his car and Tywin snorted derisively at his non-response. “This is why you're not a winner, Jaime,” he called as Jaime unlocked his car a short distance away in the parking lot. “You're not willing to do whatever it takes.” Jaime slammed the car door shut on his father, but the words sat like heavy ballast in his body, weighing him down on the drive back home.

Jaime slapped a mosquito on his neck and tried to pay attention to what Peck was telling the drivers.

“I know most of you have done this before but we'll go through the plan just as a reminder. The Grid Kids have all been suited up in their special F1 karting suits and caps and they're waiting for you where you start driver's parade. Your Grid Kid will ride with you in the parade, then stand with you while we make the opening ceremony announcements, and then they'll be ushered back to your paddocks to watch the race with their families. All you have to do is just make sure they don't get lost from the moment we leave them with you to when they're reunited with their families.”

Jaime could feel Peck's gaze on him and he ignored it, continuing instead to pick at the grease under his nails.

“Does anyone have any questions?”

“Can we sign autographs for kids not our own?” Euron asked. “Last time I had one of Stark's want my signature.”

“You can, but we try to keep drivers and kids one-on-one, so if your kid wants the signature of a different driver, you have to go with them.”

“Why can't you just match fans to drivers?” Daario asked. “Seems short-sighted.”

“Not as short-sighted as you think,” Peck said, his tone delicate. “We can't always find a fan for every driver, especially when we're far away from some cities.”

“Yeah, how many Daario t-shirts have you ever seen up here?” Jaime said, smiling beatifically at Daario's angry glare.

“Please don't get in a fight around the kids,” Peck said.
“Tell that to Lannister,” Connington grumbled from somewhere behind and to his right side.

“Sorry, I couldn't hear you,” Jaime said. “Is your face not fully healed yet?” Addam, on his immediate left, snorted.

“Please,” Peck begged.

“We'll behave,” Addam promised. “Is there anything else?”

“No, sir. Just remember the kids are all really excited to be here, please try to make the experience fun for them.” The drivers shuffled around and Peck said, “oh and thank you!” as they started to file out of the weigh-in room. Not every driver on the track had signed up, but Jaime noticed most of them were there, chatting easily. Addam settled into step with him and when Jaime looked over the other man smiled.

“I don't think I've seen you do this before.”

“I haven't.”

“It’s fun. Although I had one boy last year who talked nonstop about wishing he'd been with Oberyn instead.”

Jaime winced. “I expect whoever gets me will wish he hadn't.”

“Maybe in earlier seasons, but not this year. Who doesn't want to sit with the current World Championship leader?”

_Almost everyone_, Jaime though morosely, but he flashed Addam a falsely confident grin.

They emerged into the sweltering heat radiating off of the track that had spent all day soaking up the sun. The tires would run extra loose in this weather; Jaime had already reminded Brienne – and been subsequently snapped at that she knew – to keep a close eye on the car's temperature for this race. At least Lannisport had some parts of the track that were covered, and other summer tracks were built with concrete instead of asphalt. The Winterfell Grand Prix was entirely open and laid bare to the burning sunshine; running it in summer was at least as much about temp management as anything else.

“Gods I'm going to be dehydrated before we even start the race,” Addam muttered.

“Don't pass out on your Grid Kid.”

“I'll do my best,” Addam said drily. “Look there they are.”

There were a small crowd of around fifteen kids watching them looking excited and terrified in equal measure. There were enough of them, around eight to twelve years old, to match one kid per volunteering driver. Standing just off to the side was IAF president Petyr Baelish, his usual smug and mysterious smile in place. Jaime hadn't seen Petyr since a blessedly brief interaction last season and though as usual the man's face stirred up every dark and painful reminder of what had happened with Aerys, it felt duller now, more a memory of the hurt than the hurt itself.

The drivers assembled in front of the Grid Kids, and Petyr stepped in between the two groups. “Gentlemen, the IAF thanks you for participating in our Grid Kids program. This is our second year and it's already more successful, with new drivers participating all the time,” he inclined his head towards Jaime. “Children, you are welcome to introduce yourself to your driver now.”
The kids stood there, shifting awkwardly from foot to foot, when one pushed forward from the back. It was a girl of around ten, Jaime saw with surprise, with brown hair pulled back in a severe ponytail and a very serious look on her young face. She marched directly up to him and held out her hand while everyone watched.

“I'm Lyanna Mormont, and I was picked because I have the top Pro Skills score,” she said just as severe as her hairdo.

There were some hastily muted snickers from around them and Jaime felt a surge of protectiveness as he took her hand and shook it like he would any other professional.

“I'm Jaime Lannister and I drive for Lannister Corp Racing,” he said just as gravely as her. “It's a pleasure to meet you, Lyanna.”

She nodded and then he saw her fingers tug nervously at the brim of the cap in her hand and he was reminded of Brienne, of the steady, dedicated race engineer and the uncertain woman always hiding underneath and Jaime knew Peck had assigned Lyanna to him on purpose. He glanced up, looking for Brienne, and caught her watching them from the gantry across the way.

“Would you like to meet my race engineer?” he asked Lyanna and she nodded quickly, like she'd been waiting for him to ask. He smothered his smile and gestured for her to follow him, and the other Grid Kids poured forth to meet their drivers while he wound Lyanna through the crowd.

As they neared Brienne waiting with a small, warm smile, Jaime felt the same swirls of hastily muted desire, hurt, and happiness that had accompanied every interaction since the party, and probably before if he were honest. In the past week he'd been the picture of perfect work friendship, but doing so had sapped him of nearly every last ounce of willpower with her always so close but never as close as he really wanted. Jaime clung to calling her Wrench like it was a lifeline. She'd joked at the party in High Hall about him not remembering her name but of course he knew her name, he heard it like a bell in his soul every hour on the hour. It was worse when she wasn't near, a constant tolling of where's Brienne? what's Brienne doing? when will I see Brienne again? Her name felt like grace on his tongue.

Wrench was a chummy name. The name of his race engineer and friend and not the woman he had a hopeless crush on.

“Wrench,” he said now, putting a gentle hand on Lyanna's shoulder. “This is my Grid Kid, Lyanna Mormont.”

The girl's face had transformed into open worship and Jaime couldn't hide his pleased smile as he glanced at Brienne, who looked charmed and shy and happy all at once.

“It's very nice to meet you,” Brienne said, her big hand swallowing the girl's as they shook.

“I was really hoping to,” Lyanna whispered, all of her brash confidence with Jaime gone.

“How long have you been karting?”

“Since I was four,” Lyanna said proudly. “I've been doing it professionally since I was eight.”

“Just like Jaime.”

Lyanna glanced back at him and he wanted to laugh at how unimpressed she was. “I guess.”

Brienne pressed her long fingers to her lips and he knew she was smothering a laugh, too. “You
know he's first in the World Championship this season.”

“I know.”

“I look forward to the day you can say you're first in the F1 championship.”

Lyanna’s eyes widened and she nodded vigorously, her ponytail swinging. “That's what I'm going to do. I'm going to be the first woman to win in Formula One.”

“I sincerely believe that you will win,” Brienne said. “Although I hope you're not the first.”

“Uh, Mr. Lannister? It's time for the driver's parade,” Peck said, pushing through the crowd to them. “Sorry to interrupt. Hi, Ms Tarth,” he said bashfully. Jaime's brows lifted and he tucked away a reminder to needle her a bit about Peck later on.

“Shall we?” he asked Lyanna and he wondered for a second if she was going to just ask to stay with Brienne instead, which he wouldn't have blamed her for in the slightest. But she came with him to their car for the driver's parade, an old-model street-ready Direwolf Pack, their line of roomy convertibles. He climbed up onto the top of the back seat to sit and Lyanna sat next to him holding tight to the headrest.

“You can grab my hand if you need to,” he whispered.

“I won't.”

“Then do you mind if I grab yours if I'm scared?”

She looked skeptically at him but nodded. “If you must.”

Jaime wondered if they could request specific kids when they did this again. Their car started rolling slowly and though her small fingers went white-knuckled on the seat leather, her jaw was firm as she stared out at the crowds cheering for them. Robb and Jon Snow's cars were in the lead as the local team, but he and Lancel were just after, befitting their team's status in the Constructor's rankings. Jaime waved briefly at the crowds and then glanced at Lyanna.

“What's your favorite part of a race?” he asked her.

“The third lap,” she said quickly. He tilted his head curiously at her. “I get nervous at lights out, and it takes me two laps to settle. The third lap always feels like the real start of the race to me.”

“Mine is the middle.”

“What's so great about the middle?”

“That's where the race is run. The beginning is all speed and adrenaline, trying not to crash right away and getting a feel for your car and the track that day. The end is all the stress of the finish, making sure you pay off everything that came before. But the middle is where you make your tire decisions, where your pit crew comes in, where it's just you, your car, and thirty or forty or fifty laps of racing. All the work we do between races? That's not for the beginning or the end, it's for the middle.”

Lyanna considered him, her dark eyes thoughtful. “That makes sense,” she said sounding surprised.

“It took me a long time to realize it. Maybe you can have the benefit of it much sooner in your career.”
She smiled up at him, fierce and grateful, and he thought again of Brienne, of how she might have been like this little warrior as a child. He wished he had known that girl, too.

They chatted idly through the rest of the parade, mostly him asking her questions about her karting career, while they waved at the applauding crowds all around the track and Jaime tried not to wish too hard that Brienne was with them, too, getting the accolades she deserved.

When they pulled back into the pit lanes for the opening ceremony, Brienne was there, beaming at him with her thick lips and her wide, white teeth, and the urge to stride up to her and kiss her there in front of everyone -- wagging tongues be damned -- was so strong he had to look away. Surely the world knew by now that she unquestionably deserved to be where she was; whether he kissed her or not didn't mean all her skill disappeared. But he watched Lyanna head over to the crowd of other Grid Kids, all boys, and the way she stood near but slightly away from them while they all chatted with each other and ignored her, and his desire was swamped quickly by anger.

Those careless children weren't ignoring Lyanna simply out of cruelty; they'd never been taught that a girl could be as good as them at racing, that what she had to say was worth anything. Jaime swallowed hard, knowing how frustrating it was to be the best and still be treated like you didn't belong. How much worse would it be when it was through no fault of your own except being born what they all saw as the wrong gender?

He hurried to Lyanna's side and knelt down in front of her. “Lyanna,” he said too loudly, startling the boys near them into silence. “I've been thinking about how you said the third lap is the real start of the race. That was very smart and it's something Brienne and I will work into our race planning. It's clear you've earned that Top Skills position.”

Her mouth opened, a small round 'o' of surprise, and he shook her hand again and stood, feeling a warm pleasure suffuse him as the nearest boys shifted closer to talk to her, one asking her what he'd meant, a second wondering if she had any other tips she could share.

Brienne wandered over and bumped her shoulder against his, a friendly pressure that caused every nerve ending in his body to coalesce in the places they touched.

“I'm glad she was your Grid Kid,” she said quietly, watching Lyanna opening up under the attention, talking with confidence and a quick-witted sarcasm.

“I'm glad she got to meet you.”

Brienne flushed. “That's the only part of the job I'm still not used to.”

“Then you clearly need to meet more fans until you are.”

“Gods, no. I barely have time for the work as it is.”

“Are you getting enough sleep?” he asked.

“Enough, yes.”

“And you're eating well?”

Brienne sighed. “Yes, Lannister. I'm exercising and taking care of myself. You're as bad as my father.”

“I'm glad you have someone looking out for you.” Her smile was soft and warm in response and though he knew she was thinking of Selwyn, he pretended it was for him instead.
“Ceremony's starting and I need to finish some last prep,” she said. She bumped his shoulder again. “You were great with her. Now go be great on the track.”

“As long as I've got you with me,” he said lightly and she went red from forehead to neck, before turning away hurriedly.

Chainsaw juggling, he thought wistfully as he watched her go, would have been easier.

A week later, on the off Sunday between Winterfell and Lannisport, Jaime was spending his birthday alone at the office.

He hadn't intended to be there, but he wasn't sure where else to spend the day. His twin was having a staid soiree hosted by her husband that sounded like slow torture and he'd turned down Tyrion's invite to spend a rare weekend off going clubbing until they were both passed out or dead by the end of it. Bronn was home with Lollys, probably having enough sex to stock them up until August, and Jaime wasn't really close enough with the rest of the crew to consider spending time with them outside of work.

The only other person he wanted to see was Brienne and though she'd sent him a 'happy birthday!' text that morning unprompted, he hadn't responded for fear it would end with him begging her to have dinner with him even though he knew she would just say no. So he'd poured himself an extra large drink for lunch, smoked what he swore was the only cigarette he would have as a thirty-six year old, and then aimlessly watched TV for a few hours before driving his motorcycle into the office.

There had been a scattered handful of engineers there that afternoon, working away in preparation for the different requirements of Lannisport next week, but now that it was dinner time and there was no need to spend the whole day indoors, Jaime was fairly certain his was the only light still left on in the building.

He raised his glass of water to his empty office. “Happy birthday to me,” he muttered, taking a sip. It wasn't even flavored water, which felt like such a maudlin statement on his life that he couldn't finish it.

He probably should have texted Taena or Melara, but he didn't want to spend time with them. He didn't want to listen to his sister's barely concealed insults or his brother's indecent bragging. All Jaime wanted was to talk with Brienne, to find out what she did on her off days, what kind of birthday cake she liked, if she would ride through the hills of King's Landing with him on his bike.

Jaime moaned and banged his head on his desk, then nearly shouted in alarm when his door opened.

“Who-’” but he knew in an instant who it was when her long shadow fell across his arm. “Brienne,” he breathed, half-believing she was just a dream in the dark.

“Jaime,” she said, concerned. “What are you doing here?”

“Working?” he said, his voice going off-puttingly high at the end.

“On your birthday?”

He shrugged. “It's just a day like any other.”

Brienne's worried frown deepened. “Have you done anything for your birthday today?”
“I had a cigarette.”

She shook her head, looking disappointed. “Anything that doesn't shorten your life by doing it?”

“I drank some water,” he grumbled.

“Have you even eaten?”

“I feel like we've had this conversation before.”

She blinked, startled, and then a sheepish grin swarmed over her face. “I guess some things don't change. At least you didn't insult me this time.”

“Progress,” he said, smiling, watching her features go soft and open in a way he'd probably dream about that night. Distance, his brain reminded him. He ignored it in favor of the much louder yelling in his heart. “Do you want to go to dinner with me?” Brienne's smile froze and then wobbled uncertainly.

“I don't know,” she said quietly. “I mean I do, but.”

But. But the too loud gossip of others that wouldn't even let him drive her home from a party.

“Then how about a ride on my motorcycle?”

“What?”

“It's getting dark outside and where I ride is usually deserted at this time of night, especially on a Sunday. No one will see us.”

She chewed her thick bottom lip. “That makes it all sound very sordid. I don't mind spending time with you, I just-”

“You don't want to be seen with me, I know.”

“That doesn't make it sound better,” she said in a tone so dry it could catch fire.

“Then come riding with me. Have you been on a motorcycle before?”

“No. My dad was firmly against it after Galladon died.”

“Well,” he said, standing slowly, “your dad's not here now, is he?”

Brienne's cheeks reddened and she looked down. “He's not.”

“I'm a pretty good driver,” he said, teasing, and he saw her shoulders shake once with a laugh.

“That's what you keep telling me,” she said, and when she met his eyes he could see how much she wanted to say yes. “Do you think we'll both fit? I'm not exactly back of the motorcycle-sized.”

Jaime arched an eyebrow. “My bike is plenty big.”

Brienne snorted but the red in her cheeks spread out to her crooked her nose and down the freckled length of her long neck. “Sounds like you're compensating, Lannister.”

I could show you he thought but he bit it back, as well as the image of pushing her against the door of his office and- No. Bad. he told both his errant thoughts and his twitching cock like they were
misbehaving dogs.

“I probably am,” he said out loud, taking a deep breath and picturing his father's disappointed face like an ice bath to cool his blood. “Come look at the bike and you can see for yourself.” He came around the desk and held out his hand and she stared down at it like it was a snake she was trying to decide was poisonous or not.

Brienne gingerly wrapped her long fingers around his and glanced at him with a shy smile that was almost enough to override the mental images he frantically dreamed up of his father striding furiously around the halls of Lannister Corp, Kevan groveling at his side.

What are you doing? his brain demanded as he led Brienne through the empty corridors out to the front parking lot.

Enjoying my birthday for once.

His bike was parked in Tywin's CEO spot, where he always parked as a small, childish fuck you to his father. Brienne gasped as they walked up, pulling her hand away to brush the gleaming chrome.

“You have an Iron Throne!”

“My pride and joy.”

“It's beautiful,” she gushed, touching the deep leather seat, squatting to look at the engine. “My dad would flip out if he saw this. He's always wanted one.”

“I thought he was against motorcycles?”

“He's against me riding them. He still wants one.”

“Sounds hypocritical.”

She frowned up at him and Jaime made a mental note to limit the negative comments about her father. “He doesn't have one, so he can't be hypocritical.”

“You're right,” he quickly agreed.

“I guess it could fit us,” she said, standing again, her hands on her thick waist. He wondered briefly how it would feel to fit his hands there, the muscle and weight of her against his palms. Brienne's eyes narrowed and he worried for a second she'd heard his thoughts. “It's not safe to ride without a helmet though, and I don't have one. Do you have an extra?”

Jaime hadn't brought his today, either. “We could wear driving helmets.”

“I don't have one of those and Lancel's won't fit me.”

“Hold on,” Jaime said, filled with sudden inspiration. “I know just the thing. Wait here.” He rushed back inside to one of the many storage rooms and rifled through the miscellaneous items there before he found what he was looking for, then grabbed his own driving helmet on the way out with his free hand. When he hurried back outside he found Brienne bent over the bike, looking at the gauges and handles, the old jeans she was wearing pulled taut against her ass and he gripped the helmets tightly and stared instead at the big tires of his bike.

When she saw the helmet he had she laughed, the sound bursting up into the sky like a flock of startled birds.
“What in the seven hells is that?”

“It’s a helmet,” he said, holding it out to her. The helmet was a bright neon green and covered with frogs forming the words MOAT CAILIN with their bodies. “I got it from one of our sponsors a few years ago and kept it thinking someday I’d wear it just to piss off my father.”

“You're going to wear that one, right?”

“Part of the reason I never wore it is because it doesn't fit right, but it should work for you.”

Brienne took the helmet and held it out away from her like it was a very stinky baby. “You're sure no one is going to see us?”

“Now who's vain?”

She smirked but took a breath and put the helmet on, her eyes peering out bright and amused. “Well?” she asked, her voice muffled.

“You look like a radioactive lollipop,” he said cheerfully, pulling out his phone to take a photo.

“No pictures!” she squealed, holding her hands up and trying to grab it out of his hands. Jaime laughed and danced away and she followed after, grabbing it with her long reach. She shut the phone all the way off and tossed it back to him and he had to scramble to catch it before it fell.

“You're no fun,” he said.

“You invited me,” she reminded him. She looked absurd in her hoodie and jeans and glowing helmet. Absurd and adorable. Jaime pulled his helmet on and got on the bike, shifting forward a little more than usual to give her plenty of room.

“All aboard,” he said.

“Isn't there some biker lingo you should use instead?”

“Hop on my hog, sexy mama?”

Brienne laughed even harder that time and shook her head. “You are so annoying,” she said fondly, climbing on behind him. He let himself scoot back a little once she was on until the front of her strong legs pressed against the back of his, her body a solid, warm wall a few inches away. She brought her hands up and he saw them hover at the edge of his vision, until they tentatively settled on his waist. A shiver of delight went through him.

“Since you've never ridden before, the primary rule is that you have to lean into the curves with me. If you're balanced differently than I am it might bring the whole bike down. There are some easy turns on the way that will get you used to it before we get to the fun stuff. Ready?” Her helmet nodded in assent and he started the motorcycle, the engine roaring to life between their legs.

Brienne's thighs and fingers tightened against him as he took off and Jaime focused twice as intently on the darkening road, the occasional car they zoomed by, the streetlights gleaming yellow as they flickered on. Once they hit the edge of the hills Brienne had settled into it with an ease he had expected from her, as naturally attuned to vehicles as she was. She was still holding herself back from him, though, sitting straight and as far away as she could fit in the limited space they had, but as the sky turned rose and purple he hit the low part of the hills and opened up the throttle. When they took the first of the winding curves she cinched tighter around and against him. Her arms fully encircled his waist, her body pressed so firmly against his back he imagined he could...
feel the weight of her small breasts through his own shirt. He had no jacket but he didn't need one; even if it hadn't been for the drowsy summer heat, Brienne's warmth against him stoked enough fire he could have burned all night.

It was almost like sex, the way they moved together around the curves, the blood thrumming in his veins, her occasional breathless gasp. He had to shift a little on his seat to make room for his awkward erection, but he pressed the bike faster, the curves tighter, until she was welded against him and the wind whipped her joyful laughter from her mouth, leaving it like tracers behind them in the dark.

They drove in and out of the sunset as they curved around the hill; here blinking against the last burnished red rays, there disappearing into the deep blue of the twilight. At every point Brienne touched him, Jaime's skin felt as tender and raw as a sunburn under his clothes; he was hyper-aware of her helmet vibrating a little against his, of her strong arms clutching his torso, of his ass pressed into the hot v of her legs. His hands were sweaty on the grips but there was no fucking way he would stop, not until they got to the smaller dirt road that took them the last way up to his favorite spot.

As he slowed the bike to a standstill, Brienne's arms loosened and she pulled away, leaving him cold and aching for her touch again. Instead he turned off the motor and sat still, trying to figure out a way to get off of the bike when his cock was pressed so hard against his jeans he could barely move.

“Everything okay?” she asked him, and he nodded, taking off his helmet.

“Just taking a break.”

Centuries ago there had been a keep at the top of Aegon's High Hill, but all that was left now were old stones weathered by time and the salt air off of Blackwater Bay. It was a popular destination for many, which was why Jaime had spent time looking for side routes and less-used places to rest, and he'd found this access road a couple of years ago that took him to the edge of the hill, just under where the keep had been, with a view of the bay and the lights across the Blackwater Rush below, and the endless parade of stars above. The air up here tasted of salt and grass and he saw Brienne inhale deeply when she dismounted the bike and took her helmet off.

“It smells like Tarth,” she said, turning back to smile at him in the dim moonlight. The moon was half-full tonight, and the last pink rays of the sunset had died long ago, leaving them bathed in silver and black.

“It's my favorite place to get away,” he admitted, dismounting on the other side of the bike from her, taking a hurried moment to tug at his jeans while he had his back turned.

She wasn't looking at him, instead staring out into the distant horizon like she could see the rest of the world beyond. The wind played gently with her thin hair in the way he wanted to. “I can see why.”

“Why were you at work today?” he asked, staring at her.

Brienne pulled off her hoodie to reveal a tank top underneath, her muscular shoulders bunching as she did so in a way that made his mouth go dry. Her skin seemed to absorb the light, making it white and smooth as milkglass, her freckles mirroring the infinite stars. “Truthfully,” she said, “I wanted to spend some time alone with the car.” Even in the moonlight the reddening of her pale cheeks was clear.
“August break isn't that far away, you'll have plenty of time then.”

She glanced at him, her brows furrowed. “I'm going home to Tarth over the break.”

Of course. She had no reason to stay in King's Landing when everyone was off. She'd want to go home to her father and whoever else was waiting for her there. Not a boyfriend, she'd said back in April, but perhaps someone she wished was her boyfriend.

“We are allowed to go home?” she asked, sounding worried.

“August break is your time, you can do whatever you want.”

“Good.” She tilted her head curiously at him. “What about you? Do you stay here?”

“Sometimes. Sometimes I go to Myr or somewhere similar to take in the city without all the pressure of work to distract me. Lancel and I will spend the first week doing stupid promos they can release during the time off so the fans don't get too annoyed, but after that I'm free to do what I want, too.”

Jaime walked to the edge of the flat gravel and stared across the Rush to roughly where he thought Tarth would be way down south in the Stormlands. It had been years since he'd been and he didn't remember it well, but he wished he could so he could picture Brienne there. She walked up next to him, stopping near without touching.

“I see why you like the motorcycle so much. There's a freedom to it.”

He swallowed, feeling more trapped than he'd ever been by his conflicting desire to be close to her and his need to push her away. Jaime would still kiss her here in the dark if he thought it wouldn't send her running, if it wouldn't ruin the friendship he treasured. “There is,” he said, his voice a rasp in the night. “We should get back, it'll be late by the time we're at the office again and I don't want you to miss dinner.”

They put their helmets back on, and Brienne her hoodie, and she climbed on behind him again, her arms automatically curling around his waist this time instead of the distant grip of the start. He started the engine and leaned forward a little, and she leaned her head against his shoulder as they took the drive down more slowly.

The trip down the hill was as solemn as the stars above and when he parked again in front of the Lannister Corp Racing offices Brienne took her helmet off and stared quietly at him when he remained seated, his visor pushed up.

“It's your birthday but I feel like you gave me a present,” she said, crinkling her crooked nose with her awkward smile.

“Still one of the best birthdays I've had.”

Sadness gleamed like the stars in her big twilight eyes. Brienne put a hand on his shoulder and his whole body went rigid under her touch. Her fingers crept to the nape of his neck under his helmet, softly brushed through the short hair there before she dragged them away again as her pale skin reddened. “I'm sorry that we can't go out to dinner and do this right, but thank you for spending some of your birthday with me.”

He wanted to tell her their ride was what he had wanted, that if he'd had a cake it would have been his wish before he'd blown out the candle, but that wasn't something drivers said to their race engineers, and Jaime was pretty sure friends wouldn't say it either, so he just nodded and started the
bike up again.

“You can get home okay?” he asked.

“I'll take the bus, there's a stop just by the sports bar.”

“Goodnight, Brienne.”

She licked her lips and he thought for a moment there was something more she would say, that perhaps her body would lean towards him and he'd know for sure he wasn't alone in this, but she only hugged the bright green helmet to her chest, a shield between them. “Goodnight, Jaime.”

The motorcycle roared as Jaime gave it more gas and he pulled away, though his thoughts stayed with her long after he'd left.

He couldn't even quit smoking; how was he ever going to quit wanting Brienne?

They left a day early for Lannisport due to well over half the crew demanding to spend the extra time enjoying the city's particular delights. Brienne was mostly annoyed by the request, but Kevan didn't seem to even think twice at the team meeting on the Monday after Jaime's birthday; he'd just announced it with a sly smile and eaten up the raucous cheering like it had anything to do with him.

So Wednesday they boarded a bus and took the Goldroad straight across Westeros to Lannisport. Brienne sat next to Pod and they played his travel version of Boggle until she couldn't think of any more words and she drifted between sleeping and waking, her head against the window, her thoughts returning inexorably to the night of Jaime's birthday.

He had been scarce since then, but that hadn't stopped Brienne from thinking about him, the way he'd felt so solid and strong in her arms, the tantalizing confidence with which he'd taken them through the hills, his green eyes glowing in the moonlight. Brienne had never wanted to kiss someone as badly as she had wanted to kiss Jaime on the top of Aegon's Hill, at least not until a short while later when his eyes had been so serious and sweet, the back of his neck a little sweaty from the helmet. It had been so tempting to let the darkness convince her that if she did kiss him, everything would still be the same.

Instead she had shoved her desire back in its box where it belonged, though she'd had to admit to herself as she tossed endlessly in bed that night fighting the wanting she could not fully ignore, that she had unnecessarily snuggled against him on the way back. His driving had been much more sedate but his body had been such a wonderful weight against her chest, and her thighs had curved so perfectly against his hips, and he'd been relaxed in her arms like he didn't mind at all. When they turned onto the familiar street to the Lannister Corp offices, Brienne had internally cursed the night for not putting some sort of traffic in their way to slow down their return.

It seemed the fates had saved the traffic for their drive to Lannisport, and as the bus crawled through the line of thousands of race fans all with the same destination in mind, Brienne could only stare out the window and be grateful that the August break would start soon. For a fleeting moment she'd thought Jaime had looked disappointed at her plans to leave, but that had to be fanciful nonsense. It would be good for them to spend time away from each other, to see her father and walk the familiar beaches of Tarth and not think about Jaime.

She thought of him now, wondering how he would be arriving in Lannisport, if he would be partaking of the city's scandalous delights. Though the Lannisters were known for Casterly Rock, the port city that bore part of their name was considered their real spiritual home. The Golden City
many called it, sprawling along the low hills and shores of the Sunset Sea. The three major roads of Westeros all ended here, and every racing fan in the country seemed to be traveling them now. As their red and gold bus crawled through the narrow streets, people hollered and cheered as they went by.

“N-never been before?” Pod asked.

“Never. I've only seen it on television.” She pressed her fingers to the window made warm by the sun. “It's intense.”

“Just w-wait,” he said, grinning at her.

They were dropped off with their luggage at the team's hotel, a tall, luxurious building right on the water's edge and when Brienne checked in she found her room overlooked the sea. The beach below was crowded with colorful umbrellas, towels, and people stretching in both directions. When she ventured down to the lobby to look around she was surrounded by beautiful men and women, many of them in skimpy bathing suits and expensive jewelry. She had packed her regular one piece as she always did on trips, though she hadn't been brave enough yet to actually chance swimming in case she ran into one of media or unfriendly crew. She would most assuredly not be testing the waters here, especially when her pale skin and masculine body would look more absurd than normal when surrounded by any number of women who could easily pass for swimwear models.

Thankfully she had her work as a distraction, and she spent the evening on her balcony, her laptop balanced on her lap while she drank some of Lannisport's famous spiced honey wine and listened to the sounds of music and laughter from the partiers below, watched the lights bobbing on the water from yachts anchored off the shore.

Thursday was the crew's day off, but Brienne took a cab down to the track and spent the day helping oversee the set-up of the mobile command center, the gantry, and, of course, the car. The engineers had been tinkering again and Brienne fussled over her a little, brushing off extra dirt, making sure everything was in order. She considered texting Jaime to see if he wanted to get in some extra discussion about the track, but decided it was better, and safer, to hold the distance as long as she could. They'd be back side-by-side tomorrow and she still hadn't fully recovered from the closeness of the motorcycle ride that she never should have agreed to but could never have resisted. Instead Brienne decided to walk back to her hotel through the busy, party-like streets of Lannisport.

IAF had started here, and the Lannisport Grand Prix was considered by many the highlight of the season. There would be celebrities everywhere: actors, musicians, models, and more all wanting to get their photos taken at one of the premiere events in Westeros. There were parties every night, including the wildest Amber Lounge party of the season if the gossip sites Brienne had skimmed over the years were to be believed. In the middle of it now she could easily see that the barely contained carnival atmosphere of sweat and alcohol and fun during the day would transform into hot, wet nights of bodies pressed together and moving in time to too-loud music.

Brienne imagined seeing Jaime at one of those parties, him walking in and giving her the same look he had when they were saying goodbye on his birthday. The hair on his neck had been so soft on her fingertips and hunger had flared in his eyes at her touch, rewarding her uncharacteristically bold gesture. Brienne had never had a man look at her that way and she didn't know what to do with it. Their work was a crucible, melting and reforging them together into a racing team, but that didn't explain why it had looked like he'd wanted to devour her. Brienne, with her too-large lips and her broken nose and her thick waist, had never been desired by anyone. But here in Lannisport surrounded by the smell of sunscreen and sex, the possibility that Jaime did felt as real and
unsteady as the cobblestones under her feet. Perhaps, in her imaginary club, he'd grab her hips with his strong hands and pull her against him and her arms would fit around his body like she already knew they could. She wondered how the rest of his hair would feel when her hands curled tightly into it. Heat pooled in her center and Brienne stopped at a farm stand to give all of her attention to a selection of spiny fruits until her breathing evened out and her face felt less flushed.

At least people would think it was just the sunshine that had her sweating.

What Tyrion had told her a month ago at Tywin's party was not any less true now than it had been then, but it certainly felt less true here in the middle of so many people who didn't seem to care at all what anyone thought of them. Brienne wished she could be the same, if only just for a day. But even if she did, she would go back to being herself tomorrow: a giant, ugly woman trying to make her place in a sport that didn't want her, with a man who would surely wake up and regret whatever had happened.

All she could allow herself were brief fantasies and even those were probably dangerous to indulge too deeply. Brienne hurried back to the hotel, her head down as she passed groups of people clinking champagne glasses at sidewalk cafes, children running wild around their tired parents, and couples walking hand-in-hand and occasionally kissing passionately in the sun. Nothing felt quite real, not even the cold air of the hotel lobby as she pushed through the revolving doors.

"Brienne!" She looked up and saw Podrick waving at her from the hotel bar. He was sitting with Bronn and Willem and she changed direction to join them.

"Enjoying your day off?" Bronn asked as she walked up.

"It's certainly different."

Willem smiled and gestured for her to take the seat next to him. Ever since Martyn's departure he'd been extra solicitous towards her, as though he was trying to prove he was the exact opposite of his twin. Brienne still didn't entirely trust him, but she was working on it, and she sat down with a small smile.

"D-d-did you go t-to any parties last n-night?"

"No, I had some work to get done." She took in Pod's bloodshot eyes and the dark circles underneath them and grinned. "I take it you did though."

He beamed at her and Bronn snorted. "He thinks he's in love."

"Do tell," Brienne said, leaning forward.

"I m-met her at the p-p-party last night. W-we danced f-for hours," he said on a dreamy sigh. "She's b-beautiful and funny and sh-she didn't care about m-m-my stutter."

"What's her name?"

Pod's smile disappeared and he looked despondent all of a sudden. "I d-don't remember."

Bronn snickered into his drink, something fruity-looking with a small umbrella. "What do I always tell you, Poddy? Drink just enough you forget the shitty parts but not so much you forget the fun you were having."

Pod shrugged, looking sheepish. "The h-honey wine w-w-was stronger than I-I-I thought."
“Do you remember what she looked like?”

“Curling brown hair of the softest sheen, brown eyes as gentle as a doe’s,” Bronn droned in the tone of one who had not stopped hearing about all the girl's qualities. “Tits that fit in your hands.”

“Bronn!” Pod snapped, scandalized and blushing. “D-don't talk about her like th-th-that.”

“Am I missing gossip about young Podrick's love life?” Jaime suddenly asked from behind her, and Brienne stiffened in her chair. He touched her shoulder gently, long fingers curving over the sweaty fabric on her skin, before moving to sit in the last remaining free seat across the table. He was wearing a white linen shirt and brown, knee-length shorts and he looked tanned and rested and remarkable and Brienne stared intently at her hands on the table to keep from staring at him.

“Pod's in love and he doesn't know her name,” Willem said, filling Jaime in.

“He knows what her tits feel like, though,” Bronn supplied cheerfully and Brienne worried for a second Pod was going to launch himself across the table at Bronn.

“Gods, Bronn, you're too old to be this coarse,” Jaime grumbled.

“You're never too old for that. Besides, he told me about it this morning.”

“I-I didn't mean f-f-for you t-to share it!” Pod looked significantly at Brienne and she heard the silent “with her” that it implied.

“Why would Chief care? She's got tits, too,” Bronn said. Brienne covered her face and laughed in embarrassment.

“Bonn,” Jaime said sharply, his tone rough and serious. When Brienne peeked at him between her fingers he was angled towards Bronn, glaring.

“I'm not trying to be offensive! I'm just pointing out a fact! It'd be like saying you have a cock.” The words 'Jaime's cock' settled into her brain and would not be dislodged. When Jaime looked at her to gauge her reaction it only made the whole thing worse, her thighs tightening in instinctive response. He wouldn't stop looking at her, eyes as hot as the sun outside.

“I have more work to do,” she said abruptly, standing so fast her chair screeched loudly across the tile floor.

“Look, I didn't mean-” Bronn started, but Brienne shook her head.

“No, it's fine. I really should get back to my room.” She licked her dry lips and tried not to look at Jaime, worried he would take it as an invitation that she desperately wanted to but couldn't give. “See you all later?”

All the men around the table nodded, except for Jaime, who was watching her with a narrow, intense gaze. Brienne felt like she was escaping a predator's trap when she left, her heart racing all the way up to the sanctuary of her room. She ordered room service for dinner, stared unseeing at the ocean until the sun had disappeared behind the far horizon of the Sunset Sea. Unasked for she thought of Jaime finding her here in the dark, of what he would look like sprawled on the sheets of her bed, the moonlight in those dangerous eyes. Brienne slipped her hand under the elastic of her sensible cotton underwear to touch herself and her finger slid into eager dampness. Don't do this, she warned her aching body, but she felt too reckless and needy to heed her own advice. She came quickly, imagining her fingers were his, and she eventually fell asleep relieved and disappointed in
equal measure that Jaime had not followed her.

Jaime was disappointed. He was certain there had been a mirror of his desire in Brienne's beautiful eyes right before she'd fled the table and Bronn's obnoxious commentary about Pod's crush. Mostly certain. Fifty percent for sure. But he knew her reputation still meant everything to her, and if he followed her up to her room in this hotel crowded with fans and cameras, it could have put all of that in danger, so he sat there slightly hunched over until his erection died down and he listened to Podrick getting angrier and angrier at Bronn's crude language until the younger man had fled with as much speed and constrained emotion as Brienne.

“What's got your panties in a twist?” Jaime asked Bronn after Willem awkwardly excused himself a minute later.

“Lollys wants me to quit after this season.”

“She's ready for you to become a house husband? I didn't see that coming.”

Bronn glared at him. “No, she wants me to work, just not doing this. Takes me away too much, she says. Thinks I should become a regular mechanic.” He scoffed. “Me, working eight hours a day on some old woman's station wagon after all I've done?”

“Brienne likes it.”

“Here we go.”

“What?”

“Brienne. You never shut up about her now, do you?”

“That's not true,” Jaime protested, drawing his finger through the wet residue left by his drink. “Besides you're the one who wanted me to make her my race engineer.”

“For which you never thanked me.”

Jaime rolled his eyes. “Thank you, Bronn, for being a giant pain in my ass all the time.”

“You're welcome,” he said primly. “Since you're thanking me for that very thing.”

“Whatever you're about to say, just stop.”

Bronn drank down the last of his beer and they sat in blessed silence for long enough Jaime thought he was going to listen for once, until Bronn broke the peace by saying, “you can't fuck her.”

Jaime's hand curled tight around his own empty glass. “I know that,” he muttered.

“You're welcome,” he said primly. “Since you're thanking me for that very thing.”

“Whatever you're about to say, just stop.”

Jaime's hand curled tight around his own empty glass. “I know that,” he muttered.

“Your eyes said otherwise earlier. You better tone that shit down.”

“I don't know what you're talking about.”

“Uh-huh.” Bronn looked at his empty glass and sighed, then stood up and stretched. “Either find some other woman to get your rocks off with or become more familiar with your hand, but do something that doesn't make you look like you're going to die if you don't stick your cock in her.”

“Gods, why do you have to put everything in the worst possible way?”
“I’m a truth-teller, Lannister, I don’t have time for tact,” Bronn said airily. “But you know I’m right. She can’t afford all the shit you’ll put her through.”

“I wouldn’t hurt her,” Jaime said fiercely, even the idea of it swirling bile in his throat.

“Not on purpose.”

Jaime leaned back in his chair and massaged his forehead where a dull ache steadily grew. “Fuck,” was all he said, knowing Bronn was right and hating him for it. The other man quietly bid him goodnight and Jaime stayed in the hotel bar for another hour growing broodier by the minute. He thought of Brienne arguing with him, of her endless legs that would easily wrap around his waist, of the serious furrow of her brow as she helped guide him to victory, until he found himself in his hotel shower that evening coming hard in his own hand, with Brienne's name on his tongue, imagining it was her strong fingers gripping him tight.

“We had an agreement,” Theodan hissed at Brienne three days later. It was the middle of the Lannisport Grand Prix and they were side-by-side in the gantry, watching their drivers fight for the 1-2 positions.

“I don't recall exactly what was discussed,” Brienne murmured, trying to put him off, willing Jaime to move just far enough ahead of Lancel that it wouldn't matter in a minute anyway. But of course their cars were mirrors of each other and it was a constant battle to get and hold a lead.

“We gave up our pole position for you!”

“No, you gave Jaime a slipstream, he just made the most of it.”

Jaime pulled ahead on the next corner when Lancel briefly locked his tires and Brienne gave Theodan a knowing look.

“He needs to pit first so Lancel can pull ahead,” Theodan complained. Brienne pretended she didn't hear him and he grabbed her arm. “Are you listening to me?”

“Get your hand off of me,” she said in a low, threatening tone, and Theodan quickly released her. “Focus on running your driver's race and I'll focus on mine. It's too early for Jaime to change tires if he's going to take this.”

Tywin's voice cut in, a sharp demand to Jaime: “let him by.”

“Tell him to close up,” Jaime snapped.

“Tell him to close up,” Tywin said in the tone of a man who never repeated an order.

“Stark is too close, we'll do it later,” Brienne interrupted. Her voice felt confident but her hands were shaking on the keyboard in front of her. “Focus on your race, Jaime.”

“Roger that,” Jaime said and when Brienne turned to look behind her into the Lannister Corp garage, she saw Tywin glaring at her from within. Even from this distance his eyes were as sharp as the Valyrian steel swords of myth.

“They're not doing it,” Theodan relayed to Lancel from next to her. “Box this lap and we'll try on fresh tires.”

Thirty minutes later, Jaime zipped under the checkered flag in position one and whooped loudly over the microphone. “Fucking fantastic!” he shouted, making her wince. “Well done, beautiful
girl.”

Brienne's heart stuttered. “What?” she gasped into the mic.

Jaime was quiet for a long second before saying, “that's what I call my car.”

She pressed her hands to her pink cheeks and nodded. “I'm sure she appreciates it.”

“We took first didn't we?”

“Well-earned, by both of you.”

“All three of us,” Jaime said, and Brienne bit down hard on her lip to keep from smiling too wide. “I haven't forgotten our wager, either.”

“Warrior's balls,” she muttered and Jaime laughed gaily in her ear. It had been impossible to forget; the crew of course had heard all about it, but because their radio communications were also publicly broadcast the IAF had been playing it up all weekend as marketing. Brienne imagined Petyr Baelish salivating now that Jaime had actually won, and wondered how many ill-advised photos her dad was going to send her of herself getting pushed into the pool.

She looked down at her clothes and sighed. She'd stopped wearing jumpsuits on race day months ago, when the heat made it unreasonable and she had no need to as race engineer. Today she was in a Lannister red polo shirt and tan men's slacks. At least they wouldn't turn see-through when wet.

“I'll see you when you park,” she grumbled, taking off her headset while Jaime was still chuckling.

Brienne crossed the pit lane and saw Tywin watching her with with a cool anger that suggested his response would be delivered only after he'd given it careful calculation. Her stomach tightened but she forced herself to smile at him as she strode by.

Jaime was already climbing out of the car by the time she got to the section of track that they'd set aside to act as the parc fermé and she watched from the back of the crowd as the crew celebrated the win with him. P1 at the Lannisport Grand Prix was like a mini World Championship; many men had won only this race in a year and still felt like they'd had a good season. Arthur Dayne had once said that a win here felt like two anywhere else. It was thrilling to see Jaime enjoying it, the way the happiness poured from him like sunlight, warming all who felt it. After pulling away from Bronn, she saw him scanning the crowd and he found her easily; there was a promise in his eyes that made her shiver, made her think of her own hotel room fantasy days before.

The bet, she thought. He's thinking of the bet.

After the podium ceremony the team gathered together along the edge of the swimming pool for group photos. The pool was a feature unique to Lannisport, a throwback to the days when women weren't even allowed on the track, just as pretty ornaments beside it, but Brienne loved the traditional celebration here, the way it reminded her of kids in summer being reckless and carefree. Today she would be one of those grown-up kids, and she stuffed down the goofy smile she could feel forming. There were always so many photos before and after a race, but these where they gathered to celebrate the win as a team were the only ones Brienne ever liked. Jaime posed in the front middle with the rest of them fanning out behind him, and she liked standing at the back where she could tuck herself away and still feel like she was a part of everything.

But this time as the photographers waited for the crew to arrange themselves, Jaime grabbed her forearm and gently but firmly dragged her forward to stand with him at the front.

“I won't renege on the bet, but can't I at least do the photos from the back?” she asked hopefully.
“No, the world should see you.”

“I don’t want the world to see me,” she said, glancing around nervously.

Jaime stilled even as crewmen bumped into them while they jostled for their favorite spots. She waited for him to deliver platitudes about beauty being on the inside or to even ask why she would care, the way someone as naturally gorgeous as he was would never understand what it was like. Instead he just smiled a little. “It’s their loss,” he said, letting her go.

Startled, she pushed to the back of the crew, but for the first time she felt a twinge of regret for not being up there next to him, beaming at the cameras and believing that who she was, not what she looked like, might actually be enough.

Jaime fidgeted after the first round of photos and he swiveled his head to find her, grinning maniacally when he did.

“Wrench!” he yelled, and the assembled media chuckled. “I believe I won a bet.”

Excited whoops ran through the crowd when Jaime stood suddenly, and the clicking of cameras turned frantic when the bodies between them parted like he’d waved a magic wand. “Time to deal with you,” he said in a low voice and Brienne flushed hot all over. He tugged on her fingers, a quick pull that got her moving towards the edge of the pool, and then he leaned forward, turning his head slightly to whisper in her ear.

“You can swim, right?” he asked.

“Better than you,” she replied and when he pulled back to grin at her, his teeth white against his golden skin, his eyes dancing, she put her hands up on his chest and shoved him backwards into the water first.

The crowd went silent for a second until Jaime broke the surface and shook his head like a dog, running his hands over his wet hair. “Now you’re in for it,” he promised, climbing like lightning out of the pool, faster than seemed entirely fair, and the shouting and cheers became cacophonous when he lifted her up, swinging her legs up into his other arm like a groom carrying his bride, and jumped back into the pool with her.

The water hit with a cold slap against her back and she flailed in his arms, but he set her feet down and she realized she was standing only chest deep. Jaime wiped the water from his face and he winked at her.

“A Lannister always pays his bets,” he said.

She laughed. “I’m not a Lannister, I only work for one.”

“Close enough.”

They smiled at each other and then gasped simultaneously when Podrick came crashing in-between them, arms waving wildly. Brienne blinked away the water and saw Bronn grinning sharply down at them just before Willem shoved him in, too.

After that it was chaos, bodies falling into a pool not big enough for all of them, cameras going, spectators laughing and cheering them on. Brienne stood in the middle of it, her heart radiating contentedly inside of her, until she saw Tywin standing at the edge of the pool, his arms folded over his chest. No smile dared cross his severe features; no person in the world would dare push him into the pool.
“Come to take a dip with us, father?” Jaime shouted from across the pool. He’d gotten moved back there when it became too crowded with the others.

Tywin sneered and turned away, and when she looked back at Jaime he looked hurt, the little boy he had been still desperate for his unyielding father's approval. Brienne tried to shove through the crowd to get to his side, but he pulled himself up out of the pool and was gone before she could manage, leaving only his wet footprints drying in the sun.

Chapter End Notes

I stole the Arthur Dayne quote about Lannisport from Triple Formula One champion Nelson Piquet, who said that at Monaco (which Lannisport is HEAVILY based on) "a win here was worth two anywhere else." I also copied the Lancel/Jaime position battle from what happened between Ferrari drivers Sebastian Vettel & Charles Leclerc this season.
August (Part 1)

Chapter Summary

The first week of break passed quickly enough as Jaime threw himself into cleaning up his email inbox, his apartment, and his office desk in-between the various activities they filmed him and Lancel doing: rollerblading on a beach sidewalk, miniature golf (which he'd wanted to text Brienne about when he'd kicked Lancel's ass, but she'd only been gone a couple of days and it felt too needy), and a particularly mistake-filled afternoon grilling over an open flame that eventually had to be put out with fire extinguishers. Jaime had prodded the charcoal that had once been his steak and sighed, wishing Brienne was there to tease him about it.

The first day after they were done with their commitments for the team, with his time stretching free and unburdened by demands, Jaime woke up without an alarm, stretched in his bed, and then laid there for an hour with no fucking idea what to do until the urge to pee got too strong to ignore any longer. He listlessly scrambled himself a few eggs for breakfast, flipped through channels on his tv, started reading his own copy of the Arthur Dayne book, and just generally floated lost through his own life.

Chapter Notes

I know I said I'd post on Sundays but I might change the day to Friday for awhile. I'm too busy Monday through Thursday to think about it, but as soon as Friday hits I become unbelievably impatient. So as long as I have chapters backed up and weekends to work on future chapters, I'll post on Fridays. :) Thanks go to Brynn again who has been really helpful with some thorny future stuff I've been working on, as well as this chapter as with every chapter. She is the best! And thank you all for your wonderful comments and enthusiasm! And now: August break.

The last race before break was a somber end to the first half of the season when Theon Greyjoy crashed so severely in Pyke that they had to end the race even though it was only halfway done. The drivers all returned to the parc fermé and they and the crowd were muted as everyone watched the flatbed truck hauling away the twisted body of Theon's car, the distant wailing of the ambulance having already faded.

There was no podium ceremony for the top three, just a quick presentation of trophies and each man with a look on his face that said they were grateful it wasn't him that day. When Jaime trudged down the stairs holding the phallic-looking first place trophy, not even Bronn made a lewd comment. Brienne searched Jaime's serious face as the crew clapped him on the back, but he only stared at the trophy.

They had to fly home from Pyke, so Lannister Corp held their last team meeting before the break on Tuesday morning, where Kevan informed everyone that Theon had suffered a concussion but he
was awake and otherwise seemed he would recover well. A ripple of relief filtered through the room and Jaime visibly slumped next to her. Kevan finished with the usual platitudes about the season and then dismissed them, saying he'd see them in three weeks when they'd start preparing for White Harbor.

Though everyone else hollered and cheered, hugging and patting each other on the back, Brienne frowned as Jaime excused himself to go hole up in his office. She'd watched the tape herself the night before; Theon had made a bad call and slammed into a wall, and then Euron had come around the corner and tried to avoid him but smashed his rear end, sending Theon's already-damaged car in a spiral. Euron had been fine and though his nephew had not been so lucky, with the positive news she didn't understand why Jaime still seemed so off. He hadn't been anywhere near them on the track, so it couldn't have been guilt.

She started to cautiously follow him when Pod and Bronn intercepted her.

“Leaving already?” Bronn asked.

“No, just going to pack up my work things.”

“Well I'm off and I'm giving Podrick here a ride; we can wait if you need one.”

“No thanks. Sandor's waiting outside and he's got my luggage, I'm heading straight for the ferry.”

Bronn shrugged and Podrick stepped forward, hugging her. “H-h-have a good b-break,” he said.

She hugged him back hard, realizing she'd miss his sweet face and cheerful smiles. This must have been what it felt like to leave school for the summer when you actually had friends.

“It's just a few weeks,” Bronn grumbled, but he gave her the world's most awkward one-armed side hug and looked mollified when he stepped away. “Enjoy your time to yourself, and don't turn on your laptop, will you?”

“I can't make any promises, but I'll do my best.”

Bonn grunted. “Never thought I'd meet someone more stupidly dedicated than Lannister. We'll be seeing you.”

Brienne wished the pair well and then escaped from the room to go find Jaime.

She hesitated at the window to his office and peeked inside. He was sitting in the dark, leaning back in his chair with his hands lightly resting on his knees. She would have thought he was meditating if it weren't for the slight frown creasing his face. Brienne knocked once on the window and he jolted, his eyes flicking up quickly. Jaime nodded when he saw it was her and she entered the office, shutting the door and the noisy goodbyes outside.

“Good news about Theon,” she said.

“Very.”

“Are you...” Brienne tugged her bottom lip between her teeth. “Is everything all right?”

Jaime's fingers tightened on his knees. “I don't like crashes,” he said quietly, and then huffed a self-deprecating laugh. “That sounds stupid, of course I wouldn't. No one does. But the bad ones still make me think of Aerys.”

Brienne nodded and took the empty chair across his desk, a chair she had spent countless hours in
since January. It felt comfortable and right to be here with him now in that chair, even as everyone outside the office packed up their things and hurried to their homes and loved ones.

“I've never watched it,” Jaime said, his gaze on but not seeing her.

“Aerys' crash?”

He nodded. “I tried once, about six years ago, but I couldn't do it.”

“That's not surprising – I still try to avoid the road Gal died on. It must be very traumatic for you.”

“For me?” His eyes sharpened and she felt his self-hatred like a physical wall between them. “I'm alive still. The least I could do is watch what happened.”

“Do you want to?”

“Yes. And no.”

“I can watch it with you, if you want,” she offered softly.

Jaime's face hardened into a look she hadn't seen from him since before Martyn had left, but it disappeared just as quickly, melting into a gentleness she wasn't sure she had ever seen. “Thank you. I can't right now but...maybe later.”

“Just tell me, Jaime. I'll be here when you're ready.”

He breathed in slow and deep and leaned towards her, sliding his hands over the top of the desk and she had the sudden urge to reach out and cover them, but she folded hers tightly together in her lap instead. “You're leaving soon, I suppose?” he asked in a rough voice.

“Right after this,” she confirmed. “I tried to tell my dad I wouldn't get in on the last ferry until past midnight but he didn't care, he said he'd rather have me home.”

Jaime's smile was small but genuine. “He seems like a good man.”

“He is. I know he's not a perfect father but...he's perfect for me.”

“That's all any of us can hope to be to the ones we love.” He dragged his hands back into his lap and smiled crookedly at her. “You should get going, then. Don't want to keep the Hound waiting too long, it's not worth the extra sass. Make sure you use your free time to read your book.”

“I was planning on it.”

“And enjoy your time away from me,” he smirked.

Brienne laughed a little at the unexpected jolt of humor. “I'll try not to get too used to the quiet.”

They smiled and stood together. Jaime came around the desk and her heartbeat sped up, a hummingbird's wings in her chest.

“It feels weird to just shake your hand,” he explained as he held his arms out a little from his body, a question in his eyes. They had never hugged outside of the track and the elation of a race's end, though she'd wondered about it often enough. She licked her lips and stepped into his embrace, intending for it to be quick, or at least no longer than the hug she had shared with Podrick, but without the distraction of the cheering crowds, the feeling of being where she belonged flooded her even more intensely when his arms curved around her back and she held him tightly in return. She
closed her eyes for a long second and imagined she could feel their hearts beating in time. As handsome and charming and talented as Jaime was, this was what she had yearned for when she was imagining just this those weeks ago: his quiet strength supporting her, his steadiness even with the size of her in his arms. She didn't feel too big or too ugly or too anything with Jaime; she just felt like herself.

Brienne swallowed hard and forced her arms to unlock, her body to take a step away from what all of her desired. Jaime was breathing harder and she thought for a wild moment he would pull her back against him, couldn't decide if she wanted him to or not. She glanced out his window and saw there were still crew out there packing up and saying goodbye and when she looked back at Jaime whatever she had thought had been in his face was gone, replaced with a tight smile.

“If you get tired of King's Landing you can always come to Tarth,” she blurted impulsively, and then immediately wanted to sink into the floor. Distance! her rational brain reminded her. Her heart gave her head the finger.

Jaime smiled, a surprised but pleased twist of his lips. “I'll keep that in mind. Goodbye, Brienne.”

“Goodbye, Jaime.” She left his office, packed up her things, and bid a few of the remaining engineers goodbye, forcing herself not to look back at Jaime, to see if the prickling of her skin was memory or him watching her go.

Brienne's heart didn't slow down again until she was standing on the deck of the ferry, heading for home.

The first week of break passed quickly enough as Jaime threw himself into cleaning up his email inbox, his apartment, and his office desk in-between the various activities they filmed him and Lancel doing: rollerblading on a beach sidewalk, miniature golf (which he'd wanted to text Brienne about when he'd kicked Lancel's ass, but she'd only been gone a couple of days and it felt too needy), and a particularly mistake-filled afternoon grilling over an open flame that eventually had to be put out with fire extinguishers. Jaime had prodded the charcoal that had once been his steak and sighed, wishing Brienne was there to tease him about it.

The first day after they were done with their commitments for the team, with his time stretching free and unburdened by demands, Jaime woke up without an alarm, stretched in his bed, and then laid there for an hour with no fucking idea what to do until the urge to pee got too strong to ignore any longer. He listlessly scrambled himself a few eggs for breakfast, flipped through channels on his tv, started reading his own copy of the Arthur Dayne book, and just generally floated lost through his own life.

Summer breaks were not usually like this for him. Last year, barely even in the top ten of the world championship ratings, Jaime had spent one of his weeks hiding in Braavos and the other training intensely for the second half of the season, an exercise that turned out to be for naught. In his second season back at F1, he'd spent most of the two weeks drunk with Tyrion and coming up with nicknames for their father that could never be repeated. But drunk or sober, he had had plans. There was nothing stopping him from making plans now, except the one thing he wanted to do was the one thing he wasn't sure he should.

'Find some other woman,' Bronn had said back at Lannisport, like Jaime had ever been one to scoop up the nearest willing warm body.

Even he and Melara and he and Taena had had to come to clear arrangements, agreeing that nothing serious would come of their handful of nights together beyond the expectation of a good
time, before he'd felt settled enough to enthusiastically enjoy them. It wasn't the relationship he'd always imagined, but it shored up at least some of the small holes in his angry heart knowing someone was just a text message away when the pressure got to be too much and he didn't want to waste another night in a glass.

At least until Brienne stomped into his life.

F**king Brienne, he thought, angry at her for being her, angry at himself for being mad at her for it. She drove him crazy without even trying; he'd thought of nothing for a week after the Lannisport pool but her body in his arms, and he'd been the idiot to pick her up when he could have just pushed her in.

The worst part, the part that made his stomach feel like a particularly acidic rave, was he was certain she wanted him, too; if not as much as he wanted her, then at least enough it was getting under her skin. It had been impossible to miss in the goodbye hug they'd had, when she'd clung to him with a vulnerability and desire that had left him reeling. Three weeks they'd be apart, and yet they had both acted like it would be a year or more. It was inane. Idiotic. A testament to how badly they both needed to get laid.

Jaime had always felt more connected to Melara so he called her first, hoping and dreading in equal measure that she'd answer.

After three rings, she did. “What's wrong?” she said.

He frowned. “Why would you think something's wrong?”

“You're calling me. You don't call, you text.”

“I'm calling now.”

“Jaime.” He could picture the impatient twist of her mouth. She had less time for his foibles than even Bronn. She was, he thought, almost a friend, and he knew he couldn't have sex with her when all he would think about was Brienne.

“I don't think I can see you again.”

“Ohhhhh there's a woman,” she said, sounding amused.

“Yes. Well. No. Not yet.”

“No yet? Why on earth not? Is she in jail?”

“It's complicated.”

“So she is in jail.”

“She's not in jail,” he grumbled. “It's just not a good time.”

“Jaime you're in one of the most dangerous sports in the world and you haven't had a girlfriend, well, ever as far as I know. When is a good time?”

He plucked at the knee of his jeans. “It's not right for her.”

“Did she say that or did you decide it for her?”

“She said it.” She had, hadn't she? He thought back to the party; she'd said she liked him but they
couldn't be seen together because the rumors of something that wasn't true. But what if they made it true? Would that make the attacks about her job easier to turn away? Would she even be willing to take the chance? It wasn't like she'd turned him down – he'd never even had a chance to ask. A small tremor started in his belly.

“Did she say when the right time would be?”

He had to tread carefully here; with even a few hints it would be easy for her to assume it was Brienne. “Not exactly. But more when the racing season was done.”

“So you're just going to wait around alone? If you're not together, it wouldn't be cheating if we had sex,” Melara said, oblivious to the sudden foundational rearrangement going on in Jaime's world.

“It would to me.”

“Such a romantic. What's your plan, then?”

“My plan?”

“In my experience, romantics don't sit around waiting for their love lives to just work out, much to their detriment.”

A plan? He'd only just realized there was room for a plan two minutes ago, though he couldn't tell her that. “She did invite me to visit her over the break.”

“She wants you to wait but she also invited you to see her? One of those isn't true.”

“What do you think it is?” he asked, dreading the answer.

“How should I know? I don't even know who this woman is.” Jaime sighed and he heard Melara make a small humming noise over the phone. “I give you permission,” she said.

“What?”

“Isn't that really why you called? You wanted someone to tell you it was all right to go. I'm telling you: it's fine. You were never tied to me, or me to you. Go get her.”

He straightened in his chair, heart racing. “What if the invite wasn't real?”

“Then you come back and I'll make you forget her.”

Melara was great in bed, but he doubted even she could make him forget Brienne. “You know it's not you-”

“Don't patronize me, Jaime,” she cut him off, sounding annoyed. “It is me, and it's you, and it's her. I hope it works out for you, but if doesn't, call me and we'll see where we are. Are you going to tell Taena?”

Jaime snorted. “I'm sure she already knows. It's been months.”

“You should send me her number,” Melara said thoughtfully. “She might be lonely.”

For a second the plans that were forming themselves in Jaime's mind skidded to a halt as he considered Melara and Taena together, his cock stirring a little. “Why didn't you ever tell me that was an option?”
Melara laughed dryly. “Good to know you do still have some typical male qualities. Eases the sting of losing you.”

He snorted. “Thanks, Melara.”

“Thank you. You didn't love me, but you were always kind.”

“Did you?” he asked tentatively.

“Did I what?” she asked.

“Love me?”

“So full of yourself.” He could hear her fond smile. “Goodbye, Jaime,” she said, gentle but firm.

“Take care.”

She hung up without responding. Jaime sighed and texted her Taena's information and 'she likes her feet massaged' and grinned when she sent back two women emojis with a taco between them. They'd both be just fine without him, he knew; shit, they'd likely be better off. That left just him and Brienne to worry about.

Bronn had warned him away from Brienne because he thought Jaime would hurt her, that he didn't understand her gentle heart. Jaime had two weeks to prove to all of them that he did. He opened up a new browser on his phone and started looking for somewhere to stay on the beautiful island of Tarth.

When Brienne stepped off the ferry, the sight of her dad, tall and broad and home, overwhelmed the space in the mostly empty waiting area. He waved his big hand and she rushed over, was swooped up and spun around in his arms. After she regained her feet she smiled up at him and all the lines in his face went deep as he smiled wide back at her.

“Welcome home, girl,” Selwyn said, kissing her hard on the forehead. He easily hefted her single piece of luggage and wrapped his other arm around her shoulders. “Truck's this way.”

They chatted about work the short ride back to his house, where she'd been living in her own separate space in the backyard ever since she'd returned from Stormlands College. It hadn't made sense to spend money on a more expensive place when it was just the two of them and there was lots of room for the good enough mother-in-law unit that gave them both plenty of privacy. They didn't even have connecting walls, which was more than she could say for any apartment she would've rented, and she benefitted from having his larger kitchen and washer and dryer nearby when she needed them.

Besides, while her father went on more than his share of dates, Brienne hadn't ever brought a man home and it didn't seem like it would start happening now. Though if she could, she knew exactly who she'd want it to be.

Brienne exhaled sharply in the silence of her little one room house and dropped her luggage noisily on the floor. After promising they would catch up more over breakfast she had bid her father goodnight and retired, eager for sleep; how could she have taken literally only three steps alone before she thought of Jaime?

“You're pathetic,” she said out loud to herself, going to the barely big enough bathroom to get ready. Because they'd built the house themselves, the shower was roomy enough for even her
father, but there hadn't been much space left over for the sink and toilet and medicine cabinet. She didn't regret it, though; she'd had enough of ducking every time she wanted to be clean. She brushed her teeth and considered the shower now, wondering if there would be room for two tall people in it.

“Quit it,” she sternly ordered her reflection, toothpaste foam hitting the mirror. Brienne brushed harder until her teeth were the cleanest they'd ever been and then she locked the door, shut off the lights, and laid down in the bed that had been familiar to her in January. It felt different now; she felt different now. She'd been so scared of taking this chance and especially of taking it with Jaime, but that had been before she'd known there was more to him than the roguish, sinister bad guy he seemed so eager to portray.

*He would like Tarth,* she thought, listening to the distant white noise of the ocean through her window screen. They weren't right on the beach, but near enough that the sound could carry when the rest of the world and her own restless thoughts were quiet. She fell asleep imaging them standing side-by-side with their toes in the sand while the ocean washed over their feet, welcoming them home.

The next morning Brienne knocked once on her dad's back door and entered on his call. He was in the kitchen, making omelettes as she knew he would be. He turned and smiled happily.

“*I know we usually only do Sunday breakfast, but I figured we'd missed enough you'd forgive me.*”

She kissed him on the cheek and fell into their familiar routine: Brienne setting the table and making the coffee, her dad cooking and humming a random assortment of sea shanties and classic rock under his breath. When the coffee was done she poured herself a mug and wandered around the first floor, looking for what was the same and what might have changed in her absence. There was a new vase on the small table in the hallway and he'd gotten a new rain jacket that was currently slung on the bannister of the stairs. But the most surprising addition was a cork board placed prominently over the fireplace in the living room, filled three-quarters of the way with pictures of her that had been printed out from the internet, the board's whole purpose in life seeming to be a place to capture her Lannister Corp career.

Brienne took a sip of her coffee and scanned the photos, curious to see what he'd picked, nervous to see herself. There was one from winter testing, when she'd been in the car for the first time, her anxious eyes peering out from the helmet. Another one from later in winter testing, the helmet tucked under her arm as she engaged in conversation with Bronn, who was pointing at something on the car. He'd printed out an image of her in the gantry with the other engineers, all of them leaning forward except for her standing tall with her arms folded, watching the race. She guessed based on the look of the track it was probably Pentos.

There were more, too, many taken of her from behind or the side during a race, some of her in the garage – here with Podrick, there with Willem or Bronn or Lucion. Then one of her and Jaime staring at each other in the parc fermé, him with his helmet off and grinning, her clutching her headset in her hands like an anchor. Tacked most prominently were two photos of which she had startlingly different memories. The first was a screencap from the Melisandre interview before the season began, which seemed so long ago it may as well have been a different lifetime. She'd been only the chief mechanic then, new and overwhelmed and reluctant to even talk to Jaime. The second was from the Lannisport poolside, when Jaime had picked her up in his arms. The photographer had captured the moment just before he'd leapt, and Brienne's heart thudded as she stared at the details of it. Jaime was carrying her easily, a wicked smile on his face as he stared down at her. She had one arm wrapped around his neck and the other reaching for space but she
looked happy in a way she had never seen on her own face before. Brienne had never liked photographs of herself, had always been supernaturally aware of cameras since she was old enough to realize they did not like her, either. And even though in the picture her smile was too big, her face was alarmingly red, and her hair was a mess, for this one moment in time it didn't seem to matter, either to the woman in the photo or the woman standing there looking at it now.

“You found my brag board,” her dad said, coming in from the kitchen.

Brienne startled and looked over her shoulder. “This is embarrassing,” she said. He waved her off.

“Too bad, short stuff.” Brienne laughed, the familiar nickname making her heart warm. He saved it only for when she was feeling down on herself; she loved it because he was the only person who could call her that. “Breakfast is ready, and then afterward you can talk me through all of these so I can hear all the behind-the-scenes gossip.”

They spent a long, pleasant breakfast catching up, Brienne hyper aware of not talking too much about Jaime. Her father passed on stories from the garage, of Argella, of a woman he'd taken on a date recently who hadn't wanted to line dance so they couldn't have a second date. Her father loved dancing, though she suspected no woman ever expected that when they saw him. She had many fond memories of him dancing Galladon and her around their kitchen when she was little. When Galladon was older he'd just roll his eyes at their father and half-heartedly join in, but Brienne always enjoyed it. Her father was one of the few men in her life that wasn't surprised when she wanted some of the more feminine things other girls did.

That afternoon there was a knock on the door and it was their neighbor, Argella Durrandon, trying to look teenager cool and, Brienne thought with a hidden smile, mostly failing. She had dusky skin and her black hair was chopped short and uneven.

“Hey,” Argella said, fidgeting on the porch. “I heard you were coming home today.”

“So much. You have to come see how I hacked together a motion-sensing camera system for our house that runs totally off of this Raspberry Pi.” On Brienne's confused look Argella grinned. “It's all legal, don't worry. I just wanted to say hi, since you'd been gone so long and everything.”

“That's sweet of you, Argella. I'll come over later and you can show me what you've been up to.”

“Just the legal stuff.”

“Yes,” Brienne said dryly. “Please don't make me accessory to a crime.”

Argella waved and hurried off back to her own home and, Brienne suspected, the room where she spent most of her time. Like Brienne, Argella was an outcast among her peers, mostly by choice from what Brienne could tell, but she felt for the girl nonetheless. Especially now that Brienne had actual friends in Pod and Bronn and even Arya in a more distant way, and she finally felt their value.

And Jaime, she reminded herself, though their friendship was not like the others'. If she needed
someone to do something for her, she would call Podrick first; if she needed someone to give her advice, she'd call Bronn. If she wanted someone to have a bitch session about her job, Arya would be a good first choice. But if her world were falling apart, Jaime was the only one she'd want to turn to. He would not falter under the weight of her.

Brienne sighed and reminded herself these three weeks were explicitly not about Jaime, were a chance for her to take a mental, emotional, and physical break from both him and the intensity of the daily grind. In an F1 season there were no such things as weekends off, just a day here or there that she spent cleaning her apartment, buying her groceries, and maybe watching TV for a few hours while her body unwound. Now she had many days of free time ahead of her and she would not spend them thinking about everything she'd left behind in King's Landing.

She spent the next week helping out her dad around the house and the garage, stoically not thinking about Jaime even when she spent a solid day checking on her own F1 car, tuning it up and using everything she'd learned so far to make it run better and faster.

Her father watched her at that for awhile, asking questions, listening thoughtfully to her answers. By the end of the day he was watching her with a new respect in his eyes.

“You've grown so much,” he said when she stood and wiped her hands off for the final time.

“I can't afford to grow any more,” she said wryly.

“Brienne,” She looked over at him and was startled by the seriousness of his expression. “I shouldn't have kept you here so long.”

“Here where? On Tarth?” He nodded. “Gods, Dad, it's not like I'm some locked-away maiden. I wanted to work here with you.”

“You didn't know any better.”

“I did,” she said quietly. “I spent time in the lower circuits. I knew what I was missing and I never regretted it.”

She shut and locked the door behind them as they moved back into the main garage bay. There was one car left for the day, a station wagon waiting on parts for a new clutch; everything else she and her dad had worked through. He'd given his new assistant the week off while Brienne helped out.

They cleaned up the workbench, Brienne organizing the screwdrivers in the order she liked them while her dad tidied up the dirty rags. When he was done, he leaned against the bench to watch her putting away the rest of the tools.

“I wish whatever drove you away from F2 hadn't happened,” he said abruptly.

Brienne shrugged. “I do, too. But...” she stared down at the wrench in her hand and smiled a little. “Maybe I wouldn't have been in a place to take the position on Jaime's team if I had.”

“That would've been a shame,” Selwyn agreed. “It suits you.”

“I'm happy,” she said.

Selwyn ran his hand over her hair and his smile was so sweet it brought tears to her eyes. “Before your mom died she made me swear to watch out for you and Gal. She wanted you to be happy more than anything else.”
“Dad,” she said, exhaling shakily. He tugged her into his arms and she curled inside their warmth until her emotions were as steady and strong again as her father. Her phone beeped with a message and he let her go.

“I hope that's a plan to do something besides just work the whole time you're here.”

Brienne rolled her eyes and looked to see who it was, curious. She hadn't made plans with anyone on Tarth; the only people she'd wanted to see were her dad and Argella and maybe Goodwin and her uncle, and none of them would be texting her now. When she saw Jaime's name on her screen her heart lurched like someone stomping on the accelerator of an idling car. Her cheeks went hot and she felt her dad watching her curiously, which only made her blush harder.

When she opened the message she saw Jaime had sent a picture and the words 'Any suggestions for places to eat?' underneath. Brienne peered at the photo and as the familiarity of the scene sunk in, she gasped. It was a beach here on Tarth, not far from her house, and when she glanced out the windows of the garage doors she saw the red and gold sky in the picture matched the sky outside.

“Everything all right?” her dad asked and she glanced up at him and struggled for words for a moment.

“It's Jaime,” she said. “He's here.”

Jaime stared at his phone and regretted every part of this. He should have gone to her house. He should have texted her to let her know he was coming. He should have asked if she even wanted him there. Showing up without warning and then sending her on some mysterious scavenger hunt to find him sounded romantic in his head but Brienne would probably hate it. What if the goodbye hug had just been a friendly one and he was too confused about his own feelings to realize it?

How long ago had he sent his message? It felt like it had been an hour but when he checked the timestamp it had been two minutes. Three little dots appeared all of a sudden and he swallowed hard, waiting for Brienne's kind brush off.

Then the dots disappeared and he stared harder at his phone, willing them to come back. *Fuck* he thought. *She can't even think of how to tell me I wasted my time.* Or maybe she was diligently looking up the address of a restaurant she could send him to and then he could eat his fish alone and plan to go back to King's Landing tomorrow. It would be the best possible outcome at this point.

The dots appeared again and swiftly after: 'I'm at my dad's garage.'

Jaime blinked, nonplussed. What did that mean? She sent another message.

'I can recommend a place or if you have time to wait I can take you.'

The air whooshed out of him in relief. He had all the time in the world for Brienne. But he couldn't say that over text, not until he saw her face again and made sure she actually was as interested as he was, that he hadn't misunderstood her reasons behind putting space between them. Instead he sent back, 'I can wait. It's beautiful here.'

She sent back a blushing smile emoji. 'It's one of my favorite beaches. Be there in half an hour.'

'I'll be here.'

Jaime tucked his phone back into the pocket of his jacket and settled down on a scrubby patch of
grass at the top of the beach, picking up a nearby smooth stone and rubbing his fingers over its multicolored striations. Unlike King's Landing, the beaches here were rockier and more wild, the ocean a fierce, untamed presence all around them. There was soft sand at the line where the waves met the shore, but you had to walk over rough, unforgiving ground to get there. A reward for the person brave and dedicated enough to try. There were a few children shrieking and running around in the low waves a distance away, two families on blankets up in the grassy area watching them, but the beach was otherwise deserted in this area. Jaime had picked it because it had looked peaceful and he knew her home was nearby based on the contract she'd filled out with Lannister Corp.

It was turning cool as the night came in, and he pulled his jacket around him while he watched the sun turning the sapphire water gold when it dipped behind the horizon. He could picture Brienne walking the shore's edge in the sunset, her feet splashing through the tide coming in, her cheeks turning pink from the sea wind. When the stars started to blink on above, he imagined her looking up at them as she had the night of his birthday, all the sky reflected in her beautiful eyes.

He heard the rumble of a truck approach and then park, idling, and Jaime glanced over his shoulder. Brienne slipped out of the passenger side of an old full-sized pick-up, saw her lean into the cab and say something to her father inside, before stepping back and slamming the door shut. He stood and brushed the dirt off of his jeans when the truck drove away.

Brienne scanned the parking area and then the beach and when she saw him he noticed her intake of breath, the way she caught her lip between her teeth in a motion that had become achingly familiar. Jaime gave her a little wave and she smiled before ducking her head. He watched her walk towards him and became suddenly obsessed with what to do with his hands; he tried putting them on his hips, which felt too pose-y; folded his arms over his chest, which felt too aggressive. He settled for shoving them in his pockets, thumbs hanging out, and tried to look natural.

She stopped a few feet away and he took her in, the faded blue jeans and gray t-shirt with 'Tarth Pirates' scrawled along the front. Her eyes turned nearly purple in the twilight. Her wide mouth, lush and pink.

He still really wanted to kiss her, at least.

“I see you didn't bother to wear your helmet,” she said, and Jaime laughed, startled and delighted.

“I missed you too,” he replied dryly, and she flushed, the red rushing down her long neck to below her shirt.

“What are you doing here?”

“You did promise me in Myr that you'd show me the best place to eat seafood on Tarth and I figured we had some time.”

Brienne pushed the hair back out of her face, but the wind just ruffled it loose again. “You came all the way here for fish?”

“I was told it was the best fish anywhere.”

“It is,” she said firmly and gods he didn't think he could take another minute of not touching her but they hadn't even talked yet and he couldn't just step into her space and press his lips to hers, chapped and probably tasting of the sea. Could he?

“Jaime?”
He blinked, realized she had asked him something while he'd briefly fantasized about kissing her on the beach. “Sorry, what?”

“I can take you to my favorite place to eat if you want.”

“I'd like that,” he said hurriedly. He didn't want her to think he wasn't listening because he wasn't interested. “You're okay being seen with me?”

“I don't have much choice, do I?”

He winced a little but put on a bright smile. “There's no media here, no one will know. My motorcycle is parked just up there.”

“We can walk, it's not far.”

“Is it just because I don't have helmets? Because I actually did pack them, I just left them at my hotel.”

She frowned. “You have a hotel room?”

“Yes?”

“I...assumed you would leave after dinner.”

“That's a long way back late at night.” He hesitated, not sure whether to tell her he'd booked the room for the next week and a half and then decided to see how dinner went first.

She seemed to accept his answer at face value because she gestured for him to start down the road, walking at his side. “How's your break been?” she asked after they'd settled, their steps already aligning.

“I kicked Lancel's butt at miniature golf. They'll be releasing that and some other things over the next couple weeks all over social media and the news sites.”

“I saw the rollerblading one,” she said. “You looked ridiculous.”

“It's hard to make rollerblades look good,” he said defensively.

“I'm sure Renly could do it.”

Jaime glared at her and she just gave him a coolly knowing look that somehow managed to both agitate him and make him want her more. How did she do that?

“Are you sure we can't take my bike? I feel weird leaving it back there,” he muttered.

“Tarth is very safe, no one will touch it.”

“I'm holding you responsible if they do.”

“You go back then and I'll walk by myself.”

She would, too. Just keep marching along without a backward glance. “You're very stubborn,” he muttered.

“You're very annoying,” she grumbled back and they walked in silence for another few minutes while Jaime thought dark thoughts about ever wanting to hire her in the first place until they came
around a corner and a short distance away was a cozy looking, brightly lit house with a sign stating 'House of Fish.'

“House of Fish?” Jaime said out loud in disbelief. “You're pulling my leg.”

She hunched her shoulders and picked up speed, her slightly longer legs easily putting her in front of him. He had to nearly jog to keep up with her, though she slowed when they reached the porch. “This is it,” she said, sounding anxious.

“The best seafood anywhere?”

“Yes,” she said, biting off the word. “You don't have to try it, you can just leave and be convinced of your own superiority.”

“I'm not-” he huffed, annoyed. This was not the start to the evening he had anticipated on the ferry ride over. “I look forward to trying it,” he said, managing to modulate his tone enough that some of her tension eased and she opened the door for him.

Warmth rushed out, along with low, cheerful pop music and inviting smells. He stepped inside and took it all in. They'd cleared out all but the back walls to make space for a collection of small, mismatched tables and chairs. The restaurant was about half-full and everyone looked happy, or at least as happy as Stormlanders ever looked, Jaime mused. The server at the cash register smiled politely when he saw Jaime, but when he saw Brienne the smile turned welcoming.

