Summary

This is how it ends (or Jaime and Brienne and End Game).

Notes

I'm terrified to post this because this is my first fic in this fandom and for this pairing and I haven't even finished the books yet (and I won't be watching the show). What am I doing???

Disclaimer: I own nothing. I only wish I could build a world as detailed and complex as George RR Martin. I'm only going to play for with Jaime and Brienne and the others for a little while and return them...likely in better shape than how GRRM is going to leave them.

*throws bubblewrap over them*
That night he dreams of Bran.

The boy is standing on two strong legs and is older and taller than when Jaime pushed him from that tower so long ago. Jaime’s gold hand is made flesh and he flexes it with a bittersweet smile, accepting this is a dream although he had not expected to sleep. There’s nothing to be seen other than the boy and a soft gray fog, but it at least hides his prison and he’s grateful for that.

Bran’s eyes are watchful, calm and curious but no anger that Jaime can see. He wonders why he should dream the boy so calm. Of all the things he’s done, Brandon Stark is the only one for which he feels true guilt.

The fog is muffling but Bran’s voice cuts through it as he says, “You will die tomorrow.”

"Mayhap," Jaime says with a shrug, still smiling as he flexes his golden hand and wishes for a sword and one last dance, "but I have never feared death." He glances at the boy. "If I do die on the morrow, however, I will regret that I did not dream of other things."

"You need not die at all if you would but bend the knee."

"The price is too high."

"Higher than your life?"

"Aye. I swore an oath."

Bran's voice cracks in a laugh.

"You've broken every oath you ever swore, Kingslayer. What's one more?"

Jaime pulls himself up straight, tall, stubborn and lion proud, and for a fleeting moment, every inch the knight he once longed to be.

"Not this one," he says. "The price is too high."

"Show me," Bran commands. "Help me understand."

Jaime's smile is sharp as a knife. "Some things are not for children," he says and turns away.

"But throwing a boy from a tower is?"

Jaime stops in his tracks.

Bran says, "You have cost me much, Kingslayer. You owe me your reasons. You owe me your story."

What does it matter, Jaime thinks. This is only a dream and there are parts of the story he would much prefer to think on than this boy or what awaits him when the sun rises. He flexes his golden sword hand one more time, then turns back to Bran and smiles.
He leaves the cottage as asked. He doesn't like it, but he can't risk her life because the silent brothers who should be tending her wounds are too busy trying to be rid of him.

He pauses outside the door and wishes for Ilyn Payne so he can swing a sword against him. At least then he could feel as if he were doing something. He supposes he should go find the others. When she awakens, she will want to know how they fare.

He's no more than three steps away when he hears her, calling his name as if he were her only salvation and not her downfall. Her second cry for him is a sobbing wail that rents the air and he's bursting in to the cottage before the echoes of it can fade. He barely notices the silent brother he sweeps from his path as he throws himself to his knees beside the bed, his hand seeking hers.

"I'm here," he says in her ear, urgent and low. "I'm here, Brienne. I'm here."

He refuses to leave again.

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The Elder Brother returns that night and, with a nod, sends the two brothers who had been tending a now-unconscious Brienne to their rest. He looks thoughtfully at Jaime, slumped on a chair, his head drooping but his hand still resting on hers.

"You should get some rest, Ser Jaime," the Elder Brother says.

"I've slept on horses and in bogs and in chains," Jaime replies sleepily. "I'm sure I can manage to sleep upright in a chair."

"You must leave, Ser Jaime. On this isle, we do not allow unwed men and women to sleep beneath the same roof."

There's no sleepiness in Jaime's flashing green eyes now as he glances at the Elder Brother. "Do you honestly think I would fuck her while she's in this state?" He smiles his knife-like smile. "Of course you would. I am the Kingslayer, an oathbreaker, and a man without honour."

"It is the rule of our Isle," the Elder Brother says, his voice mild. "We will care for her while you sleep."

Jaime turns his gaze to Brienne and his expression softens.

"We were tied together when they took my hand, but only during the day," he says softly, more to the unconscious woman on the bed than the man standing beside it. "I found I could only sleep while we rode, when I was pressed close to this big, lumbering wench. She was warm. She fed me and cleaned me when I could not clean myself, and she told me to live. To live, and fight, and take revenge. She cared for me as much as she was able at a time when my world was narrowed to the fire in my arm and the stink of my hand rotting round my neck." He turns his green eyes back to the Elder Brother. "She calls for me. She cries for me. I will not leave her afraid and alone again. She wants me near. This is where I stay."

The Elder Brother slowly shakes his head. "I cannot allow it."

"The Maid of Tarth is under the protection of the King on the Iron Throne, and therefore under my protection as Lord Commander of the Kingsguard. I swear I shall not touch her except to tend her wounds while we are on the Quiet Isle."

"Allowing you to stay in the cottage will do more harm than good, ser. She's already known as the
Kingslayer's Whore. We've heard the name even here on the Quiet Isle."

Jaime's eyes grow wide although his expression does not change.

"I have broken a man's teeth for less insult than that against the lady," he says, his voice a lion's growl. "Be grateful I owe you a debt for your aid...and that your brothers are silent."

"She is a high-born lady--"

"If it worries you so, then marry us," Jaime snaps. "I am already an Oathbreaker; what's one more?"

"You would so lightly throw away your oath to the Kingsguard?"

"The Kingsguard has thrown away more than that of mine. I had hoped to make it the stuff of songs once more, but the only thing I will ever do well, apparently, is slay kings. Marry us; don't marry us; it is naught to me, for either way I shall not leave Brienne's side."

"She is not conscious, ser. How would I wed the two of you under these conditions?"

"Babes still at their mother's teats have been wed to bring great Houses together. If my oath as a Kingsguard is not enough to soothe your conscience, good brother, then wed us, and we shall have her squire say the words on her behalf. When she's better and realizes what I've done, she will no doubt try to take my head with the sword I once gave her. I may even survive the attempt, but if not, that will be on your conscience, not mine."

"Ser Jaime," the Elder Brother says, then hesitates.

Jaime sits silent and waits for him to continue.

"She is not likely to live through the night," the Elder Brother finally says, very gently. "It is better if she faces her final hours with a brother of the Seven and not..."

Jaime's smile is dangerous. "A Kingslayer? Did you think the threat of wedding her was enough to send me scurrying from her side? I will not leave her, and she will live." He leans forward until his lips are close to her ear. "You will listen to me, wench. You are not so craven as to die before you face me."

The slight flutter of Brienne's eyes beneath their lids is her only reaction, but Jaime still nods with satisfaction. He leans back and makes himself more comfortable on his chair as he adjusts his grip on Brienne's lax hand. "Elder Brother, the choice is yours."

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When Brienne finally sleeps, she dreams of a boy.

He’s young and slender, the only substantial thing in a world of soft gray fog. She carefully studies him and decides he reminds her of Catelyn Stark, before that lady became the revenant known as Lady Stoneheart.

“Would you like those to be gone for a while?” the boy asks, nodding towards her face. She raises a hand and touches her ruined cheek, the ravaged mass of scars where Biter had ripped pieces of her away so long ago.

She shakes her head and lowers her hand to her side.

“What are you?” she asks.

The boy smiles and shrugs. “A friend, here to help you through the next few hours.”

She frowns. “You are not the friend I expected or wanted,” she says, suspicious. “I had hoped--” she stops, swallowing her words, tasting despair.

“The Kingslayer dies on the morrow,” the boy says calmly, as if the words were no more painful than a battle wound—or a monster’s teeth tearing through her skin.

“What do you want?” she asks.

“To know,” he says, and pushes.

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He’s more magnificent than she remembers and the sight of him takes her breath away. His hair has grown back burnished gold, his beard is lush and well-groomed, and he wears a hand of gold.

It’s the hand that makes it easier.

While she knows this man is the Jaime she had escorted through the Riverlands, the broken warrior, the man who leapt in to a bear pit to save her, he looks nothing like him. Nor does he look like the Lord Commander of the Kingsguard, his white cloak falling over his shoulders like snow as he gave
her a quest and armor and a sword of Valyrian steel.

No, this man is the Lion of Lannister, arrogant and proud, making war against the Starks and the Tullys, breaking yet another oath (made at swordpoint, a voice inside her whispers, and while he was drunk as well). No, this man is not the Jaime of her memories.

This man is the Kingslayer. An oathbreaker.

Telling herself that makes it easier to lie to him and convince him to follow her.

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They’re taken before they’ve travelled more than hour.

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They’re blindfolded and tied together on the horse, face-to-face as they had been once before, but without the stench of a rotting hand hanging between them. They’re at least able to draw warmth from each other as their party trudges through the snow that had fallen earlier, thick and heavy.

“You betrayed me, wench?” Jaime says, his tone light but biting, and Brienne’s glad she can’t see the edge of his smile as it cuts her, sharper than any sword.

“I had no choice,” she mutters, and it’s easier to speak when she doesn’t have to look him in the eyes. “They were hanging Pod and Hunt.”

“Pod and Hunt. Of course.” They ride in silence then Jaime says, “At least my life is worth two others although I would have expected it to be worth slightly more.”

“Jaime…” she almost groans and wishes she could weep, “I–”

“At least tell me you hoped to save us all,” he interrupts her. “At least tell me your sense of knightly honour still extended that far.”

“Enough talking,” someone growls before she can answer, and they’re both clouted on the backs of their heads hard enough to bash their foreheads together.

Stars explode behind her blindfolded eyes and she feels the wound on her cheek tear open and her blood seems hot enough to scald what’s left of her face as it oozes beneath her bandage. Jaime’s curses fill her ears as tears fill her eyes from the pain and the humiliation and the guilt.

“Your head is as hard as ever, wench,” Jaime finally groans, but all she can do is sniffle and pray that the burning pain in her cheek will soon subside.

She feels him carefully lean his head closer, his nose bumping lightly against the uninjured side of her face until his lips hover over her ear.

“Are you weeping?” he asks softly.


He doesn’t move away but he also doesn’t say anything for a long moment, and now she wishes she could see him, to understand why he is so silent. Or perhaps she’s grateful she can’t see his disappointment at her weakness and failure, at her petty conceit in believing she was strong enough to be a knight.
“What are your other wounds?” he murmurs. “Your arm. It’s broken?”

“Yes,” she says.

“Several ribs as well?”

“Yes,” she says again, her cheek throbbing.

“Did they do all this to you?”

She’s puzzled by the strain in his voice.

“No,” she says. “Rorge and Biter and those who followed them.”

“Are they dead?”

“Yes.”

He hums lightly and it vibrates against her ear.

“Shut up, I said!” they hear and then they’re both clouted on the backs of their heads again.

They stay silent after that.

When they finally arrive, they’re tumbled from the horse, landing in a bone-crunching tangle on the cold, semi-frozen ground. Their blindfolds are removed without warning and they blink against the sudden glare of light as they’re untied, yanked to their feet then shoved towards a small clearing.

Brienne’s legs feel shaky and her eyes are blurry but she sees Lady Stoneheart, cowled and silent in the entrance of the cave, waiting for them. Thoros of Myr stands by her side.

She sees Hyle Hunt, whose face is still so swollen as to be almost unrecognizable but appears to have received no more injuries other than the rope burn round his neck. She remembers him promising to kill the Kingslayer, promising anything, so long as they let him live. She sees the women and children who witnessed her near hanging, she sees Long Jeyne who had tended her wounds, and several more she doesn’t recognize. But she does not see--

“Pod,” she says, loudly, desperately. “Where is Pod?”

“The boy lives,” says Thoros of Myr. “You have my word.”

“I would see him,” she begs, wishing she were stronger. She only hopes no one notices how she’s trembling.

Too many, she thinks, too many again, and while they’ve left Jaime his sword, he has no sword hand and cannot possibly last long against so many. But she still has Oathkeeper and she won’t let them kill Jaime and Pod without it costing them.

If she can swing her steel.

They’re silently watching her and Jaime and they’re almost licking their lips with anticipation.

They planned this, she thinks with a sudden spurt of anger and fear. They want us to fight them. It’s why they’ve left us our swords. She looks at Hunt, his eyes downcast; at Thoros, his face sharp with
pity.

She wants them to play with us, Brienne realizes. A death by a thousand cuts. Hanging is too kind a death for the Kingslayer and his whore.

Lady Stoneheart pushes back her hood and Brienne hears Jaime’s long, indrawn breath as he takes in the horror that had once been Catelyn Stark.

“Lady Catelyn,” he finally says, “I see the rumors of your death...have not been exaggerated.”

It takes a moment for his words to sink in, then Brienne turns and stares at him. He meets her gaze with a mocking one of his own, but beneath it she sees the same horror she felt when she first recognized the creature.

“Oh, come now, wench,” he says, “I see you have had no better luck finding a sense of humor than you have in finding Sansa Stark!” He bows to Lady Stoneheart. “My apologies, my...er...lady. I seem always destined to forget my manners when first confronted by you. At least this time my chains allow me to stand as I await your judgement.”

Brienne watches him, torn between irritation and admiration. They are surrounded and will die in a few minutes, one way or the other, and yet he’s commanded the attention of everyone around them and if he’s as afraid as she is, the Lion of Lannister hides it better.

“Kingslayer. Oathbreaker,” Thoros of Myr says, slowly, solemnly. “The Lady Stoneheart has condemned you to death.”

“Oh? How surprising.”

Brienne briefly closes her eyes. “Jaime. Please.”

“They’re already going to kill me, Brienne,” he says absently, eyes searching the faces that surround them. “How much worse could things be?”

She gives him a speaking glance. “Look down, ser,” she says.

He looks at his golden hand and pulls a rueful face as he glances up at her and nods.

“I told you she stank o’ lion!” someone yells and the crowd erupts with catcalls and jeers.

“Well, at least we are providing entertainment,” Jaime mutters.

“Lady Stoneheart offers you death by combat,” Thoros continues. “Your lady knight forfeited her life when she tried to save yours by leading you away from this camp. She had eluded her guard and might have succeeded if not for Tom O’Sevens. She will therefore die by your side and since she fancies herself a warrior, she will share your manner of death as well. Draw your weapons, ser, Lady Brienne, and face Lady Stoneheart’s champions.”

“I would prefer you spare the Maid’s life,” Jaime says. “Her only goal since Lady Catelyn’s death was to fulfill the oath she swore to find the Stark girls and keep them safe. Lady Brienne had no role in whatever treachery you believe I have committed.”

Stoneheart presses her fingers to close the ragged wound in her throat and rasps, “She dies.”

Jaime shrugs and says, “I tried, Brienne,” as he awkwardly draws his sword and Brienne’s heart drops.
She draws Oathkeeper and positions herself at his side, although she needs both hands to compensate for her splinted arm and broken ribs.

They will draw it out, she knows, for the sport and so they can claim they defeated the mighty Kingslayer and--she glances at the minstrel, Tom O'Sevens--be remembered in songs.

Jaime turns to Brienne and lifts his sword in salute. “Come, my lady. At least let us dance before we die.”

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The battle passes in flashes.

Lem Lemoncloak, the Hound’s helm hiding his features, comes at her and she sees his hand and then his head fall with a flash or two of Oathkeeper’s blade.

Jaime’s beside her, behind her, near enough she tells herself she can feel his heat through her armor.

A slice into her thigh, another across her collarbone, missing her neck by inches, an attacker falling aside, teeth and blood and sputum flying as Jaime’s golden hand breaks the man’s nose and jaw with a sickening crunch.

Jaime’s name on her lips as a sword bites into her other thigh and she falls into the mud and snow and ice, Oathkeeper sliding from her hand as her arm re-breaks.

The din of clashing swords and screams and shouts mixing and swelling and exploding as her vision narrows to black tinged with red.

The last thing she sees is Jaime standing above her, fighting furiously, beautiful and ferocious, and the blood on his golden hand is Lannister red.

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Brienne]

_Brienne opens her eyes to gray fog and the boy. She sees a startled look on his face before he frowns._

"Go back," he says.

"No."

_His frown deepens. "Go back," he says again, more firmly._

"No. Some things do not need to be remembered."

"I want to know," the boy tells her and pushes, harder than before.

_Brienne cries out as she falls backwards and is enveloped by the fog._

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There are voices and movement and she howls with pain when they lift her.

A man stands before her, face hidden by the Hound’s helm as she cuts his head from his shoulders with a flick of her blade again and again and again. When she looks beneath the helm she finds Rorge and Lem and herself, but it’s Jaime’s face that makes her fall to her knees. She’s still gasping as she looks up to see Lady Stoneheart swinging Oathkeeper at her neck.

She gasps and flinches and when she opens her eyes again, she’s wearing faded, threadbare red robes as she stands beside Stoneheart, Jaime kneeling before them, and she is now the one holding Oathkeeper.

Jaime smiles as she swings the sword, his green eyes bright with disappointed mockery. She is no knight, she thinks. She has failed in her quest, she has failed to keep safe those who depend upon her, she’s failed to protect those who are innocent, and she fails to stop her arms from swinging the blade and removing Jaime’s head from his shoulders.

She takes off his head and she screams his name and then he’s there, disappointed but whole as he turns and leaves her half-buried in broken oaths and failed quests beside the woman she had once sworn to follow. Only that woman is dead, and what stands in her place is a horrifying shadow of the woman she’d known.

She calls his name after his retreating back, his shoulders impossibly broad in the now-white, now-red cloak he wears. She calls for him again as he fades from sight and she imagines she hears his voice on the breeze saying, “I’m here, I’m here,” and even though she knows he’s gone, she allows the memory of his voice to soothe her anyway.

She sinks deeper and drifts higher and his voice draws her closer and she’s sorry and she’s even failed to save at least Pod and she wants to let it all go to stop struggling to allow her failures to bury her and crush her beneath the weight of her shame.

“You are not so craven as to die before you face me.”

He’s dead, his blood bright on his golden hand, but the memory of his voice calms her even as he...
calls her wench and craven and mocks her. She almost thinks she can feel his fingers press warm against hers and, later, fumble with the clasp of her once-beloved rainbow cloak where it lays heavy against her throat.

She sinks away and if she dreams any further, she does not remember it.

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She’s thirsty.

She opens eyes that feel as rusty as old hinges and stares uncomprehending at the thatched ceiling above her.

Dead? she wonders. She somehow expected it to be more beautiful than the world she’s left behind and a whole lot less painful.

“Well, I see you have finally opened those remarkable eyes, wench. About time, too. I was beginning to think I had only dreamed them.”

She frowns as her sluggish mind processes the words then she painfully turns her head and sees Jaime, sitting on a chair, dark circles beneath his green eyes.

Her mouth opens and closes until she painfully croaks, “Alive?”

“Yes, you are,” Jaime says and nods at someone on the other side of her. A cowled brother lifts her up and gives her a dribble of water as Jaime adds, “Although you certainly managed to alarm the brothers enough.”

She’s too busy drinking as greedily as her attendant will allow to tell him she was speaking about him.

She finishes the meagre portion and collapses back against her pillows, panting for breath.

“How?” she asks, her voice feeling as rusty as her eyes.

“You did something truly noble,” Jaime says and for once there is not a shred of mockery in him. “You fought for the children at the inn even in the face of certain death and that bravery did not go unnoticed. When the Brotherhood without Banners let Septon Meribald go free, he hastened here, to the Quiet Isle, and told them of your bravery and sacrifice. He managed to convince a small number of the brothers to leave the Isle to rescue your bones and return them safely to Tarth.”

She frowns.

“They found the children at the inn, along with a half-grown boy. An apprentice blacksmith.” He gives her a significant look.

She gives him a small nod. “Gendry,” she says.

“Gendry. Yes. He confirmed Septon Meribald’s story and while it took some convincing, he finally led them to where the Brotherhood without Banners and their followers could be found. These quiet brothers were there for several days, lurking in the woods. They were still trying to find your body when we arrived.”

She frowns and Jaime shrugs and nods towards the silent brother who has dampened a cloth in warmed water and now begins to sponge the dried sweat from her face.
“They found they could not allow us to die alone,” Jaime says then smiles. “Or, rather, they did not want to allow you to die by my side. They took up swords and fought with us.”

Brienne’s brain can’t seem to make sense of what he’s saying and she shakes her head, closing her eyes.

“Pod?” she sighs.

“He’s around somewhere. The Elder Brother has put him to work to keep him occupied until you woke.”

“Ser Hyle?”

“His face looks almost human again,” he says and there’s a tightness in his voice that causes her to open her eyes and blink sleepily at him. She frowns as she realizes her eyelids are growing ever heavier.

“Milk of the poppy,” Jaime tells her. “The Elder Brother believes you need more rest. In the morning, you’ll be allowed to fully wake and mayhap even be lifted from the bed and helped to stand for a few moments.”

His voice is receding and she hears, “But that is on the morrow, and there is much more to tell you.” Her eyes flutter closed and she imagines she feels his fingers wrap warmly round hers. “Rest, wench. At least we now know you will live.”

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Jaime

Brienne is sleeping peacefully when Jaime steps from the cottage and stretches. The air is crisp and cold, the snow thick on the ground where it hasn’t been trampled by the feet of the brothers and their most recent visitors. He half-turns as the Elder Brother follows from cottage and stands beside him.

“It is almost meal time,” the Elder Brother says and Jaime gives him a half-smile.

“Perhaps I should eat away from your holy brethren. I feel as if I corrupt the brothers with every moment they spend in my presence,” Jaime says.

“We simply say another prayer or two to cleanse ourselves once you leave us,” the Elder Brother says, and Jaime chuckles. The conversation has become as much a ritual as any of the prayers or mealtimes or other activities on the Quiet Isle.

In silent accord, they begin to walk to the meal hall.

“Well,” Jaime says, “at least you had received word about the Kingsguard before I broke another oath or three.”

“When will you tell Lady Brienne?”

“When she can keep her eyes open for more than two minutes. I’d prefer to wait until she can hold a sword, so she can more readily take me to task, but we must be away long before then.”

“Yes,” says the Elder Brother, suddenly serious. “Winter is here.”

Jaime nods. “And the dead are walking.”
Brienne is as awkward as a newborn foal, all long legs and wobbly and it takes all Jaime’s and Pod’s strength to get her from the bed to the chair that has been Jaime’s home for the last few weeks.

Brienne is pale and sweating, panting with exertion and pain when she is finally seated, and Jaime thinks she’s uglier than ever, especially with the horrible wound on her cheek exposed and healing as well as can be expected.

Pod busies himself with refreshing her bed, stripping the linens and bustling from the cottage with a frightened look at him and then at Brienne. She doesn’t seem to realize he’s gone as she simply sits, unmoving, with her eyes closed and her freckles stark against her milk-white skin. She breathes carefully, until she finally takes a deep breath, opens her eyes and looks at him.

He pauses to admire the sight. He can’t deny the beauty of her eyes, even if they may not be as beautiful as Cersei’s Lannister-green ones. For a moment, he sees Cersei’s lovely face and his heart clenches. He wonders if she’s had her trial, wonders if she still lives.

“Jaime?”

He realizes Brienne has asked him something and he blinks at her.

“How long have we been here?” she asks again.

“Ten days,” he says. “Mayhap a day or two more.”

“Why have you not rejoined your men? We are safe enough. There was no need to stay with us.”

“You betrayed me, wench, to a woman who is long dead and yet somehow still lives. I would not leave without an explanation.”

She flushes, guilt on her face as her eyes slide away from his. “She was hanging Pod,” she says.

“Ah, yes. Podrick Payne,” Jaime murmurs. His brother’s former squire, and now Brienne’s, and how that came to be, he would dearly love to learn. The memory of Tyrion cuts him even sharper than his memories of Cersei and there are days he’s not sure which betrayal is worse. “You traded my life for the boy’s. And Ser Hyle’s, I believe.”

A slight frown creases her forehead. “I agreed to Lady Stoneheart’s demands, then prayed to the Seven for something, some idea that would save us all. I had hoped to have you safely hidden far from the Riverlands before I returned to face her. I had not expected to be captured so quickly. I also had not expected you to have any skill with a sword.”

“‘Skill’ is too kind a word. Luckily those we faced had even less. If the quiet brothers had not intervened, we would have all died, and all that would remain of the Kingslayer and his champion would be the songs being sung.”

Mayhap that would not have been such a bad thing, he thinks. He would have died with a sword in his hand, at least, and would not have to return to King’s Landing and his murdered father, his vanished brother, his possibly-dead sister-lover, and his nephew-son, who, if the boy is to keep his head and his throne, must never learn the truth.

“Lady Stoneheart?” Brienne asks.

“Gone. Vanished like smoke once the brothers appeared, and Thoros of Myr with her.”
“Along with the surviving Brotherhood without Banners?”

“Few enough of those,” Jaime says with a shrug. “They all seemed determined to be the one to be remembered for killing the Kingslayer.”

“Or they all simply wished to strike back at the Lion of Lannister?”

Jaime smiles. “That, too.”

The door opens and Pod returns on a wave of cold air, followed by the Elder Brother carrying a scroll.

“Another raven has arrived from King’s Landing,” that man says.

Jaime feels the colour drain from his face.

“Cersei,” he breathes.

“Yes, Ser Jaime. And more.”

Jaime takes the message and quickly scans it, his heart clenching again. He may have burned Cersei’s letter, may have condemned her to her fate, but he had loved her all his life. Confirmation of her death will not be easy to bear.

He finishes reading, blinks, then reads it again more slowly.

“By the Seven,” he groans.

“What?” Brienne demands.

“Queen Cersei has endured the Walk of Shame,” the Elder Brother says. “The Hand of the King, Kevan Lannister, and Maester Pycelle were murdered and Mace Tyrell is now Hand. Queen Cersei has won her trial by combat and is once again Regent, although with severely limited powers and only until Queen Margaery’s trial is complete. The Kingsguard that was under the command of Ser Jaime was dismissed before Queen Cersei’s trial and replaced with members of the Faith Militant, and now that Kingsguard, in turn, has been dissolved by the King. The contingent named in its place is under the temporary command of Ser Robert Strong, a monstrously large man who was Queen Cersei’s champion but who does not appear to speak or eat or drink or sleep. He will hold command until the fate of Ser Jaime Lannister has been confirmed. To that end, Queen Cersei is calling for any word of her beloved brother Jaime, and prays he still lives.”

Brienne’s broad face is so comically confused that Jaime has to fight the urge to laugh, just as he has to fight the urge to rage.

“Walk of Shame?” she finally says. “Both Queens on trial? The Kingsguard has been dissolved not once but twice? By the Seven, how long was I asleep?”

Now Jaime does laugh although there’s no humor in it. He had forgotten that Brienne likely knew nothing of Cersei’s fall from grace even before her capture by the Brotherhood without Banners, and he doesn’t look forward to explaining it all to her. She already thinks the Lannisters are monsters and if she learns of everything that Cersei has done, her opinion will only sink further.

“You must return to King’s Landing as quickly as possible,” she says with a bemused shake of her head. “Your...your sister has need of you.”
Jaime’s eyes narrow at her slight stumble over the word ‘sister’.

“My King has need of me,” he says, low and dangerous, eyes flicking in warning to the Elder Brother and Pod, who is putting the finishing touches on the bed.

“Yes,” she says, “and both are your family as well as your sovereigns, and they have no idea if you are alive or dead. You are also no longer the Lord Commander of the Kingsguard until you return to King’s Landing and prove you still live.”

He frowns and wonders why she is so determined to be rid of him.

“It will be some weeks yet before you’re fit to travel, my lady,” he says. “If the Elder Brother will grant us a boon, I would send word to the king and my sweet sister that I still live and will return to King’s Landing in due time.”

The Elder Brother inclines his head in agreement while Brienne frowns.

“It is not necessary that I go to King’s Landing with you,” she says and her frown deepens as Jaime exchanges glances with the Elder Brother and Pod, who flushes and gives her a guilt-laden look.

“You needs must return to King’s Landing with me,” Jaime says, “since the High Septon is the only one who can grant an annulment.”

“Annulment? Of what?”

“Of marriage, wench, what else?”

She scowls deeply then winces as the movement pulls at the wound on her cheek. “What marriage?” she asks suspiciously.

“Why, your marriage to me, my lady,” Jaime says and smiles as her mouth slowly sags open. “It was the only way the good brothers of this isle would allow me to remain by your side once they realized you were too stubborn to die.”
Did I remember to say that this is unbeta'd? Well, it is, so my apologies in advance for any mistakes.

Brienne

Brienne doesn’t know whether to laugh or cry, or even if she should believe him.

“What would—why would we wed us under these circumstances?” she finally demands, and wishes her arm wasn’t broken so she could bash at him with her fists—or better yet: a sword.

She wishes she still had a sword.

“Septon Meribald was kind enough to speak the words and perform the rite. Pod spoke the words on your behalf and I managed to put my rather tattered cloak over your shoulders, although doing so one-handed took longer than saying the words. We are wed. At least for now.”

“Why?” Brienne whispers.

Jaime turns and looks at the Elder Brother and Pod.

“If I may have a moment alone with my young bride.”

Brienne flushes. “Don’t,” she begs as the others leave the cottage. She imagines she sees actual shame on his face at her pleading, although it’s gone so quickly she decides she must have imagined it.

“The brothers of this Isle may be silent,” Jaime says once they’re alone, “but they take their rules seriously.”

“I don’t understand,” Brienne says so softly she’s not sure he hears her.

He stands in front of her but half-turned, and even in profile with a thick unkempt beard, he’s so beautiful she wants to weep from it—or perhaps she only wants to weep from the absurdity of it all.

“The brothers saved us,” Jaime finally says, startling her. “They saved you. I did not wish to cause them undue distress. Yet you called for me, and you had saved my life and cared for me after the Bloody Mummers took my hand. I could not leave you to face your own struggle with death alone. So the Elder Brother once again gave me a choice once we knew you were going to live: wed, or leave your side.”

She scowls then winces as the wound in her cheek pains her from the movement.

“Wedding me is not the choice I would have made,” she says.

Jaime slants an amused glance at her, his green eyes dancing. “Your admirer, Ser Hyle Hunt, quickly offered to wed you instead and take my place by your side.”
Her eyes widen.

“However, Pod assured me that you do not wish to wed the man—and you did not call for Ser Hyle in your dreams, nor did you calm when he spoke to you while you thrashed about in your sleep.”

She flushes and wonders how, exactly, she had called his name, and flushes even deeper as Jaime’s eyes grow wicked and he grins.

She lifts her chin, careful not to the pull at her wounds, and glares. “You were the Lord Commander of the Kingsguard,” she says. “Not even Septon Meribald or the Elder Brother could expect you to break those oaths.”

His grin fades. “I think I had half-convinced them that my vows as a brother of the Kingsguard, and the fact you were under the King’s protection, were enough to keep you safe from my carnal desires...until a raven arrived from King’s Landing several days after our rescue, informing the brothers of the dissolution of the old Kingsguard and its replacement with members of the reborn Faith Militant. I was no longer Lord Commander, or even a Kingsguard, and that, my lady, made all the difference.”

She’s horrified. “I’m sorry, Ser Jaime,” she whispers.

Jaime shrugs casually. “At least you can rest assured I have not broken any more oaths.”

“They were broken for you,” she says sadly.

He shrugs again. “To be honest, the Kingsguard I led much to be desired. Almost anyone would be an improvement, really.”

She gasps and he chuckles.

“Besides,” and now his smile turns mocking, “this also serves to delay your marriage to Ser Hyle, who assures me the two of you will wed as soon as you’re free of me. Perhaps we will ask the High Septon to perform the annulment and marriage in the same hour.”

Now rage sparks in her eyes.

“You presume too much, ser! I have no desire nor intention to ever wed Ser Hyle Hunt, and if you force such a thing upon me, I shall call myself a widow twice-over, annulment or no!”

Jaime’s smile slowly loses its mocking edge and he nods, his eyes warm. “There’s the wench I remember. You have been too long subdued and still. I am glad to see your fire has not been quenched, only dampened.”

“If I still had a sword and the strength to wield it, you would learn just how hot my fire still burns!”

He throws back his head and laughs, then frowns. “What do you mean, if you still had a sword?”

She flushes and turns her gaze to the floor.

“I lost Oathkeeper in the fight, and even if it was found...I failed in my quest, Jaime. I failed to keep my oath to you, just as I failed to keep my oath to Lady Catelyn and King Renly. Mayhaps Stoneheart is right: the next blade I carry should be named Oathbreaker.”

Jaime frowns. “Oathkeeper is not lost,” he says as if speaking to a simpleton. “It’s safely stowed in that chest in the corner of this room. It’s hidden from sight only because we have several of Lady
Stoneheart’s followers still with us.”

She frowns. “You do?”

“We do, yes. Mostly women and children, the blacksmith boy who led the brothers to Stoneheart, and that thrice-damned minstrel who followed us from my camp. I allowed him to come with us only to ensure he could not lead Stoneheart and the ones who fled with her back to us again—although they may still have followed us, for all we know. We were too many to be stealthy. But the good brothers have agreed to keep everyone here for several days after we take our leave. We may yet again fall afoul of Stoneheart, but not because these loyal followers will lead her to us.”

“But Oathkeeper—your father gifted that sword to you.”

“And I gifted it to you in turn.”

“But only for the purpose of finding Lady Sansa!”

“It is your sword, Brienne. I gave it to you. I knew it was a hopeless quest from the beginning, but we had to try—I had to ask you to try. Perhaps one or both Stark girls are still alive, but there is no way in the seven hells we’re going to find them now. Winter has come while you were sleeping, my lady, and Stoneheart shows us the dead have come with it. We have larger mysteries to solve now than what happened to two young girls, and, I fear, we shall soon have larger battles to fight than who is the true owner of a sword.”

Weary tears prick her eyes and she closes them with a sigh.

“Are we truly wed?” she asks and is shamed by how small her voice sounds.

“Aye, my lady, we are truly wed,” Jaime says kindly. “But do not fret; we won’t remain wed for long. We will go to the High Septon as quickly as possible upon our arrival in King’s Landing and have him undo this thing.”

She swallows against the tightness in her throat.

“I am weary,” she says, opening her eyes and meeting his gaze. “I would sleep.”

If Jaime notices her tears, he for once holds his tongue, although his look is searching. He strides to the door and bellows for Pod, who appears too quickly to have been gone far. Between them, they manoeuvre her on to the bed. Once she’s warmly beneath the blankets, she thanks them and asks them to leave, something they reluctantly agree to do only after she repeatedly assures them she will be all right alone.

Cold fingers of air linger even after they have closed the door behind them, and it chills her to the bone.

She shivers, her wounds aching as her poor head whirls from everything she’s learned in the last hour. As her mind works, slow, hot tears slide from the corners of her eyes, leaving trails of salt against her skin, and she is too exhausted and confused to bother wiping them away.

She doesn’t understand why she’s weeping. Perhaps it’s because of her injuries, or perhaps it’s because she’s finally weeping for the horror the good Lady Catelyn has become. Perhaps it’s simple relief that somehow she and Jaime and Pod and Ser Hyle have all survived.

Or mayhap she weeps because Jaime felt forced to marry her in order to abide by the rules of the Quiet Isle, or mayhaps it is because he is naturally anxious to annul the marriage as quickly as
possible.

The tears come faster now.

Mayhaps she’s weeping because she failed in her quest to find Sansa Stark and keep her safe. Compounding that failure is the realization that without the quest or someone to serve, she has no idea of her purpose, except for the one she is doomed to be unable to fulfill: her duty as heir to Tarth. Finding a husband will be even more difficult now with her maimed face and the scars across her body—but she will never wed Ser Hyle, no matter how desperate she may become for an heir.

She yearns for sleep, her splinted arm throbbing, her other wounds tender to the touch. Well, she tries to comfort herself and only causes her tears to flow even more, she has no need to worry that her brief marriage to Ser Jaime Lannister will cause her additional grief when finding a husband.

No one will ever believe it.

Jaime

Jaime slips into the cottage on soft cat’s feet, although there’s nothing he can do about the cold that accompanies him.

He removes his cloak and boots and walks to the bed to gaze down at Brienne, who even in sleep has a slight frown creasing her forehead. He sees the dried tracks of her tears and wonders if she wept from pain or if her dreams had once again tormented her rest. He feels a pang of guilt at the thought she might have called for him and he wasn’t there to soothe her.

Not that she had called for him last night. It was the first night she had slept peacefully since they had arrived on the Quiet Isle.

He frowns at the thought and turns away.

On the third day after Brienne first leaves her sick bed, she wakes with bright eyes and more energy than Jaime has seen since before she walked in to his command tent. Sadness still lurks in the depths of her remarkable eyes but there’s new determination in the set of her chin and her shoulders as she waves both him and Pod away and pushes herself to her feet.

She sways, and they hover close, but she manages the few steps to Jaime’s chair and lowers herself on to it. She lifts her chin and smiles, and Jaime blinks both at the first smile he’s ever seen on her face, and at how brightly she shines with pride.

“I would like to bathe,” she says. “Perhaps my continued weariness has more to do with my smell than my injuries. Pod, please see if you can find something I may use as a tub.”

Jaime waits until Pod has left the cottage before he speaks. “Is it wise for you to attempt to bathe yourself so quickly since rising from your sickbed? This is not like the baths at Harrenhal, my lady. You will need to lower yourself in and lift yourself out, and your one arm is still splinted.”

He watches as the blood climbs in to her cheeks and she lifts her head high. The effect is somewhat diminished by her matted hair, sticking up in tufts round her face.

“I will find a way,” she says firmly.
He smiles. “I’m glad to see your thick-headedness has returned with a vengeance, wench, but I beg you not to attempt to do anything until I have returned to assist you.”

Her eyes narrow. “Assist me? And where are you going?”

“Why, to speak to the Elder Brother to see if you should submerge your wounds. You may have to settle with me washing you.”

Her flush deepens. “I can wash myself, ser.”

“Yes, yes, wench, of course you can. I speak from experience, you know. Just because you have energy now does not mean you will have enough to prevent yourself from drowning in your tub.”

She opens her mouth but is forestalled by the door slamming open and Pod being almost blown off his feet by the suddenly howling wind as he struggles to control the metal tub he’s carrying. Jaime hurries to help him and to get the door closed before the cold wind freezes the fire in mid-flame.

“The Elder Brother says there’s a blizzard coming,” Pod says breathlessly, his face rubbed raw by wind and snow. “A bath may not be the best idea right now, ser, my lady.”

She stares. “Why not?”

“Blizzards can last for several days here, the Elder Brother said. He’s asked you to come to the meal hall, Ser Jaime, and he will give you food for you and my lady, ser. He’s asked me to return with you to help the brothers tend to the other women and children staying in the women’s cottages, and then wait out the blizzard in the meal hall, to keep an eye on Lady Stoneheart’s men.” He looks anxiously from Jaime to Brienne and back again. “We will need to work hard to ensure we have enough fuel to keep all the fires burning. If the fire goes out, you may end up freezing to death before the blizzard ends or before we can clear a path to get to you.”

Brienne stares, eyes wide, and Jaime bites back a laugh.

“Well, wench, if you can entertain yourself for the day, I will leave you alone and assist the brothers and Pod wherever I may be useful. I may only have one hand, but I’m sure I can swing an axe often enough to fell a tree.”

“But there’s a blizzard rising,” she says as he pulls on his cloak.

“Which means I will be back as soon as I can.” He pulls open the door and squints against the snow and cold already biting against his flesh. “I, for one, have no wish to freeze to death because we did not have enough fuel for the fire.” He turns and gives her a thin smile. “Rest, my lady, and I will see you in a few hours.”

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Darkness is falling and the winds are rising when Jaime returns, laden with several days’ worth of food. Pod and a few of the brothers are stacking cords of wood to the right of the cottage door. When they finish, Pod steps inside to check on Brienne and to tell them he’s returning to the meal hall—unless ser, my lady wishes him to stay to set the cottage to rights.

“If the storm is getting as bad as it sounds, then you must go,” Brienne says, “and quickly, before the winds gets any worse.”

She’s managed to make her way back to the bed during their absence and is struggling to hold herself up enough to look at Pod as she speaks.
Jaime nods. “Listen to your lady knight, Pod. Septon Meribald told me that if anyone loses their way, they will freeze or drown or be lost in the mud, if it’s still soft enough.”

Pod protests but Brienne insists until finally Jaime’s closing the door on Pod’s forlorn back as he bends into the sharp snow and cold wind that is howling round the corners of the cottage.

Jaime turns and gives Brienne a rueful look before he begins to unpack the food the brothers have given them. He pulls out a small vial filled with milk of the poppy and puts it beside the almost empty larger flask that rests beside the bed.

“I don’t want that,” Brienne says, wincing as she pushes herself up to a sitting position to warily watch him.

“It’s only to be used if I decide you need it, wench,” Jaime says with a shrug as he turns away. He grins as he hears her grind her teeth.

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The storm is horrendous.

The wind screams unceasingly round the cabin, and when Jaime cracks open the door to replenish their supply of fuel for the fire, all they see is a solid wall of white.

By the start of the third day, Jaime decides he’d welcome a silent cowled brother or even Ser Hyle...almost. Anyone, really, to break the monotony of being in one room and trying to be silent while the wench sleeps. He’s also getting tired of sleeping on the chair, although compared to the cage and chains he’d been in when he first met the Maid of Tarth, the chair is the height of luxury.

Brienne is rare company. She still needs to rest a great deal, although she’s awake and out of bed for longer and longer periods each day. She’s still slow to trade barbs with him until he manages to goad her enough she forgets herself and snaps back, and then his slow smile makes her so angry she can only glare as she sputters on her words.

On those occasions, he thinks it’s a good thing he can move faster than she can at the moment, although he wonders if it might be a good idea to begin locking the chest where Oathkeeper is stored. She’s getting stronger by the day, and he may goad her so much she’ll decide to get the sword while he sleeps.

He smiles at the thought as he checks on the stew he has simmering over the fire.

“You should have stayed in the meal hall with the men,” Brienne says from behind him and he turns.

“And who would have stayed with you?”

“There are other women on the isle.”

“Stoneheart’s women,” he says flatly, “and therefore not to be trusted.” He cocks his head and considers her thoughtfully. The hideous scar on her face is healing well, but her hair is matted and dirty. Her freckles are dark against the paleness of her skin, and he thinks she hasn’t truly been clean since they arrived on the Quiet Isle. He hasn’t tried to fill the tub with water since the blizzard began because they need their water more for drinking than bathing. Although, come to think of it, if there’s one thing they can get fairly quickly, it’s water, thanks to the banks of snow piling up outside their door.

“Would you like me to bathe you?” he asks suddenly.
Her eyes widen. “No!”

“Well, I think my nose would appreciate it even if you don’t,” he says and, as quickly as he can with only one hand, he pulls on his boots and throws his cloak over his shoulders. “It won’t be a full bath, but I can at least help you wash your hair.”

There’s a sudden expression of longing on her homely face.

“Clean hair?” she asks wistfully.

He pauses, staring hard at her, then says, “Aye.”

He hangs one of the pails they use for water over his right elbow, opens the door and quickly steps out to brave the storm. He doesn’t go far, as the world is a blinding sheet of white and he does not want to lose sight of the cottage. He packs the pail with as much snow as he can press in to it. It won’t give much water, he knows, but the day is still young, and he can make several forays outside to refill the pail until he has enough to at least wash her hair.

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In the end, it takes him six trips out in the storm—and a seventh to bring in more firewood—before he decides they have enough water. They then bicker almost amiably over the best way to actually wash her hair that doesn’t involve her sitting naked in the cold tub while he pours the meagre water over her head.

Finally, they hit upon having her sit on the chair and bend as far double as she can, given her still painful broken ribs, with her head hanging over the tub while he carefully pours the water over her.

“Well,” he says as water splashes on the floor, over her shoulders, and onto his breeches and feet, “not perfect, but I think we can make due.”

Brienne makes a noise that sounds suspiciously like a chuckle, but Jaime’s too busy scrubbing soap into her hair with his left hand while gently holding her head steady with his stump, to confirm it. Besides, he must have imagined it, since the wench has never laughed in his presence...not that there have been many reasons to laugh during their times together.

He runs his fingers through her hair, carefully untangling the straw-like strands. Brienne’s hair is not as luxurious as Cersei’s, and much shorter, and he finds himself almost fascinated by how alien it feels against his fingers. He realizes with a sudden shock that this is the first time he’s touched another woman’s hair.

And there she is, suddenly in the forefront of his mind.

Cersei.

He remembers stroking her hair, he remembers her beauty and passion, and his cock twitches. He may have turned away from her, but his body still yearns for the only woman he’s ever known. He remembers the last message he received from her: “I need you now as I have never needed you before. I love you. I love you. I love you.”

He also remembers telling his squire to put that message in the fire.

But now he knows she lives. She is once again Regent and now guarded by a creature that sounds like something that, until he saw Lady Stoneheart’s face, he never would have believed could exist. He must needs return to King’s Landing, and soon, and--his thoughts are caught up short by a soft,
contented sigh from Brienne, and he realizes he’s managed to untangle her hair, and he’s been slowly combing it with his fingers, rubbing soothing circles over her scalp as he does so.

He blinks and frowns, wondering how long he’s been lost in thought. He almost reluctantly pulls away then brusquely tells her to close her eyes, and begins to rinse the soap from her hair.

As he works, he goes back to his thoughts. He must needs return to King’s Landing and reclaim his place in the Kingsguard—and he will be bringing the Maid of Tarth with him as his bride.

He finishes rinsing the soap from Brienne’s hair and gently towels her head dry as he broods. There’s a chill seeping in to his bones that’s caused by a certainty that’s colder than the wind blowing outside.

If Cersei discovers he’s married to Brienne, whatever his intentions for the future, his sweet sister will ensure he’s a widower long before he can hope to acquire the annulment from the High Septon.

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Quiet Isle: Five

Brienne

Clean hair seems to give her energy, or perhaps it was the feel of Jaime’s fingers gently stroking through her hair. Septa Roelle was always rough, yanking so hard through the tangles, tears would spring to Brienne’s eyes. Perhaps her mother had been kinder, but she couldn’t remember. She suffered until she was old enough to tell Septa Roelle she would take care of it herself. She hasn’t allowed anyone else to wash her hair since.

Well, whatever the reason, she feels more alive and more like herself for the first time since she woke. So much so, she even allows herself to rest on the chair and watch, secretly amused, as Jaime struggles to remove the filthy water from the tub and the cottage. Her amusement is wiped away when he returns from his last journey out in the storm and snow and she sees he’s shivering, his teeth chattering. Brienne guiltily realizes his clothing is still damp from where the water spilled over him.

He stands in front of the fire, briskly rubbing his hand over his stump, and she sighs.

“Wrap yourself in one of the blankets,” she says, not unkindly.

“I’m fine, my lady,” he says, sparing her an offended glare, and she presses her lips tightly together to stop herself from laughing out loud.

“Of course,” she murmurs instead. She carefully pushes herself to her feet and begins to slowly walk from the chair to the far side of the bed and back again. It is the most exercise she’s had of late and it feels good. “Has the storm eased at all?”

He shakes his head.

“How are we for firewood?” she says, repeating her careful circuit.

“Two days’ worth, perhaps three, if we feed the bare minimum to the fire. Then we would have another day, perhaps two, if we burn all the furniture. After that...” he shrugs. “I doubt the storm will last much longer, my lady. They seldom last this long, according the Elder Brother. The brothers put a great deal of firewood aside, knowing winter was coming, but they had not expected to house so many additional people, or for a blizzard to begin so soon and last so long.”

“The Elder Brother has been telling you a great many things, it seems.”

“You were sleeping, wench. We had to do something to pass the time.”

She flushes. “Why have you stayed by my side?” she says. “We are safe enough on the Quiet Isle. You could have immediately returned to your men, returned to your war against the Tullys and the Starks.”

He scowls. “I was not at war against the Tullys and the Starks. I was sent to calm the Riverlands, and I was well on my way to doing so when I was called away by a certain wench who told me she had succeeded in her quest but needed my help.”

Brienne’s flush deepens. “I--”

“They said you were taking me in the opposite direction from Stoneheart’s camp. Were you at least intending to not simply hand me over?”
“I was trying to get you out of the Riverlands,” Brienne mutters miserably. “I had no plan beyond that.”

Jaime smiles his razor-like smile. “The thought of asking for my assistance never crossed your mind, my lady? I had an army at my back!”

She shakes her head, wincing as her wounds protest the movement. “They said there were spies among your men. I didn’t know who could be trusted and we couldn’t speak freely in your camp. I just...I didn’t know what else to do.”

“Why did you have to do anything, Brienne?” he asks softly and while he’s no longer shivering, his voice is cold, and he is very much the golden Lion of Lannister.

She stops her pacing, her shoulders slumped in defeat. “She was hanging Pod,” she whispers. “I was prepared to die, I was already hanging, but I couldn’t—he’s just a boy, and he had done nothing wrong.”

Jaime’s eyes sharpen as she speaks.

“You were already hanging?”

“She told me to choose: sword or noose. My life or yours. I refused to make that choice and they put the noose round my neck and hauled me up a tree. But Pod...he didn’t deserve what she was doing to him. She was hanging Ser Hyle as well, even though he was offering to bring her your head in my stead.”

“You chose to save them both. My life for theirs. And yours.”

Brienne didn’t respond, too busy wondering what she would have done if she had actually killed Jaime in order to save Pod and Ser Hyle. She thinks of the fragments of her fever dreams that she remembers, of the dreams she still has of swinging Oathkeeper and seeing Jaime’s head part from his shoulders.

She shudders.

“I prayed to every aspect of the Seven that I would find a way to save all of you,” she says.

Jaime gives her a hard, searching look. “Well, we are all still here, saved by the Quiet Brothers, so perhaps the Seven heard you. If so, it is the first time I’ve ever known any god to answer a prayer.”

“Perhaps I should join the Silent Sisters in thanks,” Brienne says, only half in jest.

“And deprive Tarth of an heir? I doubt the Seven want that, or they would have taken you when they had the chance.”

Brienne doesn’t know what to say to that, so she subsides into silence. Jaime turns his back and seems content to stand in silence as well, brooding by the hearth, his beauty outlined by gilded flame. He frowns as he stares into the fire and Brienne wonders what’s bothering him so.

He turns and looks at her and she blinks, feeling as if she’s been caught doing something wrong.

“We should eat,” he says and she nods, grateful that he didn’t seem to notice anything amiss.

She makes her way to the chair while he moves the pot of stew hanging in the fireplace to the small counter beside it. He awkwardly fills a bowl with stew and carries it to her, then fills a bowl for
himself. She stays on the chair while he sits on the bed to eat, and it’s the first time she’s sat in a chair to eat since she awoke. She hopes it’s a sign that she will soon be healed.

What she will do or where she will go once she is, she still does not know.

She finishes the stew and sighs with satisfaction.

That is tomorrow’s problem, she decides as Jaime finishes his portion and takes their bowls back to the small counter. He gives her a glass with milk of the poppy and stands over her until she drinks it, then he cleans the dishes while she makes her careful way back to the bed and climbs in to it. She watches, already sleepy, as he finishes tidying the place then settles on the chair. He shifts, trying to get comfortable.

“You can share the bed,” she says, to her own surprise.

“You’re still in pain,” he says.

“Do you thrash about when you sleep, my lord?”

He raises an eyebrow. “You’ve seen me sleep before.”

“While you were in chains, or sick almost to dying, or tied to me,” she says drily, “and you did not sleep near me on our journey from Harrenhal to King’s Landing. I have no idea how you sleep when you’re not confined in some way or delirious with fever.”

He stares then throws back his head and laughs, loud and hearty. “Well put, wench. As far as I know, I do not thrash round in my sleep. Are you strong enough to push me out of the bed if I cause you pain?”

“My wounds are still tender,” she says, yawning, heavy eyes drifting closed. “If you were to bump me and cause pain, I am like to react without thinking.”

“Hmm,” he says softly and she hears him standing and loosening his clothes before he slips beneath the blankets beside her. “Mayhaps I’m even more grateful your weapons are not close to hand.”

She breathes out a chuckle and tumbles in to sleep.

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She dreams of Lady Catelyn, kind and beautiful and sad. She begs that lady’s pardon for failing so badly to keep the vows she’d made her.

“You can still make good on your broken oaths,” Lady Catelyn says as her skin turns mottled and splits across her throat. “Take your sword,” she says as her hair thins, becomes brittle, as her flesh shifts and changes until Lady Stoneheart stands before her. Stoneheart presses her fingers against the gaping wound in her throat and rasps, “Kill him.”

Brienne turns, Oathkeeper in hand, and Jaime is kneeling before her, in chains, his green eyes defiant yet unafraid.

“No,” she begs Stoneheart, “he’s not the man he was. He saved me, he sent me to find and protect your daughters—”

“You swore an oath. Kill him,” she says, and Brienne is helpless to stop herself as she lifts her arm and swings the blade.
“No! Jaime!”

“No! Jaime!” his low voice says, and she remembers how his fingers had felt in her hair as he washed it. “I’m here and alive, although my hearing may be gone after such a bellow.”

She turns to see Jaime standing before her, smiling his mocking smile, but whole.

“No dead?” she mumbles, her tongue thick in her mouth.

“No dead,” he says, and she can see his left hand on the pommel of his sword and his gleaming gold hand resting on his hip. Yet the phantom memory of his fingers against her scalp grows stronger.

“Pod?” she says, suddenly terrified she’d managed to save one but not the other.

“Pod is weathering the storm at the meal hall and most like getting more rest.”

“Oh,” she says, and only then allows herself to sink back to sleep beneath those soothing, stroking fingers.

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When she opens her eyes in the morning, Jaime’s standing, scowling at the tub and the two empty pails he used the previous day to melt snow into water. The wind is still howling outside the cottage, the sound now so familiar she almost doesn’t notice it anymore.

She makes her way to the makeshift privy in one corner of the cottage, the thin linen sheets giving the illusion of privacy do nothing to muffle the sounds as she uses the chamber pot that’s located there. Not that there’s much point to modesty between them, she thinks ruefully, not after their last journey through the Riverlands.

She makes a face as she pulls her shift back in to place and slips out from behind the linen curtain. The shift could most likely stand up on its own by now but there’s nothing else for her to wear at the moment.

She sees Jaime is still scowling as he straps on his golden hand.

“Why do you have that look on your face?” she asks and yawns as she limps—more easily than yesterday but still far too slowly—to the chair.

“’Tis my turn for a wash, my lady, and I was just wondering how many pails of snow will be needed before I have enough water to use as a bath.”

She has a sudden memory of the baths at Harrenhal and blushes furiously. Her blush deepens when he glances at her then gives her a smile that has a mocking edge.

“Why so shy, my lady? You’ve seen my body before, and even cleaned it.” His smile turns to a grimace. “More often and more personally than I care to remember.”

_She_ remembers. He had been half-dead, thanks to Zollo the Fat and his arakh and the resulting fever that left Jaime weak and half-mad with pain and grief. She had cleaned him, top and bottom, shit and vomit, with the vile, rotting odor of his hand hanging round his neck and the same vile, rotting odor rising from the festering wound at the end of his arm.

“I killed Pyg and Timeon and Shagwell,” she says abruptly.

He blinks then nods. “And Rorge and Biter and Vargo Hoat.”
She shakes her head. “Gendry killed Biter, and Gregor Clegane killed Hoat, piece by piece.”

“At least you caused the Goat pain. When you bit his ear off, it festered.”

She shudders and puts a hand to her still-tender cheek. “It wasn’t the same,” she whispers to herself. “I didn’t eat him.”

“What?”

She starts at Jaime’s exclamation, and blinks owlishly. “I--nothing.”

“It was most definitely something! Speak, wench, or do I have to come over there and press upon your ribs to get you to speak?”

“You wouldn’t dare!”

“I am the Kingslayer--of course I would dare...but I would not cause you pain while you’re weak and defenseless. Once you are stronger, I’ll put a tourney sword in your hand and we can bash at each other until we’re exhausted, but for now...” His eyes narrow. “Biter gave you that wound in your cheek? And he ate your flesh?”

She closes her eyes and shudders again, wishing she could destroy those memories. “Yes. I was dying--he had broken my arm and my ribs and he had me pinned in the mud, his hand choking the breath from my body, and then he--he--”

“I can see what he did,” Jaime says shortly. He scrubs his hand over his face. “By the Seven, Brienne. If I had known...”

“What? You would have kept me captive in the Red Keep? Asked your sister to accept me as a lady companion? Forced me to don a gold cloak?”

“Sent you home to your father,” he snaps, “with orders to betroth you for the fourth time, and this time, force you to see it through.”

She pulls in a hissing breath. “How do you--?”

He shakes his head and roughly runs his hand through his hair. “It doesn’t matter,” he says. “My apologies, my lady. Too long inside this small room has made me far too sharp of tongue.”

Brienne takes in a deep breath despite her protesting ribs and only then realizes she’s scrambled to her feet.

Jaime gives her a half-smile. “I believe I must begin locking the chest where Oathkeeper is hidden, or you’ll have it in your hand before I have a chance to apologize for my wayward tongue.”

She remembers her dream and pales. “I will never kill you,” she says fiercely. “I swear it. I swear.”

“I have no worries on that score, wench,” he says, as if she had never once wished him harm in the past, “but I hope you will spar with me once you’ve healed. I need to practice with more than just one person, and my success against Stoneheart’s outlaws has given me confidence that I may someday be able to wield a sword well enough to stay alive for five minutes on the battlefield.” He grins at the look on her face. “That’s much longer than the one minute I expect to last now.”

He turns his attention back to the tub and shakes his head. “A cold bath is better than no bath at all,” he says with a sigh and throws his outer clothes on. He hooks a pail onto his golden hand.
“At least this is an advantage,” he says with a wry look in her direction. “It doesn’t feel the cold.”

Jaime

When he returns with the first pail of snow, he finds her tottering cautiously round the room, stretching her legs with a grimly determined look on her face. The shift she’s wearing hangs loose on her body and he thinks if they’re trapped for another day, they will have to wash the thing before it rots off her body.

He awkwardly hangs the pail over the fire to allow the snow to melt, then turns to consider her again. The story behind about the bite on her face shocked him and he is surprised by the depth of his regret that she suffered such a thing--and would bear the scars all her life--while on a quest he had given her. It had been a hopeless quest from the beginning, he thinks bitterly, and still he sent her away. And she, the great, lumbering, stupid wench, had been grateful.

He shakes his head, picks up the second pail and steps back out in to the storm.

Evening has fallen and Brienne is dozing on the bed by the time he finally has enough water to justify calling it a bath. He strips off his clothes and lowers himself into the tub, shivering as the meagre, lukewarm water laps over him, yet he’s grateful for its promise that he will soon be clean.

As he quickly soaps himself, he decides he will wait until the storm lifts before allowing Brienne a full bath. The last thing she needs is to catch a chill so soon after she had been so close to death. And the storm must lift soon else they will freeze to death in this cottage and their bones will rest here until spring.

His thoughts turn to their looming departure from the Quiet Isle. He only hopes the river will remain unfrozen so Stoneheart’s followers who came with them to this place will not be able to follow after them.

And when they arrive in King’s Landing, he will need to think of something to tell Cersei, if she asks if he received her previous message. While she and Tyrion lied to him thousands of times, he has never lied to her. He doesn’t know if he will lie to her now.

If she asks.

For all he knows, she wants to give him to the High Sparrow, or to kill him herself for his betrayal. He made sure there was no hint of his marriage to Brienne in the message they sent the day before the blizzard began. Whether the raven will make it through is unknown, since he doesn’t know how far the storm stretches. Snow and cold and blizzards are rare in King’s Landing, but he suspects this winter is going to be different than anything they have experienced before.

He thinks of Lady Stoneheart and shudders.

He finishes rinsing the soap from his hair and stands, goose bumps forming on his skin as the cool air of the cottage hits his wet skin. He snags the threadbare towel he’d left beside the tub and dries himself. He almost drops the thing a time or two, catching it each time with a muttered curse.

He glances over his shoulder and sees Brienne’s eyes are closed--resolutely, it seems to him--and he can tell by her breathing that she’s not asleep. He can’t help but be amused--and irritated--by the Maid of Tarth’s misplaced modesty.
“Open your eyes, wench,” he calls, “and come here and help me, if you have the strength to do so.”

Her eyes fly open and she gives him a guilty look as colour climbs in her cheeks.

“Help with what?” she asks suspiciously.

“Why, dressing me, of course.” He smiles at her expression. “Come, wench, you’ve seen all of me before, and touched me, as well. This is not nearly as unpleasant as shit and puke. I simply need your help to pull my clothes on.”

She winces as she pulls her over-sized body out of the bed. “What had you planned to do if I hadn’t woken?” she asks as she limps towards him.

“Wait,” he says, “and if you had slept too long, I would have crawled beneath the covers, naked as my name day, and pressed against you to stay warm.”

He laughs as the colour rushes once again to her face.

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The wind eases as the evening creeps by, and by the time night has fallen, the silence is almost as deafening as the wind. Jaime looks out and sees the stars glittering in the cold, clear night air.

“It’s going to be a long, cold journey to King’s Landing, my lady,” he says as he closes the door and makes his way to the bed.

Brienne nods and shifts uncomfortably as he slips beneath the covers. “Mayhaps you should return alone,” she says softly as he snuffs out the lantern.

“You have a tendency to find trouble when you’re on your own, wench,” he says. “We travel together from now on, or not at all.”

“Jaime--”

“Sleep. We’ll see how deep the snow is tomorrow and mayhaps I’ll break a path for you through the snow so you can see there’s still a world outside this cottage.”

She’s silent for so long, Jaime thinks she must have fallen asleep without him noticing.

“That’s what worries me,” she says so softly that he knows she hadn’t meant for him to hear.

“Sleep,” he says and rolls on to his side, his back to her.

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He’s wakened an unknown time later by Brienne wailing his name. He rolls towards her and begins to gently comb her hair with his fingers. Like the night before, it seems to immediately soothe her and she even leans in to his touch as he murmurs that he’s there, and alive, and that she needs to sleep.

She sighs, a warm contented sound, and the tension in her body eases.

He continues stroking her hair for a long time afterwards.

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Brienne

They wake to the sound of voices and the door opens before they can do more than lift their heads from their pillows, blinking sleepily.

The Elder Brother steps in, followed by Pod and a cowled silent brother.

Jaime looks at them and groans, falling back with his maimed arm flung across his eyes.

He says, “I pray you have brought us food, water to bathe, and the wench’s clothes. We both have a mind to venture beyond these four walls.”

“We’ve come to check on you both,” the Elder Brother says.

“And so I can return to my duties as squire,” Pod says. He looks at the dirty water still in the tub and says, “I will bring enough water for a true bath, ser, my lady.”

“Thank you, Pod,” Brienne says.

“Perhaps Ser Jaime should accompany you to the meal hall, Pod,” the Elder Brother says, “while we tend to Lady Brienne’s wounds.”

Jaime nods. “Of course.”

Jaime makes ready and says, “Don’t miss me too much, wench,” as he closes the door behind him as he follows Pod outside.

Brienne gives the Elder Brother a wide-eyed look. “I must needs use the privy,” she says, and makes her way as quickly as she can to the curtained-off corner. When she’s finished, she limps to the pitcher and bowl beside the hearth and washes her hands, splashing some water on to the uninjured portions of her face before she makes her way back to the bed and sits. The Elder Brother and silent brother have watched her silently and now they exchange glances and nods of satisfaction.

“You are much improved, my lady,” the Elder Brother says and gestures for her to lie back. He and the brother carefully lift her shift until the livid wounds on her thighs are exposed. He touches them gently and while tender, they are not near as painful as they had been when she first awoke.

He moves on to the sword wound across her collarbone that cuts through the scars left from the bear’s claws, gently examines her broken arm and re-applies the splint before he turns to the wound on her cheek.

“A man did this?” he says.

“Yes.”

The Elder Brother sighs then turns to the cowled brother and speaks softly--too softly for Brienne to hear. The brother bows his head, rises to his feet and leaves them.

“You should have returned to your father,” the Elder Brother says once they’re alone.

“I had a quest,” she says. “I swore an oath.”

“And almost died for it.”

“Yes.” Now it’s her turn to consider him thoughtfully. “Why did you force Ser Jaime to wed me? You knew he would do nothing to me while I was ill--you knew he would do nothing to me, even if
I was well! Could you not have simply ensured a brother was with us at all times? Or pressed one of Stoneheart’s women into the role of companion?”

The Elder Brother smiles a little. “Stoneheart’s followers call you the Kingslayer’s Whore, my lady. The title will be spread by those who escaped and by this lot when we allow them to leave the Isle. I fear you will no longer be known as the Maid of Tarth, even if you are forever a maid in truth.”

Brienne pales, swallows, then says, “That is not your concern, Elder Brother. I doubt many believe I am truly a maid any more than they believe I am a beauty.”

“Once he realized what was planned, Ser Hyle quickly volunteered to take Ser Jaime’s place by your side, and to wed you, if need be. To quell the rumors, he said.”

She closes her eyes and groans. “He is stubborn, I’ll grant him that,” she sighs. She smiles sadly. “The Isle of Tarth is a great prize to a man like him, and he’s willing to close his eyes and dream of whores so he can do what must be done in order to win it.”

“Your young squire assured me you did not wish to wed Ser Hyle. And his was not the name you called in the depths of your fever, nor did you calm when he spoke to you.”

She stares, expressionless. “So you forced Ser Jaime to wed me so...what? So I would no longer be called his whore and Ser Hyle could not force me to wed him whether I willed it or no?”

The Elder Brother smiles. “Yes.” He turns his head as if he hears something. “I remembered all you told me the last time you were on this island. While I knew the Kingslayer would not harm you, my brothers did not, nor did the others who were watching.” The door opens and he leans forward, his voice low. “Perhaps this will be best for both of you.”

He stands with a smile and turns to help Pod and Jaime as they bring in pails of water to heat for a bath.

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It takes several journeys, and several brothers join them in their task, but they finally fill the tub with enough water for her to be able to actually bathe. Jaime tests the water then shoos everyone else out of the cottage. She eyes him as he walks towards her.

“What are you doing?” she says.

“I’m going to assist you, wench.”

“Why?” she asks bluntly. She realizes she’s clutching at her shift like some young maid who has never been near any man, let alone this one, and forces herself to drop her hand.

Jaime grins a predator’s grin, and says, “Because a Lannister always pays his debts.”

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Jaime

The resistance goes out of Brienne at his words, and she allows him to help her remove her shift without argument. He pulls a face as he tosses it on the floor. Thank the gods Pod is finding the wench’s clothes—or acquiring some from the larger brothers.

She puts a hand on his shoulder as she carefully steps in to the tub, and in spite of the chill in the air,
her hand is still warm and still gentle. He sees her ribs are sharp beneath her skin, and as a result, her teats seem more full than the last time he’d seen them. Her hair is still as thick between her thighs as he remembers, and he quickly averts his eyes. The woman is barely out of what should have been her deathbed; she did not deserve this appraisal of her.

She pauses, and slides a sideways glance at him. “Why did you go through with the marriage?” she asks suddenly. “Were you truly so worried about what these quiet brothers would think if you simply ignored them?”

“They called you my whore,” he says quietly, supporting her while she lowers herself in to the water.

“Do you intend to marry every woman they call your whore?” she groans as her wounds protest her movements, then blushes.

Jaime raises an eyebrow as he picks up the soap. “Was that a jape?”

“No! It was a serious question!”

He shakes his head, a mocking smile on his lips. “No, no, I think you were trying to jest with me. Is that my groom’s gift, my lady?”

She glares, jaw set. “If it means I don’t need to give you another one, then yes.”

He bursts out laughing and is still chuckling as he begins to scrub her back.

She tenses.

“You really do not need to stay with me while I bathe,” she says, almost desperately.

“If I leave you alone, you are like to drown in the tub.” He looks at the relative sparsity of the water and shrugs. “Or sit and shrivel to nothing because you are too weak to lift yourself out. It is no great hardship for me to help you as you once helped me. Besides, you are, by rights, a Lannister now, and we do not die in the bath.” Only the privy, he thinks, and winces. “Now, hush, my lady, or you’ll still be as naked as your name day when the others return with fresh clothing for you.”

She blushes and he notices the red colour even spreads to her back. For some reason, that makes him smile.

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The snow lies thick and heavy and for the next several days, the air is crisp but not as cold as it had been leading up to the blizzard. Each morning, they rise, Brienne getting stronger every day. Once dressed, they make their way to the meal hall to break their fast with the brothers and those of Stoneheart’s followers who had come with them to the Quiet Isle.

On the second day after the blizzard ends, they put Brienne on a horse. She acquits herself well but when it’s over, she’s stiff and sore, stoically blinking back her pained tears as she limps to the cottage. She’s on the horse again the next day, and the next, and Jaime can tell things are getting easier. In the meantime, he tasks Pod and Ser Hyle with gathering what supplies the brothers can spare for their journey to King’s Landing, a journey he is not anticipating with pleasure.

Winter has come, the dead are walking, the realms have been torn apart by war, and the smallfolk will starve unless those in King’s Landing can put aside their quarrels and work together to save them all…and through all this, his small band must needs make their through these snow-filled lands.
to return to that treacherous city.

And somewhere in those vast lands is Stoneheart and the rest of her followers, and Jaime has not forgotten the howling of wolves and a mutilated horse.

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The raven arrives several days later.

Cersei’s words are quick and passionate, as passionate as when she begged him to rush to her side before her trial by combat, or when she begged him to join the Kingsguard--although she had been even more passionate with her body in that instance.

In the letter, she thanks the Seven that he still lives and begs him to return to her as quickly as he can. Remnants of his army were still searching for him in the Riverlands under the command of Ser Addam Marbrand. Now Ser Addam will meet him at Maidenpool, and from there, escort him to King’s Landing.

“Bad news, ser?” Brienne asks.

He glances up and shakes his head as he crumples the parchment in his hand. “Good news, my lady. We’ll have a full escort to King’s Landing. We will be able to leave more for the good brothers than I had expected.”

He walks to the hearth and tosses the parchment in to the flames.

And at the end of the journey, waiting anxiously and with love, so she says, is his sweet sister, and only the gods know what that means.

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King's Landing: One

Chapter Notes

A/N: This chapter has some Jaime/Cersei in it.

Warnings: Canon-compliant coarse language. Ummm…I don’t think I need to warn for anything else (other than Jaime/Cersei), but if you’re reading ASOIAF fic, be prepared for…well…anything, really. O.O

Brienne

She dreads leaving the Quiet Isle more than she expected, and the day for departure arrives all too quickly. The weather has turned mild and the snow is slowly melting so they’re cautiously hopeful they will have a quick and uneventful journey to Maidenpool.

Her stomach churns as she straightens the cottage the night before their departure and a part of her wishes they could stay here forever and never again see the world that is beyond this island. The door opens and Jaime strides in on a gust of cold air, a satisfied smile on his lips.

Not that he would be grateful, she thinks ruefully, as she glances at him then continues straightening the cottage. Jaime must needs be anxious to return to his duties as Kingsguard, his King and his sister-lover. The realm is still unsettled, winter has arrived, and there is little food for either nobles or smallfolk. There is much the court in King’s Landing must do if the Seven Kingdoms are to survive winter.

But she still has no idea where she will go or what she will do once her presence in King’s Landing is no longer needed. She thinks of Tarth and her father and is surprised by how deeply she yearns to see both again. She could go home then, back to the Sapphire Isle. Convince her father to marry again—the mutilated face she has yet to see will surely help in that endeavor—and mayhaps she would have little brothers and sisters she could help protect in to adulthood this time. She mourns for a moment for the mother she barely remembers, for Galladon and the two small sisters she lost, and thinks mayhaps going home to Evenfall will be for the best.

She left Tarth to follow King Renly, and he’s dead. She stayed to serve Lady Catelyn, and she’s been transformed in to a walking abomination. She dare not swear her sword to Jaime, not that he would ask, and she will not serve the monsters in King’s Landing. Even taking the black is barred from her, even if she wanted it, and without a lord to serve, she’s no better than a hedge knight, nobly born or no.

She sighs.

“Why so quiet, wench?” Jaime says. “I can almost smell you thinking.”

She glances over her shoulder and glares. “I am thinking of home, Ser Jaime,” she says with as much haughty dignity as she can muster.

He raises one golden eyebrow. “The Sapphire Isle?”

“It is the only home I’ve ever known,” she says and turns away. She had hoped to find a home with
King Renly, but that was not to be. And as for Lady Catelyn, well...the less thought she gives to her fate, the better.

“I wish I could say King’s Landing will be your new home, but no one rests easily in that city,” Jaime says lightly as he, too, begins collecting his few possessions, setting them to the ready for the morning. He strides to the chest in the corner and lifts the lid. “I doubt any of us will be in King’s Landing long enough to consider it home. We still have a dead revenant roaming the Riverlands with a band of outlaws willing to obey her every word, and hanging Freys and Lannisters without thought. She must be stopped.”

She spins to look at him. He’s standing, staring into the chest with a pensive scowl.

“You cannot mean to ask--she was once Lady Catelyn! I swore an oath to serve her!”

Jaime gives her a pitying look. “Lady Catelyn is dead, Brienne, no matter if her body hasn’t realized it. And I have no intention of asking you to break one of your precious oaths! Nor was I finished. We have Lady Stoneheart in the Riverlands, and I fear Ser Robert Strong is a similar creature--and he is Lord Commander of the Kingsguard!”

Brienne stares, eyes wide. “What do you think it all means?” she asks, suddenly feeling very much like a child begging for reassurance.

He shakes his head. “I’m not Tyrion,” he says and there’s a note of sadness when he says his brother’s name. His smile is both fond and sad. “He would have known all of what it means—or found out!—and would have thought of some jape to ease my cares.”

Brienne stands awkwardly, and curses her thick head for being unable to think of something to say.

He blinks and looks up at her with a rueful smile.

“But I’m not Tyrion,” he says again, “and without a sword hand, I am less than useless.” He reaches in to the chest and pulls out Oathkeeper. He walks to her and holds it out. “I’ll need your help, Brienne. Only those of us who have seen Lady Stoneheart for ourselves will believe what’s happening, whatever it is. We may be the only ones who can stop it.”

She blinks, then drops her gaze to the sword. She has a flash of memory, of begging for, searching for, the magic sword Jaime had given her. She takes in the golden lion’s head on the pommel with its ruby eyes, and thinks of the beauty of the Valyrian steel currently hidden by the scabbard.

“And if we can’t?” she says.

“We die trying.”

They take their leave of the Elder Brother and the other brothers and make their way through the Riverlands to arrive in Maidenpool ahead of Ser Addam Marbrand. The people of Maidenpool watch them with suspicion as they make their way to Lord Mooton’s castle on the hill, and Jaime prudently removes his golden hand and hides it from view. Brienne does the same with Oathkeeper.

Lord Mooton is surprised but cautiously welcoming, and Brienne is relieved to find Lord Randyll Tarly was no longer in residence. Jaime and Brienne are ushered to bedchambers in the castle while Ser Hyle is sent to bed down with Lord Mooton’s knights. From his grin, Brienne suspects Hunt is planning on bedding down with more than knights. She only hopes he is discreet about where he’s been the last few weeks.
Brienne’s room is pleasant enough, large and unused and she hopes the chill will soon be eased by the large, cheerful fire Pod kindles in the hearth. She then sends him to arrange for bathwater. Once alone, she roams round the sparsely furnished room, noting the bed appears comfortable and may almost be long enough for her, but she carefully avoids the large mirror that’s above the pitcher and basin not far from the bed.

Still, as basic as the room is, it feels over-large after the cozy cottage on the Quiet Isle—or mayhaps it’s because there will be no Jaime tonight to take up space and crowd her on a narrow bed, or to press up close against her for warmth as he did during their journey here. This bed will be far more comfortable than those previous ones, made even more so because she will have it to herself.

Or so she staunchly tells herself.

Pod arrives with several serving girls carrying hot water to fill the tub that’s in front of the hearth. Two other serving girls are behind them, one carrying towels and the other, Brienne sees with a sigh, carrying what appears to be a dress. It will be too small, she thinks despondently, and will make eating virtually impossible as she will fear to split the seams with every movement.

With luck, this Ser Addam Marbrand and what’s left of Jaime’s Riverlands army will arrive in the next day or two, and they can leave for King’s Landing. The sooner they arrive there, the sooner she can leave again for...wherever their discoveries about the dead returning to life might lead her.

Mayhaps, she thinks as the servants finish getting her bath ready and troop out of the room, staring at her over their shoulders, mayhaps it would be better if she stayed in the Riverlands and searched for news of Lady Stoneheart. She might be able to learn if the smallfolk have any lore that might explain how that creature came to exist. Or mayhaps she should go to Myr. The Red Priest said it was his dark magics that ultimately spawned the revenant.

She slowly loosens her clothes, wincing as her movements unexpectedly pull at her wounds. The wince pulls at the scar on her cheek and reminds her of that one thing she’s been avoiding.

She looks over her shoulder, where the mirror lurks.

She doesn’t want to look but she knows she must. She had managed to avoid it while on the Quiet Isle because she was seldom alone and for the first few weeks, far too weak to even think of it. But now...she cannot avoid a looking glass forever. And she needs to know.

She straightens her shoulders and turns and, with a deep breath, walks towards the mirror.

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It is as bad as she imagined, and worse than she expected. Her cheek is sunken, the scars twisted ropes that are a bright, still-angry red, livid against her freckled face. She gently touches it, feeling the unfamiliar bumps and curves against her fingers.

She slowly drops her hand, eyes wide and filling with tears.

She’s gone from homely to truly ugly and she thinks that Red Ronnet Connington would not even bother throwing a rose in to the dirt at her feet, as she turns away, weeping.

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She’s still weeping when there’s a knock on her door. She knows it must be Jaime--who else would come looking for her? Who else would knock in that arrogant way? She tries to wipe the tears from her cheeks but they seem never-ending and she wonders why she weeps so for something she never
truly had in the first place.

He knocks again. “Brienne? Open the door, wench, or have you drowned in the tub?”

No, only in her tears, she thinks, and sighs as she opens the door.

His smirk disappears and his eyes widen when he sees her tear-ravaged face. He gently herds her
back in to the room and demands, “What has happened? Are you hurt?” He grips her shoulder,
hand squeezing so hard she winces, but it stops the tears. “Has someone done something to you?”

She blinks owlishly at him. “No,” she says, “no. I--I just--” she waves helplessly at her face then
towards the mirror and she knows he doesn’t understand because he releases her and glares round
the room as if daring the enemy to appear.

“I saw myself for the first time,” she says and presses her lips tightly together.

His puzzled frown doesn’t change. “For the first--?” He stops as realization dawns and his shoulders
relax.

She ducks her head and looks at the ground.

They stand in not-uncomfortable silence. She starts when he carefully puts his gold hand beneath
her chin and gently raises it until she has no choice but to look in to his eyes. At least she doesn’t see
pity there, she thinks, blinking her tears away as she forces herself to hold his gaze.

“I forget how young you truly are,” he murmurs after a moment, “and that you are not only a warrior
but also a maid.” He searches her eyes, his own, for once, serious. “There are too many scars left
from these damnable wars, Brienne, and some of them you can’t even see.”

She stares, wondering what he means, then realizes he must be telling her to stop feeling sorry for
herself as she is not the only one with wounds. She nods and steps away, scrubbing the last traces of
her tears from her cheeks and grimacing as her fingers brush over her scars.

“My pardons, Ser Jaime,” she says, straightening her shoulders. “You did not come here expecting
to find a weeping maiden.”

He stares at her as if she’s run mad, then abruptly shakes his head. “No, I came to see what
monstrosity of a gown the good people of this castle are trying to force upon you.”

She sighs and waves a hand towards the pile of silk on the bed.

Jaime strides to it and lifts it. “Well,” he says at last, “at least it’s not Myrish lace and pink satin.”

She grimaces. “I should be thankful, I suppose.”

Jaime shakes his head. He yanks the door open then looks both ways down the hall before roaring,
“Pod!”

“What are you doing?” Brienne hisses as he closes the door. “Pod is hopefully in the kitchens,
wrinkling treats from the cooks.”

The door bursts open and Pod skids inside, his cheeks red as he pants for breath. “Yes, Ser Jaime?
My lady, ser?”

“Go to the knights and find clean breeches and a shirt for your ‘my lady, ser’. She can’t be expected
to parade about the Great Hall tonight in a gown that’s far too small.”
“Yes, Ser Jaime,” Pod says.

“If the shirt you find is blue, even better.”

Pod nods and disappears again.

“I can’t go to Great Hall wearing breeches! Lord Mooton will not allow it!”

“You are with me, Brienne,” Jaime says, all arrogant lion. “Lord Mooton will have naught to say about it.”

She glares and opens her mouth to argue, but before she can say anything more, he says, “Besides, the man has the courage of an earthworm. He would not dare say nay to you alone, if you wished to press the point. But no matter. You don’t have much time left in which to bathe before we sup. Get undressed and I’ll help you.”

She flushes a hot, fiery red. “You can’t assist me here, Jaime! This is not the Quiet Isle!”

He rolls his eyes. “And you can’t possibly pretend to maidenly modesty after our time there! A maid you still may be, but there’s nothing left to hide from me, Brienne.”

Her cheeks are so hot she wonders if her face will actually burst into flame. “What if one of the servants—”

He waves away her concerns as he saunters to the tub and tests the water. “Still quite hot. Quickly, so you’re ready when Pod returns with fresh clothes.”

She grumbles but tells herself there’s simply not enough time to argue, and relents.

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Jaime

Damn those big blue eyes, Jaime thinks as he scrubs the hard bar of soap over Brienne’s broad back, and damn them thrice over when they’re swimming in tears. They had dried quickly enough, and he thinks he must have said something wrong when he was trying to comfort her. He’d intended to put his arms round her, to draw her head to his shoulder and let her weep, but the maid had been overtaken by the warrior and the moment was lost.

He had not realized she had not seen herself while on the Quiet Isle. He had become so used to the scars on her face and on her body that he sees them now as simply a part of her. Still, he, of all people, should have realized how difficult it would be for Brienne to face the world outside the Quiet Isle, bearing the scars she acquired in her quest. Jaime glances ruefully at his stump, wrapped in a wet cloth he’s using to wash her.

“Ser Addam should be here in a few days,” Jaime says as he hands her back the soap.

“Are you going to remind me yet again not to tell him that we are wed?” she asks drily as she uses the soap to scrub her legs. He grins at her disgruntled tones.

“No, no, I believe I’ve finally managed to lodge that point in your stubborn brain, wench.”

“Do you think I want anyone to know?” she snaps.

“You could do worse than a Lannister of Casterly Rock!”
“Not one who is Lord Commander of the Kingsguard!”

“Even if I was released from the Kingsguard at the time?”

She snorts and leans forward with a pained grunt to clean her feet. Jaime nods with satisfaction. The wench is sitting a horse well enough for hours at a time and her limp is easing.

“I think you can begin training once we arrive in King’s Landing,” he says.

She gives him a frown over her shoulder. “I intend to begin as soon as we leave Maidenpool,” she says. “I have been too long without swinging a sword.”

“I, as well, but it was your sword arm that was broken, my lady, and the splint was only removed the day we left the Quiet Isle. The bone is still tender. Do you truly wish to risk breaking it again?”

“You think you’re strong enough to break it with your left hand, ser?”

He bites back a grin at her arrogance. “Mayhaps I am not, but Ser Addam most definitely is, and he is the one I will charge with training you back in to fighting shape. He will not hesitate to break your arm again if it pleases him.”

“Do you spar with him?”

Jaime laughs as he pours water over her head, making her sputter, and begins soaping her hair. “Addam could break my head, if it pleases him. No, I spar with Ser Ilyn Payne. It seems my skills are only fit for fighting a man who, for the last fifteen years, has only swung a sword when it was time to remove a man’s head from his shoulders.”

“You fared well enough against the Brotherhood without Banners.”

“Fear adds strength and skill to the arm,” he says, rinsing the soap from her hair, gently using his fingers to work through the tangles. “The Quiet Brothers lurking nearby and joining the battle on our side was what saved us, not any skill or strength in my arm. Finished?”

She nods, and he gains his feet, then helps her stand, water streaming off her.

“I won’t be able to do this once we leave Maidenpool,” he says.

“I know,” she says. “I don’t expect you to do this here.”

“There are no serving girls strong enough to lift you from the bath. I inspected them all.”

She flashes him a look that seems almost amused. “I have no doubt you have,” she says.

“You wound me, my lady. I am nothing if not faithful.”

The words immediately bring Cersei to his mind, and he realizes it must also bring his sweet sister to Brienne’s mind as well, because in an instant, her amusement is gone.

“Yes,” is all she says, but she will not look at him as she holds on to his shoulder to steady herself as she carefully steps from the tub.

He scowls as he quickly towels her dry, being careful of her still tender scars and bones. He finds himself looking at her, truly looking at her, in a way he hasn’t since the first bath he assisted her with on the Quiet Isle. He sees her teats are small, yes, but still pleasingly plump, covered with freckles like the rest of her, and he can’t help but notice they fit perfectly in the palm of his hand as he passes
over them with the towel. Her nipples are small and pink, and are currently hard little pebbles from leaving the warm water for the cool air of the room.

He glances up at her face to find her watching him with a puzzled frown.

“Go wrap up in a blanket, wench, before you get cold,” he says. “I’m sure one of the serving girls will be here soon to help with your hair.”

She snorts but does as he suggests and he sees her shiver as she turns away. His eyes drift down her muscled back, to her thick waist, then lower, and his gaze lingers on the firm globes of her ass as she limps away from him.

He tears his eyes away and thinks that perhaps it is not such a bad thing that they’re soon to be separated.

He has, once again, been too long without a woman.

Without Cersei.

That thought soberes him more than any other.

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Ser Addam and his tail arrive in Maidenpool four days later and two days after that, they press on to King’s Landing. The weather remains cold, but no further snow falls and they make good time.

Ser Hyle is integrated with the rest of the knights and Jaime gives orders for Brienne’s tent to be struck close to his each night. He assigns Ser Ilyn to camp close by her with strict orders to wake Jaime if Ser Ilyn hears her calling in the night. Jaime is pleased to find his squires and Pia are part of Ser Addam’s tail, and he assigns Pia to act as lady’s maid for Brienne...to the extent that Brienne requires one. From what he can see, the poor girl and Brienne seem to get along well enough. Pod, of course, sleeps in the tent with Brienne and continues to fulfill his duties as squire.

Jaime is satisfied that he has provided her with every comfort he can and he should sleep easy.

Yet he finds it surprisingly difficult to sleep without the big, lumbering wench snoring beside him. Most likely because she’s warm, he tells himself, but still he finds himself waking several times in the night, listening for her calling him, or reaching out to stroke her hair only to find he’s alone.

Addam seems more bemused by Brienne than anything else, but then, Brienne tends to have that effect on everyone. Jaime’s looking forward to watching Addam’s first sparring session with the wench once they’re settled in King’s Landing. He grins as he imagines the look on his friend’s face when Brienne proves her skills.

But King’s Landing means Cersei, and his reluctance to face her only grows the closer they draw to the city.

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They enter the city through the Dragon Gate and ride too slowly for Jaime’s liking through the streets towards the Red Keep. The people of the city watch them with burning eyes but appear peaceful enough even as they whisper “Kingslayer” as they pass.

The last time he arrived in King’s Landing with Brienne by his side, no one recognized him. He had locked Brienne in a tower cell to protect her from Loras Tyrell’s sword and rage at the death of his
lover-king, and then Jaime had found his sister in the sept beside their son’s dead body and fucked her on the Mother’s altar.

He wonders if Cersei ever told the High Sparrow that particular sin.

That had been the last time they fucked, but then she hadn’t really needed him, had she? Especially when he no longer had a sword hand. After all, she’d been fucking Lancel and Osmund Kettleblack and Moon Boy, for all he knew.

He presses his lips tightly together then says to Addam, “I must needs wash the dirt of travel from me and then find my sweet sister.”

Ser Addam nods. “I’ll marshall this lot through the city, ser, if you would like to ride ahead.”

Jaime gives him a grateful look along with a short nod. He glances at Brienne, riding stoically on the other side of him, then spurs his horse and leaves them all behind.

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He’s ushered in to Cersei’s chambers to find her standing with her back to the door, shrouded in a dress of muted colour with a hooded mantle pulled up over her head. She is attended by three women he’s never seen before.

One murmurs in her ear and she says, “Leave us. I wish to speak with my sweet brother in privacy.”

The women hesitate and Cersei says, “Leave. Now.”

The women scurry from the room and Cersei slowly turns, lowering the hood of her mantle to reveal her shorn hair.

Jaime’s eyes widen, and as angry as he’s been with Cersei, he has loved her his entire life, she is his sister and his twin, and there’s still something in him that rages at the sight of her short hair, barely an inch long. There’s also a sallowness to her skin and her eyes are bright green and glittering with a dark and angry fire.

“When last you were lost in the Riverlands,” she says, “you returned with shorn hair and broken pride. This time, I am the one with shorn hair and broken pride.” She laughs, a harsh, cracking sound. “We are once more mirror images of each other, true twins as we have always been, sweet brother. You are a knight without a hand, and I, a Queen without power.”

“Cersei,” he says, choking on his words, his heart breaking.

Cersei smiles. “You’re back, and my trial is over, although our little Rose Bitch is still awaiting hers. No matter. Even if found innocent, I will destroy her and the rest of those grubbing, grasping Tyrells. Because now you’re back, and with your aid, this city will rue the day they jeered at the naked body of their Queen.”

She steps quickly to him, pulls his face down to hers and kisses him, deeply, hungrily, passionately. And, to his shame, he’s drawn—tempted—and he wants--

He pushes her away slightly and she blinks lust-glazed eyes in surprise. He’s so hard it almost hurts and while part of him wants to rip the dress off her, to take her against the wall, to throw her on the bed and fuck her until she screams his name, he also needs to know.

“Lancel?” he rasps, his voice husky. “Osney Kettleblack and his brothers?”
Tell the truth, he wants to beg. Tell me, beg my forgiveness, confess all, and mayhaps—mayhaps—I’ll be able to forgive...

For a moment, he desperately longs—yearns—for the Cersei of his memories, the Cersei he had fled to in his mind while the Mad King raped his wife or murdered his enemies, the Cersei for whom he had given up his birthright for the privilege of staying by her side, the woman he had loved so utterly and completely all his life.

If she tells the truth now...

“Oh, Jaime—it’s all lies,” she says, stroking his cheek. “The septas wouldn’t let me sleep, wouldn’t let me go. I lied so the High Septon would release me. I had no choice!” She throws her arms round him, pressing frantic kisses all over his face. “Oh, Jaime, no! No, no, no! It’s always only been you! Always!”

Jaime gently disentangles himself and takes a step away.

“Have a care, Cersei,” he says. “The septas may be watching you still, and fucking your brother will only give the High Septon reason to arrest you again—and me along with you! His power is still too strong to test.”

Her jaw drops, then her expression hardens, green eyes glittering.

“We must needs change that, now that you’re back.”

Jaime’s eyes narrow. “How so?”

“We must needs remove this High Sparrow and all his twittering followers. No one humiliates the Queen!”

Except Kings, apparently, Jaime thinks, but stays silent.

“Well?” she snaps.

“He’s popular,” Jaime says slowly, thinking this is yet another strange homecoming after being thought lost forever. “The smallfolk will riot if something were to happen to him. They support his warrior brothers—they feel they fight for them and not the nobles, who have left them without food for the winter. This is not something solved by might, sweet sister, but something that must be won through guile.”

Cersei sneers. “Guile? I have the wrong brother in front of me if I wanted guile! I want him punished, Jaime—I want them all punished! Now!”

“And if I take his head, the smallfolk will tear Tommen apart along with all who surround him! They’re starving, Cersei, they are dying, and not even the sight of your bare teats and hairless cunt will be enough to appease them!”

The crack of her palm against his cheek is loud and seems to echo in the silence that follows.

“Have a care, Jaime,” she finally hisses. “I find I no longer have the stomach for insults.”

Jaime rubs his stinging cheek.

“Your pardon, Your Grace,” he says and bows mockingly, “but my point remains. If you use violence against the Faith, King’s Landing will burn.”
She leans closer, eyes glittering. “Then let it burn.”

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King's Landing: Two

Brienne

Brienne is given every courtesy and shown to a comfortable room in a remote corner of the Red Keep. It’s much better than the tower cell she initially occupied the last time she was here, when she was imprisoned by Jaime because of Loras Tyrell’s accusations. Even now, the memory makes her scowl.

She doesn’t see Jaime until late the next day and then she sees him only from afar, golden head bent as he walks beside a cloaked and cowled Queen Regent in a secluded garden. His expression is intent as he listens to her speak.

Brienne hurries away before he can notice her.

She sups in the Great Hall, on edge that she will cross paths with Jaime or the Queen Regent, but her worries are for naught. Neither they nor the King appear and while she’s relieved, she can’t help but think of why Jaime has secluded himself with the Queen. The savory food tastes like ash in her mouth and the whispers that follow her as she moves about the room seem louder than ever. She forces herself to stay and eat only because Podrick is watching her with worried eyes.

A seamstress appears at her door the next morning and takes her measure, her face filled with horrified sympathy. Brienne knows this is Jaime’s doing and she’s torn between anger at his pity, thankful for his thoughtfulness, and hope that she may end with a dress that she need not fear splitting in two when she reaches for her wine goblet at dinner.

She decides, half-defiantly, that she will take this dress with her when she leaves. It won’t fit anyone else anyway and it would be a kindness to not force future noble hosts to search out ill-fitting gowns for her.

When the seamstress leaves with one last, pitying look over her shoulder, Brienne takes up her armor--dented and ruined as it is--and with Pod by her side, she finds the training yards.

She carefully tests her arm against a target, gradually increasing the force of her blows. She finally stops and nods, satisfied. Still sore, yes; still weak, yes, but she thinks she’ll be able to withstand the force of a sword, at least for a few minutes.

She goes in search of sparring partners.

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Jaime

Jaime sups with Cersei and Tommen his first night in King’s Landing and is relieved to see the boy is still sweet and pliable and more inclined to talk about the adventures of his kittens than anything else. There is an underlying bewilderment in his eyes, however, when he looks at Cersei, and he’s careful to never mention Margaery’s name. Jaime wonders if the boy is as sheltered as his mother would like to think.

Cersei is more subdued, although it took him the afternoon and a flagon of wine to convince her he couldn’t simply walk in to Baelor’s Sept and slit the High Sparrow’s throat. Convincing her the danger to Tommen was real took longer than he expected, and he doesn’t know what to make of the fact that she truly only relented when he pointed out that all of her plans against Margaery would also
be for naught if he acted immediately.

Mayhaps it would have been easier if he had simply used his body and his kisses to convince her, the way she obviously had intended to use hers to convince him. But those days are gone, he thinks as he smiles at Tommen’s tale of Ser Pounce finally wresting a toy mouse away from Lady Whiskers.

It is too late to seek out Brienne by the time he is finally allowed to take his leave.

Jaime sees Brienne from a distance the next day, as he walks through a secluded, snow-covered garden with Cersei. It is his sweet sister’s first time outside her chambers without being surrounded by septas and initiates or being escorted to Baelor’s Sept. She is cloaked and cowled and more demure than Jaime has ever seen her, but with her face hidden from prying eyes, she is gloating to him about Ser Robert Strong and how quickly the Faith’s champion had been defeated. Not Lancel, thank the Seven, Jaime thinks. They are running far too short on Lannisters to lose another to his sister’s folly, even if that Lannister is Lancel.

As Jaime bends his head closer to Cersei’s, he idly wonders if Lancel will reconsider his decision to join the Warrior’s Sons now that his lord father is dead. Murdered, and no one has been brought to justice for the crime. Cersei, of course, believes Tyrion is behind it, and Jaime is tempted to tell her that their brother has long been in the Free Cities, where Jaime sent him, and has likely been enjoying the exotic whores and wines he can find there.

He escorts Cersei back to her chambers then seeks out Ser Robert Strong, who is standing guard outside Tommen’s rooms. Jaime observes him as he requests entrance to see the King, and pays close attention as the monstrous form with the tightly closed helm moves ponderously aside.

He recognizes that frame. He recognizes how that body moves.

Another revenant, he thinks, as he strides past and greets his nephew and Mace Tyrell. He wonders how much more monstrous Ser Gregor Clegane is in death than he was in life. He thinks of Lady Stoneheart, thinks of Lady Catelyn, and his blood runs cold.

He sups with Tommen and Cersei again that night, and Cersei says, “I understand you brought that brutish woman to King’s Landing.”

Jaime frowns then realization dawns. “The Maid of Tarth, you mean?”

He keeps his voice light, his face carelessly amused.

“Is that her name? The one you followed in to the Riverlands?” Cersei’s smile and eyes are equally sharp. “I understand she is unfortunately over-sized and hideously scarred. Qyburn noticed her in the training yard and stayed to watch a while. He said she seems much weaker than the last time he saw her.”

Jaime’s stomach clenches as he remembers Qyburn’s chuckle when he told Jaime Brienne was still a maid. Jaime has a sudden, vivid image of a struggling Brienne being held down by Hoat’s men as the disgraced maester’s hand fumbles at the juncture of Brienne’s thighs, intent on searching for her maidenhead. Jaime clenches his teeth and the knuckles of his hand whiten round his knife as he thinks of Qyburn shoving his finger in Brienne’s--

“Jaime!” Cersei says sharply and he startles back to reality.
He blinks then glances at Tommen. “My pardons,” he says. “Yes, the Maid arrived in King’s Landing with me and the rest of my men. She was grievously injured in my service and has only recently picked up a sword once again. Tell Qyburn she is stronger than she appears.”

Cersei smiles a dangerous smile. “Some day you must tell me where you disappeared with her for so long, and why. I understand she is your honored guest and has been given every comfort and freedom to roam the Red Keep and King’s Landing at will. You have even commissioned a dress to be made to her measure. That’s very...kind of you.”

Jaime shrugs. “She saved my life, and a Lannister always pays his debts.”

Cersei’s eyes do not waver from his. “So we do. She is high-born, is she not? We must make arrangements to present her to the King, both to thank her for her service to you and as her right as a daughter of a noble House. We would not want it said we treated her discourteously...no matter how freakish she may appear.”

Jaime sits silent, trying to decipher if Cersei’s heard more about his journeys with Brienne than he would like her to know, or if she is simply being...well...Cersei.

She turns a loving smile to Tommen, who is watching them both with curious but nervous eyes. He feels the tension, Jaime thinks, but cannot understand what is fueling it.

“Wouldn’t you find it amusing, Tommen?” Cersei says. “Meeting someone who is apparently a woman pretending to be a knight? It will be good amusement for the entire court, I think, especially after a long day of listening to the petty issues of the realm. We must not let the lady feel like we are rudely ignoring her.”

Jaime swallows the words that are hot on his tongue and instead says, “Lady Brienne is not used to court life, sweet sister. I’m sure she will not feel slighted in the least if the King should forget to call her to court.”

Cersei’s smile widens but there is no humor in her eyes. “The King has already called her to court,” she says. “I took the liberty of adding her to the end of the roll for tomorrow.”

Jaime knows Cersei will not allow him out of her presence now until it’s far too late to find Brienne and warn her.

Not that the wench should need warning, he thinks in sudden irritation. She’s staying in the Red Keep and arrived with him, the former Lord Commander of the Kingsguard, uncle to the King and brother to the Queen Regent. She should expect to be called to present herself to the King sooner rather than later.

Still, he thinks as Cersei turns the conversation to another topic, he hasn’t spoken to Brienne for two days and he wonders if the seamstress was respectful, and if Brienne’s been able to get in and out of the tub on her own or if she’s used the public baths instead. He wonders who she fought against in the training yard and whether her wounds troubled her as she sparred.

He shakes his thoughts away. He has more important tidings to share when he sees her. He has also been briefed on the happenings throughout the Seven Kingdoms and there is much he must tell her.

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Brienne

Pod shines her battered armor, the armor Jaime had gifted her, until it gleams as much as it still can.
She’s grateful she has not been ordered to wear a dress to court since she has none to fit her as yet.

Besides, she suspects she will need the armor while in front of the the court of King’s Landing.

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There are some gasps when the ladies of the court catch sight of her, but whether it is because of her garb or her face she does not know. Deafening silence falls as she walks past the rows of spectators, keeping her eyes on the small figure seated on the Iron Throne.

The boy looks uncomfortable and much smaller and plumper than she expects, but then, he is only a child still, younger even than Pod. He has a sweet, round face beneath his blonde curls and his fa-uncle’s, she tells herself sternly--bright green eyes. The boy is watching her with avid curiosity.

Two members of the Kingsguard in their white armor and cloaks stand at the foot of the steps while the members of his small council flank him on either side, arrayed on the steps leading to the Iron Throne. Standing on the dais to the King’s right is Jaime, handsome, clean-shaven, hair freshly cut, garbed in the white of the Kingsguard, and utterly expressionless as he looks down at her. On the other side of the King is the Hand, Lord Mace Tyrell, who’s staring at her with what can only be described as horrified recognition.

She has her own moment of horrified recognition when she realizes that the man one step down from the Hand is Lord Randyll Tarly and she flushes, vividly remembering that last time she was in his presence.

Lord Tyrell clears his throat and announces, “Lady Brienne of Tarth.”

She bows.

She hears gasps and snickers behind her, and knows she’s erred but she meets the King’s eyes steadily enough when she straightens.

“It is an honor, Your Grace,” she says.

The boy smiles, an honest one, it seems. “My uncle ser tells me he owes you his life while he was in the Riverlands.”

She blinks to stop herself from looking at Jaime and gives King Tommen a small, close-lipped smile of her own. “Truth be told, he saved mine.”

Tommen turns to his uncle, an accusing look in his eyes.

Jaime says, “Truth be told, Your Grace, we have lost count of which has saved the other most often. It is a point of endless arguments between us.”

She stares at him in blank surprise and opens her mouth to object to this blatant untruth when she catches the amused gleam in Jaime’s eyes. He expects her to contradict him, she realizes and closes her mouth with an audible snap.

She returns her gaze to the King and says, “Arguments which I always win. Naturally.”

“Oh, naturally, my lady,” Jaime says. “I always make it a point to let a maiden win.”

Brienne wonders if anyone would stop her if she rushed up the steps and strangled the man. She settles for a warning glare and turns back to the King, whose smile has widened to a delighted grin.
“Is it true you are a warrior maid?” Tommen asks. “Can you wield the sword as well as my uncle ser, before his maiming?”

“I am a warrior maid,” she says, “and I can wield a sword as well as most men, but your uncle ser was the best swordsman in Westeros and not even I could have withstood him in his prime.”

“You flatter me, my lady,” Jaime says. “I regret we will never know which of us would have worn down the other.”

“Don’t encourage her,” Lord Tarly snaps. “She has never faced the enemy on a battlefield. She is no true knight nor warrior nor even a true maid, looking and acting more like a man than a woman, as you can see by this spectacle before you.”

Brienne turns wide eyes towards him then glances back at Tommen. She catches a glimpse of Jaime’s thunderous face and stutters into speech, “Lord Tarly speaks true enough, Your Grace. I have never faced battle in the same way as your uncle ser, or the esteemed members of your small council.”

Jaime opens his mouth but she manages to catch his eye and gives him a small shake of her head. His murderous scowl doesn’t change but he closes his mouth. Then his eyes narrow and he leans close to the King and murmurs in his ear.

The boy nods and stands, a signal that court is at an end. Brienne straightens as he looks at her with his bright, curious eyes.

“It would please me if you would join me and my uncle ser in my private chambers,” he says. “I have never met a warrior maid before, and I would speak with you...” he glances at Jaime then looks at Lord Tarly “…without interruptions.”

Brienne bows once again. “Of course, Your Grace. It will be an honor.”