“I heard you were back!” he said cheerfully, grabbing two menus. “Why did it take you so long to stop by?”

She shrugged and didn't quite meet his eyes. “Busy, I guess.”

The young man, Jaime guessed he was around Brienne's age, had dark skin and eyes and short, bushy black hair. His smile was white and admiring for Brienne, and Jaime both liked him and hated him instantly for it. The man wove them through the tables to a nice spot in one of the quieter corners and set the menus down.

“Who's cooking tonight, Arryk?”

“Not my brother, so you should actually enjoy your meal,” he said with a friendly laugh that Brienne shared as she sat. Arryk finally took his eyes off Brienne to look at Jaime as he sat down, too, and Jaime saw the slow dawning of recognition. “Oh shit you're Jaime Lannister,” Arryk said.

“The one and only,” Jaime smiled, allowing himself just a hint of feralness to it. “You can have my autograph when I pay for dinner.” Arryk blinked and under the table Brienne stepped on Jaime's foot.

“Ignore him, he's hangry,” she told Arryk, who stifled a laugh.

“Then I better let you look at your menus,” he said. “It's slow tonight so I'll be your server. I'll be back with some water and biscuits.”

Jaime glared down at his menu after Arryk had left. “I'm not hangry.”

He could feel Brienne's eyeroll. “I recommend any of the fresh fish,” she said, ignoring him, which he was probably grateful for. He needed to reboot this whole evening and start again but he was going to just have to change the mood by letting her order his meal for him.
“Since it's your good word on the line, you pick the meal,” he said, closing his menu.

“Are you sure?”

“I trust you.”

She smiled, a small twitch of her lips that made his heart beat hard. “Any allergies?” she asked. “Anything you really dislike?”

“No and no. I have an eager tongue,” he said in a low voice, and was rewarded with a significant flush.

“Ok,” she said, her voice high. “I'll pick for us then. Stop talking so I can focus.”

He watched her scanning the menu, the way her eyes narrowed in consideration, how she licked her lips thoughtfully and seemed to talk to herself. When had she started looking so adorable to him? The crooked line of her nose was like a contracted esse he wanted to run his finger down; her broad forehead and solid jaw made her look honest and trustworthy; and her eyes – he had been fixated on her eyes since they'd first met his and he'd seen only disgust in them. Now when she looked up, after finally nodding and closing the menu, they were bright and warm and it made them even more beautiful; deep pools that deserved attention but never demanded it. Arryk returned with their water and biscuits while Jaime stared helplessly into her eyes, and Brienne ordered efficiently, sending Arryk quickly on his way once more.

“What *are* you doing here?” she asked after folding her long-fingered hands on the table. “Is it a media thing?”

“We finished all that a couple days ago. I came to Tarth because...” He wasn't sure even he knew how to end that sentence. *Because you were here* seemed the most honest, but that felt like too much even to him. “I don't have many other friends.”

“I can't imagine why,” she murmured, sipping her water.

He let that go. “Work was done and for the first time I'm actually ahead in the World Championship points. Well ahead. I don't feel like I have to spend the two weeks berating myself and trying to get better. I was a bit at loose ends and it seemed like a waste to spend the entire time watching television.”

“You could read some books.”

“Do you not want me here?” he asked, quiet, and she went still.

“No, it's not that. I'm just surprised, that's all. I thought you'd have plans. Other...people to be with.”

“I don't.” It hit him abruptly that she might be projecting. “Do you? Have plans or other people to be with?”

Brienne laughed once, a surprised sound. “No,” she said, as though the fact that he'd even asked was the most absurd part of the evening.

He took a biscuit for himself and handed one to her. “Then let's enjoy our free time before it all disappears again, shall we?” he asked, tapping his biscuit to hers like they were wine glasses. Brienne grinned a little and they each took a bite.
They chatted their way through a fried scallop appetizer, a salad sprinkled with fresh shrimp, and a cup of clam chowder so good that Jaime moaned loudly enough over the first bite of it the couple at the table next to him gave him a strange look. Brienne was looking at him, too, her eyes wide and wondering, her mouth open a little.

“Good chowder,” he said, slurping another spoonful. This time, he noticed, she watched his mouth, and he felt a slow burn in his belly.

When they'd finished off the main course, Jaime had to admit she was right: it was the best seafood he had ever had. How much of that was the food and how much of that was the company, he couldn't have said.

“Dessert?” Arryk asked as he came to clear away their empty plates.

Brienne glanced at Jaime and he groaned. “Gods, no, I'm going to explode if I even smell more food.”

“A danger at the House of Fish. I'll go get your bill,” Arryk said cheerfully, expertly loading both arms with everything and hurrying away.

“Well?” Brienne asked, her eyes brightly amused. “What's the verdict? I expect you to lie, but I want to hear you say it out loud so I can hold it against you later.”

“You were right,” Jaime said. “It's incredible.”

Her face softened with genuine pleasure, giving her a look of such sweet satisfaction he nearly leaned across the table to kiss her then and there.

“I'm still holding this against you,” she said, but her tone was airy.

Arryk came back with the bill and set it in the middle of the table. He glanced at Jaime. “Mr. Lannister, would it be possible to get a selfie with you? My brother would be so jealous I got to meet you tonight. We're both huge Formula 1 fans.”

“Of course. Brienne, come get in the picture with us.” But she shook her head, looking nervous.

“I'll take the picture for you.” She took Arryk's phone while Jaime stood next to the man and gave the charming surface smile he used for fans.

“You'll be rooting for us in a few weeks, I hope?” Jaime asked as Arryk checked the picture.

“Well, no, we're both Stag Motors fans, being Stormlanders and all. But we're rooting for Brienne!”

Jaime snorted and grabbed the bill. “I hear that a lot,” he said. Brienne bit down hard on her lip and he could see she was trying to hold back a pleased smile. “Go ahead and gloat,” he told her.

“Have a good evening,” Arryk said, tucking his phone away again. “Thanks for stopping by, and for the photo!”

The prices were more than reasonable for the quality of the food and Jaime shook his head as he left a fifty percent tip and a quick note - charge more for the chowder, it's phenomenal - before signing with a flourish.

They stood and Jaime held the door for her on the way out saying, “after you, my lady” which
Brienne only rolled her eyes at as she walked by. They started back down the dark road to the beach. There were no streetlights along the way, but the moon was nearly full and everything looked shining and silver, the sea an endless mirror of reflected magic.

“You haven't called me Wrench once yet,” Brienne said after a minute.

“You haven't called me Lannister.”

“I suppose not.”

They were quiet for another minute, long enough that Jaime debated with himself about whether to try and hold her hand as they walked. He had just fought down the anxious butterflies and decided to do it when Brienne said, “I need to tell you something.”

The butterflies all immediately dropped dead to the bottom of his stomach. “Okay.”

“I don't....not want to be seen with you.”

He swallowed, his brain not able to parse the negatives in his nervous state. “What?”

“I'm not ashamed to be seen with you. That's not why we can't go places together.”

“I know. We've talked about this.”

She stopped, shaking her head. Her freckled face was as large and pale as the moon. “We have, but you're here anyway so I don't think you get it. I'm not just doing this for me, Jaime. I'm doing this for you, too.”

“For me?”

“Of course I don't want people to think we...that I became your race engineer for some illicit reason. But they're going to think that anyway whether we hang out together or not. It's already happened back when I didn't even like you.”

“Dark days,” he said, but she only frowned at his light-hearted tone.

“Don't you understand? If someone sees you here on Tarth, they're not going to just say things about me anymore. They're going to start saying things about you. To you. They'll think you came here for some...wild weekend with me.” She was red now and getting redder.

“It's Wednesday,” he said and she sighed like he was a burden she could no longer bear.

“That's not the point! The point is I can't take selfies with you while you're on vacation. People will post them and then other people will find them and they'll think we're, that we're-”

“Fucking?”

He was afraid for a moment that he had broken her given the way her cheeks seemed to go almost purple in the moonlight, but she nodded sharply and stared down at their feet. “Yes. I don't want your every interview from here to the end of the season to be about that. You've got a real chance to win this year, Jaime. We can't distract from that just because you want to be friends who do things together. I can wait.”

“I can't,” he said and he cupped her cheeks in his palms – she was warm when she blushed, he finally discovered, burning like a hot coal in his hands – and lifted up a little to kiss her.
Brienne's body was as stiff as the wrench he liked to call her, but her mouth was soft and startled under his, and she tasted like the dessert he'd sworn he was too full for. He would always be hungry for this, he thought, the heat of her in his hands and against his lips. Her fingers gripped him at the waist and she was strong and gentle all at once even as she pushed him back a step.

“What...” words and breath both had left her as she stared at him with her huge eyes.

“I'm kissing you,” he said, almost a growl in the darkness, and he saw her shiver a little.

“But why?”

“Because I want to, you foolish woman.”

That seemed to jerk her out of the shocked trance she was in and she glared at him. “I was just telling you-”

“That you're trying to protect my maidenly virtue, yes, I recall. I don't care, Brienne. That's what I'm trying to tell you. I don't care if you're the only thing they ask me about even as I'm standing on the podium in King's Landing at the end of the year holding my World Championship trophy, as long as you let me kiss you again right now.”

Her lips opened, closed, opened again, and Jaime wondered if he really had read her interest completely wrong. Then she grabbed the lapels of his leather jacket and pulled him into her and the swell of vindication was swept away by the hurricane force of desire. The blood rushing in his veins was louder than the ocean at his back as he kissed her hungrily, discovering the salt and savory taste of her, her full lips a feast all on their own. Her approach was awkward and eager at once, and when her tongue tentatively swept over his he wrapped his arms around her and pulled her hard against him. This wasn't the gentle or excited hugs of the past, this was pure need fusing them together, their banked desire finally set alight. He was desperate to have her touching him, marveled at how her size let her meet every part of his body with hers, so perfectly fitting that he could have stripped them both down and slid into her with barely an effort and oh that had him hardening just at the thought and she gasped into his mouth, warm and wet and he slid his tongue inside and this was it he was going to lay her down on the asphalt and take her right there in another minute. Except the sound of an approaching vehicle burst between them and a second later so did the lights and they jumped apart like they'd been burned.

They were both panting hard, Jaime's fingers clenching and unclenching at his sides, his cock straining in his jeans as he stared at her big lips fuller and redder from his kisses and all he wanted was more. The car slowed as it neared them and then stopped and Jaime realized it was the truck that had dropped her off at the beach and he almost laughed aloud when the window rolled down and Selwyn's voice boomed out, “evening, you two! Need a lift?”

Do not curse out her father Jaime warned himself. “We're fine,” he said tightly. “Just enjoying the fresh ocean air.”

“It's no trouble,” Selwyn said. “Truck has plenty of room for all three of us.”

“The beach isn't far, Dad,” Brienne said and Jaime was pleased to hear how breathless she was, to see how wide her pupils were.

“It's dangerous to walk without any safety lights,” Selwyn said, gently scolding.

Brienne looked helplessly at Jaime and he sighed. “Quite right, Mr. Tarth,” he said glumly. “I suppose we should take your kind offer.”
“Fantastic,” Selwyn said relieved, and Brienne looked at Jaime so gratefully that it soothed the ache of how much he would rather have kept kissing her. But they had a week and a half before they had to be back at King’s Landing, surely he would find plenty of other times for it; in the meantime he could do this for her and her dad both, show them he was interested in more than just a quick fuck with Brienne.

Not that he would have turned that down right now, either.

Jaime opened the door and gestured for her to get in first and then he climbed in after, their thighs pressed together on the bench seat. He kept his hands folded in his lap as his erection faded and he tried not to imagine they were in the back of the truck instead where he could secretly slip his hand up her shirt and no one but Brienne would know.

“Nice to see you again, Mr. Lannister.”

“Please, call me Jaime.”

“As long as you call me Selwyn.”

Jaime smiled at him. “Deal.”

“What brings you to Tarth?”

“The promise of excellent seafood,” he said lightly, catching Brienne’s slight smile.

“She took you to House of Fish, didn't she? Best seafood anywhere.”

“That's what I'd been told and it seems it was correct. How's your shop?”

“Keeping me busy, which is good, but not so busy I can't keep up with your season. You're doing remarkably well this year.”

“Entirely thanks to Brienne,” Jaime said and she ducked her head between them.

“Well I'm sure you're overstating that on behalf of her father, but it's good to hear anyway. Didn't I tell you she was the best mechanic in Westeros?”

“You did. She makes a damn good race engineer, too.”

Selwyn glanced at him, a considering look in his eye. “I wouldn't have thought of it but you were right to see it.” He looked back at the road and slowed over to the side; Jaime's bike glinted in the headlights of the truck. “Gods above, is that an Iron Throne?”

“Would you like to see it?”

“I'd love to.”

“I had planned to stay a few days,” Jaime said, trying to sound casual. “I can stop by your garage tomorrow so you can take a look in the daylight.”

“I don't want to mess up your plans,” Selwyn said but it was clear that was just a polite formality. Jaime grinned a bit, seeing more clearly why Brienne was the way she was.

“I had no plans other than seeing Brienne and enjoying my time here. I'm happy to do it.”

Selwyn nodded and the smile on his face was boyish. “I'll be in the garage all day tomorrow. Come
by early and you can take my daughter away to do something that isn't work.”

“I'd like that very much,” Jaime said. Brienne was red and fidgeting next to him.

“I can show you the ruins of Morne,” she said uncertainly. “They're on the eastern side of the island. It's more deserted over there.”

Jaime pictured them walking alone among old ruins, the sunlight sparkling off the sea and Brienne's eyes, tugging her into the shadow of an old stone wall to kiss her like a knight might have with his lady. “That sounds perfect.” He opened the door of the truck and got out before he did or said something improper in front of her father, slammed it shut again and met Brienne's eyes through the open window.

“Thank you for the company tonight,” he said and she brushed her fingers against her lips, clearly remembering more than just dinner.

“Tomorrow, then?” she asked.

“Tomorrow,” he promised. She swallowed and then smiled shyly at him, and even though he and Selwyn said goodbye, even though the sound of his motorcycle starting up was a comforting rumble in the night, even though the road back to his hotel was serene, Jaime's heart was still pounding as he lay in bed waiting anxiously for the night to end and tomorrow to arrive.
August (Part 2)

Chapter Summary

They had kissed. Her stomach looped over itself at the memory, a shiver of delight running through her. Jaime had put his hot palms on her cheeks and kissed her like he wanted to, like he'd been wanting to for maybe as long as she'd wanted him to. Gods could he kiss, too, a promise made and fulfilled all at once, and still just a hint of what his talented mouth could do. 'I have an eager tongue,' he'd said at the restaurant and she'd nearly melted into the floor.

She pressed her own hands to her cheeks and felt the difference between her calloused palms and how his had felt. No one had ever touched her like that, like they were grateful to be doing it. Her body trembled with the memory.

Chapter Notes

I got a shitload of writing done in the last couple days, so have another chapter! Also based on how some of these later months are falling out, I've upped the total chapter count to account for the additions.

Jaime had kissed her.

They had stood in the moonlight by the side of the road and he'd looked so aggravated with her that she thought he would just storm off, but he had kissed her instead.

And then she had kissed him back.

Brienne stared out the window of her dad's truck as he drove them home and she pressed her fingers to her lips, remembering the feel of Jaime's mouth on hers, of the craving behind it, like he had come to Tarth only for this. For her.

They parked and Brienne climbed out, knowing her dad was watching her curiously and also that he wouldn't pry, at least not too directly. Which was for the best; all she could see was Jaime's face in the glare of headlights, how he'd been looking at her like he'd looked at her car all those months ago. Brienne took the side path to her little house and her dad cleared his throat, bringing her up short.

"I know it's summer but would you like some hot chocolate? I've got my special ingredient." His special ingredient was peppermint schnapps.

"No, I'm really full, I was just going to go relax for a bit."

"All right." He pressed his lips together before saying, "I hope you don't mind that I made that arrangement between you and Jaime tomorrow. I know you're not his biggest fan, but you seem to be getting along and I really do hate to see you spend your entire break in the garage. I want this to
be a vacation for you, and not a working one.”

Brienne almost burst into hysterical giggles. Not Jaime’s biggest fan? She might have been having sex with him right out there in the open if her dad had showed up two minutes later. “It’s fine. You’re right, I should do something less like work for at least a few days. And Jaime is...” she had even less idea of how to describe him now. “We get along fine.”

Her dad smiled wide with relief and nodded his head. “Good, good. He seems different from when he was here the first time. More relaxed. I guess winning will do that for you.”

“I guess it will.” She edged towards her path.

“The ruins sound like a fun idea. Maybe I'll close up early and join you for a late lunch.”

She very much did not want her father going with them to the ruins but she just nodded gamely. “Maybe.”

“Well, goodnight darling.”

“Goodnight, Dad.” She hurried into her own house and leaned back against the front door when it was closed, exhaling slowly.

They had kissed. Her stomach looped over itself at the memory, a shiver of delight running through her. Jaime had put his hot palms on her cheeks and kissed her like he wanted to, like he'd been wanting to for maybe as long as she’d wanted him to. Gods could he kiss, too, a promise made and fulfilled all at once, and still just a hint of what his talented mouth could do. 'I have an eager tongue,' he'd said at the restaurant and she'd nearly melted into the floor.

She pressed her own hands to her cheeks and felt the difference between her calloused palms and how his had felt. No one had ever touched her like that, like they were grateful to be doing it. Her body trembled with the memory. Brienne got ready for bed, but once she was lying down in the dark she just stared up at the ceiling, completely awake.

What if he regretted it tomorrow?

Don't be an idiot she told herself. Neither of them had had alcohol with dinner and she hadn't even been the one to bring it up; in fact she'd tried to convince him of exactly the opposite. The media would have a field day just with pictures of them enjoying themselves as friends on Tarth, they'd be relentless if they knew their salacious rumors were true. Brienne frowned into the black.

What if she regretted it?

Would Melisandre bring it up during the Women of F1 interview that she and Arya had scheduled for next month? Would Lancel and the others think that if she and Jaime were...whatever they were now, that their earlier vile thoughts were also true? Would her own crew think less of her? What about the girls that looked up to her?

Brienne's breathing was too fast and shaky and she clutched at the bedsheets and tried to slow it down, imagined the air moving in and out of her chest like calm waves on the shore, the way Galladon had taught her when she was a kid and had been upset after someone had made fun of her.

She and Jaime had kissed one time and had plans only to spend the day looking at ruins together tomorrow. It didn't serve to spiral into anxiety about the rest now when she couldn't do anything about it. Tomorrow in the bright sunlight they would see each other more clearly and they could
both see if this was something they wanted when everything wasn't turned gentle by moonlight.

*No more kissing until we talk about it,* she promised herself, turning over in bed, feeling resolute though still no more able to sleep. *No matter what he does in the morning.*

What he did was show up at her father's garage in comfortable jeans and a tight black t-shirt, his hair windswept from the ride on his motorcycle. With his scuffed boots and riding jacket slung over his shoulder he looked like a romance novel hero there to sweep her off her feet so he could do untold things to her while he whispered dirty words in her ear. When he bit his lower lip with a sultry smirk, Brienne was certain she would combust right there in the garage. 'Local woman dies of spontaneous hormones' the headline would read and under it a picture of Jaime just like this. No one would blame her.

“Good morning, Brienne. I hope you slept well,” he said in a low, knowing voice.

She had slept badly, because once she stopped thinking about kissing him she remembered the way his cock had been hard against her and that had led to thinking about what it would be like to feel him inside her and that had led to having to get up and take a long shower to wash the wetness away.

“I slept just fine,” she managed to get out. “Still no helmet, I see. Do you want a head injury?”

“No much to hurt in here,” he said, knocking his knuckles against his forehead.

“You should at least try to protect your face, it's your best quality.”

Jaime grinned and licked his lips. “Brienne, I-”

“Good morning!” Selwyn said, coming into the garage waiting room from the back. “Thought I heard you out here. You brought your bike?”

Jaime smiled thinly. “Right out front.”

“You can leave it here with me today, if that's all right? Brienne can drive you two in my truck.”

“That will do. You know Brienne has done some test driving for us, even a few free practice laps.”

“I know, and I hope you're paying her to account for the extra responsibilities,” he said, clearly not joking.

“Dad,” she hissed. Had he always been such a helicopter parent, or had she just never noticed because she’d been a helicopter kid?

“What? I know how undervalued women are in sports and I just want to be sure you're being compensated for what you're worth.”

“Her contract was renegotiated back in March,” Jaime assured him. The increase had been significant and now she not only could easily pay her rent and bills, she was stocking away a sum for once the season was through. She hadn't decided what to do with it yet, but it comforted her to know it was there. The money-back guarantee had also been stripped out, a gesture that felt like an indication of trust.

“Well, good,” Selwyn said gruffly. “You two should head off. It's a bit of a drive to the other side of the island and I don't want you to miss the nicest part of the day.” He handed Brienne the keys
and kissed her on the forehead and sent them on their way.

They were quiet until after they'd climbed into the truck and Brienne had pulled out onto the main road that wound all the way around Tarth. “It'll take a couple hours to get there,” she said, “so I hope you brought some reading material.”

“I thought I'd talk to you. But why so long – Tarth isn't that big, is it? Just drive across the middle and you're there.”

“There are no roads right across the middle. It's all mountains and valleys. We've left it mostly unpaved to preserve the natural beauty. Waterfalls, clear lakes, rivers that cut through the trees.”

He stared at her and she felt her cheeks redden. “Sounds incredible. We should check it out.”

“The best ones take some hiking to get there and you don't really strike me as the camp out under the stars type.”

“I could become one. Besides, we'd be very alone out there.” His voice had dropped a full register and it was registering right between her legs.

Brienne swallowed hard and gripped the steering wheel. “Jaime, we should talk.”

“Oh?” His voice was much higher that time. “Don't tell me that kiss was the result of food coma or I'll throw myself out of this moving vehicle right now.”

“You don't have to be so dramatic,” she said, exasperated. “But we should talk about...the kiss.”

“Did you like it?”

Brienne kept her gaze firmly on the road, afraid she'd drive them off it if she turned to look at Jaime. “I did.”

“I did, too. Park so we can do it again.”

“Jaime,” she sighed, but she heard the smile in her own voice. “I still don't know if it's a good idea.” She had woken up not fully accepting that Jaime Lannister, easily the most attractive man she had ever seen, was interested in her, likely the ugliest woman he had ever seen. There had even been a moment when the clock showed three am that she'd believed he was tricking her just as Connington and Hyle and the others had. She'd carried that worry with her until this morning, when he still looked as interested in her in the unforgiving sunlight as he had last night in the much kinder moonlight. A fairy tale, for sure, but one she couldn't disprove based on how he was still looking at her now; Brienne could be stubborn but not that stubborn, not when her devilish prince had come to seduce her away.

“I want to do much more than kiss you, Brienne.” His voice was as smooth and amber as fresh oil, and it had the same affect on her insides.

“That's nice,” she squeaked and he chuckled. “But whatever it is we do you have to know what it will mean. For both of us.” She did glance at him then and saw he was finally watching her seriously. “They'll come for me first, with questions, and shaming. And then they'll turn on you. Not just the media, either, but Lancel and his crew. Your sister. Your father.”

Jaime was glaring out the window now, his fingers holding tight to the dashboard. “Fucking Lannisters,” he grumbled.
“You say that like you're not one of them.”

“I was including myself.”

She touched his knee gently and he tensed. “You're not like them,” she said.

“If you think that then maybe you're too brainwashed for me to kiss you again.”

“Jaime,” she said a third time, this one a resigned sigh, and put her hand safely back on the wheel.

“What do you propose then? I want to kiss you, obviously, and you seem to want to kiss me.” She felt him waiting for her so she nodded in agreement. “Do we just...not kiss?”

She considered it: the aggravating tension of having to work at his side for months and months knowing what he felt like against her, knowing he wanted that – and more – as much as she did and not being able to do anything about it; versus what she was certain would be an overly publicized, hunted experience broken by the intense, fleeting moments they'd have together where they weren't working.

“I don't know,” she said miserably.

“What if we kept it secret?”

“The kissing?”

“Yeah.” He straightened a little in the seat. “It's the best of both worlds. Neither of us gets any more harassed by the vultures than we already are, but we still get the rest of it, too.”

“That sounds risky.”

“I love a good risk,” he said.

“I don't.”

He carefully pried her hand off of the steering wheel and brought it to his lips, kissing the inside of her wrist tenderly, then further up to the soft bend of her elbow until she had goosebumps all over. “Perhaps this risk would be worth it,” he murmured against her skin.

“Jaime,” she breathed and she felt the pleased huff of his breath on her arm.

“Don't say my name like that over the radio or we'll both be in trouble.”

She pulled her arm away but he stayed leaning towards her, gazing at her intently. “What if something happens and we...stop kissing?” she asked.

“That seems very unlikely.”

“People always say workplace romances are the most dangerous.”

Jaime grunted. “People should mind their own business.” He drummed his fingers on his leg. “If it happens that we want to stop, then we'll just go back to being co-workers and friends.”

“As simple as that?”

“Yes, Brienne, as simple as that,” he said, his frustration clear. “Don't deny yourself something that you and I both want because it might end badly.”
In her experience everything *did* end badly; but she supposed his life was the same as hers in that regard. Maybe this time would be different for both of them.

“I guess we could try it, here, on Tarth, and see how it goes.”

“A secret summer island romance? I'm in.”

Brienne snorted. “Emphasis on the ‘secret,’ Jaime. No compromising selfies, no holding hands while we tour the towns. Secret. As far as anyone else needs to know, including my father, we're just friends.” She glanced at him and shook her head. “And you have to stop looking at me like that.”

“Like what? I'm just looking!”

But he hadn't been just looking; he'd been contemplating her with the same single-minded intensity of a lion after its prey, and with possibly as much biting involved.

The idea of it had her whole body flushing red, her breath coming harder.

“Gods, we're doomed,” she groaned.

Their first outing as a secret, well, couple, Brienne thought, went mostly according to plan. It didn't feel right to think of her and Jaime in that way – they’d been so focused on just the kissing parts and not everything else that frankly she wasn't ready to even *look* at that can of worms let alone open it yet – but this was all so far out of her experience she didn't know what else to call it. They'd held hands in the truck and talked about her life on Tarth, Jaime asking questions about where she went to school and what it had been like growing up with just her dad, and Brienne pointing out spots that held good memories as they passed them. It had been comfortable and warm and she had tucked away Jaime's smile and deep-chested laugh for a future night when she might have only the ghosts of them.

The ruins snared Jaime's interest as Brienne showed him around the crumbling stone castle, giving an in-depth tour. She'd done docent work here giving this same tour to tourists one summer in high school at the suggestion of her father, who'd thought the experience would give her confidence. Mostly it had given her a useless amount of Age of Heroes knowledge and well-toned calves from all the walking.

“My brother was named after a legendary knight of Morne,” she said as they read a sign that talked about the history of the area. “Ser Galladon.”

“A strong name. I'm sorry about the loss of your brother,” Jaime offered. “He seemed to mean a lot to you.” He briefly touched her shoulder, and Brienne blinked back unexpected tears.

“Thank you,” she said quietly. She squeezed his hand and then led him to the next sign.

They were not the only ones there, which wasn't surprising given how nice the day was. The sky was wide and blue above them, dotted with only a few puffy, pure white clouds, and the view of the sea from atop the only stable tower left standing was breathtaking, an endless view of deep blue blending upward into bright. It was easy to believe Tarth was the only place in the world on days like this, though she could feel more than see a slight darkening on the western horizon that she knew was the mainland hiding behind the island's mountains.

Jaime had taken what felt like a hundred photos of the area and she heard the click of his phone camera yet again as she stared out over the sea. When she turned, he had his phone pointed at her.
“No pictures,” she reminded him.

“We're not together. It's just you against the sea that pales in comparison to your eyes.”

Brienne blushed and shook her head. “You're much more of a sweet-talker here than you've ever been at work.”

“The magic of Tarth,” he said, moving in closer. He brushed his hand down her arm, until his fingers curled briefly around hers. “Just one quick kiss,” he promised as he stepped even nearer, and then he did, a brief press of his lips to hers that had her eyes fluttering closed. “That was a mistake,” he murmured from centimeters away. “Now I want another one.”

Brienne put her hand against his chest, felt his heart beating under his soft t-shirt. The sound of footsteps on the stairs leading up to where they were had her pushing him back and he smiled ruefully but turned away.

They'd wandered around some more until the sea wind changed and started blowing in cool as it did every afternoon, and Brienne's stomach growled. “A bit late for lunch, but there's a place a little north of here where we could grab an early dinner. It's not as good as House of Fish, but it's pretty good.”

“I don't know, I feel like I've grown accustomed to a certain quality of seafood now.”

Brienne shoved him towards the truck and he laughed. They talked of his childhood then, a little of his early karting years with Addam but mostly about the trouble he and Tyrion would get up to, the way they'd annoy Cersei and their nanny with their antics.

“Tyrion is quite fond of you, you know,” Jaime said as she parked in front of a bland-looking family restaurant called simply 'Maeve's.'

“We haven't talked that much, but he's quite a character.”

“His life hasn't been easy.”

“That's true for many of us,” Brienne said, trying not to make it sound like a reprimand. They got a booth by the window and ordered food – fish and chips for Jaime, fish tacos for her.

As she took a drink of water, Jaime said, “so what's your stance on us fucking?”

“You know this is your fault,” she said later after she'd stopped coughing and he'd cleaned up the water she'd accidentally spit in his face. Her own face was still burning with embarrassment, but Jaime only looked amused by the whole situation.

“I'll allow that.”

“Why would you even ask me that while we're in a family establishment?” she whispered fiercely.

“Because I love when you look so shocked and offended.”

“Jaime.”

“Brienne.”

She glared at him and his smug smile and his sparkling green eyes. “I'm not going to talk about it here.”
“Then I'll just ask in the truck.”

He would, she knew, which meant their early dinner became a quiet, slightly nerve-wracking affair for her as she considered what she would say. Was she ready to have sex with Jaime? Her body certainly was, but she wasn't sure about the rest of her. He was a force of nature, as rumbling with energy and danger as the car he drove, and she didn't trust her ability to not steer them both straight into a wall.

After their meal they got back in the truck and she started it up with slightly trembling hands, waiting for him to ask her again.

“I booked my hotel room until the end of next week,” he said, surprising her in a different way.

“Confident today would go well?”

“I booked it before I even arrived on Tarth.”

Brienne glanced at him but he was looking out at the coastline already starting to warm with the impending sunset. “What do you want to do tomorrow, then?” she asked.

He looked her way and the open hunger on his face made it clear what he wanted to do with her. “It's up to you,” was all he said, and she chewed her lip for a long time as they continued the drive back to the garage.

As they neared she finally offered, “do you want to go karting? The place I learned at as a kid holds adult only times Monday through Thursdays.”

“I haven't been karting in years but I have to warn you, I'm very competitive.”

“So am I.”

He grinned at her. “You're on.”

Though Jaime had wanted nothing more than to kiss Brienne again – and again, and again – when they arrived at the garage, he had only squeezed her hand in the truck and then indulged Selwyn's enthusiastic ramblings for nearly an hour about the bike. The man knew his stuff, though, and had spent some of his day tuning the bike up so that when Jaime started it, it roared in a way it hadn't since he'd first bought the thing. Selwyn had refused payment, seemingly just thrilled that they'd spent the whole day together, Brienne out having a good time instead of working.

“She always works too much,” Selwyn said as they'd both watched her organizing the tools in the garage.

“She works harder than anyone on my team,” Jaime agreed.

“I worry too much about her, I know, but I can't stop.”

“She has a soft heart,” Jaime murmured, and he tried not to be intimidated by Selwyn's immediate sharp-eyed stare.

“I'm glad you recognize that about her.”

“Well,” Jaime said, trying to be nonchalant, “it's hard to miss. Especially when compared to the rest of my crew.”
“The boy she always tells me about – Podrick? He seems all right.”

“They're thick as thieves. He jumped right in to fight Martyn after the garage incident, didn't even hesitate from what I heard.”

Selwyn tilted his head. “Garage incident?”

“When Brienne hurt her wrist.”

“She hurt her wrist?”

She hadn't told him. Jaime sighed and tried to step back out of the trap he'd inadvertently sprung. “There was a disagreement between her and one of the pit crew. She sprained her wrist during it and Podrick came to her defense. The man, Martyn, no longer works for Lannister Corp, so it won't happen again.”

“I see.” Selwyn was frowning and Jaime quietly cursed himself and Brienne both. Why hadn't she told him? What other mines were lying in wait for Jaime to blunder into? “It's getting late and Brienne and I should close up,” Selwyn added.

Jaime could take a hint. “I'll just wish her good night and head off,” he said, hurrying to Brienne. She looked up, smiling, at his approach.

“Thanks for talking to my dad about the bike. You've made his day.”

“I seemed to also have ruined it,” Jaime said. “I didn't know you hadn't told him about your sprained wrist.”

“You told him?” she groaned.

“It seemed like a safe topic.”

Brienne sighed. “You're right. I just...I didn't want to deal with, well.” She glanced over Jaime's shoulder at Selwyn, and when he followed her gaze he could see by the look on the man's face exactly what she meant.

“Shall I kidnap you for the evening until it all blows over? My room is quite nice, and the bed is large.”

She reddened almost instantly. “Secret,” she reminded him in a fierce whisper.

He grinned. “Then I shall have to bid you farewell, my lady.”

“I miss 'Wrench.'”

“I'm saving that for when we go back. Tomorrow then? Karting.”

“I look forward to beating you soundly.”

“I look forward to you trying.”

“Jaime,” she said quietly as he turned to go, and he searched her eyes and found them more uncertain and scared than he expected. Her father was still a distance away, but she lowered her voice until it was felt more than heard. “You don't have to stay, if you don't want. You can leave at any time and I won't- I won't hold it against you.”
He couldn't imagine leaving her here on Tarth now that he'd come, now that he knew the softness of her full lips, the tender skin that held such incredible strength. A giant could pick him up and hurl him all the way back to King's Landing and he would swim the Narrow Sea to get to her again.

The weight of that unsettled him, and he simply shrugged. “I have nowhere else to be,” he said, aiming for casual and hitting the mark too well given the way her brow fell and her mouth turned downward.

“Well if that changes, don't stay for me. I'll be fine.”

Not trusting himself to not fuck it up further if he said more, Jaime simply nodded and headed back into the night, her wounded eyes following him into sleep.

Selwyn was thrilled to hear Brienne had made non-work plans again and shooed them out of the house after breakfast with a promise that Jaime would just take her straight home after their fun instead of bringing her back to work.

“If that's okay with her,” Jaime said, looking to Brienne, and she felt inordinately pleased that he was checking with her instead of acting like he owned her. She was clearly going to have to talk with her dad about his sometimes overbearing acts of love.

“That will be fine,” she agreed, and then took the frog helmet from Jaime with a laugh.

“What's that?” her dad asked, his voice suddenly serious.

“We're going on Jaime's motorcycle.”

“You can take my truck, Endrew is giving me a ride.”

Brienne gripped the helmet tighter and met her father's stern look. “We don't need the truck, I'll ride with Jaime.”

“Brienne-”

“You don't get to decide this for me,” she said firmly. “I'm not a child.”

He folded his arms across his broad chest. “You're my child.”

“I'm also a grown woman. I've done it before and I'll do it again. You can't forbid me from things anymore.”

The disappointed frown he gave her was only slightly mitigated by his mumbled, “I never could.” Selwyn glanced at Jaime. “I hold you personally responsible for her safety.”

“Only while she's on the bike. I don't have any better luck telling her to do things than you do,” Jaime said lightly.

Brienne rolled her eyes and gave her dad a swift hug and kiss goodbye. “It'll be fine. Jaime's an excellent driver, you know that.” In order to avoid Jaime's surely gloating expression, she pulled the neon helmet on and her dad's lips twitched.

“You sure you want to be seen in that thing?”

“No. But safety first, Dad, you know me.”
They hurried out of the house and she slid comfortably behind Jaime on the motorcycle, hugging him tightly as he sped off. She loved how his body felt in her arms, how she felt pressed up against him. They'd left early so they could take the long way around Tarth, the road they'd driven last night now unfolding in the sunlight. The sun made the sea sparkle, a million points of light glimmering off one side, while they passed the meadows and occasional towns of Tarth on the other. Brienne wished for a moment they didn't have the helmets, that she could feel the wind in her hair, that she could kiss the back of Jaime's neck when she was so perfectly positioned for it.

Brienne had picked karting because it had sounded both fun and safe; an activity they could do together without having to be worried about the temptation to be together. What she discovered was that no matter what they were doing, at least fifty percent of her thoughts were on Jaime's eternally moving lips. If he wasn't talking, which seemed to be almost never, he was smiling or doing things with his tongue or just generally directing her attention to his mouth with shocking effectiveness.

They'd gotten suited up and into the karts side-by-side on the first row and Jaime had turned towards her with his beat-up yellow helmet and done this thing with his teeth that she desperately wanted to feel on her skin, and then at lights out he'd leapt forward while she was still recovering.

After that Brienne had gotten more focused. There weren't other people on the track when they first got there and the bored teenager at his summertime job let them run three races without even having to get out of the karts in-between. Jaime easily won the first race with his cheating start, but though he won the other two as well he had to fight for them, and the third one she was so close to him as they went through the checkered flag that even the teenager whooped in excitement.

“You two are really good at that,” the boy said as they stood, laughing and taking their helmets off.

“I've had some practice,” Jaime said wryly and the boy shrugged.

“Too bad you're not younger, you might be good enough to break into Formula 4.”

Brienne snorted so loudly she thought she'd hurt herself. “Yes, Jaime, too bad you're not younger.”

Jaime had looked at her with such heat in his gaze that she'd wondered if he was actually offended, but what she was discovering now in the locked bathroom was that he had been desperate to kiss her. He had per back against the cold wall, his hands on either side of her head, the barest space between their bodies as he did the thing with his teeth to her neck and slowly drove her mad.

“Jaime,” she gasped, clutching his waist. But when she tried to drag him against her, to press his length to where she was aching, he went rigid and held himself apart from her still, the strength he always kept tightly controlled shocking her with his resistance.

“Not done,” he murmured against her neck and then he switched sides, kissing the hollow of her throat on his way, and applied himself to the other side of her neck with the same intensity as the first.

“We have to get out of the bathroom,” she whispered, digging her fingers into his ass and earning a muffled groan against her skin.

“Ten more minutes.” He sucked the tender flesh behind her ear and she whimpered.

“One.”

“Five.”

“Two.” She could feel his smile on her.
“Deal,” he said, and then he did press against her and she forgot to check the time.

When she snuck out of the bathroom first, her hair hastily finger-combed, her face splashed with water to ineffectually cool her heated skin, the coast was clear, but when Jaime came out a moment later, she saw the bored teenager staring at them wide-eyed. Jaime gave him a quick wave and Brienne covered her face with her hands.

“How's the kid gonna tell? He doesn't even know who I am.”

They walked into the small, beat-up quasi-diner attached to the karting arena and both stopped as they looked at the mural of photos along the bottom of the counter.

‘World Championship Standings!’ was printed on a blank sheet of white paper, and then immediately after that on a different sheet was a picture of Jaime, the official F1 bio shot from the website, with ‘#1’ next to it, and then another sheet with Robb Stark and so on for all the rest, all in the current championship order.

“I guess he doesn't work the food area,” Jaime said dryly. The other bored teenager at the food counter recognized Jaime immediately, though, and she went into shock when the two of them walked up to order food.

“You're open, right?” Jaime asked and she nodded mutely. “Then I'll have a deluxe Racerburger with fries and the biggest strawberry shake you've got. How about you, Wrench?” he asked, his tone casual.

“The same but a vanilla shake, please.”

The girl's eyes were so wide Brienne was afraid they were going to fall out of her head as she entered the order and stared at Jaime. “Is that all?” she squeaked.

“I don't know, do you want an autograph?”

She blinked rapidly and then nodded and pulled a napkin out of the nearby dispenser and set it down.

“What's your name, darlin'?” Jaime drawled in his most approachable tone and Brienne barely restrained herself from slugging him for tormenting the poor girl with his excessive charm. Brienne knew if she'd met him when she was a teenager she would have been as gawky and uncontrollably blushing as this girl was. Seven hells, he did it to her now.

“Alayne,” the girl whispered, as red as the Lannister colors.

“That's a lovely name. Can you spell it for me? I want to be sure I have it just right for you.” She did, slow and hesitant as though she'd forgotten how while Jaime signed with his name and 'Keep racing, Alayne!' in his big, loopy handwriting. “Save that. It's going to be worth a fortune when I win the championship this year,” he said with a wink and Brienne had to admire the girl for not passing out.

“Go sit down,” Brienne said, shoving him a little towards a table and pulling out a card to pay. The girl seemed to remember where she was once Jaime had given her some distance and she finished ringing up their order and handed Brienne her receipt and number. When Brienne sat down at the rickety, dirty-topped table, Jaime grinned at her. “Oh stop congratulating yourself,” Brienne said.
“You can't possibly be jealous, although if you are I'd be happy to take you back to the bathroom to show you there's no need for it.”

Brienne flushed and kicked his shin when he laughed, though she was smiling, too. “You're going to have to learn to control yourself.”

“Self-control is overrated,” he purred and she fidgeted in her seat. The man was insufferably attractive. Jaime set his hands on the table and peered at her. “Were there any other boys you ever wanted to kiss in the bathroom here?”

“Gods, no,” she said, scrunching her face in disgust. “They were all immature jerks.”

“So you do have a type,” Jaime said with a wry smile and Brienne burst out laughing.

They filled up on greasy karting diner food and as they talked Brienne realized that she'd laid her hand next to his, her pinky brushing over his own without even meaning to. He gave her a knowing smirk when she yanked her hand away.

“Why Renly?” he asked as he slurped up the last of his shake.

“Why Renly what?”

“I've been staring at his picture over there this whole time and been reminded that he's not that impressive. His driving definitely isn't.”

“You sound quite jealous,” she murmured and was amused to watch his whole face try to rearrange itself into a mask of schooled indifference.

“Of Renly? There's no reason to be. I'm just wondering why he turns you into such a blushing schoolgirl when he's around.”

Brienne finished off the last of her hamburger. “He was kind to me,” she said truthfully. “I felt respected, even if the rest of his team didn't share his decent nature.”

“He didn't even remember you when we saw him at winter testing.”

“That makes it better. It means how I look didn't even matter to him.”

Jaime looked unsettled by that answer and then frowned. “I respect you.”

“You called me Wrench and insulted me for weeks,” she said, frowning.

Jaime had the sense to at least look ashamed. “I wasn't on my best behavior then,” he grudgingly admitted.

“You're not now either,” she teased him.

“No, I guess I'm not. Shall we go back to the bathrooms then, if I'm to be damned for my misbehavior anyway?”

She threw her last fry at him. “Let's leave before Renly's handsome face makes you behave even worse.”

“I'm handsome.”

“If you say so,” she said casually, rewarded with his snort of offended disbelief.
They hurried out just as a big group of twenty-somethings bustled in, chattering and happy. “Hey is that-” one of them said as the door closed behind them.

“Where to now?” Jaime asked as they got back on the bike.

“You can take me home,” she said and when Jaime tensed under her hands she realized how that sounded. Brienne had not decided that their secret island romance should extend so far to sex; she needed to know any of this would work between them before she committed to that, no matter how much her body wanted it. “I can show you around the neighborhood,” she added hastily. “You can meet Argella, my neighbor. I don't think even you can charm her.”

Jaime had smirked a little and pulled his helmet on. “Challenge accepted.”

Argella stood in Selwyn's front room, arms folded over her chest like an aggressive schoolmarm and stared Jaime down. “So you're the racer,” she said and Brienne looked down and to the side, pressing her lips together hard to keep from giggling.

“I am,” Jaime said.

“You don't look like much.”

Brienne felt Jaime glance at her but couldn't chance meeting his eyes for fear she would lose it entirely. Shoulders trembling she turned and went to the kitchen to get everyone drinks.

She could still hear them clearly from the kitchen. “You better be nice to her and appreciate her,” Argella said as Brienne got out glasses. “I bet I could hack your email if I needed to.”

Jaime's response was washed out by the faucet as she filled the glasses with water, but she did hear Argella's response: “Your password is Dayne8, isn't it?”

“Almost done in there, Brienne?” Jaime said, sounding nervous and she grabbed a can of soda for Argella and carried the drinks back into the living room. She handed them out while Jaime looked at Argella with big eyes.

“Where's your bathroom?” he asked and Brienne pointed him down the hall.

Argella popped her soda can and snorted. “He's totally changing his password right now,” she said once he'd left.

“Try not to completely break him with your tech wizardry,” Brienne said mildly.

“Why not?”

_Because I like him_, Brienne thought, feeling her cheeks redden a little. “He needs to at least finish the season,” she said out loud.

Jaime returned looking calmer and more at ease. “So do you like racing, Argella?”

“I like watching it. I really like all the high tech parts of it best. Those steering wheels are wild.”

“If you ever want a tour of our facilities, let Brienne know. We'll get you to all the best places.”

Argella seemed impressed in spite of herself. “Will you let me look at some of the code?”

“Only if you sign an NDA.”
“We'll see.” But she seemed pleased that he'd taken her request seriously and she lifted her can towards him. “You seem all right. I'm glad Brienne's on your team.”

“So am I,” he murmured, and Brienne could feel his eyes on her like they were caressing her skin.

“Come on,” she said quickly, “let's talk a walk around the area and then Argella can show you all the things she's engineered.”

By the time the trio returned to her father's house a couple of hours later, Jaime and Argella were entirely at ease with each other, teasing and chatting like she was his little sister.

“You can really make someone's refrigerator turn on and off?” Jaime was asking as he held the door open for her.

“Change the internal temperature, too. It's super easy. Almost none of these internet-connected things let you change the default password, and some of the factories use 'password' as the default password,” she said, sighing loudly.

Brienne could see Jaime making mental calculations as he considered every internet-connected item in his world. “I should have you come look at my stuff and see if it's secure.”

“Sure,” Argella said easily. “I need to get back home, but it was nice to meet you. Remember what I said about password managers!” She waved to both of them and trotted down the steps and back across the yard to her house.

Brienne smiled at Jaime. “You're surprisingly good with kids.”

“I went through the karting world so fast I was still a kid in places where adults always were. All I ever wanted was to be treated like one of them.” He shrugged. “I try to do the same for kids like that. Besides, she's pretty great.”

“Yeah.” Brienne watched him take his empty glass back into the kitchen and she exhaled shakily. Getting to know Jaime was not making it any easier to resist him in public spaces. She'd almost taken his hand countless times while they toured the neighborhood, Argella running off ahead of them. It had been so calm and domestic that Brienne's heart ached as it snapped back into the present, heavy with longing for something more.

Jaime came back and gestured at the sea of pictures with his chin. “What's that?”

Brienne felt her cheeks burn. “My dad's. He calls it his brag board.”

“That's adorable,” he said, sounding amused and sincere in equal measure. He scanned the photos, ending at the one of them at the pool in Lannisport and when he turned to look at her she felt her body tighten under his sharp, hot eyes. “Now what?” he said softly.

“I don't know.”

He took a step nearer. “Do you live here with your dad?”

“No, I have my own small place out back.”

“That sounds nice and private.”

She swallowed. “It is.”

“It's been killing me to be so near you all day and not able to even touch you.” He was closer still,
an arm's length away. “Can I touch you, Brienne?”

“Yes,” she whispered.

Jaime brushed his fingers up her arm, across her collarbone, and then slid them up behind her neck, and her skin tingled like an electric storm was gathering. “Can I kiss you, Brienne?” he asked with a small smile.

She licked her lips and nodded and his strong hand tugged against her neck, pulling her into him, into the swirling heat of his desire as he kissed her with unexpected gentleness. He pressed a kiss to each side of her mouth, to the center of it, to the tip of her nose, then warmly to each cheek, like he was mapping her face. She felt treasured and it terrified her.

She was trembling when he stepped back enough for her to remember where they stood, a patient, discerning look on his face. He took her hands in his and kissed the tops of each.

“I'll see you tomorrow,” he said and Brienne blinked at him, worried that she'd offended him by just standing there unable to even breathe under his ministrations.

“I'm sorry, I-”

“There's nothing to be sorry about,” he said firmly, squeezing her hands. “If I stay here things are going to progress somewhere you don't seem ready for yet. I'll wait until you're ready.” He kissed her again, the merest hint of how he wanted her, and her knees were weak when he backed away out of reach. “A safer distance,” he said, grinning a little. “Goodbye, Brienne.”

He sauntered out the door while she stood silently in her dad's living room, feeling like Jaime had dropped a match and left her there ablaze.

Jaime had had to borrow a loan against his own willpower in order to make himself walk out of Brienne's home, away from her tempting lips and freckled skin, from the feel of her quivering body so near his. He'd walked down to the beach near his hotel and had smoked a cigarette he'd purchased from a nearby quickie mart, and when that hadn't soothed him in the slightest, he'd stroked himself off in the shower until the ache had subsided. But Brienne hadn't been ready, not really; there'd been so much nervous concern in her face when they were finally alone. That first night, when she'd kissed him back, Jaime had felt the mountainous need in her, and he wanted her like that again before they fell into bed together. He couldn't bear her being overcome by regret afterward, not when he wanted her with every pulse of blood in his body.

So he'd wait. And he'd smoke. And he'd jerk off twice a day if he had to.

The next morning he woke up to a text from Brienne asking him to meet her at Evenfall track in a few hours. Curious, he got ready quickly and then read more of the Arthur Dayne book to pass the time, speeding out on his motorcycle as soon as was reasonable.

Evenfall circuit was a solid enough track nestled against the dramatic backdrop of the crumbling walls of Evenfall Hall atop the hill. It seated twenty or thirty thousand spectators but the parking lot was empty except for Selwyn's truck hauling a big trailer when he pulled up. As Jaime came to a stop, Brienne got out of the passenger side of the truck, beaming.

“Good morning,” she said, and Jaime was only stopped from taking her in his arms to kiss her hello by Selwyn getting out of the driver's side.

“Morning, Jaime,” Selwyn said. “Have a good night?”
“Good enough. Is that what I think it is?”

Selwyn's face brightened and he looked ten years younger. “It is indeed. Brienne mentioned you wanted to give it a whirl, and the shop is quiet today so I closed it down. I didn't want to miss this.” He unlocked and opened up the rolling door of the trailer to reveal their personal F1 car waiting inside. “If you're interested, that is.”

Jaime felt his smile mirroring Brienne's with excitement. “I'd love to,” he said.

They rolled the car down the small ramp Selwyn provided and through a locked gate Selwyn had the keys to. When Jaime looked curiously at the older man he just shrugged. “Family prerogative,” Selwyn only said with a mysterious smile.

They got the car in position at p-1 and Brienne ran back for her helmet while Selwyn looked the car over, making sure everything was in place.

“Brienne tuned her up last week so she should run great,” Selwyn was saying when Brienne came back holding a plain white helmet.

“Don't you miss the frogs?” Jaime asked slyly.

She mock glared at him. “Be nice to me or I won't let you go first.”

Jaime put his helmet on while they got the car started and Brienne moved swift and sure around the car as it rumbled loud on the asphalt. She tucked and pulled, brushed off the side, paused to listen intently to the sound of the engine before finally nodding at him. “She's all yours,” Brienne said and Jaime climbed inside, settled himself in a seat that was just slightly too big for him. It was strange to not feel fully encased and a little compacted by the cockpit as he did in the car that had been built just for him, and the steering wheel was different, but the feel of the engine shuddering through his body was familiar, and so was Brienne looming over him. They had done this many times now, Jaime in his car, Brienne at his side, that it felt like the world was aligned as it should be.

Brienne pointed out the key buttons for him on the wheel and then she and her dad stepped back, pulling headphones on to drown out the noise and Selwyn pointed at the lights, which were starting to light up. Jaime grinned and pulled his visor down and the world narrowed to just the starting lights, until they went dark and he let the car loose.

The track was unfamiliar to him – it had been years since he'd run it last in F2 – so he took it slowly for the first three laps, getting familiar with the angle of the curves, the length of the straights, before starting to speed up. He kept an eye out for a checkered flag calling him back but every time he passed Brienne and Selwyn at the pit wall, they were waving the green flag for him to continue.

The car itself drove like a dream; it didn't have the same speed as his own, lacking the millions of dragons of money Lannister Corp poured into the engine and every minute adjustment to the body, but Brienne had clearly tuned her to handle the limitations of speed, and Jaime loved the way the car responded to his every whim, almost like it knew which he way wanted to go before he did.

After nineteen laps they showed him the yellow flag, which he took to mean it was time to come back in and he felt, oddly, glad of it. He missed Brienne's voice in his ear as he was driving and it felt wrong to be speeding around a track without her.

>You're pathetic, he told himself.
On the twentieth lap they waved the checkered flag and he did one last slow-down lap before rolling to a stop back at p1. Jaime pulled off his helmet as Brienne nearly bounded up, her eyes wide and excited and a little anxious.

“What did you think? How’d she run?” she asked, offering a hand to help him up out of the cockpit.

“You've done great work,” he said, sincere. Brienne flushed with pleasure, her eyes as bright and sparkling as the sapphire sea and Jaime had the sudden urge to make her look like that because of him.

“She's not as fast as your car, of course.”

“She handles better, though. What have you done to get that smoothness? And why haven't you done it to my car?”

“I suggested it in preseason but the engineers said it wouldn't work with your car.”

“That's a shame,” Jaime said, frowning a little. He wondered if that were really true, or if they'd just ignored her because she was a woman. He made a mental note to press on it when they were back in King's Landing.

“I don't think you quite got her up to speed, though,” Brienne said, pulling on her helmet. “Let me show you.”

Jaime grinned and watched her climb into her car with more ease than when she got in his, her fingers pale and long against the blue of the exterior before she pulled on leather driving gloves. He had the sudden image of pulling them back off her fingers one-by-one, unzipping the jumpsuit she wore and exposing the strong body hiding underneath and he coughed and shifted slightly away from her and Selwyn to hide his extremely untimely reaction.

The car roared under Brienne's command and he and Selwyn retreated to the wall as the lights went on one at a time and then blinked out and Brienne took off much faster than Jaime had. He watched her avidly as long as he could, the way she seemed much more confident in her own car on this familiar track, how she took the corners nearly perfectly at maximum acceleration, the blue of the car reminding him of her eyes in the sunlight.

When Brienne had disappeared around the furthest corner he could see, he turned to find Selwyn was looking at him.

“She's good,” Jaime said.

“She's better than she used to be. You say she's driven some free practice laps for you?”

“Some, yes,” he said, uncertain what Selwyn's solemn tone suggested.

“There's something different about her.”

Jaime felt sweat spring up at his temples and reviewed his every action since he'd arrived this morning. He hadn't thought Selwyn had seen his slight erection earlier, but perhaps Jaime had been less stealthy than he'd thought. “Is there?” Jaime asked, trying not to sound nervous.

“Jaime.” Selwyn turned to face him and crossed his arms over his big barrel chest. Jaime had never in his life felt more like a teenager facing a girlfriend's father than in this moment, and Brienne wasn't even his girlfriend.
Though he wanted her to be, he realized.

“I know Brienne thinks I meddle too much in her life, but things have not always been easy for her. You understand why I'd be protective, don't you?”

Jaime paused, was relieved to see Brienne coming back into view and they both switched their attention to watch her, Selwyn waving the green flag as she flew by them for her second lap, before he set it down and was back to staring intently at Jaime, not having forgotten his question.

“I understand why you want to, and I understand why she doesn't want you to,” Jaime finally said, trying to be diplomatic.

Selwyn's broad face twisted with a smirk. It looked out-of-place on his usually kind features. “That's a very bland answer for the Kingslayer.”

Inhaling slowly, Jaime fought back the instinctive snarl in response. “You are overprotective,” he said. “But I've seen some of what she goes through just in F1, so I get it.” He thought of Connington sprawled on the floor and how good it had felt to let his rage direct his fist. How mad Brienne probably would be if she knew the real reason he had hit the man.

They heard her coming again and Selwyn waved her on before looking back over his shoulder at Jaime. “I can tell you're watching out for her,” he said, “and I appreciate it. She's never had enough people in her life who would.”

The other man turned his back on Jaime then and they watched Brienne run the rest of her twenty laps in silence, while Jaime retroactively hated every person who had ever hurt her.

They took turns off and on for hours, pressing each other to get the fastest lap of the day. Brienne was fastest for awhile, until Jaime got comfortable and familiar enough with the car and the track that his decades of racing experience finally let him pass her. Eventually, as the afternoon sun started its descent, they called it a day, sweaty and satisfied.

While Selwyn cleaned up and let whoever had been running the lights go, Jaime helped Brienne start rolling the car back to the trailer.

“How did you get faster all day?” she asked on a half-laugh. “I thought for sure I'd have you beat.”

“It's all rhythm and feeling. Once you stop thinking about the track and just start feeling it, you drive it better.”

“How do you stop thinking about it though? I feel like I'll lose control if I shut off my brain.”

Jaime flicked his gaze briefly to her face, but Brienne was staring with narrowed eyes at the road ahead of them. “You have to trust yourself and your instincts.”

“I don't have instincts.”

“I doubt that,” he murmured, his fingers tightening as he thought again of the night he'd arrived here, that kiss on the side of the road.

“I missed this, you know,” she said after a few quiet seconds. “The track. The work. Less than a year and I already miss it when it's gone.”

“You're addicted. It happens to the best of us.”
“What happens-” she clamped her mouth shut abruptly.

“After this season ends?” He shrugged, keeping his tone light. “Let's focus on the championship first. If I don't win, I may not be with Lannister Racing next season either.”

“You can't be serious.”

“You've met my father, right? About so tall, stern face, disdain dripping out of his ass?”

“I just...” they'd reached the trailer and she stood, arching her back to stretch the muscles but also succeeding in dragging all his attention to her small breasts pressing against her jumpsuit. “I don't wish to speak ill of him.”

“I give you permission to speak as ill of him as you want. He's earned it.”

She chewed her bottom lip and glanced around. “He seems cruel,” she said softly.

“He is. And when I win the world championship this year, I'll show him, and my sister, and everyone else that I'm not the stupid fuck-up they all think I am,” he added, feeling the rage that always simmered low in his heart boiling up.

“Oh, Jaime,” Brienne breathed, sounding sad for him.

Jaime couldn't bear the sympathy in her eyes, was grateful when Selwyn hailed them and kept him from having to.

“Will you be joining us for dinner tonight?” the elder Tarth asked once they'd gotten the car safely stowed away.

“No, I'm going to head back to the hotel and have an early evening. Thank you for letting me drive your car, she's a real beauty. I can tell how hard you've both worked.”

Father and daughter both smiled, mirrored pleased looks on their broad faces. “I'll see you tomorrow, though?” Brienne asked, still tentative and Jaime wondered if she'd ever trust how much he wanted to be near her. But with her dad standing right there he couldn't do more than nod and hold out his hand for a friendly shake. If they gripped each other for a few seconds too long, Selwyn didn't seem to notice.

Jaime watched them get into the truck, waved when Brienne turned to smile shyly at him from the passenger seat, and then he drove along Tarth's darkening roads until the stars came out to remind him of Brienne, pushing the memories of his father away.
August (Part 3)

Chapter Summary

When she opened her eyes again Jaime had turned her way, staring at her wide-eyed as though he'd seen one of the Seven themselves. “You're magnificent,” he declared, moving closer. “I don't know whether to kiss you or throw myself at your feet.”

“I don't want your worship.” Brienne stepped down off the stone until they were a handspan apart, until she could feel his heavy breathing on her face stronger than the wind. His lamplight eyes a promise he would guide her through the sharp rocks of her fears. “I want you.”

Chapter Notes

I'm having some writer's block and, oddly, posting seems to often help me write (I think it's the sense that I'm one chapter closer to not having enough chapters written in the backlog, heh), so I'm going to do the counter-intuitive thing and post the final August chapter early this week. At this point I have to admit to myself there is no schedule besides "I promise I will post once a week, but when that is and whether I post more is all up in the air.” I hope that doesn't cause y'all too much consternation. I'm really hoping once I get past the section I'm currently stuck on, that the following chapters will flow quickly. I've certainly got them outlined well enough for it.

Housekeeping note: I've upped the rating to Explicit. I've been waffling on which way to go for weeks now and decided to err on the side of over-rating vs. under-rating. I also updated the tags to warn for upcoming things that most of you have been expecting for several chapters now. Again, I wasn't sure whether to include those tags from the beginning but I probably should have.

FINALLY: my beta, BrynnMcK, she who just today sent me the sweetest, most helpful series of texts while I was dying a slow death of low writing self-esteem, started publishing her (finished) multi-chapter JB fic, Pilot Light. Chefs! Fake dating! Reality cooking show! I had the privilege of reading it already and you will love it. Her banter is off-the-charts great. She's got it all done and should be posting twice a week. Unlike me, she's reliable.

On Sunday, Brienne woke to the smell of a storm on the air.

She lay in bed and thought about Jaime, about how they'd gone to see a movie the day before and when her dad had asked her how it was later she couldn't remember a thing because she and Jaime had spent most of it making out in the back row. They hadn't kissed at all on Friday at the track and it felt like they were making up for lost time in the nearly empty theater, Jaime's hands skimming along her thigh and back, her torso twisted to try to reach him with her own hands. Her muscles had not appreciated the awkward curve in the tight seat, but the rest of her body certainly had.
Still, when the movie had ended and they'd sat there not even holding hands as the few patrons in front of them milled out of the theater, Brienne hadn't been able to invite Jaime back to her bed, or to invite herself over to his. They'd instead gone to another of her favorite restaurants on the island and their talk turned to work and the race at White Harbor in two weeks. Brienne would have preferred making things up about the movie they hadn't seen instead of dancing around the swiftly approaching end of their peaceful rest on Tarth. They would have even less time alone once they were back in the thick of the season, and the world championship was still on the line. No matter Jaime's blithe hand-waving that any sort of secret whatever-this-was would work, he would need focus and so would she if she was going to help him win. How they were going to spend day after day in his office together trying to keep enough space between them to focus was a problem she wasn't sure how to solve and they hadn't even had sex yet.

The yet weighed heavy. There was time still for her to stop feeling so nervous and afraid thinking about taking that step with Jaime. Not much time, but time nonetheless.

For today, there was a storm coming, and Brienne pulled out her phone and texted him.

'When you get up, eat a big breakfast and drink something warm. I've got a plan.'

A minute later he sent, 'Should I be worried?'

'Only if you don't like getting wet.'

He didn't respond for even longer and she imagined him sitting in his own bed, trying to decide whether to make some innuendo-laden reply. 'What time should I come over?'

'I'll pick you up.' She peeked out the window and judged the shape and darkness of the clouds, glanced at the clock to see the current time. '10:30'

'It's a date'

Her cheeks reddened but she beamed happily at her phone and sent him a smiling emoji before following her own advice.

When she stopped in front of the Lighthouse Inn at 10:30am sharp, he emerged from the lobby just as fat raindrops started to fall. Jaime held a cozy-looking, thick brown jacket under his arm and wore a deep green t-shirt that made his eyes glow. His black jeans clung with just enough tightness to his hips and thighs that Brienne caught a woman staring appreciatively at him as she headed into the lobby. The look on the woman's face had to be the same one Brienne was wearing, watching Jaime approach looking like he'd come from a Hottest Drivers of F1 photo shoot. Jaime didn't seem to even notice the other woman or her attention though, his eyes only for Brienne as he climbed into the truck and brushed his hand over his golden, slightly damp hair and smiled at her. Her world settled and sparked at the same time, a dizzying swirl of comfort and anticipation.

“So what's this mysterious plan?” he asked, buckling up and resting back in the seat.

“Do you remember how I told you about how my dad used to take Gal and I up to Evenfall Hill during storms?”

Jaime looked out the window at the angry gray clouds overhead; the rain was still falling slow but steady and the ground was already wet. “I was afraid you'd say that.”

“Scared, Lannister?”

“Not when I've got you to protect me, Wrench.”
She shot him a small grin and drove the quickest route to the hill, not wanting to miss the heart of
the storm. Her blood was already singing in anticipation of the wildness of nature roaring through
her, of sharing that with Jaime. Back in Gulltown she hadn't fully trusted that he wouldn't just mock
her for wanting to be inside the storm, to feel the rain pouring down on her skin like a welcome
caress. But now everything between them was different, a push-pull of friendship and attraction
that left her as breathless and tingling as if she'd been struck by lightning.

They were quiet on the drive, Brienne focused on the road as the rain turned heavier, Jaime staring
out at the storm and keeping his own thoughts to himself. His silence was very loud. The winding
drive up Evenfall Hill was familiar under the truck's tires and Brienne let memory lead them
confidently up to an empty parking lot at the trailhead to the top. There were only a few short,
scrubby trees up here, the rest having been cleared away ages ago, but they already swayed in the
growing winds and she saw Jaime stare at them, his brow creased with worry.

“I won't let you get hurt,” Brienne said firmly and he turned to search her eyes for reassurance, his
face warming with pride.

“I believe you could even hold back nature itself,” he murmured, her cheeks reddening under his
appreciative stare. Jaime winked and opened his door and the wind rushed in, cold and restless.
They both pulled on their jackets and stepped out into the growing storm.

“At least we'll be alone,” he called over the top of the truck. She left the truck unlocked and zipped
up her jacket before gesturing for him to follow her down the trail, and he hurried to her side and
took her hand with a quick squeeze. It was a short walk at a slight elevation and Brienne breathed
in deep of the familiar smells from her childhood. Though her father had stopped bringing her here
after Galladon's death, Brienne had come back on her own as soon as she could legally drive
herself. How many lonely days she had walked this uneven trail that curved around the ruins of
Evenfall and deposited them in a meadow at the furthest edge of the hilltop. Bringing Jaime here
now as the clouds continued to gather made her heart pound as fast and heavy as the rain. If he
made fun of it, of her, she wasn't sure what she would do.

But when they hit the highest point, Jaime gasped aloud and breathed, “by the gods” at the sight
and she felt weak-kneed with relief.

The top of Evenfall Hill was slightly higher than the tower at Morne, which was hidden in the
distance behind the stone walls of the Hall at their backs. The spot she led them to looked out
towards the northwest from where the storm had rolled in deep gray and thick as smoke above
them. She’d watched other storms come in from here, long shelves of menacing darkness, and she’d
imagined herself a warrior facing down an oncoming army of snarling undead, resolute and
unafraid. It was almost funny how the wind howling over the hill filled her with so much less fear
than Jaime whispering in her ear.

At their feet now the towns and roads of Tarth soaked in the rain, but it was the wild and white-
capped sea fighting and lashing upward at the sky that captured the immense ferocity that
surrounded them. A shipbreaking sea, they called it in the docks, and woe to anyone who dared to
venture out into its raking claws. In the distance a lighthouse burned through the sheeting rain, a
reminder that there was always someone keeping the light on in case a lost soul needed it even in
the most fearsome storms.

“Brienne,” Jaime said, barely audible above the wind. He released her hand and strode to the edge
of the meadow where it dropped at a steep slope back down the hill. “This is incredible.”

Standing at the edge of the hill, soaked through with the rain, the wind buffeting hard against his
coat, Jaime looked as tall and bright as the lighthouse below. Brienne's body ached to see him here
in this place of her heart, facing down the storm, filling her with a heat stronger than the chill.

With his back to her she took the moment to climb atop the low, flat rock nearby from which she'd faced many storms, closed her eyes, and held her arms out to the tempest, welcoming it in. The rains of Tarth were strong, beating against her skin and upturned head. Cold as they were, though, they couldn't dull the steadily growing need inside of her. She felt strengthened by the storm, implacable, her big body driving through the seas by sheer force of her will. What she willed was growing louder in her with every beat of her heart.

When she opened her eyes again Jaime had turned her way, staring at her wide-eyed as though he'd seen one of the Seven themselves. “You're magnificent,” he declared, moving closer. “I don't know whether to kiss you or throw myself at your feet.”

“I don't want your worship.” Brienne stepped down off the stone until they were a handspan apart, until she could feel his heavy breathing on her face stronger than the wind. His lamplight eyes a promise he would guide her through the sharp rocks of her fears. “I want you.”

They moved into each other at the same time, kissing as fiercely as the storm that swirled and wailed around them. Thunder rumbled loudly overhead and they broke apart, chests heaving. Brienne led them quickly and silently back down the path to the truck, pushing him hard against it to kiss him hungrily, Jaime's hands clenching in her hair.

He mouthed the side of her neck, his mouth a furnace against the cold of the rain, and then whispered, “what now?” hot into her ear.

There was no doubt this time, no thinking, just instinct as natural and untamed as the storm as she threw open the door and climbed inside the truck to lie down along the bench seat, pulling Jaime in after her. They both pulled off their jackets and then Jaime shut the door, sealing them inside.

The cab of the truck was just big enough for the two of them like this, Jaime frantically undoing her jeans and groaning as he tugged them down her legs, his groan turning to laughter as they both had to wrestle to get them off.

“For your legs are too gods-damned long,” he muttered, sounding entranced by the fact, not annoyed, and quickly her shoes and pants and underwear were lying in a soggy heap on the floor of the footwell. He looked at her exposed before him as he'd looked at the fierce wildness of Tarth in the meadow. His fingers traveled back up the length of her legs, and when Jaime pressed the heel of his hand against her center, Brienne's laughter died in her throat and she gasped as though he'd shocked her, her body buzzing, her legs clenching tightly against his hips to pull him nearer. Even when she'd touched herself while imagining him it had never felt like this, a rogue wave of need she could only crash through, not climb over.

“Please,” she begged, grabbing at his shirt, at the waist of his jeans, and he kissed her hard before pulling away a little. He tossed his wallet onto her chest and then started working at his own pants.

“Condom,” he growled and she nodded and hurriedly went through the wallet with fingers chilled and trembling from the rain and the feel of Jaime's body pressing her down into the seat. She barely registered expensive-looking, shiny credit cards, his license, an old photo of a pretty woman holding two babies in her arms before Brienne's fingers closed around the square foil of a condom. Or, she discovered as she pulled out the strip and threw the wallet on the floor, six condoms.

She held it up as Jaime finally kicked his own pants off and his cock pressed blunt against her thigh, hard and scalding against her cold skin, leaving a smear of heat between the raindrops.
“Feeling lucky?” she asked, breathless with desire as he rubbed his thumbs over her hipbones, his long fingers curling around her ass.

“I wanted to be prepared,” he explained, just as breathless as she was. “Besides,” he said, leaning down enough that his cock nestled heavy between her legs and she could only gasp at the sensation, “I knew when you were ready, once wouldn't be enough.” He plucked the condoms from her hand and she watched him open one and roll it on in a smooth movement, the sight of his long-fingered hands holding himself making her yearn for him with a desperation that matched the wind battering the truck, trying to get in.

Jaime kissed her tender and slow, like that was all he intended to do for awhile but Brienne wanted him inside her more than air in that moment, and she bit at his lip, swiped her tongue in his mouth when it opened on a moan. His hands tightened on her skin but still he slipped almost tentatively into her while they both shuddered at the pulse of him deep within. The feel of Jaime enveloped and overwhelmed her, more intense than the storm outside, louder than the rain pounding the metal roof above them. She'd wanted this for so many weeks and it was still almost more than she could bear.

No storm could compete with Jaime sliding wild and wanting in and out of her, his mouth fused to her own, their wet bodies burning and crashing like lightning, like cars bottoming out on the track to send sparks flying. She had been so afraid of what this moment might do and she trembled on the edge with that fear, that his strength and his gentleness combined, his open hunger for her, were too much for her heart to resist. Jaime's hand slid between them to rub between her slick folds, his eyes drinking her in. She shut her own and turned her head aside.

“Don't turn away from me,” he said, a murmured plea, and she opened her eyes, a doomed ship ready to throw herself against the rocks for the lure of something golden. His stare wasn't warm now; it was bright and hot as the sun, burning away the last of her fear. There was nowhere in the truck she could hide from the wash of his light, revealing every part of her. Not that it mattered: it was already his anyway. Brienne arched her hips up to pull him in deeper and Jaime made a strangled noise in his throat and gripped her tighter, pushing in until their bodies were one and her release struck as loud and shocking as thunder as it erupted all through her with the desperation of a shipwreck, one hand pressed up against the cold glass of the window, the other twisted in his shirt. A moment later his orgasm struck as hard and fast as her own and he stuttered helplessly against her, curse words and her name falling from his lips like sunbeams on her skin.

Jaime uttered one last, loud moan and then slumped against her and Brienne wrapped her arms around him to hold him there, his weight an anchor that tethered her to the world while the aftershocks quivered through them both. She stared up at the ceiling of the truck and gulped down air and the waves subsided, leaving her safely ashore. Their chests moved in time as they panted and calmed, both of them slick with sweat and rain. Brienne hadn't been a virgin before this, but she may as well have been for how entirely different it had been with Jaime. She felt like the first tender shoot blossoming in a meadow that had been burned to ash. Her feet were tucked around Jaime's calves, one up on the seat, one down in the footwell, and she was stretched and sated and full until he shifted and slipped out of her.

“I should take the condom off,” he mumbled into her neck and Brienne boldly rubbed her fingers under the shirt plastered to his muscled back. She'd burned to feel the ridges and planes of him for months now, and it thrilled her to be able to do so, to have him almost purr under her touch. He seemed satisfied as he nuzzled into her shoulder.

Her own back was starting to ache from the seatbelt buckle poking into it, so she kissed his temple
and gently tugged his chin up to look at her, struck silent for a moment at the adoration all over his face when he did.

“You looked like one of the old gods made flesh,” he murmured, kissing the tip of her nose. “Even if there had been people around I wouldn't have been able to resist you.”

Brienne blushed, and she watched his eyes travel down her neck to her shirt, where he tugged the collar down and grinned happily.

“I knew it,” he said, looking at her reddening chest, and Brienne snorted and pushed him gently off of her, feeling awkwardness creep in again now that the passion had tapered off. The storm had, too, and while she wrangled her body into her wet underwear and jeans, grunting when the fabric stuck and clung to every inch of skin, the rain turned to a gentle pattering against the window.

Once they were both dressed again, Jaime kissed her softly and then pulled away just enough to be able to meet her eyes. “The storm is over and my hotel bed is a lot more comfortable than this,” he said. “More private, too. If you're free.” He sounded uncertain in a way she'd never heard him before and her heart wobbled unsteadily inside of her.

Brienne touched her fingertips to his chin, his cheek, and he turned his head to kiss them in a gesture somehow more intimate than the sex they'd just had.

“I don't have any other plans,” she said, smiling a little, and then, feeling emboldened by the storm and the memory of him desperate inside of her she added, “besides, I'd hate for you to have wasted your money on these.” She waggled the discarded strip of condoms at him. For a moment she thought he would swarm her again right there, and she would have let him, but he took the condoms from her fingers and tucked them into the pocket of her jeans.

“We don't want to be wasteful,” he agreed in a low, knowing tone. They both buckled up and Jaime kept his palm heavy and hot on her leg the entire, not-fast-enough drive back to the Lighthouse Inn.

Jaime felt like he was flying as Brienne drove them quickly back to his room. It wasn't the speed or the slick roads that caused it though, it was the memory of her flushed and panting underneath him, her unbelievable strength both as she'd pulled him into her to begin and held him close after they were done. He had come to Tarth for her and she'd given him everything he wanted and more and he would never forget the way she'd seemed made of the storm itself at the top of the hill, or of the soft, happy look on her face when he kissed her fingertips and invited her back to his bed.

Fuck, he thought, squeezing her thigh and earning one of those shy, pleased smiles as they neared the Lighthouse Inn. Jaime had had sex with a few people, but he'd never felt as moved by it in the way he did now as he stared at Brienne, memorizing every freckle, every awkward, beloved line of her face. He would do whatever it took to keep that joy shining bright beneath her rough, pale skin.

This had, perhaps, been a mistake. Good sex – great sex, indescribable sex – wouldn't change why Brienne had wanted to keep things quiet in the first place, but it would make keeping things quiet even more difficult. He wanted to take out a front page ad in every paper in Westeros claiming Brienne for his own and he didn't even know if she would want to keep this up when they got back to King's Landing. Jaime promised himself he would ask, but not for a few days. They still had time to enjoy on Tarth and he'd rather live with the uncertainty than press his luck. Besides they were parked now and Brienne was looking at him, her blue eyes nearly black with desire and Jaime realized that though he wasn't a young man anymore, it wouldn't matter today. He pressed a kiss to her palm and slid out of the truck, fumbling for his keycard.
There was no one around, bless every god old and new, as Jaime led Brienne to his room, kissing her every few steps until he opened the door and nearly dragged her inside. Since he'd dropped his luggage in the closet he'd thought of little else but having her here: the bed he'd wanted to see her stretched out on, the small desk with the Dayne book he'd earmarked passages to talk to her about, the small gas fireplace he'd imagined using as the only light to explore her naked body. He turned it on full now before facing Brienne.

Her freckled skin was pink and she was shivering, her arms wrapped tightly around herself, her hair plastered to her head. He couldn't believe he'd ever thought her ugly; he'd never wanted someone more than when she chewed her lip and glanced shyly at him from under her pale wet lashes. She had been a force of nature on the hill, but here with her hair tucked messily behind one ear, dripping and uneasy under his steady gaze, Jaime was stunned by the weighty, raucous beat of his heart.

Jaime cleared his throat and peeled her arms away from her body, her shirt off of her entirely. “Let me warm you,” he whispered against her shoulder as he stepped around behind her and undid her plain white bra. It slid to the floor with a sound like a sigh, echoed by Brienne as he ran his hands down her arms, over her waist and up to cover her small breasts fully with his hands. She leaned back against him and yelped a little.

“Your shirt is cold,” she said, laughing.

Jaime removed his hands only long enough to take off and throw away his own shirt and then he pulled her wide, firm body back against his, skin-to-skin, stroking and pulling at her nipples and kissing the corded tendon and muscle that formed the perfect curve of her neck. He could feel the vibration of her low moan with his lips. In the truck, surrounded by the cacophony of the storm and his own rushing blood, he hadn't been able to hear the quiet noises she made, whimpers and wordless pleas that reverberated through him now and made him ache for more. He kissed along the strong line of her shoulders, covering the constellations of freckles with his mouth. Even back in the sauna when they'd both hated him in equal measure, Jaime had wanted to use his tongue to trace a path through the hundred small stars on her back.

When she was arched and gasping in his arms, Jaime slid one hand down over the plane of her stomach, stopping at her abdomen. Oh, he thought with sudden delight, she has a belly button. He felt silly for a moment – of course she would, she wasn't a clone – but he'd never seen it before and the dip of her belly was so soft in the firm muscle that he was briefly transfixed, brushing his fingers repeatedly over it until she nudged away his probing hands. It was just like Brienne herself; the softness of her heart surrounded by the hard wall she'd built to protect it. A wall she was willing to let him through as he turned her in his arms and kissed her deeply.

“Bed,” he directed, and then for the second time that day he helped her out of her pants and underwear before divesting himself of his own, gratified by the way she greedily eyed his already hard cock, her trembling shyness from the first time at least temporarily discarded. He stroked himself while she watched and licked her lips, her body shifting restlessly. The cramped interior of the truck had cocooned them before, a safe haven momentarily outside of time, but he liked this space better for giving him a full view of her, especially her legs long as a summer's day. He wanted to see them on the silk sheets of his apartment, on the plain cotton sheets he'd spotted in hers. He wondered for a moment if he could talk her into closing the blinds of his office, locking the door, and recreating the first time he'd been up close to her legs back in January, except this time he wouldn't leave her there untouched in his chair.

Jaime exhaled, his control shaky, the edge of his desire and shocked elation barely dulled by their first round in the truck, and he knelt at the end of the bed with his hands on her knees, spreading
them wide. She was so wet already, eager for him again when he wasn't even sure why she liked him most days. Having her here with eyes as clear and blue as the sky after a storm, it felt almost too much; an unearned gift he was afraid he'd have to return. But she was here with him after he'd dreamed of her for so long; she'd chosen to be not once but twice, with nothing to convince her but his grasping, bottomless need. Jaime would not give her reason to regret it.

He settled with his head between her thighs and used tongue and teeth on her center, lapping up her sweet and salty musk with a heavy groan, his fingers keeping steady time inside her until she was crying out his name -- and he knew he'd always hear the echo of this moment when she said it in the future. His shoulders were compacted between her legs, his hair pulled tight by her hands, his nose soaked and buried in the blonde hair at her juncture, but he only stopped when she was shuddering, digging her heel into his arm to push him back. Jaime lifted his eyes to her face and wiped the back of his hand over his mouth like a man who had enjoyed a gourmet meal, her patchy, deep-red flush going darker when she met his stare across the expanse of her own endless body.

He crawled up that long, muscled plain to tenderly kiss her, and she hummed under his lips, her tongue sweetly darting out and tasting herself in his mouth. Every man that had ever passed this up had been an idiot, Jaime thought. For all his many flaws, at least he was here, the fire's heat at his back, Brienne's heat at his front.

"My turn," she said and he felt a tremor of want almost painful in its intensity as she sat up and maneuvered him so he was sitting back against the wall. She barely fit in-between his legs and he grabbed her wrists, yanking her against him to kiss her soundly.

"I'd rather put those condoms to use," he said into her mouth, feeling her thick lips smile against his.

"I'd rather put my mouth to use," she whispered back, flushing and barely meeting his eyes as she spoke, and he groaned loud and long against her skin when her hand moved rough up and down his length.

He stilled her with a firm grip, gasping "I won't last" when she pulled away a little, looking worried. "Brienne, I can't-" he kissed her, ferocious, and touched his forehead to hers. "I want this to last and it won't if you do that."

She smiled with a hint of wickedness he could never have imagined her capable of, and he knew he'd do whatever she wanted in that moment, no matter how fast and potentially embarrassing to his reputation it might be. But instead she reached over to the condoms she'd smartly set at the bedside table and opened one, awkwardly putting it on him under his panting direction. Brienne had clearly never done this before and she squeezed and tugged his cock as she rolled the condom on, her tongue trapped between her teeth in concentration, and by the time she was done Jaime's hands were fisted so hard in the sheets his fingers hurt and he had to take a few steadying breaths while she watched him.

"Are you ready for this?" she asked, an echo of what he always asked her on the track, never realizing what it meant to have someone ask it of him.

Jaime nodded and pulled her towards him, positioning her knees on either side of his hips and she sank down onto him while he cursed deep and low in his chest and her passionate moan harmonized underneath. The rest was all sensation: the sound of her wet heat around him, the unrelenting blue of her eyes occasionally fluttering closed, the powerful grip of her hands on his shoulders as she held him in place when he came apart inside her with his neck arched backward, his head pressed hard into the wall. Only when he sank back onto the bed did she slow and still and
curl into his chest like he could comfort her; a ridiculous lie when it was always her who soothed him. But for this moment he would not let her down. He wrapped his arms around her broad back, buried his head into her neck, and wished that this week would never end.

They re-settled themselves under the covers, Brienne scooting down a little extra to lay her head on Jaime's chest so she could hear his heart beating like a lullaby in her ear, his toes touching the tops of her feet below them. She wanted to look at Jaime but was too nervous to do so, even though he'd given her no reason to believe he was anything but content, one hand rubbing small circles along her arm, his other hand covering hers against his stomach where she lightly ran her fingers over the trail of hair there. Not every man is Connington she reminded herself. Jaime least of all. There were no men like Jaime, she was starting to believe; his unique alchemy of advantage and adversity, sarcasm and sweetness impossible to replicate anywhere else. Her fingers curled a little into his skin, holding him tight.

As the silence stretched between them, Brienne wondered what people usually said after sex. In her previous experience the silence had lasted only as long as it had taken her to shuffle out of her fellow student's dorm room, never to return. Here, with a warm fire and warmer man, she had no urge to leave Jaime's room or even his bed, and he seemed to be slowly falling asleep under her. The quiet wasn't uncomfortable, but for the two of them to not talk for so long in any situation was unusual; after all that had just occurred even more. She'd thought Jaime, at least, would have had something to say.

Brienne shifted her head a little to peer up at him, traced with her eyes the sharp line of his jaw, the point of his nose. He lifted his head to look back down at her, smiling with a tenderness that sent her heart into a skid. In the storm she'd felt brave, their attraction unstoppable; when he'd pulled her into this room she'd felt desired; here in the aftermath of it all, when the quiet sunlight peeking through clouds and curtains allowed no hiding, he was looking at her like she was something to be cherished and Brienne had to look away again to blink back her sudden tears. She inhaled deeply, cursing the way it shuddered a little through her lungs.

Jaime's hand stilled on her arm. “Everything okay?” he asked and she could hear the hesitance and concern in his tone.

“Yes. I just-” Brienne bit her lip and then pushed herself up on her elbow to look down at him. She had thought him handsome before, but ruffled and relaxed like this, his long, golden body nestled in white sheets, he was stunning. And he was hers, if only for a few more days. “Everything’s great,” she said, meaning it in the moment.

His smile was so big the sun itself seemed to pour out of him and he lifted up enough to kiss her chin. “Good, because I wasn't planning on anyone leaving this room for at least the next twenty-four to thirty-six hours.”

“No,” she laughed. “I can't just not go home.”

“Call your dad and tell him we took a boat out that broke down in the middle of the ocean and you'll be back tomorrow.” On her skeptical look he shrugged. “Tell him the truth then. What does it matter if he knows? What does it matter if anyone knows?”

“The first woman F1 race engineer having sex with her driver? You're right I'm sure no one will care about that at all.”

He frowned and she ran her fingers over his wrinkled brow. “I told you I don't care if that's all they
“That’s not all they’ll ask about and you know it,” she said, quiet and firm. “The secret part of this is the most important part.”

Jaime tensed beneath her. “I thought the part between us was the most important part.”

Brienne’s stomach rolled over and she sat up on her knees, folding her arms over herself. She wished they weren’t naked for this conversation. “You know what I mean. You’re being obstinate.”

“I’m not the one who won’t listen to reason.”

“Reason? Let’s play this all the way through, then, if you’re such a fan of reason.” He sat up, mirroring her by crossing his own arms. Brienne wanted to hold him, but he had to see what she did. “We start by telling my dad and he’s, I don’t know, happy maybe. Maybe he’s annoyed. Maybe he worries you took advantage of my inexperience.”

“But I-”

“Let me finish. Best case, he wishes us well and we have a lovely break. Then we go back to King’s Landing together at the end of the week. We show up at work together on Monday. We kiss in front of the Lannister Racing offices and Kevan sees us. Or even better, your father. Either way Tywin will find out. What happens then? I get to keep my job? More likely he fires me before sunset.”

Jaime’s face darkened like the storming sky. “I’d quit first,” he ground out between clenched teeth.

“And ruin your shot at the World Championship? What good would that do? He wouldn’t keep me if you left.”

“I couldn’t stay if I’m the one that got you fired.”

Brienne sighed, resigned. “Best case he’s pissed at both of us but we get to keep working while he throws even more of the team’s weight behind Lancel. What will your pit crew think? Bronn and Podrick and Lucion should be fine but does Willem suddenly rethink working with me? Do the others? Are you down a man, two, ten by the time it’s all done? Where do we get more pit crew to replace them? Of course then the gossip gets out and the media start to call. They put out puff pieces, attack pieces, endless requests for interviews-”

“I get it,” he muttered.

“I haven’t even gotten to the other teams or the fans yet. It only gets worse from here.”

“It’s enough,” he snapped. “I get it.” They glared at each other before Jaime exhaled loudly and looked away. “I get it,” he repeated, his voice dull. “So what do we do?”

Though it felt terrifying to let herself go from her own safe embrace, Brienne unfolded her arms and unwound his, twining their fingers together. “We started down this path, so we either go back to where we were or we keep going.”

“In secret.”

“In secret,” she agreed.

“When the season is over-”
“We’ll see,” she interrupted, and he pursed his lips. “Let’s just get through this season first.”

Jaime tugged her and she nearly fell into his solid chest. He kissed her hard, biting at her lip, his hands slipping free to tangle in her hair, tilting her head to devour her mouth. He was not the steady lighthouse now; he was the tsunami that would swallow her whole. “I don't want to go back to not having this,” he breathed against her after he broke away, his arms banding around her body.

“We should have had this discussion sooner.”

“We did, I just ignored it.”

Brienne smiled a little, pressed a kiss to his neck, salty with dried sweat. “Just like you ignore when I tell you to box, why am I not surprised?”

He snorted and she felt it against her chest. “No work conversations while we're naked.”

“Afraid that I'll seduce you into a strategy you don't like?”

“That's exactly what I think.”

She laughed and shook her head and he urged her around so she sat against him, her head leaned back on his shoulder, his cock soft but twitching against the curve of her ass. “Do you think we'll regret this?” she asked quietly, needing to know even if it hurt.

“No,” he said simply, kissing her hair. “Do you?”

She rewound the last few days and what it would have been like if she hadn't kissed him back that first night. Simpler, perhaps; he probably would have gone back to King's Landing the next day and left her safe but filled with regret anyway. “No. But even if we do it's better to regret something we did then something we missed.” Galladon had been the one to teach her that, though after his death – and only reinforced by Griffin – it had seemed misguided advice.

“Spoken like a Lannister,” Jaime smirked.

“Like a Tarth,” she responded and he squeezed her with his legs. His hands rubbed down her arms and then came to a stop where the dip of her hips would be if she were like other women. Brienne flushed a little, waiting for his shocked retreat, but Jaime seemed incapable of noticing her physical flaws.

Or perhaps, she tentatively mused as he nuzzled her ear, he just didn't care. Not like all the others did. Not like Red Ronnet, who'd thought her so ugly he couldn't even ask her out as a joke.

“Did you punch Connington because of me?” she asked abruptly. Jaime's fingers curled against her sides, his breath a puff of surprise in her hair.

“It doesn't matter why I did it.”

“It does to me.”

“Why?”

What was one more secret when he'd already seen so much of her? She told him, in a steady voice, about what had happened during her two months at Griffin, from the first week of snide comments to the final moments of painful laughter. Brienne did not leave anything out, and she did not cry.

Jaime was quiet, but as she talked she could feel the anger trembling in him through her skin.
“I should have done more,” was all he said when she finished. He moved from behind her to in front and the line of his brow was dark and intense before he disappeared between her legs again, his mouth and fingers relentless until she was hoarse and weak with pleasure. Then when she was limp, her thighs slick with their sweat and his spit and her own wetness, he fucked her slowly, whispering everything he wanted to do to her like a promise, and Ronnet Connington's cruel smile faded into a distant, painless memory.

The next day Jaime woke up alone in the bed they'd spent most of Sunday in, still smelling Brienne on the sheets.

After her story he had been desperate for some way to fix what those assholes had done, but since he had no way to go back and change the past he spent dedicated time changing her present, trying to show her how much he wanted her for who she was: her height, her strength, her serious face and mesmerizing blue eyes. They'd fallen asleep in each other’s arms after he'd exhausted them both, and then hours later he'd woken her up again by teasing her nipple into his mouth.

By the time she left late at night, they'd gone through four of the six condoms and one and a half large pizzas and Jaime was already planning what to do with the rest of both.

He reached for his phone and smiled to see a new message from Brienne: 'Good morning.'

'Morning' he sent back. 'Feeling sore?'

She responded with a frowny-face emoji and he laughed in the empty room. Shortly after she sent another text. 'Dad's noticing how much time we've spent together; I need to spend the day with him'

Jaime hrmphed. 'I was hoping we could spend the day together'

'Maybe tomorrow'

“Maybe tomorrow?” he said out loud. How was he supposed to not see her until tomorrow? Or longer? They only had a few days left before they had to return, and he knew she'd want him to go back before she did. 'What about dinner tonight?' he sent her.

'No. Go explore the island. Do tourist things. That's why you came.'

It wasn't even close to why he'd come, but he left the lie. 'If I have to' 'You do'

“Spoilsport,” he muttered. He shouldn't begrudge her spending time with her father when Selwyn was actually a decent man, but he did.

He considered lying in bed all day and just reading the Dayne book, but decided to do as Brienne had bid and instead got to know more of the island that was her home. Post-storm, the air was even more crisp and clear than it had been before, the waters a blue so deep they looked painted on, and every meadow he passed on his bike glimmered with raindrops in the sunlight. Jaime had been to tracks and garages all over the world, places he loved and had lingered at when he could, but nothing had filled him with the same breathtaking awe as the view from Evenfall Hill, or the waterfall he discovered on one of the shorter valley hikes. It was an easy island to fall in love with; the open, curving roads perfect for his bike, the people stoically kind. If anyone he met on his day-long adventure knew who he was, they left him alone.
No wonder Brienne had immediately come home for the break. Her father, the neighbor girl, the smell of fragrant summer flowers on the breeze – she must have missed them all terribly so far from home, stuck in the lion's den with him.

Jaime climbed back up out of the valley and drank the last of the bottled water he'd bought. The sun was finally setting and he'd spent the entire day on his own, not thinking directly about Brienne but her presence hovering nonetheless. He'd almost texted her a dozen times, resisted doing so yet again and instead went to House of Fish to have an entire bowl of the chowder. Arryk was there and he greeted Jaime with a much friendlier smile, seated him at a small table by the window so Jaime could watch the stars appear while he ate.

He finished his meal, left Arryk another huge tip, and started up his motorcycle, and only then did Jaime let himself think about Brienne naked and flushed because of him. He checked his watch – just after nine pm. The long way around the island would take him a couple of hours in the dark; if he drove that he could arrive at Brienne's neighborhood at a time when Selwyn would surely be asleep, leaving Brienne alone in her little house.

I should text her, he thought, except that would give her a chance to be sensible about this and that wouldn't do either of them any good, so he stuck to his plan and as the clock hit 11:02, Jaime was walking his bike up to the side of her house instead of driving it, like he was some sort of hooligan come to seduce Selwyn's daughter; which he supposed he was, he thought with a grin. Jaime knocked on her door in the dark. He heard the faint crash of waves until Brienne's distinct, heavy footsteps drowned them out.

The porch light came on and Jaime winced at the sudden brightness. She was going to be annoyed, he thought, but he didn't care when she opened the door and he took her in: blond hair mussed and clearly pressed down with hasty hands, an old t-shirt with a hole in the arm, and sweat pants that had been cut into shorts that barely skimmed the tops of her thighs. She didn't look annoyed, she looked worried, and though she reached out to touch his arm he felt like her fingers had grabbed his heart.

“Jaime. Is everything ok?”

The snarky response he'd prepared died in his throat. “I had to see you,” he said on a shrug. Now she did look annoyed and he leaned forward to kiss it away, her lips opening on a soft sigh under his. “You have to be quiet,” she warned him when he pulled away.

“As a mouse,” he promised, running his fingers along the soft skin just under the hem of her shorts.

“And you have to leave before morning,” she added, gasping a little.

“Then we better get started,” he murmured, crowding her back into the dark house and shutting the door behind them.

Jaime kissed Brienne goodbye again as the pale light of dawn peeked over the horizon. “Will I see you today?” he asked, trying not to sound desperate.

“You're seeing me now,” she grinned. If she'd looked messy when he woke her, she looked downright disheveled after their night together, her thick lips red from kissing him, her shirt on backwards, hair a tangled nest. He probably didn't look much better, though at least he'd gotten his clothes on the right way.
“Stubborn,” he said into the curve where her neck met her chin.

“Annoying,” she breathed into the soft skin behind his ear.

He slipped his hand under her shirt and around her waist and she moaned low and then gently put her hands on his chest, holding him still.

“Meet me at the top of the Hill this evening,” she said. “We can watch the sunset from there. I'll bring a picnic.”

“I'll bring wine.”

“That's too romantic, there will be people there. Bring water.” Brienne kissed him soft and sweet, still holding him at bay, and then nudged him away. “My dad is an early riser, you better get going.”

He smiled, rueful, but nodded and took a few steps, glancing back over his shoulder to find her leaning her head against the door, watching him with a small smile. “Sunset,” he told her.

“Sunset.” She shook her head a little and then shut the door, watching him until it had closed completely.

Jaime walked his motorcycle back down to the main road and turned his phone back on on the way. There were five calls from Tyrion and a voicemail suggesting Jaime call at any time. Nerves sparking, Jaime dialed his brother while he watched the sky lighten behind the houses.

After three rings Tyrion picked up. “Why the fuck are you calling me before six am?”

“You told me to! You said any time.”

“I didn't mean at the crack of dawn,” his brother groused in a thick, rough voice. “Where are you?”

“On vacation.”

Tyrion made a rude noise. “No shit. Father keeps asking about you, wondering where you are, if you're with 'that big woman' as he so delicately calls her.”

“Father has my number, he's welcome to call.”

“He wants the answers to magically appear in front of him.”

“And today you're playing the role of his loyal wizard.”

“I'm more a court jester, Jaime, you know that,” Tyrion threw back, though he sounded hurt. “I thought you'd want to know that he's been sniffing around. Varys showed him a photo some waiter posted of you and him at a restaurant on Tarth, and then there were tweets he found from someone saying they thought they'd seen you at a karting place.”

“Shit,” Jaime muttered.

“So you are with her.”

“I'm on Tarth,” Jaime said evasively. “Just a couple days to get away. Nothing untoward.”

“I'm sure the media will treat it as a not-at-all-salacious summer vacation with your race engineer when you have never taken a summer vacation with a race engineer before. Ever.”
“You don't have to make it sound tawdry.”

“I'm not. I'm just stating the facts. The facts themselves are suspicious.”

Jaime sighed. “Has Varys told father anything else?”

“Is there anything else to tell?”

“No,” Jaime said, and the lie tasted bitter in his mouth. He wanted to tell his brother everything, but they couldn't chance it. Brienne didn't even trust her own father with the truth. He loved Tyrion, but his brother was still a Lannister.

Tyrion hummed on the line, a curious, knowing sound. “Will you take some advice, big brother?”

“Not from you.”

“Whatever you're playing at, you should stop,” he went on, ignoring Jaime. “If, as you say, nothing is happening, you're harming Brienne by being there.”

“What if something were going on?”

“Then it's you who's the family fool.”

“Fuck you.”

“So touchy for someone who's only there for an innocent vacation.” He could picture Tyrion raising his eyebrows. “Perhaps you should have gone to Dorne instead.”

“Perhaps you should learn how to suck your own cock and keep your mouth too full to speak.”

“Alas, I have dedicated my life to trying, but even with the shortness of my body and the length of my cock it's not to be,” Jaime laughed in spite of himself. “Father is watching you, Jaime, this year more than ever before. If you want to win, you must do whatever it takes.”

The echo of their father was loud in Tyrion's warning words. Jaime swallowed hard. “I'll keep that in mind. Is that all, or do you have any other dire portents to share?”

“I drank the last of my best whiskey last night, that's got to mean something.”

“It means you drink you too much. Go back to sleep, Tyrion.”

“See you soon,” his brother said, firm and knowing, before hanging up.

Jaime cursed loud and started up his motorcycle. Tyrion was right, of course: the World Championship was not a sure thing, no matter the spectacular season he'd already had. Fortunes changed by the merest touch of tires, the simplest unplanned skid around a corner. Jaime understood that in a visceral way.

Yet it had been so easy to forget it all when he was with Brienne. He hadn't forgotten about racing since he was eight years old. She had been a distraction since the beginning, but it was almost starting to feel like racing was the distraction, and that he couldn't abide.

Jaime opened the throttle on his bike and took another tour around Tarth. He would decide what to do with the rest of his break later, when the feel of Brienne's tongue wasn't so fresh on his, when Tyrion's serious voice wasn't so loud in his mind. For now he used the still unfamiliar roads to pull his mind from it all: from Brienne, from Tyrion and his father, from what awaited them in King's
Brienne arrived early at the top of Evenfall Hill and parked in the much busier parking lot. She tried not to blush too hotly with the memories of what had happened the last time they were here. There were families and couples in the meadow today, all of them enjoying one of the last nights of summer, a reminder that she and Jaime were to be here just as friends even though they'd left here last time as so much more.

By the time she had her dad's soft blanket laid out on a patch of grass near the far edge of the meadow and was rifling around in the basket of food and paper plates she'd brought for dinner, the sun was dipping near the ocean and Jaime was heading her way, carrying two big water bottles. Her heart sped up to see him again; she'd been so surprised to find him on her doorstep in the middle of the night, never guessing he'd shown up just to be with her. He'd made it clear that was his only goal once the door shut behind him, though, not even waiting to get back to her bedroom before he had her shirt off and his burning mouth on her skin. She had not done a good job of being quiet.

Brienne flushed as she looked at his mouth now, knowing all that it was capable of, the things he could say to her in the dark night. He smirked when he got close enough to catch her watching, and when he licked his lips she caught her breath.

"Hello," she managed to say as he lowered himself gracefully to the blanket, near but not too near.

"Long time no see."

"Did you have a good day?"

"No," he said, leaning nearer. "I was much too far away from you."

"Jaime," she sighed, and then wrinkled her nose. "Are you smoking again?"

He grunted and leaned away. "I talked to my brother this morning, my family drives me to all my bad habits."

Brienne's throat closed a little. "Is everything all right?" she choked out.

"You mean does he know about us? Not exactly, no, but some of your island friends have shared their Kingslayer spotnings and that has stirred up the hornets' nest back home."

"Is your father-"

"In the dark still and mad as a wet cat about it. But the longer I stay here, the harder it gets to explain away a vacation on Tarth being just a friendly visit."

"You have to go," Jaime nodded, looking unhappy. "When?" she asked, trying to be calm about it, trying to ignore the tremulous disappointment that even the little time they had left would be taken from them.

"I'm taking the late ferry tonight."

"Tonight?" she whispered, stricken. She'd hoped he would come home with her again, sneak into her house and imprint himself in every corner that she'd be able to be there alone and still feel him.

"It's not the end of anything between us," he said fiercely, capturing her with his narrow, burning
stare. “We can keep this up in King's Landing.”

“How? If your father suspects even here—”

“He doesn't suspect anything except I'm not acting the way he understands. In King's Landing we have every reason to be together. Besides I'm much better at avoiding paparazzi there, I can come to your apartment and no one will ever have to know.”

“What about race weekends?”

“Every town has a sketchy hotel that won't mind cash upfront for a night.”

She flushed thinking of them slipping away after a race to meet in some dingy room, Jaime still sweaty from the thrill, his skin sweet with champagne. “We couldn't even manage here without you being talked about,” she said, reluctant still.

“Brienne.” Her name was a plea on his tongue and she shut her eyes briefly, feeling it shiver down through her. “If you want to stop, we will and we'll have only a work relationship for the rest of the season. But don't do it because you think my father will find out. We can make this work. All of it.”

Brienne had never dreamed of having everything; she had barely been able to hold onto even the smallest things she wanted. But Jaime seemed so certain, his meadow-green eyes glimmering with sincerity in the sunset.

“Okay,” she whispered, and he exhaled, relieved, leaning towards her like he would kiss her. Brienne rolled her eyes and pushed him back. “Don't mess it up two seconds after we agreed to it,” she said.

“I have to admit the hardest part is seeing your beautiful mouth and not being able to kiss it.” When she immediately blushed he grinned at her. “So easily embarrassed even now, Wrench? After I've had my cock so deep inside you?” he added, his warm voice low.

Brienne must have looked as red as the sun caressing the sea. “You cannot do that at the garage,” she gasped, taking a sip of the water he'd brought.

“What, fuck you?” he murmured.

“Jaime,” she hissed. But now that he'd said it the idea played like a vivid movie in her mind: her up on the bench, tools clattering to the floor while Jaime took her, his car gleaming red behind him.

“You're thinking about it aren't you?” He shifted a little and she glanced down to find he'd obviously been thinking about it, too.

“What are we going to do?” she asked seriously, feeling the impossible weight of it, of what would happen if they failed, cutting through all her imaginings like they were made of tissue paper.

“We're going to have a nice dinner,” he said, just as serious. “Then we'll say goodbye like good friends, just for a few days.”

“And then?”

He shrugged helplessly. “Then we do the best we can.”

It was all they had. She just hoped it would be enough.
Jaime was sitting with one hip up on the edge of his desk, staring at her with a hungry look that she was now all-too-familiar with. Brienne flushed, her belly tightening when he licked his lips and beckoned her in. She glanced around but the offices were still mostly empty, the few people there at this time bent down over their laptops already.

Brienne opened up the door to his office and gripped the doorknob tight to keep from running into his arms.

“Good morning,” she said from the open doorway.

“Come in and close the door,” he said, his voice deep and commanding like it had been when he'd been under her in her bed just days ago.

Chapter Notes

I did finally get through my block on the chapter I'm working on but I didn't finish it, so I'm taking a chance here by posting. But the holidays have arrived and so will several house guests and I've gotta get this out now while I can for sure. I suspect there will not be a Sunday update this week.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

It was easier to leave Tarth the second time. She knew what she was waiting for her when she stepped off the ferry and into Sandor's waiting car: work that she loved, friends she had missed, and Jaime.

They had texted each other every day since he'd left, nothing incriminating, just brief reminders that what had happened between them was real, and she was anxious to see him again to make sure the friendly texts weren't just lies. There was always the chance that the distance had soothed his fervor for her.

“How was your break?” Sandor asked as he drove her down the long highway to King's Landing.

Brienne blushed hard and she caught him frowning at her, confused. “Fine,” she stammered. “How was yours?”

“I worked.”

“Oh.”

“You think all I do is drive you around?”

She shrugged a little. “I guess not.”
Sandor snorted. “I have bus and truck licenses, too. Pick up some extra work during the break when I'm not being paid to ferry you and Lannister all over.”

So it was Jaime who was paying for Sandor for her, and had been since the beginning. She felt a warm twist in her heart. “It's good to see you, Sandor.”

He only grunted, but he put on the radio station he knew she liked for the drive.

Monday morning she was at the Lannister Corp Racing offices early, and she spotted Jaime's motorcycle in the CEO spot as she walked in through the glass doors. Her heart sped up as she pushed her way through, greeted a few engineers who had beat her in and were already at work, exchanged pleasantries about what they'd been up to at the break, before finally being able to escape and head back to her cube. The blinds of Jaime's office were up and she saw light coming from inside, caught the shadow of his movement and she forced herself to walk at a normal pace to her own desk, set down her things, and then, finally, when she was certain no one was watching or would think her behavior unusual, she looked up into Jaime's window.

He was sitting with one hip up on the edge of his desk, staring at her with a hungry look that she was now all-too-familiar with. Brienne flushed, her belly tightening when he licked his lips and beckoned her in. She glanced around but the offices were still mostly empty, the few people there at this time bent down over their laptops already.

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“Good morning,” she said from the open doorway.

“Come in and close the door,” he said, his voice deep and commanding like it had been when he'd been under her in her bed just days ago.

“I think that would be a bad idea.”

“Don't you trust me?”

“I don't trust me,” she said, soft, and his chest heaved with the force of his caught breath.

“Did you enjoy your break?” he asked, and though he was clearly trying to keep his tone light she could hear the cracks in it.

“It was all right.”

He lifted an eyebrow. “Is that all? Nothing exciting happen?”

“You wouldn't believe me if I told you.”

Jaime smirked. “Try me.”

Her fingers were sweaty on the doorknob that she still held in a death grip. “I should get to my email, did you need anything?” His eyes answered that question for her, and she swallowed and looked out into the offices. “We have a meeting later to talk about White Harbor, and I've scheduled some time for you in the virtual trainer.”

“Then I'll see you later, Brienne.”

“Lannister,” she said, emphasizing what she'd come to think of as his work name. He looked at
least a little repentant and gave her a small nod before she closed the door and went back to her cube. She heard the blinds close and breathed a sigh of relief that he'd thought of it; the temptation to constantly look at him through the window while she was trying to work would have been too much. As it was she would read and answer a few emails and then glance up to find the blinds still closed. She wondered briefly if he was in there touching himself and she had to grip the edge of her desk to keep from going in to check.

When Podrick and Bronn arrived at their desks later, Brienne was back under control and happy to see them, giving Pod another hug and asking after his break, shaking Bronn's hand and laughing at his tales of his weeks home with Lollys. For all his fussing, he seemed to genuinely love his wife, and she knew the time apart during the season was a strain on both of them. Jaime came out of his office while they were talking and greeted the men with casual friendliness, barely even glancing at Brienne.

“What about you, Lannister? What did you get up to over the break?” Bronn asked.

“I took your advice,” Jaime said, smiling a little.

Bronn briefly glanced her way and she froze, confused. Had he told Jaime to go to Tarth? “That so? Glad to see you're finally listening to me.”

“I don't plan on making a habit of it.”

Bonn rolled his eyes but he was suddenly very purposefully not looking at Brienne and when she turned her questioning stare to Jaime he just smiled at her like it was some private joke.

“See you later for our meeting, Wrench, I've got some post-break interviews to do.”

“Okay,” she said, nonplussed. Bronn sat down at his desk, opened his laptop, and cursed loudly.

“Three hundred emails! Which one of you fuckers was working over the break?” he yelled around the empty offices, and Pod just shook his head and went to his desk, leaving Brienne with her unease.

By mid-morning she had fallen back into the whirlwind of work and forgot Bronn and Jaime's unusual exchange until she and Jaime were alone again in his office to talk about White Harbor, the blinds and door wide open at her insistence.

Jaime behaved himself for the most part, except for one point when he urged her to lean closer to look at something on his monitor and he whispered, “what time should I be at your place tonight?” without warning.

She shot him a dour look and pointed to a turn on the screen without seeing it. “Let's talk about this one.”

He leaned back, gave her the same smile he'd given Bronn and she narrowed her eyes at him. “What's that look about?” he asked curiously.

Brienne glanced at the offices; no one was paying them any attention. “What advice did you get from Bronn?”

“About White Harbor?”

“No,” she sighed, lowering her voice. “Earlier, when you were talking about the break. You said you'd taken his advice and he looked at me weird.”
“Ah.” Jaime rubbed his stubbled chin. “Back in July, at Lannisport, Bronn suggested I do something about my very obvious attraction to you.”

Brienne’s face burned with embarrassment. “So he knows?”

“No, he told me to leave you alone and go find a willing woman. I just didn’t tell him I ignored the first part of that advice.”

“Why would he tell you that?”

Jaime’s face darkened, but only for a moment, like a cloud passing over the sun. “Because he’s an emotionally constipated idiot. But he doesn’t know, that’s what matters. No one knows but us, Brienne.”

“That won’t be true if you keep calling me Brienne. And you have only yourself to blame for that.”

He laughed and briefly touched her hand, a bright shock of warmth before it was gone again. “How’s your first day back at work going?”

“Good. The crew lost some cohesion with the break but we’re doing extra pit stop practice this week to make up for it. My driver continues to be annoying but somehow I find it charming now.”

“What a coincidence, I was just thinking the same about my very stubborn race engineer.”

They grinned at each other across his desk and Brienne was sure hers was as dopey-looking as his. “Let’s pick this up tomorrow,” she said, shaking her head to try to break the connection. “I’ve got to go talk to Bronn about tires again.”

“You have my sympathy.”

Brienne picked up her laptop and clutched it to her chest, scanning the offices one more time before she leaned forward a little and murmured, “nine o’clock tonight,” before leaving his office, feeling his hot-eyed stare on her the entire way back to her desk.

The wait for Jaime at her apartment that night was excruciating. She’d gotten home a little after seven, wishing Sandor goodnight before hurrying up to clean her place, change her bedsheets, and take a shower, and even still she was done before eight-thirty. By the time he knocked on her door—five minutes early, she noted gratefully—she was fairly vibrating with anticipation.

She opened the door and he stood there with a small bouquet of bright purple lilacs in a sea-green vase. “They’re not real, so they won’t die,” he said. “But I thought you might like some color for your apartment and you said these were your favorite.”

Brienne took the vase with her heart in her throat, and ushered him in. She set it down on the kitchen counter, the burst of color immediately cheering the room. Jaime shrugged off his riding jacket and tossed it casually onto one of the dining room chairs.

“How do you want to do this?” he asked, assessing her apartment. As far as she knew, except for the flowers, it looked exactly the same as the last time he’d been here.

“I have.”

“Good,” he said, and then he wrapped her up and kissed her desperately. “I’ve been dreaming about this since I left Tarth. Couch first,” he panted into her mouth, “then the bed.”
She met his need with her own, tugging his bottom lip with her teeth, nipping and sucking at his jaw, his neck. He was wearing what she thought of as his Lannister cologne, something spicy and rich, and she wanted to roll in it and get his scent over all of her. They stumbled to the couch, Brienne pushing Jaime down first and then straddling him, their noses and teeth knocking together in their abandon to pull off each other's clothes while never separating their mouths. Somehow they were finally both naked and she sank down on Jaime's length before he could even reach for the condom. Brienne shuddered at the feel of him, the tension of the day – the last several days – finally released; but Jaime was more rigid than ever, his every muscle in sharp relief as he held completely still.

“Brienne,” he rasped, his fingers clenching hard on her hips, “we forgot-”

“I didn't forget,” she said, shifting as much as she could in his impossibly strong grip, making him moan. “I got an IUD a few days ago.” She bit her lip, suddenly embarrassed. “I wanted to surprise you.”

If she had thought him desperate before, it was nothing compared to him surging up from the couch to wrap his arms around her, his cock going deeper with the movement. He turned them so that she was under him and not entirely sure how she'd gotten there – and not caring when he started thrusting into her like he would die if he stopped. She was sure she would, and when he added his fingers to the mix she knew her neighbors would not appreciate the sudden scream it pulled from her lips, or Jaime's own, ecstatic shout as he came hard inside her.

He collapsed on top of her, breathing hard, and she wrapped him up as best she could with her sweaty, boneless limbs. Jaime moved a little and kissed her cheek.

“You didn't even ask if I've been tested,” he said, his voice both stern and weak.

Brienne huffed a laugh, ran her fingers through his soft hair. “Have you?”

“Yes.”

“So have I.”

“Anything I should know about?”

“No. You?”

“No. I'm glad we got that settled,” he said, pulling out and off of her so his head was on her stomach. He kissed her belly button. “That was a good surprise.” He started to move further down and she tugged him back up, wanting his weight.

“I'm exhausted,” she said, smiling fondly at him. “Let's just lay like this and watch a mindless tv show for awhile.”

“You're sure?”

“Yes.” She moved around, dragging and shifting him until they were spooning, Jaime in front, his back against her chest, her arms and legs holding him tightly to her. It was like having the world's warmest, most attractive teddy bear to snuggle with. She put her chin over his shoulder, their cheeks pressed together while they watched a reality cooking competition late into the night.

When she started drifting off he slithered out of her arms and half-walked, half-carried her to her bedroom. “Time for sleep,” he said to her barely awake protests at being shooed into the bathroom and then when she was done tucked into bed.
“Don't go,” she murmured, holding his hand.

“This is secret, remember?”

“Not to my neighbors it's not.”

Jaime snorted. “We'll work on that next time. I can't stay til morning, I have to go home,” he said and even in her half-awake state his regret was clear. He kissed her palm and then tucked her arm under the covers, too. “Good night, Brienne.”

“Good night, Jaime,” she said on a yawn.

She was asleep before she heard him close the door.

The next morning they greeted each other with “Wrench” and “Lannister” and by all accounts were working, and snarking, together the same as they ever had, but by the afternoon Jaime had followed her into the women's locker room he'd had built at her demand, and pressed her against the set of six metal lockers to kiss her thoroughly.

“We can't,” she said, sliding her hands under his shirt to scratch her blunt nails down his back, holding him close. “We can't.”

“We are,” he said, sucking at the tender skin of her neck while she trembled. They broke apart a few minutes later when they heard footsteps, both of them flushed with desire.

“No more kissing at work,” Brienne insisted, and insisted again on Wednesday after he'd tugged her into the storage room, closed the door behind them, and devoured her mouth under the unforgiving florescent lights. *He must actually like me*, she'd thought as she ground eagerly against his thigh. *No one looks good in this lighting.* Jaime pulled back to grin seductively at her. *Except him*, she amended.

It had been Jaime who had stopped them that time, claiming if he spent another second alone with her in the room they'd have to get naked. Brienne had for a fleeting moment considered it and then shook her head at herself. Never in her life had she been this interested in sex, but every time she thought about Jaime now she thought about doing all sorts of inappropriate things to him. She had been around handsome men before; her crush on Renly had at first been due to his looks and charm, but even in his kindness she had never felt this desperate to be near him. She never would have imagined a man would be even half so desperate to be near her, either. She had mostly stopped waiting for Jaime to come to his senses; they had worked side-by-side for too many hours on too many days to not allow him that trust, even when all her life wanted to tell her differently.

However they couldn't seem to connect in the evenings. Tuesday night Jaime got stuck late at a racing-related function, and on Wednesday Brienne was so tired from a busy day of pit stop practice that she'd fallen asleep at her dining room table and missed his text. Thursday they traveled to White Harbor, Jaime chauffeured by Sandor, Brienne on the team bus. He stopped by the mobile garage in the afternoon for the track walk, but they were joined by Lancel and Theodan and kept a professional distance the entire time.

When Brienne finally got to her hotel room late that night after overseeing the building and tuning of the car for free practice tomorrow, she was both exhausted and wired. Jaime had hovered around the garage for awhile, watching her work, until she'd glared at him and sent him away. But his scent had lingered and though she'd been devoted to her tasks he'd been a ghostly presence the entire time. She checked the clock and sighed. He was a zealot for his sleep schedule in the days
before the race and it was past his usual bedtime, but she sent him a message anyway on a foolish whim. 'Are you up?'

It took only seconds for his answering 'Yes.'

'Shouldn't you be asleep?'

'Was waiting for you'

Brienne smiled down at her phone. 'Long day.'

'Tired?'

'Not too tired' she sent, hoping he'd understand.

His next message was an address, a room number, and '30 minutes.'

Stomach trembling with excitement, Brienne punched in the address and saw it was about twenty minutes away by car, a lonely motel stuck on a rundown street between an auto parts store and a pawn shop, both of which were closed this late. She asked the hotel front desk to call her a taxi and ran her fingers through her hair in the mirror, debated about whether to bring a change of clothes before rolling up her outfit for the track tomorrow into a ball and shoving it in a plastic hotel laundry bag just in case.

Twenty-nine minutes after Jaime's message, Brienne closed the door of the taxi, paid the driver cash through his window, and scanned the area. There were eight or nine cars parked in front of the two-story building, and a neon sign missing letters that declared the name as the 'azy Ee otel.' The vacancy sign looked new and was an almost blinding red, a lure in the dark night. The room number Jaime had given her, 120, was at the end of the first floor, about as private as you could get, especially given the light between 119 and 120 had burned out. She knocked gently on the door, a thin piece of wood that had likely been busted down before based on the patch job around the keyhole and hinges.

The door opened and Jaime was there in only sweat pants, a single yellow light from inside highlighting his bare torso from behind. He'd taken a shower and his hair was wet and smooth on his head, his fresh soap scent like a drug. Brienne entered on his invitation and hesitantly looked around the small room. There was a single queen-sized bed with a thin cover on top that was possibly older than she was, threadbare carpet that had stains that were definitely older than she was, and walls that had been repainted white multiple times and never in the same shade.

"Not to your usual standards," she said wryly, setting her bag of clothes down next to the ancient television set.

"I'm not here to sleep." He came up behind her, kissed her neck as he untucked her shirt from her pants.

"Are you sure you want to use that bed for anything?" she breathed, pressing back against him to find him already hard.

Jaime pulled her shirt off her and then started on her pants. "We don't have to use the bed," he whispered in her ear.

"I don't trust the carpet either," she said, her eyes closing as he stripped her down to just bra and panties, his nimble fingers sliding back up the inside of her legs and then out to her hips as he stood.
She turned in his arms and slid her hand down the front of his sweatpants to discover he wasn't wearing any underwear. He looked up at her and smiled as sly as a fox. “Have you ever had sex against a wall?” he asked, rubbing slow circles on her lower back. “I think you'll find we're just the right height.”

Minutes later, sweaty and whimpering, she discovered he was right. He was holding one of her legs up and curved around his ass with one hand, the other bracing himself as he thrust in long, slow strokes and she fell apart trapped between his strength at his front and the much less impressive wall at her back.

“I wanted to do this on Tarth,” he rumbled into her ear, sliding out nearly all the way, before coming agonizingly slowly back into her until she was shuddering, urgent for all of him.

“Why didn't you?” she gasped, leaning forward to kiss his face wherever she could reach, trying to hold him tight inside her. He shifted his hand to her wrist to hold her still as he did it again: out as she tried to follow, in so slowly she whined low in her throat.

“Your dad showed up.”

She half-laughed. “Gods, on the road that first night?”

Jaime nodded against her neck. “If I'd been less of a gentleman, I'd have thought about it long before that.” He pulled back again and she swallowed down a plea, knowing he was torturing her on purpose, not ready to give in.

“You're no gentleman,” she growled, earning a knowing grin.

“I'm not.” He thrust hard and fast this time and she keened like the high-pitched scream of an engine finally letting go. “Fuck,” he whispered, quivering against her. Brienne scrabbled at his back, his ass, trying to get him to move, dammit; she needed to feel the wet friction, his pulsing heat. But he inhaled and was back to unhurried again, his body rigid with control, sweat on his temple, his thighs. Jaime moved relentlessly slow, every movement dragging sounds she couldn't control from her body.

“Jaime,” she moaned, the only coherent word she could manage. “Jaime.” Just his name, over and over.

“What do you want?” He slid back into her heat a centimeter at a time, like it wasn't driving them both to madness.

She gripped his side so hard he winced but he didn't change his speed. “Please,” she finally begged and he trembled a little but didn't give in.

“Please what?”

Brienne snarled in his ear and Jaime groaned into her sweat-covered neck. “Please just fuck me,” she pleaded, too aching for him to be embarrassed.

He was in her all the way, his cock hard and hot as she clenched around him. “Not yet,” he said, pulling back out. She bit back a scream of frustration and shoved him back with her free hand, setting his eyes alight.

“What do you want?” she asked, gripping his upper arm, not sure if she wanted to shake him or pull him close.
With the reflexes he'd spent a lifetime honing, he twisted his arm up to capture her other wrist against the wall and he pressed his cock against her pelvis, coating her skin with their mixed wetness. “I want you so desperate for me you'd lay down on that bed and thank me for it. I want you barely able to stand you've had so many orgasms. I want you like this: mad and full of fight as the Warrior, and just as able to push me away but aching for me so badly you never would.” Brienne couldn't breathe, she couldn't look away from him and the hypnotizing emerald of his eyes. “Because that's how I feel every fucking day I'm near you but we can't even kiss.”

She stilled from where she'd been rolling against his body pressed hard to hers. “Jaime, you said-”

“I know.” He briefly tightened his fingers before he dropped her wrists and took a step back, and she shivered from the sudden cold. “I underestimated how much I wanted you.”

“Do you want to stop this?” she asked, her voice much too small for her size.

“No,” he said quickly. He pressed his palm to her cheek. “No. I'm just an asshole who always wants to get his way. It'll get easier.” He didn't sound like he believed it, but then neither did she. She'd been just as needy for him this week, and she didn't see how being around him more would make that go away.

“Let's not waste this perfectly mediocre motel room,” she said, sliding her hand around his neck and urging him nearer.

He kissed her tenderly, the exact opposite of who he had been just a minute before. “I don't know why you put up with me,” he sighed, pressing his forehead to hers.

She knew, but she could not tell him. How could she explain how his voice in her ear on race day was as exciting as watching him drive? How she wanted to share every stupid thing at work with him the moment it happened? How that night falling asleep with him on the couch watching and discussing a show together was one of the happiest nights of her life? Brienne swallowed all of that down and instead put on her best playful look. “You're pretty good at sex,” she said. And if she imagined she saw a flicker of disappointment in his eyes, it was forgotten when he pulled her towards him by the hips and thrust hard inside her, his slow torture of before consumed by a sudden, desperate urgency in them both. When he groaned and stuttered against her moments later she came hard to the feel of him pulsing inside her, to the memory of him curled up warm in her arms.

Just outside their room hours later, new stains having been added to the surprisingly comfortable motel bed, Jaime held Brienne's hand against his chest and didn't kiss her. He wanted to, even though her full lips were already red from the storm of goodbye kisses he'd rained down on her before her taxi arrived, but he didn't.

“Can you drive the first free practice today?” he asked and she nodded, her eyes glimmering with excitement. If it had been up to him, he'd let her drive every FP1 for him, but his father and uncle were displeased enough with her doing it only occasionally. The last time had been back in Winterfell and her experience on the track had helped him come in ahead of Stark.

“You won't have had much sleep,” he continued and she rolled her eyes, delighting him. Everything she did delighted him, even when it annoyed him, or turned him on. Brienne was a bundle of nervous tics, proud behaviors, and sarcastic responses wrapping up a heart so full of kindness and soft hope that he veered constantly between wanting to have sex with her and wanting to wrap her up in a blanket and protect her.
“Neither will you and you're much more precious about it.”

“You should be nicer to your elders.”

She snorted. “You're not that much older than me.”

“You were eight when I started F1.”

“You're keeping up with me ok for now,” she retorted and as he opened his mouth to respond, the taxi honked impatiently. They both glanced over and then back at each other and Brienne pulled her hand away. “I'll see you later. Don't be late.”

He was, a little, but he slept through his first alarm and didn't wake until his third one, grudgingly letting go a dream of walking hand in hand with Brienne in an endless summer meadow.

By the time he got to the track she was already suited up, talking to Bronn about one of the many reports on the screen, so he let her be, going through his own check-ins and rituals. By the time he was done she was in the car and ready to take the track. He put on the headset as he always did when she drove during practice.

“Radio check,” he said when she'd pulled out of the garage.

“I hear you.”

“Sleep well?” he asked lightly, and he saw her car weave ever so slightly on the screens. He could picture her annoyed glare.

“Just fine thanks.”

The garage was quieter during practice, pit crew standing around chatting idly in their regular shorts and shirts instead of their race day jumpsuits, the engineers all muttering over readouts and reports. Kevan was wandering around somewhere and his father never attended practice sessions. Still, Jaime knew the radio chatter was being recorded for later review and potential publishing, so they had to be careful.

“I had the strangest dream last night,” he said. Brienne didn't say anything, so he pressed on. “I was in the loveliest meadow in the middle of a terrible storm. But I was very warm and excited. What do you think it means?”

She picked up speed on the track as though she were trying to out-drive his question.

“Radio still working, Wrench?”

“Yes, I was busy actually driving and not uselessly nattering on.”

Jaime smirked. “Think on it then and you can get back to me.”

Brienne drove faster.

Half an hour later he was getting ready to call her back into the garage for the new wing they were testing when the newest crew member, Vargo Hoat Jaime recalled, sauntered up to him. The man had kept to himself since he'd been hired, not causing problems but not really bonding either. He did the work, though, and listened to Brienne, and if his gaunt face sometimes seemed more fit for a sneer than a smile, Jaime hadn't ever interacted with the man long enough for it to matter.

“Lannithter,” Hoat said, his thick tongue making him lisp. When Jaime had first discovered the
man's speech impediment he'd wondered if Tywin had hired him because of it; gods knew Jaime had taken enough shit from his father because of Podrick in the beginning. It would be just like Tywin Lannister to hire a new crew member out of cruelty.

“Hoat,” Jaime said, nodding slightly. He kept his eyes on Brienne's car and the smooth curves of her cornering. She was noticeably better than that first winter test run in Dorne; Jaime idly wondered how she'd do in a real race, certain she would not come in last.

“Will you be driving today?”

“Of course. I'll be driving FP2 as usual.”

“I jusht wanted to be thure. The engineerth have changeth to make and we'll need time to adjutht the cockpit.”

“That's fine. Do you need me have her come in early?” They were given ninety minutes for each practice, but they didn't have to use them.

“A few minuteth would be good,” Hoat said. He stood next to Jaime, arms crossed, watching Brienne drive. For no reason he could name, Jaime felt his skin prickle uncomfortably. Perhaps it was the odd look on Hoat's face, something hidden and somehow unkind.

“Did you need something else?”

Hoot glanced at him, and for a moment Jaime swore he saw hatred, but it was a flash, there and gone, and could have easily been the reflection of the bright White Harbor sun. The man had been fine for months, it made no sense that he'd be different now. “I have everything I need,” Hoat said, and he ambled back to the others, standing near but outside of the pit crew that were chatting amiably.

Jaime called Brienne back in for the wing change and a chance for the crew to run a quick pit stop practice, and the prickling feeling eased watching Hoat do his part as he'd done many times before. *You're like an old, nervous septa* Jaime scolded himself, smiling at the man when he found Hoat looking his way as Brienne tore off again.

Fifteen minutes before the end of the first practice, Jaime had Brienne start to slow down before pitting, and he was turning to meet her when the unmistakeable sound of a car slamming into the nearest corner roared through the pit alley, and he saw a wheel bounce high into the air. There was a gasp from the attending fans and the nearby teams and Jaime furiously scanned the monitors to find out who had been involved, unable to breathe.

He found Brienne coming down the last corner before the accident, slowing and weaving carefully around the debris scattered along the track. Jaime felt the fear rush out of him in frantic relief until he saw whose car had been involved. It was Addam, the car a mess of metal turned on one side, one wheel gone, the rest at broken angles.

There was no movement and little sound and even the purr of Brienne driving into the garage couldn't hide the quick whoop of the ambulance siren. He watched his friend's car intently, scanning for even the slightest sign of life, barely aware of Brienne coming to stand next to him and do the same. The course workers were already at the car, pulling pieces away, trying to help extricate Addam from the wreckage.

“There,” Brienne said, pointing at the screen. Jaime narrowed his eyes and then gasped in relief. Addam's hand could be seen waving a little just over the top of the car, indicating that he was alive.
and able to move. “Thank the gods,” Brienne breathed.

“Thank the engineers.” Jaime pulled off his headset and glared at her, realizing how easily she could have been caught in Addam's wake. If she'd been just a few seconds sooner, if they hadn't asked her to slow down to come in early, it could have been her the ambulance was coming for, and he could only have stood there too bound by their secret relationship to do anything but worthlessly pray. Jaime swallowed, yearning to hug her and feel her safe and whole in his arms, furious at everyone that he couldn't. He exhaled hard through his nose like an angry bull and stalked off, leaving Brienne frowning in confusion in his wake.

Addam was alive and didn't appear seriously injured but he was taken to the nearest hospital and free practice two was canceled to give the marshals time to figure out what had happened and clear the track. Given the amount of scrap metal, gas, and oil Addam's car had left in its wake, it would take hours.

Jaime could have taken Brienne back to the Lazy Eel with the free time, but she'd disappeared from the paddock and he couldn't bear another quick session in a dirty motel room tonight anyway. He wanted to take her to his much nicer hotel, to his apartment in King's Landing, to her home on Tarth where they'd both be safe and together and what everyone else in the world thought wouldn't matter.

Instead he was at a bar with his brother, who'd just showed up at Jaime's room and dragged him out.

“Why are you even here?” Jaime grumbled as he threw back a finger of whiskey.

“I love watching you drive in endless circuits around a twisty piece of asphalt, surely you know that. I just didn't realize I wouldn't get to be doing it today.”

Jaime glared. “Don't you make a single fucking joke about the crash.”

Tyrion's mismatched eyes glinted, but he nodded once. “I would never. Is Addam all right? Everyone at the paddock seemed to have a different story.”

“I don't know. He's alive. He was moving on the stretcher and waving at the fans, so I assume he's fine.” But Jaime knew there'd been men who had died hours or days later from bleeding that hadn't been stopped, and he wouldn't feel at ease until Addam was out of the hospital for good.

“I didn't realize you and he were friends again.”

“We're not.” They should never have stopped, if Jaime hadn't ruined it like he ruined every relationship. He thought of how he'd left Brienne back at the track.

“So you're just mad that you didn't get to do your practice run today?”

Jaime didn't give his brother the benefit of rising to his bait, instead motioning to the bartender for another glass of whiskey. “Since your fondest wishes aren't coming true tonight, why don't you just leave?”

“And let my distraught brother drink alone? That would be heartless of me.” Tyrion was taking his time with much stronger and more expensive stuff and he finished off his first glass as Jaime got through his second. “I didn't see your race engineer when I arrived, and she's much too big to miss.”
“Her name is Brienne,” Jaime grit between clenched teeth. He moved on to tequila and ignored Tyrion's slightly wide-eyed stare.

“You have it bad, don't you?”

“I don't have anything except the world's most annoying siblings. Can't you kindly fuck off?”

“Why were you alone smoking in your non-smoking room when I came?”

Because he couldn't be with her, he wanted to say. It would have been too obvious to leave with Brienne from the track; it would have taken too much out of him emotionally to go to her and have to slip away again in the dark. “I was meditating.”

“Mm.” Tyrion shook his head a little. “Doesn't seem to be helping.”

“It's a journey.”

Tyrion snorted. “At least you haven't lost your sense of humor, dear brother. I do worry though that some day you may lose your life.”

“Everybody dies, even you.”

“Not while they're behind the wheel of a 200 mile an hour death machine.”

Jaime finally looked down at his brother then, saw real worry in his eyes. “I'm not going to die in a crash. Cars are safer than they've ever been. You saw that crash of Theon's and he was back racing today.”

“You drivers are idiots, though, constantly returning to a sport that's mostly tragedy, even if the tragedy is just never winning.”

“You've never understood,” Jaime said quietly, staring down into his empty shot glass. “We have to drive.”

“You don't have to do anything but be happy. Regardless of how that happens, or who with.”

Jaime thought of the night in Brienne's apartment, her cheek pressed against his, her weight like a blanket around his body, keeping him safe and warm. She'd started snoring softly in his ear as she fell asleep and his heart had burned like a coal in his chest, fanned hotter by every breath. “I don't want to be remembered as the boy who killed Aerys,” Jaime whispered, half-hoping Tyrion wouldn't even hear him.

“You've done enough to go into the record books for more than that, Jaime.”

“Record books don't keep memories. I can win the world championship this year, Tyrion, and then next year I could do it again. I could get Lannister Racing behind me and be the best that ever was.”

“I know you could,” Tyrion said solemnly. He put his hand on top of Jaime's on the bar. “I just worry about the cost.”

“I thought you said I should do whatever it takes to win.”

“I said in order to win you'd have to.”

Jaime thought of a dark movie theater, of a car as blue as the sea, of a stormy hilltop meadow. Of
Brienne in his ear as he drove to victory. Could he leave all of that behind if it meant he'd stand with the World Championship trophy at the end of the season? If Kingslayer would come to mean how he'd taken down Arthur Dayne in the records, instead of Aerys on the track?

“You're maudlin tonight, brother,” Jaime said, downing his last shot, “and I'm tired. Take your advice back to King's Landing and leave me be.” He patted Tyrion on the back and walked back to his hotel alone in the dark.

Chapter End Notes

If you'd like a musical accompaniment to this chapter, I recommend Luke Wade's "Three Days."
September (Part 2)

Chapter Summary

“Have you thought about what will happen after this season?” he asked, his voice low.

She had specifically been denying herself those thoughts, had focused only on the present as everyone always seemed to want her to do. “That's a long way away,” she said, curling her fingers in his hand. “I just want to enjoy this.”

He squeezed her hand, but the tension had returned and when Bronn walked by the window on his way to somewhere else they separated and did not touch again.

Chapter Notes

*Listen: of all the things that you are about to lose, this will be the most painful.*
- Typhoon, "Wake"

See the end of the chapter for more notes

White Harbor had changed something in Jaime, but Brienne couldn't tell exactly what, or why. She just knew that he'd shown up on Saturday at the track after Addam's crash, having tersely responded to her single text to him the night before asking if he was all right, and he'd looked pale and bleary-eyed, like he'd stayed up too late drinking. They'd preceded as usual for qualifying, Jaime easily capturing pole position, and though he'd been subdued, that night when she sent him another message he had responded quickly, asking her to meet him at the Lazy Eel Motel once more.

There was little softness or patience to him in the grimy room; he seemed to be in agony with desire, and insatiable. After he'd had her on the bed on a sheet he'd brought from his room, she'd tried to run a soothing hand down his back but he'd moved to put his tongue at her heated core immediately, and when she'd staggered through her orgasm he had been ready for her again.

“Jaime,” she'd whispered once he'd collapsed in her arms, shuddering almost violently. “What's wrong?”

“Everything,” he'd sighed, but he had seemed to relax, or at least calm down, and they had slept fitfully for an hour before Jaime had woken her up with his mouth on her neck.

“You need sleep for the race tomorrow” she protested, even as she reached for him.

“I need you,” he'd breathed against her lips, and he'd shown her one more time before he'd finally left for his actual room and what rest he could get before morning.

Under-slept though they both were the next day, Jaime still came in first, moving even further ahead of Robb in the World Championship race. They didn't hug on the parc fermé, having both decided it was too dangerous to risk it, certain they'd forget themselves once they were in each
other's arms, and Brienne didn't see him again until Tuesday when work began for the race the coming weekend at Oldtown.

“Will I see you this week?” she asked him as they sat in his office doing their first review of the track.

He glanced at her over the edge of her laptop. “You're seeing me now,” he said, though with much less humor than she'd said it back on Tarth. On her slight frown he added, “what about tonight?”

“I have the interview with Melisandre tomorrow, so I don't want to be up too late.”

“Do you need me to go with you?”

“No, I'll be okay, I'm doing it with Arya.”

“You'll do great,” he said sincerely, and the tenderness in his eyes was there again, surprising her with how much she had missed it the last few days. Wherever this Jaime had gone, he was still at the core of the much more unsettled and desperate man he'd recently been. Brienne reached around the laptop to brush her fingers over the top of his hand, his eyes following her every movement.

“You can come if you like,” she offered.

“It's better if I don't. This week is busy, I can use the time to catch up on some things.” He turned his hand over so her fingers were resting gentle in the palm of his hand. “Have you thought about what will happen after this season?” he asked, his voice low.

She had specifically been denying herself those thoughts, had focused only on the present as everyone always seemed to want her to do. “That's a long way away,” she said, curling her fingers in his hand. “I just want to enjoy this.”

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“How wonderful, you wore the same outfit!” Melisandre said in greeting when Brienne arrived on set. She flushed and the other woman squeezed her arm. “I mean no offense, it suits you,” she said.

“Thank you,” Brienne murmured, letting Melisandre lead her to the stage. Arya was already there, dressed in a simple black pantsuit with pale, howling wolf heads all over it. It should have looked ridiculous but she seemed so at ease it was impossible for anyone to criticize. Brienne envied her self-confidence. Arya smiled at Brienne as they walked up.

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“Why don't you get comfortable?” Melisandre said, gesturing at the empty chair next to Arya. “We'll get started in a few minutes.”

“You look nice,” Brienne said as she sat down.

“You look terrified.”

Brienne managed to laugh a little at that through the hard knot of anxiety in her chest. “I was hoping it wasn't obvious.”

“It'll be fine, I've got your back.”

“I'm worried about what she's going to ask.”
“I thought you set up the ground rules before even agreeing to it?”

“I did,” Brienne admitted, though even with her limited experience she was certain Melisandre would find some way around it. She didn't know how, though; they'd gotten in writing that Brienne would only talk directly about her experience at Lannister Corp Racing, that anything else in her past or speculation on her future were strictly off-limits. When they'd made the agreement in July, she'd had Jaime look it over and he had assured her it looked reasonable, but it felt dangerous now. *I should have demanded questions ahead of time,* she worried.

“Then we stick to the rules,” Arya said matter-of-factly.

“Let's hope she does.”

Arya lifted her eyebrows in surprise, but Melisandre sailed over before either of them could say more.

“I'm very excited to be doing this with you two,” she nearly sang, settling in the chair across from them and lifting her face for her final touch-ups from make-up. “Brienne, I will of course keep strictly to Lannister activities, as agreed.”

“Thank you,” Brienne said and then cursed herself for starting out from a place of weakness. Hadn't she told Jaime she hated interviews? Even with Arya next to her, spring-loaded for action, Brienne's palms were sweaty. She should have begged Jaime to come, to be a friendly face in the crowd beyond the cameras.

“Any last minute concerns? Since this isn't live we'll re-do questions if we need to, so feel free to be open and off-the-cuff with your responses.”

Brienne nodded tightly, not trusting Melisandre. The reporter was looking for a story and Brienne was going to give her only the one she wanted to give: that of a woman at an unprecedented role in Formula 1 and the struggles and successes she'd had doing the job.

The interview started with Melisandre's introduction of Brienne and Arya, their roles with their respective teams, and their histories. Arya's was impressive: working in her family's garage from a young age, sailing through university to get her engineering degree, and now an internship with Stark motors that she'd earned an interview for by applying with an anonymous resume. In comparison Brienne felt even more foolish: her early years in karting were good, as was her time on Renly's F3 team, but they skipped over her two months at Griffin and all that was left was the occasional test drives and her dad's garage on Tarth. At least her time with Lannister Corp Racing was evidence she could strengthen herself with that she was cut out for the responsibilities Jaime had given her.

“Let's start with what is probably an obvious question,” Melisandre finally said. “How did you two meet?”

They had agreed Arya would take any questions that were directed to both of them and she jumped in now. “On the track. I introduced myself to Brienne after the first race in Sunspear. I was excited to meet her, the word among the crews was she was something special.”

Brienne flushed hotly and Melisandre smiled at her. “How wonderful. It must be nice to have another woman out there with you who isn't a trainer or a personal assistant.”

“That is,” Brienne said.

There was a brief silence before Arya smoothly added, “we're both hoping that now that there's
been one woman we'll see the other teams hiring a lot more. The lack of women in all levels of F1 has become impossible to ignore any longer, and more than in most sports it shouldn't matter. A woman can compete at every level with a man in racing.”

“Bold words,” Melisandre said, leaning forward a little. “Do you think a woman could compete in an F1 race?”

“Absolutely.” Arya looked offended she'd even asked. “What's stopping her? It's not like the men drive with their cocks.”

There was a sigh from behind the cameras and Melisandre laughed. “Would you like to re-word that, or shall we just bleep it out?”

“Bleep it out. Keep your bleeper ready, I've got a lot to say on this subject,” Arya added with a smirk.

As the interview progressed, she proved it to be true. They spent some time on the history of women in the sport, an area with which Arya proved to be surprisingly knowledgeable, and Brienne was happy to throw in the occasional supporting comment but let the younger woman lead. The history then segued into women in F1 today, and Melisandre turned her attention fully to Brienne.

“What were your first impressions of Jaime Lannister when he came to your father's garage to hire you?”

Brienne's cheeks reddened a little, but she managed to smile. “I thought he was arrogant.”

Arya snorted next to her and Melisandre nodded. “You knew about his reputation?”

“Of course. I've been a Formula 1 fan all my life.”

“But you took the job anyway.”

“Absolutely,” she said in a firm voice. “Whatever the world thinks he's done, Jaime is a phenomenal driver, as he's proven this season.”

“Yes, he's had quite a remarkable run.” Melisandre glanced down at the papers in her hand that she'd been using as a guide for questions. “Odds are heavy in his favor to win the World Championship this year. He could even clinch it early next month depending on how he and Robb Stark drive over the next few races. He has struggled to contend in F1 since the year he killed Aerys. Do you-”

“He didn't kill Aerys,” Brienne cut in, her hands tight around the arms of her chair. “There was an accident and Aerys tragically died.”

Melisandre made a noncommittal sound. “Is that how you've always looked at what happened between Aerys and Jaime, or has working for him changed your mind?”

She tread carefully, knowing Jaime wouldn't want her to share his secret pain on national TV. “Working with Jaime has confirmed that he is a man dedicated to his sport, his car, and his crew.”

“Does his dedication extend to vacationing with his crew?” Melisandre asked, her eyes narrowed and knowing, and Brienne's stomach dropped to the floor along with all the blood in her face.

“What?” she choked out, throat closing.
“There are rumors that Jaime spent part of his August break this year on Tarth.” She gestured at the monitor that showed the three of them onscreen and it flashed to an image of the picture Brienne took of Jaime and Arryk. “This photograph says he at least had a meal there one day.”

Her mind was whirling, trying to decipher how much Melisandre actually knew and how much was just speculation meant to make Brienne give up her secrets. She should never have agreed to this, it was everything she was worst at. “We did have dinner one night,” Brienne said. “He came over to see Tarth when it wasn't raining.”

Another photo came up on the screen, this time of them walking arm-and-arm into his father's birthday party. “He took you to his father's birthday as well, didn't he?”

Brienne nodded, mutely.

“I went to his father's birthday party, why don't you show a picture of me?” Arya jumped in, annoyance making her tone sharp.

Another photo: the two of them from the Amber Lounge, the one that Jaime had been so upset about when he’d seen Brienne airbrushed into someone more beautiful. That woman could have been Jaime Lannister's girlfriend, she thought fleetingly, a bright, tense thread in the dark.

“That's from that dumb Women in F1 online article,” Arya said. “It was mostly wives and girlfriends, which is the problem we've come to talk about.”

“It doesn't seem unusual how close the two of you seem to be?” Melisandre directed to Brienne. One last photo on the screen, this time of Jaime holding her in his arms at the Lannisport pool.

“No,” Brienne said hoarsely.

“You should see Jon with his race engineer, Satin. They're constantly off doing things together. I could show you ten pictures of them looking like they were about to kiss. Who cares?” Arya was furious now, Brienne could feel it radiating off of her, and the heat seemed to thaw her own frozen body.

“I thought we were here to talk about the work,” Brienne said. “Not my friendship with Jaime.”

“There have been rumors-”

“Which is exactly the problem with you giving them any weight here,” Brienne said tightly. “I did not sleep with Jaime Lannister to become his chief mechanic or his race engineer. I earned those jobs through skill and hard work and if I were Brian Tarth in any of those photos, you'd be talking about our 'bromance' with a smile and no one would question if I deserved it. It's infuriating and I'm sick of dealing with it, especially from other women.”

Arya nodded vigorously and Melisandre sat back in her chair looking off-balance for the first time Brienne had ever seen. Though she was trembling, Brienne felt lighter than she had in months.

“Now if you have any more questions about the actual work or what can be done to open up the sport to more women, I'm happy to answer them. But if we're going to just keep talking about pictures of two friends in their personal time, then I'm done.”

Melisandre looked down at her papers, shuffled one to the front, ran her hand over her very red hair. “Why don't we take a quick break to give everyone a chance to gather themselves and we can resume.” She stood and hesitated a moment once the cameras' red lights blinked off. “I don't think the two of you are actually sleeping together,” she said. “I was just attempting to address the
absurd rumors.” She hurried off to talk to her producers and Brienne sighed.

“You all right?” Arya asked.

“Yeah,” she lied.

“She was totally inappropriate; you did a great job shutting her down. I hope it makes it into the final cut, even with the stupid photos. No one worthwhile really thinks you're sleeping with him. Just the assholes.”

Arya patted her arm and hopped up to get some coffee, and Brienne didn't feel any better. She knew what Arya really meant: no one would believe someone like Jaime would actually be with someone like her. I'm so ugly it helps our secret, she thought, swallowing down hysterical laughter. Brienne pressed her fingers into her eyes for a moment, holding all of it in: the tears and the anger and the bitter humor. It was a good thing Jaime wasn't here; he would have jumped onstage and ruined it all, though Brienne let herself imagine Melisandre's face if he had swept Brienne into his arms and kissed her there in front of the cameras.

Almost would have been worth it, she thought, gathering herself as Arya and Melisandre returned.

The director counted them back to camera and the red lights flicked back on.

“Now,” Melisandre said, smiling like they were all friends having a casual chat. “Let's talk about opportunities for girls in karting.”

'How'd it go?' Jaime texted Brienne later that afternoon.

'Fine' she sent back.

'That's it?'

She considered how much to tell him, decided it wouldn't do to get him riled up if Melisandre just cut the segment about him anyway. 'Yeah. Arya did most of the talking, which was fine with me. Are you free tonight?'

He didn't respond right away and she could picture him peering at his phone, knowing she was brushing off his questions about the interview and not sure how much to push. 'I'm not' he finally sent back with several frowning emojis.

She sighed. 'You work too much'

'So do you'

Brienne had gone home after the interview to finish up her work day from there since Jaime was in other meetings all day and the crew were busy making small tune-ups to the car.

'Tomorrow is travel day' she sent.

'I guess I better start looking for motels'

She flushed, her fingers hovering over a text that would be entirely indefensible if someone saw it, and then deleting it quickly. 'Guess so' she decided on instead. And then, before she lost her nerve, she typed 'pick somewhere less likely to be diseased' with a smile emoji and hit send, her stomach quivering as though she expected Tywin to immediately burst through her door and fire her.
All that happened was Jaime sending back a winking emoji and 'I'll do my best' and she went to sleep that night eager for the morning.

“This is better,” Brienne gasped as Jaime sucked and nibbled at her long neck the next night. He’d spent entirely too much time that day finding the perfect place for them: somewhere Brienne would feel was safe from prying eyes but also where neither of them would be uncertain about actually using the sheets. The front desk still accepted cash, although they’d looked at him a lot more skeptically when he’d paid for the room with it. But enough dragons were always louder than anyone's morality and Jaime had paced around the fair-sized room for an hour before Brienne arrived with a light knock at the door.

He laid her down on the bed, tossing aside her little bag of clothes and toiletries to a far corner, pressing her into the mattress with his body until they were both moaning softly.

“I missed you,” he whispered in her ear, running his hand up her side under her work shirt. 'Missed' did not accurately describe what he felt, but it would do; he didn't know how to explain how her unusual absence on Wednesday had made him feel out-of-step all day, like his world wasn't quite right. They had spent at least part of every working Wednesday together since March, a habit Jaime had not even been consciously aware of until it had been thrown off.

She kissed him hard and he knew she had missed him, too, settling anxious nerves he hadn't been fully aware he'd had. They didn't need to talk after that, their bodies saying everything for them with soft sighs, the stroke of a calloused hand, their mouths pressed open and hot against skin. When she shuddered and whimpered under him, his fingers bringing her to a quiet, desperate climax as he thrust into her slowly, Jaime closed his eyes and let her pull his own from him, wishing he could give her everything as freely as he gave her this.

They curled into each other after, sweaty and breathing deep. Jaime kissed her temple. “Seven more races.”

“Over half done,” she agreed, her fingers tickling his chest as she rubbed her hand over the hairs there.

“Do you think we can do it?”

“I know you can. You already have.”

She thought he was talking about the world championship. “I haven't done anything yet,” he said, joining her conversation. He tucked his arm under his head and stared up at the ceiling. “What if-”

“No.” He glanced at her and she lifted up, her mouth in the firm, annoyed schoolteacher line he liked so much. When he tried to kiss it away she ducked her head. “I'm serious, Jaime. No what ifs. You're having the best year of your career. It's okay to believe in yourself. It anything happens, it won't be because of you.”

“It won't be because of you, either,” he said, overwhelmed with how much he wanted to hold her close and never let go.

“We'll see about that.” He frowned at her and she looked away. “How was work yesterday?” she asked, so obviously trying to distract him and failing that he had to laugh.

“Boring without you there. Not a single person insulted me.”

“You must have been insufferable. I'll have to assign an alternate for when I'm gone.”
“Or you could just not go,” he whispered in her ear, pulling gently at the lobe with his teeth.

“Are you going to be one of those overbearing boyfriends? Because if so we need to set some limits now.”

Jaime went still, his skin tingling. She'd only been teasing, but the word 'boyfriend' set off a chain reaction he couldn't hide. As he struggled to find some appropriately light-hearted response, Brienne turned her head away, looking uncomfortable.

“Sorry,” she said, “I didn't mean-”

“Is that what I am?”

She still wouldn't look at him. “I don't know. I don't know what any of this is.”

Don't ask, he warned his heart, but his errant mouth didn't listen; it never did. “We could take all this public and make it official.”

“You know we can't.”

“I know you can't,” he said and gods when would he learn to just shut up? She sat up in bed, pulling the sheets around her like armor. Her shoulders were low, pale hills, round and sloping down, freckles scattered like dying flowers.

“Are we going to just keep having this conversation? You keep saying you'll be ok and then a few days later you're not. You said it yourself Jaime: seven more races, at least.”

He sat up, too, the sheet falling down, exposing all of him. “I'm sorry that I want to be able to hold your hand on the street, or hug you after a race.”

“That's not fair,” she said quietly, but she was mad now, too, he could see it in the taut line of her neck. “You know why I can't.”

Jaime looked down at his own hands, curled them as tightly as he could until the knuckles were white and the instinctive, angry words were trapped inside them where they couldn't hurt Brienne. “I hate hiding this,” he sighed.

She turned her head slightly to the side, her uneven profile sad in the dim light of the room. “I do, too.” Brienne exhaled slowly and looked away. “Melisandre asked about us at the interview.”

“She did?”

“She doesn't know anything. She said she was just trying to squash the rumors. The ridiculous rumors that we could be together.”

“They're not that ridiculous.”

“Of course they are.” Brienne stood from the bed, dragging the comforter around her body. Wrapped up in it she looked even bigger, and somehow more fragile. “Why would someone like you ever want to sleep with someone like me?”

“Do you really not know?”

She bit her lip and pulled the comforter tighter. “I don't want to hear any well-meaning lies right now,” she said, her voice thick with anguish, and Jaime stood quickly from the bed to hold her face in his hands. He studied her carefully while she avoided his gaze; examined every misplaced line,
every freckle, her big white teeth, her pale eyebrows. She was a composite of awkward pieces, and she was Brienne, and that was enough for even the best of men. For a man like him, she was a once in a lifetime chance.

Jaime kissed her tenderly, not seeking anything from her in the press of his lips, only wanting to give her everything she was to him. When he pulled back, her eyes were bright with unshed tears.

“Have you ever considered that everyone thinks it's ridiculous because I'm not good enough for you?”

She spluttered a little, a small laugh that seemed to surprise even her. “No, I have never considered that.”

“You should,” he murmured. He rubbed his thumbs over her cheeks, down over her full bottom lip. “Because it's true.”

“Now you're being ridiculous.”

“Mark my words, Brienne. Some day you're going to realize how much better you could do, how much easier it would be with someone else, and it'll be over for me,” he said, and though he'd started in a joking tone he couldn't keep it up, the seriousness of it impossible for him to ignore.

“Jaime,” she breathed, her head shaking in his hands, and he kissed her, tugged the comforter off to spread his hands over her sides and down her ass, and pulled them both back down to the bed to keep her from telling him any well-meaning lies.

Jaime had become unstoppable, it seemed, and he soared to his most dominating win yet at Oldtown, followed by a celebratory evening in their getaway hotel room where Brienne had eagerly bent over the desk and let him take her from behind barely a minute after she walked in the door. Her pants had been around her ankles, his hands bunched in her shirt, and she'd had to bite her own forearm to keep from yelling too loudly when he snuck one hand around her hip and between her legs as he'd thrust hard into her, the slap of their bodies loud in the room.

They had showered together afterward, packed together in the just-big-enough space, Jaime rubbing some generic fruit-scented shampoo into her hair and directing her under the shower head to rinse it clean before tenderly washing her back and chest. She'd returned the favor, her fingers digging into his scalp as he moaned slightly in pleasure. Somehow they managed to make it back out of the shower before they were kissing again, Brienne overwhelmed with how much she yearned for him at all hours of the day, whether he was there pressed up against her or not.

It had been almost impossible to leave him that night; they'd ended up wrapped around each other snarking together about a random bad movie on cable TV, Jaime idly running his fingers through her hair, Brienne rubbing slow circles on his stomach. When the movie had ended he'd turned off the TV and kissed the top of her head and gotten dressed, and though he didn't complain once or beg her to stay, she heard the plea anyway, except this time it was coming from her own heart.

They didn't see each other at all on Monday, though she texted him when she arrived home.

'Back at my apartment' she sent.

'Me too. How's yours?'

It was exactly as she had left it Thursday morning: tidy, and empty. 'Everything's where I left it.'
'Going shopping?'

Brienne hesitated. 'Unless I have other plans.'

There was no response for a moment and then 'You need food and it's Monday. Can't have you off schedule.'

'Piss off' she sent, amused and frustrated and lonely.

He didn't respond.

Tuesday morning, Brienne went in early and headed straight for the gym, eager to work off some of the nervous energy that had slowly settled in her body the night before. As she completed her deadlift set with a new high weight, she noticed a man she'd never seen before hovering in the corner. On first glance he was completely non-threatening: entirely bald head, a soft round body, obsequious features and posture. But when she met his gaze his eyes reminded her of a very intelligent, very patient spider waiting for her to stumble into his web.

“Ms Tarth,” he said in a perfumed voice, “Tywin Lannister would like to speak with you.”

Brienne's stomach knotted immediately, a sharp cramp in her belly that did not go away. “I'm almost done here,” she managed to get out, sliding the weights off the bar and back into their spaces.

“Now, if you will. I'll have someone put that away for you.”

She looked down at herself and back at the man. “Can I shower? Change?”

“I'm afraid not,” he said, curving his lips in what she would have called a smile if it hadn't been so oily and knowing. “He wishes to see you now.”

Brienne picked up her nearby phone and slipped it into the pocket of her workout shorts before she followed the man, smoothing down her hair as best she could. He led her through a back exit she'd never paid attention to before, up two flights of a dim stairwell, and out to a quiet, lushly carpeted hallway that breathed money. The man led her to the end where an imposing mahogany door was closed, and an empty receptionist's desk sat off to the side. “In there,” the man said, gesturing at the door.

She reached for her phone to text Jaime a heads-up and the man cleared his throat when he saw it before holding out his open palm. “No phones, please. I will hold onto that for you.”

“I'd rather not.”

“I understand your reluctance, Ms Tarth, but we must protect the secrets of the company.”

“I'm not going to steal anything,” she said, offended.

“Of course not. But has your phone been checked for bugs?” Brienne blinked uncertainly and the man smiled in victory. “Your phone, please.”

She gingerly placed the phone in his hand, feeling like she was suddenly alone in a dark sea now in a way she hadn't been before. On the man's look, Brienne opened the door to Tywin's office and stepped inside.