The King nods and turns, leading the way out of the throne room. Brienne hears the whispers and titters behind her and feels Lord Tarly’s glare boring in to her back as she climbs the steps. She doesn’t look at him or any of the others as she follows the King and Jaime, her spine straight as an oak, her head held high.

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The King’s chambers are comfortable and there’s a cheerful fire in the hearth. Three young black cats come to meet him, winding round his ankles as he grins and laughs and tells Brienne their names.

“Lady Whiskers, Boots and Ser Pounce,” he says and he’s so proud, she can’t help but smile.

She finds herself sitting with one of the kittens--almost grown, really--on her lap while Tommen hands another to Jaime and takes the third for himself.

“I’ve let you hold Lady Whiskers,” Tommen tells her, “because you’re a lady, and a warrior, and Lady Whiskers battles often enough with Boots and Ser Pounce.” His bottom lip pouts out. “And she usually wins, too.”

Brienne meets Jaime’s laughing green eyes as they both attempt to make the cats comfortable on their armored legs without much success. She gently holds Lady Whiskers still and strokes her head and is surprisingly pleased to feel a purr against her fingers.
Tommen beams. “She likes you.”

They both look at Jaime with Boots. The cat is standing on his hind feet, front paws resting on Jaime’s chest, and is staring at the Kingslayer with baleful eyes as Jaime scratches at the base of the cat’s ears with a hopeful air.

She presses her lips together and tries not laugh aloud.

Tommen sighs a little then turns back to Brienne.

“Do you really know how to use that sword?” he asks.

She nods. “Yes, I really do know how to use the sword.”

“Is that what happened to your face? A sword wound?”

She flinches a little. “No, Your Grace,” she says, “not a sword wound. I was bitten.”

“By a direwolf?”

By a monster, she thinks, but says, “No…just an animal.”

“Oh.” He seems disappointed. “My sister has suffered a sword wound to her face and lost her ear, so I’ve been told. She’s on her way home to King’s Landing and Mother has tried to prepare me for the sight.”

Brienne blinks. “I’m sorry to hear that, Your Grace.”

Tommen nods glumly. “Mother was very upset when she learned the news. She’s saddened that Myrcella won’t be pretty anymore and worried that people will feel sorry for her or be repelled by her. Myrcella, I mean.”

Brienne nods in understanding.

“When I saw you in court, I thought...I was hoping...” Tommen bites his lip and looks at her with beseeching eyes. “When Myrcella gets here, would you meet with her? Talk to her? Let her know that things aren’t so bad, no matter what she looks like now.”

Brienne stares and isn’t sure if she should be honored or insulted. Tommen obviously wants to show Myrcella that there are still women uglier than she could ever be and Brienne flushes with hot embarrassment.

“I’m worried people will laugh at my sister,” Tommen adds, bottom lip jutting out in a pout as he pets Ser Pounce, “and that will make Mother even angrier. Ever since Mother cut her hair, she doesn’t seem to like people to laugh round her and she was always so proud of Myrcella’s beauty. I heard people laughing at you today and...you could help Myrcella ignore the teasing. Like you do. You could teach her how to not let it bother her.”

Oh, she thinks, if you only knew how much it bothers me. She glances at Jaime then turns back to Tommen.

“If you think that Lady Myrcella would like to meet me, then I will gladly meet with her and give her what help I can, Your Grace,” she says and is rewarded with a blinding grin.

He really is a very sweet boy, she thinks, and smiles back at him, a true smile this time.
“Have you ever jousted?” Tommen asks.

“Yes,” she says. “I even won a tourney once.”

His eyes light up. “Truly?”

The next hour passes quickly, with Tommen asking a constant stream of questions and seemingly fascinated by every answer she gives. The kittens quickly tire of their laps and she and Jaime spend the last fifteen minutes of their time with Tommen beside him on the floor, tempting the kittens with pieces of string or waggling fingers.

They finally take their leave and walk in silence down the halls, pausing only to adjust their cloaks before going outside.

“Is your bedchamber comfortable enough?” Jaime says once they’re outside.

“Yes, Ser Jaime.”

“Did the seamstress arrive?”

She nods and wracks her brain for something to say.

“I understand you were in the training yard yesterday,” he continues.

She nods. “And this morning. I am weak and tender but that will pass soon enough with enough practice.”

There’s a bitter tinge to his smile. “If only it were so easy to switch hands,” he says and raises his golden hand in mocking salute.

She frowns. “Mayhaps I should learn to fight with my off-hand as well,” she says.

“In case the next Vargo Hoat takes your hand instead of your maidenhead?”

She rolls her eyes. “He could take your maidenhead, instead.”

Jaime cracks a laugh. “That would be a feat indeed,” he says. They stride on in silence and Brienne is beginning to wonder where he’s leading her when he turns a corner and opens a half-hidden and quickly ushers her through. They step into an overgrown courtyard surrounded by high walls with few windows.

“This is where I will do my training, when I have a moment or two to myself,” Jaime says, gesturing to the tourney swords and padded leather and sparring armor piled high in a corner. “Perhaps I, too, need your help with ignoring the laughter of others.”

“No one would laugh at you, Jaime,” she says and realizes it was a stupid thing to say even before he cracks his bitter laugh.

“I am the Kingslayer and a man with shit for honor. There are rumors that I’ve fathered my sister’s children and I am a knight without a sword hand. Everyone is waiting for the chance to laugh at me, my lady, I just prefer to delay giving them even more reason to do so for as long as possible.”

He paces away and her gaze follows him.
He looks so different from the bearded, shaggy man who tended her so carefully on the Quiet Isle, or who helped her bathe in Maidenpool. His beauty and power are on full display now and she’s fascinated by it—and annoyed with and ashamed of her own fascination.

The sooner she concludes her stay in King’s Landing, the better.

“Have you had an opportunity to speak to the High Septon?” she asks.

He stops and her breath catches as he looks over his shoulder at her.

“No,” he says. “My sweet sister has commanded most of my time since my return.”

Brienne blushes as she remembers exactly why Cersei has commanded his time and she whirls round and walks away, making a show of inspecting the courtyard and hoping the cold air will quickly cool her cheeks. She can’t help but think both Lannisters are far too foolish—it’s only been a few weeks since Cersei’s walk of shame and her trial by combat—but, Brienne sadly tells herself, love makes fools of everyone.

She returns to him but doesn’t quite meet his gaze.

“Mayhaps I should speak to him,” she says. “I have more time.”

“No,” Jaime says sharply. “The High Sparrow is far too harsh and unforgiving. I will not have you lectured by such as him.”

“He’s the High Septon,” she says, “a man of the Faith.”

“And still just a man, with opinions of his own. No, Brienne. I will speak with him but it will take some time. Come. Sit down,” he says, gesturing to a marble bench. “There’s more that I must tell you.”

She hesitantly sits and listens as he tells her all he has learned the last few days. Most of it is rumors; some of it is only dark silence. He tells her tidings of Daenerys Stormborn and rumors of her dragons born from a funeral pyre. Of someone claiming to be Aegon Targaryen with an army at his back and Jon Connington at his side. Of Red Ronnet Connington, held captive in the Red Keep until the small council can determine if he is a traitor or no.

He tells her of Aegon’s incursions in to the Stormlands.

Jaime tells her of the fall of Tarth.

“We have heard nothing of your father, Brienne. I’m sorry. I sent a raven on your behalf yesterday but...they have not been returning, so I’ve been told. I hope...”

“You hope that whoever holds the island will take pity on a poor maid, seeking word of her father’s fate?”

He nods.

She feels oddly disconnected from her body as she stands. She looks down at him, and prays he does not show her any softness or she will break. She appeared broken once in his presence and she does not wish to appear so again.

“I must go,” she says with an effort, speaking past her closed throat, then whirls and rushes away.
Baelor’s Sept is chill, dim and empty except for a tiny, frail, old woman, obviously high-born, sitting on a chair in front of the Maid. Her gray head is bowed over her hands, folded on top of the cane in front of her, and her lips move in silent prayer.

Brienne hesitates at the sight then walks to the altar of the Father and kneels.

No prayers come to mind, only memories. Of brave young Galladon and how she worshipped him. Vague impressions of her mother, more emotion than actual memory, of gentle hands and a sweet voice. She remembers her sisters only as facts rather than actual babies. But her father...

She remembers her father’s big, booming voice and how he blotted out the sun until she grew tall enough to over-shadow even him. The resignation in his eyes when her third betrothal was broken but she liked to think there was some pride there as well. He let her train at arms and let her join Renly’s host and she wonders if he ever learned what became of her after Vargo Hoat sent the ransom demand.

She’s finally married, she thinks, choking on either laughter or sobs, and wonders what he would make of his daughter marrying a Lannister of Casterly Rock—*that* Lannister of Casterly Rock!

She’s sorry she will likely never know how he would react.

Would he bend the knee, she wonders, despairing. Would he bend the knee even though this Aegon is most likely a false Targaryen, a pretender like all the rest? If he did not bend the knee, however, and if Tarth has fallen...

She bows her head and tears seep from beneath her lids as she finally begins to pray.

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Both her tears and her prayers have run dry by the time a septon, wearing a plain white tunic that falls to his ankles, enters the sept. He pauses and Brienne can almost feel the weight of the man’s stare before he walks with measured step to the old woman sitting at the Maid’s altar.

“Lady Olenna,” he says with cold courtesy, “I understand you are unable to attend me in my cells beneath the Sept.”

“I am an old woman, High Septon,” Lady Olenna says. “Stairs are becoming more troublesome with every passing moment.”

The High Septon gives her a thin smile. Brienne, watching as discreetly from where she is still kneeling at the Father’s altar, notices that the smile does not reach his eyes. They are as cold as the wind outside.

“Do you wish to wait until this penitent is finished with his prayers, so we may speak privately?” the High Septon says.

Lady Olenna’s laugh cracks through the sept and Brienne sees anger flash quickly across the High Septon’s face. From the half-smile on Lady Olenna’s face, Brienne thinks she caught the anger as well.

Lady Olenna says, “You need more candles in here, High Septon, if you cannot recognize a Maid when you see one. And I believe she has finished her prayers for now. Lady Brienne? I would ask a boon. Come, stand by my side.”

Brienne rises to her feet and joins the little noblewoman who had terrified her even from a distance
during Renly’s wedding to Margaery.

Lady Olenna gives her an approving look, her gaze lingering on the scarred cheek before she returns her attention to the High Septon.

“I have been ill, High Septon, and have only recently regained my health enough to return to King’s Landing. I have come to hear from your own lips the charges against my granddaughter. State the charges against my granddaughter, and quickly. The cold of this sept is making my bones ache.”

The High Septon raises an eyebrow then says, “Queen Margaery is accused of fornication, my lady, with eight men, in the presence of her innocent cousins and while her favourite harper played in accompaniment to her wantonness. She is the Queen and such behaviour is treason.”

“And what is the evidence against her?”

“Statements from the Blue Bard, Hamish the Harper and also from Maester Pycelle, who swore he was providing her with moon tea.”

Lady Olenna snorts. “Both Maester Pycelle and Hamish are dead, and I’ve heard the bard is nothing more than a gibbering idiot once you finished with your questioning. Osney Kettleblack accused the wrong queen as well, if you were hoping to gather more evidence against my Margaery. The charges and the evidence are as thin as the gruel you eat. Why, then, do you still hold my granddaughter?”

“These are serious accusations, my lady, and must be disproved by a trial. All women are weak, unable to control their own desires, and the King is still but a child and does not understand the Queen’s actions for the treasons they are. If she has fornicated with other men, then she must be punished.”

Lady Olenna considers him thoughtfully, her eyes sharp. “I see. Yes. I believe I understand all, now.” She turns to Brienne. “Come. Help me to my feet, child, and it would please me if you would escort me back to the Red Keep. I am finished here.”

Brienne hurries to assist her and can’t help but feel she’s going to break the petite little lady, leaning heavily on her cane.

They turn and Brienne makes the mistake of meeting the High Septon’s eyes. He’s watching her with appalled fascination.

“I know who you are,” he says. “You’re the one they call the Kingslayer’s Whore. Did you come to the sept today to repent your own sin of fornication?”

She blinks and says, “I am still a maid, High Septon, regardless of what they call me.”

Lady Olenna’s laugh cracks once again through the sept. “As is my granddaughter. Come, child, I am tired.”

Brienne gives the High Septon an awkward nod as she allows Lady Olenna to lean on her as they leave the sept.

They make slow progress towards the Red Keep in the carriage that appeared as if by magic when they stepped out of the sept. Brienne cudgels her brain for something to say. Lady Olenna seems content with silence, sitting deep in thought until she finally says, “Thank you, child. I’m sorry for interrupting your devotions, I’m assuming for your father? You’ve heard the news about Tarth?”
Brienne nods.

Olenna nods in her turn. “I appreciate you humoring an old woman. I wanted a witness to whatever the High Septon might say.”

“Why, my lady?”

“Because I wanted another’s opinion of the man. What did you think?”

Brienne hesitates, then says, “I think...he is...unbending in his devotion to the Faith.”

“Unbending in his devotion to the Faith. Kind words but yes, true enough. Do you believe he is capable of mercy?”

“No,” Brienne says immediately and realizes she speaks truly. There was no kindness in the High Septon’s cold eyes.

“Is he capable of forgiveness?” Lady Olenna says.

“No, my lady. There is no softness in him at all.” Which means he is unlikely to grant an annulment if he believes Jaime was still Lord Commander of the Kingsguard when they wed. She also wonders if he would use the information for his own purposes.

“I agree,” Lady Olenna says. “Join me for tea. I would thank you for bearing witness and for escorting me so kindly back my chambers.” She smiles. “I know your father, Lady Brienne, and I know of you, from when Renly wed my Margaery. Come, sup with me, and explain how and why you have travelled so far from your home to become a warrior maid, and I shall share stories of your father he no doubt would not wish you to know.”

Brienne, for all her size and strength, is unable to resist the small lady beside her and simply nods.

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Jaime

Jaime has been in the courtyard sparring with Ser Ilyn for half an hour before the door opens and the wench strides in, face set in stubbornly stoic lines. He’s distracted enough that Ser Ilyn knocks him down once again then stands over him, clacking his laughter as Jaime scowls up at him.

“Go,” Jaime snarls as he clambers to his feet, “I’m tired of holding myself back for you. The wench here will give me a true workout of my sword arm.”

Ser Ilyn’s clacking only gets louder as he gives him a mocking bow then drops his tourney sword on the ground and strides away.

Jaime waits until the door has closed on the man’s back before he says, coolly, “You were a long time in the sept yesterday, my lady, and returned as the Queen of Thorns’ new pet.”

She blinks, those magnificent blue eyes first startled then hurt then angry. “Have you put eyes and ears on me, my lord?” she says, equally cool. “Do you not trust me enough to keep your secrets?”

“‘Tis not you I mistrust, wench,” Jaime says, nodding in invitation towards the pile of tourney swords, “and there are eyes and ears everywhere in this city, especially here, in the Red Keep. If my uncle Kevan had understood that, he might still be alive to vex both me and my sweet sister.”

“And yet you speak freely, wherever we are,” Brienne says, picking up a sword and testing it in her hand before discarding it and choosing another.

“Mayhaps because I have yet to understand it myself,” Jaime says and smiles as she gives him a baleful look.

Jaime waits patiently as she removes her armor and replaces it with padded leather similar to his own. He watches the play of her leg muscles as they flex beneath her breeches as she props each foot in turn on the marble bench to attach her leather greaves. He idly thinks he will need to commission better clothing for her as the breeches she’s wearing look far too thin to be warm, now that winter has arrived. As he watches her armor herself, he acknowledges she’s still a great, lumbering wench, but her legs are long and well-toned and it seems there are sweeter curves to her calves and thighs and hips than he noticed during the last bath he helped her with in Maidenpool. But her ass, he’s pleased to see, is just as firm and shapely as he remembers.

She turns and his gaze moves up her body, lingering for a moment on her chest before continuing on
to end on her puzzled scowl. He grins.

“Shall we dance, my lady?” he says.

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Brienne

Brienne has Jaime disarmed or down on the ground half a dozen times in the next half hour, but she can’t help but admire the fact he always picks up the sword and tries again and each time he does, there’s something new that surprises her.

She remembers the last time they crossed swords, when he had been chained and still had both hands, and a part of her mourns the loss of that magnificent swordsman while another part of her admires the tenacity of the man in front of her now.

She knocks him onto the ground again and he yields and takes a moment to catch his breath after the blow she dealt him, laying on his back. His golden hair is black with mud from where they--and Ser Ilyn before her--have churned the grass and snow into mud.

“What did you learn in Baelor’s Sept?” he asks, panting a little.

She stands relaxed, the tourney sword pointing down. “I learned it is difficult to know what to say to the Seven when your home is lost and your last surviving kin may now be dead.”

“I’ve learned it’s difficult to pray to the Seven at any time,” Jaime says and gains his feet, “or any other god, really.”

They dance again, silent except for their grunts as their swords clash together or in reaction to a blow landed against padded leather armor. This time it takes a good few minutes before she knocks the sword from Jaime’s hand and he yields.

“Now answer my question, wench,” he says as he retrieves his sword. “I know you left the sept with Lady Olenna, who I am sure was there to take the measure of the man holding death over the head of her granddaughter.”

“She spoke to the High Septon in the sept,” Brienne concedes, “and asked me to bear witness. I did not attempt to speak to the man on my own.”

Jaime laughs as he strolls back to face her. “I have no doubt simply seeing him was enough for you to understand the truth of my words.”

They spar again and Brienne realizes Jaime has spotted a weakness in her defense and is attempting to exploit it. She parries well, adjusting her fighting style and before long the sword is flying from Jaime’s hand once again, accompanied by his shouted curse as it does so.

“I thought I had you, wench,” he growls.

She allows herself a smirk, then says, “Yes, I understand your concerns about the High Septon now. There is no softness or understanding or— or forgiveness there, Jaime. He’s only continuing with the trial of Queen Margaery because he believes all women are wanton and has adjudged her guilty based solely on her sex.”

Jaime shakes his head as he returns to her with sword in hand. “The evidence is thin and she should be found innocent quickly enough,” he says and attacks.
She quickly parries and they dance round the courtyard before she knocks him again into the mud. He lands hard, breath whooshing out of him, and he lays still, his face contorted with pain.

Brienne says, “Lady Olenna is worried the High Septon will do everything he can to ensure the Queen is found guilty, regardless of the evidence.”

“The smallfolk love their little Queen,” Jaime grates out through gritted teeth as he continues to ride out the pain. “If he were to convict her without enough cause, he will soon see his support disappear like dew on a summer’s morn. The men accused as her lovers are in the cells of the Red Keep, under Qyburn’s charge.”

“Qyburn?” she says, surprised. “He’s still here?”

“Cersei placed him on her small council before she exiled me to the Riverlands, but he was removed from the council upon her arrest. He is now in charge of the prisoners languishing in the dungeons of the Red Keep.” He sits up. “I have no doubt there will be confessions from each of them in time for the trial.”

Jaime pushes himself to his feet and she finds herself noticing his muscles flexing in his legs and the stretch of his breeches across his buttocks as he picks up the sword. Heat rises in her cheeks and she hopes she is still red enough from exertion so he won’t notice her blush as he turns, sword in hand, and sets himself ready.

She steps in to the attack and he holds his own for several minutes before she knocks him aside with the flat of her sword and he lands again on the ground.

She waits until he stops cursing and he’s sitting up before she says, “From what little I saw of the High Septon yesterday, I doubt he will be willing to grant us an annulment.”

Jaime looks up at her, eyes bright in his mud-covered face. “I agree. Given the outcome of my sweet sister’s recent trial, I doubt he’s feeling generous towards Lannisters.”

“So what are we to do?”

He shrugs as he stands once again. “Unless you have another suitor you’re panting to wed, wench, there’s nothing that says we must do anything. Podrick is the only one who witnessed the wedding since he spoke the words on your behalf, and I know that boy would rather die than betray you. As for Ser Hyle, well, if he chooses to share the story, what does it matter? It’s just another story.”

Brienne stares, thinking that last blow must have addled his brain. “You cannot want—”

“I am the Lord Commander of the Kingsguard, wench, I am not supposed to be married at all. You are heir to a House that has fallen to someone calling himself Targaryen, and while we will eventually regain the Isle of Tarth, well...” he shrugs then gives her a sympathetic look. “I’m sorry, Brienne. You may be the heir to nothing, now.”

“I know,” she whispers, and understands what he’s not saying. Without the Isle of Tarth to sweeten the pot, no one would be convinced to wed her now, even if she wished it.

“Well,” she says with a sigh as they ready themselves, “the loss of Tarth should stop Ser Hyle’s continuous talk of wedding me.”

Jaime’s smile is suddenly feral. “There’s that, at least,” he says, and attacks.

There’s a certain ferocity to his blows that surprises her, and it takes her longer than she expects to
once again knock him into the mud.

He groans as he rolls on the ground before he sits up and says, “At least I can’t complain you’re tempering your blows, wench. I appreciate that. I think.”

She raises an eyebrow. “I did not think you wanted me to let you win,” she says.

He stands and retrieves his sword. “True enough,” he agrees, “but I do not intend to end our dance today without making you yield at least once.”

“We can’t always get what we want,” she says with a smirk.

His eyes widen then light up and there’s a decidedly wicked edge to his grin that immediately puts her on her guard.

“Oh, I do love a challenge, wench,” he says, and engages her with a new air of determination.

She parries his blows and then, quick as a viper, he blocks her sword, feints, and ducks within her reach and uses the weight of his body to bear her down. His body lands heavily on hers as they hit the earth and knocks the breath out of her. Jaime quickly clamps her arms to the ground on either side of her head and straddles her. His gold hand is cold where it rests against her palm as he uses his forearm to hold her left arm in the mud.

Now his grin is triumphant. “Do you yield, wench?”

She bucks up against him but he barely budges and simply presses harder against her. She winces as her recently healed injuries twinge. She’s suddenly very aware of the cold mud beneath her, of Jaime’s body pressing her ever deeper into it, how close his face is to hers. He ducks his head and--

--his teeth are sharpened to points and stained red with her blood as he flips the flesh he’s just torn from her cheek into his mouth and chews--

--she screams as she wrenches away, heaving Jaime off her with a sudden, panicked surge of strength.

He hits the ground with a grunt and she scoots away, feet slipping against the slick ground before she realizes where she is and stops, breath coming in rapid pants. She presses a hand against her destroyed cheek as she takes in Jaime’s shocked face. She closes her eyes and bends forward, resting her forehead against her knees.

There’s a profound silence in the courtyard, broken only by the muffled noise of the people moving through their lives in the rest of the Red Keep. Her breathing finally eases and she risks lifting her head to look at Jaime.

He’s still sitting on the cold, wet ground, one knee bent, his arms resting on his knee. He’s watching her with eyes that are far too sharp, that seem to see everything she most wants to keep hidden.

“Are you all right?” she asks. “Did I hurt you?”

“Do I look hurt, wench?” he asks. “Did I hurt you?”

She shakes her head. “I just...Biter...” she trails off and shudders.

He watches her in silence then says, “It is rumored the Hound broke and ran during the Battle of the Blackwater because of the wildfire my brother used against Stannis’ ships. Sandor Clegane was
many things, but a coward he was not, yet even he--apparently--had a breaking point.”

She frowns. “What are you trying to say?”

“We all have things we fear, Brienne. We control those fears or they control us. In the heat of battle, I doubt you would have reacted the way you just did but the others...if you react this way during sparring sessions, they will not trust you when you stand beside them in battle.”

She glares. “And what do you fear, Jaime?” she snaps, suddenly tired of appearing weak in front of this man, of all people.

He smiles his knife-like smile that doesn’t come near his eyes. “I fear losing my remaining children, even if I can never claim them as such. I fear the dead that refuse to die. I feared losing my brother and my ability to fight and my sister’s love—yet all of that has come to pass and here I sit, wondering who I am without any of those things to define me.”

He stands then holds out his hand and pulls her to her feet. “Ser Addam and Ser Ilyn will meet us here every day, just after the mid-day meal. Our squires shall stand guard outside the door but deliver messages if needed. As for Ser Hyle...I’ve added him to our rank of knights. I doubt any will believe his stories if he shares them and we need someone who can tarry in the pubs and the brothels, listening for stories of Lady Stoneheart or Ser Robert Strong or others like them.”

She blinks, trying to ignore his hand that’s still holding hers. “You were serious about that?” she says.

He nods. “You said Thoros of Myr gave Lord Beric the kiss of life, and then Beric, in turn, gave the kiss of life to Lady Catelyn. We don’t know where or how Ser Robert Strong was found, only that Qyburn found him and Tommen named him to the Kingsguard in time to save Cersei’s life. You ask what I fear? I fear the dead that refuse to die—and those who can create more of them.”

Jaime

Jaime eases his aching body into his bath and relaxes with a sigh. He was as pathetically poor against the wench as he expected but yet he feels...satisfied. Bruised and sore, yes, but satisfied. He hadn’t expected her to be so easily tackled and he knows he will never be able to dodge through her defenses in that way again.

It was worth it, though, if only for the look on her face and in those amazing eyes as he’d pinned her down and straddled her. Then he’d noticed how her mouth was slightly open in her surprise and he found himself thinking how nicely shaped and plump her lips were and that they looked soft and inviting. He didn’t realize he was leaning down, intent on discovering if her mouth would live up to its promise, until she screamed and bucked him off.

He leans his head back with a groan and closes his eyes.

Stupid, stupid, stupid, he thinks, a momentary madness that he would be well served to never surrender to again. Especially not in the Red Keep with Cersei watching him and beginning to wonder why he has not yet returned to her bed.

Besides, stealing a kiss from the wench is a line he must not cross. It feels somehow...dishonorable.

Which is strange, he admits, opening his eyes and scowling at the ceiling. He has seen the wench naked, bathed her and dried her and dressed her wounds, and she has done the same for him. In the
eyes of their peers, her honor is hopelessly compromised for those reasons alone, yet stealing a kiss--now that he thinks on it--seems more of an affront than any of those other instances.

Of course, he thinks as an amused grin curves his lips, she likely would have broken his nose for his troubles--or she would have at least tried. He chuckles at the thought as he slides down into the tub and begins soaking the mud from his hair.
King's Landing: Four

Jaime

He meets Brienne, Ser Ilyn and Ser Addam in the courtyard the next day, and he can’t hide his amusement as Ser Addam crosses swords with Brienne for the first time. Addam snarls at his laughter but he gives Brienne a respectful nod and that night, over wine in Jaime’s private chambers, Addam grudgingly admits the wench is skilled and Jaime doesn’t even try to hide his proud grin.

The four of them meet each day for the next week and while Jaime still isn’t sure Addam won’t let slip how poorly he wields a sword, he realizes he needs to start trusting him and training against more people than just Ser Ilyn or even Brienne if he has any hope of improving.

As for the wench, he finds the madness that almost led him to kiss her appears to be growing. Jaime finds himself enjoying--far more than is seemly--the sight of her garbing herself in her padded leather, and even more when she’s completing the actions in reverse. There’s something about the length of her legs he’s finding particularly fascinating.

He tries to tell himself it’s because he’s so close to Cersei and yet must not touch her, but after a week of being regularly knocked down by the wench he ruefully admits it’s not Cersei he’s seeing in his dreams at night when he finally sleeps. His sleeplessness is caused by his worries about his sister and the King and all that’s happening in the realm, yes, but he knows it’s more personal and basic than that. He still misses Brienne’s bulk warming the bed beside him. Which is beyond mad, he thinks as he readies himself for court. They only slept beside each other for weeks, not years, and yet he still finds himself listening for her call and he still reaches out, half-asleep, to comfort her in the night.

As he leaves his chambers to walk to court and attend his King, he takes some small measure of comfort that this madness is, at least, not all-consuming. She’s still ugly, even if her eyes are riveting and her lips soft and inviting. She’s still a lumbering, great, stupid cow, even if her legs are endless and she does manage some clever insults when he goads her enough. When they spar, Brienne is just another warrior and he is as intent on besting her as if she were a man. When they steal some private time to share what little news they’ve gathered (the ravens have not returned from Tarth; the man calling himself Aegon Targaryen and his army have not yet captured Storm’s End; Ser Hyle heard a tale that the Others have returned but he’s only heard it once and the man was soon arrested and executed as a deserter from the Night’s Watch), they are simply two knights focused on a quest.

Which is only as it should be, he assures himself as he pauses outside the throne room to straighten his white cloak. It’s all it can ever be, he thinks, then opens the door and strides inside.

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Princess Myrcella returns to King’s Landing that evening with little fanfare. In her private sitting room, Cersei greets her with hugs and kisses and angry tears when she takes a good look at her daughter’s ruined face and the scars where her ear used to be. Jaime notices Cersei takes care to only kiss Myrcella’s smooth cheek and avoids the one with the livid scar slashed across it.

Nymeria Sand, Myrcella’s Dornish guardian, and the newest member of the small council, watches with a shuttered expression that Jaime cannot even begin to decipher. Myrcella is subdued and tearful as she confirms Ser Balon Swann was killed in Dorne, but she seems happy enough to be back in King’s Landing and to see her mother and her brother. Tommen launches himself at her and hugs her with all the fervor of a young boy who has sorely missed his older sister.
Tommen is still chattering happily about his kittens and all that he has to show Myrcella once she’s rested as they’re led from the Queen’s rooms by Ser Boros. Nymeria glances over her shoulder and gives Jaime and Cersei a last unfathomable look as she follows them.

Once alone, Cersei turns to Jaime, dashing the tears from her eyes and letting the mantle she had kept firmly over her head fall back.

“She’s home,” Cersei says with a relieved sigh before she walks to her sideboard and pours herself some wine. “The Imp won’t be able to touch her now.”

Jaime considers telling Cersei that Tyrion is most likely frequenting the whorehouses of the Free Cities, not hunting his niece in Dorne, but holds his tongue.

“You seem to be drinking more wine than the last time I saw you,” he says instead.

Cersei glares then takes a sip. “My daughter has returned home after being bartered off and then maimed by our monster brother. I think that deserves some small measure of wine.”

“As does everything else, it seems,” Jaime mutters.

“You are not here to judge me, Jaime,” Cersei says sharply. She strides round the room and Jaime admits he’s glad to see her arrogance returning as she spins to face him. “Lady Taena Merryweather will be returning to King’s Landing within the next few days to act as companion to me. She will also be bringing her son as a playmate for Tommen. He is too much without boys his own age around him.”

“On that, at least, we agree,” Jaime says, surprised that Cersei is willing to let her control of Tommen loosen even that much.

Cersei takes another sip of wine before gracefully lowering herself into an over-stuffed chair. “I shall attend the meeting of the small council this evening,” she says.

Jaime can’t hide his surprise. Cersei has not attended a meeting since regaining her status as Queen Regent.

“All right,” he says. “Tis like to be a short meeting, filled mainly with Lord Tarly’s raging to leave King’s Landing to face the false Targaryen and Lord Tyrell’s equal raging that no one shall go anywhere until his daughter’s trial is completed.”

“Well, both will soon get their wish,” Cersei says and her smile is sharp. “The last of the little Queen’s lovers has finally confessed. The High Sparrow himself coaxed the admission out of the man.”

Jaime’s eyes widen and he straightens.

“Then the trial will be soon,” he says.

“Within days,” Cersei says then raises her glass in a toast and drinks.

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Mace Tyrell does not take the news well, but Cersei maintains a serene and sympathetic expression throughout his sputtering and, at times, incoherent tirade. Cersei has dressed modestly for her return to the small council, her head covered by a Myrish lace veil carefully arranged to hide her short hair while setting her beautiful face to its best advantage.
“You know how much I love our good-daughter,” Cersei says, and her dulcet tones do nothing to betray her true feelings towards Margaery, “but ‘tis better to have this trial happen sooner than later. The longer it takes, the more people will begin to wonder if the charges are true, and we have much more pressing matters at hand. Once the trial is over, Lord Randyll, I will expect you to immediately march to meet the Targaryen pretender in the field of battle.”

She turns to Jaime. “You shall stay here and protect the King and Princess Myrcella. We have two empty places in the Kingsguard. We need new blood there and quickly. There will be dark times ahead if the little Queen is found guilty.”

“She will not!” Mace bellows and surges to his feet.

“If she is innocent then the Seven will surely intervene to find her so, of that I have no doubt,” Cersei says at her most soothing, “but it would be very short-sighted of us all if we did not prepare ourselves for the worst. I’m sure your mother would have need of you in such an event, and you of her. If the worst happens, you have our leave to immediately depart for Highgarden with your family so you may mourn privately.”

Mace is obviously caught between snarling at the Queen Regent and bewildered fear for his daughter’s life.

Cersei gives him a kind smile and Jaime wonders if he’s the only one who sees the irony behind it.

“Rest easy, my lord,” she says. “Soon this will all be over. One way or the other.”

Once Mace Tyrell calms, they deal with other points of business quickly, and end the evening debating the question of the Rosby inheritance. To Jaime’s amusement and secret admiration, Rosby seems to have finally been wrested into House Stokeworth’s control, much to Cersei’s barely concealed annoyance. Ser Bronn of the Blackwater, now the self-styled Lord Stokeworth, may be untrustworthy, but Jaime cannot deny he gets things done.

“Ser Bronn now controls half the food supply for King’s Landing,” Cersei snaps, bringing Jaime back to the matter at hand, “and he revels in defying us.”

Lord Randyll leans forward. “It would please me, Your Grace, to pay him a visit and remind him of his duties to the crown.”

Cersei looks thoughtful and Jaime quickly says, “Mayhaps it will be better if I approach him.”

“No,” Cersei says. “I do not wish you to leave King’s Landing again so soon.”

“Stokeworth is only a day’s ride,” he says. “I would be away for two days, three at most. Besides, mayhaps he has had news of Tyrion, news he would be reluctant to share if Lord Randyll arrives at Castle Stokeworth with threats.”

Cersei’s head snaps round and she stares. “The Imp?” she practically spits. “You think he may have contacted Bronn?”

Jaime shrugs. “Unlikely, true, but it’s been months and Tyrion and Ser Bronn were...well, ‘friends’ is not quite truth but close enough. Ser Bronn named the boy after our sweet brother, after all. If he’s heard from Tyrion, he may be persuaded to share those tidings with me or to share such tidings in the future if we do not try to crush him now.”
Cersei’s eyes narrow as she considers his words.

“Why would you protect this sellsword?” Lord Randyll says, his face full of anger and distrust.

Jaime thoughtfully considers him. He has not forgotten Tarly’s words about Brienne in the throne room. “He saved my brother’s life, once,” is all he says.

“And refused to do so a second time,” Cersei reminds him. “He took a lackwit for a wife and a bastard for a son instead.”

“He would have been facing the Mountain,” Jaime says. “I would have taken the lackwit and the bastard, too.”

That causes a small ripple of laughter and Jaime smiles at his sister. “Come now, Cersei, you can always send Tarly to take the castle by force before you send him to Storm’s End. Bronn and Castle Stokeworth aren’t going anywhere and we need to ensure he doesn’t take it into his head to choke off the food for our city.”

Cersei shakes her head in frustration then waves a hand in agreement. “All right. But tell him he must fulfill his duties, Jaime, or the next to pay House Stokeworth a visit will be Lord Tarly with the King’s army at his back.”

Brienne is the only one in the courtyard when Jaime arrives the next day.

“How did you find Princess Myrcella?” she says as he walks towards her.

“Still a sweet girl,” Jaime says. “Still shocked by what happened to her. She told us Ser Balon Swann was killed in Dorne.”

He sighs as he struggles to divest himself of his white armour and to put on his padded leather.

“Another empty slot in the Kingsguard,” he mutters, more to himself than to her, “and the last of the men accused of fornication with Queen Margaery has confessed.”

Brienne nods as she buckles on her greaves. “Lady Olenna told me last night.”

Jaime glances at her, admiring the line of her leg, then says, “The trial will happen soon and with the confessions...” he sighs again. “If we had a worthy enough champion, I would suggest she demand a trial by combat. But she is Queen and needs must be championed by a member of the Kingsguard and none of us who are left will win.”

“Ser Robert Strong—”

“Is an abomination. Suspicions are already high because of Cersei’s trial and we are playing a dangerous game with keeping him--it--in the Kingsguard as it is. Using him will only serve to ruin Margaery in the eyes of the Faith and the smallfolk when the truth comes out, as it surely will. No, Ser Robert Strong is not an option.”

“Ser Loras?”

“Is still near death on Dragonstone.”

Brienne nods. “Lady Olenna says that if he survives his wounds, he will no longer be fair to look upon.”
“Beauty isn’t everything,” Jaime says absently and frowns in thought. “I would only guarantee her death,” he says, more to himself than to Brienne. “Ser Arys Oakheart is dead, after failing to protect Princess Myrcella, as is Ser Balon, and Osmund Kettleblack is imprisoned and will be sent to the Wall once the trial is over.”

“So that leaves Ser Boros and...?”

“Ser Meryn Trant. Either Ser Boros or Ser Meryn would likely guarantee Margaery’s downfall.” He gives Brienne a sliver of a smile. “Their swordsmanship is serviceable but even I, as I am now, might be able to defeat them.”

She snorts at that and straightens. “I doubt that, ser.”

He shakes his head. “You treat my ego so tenderly, Brienne,” he says and gestures at the last few buckles of his leather armor. She rolls her eyes as she assists him.

“I’m leaving for Stokeworth Castle tomorrow,” Jaime says as she buckles the last buckle. “I am to speak very sternly with Ser Bronn of the Blackwater. Or perhaps sweetly, so he will continue to feed us all. I shall be gone for several days so please, by the Seven, stay out of trouble while I’m not here to watch over you.”

She makes a scoffing noise as she picks up her tourney sword and they walk to face each other in their training field of battle. “I am not the one who seeks trouble, my lord,” she says as she readies herself.

He gives her a wicked grin. “Oh, you seek it, my lady, but you know not what to do with it once found.”

He laughs as she blinks those incredible albeit puzzled eyes at him. Her puzzlement turns to a scowl but then she nods and begins their dance.

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The next morning, Jaime and his small contingent of men are almost ready to depart when the Tyrell carriage rolls up, flanked on either side by identical twin knights on identical horses. He frowns in confusion until a carriage window opens and Lady Olenna calls his name.

“My lady,” he says, confused, walking up to the carriage, “what brings you out so early?”

“My addle-witted son told me last night that you are on your way to Stokeworth Castle. I have been cooped up too long between the walls of the Red Keep and King’s Landing. I pray you will humor an old lady and allow me to travel with you.”

Jaime raises an eyebrow. “I did not know you were such great friends with House Stokeworth.”

“Lady Falyse is as useless as nipples on a breastplate, wherever she may be, but Tanda was pleasant enough, and Lollys is a rather sweet girl if you can ignore her size and lack of wits. Besides, she is Lady Stokeworth now, or she is until Falyse can be found, and I have not yet paid her my respects.”

“We will likely spend the night, m’haps two, at Castle Stokeworth,” Jaime says almost desperately.

“I have several guards of my own if need be, Ser Jaime, and I’m sure I can beg additional men from Ser Bronn to see me safely back to King’s Landing. But since we are travelling there together, it would please me if you would share my carriage for the journey.”
He hesitates then bows his head. “It would be an honor, my lady.”

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“You have been spending a great deal of time with the Maid of Tarth,” Jaime says after they have travelled for some time in silence. Truth be told, Lady Olenna’s steady stare was beginning to unnerve him.

Lady Olenna gives him a thin smile. “I find your Maid of Tarth to be a fascinatingly refreshing companion.”

“She is not my Maid of Tarth!”

“You spent a great deal of time alone with her, roaming the Riverlands not once but twice.”

“We were not truly alone, and we did not roam the Riverlands by choice,” Jaime says and wonders why he feels the need to defend himself against this old woman.

“Yes, yes, I understand there were many dangerous adventures during your time together.”

Jaime raises an eyebrow. “Oh? Has the Lady Brienne shared details of our time in the Riverlands?”

Lady Olenna smiles again and says, “Lady Brienne has the most remarkable eyes, does she not? So beautiful and so very...expressive. I’m sure even the infamous Kingslayer must have noticed, even if he is Lord Commander of the Kingsguard.”

Jaime stares, trying to understand what she’s trying to discover. “Her eyes are lovely,” he finally says.

Lady Olenna suddenly looks thoughtful. “When we return to King’s Landing, I think I shall begin to cast about for a suitable match for her.”

Jaime blinks. “A match?”

“Her honor is hopelessly compromised. I hope you realize that? At least while she was in Renly’s camp and a member of his Rainbow Guard there was some illusion that she was still a maid. But now? After all that time alone with you?” Lady Olenna shakes her head. “If she is to have any standing at all in King’s Landing then we must do all we can to salvage her reputation and unfortunately, that means a marriage.”

Jaime clenches his hand then relaxes it when Lady Olenna’s eyes flick to it then back to his face. “Why do you care?” he quickly asks.

“The King has become quite fond of her, and I know he intends to introduce her to Princess Myrcella at the earliest opportunity. I believe Margaery would also enjoy her company, if given the opportunity. Normally I would have no objections to Lady Brienne’s friendship with any of them, but even once Margaery is found innocent of these charges against her, she shall need to tread carefully. A woman with a reputation such as Lady Brienne’s would not be...appropriate as a friend for a Queen recently on trial for fornication and therefore treason.”

“Lady Brienne’s honor is above reproach,” Jaime snaps, “and all three would benefit from her presence.”

Lady Olenna’s smile tells him he’s shown her more than he should.
“I am a woman, Ser, and an old one at that, and I know better than you how quickly a woman’s honor can be lost and how difficult it is to regain. Margaery’s current predicament is a perfect example of that. So forgive me if I disagree that Lady Brienne—unwed—would be an appropriate friend to my granddaughter.” She tilts her head. “Rumors and innuendo are dangerous things for women, Lord Commander. And Kings.”

Ah, Jaime thinks.

“I think we can both agree,” Lady Olenna continues, “that we have a vested interest in ensuring no one has a reason to question Tommen’s right to the Iron Throne. His head—among others’—would be forfeit if certain claims could be proven. Of course, my family’s vested interest will end if my granddaughter is found guilty by the Faith.”

Jaime’s eyes narrow as he watches the deceptively delicate old woman sitting across from him in the gently swaying carriage.

“I understand,” he says.

Lady Olenna nods. “Yes, I believe you do.”

“What would you ask of me?”

“You needs must convince the High Sparrow to allow Margaery a trial by combat instead of a trial of the Faith.”

He raises an eyebrow. “And how shall I do that?”

Lady Olenna smiles a thin smile. “By convincing him that she would be guaranteed to lose.”

He laughs. “And just how would I do that?”

“By heavily implying that you would stand as the Queen’s champion. Make much of the fact that you are Lord Commander of the Kingsguard and all that the title implies. Tell him you know that even without your right hand, you’re still a better swordsman than any of the Faith he could send against you.”

“In other words, be myself?” he asks drily.

Lady Olenna chuckles. “That is usually the most effective way to bend people to your will, as you well know.”

“And if I can get the High Sparrow to agree to a trial by combat?”

“Oh, you won’t get him to agree to anything, ser. He is not so easily swayed! But he is playing his own game of thrones and will not hesitate to take any advantage that presents itself.”

Jaime is surprised. “You believe the High Sparrow wants to sit the Iron Throne?”

“Don’t be foolish, boy,” Lady Olenna snaps. “The man wants to destroy it and all it symbolizes. He would replace it with rule by the Seven, with him at the head. He is truly devout. And truly mad. But if he is convinced—or even half-convinced will do—that you will declare yourself as champion for Queen Margaery, then I believe he will accede to her demand for a trial by combat. Something he would never do if, for example, he thought Ser Robert Strong would be put forward as her champion. Not that the Queen Mother would allow that, of course.”
“So who will step forward from our poor collection of white cloaks?” Jaime demands. “Or is your true goal to rid the world of one more Lannister?”

“Granted, it is a tempting plan,” Lady Olenna says, “if for no other reason than to glory in your sister’s pain as she watches you die. I have not yet decided who will step forward in your place, but someone will, have no fear. My granddaughter’s life depends upon it.”

Bronn is welcoming enough and Lady Olenna disappears with Lady Lollys while Bronn shows Jaime into the library. He offers wine and Jaime watches while Bronn pours it then settles into a chair across from him.

“You have adjusted quite well to the manor life,” Jaime says with a smirk.

Bronn raises his glass. “It is easy to get used to,” he says.

Jaime chuckles as he drinks then says, “I’m here to ensure you’ll keep a steady supply of food flowing into King’s Landing, especially now that you have proven the Stokeworth claim to Rosby. I hereby levy all necessary threats you may need to hear in order to be convinced.”

Bronn gives a careless shrug. “Done. What else?”

“The Queen Regent believes you are in league with our brother, the Imp. She fears you will sneak into King’s Landing and murder her children, as he has no doubt ordered you to do.”

Bronn’s eyes widen then he grins. “And you? What do you believe?”

“I believe Tyrion is as far from King’s Landing as he can possibly get. The Free Cities, most like. I’m sure he’s enjoying himself in some whorehouse and laughing himself sick at the thought of our sweet sister’s suspicions driving her mad.”

“I hope he is,” Bronn says. “I rather liked the halfman.”

“You liked his gold, you mean.”

Bronn shrugs. “I like anyone’s gold, but Tyrion…” He sighs. “He’s brave, I’ll grant him that, and far too clever for his own good. If it had been anyone other than the Mountain that Rides, I would have championed him again, but even I would not have survived Gregor Clegane.”

Jaime nods. “Oberyn Martell would not have survived as long as he did without deceit.”

“True. But at least he levelled the Mountain.”

“For a time.”

Bronn’s eyes are sharp as he searches Jaime’s face. “It’s true, then?”

Now it’s Jaime’s turn to shrug. “We are all too craven to lift the helm and see for ourselves. And given that one Queen has only recently been proven innocent, thanks to Ser Robert Strong, and another Queen’s trial set to begin within days, it would be...imprudent to expose what may be our greatest asset.”

Bronn lifts his glass in salute. “Now that sounded like your brother.”

Jaime grimaces. “While I would have to kill him on sight, I confess I wish he were here to navigate
through these murky waters. I prefer to cut through my problems than to steer my way around with words and manipulations. The sword is a far easier and more straightforward approach.”

“Aye, it is. I prefer it myself. And now tell me why you’re really here, Lord Commander of the Kingsguard.”

Jaime’s eyes are intent on Bronn’s face. “I am here for information. Your network of informants are, let us say, of a different measure than the informants I can gather—or trust.”

“Low born, you mean?”

“Close to the ground, yes, and not like to speak honestly to the likes of me or mine.” Jaime thoughtfully considers the wine in his goblet. “This will sound mad, I know, but...have any stories come to your ears about where Ser Robert Strong came from? Have you heard any stories about a woman called Lady Stoneheart?”

Bronn gives him a considering look, then says, “I have heard many stories, Kingslayer, including how you’ve taken a huge manlike beast for a whore. Stories of Lady Stoneheart have ghosted in my ear, yes, but only that she roams the Riverlands, hanging Freys and Lannisters, and that there is now a giant wolfpack, led by a monstrous she-wolf, by her side. As for Ser Robert Strong...”

He leans forward, and says, “When my good-brother attempted to murder me, and I prevailed, I sent Lady Falyse scurrying from this castle with her tail between her legs and grateful for her life. I cared naught where she went or what happened to her, and never asked, except...”

Jaime raises an eyebrow. “Except?”

“Whispers have reached me. Whispers that say Lady Falyse made her way to King’s Landing and to your sweet sister, seeking aid. They say Queen Cersei gave her to Qyburn. They say Lady Falyse died screaming in the black cells beneath the Red Keep. They say many have disappeared of late into those cells upon your sister’s orders.” He shrugs and leans back in his chair. “They also say Ser Robert Strong was birthed in those black cells.”

Two days later, Jaime sups with Cersei and her children and he smiles a little at the happiness shining from Tommen’s face and Myrcella’s shy dignity even as she dresses her hair to shield her damaged ear and cheek from view.

He listens as Tommen regales them with stories of the kittens, his lessons, and his small victories in the training yards, although he pouts a little as he tells them Lady Whiskers seems to prefer Myrcella’s lap to his. Cersei listens with a fond smile on her lips and a thoughtful gleam in her eyes.

Her demeanor changes, however, as the children finish their meals and take their leave as on the way out of Cersei’s private dining room, Tommen says, “Lady Brienne has agreed to visit with us tomorrow, Myrcella. You’ll like her, I know.”

Cersei’s eyes are green shards as she glares at Jaime. “I will thank you to keep that brute of a woman away from my children.”

Jaime raises an eyebrow as he takes a sip from his goblet of wine. “As you wish, Your Grace,” he says, his tone mocking. “Do you plan on keeping your children locked away in Maegor’s Holdfast forever or is it just the Lady Brienne to whom you have taken a dislike?”

Cersei waves a careless hand. “I will protect my children however I see fit,” she snaps, “and I have
no feelings about the beast one way or the other. I just do not wish them to be hurt any more than they have been already.”

“And you believe Lady Brienne will hurt them?”

“Tommen is already too fond of the creature,” Cersei says and drinks deep from her own wine glass. She holds it out for Jaime to refill. “That will change, of course, once Lady Taena arrives with her son.”

“Do you wish me to send Lady Brienne away from the Red Keep?” Jaime says and thinks even Tyrion would have been proud of his wording. He could send Brienne from the Red Keep, yes, but keep her in King’s Landing without violating any orders from his sister.

Cersei grimaces and shakes her head. “No, she is your guest and I understand you still feel you owe her a debt, however small that debt may truly be. Besides, Qyburn is quite fascinated with her and desires to reacquaint himself with the lady. He says he has never seen a woman so large and wonders if she is somehow different than other women.”

Jaime’s skin prickles at Cersei’s words. He hides his disquiet behind another sip of his wine. “And how, exactly, does he intend to determine that?”

Cersei shrugs one graceful shoulder and even now Jaime is struck by her beauty.

“That does not concern me. Qyburn has been a good and true friend when no one else could or would raise a finger to help me. He is the one who discovered Ser Robert Strong in time to be my champion, and Qyburn...assisted the little Queen’s lovers in admitting their treasons. As a reward, I have promised to reintroduce him to this Lady Brienne once Margaery’s trial is complete and she has been found guilty.” A slow smile curves Cersei’s lips. “I owe Qyburn a great deal and, in truth, he asks for so little. And a Lannister always pays their debts.”

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Jaime

Jaime walks in to the cells beneath the Red Keep and remembers the last time he was here. He freed Tyrion from his prison because he couldn’t stand the thought of his brother losing his head, and the seven-times-damned Imp repaid him by murdering their father. There are days he’s still not sure if he believes Tyrion murdered Joffrey as well.

He shakes the memories from his head as Qyburn walks up, a sly smile curving his lips.

“Ser Jaime. It’s been a long time.”

“Yes,” Jaime says, and thinks he would have been happy to go even longer before having to see the disgraced maester’s face again, but Cersei’s words last night have compelled him to make this visit.

“Why have you graced these cells with your presence, ser?”

“I’ve come to see the prisoners, the men who are accusing the Queen of fornication. How many are left again?”

“Seven, my lord, but none are, hmm, prepared for visitors.”

“Yes, I have heard the one called the Blue Bard only screams whenever someone comes near.”

“Yes,” Qyburn says sadly, “pity. He was a talented singer.”

Jaime nods, eyes sharp on Qyburn’s face. “And are the others in similar shape?” he asks.

Qyburn gives him an eloquent shrug. “Getting to the truth can be taxing on both the questioners and the questioned.”

“Oh, yes, the questioners suffer greatly,” Jaime says. “Are they capable of giving testimony during the Queen’s trial?”

Jaime sees something that might be fear flash across Qyburn’s face.

“Please assure the Queen Regent that the witnesses will be fully, er, functional in time for trial.”

“It’s in two days,” Jaime snaps and gives him a thin smile. “Not much time to get them to a place where they can actually respond to questions with words instead of sobs and screams.”