The room was huge and still the giant desk that matched the color and heft of the door commanded
it, as did the severe-faced man sitting behind it. There were gold curtains at the windows, pulled back to let in the morning sunshine, a few potted plants tucked in the corners as though they were cowering in fear, and gold and marble statues of lions and race cars and artifacts from Essos on pedestals along the walls. She wanted to look at them instead of Tywin, but she headed for his desk and stood between the two uncomfortable-looking chairs there, knowing how awkward and out-of-place she was in her gym clothes in this pit of rich contempt.

“Brienne Tarth,” he said, not inviting her to sit. She sat anyway and Tywin's eyes tightened. The chairs were even more uncomfortable to sit in than she'd thought, and too small for her size.

“There's an interview coming out soon about the Women of F1.”

She felt a little of the tension ease; he must have called her here because of the interview. “Have you seen it?”

“Melsandre sent it to both me and Ned Stark. We get final approval of these things.” He glanced down at a paper on his desk, pushed it aside.

“Will you let it run?” she asked quietly. Besides the section with Jaime, it had been a good interview, addressing important points about girls and women and the sport.

“Yes. You made the company look good, and she's taken out all of the questions about you and Jaime.”

Brienne blanched. “She left them in?”

“She wanted to. She argued rather forcefully for it. I made her take them out.” His intent couldn't be more clear: Tywin Lannister always got what he wanted. “Are you enjoying your work here?”

She swallowed. “Yes.” She almost called him sir but reminded herself he had only earned politeness and not reverence. It was astonishing to her that this cold, cruel man could be Jaime's father.

“Do you wish to continue working here?”

Her stomach dropped. “Yes,” she said again, feeling significantly less confident.

“Yet you directly disobeyed my order to not fuck my son.”

The vulgarity of it from Tywin's mouth shocked her. Fucking was what they were doing, but he made it sound like it was some low-grade porno.

Isn't it? she thought. Cheap motel rooms and sneaking around; she had feelings for Jaime but they'd never talked about anything beyond the physical; her choice, she knew, not his.

“I don't know what you're referring to,” she managed to say from some stoic, hardened part of her hidden deep inside. Her neck heated from the lie to her boss and Tywin lifted an eyebrow in disdain. She fleetingly recalled Jaime saying “you've met my father, haven't you?” at the track on Tarth.

“I would suggest you not add lying to your offenses, Ms. Tarth. You're walking a very thin line right now as it is.”

She swallowed. “What does it matter if we are? We're being discreet. Jaime came in first the last two races so it's not affecting his driving. Why do you care who he takes to his bed?”
“You have been good for his season,” Tywin said and for a moment he sounded almost angry, though it made no sense. Even Tywin couldn't be mad that Jaime was doing well when it only helped the whole team in the Constructor Championship. “But you have not been discreet.” He turned his monitor to show her a photo of them at the Lazy Eel Motel in White Harbor, Jaime holding her hand to his chest when they'd stood out front after their night together. They both looked rumpled and happy; anyone looking at this photo would know what they'd just been doing.

“Were you spying on us?” she asked, horrified.

“I'm protecting my investment. It's all legal, my team of lawyers is certain of it.”

Tyrion was on that team of lawyers, she thought. Had he known?

“So what are you going to do about it?” She felt reckless with fury, her privacy violated even if it was technically legal.

Tywin clasped his hands together on top of his desk looking for all the world like a disciplinary school principal. “It's not what I'm going to do, it's what you are. You will immediately cease all non-work relations with my son. If it’s not a required part of your job, then you have no reason to talk to him. No attending functions together, no non-work lunches, and certainly no illicit meetups in hotels.”

He was effectively cutting her out of Jaime's life except for the places even he couldn't reach. She wanted to cry. She wanted to scream. She folded her own hands in her lap and stared at him with her best coolly composed face.

“You can't do this. I can't just stop hanging out with him entirely. Whatever else we are to each other we are friends, Mr. Lannister, and I will not lose my friend.”

“Who do you think will be his race engineer after you're gone?”

“He's winning,” she said, though she hated the slight tremble in her voice. “They'll come out of the woodwork to help him now.”

“And you think he will continue to drive for me when I tell him I fired you? When I let the media fight over the photos we've taken?”

She blanched, remembered Jaime saying he'd quit if it was his fault she was let go. How much worse would it be if Tywin dragged them through the mud when he did it?

“Mr. Lannister-”

“You've had your fun, Ms. Tarth. It's time to grow up and put an end to this. Surely you know it would never work out between you anyway. Someday you might even thank me for stopping this now.”

Brienne bit down hard on her lip trying not to lose control in front of this hateful man. “Jaime will ask why. I can't just cut him off with no reason.”

“If you tell him it was my doing how long do you think it will take before he's unemployed or in jail?”

She swallowed down the rising bile. She'd never convince Jaime to stay the course and finish out his season with Lannister Corp if he knew his father had any part in her distance, if he felt her reputation were truly at stake. He was too full of righteous anger at his father, too quick to foolish
action even when it put everything he'd ever wanted on the line.

“If you don't want to ruin his remarkable run,” Tywin pressed on relentlessly, “I suggest you make him believe this came from you, Ms. Tarth. If I have to get involved, it will not end happily. Are we understood?”

“Why are you doing this?”

Tywin stilled and for a moment there was a fierceness in him that reminded her of Jaime. “Everything I do, I do for Lannister Corp. Now I ask again: do you understand what I am telling you?”

“Yes,” she whispered, trapped. Tywin nodded, dismissing her, and the bald man came back into the room.

“Take her back from where she came, Varys,” Tywin said, his attention already somewhere else, caring not at all about the world crumbling at Brienne's feet.

“This way my dear,” Varys said, leading her back out of the office. When the door had closed behind them, he patted her arm gently and then handed her her phone. “I suggest you do what he's told you. It will not be so bad. It's not like you are already in love.”

_Then why does it feel like my heart is breaking?_ Brienne thought as she followed him back to the gym in a dull gray haze.

Brienne texted Sandor when Varys left her alone again, begging him to come get her and take her home, claiming she was sick. She was – her heart a pounding ache in her chest – but it was a sickness no doctor could heal.

When Sandor responded that he was out front, Brienne gathered up her things and hurried outside. Jaime's bike was parked in its usual place, a gleaming reminder of what his father had just demanded of her, and she pressed her lips together and let herself silently into the car. Sandor glanced at her in the rearview mirror, and narrowed his eyes.

“You look like shit,” he said unceremoniously and Brienne burst into tears. His eyes went wide in alarm. “What the fuck?” Sandor turned in his seat and looked back at her and she waved him off with one hand, covered her face with the other.

“It's okay,” she wailed and she would have laughed at the absurdity of it if everything didn't hurt so much, if it didn't feel like her insides would never untwist.

“You're not sick, are you?”

“No,” she choked out.

Sandor turned back around and put the car into drive. “Then I know just what to do.”

Fifteen minutes later they were sitting side-by-side at the far edge of a dirty bar. He'd taken her to a hole in the wall that didn't even have a name and she suspected also didn't have a liquor license, but the whiskey was cheap and burned her throat when she drank it and it eased some of the burning in her heart. When they'd entered the bartender hadn't even blinked at the two of them, just got out two tumblers without Sandor even asking and set the drinks down and left them alone. Brienne knew she looked awful – she'd always been an ugly crier – but there was no mirror behind the bar and at least she and Sandor were a matching set in that regard.
“You don't need to talk about it,” he said after he'd finished his first whiskey in silence and picked up his second. “But if there's someone you need run over with a car, I've got a spare.”

Brienne laughed a little, a dry, sad sound. “He'd just pay to have you murdered,” she sighed.

Sandor set his glass down and looked at her for the first time since they'd entered the bar. “How'd you get on Tywin Lannister's bad side?”

Brienne took another gulp of her whiskey, gasped at the fire in her chest. “I had sex with his son,” she said, and Sandor choked on his drink.

“Which one?”

“Jaime.”

“Fuck me,” he mused. “I thought it would have been Tyrion.”

She looked at him, confused. “Why would you think that?”

“I thought you were smarter than to get involved with Lannister.”

“I guess I'm not,” she said, staring at her drink in despair. Her phone beeped and when she checked it was a message from Jaime asking 'where are you?' Brienne groaned.

“You can't put milk back into a cow, so why does Tywin care that you two fucked?”

She grimaced. “I wish I knew. But I have to break it off with Jaime or else the whole season will be ruined. I can't do that to him. He's so close to winning, I know he can do this.”

“Why don't you let him decide?”

“Decide what? If I tell him his father had anything to say about this he'll be gone by the end of the week.” Unemployed or in jail, Tywin had said, and she worried it would almost certainly be the latter. “No, I have to end it so he doesn't know. So he thinks it's what I want.” She remembered their sweaty nights in cheap motels, Jaime's constant conflicted embrace and dismay at having to keep things quiet, and knew exactly what she would have to do. Brienne's chin trembled again and she pressed the heel of her hands to her eyes.

“Fucking Lannisters,” Sandor grumbled.

They finished their drinks, leaving Jaime's message unanswered on her phone.

Two hours later, Sandor left Brienne at her apartment, surprisingly mostly sober, having nursed her second drink for most of it.

“See you tomorrow?” he asked and she nodded.

“Thank you.”

“Just don't tell anyone about this and we'll be square,” he muttered, getting back in the car and driving away.

Brienne trudged up to her apartment, let herself in and felt her breath hitch again at the sight of the cheerful lilacs on her table. Jaime had sent another message a few minutes after the first one back at the bar, clearly worried when she hadn't responded or shown herself in the office.
'Wrench? Everything ok?'

She'd responded 'feeling sick. going home' and shut off her phone. When she turned it on again in her apartment now, there was another message from Jaime.

'Sorry to hear that. Can I bring some chicken soup?'

'No' she typed, standing in the middle of her apartment. 'Don't want you to catch anything before next race.'

'I've already got all your cooties' he responded astonishingly fast; he must have been waiting by his phone. She swallowed around a fresh lump in her throat.

'Please don't come' she sent, blinking hard.

There was nothing for a long minute and then: 'Fine.'

Brienne stared listlessly around her apartment, went to change her clothes and then sat on her couch late into the night not watching the television as it turned from weeknight dramas to late night shows to paid commercials.

When she woke up with the sun, bleary-eyed and exhausted, Brienne considered just calling in sick for the whole week, but they had Highgarden in a week and a half and she was doing this to help Jaime win; she couldn't abandon her work in addition to him. Besides, it wasn't like he would just leave her alone to sit in the dark in her pajamas, not responding to his texts and not letting him come help her. Better to get it all over quickly, like ripping off a band-aid.

Too bad when she did it would be her heart bleeding all over the floor.

Sandor was quieter than usual when he picked her up, though he shoved coffee and a donut wordlessly in her direction when she came downstairs. When they arrived at the Lannister Corp offices he turned back to face her.

“I know lots of bars,” he said and she smiled a little, pressed a hand quickly to his forearm in thanks before getting out of the car.

Jaime's motorcycle was already parked in the otherwise empty lot. She exhaled shakily at the sight of it, remembering the feel of him in her arms, their bodies merged together on the bike, in the bed. Brienne had hoped she'd have some time to gather her thoughts, to figure out the right time and place to talk to him, but he'd come in early, too, and she knew it was for her.

She found him in his office, sitting at his desk and staring idly at his closed laptop. When she entered, his head jerked up quickly, his eyes searching her face.

“Feeling better?” he asked in a neutral voice.

“No,” she said quietly. She shut the door and Jaime's eyes widened, his fingers nervously drumming on the desktop. Brienne closed the blinds, too, leaving them with just the light from his floor lamp shading them in warm yellow.

He opened his mouth to speak and she cut him off quickly, suddenly terrified if she didn't begin she never would. “We have to stop this.”

Jaime went utterly still, except for a sudden storm in his eyes. “Stop what?” he finally asked.
“Our...relationship.”

“Why? What happened? Did someone say something?”

“No,” she said, forcing out the lie, praying he believed her. “It's a distraction.”

“I've come in first the last two races, it's not that distracting.”

“It's too hard,” she whispered. “I'm not getting enough sleep. I'm worried all the time. I'm not happy.” Her voice broke on that, the truth of it overwhelming her. “And neither are you. We need to stop.”

“We can cut back,” he said, his brow furrowed. He reached out to her over the desk. “I didn't think it was bothering you this much, I'm sorry if I-”

“No,” she said so sharply his hand dropped to the desk. Somewhere around two am she'd thought she would say he'd needed her too much, but she realized now she couldn't bear to hear him apologizing for something he hadn't done. He pressed his palm hard against the desktop and Brienne stared at where the line of his hand went white with the pressure. “You said if we wanted to stop we could stop, just go back to being coworkers.”

“You really want to stop?” he asked in a voice hoarse with despair.

“Yes,” she whispered.

“Permanently?”

Tywin's calculating stare, the threat of what he wanted her to say, was like a sword hanging over her, but she choked on the words. “It's just sex,” she managed instead, a truth and a lie at the same time.

Jaime leaned back in his chair like she'd physically shoved him away, gripping the edge of his desk. “I see.”

“Jaime, I-”

“No, we had an agreement,” he said in a tone she hadn't heard from him since January. Since before he'd let her see the man desperate to be known that he hid from the rest of the world. “We'll stop, then. Right now. Is there anything else, Tarth?”

Brienne winced and shook her head, blinking back tears. “After the season-”

“We'll see,” he said and she nodded, closing her eyes even as she stood to leave. When she opened them again they stared at each other for a long moment and she willed him to see through it, to realize she didn't want this, not really. She would have given anything to climb into his arms and kiss him and tell him all. But she knew if she did he'd go straight to his father and she couldn't protect him from what would happen next.

“I'll see you later,” she said, but Jaime didn't say anything, didn't even seem to hear her. Brienne exited and shut the door behind her, and she didn't see him again the rest of that day.

The next morning, dread like a rock in her stomach, Brienne showed up at work to find Jaime gone.

“Where is he?” she asked Bronn mid-morning, gesturing at Jaime's office.
“Who the fuck knows,” Bronn muttered, poking at his keyboard. “At least he's leaving us alone. Hey come check out these stats, this can't be right.”

On Friday Jaime's office door was still closed, his lights off, no meetings with him on her schedule. That afternoon she asked Pod if he knew where Jaime was, and the younger man had shrugged.

“Maybe he went t-to do interviews? D-did you need him f-for something?”

Yes, she thought desperately, but she shook her head no.

That night Brienne picked at a dinner of butter on toast and sat in her dimly lit apartment trying not to worry. She'd just decided to send Jaime a quick text when her phone rang, Jaime's name lighting up the dark screen.

“Jaime?” she said, answering on the second ring. “Are you ok? Where are you?”

There was quiet for ten seconds, thirty, just the steady sound of his breathing on the other end, the silence of her apartment on hers.

“Rosby,” he said finally, startling her, his voice rough like he'd been drinking, or crying. “I think.”

“Do you need me to send Sandor to get you?”

“No.” He made a wounded noise, something between a moan and a stifled cry. “I shouldn't do this, I know I shouldn't do this, but I can't stop thinking about you.”

Brienne gripped the phone tighter to her ear. “You promised we could go back,” she pleaded.

“I was an idiot. I can't do it. Can you?”

*Say yes,* she urged herself, but she couldn't make that lie pass her teeth. “Just focus on the racing,” she said instead. “We'll just focus on that.”

“I didn't even get to kiss you one more time,” he said, desperate. “I thought I'd get to kiss you. Fuck, Brienne, all I wanted was one more taste of you. Let me have one more night knowing that's all and then I'll let you go.”

“Jaime,” she whispered, her whole body tingling, aching for him. “We can't.”

“Then talk to me,” he begged, “let me pretend one more time that we're not just done.” She suddenly pictured him sprawled on the bed, gripping himself, and she knew it was wrong, but she couldn't stop her breath from speeding up, heat flooding through her. “Please.”

“Alright,” she managed, swallowing hard.

“Can I tell you what I would do, if you would let me fuck you one last time?”

“Yes,” she breathed, lying back on her couch. She put her phone on speaker and set it on the coffee table near her head, shut off the last light in her apartment so only the city lights shining through her window pale and distant illuminated the room. “What would you do?” she asked, her voice deep and needy even to her own ears.

“Did you put me on speakerphone? Are you touching yourself, Brienne?” She could almost see the fire in his eyes.
She rubbed her fingers over her own stomach, dragging them up between her breasts. “Yes,” she whispered.

“Gods,” he groaned, “I wish I was there. I had to leave, you know, go so far from you I couldn't make it back or I'd be at your doorstep. I'd planned to bring you to my apartment on Tuesday. I could just see you sitting up on the counter, my tongue deep inside you like a fucking five course meal just for me. I don't give a shit about my neighbors so you could have screamed as loud as you wanted. And I would have made you scream, Brienne.”

She gasped and sucked her fingers, then rubbed them over her nipples, wishing it was Jaime's rough tongue.

“When you were done there we would move to my couch. It's bigger than yours, and soft. You'd kneel at my feet and you'd—” he moaned low into the phone and she heard the movement of his arm against the sheets. “You'd wrap your mouth around my cock,” he managed, panting. “Would you do that?”

She'd wanted to their second time together on Tarth, had been hungry for the weight of him on her tongue, but Jaime had stopped her, gentle but firm. Brienne had been filled then with her own power to make him weak; now she hated that she could. “Yes,” she said, her whole body on fire as she slid her fingers down below her waistband into her own slick heat.

“I know you would,” he whispered and he sounded miserable. “I'm sorry I pushed too hard, that I ruined everything.”

“Jaime,” she murmured, her heart cracking. “It wasn't you.”

“It's always me.”

Brienne trembled with rage at Tywin and every other Lannister, at a racing world that had taken Jaime's young, hurting heart and broken it so completely. She was helpless against the overpowering weight of it all, unable to shield him even now as his race engineer, his friend. “What else would we do?” she asked, reaching for anything to distract him.

“What?”

“If I were there, after I'd finished with your, your cock,” her voice dropped but he groaned in her ear. “It would be wet from my mouth. But I didn't let you come yet, so what would you do?”

“Brienne—”

“You'd take me to your bed,” she hurried on. “I'm sure you have silk sheets and they would be cool on our skin. We'd be sweaty and hot and it would feel good. Not as good as it would feel to have you thrust into me though,” she said and he whined over the speaker. “Imagine how I feel. I'm so wet for you, Jaime.” That wasn't a lie; her fingers were soaked pressed against herself. “Can you feel it?”

“Yes, gods, you're drenched. You're always so ready for me.”

“Stroke yourself faster, Jaime” she commanded him, her face burning with lust and embarrassment. “As fast as you would be fucking me.”

The noises coming from the speaker were dirtier than any erotic dream she'd ever have. “Are you doing it?” she asked.
“Yes,” he gasped. “Yes.”

“Good. You're so good for me,” she breathed and Jaime cried out on the line, inarticulate and lost. She waited for him to quiet, for his heavy breathing to slow down.

“Yes,” he asked after a minute, everything but exhaustion stripped from his tone.

“No.” She pulled the phone back onto her chest, cradling it. “We can't do this again.”

“I know.”

They were silent together on the phone for another minute and heading into a second when Brienne finally said, “Jaime?”

“I love you,” she wanted to say, her heart crushed under the unleashed force of the feelings that had been there much longer than she'd wanted to admit. I'm a fool and I love you. “Get some sleep, ok? I'll see you at work at Monday.”

She worried he'd hung up, but he eventually sighed into the phone, shaky and sad. “Ok. See you Monday,” he murmured, and then the line went dead and Brienne was left alone with a yearning she had no idea how to ease.

Chapter End Notes

Hi. I'm sorry. Please enjoy this extremely sweet modern AU JB one-shot, meet me in the afterglow by hotaruyy as a palate cleanser.
Chapter Summary

Jaime wanted to kneel at her feet, bury his head in her lap and beg her to try again, but the ride home Sunday had cleared more than his headache. She'd said it was just sex, but it had never been just that to him. He'd loved her since Tarth for sure and probably since January when she'd stepped out of the garage and hated him for the reasons he'd deserved to be hated, and he was incapable of keeping it private. If it had only been physical for her, if the way her eyes had burned with joy had been her body and not her heart, then it was better she stop it now. He wasn't going to love her less with more exposure; he had no immunity to Brienne.

Chapter Notes

This is the shortest chapter of the story so far, but I think we'll all be ok with that.

Jaime had thought he'd known the worst of loss, had been through the most difficult moment of his life back when he'd killed Aerys and the world had turned its back on him. But showing up at Lannister Corp Monday morning, walking into the offices to see Brienne at her desk, to watch her look up with aching sadness in her eyes, and to just nod and walk past her into his office felt like Aerys had caught up with him and he was burning up from the inside, everything good about the last few months turning to ash.

It was worse when she knocked tentatively on his door later and said, “we have a meeting to talk about Highgarden.”

He gestured at what he'd come to think of as her chair and she sat in it, looking at him cautiously. Saturday had passed in a blur of drinking and smoking in a motel in Rosby that was a step below the Lazy Eel, and Sunday he'd ridden home with a pounding headache that throbbed in time with his hurting heart.

“I'm sorry about Friday,” he said quietly, and she flushed, the familiar red staining her cheeks.

“It's fine.”

Jaime wanted to kneel at her feet, bury his head in her lap and beg her to try again, but the ride home Sunday had cleared more than his headache. She'd said it was just sex, but it had never been just that to him. He'd loved her since Tarth for sure and probably since January when she'd stepped out of the garage and hated him for the reasons he'd deserved to be hated, and he was incapable of keeping it private. If it had only been physical for her, if the way her eyes had burned with joy had been her body and not her heart, then it was better she stop it now. He wasn't going to love her less with more exposure; he had no immunity to Brienne.

But the deep lines between her brows suggested she was telling them both at least a partial lie. Perhaps after the season was done they could talk and she would change her mind. He could tell
her how she was the first thing he thought about every morning, even on race day; the only thing he dreamed about at night, even with the World Championship so near. And for now he would give her her space and pray that someone else didn't step in to fill it before he could have another chance.

“Do you have notes to start?” he asked, turning his monitor so she could see it, too, the track already on the screen.

Brienne looked so grateful he thought she might cry, and he gave her a small nod of understanding.

The rest of the week passed as tentatively and distant as that meeting, the two of them only talking when they had to, adrift in a sea between lovers and friends, unable to reach either shore. He heard her laugh only once, in response to something Pod said in the garage, and when he looked over to see her happy she immediately stilled under his hungry stare.

In the mobile garage at Highgarden on Friday, Bronn sauntered over to him while Jaime stood in a corner holding his helmet hard against his chest while he watched Brienne arguing with the engineers.

“I've changed my mind,” Bronn said, standing at Jaime's side and following his gaze, his arms folded over his chest.

“How about we just...”

“About what?”

“About you and Chief. You should fuck her.”

Jaime turned on the other man, furious. “That's not funny,” he snarled.

Bronn lifted an eyebrow, an expression on his normally disinterested face that meant he was stunned at the response. “I don't know what your fucking problem is Lannister, but whatever this is can't go on. Put us all out of our misery and just do it.”

His heart raging like a trapped animal in his chest, Jaime shoved past Bronn to head for his driver's room, Bronn's offended “hey!” echoing off the walls behind him.

“Radio check,” Brienne said in his ear later as Jaime pulled out for first free practice. He tightened his grip on the wheel.

“I hear you.”

She was quiet then and so was he, neither knowing what to say or how to say it. It was like that through the second free practice that afternoon, the last one Saturday morning, and all three qualifying rounds: Brienne calling for radio check, Jaime saying he'd heard her, and then as little communication as possible.

Because he was in the lead in the standings, the IAF kept asking him to be part of the pre-race interview groups, but he begged off that Sunday, claiming he was feeling unwell, and he sat in his hotel as long as he could until waiting any longer would have made him late for the driver's parade and weigh-in.

Highgarden's driver parade consisted of a long flatbed decorated lavishly with flowers, like they were a float in a holiday parade. The theme this year was 'Love of the Sport,' and there was an abundance of hearts in the decorations that felt bitingly ironic.
Jaime climbed up and stood where the race director pointed him, glanced up briefly at Addam when he joined him. “They let me pick my spot,” Addam explained, smiling a little. “And you looked like you could use a friend.”

Jaime swallowed hard, glancing down and away to hide the rush of gratitude that weakened his iron-willed resolve to not cry. But he nodded a little and Addam patted his shoulder warmly.

As the parade got under way, Jaime and Addam waving at the cheering crowd, Addam softly asked, “anything you want to talk about?”

“No,” Jaime said firmly, acknowledging a crowd of fans wearing his colors and number and yelling his name in wild voices. He’d noticed these groups getting bigger with every win, until Lannister #8 was the most prominent fan gear at every race. Some of them had even started chanting Kingslayer as though it were a reward and not a punishment. It made Jaime's skin crawl with unease.

Addam grinned and blew kisses to a small group of women who had his face on their t-shirts and their resounding screams made Jaime smile a little. “Anything to do with your race engineer?”

Jaime shot him a glare. “I said I don't want to talk about it.”

“Mm.” They held on as the truck took a sharp corner and then started waving again when the next set of bleachers came into view. “Three more wins and you've basically locked the championship down for the season, isn't it?” Jaime nodded. “Yet you've looked so unhappy this weekend that a reporter asked me this morning at the scrum if a family member of yours had died.”

Jaime rubbed his face, suddenly so tired of all of it: the pressure he put on himself to win, the pressure the media put on them to give over every moment of their lives, the pressure of his own demanding heart. “I appreciate what you're doing but I need this to be private,” he said quietly.

Addam studied him as they went around another corner. “All right. But if you need someone to talk to, I'm just a few garages down.”

As they rumbled down the straightaway, Jaime asked, “how are you feeling?”

Addam had missed Oldtown on doctor's orders, given it had occurred less than a week since he was hospitalized for the crash at White Harbor. He looked all right now at first glance, just the ghost of bruising on his forehead when Jaime peered closely.

“This might be my last season,” Addam said, sighing. “I've been getting headaches since the crash, I get tired more easily.” His gaze darkened a little. “It was such a stupid thing, too; I braked a little too late and hit a piece of tire someone had left on the track and turned just the wrong way and that was it.”

“Aren't you on contract for another year?”

“The money's not worth it if I'm not alive to enjoy it.”

“What will you do, if you stop racing?”

Addam lifted his face to the sunshine, his features calm and at ease. “Live.”

They took the rest of the track in silence, waving to the fans, Jaime even able to put on a smile when needed, and when they tromped down off the truck at the end, he gave Addam a grateful look, which Addam accepted with a nod and a smile and a “see you on the track.”
Jaime caught Brienne watching them, her brow furrowed with worry. Since she'd told him the non-work part of their relationship was through he hadn't once talked to her just because he wanted to, and the urge to saunter over, tease her until her face smoothed and then crinkled again in annoyance at him, was almost unbearable. He wanted to pull her into his arms and kiss her in front of everyone. He must have been telegraphing it because she reddened and turned away, giving him only the rigid line of her back in response.

He missed Tarth, when they'd been together and happy; when the dark of her small bedroom and the clean anonymity of his hotel room had been enough to keep the rest of the world at bay. The world had seemed softer there, its sharpness blunted by the warm comfort of Brienne's arms.

She engaged Bronn in conversation, pointing out something on the screen and then leaning past him to talk to an engineer and Jaime shook his head, pulling himself back to the hard-edged present. Jaime looked around, taking in his crew dressed in their race day jumpsuits, chatting idly while they did warm-up exercises and checked their tools, and the small crowd of random people that always bustled about the garage on race day: trainers and engineers and operations staff and photographers, all with somewhere to be and something to do, all working towards the goal of getting him and Lancel onto the track. Lancel was in deep conversation with Theodan over his car, pointing at the wing and frowning, Kevan watching and nodding solemnly. And in the recess of the garage, Jaime saw his father, who had his cold, hard eyes on Brienne, considering her as a snake would its prey. Jaime felt a flame of anger ignite in his stomach.

Tywin slowly turned his head and met Jaime's burning stare, and his father smiled a little, an ugly, victorious thing that Jaime did not understand. It filled him with dread, made every muscle in his body tense and his fists clench at his side. But then Brienne was there in front of him, her face unusually pale, blocking his view of Tywin.

“It's time for weigh-in,” she said, her eyes darting all over, unable to settle.

“Is something wrong?”

She jerked her head back, shook it furiously. “No. Why?”

He peered over her shoulder but Tywin was gone. “Are you ready for this?” he asked, bringing his attention back to her, asking her the question he'd asked her at the start of every race, but meaning it in a hundred different ways this time.

Brienne nodded, and he saw her hand twitch towards him before falling back to her side. “You've got this,” she said and he laughed a little, a wry, bitter chuckle.

“I have almost nothing,” he said. “This least of all.” Jaime turned on his heel and headed for the weigh-in area, unable to be so near her but still so far away for another moment longer.

“Brienne!” Melisandre was in the small pack of reporters that had caught Brienne heading into Harrenhal for qualis the following Saturday, trapping her just outside the paddock where she could have escaped their questions. “How has the response been to the interview you did with Arya?”

“Very supportive,” she said. “I've had lots of emails and letters from women and girls since it aired, all happy to see the problem addressed and hopeful to make their own marks. Thank you again for giving us the platform.”

Melisandre smiled knowingly and Peck waved his hand to get her attention.

“How do you feel about Jaime's chances this weekend?”
“The same way I feel every weekend: that he can win.”

“Why isn't he doing interviews?” Bonifer Hasty asked. He was an old reporter that she recalled used to be visible at all the Stormlands tracks and now seemed to mostly haunt Harrenhal and the surrounding areas.

“This is a very important time for him, he's been putting in extra work to make sure he leaves it all on the track trying to win the championship.”

“It seems he's been willing to make the sacrifices needed to win this year. Have you had to make the same in your first year in F1?” Bonifer asked and Brienne felt her careful smile fall.

If only you knew, she thought. “Every Formula One professional makes a hundred sacrifices in any season, regardless of what their role is and where their team is placed. Why don't you do a segment on that?” she directed at Melisandre, who raised her eyebrows and then seemed to type something into her phone. “Speaking of which, I don't want to sacrifice my morning coffee, so I need to go,” she said, and the small crowd laughed appreciatively, parting to let her pass.

Brienne was shaking only a little when the paddock door closed behind her, feeling better about that brief media encounter than any she'd done all season. Without Jaime constantly at her side, stepping in to field questions and protect her from her fears, she'd been slowly learning to handle at least the easy parts, and some of the faces were becoming familiar, their questions a routine cadence she was learning to meet. She'd never be good at it, but at least she didn't fumble the simple ones any more.

She was learning to handle attention in general, especially after Melisandre's segment with her and Arya had aired the Monday after Jaime's nail-biting win in Highgarden. Loras had come in second in that race, so close to Jaime's wheels Brienne had been worried they'd crash before they crossed the finish line. But with Robb taking third he fell even further behind Jaime in the championship race, and while Brienne had been prepared for the onslaught of interview requests on that, she'd been overwhelmed by the response to the interview with Melisandre, both from strangers and those she knew.

Monday night, alone in her apartment, she'd received texts from her father, Podrick, and Bronn, just as she had back in January, but there'd been more this time, too: Argella using internet slang Brienne had had to look up; Arryk who said he'd gotten her number from her dad; Arya herself who Brienne exchanged a flurry of excited messages with. None of those were as surprising as the ones from Sansa, who'd complimented her on the color of her outfit and the way she'd answered questions; or the applause emojis from Willem, who she hadn't even known had her number. The next morning the crew had been waiting for her, all of them gathered around, whistling and clapping loudly when she walked into the garage, even some of the engineers and Lancel's crew having joined in. Brienne had flushed as red as the car at all of the attention, but her heavy heart lightened a little at the sea of smiling faces.

When she went to see Jaime that morning to discuss Harrenhal he'd looked up from his computer where she heard herself talking about her experience on his crew and his eyes were shining in admiration. “You were fucking incredible,” he said and she had to wrap her arms around herself to keep from wrapping them around him. They hadn't touched since Oldtown, when they'd been snuggled together watching TV in bed. If it had been a thrilling impossibility to keep apart when they were secretly together, it was a brutal marathon to keep working together when all that would help was being apart.

Five more races, she thought, everything after that a terrifyingly uncertain future. Lannister Corp hadn't approached her to renew her contract, and neither had Jaime, of course. Hyle had asked again
a few days after the interview, urgent in his email as though he was worried someone else would swoop in first, and she had in the dark of night seriously considered it for the first time. Being near Jaime but not with him was not making her love him less; if anything, his quiet dedication, the way he kept out of her way so she could do her work without worrying about him, only made her heart more tender. She would never feel this way about Hyle and that would make the work easier. For both her and Jaime's sakes she might have to make one last, hard decision.

But all of that could wait until after the end of the season. Brienne was focused now only on getting Jaime the world championship he deserved. Nothing else mattered: not her future career, not her immediate prospects, and not her heart. And as her focus turned to the next race, she knew she'd need to be at her best.

Harrenhal was by far Brienne's least favorite track of the season. The track designer had, in a misplaced fit of preserving history, built it to wind around and through the crumbling ruins of what had once been the largest castle in Westeros. Even as old and broken down as they were, the ruins were still enormous, hulking beasts that obscured every good view, whether watching on TV or in person. It was often impossible to tell what was happening as a fan, and even now as a race engineer, having spent all week peering at reruns of past races trying to make sense of the track with the map in her hand, she was uncertain how best to help Jaime with his race. Drivers drove in and out of view, whole corners were hidden between tall, black rock walls, and there were few straightaways that Lannister Corp's increasingly fast cars could take advantage of.

So when Jaime's car slipped between Euron and Oberyn during Q3 and then all three cars disappeared from view she quickly scanned the screens trying to remember which one he'd come back on when his voice cut loud into her headset saying “fuck fuck fuck fuck” and her hands clenched on the gantry's counter.

“What is it?” she asked, finally finding Euron and Oberyn but not Jaime.

“I crashed,” he said. “FUCK!”

“No, the front is ruined. Fucking Greyjoy-“

“We'll review the tape,” she said, cutting him off to keep him from saying something on the public feed he might regret later. They were yellow flagging his sector now, she saw, and the retrieval truck was on its way. “Hang tight,” she told him, “they're coming to get you.”

“I don't know if it can be fixed by tomorrow. I'm sorry.”

“It's fine. We'll take a look, I'm sure it's not as bad as you think. Just stay somewhere safe until they get to you.”

“Fuck. Brienne-“

“It's fine,” she repeated, keeping her tone soothing. “We'll fix it.”

By the time the car had been delivered back at the garage, she was feeling less confident. Jaime had been knocked at an awkward angle into one of the kerbs, jumped it and slammed the right side of his car into the walls, crumpling the whole thing. They'd have to build the machine back up from his spare monocoque, a process that would take hours and hours of concentrated work; a late night for her and the crew as they rebuilt the machine in time for a re-scrutineering check in the morning.
Jaime stood slumped and defeated as Brienne examined the damage and made notes on a pad of paper before murmuring to Pod about getting approval from IAF to break the curfew in order to repair everything. Pod ran off to start that process with Kevan and she approached Jaime, standing by his side, facing the broken car.

“What happened?”

“Euron,” he spit out. “He took the corner too tight and I couldn't brake fast enough before he'd tagged me, sent me into the wall.”

“You're still starting at p-3,” she said. “That's good.”

“You know how hard it is to overtake here. I needed p-1.”

“You'll be fine. Oberyn is at p-1 and Robb is at p-2. You're better at managing tires than Oberyn is, which means Robb is your only real competition.”

“If I don't win this-”

“Then you have four more races to lock down the championship. Just place top ten and in two weeks it's yours.”

“If I don't crash again.”

“Jaime.” He glanced up at her, his face twisted and bitter. “I believe in you,” she said quietly. “I know you can do this. Just focus on the race in front of you; everything else we'll deal with as it comes.”

“How can you be so sure?”

“Because I've watched you race for all of your life and this is the best you've ever been. One unlucky spinout isn't going to change the weight of everything you've done this year.”

He huffed and dragged his hands through his hair. “Maybe everything is ending,” he said, so soft she almost couldn't catch it, so sad it felt like an arrow in her heart. He stalked away back to his driver's room and she let him go, unsure whether to follow. If Tywin had wanted to undercut his son's self-confidence, he couldn't have picked a better way to do it than having her break Jaime's heart two months before the end of the season.

But Tywin gained nothing from ruining Jaime's season. Lancel had no chance of winning the championship, and it was Jaime who was carrying the entire team on his back to a constructor's championship. Which meant Tywin just genuinely hated Brienne enough he'd rather she leave his son alone and put the whole season at risk than let them be happy for three short months.

She wondered if he'd started hating her when she'd stood up to him at Lannisport, or if it had started from the first moment they met. Either way, they weren't things Brienne would change even if she could. She was here only for Jaime; Tywin and the rest of them could go fuck themselves.

That anger fueled her through the rest of the hectic afternoon and late into the evening as they rebuilt the car, a mishmash of 11,000 pieces to be arranged and bolted on. Though some had already been attached to the tub of the monocoque, there was still so much work to do she felt cross-eyed and exhausted by the time they had finished in the middle of the night, her fingers aching from the concentrated work.

She'd sent Pod and the others home ten minutes ago and was taking one last look at everything,
testing pieces she hadn't already tried, examining connections to make sure they were true. As Brienne stood outside the paddock and stretched her aching back, she heard noises from the garage next door. She hadn't realized they were staying late as well, and she peered into their dimly lit paddock curiously. They'd all been so consumed with getting Jaime's car built on time that it was possible she had missed a crash by one of Golden Company's cars, but she doubted it. She saw three men come out of the garage, talking quietly until Ramsay Bolton's sharp, sneering laugh cut the air.

Brienne had had little interaction with most of the other drivers through the season; Robb and Jon Snow more than most as Direwolf's garage was always next door to Lannister Corp's at the track. Golden Company was always on Lannister Corp's other side, but she hardly saw Harry and she'd made a point to avoid Ramsay whenever she did see him, not liking the look of his pale, mean eyes. Uneasy, Brienne avoided him now, until she recognized the tall, gaunt form of Hoat. It wasn't entirely unusual for crews to mix after hours, though it mostly happened at bars and parties and almost never at the track. The third man stepped into and out of the light and she felt a hard thud of recognition in her chest. It was Martyn Lannister, and he was laughing with Ramsay and Hoat about something she couldn't hear. Brienne frantically tried to recall if Hoat had said anything about Martyn during the months they'd worked together, but the man had kept to himself and Brienne had been happy to let him, too busy to spend time worrying about him when she had racing and eventually Jaime to distract her.

The three men leaned in together under the light and then shook hands before splitting apart, and Brienne hesitated, uncertain whether to follow or let them be. They'd only been talking, laughing; if not for who they were she would have paid them little mind at all. It wasn't like Martyn had been banned from the tracks; he'd just been fired from his job. If the man loved racing, of course he would want to still be a part of things. Maybe Ramsay had even hired him. As soon as Martyn had been gone from Lannister Corp Brienne had put him out of her head as well, relieved to not have to think about him again.

You're just tired, she told her anxious heart. I'll get some sleep and tomorrow I can ask Hoat about it. Brienne lingered for a few minutes more, but when nothing else seemed out of place she called for a taxi and struggled to not fall asleep on the short drive back to the hotel.

Brienne was onsite late the next morning, having slept through her alarm, and by the time she got settled and had had a chance to check-in with the crew and Jaime, to see Hoat working diligently with the rest of them, the absurdity of her suspicion seemed even stronger. Martyn was nowhere to be seen, either near them or in Golden Company's garage, and she didn't have time to look for or care about Ramsay. Jaime was in a tightly ferocious mood and she needed to figure out how to settle him before he got in the car.

“I smoked four cigarettes this morning,” he told her when she found him in his driver's room. “None of them helped.”

A few weeks ago she would have bothered him about the smoking, but she let it lie today. “Do you want to go over the strategy again?”

“No I do not want to go over the fucking strategy.”

She tamped down a hot flash of annoyance. “I think we can do one pit stop today.”

“Hooray for us.”
“Everyone else is going to need two,” she pressed on, “but you can get more life out of those mediums than anyone I know. Which means you'll end on the hards. It'll slow you down, but there's not any straightaway worth talking about here.”

He slumped in his seat, his arms crossed over his chest like a sullen teenager. “Then why are we talking about it?”

“Fuck off,” she spit, the last thread of her strained rope snapping. His head jerked up, his eyes narrowing.

He looked ready to fight as he leaned towards her. “What did you say?”

“You don't think it hurts me too, to come into work every day and see you? To have to smell your cologne and see your face and remind myself I'm just here to work?” The conversation was quickly spiraling out of her control as Jaime stood slowly, his arms at his sides. “We were both in this, Jaime, and now we're both not and we have to deal with the stupid fucking decision we made back on Tarth.”

“You regret it?”

“Yes!” she shouted, angry tears in her eyes. “I didn't want to feel like this!”

His broad chest heaved with the force of his harsh breathing. “I thought it was just sex.”

Brienne clamped her mouth shut, realizing she had given away far too much. Four more races, she thought in despair. I couldn't even do that for him. “It was,” she said, her voice too weak.

“It wasn't,” he insisted and the deepness of his voice curled around her spine, making her shiver. She struggled to think of Tywin, sharp-eyed and demanding she give up everything she wanted so Jaime could have everything instead.

“It was,” she repeated. He took a step nearer and she put her hand against his chest to stop him. He was on fire under her palm; she could feel the pounding of his heart through her skin.

“Brienne.”

Her eyes fluttered closed at the way her name rang like a bell on his lips, the yearning she could not escape crawling up and slowly swallowing her willpower and good intentions. “It was,” she whispered a last time, opening her eyes. They were stuck in that tableau for a long minute: Jaime leaning towards her, her hand against his rising and falling chest holding him at bay. If she faltered for even a moment, she would be lost, and so would everything they had worked for.

There was a knock at the door.

With a strength she didn't think she had she pushed him away, and watched the hope in his eyes flicker and burn out. “Come in,” she said, the words torn from her aching throat.

Podrick opened the door and blinked at them with wide eyes. “Uh.”

“Is it time for driver parade?” Brienne asked, staring into Pod's confused face, unable to bear the weight of Jaime's anguished stare a second longer.

“Y-y-yes.”

“Good. Get him ready.” She pushed past Podrick to escape to the gantry, as far away from Jaime
and her heart's desires as she could get.

By the time the pre-race activities were done and Jaime had been seated in his rumbling car, Brienne had spent twenty minutes hiding in the bathroom and another five staring at herself in the mirror, splashing water over her heated face and wondering how she was going to manage to keep this up for another four races. When she was back in the gantry with her headset on, she hesitated to check in, but finally took a steadying breath and said, “radio check.”

There was nothing for a few seconds and finally Jaime said “check” in a dull voice.

She'd let him down by letting her emotions escape back in his room, distracting them both. Brienne swallowed and took a steadying breath. She had to control this, control herself, give him the control he would need to make it through the race. “Remember the strategy,” she said. “We're focused on tires.”

“Right.”

“Oberyn and Robb are both starting on softs. They'll be faster, but they'll need to pit sooner.”

“Okay.”

“Keep it tight before their first pit. You don't need to be first, you just need to hold on. Got it?”

“Yeah.”

“Tell me the plan, Jaime.”

“I've got it,” he said, and she was relieved to hear the sharp bite of annoyance.

“You say that, but then you don't follow the plan, so I'm just making sure you've got it.”

“Stubborn,” he grumbled, and she felt a bittersweet tug in her heart.

The lights started flicking on so she let him be, and when it went lights out his car leapt forward confidently, holding onto his p-3 spot with ease as the pack thinned out and separated after the first few corners. Even upset, Jaime listened to her and when Robb and Oberyn both boxed, he pulled ahead into p-1, opening up the car, taking the corners in perfect arcs, and putting extra space between him and his two closest competitors. He was driving a flawless race and she watched as closely as she could as he wound in and out of the view of the cameras. Nearly halfway through she called him in to box.

Brienne turned to watch the pit crew settle into position, her eyes drawn to Hoat, who fumbled a bit with his pneumatic as he ran around. Jaime's car pulled in, stopping precisely on the line, and it was the crew's turn to leap into action. In just under three seconds they'd replaced all four of his tires with new hards and he was off again, his car tearing out into the pit lane. Brienne watched him go until she could no longer see his car, and she turned back to the screens, saw Jaime exiting out onto the track, a car coming up fast from behind him.

“Ramsay on your left,” she said, but even as she said the words, she watched Ramsay swerve suddenly towards Jaime, saw Jaime correct sharply to the right, and his right front tire exploded out from under him, the front of his car dipping down abruptly and then the whole thing was rolling until the black walls of Harrenhal brought it to a crashing stop.

There were gasps all around her, and Brienne stared hard at the wreck on the screen. She blinked
and for a moment it was superimposed with an image of the truck Galladon had died in. She had
snuck into the junkyard once to see it; the metal had crumpled like a piece of paper and there had
been bloodstains still on the seat. Brienne couldn't breathe, couldn't think, she touched the screen
and searched desperately for movement from Jaime; she could barely tell where he was in the
mess.

The sharp wail of the ambulance broke her tongue loose and she gripped her headset close to her
head with shaking hands. “Jaime, do you hear me? Are you okay?” It was silent on the other end of
the line, it was silent along much of the track, the race steward having brought out the red flag
already, the crowds watching in hushed horror. The only sound was the piercing cry of the
ambulance as it hurried nearer. *It's so sunny outside*, Brienne thought. *Too sunny for him to die.*

“Jaime,” Brienne pressed urgently, barely able to speak around the terror clawing at her throat.
“Say something. Anything.”

More silence for endless, agonizing seconds. And then he screamed.
Chapter Summary

“Your family is out there, and a few of your racing crew. I saw the crash,” the doctor said solemnly. “You're lucky to be alive and mostly uninjured. The miracle of those cars of yours, I suppose. Just unlucky about, well.” He at least had the sense to look awkward. “Anyway they've been anxious to see you.”

How could they see him when he'd disappeared? “I don't want to see anyone,” he muttered.

“That's your choice, of course, though we do recommend re-connection with your loved ones as soon as possible after surgery. It helps with the healing.”

“I don't have any loved ones,” Jaime said, leaning his head back against the pillow and turning to stare out the half-closed blinds. “I just have family and coworkers.”

Chapter Notes

I was going to wait to post on Sunday but honestly I felt bad about leaving y'all on the cliffhanger, so here you go a day early. Extreme, never-too-many thanks to BrynnMcK for not just her usual spot-on beta'ing skills but pushing extra hard on this and the next two chapters to make it so so SO much better than it was. Any remaining off-ness is mine.

When Jaime woke after surgery, groggy and in pain, not fully aware yet that his life had ended, the doctors rushed to assure him they had done everything they could, their faces drawn and worried, their posture suggesting they did not want to be sued by Tywin Lannister. Jaime only stared down uncomprehending at the empty space where his hand had been. Instead of fingers, he had a drainage tube; instead of a palm he had a compression bandage. The nurses came to check on both with aggravating regularity while he tried to escape through sleep. There was no escaping their cool, efficient fingers as they checked his pulse, his wound, whether he had a concussion or internal bleeding that had been missed. His body felt like one big bleed, everything he knew draining out of him as he lay in bed through the dark night and realized what losing his hand meant. When dawn came he felt emptied and translucent as a ghost.

The doctor had come in a few hours later looking serious but friendly as he made his rounds. “We've deadened the nerves,” he'd told Jaime. “It should prevent phantom pain, or at least minimize it. But it's important that you start stretching and working your residual limb in a couple of days, make sure you're retaining as much strength and movement as you can.”

“My what?” Jaime had asked, his mouth dry. He'd had what felt like gallons of water already but it didn't seem to help. (“Blood loss,” the nurse had told him in a bored voice an hour earlier when he'd complained of his thirst while she checked his vitals. “Your body is building new blood. Drink more.”)
“Residual limb. That's what we call what's left of your right arm. Which is most of it, I'm happy to say. We only had to perform a wrist disarticulation. Didn't have to cut into the transradial area at all.”

Jaime stared down at the flat mattress where his hand should be and did not feel grateful. He didn't feel much of anything.

“I want off the painkillers,” he said, his throat sore.

“We'll take that under advisement, Mr. Lannister,” the doctor replied, his smile indicating he'd do no such thing. “In the meantime, you've got visitors waiting to see you. Since you're still in post-op, we can only send in one or two at a time, if you're ready?”

“Who is it?” he asked.

“Your family is out there, and a few of your racing crew. I saw the crash,” the doctor said solemnly. “You're lucky to be alive and mostly uninjured. The miracle of those cars of yours, I suppose. Just unlucky about, well.” He at least had the sense to look awkward. “Anyway they've been anxious to see you.”

How could they see him when he'd disappeared? “I don't want to see anyone,” he muttered.

“That's your choice, of course, though we do recommend re-connection with your loved ones as soon as possible after surgery. It helps with the healing.”

“I don't have any loved ones,” Jaime said, leaning his head back against the pillow and turning to stare out the half-closed blinds. “I just have family and coworkers.”

The doctor did not have a pithy comeback for that. Instead he mumbled a goodbye and left Jaime alone with his empty spaces.

Twelve hours after the doctor reported on Jaime's successful surgery, Brienne left the hospital without having seen Jaime once. He'd refused visitors no matter how many times Tywin sent a nurse in to ask him, and once Jaime's father had left in a tight-lipped fury, Kevan and Lancel had left, too, leaving Brienne, Podrick, Willem, and Bronn in the waiting area. Eventually, the others, too, had gone, and Brienne was on her own. She would have stayed longer, even though it was morning and she was slumped half-asleep in the ultra-uncomfortable waiting room chair, but Cersei was still coming in from King's Landing and Brienne didn't want to be sleep-deprived and alone when the other woman arrived.

Instead Brienne retreated to her hotel room and collapsed on the bed still dressed in her race day clothes. She dreamed about Jaime bleeding in a crumpled truck on a rainy Tarth road, about Galladon bleeding against the walls of Harrenhal. She woke up a few hours later in the same position she'd fallen asleep with a small puddle of drool on her pillow. Before she'd even cleared the blurriness from her eyes she checked her phone to see if anyone had left word about Jaime, but the only message was from her father asking how things were going.

’I don't know’ she sent back. The only things she did know were that Jaime's hand had been severed in the crash and his scream was still rebounding in unearthly echoes in her head. She didn't know why his tire had ruptured like that, she didn't know if he was in pain or despair, she certainly didn't know if he would even be willing to see her if she went back to the hospital.

But on the last item, at least, she could try. She owed him that. Brienne stopped by the hotel lobby to extend her stay for another week, uncertain of when they'd be able to transfer Jaime from the
Harrenhal hospital to one in King's Landing, and hopped a bus to see him.

“Go away,” Jaime greeted Cersei when she breezed through his doorway.

“That's no way to talk to your sister,” the nurse at her side said. Jaime couldn't remember the woman's name through the haze of painkillers, but he thought it might be Roz.

“That's none of your business.”

Cersei put on her best fake smile, a bright piece of fool's gold that no one except a Lannister would disbelieve, and patted Roz on the shoulder. “He's always like this when he gets sick,” she said, like he had the flu. “We'll be fine.” She maneuvered Roz out of the room and closed the door behind her. They'd moved Jaime from one private room to another near the top floor mid-morning, saying that he was just taking up space in post-op that could go to someone who actually needed it. This room was more like a hotel room with a hospital bed in the middle of it, designed to convince visitors and patients alike they were having a brief, pleasant layover in life. It didn't make him forget about his hand for a second.

“What do you want?” he snarled at his sister.

She stood next to the bed, on his left side where he was still whole. “Oh Jaime,” Cersei sighed, her mirror image eyes welling with the perfect amount of tears as she studiously did not look at his injury. “Look at you. I told you this would happen someday.”

“You came to gloat.”

“It's just the truth. You have to see now that racing has never been anything but damaging to you.”

“It's my life,” he said low.

“A bad one.” He had seen Cersei in all her directed cruelty many times before, so he knew that this wasn't her trying to destroy him, it was just a side effect of her being right.

“Get out,” he snapped, turning away. The window at least afforded him a view of God's Eye lake, houses crowding around its edge, the water sparkling blue and green in the morning sunshine. A pair of black swans flew into view and came to a long, skimming landing on the calm waters.

“You know I'm right,” Cersei continued. “It's for the best, Jaime.”

“For the best?” he spit out, whipping his head around to face her once more, blinking against a sudden rush of dizziness. “How can you say that?”

Cersei lifted her chin. “Driving cars around for hours week after week, never being home, never thinking about more than how fast you can go for some silly trophy, all while risking your life? What's the point?”

He gaped at her, unable to talk, barely able to think. She'd dismissed everything he'd sacrificed for for most of his life in the span of a few sentences and she didn't even care. He could feel his heartbeat pounding in his injured wrist.

The door behind Cersei opened again and Brienne poked her head tentatively in the room and all of Jaime's empty spaces grew heavy. “I'm sorry,” she said, glancing between Cersei and Jaime, her cheeks going pink. “The nurse said I could come in.”
“We're having a family discussion,” Cersei said.

“And we're done with it,” Jaime added bitterly. “Come in if you want.”

Brienne swallowed and nodded at him, moving to stand at his injured side opposite Cersei. He had been dreading seeing Brienne, unable to bear any pity in her eyes, but now that she was here he saw only a warm concern, a tender sadness, and a nervousness he hadn't seen in her since January. Her eyes searched his bruised face, then settled on his bandaged stump, her fingers hovering above his forearm.

“Oh Jaime,” she breathed, “I'm so sorry.”

He tucked his ruined arm a little closer to his side and her hand fell away. “It's not your fault.”

“I should have warned you sooner that Ramsay was coming up behind you.”

“It's not your fault,” he repeated more forcefully and Brienne pressed her lips together and sniffed loud in the quiet room.

Cersei shifted but Jaime ignored her, too busy taking in Brienne. She looked worse than he'd ever seen her: deep circles under her eyes, pallid skin that even washed out her freckles, her jeans and shirt wrinkled from where, he assumed, she'd had them stuffed in her travel bag. She always packed light, he recalled, being too busy with work to spare time for what she considered the trivialities of fashion. Two weeks ago he still would have pushed her up against the window and kissed her backlit by the sun. But that was before, when he had two hands and something to give her besides just himself and the snarling vacuum inside him.

“Jaime,” Cersei said sharply, unhappy as always to have anyone else eating up her attention. “How long will you be stuck here?”

“They said a week or two.”

“Will they be able to move you to King's Landing?” Brienne asked him.

He shrugged his left shoulder. “I don't know. We haven't gotten much beyond the fact that I'm going to have to change my own bandages at some point.”

“I can help with that,” Brienne said immediately. When Jaime glanced at Cersei, her face was pulled tight with a faint sheen of disgust.

“We'll hire someone to do that. He doesn't need you playing nursemaid.”

Brienne stiffened and stared down at the floor. “I didn't mean-”

“Cersei's right,” Jaime said. “I'm not going to make you be my caretaker.” It was just sex, she had insisted again before she pushed him away in his driver's room at Harrenhal, though he'd been certain there was more there in her turbulent eyes. That was the moment he'd lost all hope of fighting whatever was keeping her away; it had felt the same as the wheel wrenching out of his hand at Harrenhal, the ground coming up to meet him. He wouldn't let her tie herself to him now out of guilt when she had even less reason to stay than before. His arm throbbed at his side.

He hated the triumphant sneer on Cersei's face when she put her hand on Jaime's left one. “Lannisters take care of themselves,” she said, somehow straight-faced with such an obvious untruth.
Brienne looked lost for a moment and Jaime's heart twisted. If he'd had his right hand still he might have grabbed Brienne's with it, but all he had was nothing, and she nodded once, sharp, and backed away from his bed. “I just wanted to check on you,” she mumbled. “Make sure you were, I mean I know you're not all right, but—”

“Thanks for stopping by, Wrench,” he said, the nickname slipping out, and her eyes jerked up to his, open and hopeful. He realized with lightning clarity that she hadn't been nervous about Cersei, or afraid of what his hand would look like; she was afraid of him, that he would hate her. If he had remembered how to laugh he would've done so. He couldn't hate her now even if it had been she who had taken his hand. She'd taken the most important part of him already anyway.

The door opened again and this time everyone went still when Tywin strode into the room, leaving the door wide open behind him.

“I see you've stopped sulking finally,” Tywin said in greeting, and Jaime inhaled sharply. “What are you doing here, Ms. Tarth?” he continued in an accusing tone.

“She's visiting me,” Jaime answered for her, but Tywin was glaring at Brienne with an intensity he usually reserved for Ned Stark or Doran Martell, men he considered personal, threatening enemies.

“I was just leaving,” she said. She met Tywin's icy stare but instead of freezing she seemed to grow into herself, turning to solid steel, and Jaime had never been more proud of her than when she turned her back on his father to squeeze Jaime's lower leg. “Call me if you need anything.” Her hand was warm and heavy through the blanket, and he was ashamed of how much he'd missed even this small touch. When she'd pressed her hand to his chest in the driver's room it had felt like all his blood had gathered there, eager to be hers.

He couldn't form a response but he kept his eyes on the door long after Brienne had shut it behind her.

“The doctor says the surgery went well.” Tywin stood tall at the foot of the bed, and Jaime was reminded of the night his mother had died. He'd woken up to Tywin stooping hollow and shrunken at his feet, staring past Jaime, seven years old and terrified to find his iron-willed father floating like a limp balloon. For days Jaime had thought it was a very vivid nightmare even when their home filled with well-meaning visitors come to pay their respects. His father had never been a soft man before, but the death of Jaime's mother had irrevocably hardened whatever tenderness there might have been. That night had been the last time Jaime had ever seen Tywin at a loss.

Jaime closed his eyes, concentrated on the pulsing of his injured arm. He'd fought against the last application of painkillers even as they'd injected it into his IV, but he'd down a whole bag now if his family would just leave him alone.

“You're lucky to be alive,” Tywin continued, unbothered by Jaime's silence.

“Am I?” Jaime murmured.

Tywin scoffed. “You're not the only one who lost something here, Jaime. There's no way we can win the championship with just Lancel.”

Fury roared through Jaime, filling up the emptiness with a familiar, bright, dirty heat. “You think I give a shit about what you lost?” he growled. “Fuck your Constructor's Championship, fuck the team, and fuck you.”

Tywin wrapped his hands along the footboard, and for the first time Jaime could remember, there
was an uncontrolled fire in Tywin's eyes, something angry and anxious. “You have no idea of what this means to the team, to our family. All you've ever cared about is yourself.”

“I lost my fucking hand!” Jaime shouted. “I'll never race again. I'll never win the championship. I'll never-” he choked on his own admission, unwilling to display any more wounds for his father. “Get out,” he said and it was more of a plea than a command.

Tywin pushed himself away from the bed with a disgusted huff. “I'll pay to have you transferred back to King's Landing as soon as you're able. The rest of us are leaving today as planned. Cersei.” He nodded at his daughter, acknowledging her for the first time only as he strode out the door. Jaime exhaled, shaky.

“You too,” he told Cersei, staring out at the lake. The swans were gone. He felt Cersei squeeze his good hand and then she was gone, too, and Jaime was alone.

Brienne left Jaime's room and nearly ran for the sunshine, bursting out into the fresh air and taking huge breaths. His beautiful face had been bruised, his hand was gone, but it was the dull, empty caverns of his eyes that she would not forget. She had seen that same hopeless look in her dad's eyes in the first days after Galladon had died, that belief that all the light in the world had disappeared. Even as a child Brienne knew her dad had fought his way back because she'd been there. She would be here now for Jaime, until he didn't need her anymore.

But he'd called her Wrench and she clung to that with the ferocity of a woman not ready to let go. Maybe once the need had passed, they would have a chance to talk about what they wanted instead.

After she left the hospital, Brienne ran into Podrick in the hotel lobby, his big bright red duffel bag slung over one shoulder.

“H-hey,” he said. “D-did you see him? How is h-h-h-e?”

“He's...” she thought of how angry he had looked when she'd entered, how forlorn when she'd touched his leg. “His whole hand is gone,” she finally said.

“Oh no,” Pod breathed. “Sh-should we v-v-visit?”

“He doesn't really want to see anyone. At least right now. Maybe later.” She nodded at Pod's bag. “Heading out?”

“Y-y-yeah they held the b-bus but it's leaving soon. You have t-t-time to pack, though.”

“I'm not going,” she said quietly. “There's no work for me now and I...I want to be here for Jaime.” Even if he had seemed reluctant to have her there, she couldn't leave him alone in Harrenhal and she was certain his family wouldn't stay. Tyrion hadn't even shown up at all. “But you should go,” she added at Pod's conflicted frown. “It doesn't make sense for all of us to stay, and I'm sure they're going to try to find a replacement driver for Jaime for the last races.” The words were thick in her throat.

“W-what about you? You c-c-could drive.”

“Tywin would never allow it,” she said, thinking of how his stare had been cold and dangerous as an ice storm.

“But it d-d-doesn't matter th-that you're a girl! W-w-woman,” he amended hastily.
How could she tell Pod that was the least of Tywin's problems with her? “Just trust me on this,” she said, unwilling to tell any more lies. “I will never drive for Tywin Lannister.” Even if he asked her she wouldn't do it, knowing her successes and stories would be forever entwined with such an awful man. *I'm no better than Jaime*, she thought ruefully.

Pod nodded miserably. “T-take care. Text me how h-he's doing.”

“Of course.” They exchanged a swift hug and she headed back to her hotel room, was stopped again by a quiet, “Ms. Tarth?”

Brienne turned slowly, so tired she was certain she was seeing things. “Arthur Dayne?” she said, her mouth dropping open.

The man smiled and nodded a little. He looked exactly as she'd last seen him on television a few years ago, his dusky skin still mostly smooth, though his always pale hair had turned more gray than blond and there more wrinkles around his kind, almost purple eyes. After retiring from racing, Dayne had become notoriously private, retreating to his home in Starfall in the western Red Mountains of Dorne. There were occasionally pictures of him on social media and in gossip columns, hiking those mountains, on shopping trips around Dorne, but for the most part the Formula 1 community had respected Dayne's privacy and when he made an occasional appearance at a race he was always received with thundering applause.

“I hope I'm not bothering you,” he said in a deep, calm voice that reminded her of her father.

“No. I mean, yes, I'm happy to talk to you but you don't have to buy me anything. We can just talk. I'm not hungry.”

His mouth twitched with a smile and he gestured for her to follow him. She did, briefly covering her face with her hands while she was safely behind his back before dropping them again with a sigh. They settled into opposite sides of a booth and Brienne stared blankly at the menu before shutting it.

“I'm really not hungry, Mr. Dayne,” she said. “We can just talk.”

“Let's not take up a booth for no reason.” He gestured at the waitress and ordered a farm-style brunch for himself and water for them both. “Coffee?” he asked Brienne and she shrugged and nodded. “And two coffees, please,” he asked the waitress. Judging by her pleasantly bored smile, Brienne suspected she had no idea who she was serving.

“You've had a remarkable season,” Dayne said after a pause, nodding thanks at the waitress when she returned with their drinks.

“Jaime did the driving.”

“I know. I also know how much a race engineer can help, or hurt. And he wasn't driving like that before this year, so you helped a lot.”

Brienne glanced down at the tabletop. “Thank you,” she murmured.
“I was at the track yesterday to watch the race.” Brienne blinked up at him, surprised. Though she supposed it made sense why he was here this morning; Starfall was a long way from Harrenhal to just make a quick trip. “I don't usually go to more than the Oldtown Grand Prix, sometimes Highgarden or Sunspear if I want to make a vacation of it. This year, I've been to nine races.”

“Why so many?”

“To watch Jaime become the driver I knew he could be.”

Brienne blinked back sudden tears. “Why didn't you say something?”

“He didn't need that kind of pressure, and neither did you. Goodness knows there was enough media to keep you both busy. I appreciated that last interview you did with the Stark girl-”


Dayne grinned, sharp but pleased. “Of course. I see why you've done so well,” he said and then looked up as the waitress brought his food. “Thank you, miss,” he told her before she left them alone again.

He took a few bites of food while Brienne fixed her cooling coffee and took a sip.

“You know,” Dayne picked up again, “they wanted to retire my number when I left racing, but I wouldn't let them. I knew Jaime was coming up fast and he'd made it clear he wanted it.” She watched Dayne carefully salt his eggs. “I held it for him because he'd earned the chance to drive under number eight.”

It should have been a point of pride, a sweet story, but all she could see were Jaime's shadowed eyes in the hospital bed, the bandage wrapped tightly around his wrist, and Brienne felt a surge of anger. “You should have told him that.”

Dayne looked briefly surprised. “He was an arrogant prick, if you'll pardon my language. I didn't want to make it worse.”

“He could have used a mentor,” she pressed. “Especially after Aerys.”

“Aerys.” Dayne shook his head. “He wasn't a good man,” he said cautiously.

“I know. Jaime told me all about him. How much did you know? How much did you let him get away with?”

He frowned at her, his eyes flashing. “I wasn't Aerys' keeper.”

“You had to know what he was like off the track. And on.”

“I know there were rumors about him, but there were rumors about me, too, just as disgusting, and untrue. You know how busy a season is, you think I had time to worry about Aerys?”

Brienne huffed, shoved her barely drunk coffee away. “What did you think, after the accident? Did you think Jaime did it on purpose? For no reason except jealousy? Why didn't you retire your number then when he got kicked back down to F3?”

“I know he didn't do it on purpose. Jaime was never like that, even at his most puffed up he respected the sport.”

“Then why did you leave him to bear it alone?” she asked quietly. The memory of Jaime's relief in
the sauna, when he'd told her his secret and she had believed him, flooded through her. Everything she had felt about Jaime had changed in that instant. He had changed.

Dayne's fingers tightened on his silverware and he set them down, folded his hands solemnly on the table. “It wouldn't have mattered,” he said, but he sounded uncertain.

“It would have to him.”

He rubbed his hand down his face and sighed. “I was already distanced then; I didn't realize the extent to which they turned on him until it was too late.”

Brienne shook her head, resigned. “Why did you want to talk to me today?”

“Word is he was badly injured,” he said, watching her carefully. “Really badly.”

“Yes.” She had studiously avoided looking at anything online or on tv, wasn't sure how much the world knew, but the state of his hand had been obvious even when they'd pulled Jaime passed out and bleeding from the wreckage. His sharp scream reverberated like a banshee in her thoughts.

“Will he race again?”

“No,” she whispered, fighting back tears.

“Damn.” Dayne sighed. “That's a tragedy, I'm sorry.”

“I let him down,” she said, staring at the heaping pile of hash browns on Dayne's plate. Her stomach turned over even though she hadn't eaten since yesterday. She was too full replaying the moments before the crash over and over instead. If she'd warned Jaime sooner about Ramsay's approach he could have been better prepared, could have moved quicker or accelerated faster.

“Were you his doctor?”

Brienne blinked, dragged her gaze up to Dayne, who was looking unexpectedly stern. “What?”

“Unless you were his surgeon and it was possible to save his hand and you failed, then this is not your fault.”

The reasons piled up on her tongue but she just stared down at the table and let them lie.

“Why I came,” Dayne said, his voice softer, “is because I thought Jaime would need someone now. I'd like to talk to him myself, but I wanted to talk to you, too. I want you to know what he's going through so you can help him. You clearly have a solid relationship and it's a natural instinct for a driver to turn to their race engineer in times of trouble.”

Brienne felt her cheeks heat but she shook her head a little. “He doesn't want to see me.”

“Maybe not now, no. You're a walking representation of everything he's lost. Even for me, making the decision by myself to leave Formula 1, it was so hard to retire. I dedicated my life to getting there and then to just stop and walk away...it felt like I was dying. I had to get as far away from the sport as I could so I could figure out how to live without it. Jaime's going through this same grieving process and he didn't even get to choose it.”

She swallowed around the lump in her throat. She heard Jaime again, from the night on the phone: *I had to leave, you know, go so far from you I couldn't make it back.* “What do I do?” she asked.

“Just be there for him. Get over your own guilt,” he said, surprisingly gently, “and know that he's
going to be mad and lost for awhile, and be there to help him find his way. He'll need his friends more than ever, and he'll need to know that it doesn't have to be the end. He can still be involved in the sport somehow, when he's ready.”

“I don't think he'll ever be ready for that.”

Dayne shrugged. “Then he can become a hermit like me. But he needs to know he's got a choice still, even if it's not the one he wanted.” He pushed his half-full plate away and sighed. “You know I don't think I'm hungry, either. Let me pay up.”

When they walked into the lobby there was a small crowd of people who all turned towards them, and then a startled murmur when they saw Arthur Dayne. Cameras started to flash.

“Brienne, have you seen Jaime?” “What are you doing here, Mr. Dayne?” “Brienne!” “Will Jaime ever race again?” “Has Golden Company or Ramsay reached out yet?” “Mr. Dayne, look this way, please.” “Will Lannister Corp be calling for an inquiry?” “Did Tywin call you, Mr. Dayne?” “Brienne, was this in any way your fault?”

Brienne inhaled sharply, scanned the crowd to find who had asked her that, but everyone looked anxious and eager for information, and though none of their faces were cruel enough to be expecting an answer to that question, none of them seemed offended by it either. Peck came around the edge of the crowd, looking only sad and sorry, and she nodded at him.

“How are you?” Peck asked her, and the other journalists stilled, phones and pens and cameras at the ready.

“I'm tired,” she said.

“How is he?”

Brienne bit her lip, shook her head a little, unable to even say the words out loud.

“He's in the hospital, but he's alive,” Dayne stepped in smoothly. “And that's all you'll get until Lannister Corp issues a full statement.” He laid his arm over her shoulder and guided her past the crowd towards the elevators, giving them a glare back over his shoulder that held them all in place.

“Thank you,” she whispered.

“The worst part of the job honestly. May as well use what respect I've earned for some good here.”

He let her go and pressed the Up button. “I'll stay here until you get safely in the elevator.”

Brienne nodded, a soft ding filling the tiled space. When the doors opened, Bronn stepped out and came to an abrupt halt and the three of them stared at each other while the doors closed again.

“Arthur,” he said flatly.

“Bronn.” There was a strange, non-threatening tension between them. “Push the button for Ms. Tarth, will you? I'm holding the vultures at bay.”

Bronn looked past Dayne's shoulder and groaned. “Fucking media.” He glanced at Brienne. “How are you holding up, Chief?”

“I'm all right. What are you doing here still? Pod said the bus was leaving.”

“It is. But I'm not.” He folded his arms across his chest, daring her to protest, but she just pressed
her lips together and nodded in understanding. “What about him” he said, thrusting his chin at Dayne.

“He just stopped by to talk. You're leaving?” she asked Dayne.

“Yes. I've got a flight back to Starfall in a couple of hours. Do ask Jaime when he'll let me pay him a visit, though, once he's back in King's Landing.”

“I will. Thank you.”

Dayne squeezed her shoulder. “Take care of yourself, Ms. Tarth. You've had a tremendous year. I don't think your career ended in Harrenhal either. Bronn.”

“Arthur.”

They gave each other cool once overs and then Dayne went back to the lobby, the journalists' voices rising again when he reappeared.

Bonn pushed the Up button and when the elevator dinged he gestured for her to precede him inside. They were both on floor six, and he leaned back against the wall of the elevator and sighed as it lifted quietly. “You've seen him?”

“Briefly.”

“How is he?”

Brienne opened her mouth, cast about for how to explain what he'd looked like in that hospital bed. “Empty,” she said finally.

They arrived at the floor and paused in the hallway. “I'm gonna check in on him later,” Bronn said. “Do you want to come with me?”

“Not today. I'll visit him tomorrow morning.”

He nodded. “You can do mornings and I'll keep him company in the afternoons. I'm sure he'll be unbearable as usual but we'll put up with him,” he said, but the joke fell flat on the hotel carpet.

Brienne had started towards her room when Bronn called after her, “Chief?” She glanced back at him. “You know how he feels about you, yeah?”

She swallowed hard. “Yes.”

“Good. I may have,” he hesitated, “I mean we all needed to focus on the racing. But now that it's done, maybe when he's ready you should talk to him about it. You seem like you might feel the same as he does.”

Brienne blinked back tears and nodded. “I do.”

“Good,” he repeated more warmly this time. “I've known Jaime a long time now and I know this next part is going to be hard as hell. But I know you being there will make it better.”

Brienne smiled a little. “If he wants me, I'll be there.”

“Yeah, I figured you would. You two've already fucked, haven't you?” She flushed red and hot and Bronn laughed a little. “That explains a lot,” he said wryly. “Not that it's any of my business. Well, I best be off, let you cool down before you melt from embarrassment.”
He tapped a finger to his forehead and sauntered off, but this time she called him back. “Bronn!”

“What?”

“How do you know Arthur Dayne?”

He rolled his eyes. “That ponce? He's a good enough man but he cheats at poker. When I first got into racing I worked for his F2 team. We both fell for the receptionist at the office and we bet over who got to ask her out first. I won. Barely. Turns out I cheat at poker, too.”

Brienne laughed softly. “How did the date go?”

“Pretty good. We're still married.” He winked.

“Lollys worked in racing?”

“She loved it. They barely let women in the building in those days, so she took the only job she could. Once I was made a mechanic she stopped working. Was sick of dealing with the macho bullshit. I don't blame her. She loves you.”

Brienne felt a pleased smile curl her lips. “I'd like to meet her someday.”

“Maybe someday you will. Get some rest, you look like you were in that crash, not Lannister.”

“When you see Jaime, will you tell him,” she paused, not sure what to say. “Tell him he was right: it wasn't.”

Bronn shrugged. “Sure. Dinner tonight? Since we're both stuck here.”

“Yes, that would be nice.”

“I can tell you more stories about Dayne, maybe take him down a notch or two.”

“That is your speciality,” she said, smiling.

“Everybody's gotta have a hobby.”

Brienne was still smiling when she let herself into her room.

“Did you get the short straw?” Jaime asked when Bronn entered his room without knocking later that afternoon.

Bronn pulled one of the padded chairs by the window near the bed and sat down. “I see my faint hope this had all been a ruse to hide a personality transplant has been dashed.”

Jaime shook his head and stared out the window. He'd spent most of the day staring out the window, watching the coming and going of the birds. They all had two wings, strong and powerful. A one-winged bird would be a liability. Would barely even survive the day.

He knew ignoring Bronn wouldn't make him go away, but he was still annoyed when the other man sighed loudly and pulled another chair nearer to prop his feet up on.

“At least take your shoes off,” Jaime grumbled.

“Why, you going to be getting out of that comfy bed soon to sit over here?” Jaime glared at him.
“When are you getting out of that bed, anyway?”

“I don’t know. They already make me walk to the bathroom now that I’m not a so-called fall risk.”

“Huh. Only been a day and you're already on your feet. Must be some sort of magic healing body you've got there.”

“Not magic enough.” Jaime scratched at the bandage wrapped tightly around his wrist. The nurse had come in a little bit ago to tighten it again, compression to shape the stump so he'd be ready to try a prosthetic.

Bronn twisted his head around the room, taking it all in. “This place is nicer than my hotel.”

“Lucky me.”

“Ah, I didn't say that.” He scratched at his chin. “Does it hurt?”

“Of course it does. It makes me tired, too, so you can just go.”

“You go ahead and take a nap, I'll just turn the telly on and watch a show. I'm sure they've got the full cable package here.”

Jaime felt a snarl rise in his throat. “I don't need a babysitter.”

“Good, because I'm shit at changing diapers.”

“I'm going to sleep. I don't want you watching me while I do it.”

“Why, do you snore? Or are you just afraid your pretty face isn't so pretty all slack-jawed and droolly?”

Jaime leaned his head back on the pillow, waiting for the emptiness to come and take him away again. It wasn't worth rising to Bronn's poking words, like a toddler trying to get attention.

“What do you want to watch?” Bronn asked, reaching for the remote.

“Nothing.”

“Come on, I'm sure there's some bullshit reality show we could put on.” Jaime shut his eyes and tried to remember what it felt like to curl both hands into fists. The deadened nerves at the end of his right arm made it feel like he was wielding a meaty club.

The TV turned on and the familiar WSN music played. Jaime opened his eyes and saw a newscaster looking serious. “Still no word from Lannister Corp Racing about their driver, Jaime Lannister,” the man said.

“Shit,” Bronn yelped, fumbling with the remote.

“Word is that he's been badly injured, and the World Championship he was so close to winning may-”

The TV clicked off again and he felt Bronn staring at him, but Jaime just turned his attention to the lake. Someone was canoeing across it, the oars – two of them, moving in perfect tandem – propelling it smoothly.

“Sorry,” Bronn mumbled. He tossed the remote onto a nearby table. “No TV.”
Jaime closed his eyes again and willed sleep to come, but he'd woken from a nap not long before Bronn had arrived, and his wrist was starting to hurt. It would be time for the pain meds soon at least, and he always slept a little after those.

“Want to play a game?” Bronn asked, holding out his phone when Jaime glanced at him.

“No.”

“Suit yourself.” They spent the next endless minutes like that, Jaime desperately trying to sleep, Bronn making quiet noises to himself while he tried, and failed, at whatever he was playing.

“You hungry? I bet they have room service here.”

“Why are you here?” Jaime finally snapped, the pressure in his wrist surging up his arm.

“It's my shift,” Bronn said. “Chief and I are splitting our time. Ironically, hospitals suck for healing, even in fancy rooms like this one. We're keeping an eye on you.”

“But why are you here?” Jaime pressed, confused.

Bronn sat up straight at that, his face twisting with genuine hurt and anger for the first time Jaime could remember in their long acquaintance. The man had always been so taciturn, so above any of Jaime's rankling and sharp barbs. At his worst, Jaime had called Bronn a hundred awful names, but he'd never once looked like this, his brown eyes glinting in pain.

“Why am I here? You stupid cunt,” he said low. His hands gripped the sides of the chair tightly.

“You don't owe me anything, Bronn. There's no reason for you to stay.”

“No reason? You almost died out there, you shit. I have better reason than any of your atrocious family. I've known you since you were a dumb, bullheaded teenager. I've followed your career since you blew through F3 just by training harder than anyone else. You were a good driver, but you know what stood out? You loved the sport, more than anyone I've ever met. It was inspiring to watch you, to work with you. And no matter how much you pushed everyone away, I saw how you treated Pod. How you've been with Brienne once you got over yourself. It would have been easier to give up after Aerys, go live your pretty little rich boy life on your father's money and your notoriety, but you didn't. You stayed. You worked and you fought and you loved the sport even if you hated every single fucking person you worked with. Even when they all hated you. You think I just hung around your sorry ass because you paid me well? I thought you were smarter than that. I thought you knew-” Bronn exhaled sharply and leaned back in the chair. He looked older, aged a decade in a minute. “I guess I was wrong.”

Jaime looked out at the lake and then, slowly, down at his hand. He'd tried to avoid looking at it at all, the dissonance of nothing where his hand had been still making him dizzy. He'd known Bronn for half his life, he realized. The man had not let him drown when Jaime had first joined Dragonfire. He'd said yes to being on Jaime's Lannister Corp F1 crew before anyone else and with not a hint of hesitation at working for the Kingslayer. He'd stayed even when Jaime was at his most furious and cruel, fighting back without ever going for the dig that would genuinely wound. If there had ever been anyone in his life that believed in him, it was the coarse, angry, worn-down man slumped in the chair at his side.