He turns away, his white cloak swirling round him, then pauses. He glances over his shoulder and gives Qyburn a thoughtful look.

“My sister says you discovered Ser Robert Strong for her.”

Qyburn smiles. “Yes, my lord, so I did. She’s very grateful.”

Jaime’s own smile is even sharper than before. “As am I. Tell me. Where, exactly, did you find him?”

“He was but a lowly knight, begging for succor and an opportunity to serve, devoted to the Seven and the royal family. I gave him shelter and a purpose and the Seven was kind enough to ensure he
arrived in time to stand as champion for the Queen Regent. He proved her innocence in the eyes of the gods and men.”

“Yes. So he did.” Jaime paces slowly round the room as he speaks. “My sister owes you much, as do we all, but there are limits even on a Lannister’s generosity when it comes to repaying a debt.” He stops close in front of Qyburn, looming over him. “Lady Brienne is under my protection. I will gladly allow you to remake your acquaintance with the Maid of Tarth and speak with her, but never without another person I trust as escort—and I trust very few. If anything...untoward...were to happen to her, and if I were to even think she was in your presence when it happened, well...”

His eyes glitter as he smiles a lion’s smile and he’s pleased to see Qyburn pale.

“Yes, Lord Commander,” Qyburn gulps.

“I’m glad we understand each other,” Jaime purrs and once again turns away.

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The High Sparrow is a much tougher adversary than Qyburn, at least when it comes to pretending to be intimidated by the one-handed Lion of Lannister.

Jaime doesn’t truly try to convince him he intends to stand as champion for Queen Margaery. Even a fanatic such as the High Septon would be hard-pressed to believe a man such as he would volunteer to be his Queen’s champion, knowing he is most like to fail and doom not only himself but the very Queen he’s trying to save.

Jaime decides to use a different approach.

“I understand the witnesses against the Queen are either dead, incapable of speaking, or are on the verge of death,” he says after he and the High Septon have danced round each other for several minutes with insincere words of piety and devotion to the King. Ser Addam and several of his Lannister soldiers are standing guard at various points in the room since Jaime decided he has no desire to become a guest of the High Septon like his sweet sister before him.

“We do not need the witnesses to speak directly to the court,” the High Septon says calmly.

“No, but Queen Margaery is popular with the smallfolk,” Jaime says, “and they will want more than just the word of a torturer when you convict her.”

“The smallfolk know I am the representative of the Seven on earth. They know when I speak, I speak truth.”

Jaime shrugs. “Mayhaps,” he says. “You sold some trinkets and bought them food and that was well done of you and bought you some good favor. But you cannot underestimate how much the people of King’s Landing love their little Queen. I suspect that if they do not have faith in the evidence you present, they will not stand idly by and allow you to sentence her to death without protest.”

The High Septon stares at him without blinking. “Are you threatening to cause a riot if the Seven adjudge the Queen to be guilty?”

Jaime shrugs. “I am not threatening anything, High Septon, I am, like you, simply speaking truth. As Lord Commander of the Kingsguard, my priority is the protection of the King and his heir, Princess Myrcella. That protection also extends to the little Queen’s family as well as the Queen Mother. I am simply informing you of the danger we may all be in if the smallfolk believe the
judgment is...*arbitrary*, let us say, or determined by men rather than the gods.”

The High Septon’s eyes are as unblinking as a snake’s, and Jaime gives him his best smug, cocksure smirk, his own eyes unwavering. “You do realize the trial will be in front of the smallfolk, don’t you?” Jaime says. “Workmen have been working night and day to clear the tourney grounds for the spectacle to make it so. All the people of King’s Landing have just as much right to see the Seven judge the little Queen as they did to see the Queen Mother’s naked teats."

“The Queen Mother confessed to fornication with the Kettleblacks, and to incest with your cousin, Lancel,” the High Septon says. “The punishment fit the crime.”

“Did it?” Jaime asks, with a raised eyebrow. “It certainly entertained the people of King’s Landing, so I’m told. As will Queen Margaery’s trial. One wonders what dark plans were at work to attempt to topple both Queens at the same time. One wonders if the Faith has more invested in finding at least one of the Queens guilty than is seemly. Or safe.”

Finally the High Septon blinks. “The Queen must stand trial.”

Jaime nods and turns away. “Yes, she must,” he says. “Her innocence must be publicly proven and I, for one, look forward to ensuring it is done.”

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To Jaime’s frustration, he is unable to find Brienne after he leaves the High Sparrow, and she does not arrive in the courtyard to spar. He does at least hear of her throughout the day, which does much to save Qyburn’s teeth.

Ser Addam assures him that he saw the wench sparring in the training yards just that morning, while Tommen tells him Brienne visited him and Myrcella that afternoon and told them tales of the Sapphire Isle. Tommen glances round and adds, in a hushed voice, that Lady Brienne has agreed to teach Myrcella to use a sword and dagger, but no one, least of all their mother, is to learn of it.

Jaime nods and thinks their secret courtyard will not be quite so secret by the time Brienne reveals it to the children, and with Lady Taena Merryweather’s arrival in King’s Landing that morning with her son, there is now a third child who is unlikely to be able to keep secrets from his mother.

Jaime learns from Podrick Payne that Brienne will be at the Tyrells’ table again that night even though Queen Margaery is being allowed to sup with her father, grandmother and husband for what may be her last time. Pod also tells him, stammering wildly, that Brienne has supped with Lady Olenna every evening since Lady Olenna’s return from Stokeworth the day before Jaime’s own. Jaime makes a note to speak to Brienne about becoming too obviously a Tyrell supporter while she’s in King’s Landing or it won’t matter how much he threatens Qyburn. If angered or threatened, Cersei will ensure Brienne ends up in the black cells or dead in an alley in Flea Bottom, and lately everything seems to anger or threaten Cersei.

That evening he sups with Cersei, Lady Taena and Princess Myrcella and it’s pleasant enough. Lady Taena is as seductively and exotically beautiful as ever, her eyes slyly thoughtful as she watches him. He notes, however, that there’s a hint of wariness about her in the way she watches Cersei.

“I did not wish Tommen to dine with them tonight,” Cersei grumbles after Myrcella has been led away, “but the old bitch insisted.” She sighs then lifts her goblet and drinks deeply. “Well, no matter. After tomorrow, the whole sorry lot of them will be gone from King’s Landing, one way or the other.”
Jaime raises an eyebrow and pours the ladies more wine when requested. He finishes his task and stands.

“I beg your leave, Your Grace,” he says with faint mockery. “The day tomorrow will be long and I have much yet to do before I may sleep.”

“I don’t want you to go,” Cersei says with a pout and a look in her eyes that is only too familiar. Once he would have moved all seven heavens and all seven hells to see that look and to glory in all it meant.

Now he simply smiles. “Tomorrow is a very important day, sweet sister, and I must be in full possession of my wits if things go badly for the little Queen.”

The lust in Cersei’s eyes quickly turns to anger. “Fine,” she snaps, “go. At least you will not have protecting Tommen on your oh, so heavy list of duties. I have given Ser Boros strict orders to keep him in his chambers until the thing is done.”

“Tommen is King,” Jaime says flatly. “He needs must be seen to be King, especially when it is his wife standing trial.”

“Tommen is but a little boy and he does not yet need to hear all the lurid details of what his so-called wife has done.”

Jaime tilts his head as he wonders if she is putting on an act for Lady Taena’s benefit or if she has told herself the lies for so long that she truly believes them.

He decides he doesn’t want to know and instead bows.

“Until tomorrow, Your Grace, my lady,” he says and leaves them to their wine and gloating.

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The morning dawns crisp and cold although it warms slightly by the time the nobles and smallfolk of King’s Landing make their way to the tourney grounds, pouring out of the city from both the King’s and Lion Gates. Jaime scans the crowd for a tall, hideously scarred woman in armor but cannot see her. While he doubts Cersei would blatantly go against his wishes, Jaime would rest a little easier if he could at least lay eyes on the wench. He hasn’t seen her since he left for Stokeworth and if he didn’t know better, he’d almost think she was deliberately avoiding him.

Jaime hides a scowl as he escorts a scrupulously polite Cersei, Lord Mace Tyrell and Lady Olenna to their places. He tried again that morning to persuade Cersei to allow Tommen to attend but was unable to do so, much to his disgust although not his surprise. Jaime knows what happened during the Battle of the Blackwater and how Joffrey’s power was weakened by Cersei’s decision to recall the boy from the front line and it appears his sweet sister has learned nothing from her past mistakes.

The chattering, rustling crowd slowly grows silent as Queen Margaery is escorted on to the grounds surrounded by Warrior’s Sons and is brought to stand in front of the High Septon and his six fellow judges.

The High Septon opens the proceedings with a prayer then lays out the charges against the little Queen, his voice carrying to all in attendance without, it seems, any effort on his part to do so.

“All the men have confessed to fornication with you and your cousins, or to witnessing such acts with others,” the High Septon says. “What say you to these charges?”
“I am innocent.”

“You claim all these men have lied?”

“Words wrung from a tortured back have no more truth than any other,” Margaery says. “I have no wish to sully my people’s ears further with these lies. I demand trial by combat.”

Excited chatter ripples through the crowd and beside Jaime, Cersei straightens, her eyes narrowing.

“She cannot have Ser Robert,” she hisses to Jaime.

Jaime almost laughs and wonders what she’d say if he told her no one wanted Margaery to claim Ser Robert Strong as her champion. The truth about the giant creature could not be hidden forever and Jaime fears what the Faith and the smallfolk will do once the truth is confirmed.

“Who do you name as your champion?” the High Sparrow asks. “Which of your husband’s Kingsguard will stand for you?” He turns to Jaime. “Lord Commander?”

Jaime wonders if Lady Olenna has indeed found another champion as he opens his mouth, but before he can speak Queen Margaery says, her voice quavering, “I will not accept the Lord Commander as my champion.”

Jaime can’t tell if Cersei is relieved or angry.

The High Sparrow frowns, his eyes darting from Margaery to Jaime and back again, and Jaime realizes the man had actually half-believed he would step forward.

“Then name your champion,” the High Septon says.

“Brienne the Blue, late of King Renly’s Rainbow Guard.”

No, Jaime thinks and closes his eyes, almost in prayer. There’s a moment of stunned silence followed by shouts and jeers as Brienne, clad in blue armor, a blue cloak draped round her shoulders and her helm beneath her arm, pushes her way through the crowd from behind Jaime and makes her way to Margaery’s side. The High Sparrow watches with a grim set to his jaw. He doesn’t speak until the crowd has quieted once more.

“A woman?” he sneers to Margaery. “A woman who plays at being a knight? One sworn to protect a false King?”

Margaery lifts her chin. “I was wed to King Renly,” she says, “and we swore fealty to him before he was defeated and we bent the knee to the true King. Lady Brienne swore the same oath as any of the white cloaks. A Queen must be defended by a Kingsguard, so I’m told, but nowhere does it say it must be a Kingsguard of the current King.”

“She is a woman,” the High Sparrow says again and looks at Brienne. “So it seems, at least.”

Brienne flushes but says nothing and Jaime wants to grab her and shake her and send her fleeing from King’s Landing. Fighting as Margaery’s champion has doomed her, one way or the other, because either she dies for Margaery, or Cersei will kill her for saving the little Queen.

But even more than that: this is not a tourney or even a fight for her life against murderous rapists, or to defend innocent children, or even to defend a not-so-innocent Kingslayer. This is a fight to the death to prove the guilt or innocence of a Queen and the fate of a King and the realm hang in the balance—and he will have Lady Olenna’s head if Brienne dies as a result of this mad scheme.
Cersei speaks, her voice ringing through the now almost silent crowd. “You cannot recognize this...this ‘Brienne the Blue’ as a Kingsguard. Renly was not a King, even if he played at being so.”

Jaime closes his eyes again and wishes he could clamp a hand over his sweet sister’s stupid, stupid mouth. The High Sparrow is more apt to accept Brienne now even if it is just to spite Cersei’s wishes.

“To accept her as champion is to accept that Lord Renly had a legitimate claim to the Iron Throne,” Cersei continues, “and he did not. King Tommen is the rightful King and to imply otherwise is treason.”

The High Sparrow looks thoughtful. “The Queen Mother is right,” he says, turning to Margaery. “To accept her as your champion is to recognize Lord Renly as being a true King, and he was not.”

“Then I name her to my Kingsguard!”

Everyone’s heads whip round to the direction of the King’s Gate and they see Tommen standing in front of the crowd, clad in a coarse brown cloak he had used to hide his bright hair.

Jaime and Cersei’s involuntary “What?” rings through the sudden silence.

“You are not to be here,” Cersei cries now, taking a step towards him. Jaime grips her arm and holds her back. She tries to shake him off but his fingers only tighten as he drags her back to his side.

“Queen Margaery is my wife, Mother,” Tommen says, as regal as any nine-year-old boy who’s intimidated by his mother can be, “and I am King. I believe her to be innocent of these charges against her and I needs must be here to show my trust and to watch the trial.”

As he speaks, Ser Boros comes panting up behind him, pushing aside noblemen and smallfolk alike in his haste.

“I’m sorry, Your Grace,” he says looking fearfully at Cersei.

“You shall pay for this,” Cersei hisses.

Jaime leans closer and growls, “By the Seven, Cersei, be quiet! You undermine Tommen’s authority and your own with every word you speak! Have you completely lost what few wits you had?”

She stiffens and glares at him then blinks, and suddenly she looks like a Queen again, the Queen he once believed she was. She gazes round the tourney field, taking in the interested stares of the Faith and the crowd that had gathered close to witness another Queen’s humiliation. She flushes and Jaime thinks she’s finally realized everyone is staring at her with a variety of expressions ranging from disgusted to amused to pitying.

“I beg the King’s pardon, and the Faith’s,” she says with difficulty although her tone is as sweet as any maid’s. “I had hoped to protect my son from this ordeal and allowed my love as a mother to cloud my love for my King.” She turns to Tommen, and Jaime now sees Myrcella is standing close behind her brother, a hand discreetly on the boy’s shoulder. He barely manages not to turn and glare at Lady Olenna. He wonders how many others the Queen of Thorns has roped in to her schemes for this day.

“Your Grace,” Cersei says to Tommen, “I’m sure you’ve misunderstood what is happening here--”

“I’ve understood enough, Mother,” Tommen says and turns to the High Sparrow. “I name Brienne of Tarth, also called Brienne the Blue, also known as Brienne the Beauty, to my Kingsguard, for the
sole purpose of championing Queen Margaery in this trial by combat. May the Seven allow Lady Brienne to prove the Queen’s innocence in the eyes of both gods and men.” He turns to Jaime. “Lord Commander.”

Jaime is reluctantly impressed. Whatever fresh hell may be unleashed as a result of this day’s actions may be worth it to see Tommen assert himself as King. Cersei sends him a pleading look that he answers with a warning one of his own as he releases her arm and strides forward.

Jaime makes Brienne kneel and swear a modified version of the oath he himself swore so many years ago. Once finished, Jaime removes his white cloak and hands it to Tommen, who places it round Brienne’s shoulders and fastens it at her neck.

Jaime wishes he could get his hands round that thick, freckled, milky-white column instead. He wishes he could shake her until she understood what madness this is, what danger she’s in even if she succeeds... or perhaps he wishes he could kiss her instead, kiss her until she vows never to offer to fight and die for anyone ever again—or agree to serve in any more fucking Kingsguards.

He knows none of what he wants is honorable, or respects her skill as a warrior, but at the moment he’s too worried for her to care.

Brienne stands and blinks at him and the thought that he may be seeing those amazing eyes for the last time makes him growl, low and through gritted teeth, “If you die, you hulking, mad, brave wench, I will kill you myself.”

She blinks again, startled, then the corners of her full lips quirk up as she murmurs, “You are welcome to try, ser.”

Jaime gives her one last glare before he and Tommen turn to leave the field of battle and Jaime wonders at how sharply Lady Taena is watching him as he and Tommen take up positions on either side of Cersei.

Brienne faces the High Septon and bows.

“I stand as champion for Queen Margaery,” Brienne says, strong and proud, and Jaime thinks she looks more of a knight than he ever had.

The High Sparrow watches her with eyes as narrow and harsh as his face then says, “Who shall stand for the Faith?”

A knight steps forward, clad in silver armor and crystalled helm, a rainbow cloak round his neck.

“I shall,” he says, raising his helm. “I am Ser Theodan the True, Commander of the Warrior’s Sons.”

The High Septon nods, and graciously gestures Ser Theodan to his place in front of him.

The two champions face each other and kneel with Margaery standing between them. The High Septon then intones the ritual prayer, asking the gods to find the truth and to free this woman if innocent or to render a judgment of death if she is guilty.

Once the prayer is finished, Ser Theodan and Brienne stand as Margaery is guided to one side. They both raise their swords in salute to the High Septon, then Brienne turns and salutes Tommen and by extension those standing beside him, before she turns and salutes Margaery and finally faces Ser Theodan. She eyes him thoughtfully and nods.
He does not nod back, only stares and says, “I’ve heard of you, Brienne, Maid of Tarth. Brienne the Blue. Brienne the Beauty. You are a woman who imagines herself a knight, an unnatural creature, an abomination in the sight of the Seven and a disgrace to your sex. But you are only a woman—barely, from the looks of you. Yield now and save your life, and mayhaps the High Septon in his wisdom will allow you to beg the Seven for forgiveness.”

Jaime clenches his hand into a fist and it takes all his self-control to not leap in front of Brienne and knock out the Warrior Son’s teeth with his gold hand.

“I am Maid and Warrior,” Brienne says, and Jaime’s eyes dart back to her. Her voice is calm and clear as it carries out over the silently watching crowd. “If the Seven is kind, I will someday be a Crone and mayhaps a Mother. I use the Father’s wisdom when I am forced to judge the character of men. I was the Smith when I used the strength in my arm to protect the innocent. And I was the Stranger to the men I killed in the Riverlands. I am more the Seven, ser, than you can ever hope to be, no matter how many hair shirts you wear, and I pray they will allow me to prove the innocence of our Queen. Yield now and save your life, and you may yet have a chance to once again beg the Seven for their favor.”

The muscles in Ser Theodan’s jaw are clenched so tight Jaime expects to hear the bones crack.

“So be it,” Ser Theodan growls and lowers his helm.

Brienne nods and lowers hers.

When the High Septon gives the word, they circle each other, swords held almost casually, shields at the ready.

Ser Theodan strikes first and Jaime sees he’s doing Jaime has seen others do: the hard strike, believing he’s going to quickly overwhelm Brienne with strength alone. Brienne easily parries each blow until Theodan breaks off and they circle again.

Ser Theodan’s next attack is a rapid-fire flurry of blows and Jaime nods, thinking the man, as expected, is now using speed, expecting Brienne to be too slow and graceless to block him.

She isn’t, and Jaime struggles to keep his mouth from curving into a smile. There are too many people watching, from Cersei beside him to the High Sparrow in front of him, and none can be trusted.

Brienne’s sword clashes again with Theodan’s and Jaime sees he’s moved on to a combination of strength and speed but so far, he’s not managed to even put a dent into the armor Brienne is wearing. As he thinks it, Brienne lands a blow against Theodan’s chest plate that makes him grunt and redouble his efforts. Now their swords are steadily clashing against each other or thudding against their shields, and Brienne dances to one side and lands a hard blow against Theodan’s sword arm, using the flat of her blade.

That seems to enrage the man and now they’re battling in earnest and Theodan’s sword clangs against Brienne’s helm from a lucky blow she fails to block, causing her to stagger and shake her head. Theodan presses his advantage and Jaime’s hand tightens round his own sword as the Warrior’s Son rains blow after blow against Brienne’s shield and sword. He manages another glancing blow against her helm followed by one that knicks her chest plate, before landing a blow that sends Brienne to one knee.

Theodan’s laugh rings through the crisp air. “Do you yield, woman?” he shouts at her.
She’s back on her feet before he even finishes speaking and Jaime thinks she needs to end it. *Now.*

Jaime wonders if he spoke aloud because Brienne now has control of the battle, landing blow after blow against his chest, his arms, his helm, herding Ser Theodan round the arena and keeping him constantly on the defensive. Then she does something that almost makes Jaime laugh: she knocks Theodan’s shield aside with her own, and goes in low and hard to tackle the knight to the ground.

She straddles the man, one knee grinding into his sword arm as she bashes his helmed head against the ground with each word she shouts in his face: “Yield! *Yield!* DO YOU YIELD?”

“HE YIELDS!”

Brienne slams Ser Theodan’s head against the ground twice more before the words penetrate her battle-lust and she stops. She turns her helmed head towards the High Septon. Her breathing is loud and harsh as the crowd holds its breath, and Jaime wonders how so many people can be so silent.

“He yields,” the High Septon says again.

“High Septon,” says Ser Theodan in faint and dazed protest.

“Rise, Brienne the Blue of King Tommen’s Kingsguard,” the High Septon says.

She stands and lifts off her helm. Her face is gleaming with sweat, her hair plastered against her scalp, and Jaime has never been so relieved to see her face as he is in that moment.

The High Septon considers her thoughtfully, then turns to the waiting crowd. “The Seven have rendered their judgment. Queen Margaery is innocent of the charges against her.”

The watching crowd, nobles and smallfolk alike, burst into cheers while Jaime can hear Cersei’s teeth grinding through her forced smile. Tommen is jumping up and down with Myrcella and both are squealing and laughing and crying, forgetting for a moment that he’s the King and she’s a princess. Jaime is caught in the immediate pandemonium and by the time he extricates himself from the people around him, it’s in time to see two Warrior’s Sons assisting Ser Theodan from the arena and Brienne’s broad back, still cloaked in white, striding rapidly towards the Lion Gate.

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**A/N1:** Man, the only thing I write worse than fight scenes is smut. WHY have I inflicted this fic on myself??

**A/N2:** Yeah, I think I hand-waved a few things that might be contradicted in canon…but that’s what fanfic if all about, right? Riigght??
Chapter Notes

Warning: Rape mention.

Brienne

Pod has removed her armor, leaving her in her sweat-soaked tunic and breeches, when the knock she’s been half-expecting finally lands on her door.

Well.

Thunderous pounding, really.

She gives Pod a reassuring nod and he nervously opens the door.

“Leave us,” Jaime orders as he pushes past her squire, all power and grace and barely controlled raging lion.

She gives Pod another nod and he looks relieved as he hurries out, closing the door softly behind him. Brienne barely notices, warily watching Jaime as he prowls the bedchamber.

“I thought I told you to stay out of trouble while I was in Stokeworth,” he finally says as he returns to the door and lands another thundering blow against it with his gold hand. He grins at the startled yelp from the other side.

He yanks open the door and glowers at Pod. “Go--make yourself useful somewhere else. I swear I will not lay a hand on your ‘lady, ser’.”

Pod begins stammering a reply but Brienne says, “It’s all right, Pod. Truly. Go to the kitchens and see if you can charm a treat from the cooks.”

Jaime closes the door on Pod’s worried face.

“Jaime,” she scolds and he laughs, a hard, mirthless sound as he returns to prowling the room.

“You are Maid and Warrior,” he says, mocking, “someday Crone and Mother. Father and Smith and Stranger to those you fought in the Riverlands.” He huffs what might be a chuckle, shaking his head. “Oh, Brienne, you are the stuff songs are made of and bards can only dream about.”

“Are you...pleased by that?” she asks cautiously and could kick herself for the stupidity of the question.

“No, no--I’m furious, just in case you haven’t noticed,” he says lightly, and now his grin is dangerous, his green eyes glittering. “Almost as furious as when I realized you’d lied to me at Pennytree. Which, to be fair, was the moment you began speaking.”

He stops in front of her and even though she has an inch or two on him, she feels as if he’s looming over her. Her heart is beating rapidly, both from the rush of the battle and because this is the closest
he’s been to her without a sword in his hand since Maidenpool. She feels almost as naked now as then, standing here in front of him without her armor as a shield.

“I suppose this is why you’ve been avoiding me the last few days,” he purrs.

“I was not--!”

“You’re a hopelessly bad liar, Brienne, late of King Renly’s Rainbow Guard. Brienne the Blue. Brienne the Beauty.” She flushes at his biting sarcasm but raises her chin, a mulish set to her mouth. “Tell me, wench,” Jaime says, “what was the plan if Tommen hadn’t managed to escape from Ser Boros’ not-so-firm clutches and make it to the tourney grounds in time to name you as Kingsguard?”

“If Cersei hadn’t said anything, then it wouldn’t have been needed!” she snaps and Jaime raises his eyebrow.

“And just how can you be sure of that?” He leans closer and it takes all her courage not to shrink away beneath those accusing green eyes. “What did you promise the High Sparrow so he would let you fight?”

“I--I--I didn’t promise him anything! Lord--Lord Mace asked him some questions, that’s all.”

“Oh, I see. Lord Mace Tyrell, with all the in-born subtlety of a brick to the back of the head, went to the Great Sept and just happened to strike up a conversation with the High Sparrow about whether someone who once belonged to the Kingsguard of a pretender King would qualify to stand as champion for the Queen. That would have raised no suspicions at all. Naturally.”

“It didn’t matter if the High Septon was suspicious or not. Margaery planned on appealing to the people if the Faith proved stubborn. A trial by combat is a right and to avoid being torn apart by the watching smallfolk, the High Septon would have been forced to accept either me as champion or to allow Lord Mace to send to Highgarden for Ser Parman the Purple. If Cersei hadn’t spoken, Tommen would never have needed to step in.”

“Did you know Tommen was in the crowd? Just in case?”

She doesn’t flinch beneath his accusing stare. “I knew he was to try to slip away from Ser Boros, to hide in the crowd, but he was only to watch. We did not want him to distress his mother.”

“No,” Jaime growls and spins away from her, “we most certainly do not want to distress his mother.”

The words hit her heart with a small stab of pain and she grimaces then quickly smooths her expression as he turns back to face her.

He gives her a searching look before his lips curve into a slight smile as he says, “We will never convince Cersei this wasn’t all a Tyrell plot to put another of their pets in the Kingsguard.”

“I am not truly in the Kingsguard,” Brienne sighs. “You heard Tommen--you changed the oath yourself! He gave me the white cloak for the sole purpose of defending the Queen in her trial by combat. I have done so--successfully, I might add! You could at least be grateful that I saved the Queen’s life!”

“Oh,” he says as he once again prowls closer, and now he has that strangely intense, indecipherable look in his eyes that she’s been noticing on occasion, “I’m so very grateful.”

She stands her ground but he doesn’t stop until their noses almost touch. For one mad moment, she thinks all she has to do is close the small distance and her mouth will be on his. It would be her first
true kiss and then she would know what that was like, even if only once—and she flushes both at her own outrageous thoughts and at his undoubted reaction to such a thing. She had once sent Owen Inchfield tumbling into a campfire when he dared steal a kiss; she can’t imagine Jaime would do any less...and then he would send her as far away from King’s Landing—and him—as he could.

“You have no idea what you’ve done,” he says, breaking through her whirling thoughts.

“What I’ve done?” She takes a hasty step away and now it’s her turn to pace round her small chamber. “No, I don’t know what I’ve done, so why don’t you tell me, Jaime, instead of trying to, what? Make me feel guilty that I could stand as Margaery’s champion when you could not?”

She stops in mid-stride when she realizes what she’s said. She bites her lip and closes her eyes and waits for his anger to explode.

There’s only tense silence for long moments until Brienne can take no more and risks a glance at him. He’s standing where she left him and he’s staring pensively at his gold hand, turning it this way and that. He seems to feel the weight of her gaze because he half-turns his head and gives her a sidelong look. Her breath catches because the beastly man is truly beautiful even when he’s being an ass, and she tries not to shiver at the memory of how close he had been to her just a few moments before.

“Mayhaps you are right,” he says, his eyes steady on hers.

“I’m sor—”

“No, no, not about standing as champion. Well, you’re right about that, too—I am envious that you can still wield a sword as easily as you ever could and I am less skilled than a newborn babe and likely always will be. But that’s not what I’m talking about. I think we shall need to take a ride soon, outside King’s Landing, where we have less chance of being overheard.”

She scowls.

“Until then, do yourself—and me!—a favor: don’t accept food or drink from anyone you don’t know, especially when eating alone. In fact, you may even wish to cook for yourself from now on.”

Her scowl deepens. “What?”

“Trust me on this, Brienne.” He turns and walks to the door. “And be on your guard against any dirty urchins who may come to you and beg your aid, especially if they try to lead you into darkened corners of the Keep or the city.”

He opens the door and pauses to give her a humorless smile, his eyes dark with that same strange, indecipherable expression he’d had earlier.

“You should be proud of me, wench,” he says.

She shakes her head in wordless confusion.

“I didn’t lay a hand on you, just like I promised Pod. You might even think I’m learning to keep my vows.”

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Jaime
That night, Jaime finds himself almost fondly remembering his time with Robb Stark. At least he hadn't had to listen to the endless prattle of the small council. The only one who speaks when she has something of value to add is Nymeria Sand. If she wasn't watching them all so carefully, Jaime would have welcomed her, if only for the voice of sanity she appears to be providing.

Jaime amuses himself with remembering the clear beauty of Brienne’s blue eyes as Cersei says some meaningless words of gratitude about the little Queen being judged innocent by the gods. He thinks they should both be grateful he promised Pod he would not lay a hand on her. If he had touched her, he would have used more than his hand.

He’s half-listening to Cersei tell the council that Tommen was to honor Brienne’s victory at a private supper the following evening while he imagines what Brienne would have done if he had kissed her, run his hand over her firm ass before slipping it beneath her tunic to explore the acres of warm skin it was hiding.

“We needs must do more to reward Lady Brienne,” Lord Mace says, every part of him beaming with relief.

Lord Tarly sneers. “She will have no reward from me,” he says flatly. “If her character holds true, she will wish to join our march to face the Targaryen pretender and I will not again have her in my camp. She disrupted Renly’s host enough with her ill-advised presence, causing otherwise good and noble knights to swarm round her, acting the suitor.”

Jaime’s daydreaming stops abruptly as he snaps his head round to stare at the man.

Cersei laughs. “The poor creature does not seem the type to inspire such devotion.”

“It was not her person that inspired such lust, Your Grace,” Lord Tarly says, “but the pot of gold dragons that was the prize to whoever took her maidenhead. I put a stop to it as soon as I learned of it.”

“That was kind of you,” Nymeria says.

“What they did to her was nothing to me. It would have been better if they had raped the girl and been done with it. At least then I could have dealt with the rapers and set an example for the rest. As it was, the wager was disrupting the discipline of the men and the amount of gold at stake would have caused discord between the one who won and those who lost. The stupid girl had no idea until I told her. I think she almost believed they were courting her for herself!” Tarly shakes his head. “She’s passable with a sword, I’ll grant you, but she is as slow of wit as she is ugly, and easily fooled.”

Jaime’s teeth are clenched so tightly his jaws ache. He dearly wishes to leap across the table at the arrogant piece of shit but he knows Cersei would wonder at his reaction as would the others. He glances round to find Nymeria watching him with a thoughtful expression. He relaxes his posture and meets her gaze with a challenging one of his own. She raises an eyebrow and flicks her glance towards Cersei and then back to Randyll Tarly, who has already dismissed Brienne and is now speaking of his plans to lead the King’s forces to deal with Aegon Targaryen’s Golden Company.

“I will be taking Ser Ronnet with me, of course,” Tarly says. “He claims he is loyal to King Tommen but we shall see how loyal he is when he’s facing his cousin and his natural born son is hostage.”

“Yes, yes, do what you must,” Cersei says, dismissing the matter. “You shall march as soon as possible and defeat this Targaryen pretender while he’s still battering himself against the walls of
Storm’s End. Don’t forget: we still have Stannis in the North and when winter is over, we shall have to deal with him as well.”

For a moment, Jaime’s hopes rise that his sweet sister may be growing in to her role as Regent.

Those hopes are dashed as she turns to him and says, “And now we needs must talk about cleansing the Kingsguard. Lord Commander.”

His eyes widen. “Lady Brienne--”

She cuts off his words with a graceful wave of her hand. “Lady Brienne is but a symptom of what the Kingsguard has become under your leadership--or should I say, your absence? You have been gone more than you have been in King’s Landing since being named Lord Commander.”

His eyes narrow. “Well, a year or more of that was because I was held captive by the Starks,” he says mildly.

“And then you disappeared into the Riverlands, leaving both your Queens without adequate Kingsguards to stand for them. And Ser Boros Blount allowed the King--a nine-year-old boy!--to slip away from him yesterday to attend a trial I specifically forbade him to attend!”

“Your son is King, child or no,” Jaime says, “and you are but Regent. The fact Ser Boros sought to prevent Tommen from slipping through his fingers tells me where his loyalties truly lie.”

“So you agree he needs be dismissed from the Kingsguard? Again?”

“Kingsguards serve for life, Your Grace, or have you forgotten?”

She smiles. “You are the one who seems to have forgotten. King Joffrey--” her voice cracks a little on the name, “--set a new precedent when he dismissed Ser Barristan Selmy from the Kingsguard and named you in his place as Lord Commander. Was that a mistake?”

Jaime tries to read her eyes, her expression, but he can’t decipher what lies beneath her words. At least not here, with an audience to hinder the words he can speak or the actions he can take.

“What King Joffrey did was…unique. To make it commonplace is to go against all of the traditions, values and honor of the Kingsguard.”

Lord Randyll Tarly barks a harsh laugh. “You speak of the honor of the Kingsguard? Are you not the one who destroyed that honor when you murdered your King?”

Jaime turns and gives him a knife-like, dangerous smile. “He was your King, too, Lord Tarly, and a mad one at that.”

“This petty squabbling is beneath all of us, and it shames us in front of our newest member of the small council,” Cersei says with a coldly gracious smile towards Nymeria Sand. “When the time comes, Lord Commander, I expect that you will assist Tommen with dismissing Ser Boros, Ser Meryn and Ser Loras from the Kingsguard, and this--this---Brienne the Beauty, as well. She, at least, is easily dealt with. We will give her some gold and send her on her way.”

“She is a high-born lady,” Lord Mace squawks in protest.

“Who no longer has a House,” Cersei reminds him. “She is now as much a beggar as any of the others who have come to King’s Landing. She pretends to be a knight; let her swear her sword to some worthy lord and be done with it.” She glances at the horrified faces staring at her from round
the table and gives them a graceful shrug. “We can’t reward her too handsomely or before you
know it, more ladies will choose the sword than the marriage bed.”

There are polite smiles round the table at her words.

“But enough of the Kingsguard and Lady Brienne,” she says, “what of the Iron Bank?”

Ser Harys Swyft says, “They have once again refused to loan us more money until the Crown has
paid back what they have already provided.”

Cersei shrugs. “No matter. I have sent a raven to Casterly Rock ordering my castellan to increase
the output of the mines, by any means necessary.”

Jaime frowns. “The mines already work round the clock, Your Grace, and with a full contingent of
miners. Any increases will be dangerous for both the workers and the mines themselves.”

Cersei scowls. “Now you sound like our cousin Damion, nattering on about the safety of the mines.
I will tell you what I told him: we need money, sweet brother, and much of it, if we are to keep the
army clothed and armored while they march against this new invader.”

“What of money to buy food for the people of the realm?” Jaime asks. “Or at least those in King’s
Landing?”

“We have Stokeworth on one side with their stores, and Highgarden on the other with theirs. King’s
Landing will not starve. The rest of the realm, well, we have all been devastated by these never-
ending wars. We cannot hope to feed them all.”

“We will be forced to, once the people arrive in King’s Landing, begging for food and shelter.
Winter has only just begun, Your Grace, and the smallfolk are already starving.”

“We will deal with it when the time comes,” she says, giving him a warning look. “Once we have
pushed this so-called Targaryen back across the Narrow Sea, we will reach out to the Free Cities and
the Summer Isles, see what stores we can obtain from them.”

She turns to Qyburn, back on the small council as the Master of Whisperers. “Have you released the
men who accused the little Queen of treason?”

“Ah, unfortunately, the questioning they endured by both the Crown and the High Septon has--alas--
broken them all in mind and spirit. They refuse to leave the cells, Your Grace. I fear we shall be
burdened with their care for as long as they live.”

Tarly scowls. “Why? Release them and let them live or die as the gods decree.”

“That is not...advisable,” Qyburn says. “They repeat their confessions to any who come near. The
little Queen has been found innocent by the gods and that is how it must remain. We do not wish to
add fuel to any lingering rumors.”

Cersei looks wistful for a moment then reluctantly nods her head. “True,” she sighs, and Jaime
wonders if he’s the only one who realizes just disappointed she is with the decision.

“Have no fear, Your Grace,” Qyburn says, “we will not be burdened for long.”

Jaime’s hackles rise as Qyburn smiles beneficently at Cersei, who gives him a long, thoughtful look
before she, too, smiles.
“I leave them in your more than capable hands,” she says. “Anything else?” she asks, turning back to the others on the small council.

They are all silent and she stands and smiles. “Thank you, my lords, Nymeria. I’m grateful that now the little Queen is out of danger, we can turn our attention to the other problems that are vexing us all.”

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Brienne

Brienne arrives at Cersei’s private quarters with Tommen, Margaery and Myrcella, feeling uncomfortable in a blue dress that at least fits better than other dresses she’s owned. But the seamstress had attempted to make the most of her small breasts and she has to keep reminding herself not to tug at the bodice once Jaime’s mocking eyes skim over her and returns to her face, a slight smile curving his lips.

Well, at least she knows her hair, coarse as it is, is shining clean and prettily arranged; Pia had labored long and hard to make it so. It’s something to cling to when Tommen presents her to Queen Cersei, who’s even more beautiful when seen close to than from a distance. Cersei’s head is artfully covered with a delicate Myrish lace veil that matches the demure gown she’s wearing, setting her cheekbones and brilliant green eyes to an advantage. Those eyes are even more mocking than her brother’s, and Brienne flushes uncomfortably as Cersei exchanges amused glances with Lady Taena Merryweather, introduced to Brienne as Cersei’s most favored companion.

Brienne remembers Lady Taena from King Renly’s wedding to Margaery, and, as she awkwardly stumbles through a bow-turned-curtsy, any faint hope she had that this may be a pleasant enough evening melts away like snow on a flame.

Lord Mace Tyrell and his mother, Lady Olenna, soon arrive, looking smug while warily watching Cersei, Jaime and Lady Taena, who are warily watching them in their turn. Everyone sits, and Jaime seems amused by Cersei’s arch politeness and Margaery’s and Olenna’s equally arch responses, with Lady Taena occasionally adding in a honeyed word here and there while Lord Mace seems oblivious to the verbal sparring between the women.

Brienne sits, stolid and silent, speaking only when spoken to, and desperately trying not to look at Jaime. She glances at him once or twice, but the look in his eyes when Cersei is actually trying to charm her guests makes her stomach twist. She keeps her eyes on her plate and listens to the flow of conversation around her as Tommen, sweet boy that he is, chatters about his kittens, and Myrcella talks about her lessons, and the others talk about those in King’s Landing that Brienne has never met.

Finally, to Brienne’s relief, the meal is finished and even Tommen is allowed a small glass of wine as they toast to Margaery’s freedom.

Cersei sips the wine then lowers the goblet.

“I must offer you my pardons, Lady Brienne,” she says.

Brienne jumps a little, blinking owlishly at the Queen Regent.

“Your Grace?” she says.

“You have been so silent, mayhaps you feel we have cut you out of the conversation.”

Brienne flushes. “N-no, Your Grace, of course not. I just--I learned long ago not to--I was simply
enjoying listening to the conversation, Your Grace.”

“And we have spoken mostly of happenings in King’s Landing,” Lady Olenna says briskly. “Interesting, yes, but you were not here for most of what we are gossiping about, were you, dear child?”

Brienne gives her a grateful look. “No, my lady. I have not spent much time in King’s Landing before this.”

“So we must come up with something Lady Brienne can speak about,” Cersei says lightly, and smiles round the table at the others, her gaze pausing on Jaime.

“I remember you from Lord Renly’s camp,” Lady Taena says. “It must sadden you to know that one of your many admirers was one of the men who accused Queen Margaery.”

Brienne tears her gaze away from watching Cersei and Jaime to turn to Lady Taena and frown. “One of my admirers?”

“Ser Mark Mullendore? I understand he flitted round you for some time—or am I misremembering the tales I heard?” She gives Brienne an arch look then smirks at Cersei. “I understand the Maid of Tarth was quite popular while she was in Renly’s camp.”

Brienne flushes again. “Someone misspoke,” she says. “I knew Ser Mark, yes, but he was no admirer of mine.”

“Ser Mark was very charming,” Queen Margaery says quickly, “and he had that funny little monkey, didn’t he? At Bitterbridge?”

“Yes,” Brienne says, and smiles a little at the memory. She wipes the smile away as she catches Jaime’s dark gaze and says, “Is it true he lost his left arm on the Blackwater?”

“Yes, it’s true,” Margaery sighs, “but he was cheerful enough.” She shakes her head. “A pity he was caught in all this madness. My cousin Megga was quite smitten with him. He was a good man.”

Brienne stares at her and tries to decide what to say, remembering not just the charming man with the amusing monkey who made her laugh, but the man who had wanted to take her maidenhead in order to win a pot of gold. She swallows. “He was a good knight,” she manages to say and wonders why Jaime looks like he wants to throttle her.

“This is the first time I’ve spent time in your company, Lady Brienne,” Cersei says and Brienne turns her gaze to her. “Tell me, how did you come by that unfortunate scar on your face?”

Brienne brushes her fingertips across the twisted flesh and says, “A bite, Your Grace, while I was in the Riverlands.”

“When you were roaming round the countryside with my sweet brother?”

Brienne shakes her head. “It happened before I met Ser Jaime again.”

“It is most unfortunately livid,” Taena says, all sweet concern. “It must cause much talk when you appear. Mayhaps you would be more comfortable wearing a veil when in noble company?”

“Yes,” Cersei says, “we have commissioned some lovely ones for Myrcella.” She smiles beatifically at her daughter, who lowers her gaze to the table in front of her.
Brienne’s heart goes out to the child as she says, her voice flat, “I am more comfortable wearing a helm, but it is exceedingly difficult to eat while doing so.”

“I expect it would be the same with a veil,” Lord Mace says quickly, and there is a smattering of polite laughter round the table.

“Still,” Cersei says, “you must be uncomfortable with all the stares you receive because of your scar. Mayhaps it would be better if you were to shield your face from such pitying looks.”

Myrcella ducks her head even lower, flushing, and Brienne wonders why Cersei does not notice how this talk is distressing her daughter and Brienne’s anger flares.

“I have been stared at all my life, Your Grace,” Brienne says, “and I have no more need to hide from the eyes of others now than I have ever had. These scars may be unsightly, but there is no shame in them.”

She allows her eyes to linger on the Myrish lace covering Cersei’s shorn hair before she calmly meets the Queen Mother’s eyes that are now sparkling with rage. Brienne doesn’t dare look at Jaime but then he’s already so angry with her, what’s one more reason?

It was worth risking the twins’ ire, she thinks, because both Myrcella and Tommen are watching her with wide, shining eyes. She gives the children a slight, encouraging smile as Cersei pointedly changes the topic.

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Jaime

Jaime watches, envious, as Brienne, with a palpable air of relief, takes her leave along with the royal couple and Myrcella. Lord Mace and Lady Olenna follow suit shortly thereafter, leaving Jaime alone with Cersei and Lady Taena.

He pours them all another glass of wine as the women sit with an air of thoughtful silence and then Lady Taena chuckles.

“Lady Brienne,” she says, and chuckles again, a low, husky, seductive sound. “That poor cow is in love with you, Ser Jaime.”

_I know_, he thinks as he lifts his wine goblet to his lips and drinks. _I’ve known since the first time she called my name on the Quiet Isle. I’ve known since my first look at her at Pennytree._

He places the goblet back on the table, and calmly smiles at his audience.

“She’s young,” he says smoothly, dismissively, “infatuated with the ideals of knighthood and the Kingsguard. ‘Tis not me she loves, my lady, but my white cloak.” He shrugs. “Speaking of which, I, too, must beg my leave of you both. I understand I have a new Kingsguard to form, and quickly, else my position as Lord Commander is forfeit.”

Cersei waves him off but there’s an angry glint in her eyes that sends a chill down Jaime’s spine.

He goes to the White Sword Tower and the room with the White Book. He looks at his page, at the emptiness still to be filled. He had told himself he could fill his page with whatever he chose and he had, for a moment, hoped to be known as the Lord Commander who restored the Kingsguard to its former glory.
He slides his fingers across the words that have been written to date, and sits, his hand resting on the book.

Decisions need to be made, he thinks, and soon.

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Jaime

Brienne returns Jaime’s white cloak the next day in the courtyard and then proceeds to batter him to the ground until Ser Ilyn and Ser Addam arrive.

Tommen presents her with a modified white cloak in court a few days later: white with a blue border, pinned round her neck with a gold brooch of her House sigil. Tommen thought of the gift himself, Tommen proudly tells them later.

It makes Cersei livid when she hears of it—but not nearly as livid as she is when Tommen assigns Brienne as a special guard for Myrcella. Jaime spends most of a week soothing his sister and he does not look forward to the day she learns Brienne is teaching Myrcella to use a dagger and sword.

The army leaves shortly after the Queen’s trial by combat, although Lord Randyll Tarly remains behind at the Queen Regent’s command. She tells Jaime later it was only because Tarly was arguing with her so much during the last meeting of the small council. Judging from the man’s glares whenever he sees him, Jaime suspects he knows the true reason.

Several days after the army leaves, Jaime approaches Lady Olenna and tells her he would be pleased to escort her whenever she wished to visit Lady Stokeworth again.

The Queen of Thorns is many things, but lackwitted she is not, Jaime thinks as, two days later, she smiles thinly from across her carriage-turned-sleigh while they leave King’s Landing behind them.

“While I always enjoy your company, Ser Jaime, you have not imposed this journey on me for my health,” she says drily.

“No,” he says.

Olenna watches him carefully with her shrewd, old eyes.

“You want something from Mace.”

“No. I want something from the King, and I dare not go through my sweet sister to acquire it.”

“And you dare not approach the King yourself, Lord Commander of the Kingsguard?”
Jaime hesitates, wondering if he can trust her, if he can put so many lives into her care and remain unscathed.

“Ser Jaime?” Lady Olenna prompts when he remains silent.

He gives her a slight smile. “The game of thrones is not my game, my lady,” he says slowly. “I am a knight. A warrior. So long as I have a sword, I have a solution to any problem that I might face. Except this one. This one will take intrigue and guile...and those were Tyrion’s strengths, never mine.”

“But Tyrion is not here.”

“No, and neither is my father who would have made even shorter work of the issue, albeit the conclusion would have satisfied only him.”

“You cannot mean to put your hopes on Mace to solve your problem, whatever it may be. My son is a great, bounding fool, and he is only still Hand because the Queen Regent has not yet cared enough to remove him. The rest of the small council is as gutless as my son, except mayhaps Lord Tarly, who is far too pig-stubborn to be useful.”

“Or his kind of pig-stubborn is exactly what is needed at certain times.”

“True,” she sighs. “What is it you want from the King?”

Jaime warily watches the old woman and wonders, again, if he can trust her.

“I cannot remove Cersei as Queen Regent,” he says abruptly.

Olenna raises an eyebrow. “I had not thought you would even if you could.”

“I cannot take the regency from her, but I can take Casterly Rock.”

The only sound in the carriage is the rattle of harnesses and the soft shushing as the sleigh slides over the snow. Jaime’s gaze doesn’t waver beneath Olenna’s hard stare.

He says, “Cersei’s demands for Lannister gold has recently led to the death of a hundred miners and a mine collapse at Casterly Rock, narrowing our gold production by half. Our cousin Damion has refused her orders to press even more smallfolk into labor and is threatening to leave his post as castellan. It took me two hours last night to convince her it would be the height of folly to send Ser Robert Strong to bash our cousin’s head against a wall. Adding to the chaos is the fact the people of the Westerlands are restless and our forces are needed to impose peace on the countryside.”

“I see,” Olenna says thoughtfully. “Do you plan on taking the Rock for yourself? Against Cersei’s will?”

“I will give the Rock to any Lannister who can go there to rule it. And it must be by Cersei’s will, not mine, else I will not live long enough to congratulate the new Lord or Lady.”

Lady Olenna hums, her eyes skeptical. “But if she should happen to be convinced to restore you as Lord of Casterly Rock, you would not object, I am sure. Are you so determined to break your oaths to the Kingsguard?”

“I have no wish to break my oaths at all, my lady, but I will soon be forced to dismiss Lady Brienne from the Kingsguard, and if my sweet sister has her way, I would remove my protection when I remove the white cloak.”
Olenna searches his face. “Ah. Now I truly do see,” she says softly.

“I doubt that very much.”

“You shouldn’t. The Maid of Tarth is not the only one with expressive eyes.”

“She deserves better.”

“She does.”

Jaime smiles a little at that. “We cannot tell her what we’re doing.”

“Oh, gods, no! The child is a hopelessly bad liar! Why do you think we kept her away from you before Margaery’s trial?”

Jaime gives a rueful shake of his head at this confirmation of what he had suspected. “This will be a dangerous and delicate dance, my lady, and in the end, I may stumble and fall.”

“So you may.”

“I swear that I will do my best to ensure no one else falls with me...if my vow means anything at all to you.”

Olenna smiles. “It means absolutely nothing to me,” she says bluntly, “but I believe you nonetheless. Now tell me what part you think I can play.” She barks a sudden, harsh laugh. “And here I thought my old age would be boring.”

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Brienne

Brienne watches as Jaime strides into the courtyard the day after his return from Stokeworth and tries to read his expression. He raises an eyebrow at her as he picks up a tourney sword then steps inside the training circle they’ve trampled into existence over the last few weeks.

“Successful journey?” she asks as she faces him, standing at the ready.

“Very,” he says smugly and attacks.

They dance for several minutes before Brienne disarms him and she nods. “You’re improving.”

He snorts as he retrieves his sword. “I now have the skill of a five-year-old child instead of a three-year-old,” he says. “Do not coddle me, wench.”

She flashes him a glare. “I was simply speaking truth,” she snaps.

“I have no wish to quarrel,” he sighs, suddenly tired. “I have been quarrelling enough with Cersei long into the night.”

Brienne grits her teeth at the flash of emotion she feels when she thinks of him with Cersei during the night. To drive out the images that flash in her mind, she quickly begins sparring with him, their swords clanging as she wrestles her emotions under some sort of control.

When he yields a few minutes later, and they pause to rest, she says, “What is causing discord between such a devoted pair?”
The look he flashes her is wickedly amused. “Prying, my lady? Will you run to your Tyrell masters and tell them tales?”

She flushes, scowls and attacks with doubled fervor and quickly disarms him.

“I touched a nerve, it appears,” he laughs as he picks up his sword. He turns to face her. “We are arguing about Casterly Rock. The Crown is deeply in debt and needs funds. The Queen Regent, in her role as Lady of Casterly Rock, has decreed that House Lannister will lend even more money to the Crown and has therefore ordered our cousin Damion, her castellan, to double the output of the mines. He is objecting, vigorously, and several days ago, one of the mines collapsed due to the miners working so quickly, they failed to properly support the new shafts. Thanks to Cersei’s reckless demands, the output of the mines has been halved, not doubled. Damion is sending ravens every day at the moment, and the news grows more dire with each one.”

Brienne blinks, feeling a surge of pity for the people working the mines.

Jaime shrugs as he readies himself. “Casterly Rock has its winter’s stores intact, but I have had to convince Cersei not to demand all of them for King’s Landing. I fear that in her zeal for her duties as Queen Regent, she has lost sight of her duties as Lady of Casterly Rock.”

Brienne thinks on his words as they spar for the next few minutes and when he yields, she says, “What do you plan to do?”

“Why, nothing,” he says, surprised. “All I can do is attempt to persuade my sweet sister that she needs to be more thoughtful with her orders regarding the Rock and to remember that she has as much a duty to the people of her House as she does to the people of the realm.” He grimaces. “The arguments are long and unsatisfying.” He flashes her an unfathomable look. “I would prefer to spend my time in another way.”