“You are wrong,” Jaime said. And then he looked at Bronn. “I was a great driver.”

Bonn looked up, and he huffed a tired laugh. “That you were, Lannister. That you were.”
They didn't talk much more after that, and then the painkillers did release and Jaime fell asleep again while Bronn muttered that he'd forgotten to tell Jaime something important.

“’Sok,” Jaime slurred. “Tell me t’morrow.”

He woke in the middle of the night, dinner cold on the table next to his bed, the chair Bronn had been in empty. Jaime pressed the call button and waited for the nurse on duty to come help him out of bed. The first time he'd tried on his own he had forgotten he only had one hand, and when he'd went to lever himself out with both he'd toppled to the side and nearly crashed to the floor, knocking his IV over. He hadn't tried on his own again.

The nurse knocked lightly and entered. It was Gilly, he saw, the young, sweet one, pale and doe-eyed and looking too slim to be much help given his size. “Did you need something, Mr. Lannister?” she asked in her soft voice.

“I need to use the bathroom. Are you able to help me up?”

“Of course. Though I suspect you’re strong enough to stand on your own.” She came over and put his injured arm gently around her shoulder. “Come on now, swing your legs over.”

He did as directed, found her slender frame was stronger than it looked. She still made him bear most of his own weight as they walked, though, and left him to relieve himself in private. When he washed his hand after, an awkward affair made more awkward by the sticky soap pump he struggled to work one-handed, he glanced at himself in the mirror. Purple bruises on his forehead, scratches on his neck and upper arms from debris, dark circles under his eyes even darker against his unusually pale skin. It had been less than two days since the crash, but it felt like a week. A month. A lifetime.

“Everything okay, Mr. Lannister?”

“Fine,” he said hoarsely. He missed his hand. He missed Brienne. He couldn't have either. Jaime pushed the door open and let Gilly help him back to the bed, gingerly using his left arm to roll in. She checked his vitals and examined his bandage while he looked up at the ceiling.

“Everything is looking good,” she said. She had the perfect nurse's voice, he thought. Tender and caring, but still confident. Like she believed he'd walk out of here tomorrow if he just put his mind to it. “Try to get some more sleep now. Sleep is a great healer.”

“I thought medicine was.”

“Well,” she smiled, and he saw a flash of crooked teeth. “It got you here, but your body is doing most of the work now. Your body and your mind.”

“What does my mind have to do with anything?”

“Oh lots,” she said very seriously. “My husband is a therapist who sees lots of patients like you.”

“Like me?”

“Trauma,” she said simply, the single word sliding into the empty spaces in a perfect fit. “He says that sometimes the body won't heal all the way right because the mind hasn't healed right.”

“Sounds like nonsense,” Jaime sneered.

She frowned at him and he felt like a little boy being reprimanded by his mother. “It's not,” she
said firmly. “I've seen it too many times. Maybe you should try some therapy, see for yourself. My husband is very good. Samwell Tarly, you can look him up.”

Therapy? Gods knew he probably had enough things to talk about, but he did not want to talk about them with a stranger. “Think I'll stick with sleep,” he said.

She shrugged and none-too-carefully fluffed up his pillow. “Suit yourself.” She didn't say anything else after that, just finished her tidying and left him in the dark with his aching arm and his aching heart, sleep not doing a good job of healing either.
Chapter Summary

Alone with him, free to stare as much as she wanted, she did, but not at his stump. Instead she catalogued every small cut and bruise from the crash, the sweaty tendrils of hair curling along his temple, the pulse she could see in the line of his neck. Brienne had felt his heartbeat there with the pads of her fingers and the flat of her tongue and it had tasted strong and true.

Jaime made a scared noise in his throat and she covered his hand with hers, curling her fingers around his palm. Then he gasped, still asleep, and she gently hushed him: “Shh, it’s just me. It’s Brienne.” He stilled under the sound of her voice, the lines on his face smoothing out.

Chapter Notes

Happy last day of 2019! I figured I'd celebrate by making one last chapter post in the decade (please do not @ me about how the decade really starts in 2021, both takes are correct). This is officially the shortest chapter of the story so far, but sometimes you have to make chapter breaks at emotional moments not at word counts. Shoutout to Kristie Sita who is a YouTube vlogger that has lots of funny, educational, and real-talk videos about what it's really like to be a hand amputee. I have watched these extensively and they're worth the time.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Brienne took a deep breath outside of Jaime's room and then let it out slowly, relaxing her shoulders. Calm and cheerful, she told herself. She plastered what she hoped was a sincere smile on her face and knocked on the door.

There was no response, either welcoming her in or sending her away, so she frowned and slowly opened the door. But as soon as she'd stepped in she saw he was sleeping, and she hesitated in the doorway. His brow was furrowed, his lips turned down. Whatever he was dreaming about, it was causing him pain. Brienne quietly shut the door behind her and took the seat pulled up next to his left side.

Alone with him, free to stare as much as she wanted, she did, but not at his stump. Instead she catalogued every small cut and bruise from the crash, the sweaty tendrils of hair curling along his temple, the pulse she could see in the line of his neck. Brienne had felt his heartbeat there with the pads of her fingers and the flat of her tongue and it had tasted strong and true.

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She got out her phone with her free hand and scrolled awkwardly through non-race related news
articles while he slept another ten minutes, before she felt him stir under her touch. Brienne glanced up to see his eyes were open, hazy and half-awake as he blinked at her and smiled.

“I thought I dreamed you,” he said, his voice still thick with sleep. She'd heard that voice enough times since Tarth that she knew her cheeks were reddening even as she pulled her hand away.

“No dream,” she mumbled, standing and going to open the blinds. When she looked back he'd raised his bed to a sitting position, his gaze narrow and considering.

“You came back.”

“Of course I did,” she said, frowning. “You're still here.”

“My family didn't have the same concern.”

She bit back a cruel comment about his family and shrugged. “They don't need to. Bronn and I are both staying here until they send you home.”

Jaime looked past her out the window, his eyes searching the sky. “You don't have to.”

“I know.” She looked down at his stump, the bandage bright in the sunshine. “How's it feeling?”

“It's not.”

“I mean does it...does it hurt?”

“Not enough,” he said quietly.

“Arthur Dayne came to see you,” she blurted out, and Jaime finally looked at her, a hint of who he had been sparkling in his green eyes.

“Here? While I was sleeping?”

“At the hotel. He was watching the race; he's been watching a lot of your races this season. He wanted to talk to you about,” Brienne bit her lip. “Well. About what you do next.”

“What is there to do? I can't drive a Formula 1 car with one hand and a prosthetic. I'm done with racing. Forever.”

“You don't have to be done with all of it,” she offered tentatively.

“What would you have me do? Personal assistant? I can't even type well.”

She leaned back against the windowsill, the sun warming her back. “I don't know, an executive, maybe?”

He laughed sharply, a bitter, barking sound. “Become my father, you mean. No.”

“You could never be your father.” I could tell him now, she thought, trying to form words with her suddenly dry mouth. It was an opening to lay bare all that Tywin had said, the reason behind why she'd abandoned Jaime before the crash and why she would not abandon him now. She briefly imagined it: his initial relief followed by the weight of what it meant, and it stilled her tongue. She couldn't put that on him when he was already dealing with so much. Even as terrible as Tywin was, Jaime needed his father now, or at least his money and security, the false hope that his father might not be as awful as he seemed. Jaime had so little other hope to cling to.
Jaime swallowed and looked up, his head tilting back. “I ruined your career, too.”

“You didn't,” she protested immediately. “If anything this is my fault. I should have stayed just your mechanic. I could have stopped what happened.”

“You can't stop a freak accident.”

She thought of Dayne warning her to get over her own guilt and she silenced, barely, further protests. “Lannister Corp paid the hospital to keep all media out and at least one hundred yards away from the outside. You'll be left alone as long as you're here. They also released a statement this morning.”

“What did it say?”

“What you would expect. A terribly tragic accident, your hand was lost and you won't be racing the rest of the season. They'll be looking for a new driver, though of course you can't be replaced. Thank you everyone for your concern, they'll pass along all the well wishes to you.”

“Have they asked you to drive?”

Brienne snorted. “No.”

“Fools.”

“I won't drive for your father,” she said firmly, ignoring Jaime's curious look. “But he wouldn't ask me anyway.”

“No, I suppose he wouldn't.” Jaime sighed, a loud, long exhalation that filled up all the space between them. “So Arthur Dayne, huh?”

“In the flesh.”

“Was it handsome flesh?” he asked, and the faint teasing tone of his voice had her heart swelling. “Not as handsome as Renly,” she said, and Jaime chuckled, sounding tired but genuinely amused.

They sat in mildly awkward silence for a few minutes, Brienne examining every corner of the room, every line of the modern art that hung on the wall. How different this moment would have been six months ago, or even two. Now she knew what his hands and body felt like on hers, she had seen him at ease and smiling, knew the way his eyes caught the light when he turned his head towards the sun. And she had given all those things up to get him to a World Championship that had been stripped away. Because she loved him, with all her foolish heart.

“Gods, Brienne, why did this happen?” Jaime whispered, stricken and angry, into the quiet. He was holding his stump up, twisting and turning it as much as he could with the tubes still attached, staring at it like it was a curse.

Her first instinct was to blame herself, to blame Ramsay or the tire-makers or the crew. But the truth was that there was likely nothing to blame. He'd gotten unlucky, maybe more than most, but still just a random chance of fate and timing and his hand being somewhere it shouldn't at just the wrong moment. She suspected that wouldn't give him any comfort, though. Not that Jaime had ever been one to seek out comfort; he'd always seemed happier on the edge of the knife than safely back at the handle. He had driven too fast and loved the sport too hard and now it had repaid him by spitting him out, broken, on the asphalt.
“We can’t focus on the why,” she said, unflinching under his raw, reaching stare. His eyes were as bright and unyielding as stars.

“What am I now?”

“You’re who you’ve always been,” she said, urgent, covering his hand. “That hasn’t changed.”

He shook his head forcefully. “I’ve only ever been this. My whole life, it’s who I was. Jaime Lannister: race car driver. A man without honor. Kingslayer. At least Kingslayer was better than this.” He waved his stump, his face twisting in agony. “At least it was something.” A tear slipped down his cheek and he groaned, a painful, ragged sound that twisted out from deep inside. “Fuck!” he hissed like the crack of a bullet. His whole body heaved upward, once, and then he curled in and away from her, his shoulders shaking.

“Jaime,” Brienne whispered, her heart crumpling like rubber and steel. She touched his back and he arched away from her.

“Leave me alone,” he begged in a voice soaked with tears. Brienne stood, her hand hovering near. “Leave,” he roared, a furious storm that pushed her back a step, two, towards the door, before she stopped herself.

She could not shelter him from his own grief, but she could ride through it with him. He’d lived through all the loss in his past alone and she would not let him do it again. She wasn’t afraid; she’d been in storms before. Brienne climbed onto the bed with Jaime and wrapped her arms around his shaking body. Quiet, desperately sad sounds slipped from his clenched teeth as she gripped him tightly.

“Let it go,” she murmured. “I’m here.” He made a noise like a wounded animal and clamped his hand around her wrist, so hard she was sure he’d leave an imprint.

Brienne held on, her forehead pressed against the back of his bowed and burning neck, and listened to Jaime's world collapsing.

Her arms were aching by the time Jaime's heaving sadness finally calmed, the little stuttering hiccups dissipating and his breathing evening out into gentle waves. Brienne shifted and flexed her fingers and he stirred in her arms, his hand lax on her wrist.

“It’s okay, you can go to sleep,” she murmured.

“You don’t have to do this.”

Brienne breathed out slowly. “Do what?” she asked, keeping her tone gentle. “Be your friend?”

Jaime pulled away from her, tucking his arms into his own body. “You don’t owe me this just because we slept together.”

“Jaime,” she sighed, from deep in her heart. “That has nothing to do with why I’m here. There’s no debt between us. I...I care about you.” He tensed in her loose embrace and she could feel his questions, his belief that the answers would help more than hurt, but she had to protect him from what he didn’t yet know. She could push his father’s goodwill by being here for Jaime, but she was afraid to push too far. “When you’re healed we can talk more about what that means,” she whispered, offering him as much as she could to hold the full answers at bay. Knowing Jaime, it wouldn’t last long, but she just needed it to last long enough until they both knew what their futures held. Besides, she’d asked Bronn to tell him it wasn’t just physical, and surely when Jaime had time
and space he would understand what that meant, could be patient enough to wait until she could
tell him everything. “You need rest,” she went on, “I'll stay with you until you're asleep.”

“Brienne-”

“Sleep,” she said, firm, and closed her eyes and breathed him in. Eventually his muscles relaxed,
his body melding to hers in a way so familiar her heart hurt, and he was asleep again. Brienne
extricated her arm from underneath his heavy body. Jaime's face was calm, quiet. He'd be having
no more dreams today.

Relieved, Brienne left Jaime to sleep, her shirt sweaty from where she’d been holding him so tightly
against her, a red ring around her wrist. She was lost in thought on the bus ride back to the hotel.
While she hoped that would be the worst of it, she knew it was unlikely. Jaime would have to find
purpose in himself; and even in the short but intense time she'd known him, she knew how little he
thought of himself outside of his skills as a driver. She knew him, the good parts and bad, and
loved him for both; she knew Bronn did, too, and Podrick, and perhaps others. They would have to
be Jaime's confidence until he could build his own.

When she stepped into the lobby, a handful of media were still there and they swarmed towards
her.


“I think it states the situation appropriately.”

“Have you seen Jaime? How is he responding to news that his career is over?”

“That's private,” she snapped. “I'll tell you all this one time and then I'm done with these
ambushes: the man has just been in a serious car crash. He needs sleep and he needs time and he
needs you to get out of his fucking life.” Hasty raised his eyebrows in surprise and she flushed.
“There's another race in Storm's End in a week and a half, why don't you prepare for that instead
of leeching off of a human being's grief? Jaime won't talk to you, and I won't talk to you either. Just
go away.” She shoved through them, stabbing the elevator button with a trembling finger, grateful
when it opened almost immediately.

She let herself into her hotel room with a heavy sigh, staring aimlessly around before sitting down
with her laptop to catch up on email. Who knew how much longer she'd have to answer it? Would
Tywin insist she be let go immediately now that Jaime could no longer race, or would he at least let
her stay on contract until the season ended in November?

Knowing Tywin Lannister, it was far more likely to be the former. She half expected her password
to no longer work, that they'd have already shut down all her accounts, but she was able to log in
as usual and she scanned through her emails. There was one from Arya, all sympathy and well
wishes, and one from Addam asking her to tell him the second he could visit Jaime. She typed out a
quick reply to his, promising she'd let him know as soon as Jaime was back in King's Landing.
When she hit send, she noticed a new message in her inbox from Hyle. Brienne read it hesitantly.

Brienne -

Sorry to hear about Lannister. I wouldn't wish that on anyone. Give him my sympathy and best
wishes for a quick recovery. Would love to talk to you about my offer whenever you're free. Any
time. Any place. I'll come to you, or maybe I'll see you at Storm's End Grand Prix? Now's the time.
Unlikely Lannister Corp will keep you. Don't let your career end on the track in Harrenhal just
because I was an asshole once. Think about it. Please.
She hovered her mouse over the delete button, angry that Hyle had taken this tragedy to try to get to her once again, despairing that Hyle was right. Brienne’s eyes flickered over the message again, the words bouncing and clattering like marbles inside her. She sighed and clicked Reply.

Jaime awoke, his throat and eyes rubbed raw with sandpaper, to find someone half Brienne’s size but twice her ego sitting in the chair by his bedside reading the newspaper. He was briefly disappointed she was gone; her admission still burned like a small, unsteady flame in the room and he was afraid it would go out with her distance.

“Tyrion,” he rasped. “Finally found some time to visit?”

Tyrion looked up and there was no amusement in him at all. Jaime had never seen him look so completely despondent. “You must be thirsty,” Tyrion said, lifting himself out of the chair and getting Jaime a cup of water. When Jaime drank the whole thing down, Tyrion filled his cup again. “I’m sorry it took me so long to get here,” he apologized when Jaime had temporarily quenched his endless thirst.

“Too busy fucking some nameless woman?”

His brother looked ashamed. “I wish it were that simple.”

Jaime just stared at him, in no mood to offer understanding when it was him stuck in this hospital.

Tyrion climbed back into the chair and sighed. “I was afraid to see you.”

“It’s not contagious,” Jaime muttered, and Tyrion’s lips twitched in the tiniest, briefest of smiles.

“I didn’t want to see you like this.”

“In a hospital gown?” Jaime offered gamely.

“Cut down to my level.”

They were quiet for a long moment, Tyrion’s head bowed low under Jaime’s stare. “Joke’s on you, brother, they took my hand not my feet.”

“Don’t do that,” Tyrion said, shaking his head.

“Do what? Haven’t you spent your whole life biting first because of your height? I’m just learning from you.”

“I don’t want you to be like me. You’re a much better person than that.”

“Wrong again. You’ve always been held in much higher regard. Frankly I could have used some of your respect these past years.”

“The only respect anyone assigns me is for my ability to hold my alcohol.” Tyrion exhaled and when he met Jaime’s eyes he looked tired. “Why don’t you ever tell me anything real? I’m your brother, by the gods. You don’t have to be like this with me. Especially now.”

“Don’t start,” Jaime said, leaning his head back against the pillow. He was wiped clean and fragile from breaking down in front of Brienne, from her whispered promise that all hope might not
be lost; even as glad as he was to see his brother, part of him wished Tyrion – wished everyone – would just leave him alone.

“I saw your car on that track and I...” Tyrion looked down at his hand as though he expected to see a glass he could lose himself in there. “I thought you were dead.”

“I certainly feel like I’m in one of the seven hells.”

“Stop it,” Tyrion snapped. “I’m trying to be serious. When I thought you were dead I realized I’ve never even told you I love you.”

“Fine, you’ve told me, now you can go.”

Tyrion rubbed the bridge of his nose in a gesture that looked startlingly like their father. “I blame our upbringing for this, not you. We haven’t had the best male role models.”

“Our female role models haven’t been great, either.”

His brother snorted and leaned back in his seat, pressing his hands together like he was praying. “My first thought when I saw your accident was that I would be alone in the world without you. How pitiful is that?”

“Very. Selfish, too.”

“I’m a selfish man, Jaime, surely you know that. But my second thought,” he went on, all his ease disappeared, “was how dark your world would seem in the aftermath.”

“I lost my hand, not my sight.”

Tyrion sighed heavily. “Maybe I should have a near death experience so you’ll be serious with me for one minute.”

“What do you want from me, Tyrion? Do you want me to cry on your fucking shoulder? To open my heart and drown you in my anger? What will make this trip worthwhile for you?”

“I want you to hear what I’m telling you, Jaime: you can’t leave me alone in the world.”

“It’s not like I tried,” Jaime said, staring out the window. Clouds had covered the sun and the God’s Eye was gray and dim today.

“I don’t want you to try in the future either.”

Jaime squeezed his eyes shut hard, starbursts appearing briefly in the black. The future was a long road stretching to a destination he couldn’t imagine here in this bed with his missing hand and his missing heart.

“I’m glad you won’t be racing anymore,” Tyrion said softly.

For a moment Jaime hated his brother, a deep and twisted vine he grabbed and desperately tried to choke back. “Is that why you never stood up for me after Aerys? Were you hoping I’d just give up?”

Tyrion smiled, something small and sad and knowing. “Who do you think convinced father to bring you back to the team again?”

“Why didn’t you ever say anything?” Jaime asked with a frown.
“I wanted you to love me for me, not what I could do for you. You were the only one who ever did.” Tyrion's eyes were bright, a sheen of tears that Jaime hadn't seen since his brother had been young and words still hurt him. Jaime had done what he could to protect Tyrion from every sharp-tipped arrow, but as his racing career grew he'd had to spend more time away and Tyrion had built an armored shell no one could pierce.

“Tyrion,” Jaime sighed, and he felt his brother's small hand briefly cover his.

“Don't make a joke of this,” Tyrion begged him quietly.

Jaime turned his hand over and gripped his brother's. “I won't leave you alone. Not until we're much older anyway.”

Tyrion squeezed his fingers and pulled his hand away. “Optimistic of you to assume I won't die first. I plan to go out in a drug-fueled orgy, you know.” Jaime laughed, startled. “Not only will I be happy, I'll have the additional pleasure of knowing that while I'm roasting in one of the hells father will have to deal with the public outcry when I'm gone. Win-win.”

“I can't imagine why you're not father's favorite child,” Jaime said wryly.

“Truly astonishing,” Tyrion agreed. He settled back in the chair, his feet dangling a little off the floor. “I have all afternoon free, Jaime, shall I describe in great detail which act in particular I expect will cause my death?”

Jaime groaned and awkwardly yanked his pillow from behind his own head and threw it at his brother.

Jaime's hospital stay settled into an unexpected routine. Every morning he woke to a nurse's exam, performed a wound check and bandage change under their increasingly hands-off supervision, then ate a mildly flavorful breakfast while waiting for Brienne. She entered the same way every time: her double-tap knock so familiar from work, a hesitant smile on her full lips, and “good morning, Jaime,” in a voice that warmed him like sunshine. He tried not to think about his racing career when she was there, or the fact that she wouldn't be spending time with him at all if he hadn't crashed, or about how the ache in his wrist was nothing compared to the ache he felt wanting to hold her again; instead he packed all of it in boxes and shoved them away, grateful just to have her near. He held on to the fantasy that here in this plush hospital room everything between them was fine and it could go on this way forever.

Every day when she left it was a battle not to beg her to stay, to force the conversation she had promised was in their future. But he had pushed too hard too fast last time and he would not do that again. The only thing Brienne had ever directly asked from him was his patience and he had all the time in the world for her now.

In the afternoons Bronn would show up, a visit that inevitably started with Bronn insulting him for being lazy and ended with Jaime getting his ass kicked at poker while Bronn needled him endlessly any time Jaime even hinted at complaining about how difficult it was to play one-handed. Three days after the crash, while Jaime had been on the verge of bluffing Bronn into a loss, Jaime's physical therapist arrived. He was a dour, taciturn man who gave his name as Ilyn Payne and said he was based out of King's Landing so he'd be working with Jaime long term. After he was done and Jaime's arm was burning, his head and back covered in sweat, his jaw aching from how tightly he'd been clenching it, Jaime considered putting a call into the man's manager and having him transferred to Winterfell instead. But his arm did feel better, less a useless weight on his body and more the part of him it had always been. Payne could stay for one more session, at least.
On the fourth day, Jaime mastered getting in and out of bed by himself, and he'd nearly floated around his room buoyed by his small success. The next morning Jaime’s routine altered when the doctor entered with the nurse, smiling wide. “Mr. Lannister, I heard the good news.”

Jaime grunted, focused on the work of unwrapping his bandage. The doctor stepped closer, examining the wound. It had been a clean surgery, Jaime had to admit, the flaps of skin expertly sewed together to form a pattern of tight red lines on the inside of his arm, the stump a round bulb.

“We moved some muscle down to give you padding,” the doctor said as he gently touched the edges of the stitches and nodded thoughtfully. “That will make this weight-bearing for you. You’ll be able to do push-ups on it once the scar has fully healed.”

Jaime blinked up at him. “Really?”

“Absolutely. It’s healing very well and your father has set up an initial appointment for you in King’s Landing next week to start talking about prosthetics. There are lots of different attachments now, you’ll find you’re surprisingly functional.” He stepped back and tucked his hands in his pockets. “I’ll make sure the nurses show you how to keep it clean and we’ll get you a desensitization brush to take home, but you’re looking good to leave in two days.”

“Which hospital in King’s Landing are you sending me to?”

“Oh not to the hospital, Mr. Lannister,” the doctor said, grinning. “To your actual home.”

Which was how just over a week after the accident, Bronn, Brienne, and Jaime left Whent Hospital with their assorted luggage to wait outside for Sandor to come get them. As they emerged Jaime blinked and held up his good hand to shield himself from the sunlight. I am alive, he thought, turning his face to the sky, the reality of it hitting him now that he was out in the world once more. His tender right arm felt small and fragile against his side.

Sandor pulled up with an abrupt halt and unfolded himself from the SUV to glare at the hospital like it was an enemy he was sizing up and trying to intimidate.

“Thanks for coming to get us,” Brienne said as she opened the back and started tossing luggage in with ease. Jaime watched her hungrily, the shift and pull of her muscles as she moved with quiet strength. He could recall too well how those arms felt tight around him, those strong hands gripping his back. In the muted half-life of the hospital he’d managed to ignore all that was between them, but here, drunk on the sun and fresh air, he couldn’t hold closed the dark closet he’d put the boxes in, and everything fell out again into the light in a painful rush.

He heard her telling him it was just sex, a lie he couldn’t disprove except when he looked into her beautiful eyes. She had held him as he’d fallen apart that second day, her steady murmurs a lighthouse in the storm, and said she cared for him. It wasn’t an admission of love, but it was a hope that someday it could be. He wished he could love her less until then, but Brienne being Brienne was enough to remind him every second that would never happen.

She looked up at him now and her pale skin flushed red, but instead of looking away she came nearer while Bronn and Sandor got into the car.

“Are you ready for this?” she asked him softly.

Jaime swallowed hard. “Not at all. But I don’t have much choice.”

Brienne smiled a little, as resigned as he felt. “You can have shotgun,” she offered, charming him as easily as always and he swayed towards her like a tree in the wind, but she turned her head
away and he stilled. Patience, he reminded himself. With his hand and his career and his confidence gone, it was the only thing he had left to offer her.

So instead he just gave her a tight-lipped smile and opened the door, managing the seat belt with more ease than he could have asked for. Sandor looked him over, his gaze lingering only briefly on Jaime’s bandaged stump.

“Don't put your feet up on my dashboard,” he grumbled, before the engine roared to life and he drove them down the Kingsroad to home.

Chapter End Notes

Wishing you all a happy, safe, and peaceful new year. Thank you for your incredible support through the first half of this fic. I will do my best to keep it up for the last half. :)

October (Part 3)

Chapter Summary

After Bronn and Brienne had left Jaime and his luggage in the apartment six days ago, he'd thought that it was the first step towards his recovery, but what he'd realized thirty minutes into being on his own was how fucking hard it was going to be to be on his own. Not just the physical tasks – he'd given up putting his shirts back on hangers after two annoying minutes and thrown them in crumpled balls on the floor of his walk-in closet, and after wrestling with the shampoo in the shower he'd determined going bald might be the best course of action for the rest of his life – but the quiet of his apartment became swiftly suffocating. He hadn't realized how much welcome distraction Brienne and Bronn's daily visits had provided when he was in the hospital, or how much structure he'd built around the nurses’ schedules. Racing had been his whole life before the crash and none of that demanded his time any more. Now that he was home, he could do anything any time, but what he did was sit on his couch and grow more despondent and angry at his useless residual limb and the fact that he wasn't behind the wheel and never would be again.

It had not gotten better as the days grew closer to the next race.

Chapter Notes

Let's just pretend when I started this whole thing I said I was going to post "at least once a weekend, whichever day" and that I have not fallen so completely off my initial posting schedule that that first author's note isn't entirely laughable.

Also a few content notes for emotional state stuff in this chapter at the end.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

“Thank you for seeing me,” Hyle said when he sat down in the overstuffed recliner across from Brienne at her local coffeeshop. “I was surprised you even responded, frankly. You've been so reluctant to talk to me.”

“That hasn't changed,” she muttered, taking a sip of her coffee.

Hyle half-smiled, clearly confused whether she was joking or not. “How's Lannister?” he asked, avoiding the question entirely.

“Recovering.” She assumed he was, at least. After she and Bronn had delivered him safely to his apartment two days ago, Jaime had not answered the one time she'd called, had been slow to respond to even her texts, and every time she'd offered to come over he'd refused. 'I'm not in the hospital anymore, Wrench, you can have your space' his last one yesterday had said.

Brienne hadn't been sure how to respond to that, so she hadn't at all. That had been over twelve hours ago. Thirteen hours and twenty six minutes, if she were counting. Which she was not.
“Can't believe he's done racing just like that. I'd kill the man that did that to me,” Hyle said, full of obvious bluster.

“Ramsay got enough penalty points he's out of the race this weekend.”

“A single race in exchange for a man's whole career? Probably for his world championship, too, since he can't get any more points now.” Hyle shook his head grimly. “Ramsay's lucky he didn't pull that shit on me.”

Sighing, Brienne took another sip of her coffee. She had to admit that Jaime had been much less angry about the loss of his hand and his career than she'd expected. He'd seemed instead resigned to a fate he'd long seen coming. The spark that had once lit his eyes just thinking of race day was gone, snuffed out with the screeching of metal, and sadness was the only debris left behind. Except for when he looked at her and she could feel the weight of his hope pressing against her heart.

It was for the best they hadn't seen each other since the journey from Harrenhal. She wanted to tell him everything, but Tywin still had their photos and she was afraid of what he and Jaime both would do. Of what Jaime would think of her for giving in to his father's demands in the first place. The distance between them now that they were back in King's Landing made it easier to push away his pain and her own, made it easier to believe they could go on without either of them having to strip their hearts bare first.

“What did you want to talk about?” she asked Hyle. Bland, inoffensive, obnoxious Hyle, who still thought he'd just been a mild jerk back at Griffin, but who also seemed genuinely interested in her skills. Hyle would not be a complicated man to work with, she was certain.

“I've been holding the mechanic spot open for you. My chance is shot in terms of the World Championship this season so Randall isn't pushing for a decision yet, but he's getting impatient to fill the position. You know, most drivers don't have influence on hiring decisions,” he added proudly, “but Randall respects my input. I've told him I've got the perfect person, they're just not ready yet. That's you, obviously.”

“Randall doesn't know it's me you want to hire?”

“No yet.”

“When are you planning on telling him?”

Hyle waved the question away. “I'll work it out. Trust me, Brienne, I've got everything under control.”

She very much doubted that. “I don't get why you're pushing so hard to hire me.”

He set his coffee down and leaned towards her, his hazel eyes serious. “Everyone in racing is talking about Jaime's turnaround this season and to a man they're convinced it was you. Surely other teams have reached out to you by now?”

“No. Not one.”

“Really?” He looked genuinely surprised. “That doesn't make any sense,” he murmured to himself.

“None of this does.”

“You don't think...Tywin hasn't forbidden contact with you, has he?”
Brienne straightened abruptly, feeling the certainty of it settle in her bones. Hyle was the only one she knew well enough that he could reach out to her directly. The others had probably been biding their time over contracts, making official inquiries and not wanting to piss off Tywin Lannister by going around the old boys' club to ask her directly. Hyle's hubris had made him ignorant of the risk he was taking, and Brienne might've felt bad for him if he wasn't Hyle.

There seemed to be no part of her life Tywin wasn't hellbent on invading and she sat there in the coffee shop taking deep breaths while Hyle's brow furrowed deeper and deeper with concern.

“Are you ok?” he asked and then, his brain finally processing everything, added, “Am I gonna be ok?”

“Are you rescinding your offer?” she asked, narrowing her eyes at him.

Hyle paled. “I...no. But do me a favor and keep it between us for now? I just need to grease the skids before we make anything official.”

“Nothing is official, Hyle. I won't make any decisions until the year is done.”

“That's a long time,” he muttered. “I can give you until the end of November but that's it. Even that's probably too long. All the other good mechanics will be snatched up by then.”

“You're welcome to hire one of them now, but they're not me,” she said, borrowing some of Jaime's arrogance for herself.

He sighed in resignation. “The second you know either way, you'll tell me?”

“Yes. You'll be the first to know after Lannister Corp.”

“And you'll consider my team first, before anyone else's? Give me a chance to meet any other offers?”

Brienne tilted her head, taking him in. She'd never imagined she would have this kind of chance to make Hyle Hunt's life easier or harder, and while she wouldn't have searched it out, she had to admit she was enjoying it. “I suppose,” she finally said, and he exhaled in relief. “But even if you meet it it's not a guarantee I'll sign with you.”

“That's fair, I guess.” Hyle lifted his coffee cup to her in a salute. “You're tougher than I remember.”

“I've had to be,” she said pointedly, and he flushed and looked away. Brienne took a last drink of her coffee and set it down, then stood to her full height, towering over him. He shrunk back a little in his chair, but there was no disgust or disdain on his face, just a slight worry and a grudging respect. “End of November,” she said, leaving him behind.

There was a double-tap knock on Jaime's front door and he glared at the television and turned it up louder.

“Jaime?” he faintly heard.

“Wrong address,” he shouted. The door opened and he cursed himself for leaving it unlocked after his last food delivery.

He heard Brienne walk down his short hallway, halt in the doorway to the rest of his apartment,
“Jaime,” she sighed. “Have you even left your house since you got back?”

“No need, Wrench, they'll deliver anything you want now. Except someone to wash me; I don't suppose that's why you're here?” He scratched his week-old beard growth and grinned at her, feeling a little feral. He hadn't talked to or seen another person all week except the delivery people.

Bright pink spots appeared in her cheeks, but he could see he wouldn't be charming away her disappointment today. He looked around his apartment, trying to see it as she would, and decided he couldn't entirely blame her; the place was a mess, and so was he.

After Bronn and Brienne had left Jaime and his luggage in the apartment six days ago, he'd thought that it was the first step towards his recovery, but what he'd realized thirty minutes into being on his own was how fucking hard it was going to be to be on his own. Not just the physical tasks – he'd given up putting his shirts back on hangers after two annoying minutes and thrown them in crumpled balls on the floor of his walk-in closet, and after wrestling with the shampoo in the shower he'd determined going bald might be the best course of action for the rest of his life – but the quiet of his apartment became swiftly suffocating. He hadn't realized how much welcome distraction Brienne and Bronn's daily visits had provided when he was in the hospital, or how much structure he'd built around the nurses' schedules. Racing had been his whole life before the crash and none of that demanded his time any more. Now that he was home, he could do anything any time, but what he did was sit on his couch and grow more despondent and angry at his useless residual limb and the fact that he wasn't behind the wheel and never would be again.

It had not gotten better as the days grew closer to the next race.

The anger felt comfortable at first, a cloak he'd worn for so many years it was simple to pull it back around his shoulders once more until Brienne had texted him, and kept texting, wanting to come over, to help, to make sure he was all right even when he barely responded, and the cloak started to choke him like a too-tight collar. Jaime hated texting with just one hand so he quickly switched to voice-to-text, but during the review of whatever cruel, scathing message he initially spit out he'd stare at it before sending and think, she wouldn't do that and grudgingly delete it. It wasn't that Brienne was in his head or he was worried she'd be disappointed, but that he'd somehow, between January and now, become attuned to her moral compass. Brienne's north star was goodness, and Jaime had begun to see it shining in his sky, too.

It was fucking annoying to realize his own pain was a weapon and sheathe it, though at least it gave him something fresh to be angry about for a day. But once that, too, turned bitter in his mouth, he'd spit it out. It hadn't been replaced by optimism or motivation, though. Instead he'd sunk further down onto his couch and just stayed.

Now here she was, staring around his messy apartment, taking in his messy appearance, his un-bandaged hand, the WSN race day pre-show already starting. Instead of nagging him or looking at him with pity, she sat down next to him on the couch and turned off the TV.

“I'm taking you to the park,” she said without preamble. “Go get ready.”

Jaime glared at her. “Why the park?”

“Because you need fresh air and to be somewhere you won't see the race.”

“I wanted to watch it.”

“I think that would be a bad idea,” she said firmly. “Come on, I'll help you.” Brienne gestured at
his stump. "Isn't that supposed to be covered still?"

"I got sick of wearing the bandages."

"Too bad. Here, give me your wrist." She held out her hand, big and solid, waiting for him to just lay his tender, aching arm in it like it was nothing. "I won't hurt you," she insisted.

He lifted his arm and awkwardly held it out, and she curved her long fingers underneath, shifted closer so he wouldn't have to move. Her palm was warm and gentle. "What do I do first?" she asked quietly.

"Clean it. Softly, it's still sensitive."

Brienne nodded and set his arm down to gather all the necessary supplies at his direction before returning, closer this time, their knees pressed together while she took his arm. "Ok," she said, exhaling slowly. "Tell me if this hurts."

Gingerly, Brienne pressed the warm washcloth to his wounds and Jaime inhaled sharply but shook his head when she darted a worried look his way. "Sensitive," he reminded her, "but not painful."

She dabbed the cloth over the sutures, careful as could be, then followed with another to dry them. He shivered from the feel of her breath over his cooling skin. "Now what?" she asked.

"I'm supposed to rub a cotton ball over the whole area for a few minutes. It helps it get used to sensation."

She picked one up and touched it to his skin so softly Jaime smirked. "Harder than that," he said, "it's not made of steel."

Brienne pressed harder, rubbing with firm, smooth motions all over the end of his stump, her other hand holding him steady. When the nurses had helped him they'd been businesslike, gentle enough but he was just one of a hundred tasks they had to do that day in too little time for too little pay. He had not been touched by someone who cared about him, whose sole intent was to give him the time and attention he needed. Jaime watched her eyes, the way they burned with focus, with kindness, and he licked his lips. He felt the unfamiliar warmth of being taken care of and he thought he should be ashamed and angry at how much he wanted it, how his soul leaned into the touch, but those feelings never came. Instead he just stared more intently, and fell a little more in love.

After a couple of minutes she pulled away. "Enough?"

He nodded. "Bandage last," he said his voice surprisingly hoarse. This she had watched happen enough times that she moved with surety, tight at the stump, looser as the bandage moved up his forearm. By the time she was done his whole body felt compressed, tingling with pressure.

"Is that good?" she whispered, her hair falling across her cheek. Jaime reached out and tucked it back behind her ear and Brienne turned her cheek into the brush of his fingers.

"Perfect," he said and he watched red spread like spilled ink all across her chest. "We could just stay in," he said low and saw her flush deepen.

She shook her head quickly, and then stood, gently tugging on his elbow to bring him up with her. "Out. We both need it."

Jaime looked down at his sweat pants and old t-shirt. "They don't have a dress code at the park, do they?"
“You’ll be fine,” she said, grabbing his jacket for him and ushering him out the door.

“Are there even any parks around here?” he asked as they set out into the crisp air. Jaime hadn’t realized the weather had changed, fall having arrived sometime in the last two weeks while he’d been locked away. It was a good day for walking, though he would have preferred holding Brienne's hand while they did. She'd set herself on his right side like a shield as soon as they'd hit the sidewalk, and he should have found it aggravating, should have felt words of bile ready to spring from his lips. None of that happened; instead he breathed in the cool air and wished he could put his arm around her waist and pull her closer.

“How do you not know that?”

“What good was a park to me? You can't race in one.”

Brienne pursed her lips, clearly disappointed by his honest answer. “I'm taking you to a walk-through flower garden that's not too far by bus.”

“By bus?” Jaime groaned.

“What's wrong with the bus?”

“It takes forever, the inside smells like sweaty old socks, and there's always some weirdo lurking around.”

“You've taken the bus that many times to be an expert, have you?”

Jaime glared at her. “Once would be enough. Why don't you just call Sandor?”

“Because the bus is always available if you need it. It'll drop us off right by the park.”

“Aren't you worried we'll be seen together?” he asked, the words so sharp they sliced even his own tongue.

Brienne's step faltered for a moment and then picked up pace, and though Jaime's arm throbbed he hurried to keep up with her. After two blocks she halted at an empty bus stop. “This one,” she said tersely, and Jaime sat down on the cold metal bench under the overhang. He stared idly at a piece of graffiti that said *suck my dragon!!!!!!!* with a badly drawn and very phallic rendering underneath.

“The media was camped outside your house for the first few days,” she said, not looking at him.

“Did they get bored?”

“I think they were firmly removed. There was a man across the street from your building that I'm pretty sure I saw back at the hospital, too.”

“At least my father's overprotectiveness of the Lannister name is good for something,” he said, and Brienne's shoulders hunched downward.

“Did Addam contact you?” she asked.

“He sent me a couple of messages but I haven't felt like seeing anyone. Oh don't look at me like that, Wrench. It's just...different, being out of the hospital. I needed time.”

“You should invite him over next week.”
“You should mind your own business.”

She shrugged that off. “Sandor can take you to your follow-up appointment. I assume you missed that, too?”

Jaime regretted not going just so he could deny it, but instead he shrugged petulantly. “There's no infection, you saw for yourself. And they can't fit me for anything until I've worked on my desensitization exercises.”

“Will Payne make house calls?”

“I hope not,” Jaime said, but he could see her wheels turning. They bus pulled up before she could tell him whatever plan was at work in her very responsible brain. When they stepped on, he saw several people's eyes flicker their way, taking in Brienne's tall form and his missing hand with the same amount of surprised disgust. When Jaime caught one man sneering at Brienne he stepped on the guy's foot as they walked by.

“Hey!” the man yelped, and Jaime gave him his best innocent, wide-eyed look, but Brienne tugged him onward before he could respond. They sat in silence at the back of the bus, Jaime pulling his head in and down, cradling his stump against his stomach.

Sneering guy got off one stop after they got on, giving Jaime one last glare as he did. Brienne sighed and seemed to relax once the doors closed again and Jaime leaned over.

“You know that guy?”

“No. But I've known plenty of guys like him,” she said quietly.

A few stops later she tugged Jaime's arm and led him off at their stop, and Jaime took a deep breath once they were back in the sunshine. The bus had dropped them off in front of a wide, welcoming arch flanked on either side by a low stone wall that was clearly all decoration and no protection. There was a sign over the arch that said 'Rhaenys Targaryen Memorial Garden Welcomes You' in a flowery script, vines tracing patterns all around the words without covering them.

Most of the flowers within were summer blooming and had already wilted or fallen off, but the few hardy fall flowers they saw were bright with color: lovely, purple, star-shaped ones along the walkway; a whole sea of orange, red, and yellow flame-shaped flowers that looked like flickering candles in the gentle breeze; and of course loud puffs of chrysanthemums in red and white and purple. It was soothing to walk side-by-side through the garden with Brienne, the way she would point out the ones she liked, how she stopped to sniff every new type; it was a small window into the romantic heart she often seemed so uncomfortable admitting to.

Brienne leaned down to smell what the sign said were Eternal Fragrance Daphnes and when she straightened again her eyes were faraway and serious. “I have to tell you something.”

Jaime brushed his finger over a soft petal, even that small movement awkward with his left hand. “Sounds bad when you start it that way.”

“It's not bad, exactly,” she said, but she didn't face him. “Hyle asked me to join his team again.”

“Griffin's Hyle?” Jaime asked, turning to look at her. “The one who-”

“Yes,” she said.

A dark ball of rage formed in the center of his chest, a black hole sucking away any ease he'd
found on their walk through the garden. “I hope you told him to fuck off.”

“I didn't.”

“Brienne-”

“I was your race engineer, Jaime, and Tywin's not going to keep a place for me at Lannister Corp Racing now that I'm...not.”

He glared down at the cheerful flowers. “How can you even consider working for Cunt?”

“Jaime,” she sighed in disapproval. “I have to consider everything. Right now it's that or I go back to my dad's garage and I don't know if I can just do that.”

“I'll hire you,” he said, and she dragged her eyes to him, startled.

“To do what?”

“Anything. Nothing. I've got money invested and I saved even more this year with the win bonuses. It's not a problem.”

“It's a problem to me,” she said, gently. “I want to work, Jaime.”

It had been a stupid offer, but he was panicked at the idea of her being gone. He cast about for a way to convince her she'd be doing him a favor but he knew there was no argument he could make that his responsible, hardworking, beloved Brienne would agree with. “So did you tell him yes?”

“I told him I'd let him know by the end of the season.”

Jaime recalled the races left to be run: the Storm's End Grand Prix was happening that afternoon, then Dragonstone, the track where Aerys had died, two weeks after that. A week later was Maidenpool and the final race of the season two weeks afterward in King's Landing in mid-November. That gave him a little over a month to convince Brienne to stay, or at least to figure out a reason she'd agree to be saddled with him and his baggage while she explored any of the other, better options in her life. Even working for Hunt's team had to be preferable to hanging around with a depressed, angry cripple that was too scared to tell her he was desperately in love with her and too selfish to let her go.

I'm the total package, he thought bitterly.

“Would you be his race engineer?” Jaime asked, trying to sound casual over the idea of her being the voice in Hyle's ear instead.

“Gods no,” she said quickly. “Just his mechanic. I couldn't work that closely with him.”

He couldn't stop the relieved sigh. “Give yourself time to think about it,” he said. “You never know what's going to happen by the end of the season.”

She nodded and chewed her bottom lip. “Anyway, I don't even know if I can do all this again. If I can be on the road so long and so far away from...” her eyes flicked towards him and away as fast and erratic as butterflies. “From home.”

Jaime wanted to kiss her in that moment more than even the first time, or the last. She licked her thick lips and he leaned towards her, there among the end-of-the-year flowers, and she didn't pull away. He took a slow breath, the air thick as honey in his lungs. *Patience*, he urged himself as her
mouth opened a little in anticipation. *Give her a reason to stay.* With a restraint he didn't know he was capable of, Jaime kissed her cheek, pressing his lips soft but quickly to the freckles there, and then pulled away in time to catch what he thought was a flicker of disappointment in her eyes.

“Thanks for getting me out of the house,” he said.

Brienne blinked at him, wide-eyed. “You're welcome.”

“I was scared to leave it,” he admitted suddenly, driven to honesty by the softness of her eyes.

“Scared of what?”

He gestured a little with his stump. “That I'd be weak.”

“You have to do your physical therapy,” she said. “Go to your appointments. Let your friends visit.”

He couldn't withstand the heat from the deep blue fire of her eyes, but he was helpless to look away. “Why?”

“Because you're more than just a hand.”

Jaime didn't see how that was true when it was his hand that let him drive, and driving was the only thing he had ever been good at. But Brienne looked so sincere it was hard to disagree out loud. Instead he sidestepped her words entirely. “Dragonstone Grand Prix is in two weeks.”

“Do you want to watch it?”

Jaime hadn't watched a race at Dragonstone since he'd killed Aerys, trusting his extreme knowledge of the track to prepare him instead of the usual footage review he did for every other Grand Prix. He was certainly not going to start watching it now. He shook his head no.

“Then I suppose we have another bus ride in our future,” Brienne said, her lips twitching into a satisfied grin.

Jaime groaned.

They stayed at the park for hours, talking about the flowers and the weather and what their expectations were for the upcoming crop of holiday action movies. Then when it was time for the grand prix's start, they stepped back onto the bus and stopped at the coffee shop across from his house until it was too late for him to catch the race when she left him at his door.

“Do you want to come in?” he asked, oddly nervous, but Brienne shook her head.

“I shouldn't. This was nice, though.” She took his hand and squeezed it, and then she was gone and Jaime cleaned up all the trash in his apartment while he tried to ignore the TV sitting dark and quiet on his wall. Once the last container was shoved in the trash chute, Jaime sat down on the couch and turned on the TV to catch the post-race recap. It was strange seeing the cars whizzing by on the screen yet not knowing anything that had happened, like he was suddenly distanced from his own life, a visitor to something he'd once known so intimately. Jaime had driven with the flu, with sore muscles, and even, back in F3, a cracked rib, but the only thing that had ever kept him from missing a race was crashing during it, and even then he was still down at the track on race day.

The commentators announced that Oberyn had come in first and that led into a discussion about
Robb placing second, about how many races until he would overtake Jaime in the World Championship now that Jaime couldn't defend himself at all. He clenched his left hand on his knee, felt the phantom movement of fingers on his right hand doing the same, but when he looked down they were still gone and so too, soon, would be his lead. He shut off the TV again and sat in the dark, watching the red-gold sunset fading from the sky.

Of all that he'd lost because of the crash, knowing that the championship would likely never be his hurt the most, the almost-thereness a fresh cut to his scarred heart. Jaime breathed through the sharpness slicing at his throat and heard a small ding on his phone of a message received. When he glanced down at the screen, there was a text from Brienne. She'd taken a picture of someone's bare feet on the bus and added the words 'something to look forward to next time' and he tipped away from the edge of the spiral he wanted to fall in, tugged back by the memory of the calm sea of Brienne's eyes, her gentle fingers, and her steady belief that he was worth standing by.

And over the next two weeks, without his really noticing it at first, she helped him start to build a new routine to his life.

That bus ride had not been their last. She would text him in the morning to remind him to check and change his bandage and then she'd ask if he was free later, like he ever had anything else to do, and they'd make plans for the afternoon which she never let Sandor drive them to. But though the smell of the bus didn't change – and in fact only got worse on rainy days – Jaime grew more comfortable with it and started noticing the routines of their fellow afternoon riders.

There was Mrs. Peake with her tiny chihuahua that she hid in her huge purse; the little girl on the stoop the bus driver waved at whenever she was out watching them go by; the dark-skinned teenager with spiky, neon-colored hair who glared sullenly at all of them until a little over a week after Jaime and Brienne's first trip, when the weather had been unseasonably warm and Jaime felt comfortable enough to wear a t-shirt, that the young man sat down next to Jaime and said “you too?” before tugging up his baggy pants to show his prosthetic foot. The next day, on his way with Brienne to a cupcake shop right next to the memorial garden, Jaime and the teen had exchanged knowing nods, bound together by their shared difference.

In-between the outings, Jaime went to his appointments and he let Payne train him into a sweaty puddle, and he would text Brienne after both, beaming when she'd respond with a smiley face or a 'good work!'

They weren't having sex and they weren't talking about racing and Jaime had to wonder if maybe she did actually like him, that she was spending so much time with him out of more than just misplaced guilt or sympathy. Even in the flurry of weeks they'd been together, they'd mostly either been working or fucking; now they were sharing daily domestic space and the simplest of activities and by all rights he should have been sick of her or at the very least bored, but he was just so happy to see her every day it didn't matter what they did. She certainly never treated him as less than he had been; if anything she expected more of him than ever, including sitting stoically on his couch for an hour one day while he figured out how to put his shirts on his hangars with one hand, complaining the entire time.

“If it's that much of a problem,” she said at one point, “just fold them and put them on shelves.”

“I can't put them on shelves, they'll wrinkle and then I'll have to iron them, too.”

“Then you better figure this out, hadn't you?”

He'd stuck his tongue out at her and briefly felt almost himself.
Bronn, who had given up texting him long before Brienne had, came over on the Saturday after the Storm's End Grand Prix, gave Jaime a knowing once over and drawled, “you need to shave.” Jaime rolled his eyes and let his friend into his apartment just to hang out for the first time in their long acquaintance.

A few days after that, he opened the door nervously for Addam. “Hey,” he said, and Addam smiled and held out a six pack of cheap domestic beer they hadn't drunk since they were teenagers.

“I figured your taste probably hasn't gotten any better,” he said dryly, and Jaime had laughed and let him in, too.

Sunday of the Dragonstone Grand Prix, he was relieved to head out with Brienne again and leave this race in particular behind. Jaime had no interest in compounding his pain by sitting on the outside of a race at the track that had changed his life. While their trip to the memorial garden wouldn't even have been interesting enough to make it onto one of the many promotional social media videos he'd had to do through his career, by the time Brienne gave him a small wave goodbye back at his apartment, he felt warm from the sunshine of her laughter, emboldened by the way he'd handled a small child staring wide-eyed at his arm.

He took a steadying breath and turned on the post-race recap. They were showing the final lap, Stark's grey and white car, his number in deep green, hurtling down the straightaway under the checkered flag.

“And with that,” the commentator said, the camera cutting to Robb standing on his car in the parc fermé, holding his steering wheel in his two good hands, “Robb Stark is now in the lead of the driver championship standings.” The list of names appeared on the screen, Jaime's at the top, and then the graphic swapped his name with Robb's with a simple flourish. Robb had passed him by only the smallest handful of points, an amount that would have been nothing months ago but were now, entirely insurmountable. The same amount of points as Jaime had fingers yet in an instant the news crushed any last hope that the world championship would be his.

What surprised him, seeing Robb's name just above his on the standings list, was why it didn't hurt more. Jaime felt numb, like whatever response he should have had was gone and replaced with nothing at all. He had worked his entire life for the moment he could stand on the podium knowing he'd won it all, that every sacrifice and bad decision had been worth it, and now that moment would never come and all he felt was...empty, like a vessel waiting to be filled.

Unexpectedly he thought of Brienne buying them warm cookies at the coffeeshop that afternoon and how she'd given a satisfied little moan when she'd bit into hers; of Calon, his fellow bus-riding amputee, who'd fist-bumped his stump yesterday on his way off the bus; of how he and Addam had started texting each other regular updates on their various workouts, familiar patterns of giving each other shit and cheering each other on that made Jaime ask Payne to push him harder during their sessions. Small stones built on a path that led him away from everything he'd ever known and ended at a destination he couldn't see.

He trembled at the fork between despair and hope, watched Robb's car taking an esse that Jaime knew he'd never drive again, and then looked at the photo he'd saved as the lockscreen on his phone of the view of Tarth from the top of the tower in Morne. He'd thought to change it when they first got back after the break, but he couldn't bring himself to, even after Brienne had put an end to what they had. The merging of sky and sea had, when he'd taken it, reminded Jaime of endless possibility. The future had felt limitless that day, like everything he'd ever wanted could be his.

Jaime shut off the TV and leaned his head back against the couch, staring up at the ceiling. With a
sigh he got up and made himself a frozen lasagna, eating without really tasting it; that night he slept and didn't dream of anything. He dropped like a stone into unconsciousness and then was yanked abruptly awake to blink at the morning light, surprised that the world had kept turning.

When Brienne showed up unexpectedly in the morning and said “You're playing hooky today and I'm taking you to the zoo,” his heart beat once, hard, like it had been jolted to life, a bright sharp gasping pain that made him clutch his chest and pray for the emptiness again. He couldn't breathe through the sudden onslaught of feeling, but then Brienne squeezed his shoulder and the pain receded just a little, just enough for Jaime to exhale shakily, meet her worried eyes with a small, strained smile, and walk with her into the sunlight.

Chapter End Notes

Jaime has some referenced, minor-to-moderate depression and anxiety in this chapter, most intensely in the last five paragraphs, in case those things are triggers for you.
November (Part 1)

Chapter Summary

After the race at Dragonstone, Brienne had been heartbroken to see Robb officially overtake Jaime in the standings, had thought about going back to Jaime's home that night but wasn't sure if it would be too tender to talk about, if he even knew. They hadn't mentioned racing or the crash at all since the hospital, when Jaime had broken down crying in her arms. While her intention since then had been to distract him in order to help him find his equilibrium, she might have done too good of a job. Even the uncertainty of their relationship, except for his kiss on her cheek their first Sunday back, had become a silent agreement to just not deal with it. For how much they said to each other on any given day, the ghosts of the things they weren't talking about were louder still.

Chapter Notes

Y'all don't know how lucky you are Brynn continues to be my beta, this story would be so much worse. A million thanks to her as always!

“I want to watch the next race,” Jaime said as they sat on his couch and watched the new Seralam Darklyn movie.

“What?” Brienne asked, startled. The movie wasn't good, but it wasn't awful either and she'd been invested rooting for the pop star's attempt to reinvent herself as a mature actress.

“Maidenpool, in a few days. I'm going to watch the race.”

“Oh.” She reached over to pause the movie and looked at him. “You're sure?”

“It'll be fine,” he said and she thought he almost believed himself.

After the race at Dragonstone, Brienne had been heartbroken to see Robb officially overtake Jaime in the standings, had thought about going back to Jaime's home that night but wasn't sure if it would be too tender to talk about, if he even knew. They hadn't mentioned racing or the crash at all since the hospital, when Jaime had broken down crying in her arms. While her intention since then had been to distract him in order to help him find his equilibrium, she might have done too good of a job. Even the uncertainty of their relationship, except for his kiss on her cheek their first Sunday back, had become a silent agreement to just not deal with it. For how much they said to each other on any given day, the ghosts of the things they weren't talking about were louder still.

When Brienne showed up unannounced the morning after Dragonstone in case Jaime had been tormenting himself about the championship, Jaime had seemed less upset than she was, except for one brief moment where it looked like he was about to have a full-fledged panic attack. He'd been almost manically cheerful as they wandered around the zoo, eating most of a cotton candy he'd bought to share, pointing out birds that reminded him of different drivers, posing in front of the
lions looking entirely too handsome and leonine with his increasingly shaggy, curling hair and trimmed beard and sparkling green eyes.

His overly-determined zest, his willful ignoring of what had to be devastating, had bothered her all day, though she didn't know what to do about it, if she could or even should do anything, so she'd read up on panic attacks and just decided to go along with what he felt comfortable with.

“Why don't you come to my house to watch it?”

“My TV is better.”

“Yes, but-” she hesitated, not sure how to tell him she thought it would be easier if he weren't watching it in his own home. “My couch is more comfortable,” she said and then immediately flushed when he glanced meaningfully at her. The last time they had been on her couch together they'd been naked. “Besides I'm always over here, it'll be good for both of us to have a change of scenery,” she added quickly, trying to get the memories out of both their heads.

“Fine, we'll watch it on your tiny little TV.”

“I'm sure you'll enjoy complaining about the size the whole time.” She could see him getting ready to make that into a dick-related joke and rolled her eyes preemptively while unpausing the show.

“Keep it in your mouth,” she muttered, and then covered her face with her hands when he just grinned at her.

The following Sunday, with only five minutes to lights out, there was no sign of him in her apartment and no word that he was even on his way. She frowned at the chips and seven-layer-dip she'd put out on the coffee table.

Brienne typed a message into her phone: 'still coming over?’

'Yes.’ There was a knock at her door. When she opened it, Jaime hovered there looking slightly embarrassed.

“How long have you been out there?” she asked.

“About five minutes. Your neighbor gave me the most thorough once over of my life two minutes into it that almost drove me away.”

“That would be Eddara. She's got that typical northern, take no shit demeanor. I like her.”

“You would,” he said, smiling a little and stepping inside. As she closed the door he looked all around and she recalled with sudden sense memory the last time he’d been here, when they’d been spooned together on her couch and their lives had been, for a moment, simpler and happy. The lilacs he bought her still sat on her counter, but instead of the rest of her apartment being otherwise sterile and empty, it was littered now with mementos from the last couple of weeks they'd spent together: a brochure from the Museum of Modern Art, a keychain he'd bought her at the zoo, the playbill from a matinee showing of what turned out to be a terrible comedic musical. Small signal lights she woke up to every day that reminded her of him and the warmth of his laugh, the glittering promise of his smile.

There had been moments over the last few weeks when she thought she couldn't bear seeing him another day and not telling him everything, but then the despair that he carefully kept at bay would haunt his eyes and she'd bite her tongue and command herself to patience. The end of the season she silently promised. By then she would have made a decision about her future, have hopefully helped him to find a way forward with his, and then she would tell him all of it and they could see
where their hearts ended up.

Brienne just hoped he'd still be willing for them to end up together, even with her necessary lies.

“I took the bus to get here,” he said proudly, sitting down on her couch. He leaned back and smiled at her, his left arm resting along the top cushions like an invitation, and she swallowed down an urge to climb into his lap.

“Good,” she said, turning to grab two beers and joining him at a distance. He nestled the bottle in the crook of his right elbow and popped the top with his left hand, then took a long swallow while she nearly swallowed her tongue. Why this felt like a date when everything else had seemed so innocent, Brienne couldn't say, but she nearly fumbled the remote she grabbed it so quickly to turn the TV on as a distraction.

“-and he's essentially locked down the championship now that Jaime Lannister is permanently out,” the commentator was saying, and Brienne looked over to find Jaime had gone still.

“Nothing has been heard from Lannister directly since the crash, but word is he's recovering well and if he's watching today we just want to say we wish him the best. Now, let's see how the racers handle this first notorious curve as we get ready to start the penultimate race of the season.”

Brienne heard the familiar robotic noise of the lights coming on, then the announcer shouting, “lights out and away we go! Stark leaps to an early lead, with Oberyn Martell and Addam Marbrand, who's at an unexpected p-3 today, hot on his heels.” But she didn't see any of it, watching Jaime instead.

He'd pulled his arms into his body, had seemed to shrink into the couch as the cars screamed around the first corner and into the straightaway. Jaime's brow was furrowed and his eyes were dark green and shadowed as old forest moss.

“There's a crash coming out of the first turn,” the announcer said, and the camera cut to the midfield, where Viserys and Drogo had collided. Drogo was pulling out of it, but Viserys went careening into the wall, and Jaime gasped loudly with the impact, jerking as though he'd been in the car, too. His eyes were so wide she could see more white than green, and he was breathing hard as if he'd been running instead of sitting still.

“Jaime,” she said softly, turning the TV off again. He startled and turned those wild eyes towards her, darting frantically over her face. “You're here on the couch with me,” she said, her stomach a tight knot of concern, trying to recall the advice she'd read. “I turned off the TV and you're in my apartment.”

He panted but his ricocheting gaze stilled and settled, pinning her down. His knuckles were bloodless on the beer bottle, his stump pulled tightly into his chest.

“Do you want me to breathe with you?”

He nodded and she counted to ten while their chests rose and fell in time, in and out, as barely controlled as the crashing waves on the eve of a storm. She ran them through another set of ten breaths and the wildness subsided.

“What else do you need?” she asked when he swallowed and unclenched his hand, stretched out his fingers against the round end of his stump.

“Just a moment. This might have been a mistake,” he said, huffing a laugh that sounded very nearly like a choked back cry. “I'm sorry.”
“There's nothing to be sorry for. You're not ready. That's ok.”

Jaime took another drink and then set the bottle down on the table. “Now what?” he asked.

“How about we go to the park?”

He exhaled unsteadily. “Can we get some ice cream first?”

“Yeah,” she said, relieved to see some color back in his cheeks. “Of course.”

Though he put on a bright smile while they had their ice cream and their walk, Brienne could tell Jaime was shaken by his response to the race. She was shaken, too; she felt like she'd been wading through shallow water and had taken a sudden plunge off of an unexpected shelf. Brienne was out of her depth here, but she didn't know how to help him take the next leap. Jaime begged off doing anything the following day, though he called her that night as she was getting ready for bed.

“Hey,” he said, hesitant.

“Are you okay?”

“Yeah. I just wanted to say hi.”

Brienne smiled into the phone, warmth flooding through her, like he'd laid a cozy blanket over her chest. “Hi.”

“How was your day?” he asked, and she could hear the smile in his voice.

“It's Monday, so-”

“Shopping day.”

She laughed a little. “Shopping day,” she agreed. “How about you? How was your day?”

“I tried to watch the Maidenpool Grand Prix again.”

“By yourself?”

“Maybe not the best idea, I admit.”

“How did it go?” she asked, tentative.

“It went a little better. I was more ready for it this time. But I still turned it off after ten laps.”

“I would have watched it with you.”

He was quiet for a long time before he finally said, “I know, but...you may not always be there to help. I have to be ready for that. I should go,” he added quickly, before she had time to process or protest it. “I didn't mean to bother you. Good night, Brienne.” He hung up and she blinked down at her phone, uneasy.

The next day they returned to their quiet routine: Brienne texting him in the morning, the two of them hopping on the bus in the afternoon to try a new Myrish place for late lunch. He seemed back to his new normal, though she could see the tiny fractures now in a way she couldn't before, like a windshield that looked fine from the outside but once you were inside the spiderweb cracks appeared.
That night, Brienne called Bronn.

“What’s up?” he said, sounding, for Bronn, concerned.

“I could use your advice.”

“Car, love life, or other?”

Brienne chuckled in spite of her worry. “Other, I guess. It’s about Jaime. He tried to watch the race this weekend and it didn't go well. I wanted to help him but I'm not sure what to do.”

“Help him what?”

She considered that. “I thought trying to help him build a new life would be best, but maybe he needs to get back to his old life.”

“He can't do that though, can he?”

“Not exactly, no, but he should be able to watch a race at least if he wants to.”

Bronn hummed a little over the line. “Alright. Sounds like he needs a professional though, not you.”

“Do you really think Jaime will see a therapist?”

“Have you even asked him?”

“Well, no.” She could hear Bronn’s smug eyebrow raise. “So your advice is I punt him off to someone else?”

“Chief,” he said, that one word loaded with annoyance. “My advice is that you shouldn't be solely responsible for the healing of another person, especially when he's a fucking adult. My advice is that you get some professional support in your efforts before you crack apart, too. My advice is that you take the Griffin job if nothing better comes along.”

Brienne stiffened. “How did you hear about that?”

“How do you think?”

“What did he tell you?”

“Just that Hunt had offered and he didn't want to pressure you. But I could see he was worried about it.”

She frowned at the phone. “I haven't decided either way yet.”

“Don't let anyone else make that decision for you. Hunt's not a great driver, but it keeps you in the game and away from Lannister Corp.”

“Noted. Have you talked to Pod recently?” she asked. Podrick had been offered a position with Addam's crew a few days after the accident, and though he'd been reluctant to leave, they had all pushed him to go.

“You know how the season is,” Bronn said, his voice gruff, and she knew he missed the younger man.
“Do you want some advice?”

“No, I do not. Goodbye, Chief,” he said, hanging up. She snorted into the phone and considered what Bronn had said. He hadn’t been wrong – she could at least ask Jaime first, give him a chance to surprise her. He wasn’t quite the man he’d been even before the crash; who knew how he’d respond?

Brienne nodded to herself. She’d find a way to ask him tomorrow, and the rest of it they could deal with later.

Jaime waved his stump at her in annoyance. “Why did you pick here? This is a terrible place for me.”

“That’s why we’re going,” Brienne said firmly, opening the door to the arcade and releasing a cacophony of beeps, clangs, and muddied music.

“That makes no sense,” he grumbled, but he went inside at her insistence.

Brienne followed after and looked around the arcade. There were rows of traditional games in front of them, a whole side of ticket-earning games to their right, and bigger, sit-in virtual reality machines to their left. It was the middle of a school day so there weren’t many people here yet, most of them older like them, people for whom this was clearly either a job or an obsession or both. It was the perfect place for Jaime to test his left-handed abilities: challenging, but couched in fun.

“Air hockey first?” she asked, nodding at the three empty tables tucked in a back corner of the arcade. “You only need one hand for that.”

Jaime shrugged gamely. “Sure. But you have to use your left hand, too.”

Brienne put in the dragon and a half worth of coins and the table whirred to life. Jaime positioned himself opposite her and she watched him tentatively grab the paddle, make a few test swipes. She did the same with her left, the movements awkward but not impossible. Brienne set the puck on the table and tucked her right arm behind her. “You sure you can take me?”

He grinned as toothy as a shark. “I’m disabled, not dead. Hit the puck, Wrench, and stop trying to delay your inevitable defeat.”

In terms of skill with their left hands they were fairly evenly matched, Jaime a little better because he’d been doing everything with his left hand already for the last month. But what Brienne hadn’t counted on were his latent driver reflexes, which he put to good use here. She knew F1 drivers’ lives depended on their lightning-fast response times when they were hurtling around the asphalt at 180 miles an hour, but outside of the track she hadn’t had a lot of opportunity to see Jaime put those responses to use. He was remarkable, his paddle moving fast and accurately, and he beat her 10-6, scoring three in a row in quick succession at the end to earn the win.

Brienne frowned at his wide, gloating grin. “I challenge you to a re-match,” she said.

He beat her 10-4 the second time; 10-3 the third.

“Why am I getting worse?” she groused and Jaime stood, stretching his left arm across his body.

“You’re thinking too much.”

“I’m focusing!”
“It moves too fast to focus,” he said patiently. “You have to trust you know what you’re doing.”

“It’s air hockey, there’s not much to know.”

“Very dismissive of you, Wrench. I’d think you would hate to be a ‘judge a book by its cover’ type.”

Brienne flushed, but his eyes were so soft she didn’t feel hurt. “Fine. What am I missing about air hockey?”

“Come here,” he said, gesturing for her to come to his side. She did, standing side-by-side with him at his end of the table.

She peered curiously at the white and blue tabletop. “It looks the same from my side.”

“Of course it does.” He turned a little, so her arm was brushing his chest, and he leaned in towards her. “The secret to air hockey,” he said in a soft, almost whispering voice, “is that there is no secret to air hockey.”

Brienne turned to look at him, but he was closer than she thought and their noses were only a few inches apart, stilling her snarky comeback on her lips. “Oh,” she managed instead, and his mouth twitched into an amused smile.

“It’s just a game. Which means all your big, prepared brain can do is go with it.”

“But the angles-”

“Don’t mean shit if the puck is whizzing by your paddle. You can’t unlock air hockey. You just have to know the rules and trust that you can play.”

His breath was sweet smelling and hot on her cheek. She floundered a little, tugging her lip between her teeth. Jaime’s eyes flared with interest, with want, and she had to look away, her chest tight. “Let’s try a different game,” she said.

Jaime’s eyes searched her face, but he nodded and stepped back. “What do you suggest?”

They went to a shooting game next, which he was able to mostly handle with one hand, though his arm got tired quickly and his character died before hers. Brienne scooted him around games that required two hands, not wanting to make him feel worse, before they tackled a skee-ball game that Jaime turned out to be excellent at. By the time they were done, he had a fistful of tickets and he was grinning at her.

“I'm trading these in for one of those oversized pencils,” he said. “Maybe I'll write better with it.”

Brienne laughed a little, delighted that he'd referenced his missing hand twice today with humor. There was a row of racing games behind him and she grabbed his right elbow impulsively. “One more game first,” she said.

Jaime slowed noticeably as they got closer and he realized what her destination was, until he finally stopped, feet welded to the floor still several feet away.

“Why these?” he asked, his voice unsteady.

“I thought it would be worth a try.”

“You're wrong.”
“Jaime-”

“Pretending to drive isn't going to fill some hole in my heart that not being able to really drive left,” he snapped, yanking his arm free.

“I don't want to fill anything. But it's not wrong to stop ignoring the elephant in the room.”

“It's a pretty big elephant, Brienne, which side did you want to talk about first: the crash, or how you told me you didn't want to be seen with me but now you won't leave me alone?”

She inhaled sharply and Jaime tugged his hand through his hair, frustration all over his face. “It's not that I don't want to be seen with you,” she said. The machine next to them ran through its demo and started again, the music tinny and slightly off.

“No, that's right, it was just sex.”

Brienne frowned. “It wasn't,” she said, and his head jerked back in surprise. “I thought Bronn told you?”

His eyes were deep and dark, confused and hopeful. “He didn't tell me anything.”

She stared up at the ceiling for a second to silently curse Bronn and then looked back at Jaime. “I asked him to tell you, when you were in the hospital still, that it wasn't just physical to me. It never was.” If Jaime hadn't known that, then that meant he'd spent the last month accepting her care and her friendship and the promise of a conversation about the two of them while completely at sea, and he hadn't pushed her for more a single time, even when she would have, at least in the moment, welcomed his pushing. Her heart swelled, bursting with everything she felt for him, everything new she was still discovering about him here on the other side of his accident.

“Then why did you keep insisting it was?”

“We needed the space,” she said, evasive.

“You said you cared about me,” he murmured, though he kept his distance even now. “You said we'd talk about it.”

“We will,” she promised.

“Why not now?”

Brienne folded her arms over her chest. Her heart was still too full and bright inside her. “It's more complicated than you think.”

“What's complicated? I...I care about you, too. I'm done with racing,” his voice wavered a little as he said it, “we won't work together anymore. All that's left is us.”

She thought of Tywin, who hadn't reached out to his son since the hospital, who hadn't spoken to her since their brief encounter there. A man who would ruin her future prospects and Jaime's chances just out of spite, and some misguided belief he was protecting the Lannister name. She believed he would release those photos still, that he would stir rumors that she and Jaime had been sleeping together the whole time, if only to pay her back for some slight she couldn't even imagine. Hyle was already gunshy about poaching her from Lannister Corp when Tywin was denying everyone else access; he'd yank the opportunity away if she came covered in untrue muck, and she'd never have a chance with any of the other crews. She hadn't decided yet that she'd take the Griffin job, but she wanted the choice, and Tywin would take that from her, too, if he could, and
would burn what was left of his relationship with Jaime to ashes to do it.

But she'd lose Jaime now if she didn't give him something. “I'm scared,” she admitted.

“You're scared?” The air puffed out of him. “I've been scared every day since I woke up in the hospital. I lost the key to my life and now I'm knocking on doors I've never seen before trying to find something new. These weeks with you have been better than I could have imagined when I first saw my hand, but I can't even look at a fucking racing game without a minor panic attack. And I know that this,” he gestured between them with his stump, “won't last. We can't go on like this forever. So what happens when you go, whether it's to Griffin or back to Tarth? What do I do then? You're scared?” He laughed, one short, sharp, slightly hysterical bark. “Holy fuck, Brienne, I'm terrified. I've got nothing without you.”

“That's not true. You've got Bronn and Addam and Tyrion. You've got Calon. You can find something else to do in Formula 1. Even Dayne said—”

“Fuck Arthur Dayne,” he growled, and Brienne went still.

“Jaime.” He glanced over at her, and the pain in his eyes took her breath for a moment. “You can't replace racing with just me. You need more than that.”

“I don't know how,” he whispered, strained.

“Then I'll help you learn.”

Jaime chuckled bitterly. “Relying on you again.” He wiped his hand down his face, and his shoulders drooped in dismay. “You being the one who teaches me to live without you seems particularly cruel, even for my life.”

“You don't have to live without me. You just need to make space for other people, other things in your heart.”

“I can make all the space I want, but it won't help me when they leave again. It's not going to end well. Nothing ever does, not for me.”

“Your life isn't over, Jaime.” She shifted nearer, grabbed his hand. “There's always another chance to make things better.”

He searched her face, his eyes bright and desperate. “I want you to be right.”

“Then maybe you need to hear it from someone else, too.”

“I'm not interested in finding religion.”

“I was thinking more finding a therapist.”

Jaime blinked and smiled ruefully. “You're not the first person to suggest that to me.”

“But maybe I'll be the person you'll listen to?”

He sighed and nodded a little. “Yeah. Maybe.” Jaime brought their clasped hands to his chest. “This isn't our conversation.”

“I know,” she said softly. “But I'm not ready for it yet. And certainly not here,” she said on a half-laugh.
“It wasn't just physical,” he said, a question and a promise both.

Brienne smiled, small and sweet. “No.”

He nodded his head, took a breath, and then nodded his head again. “I want to kiss you so badly right now,” he said, his voice a rumble like the promise of thunder against her fingertips pressed to his chest. He exhaled and let her go. “End of the season, Brienne. I've been doing my best but I've only got a limited amount of good in me.”

“I don't believe that,” she said, but she was smiling openly now, could feel the width of it stretching her cheeks. She was glad they were in the middle of the arcade or her own willpower wouldn't have been enough to keep from throwing herself into his arms.

“Now,” he said, clearing his throat and looking around like he'd just woken up from an unexpected sleep. “Time for me to kick your ass at air hockey again, I think.”

Five minutes later she was still smiling when he did just that.

Five days later, Jaime took a steadying breath before opening the door of Samwell Tarly's office. It led into a small, cramped waiting room lined with shelves overflowing with books and an empty desk with a computer – and more books – on top. There was a door off to the left that was slightly open and a gentle voice floated out saying, “one moment! I'll be right there!”

Jaime shifted awkwardly on his feet, wondering if he should clear off the lone chair of the books that were stacked on it, but Tarly came out while he was considering where he'd even put them. The man was shorter and younger than Jaime, with a round, open face and a welcoming aura that put Jaime at ease. Tarly smiled and held out his left hand to shake, and Jaime liked him immediately.

“Mr. Lannister,” Tarly said. “It's a pleasure to meet you.”

“You too. Although you can call me Jaime.”

“Then you can call me Samwell if you like. Or Dr. Tarly, if that makes you more comfortable. Some people prefer the title. This way, please.” He ushered Jaime into the adjoining office and shut the door behind him. This room was also filled with books, but there were two plush chairs facing each other that were spotlessly clean, with two bottles of water on the table between them. Jaime took one chair and Tarly sat in the other.

“You said my wife recommended me to you?” Tarly asked, his eyes going soft at the mere mention of Gilly.

“Yes, she said you helped a lot of people like me.”

“I try to,” Tarly said with a self-deprecating smile. “Mostly I help people help themselves.”

Jaime frowned. “Listen, I'm not really into the whole 'how does that make you feel' thing.”

“You like action, I imagine,” Tarly said, and Jaime nodded. “We can work with that, although I am going to ask you how you feel about things, too.”

“Fair enough.”

“Now, our first session is really a chance to get to know each other. You have to make sure I'm the
right therapist for you.”

“How will I know that?”

Tarly shrugged a little. “Not to sound too unscientific, but it will feel right. You'll either feel comfortable talking to me or you won't.”

“It's going well so far, I guess.”

“Wonderful,” Tarly said, smiling. He looked genuinely pleased, and Jaime relaxed a little in the chair. “I must admit, Jaime, I do know more about you to start with than most of my other new patients. I appreciate you coming all the way to Harrenhal to see me.”

“Your wife is a good advertisement for you.”

“Oh she's much better than I am,” he said with a small laugh. “I'd be lost without her.”

“I know how that feels,” Jaime murmured.

Tarly settled back in his chair as well. “What brings you to my office today, Jaime?”

He lifted his stump. “I should think that was pretty obvious.”

“You'd be surprised. Many times it's not the traumatic injury at all that brings people to my door, but what that injury has unlocked for people.”

“Well for me, it's this.”

“Why don't you tell me more about that,” Tarly said.

“Why don't you tell me more about you first.”

“What would you like to know?”

“What makes you any good at handling trauma patients?”

Tarly smiled, looking humble. “I suppose I'm good at listening to other people's pain.”

“What's your pain?” Jaime asked and he had to give it to Tarly: the man did not look bothered in the slightest.

“That's not really your concern, Jaime.”

“It doesn't seem fair that you know all mine going in, given my notoriety, and I don't know any of yours.”

“We're not here to talk about me.”

“I think it's important. How do I know I can trust you?”

Tarly shrugged, still kind, still unflappable. “You can't. You just have to decide to do it.”

“Sounds unfair.”

“You're not paying me to be fair,” Tarly said gently, and Jaime chuckled.

“What am I paying you for?”
“That's up to you. You could pay me to listen to you talk about your favorite pizza toppings, or to sit in silence for forty-five minutes, or you could pay me for whatever it is that made you come see me all the way from King's Landing.”

Jaime snorted. “You're pretty good at this.”

“It is my job.” Tarly looked as unperturbed as when they'd started, willing to take whatever Jaime served up without any interest in judging him. “Now, do you want to tell me more about what happened with your hand?”

Slowly, haltingly, Jaime did. He stared into the kind, attentive face of the man across from him and talked about the crash, about waking up to discover his hand was gone, about how the emptiness had seemed to swallow him whole in that moment with how hopeless his future had looked. Jaime went quiet, staring down at the open space his hand had once occupied. He'd been to his initial prosthetic fitting and the doctor had said all the external scars had healed well, that his interim prosthesis would help continue to shape and strengthen his residual limb, but that the internal scars would need extra time.

“Do you still feel that emptiness?”

“Sometimes. It's not as constant as those first few days.”

“Humans are wildly adaptable creatures, even in the face of abrupt, tremendous loss.”