She flushes, but shrugs. “I am sure you have been able to do both,” she snaps, and swings her sword.

His laughter only adds strength to her arm, and he’s quickly down on the ground, holding his ribs and groaning with pain even as he still laughs at her.

Luckily Ser Ilyn arrives at that moment, otherwise she would have smashed his grin off his face. Instead, she settles for a curt nod before she turns and strides out of the courtyard, and Jaime’s amusement seems to echo in her ears with each step.

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Jaime dines with Cersei, Lady Taena and Nymeria Sand—who has, surprisingly, ingratiated herself quite well into Cersei’s good graces in the short time she’s been in King’s Landing. The fact she ensures Cersei’s wine goblet is always filled no doubt helps make her an attractive companion to the Queen Regent.

Jaime also keeps Cersei’s goblet well-filled and when the meal is finished, he asks for a few minutes alone with his sister. The flash of triumph on her face as she asks Taena and Nymeria to leave them makes his stomach twist. He is playing a dangerous game, he knows, and wishes for Tyrion.

Silence falls between them as Taena casts them a thoughtfully sly look while she closes the door behind her.
“Lady Taena looks suspicious,” Jaime finally says.

“You can trust her,” Cersei says carelessly as she picks up her goblet, “if for no other reason than her son is here in King’s Landing and within my reach.”

“And Nymeria Sand? What hold do you have over her?” Jaime asks as he reaches for his own wine.

“Her continued position on the small council and a small toehold on influence. She flatters and hovers and it amuses me.” Cersei drinks deeply from her goblet. “You have not asked for privacy to speak of my companions,” she says. “Are you going to nag at me once again about Casterly Rock? I believe Damion does enough of that for both of you. Daily ravens! Sometimes more!”

“Damion has asked for my assistance in making you see sense, sweet sister. If you would be reasonable—”

“I have been more than reasonable, Jaime! The Crown needs gold, and the Iron Bank will not give it. I’ve already sent a raven to the Rock, ordering Damion to open more veins and increase production as much as possible.”

“Veins—aye, you will bleed us dry with your recklessness!”

She leans forward, her breasts almost spilling from her low-cut gown. His eyes darken as his cock stirs at the sight. He forces his gaze back to her face and the satisfied gleam in her eyes.

“You’re still mine, aren’t you? You still want me.” she says, and leans closer, but there’s no lust in her face or voice, only malicious triumph that turns her beautiful face ugly, and his arousal immediately disappears. Jaime suddenly wonders if this is the Cersei that Tyrion always saw.

“I have always been yours,” he says tiredly, “but I have been too long in the dark, sweet sister, and I am no longer satisfied with love in the shadows. Step out into the sun, Cersei. Stand by my side and tell the world that you love me and I, you. Let us marry and retire to the Rock.”

“You know as well as I do that I cannot do that. Besides losing the Iron Throne, the High Sparrow would execute us both for treason.”

“Tommen—”

“Tommen is a child, and will do whatever he’s told.”

And who trained him that way, Jaime thinks bitterly. “Then let me honor my oaths. Let me simply be the Lord Commander of the Kingsguard.”

She smirks again. “Oh, no, sweet brother. Enjoy your title while you may. I have other plans for the Kingsguard—and for you.” She pushes herself to her feet, then leans heavily on the table as she sways. “I’m pleased your abstinence is because you still love me too much, Jaime. I had begun to worry you had been lured away from me.”

“Who could possibly accomplish such a thing?”

She chuckles, husky and low. “No one, of course. You are mine, Jaime, you belong to me. My other half. Nothing and no one can ever change that.”

He stands as well. “No, nothing can change that,” he says, and worries he speaks true.

She smiles. “Good,” she says and sways again. “If I truly wished it, I know I could trample your
resistance tonight and convince you to fuck me, but I am in no mood for such games. Call for Lady Taena and leave me.”

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**Brienne**

Brienne, for all that she’s busy every day, feels as if she’s simply standing in one place. She is Myrcella’s special bodyguard and she brings the girl to the courtyard every day to teach her some tricks in using a dagger and has tasked Podrick to help the child learn to use a sword. Once they find a sword that fits her hand and is the right weight, Brienne sees the girl is naturally gifted, much like her father-uncle, and Brienne wonders if Jaime will be pleased.

She intends to tell him of Myrcella’s progress whenever they have more than a fleeting moment of privacy, but over the last week, she has seen him only in court, standing cold and remote beside the Iron Throne, or from a distance as he bends attentively towards the Queen Regent during her strolls through the gardens of the Red Keep.

The army has left for Storm’s End, taking Ser Addam and Ser Hyle with it, and she almost misses both of them. She would have preferred to go—she asked to go. Her home had fallen to the Targaryen pretender, after all, and mayhaps she would have been able to get to Tarth and see what has befallen her island and her father. Lord Tarly vehemently denied her a place, and to her disappointment, Jaime agreed with him.

Beyond that, however, there is little movement on their attempts to discover more information about people being brought back from the dead. Without Ser Hyle to listen for stories in the brothels and taverns, even that small trickle of information has dried. They have learned Stoneheart’s outlaws are gaining strength and there are rumors that more and more of her brotherhood are becoming impossible to kill. There have been several tales about the Others returning and approaching the Wall. There is even a rumor that Ned Stark’s bastard, Lord Commander of the Night’s Watch, was killed by his own men but didn’t remain dead for long.

None of which gives her an idea of what to do next. The most irritating thing, though, is that Jaime seems to have forgotten this quest. He sent Ser Hyle away, and has done nothing to replace him. He claims he hasn’t heard any new tales from the informants he met through Lord Stokeworth, and when she confronts him with a tale about Ser Robert Strong leaving a trail of blood in Flea Bottom while about the Queen Regent’s business, he brushed it aside as simple rumor.

And now, she thinks as she helps Myrcella remove the padded leather at the end of a training session, Jaime has not allowed her an opportunity to ask him more questions or to make plans for what to do next.

She scowls as she warmly wraps Myrcella in a cloak that hides the girl’s breeches, then escorts the princess back to the child’s room so she can bathe and change clothes before she goes to her mother’s chambers for the afternoon.

Well, she can’t bear to sit and wait any longer, Brienne decides as she assists Myrcella with her bath. She needs to do something.

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Brienne seeks out the oldest septas she can find and asks them to share the old tales. She weaves a story about her parents telling her about the Others, and the Long Night and the Battle for the Dawn. She explains to each in turn that now that her family and home may be forever lost to her, she wants
to hear the stories again, to have something she can cling to that reminds her of her mother and her father.

The septas tell her only the stories she’s heard before about the Others but when she asks questions about raising the dead, they are shocked and immediately set her to praying.

Brienne moves on to the maesters who are in King’s Landing with their lords, and finds few who will speak freely with her about such tales. Those that do, tell her the stories are simply used to frighten children and hardly worth repeating, and proceeds to tell her nothing she hasn’t learned before.

From the maesters, she moves on to the knights and soldiers still in King’s Landing and who sup in the hall of the Red Keep. From them, she learns the legends of Myr and the Summer Isles and the Free Cities. She hears of the powers of the Red Priests, and the legends of Azor Ahai, The Prince that was Promised and the Stallion that Mounts the World. She hears of the other gods and their powers. She finds it surprisingly easy to get the men to talk. She simply asks one or two questions, then sits back and listens as her table-mates share tales filled with magic and prophecies, dead that refuse to die, flaming swords and blood sacrifices—and everything she hears seems as useless as everything else.

Then she begins to hear whispered tales of dark experiments that took place at the Citadel in Oldtown a hundred or mayhaps a thousand years ago, and, so the whispers go, mayhaps those experiments are still being done there, even today.

There’s still nothing solid, she thinks, nothing she can take to Jaime and insist he allow her to go somewhere—anywhere—other than King’s Landing to track down the truth of it. But, as she dons her blue-trimmed white cloak before leaving to escort Princess Myrcella to attend court, at least she feels like she’s doing something.

* * * * *

Jaime

Jaime’s evenings with Cersei take on a pattern that’s almost rhythmic. He dines with her every night. The children and Queen Margaery, Lady Taena and Nymeria Sand are usually present in one combination or another. Along with Nymeria, he ensures Cersei’s at least three-quarters drunk by the time dinner is finished and he asks for privacy to speak with his sister. He admits that plying Cersei with wine in the hopes she will tell him what he wants to hear isn’t much of a plan, but it worked wonders for Lady Catelyn.

Or mayhaps it was the sword at his throat.

His whimsical thoughts fly from his head as both Lady Taena and Nymeria give them slyly knowing looks as they leave the twins alone. Jaime knows it’s not simply his actions that are fueling their suspicions but also Lady Olenna doing her part to fan the flames. He only hopes the flames don’t rise so high he and Cersei both end up on trial in front of the High Sparrow.

Once the door closes, he begins with the latest bad news from Casterly Rock. He carefully stokes Cersei’s increasing impatience with the topic even as he plies her with more wine.

“Enough, Jaime, by the Seven!” She slams her goblet onto the table so hard that wine sloshes over the side and stains the cloth beneath it.

“Curb your demands, Cersei, and deal with the crises besetting the Westerlands,” he snaps. “Then
I’ll stop.”

“Is that all you want of me? All Damion wants of me?”

“You know it’s not. We’ve talked of this before! The people of the Westerlands have been too long without their Lady there to guide them and the unrest is only growing greater each day. They sent their husbands and sons and brothers to war and not enough returned, and now the mines are collapsing because you do not want to allow them time to build them safely. Worse: the Westerlands has been in disarray since our father’s death at the hands of the Imp—his own son. They need a Lannister to come home. They need their Lady of Casterly Rock.”

“I am Queen Regent,” Cersei snarls.

“Then you must choose, Your Grace. You cannot have both.”

“I will not step aside for you, Jaime!”

His laugh is harsh and mocking. “I am Kingsguard, or have you forgotten? Even if I were not, I cannot think of anything I would hate more than to be Lord of Casterly Rock and forced to make a political marriage.”

Her eyes narrow. “I was forced to make a political marriage,” she says flatly.

“And you may be again,” Jaime says just as flatly, “or have your informants not told you that rumors are once more swirling regarding our relationship?”

“I will never be forced to marry again,” she says, glaring at him through wine-glazed eyes. “Why shouldn’t you be forced to wed someone you hate?” She gulps her wine and motions for more. This time he does not refill her goblet. He wants her drunk, not unconscious.

She frowns at his refusal and says, “It’s your fault that the rumors have resurfaced. You needs must stop spending the nights with me.”

“I don’t spend the nights with you, sweet sister. I sup with you, we argue for an hour and then I leave you to your wine.”

“Be careful, Jaime. I am in no mood to be mocked.”

He sighs and leans back in his chair. “I have no wish to mock you, Cersei,” he says. “I only want you to make decisions to fix what you’ve damaged by your actions with the Westerlands.”

“I will not give you Casterly Rock.”

“I’ve already said I do not want it.”

“Even if I did give it to you, you’re still mine,” she harshly reminds him. “No others will ever claim you as their own.”

“I am yours, Cersei,” he agrees, “and you have no need to worry of any other so long as I am Lord Commander of the Kingsguard.”

That catches her attention and she smiles. “Does the threat of your white cloak being torn away worry you, Jaime? Are you frightened? Are you regretting that you have balked me at every turn since you came back to King’s Landing?”

“I have been advising you, Your Grace,” he says, mocking, “and no, I am not frightened.” At least
not for himself.

She gestures impatiently for him to refill her goblet but he doesn’t move from his chair.

“You should be frightened, Jaime,” she says. “They all tried to break me, but here I am, still Queen Regent, even more powerful than before, with Ser Robert Strong to do my bidding. Tell me, what need have I for a Lord Commander without a hand?”

He flashes her a wary look. “I am on the small council as your ally, Cersei. I will cleanse the Kingsguard whenever we find new knights who are worthy and strong enough to protect the King. The Lannister forces still follow my command. Those are the things I bring you as Lord Commander, whether I have my hand or no. What advantage would you gain if you strip me of my white cloak?”

A vicious smile plays round her lips. “Advantage? None...at least none in the game of thrones. But without that cloak, you would no longer be able to force unwanted guests into my home and you would depend upon me for every luxury you desire and every morsel of food you eat. I find that...satisfying. You, who have always been so powerful, more favoured because you were born male, so arrogant because you could wield a sword and because you were a Kingsguard, even though you killed the King you swore to protect and fucked the Queen. If I strip everything from you, Jaime, should I accept you back into my bed then?”

He marvels at her ability to forget that he chose to leave her bed and says, “Why would you want me to return? You replaced my sword hand with Ser Robert, and my cock with other men’s. Those were the only two things you ever wanted from me. Strip me of my cloak, if it makes you feel better, but do not think I will stay in King’s Landing and dance to your song.”

Cersei laughs. “What choice would you have, sweet brother? There is no place for a knight without a sword hand in Westeros.”

“And no place for me by your side with rumors swirling round us like flies on shit.”

“Then I will force you to marry some poor, stupid girl who will never realize you’re spending more time in my bed than hers. Mayhaps I’ll force you to marry someone you despise.” She laughs suddenly. “Mayhaps I’ll force you to wed that ugly lumbering cow who lurks about the Red Keep, making moon eyes at you whenever she sees you.” She smiles slowly, maliciously. “That might be sweet justice for saving the Rose Bitch’s life. The cow would be miserable, loving you and knowing you would never love her in return, and I could rest easy knowing you would seldom be able to force yourself to fuck her—if ever.” She frowns, thinking, then shrugs. “I can always gift her to Qyburn later.”

Jaime’s blood runs cold. He says, his voice light and amused, “The only thing worse than being Lord Lannister is being wed to the Maid of Tarth. But this is all nonsense anyway. You’re not going to strip me of my white cloak, Cersei. A Kingsguard is what I was always meant to be, and I am—still and always—in your thrall. Now if only you would but make a decision about Casterly Rock.”

She rolls her eyes and again holds out her goblet for him to fill.

“By the Seven, Jaime, you are like a hound with a bone! Fine. I will step aside for Myrcella.”

Jaime nods and refills both their goblets. He lifts his in a toast and says, “Who shall be named as her regent?”
“I will, of course!”

“Then you will leave for Casterly Rock with the princess?”

Cersei scowls. “Don’t be absurd. She will stay here, with me. Look at what happened the last time she left my sight! She will never leave me again.”

Jaime sighs. “Please, Cersei—you have more wits than this. You cannot have both. You have ignored Casterly Rock for too long. You. Must. Choose.”

“I will not name you Lord of Casterly Rock, Jaime! It is mine by birth if not by sex!”

Well, that’s not strictly true, Jaime thinks, remembering a passionate night at an inn, and says, “I have never wanted the lordship. I have never wanted to rule—you know that! The last thing I want is to become Lord Lannister. Name Myrcella as lady and I as her Regent. Or name Damion as her regent—or Moon Boy, for all I care! Or keep the Rock if it means so much to you but then you needs must go and take care of the people who look to you for leadership!”

Cersei rolls her eyes. “By the gods, Jaime, enough! Enough!” She shakes her head as she picks up her wine goblet. “Call for Taena and Nymeria and leave me.”

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It is the small council meeting that finally tips the balance.

The meeting is long and contentious, with Lord Randyll Tarly in all his judgmental glory being the first to demand if the incest rumors are true and, once denied, to demand action be taken to put the rumors to rest once and for all. He is ably supported by Lord Tyrell, who squawks about the Seven and the High Sparrow and trials, then squawks even louder about the crisis of the gold mines in Casterly Rock. Lord Tarly takes over again, hammering home that he needs gold to pay the soldiers, and even Ser Harys weakly agrees that the slowed gold production at the Rock is a disaster.

Jaime, for his part, ensured Cersei had had her share of wine before the meeting and he almost feels guilty about it. But these are dangerous times, he thinks, taking in Nymeria Sand’s calculating eyes as she speaks on Cersei’s behalf. His plan, if successful, may make things worse, he knows, following the debate over to Qyburn, who is also arguing in support of the Queen Regent, but it should also keep Brienne safe long enough to get her out of King’s Landing and hopefully out of Cersei’s reach.

The arguments heat up, voices rise, until finally Cersei slams her hands on the table and surges to her feet.

“What would you have of me?” she shouts and everyone falls silent beneath her glare.

Finally, Lord Mace clears his throat and says, “You must choose between the regency and Casterly Rock,” he says.

“I choose the regency,” Cersei says flatly.

“Then you step aside for the Princess Myrcella?”


“No!” Jaime says quickly. “I do not want—”
“You will do as I say, Jaime,” she snaps and he subsides.

“You obviously mean to dismiss him from the Kingsguard,” Tarly says, his eyes flinty with contempt.

“I was meaning to do that anyway,” she says carelessly, “I’m only doing it sooner than I planned.”

Jaime ducks his head, pressing his lips together and hopes he looks as downcast as people would expect.

“Is that all you need of me, my lords?” she asks.

“There are still the incest rumors,” Mace says. “You needs must marry again.”

“And risk the regency being torn from me yet again? No. I will not. If anyone must marry to stop these stupid tongues from wagging, it will be my sweet brother.”

Jaime lifts his head. “Cersei—” He falls silent beneath her glare.

“You have not once raised your voice in my defence at this meeting, Ser Jaime. You will do exactly what I say and marry where I tell you. Be grateful I’m willing to give you Casterly Rock!”

He glares, then glances down, carefully avoiding looking at anyone else at the table.

She scowls round the table, her gaze finally stopping on Lord Mace. “But I will not allow him to marry any Tyrell daughter!” she snaps, then turns and storms from the room.

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“It went well, I understand,” Lady Olenna says with a slight smile as her fool loudly sings in front of them.

“It went the way I wanted,” Jaime says with a nod of relief. “And you?”

“The High Sparrow understands the need to quell people’s clacking tongues. He’s ready to perform the rites whenever you and your chosen bride choose to stand before him.”

Jaime raises an eyebrow. “He listened to you?”

“He knows his legitimacy is tied to Tommen’s, as is ours. He insists the marriage be proven consummated, however, so he may use that fact to deny the incest rumors with certainty.”

Jaime smiles as he stands and bows, then lifts her soft hand to his lips. “Thank you, my lady. You have played your part with skill.”

Lady Olenna snorts. “Don’t thank me until you have avoided arrest and have left King’s Landing for Casterly Rock with your wife safely by your side. I have no doubt Cersei will do all in her power to ensure your marriage is a short one.”

Jaime gives her a rueful shrug. “If she suspects the marriage will make me miserable, she will do everything in her power to ensure it is a long one. But that is a problem for the future. I have a much more immediate concern.”

Lady Olenna raises an eyebrow in question.

He grins. “First I need to convince my chosen bride.”
**Brienne**

The thundering knock in the morning startles Brienne and makes her frown. Pod gives her a questioning look and she nods. He hurries to the door and Brienne’s frown deepens as Jaime walks in. His gaze rakes her from head to toe and she feels suddenly naked even though she’s already in her tunic and breeches and boots.

“Bundle up,” he says briskly, “and put on your armor. We’re going to a small copse a few miles from King’s Landing. We’ll do our sparring there.”

“Princess Myrcella—”

“Will be guarded by Ser Boros today. She’ll be fine.”

Brienne clenches her jaw. “I have other plans—”

He simply smiles his knife-like smile and says, “Pod, get your ‘lady, ser’ ready for sparring in the woods. I’ll wait outside.”

“Jaime!” she says, exasperated, but the door’s already closing on his broad shoulders.

She glares after him, tempted to finish dressing in her usual way and then simply ignore Jaime to take up her post at Myrcella’s side. Then she deflates. Jaime is Lord Commander and she supposes that means she must obey him. She sighs and shrugs and nods at Pod, and the boy hurries to help her dress for a journey outside the city walls.

Besides, she grudgingly admits, she’s curious and would like to get out beyond the city walls.

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Brienne rides out of King’s Landing with her head held high in disdainful rebuke of Jaime’s arrogance. She can tell it only amuses him but she doesn’t soften until they dismount about half an hour later at the copse he mentioned.

“I sincerely hope you brought your tourney sword, wench,” he says with a laugh as he dismounts, “because from the look of you, I fear you will cleave me in two with your first swing.”

“Mayhaps I should,” she mutters as she, too, dismounts. “At least then you would cease vexing me.”

“You’d miss me if I were gone.”

“Like I miss a sore tooth,” she snaps as she yanks her tourney sword out of its scabbard and barely gives him enough time to ready himself before she attacks.

It feels good to batter at him. He hasn’t been in the courtyard for the last week or so, and while she
would rather re-break her arm than admit it to him, she has missed him, although right now she would dearly love to punch his beautiful, laughing face.

She knocks him down soon enough and she watches with a smug sense of satisfaction as he scrambles back to his feet.

“Why did you bring me here, Jaime?” she asks.

He shrugs. “We are both to be dismissed from the Kingsguard on the morrow,” he says.

Her mouth sags open as she lowers her sword and barely brings it back to bear in time to parry Jaime’s next attack. There’s only the sound of their swords clashing together as Brienne struggles to make sense of his words.

They separate and circle each other and Brienne says, “Why? You swore your oaths because you wanted to serve the King!”

“I swore my oaths because I wanted to fuck the Queen,” Jaime says, shaking his hair out of his eyes. He shrugs at Brienne’s incredulous look. “Cersei was supposed to marry Rhaegar, you know, and she convinced me to become a Kingsguard so I would always be near her. It was the same reason I swore my oaths to Robert, even though the thought of him touching her made me long to slit his throat the same way I had slit the Mad King’s.”

He engages her again and their swords clash as they parry and dance round the clearing before they break, circling each other.

“And you?” he says, panting a little, sweat gleaming on his face. “Why did you stand for Margaery? Why did you take the white cloak? Do you love the Tyrells so much?”

He lands a blow that makes her grunt with the pain of it as she wavers, and he laughs.

“No,” he says, pressing his advantage, his sword flashing faster and faster as he speaks, “you did it because you still love him—that pretty boy pretender who played at being King. You had already thrown away your birthright once because you loved a man who would never touch you and would never truly understand your value—and then you did it again!”

“Why not?” she snaps, flushing red, seething with humiliation as she parries each blow. “You did the same!”

“But I was already fucking my queen, and I fucked her whenever chance and Cersei allowed. I at least had that, but you—Renly would never have willingly touched you! He—”

Now her vision is as red as her face and suddenly she is a fury, her sword falling against his, hard and fast, until the last blow sends him sprawling and his breath is knocked out of him as he lands on his back.

She towers over him, teeth bared, eyes glittering with battle rage.

“Stop mocking me,” she spits as he tries to catch his breath.

“I assure you, wench,” he manages to force out through teeth gritted against the pain, “mocking is not what I want to do to you.”

“Then what do you want from me?”
He starts to laugh, short bursts through the pain of trying to catch his breath. The anger drains from her and turns to hurt and she clamps her lips together as she shakes her head.

She stomps towards her horse and is halfway there when he manages to yell, “I want you to marry me!”

Everything seems to stop, the only sound her breathing and the roar of her blood as her heart races. She can’t decide what to do. She wants to jump on her horse and run as far and as fast as she can and never see this infuriating man again. She wants to turn and say yes before he can take it back, even though she knows he’s jesting. She wants to bash his head in for treating her so cruelly.

She doesn’t know how long she stands with only her breathing and roaring blood and thoughts for company but finally she turns and stares at him where he’s still sitting on the ground.

“That is not a kind jest,” she finally manages to force out.

“It is not a jest,” he says, “kind or otherwise.”

“You are Lord Commander of the Kingsguard!”

“Not after tomorrow. And have you forgotten we are already wed? And you, too, a member of the Kingsguard? At least for today.” He rests his arms on his knees and looks up at her and her heart clenches because even covered with sweat and snow and dirt, he’s beautiful. “By this time tomorrow,” he says, “Tommen will have stamped his pretty seal on the papers that Cersei puts in front of him, and the thing will be done.”

He gives her a bitter smile.

“Casterly Rock is in crisis,” he says, “and my sweet sister would rather be regent than leave King’s Landing to put the Westerlands to rights. Last night, the small council forced her to agree to allow Tommen to dismiss me from the Kingsguard while restoring my claim to Casterly Rock. In return, in order to put the incest rumors to rest, I must marry immediately and prove to the High Sparrow that the marriage is consummated and then leave for Casterly Rock with my new bride. This must all happen within the next few days, Brienne.”

Brienne feels the blood drain from her face. “Oh, gods,” she breathes.

Jaime nods. “‘Oh, gods’ indeed. The High Sparrow is currently willing to absolve me of my vows to the Kingsguard and to perform the wedding rites. We must either take our chances with his continued good nature to seek an annulment—which he may not be willing to grant without some public penance that will humiliate us both—or I have Tommen announce you as my betrothed.”

Brienne slowly becomes aware that she’s shaking her head slowly from side-to-side.

He shrugs carelessly. “That’s the situation and those are our choices.”

She gapes and thinks she must be dreaming. She closes her eyes and makes a childish wish that when she opens them, she’ll see the thatched roof of the cottage on the Quiet Isle and this will have all been a dream.

She opens her eyes to find Jaime watching her curiously, a half-smile on his face.

Brienne blinks owlishly and says the only thing she can think of to say: “Why?”

“Because the rumors are dangerous for all of us, and my sweet sister will not listen to reason about
“Can’t she?” Brienne snaps, then flushes as she realizes what she said.

He gains his feet and prowls towards her. She swallows, tempted to retreat, but then clenches her jaw and stands her ground. He stops within touching distance and leans closer.

“Is that what you think I’m doing, Brienne?” he purrs, his breath ghosting over her ravaged cheek. “You think I’ve crawled back between my sister’s thighs and lost myself again in her cunt?”

“That is your choice to make,” she says.

“That is my choice to make,” she says.

“Is it?” To her relief, he straightens and steps back. “Cersei’s original intent was to strip me of the white cloak and leave me with nothing but the Lannister name. She wanted me entirely dependent upon her charity and good nature. At least she’s giving me Casterly Rock but I will not allow her to choose my bride.”

“No, you wouldn’t, but you would choose me, instead,” she says slowly, and now she flushes with humiliation and hurt and anger. “You are angry with her now but you’re devoted to Cersei—you always have been. You must wed but you know I will never be a threat to your relationship with her, and she will know it is a confirmation of your devotion to her. I hadn’t thought you would be so cruel, Jaime.”

That seems to surprise him because he blinks and takes another step away. “Mayhaps I’m being cruel,” he says, “but I’ve chosen you because you are the best choice.”

She laughs, a harsh, angry, grating sound. “I will not be a shield for you to hide behind!” she says and punches him, sending him sprawling to the ground.

She glares down at him. “Go fuck your sister and leave me alone,” she growls then stalks to the horses. She mounts and grabs the reins of his horse and doesn’t look at him again as she leaves him in the snow.

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Brienne’s painfully aware of the stares when she walks in to her preferred public bath, the smallest one in the Red Keep. It’s usually empty but today there are a half-dozen women there who stop and stare then whisper to each other as she makes her way to an empty tub and strips down. The silence is deafening when they get a good look at the scars on her body, highlighted by the bruises left by Jaime’s tourney sword and then the tourney swords of the half-dozen knights she’s just finished sparring with in the training yards.

What she wants to soothe, however, are the bruises that can’t be seen; the ones left by Jaime’s careless words and heartless request. She lowers herself into the bath and sinks below the surface to glide to the far side. She surfaces, turning her back to as many of the other women as she can as she relaxes beneath the blessedly hot water.

She’s barely settled on her seat when the doors burst open and Jaime strides in, Kingsguard armor gleaming, white cloak swirling. The women scream in surprise but their fear quickly turns to intrigue when they get a good look at him. He stands, glaring round the room and for a brief moment Brienne considers hiding beneath the water but his eyes meet hers before she can put her wild plan into action.

“Everyone out,” he barks as he strides towards her. “I wish to speak with the Maid of Tarth.”
There are noisy protests but he pays no attention to any of them, and his eyes never stray from hers even as one of the bolder women gets out of her tub to argue with him.

“Peck!” he bellows and his squire appears in the doorway. Brienne automatically sinks lower in the water, hands protectively covering her breasts. She blushes as Jaime smirks at her but as meagre as her breasts may be, she does not want anyone else to see them.

Jaime turns to Peck and says, “Clear out this room, then post guards at all the doors.” He raises his voice. “Anyone who tries to enter before I leave here will have their tongues cut out.”

The women squeal and quickly begin to pull on their clothes, shooting him resentful glares as they leave.

Brienne waits in silence, head ducked low, and hopes the next time she uses the public baths none of these women are there as they will be like to drown her.

Finally, the last of the women leave and Peck walks out the door and, at a nod from Jaime, closes it behind him. Jaime turns and meets her eyes. Under his gaze, Brienne hunches down until the water reaches her neck. Foolish, she knows, since their time on the Quiet Isle, but this is...different.

If for no other reason than neither of them are or have just been near death.

And he asked her to marry him for true not even three hours ago.

And she had responded by punching him in the nose, taking his horse, and leaving him to walk back to King’s Landing.

After telling him to go fuck his sister.

She hopes she can blame her red cheeks on the heat of the water.

Jaime continues to glare at her but makes no cutting comment about her modesty. The expression on his face makes her even more nervous than her nudity and she finds herself fearing what he’s about to say, especially since he’s taken time to change his clothes before seeking her out.

“It seems I am destined to always make confessions to you in the bath, wench,” he says and she blinks nervously up at him.

He slowly paces back and forth in front of her, frowning fiercely, and his power and beauty have never been stronger. His suggestion they marry for true seems even more foolish as she watches his lithe movements. He would be the laughingstock of all the realm...or she would be, for it would be obvious he wed her only to avoid having to wed and bed another, more suitable noblewoman, which would do little to put the incest rumors to rest.

“You are right to be wary,” he says abruptly and she starts, wondering if she’s spoken her thoughts aloud. But he’s still pacing and frowning and she scrunches herself a little lower into the bath, wishing she was small and dainty if only so she would be more difficult to see.

He stops in front of her, his green eyes steady as they meet hers.

“I have loved my sweet sister my entire life,” he says. “Mayhaps we fell in love in the womb. Two halves of the same whole. Kissing and fucking was just something we did. It felt as natural as breathing. I have had no other, and except for a childhood companion of Cersei’s who stole a kiss on a soft summer’s eve, I have never even kissed another woman. Never even considered it before, in truth. I loved my sister. I love her still. Mayhaps a part of me always will.”
Brienne ducks her head and looks away. She wonders if hearts literally break or mayhaps they
shrivel into something so small and cold that nothing ever hurts it again.

“I understand,” she says and is pleased her voice sounds much as it always has.

“I doubt that,” Jaime says. She risks a glance at his mocking face then lowers her gaze again to the
water. “I fled to thoughts of her while I stood guard over a mad king and his cruelties and found
refuge there. When I was chained in a cage, thoughts of her kept me sane and gave me hope. When
the Bloody Mummers took my hand, I thought how she would weep when she saw her mirror image
was no longer perfect, but I knew she would love me just the same. When you returned me to
King’s Landing, I found my sweet sister in Baelor’s Sept, standing vigil over her son’s corpse. I
didn’t care for her own mourning and fucked her there, on an Altar, while her son lay dead beside
us. When I was inside her, she held me and kissed me and told me I was home, and I closed my
eyes and felt like I was home, that all that had happened in the year or more I’d been gone was
nothing more than a bad dream that was finally at an end.

“That was the last time we fucked. I wanted her to acknowledge me—acknowledge us! I wanted
her to marry me, to bring our love out of the shadows and into the light, and I think that, along with
everything else, helped break us. Marrying me—however it was done—meant losing the power she
had over the Iron Throne. She’s even willing to give up Casterly Rock if it means keeping the Iron
Throne.

“You called me monster, once. Mayhaps I am. But I admit my actions. I would even publicly admit
everything about Cersei and the children if it wouldn’t mean their heads. I will never be the true
knight you long to find and to be, Brienne, but I do swear this: so long as you are my wife, I will
never lay with another, I will never deny you, and I will never set you aside. And if we survive this
winter—and my sweet sister—I will give you back your Sapphire Isle and an heir to go with it.”

There’s no sound but the lapping of water in the tubs, then she says, “Do not make vows you will
not be able to keep.”

His smile is thin and cutting. “Oathbreaker that I am,” he agrees, a mocking edge to his voice, “and
a man with shit for honor. Mayhaps you should run to your Ser Hyle. Marry your hedge knight and
see if he can give you back your island.”

“You know I can’t do that, even if I wanted it,” she snaps. “Remaining your wife was no burden
when neither of us were like to marry for true, but you will soon no longer Kingsguard but the Lord
of Casterly Rock. You needs must make a political marriage, and that means we needs must go to
the High Septon and beg him to dissolve this farce of a union, not—not—”

“Not ask him to legitimize this farce of a union? I have no intention of doing either. None will
know we were wed on the Quiet Isle. Instead, we will be married, wench, in full view of everyone
in King’s Landing who wishes to see, with all the attendant feastings and celebrations that go with it,
so none may question the identity of my bride or doubt that you are under my protection.”

“I don’t need your protection!”

“You shall have it anyway. And do not fool yourself. This will be a true marriage, and we will
consummate it on our wedding night. We would consummate it even if the High Sparrow wasn’t
demanding proof that the marriage is a true one.”

She doesn’t know whether she should laugh or cry or rage.

“They will mock us,” she says.
“They mock us now.”

“They will never believe we consummated the marriage.”

“We will prove it to them with the bloody sheets, if your maidenhead is still intact.”

“And if it is not?” she asks with barely controlled outrage and embarrassment.

“Then we may need to suffer through witnesses to the bedding.” He gives her a feral smile. “Pray your maidenhead is still intact, wench.”

“This is madness. All of it.”

“Haven’t you noticed, Brienne? Everyone in King’s Landing has run mad, except perhaps Tommen and Myrcella. Do you think it might be the Iron Throne itself? Valyrian steel blades are meant to be swords, not bound together for someone’s arse to rest upon. On the bad days, I like to think the swords themselves must be wreaking their vengeance upon us all. Now, will you marry me?”

She opens her mouth then closes it and sinks beneath the water to get away from his intense stare.

She has no choice, she knows, not if either of them are to keep a shred of honor now that he is soon to be Lord Lannister and needs must marry within days to protect his sister-lover and their children.

She pushes herself with her toes and glides beneath the surface to where Jaime is waiting. She stands, water pouring off her as she climbs out of the bath to face him.

“Yes,” she says and hopes the water streaming down her face hides her tears.

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They stand in tense silence after she speaks, Jaime simply staring, eyes dark. That strange, unfathomable expression is again on his face as his hand slowly clenches at his side. He swallows, then gives her a curt nod and turns, striding away from her like demons from all seven hells were on his heels.

Mayhaps they are.

That night, for the first time in a long while, she dreams of Lady Catelyn and Lady Stoneheart. She dreams of oaths made and broken, of blind obedience as she swings her sword and takes Jaime’s head from his shoulders. She wakes with his name on her lips and sweat on her brow and wonders what she’s done.

In the morning, she walks into court beside Myrcella to find the place filled to bursting. Her step falters when she sees Red Ronnet Connington in the gallery and she has a moment of blind panic. She’s suddenly convinced that the previous day had all been a ruse, another cruel jape designed to humiliate her with a pot of gold as the prize.


Brienne forces herself to smile at the girl as they walk to the royal gallery and she catches snippets of fevered talk that tell her the news of what is to happen today has already slipped out.

“I’m fine,” she says then turns her attention towards the Iron Throne as the small council files in and take up their positions on the steps. Lord Tarly gives her his usual glower of disgust and in an odd way, his contempt strengthens her spine for the ordeal ahead. ‘They mock us now,’ Jaime had said, and it’s true and laughter has only ever hurt her pride; it has never broken her bones or torn through her skin.

The King enters flanked by Ser Jaime on his right and Ser Meryn on his left. Jaime’s face is set in grim lines and she wonders how much he regrets giving up the Kingsguard, how much he regrets the need to publicly tie himself to her. She is not naive enough to believe his vow that he will never lay with another or deny her or set her aside even as, in a strange way, she appreciates the effort it took to lie to her about it. But there is no doubt that once this crisis in the Westerlands and Casterly Rock has been eased, he will find his way back to his sister.

He always does.

For the second time that day, she wonders what she’s done.
Court proceeds quickly and is mostly concerned with the flow of food in and out of King’s Landing, and the small trickle of people that have begun to arrive from the Riverlands seeking shelter from the winter. Tommen hears several petitions from smallfolk and resolves their issues readily enough with his small council to advise him. Finally, they are at the moment she’s been dreading.

Tommen stands and calls her forward and nods at Jaime to walk down the steps to join her. Once Jaime is standing beside her, Tommen walks down the steps until his head is only slightly higher than theirs and Queen Margaery and Princess Myrcella join him, standing below him on the stairs.

“Ser Jaime,” Tommen says and his voice quavers, sounding like the young boy he is. Brienne’s heart goes out to him, a sweet child who never expected to be King and especially not at this age. Margaery discreetly squeezes his hand and he clears his throat. “Ser Jaime,” he says again, his manner more assured, “you have served in the Kingsguard for my father, my brother and me, and you have served us all well and true.”

Brienne hears a few muffled snorts from the onlookers and a muscle in Jaime’s jaw clenches and relaxes. Tommen, to his credit, ignores the scoffing, and continues.

“Now the realm has a different need of you, something that cannot be done while you are Lord Commander of the Kingsguard. We have asked you to make a difficult choice, and you have, as always, risen to the occasion.” He turns to Brienne. “Lady Brienne, you stood champion for my Queen and allowed the gods to prove her innocence through your bravery and your skill and the strength of your arm. I named you to the Kingsguard to protect her and you have fulfilled your duties with grace and dedication. The realm now has a different need of you.”

He reaches out and unclasps Jaime’s white cloak and hands it to Margaery, then he unclasps Brienne’s and hands it to Myrcella.

“Ser Jaime Lannister, you are released from the Kingsguard. I thank you for your service to the person of the King and to the realm. In reward, I am restoring your right to the title of Lord Lannister, head of House Lannister, Lord of Casterly Rock and Warden of the West.”

The whispers that ripple through the watching crowd makes Jaime’s lips twitch towards a smile.

Tommen turns to Brienne. “Lady Brienne of Tarth, Brienne the Blue, Brienne the Beauty, you are released from the Kingsguard. I thank you for your service to the person of the King and to the realm. In reward, I am betrothing you to Ser Jaime Lannister. Upon your marriage, you will become Lady Lannister, of House Lannister, wife to the Lord of Casterly Rock, wife to the Warden of the West, with all the responsibilities and duties those roles entail.”

This time there are gasps and loud mutterings, and Jaime grins. Brienne sees Randyll Tarly’s jaw drop and she frowns a little. She had assumed the small council, at least, had known of Jaime’s plans for her.

She has no time to think on it further because Tommen is grinning at her, no longer King but a young boy. “I will miss you, Lady Brienne, but soon I shall be able to call you aunt,” he says then flings his arms round her neck and hugs her.

She flushes and thinks she will punch Jaime again if he dares laugh at her, but when she finally glances at him, his smile is almost kind.

Tommen releases her and says, “The wedding shall be on the fourth day from today, and I shall be the first to wish you happy.” He then drops a kiss on each of her cheeks.
Queen Margaery adds her words of welcome to Tommen’s and kisses her cheeks, and finally Myrcella does the same. By the end of it, Brienne feels like she is about to burst into flame from embarrassment and Jaime looks both dismayed and amused although his face is expressionless when they turn towards the still-shocked gallery once Tommen and his court have left the throne room. Her gaze falls on Red Ronnet Connington’s gaping face and she realizes Jaime has also noticed him because he slightly raises his gold hand in greeting. Connington pales and closes his mouth with a snap and gives them both a short nod before he looks away.

They leave the throne room and quickly walk away, the mutterings following after them. They pause once they have left the crowd behind. Jaime claps her gently on the shoulder then looks down as his Kingsguard armor and grimaces. “I needs must change and move to new quarters. I’ll be in the courtyard in an hour, my lady, if you wish to spar.”

She nods rather helplessly and watches him stride away. Then he turns and grins at her. “But no punching!”

She flushes then turns on her heel and hurries away to her own quarters.

The three days before the wedding pass in a blur while still moving far too slowly as dread eats away at her stomach.

Pia is excited and also disappointed since Brienne refuses to order a new dress for the occasion. The blue one she already has will suffice, she insists, although she does request a new cloak with her House’s colours and sigil. Queen Margaery and Princess Myrcella try to overturn her decision but Brienne stands firm. She rather wistfully considers wearing her now-battered armor that Jaime had gifted her a lifetime ago, but a small, well-hidden part of her truly wants to wear a pretty dress for her wedding.

The days are a flurry of activities and Brienne feels rather like a leaf being swept downstream. She is out of her element while Margaery and Myrcella are enjoying themselves immensely. Their enthusiasm is contagious and she’s almost cautiously hopeful that it won’t be the ordeal she’s imagining when cold reality douses her like icy water being thrown over her head.

Queen Margaery hosts an afternoon tea in her private chambers for those highborn women who wish to pay their respects to the soon-to-be-Lady Lannister. Brienne overhears several of these women, giggling in a corner about how Brienne’s even uglier close to and it will take a truly heroic effort for the Kingslayer to manage to bed her even once. Not that they blamed him; no man should be expected to fuck one such as she for the rest of his life.

She is tongue-tied and remote for the rest of her time with them and when Margaery asks if she is well, simply says she is not at her best in a crowd.

The afternoon before the wedding, the High Septon sends an old, withered septa to examine her and as uncomfortable as that is, it is nothing compared to Qyburn when he did the same at Harrenhal. The septa, her face pinched with ill-tempered disapproval, nods and confirms her maidenhead is intact and Brienne thinks that at least they will not need a witness to the bedding although she will have to suffer through another examination the next day.

The thought of the bedding makes her stomach twist as she prepares for bed that night. She tries to remember everything Septa Roelle had told her about the marriage bed and glumly admits it wasn’t much, only that it is painful but she, Brienne, was not likely to often suffer her husband’s demands. She worries that mayhaps Jaime will be unable to force himself to do what must be done but then she
remembers Ser Hyle’s contention that all women are alike in the dark.

Brienne wonders if she should ask the servants to ensure the bedchamber is unlit when she arrives there with Jaime...only she doesn’t know which bedchamber is to be used and she doesn’t know how to make the request without humiliating herself further, so in the end, she leaves it be. She’s sure she will have time to snuff any candles and lanterns that may be burning before she crawls beneath the blankets to suffer through the bedding.

The fact that during their sparring session that morning he had teasingly made her promise not to break his ribs or any other body part if he displeases or startles her does not make her rest any easier.

As she slips beneath her blankets, she wonders if she’s lost all of her wits to agree to this wild scheme. She stares up at the dark ceiling and wonders if Jaime will even appear at the Great Sept or if she will arrive to find this has all been some elaborate jape at her expense. Fear makes her cold as she wonders whether she will be walking into a bedchamber with her husband tomorrow or if she will be creeping from King’s Landing, humiliated and alone, although both possibilities seem equally bleak at this moment.

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She falls into a fitful sleep and dreams of Red Ronnet Connington and his mocking rose. She dreams Ser Hyle Hunt, Ser Mark Mullendore, Ser Owen Inchfield, and the others from Renly’s camp, playing court to a bag of gold dragons housed between her legs. She dreams of the Bloody Mummers and Vargo Hoat and of Qyburn’s cruel, disinterested fingers. She dreams of the Brotherhood without Banners and Kingslayer’s Whore. She dreams of laughing women and Septa Roelle, who all tell her she will be fortunate if her husband manages to force his attentions on her even once, although, Septa Roelle’s voice whispers, that makes Brienne the fortunate one.

Finally she dreams of Jaime, his mocking eyes and the beauty of his naked body in the bath of Harrenhal and on the Quiet Isle. His smile when he’s being kind, the shape of his lips, the angle of his cheeks, the breadth of his shoulders and the strength in his legs. She dreams of laughter and cruel japes and foolish bravery, of sapphires and swords and armor. She dreams of his warmth as he slept beside her during a blizzard and on their way to Maidenpool.

She dreams of soothing fingers stroking through her hair as she cried out her anguish in her sleep, and it is that memory that lingers when she opens her eyes to the dawn and Pia’s excited face.

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Jaime

Jaime wakes early the morning of his public wedding, eager to get the day begun and finished. He grins as he pulls on his breeches, and wonders if he should tell Brienne she has the High Septon to thank for remaining a maiden until her wedding day. It had taken all his self-control not to take her in the bath when she stood, naked and proud as she accepted his bargain.

But his goal is within his grasp and he believes he’s laid the groundwork well enough that there will be no sudden deaths at this wedding feast--unlike Joffrey, and he wishes he could feel some level of grief for the boy--but he still needs to exercise caution until they are on their horses tomorrow and have left King’s Landing behind.

The scratching at his door, when it comes, does not surprise him and only proves his caution is justified.
Cersei glides in, her robe coarse and brown and something a servant girl would wear. The cowl is pulled up to cover her hair and she’s holding the edges close to hide her face.

He closes the door and turns to face his sweet sister, grateful he has already pulled on his breeches.

She lowers the robe’s hood, her short hair gleaming gold in the early dawn light filtering through the windows. She’s smirking, green eyes gleaming, and Jaime’s breath catches at her beauty.

“A wedding gift,” she purrs, and drops her robe to stand naked before him.

His eyes widen and he can’t help letting his gaze drift down her body, a body he still knows better than his own. She’s always been beautiful to him and she still is, and his cock reacts at the sight of her bare body and his memories of it.

Yet he finds himself strangely unmoved. His body wants her, yes, but fucking her would have as much meaning as fucking Pia would have had when Qyburn sent her to him in Harrenhal.

The thought startles him, he who has loved this woman so deeply for so long. He almost desperately lets his eyes roam over Cersei’s breasts, the golden hair between her thighs, her shapely legs, but he feels nothing but physical lust and a nostalgic warmth fueled by the memory of times past.

Then he looks in her eyes and sees the almost-feral triumph in her face.

She thinks she’s won, he thinks as his arousal subsides. She thinks she can control me by again grabbing my cock and leading me with it.

He’s relieved now he has not tried to soothe the worry from Brienne’s eyes, to tell her he wants this marriage and her. If Cersei thought they might be happy together, his sweet sister would order Brienne taken to Qyburn’s cells no matter what Jaime might have to say about it.

One more day, he thinks as he looks into his sister’s eyes. One more day and they will be gone from King’s Landing and beyond Cersei’s immediate reach, but all his careful manipulations may be for naught if he does not tread carefully the next few moments.

“Put your robe on, Cersei,” he says tiredly. “You have won your freedom from the marriage bed. There is no need to reward me.”

“This isn’t a reward, Jaime. This is because I love you, and this marriage--while annoying--will help us return to what we used to be, before our demon brother took so much away from us.” She moves to him and winds her arms round his neck, pressing close, her mouth raised in invitation. “This is a celebration of our new beginning.”

He touches her shoulders and gently pushes her away.

“You know my terms, Cersei. Are you willing to take Lady Brienne’s place beside me in the sept?”

She stares at him, searching his face, eyes wide and limpid and sad. He catches his breath in sudden worry.

“You know I can’t do that, Jaime,” she says and presses against him again, fitting as naturally as she always has, her body feeling sweetly familiar. “There’s no reason we can’t continue as we have. We just need to rid ourselves of the High Sparrow when the time is right, and let the gossip die away.”

“And Brienne?”
“You can keep her hidden in Casterly Rock, if she means that much to you,” Cersei says carelessly, her hands stroking over his back and chest, her mouth brushing against his neck as her hand slides lower to fondle his cock through his breeches.

He steps away, breaking her hold on him.

“Get dressed, Cersei,” he says, not unkindly. “My squires will be here soon to ready me for the ceremony, and all our careful planning will be for naught if you’re found naked in my bedchamber.”

Cersei’s smile turns to a sneer as she sharply turns away and wraps her robe round herself.

“You truly did leave your manhood in the Riverlands, didn’t you? You never used to be so craven—nor cared if we were caught! You risked our lives more often than not—Winterfell, for instance!”

Guilt flashes through him at the memory of the boy’s face as he fell. The one thing he truly regrets, he thinks, wondering where they would all be if he had just gone hunting with the rest.

“Things are different now,” he says. “You had not recently been paraded naked through the streets of King’s Landing, nor suffered trial by combat to prove you innocent of killing King Robert. I am also short a sword hand and can no longer protect us from whoever may see.”

She laughs, a cold, mocking sound as she pulls the cowl of her robe over her head. “Excuses,” she says and strides to the door. She opens it and turns. “I’m not sure which of you will have the worse of this mummer’s farce: you for marrying that lumbering cow, or her for marrying only half a man.”

She at least knows enough not to slam the door as she leaves.

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Peck and the other squires arrive not long after Cersei leaves, a despondent Podrick Payne in their midst.

Jaime raises an eyebrow at the boy and he glumly says, “Pia said this is not the time for a squire, but a lady’s maid. My lady, ser, agreed.”

He claps his hand on Pod’s shoulder and says, “Have no fear, Pod, I have need of you.” He glances at Peck. “The wedding chamber is ready?”

“Almost. It will be ready by the time you leave the feast tonight.”

Jaime grins. “So long as the bed is comfortable and large, the room is warm, and the location is secret until it’s time to be escorted there,” he says. “There will be no bedding ceremony, but the High Septon is sending a septon and septa to witness us going into the room.”

Peck says, “We have tasked the serving girls Pia trusts to set the room to rights. The High Septon has also assigned a septa and novice to sit vigil until you arrive. When ready, Pia will escort them there.”

Jaime nods. “Good.” The High Septon demanding proof of consummation, annoying as it may be, has helped him ensure Brienne’s safety as much as possible without causing Cersei undue suspicion. “No food or drink is to come to the room unless you’ve prepared it yourself, Peck.” It’s not that he doesn’t trust his sweet sister, he thinks cynically, but it is best to be cautious.

He smiles. “Now, I need bathwater.”
Brienne bathes and puts on her blue dress and Pia toils over her hair. The scars from the bear and from the sword wound she took from the Brotherhood without Banners are clearly visible beneath the neckline of her dress but, she thinks hopelessly, at least her hair will be as beautiful as the straw-like mop allows.

Queen Margaery and Princess Myrcella accompany her to the sept which is filled to overflowing by all those who wish to watch the spectacle of the Kingslayer and Brienne the Beauty being joined in marriage. For a moment she considers turning tail and running, but then she straightens her shoulders and stands proud.

She can do this.

She will do this.

The High Septon’s opening prayers seem endless. When she finally walks down the aisle--alone, without a father or brother or uncle to escort her--she sees Jaime, clad in soft velvet of Lannister red and gold, handsome and proud, and her step falters at the realization of how foolish they look when seen side-by-side. He’s watching her with a cynical gleam in his green eyes and she lifts her chin and strides purposefully to meet him, and she thinks there’s a hint of pride in his face as they turn to face the High Septon.

She barely hears the prayers, but Jaime’s hand in hers seems to burn while the High Septon winds the ribbon round their hands. She keeps her eyes on Jaime’s as they recite the vows and when the High Septon gives them permission to kiss, Jaime’s lips are warm and dry as he briefly presses his mouth against hers. She thinks the only difference between this kiss and the one Ser Owen Inchfield had once stolen from her is the fact she doesn’t push Jaime away and into a campfire.

And then, to her relief, it’s all over, and she leaves the Great Sept on Jaime’s arm for the journey back to the Red Keep with only the feast and the bedding left to endure.

Tommen is the first to wish them happy in the Great Hall where the wedding feast is held, and he is the happiest Jaime has ever seen him when he isn’t playing with his kittens, of course. The kitchens have done him proud and the wine flows freely.

Mayhaps too freely.

“Good thing there’s to be no bedding ceremony,” says one drunken knight, his back to Jaime and Brienne who are strolling the room, stretching between courses and speaking with those who think it might benefit them to congratulate the new Lord and Lady Lannister. “The Kingslayer’s like to find a cock instead of a cunt beneath that gown.”