“I should have been more used to loss,” Jaime murmured. He felt Tarly's eyes focus a little more intently, and he shifted in his chair. “Regardless, I'm here now because I can't even watch a race anymore.”

“Do you still want to?”

Jaime pulled his head back, frowning. “What kind of a question is that?”

“One meant to make you think about the actions you're taking in your life. Do you want to watch racing because you think that you should, or because you want to?”

“I-” Jaime pressed his lips closed and considered it. Racing had been a part of his life since he could walk and he was fairly certain the media legend that his first word was 'car' was actually true. He may not be able to race anymore, but it didn't mean he wanted to cut it out of his life completely, as thoroughly and quick as he'd lost his hand. “I want to,” he said firmly.

Samwell smiled. “Then I can help.”

When Tywin Lannister summoned people, they always arrived, no matter how little time they had or how much they would rather be anywhere else. Jaime had always admired that ability of his father's, even while he'd hated being on the receiving end of it. It was why he was in front of the Lannister Corp Racing offices the next morning, staring up at the glass-walled building he hadn't been to since before Harrenhal, his heart pounding in his chest and trying to remember the breathing technique Samwell had taught him.

After a long day of travel and therapy, Jaime had texted Brienne that he'd talk to her today before collapsing into sleep last night, but he'd woken up to a message from Tywin summoning him to the office and Jaime had lain in bed glaring at it. There had been a follow-up text from his father as well, short and to the point: 'Immediately' and Jaime marveled that one word could feel like a gut-punch.
Jaime had showered and dressed and eaten, decided to take the bus as a reminder that he could still operate independently in the world, and though he had ultimately responded to his father's demands, it was on his own time at least, arriving late morning in a cold, drizzling rain.

_I can't do this_, he thought, stuck outside the doors, staring at his reflection in the mirrored wall. For a moment he imagined the hand he saw clenching into a fist was his right one, could feel the fingers there taut and aching. He exhaled slowly, counting down from five to one and both of his hands – real and imagined – relaxed.

His father could have come to his apartment at any time over the last month and a half, could have sent him a message or even a fucking get well card, but as soon as Jaime had stopped being useful, Tywin had thrown him away. He couldn't imagine why Tywin wanted to meet today, but knowing his father, it couldn't be good. Still, they held no leverage over each other anymore and for the first time in his life, Jaime and his father would be on equal footing.

_I can do this_, he told himself, and took the first, most difficult step towards the door. Each one after that was easier, though when he reached for the handle it was with his right arm first, a muscle memory from years of walking through these doors in every mood possible. This might have been the first time he ever felt free when he did.

The lobby looked the same, though the front desk receptionist's wide-eyed stare was new.

“Mr. Lannister,” she said, standing quickly. Her gaze went straight to his missing hand. “Welcome back.”

Jaime had never more viscerally understood the ‘my eyes are up here’ problem women suffered until he'd lost his hand and it inevitably became the only thing people noticed. “Is my father in his office?” he asked, and she nodded at his stump. He took the side door that would go around the main floor, not wanting to expose himself to whoever else was in the offices today. With the final race of the season five days away every corner would be busy, packed with engineers and mechanics trying to get the best they could out of one last ride. All of that attention would be solely focused on Lancel now, and he bitterly hoped his cousin wouldn't waste it.

The back stairway was empty, though he passed an engineer pulling out a cigarette as Jaime exited on his father's floor, and the man just nodded, harried, as he rushed by. Jaime felt the ironic accomplishment that he hadn't smoked since Harrenhal, either. He'd had plenty of other things to distract him.

The richly carpeted hall to his father's office was mostly empty, though Tywin's personal assistant, Myrielle Lannister, another one of Jaime's cousins, was typing something on her laptop. She glanced up and took Jaime in with a swift, calculating, very Lannister-like stare, hesitating only briefly on his stump.

“Jaime,” she said, giving him a professional smile. “Your father has been waiting for you.”

“Good. Is he in there?”

“Yes, he's on a call.” Jaime pushed through the door anyway, ignoring her indignant "wait!", and shut it firmly behind him.

Tywin sat with his hands folded on the desk, obviously not on the phone. He lifted a snow-white eyebrow. “Took you long enough to get here.”

“A man needs his breakfast, Father. Most important meal of the day.” The sharp, careless grin
Jaime had perfected over the decades settled on his lips once more. He sauntered into the room, looking around. There were pieces missing from the last time he was here, empty pedestals that had once held what Tywin valued most. Likely out for cleaning or repair, his treasures worth more attention than his own children.

His father stared directly at the space where Jaime's hand had been, his gaze traveling up his right arm to his face, a thorough evaluation and judgment performed in seconds. “You look well,” he said, and the polite kindness tripped Jaime up.

“I am well,” he managed. “What do you want?”

Tywin nodded, looking appreciative. They were long past needing to be falsely courteous with each other; neither man had time for dances they knew would end bitterly either way. “You still work for Lannister Corp and I have a job for you.” Jaime held up his stump and Tywin frowned. “Don't be absurd, I'm not asking you to drive,” he said to Jaime's silent question. “They want to do some sort of honorarium to you at the race this weekend and I want you to go.”

“No,” Jaime said almost before Tywin had finished. “Absolutely not.”

“It would be good for the company if you-”

“Fuck the company,” Jaime bit out, his jaw so tight it ached. “I'm not going to be paraded around like some sob story so the company can look good.”

Tywin's cold eyes narrowed. “I'm not asking, Jaime, I'm telling you as an employee of Lannister Corp Racing. You will attend the ceremony they have planned and you will accept whatever it is they give you and you will be gracious about it.”

“I quit,” Jaime said, and Tywin straightened, shock lighting his eyes.

“Excuse me?”

“I quit,” Jaime repeated. “If I had my contract in front of me I'd tear it up to make my point, but I think you understand. I'm done with Lannister Corp, and with you.”

“Brienne Tarth is not,” Tywin said, and Jaime's whole body tensed. “She is still a Lannister Corp employee.”

“Not for long, I assume.”

“She could be for longer, under certain circumstances.”

Jaime's fingers twitched against his leg. “This is low even for you,” he snarled.

“You have no idea how low I'll go to protect our legacy,” Tywin said, his voice weighted with threat. In all his life, Jaime had thought he'd felt every emotion it was possible to feel about his father, but for the first time he felt a deep, twisting fear. Tywin Lannister was single-minded in a way even Jaime couldn't match, and he lacked any ounce of empathy to soften it.

“What do you propose?” Jaime asked tightly.

“You do as I tell you and we keep Brienne for another year as a mechanic for whoever replaces you as driver.” Tywin didn't offer the alternative; they both knew what it was.

If she stayed with Lannister Corp then she'd still be in King's Landing, still be near enough to Jaime
that they could see each other in-between races. Assuming she wanted to see him. Assuming that working for Lannister Corp was even something she'd consider. And if she found out she only had the job because Jaime had bargained his father into it, it would devastate her. He could not take her success and twist it just to keep her near.

Jaime leaned forward and tapped his fingers on Tywin's desk in time with his response: “I. Quit.”

He turned his back on his father and was near the door when Tywin said, “I know you were fucking her.”

Jaime halted, staring at the dark wood in front of him. It was very quiet in the office, like the air itself had gone still. “What?”

“You and your race engineer. I have photos. I know what you were doing together before the crash.”

A slow boiling rage started in Jaime's stomach. He turned his head to the side. “We're not any longer.”

“I know that, too.”

“And?” He turned a little to look behind him at Tywin, who was pressing his hands hard into his desk.

“I can make sure everyone else knows, as well. How kindly do you think the racing world will look upon the first woman race engineer sleeping with her driver?”

Jaime's chest heaved with his barely controlled fury. “I'm warning you, don't drag her any more into this than you have.”

“Or what? You were the one who pulled her into this, Jaime, not me.”

With a slow, careful turn, Jaime stalked back to his father's desk, was gratified to see doubt on the older Lannister's face. He channeled thirty years of his father's example as he said in a tone sharp and gleaming as steel, “If you do anything to her, I will destroy you.”

“How?” Tywin asked, though his tone was not as confident as it had been. “You have no leverage here. You never did.”

“This,” he said, lifting his stump, “gives me leverage in the court of public opinion. You're so concerned about the Lannister reputation, how much do you think the media will love hearing about how Tywin Lannister wouldn't even visit his son in the hospital?”

“I paid for your care and your therapy.”

“A bribe for not being there.”

“Even for you this is weak,” Tywin said, but his eyes flicked away for a moment before focusing on Jaime's stump.

“I'm not going to your fucking function, and you will not retaliate against Brienne because of it. Find some other trained monkey and amputate his hand. I'm done.” Even as Jaime said the words, a sick worry shuddered through him, a thought so vile Jaime pushed it aside. It had been an accident, nothing more. It had to have been.
This time Jaime made it out of Tywin's office without either of them exchanging another word.

Brienne was sifting through her stack of bills when Jaime texted her. 'I need to talk to you, can I come over?' it said, and her heart started pounding.

'Yes. I'm home.'

'Be there as soon as I can.'

She stared at the piece of paper in front of her and then put the mail away again, knowing she wouldn't be able to concentrate while she waited for Jaime. He'd been gone all day yesterday for his first therapy appointment and she'd been too embarrassed to text him again this morning when he'd promised he would be in touch. Jaime may have been more upfront with how lost he feared he'd be without her, but Brienne felt it just as deeply. She'd talked to him every day since that first visit to the park, and though she'd started out helping Jaime because she loved him, because he needed a friend and someone to help light his way while he floundered in the dark, over time the daily visits, the morning texts, the occasional late night phone calls, had all become as important and necessary to her as eating everyday. Soon she'd have to ask herself the lingering question that she hadn't wanted to face: what was she going to do when it all came to an end?

Based on his text, it might be even sooner than she wanted.

Forty minutes later, there was an urgent knock on her door, and she hurried over to let Jaime in. He was dressed casually in jeans and a thick sweater, but it was the only casual thing about him. His handsome face was tight with worry, his eyes burning darkly.

Brienne shut the door behind him, watched him stand in the middle of her apartment like he wasn't sure how he'd gotten there. “Jaime,” she said gently, “what's wrong?”

“I saw my father today,” he said, and she inhaled sharp and loud.

“Where? What happened?”

He turned to face her. “At the offices. He wanted me to go to some honorary event at the race this weekend and I told him no. I quit, actually,” he said, his broad chest moving once with a huff of brilliant laughter. “He didn't like that.”

“What did he do?”

“He threatened you,” he said softly. “Not physically, but...” Jaime searched her eyes. “He knows about us, about what we were doing.”

Brienne licked her dry lips, her heart racing. Though she'd been waiting for this moment since September, she wasn't ready to face it. “I know.”

“You know?” Jaime's stormy eyes cleared. “He told you, too.”

“Yes.”

“When?”

“September,” she whispered.

“September?” He exhaled, shaky. “That was why you broke it off.” A statement, not a question, but Brienne answered it anyway.
“Yes. He had pictures, he said he'd use them against us both.”

“He told me the same thing.”

“Jaime, I shouldn't have lied to you, I'm so sorry.”

“Why did you? We could have talked about it, worked something out together. Instead of...” the remembered agony filtered over his features.

“If I'd said anything to you, he would've ruined your entire season,” she said, knowing how bitterly ironic the taste of that was now. “He would've fired me and I was afraid you would have left, too, even with all you were winning. That wasn't fair of me. I should have trusted you.”

Jaime deflated in front of her, like she'd pricked his heart and let the life flow out of him. “No, you were right. It was me,” he murmured, shaking his head. “I know my father, Brienne, and I know myself. I'm sorry I got you into this; if I could have just waited until the season was over, if I hadn't pushed you on Tarth, he would've had nothing.”

“I took that step with you,” she said fiercely. “I could have said no.”

“I should have just stayed in King's Landing and protected us both.”

“I'm glad you didn't,” she said softly, and his eyes sharpened, the light catching the hints of gold in their depths. “So you're going to the race on Sunday?”

“No,” he said, and her stomach dropped. If he'd still refused then that meant Tywin would release the photos, would start an offensive against her in the media that she would have to return to Tarth to hide from.

“But I thought—”

“He won't do anything,” Jaime said, stepping closer. “At least not right away. I don't have much leverage but I used what I could. We'll be fine until the season is done for sure, which gives us time to come up with a plan.”

“A plan to do what? Steal the evidence?” She could hear the fear loud in her own voice, but she couldn't control it. Her future had not truly been in her own hands for months, but now even the comforting lie that she could still do something about it herself had been taken away and she could only watch from afar, her career the rope in a tug-of-war between Jaime and Tywin.

“You take the Griffin job and then we go public with everything ourselves before he gets a chance to salt the earth ahead of us.”

“I don't want the Griffin job.” She hadn't said it out loud to anyone else yet, but every time she thought of late nights and long days with Hyle Hunt, knowing Ron Connington would always be one garage over, her stomach had done a particularly acrobatic somersault in disgust.

“Then what do you want?” he asked, his tone rough with frustration.

“I don't know! You, mostly!” she snapped, and he jerked his head back, blinking rapidly.

“Me?”

She flushed. “Is it so surprising? I never stopped wanting you.”

“Even now?”
“More than ever.” He’d captivated her since her father’s garage, back when he’d been arrogant and angry, when his love of the cars had been, she thought, the truest thing about him; now that she knew all his curves and straightaways, it would be impossible to stop wanting him. It was her turn to move nearer. “I never would have ended things between us if your father hadn't stepped in.”

Jaime tilted his head and gave her a small, sad smile. “Yes, you would've.”

“No.” Brienne shook her head. “It wasn't what I wanted.”

“Maybe not then,” he said, “but it would've been eventually.” He tenderly cupped her face with his palm, a warm pressure that made her shut her eyes for just a moment to enjoy the feel of him again. They were together every day and still she missed him. “You wanted us to keep things secret because you needed to protect yourself, and I did it but I never really understood why. I understand it now. But I also understand that I couldn't have done it the way you needed me to. Truthfully, I could never do it.” His fingers slid to her neck, tightening there, and he tugged her head down to press his forehead to hers. “I cannot love you quietly.”

Her heart ignited with nerves and desire and love, as loud as thunder, as loud as the universe itself reflecting back to her everything she had been aching to say, everything she’d ever wanted to hear across the long stretch of her whole, lonely life. “Jaime,” she whispered his name like it was precious, her own feelings too big to speak out loud. They breathed together for a moment and then he pulled back to kiss her forehead, a promise full of softness and steel.

“And because of that,” he said as his hand slipped away, his voice as gentle and firm as his lips had been, “I can't be with you unless I can be with you. Outside of the bedroom, in public. I want to hold your hand when we go to the park. I want to taste the little bit of ice cream that always catches at the corner of your mouth. I don't want you to be afraid of being seen with me. I can't do that again.”

“People will talk about us,” she said and his lips curved with regret.

“They will.”

“They'll say terrible things,” she whispered.

“They might.”

“I don't want to choose between you and my career.”

“You don't have to,” he said firmly. “I can wait.”

“Wait for what?”

“For you to be ready.”

She splayed her hand across his chest, and though he looked calm on the surface, beneath the soft fabric of his sweater his heart was pounding. She couldn't make this fierce and gentle man wait even longer for her to be brave, no matter how much she yearned for him. “It's too much to ask,” she protested against the wailing of her heart.

“It's not,” he said, and he laughed, looking self-conscious. “I've been in love with you this long already, I can wait a little more.”

Her fingers curled a little into his sweater and he covered her hand with his. There were high spots of color in his cheeks as he licked his lips. “But gods you cannot look at me like that when we're
alone,” he said in a strained voice, and Brienne exhaled and looked away, blushing. Her hand fell back to her side.

“If you're sure?”

“I've never been more sure of anything in my life,” he said seriously. “You've done so much for me. Let me do this for you."

They had spent so much time together, not just over the last month but since she'd first started working on his crew, she thought she knew every nuance, every shade of green his eyes could be. Jaime had been furious and sad and elated and lost, but she had never seen him look like this: like he was staring at his whole future just waiting for it to open up before him, happy to wait as long as he needed until it did.

She blinked rapidly to hold back tears and nodded, looking down. “Alright. So now what?” she asked the floor.

“Well,” he said after a pause, “we still have to figure out what to do about my father, in case he decides to make a move we'll all regret. And you have to figure out where you're going to end up. And I guess I need a new job,” he mused.

Brienne glanced up to find he was smiling, as light-hearted as she'd ever seen him, even before the accident. There was something loose and free in his face, a weight that had been bearing him down finally fallen away. She felt the same in her own heart, with the patient promise of his love curled inside. “That must have been a damn good therapist,” she said, and Jaime laughed, the sound bouncing gaily around her apartment.

“Let's go get lunch and I'll tell you all about it.”
November (Part 2)

Chapter Summary

They were showing the three drivers in the post-race room, their handshakes and congratulations. Oberyn pounded Addam on the back, beaming at his teammate. Jaime regretted that the only time he'd had a teammate he could have shared that experience with that he'd driven him away. This season had been the first time Jaime had felt like he'd had a team at all, that it hadn't just been him against everyone else.

He glanced at Brienne and remembered her so early on telling him he wasn't alone. She'd been by his side every day since to prove it to him. He'd had no idea how lucky he was that day in Selwyn's garage when she'd taken his hand and agreed to be his.

Chapter Notes

theworldunseen assures me that Friday counts as a weekend and I've got plans all day Saturday and Sunday, so here you go. :D I am also only one chapter ahead of you all now, so I need to get some serious writing done in the next several days or the next update won't be until NEXT weekend to give me some breathing room. Fingers crossed.

A letter arrived the next day informing Brienne she was terminated from Lannister Corp Racing, along with a stern reminder of her NDA that meant she could not share company secrets or become someone else's race engineer for two years, and she showed it to Jaime with only slightly shaking hands. Jaime wasn't sure if it was an initial volley before the barrage or if it was the only shot that was coming, but he read the terse words with regret.

“Fuck, I'm sorry,” he said.

“I haven't worked for weeks, it's not a surprise.”

“No, but the timing is suspicious.” She met his eyes and he could see she'd run through the same scenarios he had.

“What do we do?”

He shrugged, helpless. He still could only think of one solution and Brienne wasn't willing to do it. “We may only have the one choice,” he said tentatively, not liking the panic that immediately flared in her eyes.

“We have a few more days,” she said. “He may not do anything at all. It serves no purpose when neither of us works for him anymore.”

Jaime took the trembling paper from her hand and set it down. “Have you ever heard of Reyne Motors?” he asked quietly.
“They made engines, right? But they went bankrupt a long time ago.”

“That's the story my father wants the public to hear, but it's not the truth. Nearly forty years ago Lannister Racing partnered with Reyne to supply the engines for our race cars. After a few years of increasingly stingy bargaining on behalf of my grandfather, Reyne Motors decided they no longer wanted Lannister dragons at the expense of their dignity, and they took to the papers and radio to complain, loudly, about Lannister Corp, and Tywin and my grandfather in particular.” Jaime bent the corner of the paper with his left hand. “At the ripe old age of twenty-five, my father negotiated a hostile takeover on behalf of Lannister Corp, absorbing their engine-building work fully into the company, burning every contract Reyne had with anyone else, and then getting every instance of their logo and name removed from any piece of racing history he could, including Lannister Corp's own files. For all intents and purposes, Reyne Motors ceased to exist in Formula 1.” Jaime met Brienne's wide and horrified stare. “Tywin Lannister doesn't need a purpose to burn everything to the ground, especially when he feels he or the company have been slighted.”

“You're his son,” she whispered, like it would shield them from his father's revenge.

“That's the only thing that makes me think he'll hesitate. I'm still a Lannister, regardless of his feelings for me. It's why he's bailed Tyrion out of jail before, even though he hates my brother more than nearly anyone. But we can only push him so far before he strikes out, and if he can find a way to hit you without splashing anything on me, he will.”

“Maybe we should go public first,” she said, but her face was too pale, her blue eyes too dark with worry for him to take her seriously. He wouldn't do it when she looked so terrified, no matter how much he wanted to himself.

“We have at least a few days, if not longer. Let's think on it some more.” He squeezed Brienne's hand and smiled brightly. “Besides, we have much more important things to decide first, like what snacks to have on Sunday.”

Bronn had invited them to watch the final race of the season at his house, but Jaime had begged off. He still hadn't tried watching a race again since Maidenpool and he didn't want to have to fumble through his brand new coping techniques in a crowd. He felt safe with Brienne, sitting on his admittedly less comfortable couch, and getting through as much as he could.

She came over early that Sunday wearing an old Arthur Dayne #8 t-shirt, jeans, and an expression that was annoyingly concerned about him. He gave her a bright smile as he invited her in.

“Not rooting for Lancel today?” he asked, and she looked startled at his teasing.

“I wasn't really rooting for anyone,” she said.

“Addam will be heartbroken to hear that.” She looked guilty and Jaime nudged her with his elbow. “I'm kidding, Wrench.”

She smiled uncomfortably. “I just got so used to rooting for you, it felt wrong to cheer for someone else.”

Jaime considered, in more detail than he should have, kissing her just for that, but he went into the kitchen to get the vegetable platter he'd bought the day before. He suspected the most difficult part of today was not going to be the race, it was going to be sitting alone with Brienne and keeping his distance. Since he'd told her how he felt, since she'd admitted she still wanted him, they had studiously not spent extended time alone together in private. Jaime honestly wasn't sure if that was for her benefit or for his.
They settled on his couch, bigger than hers so there was at least more space between them, and watched the pre-show activities. There was an interview with Robb Stark, who could only lose the championship today by an extraordinarily unlikely turn of events, but given what had happened to Jaime, the IAF was being cautious about awarding him anything until it was all over. Robb looked distracted, his mind already on the track as the interviewer pressed him with questions they heard every week. Jaime had been on the receiving end of those questions enough times over his career that he could answer them without even thinking, and Robb did well but he was still too earnest about his image, too concerned about every word he said to the media, not wanting to disappoint his team and his father.

*I guess that's one benefit to not caring about my own.*

Brienne and Jaime talked idly about each driver's chances, Brienne watching him with careful eyes the entire time.

“Quit that,” he finally said when her hand had hovered near his on the couch as Lancel ran through his standard issue pablum.

Brienne yanked her hand back and frowned. “I'm not doing anything,” she said defensively.

“Well I'm sorry for caring whether you'll be okay.”

“I'll be fine,” he insisted. “I talked to Tarly this morning by phone.”

“You did? On a Sunday?”

“He offered at our session and I wanted to be able to enjoy this with you.” He rubbed his stump over the cool leather of his couch, the sensation less intense than it had been. He'd even tried on his interim prosthetic that morning, but the weight had been unpleasantly unfamiliar and Jaime didn't want to deal with that today, too.

“Well that's...that's sweet,” Brienne said. “I'll stop hovering, then.”

“Good.” Jaime sighed. “I just want to enjoy some part of this again, even for a moment.” Her hand covered his, warm and strong, and he turned his over to clasp hers before she could pull it away.

“But I appreciate your concern,” he said sincerely before letting her go.

She was slow to pull her hand back.

As the final lights out of the season neared, Jaime's stomach buzzed and tumbled, and he focused on keeping his breathing constant, not too deep and not too shallow. *Just breathe like a regular person having a good time watching a race,* he reminded himself.

Some of his nerves were for Addam, who'd gotten to p-4 today. Addam usually did well at King's Landing and now that Jaime wasn't focused on himself he wished he'd done more then just send his friend a goofy text that morning before the race. Jaime rubbed his hand on his knee while the crews did their last check-ups and preparations on the line of cars.

“Do you need anything before it starts?” Brienne asked him quietly.

“A tranquilizer,” he said with a chuckle. “I didn't realize watching it was so much more stressful.”

One side of her mouth quirked in a smile. “Once we get you in the car, it's out of ours hands. That
part can be hard to deal with.”

“You managed it,” he said.

“I've had lots of practice being on the outside.”

The crews retreated and the lights started coming on and Jaime leaned forward, elbows on his knees, his left hand covering his stump as the cars rumbled and then launched when the lights went out. Brienne was in a mirrored position next to him, and they watched the first couple of laps like that until the initial fights and positioning evened out and the real racing began.

In the end it was Robb's race to lose and he didn't, playing it safe and smart and riding his pole position to a first place win. Oberyn came in second and Addam took his first podium of the season at p-3, which Jaime leapt up and cheered for as his friend's car crossed under the checkered flag. When he beamed down at Brienne in excitement, he was for a moment bowled over by the open joy on her face, the way her eyes were watching him hungrily and he nearly forgot his promise to wait.

His intent must have been obvious because she flushed bright red and looked back at the TV and Jaime excused himself to the kitchen to put some much needed space between them. He wished there was some way he could convince her that the world wouldn't treat the two of them together as something to be ashamed of, that he could give her his ability to just not care even if they did, but though the path of their lives had been parallel with how they had both been mocked for who they were, the gulf between those paths was wide.

So he took a breath to boost his willpower and asked, “Do you need another drink?”

She nodded and he grabbed one for her, tossed it over the back of the couch to land next to her on the seat and she laughed soft and happy while the TV showed the top 3 drivers spinning donuts onscreen. It cut to a Year In Review package that started with, “This season of Formula 1 had an incredible amount of triumph and tragedy,” and Brienne moved to turn the TV off but he stilled her hand.

“I want to see Addam get his trophy,” he said. The announcer continued on in an overly-dramatic voice and he added, “But you can mute it while we wait.”

Jaime tried not to watch the TV and Brienne made it easy by engaging him in a discussion on choices Addam had made during the race that distracted him enough he was surprised when she reached out to turn the sound back on. They were showing the three drivers in the post-race room, their handshakes and congratulations. Oberyn pounded Addam on the back, beaming at his teammate. Jaime regretted that the only time he'd had a teammate he could have shared that experience with that he'd driven him away. This season had been the first time Jaime had felt like he'd had a team at all, that it hadn't just been him against everyone else.

He glanced at Brienne and remembered her so early on telling him he wasn't alone. She'd been by his side every day since to prove it to him. He'd had no idea how lucky he was that day in Selwyn's garage when she'd taken his hand and agreed to be his.

She turned to say something to him and caught him staring, and her checks went checkered red and white as he knew they would. “Do I have something on my face?” she asked self-consciously.

A knock on the door interrupted his answer and they exchanged curious stares.

“Did you invite someone else over?” she asked.
“No. Maybe just a delivery I forgot I ordered.” Jaime went down the short hallway and opened the door to find Peck there with a pretty, brown-haired girl hovering behind him looking nervous. “Peck?” he said, blinking in surprise. “What are you doing here? I'm not giving interviews.”

“Mr. Lannister, I'm really sorry to bother you but it's really important. It couldn't wait.”

“Jaime,” Brienne's voice floated down the hallway. “You should come here, quickly.”

Jaime huffed but invited the unexpected visitors in before shutting the door and hurrying back to the TV. Brienne had paused the broadcast and her face was inscrutable as she looked at him. The still image was of Robb on the podium, the world championship trophy being handed his way.

“I don't need to watch this part,” Jaime said quietly, but she kept looking at him with that very serious face.

“I think you do.” She pressed play and the roaring of the crowd filled his living room while Jaime watched Petyr Baelish hand off the championship trophy with a pleased smile. Robb was not smiling as he grabbed the microphone from Baelish.

“I have a message for Jaime Lannister,” he said and the crowd quieted almost immediately. Jaime's heart beat hard and uncertain in his chest, and he gripped the back of the couch with his suddenly weak hand.

“We all know I didn't really earn this this year,” Robb said, holding out the championship trophy like it was something offensive. “It's mine only by default, which is no way to win. So I won't accept it, either the trophy or the title. If IAF insists on keeping my name attached, there will always be an asterisk next to it so everyone will know who really should have been up here today.” Robb looked right at the camera. “It was an honor and a privilege to race against you this season, Jaime. You were the best I ever competed against.” He set the trophy down on the podium, shoved the microphone back into Baelish's hands, and then walked away, Addam and Oberyn joining him, the camera zooming in on the gleaming silver cup sitting alone as the crowd murmured wildly.

Baelish glared around, whispering harshly to one of his many right-hand men, who then leaped forward to grab the trophy while the commentators fumbled for something to say.

“That was unexpected,” one finally started.

“We're going to commercial,” the other broke in and they seemed to breathe a sigh of relief as the feed cut to an advertisement for the latest Direwolf sports car.

Jaime exhaled in a loud gale and Brienne touched his arm from where she still sat on the couch, her eyes bright with tears.

“Did you know?” he asked and she shook her head, no. He felt like his heart had been stretched out, pulled loose and thin as putty and then shoved back together, not yet settled, ready now to be molded into something new. He threaded his fingers through Brienne's, holding on to the one constant in his life from before the accident and after. Jaime knew her imprints would be all over the new shape his heart would take.

Brienne glanced past him and the gentle happiness in her expression shifted, her brow furrowing in confusion. “Peck?”

“Hi, Ms Tarth,” the young man said timidly from the doorway to the hall. “We're really sorry to interrupt, although honestly this is a pretty great place to have seen that.” Jaime turned his head to glare at the young man who coughed and reddened.
“What do you want, Peck? How did you even know I was here?”

“I have a lot of contacts in the sport, Mr. Lannister. Mr. Blackwater said you were here today.” His girlfriend, Pia he’d said, was staring in open admiration at Brienne, her brown eyes big and round and beaming. The young woman's teeth were crooked and ill-cared for but she didn't seem to mind as she smiled at Brienne. “We never would have come to your house if it weren't so important, Mr. Lannister. Please, just give me ten minutes and you'll understand. It's about your crash.”

Jaime couldn't tell whose hand went tighter, his or Brienne's. They shared a long, searching look and then Jaime gestured for Peck and Pia to join them at his dining room table.

Brienne got drinks for everyone, her mind whirling, while Jaime moved the snacks to the table and the others sat in tense silence. She had not thought about the crash itself, outside of the effect it had had on Jaime, except for those first few hours in the hospital when they were waiting to hear what exactly was wrong and whether he would be okay. It had replayed over and over in her mind in that harshly lit waiting room: the pull out of the pit lane, Ramsay coming up fast and swerving towards him, Jaime's tire exploding, and then his terrible scream, the one she heard in her dreams too many nights afterward. But no matter how many times she pictured it, she couldn't bring herself to watch the actual video and she'd been happy to put it behind them as Jaime had needed more immediate care. She glanced at him now, the tense line of his shoulders as he maneuvered the vegetable plate to the table, the stern blankness of his face when he sat down across from Peck and Pia. He had looked transformed by Robb's act, like he'd gotten through a difficult battle and was ready to rest for a time and recover, but as soon as he started to lay down his arms another threat had appeared on the horizon. She worried what picking up that weight again so soon would do to him now.

Juggling two beer bottles in one hand and two soda cans in the other, Brienne handed them out and sat down next to Jaime at the table, on his right side, as she often did these days to lend that side her strength.

“What did you want to tell us about the accident?” Brienne said, taking control in the uncomfortable silence.

Peck took a breath. “After the crash, everybody was concerned about what had happened to Mr. Lannister. As they should be,” he hurriedly added, “but I couldn't stop thinking about how unusual it was. I'd been recording the race while I was onsite doing reporting for the blog, so when I got home I was able to watch it again. They didn't have a great angle, but it was enough to see that what had looked really weird in person was even weirder on video. So I called in some favors with IAF folks I've gotten to know through Grid Kids and was able to get all of the available footage from that area. It's not great, being Harrenhal,” he said, and Brienne nodded, “but it confirmed what I suspected: something was wrong with your car, Mr. Lannister. The tire never should have gone like that, not on the maneuver you made. I checked other races and found you doing the same thing, even this season, with no ill effect.”

“No car is perfect,” Brienne said when Jaime didn't jump in. “Isn't it possible it was just a freak mechanical occurrence?”

“It could have been,” Peck agreed. “But it was really bothering me and, well Pia knows, when something gets stuck in my head I can't let it go. So I got all the footage I could from your garage and pit lane and started studying it.” He reached into his pocket and slid a small USB stick into the middle of the table between the four of them. “I didn't need all of it, just the footage from the pit stop right before the crash.”

Brienne held her breath, but she somehow knew exactly what Peck was about to say before he even
“I’m sorry to say but your car was sabotaged, Mr. Lannister, by your right front tire man, Vargo Hoat.”

Jaime’s hand crunched his soda can so hard liquid spilled out of it, over his knuckles and onto the table, but he didn’t seem to notice, or care. “You’re sure?” he asked in a voice as black and threatening as a thundercloud.

Peck looked sick but he nodded vigorously. “You can’t miss it, Mr. Lannister. I mean you can in the rush of the day, but slowed down and zoomed in, he ruined your tire when he was attaching it.”

“He had been nothing but agreeable for months. Why would he do that?” Brienne asked, and though she directed it at Jaime, it was Peck who answered.

“I wondered the same thing, Ms Tarth. I did some more digging,” she looked skeptically at him and he shrugged, looking almost apologetic. “My work with Grid Kids and the news blog means I run into a lot of people, in a lot of different situations. I’m a quiet guy, but sometimes my silence is a favor.” In an instant her entire estimation of Peck changed; he was charming and sweet as he’d led her to believe, but she saw now there was a core of cunning and curiosity that any great reporter needed to get ahead, well-hidden by his pleasant, conflict-avoidant exterior. Applied with care, she could see him charming what he needed out of almost anyone.

Peck took a sip of the beer she’d given him and nodded appreciatively at the taste. “He was hired by recommendation of Martyn Lannister,” he said, and Brienne rocked back in her chair, a memory hitting her like a punch to the gut.

“The night before the race,” she breathed, and Jaime finally tore his gaze away from where it had been boring into the tabletop to look at her. “I completely forgot,” she said. “By the Seven, Jaime, I completely forgot.”

“Forgot what?”

“When we were rebuilding your car the night before the race, I didn't leave until after midnight. I was the last one there and I heard people talking over in Golden Company's garage. It was Hoat. He and Martyn and Ramsay were all talking about something I couldn't hear. They were at the end of their conversation by the time I saw them, and they shook hands and parted ways. Hoat seemed fine the next morning and we had...other things to deal with,” she said, awkward, “but that meeting seemed odd even that night. I should have known better,” she said fiercely, her insides tight with regret.

“You couldn't have known,” Jaime said quietly. “It's an unthinkable act, that someone would sabotage their own driver.”

“But Martyn-”

“It's not your fault,” he insisted, and she remembered Dayne's gentle reprimand that this wasn't about her guilt, though she wasn't sure she was going to be able to breathe without this rock in her chest for the rest of her life. If she'd done something, said something, none of this might ever have happened, and Jaime would have been on that podium today, not needing Robb to make some chivalrous gesture.

Jaime laid his stump on her leg, as though he could hear the continuing recrimination in her thoughts. “So Hoat sabotaged my tire because Martyn asked him to? Are they friends or
something?"

“That's what's strange,” Peck said, taking up the thread again. “Martyn is pretty open with his social media and Hoat doesn't show up at all in his feed until a month or two before he was hired. I looked up some of the other people Martyn seemed to tag whenever he tagged Hoat and did a little asking around and...” Here Peck seemed to lose his nerve entirely and he opened his mouth and then closed it, stuck.

“And what?” Brienne asked. “You have to tell us all of it.”

“I know,” Peck said miserably, “I just don't want to.” On the tabletop Pia entwined her fingers in Peck's, squeezing his hand, and subconsciously Brienne covered Jaime's stump on her thigh with her hand, her fingers loosely circling the end. He was as still and tense as marble beside her, but she could feel his pulse thundering through the tender skin at his wrist.

Peck took a breath and finished his story. “They're all involved in an illegal gambling ring. That's why it's taken me so long to put all the pieces together, I had to be careful, and I had to be sure. During the race today my contact got me the final information I needed. Martyn was making bets, Ms Tarth, huge bets, in amounts there's no possible way he had the money to afford.”

“He was using someone else's money?” Brienne asked, and it felt like a cruel and bitter dawn was slowly breaking over their heads as each piece slotted into place.

“Yes. Based on everything we could find, someone at Lannister Corp Racing was using Martyn as a go-between to place their bets. And they were betting against you, Mr. Lannister.”
Jaime sat down on the toilet seat and put his head in his hand and wondered when his father had started hating him so completely. Had it truly been when Jaime had gone to Aerys' team? Or had it been before that, when their mother had died and Tywin had started hating everyone, his children most of all. He blamed Tyrion for Joanna's death, but he blamed Jaime and Cersei for her continued presence in his life. Tywin would sometimes stare at the twins and bemoan how much they looked like their mother, especially Jaime. “You have her smile,” Tywin accused him once, his tone suggesting Jaime had stolen it from their dead mother's body. Jaime had not smiled around his father much after that. Since Aerys he hadn't smiled much at all, until this year. Now his father had come to steal it back, and no matter how tired Jaime was he would not let him.

Jaime threw himself up and away from the table, his chair crashing to the ground behind him. Brienne flinched and stood more slowly, but he held his hand out to stop her and disappeared into his bedroom, slamming the door shut behind him.

“I'm sorry,” Peck said, miserable, and Brienne sighed.

“You're just the messenger.”

They sat staring awkwardly at each other around the table for a minute while the sound of Jaime stomping around the bedroom echoed through the apartment. He didn't appear to be saying anything, at least not that they could hear from the dining room.

Someone from Lannister Corp – though Brienne was certain she already knew who it was – had been betting against Jaime, wanting him to lose the World Championship the entire time, and had ruthlessly inserted Hoat onto the team to make it happen. She couldn't imagine the betrayal he must be feeling; it was swarming up and choking her and she hadn't even been the one targeted.

“It's exciting to meet you,” Pia said abruptly into the silence and Brienne stared at the other woman. “I framed the autographed shirt Peck brought home. It hangs right above our bed.”

“That's great,” Brienne said gamely, before excusing herself to go check on Jaime.

She knocked on his bedroom door and after a minute he said “come in,” sounding like a man who'd been dragged through all seven hells.
They stood looking at each other after she closed the door, neither having any idea what to say. Brienne held out her hand instead, and he took it in a desperate grip, holding on to her tightly.

“What do we do?” he eventually asked.

“We report all of this to the IAF, and the police. We get help figuring out who it was and we take them down.”

“You know who it was,” he said in a broken voice that sank like a dagger in her heart.

“We need proof. And we need to know why.”

“Why? Who the fuck cares why? He caused this,” he said, thrusting his stump between them.

“That doesn't sound like him. Can you really live the rest of your life not knowing why he did it?”

“If I know he's rotting in jail, yes.”

Brienne squeezed Jaime's hand and the fury went out of him, like a small piece of wood that had burned brightly and was now just dully glowing ash. “I'm going to go back and talk to Peck about what else he knows, what we can do next. You stay here and I'll tell you everything once they're gone.”

“No,” he said, lifting his head, and she was relieved to see a sliver of determination between the bitter heartbreak. “We'll do it together.”

When they returned to the table, Peck looked as guilty as though he'd been the culprit. “I'm sorry,” he started, but Jaime glared him into silence.

“Tell us the rest,” he commanded in a cool voice that reminded Brienne of his father.

Peck swallowed hard. “There are rumors that Lannister Corp is deeply in debt and getting deeper every day.”

“How is that possible? My father shits money.”

“That seems to be an illusion. Mostly he loses it. Or the rest of your family does at least. What people say is there have been bad deals and too many loans and overly reckless spending out of Lannister Corp for awhile, even starting with your grandfather, and no one's bringing in enough to make up for it.”

“Because I kept losing. I must have seemed like a safe bet to lose again this year.” Brienne hated the self-disgust in Jaime's tone.

“I don't know about that,” Peck said weakly.

“Has he bet against me in the past?”

“The gambling ring has been around for a little while, but what Martyn was betting this year was the most anyone had ever gone in on it. I don't know more than that.”

“Formula 1 employees have been betting on races for awhile?” Brienne asked, horrified.

“Yes, Ms Tarth. Seems like it's mostly been people not directly on crews. It's a terrible risk to bet on a sport when you're in the garages themselves, but the people some of Hoat's friends mentioned can be seen at the track on gameday. No drivers have ever bet on a race. Though,” Peck hesitated
and glanced at Jaime, “a few have gotten a cut of winnings for nudging things in the desired direction.”

“Ramsay?” Jaime asked, spitting out the name like it was poison.

“Probably, yes.”

Brienne was drowning with rage, choking on it; she tried to find some safe shore where she could hold on to ride out her own anger. To think drivers like Ramsay Bolton – men whose greed far outstripped their skills – were allowed on the track with Jaime and Renly and the others, trying to trip up one of their competition just for a cut of an illegal bet. She couldn't bear it. When she looked at Jaime he seemed made of stone, except for the twitch of his jaw, the pulse beating hard at his throat.

“Is there anything else?” he asked in a gravelly voice.

“No,” Peck whispered, unable to meet their eyes.

“We have to report this. Do you have a plan for that?”

Peck nodded. “Yes,” he said. “And some backups if we need it.”

Jaime leaned forward, all coiled intensity. “Then let's get to it.”

By the time Peck and Pia left, the plan had been thoroughly hammered out, starting with a visit to Petyr Baelish first thing tomorrow morning. Brienne and Jaime sat on the couch afterward in dismal silence, neither wanting to talk, neither wanting to move.

“This is not how I expected today to go,” Jaime eventually said and Brienne laughed abruptly, too loud but unable to control herself as her worry and fury and stress snowballed out of her in a hysterical avalanche. Jaime stared for a moment and then he laughed, too, a softer counterpoint to her own.

When they stilled, Brienne's cheeks and sides were aching and she didn't feel good but she felt better. “I should probably go,” she sighed.

Jaime wrapped his pinky around hers where their hands were next to each other on the cushion. “Please stay,” he asked softly. “I can sleep on the couch and you can take my bed. But I don't want to be alone tonight.”

“Okay,” she agreed, and then added cautiously, “but we could share the bed.” His eyes swerved fast to hers, searching her face. “If I'm going to be here anyway, I could use someone to hold onto, and I think so could you. If that's alright. I know it might be too much to ask.”

Without a word Jaime stood and pulled her up with him, shutting off the lights and leading her back to his bedroom. They were both barefoot already, and she watched him undo his belt with one hand and slide it free, setting it on a chair. For a moment Brienne considered just giving in, walking over and unbuttoning his jeans, sliding his zipper down and giving them both what they wanted. But too much had happened today already and she knew if she took that first step, they'd have to see it through to the end and the immediate future was a grim shadow hiding the way.

*After we deal with this*, she thought. *After that, I won't wait any more.*

They curled together on the bed, facing each other. In-between them, Brienne held Jaime's stump with both hands and she fell asleep under his soft, steady gaze.
Jaime woke the next morning with Brienne pressed against his back, her arm looped over his waist, and his cock aching. He rolled out slowly from her grip and though she sleepily protested she didn't awaken. He hurried to the bathroom, struggled to pee and then decided to take care of this particular problem in the shower. It was easy enough to stand under the pounding water and grip himself awkwardly with his left hand and think of her, lying warm and spread out in his bed. He imagined returning from the shower to see her blinking at him, her clothes piled somewhere on the floor, her eager hands pulling him near, and he came quickly, biting hard on his lip as he did.

With a resigned sigh Jaime cleaned himself off and finished his shower. Now that he'd taken the edge off of his physical needs, the memory of what they'd discovered last night, what they were doing today, swarmed forward.

Peck had said 'someone,' but Jaime knew in his heart it was Tywin. It didn't matter whose fingerprints were on it, the hands would be Tywin's. His father, his own fucking father, had been betting against him, hoping he would lose. The season came into sharp relief now that he could see it clearly, like when he'd learned reading techniques to cope with his dyslexia and the world started making more sense. Tywin had hoped he could rely on Jaime's constant inability to finish, had not anticipated Brienne helping him focus, giving him the space to be the driver Jaime knew he was. No wonder Tywin had wanted to drive Brienne from Jaime's life; with her, he was winning and ruining his father's plans. And she'd said herself: if Jaime had known Tywin was forcing them apart, he wasn't sure what he would have done. He could have tried to find another team, bringing his number one position in the World Championship with him as leverage. Nightfort would have happily picked him up. Then Tywin would have lost his bet and his best driver. So his father had played on Brienne's sense of honor and ruthlessly cut them apart, gambling on Jaime failing, and when Jaime had the audacity to not even do that, his father had apparently decided to make him fail.

He wondered if Tywin would have been more or less upset if Jaime had been killed in the crash, instead of just maimed. Probably less; he certainly had insurance he could have collected if Jaime had died.

Jaime sat down on the toilet seat and put his head in his hand and wondered when his father had started hating him so completely. Had it truly been when Jaime had gone to Aerys' team? Or had it been before that, when their mother had died and Tywin had started hating everyone, his children most of all. He blamed Tyrion for Joanna's death, but he blamed Jaime and Cersei for her continued presence in his life. Tywin would sometimes stare at the twins and bemoan how much they looked like their mother, especially Jaime. “You have her smile,” Tywin accused him once, his tone suggesting Jaime had stolen it from their dead mother's body. Jaime had not smiled around his father much after that. Since Aerys he hadn't smiled much at all, until this year. Now his father had come to steal it back, and no matter how tired Jaime was he would not let him.

Jaime wrapped a thick towel around his waist and peeked out the door to find Brienne was awake and blinking at him, though she was still fully clothed. He couldn't miss the way her gaze traveled down his chest, lingering where he held the towel closed with his good hand, or the blush staining her cheeks and neck red as she did.

“Shower's all yours,” he said, hurrying to his closet. By the time he'd dressed, he could hear the water running and he escaped to the kitchen before he let his baser instincts convince him to hang around and wait for her to finish.

At ten AM, clean and fed and strictly not talking about anything important, they headed downstairs to find Sandor waiting for them as promised. The Hound gave Brienne a look that Jaime could not
decipher and she shook her head a little as though saying “not now.” Sandor glared at Jaime.


Sandor just grunted and got in the car.

“What's his problem?” Jaime asked Brienne after they'd climbed in the backseat. He knew Sandor could hear, but the man reacted to all backseat conversations as though there were an invisible wall between them, one of many reasons Jaime had hired him.

She shot Jaime a guilty glance. “He knows about us,” she said quietly.

“What, that we were-”

“Yes,” she said hurriedly. “And that Tywin made me end it.”

“Then why is he glaring at me?”

“I...didn't take it well when it first happened. I think because he only saw my response he blames you.”

Jaime looked upfront and caught Sandor watching them in the rearview mirror. “Typical. Everybody takes your side over mine,” he said, only half-joking. Brienne just pressed her hand briefly to his knee and let it drop.

Sandor dropped them off in front of the IAF offices and opened the passenger side window to tell them he'd wait for them in the parking structure. “I don't know what you're doing,” he added, “but you look freaked the fuck out.”

“We are,” Brienne admitted.

“If you need anything, just holler.”

She smiled and they watched Sandor drive away. “We should tell him,” Jaime said, and Brienne nodded.

“After this, it will be the first thing we do. Look, there's Peck and Pia, let's go.”

They hadn't made an appointment with Baelish, but Jaime hadn't grown up at the foot of Tywin Lannister without learning how to breeze through receptionists and personal assistants with ease, and they soon found themselves seated at Petyr's oversized desk while Peck and Pia hovered behind them. Baelish's office wasn't as large as his father's, but he'd stuffed it with years of pictures and racing memorabilia.

“Jaime Lannister,” the weasel-faced man said with an insincere smile. “It's been a long time since you've been in these offices. What brings you here in such an uproar to see me today?”

“Have you done a review of my crash at Harrenhal?” Jaime asked as they'd planned. They wanted to give Petyr a chance to provide any additional information first before they shared all of theirs with him.

“Of course we have, it's standard procedure. How are you doing, anyway? Shouldn't you consider getting a prosthetic?”

“I'm not here to talk about my hand,” Jaime said grimly. “Not directly at least. Did you find anything unusual about the crash?”
Petyr sat back in his chair and steepled his fingers, but there was a flicker of concern in his calculating, gray-green eyes. “Just that it was an unpreventable tragedy,” he said.

Jaime gestured for Peck to set down the folder of images and information he’d printed out from the USB stick. “Then you’re in luck, because our mutual friend Josmyn here has done an extensive review, and we think you’ll be interested in the results.”

Petyr glanced at the folder and shrugged. “I suppose I can find some time to look at it. Is that all?”

“You'll look at it now,” Jaime said.

“I'm afraid I really don't have the time to spare right this minute, Lannister.”

“Make time,” Jaime said softly. “Unless you want to wait to read it when we publish this online.”

Baelish's smile slipped and he pulled the folder towards himself, opening it and taking out the first document. Jaime could see the moment he got to the first of the revelations, because his fingers tightened on the paper and he looked up at them. “You can't be serious with these allegations.”

“We're deadly serious. Keep reading.”

He did, his fake tan not able to hide the blood draining from his face. Finally he looked up and he folded his hands in his lap, but not before Jaime saw they were trembling.

“If this is true—”

“It is true, every word of it.”

“If it is,” Petyr insisted, “this could ruin Formula 1.”

“Then what are you going to do about it?”

“Nothing,” Petyr said intently. “And neither will you, if you know what's good for you.”

Jaime heard the echo of his father telling him the same about what had happened with Aerys, and a surge of old fury bolted through him. “We're going to tell every last person in the world, so you better come up with a plan to handle it.”

Petyr leaned forward, slamming his hands on the table. Behind them, Pia jumped. “If you let one word of this out, we will sue you into the ground for defamation.”

“It can't be defamation if it's the truth.”

“I swear to all the gods, Jaime, you cannot tell anyone about this. Let us handle it internally. *Quietly.*”

“Will anyone go to jail for attempted murder?”

“Attemted—” Petyr scoffed. “There's no way Hoat could have known that would happen. They were probably just trying to slow you down at most.”

Jaime stood, the others rising with him. “We're done here.”

“Wait,” Petyr said, standing too. He was breathing hard, his eyes darting over all of them. “We'll sort out some kind of response but I want you to sign something saying you won't publish anything.”
“Absolutely not,” Brienne said, more fierce than Jaime had ever heard her, and he felt stronger having her fighting at his side. “This is more than a tragedy, Mr. Baelish, this is a dishonor to the entire sport. You must take immediate, proactive action to show that F1 is better than this.”

“Brienne Tarth,” Petyr sneered, and Jaime swallowed down the urge to put his fist in the man’s face. “You think just because you’re some feminist hero that you have any power here? I’m sorry to disillusion you, sweetheart, but you have nothing. Including a job in F1 next season.”

Jaime worried for a moment that it was going to be Brienne who punched Petyr first, and he touched his fingers lightly to her arm when she tensed and leaned forward.

“She can still work for Griffin,” Jaime said, and Petyr shook his head.

“Not if she continues with this folly. We will address the issue, but it will be done on our terms, in our way. That’s the only deal I’m willing to make.”

Jaime shrugged. “Then I guess we’ll have to see what the media says about that on tomorrow’s news sites. Come on,” he told the others, ushering them out ahead of him. They ignored Petyr yelling their names, that he would bring all of them down if they persisted. When the elevator doors closed and silence descended as they did, the four of them looked at each other. Brienne still looked furious, and Jaime was glad to see Peck and Pia were more determined than scared.

“Plan B?” Peck asked.

Jaime exchanged a quick, considering look with Brienne, and then he nodded at Peck. “Plan B.”

They enacted Plan B the next morning in Jaime's apartment, Jaime pacing around the living room, Brienne and Pia on the couch, Sandor slouched in the recliner looking his usual amount of annoyed. Peck sat at the dining room table with his laptop open.

“You're sure about this?” he asked for the third time and Jaime glared at him.

“Yes. Publish the damned post.”

There was the soft clicking of keys and then Peck's voice loud in counterpoint: “All done.”

Plan B was a blog post on Peck’s Formula 1 news site providing a highly redacted version of what they had given Petyr; just enough information to cause a stir and prove it was real, but not so much they couldn't leverage Petyr to act. It was focused almost exclusively on the illegal gambling ring, skirting mostly around the issue of Jaime's crash. They’d spent all of yesterday afternoon preparing it and giving Baelish a chance to change his mind.

“Now what?” Brienne asked. She felt like there should have been more weight to doing something so momentous.

“Now we wait to see who picks up the story first.”

“I can reach out to Melisandre,” she offered, and Jaime frowned but he looked at Peck for his input.

“Let's give it time to seed naturally over social media. If we go too all-in with the big networks right away that might make it easier for IAF to stomp the post down before it can spread. If the fans get it first, they'll save copies and publish their own takes and the dissemination over the internet will keep the information more free.”
“It’s too bad Argella isn’t here,” Brienne murmured, “she’d love this.”

Jaime snorted, but then he faced her. “You should send her the link. I bet she’s got a huge network she could send it to.”

Brienne nodded, grateful to be able to actually do something instead of just sit and be supportive. Tywin Lannister had been closing walls around her on every side for weeks; it was time for her to bust out and do some wall-building of her own.

“You should tell the rest of your crew,” Sandor said, his voice a deep grumble. “They’ll be pissed as hell, but better that they hear it from you.”

“I’ll call Bronn first,” Jaime said, grabbing his phone and heading for the bedroom as he dialed. She heard him say, “Nothing’s wrong. Well, that’s not entirely true,” just before he shut the door.

It took a little under an hour before the first media call came in on Jaime's cell. He stared down at it and then looked at Brienne. “It's Melisandre,” he said and she took a breath. “Here we go.”

Five minutes later, an unknown number called Brienne. “Hello?” she said.

“Brienne Tarth?”

“Yes.”

“This is Myles Manwoody with local channel Sunspear 10?”

“Yes?”

“I have the most shocking blog post in front of me and I was hoping I could talk to you about it.”

She did, giving him quotes they’d all gone over earlier under Jaime's deft direction, making it clear all they were expecting was action by IAF to address their concerns.

Sandor was chewing on his fingernails and he spit something out to the side. “Anybody made plans to grab Hoat before he runs to ground?”

“Shit,” Jaime said and Brienne groaned. In their focus on Tywin and Martyn, Hoat had slipped their minds entirely. None of the three men had been named or the extent of their role in the gambling ring referenced, but if they were even halfway paying attention they’d be worried about how much Jaime and Brienne knew, and Hoat they had the least knowledge of.

With a sigh, Sandor levered himself up out of the chair. “I’m on it,” he groused.

“What are you going to do?” Brienne asked.

“Make sure he doesn't try to escape,” he said with a grin that was in no way reassuring.

Half an hour later, her dad called. “Honey?” he said as soon as she answered.

“Hi, Dad.”

“Argella just sent me the most upsetting link, have you seen this?”

She exchanged a quick look with Jaime and then took her turn in his bedroom. “I helped write it.”

“Is it true?”
“It is.”

Her dad exhaled loud into the phone. “Well.”

“Yeah.”

“Leave it to you to root out corruption in IAF in your first season.”

Brienne snorted. “I didn't do it on purpose.”

“Seems like it has a lot to do with Lannister Corp. How's Jaime taking it?”

She smiled softly at the bed, pleased that that had been her dad's first concern. “He's upset, obviously. But dealing with it has given him action to focus on in a way losing his hand didn't, so he's coping well so far.”

“How are you taking it?”

“It's...a lot to absorb. We only found out yesterday ourselves.”

“What's your plan?”

“We wait for IAF to contact us to figure out how to move forward. As we hinted at in the blog post, we went to Petyr Baelish and he didn't want to address it publicly at all, but this is too big to hide in the shadows. So we're trying to force his hand.”

“Have you heard from anyone from Lannister Corp?”

“Not yet, but I imagine we will soon.”

“Be careful when they call. You should have a lawyer on the line with you. Do you have a lawyer?”

“Jaime wants to ask his brother.”

“That might be a conflict of interest. I'll have Goodwin give you a call, you should use him as much as you need, I'll cover any costs.”

“Dad, you don't have to.”

“I know. But I'm doing it anyway. I'll call him now. Take care of yourself, darling. I love you.”

“I love you too.” She hung up and sat down on Jaime's bed, covering her face for a moment and exhaling slowly. Brienne felt heavy with regrets: that Jaime hadn't been able to savor Robb's post-race speech, that she hadn't done something when she'd seen the three men in Harrenhal, that she couldn't get over her fear of being bullied and harassed enough to let Jaime love her out loud. Brienne had lived her life swimming upstream through unkindness; it had been nice to flow downstream even for a few months, but now the river stood between her and the man she loved.

There was a soft knock and Brienne stood. “Just a second.”

“Petyr Baelish called Jaime,” Pia said through the door. “They're on the phone now.”

Brienne hurried out of the bedroom after Pia just as Jaime was saying “-put you on speaker” and then setting his phone down on the dining room table.
“Who else is with you?” Petyr asked, his voice loud in the quiet room.

“Just those of us who were at the office yesterday.”

“What do you want?”

“We told you: we want you to deal with all of this publicly. I want Hoat and Ramsay and Martyn thrown in jail, I want my father in jail, too, but I'll take him being forced to declare bankruptcy in the meantime.”

“You don't know that Tywin was involved with any of it.”

“Please,” Jaime scoffed, “huge sums of money weren't transferred from Lannister Corp accounts without Tywin Lannister knowing about it.”

“We can report Hoat based on the video footage, but his motives will get out when he goes to trial.”

“It stains the entire sport, Baelish. How could you just ignore that?”

“We won't ignore it,” Petyr snapped. “We'd just deal with it without telling everyone in the world.”

“You can't keep secrets like this,” Jaime insisted.

“So we just tell the fans this has been happening, make some apologies, and be done?”

Jaime ran his hand through his hair, an act he'd done so many times that day that it had poofed up on the left side. “You put a stop to it. You change rules if you need to. You make amends showing the fans you've got the best interests of Formula 1 at heart.”

“How do we do that?”

Brienne tilted her head curiously. She'd wondered that herself as they'd talked about what to do; none of them could circle around a single answer that would solve it all.

“You punish Lannister Corp,” Jaime said tightly.

“You really hate him that much,” Petyr murmured.

“Yes,” Jaime hissed, and then he inhaled sharply through his nose. “But more than that, showing that they can't get away with it would make the fans feel better about your power over the league, and would show the other owners that no one is above what's good for the sport.”

Petyr was quiet so long that Brienne peered down at the phone to make sure the line hadn't gone dead. When she glanced up at Jaime, he shrugged a little.

“We could cut Lannister Corp's LST bonus,” Petyr said slowly. “That would be a huge drop in revenue for them.”

“That's a start.”

“You have to prevent them from running a second driver next season,” Brienne jumped in and Jaime nodded in agreement.

“Why?” Petyr asked, the disdain back in his voice just for her.
“Because it's their fault Jaime was out early. They have to suffer the consequence of that, too.”

Jaime brushed his fingers briefly over the top of her hand while Petyr said, “We'll take that under consideration. Any other requests?”

“You need to update your image. Show the fans that this isn't the F1 it used to be,” Jaime said, staring at Brienne. “It's not some old boys' club for the rich where anyone different can't get a chance to succeed.”

“Shall we pull in some hobos off the streets to drive?” Petyr snarked. Brienne grimaced; she remembered Jaime warning her back in April that now that she was in it she would know all the dirty laundry of the sport, and Petyr Baelish was soiled.

“You need a woman driver,” Jaime said, still staring very intently at her, and Brienne's eyes widened in shock.

“That's absurd,” Petyr said.

“I've seen firsthand all season what a difference having a woman at a high level can make. A driver would be a huge step.”

“Women have entered Grands Prix before.”

“Five women,” Pia jumped in, offended, “in the entire fifty plus years of the sport, and only two even made it past qualifying. It's been twenty-five years since the last woman entered a Grand Prix, and never as a serious contender.”

Petyr was quiet again and Brienne could imagine him grinding his teeth in annoyance. Good, she thought.

“We will take that under consideration as well. I'll meet with the other IAF members and we'll get back to you soon.”

“Today,” Jaime said. “If you don't, we publish more details tomorrow.”

Brienne heard Petyr bite back a curse. “Fine. Today.” Then he did hang up, the line going dead, the four of them staring at the phone.

Pia spoke up first, asking “What's the LST?”

“The Longest Standing Team bonus,” Jaime said bitterly. “Lannister Corp gets money for being the only team that's been around since the beginning. One hundred million dragons a year just for showing up.”

Pia's nose wrinkled in disapproval. “That's stupid.”

“That's the sport. And my father's power.”

“What will he do if Petyr does cut them off from it?” Brienne asked.

“There's no telling. I'm sure he has some blackmail on Baelish as well, the man stinks of ill-gotten gains. Things could get very ugly, very fast.”

“Are we doing the right thing?” Peck asked, his eyes wide. “Are we really going to ruin the whole sport?”
“We won't ruin the sport, but even if we did, what's the alternative?” Brienne asked. “We let Hoat get away with causing Jaime's crash? We let Martyn and Tywin off the hook for manipulating the system just to make money? The sport will recover from having a light shined on its dark parts, as long as the work is done to make it right. It will only decay faster if we let the darkness stay.”

“Should have let you talk to Baelish,” Jaime murmured, his eyes warm and appreciative.

“I'm not good on the spot, you know that,” she said, blushing.

Peck and Pia exchanged a look that made Brienne nervous; a knowing, suggestive glance that said that she and Jaime were going to have to spend less time together around others if they didn't want to invite the gossip themselves.

Jaime's phone rang again, but he didn't answer it, instead staring at it like it was a live bomb. Brienne looked at the screen and saw Tywin's name and she felt suddenly sick. They let it go to voicemail, and thirty seconds later it rang again.

“Are you going to talk to him?” she asked.

“I don't think I should right now.”

The ringing stopped.

“My dad said we should have a lawyer on the line when we do. He offered our family lawyer, Goodwin.”

“Your dad is a smart man.”

The phone rang again and still they all just stared without touching.

“What do you think he wants?” Peck asked. Tywin hung up again.

“Nothing we'll be willing to give,” Jaime said quietly.

Jaime had the beaten down look of a man who had been on the receiving end of the demands Tywin would make too many times in his life before, and was too weary to hear another one, too soul-sick to fight back. Her dread twisted into a hot, burning volcano inside her. Tywin Lannister was a monster, had been one, from everything Jaime had said, his entire life. He had crushed and devoured everyone in his path, even his own family, his own children, and now he had turned his monstrous energy on her. She was sick of recoiling from him in fear, denying herself everything she wanted because Tywin might ruin it. Someone needed to stand against him, to not let Jaime carry this fight on his own. Brienne had her father and her small home and life back on Tarth, too far and insignificant even for Tywin's reaching claws, as a shield. She had her fury as a sword. If not her, then who? She wouldn't regret her inaction again. “If he calls back, I'm talking to him,” Brienne said.

“What happened to needing a lawyer on the line? Being cautious?”

“Fuck caution.”

Jaime jerked his head back, his brow knitting. “Fuck caution?”

“Yes,” she said, and she took his hand. “This isn't the time for it, there's too much at stake and Tywin can't get away with what he's done.” Jaime's fingers gripped hers tightly and he took a breath that made his whole body expand. He would wait for her as long as she needed, she believed
that down to her bones. Jaime would wait and he would want and so would she, and it all seemed so stupid now, keeping herself from him and the feelings neither of them could stop from bubbling over, like a pot on constant simmer, no matter how hard they tried. It was like trying to stop a race car with your hands. She was still afraid, but she could still be afraid and have him at her side.

Brienne wrapped her free hand in the neck of his t-shirt and pulled him closer, kissing him hard. Pia squeaked off to the side but Brienne didn't care, she just wanted this: the slant of Jaime's surprised mouth over hers melting swiftly into a devouring heat, his right arm snaking around her waist to pull her flush against him. They had kissed so many times in their few weeks together; soft kisses and hungry ones, teasing kisses and a collision of mouths that burned them both down. But she had never felt so wanted, so welcomed, so grateful to have her lips on his, his tongue swiping low across hers, imagining the feel of it much lower on her body.

“Oh for fuck's sake,” Sandor said unexpectedly, startling them apart. Jaime's chest was heaving and so was Brienne's and she still wanted more. She wanted all of him.

Jaime licked his reddened lips. “When did you get back?” he asked, still staring at Brienne.

“No,” Jaime agreed vehemently.

Brienne laughed a little, drunk on the taste of Jaime's mouth. She looked around and Peck was studiously staring down at his laptop, red to the tip of his ears, while Pia was gazing starry-eyed at them both. Sandor looked, somehow, more annoyed than usual, a feat Brienne hadn't been sure he was capable of.

Jaime's phone rang again and when Brienne went to answer it she stilled, seeing Tyrion's name. “This one's for you,” she said, holding Jaime's phone out to him. He took it, his fingertips brushing hers, and she shivered a little.

“If father is there I'm hanging up,” he said in greeting. He turned up the volume on his phone a little and held it out from his ear, gesturing her closer.

“-me, you idiot,” Brienne heard when she leaned in.

“What do you want?”

“I want to know what's going on. Father is furious.”

“Read any interesting blog posts lately?”

Tyrion was quiet for a moment. “Jaime, do you know what you've done?” he asked, and even with the distance Brienne could hear the worry thick in Tyrion's tone.

“It sounds like you do,” Jaime said, his voice tight with barely controlled fury.

There was silence from Tyrion's line before he finally said, “I think we should talk in person.”

“I think we should talk now. Did you know?” Jaime asked and Brienne prayed to every god that was or ever would be that Tyrion hadn't; she wasn't sure Jaime could take one more betrayal.

“No,” Tyrion said immediately. “Not about the gambling, or anything else. But the company...” He was agonizingly quiet again.
“Where are you? Are you at the offices?”

“No, I'm working from home today. I just haven't said it out loud before. It feels disloyal.”

“I didn't know you were still loyal to our father.”

“I'm not. I'm just loyal to the fantasy that we're not all screwed. Lannister Corp is broke, Jaime. It has been for months.”

“How is that possible?”

“It turns out you get your risk-taking from father's side of the family tree, and Cersei inherited his taste for extravagance. Combined they make for poor bedfellows, especially when the sheets are short, or in this case ripped to shreds, if you'll pardon my excruciating metaphor.”

“Why didn't you say anything?”

“I didn't know for sure until White Harbor.”

“That's why you were really there,” Jaime said, sounding disappointed.

“I did want to see you, too. But I came down to confront father away from the offices. I thought he'd be more open to discussing it. He was not, as you can imagine.”

“You could have told me.”

Tyrion sighed into the phone, the line crackling again. “I could have but you were having an incredible season and I saw no reason to mess it up. He said he had it all under control, and even though every statement I saw suggested otherwise, appearances agreed with him.”

“You believed him?”

“For my own sanity, I had to. Ironic, I suppose, that I sided with appearances over reality. But gambling on the sport? I knew he'd be desperate to save the company but I never could have guessed that. What are you going to do next?”

“We're still working that out.”

“I feel like I should be making disaster preparedness plans.”

Jaime smiled a little, and this close Brienne could see the tension in it. “That might not be a bad idea. If you have any critical funds that father can control, now would be the time to secure them. I separated all my accounts from him years ago, but I know you haven't been as lucky.”

“Not lucky, but well-prepared for the day he'd get sick enough of me that he'd finally cut me off. You don't have to worry about me. You might want to tell our sister, though.”

“The less she knows right now the better. She's got distance and protection being a Baratheon, at least. I don't want to drag her in unless we have to.”

“Should have let me change my name to Flash Speedster and join the circus like I wanted to when I was six.”

Jaime snorted, bitter and amused. “Never too late to live your dreams, Flash.”

Brienne heard Tyrion's soft chuckle, so faint she could have easily imagined it. “If you need some
of my proof, I have it stored away in a safe deposit box. I can give that to you if it would help.”

“It might. I'll let you know.”

“Take care of yourself, Jaime. The last two months have been...dramatic for you.”

“I will. You, too, little brother. I love you,” Jaime said gruffly.

There was no response for a few seconds and then Tyrion said in an emotional voice, “Now I'm really worried. Be careful, Jaime.” They hung up and Jaime sighed.

“What do we do now?” Peck asked.

“Now we wait for Baelish to call back.” Jaime wound his right arm around Brienne's waist and laid his head on her broad shoulder as easy as if they'd been doing it for months, as though this one movement wasn't as momentous in its simplicity as summing a mountain. With everyone else's eyes on them, Brienne put her arm around Jaime's back in return and held him close, reveling in the ability to do so. He was warm and solid and she pressed her nose into his hair to breathe in his familiar smell. Her whole body relaxed at the soap and shampoo scent of him, the way his curling hair tickled her chin. It felt like she'd been lost in the dark and now the light had come back to her life.

Sandor rolled his eyes and went to the refrigerator where he pulled out a beer, then opened Jaime's pantry and started rifling around before yanking out a giant bag of potato chips. He took his snacks back to the easy chair and settled in with a loud grunt, then glared at all of them.

“What? I'm just getting comfortable.”

There was a knock at the door and Jaime didn't even lift his head. “That's probably a reporter. No offense, Peck, but you all are aggravatingly relentless.”

“It got us here, didn't it?” he chirped, apparently unbothered.

“Hey! Lannister!” Bronn shouted from outside. “I know you're in there!”

Brienne smiled. “I'll get it.” She kissed the top of Jaime's head, as natural and sustaining as rain to a flower, and then extricated herself from his grasp.

When she opened the front door, Bronn stood there with several huge pizza boxes in his arms, Podrick next to him loaded down with multiple bags of clanking beer bottles and a worried look on his face.

“The cavalry have arrived,” Bronn said with a determined nod.

They ate pizza and drank beer and caught Bronn and Podrick fully up to speed and by the time Pod was sitting shocked and owl-eyed on the couch, his pizza forgotten in his lap, Baelish called back. Jaime and Brienne's phones hadn't stopped ringing in the interim, but they had stopped answering them. This call Jaime took, putting it on speaker immediately.

“That was fast,” Jaime said.

“You were very clear in your timeline, Lannister.” Petyr was on speakerphone as well and Brienne wondered who else was in the room with him.

“And in my demands. So what will you do?”
“The IAF Board of Directors,” Petyr clearly enunciated, and Brienne knew he was absolving himself of personal responsibility by making it a decision of the board and not the president, “has decided to take the following actions in regards to your report: in the clearest matter with the most evidence, Vargo Hoat will be fired and reported to the police for his actions sabotaging your vehicle. Should he go to court, the IAF will be willing to accept a lesser jail time for his uncontested guilty plea.” Jaime glowered at the phone as Petyr pressed on. “In the matter of Martyn Lannister, he will be banned from working for any Formula 1 teams in the future but will be allowed to remain a free man with his uncontested agreement to not speak of the matter further. IAF will withhold Lannister Corp's LST payment and limit them to a single driver for next season, but no other punitive actions will be taken with their uncontested agreement to the same. Everyone with full knowledge of the contents referenced in the blog post on Formula 1 News page will sign a legally binding agreement to not discuss the matter in any detail in perpetuity. If you do not sign this agreement, punitive action will be taken. Finally, we have considered your idea of a female driver and would like to offer Brienne Tarth the role of safety car driver for the coming season.” 

Jaime was coiled and trembling with rage and Brienne couldn't blame him. The IAF had decided to take the path of hiding as much as they could, buying people's silence with half-punishments that would keep everything in a delicate balance no one would be eager to break, and the world would never have to know the extent to which the corruption extended. She wondered if even the rest of the owners would know. And for she and Jaime and the others, only a threat and an offer that was so condescending she could barely swallow it.

“Tell him your thing about shining a light on the darkness,” Peck whispered, but Jaime cut them both off.

“We'll take your terms under consideration and get back to you,” Jaime said sharply, before hanging up without waiting for Petyr's agreement.

“Fuck 'em,” Sandor said from the chair around a mouthful of food. He'd eaten almost an entire pizza on his own.

“I agree with the Hound,” Bronn said.

“So do I,” Jaime agreed, “but what's our next move then?”

“What happens if we post everything?” Brienne asked. “What are we trying to accomplish?”

“We're trying to make sure these criminals get what's coming to them,” Jaime said darkly.

“We need the IAF to do that. We can't take on Lannister Corp on our own, no matter how much evidence we think we have. If we reject all of Petyr's demands and strike out on our own, he'll do anything to protect the money they're all making. I'm not entirely naive,” she said to Bronn's startled face. “The IAF won't do everything we want, but we can't do it by ourselves either.”

“So we don't even try? We take their shit offer?” Jaime asked, disbelieving.

“No. We negotiate and we use what they will give us to leverage more. We have Tyrion's proof about the company being in debt. Peck, have you been able to find out more about that, too?”

“No much. I don't have a lot of banking friends to confirm it, but I've heard enough things in the executive offices, and in the garages. Selling art pieces to the highest bidders, not bringing in a second driver for the last races of the season, even engineers complaining they've been told from higher-up not to make adjustments to Lannister cars but not being given a reason why.” Brienne frowned; she'd heard rumbles of that but had always been too busy focusing on what they would
change to pay much attention to what they couldn't. “Since we know the money Martyn bet with came from the corporation, we have to assume all these things aren't just coincidence, especially if you say Mr. Lannister has proof. There's no reason for them to take that kind of a chance otherwise, is there?”

Jaime shook his head. “There isn't. My father doesn't take risks just to take them, but he will if the Lannister name is in danger. He'd do anything to protect the company's image. Legacy before everything, even family.”

“Losing the LST will likely be a huge blow,” Brienne said. “If they don't do well in the Constructor's Championship next season, they'll lose even more.”

“And if they have one driver, they're sure to do badly,” Jaime said slowly, pulling out onto the track her thoughts were taking. “Only the top four teams get a bonus for the Constructor's Championship. Direwolf and Sunspear are certain to take the top two, and Stag Motors will likely be in third, especially if Lannister Racing only runs one driver.” He pursed his lips, but there was some other idea bubbling in his eyes, a bright, glowing spark that flared when he looked up at Brienne. “So we need someone to take that fourth spot. Keep Lannister Corp out of the running entirely. With no money from the LST or the championship, if we can use Hoat's shadow to drive some sponsors away, Lannister Corp will be forced to declare bankruptcy. We beat them using the only thing they can't deny: the races themselves.”

Brienne nodded. “Who do you think is most likely to do it? Golden Company? Griffin?” she offered, even the taste of it bitter on her tongue.

“You,” Jaime said.

“Me what?”

“You can beat them.” Brienne leaned back into the couch and Jaime shifted towards her, holding his hand and his stump out like he was trying to soothe a nervous animal. “Before you say something foolish like no, just listen to me. If we agree to most of Petyr's terms, then Lannister Corp only runs Lancel. I've driven with the man long enough to know he's good, but he's not better than you. That also leaves a twentieth driver spot open on the field. As a gesture of goodwill, we convince Petyr to give the LST money to whatever constructor we set up for you to run under. You have a car already, we use the money and the offseason to bring it up to speed while I get you trained. You bring us the fourth place constructor position.”

“That's crazy,” Brienne said hoarsely. “I haven't even driven in F3.”

“You've done test driving. You ran plenty of free practices for me.”

Nerves and every reason she would fail coiled tightly in her chest. “That's not the same. There are F2 drivers we could pull in, I'd be jumping the line.”

“Fuck the line. Are any of those F2 drivers women? Any in F3?” Her mouth was too dry to speak so she just shook her head. “You could give girls something to really cheer about instead of a fucking safety driver. You don't think Lyanna Mormont wouldn't yell louder for you than anyone? You don't think you've earned it just from what you've done for me this season?” Brienne's eyes darted to take in the others, and while Peck looked startled, none of them looked disapproving, or like she was mad to even think about it. Pia was positively glowing with excitement. “Brienne,” Jaime said softly, and she yanked her attention back to him, let his gentle, hopeful stare catch her. “If your father had let you keep racing, I know you would have made it all the way to F2, and the bullshit power structure would have stopped you there. You're not jumping the line, you're taking
your rightful place in it.”

The idea burrowed inside her, a reckless and idealistic firework lit and waiting to go off. An idea worthy of Jaime, perhaps, but not her. Not responsible, down-to-earth Brienne Tarth.

“My father will never let me do this.”

“It's not really his decision. It's entirely yours. You can take the safety car if you want, or nothing at all, and we'll figure out another way, but it's right there waiting for you. Take this and shove it down their throats, Brienne: Martyn and Ramsay and Connington and every last one of them. You can keep them from getting away with playing their game by beating them in the place they feel invincible. You were a wrench in my life,” he said, giving her a quick, fierce smile, “now you can do it for the entire sport.”

“But...how...” she gestured helplessly. She didn't even know what she was asking, but Jaime did.

“You've got a great tactical mind and natural instincts and a car. We can get sponsors and a crew. And you have me, and I have money.”

“I can't let you spend all your money on this.”

“The LST will cover a huge chunk of it. It's more than some teams get in a year.” He leaned enough towards her that their knees were touching, and he rested his hand across both, a bridge between them. She stilled a little at his touch, took a breath. “It's your decision, Brienne. If you don't want it, then we take the deal as is and be grateful something came out of this mess. But every person in this room would stand behind you if you wanted more.”

“This is insanity,” she whispered.

“Which means it's just my speed.” His grin was a reckless, curving road, a place to get lost, to find something new she had never even dreamed. “And yours, too.” His voice dropped. “I've seen you take on a storm, Brienne. You handled me, even at my worst. You can do this.”

“I need a minute,” she said. “Just, can I have a minute?”

Jaime pulled back, nodding. “Have as many minutes as you need.”

Brienne excused herself from the room, stepping out onto the small but secluded balcony and pulling the sliding glass door shut behind her, cutting off the faint murmurs of the others as they talked fallback plans. They were a resourceful group; if she didn't want to do it, she knew they would try to find another way, that Jaime wouldn't blame her if all they got out of this was Hoat in jail and the gambling ring quietly shut down.

She would blame herself, of course, but Brienne was no stranger to carrying grief and regret.

The sun was already hovering low and pale on the horizon to her right, long summer days a victim of the oncoming winter. Brienne hugged her arms around herself against the chill wind and considered her future, and her past.

When she was young, a couple years after her mother had died, she and Galladon had ridden their bikes down to the southern coast of Tarth. The summer sky had been the kind of deep blue poets used to describe the feeling of freedom, the road under their wheels shimmering in the heat.

“Where are we going?” Brienne had yelled to her brother racing ahead of her.
“It's a surprise!” his words had floated back.

“Just tell me, I hate surprises!” she'd shouted into the wind. Galladon had thrown his head back with laughter and pushed them on.

He led them to a cliff edge and then hopped off his bike, motioning for her to do the same. “We walk from here,” he'd said, starting down a small crevice carved into the side of the cliff.

“Are you sure about this?”

“Trust me, B, I've done it before.”

She had scrambled after him, even though she was scared, partly because she trusted him and partly because her heart had been singing in excitement at the feel of the pebbles slipping under her feet on the path, her fingers gripped hard into the rock, the water sparkling blue below.

He'd finally stopped about a third of the way down where the path ended in a small plateau. Galladon had strode to the edge, his toes right at the tip, and peered down. Brienne, breathing hard from fear and adrenaline, scooted close but not as close to the drop off.

“What are we doing?” she'd whispered.

“We're jumping off.”

“Gal!” she'd gasped, terrified and thrilled. “We'll die!”

“No we won't,” he'd said, and he'd smiled down at her – not too far down, she'd already started sprouting in height and he was tall, too, but not nearly his full height yet either – and she'd believed in that moment he was invincible, that she was, too, because she was with him. “Will you jump, B?” he'd asked, holding out his hand.

Sometimes she loved her brother and sometimes, like when he ruffled her hair or stole the last dessert or called her knobby-kneed, she hated him, but what never changed was her trust in him. So she'd nodded and they'd taken off their shoes and she'd peered over the edge one more time, her toes pale against the dark, nearly too hot rock.

“How do we get back up?” she'd asked, needing to fully understand the plan as always.

“There's a hidden beach we can swim to that will get us to the road.”

“What if we hit the rocks on the way down?”

“We won't hit the rocks. You can do this, I know you can.”

She'd joined him with their backs pressed to the cliff face behind them, solid and real, and stared out at the line where the sky met the sea. If she ran hard enough, jumped as far as her already long legs would take her, maybe she could touch it, lifted up by her brother's belief in her. Brienne had felt the fear drop away and she'd grinned at Galladon. “Last one to the beach is a rotten fish!” she'd called and then run, jumping off with her brother's delighted laughter falling after.

On the balcony, Brienne turned her face to the wind and felt the stirring of the same fearlessness and elation as that moment when her feet had left the ground that bright summer day. Galladon would have been the first to tell her she could do this, too. This scary, dangerous, wonderful thing that she'd stopped letting herself dream about years ago, just like she'd stopped letting herself believe a man would ever truly love her. Both of those waited for her in Jaime's living room, if she
were just brave enough to accept them.

Brienne opened the door again and every head in the room turned her way. “Call Petyr back,” she said. “Tell him we have modifications to his terms.”

The machine moved quickly after they got off the phone, a text coming in an hour later from Tyrion that Hoat had been arrested and wondering what was going on. Jaime told Tyrion as much as he could. They had agreed to review the agreements Petyr sent over, and Brienne had forwarded them straight to Goodwin, who'd promised to get back to them tomorrow with his recommendation. Jaime didn't want to put the updated terms in danger before they'd even started, so he gave Tyrion information only about Hoat's sabotage, had listened to his brother curse imaginatively and loud for a solid minute before making him swear to let the system do its work. By the time they hung up, Bronn had pulled a bottle of champagne out of Jaime's wine cabinet and was popping the cork with practiced ease. While they drank the first bottle they read the statement put out by IAF that their investigation into Jaime's crash had shown malicious action, and Jaime and Brienne had both turned off their phones as soon as they'd lit up with new calls and texts. That was a problem for tomorrow, and the days after.

It was dark and late by the time the others left, half of them drunk on the celebratory champagne. Jaime had bought it halfway through the season, telling himself it was for New Year's Eve, but in his heart he had wanted to drink it to celebrate the World Championship. Petyr's reluctant agreement to their terms, the idea of Brienne getting to prove herself in the field, were the best possible replacement Jaime could think of.

After he closed the door on Sandor shouldering a sleepy-eyed Podrick, Jaime found Brienne sitting on his couch, her bare feet up on his coffee table, her head leaned back, throat exposed to the air. His heart did a slow roll in his chest seeing her settled so comfortably in his apartment, thinking of the way she'd kissed him earlier. That kiss had been a declaration, a claiming that he was eager to see to its completion, but they had to talk first. There would be no more regrets.

Neither he nor Brienne had had much to drink; just enough on his end to make the stars sparkle a little more pleasantly, enough on hers to make her smile easy when he stood in front of the TV watching her.

“How are you feeling?” he asked, his lips curving in response to hers.

“Scared out of my mind,” she said, laughing softly. “Excited. A little like I might be dreaming.”

“Do you want me to pinch you?”

“No, but you could kiss me.” Her voice was husky and shy, and Jaime felt it shiver up his legs and thighs.

He came around the coffee table and she set her feet on the floor, her legs spreading so he could stand between them. She was just at the height of his waist like this, slouching back against the couch cushion, her blue eyes deep and endless as the night. Brienne tentatively reached out and traced her fingers along the band of his pants and his belly jumped under the brush of her knuckles. She'd looked like the Warrior earlier that day, ready to face down even his father, but she'd been as trembling and nervous as the Maiden the week before, and he wasn't sure which was the truer of her feelings.

“You know I want to kiss you,” he started and she groaned.
“I don’t think I want to hear the rest of that sentence.”

“It’s been an intense couple of days.”

“Yes.” She licked her lips and the need became a pull between them that was like swimming against a riptide. Her fingers unerringly unsnapped the top button of his pants. His cock was already hard against the fabric, but he grabbed her fingers before they could move lower, and, reluctantly, he sat down on the table’s edge with his knees pressed against the couch. “I’m not drunk,” she insisted.

Gods how had he never been able to stop smoking, but he was able to resist kissing her thick, pouting lips now?

*The things I'll do for love, apparently.*

“Brienne, I want nothing more than to take you back to my bed and fuck you until you can’t stand,” he murmured, gratified at how her mouth opened on a gasp, the color on her cheeks darkening. “But your life is about to change in ways you can’t even imagine yet. I’ll be with you no matter what we do here tonight, but...” he brought her hand up and kissed it tenderly. “The hardest part of what happened between us last time was that you regretted it. I can’t do that to either of us again.”

“I won’t,” she said and he wanted to believe her, here with her pale hair spread on his dark couch, her lips red and willing, her legs pressed against his.

This would surely kill him, but better death this way than by heartbreak.

“When we do this, I want it to be both of us knowing everything that comes with it, and not caring. I want you to be more certain than you were on Tarth, because this time I’m not going to let you leave my bed after just a day.” He slid his hand up her thigh and she trembled at his touch, her big body going tense under his palm. Jaime knew being able to bring Brienne pleasure was as satisfying as driving his muscular car around a curve had been, and he allowed himself the briefest fantasy now of dropping to his knees on the floor, tugging her pants down and licking her until she was keening, but when he thought of tomorrow morning, of weeks from now when she would face the media as a new driver, he couldn't stop picturing her worried and wounded face when they attacked her because of him, of what she might do, how she might feel, in response. He pulled his hand safely back to his side.

“I can be brave,” she said and he laughed a little in disbelief that she could believe he didn’t think she was.

“You already are. You waded into the Chief Mechanic job like even I couldn’t stop you. You've faced down my father multiple times already, and you're about to take on a challenge that most men would run from. It's not your bravery I'm worried about, Brienne. It's your heart.” He stood and tugged her up with him. “It’s too precious to treat it recklessly. So you can stay but tonight I’m sleeping on the couch, because I’ve used up every last millimeter of restraint already.” He stepped back around the coffee table, putting much needed distance between them.

Brienne chewed her bottom lip, worrying it as she considered him. “Jaime,” she whispered and it was almost enough to break his last crumbling brick of resistance. But then she looked down and away and it held. “Thank you.”

He swallowed, swallowed again when words were still lodged in his throat. “This isn't the end of it,” he promised, and when she glanced at him, there was determination in the line of her brow, even as she tucked her hair nervously behind her ear.
“Not even close,” she agreed, Maiden and Warrior both as she disappeared into his bedroom. He blew out a long, ragged breath and laid down on the couch. Jaime knew he had done the right thing, felt the certainty settle warm into his body, soothing his jangled and aching need. The hard thing, but the right one. Brienne would realize it too, if she didn't already. The next weeks and months would be a nonstop parade of interviews and work, just to get prepared for the season to come. They'd be spending at least as much time avoiding a frenzied media as they would responding to it. Brienne would have to be focused, and so would he if he was going to help her through it. They couldn't risk ripping apart the tender threads of their hearts because they couldn't wait a few more months. He was down a hand and much of his self-confidence and he would not add to the burden she would have to bear. There was too much at stake, the most important of which was Brienne herself.

And someday...someday she would come to him and he'd never have to push her away again. When that day came, nothing – not his father, not the media, not even the Seven themselves – would keep them apart.

Chapter End Notes

This chapter might not have been posted at all without Brynn's usual amazing beta services but ALSO it-may-be-dull-but-i'm-determined's salvaging of my ragged self-esteem by reading it early and reassuring me that it was honestly all going to be okay. It takes a village, people.

There have actually been a handful of women drivers in F1. Of the women who've raced, they have earned exactly .5 point because the race was called before they were half done.

Also the LST is a real thing that Ferrari gets every year because WHY NOT.
December (Part 1)

Chapter Summary

Brienne had woken up the next morning to find Jaime already gone, off, he said in his note, to his scheduled therapy session in Harrenhal, and she had seen not enough of him since then. It was for the best, she supposed. Every time she did all she could focus on were the way his slim hips moved, the strong lines of his forearms, how sometimes he would catch her watching him and she could see him thinking, too, of what else they could be doing.

Chapter Notes

This feels excessive, but at some point the chapter count will go up a little again I'm just not sure how much. I've got the rest of the story all plotted out, just not sure how much each section is going to need (I hadn't initially intended to split December into two chapters, for instance – or even November or October or September into 3 parts). So when you see the numbers go up, that's why. There is an end, I know what it's going to generally take to get there, I'm just not sure how chapter breaks are going to go.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

The ferry back to Tarth was already playing Crone's Day songs over the tinny speakers. It didn't surprise Brienne; people in the South waited eagerly for December 1 to break out their favorite tunes and decorations. She'd already heard “Lead the Little Children” three times on the trip from her hotel room to now. The North, who still believed in the Old Gods, celebrated the shortest day of the year as the Long Night and were more stoic in their celebrations, but the South wrung every last drop out of the celebration until Crone's Day when they feted the Crone and Her guiding light to get them through the longest night of the year. Though it had become heavily commercialized over much of southern Westeros, on Tarth it always took longer for the old ways to be modernized and most people's observance there tended to focus on the quieter parts of Crone's Day. Brienne was convinced complaining about the commercialization of the holiday was an islander's favorite part. Still, Brienne looked forward to the buildup and annual Crone's Day Feast with her father every year, though this year less than most.

After she had gone alone to Jaime's room two weeks ago she'd been unable to sleep for thinking of him, of how easy it would be to go back out and lay her body on top of his on the couch. They both wanted it and he loved her – an idea that even now set her heart revving at high speed – but for once Jaime had been the patient, rational one and it had been Brienne who'd been taking the curves without care. She'd been so filled with the adrenaline of action, with relief, with the look on his face when she'd kissed him, that it had been remarkably easy to overlook all of the very good reasons they should still take their time. Because he'd been right: once word got out that she was to be the first woman F1 driver in twenty-five years, the media spotlight would be relentless and while Brienne wasn't ashamed of being seen with him, no longer had to worry whether other people could control her fate because of it, what they had become to each other was still too tender
to expose to the rest of the world's cruel judgments. She was still too tender. She'd been living with the silent fear of fallout from Tywin's revenge for too many weeks to just shrug it off like it was nothing now. No, better to get past this initial onslaught and then, when they had found their new routine, when she knew what in the seven hells her new team would even be called or who her crew would be, he would be waiting for her and then there would be nothing that could hold her back from him, not even his good intentions.

Brienne had woken up the next morning to find Jaime already gone, off, he said in his note, to his scheduled therapy session in Harrenhal, and she had seen not enough of him since then. It was for the best, she supposed. Every time she did all she could focus on were the way his slim hips moved, the strong lines of his forearms, how sometimes he would catch her watching him and she could see him thinking, too, of what else they could be doing.

A sweet kind of torture, something she might have even enjoyed if those two weeks hadn't also included the stress of talking to the police about Hoat, the negotiations with Petyr Baelish about how the rest of their agreement would unfold and on what timeline, and the uncomfortable tapdace she had to perform to not tell her father anything until she could see him in person. Brienne was dreading that conversation more than any other, had complained about it at length to Jaime the day she was readying to leave, until he'd gently grabbed her shoulder while she was mid-pace, turned her to face him, and kissed her fast and hard, a shock of lightning across her unsteady bow.

“What-?” she'd gasped.

His eyes were a memory of the storm back on Tarth, but his voice was calm. “Your father loves you, he'll come around.”

“You didn't have to kiss me first to tell me that,” she'd said, flustered, though she wanted so much to kiss him again she could already taste him.

“I didn't have to, but it was quite effective,” he said with a forced grin. His fingers had curled into her skin as though he would pull her closer still.

Kiss me once more, she'd wanted to say. Love me now, because it will be weeks before we see each other again. But she hadn't. Brienne had brushed his hand away and stifled her worries and they'd finished packing up her apartment for the move. She'd be in a hotel that night, and then Sandor would take her to the ferry in the morning. Brienne had had to buy a new piece of carry-on luggage to bring home all the mementos from her time with Jaime, including the lilacs he'd brought months before.

He had seen her to the door of Sandor's car, had brushed his fingers down her arm and made her promise she'd call as soon as she was safely home.

“You could come to Tarth,” she'd offered even though she had sworn she wouldn't. For a moment Jaime's friendly smile had slipped to show her just how difficult the space between them was for him, too.

“I have to get started finding sponsors and crew. Baelish's press conference is in a week, we have to be ready.”

“Of course,” she'd said, and then she'd squeezed his hand and gotten into the car and the worry he'd so briefly kissed away had returned in force.

The ferry docked with a jolt and a thunk and Brienne sighed. She had to tell her father before Petyr's press conference, and she really should tell him before the end of the day. Goodwin had
sworn he would protect what he knew due to attorney-client privilege, and given her father had not called her in a fury over the last two weeks she assumed Goodwin had kept his promise, but she couldn't entirely trust he'd continue to keep it if she put this off much longer.

Her father was waiting for her again and she gave him a small wave, trying to be enthused but mostly just wishing Jaime had come with her. Selwyn hugged her in greeting and took her larger piece of luggage.

“What's all that?” he asked, gesturing at her newer bag.

“Just some things I picked up.”

“Oh, from all the cities you visited? That's nice.”

Brienne winced but just nodded along and they walked silently to his truck. She flushed just looking at the cab, remembering Jaime on top of her, inside her, the way he'd watched her come undone. Brienne had thought their time together had been so short she wouldn't see his memory here, but like staring at the sun and then looking away, being with him had left bright spots she couldn't blink away.

She could feel her dad looking at her as they got into the truck, but she couldn't meet his eyes, afraid he'd see too much.

“Are you hungry? We could stop at House of Fish on the way home.”

“No, let's just get back. I'm tired.”

“I'm sure you are.” Once they were on their way he asked, “You still working details out about the corruption saga? Goodwin won't tell me anything. Says he can't.”

“He's right,” she confirmed. “I asked him not to. I thought I'd talk to you about it myself first.”

“Oh. I see.” Another minute and then: “Do you want to talk about it now?”

“I'd rather wait until we were home.”

“All right then.” He turned on the radio and it washed out the memories of the sounds Jaime had made when he'd been sweaty and shuddering in her arms.

Jaime rubbed his real hand over his prosthetic one while he waited for Samwell to call him in for his appointment. He'd gotten the prosthetic weeks ago, but this was the first time he'd worn it out of his home. It was heavier than he'd remembered having a hand felt like, but that was likely the weight of the base and attachment combined. They were making him a state-of-the-art prosthetic for the new year, something fancy that he would be able to move with electrical impulses, or so they said. Myoelectric controls they'd called it, and it had sounded like science fiction. Brienne had come with him to that appointment at his request and they'd stared at the assortment of new hands available.

“I wonder if I could get a dildo attachment?” he'd murmured when the doctor left them alone to talk and Brienne hadn't recovered until well after they'd left the office.

Gods, he missed her. They'd only said goodbye last night, but they wouldn't see each other again until January once they figured out where the new team was going to set up shop. She should be on the ferry still, but getting near Tarth. He checked the weather on his phone: cool but clear there,
better than Harrenhal where it was pouring buckets outside. Jaime had had to call a rideshare since Sandor had taken Brienne down to Storm’s End to catch the ferry, and the man who had picked him up had complained nonstop about the rain, when he wasn't badly singing along to pop songs Jaime used to like. Jaime just hoped the man wasn't lingering in the area for the return ride home.

“Jaime!” Samwell said from the doorway of his office, “come on in.”

They settled in their chairs and exchanged their usual small talk, yet another routine that was shoring up the new supports in Jaime's life.

“You're wearing your prosthetic today,” Samwell eventually said.

Jaime looked down at it, touched the plastic fingers. “I thought it was worth trying.”

“Why do you think it was worth trying now?”

He shrugged. “I don't know. I guess there was no reason to not do it.”

“What had been the reason not to do it before?”

“I didn't need to.”

Samwell nodded encouragingly. “And now you feel you do need to wear it. Has anything else changed for you recently?”

“No. Well, Brienne went back home, but we knew that was coming.”

“Mm,” Samwell said, folding his hands together on top of his knees. “How do you feel with her gone?”

“Fine,” Jaime said, sharper than usual.

“I can see that.” Jaime shot Samwell a dirty look but the other man just smiled pleasantly. He was always entirely pleasant, no matter how Jaime tried to rile him. It was obnoxious, but it also made Jaime feel more at ease. He wondered if there were anything he could tell Tarly that would throw him off his game.

“I want to talk about Aerys today,” Jaime said, spurred to try it.

“If you want. Go ahead.”

“Tell me what you know about it first.”

“Well, I’m not a Formula 1 fan, but I did do some research on you and I know that you got in an accident on the track with him when you were younger. That you struggled to come back from it for a long time after, and that some have given you a nickname.”

“Kingslayer,” Jaime said, the word like asphalt on his tongue.

“Kingslayer,” Samwell said, except when he said it it sounded like just a word.

“I hit him on purpose,” Jaime said fiercely.

Samwell tilted his head a little. “Why?”

“He deserved it.”
“How did a young man barely turned nineteen determine someone deserved to die?”

“I didn't mean to kill him,” Jaime said hurriedly. He didn't want Samwell to hate him, he just wanted the man to know what he'd been capable of.

“What did you mean to do?”

“To stop him.” Jaime felt like his right-hand fingers were curled and twitching but all he could see was the plastic at rest in his lap.

“From winning?”

“Gods, no,” Jaime said, his head jerking up in offense. “I would never have done that just to win.”

“My apologies,” Samwell said. He sounded sincere and it settled Jaime back in the chair again.

“What were you trying to stop Aerys from doing?”

“Hurting somebody else. He...” Jaime's missing fingers wouldn't stop twitching, no matter how hard he stared at the fake ones and willed them to peace. “I don't want to talk about Aerys anymore.”

“All right.” Samwell sat back, too. “Then let's talk about who Aerys hurt.”

Jaime glanced up at Tarly. “The only one I know for sure is Brandon Stark. He was lucky to survive that burn.”

“That wasn't who I meant.”

“There weren't any other victims that season,” Jaime frowned.

Samwell's face was calm, and kind. “Did you ever consider you were one of Aerys' victims, too?”

Jaime's left hand clenched into a tight fist, and he felt like his right one did too but his prosthetic insisted on lying there, useless. This had been a mistake.

“I was barely even scratched in the accident,” he said hoarsely. He could remember how his steering wheel had jerked out of his hands, the incredible press of the g-forces when he'd come to an abrupt stop with the wall. But no, that had been Harrenhal, hadn't it? “Nothing happened to me,” he insisted.

“I don't think that's true, Kingslayer,” Samwell said, the name still soft, floating, as though it could be picked up by the wind and blown away.

Jaime felt like he might be blown away, like the name had been ripped from him and left behind just a shell in its absence, the outlines of the man he could have been if Aerys had lived. Samwell reached out and put his hand on Jaime's forearm, where the base met his skin, holding him down.

“Have you ever talked to Brandon Stark, Jaime?”

“No,” he managed to say though his throat felt shut tight.

“Perhaps someday you should.” Samwell leaned back again, all gentleness. “Why don't you have a drink of water while I open the window a little. I find the rain soothing, don't you?”

Jaime nodded his head and did as Samwell bid while the rain fell hard outside.

“Is there anything you need right now?” Tarly asked when he'd taken his seat again.
Brienne, Jaime thought. He needed her strength and her warmth and the weight of her heart against his. But what he said was, “I could use a cigarette,” and he laughed a little and Samwell laughed too, and the sound of their laughter in the rain was, for the moment, enough.

Brienne had managed to hold off telling her father anything when they got home, saying she wanted to go take a shower, to unpack so she could feel settled again; he'd kissed her hair and let her go, a puzzled look on his face. She texted Jaime that she'd arrived and still hadn't talked to her dad and she would call him later. He sent back just 'Miss you' and she smiled happily as she pulled out the mementos and set them around her space. By the time she ventured back out for dinner it was dark and late but she still wasn't hungry.

“I'm making spaghetti,” her dad said when she entered the kitchen and took a deep breath of the spice and sauce smells. “I'll just get the pasta cooking and we can eat when it's done.”

She wandered into the living room to look at his so-called Brag Board. He'd added more photos, but there was an unused gap where she guessed he'd been saving space for shots from the races after Harrenhal. Brienne wondered if he'd start a new board when she started driving, or if he'd just throw it away altogether, furious that she was taking such a dangerous chance.

“Everything's ready!” he eventually called from the kitchen, so she joined him at the table and they talked about some of the regulars to the garage while they started on their meal. Halfway through, when it became obvious that her father was holding up the entirety of the conversation on his own, he set down his silverware and looked at her.

“Out with it, short stuff.”

Brienne's instinct was to feign ignorance, but if she was going to be brave enough to take on this challenge, she'd have to be brave enough to face her father, first. “I'm going to be a driver,” she blurted out, not knowing how to come up on it except facing it.

“A driver for what?” her dad asked, frowning over his spaghetti.

“In F1. Part of the agreement we made with IAF was that they would give me the seat Jaime left open.”

Her father took a long drink of the wine he'd opened special for her first night home, downing the entire glass. “You'll be driving for Lannister Corp?”

“No. We're starting our own constructor team, though I'll need the car.”

“My car.”

“Our car.”

“You think I'll just let you do this after that crash of Lannister's? Absolutely not.” Selwyn's tone was heavy steel.

“I wasn't really asking permission, Dad.”

“You were for the car.” He picked up his plate and carried it to the counter even though he still had food. Brienne could not remember a single meal her dad hadn't eaten every last bite of. “My answer is no.”

“I can still drive without it.”
“Not even you can build a brand new F1 car in three months. No car, no driving,” he said as though it were a simple equation with no emotional effects.

“Dad-”

“No, Brienne, I won't give you the keys to hurt or even kill yourself.” He shoved his plate into the sink where it clattered and crashed but didn't break. “Find some other boon from IAF. You won't be getting this one.”

Selwyn strode from the room and up the stairs to his bedroom. He had never been one to get mad even when she and Galladon were much younger and more likely to cause trouble; instead he'd simply sigh heavily and talk more slowly, like he knew his size could intimidate without intending to. For her father, this brief display was more intense than most men yelling. She got up and cleaned up the plates and the food and the mess in the sink, and retreated to her own house to call Jaime.

“Hi, Wrench,” he said after picking up on the second ring.

“How was your session today?”

“It was good. The drivers I had both there and back were terrible, though. Next time, I get the Hound.”

She smiled a little. “Deal.”

“So how about you? How did it go with your dad?”

“Not great. He completely refused to let me use the car.”

“Can he even do that?”

“We've never really talked about who owns the car, so I suppose he can.” She wasn't used to her father being so firmly against her; even when he'd forbidden her from karting he'd redirected her to the mechanic work she grew to love.

“If you really want this, you'll have to fight for it. He loves you, he'll listen if you show him how important it is.”

“I'm afraid,” she admitted.

“Then use my belief in you as your courage,” he said and she felt a warm frisson in her heart. “Give him the night and talk to him again tomorrow.”

“All right.” She heard the clink of something that was probably Jaime opening his fridge.

“What are you wearing?” he asked. “Not something lacy, I hope, when I can't even be there to enjoy it.”

She laughed a little. “Jeans and a button-down flannel. It's pretty cold here.”

“Sounds snugly,” he said and she could almost feel his arms around her.

“What about you?”

“Sweat pants and an old t-shirt, honestly. You're not even gone a day and I've reverted to my laziest
“Is that a therapy question?”

“It is. Is that okay?”

“Yeah, I like it.” It made her feel like every burden didn't have to be hers to bear alone. A new feeling, one that made her feel stronger, which she hadn't expected. “Talking to you is helping,” she said.

“Good.” She could hear his smile. “Then turn on your TV, the next episode of our cooking show is on soon and I want to hear your response when your favorite inevitably goes down in flames.”

The next morning Brienne hesitantly entered her father's kitchen. He was standing at the counter, staring out the window into the backyard, slowly stirring his coffee.

“Good morning, darling,” he said.

She greeted him and poured her own mug of coffee before leaning against the counter near him, watching his face. He looked sadder than she'd seen in years.

“You're going to ask me again, aren't you?” he said.

“Of course I am.”

“Why? You were a mechanic, a race engineer. Why isn't that enough?”

She took a sip of her coffee. “Because I've always wanted more, I just denied it to myself.”

He frowned and finally glanced her way. “You seemed happy.”

“I was happy. I would have been fine working in your garage for the rest of my life. But part of that is because I didn't think there was anything more.” She didn't mean to insult him, but the lines on his face deepened. “You were the one who told me it was my dream and that I should go for it.”

“I didn't think you'd use that against me someday,” he grumbled, starting to thaw.

“Dad,” she said and waited for him to look at her. “You know I wouldn't do something like this unless it really mattered to me. I was always more like you than Gal was. I'm not doing this just for the thrill. I love driving, and I want to see just how good I can be; I want to use this chance to do something good for the sport.”

He exhaled and brushed his huge hand over her head. “It's not safe,” he said.

“It's not. But it's safer than it's ever been. Jaime's accident was...unusual,” she said, not able to tell her father all of it yet.

“He's not forcing you into this, is he?” her dad asked, narrowing his eyes.

Brienne smiled a little. “No, he's not. He's not like you think, Dad. Especially now.”

“Hm,” her father said, and she suspected he was seeing more than she had intended to give away. “I don't think I'll be able to watch any of your races.”

“That's okay. I wouldn't ask that of you.”
“I hate being so afraid. But...sometimes I still see Gal's truck.”

She wrapped her arms around him and he clutched her tight to his side with one arm, kissing the top of her head. He felt strong and solid but it didn't mean he couldn't be scared, too.

“Don't break our car,” he said sternly and she laughed, a watery, choked sound. “Ah, Brienne. You're going to be amazing, I know it already.”

“I'm going to try.”

“You should invite Jaime here for Crone's Day.”

“What?”

“I assume he'll be paying for much of this?”

“Yes. Well, between his money and some money from IAF.”

“Good. I want to talk to him about it, and I think you'd be glad to have him here, too, wouldn't you?”

Brienne untangled herself and knew her cheeks were pink under his knowing stare. “Yes,” she said, “I'd be glad.”

“Make sure you tell him I'll be very disappointed if he doesn't come.” His voice was serious but his eyes were twinkling, and when she laughed this time it was all happiness.

Petyr Baelish held a press conference a week later, announcing that Brienne would be joining F1 as a new driver for an as-yet-unnamed constructor, and they were thrilled to welcome her to the field to show IAF’s commitment to diversity. Jaime had rolled his eyes at that and Brienne, on the phone with him from her house, had snorted derisively.

They'd gotten IAF to agree that she wouldn't have to be there in person for the announcement and though Jaime had tried to talk Brienne into going, she'd looked so nervous he hadn't pushed too hard. When Petyr went on to say that Lannister Corp had graciously agreed to donate their LST bonus in its entirety to the new team, he thought it was best she wasn't there; Brienne would not have been capable of hiding the bitter taste of that falsehood. The weeks of negotiation with IAF had resulted in a few agreements they were struggling to swallow, but if Brienne were going to drive, if they were going to try to bring his father down permanently, they'd have to eat a little shit on the way to do it.

Once Brienne had called with the good news about the car – and the terrifying news about her father wanting him to visit – they'd let Petyr know they were ready to move forward and the last pieces started clicking into place. The media attention after the press conference was instant and overwhelming, even for him, and he was grateful Brienne was back on Tarth. Journalists appeared in front of his building almost overnight with no threats from Lannister Corp anymore to keep them away. Jaime hadn't been in front of cameras since before his accident, and he held his prosthetic hand down and a little behind him as he answered questions, stating firmly his support for Brienne both monetarily and as a believer, and ignoring questions about Hoat and the crash and the gambling ring. When he finally escaped back up to his apartment, everyone was disappointed by the limited answers he'd been able to give.

The crowd would filter their way to the island soon enough, but it was home field advantage for her, and he was certain the islanders wouldn't put up with the media circus the same way
everywhere else in Westeros did. Jaime was almost looking forward to seeing it happen.

He was also grateful that they weren’t together for this first part, which felt strange, but there had been no mention of Jaime’s role during Petyr’s press conference and while ‘eager funder’ was what he was, it would have looked even more unusual to be with her on Tarth when the media first arrived. Jaime missed her constant presence, but the daily phone calls and occasional text messages would have to do.

Besides, Jaime thought, looking up at the snarling Direwolf logo on the building in front of him, he had work still to do here on the mainland.

Brienne had arranged this meeting for him via Arya, and he was absolutely not convinced he was the right person to hold it, but she’d been so sure. “We’re going to be setting up a whole new constructor team, don’t you think it’s a good idea to get some advice on what to do?”

“But from Ned Stark?” he’d asked.

“Well it’s not going to be your father, and the only other person nearly as successful is Martell at Sunspear and I figured you’d want to learn from the best. The Starks aren’t that bad, Jaime, and I think it’s good that they see that you’re not Lannister Corp anymore.”

He was annoyed by how right she was about all of it.

Now that he was here he wished she’d been a little less right, but he took a breath, put on his most confident grin, and strode inside anyway.

“Mr. Lannister,” the woman at the front desk said with a bright smile. “Welcome to Direwolf Racing. I’ll let Ned know you're here.”

Ned? Jaime's father would have fired any receptionist who failed to refer to him as Mr. Lannister.

“He'll be down in a few minutes,” the woman said, “can I get you anything while you wait?”

If Ned were anything like Tywin Lannister, it would be fifteen minutes or more, but Jaime just shook his head. “I'm fine.” He turned his attention to the line of trophies along one wall, the photographs on the other. It was similar to how Lannister Corp showed their history, except many of Direwolf’s photos were of crew and support staff, the thousand small pieces that made the whole engine work. At least one important lesson to takeaway, Jaime knew.

Ned did only take a few minutes. He stepped through a side door looking exactly as he always did: long, serious face; long, serious hair; and gray eyes that were always weighing everything. Jaime had always been found wanting under that stare, but today Ned seemed neutral.

“Jaime Lannister,” he said in his serious voice, before holding out his left hand to shake. “I was sorry to hear about your accident.”

Jaime hesitated for a moment before shaking it. “Thank you for meeting with me.”

“My daughter insisted on it.” He gestured for Jaime to follow him through the main doors. “She's quite fond of that race engineer of yours.”

Jaime grinned. “Most people are.”

Ned took him on a weaving path through the Direwolf spaces, showing off the well-oiled machine his family had built and that he was now responsible for. He pointed out key departments, talked a
little about the way they operated, but he kept Jaime clear of any of the more secretive engineering spaces. Things were quiet now since it was post-season break, but there was still wrap-up work to do and planning had already begun for next season.

Jaime's heart beat dull and sharp at the same time, loss and anticipation swirling together in a confusing mix. This was all so familiar, even in these entirely different spaces. Post-season work had, over the course of his career, been a mixed bag. Especially after Aerys, he'd often spent those weeks berating himself and the team for yet another terrible season, but there'd also been the undercurrent of hope that next year it could be different. This year should have been the best post-season of his life, a celebration of everything they had accomplished, but at least he still had the promise of next season just around the corner. All they needed was office space. And a team. And a name. Jaime sighed. The work ahead of them was overwhelming to consider all at once; he knew they could do it, but it would take every bit they had to give.

He and Ned eventually ended up in a wide corner office bright with winter sunlight streaming through the floor-to-ceiling windows on two sides.

“Have a seat,” Ned said, gesturing to an empty chair. “Do you want anything?”

“No, thanks.” He watched Ned pour himself a glass of something amber and sit down behind his dark wood desk. It didn't have the imposing heft Tywin's did, but it felt like a seat of power nonetheless. Ned Stark may not be as ruthless as Jaime's father, but he was not a soft man, either, and he was prideful in his own way. “You have a solid company here.”

“We've worked hard at it.”

Jaime waited but Ned didn't seem interested in expanding. Robb had apparently gotten his social skills from his mother, not his father.

“I'll get to the point,” Jaime started, “we're starting a new constructor team and we could use some guidance on what all that entails.”

“Your family has their own team, why would you come to me?”

“Of the crew, wasn't it?”

Jaime rubbed his hand on his knee, trying to figure out how to tell Ned enough to convince him without having to lie in order to protect the agreement. “I've never gotten along well with my father, and he would be more worried about our team stealing secrets than actually helping us.”

Ned lifted an eyebrow. “What makes you think we won't feel the same?”

“You're more honorable than that,” Jaime said, shrugging a little. The Direwolf name had been built on the backs of Stark integrity, and Ned was no different in that than his father and his grandfather had been. Robb was following suit from what Jaime could see, which had made the sting of losing to him so often hurt a little less. IAF hadn't accepted Robb's noble gesture on the podium – he was still listed as World Champion and there was no asterisk – but Jaime would never forget it.

“Honor,” Ned said, rolling the word around in his mouth, and Jaime grimaced. Ned had been one of the first to argue for removing Jaime from F1 after Aerys' crash; he'd seemed entirely unwilling
to believe Jaime could be anything but reckless and untrustworthy. Many of the others had followed suit because of Ned's opinion. “My daughter tells me you've discovered some shred of it this season.”

“Never too late to become a better man,” Jaime said lightly, but Ned didn't smile. Instead he picked up his phone and said, “Tell him to come in when he has a minute.”

“That sounds ominous,” Jaime said. He forced himself to relax back in the handcrafted chair.

After a handful of intensely silent seconds, the office door opened and Jaime looked back and felt the blood drain from his face. There was Brandon Stark, his scarred and bald head, his ruined left arm and leg. He hobbled into the room and sat down in a chair near Jaime's, exhaling slowly from the effort.

“Jaime,” Brandon said in greeting. His voice was strong, even though his body still bore so many scars.

“Brandon,” he managed. “It's good to see you.” He meant it; Aerys had made them watch the replay of Brandon's crash enough times that Jaime was sometimes, even now, only half-certain the man had survived.

“I heard you were going to be meeting with my brother here, and I wanted to stop by. Why didn't you ever visit me after my crash? Or Aerys?” he asked.

“I, uh.” Jaime froze, he felt nineteen again and alone against the world. It was only a matter of time until Ned called him Kingslayer and threw him from his office. “We didn't know each other that well. I didn't want to bother you,” he said.

Brandon snorted. He looked so much older than he was, but he was alive. “I wish you had come to see me,” he said. “I would have told you what none of these other cowards ever could: you did the right thing.”

Jaime's mouth dropped open and he heard Ned sigh heavily. “I'm sorry?”

“With Aerys. I remember every second leading up to the crash, I know that was no accident. I've known this entire time. No one would listen to me, though, they all thought I was too traumatized by the fire. I cried when they told me Aerys had died. I was grateful.”

“I didn't mean to kill him,” Jaime stammered, struck half-dumb with shock.

“You did the world a favor anyway,” Brandon said.


“He was no man,” Brandon muttered. “He was a monster.” Then he turned his still-sharp eyes to Jaime. “I wanted to see you to finally tell you. I probably should have tried harder, but we've both been a little busy.”

Jaime smiled, the smallest pull of his lips, and it felt strange and tight on his face. “Just a little.”

“Well,” Brandon said, slapping his hands against the tops of his legs. “Don't let me take up any more of your and Ned's time. I promised I'd make it quick.” He stood, moving slow and finding his balance, and then nodded at Jaime's prosthetic hand. “I hope you don't feel like that's some sort of karmic punishment. Was a damn shame you lost it. You reminded me of you again this season, but
better. You might even have beaten Dayne driving like that.”

This time, Jaime's smile was genuine and full. “I would have,” he said. Brandon grinned back at him, and for a moment Jaime was a cocky teenager and Brandon Stark was still a worthy opponent and not the evidence of everything that was worst about Aerys. Then Brandon coughed a little and grimaced in pain and he limped back out the door.

When Jaime turned to look at Ned, the other man had finally finished weighing Jaime according to his complicated and heavy moral scale, and he seemed to have come around to approval. Jaime's first instinct was to kick it away again; he hadn't needed Ned's approval up until now, and he knew he'd deserved it long before this. But Jaime had promised Brienne he would try, and it was refreshing to finally be recognized as an equal even if it was by a man who had been so instrumental in Jaime's distance from the sport. “I can put together some baseline requirements for setting up a new team. You'll have just the one driver, right?”

“Yes. Just Brienne.”

Ned nodded. “The whole thing is already causing a shockwave. It's been so long since a woman even tried to enter a race, and the media focus on the sport is so different now. It's going to be difficult.”

“She can do it.”

“I don't doubt she'll do her best. You'll be at a disadvantage. There's a lot to do to have a car ready, even an existing one, to compete at this level. You'll have to hire a huge amount of people. Find a place to put them. You're sure you can do it? Won't IAF wait a season?”

“We can't wait,” Jaime said. They had talked briefly about it after Brienne had agreed to drive, but all of them had concurred that this would be their only chance to get her in and bring Tywin down. “It has to be now.”

“Then we'll be glad to provide you some guidance to get started. Arya might make our family Long Night gathering unbearable if we don't,” Ned said with a small, wry grin. Jaime wasn't honestly sure he'd ever seen Ned Stark smile at all before.

“Thank you,” Jaime said, sincere. He wondered what he would have said a year ago if someone had told him he'd be working with the head of Direwolf at the end of this year. It would have been entirely unthinkable.

“If you've got time, we can get started now.”

*The wolf and the lion, side-by-side. What a world,* Jaime thought. “I've got nothing but time for this. Let's get to work.”

Chapter End Notes

Shout-out to Brynn for being my Spaghetti Consultant. She wears many hats for this fic.
On Crone's Day Eve, Jaime stood, eager, at the ferry's bow, watching Tarth come into view. Even in the rain the dull gray light couldn't hide the island's natural beauty, but it wasn't the waters or the meadows or the mountains that he was yearning to see.

He was first in line to disembark once the ferry docked, and hurried off the moment they were released, immediately spotting Brienne in the lobby. Jaime lifted his prosthetic hand to get her attention and she broke into a wide, brilliant smile as soon as their eyes met. With muttered apologies to people loitering in his way looking for their loved ones, Jaime navigated through the crowd, dropped his luggage, and wrapped his arms around her as soon as he was in reach.

Brienne yelped and hugged him back, a strong and comforting embrace. Their bodies pressed tight from chest to knees and he buried his face in her neck for a moment, left one tender kiss there under her thin hair.

“I missed you,” she sighed into his ear before pulling away. Reluctantly he did, too. As he picked up his luggage again he noticed a small, birdlike woman with white hair watching them with a happy smile. Jaime winked at her.

“Hi,” he said to Brienne, enjoying the way her smile turned warm, the hint of a blush already playing across the bridge of her nose.
“Hi. Trip was okay?”

“ Took too long,” he said and that brought the color to her cheeks with her pleased smile. “I should have taken one of those prop planes in.”

“There’s not that many flights in and out, you’d have been here the same time anyway. Come on,” she said, leading the way, “I’ll drive you home.”

It had been weeks since they'd seen each other, their longest time apart since they'd first met in January. Every Lannister Jaime knew, even Tyrion, would have made fun of him for how attached he’d grown to Brienne, but it wasn't that he couldn't function without her, he just didn't want to. It wasn't lost on him that his life had expanded after his greatest loss, and he was grateful for reconnecting with Addam, for re-adjusting with Bronn, but nothing could paper over the spaces in his life and his heart that he'd given to Brienne.

“You're wearing your prosthetic,” she noted once they'd gotten going.

He held it up a little, twisting the plastic this way and that. “I've been giving it a try. My new one will be ready next month and my PT said while I'm learning how to use it I should get used to having the weight the rest of the time. Is it okay?”

“It's fine,” she said, seemingly confused by the question. “It's up to you.”

He should have known that she wouldn't care, but he'd been nervous nonetheless. When he'd first started wearing the prosthetic he'd felt more self-conscious about his missing hand than he had since he'd lost it, like the hunk of useless plastic was a billboard drawing attention. There were times even now, when it was the middle of the night and his phantom fingers were twitching, that he wondered if Brienne's care and attention were mostly guilt or pity, that when they were finally ready to take the next step she wouldn't want to be touched by his stump, even if she didn't mind touching it herself. Sitting with her now, her hand reaching out to hold his left one as she drove, he was embarrassed by his own ungenerous assumptions. Jaime pulled her hand up to kiss the top and grinned when her cheeks went patchy red.

“So about my dad,” she said, and Jaime's nerves buzzed. “I didn’t tell him anything about us, but he suspects something.”

“Oh gods is that why he wanted me to come? I’m going to have to go through some terribly outdated father-knows-best interrogation?”

“No,” she said, laughing. “Well, maybe a little. You know how my dad is by now. But I think he just wants to get to know you better.”

“Then I'm definitely in trouble,” Jaime said, only half-joking.

Brienne frowned a little at him but their talk turned to racing preparations, going again through the outline that Ned had helped them build. The Direwolf owner had grown increasingly interested in their progress and had left his phone and door open for whenever they needed to call. By the time they were nearly back to her house, Jaime had temporarily forgotten about Selwyn, though it came rushing back as soon as Brienne parked in the drive. The front door banged open when the headlights turned off and Selwyn came out, as tall and broad as ever, his face a pleasantly welcoming mask.

Jaime glanced at Brienne and she smiled encouragingly.

He got out of the truck and held his left hand out to Selwyn first; Jaime still wasn't comfortable
shaking with the prosthetic.

“Welcome back,” Selwyn said as they shook hands in what seemed to be a non-threatening manner. Jaime's palm was sweatier than it should have been, but Selwyn seemed at ease. “Come on inside. Here,” he grabbed Jaime's luggage and lifted it with easy strength, “I'll get that for you.”

Jaime had wanted to stay at the Lighthouse Inn again but Selwyn had insisted Jaime stay in his guest room. Jaime hadn't been able to decide if that was a “keep your friends close” or “enemies closer” type situation but based on the older man's warm smile, the way he set the luggage down in the room and showed off the small, attached bathroom, it seemed like it was the former.

Selwyn's house was decorated for Crone's Day with real and plastic lanterns, strings of lights, various images of the Crone leading all sorts of people through darkness, and a surprising amount of hand-made seven-pointed stars hung all over. Jaime paused in the hallway to admire a child's drawing of the Crone done in crayon, with incomprehensible squiggles that could have been children following her, and Brienne's name written in careful block letters underneath. He pictured her as a girl from the few photos in Selwyn's house, when she was gap-toothed and freckled and too young to care, and he felt a surge of tender protectiveness. Brienne wouldn't be the woman she was now without what she'd gone through, but he would have spared her gentle heart if he could. He brushed his fingers across her name and hurried down the rest of the stairs when he heard her and Selwyn talking.

Brienne's eyes lit up like bright blue beacons when she saw him, and he knew he must have looked just as happy to see her. Selwyn watched them both curiously.

“Have a good journey?” her father asked in his deep voice.

“Good enough. The waters were calm but that's a chilly wind. Thank you, again, for letting me stay here. I really can get a room at the Inn if it becomes an imposition.”

“Nonsense, Tarths don't let friends stay in hotels,” he said casually. Selwyn went to grab drinks for them while Jaime settled on the couch near Brienne and tried not to grin at her too wide.

They spent a pleasant afternoon talking about the work to be done and some of what Selwyn had been up to, and then when Argella arrived for dinner, Selwyn boomed that the men would be making the meal and he'd ushered Jaime, his nervousness renewed, into the kitchen.

Jaime had never been one for cooking; for much of his life anything that took more than two ingredients had been prepared for him, first by their nanny and then by the personal chefs hired to keep him well-fed and focused. Even once he'd struck out further from the Lannister name, he'd get prepared meals instead of preparing them himself. Jaime might be able to scramble eggs or put a chicken in the oven, but even before he'd lost his hand, chopping and sauteing and whatever-the-hells blanching was were not skills he was confident about, or even had. He glanced down at his hand and hoped Selwyn had not decided to reveal an unexpected mean streak tonight.

“What's for dinner?” Jaime asked, sounding gratifyingly casual to his own ears. It already smelled warm and delicious here, a pleasant mix of buttery fish and vegetables.

“I've been simmering a seafood stew for awhile and I'm going to make some biscuits while you help get a simple salad ready. I've got everything chopped in the fridge, just need you to add it to the bowl and toss it and then use that recipe to get the dressing together.” Selwyn pointed out the ingredients to Jaime. “I know you drivers don't generally concern yourselves with such mundane things as cooking, so I gave you something simple.” Brienne's father shot him a quick, easy smile and Jaime relaxed a little. “If you need any help with measuring things out,” Selwy added, nodding
briefly at Jaime's prosthetic hand, “let me know.”

They started work in silence, Jaime focusing on the task with the same intensity he would bring to a last lap showdown. He was not going to embarrass himself or Brienne by screwing up salad, damn it. When Selwyn spoke up after Jaime had pulled out all the containers and gotten started, Jaime startled, sending salad mix jumping out of the bowl. “I'm glad you could make it down for the feast. I've always tried to fill the house a little on Crone's Day for Brienne. It can get lonely when it's just the two of us.”

Jaime picked up the runaway lettuce leaves and then reached for the small container of apple pieces to dump into the salad bowl. “My family has an enormous get-together every year. A truly obscene amount of food served to an absurd amount of people, most of whom don't like each other very much. They certainly don't like me.” And they'll like me even less this year. “I'm looking forward to trying something cozier.”

“I hope it's not too disappointing.”

“That seems impossible,” Jaime said with a small smile. He'd be with Brienne; how could it be bad?

Selwyn hummed a little. “I was surprised when Brienne said she was going to be driving in F1 next year,” he said.

“So was she at first.” Jaime lifted his head from where he'd been focused at the kitchen island, but didn't turn to look at Selwyn. “She'll be great.”

“I know. But when you came to my shop you were looking for a mechanic, not a driver.”

Jaime glanced down at his prosthetic hand resting casually on the edge of the island. “A lot has changed in the last year.”

“Yes it has.” There was the solid thunk of Selwyn setting his mixing bowl down and they stood there, backs to each other, both not moving for a minute. “I have some money,” Selwyn said. “More than I think even Brienne realizes. If she's really going to do this, I want to be a part of it, even if I don't watch a single race.”

“What did you have in mind?” Jaime asked carefully.

“I've purchased the empty lot next to the garage, and a warehouse a step down from that, and they're starting building on both. I want you to operate here on Tarth. And I want Brienne to drive under the name Evenstar Racing.” They turned to face each other at the same time, Selwyn all casual challenge.

“Have you asked her about any of this?”

“We haven't talked about it much at all. Brienne, like every islander, has an independent streak as big as Tarth. I'm proud of her for that, but sometimes she gets a little...”

“Stubborn,” Jaime supplied and they shared an understanding look.

“That would be a fair description, yes. I was hoping if I got you on my side, we might be able to present a united front when I take the idea to her. I suspect she'll look to you for your opinion on it.”

“What do you want in exchange?”
Selwyn frowned. “I'm giving the money freely. I just want to invest, nothing more. I wasn't lying when I told you before, that life isn't for me anymore.”

He seemed sincere, but Jaime's entire experience suggested it wouldn't be that easy. It was never that easy when money was involved. “That's a lot of money to not take a part. Why would you be willing to do that?”

Selwyn leaned back against the counter and folded his enormous arms over his chest. “We've got distance here from the hubbub of the media and the potential in-fighting. I can't protect her when she's racing, but I can give her a safe place to return to.”

Jaime considered having the offices here on Tarth. Every race week would require an extra day of travel to ship the car, but they would only have one racing team instead of two, which would help. And whatever Selwyn spent on getting the spaces together was money Jaime could spend instead on crew and engineers and materials for testing and replacement during the year. He wasn't convinced Selwyn would be a silent investor, but he was fairly sure he wouldn't want to be more than the official Owner. It would mostly be a glory role for their small company, shaking hands and receiving trophies if they earned any. The team principal would do most of the management work, a role Jaime suspected he was going to end up responsible for, though he was ready to step in as Brienne's race engineer if she wanted him.

“What if I say no?”

“Then I'll try to convince Brienne anyway.”

Jaime tilted his head, examining Selwyn's face. “You don't like to lose, do you?”

“Not when it comes to the people I love.”

“I'm going to suggest we get a clear contract of what you'll provide and when, and what your role will be.”

“That's fair,” Selwyn said.

“And if Brienne doesn't agree, we don't do it.”

“Deal.” He turned back to his biscuit preparation.

“You must have a lot more money than you let on,” Jaime said, and Selwyn shrugged his mountainous shoulders.

“I never saw need to do much with it. Gave some away, stored some of it for emergencies. Money causes problems, as you are aware.”

Jaime let that dig at his family slide; it was true, anyway. “And Brienne doesn't know?”

“Not exactly.”

“Why not?”

“She doesn't need the stress. I just wanted her to have a safe life. A simple life.” The grief of all the things he'd lost was heavy in Selwyn's voice.

“Then why in the seven hells did you let her come with me?” Jaime muttered.

Selwyn turned his profile towards Jaime. “Because you were the only one who didn't look at her
like she was a freak.” Jaime swallowed hard around the sudden tightness in his chest. “And now,” Selwyn went on, “you look at her like she's perfect.”

“Well,” Jaime said roughly, “that's because she is.”

Selwyn's beard twitched with his smile and he turned back to his food. Jaime took a quiet breath and turned back to his as well. He was about halfway through the dressing when Selwyn spoke up again.

“You love her,” he said and Jaime dropped his measuring spoon.

“I. Uh.” Was this a trap, like the wrist had been?

“I'm not completely daft,” Selwyn said. In one big step he was at Jaime's side, helping him clean up the small mess he'd made. “You two aren't exactly subtle when you're in a room together.” Jaime blinked down at the island counter feeling like a rabbit frozen before a wolf. “Goodness, boy, calm down, it's just an observation.”

Boy. That made Jaime snort. He hadn't been a boy for a very long time.

“So why haven't you asked my daughter out yet?”

Jaime choked on his own surprised noise. The man seemed to be enjoying Jaime's sudden disarray. “It's not really a good time,” he finally managed under Selwyn's extremely piercing stare. Jaime had seen similar on Brienne before; she was very much her father's daughter in that way. “With everything that's happened, with what's still to come, it seems like the wrong time to start something new between us.” It was the truth, and though Selwyn looked disappointed by it he just nodded a little.

“Shame to let fear stop you.”

“Fear is a powerful motivator,” Jaime said pointedly.

Selwyn had the grace to look ashamed. “I know that too well. I hope you're making the right choice.”

“We are, for now.” Jaime was swiftly growing uncomfortable with even talking about it without Brienne there, and he craned his head to look into the living room, saw her listening to Argella talking excitedly about something. Seeing her settled his jangling nerves.

“I know she's an adult,” Selwyn said. He was back at the oven, sliding the biscuits in. “She's never been in love before. Not like I loved her mother. She doesn't know how much it will hurt. Everyone thinks a woman that tall, with how she looks, that she's impervious to pain. But she feels all of it more than anyone. You could hurt her in a way no one has before.”

“I won't,” Jaime said firmly. “Not on purpose.”

Selwyn sighed and then turned to consider him. He stared so intently for so long that Jaime wanted to look away, but he couldn't; not when Brienne's heart was on the line. “I trust you,” Selwyn eventually said.

“Thanks,” Jaime said, “but it doesn't matter if you trust me. All that matters is what she thinks.”

Selwyn's eyes narrowed for a fraction of a second and he straightened, tall and broad and filling the kitchen, and Jaime wasn't afraid but he did fleetingly wonder if the Lighthouse Inn would still have
Brienne woke up Crone's Day morning and stared at her ceiling. Her dad and Jaime had served them food, Jaime beaming proudly when she'd complimented the salad, and then they'd dropped the bombshell of her father's proposed investment. Though she'd protested – at length – about using her dad's money, he'd eventually convinced her he had enough of it and a desire to spend it how he wanted, so she relented. Racing under her ancestors' title made her decision feel right in a way she couldn't have imagined when she and Jaime had idly tossed around other team names before. Brienne had hugged her dad and kissed his cheek and then she'd turned to Jaime and kissed him hard on the lips without thinking before she nearly leapt backward again. At least both of them, for once, were blushing red.

Argella had crowed, “I knew it,” in a victorious tone and that had broken the awkwardness. Her father had just watched her with his quiet, knowing stare and she knew they'd probably have a conversation in their future when Jaime had gone.

After the teen had scampered back to her house for the night, Brienne and Jaime and Selwyn had stayed up far too late talking plans, Selwyn showing them what he'd already bought and his suggestions for how to build out the warehouse, and they'd all shuffled off to bed only when Brienne could barely keep her eyes open. It had been strange to retreat to her small house and leave Jaime with her dad, but they'd seemed to be getting along and she was not about to sneak into his room or sneak Jaime into hers. Not yet. No matter how much she lay there now wishing she had.

Now it was Crone's Day and Jaime was one house over, his body probably stretched warm and lazy in the guest bed, his sharp eyes soft with sleep. So close she could imagine she heard his slow breathing, feel his breath tickling her neck.

Brienne shook her head and forced herself to stop thinking about him. She sat up abruptly in bed and stared at the string of multicolored lantern lights glowing outside her window and spent a truly absurd amount of time figuring out what she was going to wear. She ended up with jeans and a warm sweater like always, but at least she was able to get up and get going on the day.

When she entered the kitchen, neither her dad nor Jaime were up yet, so she started the coffee pot and idly twirled a seven-pointed star hanging from the ceiling over the table while she waited. As she poured her first cup, she heard footsteps behind her, too light to be her dad's. Brienne's fingers tightened on her coffee cup before she turned to casually rest her hip against the counter and take in Jaime, bleary-eyed, bedheaded, and looking as entirely kissable as she had imagined he would when she was in her house.

“That smells delicious,” he said, his voice raspy with sleep. He shuffled over and kissed her softly. “You taste delicious,” he added with a smile.

“You're not making this any easier,” she said, but she kissed him again, a soft slide of warm lips, teasing, gentle, both of them wanting more but neither asking for it, until they heard Selwyn's heavy step above them.

Selwyn rounded them up after breakfast and they all climbed into the truck, Brienne in the middle, and left for the morning Crone's Day service at the nearest sept. She and her dad, at least, were what she'd heard bitter septons call 'Holiday Faithful,' but for as non-religious as Brienne generally was in her life, she'd come to appreciate these moments of ceremony, especially when her brother
had died. She had spent a lot of time in the dark of night lying in bed, begging for the Stranger, the Mother, to be merciful with his soul, lighting candles in septs in the hopes they'd light his way.

Brienne had always liked the Crone, that She was older and not as beautiful as the Maiden, that She was wiser and more patient than the Warrior. She liked that the Crone provided light in the darkness, and every lighthouse on Tarth had at least one small symbol of Her somewhere inside, a talisman to keep the lights burning on the darkest nights. She also liked that Crone's Day signified the longest night was here and soon the world would start waking up again, the stormy dark gray skies of winter would once more become the lighter and nurturing rains of spring. That hope had gotten them all through the worst of it and things would soon turn for the better. As Brienne lit her candle after the ceremony, she prayed that the same was true for her and Jaime.

They spent the rest of the day preparing for the feast. Her uncle couldn't make it this year but Goodwin and his wife were coming, as were Argella and her parents, and they were all bringing food to share so Jaime and Brienne cleaned up and prepared the table while Selwyn made a few small sides and smoked huge slabs of pink salmon for hours, Crone's Day songs playing in the background. The domesticity of it was simple and even though she expected him to look bored, whenever Brienne paused to look at Jaime he was always smiling. Her heart was a slow-burning coal in her chest, watching him laugh with her father, furrow his brow as he carefully folded the cloth napkins one-handed. She was struck with a sudden, burning desire to see him again here in the budding spring, on the shores of Tarth in the summer, when the leaves turned orange and red once more in fall, and every season after and she had to stare down at her hands to stop them trembling. They hadn't even officially gotten back together yet; the future was too vast and uncertain to want anything more now. But it didn't stop her from wanting it anyway.

When Argella arrived she and Jaime fist-bumped and then he held out his left hand to shake the hands of her parents, Argilac and Valaena. Argilac was compact and stocky, his dark skin weathered from a lifetime of storms, a fisherman from a family of fishermen, and Valaena was the same, though she had a head for crafty past-times. Neither of them seemed to understand their hi-tech daughter at all, but they were kind, if clueless, and they were good neighbors. They'd brought loaves of oatbread, still warm, and two giant jugs of cider as well. When Brienne introduced Jaime as her friend, Argella just smirked at them but remained quiet. They'd gotten her to agree to keep it covert and thankfully the girl loved a good secret. Brienne suspected it was partly for blackmail purposes, but she didn't mind owing a debt to the teen.

Goodwin and his wife Jeyne showed up shortly after loaded down with a big pot of winter squash soup and the traditional Sept-approved Holiday Buns for dessert. He gave Jaime a thorough looking over once he'd set the pot down, and then a cursory handshake. But by the time they were all holding cups of cider – the adults' with a dash of something extra – the mood was friendly and warm, and it extended through dinner. When the time came for the traditional darkening of the house to light the single lantern, they offered to let Jaime say the prayer to the Crone, but he'd looked so panicked that Goodwin had stepped in to save him.

After the prayer and another hour of quiet conversation about the winter and the upcoming new year, much of it around Brienne's new role, the guests left Jaime, Brienne, and her father sitting around the fire Selwyn had started. Once it was just the three of them, Brienne moved to sit next to Jaime on the couch, and he put his arm between them, his hand pressed against hers while they stared at the dancing flames.

“We should open presents before we all fall asleep,” Selwyn suggested.

“Yes!” Jaime said, standing. “One second.” Brienne watched him disappear, taking the stairs two at a time.
“He's a good man,” Selwyn said and she looked over at her dad. He'd kept that same watchful gaze on her and Jaime for most of the night. She heard Jaime moving around upstairs.

“He is,” she said.

“He wasn't like that before. That's your doing.”

“No,” she said, frowning. “It's entirely his. All I did was believe that he could.”

Jaime came clattering back down the stairs, three packages tucked under his arm, a smile on his face. “I know you didn't get anything for me, but I couldn't resist, especially with your hospitality,” he said, handing the large gift to Selwyn and the small one to Brienne.

Selwyn grunted and pulled out a small wrapped package and handed it to Jaime. “I told you,” her dad said to Jaime's stunned face, “we take care of our friends.”

“Crone's gifts first,” Brienne said, squeezing his knee.

“Right.” He blinked and set a package of warm socks near the lantern. “These are for the Crone when She's walking through the cold.”

Brienne laid a new sweater next to the socks. “This is for when She's leading us in the night,” she said softly.

“This,” Selwyn said, putting a couple pair of gloves on top of the sweater, “is for when She's holding the light.”

The offerings would all be donated to the temple the following day and from there passed out to the poor. It was one of Brienne's favorite parts about Crone's Day. They sat quietly for a minute and then Selwyn clapped his hands not-too-loudly.

“Now our turn! Open mine first,” he said, nodding at the two of them. Brienne gestured for Jaime to start and he unwrapped the small package, finding a plain looking box inside. Brienne craned her neck to see what it was as he lifted the lid; her father had been decidedly secretive. On a bed of silk was a twig covered in moss. Jaime opened his mouth, shut it, glanced in confusion at her, and then up at Selwyn who burst into loud, booming laughter. A slow realization stealing over her, Brienne hurriedly opened hers and found an old, ripped up sock, and she started laughing, too.

Galladon used to wrap joke presents every year – once a piece of gum, another time a muddy rock. Brienne had loved the way he'd watch them with an entirely serious face, swearing every single time that he was much too old to do it again this year and then howling with laughter when they made a big show of being upset. After Gal had died, they had stopped that tradition, until now, when her father had decided to bring it back, and it felt like Galladon was with them, sharing their joy.

Still laughing, Selwyn pulled out two boxes he'd hidden on the other side of his recliner. “Here are your real presents,” he said through his mirth. “Old family tradition,” he explained and Jaime's confusion cleared, a warm and happy smile dawning on his face. What Selwyn had really gotten them both were keys to the new warehouse.

“What would have been your gifts if I'd said no?” Brienne asked him, wryly.

“Probably just the old sock.”

She snorted and handed out her presents. “Mine next,” she said. Her dad quickly unwrapped the
package to reveal the new pair of coveralls she'd gotten him.

“Exactly what I wanted,” he beamed.

Jaime started opening his, using his right arm to hold the box in place while he ripped the paper. She was nervous as he did, suddenly regretting making this his gift, but he was already opening the box and he pulled out a headset, looking at her with a curious, confused smile.

“I'm asking you to be my race engineer,” she explained, the words rushing out of her. “I know it's selfish and silly to ask like this. You don't have to say-”

“Yes,” he said, cutting her off. His whole face was shining, as joyful as a young boy. “I would love to be your race engineer. I was hoping you would ask, but I never thought...it's not what I'm known for.”

“You made me a better driver even during free practice. I can't imagine you not being in the cockpit with me.”

“I'm honored,” he said roughly. “This is the perfect gift, thank you.” Brienne bit her lip and nodded, trying to contain her relief. She'd known since she decided to drive that she wanted only him guiding her, but there had been that quiet, persistent voice that worried he wouldn't, that it was too much to ask him to be down at the track every day just because she needed him. It had been foolish to doubt; he hadn't abandoned her yet.

“That leaves mine, I guess,” Jaime said, gesturing with his right hand. “They're not much.”

Selwyn opened his gift and held up the pack of new cleaning cloths for the garage. “They're the good kind!” he said, delighted. Brienne knew he truly was; he'd just been complaining the week before that his were all getting too stained and ripped to be usable much longer. “Thank you, Jaime.”

“Yours is much less nice,” Jaime said to her, grinning.

She rolled her eyes and unwrapped a small box. When she opened it, she gasped. There was a sturdy-looking gold chain and hanging from it was a small sword carved out of a stunning blue sapphire. She gently pulled it out of the box and it seemed to absorb the firelight, becoming the color of the sea on fire. It was simple but somehow the most arresting piece of jewelry she'd ever seen. And now the only piece of jewelry she owned, except for a ring of her mother's that her father had set aside for her. She never wore that because she was always hands-deep in grease and engines, and her mother's fingers had been smaller than her own, it wouldn't have fit well anyway. This would fit her perfectly, the necklace sized to suit her.

“It represents the Warrior,” Jaime explained. “I thought a little extra protection on the track wouldn't go amiss. I had it made for you, look closely.” She did, saw the pommel was shaped like a sun and her initials were carved inside. “I thought with how hard it was just watching Addam drive this might make it a little easier on me,” he said, sheepish. “I guess this is a selfish gift, too.”

“Jaime,” she breathed, taking his hand. “It's beautiful, thank you. I'll wear it every race.”

Selwyn shifted in his chair and she squeezed Jaime's hand and let him go. “Well,” her father said, “this was a lovely day but it's time for this old man to go to bed.” He stood and kissed her on the top of the head. “Good night, kids. Don't do anything I wouldn't do.”

“Dad,” Brienne groaned, flushing red, while Jaime chuckled next to her. As Selwyn's heavy steps disappeared upstairs, the air swirled and crackled around them, charged and heavy with the
intimacy of being alone in the dark. The necklace still lay in her hand and she held it up again to
the light.

“It's really okay?” Jaime asked quietly.

“Yes.” She turned to reassure him but the words died in her throat. He was relaxed back on the
couch, watching her with hooded eyes, the firelight lapping hungrily at the base of his throat visible
in the V of his sweater. Brienne felt like the flames had leapt inside her, a curling desire working
its way from her core to her fingertips, which burned with the need to touch him. She did, gently
dragging a finger down the hollow of his throat and he shivered.

*I will not have sex with Jaime on my father's couch,* she promised herself, though not as forcefully
as she would have thought. But she did manage to lean away from him without touching him more.

“We should still wait,” she said, disappointed. It had been so quiet the last week, and with Jaime
here it made the rest of the world feel even further away. But this was a blip at best. They had
managed to avoid even the most persistent interviewers so far through a little luck and a lot her
dad's size. Eventually even the reporters had wanted to be with their families for Crone's Day and it
had been peaceful since and likely would be until the new year. But as soon as IAF published their
team name and location, she expected it would start up again.

“We should still wait,” he agreed, his voice thick. “Which feels really fucking dumb right now but
I meant what I said before. No regrets next time.”

“Then we better go to bed. Separately,” she added when his mouth curved into a lazy smile.
Brienne stood, his eyes on her as she did. “Thank you for the necklace,” she said, holding it against
her chest. “And for agreeing to be my race engineer. I know you're responsible for hiring the crew,
but this was important to me.”

“I didn't want to make that decision for you. This season is going to be challenging, I won't lie
about that. You need someone you can rely on.”

“That's you,” she said softly. “That will always be you.”

The heat in his gaze banked a little, replaced by a quiet, almost shocked gratitude. “Good night,
Brienne,” he said, and she smiled and clutched the necklace tighter. When she got back to her
home, she put it on and when she slept she dreamt of him.

Brienne hugged Jaime again as they stood in the ferry terminal, the first call for walk-ons
reverberating in the small space. It was the next day and he was already leaving. He'd said he
could only take a couple days, that there was too much left to be done to spend more time than that
on break. She knew it, but somehow she still hadn't believed he would leave so soon.

“My dad would be happy to have you stay until the new year,” she said, felt him vibrate with
laughter in her arms.

“You've both told me that several times,” he gently reminded her. They were tucked into a corner
of the waiting area, holding on tight. The space was fairly empty; most people headed back to the
mainland wouldn't leave for another few days or even until the new year. “Now that we have the
warehouse there's a lot of work to do. I can't find all the crew we need on Tarth.”

“You might,” she mumbled into his neck.

The vibration again, and then she felt him gently kiss her hair. “It will just be two weeks. You and
your dad will get the headquarters set up and then I'll be back with the base crew so we can get your car ready for preseason start.”

“Do you really think you'll find crew?” she asked, the worry that had woken her far too early that morning creeping over her again. Now that each piece became real – the car, the location, the team name – it seemed there were ten new things to worry about. Her current biggest worry was the crew. Tarth was far enough from the mainland that it could be difficult to attract a team, and even more difficult with her as their driver. Jaime might have to pay an obscene amount for the most basic talent. She'd only exchanged brief messages with Pod and Bronn, but the last time they'd seen each other Pod was still working for Sunspear and Bronn was going to retire, finally giving in to Lollys' urging to have him home. At least I'll have Jaime, she thought, though she wished her friends could have joined them.

“I promise I'll take care of it,” Jaime reassured her. “I've done enough crew searches over the years, I know where to go.”

Another call for walk-on passengers echoed over their heads and Brienne sighed and pulled away. Jaime looked like he was trying to convince himself to go as much as she had when she'd first left Tarth in January. He was wearing a long gray peacoat that brought out the soft green of his eyes and she had so much she wanted to tell him she thought her heart would burst. But the dingy lobby of the ferry terminal, while below them the cars finished driving onto the boat, was not the place.

“It will be different when you come back,” she said. When he frowned she added, “Not us. But everything else. It doesn't feel real yet, but it'll be real then. We'll have bungalows full of employees and the media will want to come back. I'll have to start actually facing everyone.”

“We'll get ahead of it,” he promised her. “I'll set something up with Melisandre for the beginning of the year, let the others know they can have their turns and they'll lose them if they show up out of line.”

“Will that work?”

“We can try it.” She felt her breathing start to go shallow and he cupped her cheek in his palm. “Hey, hey,” he said, gentle. “Two weeks,” he promised. “Three max. You'll be so busy you won't even notice I'm gone until I come back and start bugging you again.”

“You did promise once to assign an alternate,” she said, relieved when he grinned instead of looking upset at the reminder of their time together before. Sometimes it seemed like their lives were now divided into Before Crash and After Crash and if it weren't for all it had taken to get them to this point, she would have thought everything before existed only as a dream.

“I will make my annoyance alternate a top priority in the hiring search,” he said solemnly and Brienne laughed and shoved his shoulder.

“Get on the boat,” she ordered. “Bring me my crew!”

“Yes, Captain.” He saluted her with his prosthetic hand and she saw his face go soft and yearning even as he turned away. She was certain it was a mirror of her own as she watched him walk onto the ferry back to King’s Landing, carrying her dreams and her heart with him.
Evenstar Racing: January

Chapter Summary

The garage also had her car, and when Brienne flicked on the lights, she took it in with eager eyes. It was the same as it had been yesterday, and a month ago, and even when she and Jaime had driven it back in August, but it looked different to her anyway, more full of potential than it had ever been before. Brienne hurried over, dropping her wet jacket on a chair as she passed and running her hand over the side of the car.

“Hello, girl,” she said quietly. “I hope you're ready for this.”

The door opened with a loud creak – she mentally made a note to oil the hinges before it ran her nerves ragged during the season – and then Jaime was there and all other thoughts fled. The first thing she noticed was how tired he looked, fresh creases by his eyes and shadows under them, rough stubble across his jaw. He was in jeans and a dark gray hoodie, his hair freshly trimmed but messy from his flight, dark gold from the rain. When he smiled at her, relieved and bright and home, Brienne had never seen anything more beautiful in her life.

Chapter Notes

When I started posting this fic, I had 6-8 chapters in the hopper at all times, at least four to five of which were always ready to go, but in my excitement to share this story with you all, I started posting twice a week, and not writing fast enough to make up for the balance, which means I am down to being one chapter ahead and I've only read it through two times instead of the usual five or six. SO. What this means is that for the immediate future I'm going back to a once a week posting on the weekends (Friday counts!!) until I get a few chapters ahead again or I finish the fic, whichever comes first. (I'm actually doing this because I really don't want to drop to once every two weeks like I said I'd do when I started out, but I've got a lot of non-fic stuff going on in my life in the next few weeks so that may change.) MOSTLY what I want to assure you is: this fic will get finished, even if updates slow down for a few weeks while I get back on top of things. Thank you for your patience and all your support! <3

Opening lyrics also from The Local Strangers' "Gasoline."

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Got a head full of hand me downs  
It's tough to tell what's lost, what's found  
And all I've known is all I know  
And I got you here to tell me so  
I got you

Brienne was already exhausted when she and her dad parked in front of his garage. The lot next
door that he'd purchased only a month ago had been paved and a handful of bungalows set up and their lights glowed warmly, waiting for the new occupants who were due to arrive today.

It had been three weeks since Jaime had left Tarth and today was the first official day of their preseason. It had taken him longer than they'd hoped to find a crew, but he assured her everyone would be there, ready for a rousing beginning-of-the-season speech that she was not prepared to give. The only good part was that Jaime would be there, too. Though his plane wasn't due to land for another fifteen minutes, he would head straight to the new home of Evenstar Racing once it did, and Brienne's insides shimmered with longing to see him. They talked every day now, usually about work but also about his therapy appointments and her annoyance at her father and whatever else crossed their minds. Even with the distance, they were closer than they had ever been, but she felt like nothing would soothe her steadily increasing anxiety the way being held by him would, feeling him solid and real under her hands.

“Big day today,” her dad said as they both climbed out of the truck.

“Yeah.” The bungalows were nondescript, white and tan and boxy. The warehouse in the next lot over that had been converted into a secure, well-stocked garage and engineering space for the car was even more plain except for the thick black letters that spelled out the company name. It didn't even include the logo – that hadn't been designed until a week ago, the name Evenstar with a swooping oval around it that ended in a four-pointed star for the 't.' Preparations for all the buildings had been nonstop and Brienne hadn't had a day off since Jaime had left Tarth. Even with Ned Stark's guidance, the amount of moving pieces to get them just to this point had been almost impossible to keep track of. She hoped with the new crew they could offload some of the work and worry, but she and Jaime were still going to be responsible for most of it.

And then at some point she had to actually start driving.

“You okay, short stuff?”

Brienne conjured up confidence from somewhere she didn't even know. “Yes,” she managed. “Just taking it all in.”

“Excited to meet the new crew?” he asked as they started walking across the lot to the bungalows. There wasn't much space for official parking and they'd decided to save it for the new employees to make them feel welcome. There was coffee inside and Selwyn had two huge boxes of donuts in his arms as well.

“Nervous, mostly,” she admitted. “But also excited.”

“Let Jaime handle whatever you're not comfortable with. Your entire job now is driving.”

It was, but Jaime was also handling every other part, too, and he'd sounded even more tired than she was when they talked last night. He'd been giving select interviews – starting with Peck, of course – in-between everything else he was doing while in King's Landing, had set up the first television interviews with Melisandre for here later in the week, and she knew the constant questions about Hoat's guilty plea, the crash, and his father were wearing on him. She hoped that once he was here she could provide comfort and cover for him as much as he did for her. At least Tywin had seemed to retreat, not answering any media requests and not reaching out to either of them in retaliation. Brienne didn't trust the quiet from him, but she would take it for now.

They unlocked the bungalow doors and started getting everything set up until the air smelled of sugar and caffeine and it all became very real and unexpectedly normal. For how much fancier the Lannister Corp offices were, they had this same fundamental smell and feel, the same nondescript
beige carpet, the same coiled anticipation in the air. They were doing this. *They were doing this.* She felt the first genuine flutter of excitement in her belly.

“I'm going to go get the garage ready,” Brienne said, wanting some time alone before everyone arrived. “Once they're all here and have some food, have everyone head over for introductions.”

“Will do, boss,” her father said, grinning.

She shook her head. “And tell them no donuts in the garage!” she threw over her shoulder on the way out.

It had started to lightly rain, typical for Tarth in January, and she hurried through the gentle drops across the lot. Their garage had lights that had to be manually turned on, a lock that required two keys and no fancy codes to put in, and a weird smell no one had been able to get out, but it also had state-of-the-art HVAC and a row of brand new computer equipment that Argella had helped spec out with extreme glee.

The garage also had her car, and when Brienne flicked on the lights, she took it in with eager eyes. It was the same as it had been yesterday, and a month ago, and even when she and Jaime had driven it back in August, but it looked different to her anyway, more full of potential than it had ever been before. Brienne hurried over, dropping her wet jacket on a chair as she passed and running her hand over the side of the car.

“Hello, girl,” she said quietly. “I hope you're ready for this.”

The door opened with a loud creak – she mentally made a note to oil the hinges before it ran her nerves ragged during the season – and then Jaime was there and all other thoughts fled. The first thing she noticed was how tired he looked, fresh creases by his eyes and shadows under them, rough stubble across his jaw. He was in jeans and a dark gray hoodie, his hair freshly trimmed but messy from his flight, dark gold from the rain. When he smiled at her, relieved and bright and home, Brienne had never seen anything more beautiful in her life.

“Jaime,” she breathed, and they were pulled towards each other, colliding halfway in an embrace that was so tight it hurt. His right arm was steel around her back, his left hand curled into her hair holding her cheek to his.

“Were you talking to your car?” he asked and she laughed in his arms, kissed the tender spot below his ear without thinking. Somehow, impossibly, he pulled her tighter against him and she would have in that moment sunk gladly into his skin.

“I learned from the best,” she said, feeling the rumble of his laughter in her own chest. He kissed her hair and then gently put space between them. When he'd stepped back he looked her over from head to toe while she fidgeted, feeling the blush spread down her neck and chest. Though Jaime wouldn't – she trusted by now he wouldn't – the first voice she always heard was the quiet one saying this time he would laugh at her the way Connington had. But it was getting easier to ignore that voice all the time, and what Jaime did instead was exhale loudly and adjust the slight bulge in his pants with a wry grin.

“How's she doing?” he asked, pointing at the car with his chin.

“The same as last time you saw her. We've spent the entire time getting the spaces ready.”

“I can see that,” he said, looking around the warehouse, examined the long workbench lined with neatly organized tools. “Your doing, I'm sure.”
“The tools,” she agreed. “But my dad has been really helpful, especially with the offices. Did you see them?”

“No. I knew you'd be in here so I came here first.”

She bit back the silly smile that threatened. Gods she had missed him and the easy way he settled in her heart. “You should go see it now, Dad's got donuts and coffee for everyone.” She thought of the crew she soon had to meet and pressed a hand to her nervous stomach. “Did you see other cars in the lot? Do you think they're here?”

“I did and I do.” He shoved his hands in the pockets of his hoodie and smiled at her, a nervous, excited pull of his lips. “Listen, Brienne, before they come over, I-”

The door creaked again and Brienne's heart thudded hard, anticipation and anxiety at war inside her. There were voices chattering, familiar ones, and all her nerves and fear were replaced by a startled delight when Bronn and Podrick ambled through the door.

“Hi, Chief,” Bronn said, grinning at her. “Though I guess you'll have to call me that now.” Next to him, Pod rolled his eyes but he was smiling so wide she thought his face must hurt. Hers did, for the same reason.

“What are you doing here?” she gaped, and then she saw who else had come with them. “Willem? Arya?” The younger woman looked like she'd just slain a dragon, her face was so filled with pride and pleasure.

“Well,” Bronn said, “we heard there was this promising new rookie in F1 and we all wanted to work with her.”

Brienne covered her face with her hands and tried to hold back the tears, the weeks of worry and work making her fragile. She couldn't breathe through the blazing joy that bloomed inside her, so complete and overwhelming her body felt made of it, leaving no room for exhaustion or loneliness or doubt. Jaime put his arm around her shoulders and tugged her close as she pressed her face against his shoulder and choked back a sob.

“I didn't mean to make you cry, Wrench,” he murmured into her hair and then she was laughing, too, and the others were there and she was hugging them hard: Bronn, who gruffly wrapped her up with both arms; Podrick who made her squeal he gripped her so tightly; Arya, who was so much shorter than her they both came away snickering. There were other faces behind them, some men she knew from Jaime's crew and women she didn't know from anywhere, but they were all beaming at her, eager and interested. Her team.

Hovering behind all of them was the imposing form of Sandor Clegane. Brienne marched over to him and hesitated. There was a fifty percent chance he'd kill her if she hugged him, too.

“Lannister mentioned you needed someone to drive the buses and transport trucks once you got to the mainland, that there's some shuttling work to be done here.”

“I thought you didn't like F1?” she asked, peering at him.

“I don't. I like you,” he grumbled, sounding angry for having to say it out loud.

“Sandor-”

“Don't go getting all,” he waved a meaty hand threateningly in front of him. “I'm here for the job.”
“Then you're hired,” she said, smiling.

He rolled his eyes. “For fuck's sake.” But he couldn't quite hide the upward twist of his scarred face.

“I thought you were with Sunspear?” Brienne said, turning to Pod.

Podrick shrugged gamely. “I-I-I wanted t-to be here.”

“And retirement?” she asked Bronn.

“Overrated. Besides,” he gestured to an older woman hiding a little in the back. “Lollys thought she could come work, too. You'll need a good receptionist and she's the best.” Brienne covered her mouth, afraid she'd burst into fresh tears, but Bronn looked so worried she would that Brienne held them back.

“We're happy to have you,” Brienne managed, and Lollys smiled, relieved.