Jaime clenches his hand and glances at Brienne, who’s turned a fiery red. It is not the first insult they’ve overheard, but it is the crudest.

“Even if he finds a cunt,” says another, “the Kingslayer needs must take her from behind else he’ll
never rise to the occasion!”

They hoot with raucous laughter and Jaime takes a step towards them but is stopped by Brienne’s iron grip on his arm.

He glares. “Let me be, my lady,” he growls.

“Not here, at the wedding feast,” she hisses, “and weren’t you the one who said ‘let them mock’?”

“I said they mock us now, Brienne, not that they are free to do so! Besides, you are now Lady Lannister, Lady of Casterly Rock, and my wife. They are never to mock you in my hearing without repercussion!”

She blinks those big, beautiful blue eyes and suddenly he’s sorry there will be no bedding ceremony, because he would enjoy nothing more than to show these laughing, drunken fools just how ready he is to bed Brienne, from the front or behind, in the dark or in bright daylight.

His cock rises at the thought and he wonders if he can convince Brienne to leave the feast early. The wedding chamber is still not ready but he’s sure he can find someplace where he can rip off that dress, wrap those impossibly long legs round his waist and--

“Jaime?” she asks, alarm filling her broad, ugly, scarred face, and he blinks. “Are you well?”

“Yes, Lady Lannister,” he says, and raises his voice so it pierces even the drunken knights’ ears, “but not pleased with the company we’re near.” They freeze and Jaime knows they’re likely suddenly even more sober than when they began the day.

“These good people have all been granted guest right,” he continues, “but any who mock you would be wise to remember you are a Lannister now. And a Lannister always pays their debts.”

The knights slowly turn then visibly gulp when they meet his eyes and gulp again when he smiles his knife-like smile.

“Jaime,” Brienne scolds as he leads her away, but he just grins and wonders how much longer he has to wait until the wedding chamber is finally ready.

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Brienne

The feast is interminable and Brienne feels both relief and sudden, tense dread when Jaime sends Peck to check on the wedding chamber. Upon Peck’s return, Jaime suggests it’s time for them to leave the guests to their revelry.

There is no bedding ceremony, but they are escorted at a discreet distance by a septon and septa who will report back to the High Septon that they were seen into the bedchamber, just as the septa and novice guarding the chamber will report no others entered while they were there.

Brienne’s heart pounds faster and every mocking word she’s ever heard seems to echo in her head with every step they take: She remembers Septa Roelle telling her she’s lucky enough to not inspire lust and will therefore not need to suffer her husband’s attentions often; the knights playing mock court to her in Renly’s camp; Tarly telling her no father deserved a creature like her; Ser Hyle saying that all women are the same in the dark; Red Ronnet Connington and his rose.

Jaime glances at her and says, his voice pitched low so their companions cannot hear, “I will offer
my pardons now, my lady. I’m like to frighten you, this first bedding.”

She swallows heavily and says, “It must be done but it will be finished quickly, and then we need not worry about it again.”

Jaime grimaces. “Finished quickly? Aye, true enough. I’ve been long without a woman and that sometimes wreaks havoc on a man’s control.”

Brienne scowls as she puzzles over his words. “Why?” she asks, and Jaime looks suddenly pained. “I’ll explain later,” he almost groans then frowns. “We need not worry about it again?”

She leans closer and whispers, “I see what’s in the mirror, ser, and while all women are the same in the dark, we both know I am nothing like...like...other women.” She worriedly chews her lip and says, “Mayhaps that’s the trick of it. The dark, I mean. If we snuff the candles, mayhaps you can--force yourself to go through with the--the--act.” She can’t bear to look at him as she babbles, but the mocking voices are far too loud in her memory and she just wants this bedding to be done. She lowers her voice even more. “At least when it’s finished, we need never touch again.”

“Never touch again...” he says faintly.

She gives a slight nod, mindful of their distant escort. “I will not hold you to the promise of an heir for Tarth, Jaime. We must go through with this first bedding but that doesn’t mean--”

“You need to stop talking,” Jaime says sharply but when she risks a glance at him, he seems more ruefully amused than angry. She falls silent and walks beside him, feeling like a woman going to her execution.

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Jaime

As they finally reach the wedding chamber, Jaime ruefully thinks mayhaps he should have risked Cersei’s suspicions and paid court to Brienne in the days leading up to this moment. Now his lady wife looks like he’s about to remove her head from her shoulders rather than her maidenhead from between her legs.

In truth, he thinks as he knocks on the door with his gold hand, his eagerness may work to advantage. The slow and gentle seduction he’d originally hoped to achieve may only serve to make Brienne even more nervous.

The septa and the novice open the door and he gives them such a haughty glare they scurry out of the room like mice running from a particular hungry cat.

Apt, he thinks as he gestures for Brienne to walk through the door before him. After all, he’s been practically starving now for weeks.

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Chapter End Notes

A/N1: *evil laughter* *ahem* The next chapter should be posted by the end of the
weekend or on Monday at the latest. I think their wedding night deserves to stand on its own. ;D

A/N2: Brienne needs such a hug.
Chapter Notes

Warnings: Here be sex. Not very explicit but a bit more than fade to black. Canon-level coarse language.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Brienne

Jaime follows Brienne inside the room, then closes and bars the door while she nervously looks round and thinks she’ll never make the room dark enough with that large fire burning so cheerfully in the fireplace.

She turns and freezes because he’s right beside her. His eyes are dark and there’s that unfathomable look again upon his face as he stares at her.

“By the Seven, finally!” he says and pulls her tight against him.

What? she thinks but has no chance to say because his mouth is on hers, firm and warm and demanding, nothing like the bloodless kiss he’d given her in the sept, and nothing like Owen Inchfield’s lips when he forced a kiss on her in Renly’s camp.

Jaime slides his fingers into her hair, roughly undoing all of Pia’s careful work, his right arm tight round her waist, holding her close as he urges her to move backwards.

What? she thinks but cannot say as his mouth is still on hers.

Their mouths slip apart and she gives a startled cry as her knees bump into the bed behind them and she falls onto it. He follows her down with a laugh.

“Better than I dreamed,” he says.

What? she wants to say, but he’s kissing her again and now his tongue is sweeping against her closed lips. What?

“Open your mouth, sweetling,” he growls against her mouth.

“Wha-” and then his tongue is inside, exploring even those places where her teeth have been knocked out, and it’s Jaime and there’s an odd weakness in her limbs and a strange heat in her belly and there’s growing dampness between her legs and then his hand cups her breast through her dress and he drags a thumb over her nipple and she jerks away, startled at the unfamiliar touch.

He lifts his head long enough to grin down at her, green eyes dark and dancing. “You vowed not to break any of my bones, wench, remember that,” he says, then grasps the top of her dress and rips it down.

She gives a surprised yelp, and he laughs again but it’s strained and he’s staring at her breasts in a
“Beautiful,” he groans and lowers his head.

“Wha—?” she says, but it turns into a gasp as he suckles and she’s suddenly clutching his shoulders, fingers digging deep into the soft velvet of his doublet as she arches against him. An odd mewling protest falls from her lips when he stops and rears up, his hands going to his doublet.

“Help me get this off, wench,” he pants and she blinks, dazed, and it takes a moment for his words to sink in and then she flushes and sits up, trying to ignore the torn dress hanging to her waist and her exposed breasts. Her fingers are clumsy but he doesn’t seem to mind, only smiling a little, his eyes gleaming as he helps as much as he can although he’s constantly stopping to fondle and suckle her breasts or kissing her with his tongue deep in her mouth while she’s fumbling with his laces and buckles. Finally the last of his clothes is off and he removes his gold hand and tosses it to the side and Brienne jumps as it crashes into...something that she can’t be bothered with right now because she’s naked and his cock is jutting out but she doesn’t have time to worry because he’s kissing her again and pulling her to her feet. He finishes ripping her dress and small clothes from her, then yanks the blankets from the bed before he pulls her close and kisses her again, his hand sliding down her back to cup her ass, making her startle away. She stumbles back against the bed and he laughs.

“Get on the bed, Brienne,” he says, panting, but he’s kissing her again before she can do as he asked, his arms clasping her tight against him, and the feel of his cock pressing against her belly makes her knees tremble. Finally, he manoeuvres her on to the bed, and lays her down, sprawling on top of her as he kisses her. Her fingers are digging into his shoulders because she wants to fling her arms round him but she doesn’t know if he would be disgusted by such a wanton action or if it’s something she’s supposed to do.

Finally he stops kissing her long enough to rise to his knees, looming over her as he positions himself between her legs. Brienne is dazed, her swollen lips slightly open as she blinks up at him. Everything is confusing and overwhelming and she wants him to keep kissing her but she also wants to scoot away, to get a moment to think and figure out what she’s supposed to do.

His eyes are dark as he cups her breast again, brushing his thumb against her nipple before he glides his hand and stump over her stomach to her flanks and down the length of her legs.

“I’ve been dreaming about these,” he rasps, “and whether they’ll really wrap twice round my waist.”

Her mouth drops open. What? she tries to say, but it turns to a gasping cry as his fingers stroke through the thick coarse hair between her thighs to find the secret parts hidden there. She both bucks against his touch to bring it closer and tries to scramble away, abruptly sitting up and knocking her head against his.

He grunts in pain and she’s appalled but before she can stammer out the apology that’s on her lips, Jaime kisses her, bearing her back to the mattress, then lifts his head to laugh down at her.

“‘Tis only fair, wench,” he says. “You should not be the only one to suffer a small measure of pain tonight.”

He kisses her and this time when his fingers move between her thighs she’s not as surprised by the touch although she is startled by how good it feels and she’s suddenly aware of how very wet she is beneath his fingers and worries he will be disgusted by it as he slowly pushes one finger inside her.

Jaime groans and lifts his head from where he’s suckling on her neck and says, “I’m sorry, Brienne—I should do more to prepare you but I can’t wait or I’ll be disgracing myself on your belly instead
of in it.”

What? she thinks as he fumbles to place the blunt head of his cock at her entrance and she tenses, eyes widening, and then he pushes inside with one quick thrust of his hips. She catches her breath with surprise but any pain is fleeting enough to be unnoticeable.

He groans and stills on top of her then he grates out, “Wrap your legs round me,” and she nervously bites her lip as she complies, feeling awkward and clumsy even as her belly twists with anticipation and she instinctively clenches her inner muscles round him, startling an even deeper groan from his lips.

“I can’t wait,” he says and buries his face against her neck and begins to move.

Brienne had seen the camp followers and their knights, of course, while she was in Renly’s camp, and there were always the horses and dogs and cats and other animals she had seen mating. She knows the basics of the act but nothing has prepared her for how it feels to have Jaime moving inside her, his body heavy against hers, his breath rasping in her ear. Nothing has prepared her for how her body wants to instinctively move against his, to meet his thrusts with her own, to open wider while clenching ever more tightly round him. But she’s not sure if what her body wants is what she should be doing or if it’s what he wants; she doesn’t know if she’s making things easier or worse, or if there’s something wrong with her if she’s feeling these shivering sensations with each thrust, or those sharp flashes of pleasure as he suckles at her neck or frantically kisses her, his tongue sweeping round her mouth.

The pace of Jaime’s thrusts speeds up and he lifts his head, eyes wide and dark. “I can’t wait,” he says again, “I’ve wanted this for too long.”

What? she thinks but he’s again buried his face against her shoulder and now the rhythm of his movements is broken and rough, driving as deeply inside her as he can get until he thrusts once more and tenses against her, groaning her name against her neck before slowly relaxing on top of her.

She continues holding him for a long moment, arms and legs wrapped round him, then she slowly, cautiously relaxes and lowers her legs from around his waist to rest against the mattress even as he mutters what sounds like a protest against her shoulder.

She keeps her arms round him, and almost timidly strokes down his back, his skin burning hot and slick with sweat beneath her fingers. He makes a soft humming sound as her fingers move, almost a purr, and he becomes even heavier, pressing her into the mattress in a way that’s rather pleasant before he rolls to his side and pulls her against him, his arm and leg flung over her.

A moment later Brienne realizes with surprise that he’s asleep.

What? she thinks, her mind whirling, her body thrumming. Jaime snuffles closer, mumbling her name as he presses a kiss against her shoulder before he stills again, and all she can think is, what?, and Septa Roelle lied.

Brienne stares up at the ceiling, gradually growing ever more tense while Jaime snores quietly beside her. Her mind is both whirling and curiously blank as she tries to understand all that has happened since Jaime closed the door of the wedding chamber. Everything is a jumble of sensations and sights and sounds.

She shies away from everything he said, everything he whispered against her skin. She doesn’t
understand and she’s afraid his words, his every touch, were all some cruel jape and when he wakes he’ll laugh at her like all those men in Renly’s camp had laughed at her. That somewhere there’s a pool of dragons for him to claim with a bloody sheet in hand.

It’s not true. She knows it’s not true. Jaime may be an arrogant ass, his words at times thoughtlessly cutting, but she knows he would never treat her in such a way.

Yet, she reminds herself, she dare not trust. She dare not believe, because the truth is in her mirror, she tells herself grimly, and not on the tongues of men. Because he loves his sister-lover more than he loves himself and no honeyed words in the heat of...no, not passion, she thinks, scowling at the ceiling as the fire burns lower in the hearth and the room chills, there can be no true passion with one such as her, but simply the urgency of the moment, yes, that’s all it is. Ser Hyle said every woman is the same in the dark and she’s sure that is what had caused Jaime to say the things he did.

That is the only thing that makes sense of all that has happened in this room, although her heart trembles a little with regret as she hugs her wish that Jaime’s words had been more than wind close in her thoughts then carefully and gently locks it away.

Brienne gradually becomes aware that her thighs are sticky with his seed and her virgin blood, and she finally slips out from beneath his weight to walk to the jug and basin to wash herself.

Her hands tremble as she works, and she catches sight of herself in the mirror and curses herself for a fool. Her face is still scarred and freckled, and her nose is still broken and her lips are still too thick even though they’re red and swollen from Jaime’s kisses. She is still Brienne the Beauty and she never should have agreed to this marriage because she hadn’t known—she hadn’t understood—how is she going to pretend it doesn’t matter if he never touches her again? Or if he beds her a few more times before—before—before whatever drove him earlier fades away?

She washes herself clean then sighs as she turns to look at the man who has been turning her world on its head from the moment she met him.

He’s even more beautiful in sleep, she thinks, tracing the lines of his naked body with her eyes, torn between fear and attraction and confusion and despair.

Because now she knows. She knows what his body feels like against hers, inside hers, and her knees tremble at the memory. She knows how his lips feel, how his tongue tastes, and she doesn’t know how she’s going to survive this marriage when she also knows that what drove Jaime to act so passionately will not last.

It will not last, she silently tells herself again as she rinses the cloth and empties the basin. ‘Tis best if she never forgets that.

“Brienne?”

She starts a little and turns to see Jaime has lifted himself up on his elbow, tousled and sleepy-eyed.

“What are you doing?” he asks, his voice husky with sleep.

“I—I—I—” She blushes and forces out, “I was...sticky.”

He grimaces as he wakes more fully. “I have not treated you as gently as I should have for a maiden and her first bedding. But the deed is done and cannot be changed. Come back to bed.”

He’s looking at her with that odd expression she’s noticed before, and his voice is rough and husky, a tone she recognizes from when he was—when they—when—her eyes drift down his naked body
She blushes fiercely as she quickly averts her gaze and turns away, suddenly aware of her nakedness in a way she hasn’t been since their time on the Quiet Isle.

He chuckles, low and husky, and she hears him slide from the bed and walk towards her. He gently turns her to face him and cups her cheek and draws her mouth to his. He leisurely kisses her, his tongue lazily sweeping through her mouth as he coaxes her back to the bed where he lays her down and takes his place beside her.

He watches her eyes as his fingers slide across her breasts and down her stomach to explore the secret places hidden between her thighs. She flinches at the first touch.

“Sore?” he asks.

She shakes her head, then stammers, “Strange.”

He nods, his face serious as he watches her intently, and his fingers slowly continue their explorations. Her body thrums, moistens, opens, and it frightens her and embarrasses her and she cannot—will not—allow herself to relax.

“You do not trust me,” he whispers.

“I do,” she whispers back. “I trust with you with my life and my honor.”

“But not with your body.”

Or my heart, she thinks, and says, “I—I—I don’t know why you would wish me to.”

He grins at that. “No, I suppose you don’t.”

He kisses her, gentle and sweet, and when he lifts his lips from hers, he says, “This is a true marriage, Brienne, and I am going to make sure you are well and truly bedded tonight.”

“You already have,” she says and blushes again.

He chuckles. “And I’m going to do it again. But you will rid yourself of the notion that this is the only night we spend together. Who filled your head with such nonsense?”

“Septa Roelle said it was the most I could hope for. She said I would be one of the lucky ones. Two sons, mayhaps three, and then my lord husband would never bother me again.” She blinks a little nervously at Jaime’s incredulous stare. “I am not one to—to—to inspire lust.”

He raises an eyebrow as he presses his hard cock against her thigh and slowly pushes a finger inside her. “I think it’s safe to say your septa lied,” he says, and kisses her.

By the time he relaxes on top of her, spent once more, she almost believes him.

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Chapter End Notes
A/N1: This is roughly the half-way point of this fic. The next chapter may take a little longer than my usual week between chapters because I now need to do some plotting.

A/N2: Jaime’s a bit of an idiot but I love him anyway.
Jaime

Jaime’s more controlled the second time they fuck. He takes his time, paying attention to what she seems to like, and it pleases him when she shyly and awkwardly responds to his questing tongue or squirms against his stroking fingers. But she isn’t fully relaxed and her eyes are wary. She holds herself aloof even as he makes her wet and manages to wring panting gasps from her mouth as her fingers clutch at his shoulders before she remembers to be cautious.

He doesn’t blame her for being wary. After all that tripe she was spewing about darkness and duty and never touching again, he knows his passion surprised and confused her. All right, he thinks as he pulls on his tunic and calls for bath water shortly after the sun rises, granted, their first bedding was also faster than a shy maiden wife should expect, but a man can only take so much, and he’d been dreaming about those legs wrapping round his waist for weeks.

He watches impatiently as the squires and servants fill their tub and rekindle the fire in the hearth while Brienne hides beneath the covers, and he’s sure every inch of her is fiery red.

When they’re alone, he whips the blankets from her to see if he’s right and laughs at her indignant squawk. He tosses the blankets aside so she can’t burrow beneath them to hide from his sight.

“Come,” he says and holds out his hand. “We should bathe and break our fast while we still have our privacy. All too soon we shall have to face King’s Landing.” She glares but takes his hand and stands. He’s startled by the purple smudges he’s left on her neck and teats and there’s one on her flat stomach to mark a particular spot where he discovered she was ticklish. She seemed to enjoy his mouth there well enough. He has a sudden wave of worry that they needs must conceal those marks lest someone discover what they’ve done and then he remembers: he is no longer Kingsguard; Brienne is not his sister but his wife, and he can fuck his own wife without fear.

He glances at her mulish face as they walk to the tub.

Well.

Without much fear, he concedes and grins as she steps in to the bath. She turns, startled, as he steps in behind her. He rolls his eyes as she automatically covers herself and she flushes and forces herself to drop her hands.

“We’ve bathed together before,” he says as he pulls his tunic over his head and tosses it aside.

“That was in a much larger tub!”

“And this will be far more pleasant,” Jaime says and smiles a deliberately charming and persuasive smile. He’s rewarded with a darkening of those fathomless eyes before she turns sharply away, ducking her head.

They settle into the bath with Brienne in front of him, leaning against his chest once he assures her she won’t crush him. It is a bit of a tight squeeze, but pleasantly so. He proceeds to wash her and he laughs as she slaps his hand away when he tickles her and when he reaches to wash between her legs. Finally, he wraps his arms round her and buries his face against her neck. He closes his eyes and breathes in her scent and thinks he hadn’t realized how empty his arms had been until this moment. The last time he truly held a woman was—
He stops.

He will not think of Cersei while he’s holding Brienne, except to hope he’ll be able to get them both out of King’s Landing in one piece and away from his sweet sister’s gaze.

Almost there, he thinks, and says, his voice low against the Brienne’s skin, “When we leave this room, wench, there may be things I say or do that you must not take seriously or believe to be truth.”

She turns her head and he sees the frown on her lips. “What do you mean?”

“I mean that Cersei may venture from her rooms to see us on our way or send spies to watch for her. If you value your life, try not to look as if you are pleased with this marriage.”

She twists until she can look him in the eye as she glares. “What makes you think I am?” she snaps then turns her back to him again. “Especially when you call me wench!”

He drops a kiss on her shoulder then plants slow, nibbling kisses up her long, strong neck until a low moan escapes from her lips.

He chuckles. “Clearly I am displeasing you,” he purrs against her ear and she shivers against him, “wench.”

He lets out an ‘oof’ as she elbows him then scrambles from the tub. Jaime laughs even as he admires her long, lean lines and the leagues of bare flesh he has barely begun to explore. He knows she’s not truly displeased with him since she didn’t break any of his bones in her efforts to escape the tub so he’s hopeful he might be able to persuade her to return to bed for a little while longer.

He stands and Jaime’s grin is wicked as she visibly gulps while her wide eyes drift down his aroused body and she sputters, “You can’t want—!”

“Obviously, I can,” he says with a shrug as he steps from the tub. “It’s—it’s daylight, Jaime!”

He raises an eyebrow. “Yes? And?”

She blinks wordlessly as she blushes an interesting shade of red and Jaime wonders just how many different shades she would turn if he were truly trying to tease her.

“I saw you just as clearly in the firelight, Brienne, if that’s what’s worrying you.”

She stammers out some meaningless noises and he takes pity on her. He prowls towards her and it pleases him that she neither tries to cover herself nor back away but, as always, stands her ground. He’s even more pleased when he kisses her and she opens her mouth to tentatively meet his questing tongue with her own.

There’s a knock on their door before he can do much more than deepen the kiss and pull her flush against his body, smoothing his stump down her back.


She blinks and blushes but he sees she doesn’t quite believe him.
“When we get to Casterly Rock,” he says as he releases her and goes to find his breeches, “I will lock us away in the Lord’s chambers, and we will do nothing but eat and sleep and fuck for two days.”

She snorts as she picks up the dress she wore the previous day. “By the time we get to Casterly Rock, my lord, I have no doubt this madness will have died away.”

He scowls but before he can speak, she says, “I need your tunic, Jaime. You tore my dress to shreds.” She pouts a little as she holds up the ruined blue fabric to show him.

He hands her his tunic and says, “I did not know you loved the thing so much.”

“It was the only one that fit,” she says so mournfully that he laughs and kisses her again.

“You’re Lady Lannister, Lady of Casterly Rock. From now on, all your gowns will fit.”

*B*p*/

Brienne banishes Jaime to the corridor while a sour-faced septa completes her examination and removes the bloody sheet from the bed as evidence for the High Septon. Jaime had tried to stay, to make sure Brienne was treated kindly, but the wench assured him she would be fine and almost physically pushed him from the room.

It’s chilly in the corridor in only his breeches although Pod’s uncomfortable silence amuses him enough that he almost doesn’t feel the cool air against his bare chest. His impatience as he waits also serves to keep him warm and he begins to pace, wondering what the septa could possibly be doing that could take this long.

Finally the door opens and the septa steps through and rakes Jaime from top to bottom with a thoroughly contemptuous glare. She pinches her mouth even tighter and scurries away, sheets folded and clutched to her scrawny chest.

Jaime raises an eyebrow then turns to Pod. “Have you finished packing my lady, ser’s belongings?”

Pod nods.

“Well have you brought Oathkeeper?”

Pod nods again and picks up the well-wrapped sword and scabbard from where he had propped it against the wall behind him.

Jaime thanks him and takes it, then says, “We’ll be in the main courtyard shortly. We will make our farewells to the King and then we’ll be leaving King’s Landing as soon as we can make it through a gate. The other squires will help you get the horses ready.”

Pod hurries away as Jaime steps back into the bedchamber.

Brienne is standing, frowning at the remains of her dress she’s placed on the bed. She’s still dressed in his tunic and he admires her bare legs for a moment before he says, “What took that disapproving old septa so long?”

“She prayed for me,” Brienne says absently. “Apparently you are going to all seven hells and dragging me with you.”

Jaime raises an eyebrow as he lays Oathkeeper across a chair. “You don’t sound very concerned.”
“We’ve made it through at least two of those hells already by working together,” she says. “I’m willing to take my chances.”

Her words warm him to his core but he simply says, “Why are you frowning?”

“How Pod brought my clothes?” she asks. “I can’t leave this bedchamber in nothing but your tunic.”

“No,” he agrees, “and no, Pod hasn’t brought your clothes. Now, stop mourning your dress. I have a bride’s gift for you.”

She looks sharply at him. “A bride’s gift?”

“There’s no need to be so suspicious, my lady,” he says. “I think you’ll like it.”

He strolls to the corner where he had tossed his gold hand the night before. He picks up a soft bundle and hands it to Brienne. He watches her face as she opens it to find thick, finely woven woolen breeches and an equally fine tunic in the shade of blue that will most set off her eyes.

“These should help keep you warm on our travels, my lady,” he says. “There will be more in our carriage when we leave.”

She carefully strokes the cloth. “Thank you, Jaime,” she says softly.

“That’s not your bride’s gift,” he says and she frowns. He removes the cloth from the mannequin his gold hand had clattered into the night before. He’s glad to see it had not left a dent. He’s quite proud of the armor and how it combines the blue of House Tarth with the gold and red of House Lannister. The dancing lion on the breastplate has the crescent moon on one side and the sun on the other.

He turns to look at her. “I thought you deserved new armor to go with your new name.”

She swallows and her bottomless eyes glisten with emotion. “You do not mean to have me forsake my calling as a warrior?”

“No, Brienne,” he says seriously. “I, of all people, understand what it means to have your skill with a sword. I would never demand you give up something you love so much.”

Dismay crosses her face and Jaime wonders what he’s said to cause her to look so stricken.

“And if you get with child,” he continues with a puzzled frown, “I know you will exercise caution.”

Now her eyes widen before she flushes then pales. “A child...?” she says faintly.

“I’ve asked Pia to ensure you have a ready supply of moon tea,” he says. “We are facing winter without adequate food stores, and we still have Lady Stoneheart in the Riverlands and Ser Robert Strong here in King’s Landing to deal with, not to mention the Targaryen pretender invading the Stormlands and Stannis Baratheon in the north. I would prefer there be no babe until we’ve dealt with at least some of those threats, but the decision is yours, Brienne.”

She staggers to the bed and sits as if her legs have given way beneath her. “I hadn’t thought of a child,” she whispers.

He sits beside her. “It is what’s expected of us,” he says gently.

She nods, still stunned. “Moon tea?” she asks.
“If you wish to use it.”

“Yes,” she says faintly, “I do. Thank you.”

He’s both relieved and surprisingly disappointed by her decision but he spoke true: there is much to be done, strange and familiar dangers to be faced with winter barely begun and the realm already starving. A child now would be the height of foolishness on both their parts.

He stands and pulls her to her feet then presses a light kiss against her soft, full lips. “Now we needs must dress. I told Pod we’d be in the main yard shortly to take our leave of the King. Get dressed in your new clothes and armor, and wear Oathkeeper at your waist.” He gives her a wicked grin. “And I’ll need my tunic back.”

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Brienne

Jaime leaves her in the main courtyard with Pod, Peck and the other squires. He has, she assumes, gone to say farewell to Cersei. Her stomach twists at the thought and she sternly tells herself she knew the truth of everything before she agreed to marry him again.

She tamps down her feelings as she stamps her feet and glances round her. The horses are saddled and ready, the air crisp and cold. Even at this hour, the yard is filled with Tarly and Tyrell soldiers and she notices Lady Olenna’s carriage.

She speaks to the carriage driver and discovers that Lady Olenna is leaving for Highgarden. The news makes her uncomfortable and she wonders what the old lady is thinking to leave her granddaughter alone.

Brienne turns and catches sight of Lord Randyll Tarly, proud and arrogant in his armor. She had overheard a few of the Tarly knights saying the Queen Regent had finally decided to let Lord Tarly join his armies marching on Storm’s End. Red Ronnet Connington stands beside him, sullen and angry, and he glares at her as she returns to her horses and squires, her new bride’s gift armor gleaming in the sun.

She looks down at the ground, hoping to avoid both Tarly’s contemptuous sneer and Connington’s glare. She notices Red Ronnet glancing round before he saunters over to her.

“What has the Kingslayer already abandoned you?” he says with a mocking twist to his lips.

“He has gone to make final arrangements for our departure,” she says as politely as she can, “and his name is Ser Jaime, or Lord Lannister, if you please.”

Red Ronnet lifts an eyebrow. “One night with the man between your legs and look at you! I assume he did actually manage to bed you enough to consider the marriage a true one?”

She straightens her shoulders and stares down at him from her advantage of height. “What do you want?” she says.

He at least has the grace to look slightly ashamed as he says, “Ser Mark Mullendore died in the black cells last night, so I’ve heard.”

Brienne’s surprised at the sorrow she feels at the words. She had no love for the man after his participation in the wager in Renly’s camp, but it is still a horrible and humiliating way for a warrior to die. And, she admits, he is a reminder of those glorious days when she was one of Renly’s
Rainbow Guard, short-lived though they were; a reminder of those days when she loved Renly Baratheon with all her heart and all the innocence of a child.

“There are not many knights left from Renly’s army, are there?” she says a little wistfully.

Connington shakes his head and they stand in almost companionable silence before they turn at the sound of a carriage entering the yard. It’s large and emblazoned with the sigil of House Lannister and Jaime is on his horse beside it. He pulls up beside her and dismounts then gives Connington a thin smile.

“You have come to wish us happy?” he says, and scratches his cheek with his gold hand.

Connington scowls then simply bows to them both and leaves without saying another word.

“What did he want?” Jaime asks, watching after the man with glittering eyes.

“Ser Mark Mullendore died last night, so he heard.”

Jaime raises an eyebrow. “Qyburn’s not known for maintaining the health of his prisoners, I fear. I seem to be his one notable exception.”

She shivers a little. “Mayhaps it’s a mercy if Ser Mark was as broken as the rumors say.”

Jaime scowls. “Were you fond of him?”

She shakes her head. “He’s simply a memory of a time and a way of life once loved and now lost,” she sighs. “Lady Catelyn called us the knights of summer and I didn’t believe her.” She turns and looks at him. “I believe her now.”

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Lady Olenna takes her leave of the King and Queen first and pauses the carriage by Jaime and Brienne, waiting in front of their horses and squires and carriage.

She pokes her head out the window.

“I wish you happy again, Lord and Lady Lannister,” she says. “I wish you good luck as well, although which of you will need it more is still a mystery. Safe travels.”

They watch her leave and Jaime looks as bemused as Brienne feels.

Lord Tarly, Red Ronnet and the Tarly men are next to take their leave of the King and Queen, something which is nothing more than Tommen making a show of inspecting the knights and then giving Lord Tarly a regal nod. Tarly nods in return and they quickly ride away.

Then it’s Jaime and Brienne’s turn. Tommen whispers to Ser Boros, who frowns and protests, but Tommen whispers again, more insistently and Ser Boros bows and hurries back into the Red Keep as Princess Myrcella arrives carrying a soft bundle of cloth in her arms.

“While we wait for Ser Boros,” Margaery says, “Myrcella and I wish to give you this bride’s gift, Brienne.”

Myrcella hands her the package and Brienne opens it to reveal shimmering cream silk shot through with blue and red and gold. Her jaw drops at the sheer beauty of the material.

“I had hoped you would allow us to give you this for your wedding gown,” Margaery says, “but that
was not to be. Please take this and wear it when you preside over your first dinner as Lady of Casterly Rock.”

Brienne gently strokes the luxurious material and wishes she could do justice to the beautiful thing. She looks at Margaery’s and Myrcella’s faces and gives them a shaky smile. “I will,” she says, “and I will remember you both when I do.”

They beam as she hands the dress to Pia so it can be safely stowed in the carriage, then first Margaery then Myrcella hug and kiss her. Brienne takes the opportunity to whisper to Myrcella to keep practicing her swordplay whenever she can find a moment and Myrcella whispers back a promise that she would.

Ser Boros returns as Myrcella releases her and steps away. He’s carrying a sword in a garish scabbard and Jaime sucks in his breath.

Tommen takes the sword and turns to them. He glances at Margaery, who gives him an encouraging nod.

“Ser Jaime. Uncle Ser,” he says, “you served in the Kingsguard for more than half your life. I give you the temporary gift of my House sword, Widow’s Wail, to remind you that even if you are no longer Kingsguard, you still serve the King and the realm. I ask you to carry this sword in my name and return it to my House upon your death.”

“Your Grace...” Jaime says, dismayed.

Tommen’s face falls. “I thought this gift would please you,” he says and his chin trembles a little. Brienne’s heart clenches at the sight and she’s suddenly reminded that he is still just a child. “Mother has not approved of any of the other gifts I suggested, and I can’t bear to give you one of my kittens.”

Jaime swallows, then says, “This gift does please me, Your Grace, almost as much as one of your kittens, but this is a Valyrian steel sword. It was a gift from your grandfather to your House and it’s worth is beyond price.”

“Which is why it is to return to House Baratheon upon your death,” Tommen says earnestly. “You and Lady Brienne are both warriors and this way, you can each carry a Valyrian steel sword.”

Jaime stares wordlessly at the young King then bows his head. “You honor me, Your Grace,” he says.

Tommen’s immediately all smiles, his hair gleaming gold in the sun, and the boy is so handsome and sweet, Brienne wonders if Jaime regrets that he cannot claim him as his own.

Jaime takes the sword and Peck helps him remove his current sword and scabbard and strap Widow’s Wail to his hip.

Then Tommen hugs him and Brienne, then stands with Margaery and Myrcella, watching as Jaime and Brienne lead their small entourage out of the yard and into the streets of King’s Landing.

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Jaime

Their pace is slow but steady and they stop to make camp when the sun begins to set. The days are noticeably shorter now, Jaime thinks as he scouts the area, and that will make travel even more
difficult when there are fewer hours when they can actually see.

Brienne seems to relax once they leave King’s Landing behind although she’s silent most of the day.

They finish setting up camp and once they’ve eaten, Jaime wastes no time grabbing Brienne’s hand and tugging her into their tent.

“We’ll see you in the morning,” he tells their companions and seals the door.

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He doesn’t allow much time between kisses but finally they’re free of their armor and clothes and he tumbles them onto their bedding. She watches him with puzzled eyes that he does his best to kiss and suckle and caress away until she’s mewling and arching against him and pulling him close. He finally pushes inside her and closes his eyes at how good it feels and marvels at how it’s so different yet so similar to—

No, he thinks, pausing. He lifts his head and looks into Brienne’s dazed eyes. He will never allow anyone else to be in bed with them, he thinks, making a silent promise as she blinks up at him. He keeps his eyes on hers and begins to move.

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After, he curls round her beneath their blankets, his chilled nose pressed against her neck. “I have a mind to take you to Stokeworth, wench,” he says sleepily.

“Stokeworth?” she exclaims and rolls over to scowl at him.

“I think you would enjoy Ser Bronn of the Blackwater, and I would dearly love to see you spar with him. I suspect you would both learn much from the other.”

“But Stokeworth is in the opposite direction as Casterly Rock!”

He nods as he kisses her, pulling her closer and sliding his hand down her back. “I think we may even spend a week there, if Bronn will put up with us for that long. He did send a message this morning, intimating as much.”

“A week?” she sputters. “But we have to get to Casterly Rock as quickly as we can! The mine has collapsed, people are in revolt, and food is already scarce! Things will only get worse the longer we tarry! You yourself said the people of the Westerlands need their Lord Lannister to calm them. It’s why Cersei allowed you to be dismissed from the Kingsguard! It’s why she gave you Casterly Rock!”

He begins to laugh, his whole body shaking. She pushes him away with a frustrated growl and he sobers long enough to say, “Don’t you know, wench? Lannisters lie.”

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The Place In Between

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Brienne

It takes a moment for the meaning of Jaime’s words to sink in and once they do, she pushes him out of their bedding with a growl and a vicious shove. He’s still laughing even as she scrambles to her knees, wrapping their blankets round her, leaving him naked in the chill of the tent. She glares at him through the shadows cast by the campfire still burning outside.

“It was all a lie?” she yells.

He stops laughing long enough to say, “Hush, wench, or you’ll have our poor squires believing our marriage is finished before it’s even begun!”

She glares as she tugs the blankets more closely round herself, heroically refusing to stare at what she can see of Jaime’s bare body that had been pressed against every inch of her, inside her, only a few minutes before. She glances at the tent opening as she lowers her voice and says, “It was all a lie? You broke your vows to the Kingsguard for—for—why? It certainly wasn’t honor that made you cheat your sister out of her inheritance!”

In an instant his laughter is gone, his face settling into cold, harsh lines. “Is that what you think?” he says. “That I convinced Cersei and the King and the small council to release me from the Kingsguard just so I could reclaim the title of Lord Lannister? Just so I could reclaim the Rock?”

She blinks, suddenly uncertain, struck by the anger and—was it hurt?—in his voice and wishes she could see more of his face in the dim light of the tent.

“I don’t know,” she says, more calmly now. “What other reason could there be?”

He stares then shakes his head and gets to his feet. She watches with growing uncertainty and dread as he clumisly pulls on his breeches and boots then grabs up his tunic and cloak and leaves the tent without another word.

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Jaime

Jaime ignores the squires and soldiers still sitting round the campfire as he finishes pulling on his clothes before he finds a tourney sword. He wishes now he had kept Ser Ilyn Payne with him, but he had sent him with Ser Addam when the Lannister forces left for Storm’s End. It had been what the knight had wanted and Jaime could not bring himself to refuse.

But now he needs to work out his anger and if he were to spar with Brienne, one or both of them would end with a serious injury. Most likely him, in truth. He does not want to subject any of his squires to his anger, either, so he strides off into the dark while those sitting round the camp studiously ignore him.

The moonlight reflecting off the snow lights his way through the woods until he decides he’s gone
far enough and he stops and begins to batter his sword against the first innocent tree that seems to be almost the same thickness as the wench’s skull.

_Cheat your sister out of her inheritance._

He swings the sword at each word, every blow feeling as if it is striking into the very heart of him.

_It certainly wasn’t honor._

He grunts as he slices those words away.

_What other reason could there be?_

He growls as the last blow rattles his arm and he pauses, already sweat soaked, then turns and begins slashing at another tree.

_Stupid child_, he thinks with each swing of his arm. _Stupid, hide-bound, honor-blinded, lackwitted, child!_ Thick as a castle wall and she’s learned nothing—understood nothing—from his tale of the Mad King and the wildfire.

_I trust you with my honor and my life._

_No_, he thinks viciously, sword swinging, _you don’t trust me at all._

How can she not know that he risked it all for her? That faced with the choice between the Kingsguard and her, between Cersei and her, he chose her? How can she not know how much he values her? By the Seven, Olenna Tyrell knew before they were half a mile from King’s Landing!

He stops, panting, his arm aching, and he wants to roar with rage that Brienne could still think so little of him, and he wants to weep with yearning for his strong sword arm, and he wants to howl with grief over the loss of his white cloak, and his dreams for the Kingsguard and his half-empty page in the White Book.

He turns and attacks a third defenseless tree, but each blow now is against his own rage, his own grief, his own choices and failures that have led him to this point, and against the hurt that the wench he married, the one for whom he risked everything—_Does. Not. Trust. Him._

_It certainly wasn’t honor that made you cheat your sister out of her inheritance._

_No_, he thinks, his blows gathering speed even as his control begins to slip, _it was love!_ And his sword jars against the tree at an odd angle and flies from his hand to land somewhere in the snow-filled underbrush.

He presses his hand against the tree and hangs his head, panting, his breath frosting the chill air.

He doesn’t want to use that word with her, he thinks, his anger draining as his breathing slows. It’s still tainted with too many things that he does not want to allow between them. Love is still too connected to Cersei, where the word means shadows and secrecy, anger and violence and other people’s shame. It is still too connected to Tyrion, where love means lies and helplessness, failure and guilt and betrayal. He can’t bring himself to use that word with Brienne. She deserves something better, with a better meaning than what he can offer, even if she cannot bring herself to trust him.

“Are you finished?”
He turns without surprise and looks at the lumbering, great wench. He wipes sweat from his brow and shrugs. “The sword is lost somewhere in the snow, so unless you brought me another one, I suppose I am.”

She stands, arms crossed, her freckled, mangled face set in mulish lines. She’s dressed in her new breeches and wrapped in the cloak he had placed round her shoulders in the Sept of Baelor. Her hair shimmers in the weak moonlight and he wishes it were warmer because he would dearly love to see if her bare flesh would shine as bright.

“Did the squires send you?” he asks, pushing such thoughts away.

“I sent myself,” she snaps.

There’s a cruel edge to his smile. “Worried I might injure myself, my lady? You could end up a widow before you’ve learned to be a wife.”

“Or before you’ve learned to be a husband.”

He glares then reluctantly chuckles. “I suppose I can’t argue that one, wench.”

Brienne’s posture relaxes a little at his chuckle. “Why are you so angry, Jaime?” she asks. “You are not the one wronged here.”

He’s grateful he’s worn off the worst of his anger. “How have I wronged you, my lady?” he asks mockingly.

“You do not trust me,” she says, her voice flat.

His eyes widen and his jaw drops. “I don’t trust you?” he sputters.

“You lied to me, Jaime, and instead of trusting me with the reasons why, here you are, taking out your anger on trees.”

“Because you don’t trust me to have more of a reason for my actions than simply to become Lord of Casterly Rock!”

“How am I supposed to know that?”

“You know me! After everything we’ve been through, I at least expect you to not immediately fling accusations at my head!”

“And I expect you to talk to me instead of taking offense and destroying things that have done nothing to you!”

They glare at each other, and the moonlight seems to thicken and shimmer between them.

“You believe I have shit for honor,” he says, more quietly.

“You believe I am not strong enough to help you,” she replies, just as quietly.

He blinks at that. “Of course you’re strong enough,” he says, puzzled.

“Then you believe I’m not smart enough.”

“Of course you’re smart enough, Brienne,” he says, exasperated, “but you are too honest for what I had to do!”
“I can lie if I have to,” she says.

He can’t stop his mouth curving into a genuinely amused smile. “No, you really can’t,” he says.

She lifts her chin. “You believed me at Pennytree.”

“No, I really didn’t.”

She glares.

“I know those eyes, wench, and just like at Pennytree, they would have given the game away before it had even begun.”

“Why did you have to play a game at all?” she demands.

He sighs and strides towards her. In this light, her eyes are bottomless pools and he wishes it were summer so he could lay her down and watch her face as they fuck in the moonlight. He can tell from her expression that she has no idea that his thoughts have flitted to more carnal pleasures than their argument so he reluctantly decides against kissing away her anger the way he used to do with Cersei. He somehow doubts it would work anyway.

“It will take us a day, mayhaps a little longer, to get to Stokeworth from here,” he says. “I will explain all once we’ve sent the others on their way to Casterly Rock and we are alone.”

She scowls. “Why—”

He gently presses his hand against her mouth. “Tomorrow, Brienne. I swear. Can you at least trust me that far?”

She frowns beneath his palm then tilts her head in agreement. He removes his hand and considers her thoughtfully.

“If we go back to our tent,” he says slowly, “and I reach for you, will you deny me?”

She blinks, confused at the change of subject and he can almost see her mind working as she tries to understand what he’s asking. She flushes when she does and he feels like he’s drowning in the depths of her eyes, and it’s only the wariness that lurks there that stops him. He stands in watchful silence, wondering what she’s going to say.

“No,” she finally whispers, so softly that if he hadn’t seen her lips form the word he might have thought it was only the wind. She swallows. “No,” she says again.

He smiles, relieved to his bones as he buries his fingers in her straw-like hair so he can capture her lips with his own. “Good,” he says, between long, slow, deep kisses, “good.”

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Chapter End Notes

A/N: Sorry this chapter is so short, but the next chapter is shaping up to be pretty plot heavy and doesn’t really go with this section as a single chapter. Think of this chapter as a speedy posting bonus… ;D
**Stokeworth**

**Chapter Notes**

Warnings: Sex happens, because Jaime is a lusty fellow. Not really smutty but a bit more than just fade-to-black. Canon-compliant coarse language. I suppose that last one should just be a given – LOL.

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**Brienne**

Jaime reaches for her when they return to the tent and she does not deny him. But this time is different, somehow, his face and eyes solemn in the darkness of the tent as he touches and kisses her. She softens and opens for him, moans and arches and squirms in spite of her best efforts to hold herself aloof, each touch and each kiss drawing her closer, even though she knows he doesn’t love her and now she knows he doesn’t fully trust her.

But that knowledge can’t stop the trail of fiery sensation that he leaves in his wake, and the feel of him filling her, moving inside her, feels less strange, and yes, yes, there’s pleasure in it, not least of which is the pleasure of simply being touched and being allowed to touch in return. When it’s finished, and he’s heavy on top of her, his golden head resting on the pillow beside hers as she holds him in her arms, she feels...she feels...safe.

She frowns up at the tent canvas over their heads as she hesitantly strokes the smooth skin of his back and tells herself she must not get used to this feeling because he’s only going to shatter her heart.

Jaime rolls off her with a sleepy groan. He tugs her on to her side and wraps himself round her, tucking her head against his neck. He mumbles her name and she imagines he drops a kiss against the top of her head before he relaxes into sleep.

She needs to roll away, she tells herself, put space between them. She dare not allow herself to become used to this.

But her body’s still thrumming from his hands and his mouth and his cock, and he’s warm in the growing chill of the tent as their brazier burns low, and the weight of his arm and leg slung over her, holding her close, makes it easy to pretend he holds her in more regard than he does.

She should roll away, she thinks again without conviction, then tentatively rests her hand on his chest and closes her eyes.

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In the morning, to the protests of Pod and Pia and all of Jaime’s squires, Jaime sends them and the Lannister soldiers and the carriage on their way to Casterly Rock.

She and Jaime sit their horses and watch as their entourage rumbles away.

“‘Tis a pity about the carriage,” Jaime says wistfully.
Brienne frowns.

He gives her a wicked grin, and it’s almost as if the anger of the previous night had never been. “I had it specially commissioned for us, wench, so we could enjoy ourselves without pausing our journey to the Rock.”

She gives him a puzzled scowl then catches sight of the heated look in his eyes that she’s beginning to recognize. She flushes, and flushes even more as he laughs.

“Everyone would have known what we were doing,” she mutters.

Jaimes says, “They knew what we were doing last night, too.”

“That’s--that’s at night, Jaime!”

He shakes his head as he turns his horse’s head in the direction of Stokeworth and they strike out through the snowy forest.

“I shall have to break you of this night-only thinking, my lady,” he says. “Mayhaps we’ll find a quiet spot sometime today where I can take you against a tree.”

She rides in silence, puzzling over his words. “How would that work?” she asks, honestly curious.

“Gods, wench,” Jaime groans, “your innocence will be the death of me.”

She blinks and subsides into awkward silence.

Jaime chuckles then sobers. “I made you a promise last night,” he says, and there is no teasing now.

“Yes,” she says. “You promised to explain everything to me.”

So he does.

He tells her about the rumors of Qyburn’s experiments, of the whispers that Cersei has sent at least one high-born woman to the black cells to support those experiments. He tells her of the disgraced maester’s fascination with Brienne and the Queen Regent’s promise to give her to Qyburn once Jaime tired of her. He tells her about Cersei’s determination to remove Margaery as Queen, and how Brienne’s success in the trial by combat only strengthened Cersei’s resolve to honor her promise to Qyburn and to eliminate the Rose Queen.

He then tells her about the Crown’s debt, about Aurane Waters and the loss of their fleet, of Cersei’s decision that Casterly Rock would simply keep giving the Crown more gold, regardless of the consequences to the miners or the Westerlands or even the realm.

He tells her of Cersei’s plan to strip him of his white cloak in a desire to weaken him, to keep him by her side and dependent upon her every whim. They talk about the rumors that Ser Robert Strong leaves a trail of blood behind him whenever he goes about King’s Landing on the Queen Regent’s business. Neither of them can determine if the creature simply obeys orders or is acting on its own accord. Neither doubt the creature is an undead revenant like Lady Stoneheart.

Jaime then tells her of his constant arguments with Cersei since their return to King’s Landing, of his efforts to soothe her anger, of his waning influence with his sweet sister now that he is no longer her lover. He tells her of Cersei’s conviction that she has refused him instead of accepting that he chose to not return to her bed. Finally, he tells her of Cersei’s drinking and erratic behavior and of Lady Taena Merryweather and Nymeria Sand’s encouragement of it even as he admits to exploiting
Cersei’s weaknesses for his own ends.

“There are other voices whispering in her ear, now, Brienne,” he says with a heavy sigh. “I could not trust Cersei’s word to honor the guest right I had extended to you, or to consider the esteem in which Tommen and Myrcella hold you. And Qyburn has some strange hold over her. Mayhaps it is only because he is the one who brought her Ser Robert Strong in time to save her from the High Sparrow.”

Brienne’s scowl is ferocious. “So because she no longer follows your council, you decided it was time to take your sister’s rightful claim to Casterly Rock?”

“I could have taken the Rock at any time, wench,” Jaime growls with a roll of his eyes. “Cersei has trained Tommen to stamp whatever paper is placed in front of him, and it would have been the work of a moment to have the Royal seal on something that allowed me to leave the Kingsguard and become Lord Lannister.”

“So why didn’t you?”

“Because simply taking Casterly Rock would not have saved you! Cersei had to believe it was her decision. She had to believe losing the white cloak and becoming Lord Lannister was a punishment for me, just as she had to believe our marriage would be an even worse punishment for both of us, else she would have sent Ser Robert Strong or Qyburn to deal with the problem.” He scowls. “She may still do so if she ever realizes her hold on me is truly gone.”

Brienne shivers. “She would kill you, Jaime? Her twin and lover and father of her children? You yourself said you were two parts of a whole.”

He looks at her with eyes wide in disbelief. “I’m talking about you, Brienne. You’re the problem.”

Brienne flushes and quickly looks away. “At least in her own mind,” she mutters, then more strongly, “and only until she truly thinks things through.”

“Brienne—”

She abruptly shakes her head. “Enough,” she says, and they ride in tense silence for a few minutes.

Finally, Jaime sighs, and says, “Even if I didn’t need to protect you—” he rolls his eyes at her scoff. “Even if I didn’t need to protect you,” he says even more firmly, “Cersei still needed her power curtailed. Removing her as Regent would do little as she is Tommen’s mother and her influence over her son is undiminished. Even if we forced her to the Rock, I have no doubt she would have managed to continue to control him from afar. Unfortunately, with us away from King’s Landing, she will only tighten her grip on him even more, and I fear for Margaery and Mace once she becomes more certain of her safety.”

“Have you curtailed her power enough by taking Casterly Rock?”

“It is a start. I have control of the Westerlands and the Lannister army once again, and I now control the flow of gold into the Crown’s bottomless gullet.” He frowns and shakes his head. “Although it was the desire for gold that convinced Cersei to re-arm the Faith Militant.” He sighs. “My sweet sister lacks foresight.”

“As evidenced when she failed to produce at least one legitimate heir,” Brienne says drily then pulls in a sharp breath as she realizes what she’s said.

She waits in tense silence for Jaime’s response.
“Mayhaps we both lacked foresight in that instance,” he finally says. “I’m willing to swear Joffrey, at least, was Robert’s.” He shrugs ruefully at Brienne’s shocked face. “The boy was a monster, and if I could deny he sprang from my seed, I would. Why he became what he was while Tommen and Myrcella remain free of that madness will forever be a mystery.”

He rides in frowning silence then says, “Mayhaps Joffrey was too much like his mother.”

Brienne frowns.