“My internship was done,” Arya jumped in, “and Lannister offered me a lead engineer job before my own family could get their heads on straight. I would've taken this one anyway, but good on him for recognizing greatness and stealing it away from the competition.”

“My one strength,” Jaime said, grinning.

“You're all staying here on Tarth? For the whole year?”

“Lannister helped us find places. Not a lot of choice so we've got some unexpected roommate situations,” Bronn said and Pod and Willem and Sandor all shared a look that made Brienne have to stifle a truly obnoxious laugh, “but we're all settled and ready to work.”

Brienne shook her head, looked around again at the faces that turned her way with no hint of judgment or scorn or disbelief. They had all chosen to be way out here – some of them leaving behind perfectly good positions with teams that could win – and they'd chosen it knowing they were going to work with her. She felt the combined weight and lightness of it balanced in her heart, the knife's edge of her responsibility and joy. Brienne glanced at Jaime and he nodded encouragingly; the team was hers to command. “Well,” she said, “then let's get started.”

That wasn't the last of the people Brienne already knew coming to their aid. Sansa Stark showed up the following afternoon to talk jumpsuit designs and colors. She cooed over the blue of Brienne's car, took lots of pictures, and spent hours taking measurements for everyone on the team. The day after that, Brienne's inter-office intercom buzzed and she answered on speaker, “Yes?”

“Brienne,” Lollys said, “there's a very handsome man here eager to see you.”

Brienne flushed and glanced over at Jaime, who was working at the other desk in their shared office. The space worked for the most part, as long as she didn't spend too much time looking at Jaime. Fortunately they were both so busy that it wasn't often they were in the room together alone. Jaime raised one eyebrow curiously now. “Secret suitor?” he mouthed and she felt her blush deepen.

“What's his name?” she asked Lollys.

“Addam Marbrand. He told me to announce him the other way in case Jaime was there.” Jaime laughed loudly and stood.
“Lollys, please remind him he only has this job by my good graces,” Jaime said, smiling. He gestured for Brienne to follow and they crossed the wet asphalt to greet Addam in the front bungalow that acted as Evenstar Racing's reception.

“Brienne,” Addam said, ignoring Jaime when they stepped inside. He bowed to her and bent over her hand, kissing the knuckles like a charming gentleman of old. “A pleasure to see you again, my lady.”

Jaime groaned and shoved his shoulder while she and Addam grinned at each other. “Not that it’s not good to see you, but what are you doing here? You said you gave him a job?” she asked Jaime.

“A decision I’m already regretting,” Jaime grumbled.

“He’s asked me to help train you for racing. A glorified driving instructor,” he said without rancor.

“Now that I’m your race engineer and team principal, I realized I was going to be too busy with everything else to appropriately help with your training, too,” Jaime explained. “With Addam retired, I thought of him right away. He’s got a great grasp of the critical mechanics and he can share some of the nuances of driving at this level so you don't have to learn on the track.”

“Plus I'm a more patient teacher than some people,” Addam said and Jaime glared at him.

“Jaime's been a huge help to me,” Brienne said, “but I'm looking forward to seeing what I can learn from you, too.”

Addam's glance shifted to Jaime and they shared a look that could only come from long years of friendship. Brienne wondered how much Addam knew about them. The employees of Evenstar Racing seemed to be on a spectrum: some, like Sandor and Bronn, knew everything; others like Podrick and Arya and Lollys had strong suspicions and tended to watch the two of them together like they were waiting for Jaime and Brienne to rip each other's clothes off in the middle of the garage. The rest were seemingly too busy working to care, and for that Brienne was extremely grateful.

“We've got a desk for you,” Jaime said, clapping Addam on the shoulder. “Then we can talk about scheduling and what other grunt work we can put you to.”

“I'm at your service,” Addam said, directing it to Brienne again, and this time Jaime's mouth tightened in a way that suggested he was finding Addam's flirtations genuinely annoying.

That evening when everyone but she and Jaime had left, Brienne pushed back from her desk and rubbed her bleary eyes and caught him watching her. “Thanks for hiring Addam,” she said. “It'll be helpful to have his expertise.”

“Mm,” Jaime grunted, frowning at his laptop.

“He's a sweet guy,” she prodded Jaime a little.

He narrowed his eyes at her. “You think so?”

“He hasn't compared me to a tool once.”

Jaime shut his laptop and folded his arms over his chest. “Sounds boring.”

“Does he know about us?”
“He suspects, but I haven't told him everything. He was there for me, though,” he continued, his tone softening, “that first race after...after.”

After she'd broken his heart. Brienne wanted to walk over there and pour herself into his lap, let them forget about how much her decision had hurt them both, but Jaime sighed and said, “We have our first interview in two days, with Melisandre for her WSN Meet the Team segment.” It was a gentle reminder of the reason the distance remained between them, as imposing as the Wall of myth.

“She's coming here, isn't she?”

“Yes. She jumped at the chance to be the first one to show off our offices.”

“Maybe we should have Addam do that. He could charm her into being kinder, I bet.”

“Brienne,” Jaime said and he sounded sick, her name dragged from his lips, “I hope...I know you don't want to make things more difficult but I hope you'll wait for us.” He couldn't even look at her and she regretted teasing him even a little about Addam. She had not fully appreciated how deeply what she'd done had wounded his surprisingly tender heart, even with the reasons she had done it. From the beginning she had thought he was the hardened warrior and she the soft-hearted maiden, but all this time they had each been both.

The space between them filled with every moment from January to now and Brienne curled her fingers on her desktop. “I'll wait, of course I'll wait,” she promised him quiet and fierce. “It's my doing, I wouldn't keep us apart just to never get started at all.”

“I'm not-” he waved his stump around; he'd taken to removing his prosthetic at night when the day was nearly done and his arm ached. “And Addam is-”

“A nice guy,” she cut in. “And not the man I want.”

His eyes fluttered closed, lashes dark against his unusually pale cheeks. He was the picture of exhaustion and she did get up then, holding his wondering gaze as she came near, standing by his side. She ran her fingers through his already tousled hair and he leaned into her touch.

“You should take tomorrow off,” she said quietly.

“There's too much to do.”

“It'll keep. You need some rest. You want to be at your best for the interview and one of us needs to look good,” she said, aiming for joking and not quite hitting it.

“You look good,” he said, staring up at her, and she believed him. He nuzzled his face into her belly and she wrapped her arms around him, holding him there.

His hair was so soft in her hands and she wrapped her fingers in it, tugged his head back to meet her stare. Jaime's pupils were wide, hungry; his hand was gripped tight on her hip, his stump pressing soft into her thigh.

“You should go home,” he rasped, though his fingers didn't loosen and hers didn't either.

“I know,” she whispered. She didn't want to, she had never wanted anything less than leaving him here, but it was because of her they were waiting and she wouldn't make him be the strong one on top of everything else. Brienne ran her fingers through his hair one last time and then let him go, stepping out of his reach on legs weak with need. “Take tomorrow off,” she ordered, not sure if it
was just for him that she asked it. “I'll see you Friday.”

That night when she was alone in bed she pictured Jaime as she'd left him in their office: hair messy from her hands, his cheeks flushed, his cock swollen in the loose line of his slacks. She touched herself, unsurprised to find she was already wet, her body yearning for release. But even though she cried out as she came hard around her own fingers, there was still an emptiness left behind that had nothing to do with sex.

Jaime texted her Thursday that he was taking her advice and while it was easier to show up knowing she wouldn't have to fight her own heart all day, she found odd spaces where he was missing, like when she went for her third cup of coffee and there was no one to hand her the sugar she always forgot, or after Bronn made some comment about tire selection and she had no one to roll her eyes with. She was also surprised at the number of people who stopped her asking where Jaime was, wanting to be sure he was all right. Not all of them were a surprise: when she told Podrick and Bronn she'd ordered Jaime to take the day off Bronn had nodded in approval.

“He looks like shit,” Bronn had said. “Regular person shit, even, not Lannister shit.”

Arya came into the office around lunch and stared at Jaime's empty desk and said, “Well where the fuck is he then?”

“What?” Brienne asked, blinking. She'd been going over tracks at Addam's request in prep for a run-through on the simulator Jaime had managed to purchase a few days earlier.

“Lannister, I haven't seen him anywhere today.”

“He's taking the day off, he needs a break.”

“How'd you convince him of that? I figured he'd just drop dead first.”

“Interview tomorrow, I told him he needed his beauty rest,” she said, and though her tone was joking she felt a knot in her stomach. She was worried that Tywin's shadow was driving him too hard, even though whether they would take Lannister Corp down or not ultimately relied on her.

“You gonna go home early, too?” Arya asked, sitting down in the one guest chair they could fit in the space.

“No, I've got a packed schedule today.”

Arya picked up Jaime's weird-looking cat mug and stared at the snub-nosed face, wrinkling her own nose like she was trying to match it. Instead of lollipops Jaime kept it full of pens now, his smoking habit finally broken. “When's the last day off you had?” Arya asked casually.

Brienne straightened and gave her a dry look. “I know what you're doing, and it's not the same.”

“No? Didn't you make Lannister take the day off because he's working too hard?”

“Yes, but I'm fine. Besides I took...” she hesitated, and then shrugged. “Well I was off on Crone's Day for sure.”

“That was almost four weeks ago.”

“Jaime's got the harder job tomorrow at the interview,” Brienne explained. “He needs the extra rest to prepare for it.”
“You're right, I'm sure it'll be simple for you, being the first woman driver in F1 in decades and all. Melisandre, that little fluffball of a reporter, she won't have any interest in talking to you when Jaime Lannister is right there.”

“You've been spending too much time with Bronn,” Brienne muttered, and Arya flashed her a bright smile.

“Nah, I've always been like this, you can ask my dad. But I do like him.”

As though she'd summoned him, Bronn poked his head in the office. “There you are,” he said to Arya. “Are you hiding from me?”

“Why would I hide from you? You're the least scary person here.”

“I'm scarier than Podrick,” Bronn protested and Brienne snickered quietly when Arya looked doubtful.

“What do you want anyway?” Arya asked.

“Your wing diagrams are giving me an ulcer. We'll never get those built out in time for preseason.”

“Yes we will.” She set the mug down and stood, stretching her slim frame. “I've got Ygritte on it, she'll get it done.”

Brienne tried to recall which woman that was, remembered she had bright red hair and as dirty a mouth as Bronn. She and one of the other new women, Asha Greyjoy, seemed to be getting on fabulously any time Brienne was in the garage. It had been very strange that first day to let someone other than herself or her dad touch her car, to hand over the care of it to Bronn the same way Jaime had given her control of his. At least she knew and trusted Bronn already; Brienne had only realized in that moment what a leap of faith Jaime had taken by bringing her on.

She didn't know or trust most of the engineering and mechanic crew yet, but they were all there by recommendation of someone she did trust, and that would have to carry them all through until they could build the same rapport she'd had with Jaime's team. In the meantime, she was spending less time in the garage than she'd thought, partly because she had so much else to do, but partly because she was still having trouble watching other people taking her car apart in order to make it better, like watching a doctor perform surgery on a loved one.

Bronn huffed, disbelieving. “Well I still want to go over it. We can't leave Chief up shit creek because you've overestimated your team. We don't have Direwolf capabilities here.” Bronn glanced at Brienne. “No offense.”

“It's the truth,” Brienne said. “We're operating at a disadvantage right from the get-go. But I trust Arya and if Arya trusts her team, then that's good enough for me.”

Arya's normally excellent poker face slipped a little and she looked gratefully at Brienne. “I do trust them. The wing is halfway there already, the changes won't be as much as you think. Come on,” she told Bronn, “I'll walk you through it.”

It was quiet in the office after the door closed behind them, and she wished Jaime was there so they could talk about what had just happened. He was her sounding board and her commiserator and her support; a partner in every sense of the word except the one that had burned them before, the one that the world would judge most harshly.

There was a knock on the door and Brienne glanced at her clock. “Come in,” she said, and Addam
entered as expected.

“Ready to meet?” he asked.

“I've only gotten through Gulltown.”

“That's okay, we're just going to focus on Sunspear today.” He looked at Jaime's empty desk. “He really stayed home today, huh?”

“Everyone's so surprised.”

“You didn't see him in King's Landing,” Addam said. “I didn't see him much either, but every time I did it was like he was trying to be six places at once. He's been happier here, I can tell that even in just the day I've been around.” Addam sat in the chair Arya had vacated and steepled his fingers. “I suspect that's because you're here.”

Brienne felt her cheeks go red and she shrugged. “We can certainly share the work better this way.”

“That's not what I meant.”

“There's nothing going on,” she said, which was technically true, even if only barely.

“Really?”

“I mean we're not...what has Jaime told you?”


Brienne stared down at her hands, drew a circle on her palm with a nervous finger. “What would you think if there was something more going on?”

“I'd think it was about time.”

She looked up and Addam was smiling genially. “You wouldn't think it was a mistake? Or a joke?”

“A joke? Jaime's reputation isn't great but people think of him very differently after last year,” Addam said, frowning.

“Not because of him, because of me. Because I'm...like I am.”

“Brienne,” Addam sighed. “We don't know each other all that well, but I hope you will allow me some unvarnished honesty?”

“Of course.”

“Whatever you seem to think people are going to say about you, they'll say whether you're with Jaime or not. You're a woman jumping feet first into a man's sport. You're big and tall and strong and you don't care about what you're wearing nearly as much as you care that your team is being taken care of. What part of that gets worse if you and Jaime are an item?”

“That the only reason I got this chance was because we were sleeping together. That Jaime must be blind or desperate to be with me,” she said softly. That one, she knew, was going to hurt the most, because there was still that tiny part of her that wondered if it were true.
“The only people who think that last one are those who haven't seen the two of you together. You might not officially be a couple, but Jaime's heart sure thinks you are. And yours, if I may say, seems to feel the same.” She nodded a little. “As for the other,” Addam shrugged. “You don't think people aren't saying that now?”

“If we're together it will just make them seem right.”

“Only until you hit the track, and then you'll show them why you really got this chance. Drivers respect driving, Brienne. You saw that with Jaime this season, and how Robb responded at the end. Jaime wasn't that much less of a dick to him in the cool down room than he'd ever been, but he was driving better, he was winning clean. The drivers that matter? They respect that, and fuck everybody else. Listen,” Addam said, sighing. “I'm not trying to force you into anything you don't want. You seem to have your reasons for whatever is keeping you separated. But every time I see Jaime alone and every time I see Jaime with you, he's a different man. If you feel even half as much for him as he feels for you, I think you should reconsider your reasons for being apart.”

“Even if all the rest of that is true, the media would drag us through the mud, it would be ugly and distracting. I need to focus.”

“How well are you focusing now?” Addam asked gently. Brienne stared hard at her desk. “We should be talking about Sunspear,” he went on. “Not love lives.”

“Sorry,” she mumbled.

Addam lifted one shoulder. “Let's go check out the simulator. See how well you can shut all this away when you have wheels on the road, even virtual ones.”

They worked on her technique for two hours, and although she noticed a considerable improvement with every lap, Addam having to remind her less and less about when the optimal braking point was and which gear she should be in for which section, she couldn't deny that Jaime hovered just on the edge of her thoughts the entire time.

Sandor dropped Jaime, Willem, and Podrick off at the offices early on Friday and Jaime escaped from the roommates' bickering as quickly as he could. The three men were fine separately, but together they seemed to have a perfectly calamitous mix of traits that made living together unbearable.

“It was your turn to do dishes,” Willem grumbled to Podrick as they escaped the sedan with Jaime.

“N-n-no,” Pod protested. “It w-was the Hound's!”

Sandor unfolded himself from the car and glared at both of them. “I did them night before last when you two numbnuts fell asleep watching that terrible movie.”

Willem gasped in offense and Jaime hurried for the bungalow that acted as their reception before he had to listen to the other man's full-throated defense of something that was assuredly terrible. The only bad thing Willem had never defended was his brother. It was the reason Jaime had hired him for Brienne's crew; when his brother had done something horrible Willem had chosen his morals over his family and that was a man that could be trusted with Brienne's life. Which essentially was what Jaime had kept in mind with each person he hired: did he trust that if Tywin tried to turn this person against them, they would hold their ground and stand with Brienne? It had made finding crew intensely difficult, but Jaime felt good about those that would be most closely attached to the car, and the cadre of engineers that he'd mostly left in Arya's hands to source
weren't allowed unsupervised contact anyway. It was the best Jaime could do, though he still woke up some nights in a cold sweat, having dreamed of Brienne's car flipping end over end the same way Aerys' had.

Every time he woke up from those dreams he grabbed his phone and read through the last messages she'd sent him, no matter how inconsequential they were. They reminded him that the fears weren't real, that she was safe from his father, and that Jaime could still protect her. His missing hand always ached in those moments, a persistent reminder that there were few lengths his father wouldn't go to, that Jaime would have to be vigilant all season. He suspected Tywin's lack of any response so far – even his persistent “no comment” to every inquiry about Brienne and Evenstar Racing, the constructor Lannister Corp had supposedly charitably funded – was mostly because he didn't realize the secondary purpose behind Brienne's entry to the field. Surely if he'd known their intentions, he would have already tried to disrupt them.

Jaime intended to hold onto that secret as long as he could, which meant he'd have to be careful around Melisandre today. The day off had done him good; he'd wanted to open his laptop and catch up on emails, but when he didn't wake up until after nine am without an alarm and he still felt exhausted, he decided to honor the intent of the day. He'd done little of value in the small apartment he was renting for the year, mostly watching bad movies on cable and napping on the couch, and he felt refreshed and eager to be back at work, which he hadn't felt since he'd left Tarth after Crone's Day.

“Good morning, Jaime,” Lollys said cheerfully when he entered, her brown eyes alight. She had a warm, round face, and she seemed to be in an unrelentingly good mood at all times. She would have to be, to have been married to Bronn all those years. “Melisandre's team called and they're just a few minutes out. I let Brienne know, too.”

The door opened again and Brienne stepped in and Jaime's heart beat double, the way it did every time he saw her after even the shortest of time away, like his love was a fresh discovery. She smiled when she saw him, a shy, sweet curl of her lips that he'd never seen her give anyone else. It didn't help his heart slow at all.

“You look better,” she said in greeting.

“You look incredible,” he said, and she flushed red. She did, though, in a fitted deep blue men's button-up shirt and loose black suit pants that flowed down her endless legs. Brienne even had a pair of matching blue low-heeled shoes that he could see the pale white of the top of her feet in.

“Sansa picked it out for me,” she said. “She agreed to help me with my style this season since I'll be in the spotlight more.”

“Well gods bless Sansa,” he murmured before realizing Lollys was staring at them with raised eyebrows and a knowing smile. Jaime found a casual grin and shrugged. “At least you're not wearing the blue jumpsuit for a third time.”

She snorted and was about to retort when the door opened again and Melisandre entered and she instead turned a polite smile to the journalist. “Melisandre, welcome to Evenstar Racing.”

“Thank you,” Melisandre said, shaking her hand and then turning to Jaime and shaking his, too. “And thank you for letting me be the first interview.”

“Second,” Jaime reminded her. “She did that online piece with Peck.”

“Ah, yes, Peckledon. He's getting quite a few interesting interviews these days. I suppose that's
what happens when you've got friends in high places.”

“Peck did an incredible amount of research to break the news about the gambling ring within F1,” Jaime bristled. “People respect the work.”

“I'd love to talk to you about that more, if you hadn't explicitly made it a forbidden topic today.”

“It doesn't have anything to do with Brienne and the team, why would we talk about it?”

Melisandre smiled, but it wasn't friendly. “It's not nice to start an interview with a lie, Jaime. Lannister Corp just happened to donate their LST payment in its entirety to a competitor? And now refuses to talk about it?”

“My father's new year's resolution was to be more humble,” Jaime said airily. “Besides, the publicity from helping fund one of the first viable women drivers in decades is its own reward.”

“Why isn't she driving on his team, then? He's got a free spot with you gone.” She glanced at Jaime's prosthetic and he resisted hiding it behind his back.

“A mild punishment for not vetting their employees better, as IAF has explained multiple times already.” IAF had gone out of their way to hide the extent of his family's role in both the gambling ring and the crash, laying the gambling at Martyn's feet as a lone actor, and Vargo Hoat as his hired gun sent to ruin Jaime's chances. Lannister Corp's bankruptcy, Tywin's role, those were still closely-guarded secrets and the other reason Tywin may not have struck against them yet. They were in a carefully balanced detente, Jaime and Brienne holding information that could ruin Lannister Corp, Tywin holding the power to bring down Evenstar Racing. Jaime just hoped his father's pride and anger held out for the season.

Melisandre didn't look convinced but she let it drop. “Why don't you take me on a tour of your spaces and we can figure out where to do the interview.”

In the end they decided to do it in the garage, which had enough space for the lighting, camera crew, Brienne, Jaime, and Melisandre, and also was admittedly the nicest part of their small campus. The most money had gone into the warehouse to ready it for the work that needed to happen, and although the engineers and mechanics grumbled about the break they were going to have to take thanks to needing to cover all the computer screens and the car, they didn't grumble as loudly when Brienne told them to take the day off for an early weekend. Even with the free day, many of them hung around crowded into a corner of the garage to watch as Melisandre kicked off the interview.

“Welcome to WSN's Meet the Team, I'm Melisandre van Houten and I have the privilege of being the first reporter to sit down for an onscreen interview with the brand new Formula 1 constructor team, Evenstar Racing. Joining me are Jaime Lannister, former Formula 1 driver and Evenstar Racing's Team Principal and race engineer for my other guest, Brienne Tarth.” She turned to look at them both. “Thank you both for sitting down with me today, we have a lot to talk about. Brienne,” she started, “you are the first woman driver even attempting to qualify in twenty-five years, and a woman hasn't actually been on the track at race time for forty years. How are you feeling?”

“Excited,” Brienne said, her hands folded together on her lap. “It's a tremendous opportunity and I'm anxious to get out on the track for the first qualifying session.”

“You're in this position through a truly remarkable set of circumstances. First hired as a Chief Mechanic by Jaime Lannister, then promoted to his Race Engineer, and also allowed to do test
driving for the team. We talked a bit last year when we did this for Lannister Corp about why Jaime picked you to be his mechanic, but can you talk about your journey from that point to now?”

Brienne glanced at him and he nodded a little, encouraging her. He knew she could do it and he wanted her to get comfortable with telling her story; it was something they'd practiced in anticipation of her needing to tell it over and over again through the season. He saw her take a breath and then she laid it out as they'd rehearsed.

“As you remember, Lancel got very sick the first day of preseason testing and he wasn't able to do his runs and we needed the information. Lannister Corp is notorious for not using test drivers and I had some test driving experience and so I was lucky to be in a position to help everyone out. Fortunately I didn't crash the car and they allowed me to continue testing off and on through the season.”

“It helped us,” Jaime jumped in. “Her being able to have that direct knowledge of the vehicle allowed her to give me better advice as my race engineer.”

Brienne smiled a little. “It was helpful even as Chief Mechanic, to actually feel how the adjustments affected the car. It gave me a much more visceral sense of what was and wasn't working and why.”

“But you didn't stay Chief Mechanic,” Melisandre cut in.

“No, Jaime needed a race engineer.”

“Because no one else would work with him.” Melisandre directed that one to Jaime and the pain of it felt dulled with time and everything else he’d been through since then.

“Frankly I'm surprised she worked with me,” Jaime said, grinning a little. “I suppose she still didn't know me well enough by then to know what an incredible pain in the ass I'd be.”

“Is that why you didn't make Bronn Blackwater your race engineer?”

He shook his head. “I picked Brienne because I knew she'd be great at it. She has a tremendous tactical sense of how to approach a race, she's an incredibly hard worker, and she always keeps a calm head in the middle of chaos. I think my season proved my assessment of her correct, and those skills will help her as a driver this season.”

Jaime knew she was probably blushing a little at his praise, but he didn't risk looking at her to see. Melisandre watched him with a considering stare. “How was the decision made to set up a brand new constructor team for Brienne to race?”

He glanced at Brienne and she nodded, indicating he should answer. “Petyr Baelish and the IAF have been interested for awhile in expanding Formula 1 to all sorts of drivers,” he lied smoothly. “With Lannister Corp being unable to run a second driver this year due to the gambling scandal-” he smirked internally, knowing Petyr would have a fit that he'd used that word when they'd wanted him to call it an incident instead – “there was space but teams can only field two drivers a season at most. We were in the position that Brienne already had an F1-ready car and I had money and the will to help her achieve this.”

“Why her, though?” Melisandre pressed and Jaime straightened in his chair.

“Why not?” he asked seriously, but he saw the brief annoyed frown on her face before she turned her question to Brienne.
“What do you think you bring that other women don't?”

“I-” Brienne started and then stopped, uncertainty all over her face. “ Luck, mostly,” she said. “Being in the right place at the right time.”

“You don't think you have exceptional skills?”

“I think I am very good at some things and not as good at others, just like anyone, man or woman.”

“I think you're underselling yourself,” Jaime cut in unable to keep quiet another second. “I couldn't have picked just any woman with mechanic experience and still ended up here.” He searched her eyes, needing to see her belief in the deep-sea blue. “You're a remarkable person, Brienne.”

Her cheeks went pink and then swiftly red and she looked down at her hands. “Well you have to think that, you're my race engineer,” she said lightly. When she looked up again she refused to meet his gaze, staring straight at Melisandre. “I think what I do bring is Formula 1 experience. I've been in the pit, I've been in the garages, I've even been behind the wheel. What I would love is if my work opens up the door to other women to get their chance. Imagine if the field became even a quarter women someday, let alone half.”

“Or all?” Melisandre asked.

“Even better,” Brienne said, smiling a little.

“Then it would just be a women's league, wouldn't it?”

Jaime was glad he was watching Brienne when Melisandre asked that, because he got to see the transformation of Brienne's features from polite and humble to the stubborn warrior woman he loved so much. “Just a woman's league?” she asked, offense thick in her tone. “It's still racing. It's still the same sport, only the driver composition would be different. You don't call the league now just a men's league, do you?” She didn't wait for Melisandre to answer. “Why do people think that because women are doing it it somehow becomes less important or exciting than when men do it? We are still competing at the highest level of our sport, pressing our bodies to their limits and beyond. The rules are the same, the skills required are the same. And yet when it's women doing it, it's just the women's league. Seems like a double-standard to me. You're in a position to change that double-standard and yet you feed into it. I'm disappointed you'd even ask the question.”

Melisandre sat back in her chair, clearly thrown off, and Jaime heard Arya, Ygritte, and the others whooping off-camera.

“Perhaps we should take a quick break,” Melisandre said, motioning to her producer and standing quickly.

Brienne bit down on her lip and looked nervous, as though she'd done something she shouldn't, and Jaime glanced at Melisandre's disappearing back before briefly reaching out to brush Brienne's hand. “That was the perfect answer,” he assured her just before Arya came bounding up.

“Holy fuck!” Arya said gleefully, holding up her hand for a high-five. “Do you know how long I've wanted someone to say that?”

Brienne laughed and high-fived her, her palm a solid wall absorbing Arya's ferocious slap. “We'll be lucky if she doesn't cut the whole thing.”

“At least you said it. Now maybe she'll stop asking those types of questions in the future.”

Jaime huffed. “It was only the truth,” he insisted, and she looked so startled he wondered how she couldn't see all that she truly was even now. For a woman who took up so much physical space with her marvelous body, she still seemed to think she deserved so little of it. He wished he could take her hands, kiss her hard and somehow let his feelings for her convince her of the truth. But all he could do was stare desperately and try to will his confidence and belief her way, hope that it all translated through his eyes. Her cheeks warmed again and there was the smile he thought of as his, and he hoped it had worked.

Bronn wandered over, tapping him on the shoulder and leaning closer to his ear. “If you're trying to convince people you're not in love with her, you're doing a shit job,” he whispered.

Jaime glanced at Brienne but she was engaged with Ygritte and Asha now. “I don't care if people think that,” Jaime said softly. “They just have to know she deserves to be here regardless of how I feel.”

“Including her,” Bronn said.

Jaime watched her chatting with the women, and he nodded. “Especially her. Everyone will see once she's on the track. That will change everything.”

When Melisandre returned she was composed and smiling again, and the rest of the interview followed along more familiar lines, her questions hovering into standard territory for any new driver – what are you most excited about? Who do you most want to race against? Have you chosen your number yet? – with a few that were tailored for Brienne as a woman but much less antagonizing. Jaime sat quietly through most of it, happy to watch her handle the questions with growing ease, to slowly unfold and reveal a little more of the intelligence and humor he'd become familiar with during their many months side-by-side. By the end of the season, he was certain everyone would love her almost as much as he did, or at least be on their way.

“For our final question,” Melisandre said, “what would you say to a young woman who may be watching this interview, hoping to someday be in Formula 1 herself, whether as a mechanic, an engineer, or a driver?”

Brienne pursed her lips, considering the question seriously in silence for a few seconds. Jaime glanced at the small crowd of their team, saw they were all intent and quiet as they waited.

“I would say,” she started, her voice tentative, “that the road may often be difficult, even with people who have started clearing it ahead of you. And sometimes you will want to give up or you will want to cry or scream or sit in a dark room and watch television for twenty hours straight.”

Melisandre chuckled. “Those feelings are okay, but the one thing you must never do is quit. If you want it bad enough, it can be yours, you just have to believe in yourself and,” Brienne's eyes flickered towards Jaime, so briefly he would have missed it if he hadn't been watching her so intently, “find at least one person who believes in you even more for those times when you can't do it on your own. One person can change your life.”

“Wonderful,” Melisandre said, smiling happily. “Thank you both for your time, and I sincerely wish you the best this season. I look forward to watching you.” Jaime believed her that time, and it helped him manage a friendly smile through the admiration and love surging through him like a warm river.

The director cut the cameras and he and Brienne shook Melisandre's hand before Bronn and
Addam came over, directing her and the rest of the team away so Jaime and Brienne could be alone in the crowd for a moment. From across the smallest, impossible distance, he leaned towards her.

“I mean it,” she said softly before he could speak. “I see all the things you do for me, Jaime. The things I'm not even sure you're aware of, because they come so naturally to you. I couldn't do this without you.”

“You could.”

“No,” she said, her mouth curving, gentle and sure. “I wouldn't have even considered it possible. You make me believe in impossible things, Jaime Lannister.”

Unable to resist, to stand so near and not touch her at all, Jaime took Brienne's hand in his and her fingers linked eagerly with his own and their palms pressed hard against each other as they squeezed. Addam coughed a few steps away and Jaime let her go, but he felt her hand in his, her words in his heart, as much as any phantom movement of his missing hand, twice as real and not painful at all.

Chapter End Notes

If any one chapter fully embodies my own personal wish fulfillment, it is this one.
February (Part 1)

Chapter Summary

“I've been thinking a lot about us,” she said, matching his softness with her own. “About what it would mean if we stopped waiting.”

He let out a slow, shuddering breath. “That's a step I can't come back from.”

“I know. But what if I've been worried about nothing this whole time?”

Jaime shook his head. “It only feels like nothing because no one suspects. Don't make up your mind until after the first race. Gossip sites aren't the same as being there in person with drivers and engineers and cameras in your face, with the stress from being on the track.”

Brienne sighed and nodded. “After Sunspear,” she agreed, unconvinced, and the rain dripping on her skin felt like his fingertips.

Chapter Notes

This chapter would not exist without BrynnMcK, the light in my darkest writer moments. <3

The WSN interview was scheduled to air the first Sunday in February, last in the series, though parts of it were teased through every other team's interviews until the fever pitch of anticipation was so high that Argella reported watch parties were being scheduled through social media. Calls and requests to talk with other reporters came in daily, but Jaime's threat that if anyone showed up onsite they wouldn't get any time seemed to be holding them off, and in the agreement they made with Melisandre, other interviews were being scheduled for after the WSN piece.

It worked to their benefit, Brienne knew, buying them space and focus to get done as much of the work they needed as possible. They weren't just building a car, they were building a company, and Selwyn slowly got more and more involved just out of necessity, her uncle Endrew roped in to work full-time at her father's garage. Even Goodwin joined the effort, becoming their official legal review team of one. She and Jaime had talked about getting Tyrion involved, but he'd insisted on staying at Lannister Corp as a friendly insider.

A new employee would show up every day it seemed, always with a connection to someone already on the team. Jojen Reed came to be their accountant in late January, recommended by Arya's brother, Bran; and Shireen Baratheon showed up on their doorstep shortly after thanks to a direct recommendation by Renly, nervous but hopeful and ready to be in charge of scheduling travel. The team was on the whole quite young, Brienne couldn't help noticing as she walked through rain or sun each day to get to her office and the training area and the garage. The youthful energy kept spirits high and meant most people were ready and willing to work the long hours, but
sometimes it made her feel even older than Jaime. She told him that when they were sitting in the office with Addam, who had come in to discuss the track at Myr.

“What do you mean even older than me?” Jaime asked, squinting at her. “I'm not old.”

Brienne ignored Addam's derisive snort. “You're not old, but you're older than me.”

“No _that_ much older,” he protested. “Seven years.”

She shot him a dry look. “Eight.”

“That doesn't count, your birthday was less than a month ago.” He had been in King's Landing still but he'd called her and sung 'happy birthday' over the phone and the next day a limited edition Direwolf racing poster had arrived signed by Brandon Stark himself. Brienne had hung it up next to her dad's brag board.

“In July it will be nine,” Addam said cheerfully and Jaime threw a pen at him, the angle all wrong with his left hand so it bounced pitifully off of Addam's knee.

“All I'm saying,” Brienne said, trying to rope the conversation in again, “is that so many of our employees are under twenty-five and I've never really been a go out and party type even when _I_ was under twenty-five. I feel awkward when I'm around them. I don't know how to bond.”

“You're the driver, you shouldn't be out partying anyway,” Addam said.

“When did that ever stop you?” Jaime asked.

“We're not talking about me,” Addam said primly and Brienne snickered.

“You don't have to bond with all of them,” Jaime went on. “Why don't you take the pit crew out to House of Fish some night? A team dinner could do some good.”

“We should do a company dinner,” Brienne mused. “Invite everybody. You're finished hiring people aren't you?”

“I think so. I've got everyone critical from the list we made with Ned, though with no backups. If a pit crew member gets sick on race day they either have to work through it or we'll put Addam in their place.”

“I stand ready to assist you, my lady liege,” he said, bowing a little towards Brienne from his seat. Ever since Addam had arrived he'd treated her like a chivalrous knight whenever they weren't actively training, and though she knew he mostly did it to irritate Jaime, she still secretly enjoyed it so she let it slide.

“Why don't we have the company dinner and watch the WSN interview all together this week?” Jaime asked, pointedly ignoring Addam.

She grimaced. “I was hoping to have a much smaller viewing party at my dad's instead. Besides, we have to give House of Fish time to plan for a group that big. Let's have a team dinner after we get back from winter testing, and I'll take the pit crew out for drinks this week, like we did when I first joined your team.”

“Hopefully you won't send me any angry text messages this time,” Jaime said, smirking.

“Don't give me a reason to,” she shot back.
“I was a perfect gentleman, it's not my fault you took my message the wrong way.”

“You compared me to Sandor!”

“Because you're both so tall!”

“No wonder the gossip sites love you two,” Addam sighed, levering himself up out of the chair. “They don't have to put up with this.”

“With what?” Jaime asked just as Brienne said, “Gossip sites?”

Addam turned to Brienne. “You may want to figure out your social media strategy soon so you can control a bit of your own narrative. The speculation about you is high, especially given how private you've been about everything. It'll only get worse once the WSN interview airs.” He looked at Jaime. “As for the two of you, the gossip sites have dissected every photo of you together in an official capacity from last year, and there are a number of anonymous tongues wagging about seeing you in Tarth last August, and again in December.”

Brienne shared a nervous glance with Jaime. “What are they saying?” she asked.

“Nothing worth paying attention to. But if you want to guide the discussion, it would help if you had a photographer here who could capture the two of you working and not just beaming at each other. Every photo tells a story.”

“She spent several months disliking me, there have to be lots of pictures of that story,” Jaime said.

“Not as many as you'd think,” Addam grinned, and Brienne's face went hot when Jaime looked over at her, smug.

“Really?”

“Don't start,” she muttered.

“Yours are even worse, Jaime,” Addam laughed. “You have no reason to feel superior. Brienne,” he continued, ignoring Jaime's glare, “meet me at the simulator in an hour? We'll test out those Myr strategies.”

She nodded and when Addam closed the door behind him Jaime shamelessly said, “He's not wrong: I wanted to kiss you when I saw you in my office on your first day. Well,” he gave her a roguish grin, “not just kiss you.”

Brienne pressed her thighs together and focused on her laptop. “We are not talking about this,” she said, and though she intended to be firm her voice was far too breathy. Jaime, for once, behaved himself, and a few minutes later, her thoughts back under her own control, she was able to look over at him again with only work on her mind. “Addam's also not wrong about needing to figure out social media.”

“No, he's not. Those silly videos we always had to do kept fans on our side, and sponsors pay more when they think they're getting free advertising from them. And I know you don't enjoy the photos, but it's worthwhile to have someone capturing you making history.”

“Women have driven before,” she said, blushing.

“Not like you. Not like this.” He straightened a little and grinned. “And I know exactly who we can ask to do it.”
At the end of the week, Brienne entered the garage during the pit crew's so-called Snack Time. Bronn had started having the mid-afternoon group break a couple of weeks ago, admitting that with so many new people at once they were struggling to form a cohesive bond, but Jaime had smirkingly named it when he saw how young everyone looked and the name had stuck. The hope had been that being forced to gather for a set time every day just to relax would help break down some of the awkwardness between the new crew but when Brienne wandered over to their corner, they were still segregated into smaller groups – Bronn, Podrick, Willem, and Lucion together, Ygritte and Asha in another group, the rest in pairs of two or three. They all looked up as one when she came over.

“Afternoon, Chief,” Bronn said and she smiled.

“Chief,” she returned with a small nod. Jaime had told her Bronn had been reluctant to take on the chief mechanic role, had insisted he wouldn't do it without Podrick as his right-hand man, and she had seen in the bits of time she could spare to watch them how much of the load Pod was shouldering. When she'd talked to Bronn and Jaime about making him officially co-chief mechanic, they'd both shaken their heads.

“So we've asked him several times and he refuses,” Jaime had said.

“Says he's not doing enough to have earned it,” Bronn scoffed. “Half a mind to just call him that anyway, but he might combust if we do.”

So they had all agreed to let things continue as they were, even though everyone who spent time in the garage knew the truth. It was as plain as what was between her and Jaime – or so everyone seemed to keep telling her – and as ridiculous to deny, as she was starting to realize about themselves as well. Against what was surely good judgment Brienne had spent the last few nights looking at the gossip pages and comments on racing blogs to see what they were saying, and it had been mostly what she'd suspected: people decrying how big and ugly she was, others calling Jaime a “GiantSlayer” or worse, still others wondering if he'd lost his eyesight with his hand and then pedants coming along behind reminding them these photos were all taken pre-crash.

But for all the commenters' ferocity what surprised her was how little she cared. The ones that mocked her looks hurt less than those that were attacks on Jaime and his one-handedness, and there were shockingly few that suggested she had earned her way by sleeping with him. Mostly they seemed to imply that she had to be great at what she did to convince him to sleep with her at all, which had ironically never been a possibility she'd considered. The further she got into the speculation she even started seeing responders, usually with more feminine sounding screennames, saying how romantic it all was, how they wished someone looked at them that way.

Those had, in their own way, been the most difficult to read. She and Jaime had been through so much since September and a fair part of that had been because she'd been afraid. Brienne had convinced herself for so long, even over the summer when they'd been here on Tarth, that it was mostly physical attraction, closeness but not love, and that it wasn't worth the risk of ruin to her career or his. If she'd known some people would be on their side, if she could have been loving him all this time, if she could have spared them both at least that pain before the crash...it didn't bear thinking about.

“Did you want something?” Bronn was asking now, and Brienne shook herself a little. The Jaime Problem had been weighing heavy on her thoughts for days, it could wait a little longer.

“I wanted to invite all of you out for drinks tonight. With everything going on, we never had our beginning of the year kick-off.”
“Is there even somewhere to drink near here?”

The closest bar was miles away; Tarth was not nearly as well-populated as King’s Landing and the warehouse district that Evenstar’s offices were in was fairly well isolated. That had been part of its appeal when her father purchased it, but it made moments like this difficult. “How about I bring the bar to us?” she said, thinking quickly. She’d been so distracted by thoughts of Jaime lately that she'd skipped right over the most obvious issue with the drinks plan. “I’ll go get some alcohol and we can make our own here.”

Bronn glanced at Podrick. “Go with her, Pod, make sure she comes back with the right stuff.”

Pod nodded, his mouth in a determined line. “W-w-will do.”

She rolled her eyes, but she was pleased to spend time one-on-one with Pod again; they hadn't spoken much since he'd left for Sunspear and she'd returned to Tarth.

“How’s life?” she asked as she drove them along the wet and winding roads to the nearest store.

“P-pretty good.”

“How are your roommates?”

Podrick's exasperated sigh told her everything, but he shared some additional stories as they drove, of how Sandor sometimes snored so loud he'd wake up Willem and Pod through the thin bedroom walls; how Willem watched the world’s worst shows and movies; and how Podrick had become den mother just to get them all out the door in time in the mornings.

“I'm sorry to put you through all that,” she said, pulling into the parking lot. “But I'm really glad you're here,” she added as she turned off the car and looked at him. “I would have missed you if you weren't a part of this.”

Pod gave her a wide, toothy smile. “M-m-me too.”

They spent longer than they should have wandering through the store, grabbing bags of chips and pretzels and cookies, ordering all of the already-cooked chicken tenders from the hot food counter, and loading up an entirely separate grocery cart just with alcohol. As they wheeled their two carts into the line, she saw the cashier's eyes widen in a slight panic, but Podrick shot her a charming smile and cheerful hello and the young woman relaxed. He wasn't flirting, but she kept looking his way when she should have been paying attention to checking them out, and Brienne had to hide a smile.

As they wheeled their carts full of clanging bottles and rustling bags back to her dad's truck, Brienne nudged him with her elbow. “She was into you.”

Podrick stumbled over his feet and looked at her, shocked. “W-who?”

“She was interested in you.”

She laughed gaily as Pod's ears went pink. “I-I-I think you're w-wrong. She j-just seemed fr-frriendly.”

“She wasn't that friendly to me,” Brienne grinned, but she just patted him on the back and let it lie.

When they got back, Podrick hurried to the team to finish work for the day and to tell them to head to Selwyn’s garage after work for the small party. She'd texted her dad when they were at the store
and he'd been happily onboard. Brienne hefted several bags in each hand and headed for the garage, the bell chiming cheerfully when she stepped inside.

Her uncle Endrew came out from the garage bay raising one bushy eyebrow. He wasn't as tall as her father, but he was as wide, and had the same Tarth blue eyes. “Selwyn called to tell me this was happening, but I didn't believe it. His beloved garage being used for a party. I'm afraid my brother has taken leave of his senses.”

“I'll make sure it all gets cleaned up afterward,” Brienne promised.

“Need a hand with the bags?” he asked.

The bell chimed again and Jaime stepped inside, loaded down with the rest of the groceries. She'd texted him when she parked, and apparently he'd run over to help. He'd loaded his arms down with as many bags as he could sling on and she appreciated the view of his firm muscles as he held everything up. “I've got it, Endrew, thanks.” Endrew shrugged and disappeared back into the bay. Jaime set the load down on the ground and looked around the garage.

“It's a little strange being in here again,” he said, stretching his arms out.

Brienne looked around, too: the little stand full of air fresheners, the row of plastic chairs, the clean but old counter. “It's the same.”

“I'm not,” he said quietly, but he didn't look upset, just thoughtful.

She started setting out unopened bags of chips and pretzels on the counter. “Are you okay with that?” she asked, not sure what answer she expected to hear.

“I think I am.” Jaime walked near her and leaned against the counter, watching her arrange bags. “Are you?”

Brienne glanced his way. “Different, or okay with you being different?”

“Either. Both.”

“Yes,” she said simply and Jaime nodded a little, his shoulders relaxing.

“Good,” he said, and he brushed the back of his fingers down her arm before going to get more food to set out. “You know there are only twenty people on the pit crew right?”

“Twenty hungry people who will also be twenty drunk people.”

“How are you going to get everyone home safely?”

Brienne frowned at him. “Sandor,” she sighed, getting her phone back out to text him.

With grumbling Brienne could hear even through text, Sandor agreed to be a sober shuttle service for the night, and by the time she and Jaime had set up the drinks, food, cups, and utensils, Endrew had shut the garage down for the evening and Sandor had pulled up.

“What's this for?” he asked when he came inside.

“Beginning of the year toast.”

“It's February.”
“We've been busy,” Brienne mumbled. Sandor grunted, unimpressed, and poured himself a cup full of soda with a splash of rum. She would have complained, but she knew he would barely taste that much rum, let alone be affected by it by the time he needed to start driving people home.

“I think I'll head off,” Jaime said, surveying their work.

“You don't have to go, you're part of the team, too.”

“It will be good for you to get to know your crew without me hovering around. I'd just try to take up all your attention for myself,” he said with a gentle, self-mocking smile.

Sandor muttered something Brienne was probably glad she couldn't make out, and ripped open one of the bags of chips before tucking it into his arm like a baby.

She walked Jaime out of the garage, leaving Sandor munching on his chips alone for a moment. They stood outside in the gentle rain and Brienne wrapped her arms around herself to keep from holding Jaime instead. She hadn't seen much of him the last couple of weeks; Addam had been pushing her to get more time on the simulator and the trainer they'd hired to get her into shape had been relentless, making her work out two and sometimes three times a day on everything from muscle building to reflex conditioning. If he hadn't come so highly recommended by Arya, Brienne might have thrown Syrio Forel and his sometimes bizarre methods out the door, but she had to admit when she allowed herself to look in the mirror that she was seeing new definition in her muscles, could see her response times getting better on the reflex tests. Jaime had followed a similar training pattern when he was driving and she could appreciate now why he always acted a little bit like a superhero; she felt a little bit like one sometimes when she caught a quickly thrown ball she would have missed a month ago.

“You know I don't mind talking to you,” she said, casting for one last reason for him to stay, not wanting him to go.

“That's good since I hadn't intended on stopping.” She saw his hand flex at his side, the slight shift of his body towards her. “I can't decide if the time I spend away from you makes all of this easier or harder,” he murmured.

“I looked the rumors up about us at the gossip sites,” she admitted suddenly, and he lifted his brows in surprise.

“That seems...foolish.”

She huffed a laugh. “Probably. But they're not terrible. I mean they are, but they're not more terrible than I thought. They're certainly not worse than I can bear.”

“No?” he asked, quietly, his tone hesitant.

“I've been thinking a lot about us,” she said, matching his softness with her own. “About what it would mean if we stopped waiting.”

He let out a slow, shuddering breath. “That's a step I can't come back from.”

“I know. But what if I've been worried about nothing this whole time?”

Jaime shook his head. “It only feels like nothing because no one suspects. Don't make up your mind until after the first race. Gossip sites aren't the same as being there in person with drivers and engineers and cameras in your face, with the stress from being on the track.”
Brienne sighed and nodded. “After Sunspear,” she agreed, unconvinced, and the rain dripping on her skin felt like his fingertips.

From a distance away they heard Bronn shout, “Where's the party?”

Jaime inhaled deeply, his hand fisting at his side. “I've gotta go,” he said, his voice like sandpaper. He turned abruptly, gave Bronn, Podrick, and the others a quick wave, and hurried to his car. It had been delivered a few weeks ago, modified in King's Landing with a joystick-like addition to his steering wheel that let him steer one-handed while also able to operate the signals, headlights, and windshield wipers. It was ingenious, and she'd enjoyed the occasional mornings when he'd pick her up and evenings when he'd drop her off, the way his confidence returned to him when he was behind the wheel. It wasn't his race car, but it was freedom and independence and as she watched him slide into the driver's seat she imagined jumping in the passenger side with him, letting him drive them anywhere on Tarth or taking the ferry beyond, leaving the work and the worry behind even for a few hours.

As his taillights receded her crew was upon her, chattering happily. Brienne pulled open the door to let them in and followed after, pushing her wet hair back from her head. Sandor had almost finished the entire bag of chips.

“Everybody grab a drink,” she announced. “Then we'll have a little toast.”

Bronn and Asha both went straight for the alcohol and sized each other up. “Did a year of bartending before I entered racing,” Bronn said.

Asha took a bottle and spun it expertly on her palm. “Three years while working my way up,” she grinned sharply, and Bronn chuckled and ceded the floor.

She poured drinks by request, muttering over the lack of ice and shakers but making do with what they had, mostly straight up shots or perfectly poured beers. Brienne forced herself to talk to the people she didn't know very well, and found herself charmed by Garlan Tyrell, a bigger, broader version of Loras with half as much ego, and fascinated by Ygritte Skirling, who had a fierce smile and a sharp, funny tongue. Once they all had a drink in hand, Brienne situated herself near the door and lifted her glass high.

“Good evening everyone,” she said, her voice carrying through the space. She was uncomfortable with these sorts of moments – she'd barely gotten off the short welcome speech to the entire crew back in January before Jaime had stepped in smoothly – but she'd grown up in this garage and the familiar photos on the walls and comforting smells steadied her. The group quieted and gave her their attention.

“We should have done this weeks ago,” she started, “but I'm glad we're here now. I just wanted to get you all together tonight to kick off our season and, more importantly, to thank you for taking the chance on me. We're starting from the pit lane here when everyone else is already on the grid, but I know we still have the best shot possible because of you. I've had a chance to see you work so far and you're going to be unstoppable. I won't let you down. Here's to the best crew in Formula 1!” she finished as they cheered loud and long.

Later that night she'd sloppily waved goodbye to Sandor and flopped into bed, clutching her phone near her face. She started typing a message to Jaime but when the letters kept jumping she called him instead.

After three rings, he answered, his voice rough and sleepy. “Brienne? Are you okay?”
“Yes,” she said loudly and winced. “I wanted to hear your voice.”

His laugh rumbled warm and low over the phone and she shut her eyes and drank it in. “Shall I read you a bedtime story?”

“Only if it's a dirty one,” she said and the laugh died in his throat.

“You should get some sleep,” he murmured, and she could feel the rasp of his voice on her skin, like the touch of his tongue.

“Not sleepy.”

Jaime hesitated and then she heard shifting. “Did you have fun tonight?”

“Yes. You should have stayed.”

“I couldn't. I can't-” he cut himself off abruptly with a sigh. “I wish I could have stayed.”

Brienne opened her eyes wide in the darkness, trying to see what he wasn't saying, trying to see past her own aching need. She hadn't been able to stop thinking about him, thinking about Addam telling her it was already a distraction. Jaime had been distracting her since he'd turned his lips cherry red sucking on a lollipop that first day. He would have tasted sweet if she had kissed him then, but he'd been sweeter still by the side of the road last summer.

“I want to kiss you,” she breathed and the rush of his responding exhalation was a burst of static on the phone.

“I need to go,” he choked out and Brienne was sober enough to feel badly.

“I'm sorry, I shouldn't have said that.”

“It's hard enough knowing I think it every day,” he said quietly. “I can't know that you're thinking it, too.”

She pictured him in their office, those moments when she'd look up and he'd be watching her, waiting, considering. How many afternoons she'd spent trying not to imagine what he'd look like with his head pressed back in his chair, baring the corded muscles of his neck while she slowly undid his pants. Brienne took a shuddering breath, vibrantly awake and aware now.

“Goodnight, Jaime,” she found the strength to say, fighting against the buffeting waves of desire.

“Yeah.” He sounded resigned, and relieved. “Goodnight.”

They hung up, but she didn't fall asleep for a long time after.

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On Sunday, Brienne welcomed the small group they'd invited to watch the WSN interview to her dad's house: Jaime, Addam, Bronn, Lollys, Podrick, Arya, and their new photography and social media teammate fresh from King's Landing, Pia. When she and Peck had knocked on the door that afternoon, Brienne had gaped at them and Jaime standing behind them, beaming.

“What are you doing here?” she'd asked the young couple.

Peck had looked over his shoulder at Jaime, who had flourished his hands like he was a magician presenting a trick. “Pia has agreed to help with our social media and be our photographer. Peck's just visiting.”
“Don't you have a website to upkeep? Some other scandals to hunt down?”

“Sure I do, Ms Tarth, but I can do a lot of that stuff from almost anywhere. May as well do it from here with my girlfriend.”

“Are you moving here?”

“No,” Pia said, “I'll visit a lot but I can do the social media work from anywhere and we'll be traveling to all the races anyway. I might as well do it on behalf of Evenstar Racing.”

Brienne had blinked and then laughed a little. “Sounds like you'll be a perfect fit then,” she'd said, helpless before the unexpected delight of how people kept stepping up for them. Pia, whose face had been pinched with worry, had exhaled explosively and she'd hugged Brienne hard and then let go again before Brienne could even get her arms up.

“Thank you,” she'd said fervently. “I can't believe I'm getting paid to work for your team! I would have done it for free.”

“Now you tell me,” Jaime had said wryly before Brienne made room for them all to enter. As Jaime had stepped by, she'd brushed her hand along his arm in thanks and in apology for her phone call on Friday, and he'd smiled softly at her, their fingers tangling for the merest moment, but the feeling of his fingers on hers lingered.

Once everyone had been introduced and snacks and drinks were passed around, they settled into and around the seating Brienne and her dad had cobbled together. She and Jaime ended up on the couch next to each other, but when Argella burst in she sat down in-between them, grinning, and they exchanged resigned smiles over her head.

Pia hovered around the room, taking photos from the corners, making herself unobtrusive as everyone talked while they waited for the interview to start. She even took a picture of the two brag boards side-by-side on the wall. The Evenstar one was still mostly blank, except for a printout of Brienne's online interview with Peck and the registration form for their constructor team. Brienne looked forward to filling the rest of the space. She wondered what stories the photos of her and Jaime would tell when they were done.

When the familiar music started, Brienne went rigid on the couch, her hands gripping her own knees in excitement and fear. She had a sudden case of double-vision remembering sitting in her apartment in King’s Landing a year ago all by herself, lonely and nervous. How little she’d known what was to come, that she would be here today surrounded by people she adored who had upended their lives just to help her. She blinked hard to dispel the hot tears that formed.

“Turn the lights off,” someone whispered, and Selwyn got up and put them all in the dark, their faces illuminated just by the glow of the screen. The standard Meet the Team introduction had been expanded to take the viewer on a brief tour through the Evenstar Racing spaces. The bungalows made an appearance to the hooting of the crew, and every time one of the group was on screen there was a brief cheer or applause. Melisandre's cameras had been thorough, capturing almost all of them at work: Lollys smiling at the front desk; Arya hovering over a table with Ygritte pointing at something the viewer couldn't see; Pod and Bronn chatting in the garage. There was a shot of Addam tinkering with the simulator and finally one of Brienne and Jaime walking together across the campus to their office bungalow, their legs moving in perfect synchronization, their bodies leaning towards each other in obvious affection. She was on his right side and her hand was near his prosthetic, not touching from what she could tell, but nearly. Brienne hadn't been aware they were being filmed and it was clear Jaime hadn't either, given the way he leaned even closer at one point to whisper something even though no one else was around, and onscreen she
saw her head thrown back in laughter, her hand come briefly to his shoulder to press it warmly.

“Real subtle,” Bronn muttered quietly from nearby.

The whole scene lasted a few seconds at most, but even as Melisandre's familiar voice filled the living room, Brienne couldn't stop picturing it as though it had been zoomed in and slowed down to run huge and frame-by-frame in her mind. Their closeness, the way they naturally moved together, how happy they'd both looked simply to be near. She glanced at Jaime over Argella's head, his eyes bright as he watched the interview, the line of his jaw covered with a shadow of beard. He was going to grow it out, he'd said, and she wondered what it would be like to kiss him as he did, the different ways it would feel on her skin.

But they had to wait another month at least and the beard would be in place by then and she would have missed testing the burn of it, just like she had missed the chance to kiss him goodbye when he'd left Tarth, or to kiss him hello again when he'd come back. They'd had that one moment in his apartment in King's Landing when she'd pulled them both into the aching core of her desire, and that kiss had haunted her for days, all the more vivid framed by the negative space of the careful distance they built back up again. All because of the things people might say about them if they were publicly together, or the distraction it might cause. They'd both assumed not touching would be enough to hide their hearts from those who'd gladly rip them apart with snarling teeth, but they were both fools. Brienne could not have imagined until she saw it herself how loud they were without saying a word. The scene played again in her head, how obvious their gravitation, the way they orbited each other without even trying, and everyone else would know it too when they watched this interview. People would say awful things and she and Jaime would still be apart and she'd spend the entire time trying to navigate the track while staggering under the weight of trying to salvage her swiftly collapsing walls using reasons that folded like paper.

The group laughed and applauded and Brienne startled, looking around. She realized belatedly that Melisandre had left in Brienne's impassioned speech about women's leagues, and they were cheering that.

“That was awesome,” Argella said from in-between her and Jaime, and Brienne smiled at the girl as though from far away, too busy trying to patch up the dam that was crumbling apart inside her.

It got even more impossible to ignore as the rest of the interview played out. She watched herself onscreen stealing eager glances at Jaime, saw him looking at her like the sun was rising any time she spoke. Over all of it in her mind was the image of them walking on the campus, the way their bodies so clearly already knew each other. She could lie, badly, with her words, but she couldn't lie at all with her body and neither could he and the constant, burning want pulsed out of their skin without even trying, captured and presented for the masses. Here the way he leaned towards her in the chair, there how her fingers stretched towards him across the small gap between their knees. As her onscreen counterpart said her closing comments of the interview, Brienne looked over at Jaime and another careful piece of resistance crumbled at the starry-eyed admiration shining from his beautiful face. It was the same expression he had on the TV.

Selwyn turned the lights back on as the credits rolled, and Brienne blinked in the sudden illumination. There were congratulations she was fairly sure, and Arya, Pia, and Argella immediately started expanding on Brienne's point about the women's leagues but Brienne just sat there, hyper-aware of the hypnotic scent of Jaime's cologne, knowing there were thousands of people – tens of thousands based on WSN's popularity – who knew for sure now she and Jaime were in love. How could they not after that?

And what were they going to do about it?
Jaime had his arm stretched out along the back of the couch, his hand near her but not touching. Brienne laid her own arm along his, her hand curled around his shoulder, and he turned his head abruptly to meet her eyes. He had seen their connection in the video, too, the way they seemed to call to each other without having to say a word. Brienne's belly shivered when Jaime licked his lips, and she pressed her fingertips into the firm line of his shoulder blade, tracing it. His chest expanded with his sudden inhalation.

Jaime stood abruptly at a lull in the conversation and stretched, his shirt riding up a little and in the space of a second the dam sprouted a hundred cracks and she thought I just want to touch you so loudly she was afraid she'd spoken the words,

“Early day tomorrow,” Jaime said to the curious stares of the group. “I'm going to head out.” He didn't even look at her as he told the others goodbye, but she could feel his attention on every part of her skin anyway. She was sparkling all over, the dam falling apart too fast for her to shore up and it was fire flooding out, burning away like so much kindling all the reasons she'd been using to convince herself she didn't need this, need him.

He'd told her to wait until after winter testing, but as she carefully stood to walk him to the door, she knew waiting wouldn't accomplish anything. What could possibly change between now and March? She wasn't going to love him less in the meantime, wasn't going to suddenly sprout the ability to keep her eyes and her limbs from saying everything her mouth couldn't, wouldn't find some miraculous way to put out a wildfire. No wonder she flushed so much around him, when these flames kept trailing tendrils through her body, looking for a way free.

The group pointedly not-watched them as she wound her way through their legs to escort Jaime to the door that he knew perfectly well how to find. His shoulders were tense and he could barely look at her, his eyes straying to somewhere past her neck when he turned on the porch to say goodbye.

She thought of Tyrion's words back at Tywin's birthday party – people will assume the worst, he'd said, couching it as concern for her career. But no one controlled her destiny now except her. There was no Tywin Lannister to fire her, no holding herself back worrying that she'd be compromising Jaime's dreams. She had lived a life being talked about and made fun of, had created her own space in the middle of whatever shit they threw; they couldn't harass her out of the sport now with just their sneering disbelief, and the young, fierce, angry girl inside her relished the thought of showing up at Sunspear and telling all the judgmental gossips, fuck you, he does want me.

“I'll see you tomorrow,” her mouth said. Don't go, don't go, her body pleaded, remembering his strong hands on her wrists, tight enough to mark her; how she'd wanted the red press of his fingers to linger long after they faded away because the memory of them never left.

He nodded and she thought for a moment he was agreeing with her, that he also saw what Addam and Bronn and the rest had been telling them, what she finally understood: regardless of whether he stayed or left tonight, the media and the fans were going to respond the same at Sunspear. What was the fucking point of going through it all anyway when she wouldn't even have him at her side? Her life was full now in a way she could never have imagined, but even with his bright eyes in her days, there was an empty, Jaime-shaped space in the night that she was so tired of trying to avoid.

“Sleep well,” he said softly and he left and the noise from the group at her back was like the incoming tide and couldn't he hear her begging him to stay?

Brienne closed the door and leaned her head against the wood for just a moment, surprised she didn't burn a hole in it from the heat of her skin, before she returned to the others and somehow sat quietly through the last of the group's breakdown of the interview, smiling when appropriate, even
forming responses that made sense, her foot tapping, her heart beating like she was at the top of
that cliff again with Galladon. When the others started gathering themselves to leave as well,
Brienne felt relieved. They said goodbye, she bid her father goodnight, and she escaped through the
blessedly cold night air to her home, where she paced in buzzing, restless circles around her living
room, scrolling through social media on her phone and seeing all her assumptions proven right.

'What's going on with those two?' was the very first response to WSN's posting of the video on
their site and it only got more lewd and offensive from there and all she could think was everyone
knows except us. She threw her phone on the couch.

Brienne's legs ate up the space, her hands clenching and flexing like she was getting ready to jump
into the wide blue ocean for the first time again, desire and fear blazing like a fever. It could all go
so wrong; she'd known it as a child and she knew it even better now – the Conningtons of the
world were many and cruel. But she was willing to risk her life to hold the wheel in her hands;
couldn't she risk the daggered gossip to hold Jaime, to stop pretending she wasn't always one
moment away from all her control falling apart?

All she could think of with every heavy footstep was Jaime: his soft lips, the hard line of his jaw,
the sweat-covered arch of his back as he bent over her, the trembling clench of his muscles as he
came under her.

She stilled, her toes clinging to the edge of her decision, and possibility stretched out like the
ocean, the things people would say jagged rocks waiting below whether she jumped or not. All her
good excuses, her perfect reasons, had turned to ash and Brienne was alight, consumed, aching.
Afraid. All she had to do now was take the leap.

Jaime wasn't asleep when the knock on his door came. It wasn't for lack of trying; it was the
middle of the night and he was exhausted, body and soul, and though he'd tried lying in bed, eyes
closed, listening to the waves on the shore, nothing worked.

Nothing could work, not when Brienne had looked at him earlier like she'd have thrown herself at
him in a second if they'd been alone together. They'd watched that damned interview and it had
been clear just by watching them walk together how desperately Jaime loved her. But he couldn't
do anything about it, had left as soon as he could, needing to put distance between them before his
heart pounded out of his skin. He'd come home and orgasmed so quickly from a few quick pulls on
his cock that he would have been ashamed if anyone had known.

He would keep his promise to her and wait until the end of his days if he had to, but gods
sometimes it took more willpower than he had to do it.

When the familiar double-tap knock echoed through his apartment, Jaime stilled where he'd been
sitting on the couch staring out at the dark sky. It was a clear night and the stars were bright out
over the ocean, the moon a brilliant slivered crescent cut out of the black. Waxing, he knew. He'd
become familiar with the phases of the moon here even in the few weeks he'd lived on Tarth. The
world itself felt closer on the island, like nature was a partner and not something to be subjugated.
He understood better now Brienne's embrace of storms.

The knock thundered in his head once more and Jaime considered feigning sleep, not sure he had
the strength to do what needed to be done to keep his distance from her. But he couldn't leave her
out there ignored, and she was too stubborn to believe he'd sleep through it anyway, so Jaime
padded barefoot to the door and opened it halfway. Brienne stood in the hallway in loose exercise
pants and a zipped up hoodie. She looked like she'd run here: hair a mess, cheeks flushed,
breathing hard.
Jaime gripped the door so hard it creaked under his hand. “What do you need?” he asked, hating the aggressive frustration in his tone but too tightly wound to soften it.

“I didn't want you to go,” she whispered hoarsely and Jaime thought he'd rip the door off its hinges if he held it any tighter.

“I only came here,” he managed to say. “Not that far.”

“Can I come in?” she asked, her voice pleading.

“What is it? Do you want to talk?” he asked, helpless from being here yet again, torn between the promise he wanted to keep and the unending demands of his heart.

“I'm tired of talking.” Brienne's voice hummed low and throaty in the darkness, buzzing over his skin. She stepped nearer, her heat pulling at him. He had to tighten every muscle to keep from swaying closer to her, the threshold between them his only strength.

“I told you, I can wait,” he said, his voice gravel and stone, and he could, he could, though it might kill him to do so.

Brienne shook her head. “I can't.” She crowded into his apartment, into him, shutting the door behind her and crushing their lips together and he wanted what she was offering more than he wanted to breathe but he couldn't survive jumping off this cliff if she was going to let go halfway down. Teetering on the edge, Jaime curled his hand into her hair and tugged her away.

“Everyone will talk,” he gasped.

“They already do.”

“They'll say terrible things.”

“Let them. Words are wind. This is real,” she breathed, her lips dark and wet in the night, her pupils wide enough to swallow him whole. “This is what I want. You are what I want.”

Her body was still pressed to his and he strained against her, eager and nearly out of control. He had to hold on, to protect them from themselves. He had promised. “It will be a distraction.”

“It already is,” she insisted. She made a low growl of needy frustration that he felt like a shock on his skin. “I've been thinking about this, about you, for days. Weeks. I think about you all the time. I know what I'm doing, Jaime, what we're committing to.”

Ask her, he told himself. Ask her one more time and then you never have to ask her again. “Are you sure?” His voice sounded guttural and half-gone even to himself, but he had to be absolutely certain. He could not survive holding back from her again. “If we do this, I won't hide. Everyone will find out: the other drivers, the media, the fans. They'll all know.”

“You saw that video. They already know,” she said, smiling sweetly. His smile. She scraped her fingers through his hair, leaving a tingling trail. “And if they don't, we'll tell them. All of them, every last person in the world. I don't care if they know, I don't care what they say. We've waited too long already, it took me too long to realize that it doesn't matter what they think or say or do. Not when you – all of you – is what I could have had all this time.”

During the endless space between one heartbeat and the next, Jaime searched her face, but the dark couldn't hide the shining truth of what she was saying. The carefully guarded latch burst open inside him, and everything he'd been trying to deny, to hide, to hold back since last summer, since
last January, came surging forth and Jaime swarmed into her, devouring her bountiful lips like it was his dying wish. Her tongue tangled hungrily with his and he was willingly consumed by the fire of her familiar mouth, their bodies pressed hard against each other. His hand roamed everywhere, tugging her near and then nearer still. Brienne's muscular thigh brushed his cock and Jaime groaned, rutting against her.

“Why aren't we naked yet?” she panted against his lips, her long fingers pulling at the ends of his t-shirt and yanking it off of him letting the cool night air rush in. His fingers went to the zipper of her hoodie and when he tugged it down it revealed the bare, pale freckled skin of her chest, the small swell of her breasts, her nipples hard and flushed.

“Oh gods,” he moaned, not even bothering to slide the hoodie off before he took one nipple and most of her breast into his mouth, sucking hard, teeth grazing the tender skin while she threw back her head and whimpered desperately into the night. She tasted salty on his tongue; she'd been sweating before she came to him. He wanted to taste the sweat on her thighs, too, and along the curve of her ass. He brought his hand up to cup her other breast except it was his right arm and his stump brushed uselessly along her side and abruptly Jaime pulled away, looking for disgust in her response. Brienne's eyes were round and wild in the dim light, her reddened mouth pulled into a frown.

“What is it?” she whispered.

“It won't be the same,” he apologized, moving his residual limb away. She grabbed his stump before he could hide it and pressed her lips to the tenderest part on the inside of his wrist, leaving soft kisses along the line of scars, and Jaime's whole body shuddered as he tried not to come undone.

“It won't,” she murmured. “It will be better. We don't have to hide it this time.”

“Brienne,” he said in a strangled voice. He'd thought when they were finally here he would have nothing but words for her, telling her how much he loved her, how incredible she was, all the ways he wanted to make her scream, but he found himself entirely at a loss except for her name.

“Brienne,” he said again, like that single word could hold the weight of all he needed to say.

It must have worked because she kissed him deeply and let her hoodie drop to the floor, slipped her fingers to the waistband of her pants and took those off, too. Jaime drank her in for a moment, naked and glowing like a dream of a woman, but real when he put his hand against her waist and she trembled at his touch. She'd gotten more muscular since the last time they'd been together, the long line of her thighs sharp with tension, her broad shoulders able to bear his weight even more easily. He traced his fingers along the still-delicate line of her collarbones, his thumb over the curve of her jaw until he saw the fine pale hairs standing up along her arms.

“I want to see you, too,” she said, and he stripped off his pants so they were both standing naked in his living room, their bodies tipping towards each other, pulled by the magnets lodged deep in their chests, the lodestones that brought them together time and again. She pressed her palms to his body, branding him with her heat, and he wrapped his arms around her, low around her ass.

“Put your legs around me,” he said, and she stiffened, obviously reluctant. “Dammit, Brienne, I can still do this,” he growled, bending his knees and hefting her up anyway, her legs slipping around him when he did, her delighted gasp loud in his ear. Jaime pressed his lips to the pulse at the bottom of her throat, the beat of it a drum on his tongue as he carried her to his bedroom, and his arms trembled only a little when he set her back down, her smile delighted and shy and sexy all at once. He had her knees against the mattress and he pushed a little further so she sat and then laid back, pulling herself up so she could stretch the long expanse of her pale legs on his bed with him
kneeling between them. Brienne watched him, her eyes as vivid and deep blue as a promise, her chest dipping in and out of shadow with her anticipation. Jaime settled back on his heels and took her in: the wet, red lips of her mouth and her sex, the angles and planes of her torso, the face he saw in every moment of his future from now until the sun went dark.

There had been nights he couldn't sleep from wanting her, from needing the feel of her shuddering body just like this as he rubbed his hand up her calf, over the hard bump of her knee, along the soft inside of her thigh. Jaime trailed his fingers over the curled hairs at her center to find her already soaked. He slipped two fingers into her heat and her strong walls pulsed around him as she moaned low. Brienne lifted herself up on one arm and wrapped her free hand around his cock, pulling long and slow to match the rhythm of his fingers in her cunt while he leaked into her palm and his hips jerked towards her. It was a good thing he'd taken care of himself earlier or this would have ended long before he was ready. As it was, he pressed his stump against her arm, stilling her movement, already feeling a tightening he wasn't ready to set free.

Jaime slipped his hand out and drew wet trails along her stomach that he gently leaned over and blew on and she shivered and wrapped her long fingers in his hair to pull with short, sharp tugs just on the blissful edge of painful as she directed him to her mouth. He kissed her softly before lifting himself up so he was hovering over her, able, thankfully, to support enough weight on his stump that he could stare straight down at her: the crooked line of her nose, the freckles so faint in the night against her star-bright skin. She smiled at him, a wide, hopeful, loving crease, and he would have surrendered anything to her to keep that look on her face.

He pressed against her pubic bone and she surged up towards him, her hips moving restless as the ocean, overwhelming him with the scratchy rub of her hair on his too sensitive skin. Jaime shifted and his cock slipped down to her center and they both moaned as he dipped just the head in, her heat almost too much, teasing them both with the promise of more just within reach.

For all the long nights on his own since she had called it off, for the times he'd spilled into his own hand or the pounding water of the shower, this was still as familiar and necessary as breathing. The way her body matched his from top to toes; the little noises she made in the back of her throat in a constant, desperate song of want; how eager she was for him every time, reflecting his own stunned gratitude that she welcomed him back to her arms over and over. Jaime had once thought he'd never love anything in his life as much as he'd loved racing, but that was only because he hadn't met Brienne yet.

"Please," she begged, the pads of her fingers hard and yearning on his skin as he hesitated there, keeping them apart for one second more, and then another, the slow torture of being so close and not giving in. A torture they'd been putting themselves through for months. There was no reason to hold back any longer.

Jaime went to his elbows and nuzzled his nose against her ear, felt her blunt nails curl possessively into his back. "I love you," he whispered as he slid all the way inside her, smooth with how slick they both already were, and she let out an inarticulate cry. Even in the dark it felt like he was drowning in her sunlight. "I love you so fucking much, Brienne." He thrust as he talked, the flood of everything he wanted to say set loose now that she was wrapping him up, long legs curled over his thighs, strong arms around his back, her heat swelling around his cock. "Every time I'm near you I want to touch you." Her walls squeezed him tight and he gasped and gritted his teeth. He wanted more of this, of her, even as the pressure built and spiraled up his spine. "It killed me to not even be able to touch you," he managed. Jaime mouthed the salt along the curve of her neck as he slid in and out of her drenching wetness, as she curled like a vise around him and pulled him deeper, mumbling his name between panting breaths. She was everywhere and he still didn't have enough. He wanted all of it at once: her riding him glorious and strong; him putting his mouth on
her to drink until she had nothing left; Brienne on her knees, her back long and broad and flexing under his hand. He wanted. *There's time for all of it,* he thought before being consumed by her moans turning into escalating cries, by her clenching him harder and more desperately to her, by the abandon with which he thrust into her, her hips canting up to meet his every move as easy and in tune as any moment of their lives. He'd worried they'd be out of step with all of his changes and hers, but her nipples still tightened at his touch, her powerful body still trembled when he scraped his teeth along her jaw.

“I've dreamed about fucking you again,” he growled into her ear and her cries turned sharper, as she pulled and clutched him against her, demanding more. “How wet you are, how you want this. Do you want this, Brienne? Do you want me?”

“Yes,” she moaned, “yes, please, Jaime.”

“Tell me,” he demanded. He freed his hand and slid it between their stomachs slippery with sweat, until he could press against her clit as she whimpered and pleaded nonsense words in his ear. His groin tightened, the edge so close as he drove into her. He needed her to be with him. “Please,” he begged.

“I want you.” Her hands pressed into his skin, claiming him with her calloused palms. “I love you,” she breathed as loud as a storm in his ear. “I love you, Jaime.” It was enough, it was too much, and he cried out loud and long like his heart was pouring out of him as he stuttered inside of her, as she held him close and somehow, after months – after a lifetime – of waiting, took that leap down with him.

Brienne burst out of the ocean that had capsized her and she breathed hard, enjoying the feel of Jaime's firm chest rising and falling against hers, alternating with her own heaving breaths. She ran her fingers through the sweaty hair at his temple, kissed his stubbled check, and shut her eyes so all she was was sensation.

She would have happily fallen asleep that way, with Jaime heavy on top of her, heavy inside her, if he'd let her. But his hand grabbed at the cover trying to pull it over top of them before he realized they were weighing it down with their bodies, and then he mumbled something into her shoulder that she didn't understand and he was moving out and off of her while she whined in protest.

“Shift a little,” he murmured, tugging harder.

“No,” she said, curving her arms around him, trying to pull him back. He laughed softly into her neck, a hot, humid puff of air that made her shiver.

“It gets cold in here at night.”

“I don't need a blanket, I've got you,” she insisted.

He hummed, a happy buzz against her chest, and rubbed his nose through her hair. “Bathroom's just down the hall if you need it,” he said, giving up on the cover and pulling her close again.

This time it was she who had to pull away, and she sighed and got up, looking around for something to cover herself with.

“Go naked, no one but me can see you,” he said, admiration bright in his eyes. “I'd prefer it that way.”

Brienne barely resisted covering her body with her arms and went to relieve herself, glanced at her
flushed and happy face in the mirror. She looked like she'd just had sex with the man she loved, and she couldn't stop from grinning stupidly at herself because of it, or at him when she returned to find he'd adjusted the covers for them. She crawled under them and he looped his arms around her, pulling her tight against his body, and they curved together like they'd been made for it.

It was dark in the bedroom, so little moonlight to speak of that she could make out only shadows. She looked forward to seeing more of it in the morning, of waking up with him breathing against her skin. They could have been going to sleep like this for months.

“I'm sorry,” she whispered, and Jaime went still and rigid against her, and Brienne realized what he must be thinking and hurriedly added, “that we didn't do this sooner.”

“Oh,” he exhaled, the tension still slow to bleed out of him. His arm tightened against her chest.

“What changed your mind?”

Brienne licked her lips, not sure how to explain. “I was afraid that if we offered ourselves up for everyone else's judgment that they would tear us down, but I understood tonight, watching us on that documentary...we've already been standing there before them, not hiding anything. They're going to judge us regardless, and it seemed pointless to go through that without you by my side.”

She turned a little to glance at his shadowed face. “These months we've spent, they made me realize that I love you more than I'm afraid of anything else.”

She was close enough to see his lips part, feel his stuttered breath. He kissed her cheek softly. “I would have waited longer,” he murmured, “but I'm glad we didn't have to.”

“You have Addam to thank for some of it,” she said, feeling him smile against her skin before she turned on her side again. “He's got some unexpected wisdom.”

Jaime pressed his nose against the back of her neck, kissed her between her shoulders. “I'm definitely better in bed,” he said and she snorted.

“You can't seriously be jealous of him now.”

“No, no, I'm grateful if he's part of why you're here. I'm just reminding you of my many other excellent qualities.”

“This isn't a job interview,” she said, twisting back around to face him.

“If it was, I don't have a lot of good references, so you'd have to give me an on-the-job skills test,” he grinned. Brienne laughed and trailed her arm over his side, through the fuzz of hair around his navel. Jaime had lost some definition without his obsessive exercise regimen, but she liked the softness it brought him, the way her fingers could form their own paths on his body.

“The position requires a lot of late nights,” she said seriously, dragging her hand up his chest to circle around the back of his neck. He looked happier than she'd ever seen him, even the first time they'd had sex, his face so loose and light it was a wonder he didn't just levitate off the bed.

“Night times are my specialty,” he promised.

“I'll work you very hard.”

“I think you'll find I'm a very dedicated employee.”

“Then I guess you're hired,” she murmured as he pressed kisses along her jaw, down her neck and shoulder.
“You know if someone asks if I fucked you to get this job, I’m going to have to say yes,” Jaime said as he moved down her body.

Brienne laughed until it turned to moaning under his tongue, and by the time they fell asleep she was too limp and satisfied and happy to worry about anything except how tired she was going to be at work tomorrow.

Chapter End Notes

In case you're interested, here's a video of the one-handed steering wheel modification Jaime has on his car.

Also this song lyric from Andrew Belle's "Drought" has been on constant repeat in my head for two weeks: Our love's a fire that we can't put out but it felt too spoilery to start the chapter with that. :D

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