“I fear she’s going mad, Brienne,” Jaime says in a voice tight with grief, “and there is nothing I can do to stop it.”

They stop around mid-day to eat and relieve themselves, stretch their legs and rest their horses. Once they’ve eaten, Jaime stands and pulls her to feet then tugs her against him. He presses his mouth against hers and she opens for him, and their kisses are long and slow and thorough. She softens as her belly curls and swirls and she feels the moisture pooling between her legs. While it’s been two nights now and her body’s reactions aren’t quite as strange, she’s still unnerved, because it’s all too deep, somehow, pulled from the very core of her. She can’t control how she reacts to him and she instinctively shies away, breaking their kiss and breaking free of him.

“Brienne?” he asks, green eyes wide with surprise, chest rising and falling with his rapid breathing. “What is it?” and he glances round as if she’s been startled by a noise rather than her thoughts.

She flushes and he stills, searching her face, his eyes intent upon hers. She blinks beneath his scrutiny and hopes she doesn’t look as suddenly frightened as she feels.

His expression softens before he reaches for her, pulling her gently into his arms. He hugs her close, hand tangled in her hair as he cups the back of her head. Their armor clangs lightly together as she stands stiff and unyielding in his arms.

He chuckles and murmurs against her cheek, his breath warm, “I sometimes forget, my lady, that you are young and, until two days ago, a maid.” Brienne stands in his arms in awkward silence, hands resting lightly against his waist. “You must forgive my eagerness,” he says, “but this is new to me as well.”

She pulls away enough to give him a puzzled frown and he gives her a rueful shrug. “The last time I could fuck for as long as I wished and without fear of what would happen if caught, I was fifteen.” He grimaces and shakes his head. “I do not wish to dwell on that now, however, except to say that, sadly, I will not be able to maintain the pace I have set for us since I am no longer fifteen.”

He presses a kiss against her ear and says, “We should go. I’ll leave the forest fucking for a warmer day, when it will be less likely to disappoint you.”

She frowns as he releases her. “A warmer day? What does that have to do with it?” she asks.

He looks as if he’s strangling on the words in his throat. “How could you be part of an army, wench, and still be so innocent?” he finally says, and laughs, even as he presses another lingering kiss against her lips.

He releases her and leads the way to their horses while she blushes fiercely and scowls at his amusement.
“Best we go on, before I give in to the temptation of fucking you against one of these trees, disappointment or no,” Jaime says as they set off again, “but I swear, when we get to Casterly Rock, wench, I am locking us away for three days!”

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Jaime

They travel on in comfortable silence, bickering occasionally. Jaime’s sure he’s managed to pull a slight smile from the wenches lips on at least three occasions, but he doesn’t press his luck. He’s busy thinking on the look in her eyes when she pulled away from him. The familiar wariness was there, yes, but so was fear and a heart-piercing vulnerability that reminded him of just how young and innocent she truly is. A warrior she may be, he tells himself, but she is also a maid—in spirit, at least, even if no longer in fact—and her heart is as warm as her hands no matter if she’s clad in steel or silk.

He wishes he knew what he should do to calm her fears. He grew into the relationship with Cersei without conscious thought; he simply could not remember a time when they didn’t touch and kiss and fuck, and the only fear between them had been the fear of being caught. What he’d seen in Brienne’s eyes is new to him and he doesn’t know how to soothe it. Even if he were to tell her he loves her, he knows she would not believe him—she does not trust him. Words are wind, he thinks, and she needs to believe in her very core that he cares for her before anything he might say will carry any weight.

He glances at her and thinks that in her armor, she looks as imposing as any castle wall he’s ever faced. And, he thinks with dawning understanding, like any castle, there are weak points he can exploit to bring the walls down.

‘Tis a siege, he thinks and grins.

She catches sight of his smiling face and scowls.

He laughs, because if there’s one thing he still knows how to do, it’s win castles.

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They spend the night in the woods but even with a fire in their lean-to, it’s too cold to do more than huddle close beneath their furs for warmth. He takes the opportunity to explore her mouth with his, to learn the taste of her, to persuade her to lower her defenses enough to clutch at his shoulders and pull him closer as she arches against him. He revels in every moment before he tells her with a pained groan they need to stop or he will ruin his breeches.

He kisses her again before she can ask why.

Even on the cold ground, he finds his sleep is easier with the wenches beside him and that night, when her dreams make her restless and she whimpers his name, he does what he now admits he’s wanted to do since they arrived at the Quiet Isle: he hugs her close and presses kisses against her ear as he sleepily whispers he’s here and she’s safe and everything is going to be all right, and tries not to remember that Lannisters lie.

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It’s dark by the time they reach Stokeworth the next day and Bronn meets them in the courtyard. His face is impassive as they ride their horses to him, his eyes thoughtful as he assesses Brienne.
“I see you are truly as great and ugly a beast as they say, my lady,” he says in way of greeting, and Jaime clenches his teeth.

“And I see you are not near as lordly as you claim, ser,” Brienne replies coldly.

Bronn slowly grins. “I am no more a lord than you are a beauty, and you will get no pretty words from me--but you are welcome in my home.” He glances at Jaime, a teasing glint in his eyes. “As is your husband, I suppose.”

Jaime can’t help but chuckle at that. “You will pay for that slight tomorrow in the training yards, Lord Stokeworth.”

Bronn lifts his lip in a sneer. “With that left hand of yours?”

“With Brienne’s right,” Jaime says, then leans forward and smiles, and laughs as Bronn’s mocking expression abruptly disappears.

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Jaime and Brienne are led to their bedchamber in the south tower where a cold supper is provided to them. The room is luxurious enough and warm, and the servants return with a tub that is readily twice the size of the one they shared in the Red Keep.

They bathe together, and by the time they’re finished, Jaime’s pleased to see Brienne seems as eager to lead him to the bed as he is to guide her there. He watches her for as long as he can through the push and pull of their fucking, watches her emotions play out across her face, the way she bites her lip, the expression in her remarkable eyes when she allows herself a fleeting look at him. There is pleasure there, he sees, and confusion and always that wariness, but she’s wet and hot and tight around him, and she pulls him to her, pulls him deeper, and even caresses his back although she stops short of touching any part of him that isn’t above the waist.

It’s only been four days, he reminds himself, as he finally allows his lust full rein. He closes his eyes as his movements speed up. Only four days, and he’s been dreaming of this for weeks, mayhaps even from the moment he gave her Oathkeeper and she walked out the door. He’s had more than enough time to understand what’s between them, to accept it and believe in it. Time is all he needs to be able to soothe away her fears--or fuck them away, if need be--and with that thought, he surrenders himself to the pleasures of her body.

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Jaime watches with amusement as Brienne and Bronn spar. He raises an eyebrow in appreciation when Bronn, although under-estimating her as most are wont to do, quickly changes his tactics to respect her strengths and attempt to exploit her weaknesses. Their first bout ends with Brienne victorious at last, while the second ends with Bronn standing triumphant, albeit after he uses some dirty tactics to disarm her and put her on the ground.

“That was not honorable,” Brienne pants, tearing off her helm and glaring up at the sellsword-turned-lord.

Bronn shrugs and gives her a feral grin. “I am not an honorable man, so that was your first mistake.” He holds out his hand and, after another glare, she grabs it and allows him to pull her to her feet. Bronn nods as he gives her an approving look. “Ugly you may be, but you are skilled, my lady, and even stronger than you look. I would not want to face you if you intended to kill. Even my dishonorable methods may not be enough to save me.”
“Just as her honorable methods may not be enough to save her,” Jaime says as he joins them. “If you can teach her some of your sneakier tricks, Ser Bronn, I would be grateful.”

Brienne straightens and raises her chin. “I would never—” She stops abruptly when Jaime cups her ravaged cheek in his hand and strokes his thumb over the tangled scars.

“Never, my lady?” he says softly, and sees the remembered anguish in the depths of her eyes.

“I don’t believe it,” Bronn blurs, and they both turn to him, blinking in confusion. “The Kingslayer, the mighty Lion of Lannister, tamed at last!”

Brienne flinches away from Jaime’s touch. “You don’t know what you’re talking about,” she snaps at Bronn and turns, stomping away as quickly as her feet can carry her.

Jaime and Bronn watch her go in silence then Bronn says, “She does have rather nice legs.”

“Don’t make me break your teeth,” Jaime sighs, and the sellsword laughs.

“Well,” Bronn says, “I am sorry for upsetting your lady. Given the way you were gazing so sickeningly at each other, I didn’t realize it was a touchy subject.”

“The world is a complicated place, Lord Stokeworth,” Jaime says as they turn and stroll in the opposite direction. “Lady Brienne can believe that winter is here, that she is skilled enough to defend a Queen to the death, that there are forces stirring that we cannot see and may not be able to fight but she cannot bring herself to believe that I may...hold her in some regard.”

Brienne flips through the books. “Hold her in some regard’, Kingslayer? I cannot see why she doubts you with such passionate declarations as that!” He gives Jaime a sly smile. “And, of course, there’s also your sweet sister to consider.”

“Teeth, Bronn. I’m sure you’d prefer to keep some.”

“Aye, I would.” He sobered. “I need to bathe and change clothes. Go find your lady, Ser Jaime, and meet me in my library in an hour. Let us share what we can before you continue your journey to Casterly Rock.”

Brienne

Brienne scrubs her embarrassment from her skin and shrugs away every attempt Jaime makes to touch her when he returns to their room. She’s angry at how powerfully hope surged through her at Bronn’s words and she refuses to look at Jaime or accept his teasing or his touch until she can push those feelings back to where they belong.

Besides, she thinks, once more composed as she strides beside him on their way to Bronn’s library, there are more important things they need to deal with at the moment.

Bronn shakes his head in amusement before he offers them wine and seats in the comfortable library he now claims as his. She glances round the room, taking in all the books and the quiet luxury, then gives him a thoughtful look.

He shrugs. “I cannot read, my lady, but the room is quiet...and there are no hidden ears to listen to
whatever may be said here.”

Jaime raises an eyebrow as he accepts his goblet of wine.  “You’re certain?”

Bronn gives him a thin, dangerous smile.  “Certain,” he says and Brienne believes him as a chill runs down her spine.

“You have news for us?” Jaime says, leaning back in his chair.

“Gossip and rumors, whispers and snippets of tales being told in the taverns,” Bronn says with a shrug, “and one or two things that are mayhaps more substantial than that.”

“Where do you wish to begin, my lady?” Jaime says with a teasing grin at her.  “Whispers and snippets or those things that might actually be true?”

She gives him a warning look and says, “The things that might actually be true,” and Jaime laughs.

“I am not surprised,” he says and turns back to Bronn with a rueful shrug.

Bronn gives him a sympathetic grimace and says, “A pity, my lady, for I have heard whispers of a beautiful princess who flew away on the back of a dragon and disappeared in the wilderness of Essos.  Is that not a tale to warm a maiden’s heart?”

“I have heard those same whispers in King’s Landing,” Brienne says drily, “and I am a maiden no longer.”

“You are a maid, still, Brienne, in all the ways that truly matter,” Jaime says and simply smiles as she scowls.

Bronn heaves a mock sigh and says, “Well, so much for fanciful tales.”  He sobers, suddenly serious.  “Qyburn is once more working on his experiments in the black cells.  I understand those experiments may be why those who confessed to fornication with the young Queen are still resident there.”

Jaime frowns.  “Have you learned what, exactly, these experiments are intended to accomplish?”

“Only those whispers I shared before:  that Ser Robert Strong was birthed in those cells.  I’ve heard the smallfolk believe Qyburn brought Gregor Clegane back from the dead.”

Brienne’s stomach drops as she remembers Lady Stoneheart and the story Thoros of Myr shared with her about that revenant’s resurrection.

“Any hint as to how he could accomplish such a thing?” she asks.

Bronn raises an eyebrow.  “There seems to be much you have not shared with me, Kingslayer, if you’re not even questioning that such a thing could be possible.  Or mayhaps you’ve also heard the rumors of the Stark bastard being stabbed to death at the Wall, yet is somehow still lively enough to lead a band of Wildlings to face the Boltons in Winterfell?”

Jaime gives him a thin smile and simply says, “Have you heard any more of Lady Stoneheart?”

“Only that she’s moving north, mayhaps heading for the Twins, mayhaps simply searching for more Freys and Lannisters to hang.  We’ve had a number of smallfolk fetch up at our castle walls, begging for succor, thanks to her.  We feed what we can, but we have limited shelter available.”

“Why haven’t they gone to their own lords for protection?” Brienne asks.
“There’s little enough food in the Riverlands, no matter where you are,” Bronn says. “Their lords may be willing to protect them, but they will all starve sooner or later if they stay. Those who can are making their way out, hoping to find some place where they can at least forage enough food throughout the winter.”

“They’re beginning to fetch up in King’s Landing as well,” Jaime says.

“We can’t be expected to feed the entire realm with what we have in Stokeworth and Rosby,” Bronn says.

“There’s still the Reach,” Brienne says. “They were untouched by the wars, as were the Westerlands.”

“Aye,” Jaime says, “except the Ironborn have been reaving the shit out of the Reach’s coast the last few weeks. They haven’t managed to damage much of the food stores as yet, but with the Tyrell army on its way to Storm’s End to face the Targaryen pretender, the attacks are only growing more frequent and more violent.”

Brienne frowns in thought. “Have they attacked Oldtown?”

“Aye,” Bronn says, “and are likely to do so again.”

“Why, Brienne?” Jaime asks, his eyes intent on her face.

“We need knowledge,” Brienne says slowly, “and maesters are the ones with knowledge, aren’t they?” She looks round the library again, thoughtfully eyeing the books on the shelves. “Mayhaps if we go to the source, they will tell us what we need to know.” She looks at Jaime. “Assuming, of course, that Casterly Rock and the Westerlands can stand to be without their lord for a little while longer.”

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The Reach

Chapter Notes

A/N1: It’s looking like this story is going to be about 40 chapters long.

O.O

Save me.

Warning: Canon-compliant coarse language.

Jaime

The weather takes a turn for the worse immediately after they leave Stokeworth and they spend the next few days trudging on horseback the frigid countryside skirting King’s Landing. Their faces and limbs are swaddled in fur and wool to prevent themselves from freezing although the cold bites through nonetheless.

Each night they build a lean-to and a fire, but to Jaime’s disappointment, it’s far too cold to do much more than bury themselves within the furs and hope they are still unfrozen by morning. At least he sleeps with Brienne in his arms, large and inviting and warm, but fucking is out of the question—or at least the way he wants to fuck her, with nothing between them but her caution.

“Pity,” he tells her as they huddle beneath their furs beside a fire that seems to throw no heat whatsoever, “with the nights so long, it would be the best possible way to pass the time.” In the flames he can see her blushing, and he laughs. “Your blushes heat our shelter better than the fire, wench,” he says, and kisses her. She half-heartedly smacks his shoulder then buries her cold nose against his neck.

He hisses at the touch then says, “’Tis your breeches, really, that complicate things. There’s no way to spread you open the way I want with them on your legs, and to pull them off will leave your arse exposed to the cold.”

“Jaime!” she groans, hiding her face in embarrassment.

“There’s no one to hear, Brienne, but I must admit your nose is much warmer now that I have outraged you.”

She smacks him again, a little harder this time and he laughs and moves closer to her.

“I’ll behave,” he says, “if you’ll talk to me.”

“Talk to you? About what?”

“Anything. I’m not sleepy as yet, although I’m tired, and the night is long.” He frowns thoughtfully. “If it will not pain you, tell me a tale of the Sapphire Isle or of your House. Or tell me
a tale from before I met you. Who trained you to use a sword?"

She’s stiff and unyielding in his arms when he finishes speaking.

“I—I doubt anything I could tell you would amuse you for long,” she finally says and Jaime leans away enough to frown at her.

“Let me be the judge of that, my lady,” he says. “If you’re not ready to speak of your childhood, then tell me...” He pauses. He doesn’t truly want to hear her speak of her time with Renly’s army. He doesn’t want to hear her speak of Renly at all, in truth, then reminds himself he had loved Cersei for most of his life and he could not begrudge Brienne a love before him. Even if most days she would likely prefer to beat him bloody using the tricks Bronn taught her during their stay in Stokeworth rather than admit she cares for him at all.

“Tell me...” he says, “tell me about Renly’s camp.”

“Gods, no,” she groans.

He sighs. “Then talk to me, wench, about anything you wish.”

She’s silent and tense against him, and there’s only the crackle of the fire and the feel of her breathing, her back rising and falling against his stump where it’s tucked beneath her furs to keep warm.

He presses a kiss against whichever part of her he can reach, and says, “Please?”

She startles a little at that and he tightens his arms round her when she finally, slowly begins to speak. She haltingly tells him of the mountains and valleys of Tarth, of the green grass and the brilliant blue of the sky; of the smooth sand on the beaches; of the sapphire blue of the ocean. She tells him how she had been afraid of the water after her brother drowned but her father insisted she return to the ocean that had so heartlessly taken Galladon, so she could face her fear and make her brother proud.

Jaime listens, his gloved hand cupping the back of her head over the woollen scarf that covers her ears. He doesn’t move or speak, afraid that if he does, she will duck back behind her defenses.

She falls silent, then mumbles, “Tell me something from your childhood, Jaime,” and tenses against him.

He sighs, and tightens his grip round her. “I know you do not want to hear of Cersei, Brienne, but there are stories I should tell you about my days and nights with my sweet sister. Those stories are part of me and might help you understand...we will eventually be at Casterly Rock and there are memories round every corner there. I dread facing them almost as much as you, because the Cersei of my memories still draws me, that golden girl who shone brighter than the sun. It was that Cersei who was my talisman during the worst of Aerys’ madness and I clung to that image, those memories, long past the time when they no longer had any bearing on reality—if they ever did, in truth.” He pauses and wonders why he’s adding even more mortar to Brienne’s already thick walls. “I was unwilling—or unable—to face the reality of her until she came to me in the White Sword Tower and—among other things—expected me to be complicit in our brother’s death.”

He stares into the darkness, the shadows dancing from the flames of their fire, his face stark with grief.

“I had to choose,” he murmurs.
Brienne hisses in her breath and lifts her head to stare at him through the darkness. “You let him out of the cell.”

He doesn’t look at her. “I had to choose. And my father and his whore paid the price.”

“Jaime,” she says softly, and raises a gloved hand to touch his face. She mutters what might have been a curse as she uses her teeth to yank off the glove then touches his face with chilled fingers, stroking over his brow, down his cheek and to his lips. “Jaime,” she says again, almost a sigh, before she brushes her mouth against his, startling him. “Jaime,” she breathes for a third time and then she’s kissing him, fingers buried in his hair as she urges him closer, mouth opening in invitation, which, after a moment of surprise, he gladly accepts.

Sometime later he’s pleased to be reminded that, when both are willing, there’s always a way.

Brienne

Brienne curses herself for a fool all the next day, but even in the light and shadows cast by the fire she could see that the weight of Jaime’s choice still hung heavy on his shoulders. She could think of nothing to say and only one thing to do and she had acted without considering whether she would be drawn even further under his spell.

She should have known better.

The smug expression on his face throughout the day doesn’t help and she’s relieved when they finally catch sight of the town of Tumbleton.

“Thank the gods, wench,” Jaime sighs. “We will hopefully have a soft bed beneath us and a warm roof above us tonight.”

She risks a quick glance at him and nods.

He laughs suddenly. “You are even more silent than usual,” he says, disgustingly cheerful. “Are you perhaps feeling embarrassed about something?”

She feels the heat climb into her cheeks and hopes the scarf covering her face hides her blush.

He laughs again. “You are! No need, my lady—we are husband and wife, duly wed not once but twice in the eyes of the Seven. Tell me why you are in such a mood.”

Her blush deepens as she frantically tries to think of what to say. She can’t possibly tell him the truth—that every touch makes her love him more and will make their inevitable parting that much more painful. That she revealed too much of her feelings when she reached for him in the darkness, that doing so went against anything she’d learned from Septa Roelle. She seizes on that last piece of the truth to tell him.

“A lady doesn’t...doesn’t...doesn’t request her lord’s favor,” she finally gets out.

“Oh, gods—is that from your septa again?”

She nods, miserable.

Jaime sighs, suddenly serious. “To be honest, Brienne, I don’t know what a lady does or doesn’t
request in the marriage bed. The only true knowledge I have of what goes on between married couples has been either cruel and brutal or...” he grimaces and sighs, “or I was too blinded by jealousy to believe for a moment that Cersei enjoyed what Robert did to her.”

“Was he cruel to her?” she asks and could bite her tongue out for the question.

He rides in silence, no longer smiling. “Robert was a drunken oaf,” he finally says flatly, “and Cersei said he never tried to make things easy for her. As for Aerys and his Queen, well, the less said about that the better.” He shakes his head. “The things he did to that poor woman, and we, in our shining white armor and snowy cloaks, lifted not a hand to stop him.”

“You—you were Kingsguard,” Brienne says weakly.

“Sworn to protect the King, not judge him. Yes. I remember. My life would have been forfeit as well, if I had laid a hand on him, but it was my brothers’ counsel and the vows I swore that day at Harrenhal, when Aerys put the white cloak round my shoulders, that bound me to inaction. I’ve never truly forgiven the Kingsguard since.”

He looks surprised at his words before he gives her a rueful smile and shakes his head.

“My pardons, Brienne, we were having such a light-hearted—albeit cold—day...or I was, at least. You’ve looked as if you’ve been carrying all the world with you since the sun rose.” He gives her a slightly mocking smile. “I don’t know what other lords and ladies do in their bedchambers, wench, but there should never be any shame between us. We have seen each other at our lowest points; have saved each other’s lives more than once. We trust each other in so many ways, we should be able to trust each other in this as well.”

Brienne gives him a quick glance and then looks away but cannot think of what to say.

He laughs at her expression and says, “I know you have not yet experienced a woman’s full pleasure in our bed—or ground—but fucking should be something we do for pleasure and there is no shame in that.” He nods towards the town they’re approaching. “Tonight we will be warm for the first time in days, wench, so let us make the best of it.”

She meets his heated gaze and blinks but doesn’t look away.

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Jaime

By the time they’re within sight of Highgarden, Jaime’s smugly satisfied with the progress he’s made with the wench. They’ve been travelling for close to a month, and she’s almost laughed at several of his jests and he’s managed to surprise a smile or two out of her as well. In the bedchamber—or a lean-to—she is wary but willing, and has become more comfortable in reaching for him first.

Yes, he thinks, he is well-pleased and as if to share in his pleasure, the weather has finally taken a turn for the better, the cold air warming at last.

“Good,” he tells her as they ride towards the city gates, “we have not sparred enough on this journey and my sword arm—such as it is—aches to swing steel again.”

She slants an arrogantly amused glance his way.

“You’ve missed losing?” she says and he glares then laughs.
“I would say I plan to best you this time, but we both know I hope only to last longer than five minutes. Less, if you use what you’ve learned from Bronn.”

She glances at him again, her eyes thoughtful. He raises an eyebrow in question.

“You have not yet used the sword Tommen gave you,” she says.

Jaime’s smile vanishes. “‘Tis the other half of Ice, the Stark House sword,” he says. “A Valyrian steel blade that should be wielded only by those with the skill to do so.”

“You were the greatest swordsman in the Seven Kingdoms.”

“I was. I am no longer.” He scowls. “I couldn’t refuse the boy. He meant well.” He shrugs. “I sent the sword on to Casterly Rock.”

“I have it.”

Jaime’s head whips round and he stares at her in surprise. “What?”

“I saw Peck wrapping it to stow in the carriage. I told him to put it with my things instead.”

“Why?”

“Because you are not as hopeless as you say, Jaime. You fought against Lady Stoneheart’s men and ended the battle with barely a scratch upon you.”

“The Quiet Brothers—”

“Turned the tide in our favor, yes, but you lived long enough for them to do so. And I’ve sparred with you for months now. You grow stronger and more skilled each day.”

“You flatter me,” he says drily, “but that still does not explain why you have brought Widow’s Wail on this journey with us.”

She hesitates then says, “Valyrian steel makes the wielder quick—Lord Tarly reminded me of that in Maidenpool.”

Understanding dawns. “So mayhaps I will be a serviceable swordsman if I use such a blade?” He considers the idea then shrugs. “Mayhaps. Still a waste of such a beautiful thing.”

“Will you try it?” Brienne asks.

He thinks on it, and doesn’t know if wielding it will make him better, or only make him mourn for all he lost when Zollo the Fat’s arakh flashed down. He will never be that good again, he thinks, never feel that effortless power and skill and grace as he fights.

“Will you at least wear it?” Brienne says, breaking into his thoughts.

He smiles as they reach the gate to Highgarden.

“Aye, wench, since you ask so sweetly, I shall at least wear it.”

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Brienne
Lady Olenna greets them graciously enough but her eyes are sharp when, as they dine with her in her private quarters, Jaime explains they are passing through to Oldtown on matters of importance to the realm.

“More important even than the chaos in the Westerlands?” she asks, one eyebrow arched in question. “The chaos that was at such a peak it required you to be immediately dismissed from the Kingsguard and named Lord of Casterly Rock?”

He smiles blandly and Lady Olenna searches his expression before a slow smile curves her lips.

“Why, Ser Jaime, I do believe you played the game with all of us.”

He shrugs and takes a sip of his wine.

“Tell me what news you have from King’s Landing,” he says. “How fares the King and Queen?”

Lady Olenna rolls her eyes. “They fare well enough, although your sweet sister is doing her best to keep them apart as much as possible. I understand from Margaery that she and Myrcella have taken to exploring the Red Keep simply to get out from beneath the eyes of Cersei’s spies. They have discovered several hidden passages but have been too faint of heart to explore them.”

“I don’t blame them,” Jaime says drily, “you never know what you might find crawling through the walls of the Red Keep.”

“’Tis likely best if Margaery learns as many of the secrets of the Red Keep as she can,” Olenna says. “She will soon be of an age when she could take on more responsibilities in advising Tommen.”

Brienne catches her breath and Jaime stills.

“I...had not considered that,” Jaime says slowly.

Nor had she, Brienne thinks, and wonders if they have made a horrible mistake in leaving King’s Landing behind. Then she remembers Lady Stoneheart and Ser Robert Strong and thinks they may have wasted too much time there already.

“No matter,” Lady Olenna says blithely. “My granddaughter is resourceful and she is becoming fast friends with Myrcella as well as Tommen. That may become useful.” She smiles at Jaime. “Myrcella is a delightful child.”

The silence as Jaime and Lady Olenna consider each other is sharp and even colder than the air outside.

“That is indeed fortunate, my lady,” Jaime says, his voice a dark growl. “I would hate to see anything that might cause a fracture between my House and yours. How fare your other grandchildren?”

The flicker of Lady Olenna’s lashes tells Brienne Jaime’s message has not been lost on her. “Loras is finally well enough to leave Dragonstone. He’s making his way to Highgarden, so I’m told. Ser Garlan has led several sorties to the Shield Islands but has been beaten back by the Ironborn scum who squat there. The weather has made it impossible to do any more at the moment. Willas has just left for Oldtown, to consult with the maesters of the Citadel. The cold makes his leg ache abominably.”

“I’m glad they are as healthy as they can be. Under the circumstances,” Jaime purrs.
Olenna smiles a thin smile. “We should do whatever we can to ensure they all stay that way.”

Brienne watches as Jaime, scowling, tugs at his buckles and straps and laces as he readies himself for bed. She undresses as well and slips beneath the blankets while Jaime, naked as his name day, strides to the jug and basin to wash the sweat from his stump and hand, and to wash his face as well. He looks in the mirror and critically considers his bearded cheeks and shaggy hair before he runs his fingers through both and turns to the bed.

Brienne allows herself the luxury of gazing at his body, admiring the breadth of his shoulders and his sleek lines, and the sheer beauty of his face as he walks, gaze fixed on the floor, to the bed.

He glances up and meets her gaze. He blinks then a wicked grin curves his lips and she flushes, but he sober as he slips beneath the blankets. He’s warm as he reaches for her, his hand sliding over the scars left by bear and sword and monster. Her eyes flutter closed and she sighs as he caresses her ruined face.

This has become almost a ritual which started during their stay at Stokeworth and has been repeated in every inn since then, when they had the luxury of removing their breeches and furs so there were no barriers between their flesh. He touches each scar as if reminding himself of its cause. The look on his face as he does so makes her shiver, but she’s unsure if it’s from desire, or because she wants to weep that she is so marred and so exposed in front of him.

He strokes the last scar on her thigh then runs his hand back up to her breast. He fondles it with a pensive expression before he sighs and presses a kiss against it, then against her mouth and releases her. He pushes himself up in the bed, back propped up against his pillows and scowls off into the distance.

“You are thinking of Myrcella,” she says, as she, too, sits up.

“I have been wracking my brain, wench. I will not be able to pry Myrcella from Cersei’s grasp any time soon.”

“Even if you could, where would you send her?”

“The Rock, at least until we can find a good match for her.” His scowl deepens. “Not that there are many good matches left. The Freys are out of the question. Dorne as well.” He shakes his head.

“The girl’s young, and if we can keep her safe from others’ machinations, we can wait until the dust from these wars has settled and see which Houses are still left standing. ’Tis a pity Bronn does not yet have a legitimate son.”

She gives him a puzzled look. “You would consider wedding a princess to the son of a sellsword-turned-lord?”

He shrugs. “Many of the great Houses no longer have male heirs. At least I trust Bronn...to a certain point, at least.”

“Lady Lollys is once more with child,” Brienne reminds him. “Mayhaps she will have another son.”

“Mayhaps,” he sighs, “not that Cersei would ever give her consent.”

“No,” she says. She did not have to spend much time in the Queen Regent’s presence to know the truth of that. She sighs and says, “Mayhaps...mayhaps you should return to King’s Landing immediate after we arrive at Casterly Rock.” He sharply turns his head to look at her, but she keeps
her eyes on her hands that are clasped on her lap.

“Trying to be rid of me so soon, my lady?” he says, mocking.

She ducks her head but refuses to rise to the bait. “You are the only one who still has some influence over the Queen Regent.”

He barks a bitter laugh. “I have no influence with my sweet sister—mayhaps I never did!” From the corner of her eyes, she sees him cock his head. “Where would you be, sweet wife of mine, while I am haring back to King’s Landing?”

Her head lowers a little more. “I would stay at Casterly Rock,” she mumbles, “and—and in due time, I could simply...fade away.”

Jaime is still for so long that she risks a look in his direction. The blazing green anger in his eyes makes her quickly look away again.

“Is that what you think I want, wench?” he growls, his voice low and all that more frightening because it’s so tightly controlled.

She chews her lip then tells herself she is a warrior and she lifts her head, straightens her shoulders and turns to face him, meeting his eyes with an effort.

“Jaime, I know you wish to treat honorably with me and that means you would never publicly cast me aside. But let’s not lie to each other. Cersei will always hold you, and one such as me cannot hope to break that bond.”

“One such as—?” His expression hardens. “Has nothing I’ve said and done this last month meant anything to you?”

She blinks, her eyes wide, then she says, “It has meant much to me, Jaime. But if you return to King’s Landing and I...am no longer a complication, you can convince Cersei that Myrcella will be your heir. Mayhaps then she will allow the girl to leave King’s Landing.” She scowls. “You felt obligated to wed me not once but twice, and I wish only to treat honorably with you, as well. I will not hold you to vows you cannot keep and did not wish to make.”

Jaime growls in frustration then throws off the blankets. “Get dressed, wench,” he snaps, “and come with me.”

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He leads her to the godswood and brings her to a stop in front of the Three Singers. The three-trees-made-one seem to watch, silent and still, as Jaime turns her to face him. He holds her shoulders and glares into her wary eyes.

“You think the promises I made to you in the bath at the Red Keep and the vows I said in front of the Seven are somehow suspect. Very well. I will make them in front of the old gods, too. I take you, Brienne, the Maid of Tarth, Brienne the Blue, Brienne the Beauty, you stubborn, lumbering, brave, magnificent ox of a woman, as my wife,” he growls, all fierce lion, and she doesn’t know if she should laugh or punch him. “One flesh, one heart, one soul, now and forever. So long as we live, I shall never lay with another. I shall never deny you and I shall never set you aside. And if we survive the winter and my sweet sister, I shall give you back your Sapphire Isle and an heir to go with it. Do you marry me?” He glares, haughty and angry and proud. “Say yes.”

She blinks in confusion.
“Say yes, Brienne. I ask no oaths from you in return, only that you believe mine.”

“I—yes,” she says, and he sweeps her into his arms.

He kisses her fiercely and when he releases her, he says, “And now we are wed.”

She gives him an uncertain smile. “Thrice? How many times are we going to do this?”

“As many times as it takes for you to believe me, you stupid child! I will repeat my vows in every sept we pass and before every weirwood tree we find if that’s what it takes to convince you this marriage is real and I will never betray you.”

Her breath catches because she believes him, yes, she does—and then she remembers that he has loved Cersei—once the most beautiful woman in Westeros—with blind devotion for his entire life. And she—she is still Brienne the Beauty: slow-witted, over-large, broad-faced, buck-toothed and hideously scarred with no womanly shape to her at all.

It is all too absurd.

“Jaime,” she sighs, and he looks disappointed and angry, even as he pulls her closer.

“At least promise me you will never again make such a lackwitted suggestion to me,” he growls before he kisses her one more time. “Wherever we go, we go together.”

“Jaime,” she says again, and it’s almost a groan as she buries her fingers in his hair and pulls him to her.

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Chapter End Notes

A/N2: Dear George—I understand. I’m a gardener, too, and trying to juggle just this one storyline within the larger story is enough to make me grab my bottle of tequila.
A/N1: I’m relieved to learn that the season finale hasn’t jossed this story as much as I feared, and that (no spoilers) there’s really nothing I need/want to change about what I have planned. ;) Now to get it finished before people get bored.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Brienne

The weather has warmed enough that the journey to Oldtown is almost pleasant. It’s not a surprise, of course; the Reach has always had mild winters.

Jaime, as always, relentlessly teases her during their journey and in one town where they stop for the night, he drags her into an old sept and threatens to once more recite the vows he made to her in Highgarden. She stares, horrified, then grabs his arm and drags him away before he can do more than call her the Maid of Tarth.

“I made you a promise, wench,” he says haughtily, green eyes laughing as they stride back to the inn. “Would you have me break yet another oath?”

It’s so absurd and he sounds so offended that she can’t help it: she giggles.

He stops in his tracks and stares, mouth dropping open.

“Did you just laugh, my lady?”

“No,” she says then quickly clamps a hand over her mouth as another giggle escapes.

“By the Seven,” Jaime hoots, “you did!”

“Well, you’re being ridiculous, Jaime,” she says and gives in to her mirth, laughter leaking out from behind the hand she once more has covering her mouth.

Jaime’s smile is wide and open, his eyes dancing. “How am I being ridiculous?” he asks with delight. “I will make sure to do it more often if such a lovely sound is my reward.”

She blushes but she’s still smiling as she lowers her hand and says, “Three times, Jaime? Every sept and every weirwood tree? Most people are satisfied with saying their vows once!”

“Most people don’t have as their bride a pig-stubborn wench who refuses to believe the words when they were spoken the first time!”

“I never even heard them the first time!”

Jaime finally begins to laugh as well. “Now, that was truly a jape, my lady!”

“A jape was a groom’s gift once before,” she says with a shy smile and is rewarded with a fierce kiss, a kiss that only ends when his gold hand clangs loudly against her armor.
He buries his face against her shoulder and says, his voice husky with need, “Let us get back to the inn, Brienne, before I forget myself and take you in the street.”

“Jaime!” she gasps and blushes and he gives her another quick kiss before he releases her and begins striding rapidly towards their destination.

“Mayhaps I’ll lock us away for four days when we get to Casterly Rock,” he says, and she can’t help but laugh again.

Jaime

Oldtown is bustling and Lord Leyton Hightower reluctantly welcomes them to the High Tower although they dine in the Great Hall without him, his lady wife, or his daughter, Lady Malora, the Mad Maid. Instead they find themself seated at the high table with Lord Garth Hightower on one side of Jaime and Willas Tyrell on the other, with Ser Gunthor Hightower at the end of the table. Brienne is on the other side of Lord Garth, with Ser Gunthor’s wife, Lady Jeyne, beside her.

Jaime is amused by the wary fascination with which everyone in the Great Hall watches him and Brienne. He wishes the wench was seated beside him instead of away from him, but he half-listens to her polite conversation with Lord Garth and raises a mental eyebrow at her knowledgeable questions and comments as they talk about the difficulties the Reach is having in reinforcing their fleet of ships.

Jaime, meanwhile, asks Willas about the Citadel and convinces the young man to escort him to that building in the morning and to introduce him to some of the maesters there. He turns to his other side in time to hear Brienne accept an invitation from Lord Garth to inspect the shipyards and the wharves.

“I didn’t know you were knowledgeable about shipbuilding, wench,” he tells her later as they ready themselves for bed.

She gives him a limpid look from her magnificent blue eyes. “I grew up on an island, Jaime,” she says, and he laughs at how much her tone calls him a lackwit even if those words never cross her luscious lips.

“So you did,” he says, and grins. “Regardless, your plans for tomorrow are perfect. The temples are close to the wharves to better serve the sailors who arrive here. Mayhaps you will be able to speak to a Red Priest while I speak to the maesters.”

“I tried talking with Red Priests in King’s Landing,” Brienne says, her mouth turning down at the corners. “They told me their legends but nothing of any use.”

“Nothing about how to kill these abominations they raise from the dead?” Jaime asks with a slight smile as she turns her back to him and pulls her tunic over her head, leaving her only in her small clothes. He admires the play of muscles beneath the smooth, freckled skin of her back.

She glances over her shoulder at him. “There’s no need to kill something that doesn’t exist,” she says, “or at least that’s what they told me.”

He shakes his head as he walks towards her and she turns to face him. He reaches out to tug her closer and begins his ritual tracing of the scars on her body.

Bear, he thinks as he gently runs his stump across the claw marks left on her shoulder.
“There must be stories somewhere,” he says. *Sword*, he thinks as he strokes the scar that angles across the claw marks.

“If there are, they wouldn’t tell me,” she says then sighs and sighs again as he runs his fingers and stump over the scars that mar the strong lines of her thighs.

*Sword*, he thinks and remembers how angry he’d been when he’s seen her fall, how he’d stood over her, willing to fight until he died if it meant he could keep them away from her. It had taken several minutes before he realized that some of the men in the crowd were fighting with him instead of against him.

“Did you speak only to male priests in King’s Landing?” he asks as he slides her small clothes down her legs and straightens. He lifts his hand to her face to cup her ruined cheek in his palm.

She blinks as she unconsciously leans into his touch. “I will see if I can find some women priests tomorrow,” she says and he nods.

*Teeth*, he thinks, running his thumb across her scarred cheek as he urges her to meet his mouth with hers, *and some of the scars I can’t even see.*

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In the morning, they part ways at the gates of the Citadel and Jaime watches Brienne stride off with Ser Garth with a strange wrench in his gut at the sight of her broad back disappearing from view.

“She will be safe with Ser Garth,” Willas Tyrell says, amusement lacing his voice.

Jaime glances at him and gives him a tight smile. “I’m not worried about that, Lord Willas,” he says. “My lady knows how to wield that sword she carries at her hip.” It is just this is the first time they’ve been parted since they wed almost two months ago, he thinks as he gestures for Willas to lead the way into the Citadel. It feels...*odd*, although no more odd than both times they returned to King’s Landing from the Riverlands.

The vast network of buildings they enter is beautiful and the soaring library they’re shown into while the Seneschal is fetched takes even Jaime’s breath away. For a moment, he remembers Tyrion with an aching yearning that surprises him.

He shakes away his grief as an archmaester approaches him with a puzzled smile.

Several minutes of greetings follow, whereby the archmaester is introduced as Theobald, the current Seneschal of the Citadel, and Jaime allows Willas to say all the necessary polite things on his behalf. Jaime’s attention wanders to a fat novice wandering down the aisle towards them, his nose buried in a book, his fleshy brow furrowed in thought. Jaime wonders if the boy is going to walk into the table that’s in his way but at the last minute, he swerves to the left and disappears into the stacks of books.

Jaime shakes his head in bemusement and turns back to Theobald and Willas, who have finally finished their greetings.

“I’m here to speak with someone who is knowledgeable about magic,” he says without preamble. “Specifically the magic of necromancy.”

Theobald’s smile is wiped away almost immediately. “There is no such thing as magic, Ser Jaime.”

Jaime casually waves away his words. “Humor me, Archmaester.”
“Necromancy? This is a dark thing you seek to learn, a dark path you wish to tread.”

“I have no desire to learn how to raise the dead, Archmaester. I want to learn how to send the creatures back to whichever of the Seven Hells that spawned them.”

Willas gives him a puzzled smile. “You sound as if you’ve seen such creatures,” he says, and his tone makes it very clear he believes the mighty Lion of Lannister has finally lost his wits.

“I’m sure your grandmother has mentioned Ser Robert Strong to you, Lord Willas,” Jaime says. “He was...discovered by Qyburn, the Master of Whispers on the King’s Small Council.” He smiles thinly as Theobald’s eyes widen. “I see you recognize the name.”

“Of course. We don’t often strip a maester of his chain, but Qyburn’s experiments were...abominations.” Theobald’s eyes narrow. “You truly believe this Ser Robert Strong is a man brought back from the dead?”

Jaime shrugs. “None of us dare find out,” he says, “but he does not speak, and no one has seen him eat or drink or shit or fuck. And the only man large enough to be Ser Robert Strong died of a slow poison with his head sent to Dorne as proof of his death.”

Theobald waves his words away. “None of that proves necromancy,” he says dismissively. “Mayhaps the man didn’t die after all—or mayhaps Ser Robert is another man entirely, one who is just as large as the one who died. Large men are not rare in Westeros, after all.” He shakes his head. “I’m sorry, Ser Jaime, I couldn’t help you even if I wished to do so. The only archmaester with a ring, rod and mask of Valyrian steel is not here. Archmaester Marwyn is gone again, seeking only the gods know what, and those same gods are the only ones who know when he will return.”

Jaime raises an eyebrow and glances round the library. “None of his students may be able to discover what I wish to know? Not even for a fee?”

Theobald’s lips tighten. “We have several acolytes who have forged a Valyrian steel link for their chain, but none of them have studied necromancy! None would even think to do so. No, Ser Jaime, Archmaester Marwyn’s students study glass candles and the deaths of dragons, and we even have a novice who wishes to waste his time studying the legends of the Others and the Long Night—but necromancy?” He shakes his head. “None are so lackwitted as to choose to pursue such nonsense —no matter what fee you may offer.”

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Brienne

Jaime’s sprawled in a chair in their bedchamber, all glum and gold magnificence, when Brienne returns from her tour of the wharves and the street of temples. Jaime has a glass of Arbor gold on the table beside him and she frowns as she closes the door and walks towards him.

“I hope you had better luck than I, wench,” he says in greeting. “Wine?”

“A small amount,” she says, “and I had no luck at all. Even the women red priests would tell me nothing new.”

Jaime sighs as he carefully pours her a small portion of wine. “I wish Tyrion was here,” he says. “He would know how to approach these people in order to get them to talk.” He pauses, considering, then shrugs. “Or he would spend days in that library himself and simply find what we needed to know, curse the man.”
Brienne sighs as she settles in to the chair across from him. “What do we do next?”

Jaime shakes his head. “Mayhaps we take a Lannister army into the Riverlands to hunt Lady Stoneheart and her men. Even a creature such as she cannot survive a hundred swords! Can she?”

“I hope not,” Brienne says. “We would need to kill Thoros of Myr as well. He’s the one who first resurrected Beric Dondarrion.”

Jaime frowns. “Mayhaps I should have slit Qyburn’s throat before we left King’s Landing.”

Brienne scowls then says, “Mayhaps. If we knew for certain that Ser Robert Strong is Ser Gregor Clegane raised from the dead and not simply saved from death.”

“Now you sound like Archmaester Theobald! I would not hesitate to kill Qyburn even if he saved the Mountain from death. The man was a monster before and is even more of a monster now. But I have seen Lady Stoneheart; I know what is possible. I would have put an end to Qyburn before we left King’s Landing if I knew that Ser Robert Strong could be killed...and that we don’t have need of Qyburn’s skills in order to do so.”

“Mayhaps you will need to send a thousand soldiers against Ser Robert Strong. Even a creature such as he cannot survive a thousand swords. Can he?”

Jaime smiles slowly and her breath catches at his beauty. Even after almost two months of marriage, the fact that she is in his bedchamber—in his bed—is still unbelievable to her.

“I don’t know,” he says, “but we may have no choice but to find out.” He shakes his head. “I don’t like it. From what I observed in King’s Landing, I may lose half a thousand men in the trying.”

“We can’t simply do nothing!”

Jaime sips his wine, his green eyes steady and serious. “We will do what needs to be done,” he says, “but there have been so many men lost already. The thought of losing more...” he shakes his head.

“Let us try once more tomorrow,” Brienne says. “Mayhaps if you try the temples and I try the Citadel...” She shrugs helplessly.

“Why not? If nothing else, we should enjoy the comforts of this bedchamber for another day or two. ‘Tis a long way to the Rock.”

Brienne finishes her wine and gets to her feet. “Well, at least we should not have to leave Casterly Rock again for a few weeks once we do arrive there.”

Jaime stands as well and follows Brienne as she walks to the jug and basin to wash the grime of the day from her hands and face. He slips his arms round her waist as she does so, pressing against her back.

“Oh for at least five days,” he murmurs against her ear, making her shiver, “because that’s how long I’m going to lock us away once we arrive.”

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The next day is no more successful than the one before and they meet again in their bedchamber with defeat hanging heavy on their shoulders.

Jaime shakes his head as he pours wine for them and says, “We should take our leave of our hosts
tomorrow morning since there’s nothing more we can learn here.”

Brienne nods glumly then turns at a knock at their door. Her puzzled frown quickly disappears when she sees Willas Tyrell on the other side.

“I have a message for Ser Jaime,” he says, holding up a small square of paper, and Brienne steps aside to allow him to enter the room.

Jaime saunters towards them, frowning. “From the Rock?” he asks.

Willas shakes his head. “At least, I don’t believe so. It was delivered to me by a rather filthy little urchin a few minutes ago, with a specific request that I personally deliver it to you, Ser Jaime.”

Jaime raises an eyebrow as he takes the note from Willas’ hand and gives it to Brienne to unfold. She quickly does so and holds it out to him, but he stands beside her so they can read it together.

*I may have information useful to your quest. Meet me at the doors of the Starry Sept tomorrow at daybreak. Samwell Tarly*

“Samwell Tarly?” Brienne blurts out, looking from Jaime to Willas. “Didn’t he take the black?”

“Aye, he did,” Willas says, “and became a steward to Castle Black’s maester. Unfortunately, the man was old and it was decided to bring Sam here to study and then return to the Wall as their maester. Maester Aemon died on the journey south.” He glances from Brienne to Jaime and back again. “I ran into Sam at the Citadel when I arrived in Oldtown. He’s terrified his father will discover he’s here.”

“Randyll Tarly is too busy with the Targaryen pretender to care if his son has journeyed south,” Jaime says.

Willas barks a harsh laugh. “You don’t know how much Randyll Tarly hates his first born son. Sam didn’t take the black by choice, Ser Jaime.” He shakes his head. “I’m surprised he was brave enough to send you a note.” He shrugs at Jaime’s raised eyebrow. “Sam’s a craven. Always has been. Still is, based on when I saw of him at the Citadel. Mayhaps the Wall really did make a man of him.” He thoughtfully considers them. “I would like to attend this meeting with you, if you would allow me. I’m also a scholar, as you know, and I’m curious what Sam thinks he might be able to tell you about necromancy.”

Brienne exchanges a glance with Jaime, then says, “Of course, my lord. We would be honored.”

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They move slowly, thanks to Lord Willas’ crippled leg, and Sam’s eyes keep darting from one side to another.

“Is what you have to share so dangerous that it cannot be overheard?” Jaime asks, amused.

“Mayhaps, if anyone would believe it,” Sam says. “If anyone from the Citadel learned of this, I—I’m not certain what they would do.” He glances from one to the other of them and leans closer. “The Citadel is not—not a kind place. And if word gets back to my father...” He shudders.

“There is no such thing as a kind place,” Jaime says drily.

“Jaime,” Brienne scolds and turns to Sam, a grim set to her jaw. “Tell us what you wish to share, and we will never tell anyone where we learned it.”

“And if anyone sees us walking together, my lady?” Jaime asks, mocking.

“I’ve met Sam before, Ser Jaime,” she says, equally mocking, and he grins. “We are simply two acquaintances who have met again a long way from home.” She rolls her eyes and turns to Sam. “I cannot make any promises about your father,” she says and her voice is cold, “but he is in the Stormlands now, breaking the siege of Storm’s End.”

Sam relaxes slightly at that news. “Thank you, my lady.” He flashes a terrified glance at Jaime and Willas, then focuses on Brienne. “‘Tis a long tale,” he says, “and there’s a place overlooking Whispering Sound where we should be able to speak freely.”

They make their way to a small hilltop where, on a clear day, they would be able to see all the way to the Sunset Sea. Today, however, the fog obscures everything and does strange things to the sounds around them, muffling some while others seem to be close beside them. There’s a tree stump that Willas gratefully eases himself on to and then they all turn expectantly to Sam.

Sam’s eyes widen and he gulps, then says, “You will likely not believe much of what I have to share.”

Jaime shrugs. “Let us be the judge of that.”

Sam jerks a nod and begins to speak.

The sun slowly gains strength as Sam Tarly tells them of the Others and the wights they raise before them. He tells them of the Wall, of the Great Ranging, of killing an Other with dragonglass and a wight with fire. He tells them of Coldhands, who rescued him, Gilly the Wildling girl, and her babe. He tells them Coldhands is a dead man, with blackened hands and feet, yet is neither wight nor like any Other Sam has yet encountered. He tells them the Watch and the Wall are the last defense against the Others and if they fail, the Long Night will come again.

And he tells them of Jon Snow, Ned Stark’s bastard, and now Lord Commander of the Night’s Watch, and how he sent Sam here, to Oldtown, to study and then return to become the Watch’s maester. Which he intends to do, Sam assures them earnestly, but he is also studying about the Others and the Long Night in hopes he can find something—anything—that will help the few hundreds of the Night’s Watch brothers who are all who are still left to guard the Wall.

Silence falls as Sam finishes speaking, then Willas turns to Jaime and Brienne and says, “You cannot possibly believe these mummer’s tales!”

Brienne says, “We have stories of our own, Lord Willas, that are no less remarkable.”
Sam’s eyes widen. “So you truly did not approach the Citadel because of the Others?”

“Our revenants are raised by fire, not ice,” Jaime says, thinking hard on what Sam has just told them as the noises of the wakening city drift to his ears through the evaporating mist: the cries of hawkers as they set up their stalls; the slap of waves against the hulls of ships and wharves; the clop of hooves against cobbled streets.

Willas stares while Sam’s mouth drops.

“How?” Sam finally manages to gobble.

“That is what we wish to discover—although we mainly want to learn how to kill them. Dragonglass, you say?”

“Yes, at least with the Others. It had no effect on the wight. Only fire destroyed that one.”

“Well,” Jaime says with a thoughtful look at Brienne, “I suppose fire will work as well as steel, my lady.” He frowns as the slap of waves seems to grow louder in his ears. He sees the same frown on his companions’ faces and they turn, almost as one, to look out over the Whispering Sound.

And there, barely seen through the thinning fog, is the unmistakeable shadow of—

“Ironborn,” Brienne breathes.

“Aye,” Jaime says grimly, “and closing fast.” He turns to Willas and Sam. “Sound the alarms, quickly as you can,” he says, then sprints towards the wharves with Brienne keeping pace beside him.

They warn all they pass and the hue and cry follows behind them in a wave, but by the time they get to the wharves, the Ironborn have already landed and there is no time to do much more than to draw their swords and fight beside the city guards who are rushing to join them from every alleyway and street and wynd.

He quickly loses sight of Brienne and wishes she had a shield as well as armor, but then he forces her from his thoughts as he closes with the attackers. She is a warrior, skilled with that blade he gifted her, and if he cannot trust she will fight well and honorably—and survive—then he never should have married her.

Even as he finishes the thought, he catches sight of Brienne once more, fighting fiercely on his right, a salvaged shield in her hand, and then he’s caught in the chaos of battle. Like when he fought the Brotherhood without Banners, he uses his gold hand to good effect and as he smashes one Ironborn’s nose to pulp with a satisfying crunch, he thinks he will also have a steel one forged and coat it with gold so he can do even more damage with it. But all such thoughts are quickly gone, replaced by instinct and split-second responses and the thrill of battle, with Brienne felt more than seen beside him as time seems to stretch and slow and stop.

Sweat stings his eyes—or mayhaps it’s blood—and as they spin and parry, thrust and slash, batter and slice, as his blood runs hot and fierce in his veins, as his left arm moves almost as quickly, as surely, as he used to move his right, his battle vision and the remnants of the mist makes the red twisting through their Valyrian steel appear to flow, to dance and to rise from the blades like flames.
A/N2: Yes, a quick update. I’m hoping to speed up my posting times (but no promises!) because I do want to finish this fic before November 1st, when NaNoWriMo kicks off. :D
Brienne

Brienne blinks the sweat from her eyes as she drives Oathkeeper between the ribs of another Ironborn marauder. She’s aware of Jaime, somewhere to her left, his gold hand flashing in the weak rays of the sun as it burns off the mist. The fact he still has no shield is a worry at the back of her mind, but not one she can allow to distract her. If she cannot trust he will fight skillfully and honorably—and survive—then she never should have married him again.

They fall back until they’re pressed between the wharves and the buildings that line them, and Oathkeeper flashes and parries and slices almost of its own accord, and its red veins seem to shimmer and waver above the grey steel like the flames of a campfire. The thought almost amuses her as she uses her shield to bash an Ironborn into his fellows behind him then slashes his throat with a flick of Oathkeeper’s blade. But it’s a passing thought because battle lust is upon her and she becomes a creature of action, her thoughts only about the next man to face her sword and shield and fall, to be replaced by another.

“The ships! The ships! Protect the ships!”

The voice sounds like Lord Willas but Brienne can only spare a glance towards the wharves. She sees Ironborn swarming over the sides of the new ships Ser Garth ordered built, followed by flames erupting on their decks, flames that are fed by a barrage of burning arrows. Brienne realizes this is no raid for plunder, a realization borne out by the blast of a horn and the Ironborn break away and run back to their longships, with the city’s defenders hard on their heels.

But the wharves are ablaze as well by now and as quickly as they arrived, the Ironborn are gone, their ships gliding away almost as if they are flying over the waters of the Whispering Sound.

As suddenly as that, the battle’s done, and Brienne cautiously lowers her sword and shield to look round her. Time begins to move again as she finally hears the screams of the wounded, the shouts as people fight the flames on the ships and the docks and attempt to stop those flames from spreading to the densely packed buildings that line the wharves. Mixed in with the chaos of the fighting the fire, there’s an occasional clash of arms as an Ironborn, left behind, is captured or killed.

“Brienne!”

She turns at Jaime’s shout, and her knees go weak with relief at the sight of him, covered in gore but striding purposefully towards her, Widow’s Wail clutched in his fist.

“Are you hurt?” he demands as he reaches her.
She shakes her head, then, urgent, “Behind—”

He turns almost without thinking, Widow’s Wail flashing red and black and grey as he flicks aside the Ironborn’s weapon and drives the blade into the man’s stomach, blood gushing when he yanks the sword out again.

Jaime turns back to Brienne, and even covered in gore and sweat, his power and grace are undeniable and for one strange moment, it takes all Brienne’s self-control not to fling herself against him and kiss him wildly, blood-covered or no.

“You are sure you’re unhurt?” he says, snapping her out of her suddenly lusty thoughts.

“None of this blood is mine,” she says as his gaze roves almost desperately over her. “I will have bruises upon bruises soon, however. You?”

“Same,” he says and steps beside her. They turn to watch the scurrying city guards, the Hightower soldiers and the citizens as they make a futile attempt to stop the flames from devouring the ships they’d labored so long to build. He suddenly grins, although it doesn’t lighten his grim expression. “Well, wench, never let it be said our time together is boring.”

She slants him a disbelieving look but before she can say anything, she hears Lord Willas calling for them.

They turn to see Willas and Sam standing in front of a crowd of sobbing smallfolk with red priests, septons, septas, and other religions’ holy people moving among them, offering what comfort they can. Jaime and Brienne pick their way through the dead and the wounded towards them, and Willas and Sam watch them with identical expressions of wide-eyed excitement. As they get closer, Brienne sees they, too, are blood-spattered with swords still in hand, although Sam’s is shaking so much she’s surprised he still has a grip on it.

Before they can say anything, Sam says, eyes wide with awe, “Your swords! Did you see your swords?”

Brienne exchanges a puzzled glance with Jaime before he shrugs and says, “Aye, I saw my sword. It was in my hand and going where it needed to be.”

Brienne shakes her head at him but he simply raises his eyebrow in return. She turns to Sam with a tired sigh and says, “What about our swords?”

“They were aflame!” Sam gabbles eagerly, and now Brienne realizes he’s shaking from excitement not fear.

“An illusion caused by the mist and the confusion of battle,” Jaime says and shows them the blood-covered Widow’s Wail. “There are red and black veins in the steel that occurred when Tobho Mott reforged Ice. We don’t know what caused them but at least they haven’t weakened the Valyrian steel.”

“No, Ser Jaime—Sam speaks true,” Willas says, almost as excited as the young Tarly. “The blades were aflame! Both of them!”

“Don’t you know what this means?” Sam demands. “Don’t you know the legend of Lightbringer?”

Brienne sees two red priests turn sharply at the word, eyes watchful as they look from Brienne to Jaime to the swords and back again. She recognizes them as two she had spoken with a day or so ago, but to no avail.
“Why don’t you explain it to us on the way to the High Tower,” Jaime says tiredly, startling her out of her thoughts. He takes a step away then pauses, glancing at Brienne. “Assuming you’re ready, my lady?”

Brienne glances again at the red priests, who have both turned away. She frowns and nods and takes her place by Jaime’s side.

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Jaime

Willas and Sam regale them with the story of Azor Ahai and Lightbringer, and agree to meet again in the training yards later that evening. Then they part ways: Jaime, Brienne and Willas to find their hosts while Sam hurries back to the Citadel.

Lord Leyton and his wife, Lady Rhea, question them closely, as does Ser Garth when he returns with a grim set to his mouth and the even grimmer news that most of the new ships have been destroyed. Finally the Hightowers allow them to leave. Willas hurries away to send a raven to Highgarden and to his brother, Ser Garlan, with orders to attack the Shield Islands immediately, while at least some of the Ironborn fleet is gone.

Jaime and Brienne return to their room where they order bath water, place their bloodied armor, swords, and clothing in the care of Ser Garth’s squires. Once alone, they wash away the gore and inspect each other’s bruises before Jaime leads her to the bed and lays her down, pulling the blankets warmly over them.

“I don’t know if I want to fuck you as hard as I can, Brienne,” he says with a yawn as he pulls her close, “or as gently as I can, or if I just want to hold you as you sleep while I give thanks that you are still in one piece.”

She hooks her leg over his hip and pulls him close. She runs a hand over his jaw and combs her fingers through his hair, her eyes wide and solemn and brimming with more emotion than he can bear to see.

“You are still in one piece, too, Jaime,” she says softly, and suddenly her astonishing eyes are filled with tears.

“Shush,” he says, and kisses her carefully, gently. “Why the tears, sweetling?”

“You had no shield,” she whispers.

“I had my hand,” he whispers in response, rubbing his stump against her back. She shivers and closes her eyes. He presses a kiss against her temple, then tangles his fingers in her hair as he presses her head against his shoulder. “Sleep, Brienne,” he says, the warmth of her seeping into his very bones. “Rest. We are both still here.”

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Their swords and armor are cleaned and ready by the time they awake, although their clothes are ruined beyond repair. Ser Garth’s squires have found them something to wear while seamstresses are set the task of creating new clothing for Lord and Lady Lannister.

“It seems we will be here for another day or two, my lady,” Jaime says as they walk to the training yard.
Brienne nods, a distracted frown on her face which disappears once she sees Willas and Sam waiting for them.

They greet each other, and Sam immediately says, “May I inspect your swords?”

Jaime raises an eyebrow then shrugs and draws Widow’s Wail from its scabbard while Brienne does the same with Oathkeeper. Sam and Willas peer at the blades.

“I had Widow’s Wail in my hand the entire time,” Jaime says, amused by their intent inspection of the swords. “It was not on fire.”

“We were there, Ser Jaime,” Sam says, insistent. “The blades were aflame.”

Jaime shakes his head. “Naught but an illusion caused by the confusion of battle. Yes, granted, it appeared even to me that the red veins seemed to float above the grey Valyrian steel, but when you’re in the heat of a fight, much of what you see is twisted into shapes that are not true to their form. It’s caused by sweat and blood and battle madness.”

“How did you feel while you wielded the sword?” Brienne asks slowly. “I’ve used Oathkeeper before, as you know, but for the first time I felt what Lord Tarly meant when he said Valyrian steel makes the wielder quick. It was as if the sword knew where it needed to be before I did.”

“That is naught but skill, Brienne, you know that,” Jaime says. “Your sword moves as a part of you, and I knew that feeling well when—” He stops, pressing his lips together into a tight line as he glares at his gold hand. “It is a glorious feeling,” he says, his voice low and husky with grief.

“How did it feel, using Widow’s Wail?” Brienne asks. “You survived against the Ironborn with naught but a few bruises.”

He frowns, considering the question. “I was quick, yes, and much better than I’ve ever been during our sparring sessions, but that is always what happens when I’m in the grip of battle lust. A fight to the death should make you better, faster and stronger, else you won’t live to see another one.”

“Ser Jaime,” Willas says with a puzzled smile, “you are willing to believe that the dead can be brought back to life, but you are not willing to believe that maybe there is something magical about the swords you and your lady wife carry?”

Jaime stares, expressionless, then he swallows heavily, and says, “What do you want us to do?”

Sam says, “Lord Willas, if you would like to swing one of the swords yourself?”

Jaime hands Widow’s Wail to Willas, who gives it several experimental swings, judging the weight and balance of it in his hand. He limps towards a jousting dummy and proceeds to cut it to pieces. Jaime sees the man knows how to use a sword and even with his crippled leg, Willas has skill and strength in his arm.

Willas slices the last piece from the jousting dummy and turns to them with an almost blissful expression. “Magnificent blade,” he says.

“But no flames,” Jaime says.

“No,” Sam says, and sighs. “If we can try the other sword? Or both together?” He looks sheepish as the others frown at him. “The Citadel teaches us to experiment.”

Jaime shakes his head and smirks. “You have already been there too long,” he says as he takes
Widow’s Wail back from Willas. He turns to Brienne and raises the sword in mocking salute. “Shall we dance, my lady?”

So they do.

As they spar, Jaime forgets they have an audience, because unlike with tourney swords, it takes true effort for Brienne to finally disarm him, even with Oathkeeper’s longer reach. When she finally does, they’re both sweating and panting, flushed from exertion, and when she lowers her sword, Jaime is on her in an instant, kissing her wildly and is rewarded with her kissing him back, just as wildly.

When they finally part for air, Sam says loudly, almost desperately, “No flames!”

“But plenty of heat, nonetheless,” Willas says, and doubles over with laughter.

Brienne blushes and buries her red face against Jaime’s shoulder.

“Mayhaps the swords are magical,” Jaime says, laughing as he turns her towards their audience. “I have never felt the urge to do that with any of my other opponents.”

She tears herself away from him, smacking his shoulder as she does so.

“But no flames,” she says with a determined air. “That proves you were mistaken, Sam, Lord Willas.”

Sam’s face is almost as red as hers as he shrugs. “We must have been,” he says, and sighs.

“What does it matter?” Jaime asks, sheathing Widow’s Wail once more.

“Because according to legend, it was a hero wielding a flaming sword who stopped the Others and ended the Long Night.”

“Well,” Jaime says, “it would not surprise me, then, if Oathkeeper caught fire for Brienne. She is one of the truest knights in the Seven Kingdoms even if never formally made one, but I am no hero. I am just a kingslayer and an oathbreaker and a man with shit for honor, so everyone says.” His lips twist into a bitter smile. “Such a sword would never light for one such as me.”

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Brienne

They receive a visitor the next day: a red priest, one who had been in the crowd the previous day. Jaime raises an eyebrow as the priest introduces himself as Taeno of Myr, but Jaime greets him politely enough.

“We’ve met before, Lady Brienne,” Taeno says, tall and thin and made even more so by the red robes of his calling.

She nods, “I remember.”

“You came to us, seeking information about the Last Kiss. As did you, Ser Jaime.”

Jaime nods. “With even less success than my wife,” he says drily.

Taeno gives them a small nod and says, “We were by the wharves yesterday, when the Ironborn
attacked. We saw you and Lady Brienne defending us, defending our city, against the invaders. We saw your swords.”

“The flames were an illusion,” Jaime says flatly.

Taeno’s lips quirk into a faint smile. “As you say. Regardless, you both acted bravely and honorably, and after much debate at the temple, we have decided that I would come to give you as much information as I can about the Last Kiss and those who are raised by it.”

Jaime and Brienne exchange a startled glance, then turn back to their guest with expectant looks.

“Not that there is much we can tell you,” Taeno says quickly. “There are legends that the Last Kiss brings back those who have died, but that hasn’t happened for hundreds of years—mayhaps longer. Those who perform it do so as a last rite, to cleanse the soul of the departed, but it is not intended to reverse death. If it does, well, death must still receive its due. Legends say that death changes those who are from it, that it keeps a piece of the person as payment. Legends also say the dead person’s wounds never heal, and those brought back do not eat or breathe or sleep. They are still dead creatures, even if they move and speak and seem much the same as they were in life.”

Brienne leans closer. “Can they be killed again?”

“Yes, although not easily. They are supposed to be faster, stronger, and, of course, fearless. You also cannot weaken them with blood loss since their hearts do not beat and their blood does not flow.”

“So how can they be killed?” Brienne demands.

“The same as any other person,” Taeno says, “only it must be from a blow that would be immediately fatal. Bash their head to pulp or remove it from their body, or stab them directly through the heart, and they will die again just like anyone else.”

“Do you know of any other ways to bring people back from the dead?” Jaime asks. “Ways that don’t include the Last Kiss?”

Taeno frowns. “The Last Kiss is simply a ritual act and is not, in itself, supposed to be magical. It is the prayers and the sacrifices done in readiness of the Kiss that are truly what the Red God needs. If one were to complete those rites but not the Kiss, the person may still be resurrected.” He glances from Brienne to Jaime and back again. “You must understand, however, that life is the only thing that can pay for death. The sacrifices and prayers are not for the faint of heart.”

Brienne frowns, thinking back to everything that Thoros of Myr had told her and wonders if he had lost a bit of his own spark of life every time he performed the ritual on Beric Dondarrion.

Taeno stands. “That is all we know,” he says apologetically.

Jaime frowns, thinking intently, and says, “Can a body be reanimated without a head?”

Taeno’s eyes widen. “I pray not,” he says, “because I do not know how you would kill a creature such as that.”

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The night before they leave Oldtown, after taking leave of their hosts, Jaime and Brienne have wine with Willas and Sam in a private chamber. Sam shares with them the other legends of raising the dead he’s managed to find in the Citadel’s library.
“One thing all these legends have in common,” Sam says, “is that the creatures who are raised from the dead are all still dead. They have no living functions.”

Jaime leans back with his wine goblet balanced in his gold hand. “They don’t sleep or eat or breathe or fuck,” he says.

“But at least they can be killed,” Willas says. “The Others by dragonglass; the wights by fire. According to what Thoros of Myr told you, Lady Brienne, Beric Dondarrion died several times and likely would have stayed dead if Thoros had not repeatedly revived him.”

Brienne nods. “But they all seem particularly difficult to kill and freakishly strong.”

Jaime sips his wine and shrugs. “At least there’s hope,” he says.

“I will continue searching through the library and send you anything new I may learn,” Sam says then looks nervous. “Although some of the maesters are starting to look at me with suspicion. I fear they will not let me search out this information for much longer.”

Brienne frowns. “I thought the maesters were there to help people?”

“They are,” Sam says, “but they are enemies to magic.” He glances round then leans closer. “I was told by Archmaester Marwyn to keep the Others a secret from the Citadel.” He lowers his voice even more. “I was also not to mention the stories of dragons being born in Essos.”

Jaime raises an eyebrow. “Even we have heard those stories,” he says. “I can’t imagine the maesters have not heard them as well.”

“Stories are one thing, Ser Jaime, but these are more than that. Marwyn believed them; that’s where he’s gone: to Essos, to find these dragons for himself and the woman who controls them.”

“Daenerys Targaryen,” Jaime says and finishes his wine.

“You believe these stories of the return of dragons, Ser Jaime?” Willas says.

Jaime smiles as he places the goblet on the table and carefully untangles it from his hand. “I have seen a dead woman order my death and a dead man guard my King. You and Sam claim to have seen two swords catch fire in battle. I don’t know if the tales of dragons are true but given everything else, it wouldn’t surprise me if so.” He gives Willas a thin smile. “Magic has returned to Westeros, Lord Willas, and the gods alone know what that means for the rest of us.”

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Jaime

Jaime and Brienne set out for Casterly Rock in the morning, and make steady progress. They bicker comfortably as they journey, and Jaime even manages to coax another laugh or two out of the wench as they go. He’s even happier when, after several days of high winds and snow cutting into their faces, Brienne finally agrees to hide away for three days when they arrive at the Rock, but only because he promised her an extra-warm bedchamber.

“Not a day longer, Jaime,” she scolds him through chattering teeth as they huddle together close to the fire outside their lean-to, “and certainly not the ten days you’ve been threatening.”

“Aye, wench, not a day longer,” he agrees with a grin and kisses her.
She eyes him suspiciously. “You never planned on more than that in the first place, did you?”

He gives her his most innocent look. “I knew you would need to be convinced, my lady,” he says.

She half-heartedly smacks his shoulder and he laughs as he kisses her again.

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Jaime is relieved to finally catch sight of Casterly Rock, rising high in the distance, even as his stomach tightens with dread and grief. His expression becomes more and more grim the closer they get.

“It will be fine, Jaime,” Brienne says quietly as they make their way through Lannisport.

“I know,” he says with a sigh. “But my father was...” He grimaces and shakes his head. “There will be ghosts round every corner, Brienne, with my father looming large over it all. With him will be what little I remember of my mother, and Tyrion.” He glances at her. “And Cersei.”

Brienne’s expression is stoic but her eyes show resigned acceptance before she looks away and Jaime frowns.

“I understand,” she says staring straight ahead.

“I doubt that very much,” Jaime says. “Brienne—”

She turns her head sharply away and Jaime closes his mouth with a snap and a growl. He broods silently on the willful stubborn blindness of wenches as they reach the Lion’s Mouth gate, are recognized, and escorted to Ser Damion Lannister, his castellan.

Ser Damion is thinner and greyer than Jaime remembers but the grin on his face is the same. Damion claps him on the shoulder and, after a moment of appalled surprise, greets Brienne with as much charm as he can muster. He leads them to his own drawing room and sends word to the squires and Pia, who all quickly present themselves. Jaime does his best not to laugh as Brienne deals with Pod and Pia almost tripping over themselves and each other in their attempts to greet her and make themselves useful before he turns to deal with his own squires vying for his attention.

He watches as the squires and Pia bear their armor and swords away then turns to Damion.

“We have been long without news, Ser Damion. How fares the realm?”

Damion shrugs as he pours them all some wine and waves them to chairs drawn close to the crackling fire.

“The Queen Regent is demanding gold, of course. We have provided a thin trickle of it, as you commanded, enough to keep the realm working and fed. More and more people are creeping out of the Riverlands and King’s Landing is beginning to bulge at the seams.” He frowns as he sips his wine. “I understand there are now thousands of ramshackle huts outside the walls of the city because there is no more room within.”

“What of the Targaryen pretender?” Brienne asks. “Has he been routed?”

Damion glances at her. “Storm’s End belongs to the pretender,” he says and shrugs. “The Golden Company delayed the royal army long enough that the besieged believed there was no help on the way. They threw open the gates for the pretender only to have the royal army arrive several weeks later. Now we, in our turn, are besieging Storm’s End.”
“Well, unless Tarly can convince someone inside the walls to open the gates, just as they did for the Targaryen pretender...” Jaime shrugs. “So long as the Golden Company is contained in the Stormlands, then those huddling outside the walls of King’s Landing should be safe enough.”

“At least from that army,” Brienne says, “but not from starvation and the cold.”

“I know, Brienne,” Jaime says with a sigh, “but there is naught we can do about any of that at the moment.” He turns back to Damion. “What of my sweet sister and the King?”

Damion’s face becomes an expressionless mask. “All is as calm as can be expected,” he says. “I have heard there will soon be a new Kingsguard, complete with new armor.” His dry tones tell Jaime all he needs to know about Damion’s opinion of such a frivolous use of gold when the realm is facing a harsh winter.

Jaime shakes his head and drains his glass. “Whether there are any knights who would accept the white cloak is the true question,” he says. “I have heard there will soon be a new Kingsguard, complete with new armor.” His dry tones tell Jaime all he needs to know about Damion’s opinion of such a frivolous use of gold when the realm is facing a harsh winter.

“Several, all in the Lord’s chamber. Unopened and waiting for your arrival.”

Jaime grins. “Thank you, Damion.” He stands and Damion and Brienne do the same. “Have you prepared the Lord’s and Lady’s chambers as I asked?”

Damion nods. “Everything that was your father’s has been stored until you are ready to deal with it. The Lord’s and Lady’s chambers have been completely refurnished and are ready for you and your Lady to make them your own.”

Jaime turns and gives Brienne an almost feral grin and her eyes widen when she catches sight of his expression.

“Jaime—” she warns.

“You promised me three days, my lady,” he says and laughs as she heaves a long-suffering sigh and hangs her head.

Damion glances from one to the other and shakes his head in bemusement. “I will have the servants bring you food and bath water.”

Jaime gestures for Brienne to precede him out the door. “Unless something important requires us, we will see you again in three days and not a moment sooner,” he says and grins as Brienne turns bright red.

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Jaime had worried that walking into the chambers that had once been his father’s would stir up old memories and strong emotions, but Damion had been as good as his word. To his relief, everything that had been his father’s is gone and as he closes the door on the servants’ backs and bars it, he’s grateful there’s nothing to immediately remind him of his family.

He turns to Brienne, who’s scowling uncertainly, and smiles.

“Three days, wench,” he says, prowling towards her. “Three days when we will do nothing but eat and sleep and fuck.”
“You don’t have to—”

He stops her words with a kiss and there is no conversation for a long time afterwards.

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They spend the next three days exactly as Jaime had promised. They sleep and eat and fuck and talk, and when he manages to tease another laugh out of Brienne, Jaime wishes they could simply stay hidden away and let the rest of Westeros take care of itself.

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On their last night, Jaime strokes Brienne’s bare shoulder and says, “I shall have a chain mail dress made for you, so you can still be armored and yet we can lift the skirts anytime we like. Much easier than dealing with your breeches.”

She blushes, although only the Seven knows how she can still be embarrassed by him after the last few days. She looks at him with a solemn face, slowly blinks those amazing blue eyes and says, “Why?”

Jaime knows she’s not asking about the armored dress.

He meets her gaze, searching her expression, then says, simply, “You have the most beautiful eyes I have ever seen.”

She frowns. “They’re only eyes,” she says and he knows she doesn’t understand and he—he needs must face the ghosts that are lurking round every corner of the Rock before he can say more, so he only smiles and kisses her again.

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Brienne

They step outside in the morning, blinking at the cold sunlight like they have been hidden away for weeks instead of simply several days.

Brienne looks at Jaime and says, sadly, “No more hiding, Jaime.”

He glances at her, his handsome face all beautifully sharp lines as he breathes in the cold air. “No more hiding,” he says, “no more delays.”

He straightens his broad shoulders and says, “’Tis time to become Lord Lannister, Lord of Casterly Rock and Warden of the West, and you to take your place as my Lady.” He starts walking and she falls in beside him and he slants her a crooked smile. “But I hope we will also always be just Jaime and Brienne even if we never again need to huddle for warmth in a lean-to during a cold winter’s night.”

She glances at him and gives him a small smile as she gives him an even smaller nod.

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It is while they are sparring in the training yard that they hear the sound. It drifts in the wind and falls over them like dew: the sound of a thousand souls screaming in torment wrapped within the blast of a horn.

They stop and listen, Brienne’s skin prickling.
[In the Riverlands, Lady Stoneheart and the giant direwolf by her side lift their heads and turn towards the source of the sound, drifting from the southeast.]

The horn’s blast fades, then returns, louder this time, stronger, and it strikes terror in Brienne’s heart. She reaches out and tightly grips Jaime’s arm.

[In Slaver’s Bay, three dragons take flight and soar over a thousand ships heading towards the Gulf of Grief and from there to the Summer Sea. The ships are filled with Dothraki and the Unsullied. On the lead ship stands Daenerys Targaryen, flanked by her advisors, including a dwarf with a scar where his nose used to be, and a large, burly man wearing a kraken-shaped helm, his hand on a giant dragonbone horn.]

The sound dies away, then returns, so loud they have to clap their hands over their ears as windows rattle and the Rock itself trembles so violently that everyone is knocked to their knees. It seems to last forever, and Jaime struggles to her side and wraps his arms round her. They cling to each other and she wonders if this noise will only stop once it’s shaken the world apart.

[In the North, all one hundred leagues of the Wall shakes at once. As the last of the Night’s Watch brothers begin to run, the Wall both collapses and dissolves as the magic that holds it gives way. Those who survive its fall later say it was as if the ground itself was tearing it apart. The final brick tumbles and disappears as the last note from the horn fades away.]
Jaime

The silence that follows is as sharp as glass and just as fragile. They wait, suspended, and then people begin to move, and Jaime hears children crying in the distance.

He looks at Brienne, pale and shaken in his arms, but already looking round them. He does the same.

“No damage I can see so far,’’ he mutters as they scramble to their feet and hurry to the Lord’s Hall.

It’s chaos wherever they go: frightened people milling round in confused panic, sobs of terrified children rending the air, shouts of men and the sound of running feet as people rush to and fro to check on their families and for damages or injuries. Jaime and Brienne find Damion in what used to be the throne room, when Lannisters were Kings and not just lords. Damion is ordering people to inspect the mines; to find Maester Creylen and bring him there; to inspect the castle; to go to Lannisport to assess the situation and report back.

Jaime stands helplessly as he listens, then turns to Brienne, who looks just as lost.

Damion turns round and is startled when he sees them. “My pardons, my lord, my lady. I should have stepped aside for you.”

“Don’t be a lackwit, cousin,’’ Jaime says, with a smile. “What do you need us to do?”

Damion chuckles. “You are no longer servants; you are Lord and Lady Lannister. ’Tis you who must tell me what to do.”

Jaime claps his hand on to Damion’s shoulder. “We need you to guide us, Damion, and give us good and honest counsel. And bear with us while we learn our way. Now—what do we know?”

“Little, my lord, my lady. The sound seemed to come from the southeast...or it came from all round us. Hopefully the maesters can tell us more.”

“Aye,’’ Jaime says as Maester Creylen scurries into the Lord’s Hall, flushed and panicked.

“We have never heard such a noise before,’’ he says, panting. “I have set my stewards to sending ravens to the Citadel and to my brothers in other Houses to ask if they might recognize what has occurred.” He shakes his head and wipes beads of sweat from his brow. “’Tis passing strange. I have heard tell of the ground shifting in great leaps beneath a man’s feet, but I have never heard of it accompanied by a noise such as that!”

“Well,’’ Jaime says as Maester Creylen hastens away, “let us hope that has not happened here, else the mummer’s farce we so carefully wove for my sweet sister may come true!”

Brienne blinks and Damion’s already grim face becomes even more so.

“The mines—aye. We do not have so many men to spare that we can afford to lose more.”
Casterly Rock escapes with only minor damage while there are several collapsed buildings in Lannisport. To everyone’s relief, the mines remain intact.

They repair the damage while ravens fly fast and furious between Casterly Rock and the Citadel as well as to and from the other Great Houses. A chill runs down Jaime’s spine when they learn that the hideous sounds were heard everywhere but none know from whence it began. The North has also fallen ominously silent except to inform King’s Landing that the Boltons have fallen, Rickon Stark has been found alive and well and is now Lord of Winterfell, and Jon Snow has been named King in the North with Stannis Baratheon’s full support. But that message arrived a day after the horn blast, and ravens from the south have gone unanswered in the days since.

Things calm, yet move at a breakneck pace. They receive news the Ironborn have left the Shield Islands but no one knows where they’ve gone. Jaime orders a small army to be raised and trained to be sent into the Riverlands to assist his cousin, Daven Lannister, in keeping the peace, and, he privately tells Brienne, to find Lady Stoneheart and put their theory of a hundred swords to the test. As the weeks pass, it feels as if the days themselves play tricks with Jaime’s mind, seeming to shorten and lengthen almost randomly, and he watches the ravens frantically flying to and from the Maester’s Tower with a thoughtful frown.

But the days are getting shorter—and colder—and Brienne begins her duties as Lady of Casterly Rock by setting men to cull the forests of the Westerlands for fuel, and arranges for more coal to be purchased. They at least have plentiful food stores, she tells him. Damion and his wife, Lady Shiera, have done well in provisioning the Westerlands, even when they were battered by war and Cersei’s unceasing demands.

As for his sweet sister, Jaime hears little. Bronn’s network of eyes and ears appears to be failing them, or mayhaps she has grown satisfied with being Queen Regent and has come to some sort of truce with Queen Margaery.

Even Jaime cannot make himself believe such a mummer’s tale as that.

“She is waiting for something,” he tells Brienne one evening as they ready for bed, “and I fear for Margaery’s safety when that ‘something’ finally arrives.” He scowls as he pulls at the laces of his breeches. “I fear for everyone’s future if the alliance with the Tyrells is broken beyond repair.”

“Does holding the Iron Throne mean that much to you?” Brienne asks quietly and he scoffs.

“I don’t care about that bloody thing at all,” he growls. “I would claim my children and leave the realm to fight over it if I didn’t think doing so would cause the children to lose their heads and doom everyone else to even more years of brutal civil war. With winter here, and magic returned, we needs must turn our attention to the greater enemy.”

“The Others.”

Jaime nods. “And Lady Stoneheart and Ser Robert Strong.”

“How do we rally a realm to fight enemies no one believes in anymore?”

Jaime sighs. “By proving they exist.”

“How?”

“I don’t know. I am too used to solving my problems with a sword, wench, not diplomacy.” He gives her a bitter smile. “That is a question I wish my sweet brother were here to help us answer.”
Despite Jaime’s worries and both his and Brienne’s almost frantic preparations for returning to the Riverlands, they slip almost unnoticed into a routine.

They break their fasts alone in their chambers, before sunrise, and remind each other of their plans for the day. Then they dress in their armor and make their way to the secluded courtyard Jaime has selected for their sparring. He finds that while he does well when holding Widow’s Wail, he is still weak when wielding a tourney sword. It makes him wonder if there is something after all to the nonsense Willas and Sam were spouting in Oldtown. But the blades never appear to be aflame, so Jaime decides it must simply be the Valyrian steel that makes him faster and better.

He spars with Brienne spar in cold semi-darkness, lit only by torches the squires set ablaze each morning. When they are exhausted or believe that at least an hour has gone by—it is difficult to judge the passing of time in the long twilight of a winter’s morn—they return to their chambers to bathe and dress in preparation for holding court in the Lord’s Hall. They spend the rest of their morning welcoming guests, receiving messages, hearing petitions, and rendering judgments on cases that come before them to be resolved. There are still moments when Jaime cannot understand how he’s ended up here, holding the title he had forsaken so long ago, in a situation where it is his words and not his sword that decides the fate of those before him.

He’s grateful for the two who sit on either side of him. Brienne advises him based upon her beliefs in truth and loyalty and knightly honor while Damion’s advice is based upon political and pragmatic necessities. Jaime makes decisions based upon both, but there are days he misses Tyrion with every fibre of his being. Sometimes he thinks of their last meeting in the black cells, remembers Tyrion calling them Handless and Noseless, the Lannister boys, feels again how tightly they hugged, and wants to weep.

Once they finish in the Lord’s Hall, Jaime goes his way while Brienne goes hers. Casterly Rock is teeming with high-born guests, the Houses arriving in a steady stream to pay their respects to their new Lord and Lady and, Jaime tells Brienne cynically, to determine how best to bend them both to their own ends. Which means that in addition to their normal duties, they needs must also play host to their guests. He and Brienne often do not meet again until it is time to sup in the Great Hall, where they play the role of Lord and Lady Lannister.

They end their day dealing with any new concerns that may have arisen since their time in the Lord’s Hall before finally retiring to their chambers. While Brienne has a bedchamber of her own, they sleep in Jaime’s because the bed, they have discovered, is much larger and more comfortable. The one time Brienne attempted to sleep in her own room, when her moon’s blood was upon her and, she mumbled, blushing, they finally had the luxury of two beds during such a time, Jaime had cajoled her into staying with him anyway.

They talk, then sleep, then wake in the night to fuck and talk again, this time about whatever passes through their heads: teasing words and laughter, or memories of their childhoods, or sharing what dreams they may have had before the world forced those dreams to the side. He tells her much about his father and his mother and Tyrion, but does not speak of Cersei at all. She, in her turn, tells him much about Tarth and her father and growing up as a child of an island and the sea.

It is on one such dark night, when Jaime has already coaxed a small giggle from the wench, that he reluctantly agrees that a chainmail dress, while practical for fucking, is impractical when facing an opponent with a completely different kind of sword. Brienne blushes and sputters and he laughs so loudly at her discomfiture that she gives him a hard shove. He teeters on the edge of the bed and grabs her, taking her with him as he tumbles to the floor.
He holds her, squirming on top of him as he laughs again before he begins to kiss her senseless. His last thought before devoting himself to more pleasurable pursuits, is that he cannot remember ever laughing so much with Cersei.

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**Brienne**

Brienne changes into a dress—that, true to Jaime’s promise, is made to measure—and hurries to the Lady’s Solar, where her highborn lady guests are waiting. She is late; the meeting with Casterly Rock’s Seneschal had taken longer than she had expected. Lady Shiera, Damion’s wife, skips in an attempt to keep up with Brienne’s long strides and Brienne slows, giving her companion an apologetic smile.

“They will keep, you know,” Shiera says with a smile.

“I just do not wish to keep them waiting,” Brienne mutters and tugs the bodice of her dress a little higher.

Casterly Rock is teeming with members of the Houses loyal to Casterly Rock and Brienne is hard pressed to know quite what to do with all the ladies who have arrived with their sons or husbands or brothers. She knows what she should do—feed them, entertain them, build alliances, broker peace or discord where it best serves her lord husband for her to do so. But while she has pretty manners, she is shy and uncertain when faced with the sheer number of ladies she has been entertaining for the last few weeks, and each day the number seems to swell.

“You are Lady Lannister,” Shiera says. “They will wait forever and never say a word.”

“That’s not quite true,” Brienne mutters. “Lady Sybell Westerling will make her displeasure known.”

“Aye,” Shiera says drily, “and in such a manner as to ensure the farthest corner of the keep hears her. But she is not far removed from her spice merchant forebears. How she managed to birth two such lovely daughters I will never know.”

Brienne’s lips twitch towards a smile at that, but it’s wiped away as they turn the final corner towards the solar and she hears, ringing loudly into the corridor, “You cannot honestly believe it is a true marriage!”

She slows and stops, flushing then paling as Lady Sybell continues.

“One look at that creature tells you all you need to know. Ser Jaime must have been forced to marry her. He will set her aside as soon as he is able.”

“They seem happy enough,” Lady Dorna, Kevan Lannister’s shy and still-mourning widow, says timidly, and Brienne dimly thinks she never realized how well sound travels from that room. “Lord Jaime—”

“Ser Jaime is the Kingslayer and an oathbreaker. When he’s ready to set her aside, he will do so, I have no doubt, and who will blame him? I’m sure he will settle a sufficient amount of gold on the creature so she can disappear to the Free Cities. The only real question is who he will choose for his true bride.” There is a pause and Brienne takes in a deep shuddering breath but before she can move or speak, Lady Sybell says, “Let us at least be honest with each other. We have all brought our daughters to parade before the new Lord Lannister after hearing the stories of this wife of his. My Jeyne cannot marry for almost two years, but Eleyna is a sweet and biddable child and will be a
“She’s twelve,” another voice says drily, and after a moment, Brienne recognizes it as Lady Jeyne Clifton, Cersei’s childhood friend and bedmate. Brienne has often wondered if Lady Jeyne was the girl who had once stolen a kiss from Jaime.

“And did you not bring your Alys for the same purpose?” Lady Sybell snaps back at Lady Jeyne. “*She* is but thirteen!”

“I have come to seek a husband for Alys, that’s true, but Lord Jaime is wed, and wed he shall stay, if I am any judge.”

Lady Sybell makes a scoffing noise. “Lady Alysanne, you have come to persuade Ser Jaime to wed you in that creature’s stead, have you not? I overheard him complimenting your dress the other night and you smiled so prettily in response.” Acid drips from Lady Sybell’s words. “Is that not a worthy goal, to see the Lady of the Golden Tooth wed to the Lord of Casterly Rock?”

Lady Alysanne’s voice is as light and beautiful as she is. “Aye, if Lord Jaime—”

Brienne cannot bear any more. She spins and runs, her legs tangling in her skirts until she lifts them out of the way. She thinks she hears Shiera call her name—or mayhaps it’s laughter—she cannot tell over the roaring in her ears.

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Brienne rushes to her apartment and tears into her breeches and tunic and armor as she sends for Pod. The boy barely has time to step into her room before she’s striding out and he has to run to keep up with her. She goes immediately to the training yards and begins to batter any and all knights who dare to face her.

By the time she returns to their apartment, she is bruised and battered but feeling more herself. Pod still looks worried, but at least she no longer feels the desire to scream and rage at Jaime or their guests.

Or mayhaps she does, she thinks, as all the hurt and uncertainty flood back as she steps into their bedchamber to find Jaime already there, looking impossibly beautiful in his doublet and breeches. He takes in her battered armor and sweat-soaked hair and raises an eyebrow.

“I told Lady Shiera you were likely in the training yards,” he says. “She told me you were upset but would not explain why. Did you decide you could not take another moment of needlework?”

“Something like that,” she growls and turns to Pod. “You may go, Pod. I’ll see you in the morning.”

“Whenever morning may arrive,” Jaime mutters. “Wine?”

“No,” she snaps and waits for the door to close behind Pod.

Jaime pauses in pouring the wine and his eyebrow rises higher. “I feel like I’m in trouble, wench, but when last we parted, you were pleased with me.” He gives her a wicked grin. “Very pleased with me.”

For once she doesn’t blush at his innuendo. “Do you know that the ladies of the Westerlands are here simply to see which you will choose when you set me aside?”
Jaime’s jaw drops, then he laughs. “I’m not going to set you aside, Brienne, so they will be waiting for a long time.”

Her scowl deepens. “Is that all you have to say?”

He shrugs and takes a swallow of wine. “What else is there to say? We’ve been dealing with the mockery of others from the moment we wed and we, at least, know the truth of what happens between us. Besides, you are Lady Lannister, the Lady of Casterly Rock. More than that: you are Brienne, the Maid of Tarth. You are a warrior, a former Kingsguard, and you once stood as champion for a Queen and prevailed. You cannot tell me a few sniggering women are enough to cow you. What does it matter what the gossips say?”

Rage and humiliation explode inside her. “What does it matter? It matters because these women do not respect me! It matters because they will try to exploit this weakness between us for their own ends!”

Jaime freezes. “What weakness between us?” he asks, his voice deceptively calm.

She ignores him. “This is not my world! These are battles of wits and I cannot win them with a sword!”

“What weakness between us?” Jaime demands again as he puts his wine goblet down. “Do you think I can be so easily won away from you?”

Brienne throws up her hands and prowls round the bedchamber. “Look at me, Jaime! Of course they’re going to think they can easily take my place in your bed—half of them likely don’t even believe I’m there in the first place!”

“I don’t care what they think, Brienne. I care what you think.” His voice is low and all angry lion and she pauses, blinking uncertainly. “Tell me: do you think I can be so easily persuaded from your side?”

“Look at me!” she says again, suddenly furious. “I cannot blame them for believing you will one day set me aside! I am no one’s idea of a beautiful woman or a biddable wife!”

“I didn’t marry you so you could be a beautiful and biddable wife!”

“Then why did you marry me?”

Jaime opens his mouth then closes it with a snap. He scowls then says, “You still doubt my vows to you, is that it? You must learn to trust me!”

“I do trust you!”

He barks a harsh laugh. “Yet you seem to believe I will crawl between the thighs of any woman who asks me!”

“I cannot expect you to stay faithful to me! I know what’s in my mirror, Jaime!”

Now it’s his turn to throw up his arms in frustration. “You do not trust me! I have made vows to you, not once but three times! I will not break them!”

“And I’ve already told you not to make promises you cannot keep!”

“So, you truly do believe I’m an oathbreaker and a man with shit for honor!”
She stops, blinking. “No,” she says weakly, but he abruptly turns his back.

“Go,” he growls, “get out of my sight before I say or do something I’ll regret.”

Brienne opens and closes her mouth but cannot think of what to say. She chews on her bottom lip then hurries to the door that leads to her private bedchamber and leaves him to his wine and his anger.

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Brienne asks for supper to be served in her private rooms then she bathes and readies herself for bed. She tosses and turns, tears occasionally leaking from her eyes as she thinks on all that has happened that day, from Sybell Westerling’s cruel words, to Lady Alysanne’s agreement with them, to the hurt and anger in Jaime’s eyes as he ordered her to leave, to the guilt pressing down upon her that she was unable to make him understand she doesn’t believe any of those things about him—she doesn’t.

The fire is low in the hearth and the room is chilly when she hears movement in the Lord’s bedchamber and realizes Jaime is as restless as she is. She climbs out of bed and pads to the adjoining door then hesitates.

But she can’t sleep, and she doesn’t want him to think she believes him to be less than who he is.

She puts her hand on the latch and opens the door.

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Jaime

Jaime returns to his bedchamber from the Great Hall after the tedious supper he suffered through without the wench by his side. At least he was able to make Lady Sybell uncomfortable by giving her a cold glare whenever she made the mistake of attracting his attention. Lady Shiera takes him aside for a moment and he assures her Brienne is fine and will return to her duties in the morning.

He readies for bed, glaring at the closed door leading to Brienne’s bedchamber, but he does not go to it. Instead he slides beneath the blankets and tosses and turns, unable to get comfortable. The bed is empty and cold without her bulk beside him. To his disgust, the room itself seems empty and cold without her.

He finally throws off the blankets and pads naked to the fireplace to add more fuel to the fire. He pours some wine and quaffs it in two gulps. Both warm him but neither soothes him and he glares at the closed door as he pours another glass of wine.

Stupid, stubborn wench, he thinks, turning his back to the door and glaring into the fire. She will not trust; she will not believe, and all the effort he’s put in the last few months have obviously been for naught.

If nothing else, he thinks, irritated, she should never doubt his faithfulness.

He turns sharply round when he hears the door unlatch.

Brienne steps through and her eyes widen when she sees he’s naked. Her hair is a tangled mess round her head and she’s clad in a simple white shift that covers her to her knees, her hands nervously clutching at the material. She lifts her chin, shy yet defiant, and all of Jaime’s anger disappears in an instant when he sees her gorgeous eyes are shadowed, as if she’s been crying.
Despite his worry at this evidence of her tears, his cock hardens and the sight seems to give Brienne confidence.

“I’m cold,” she says as she takes another hesitant step into the room. “I can’t sleep.”

He puts his wine goblet down and opens his arms and she’s in them in an instant, and they’re kissing as frantically as if they had been parted for days and not mere hours.

He takes her there, on the rug in front of the fireplace. The flames are warm on their skin, and while he still doesn’t bring her to a woman’s pleasure, she mewls and gasps and arches at his touch. Her calloused hands are warm and gently strong as she holds him against her, and her body is hot and welcoming when she opens her thighs and allows him inside.

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They lay together, sleepy and relaxed, sweat drying on their skin as the gold and red light of the dying fire dances over them.

Finally, Jaime stirs enough to sit up and kneel over her. Brienne blinks sleepy eyes and he smiles at the sight. He runs his stump across the claw marks on her collarbone. Bear, he thinks, and says, softly, “I take you, Brienne, the Maid of Tarth, Brienne the Blue, Brienne the Beauty, as my wife. One flesh, one heart, one soul, now and forever.”

“Jaime,” she whispers, “you don’t—” but he stops her words with a gentle kiss.

He strokes his stump over the sword wound that angles across the claw marks. Sword, he thinks, and says, “I swear that I shall never lay with another.”

He traces the scar on her right thigh with his fingertips. Sword, he thinks, and says, “I shall never deny you.” He runs his stump over the scar on her left thigh. Sword, he thinks, and says, “And I shall never forsake you.”

He cups her face and runs his thumb over her scarred cheek. Teeth, he thinks, and says, “Wherever we go, we go together, and if we survive the winter and my sweet sister, I shall give you back your Sapphire Isle, and an heir to go with it.” He sees moisture welling in her eyes and spilling on to her cheek, and gently wipes the tears away with his thumb. “Do you marry me, Brienne?”

“Yes,” she whispers, and sniffs. “Yes, yes, yes.”

He smiles at that and kisses her.

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Brienne

Shiera walks into Brienne’s private sitting room the next day, an anxious expression on her face.

“The ladies have been wondering where you’ve been,” she says.

Brienne gives her a slight smile. “I’m certain they have,” she says drily.

Shiera bites her lip then says, “I want you to know, Lady Brienne, that Lady Sybell is the only one who believes those ridiculous words she’s spouting.”

Brienne raises an eyebrow. “Lady Alysanne seemed to be supporting her as well.”
“You missed all that was said yesterday, my lady. Lady Alysanne said she would have been willing to wed Lord Jaime—if he was not already wed and happily, from what she can see.”

Brienne flushes and gives Shiera a small smile. “Thank you for telling me that,” she says and leads the way out of her rooms.

They walk in silence to the Lady’s Solar and Brienne once again hears Lady Sybell’s too-loud voice as they approach the room. This time, she is not saying anything offensive, and Brienne walks into the solar with a composed face.

Lady Dorna looks relieved at the sight of her, while Dorna’s niece, Joanna Swyft, actually looks happy. Lady Alysanne and Lady Jeyne Clifton beam at her, and the others, Brienne sees, watch her with expressions varying from arch amusement to relief to wariness. She greets them all then takes her place at the tea table, nodding at the serving girl to begin serving refreshments.

The conversation begins again round her, and Lady Sybell looks smug as she sips her tea and nibbles at the cakes in front of her.

Brienne listens to the small talk until Pia slips into the room and whispers in her ear. Brienne gives her a small nod then takes a sip of tea before she places her cup and saucer down on the table.

“Lady Sybell,” she says, her voice calm and clear, cutting through the chatter, and the women immediately fall silent.

“Yes, my lady?” Lady Sybell says, still smug.

“I understand that you believe my lord husband is shopping for a new bride.” Brienne is pleased to see Lady Sybell’s smug expression disappear. “I can assure you, that is not the case. I’m grateful you have taken time to pay your respects to me and Lord Jaime, and to wish us happy on the occasion of our marriage. I almost regret that your time in Casterly Rock has come to an end.”

Sybell gasps and Brienne raises an eyebrow. “Your daughters, however, shall remain for a while longer. Both are lovely girls and will benefit from attending me, to learn how it is that true ladies behave.”

“My lady—”

“Your luggage is in your carriage that’s waiting for you in the courtyard.” Brienne gives her a cold smile. “Lady Jeyne and Lady Eleyna are in the corridor, waiting to wish you farewell and safe travels. Good-bye, Lady Sybell.”

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Jaime

Lord Westerling offers a stiff apology to Brienne that evening in the Great Hall, and she accepts it with a gracious tilt of her head. Jaime can’t help teasing her that she behaved like a true lady and receives a sharp elbow in his ribs for his pains.

In the morning, Jaime leaves Damion in charge of the Lord’s Hall and takes Brienne with him to the waterfall where he used to meet Cersei, where they would fuck and sleep and fuck again in the warm summer sun.

They dismount in the still dim light of morning and he tells her about those days, about Cersei and how she shone brighter than the sun and their love burned twice again as bright. Those were the
memories he fled to, he tells Brienne, while he stood guard at Aerys’ feet as the Mad King burned his enemies alive. Those were the images he held close while he listened to the King savage his sister-wife, Rhaella, while his Kingsguard brothers told him they were to protect the Queen, but not from the King. He tells her other stories about Aerys, the other secrets he witnessed, there in his white cloak and armor, clad in his naive dreams of the Kingsguard and knighthood and all it was supposed to mean.

When it came down to it, Cersei and their love for each other had been the only good and true thing he could find.

“She shone brighter in my memories than the flames the King used to torture his enemies,” he says. “How could that beautiful girl, that sacred talisman who gave me sanctuary when everything around me was nothing but horror—how could she be anything but the Maid of the Seven? How could our love be anything but right and true and forever? After all I had given up for her? After all I have endured? After all I have done?”

He stops, gazing at the waterfall, lost in his thoughts.

“I see the truth of Cersei now,” he says, his voice low and harsh with grief, “and there are days I wish I didn’t. I have never been ashamed of my love for her. I am not ashamed now. I regret the things I’ve done for that love, but never the love itself.”

He turns and looks at Brienne, taking in her chapped lips and wind-burned skin. He looks deep into her blue eyes, calm and honest as she watches him.

“Do you understand now why I say a part of me will always love my sweet sister?” he asks, and waits.

Her eyes are clear and unwavering.

“I understand,” she says.

He searches her face and eyes and slowly nods. “Yes,” he says softly, “yes, I believe you do.”

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It takes another week or two but finally they have news of Lady Stoneheart and the Brotherhood without Banners once more moving south and Jaime makes the final preparations to lead his small force into the Riverlands.

“You do not have to come with us, Brienne,” he says the night before they are to leave. “I would not put that burden on you.”

Brienne hesitates then says, “Wherever we go, we go together, Jaime.”

Jaime smiles and kisses her but there’s a knock on their door before he can do anything more.

He growls a little as he releases her then laughs when he sees her disappointed expression. He opens the door to find Maester Creylen’s steward, a sealed message in his hand.

“Just arrived, my lord,” the boy says and Jaime thanks him and takes the scroll. He closes the door and turns to Brienne.

“From Bronn,” he says, frowning as he opens the message. “Mayhaps Lady Stoneheart is moving more quickly than we expected.”
Jaime reads the message once, then again, his face slowly growing more and more grim.

“What is it?” Brienne asks sharply.

“There is a new Kingsguard,” he says tightly. “Six new knights, all named Strong, and all have taken vows of silence in deference to the Faith. None recognize them, and all—so Bronn’s spies say—have emerged from Qyburn’s black cells.”

Brienne’s eyes widen but he can tell she does not yet fully understand. Well, he thinks wildly, how can she?

He says, “One is missing his left arm.”

Her jaw drops. “He’s dead!”

“Mayhaps he wasn’t, or mayhaps he was but is not anymore. Mayhaps none of them are anymore.” Jaime shudders and mentally runs through the list of Margaery’s accusers. “By the gods,” he groans, “there were six of them under Qyburn’s care who were young and strong and skilled with a sword.”

“What will Cersei do with them?” Brienne almost whispers.

Jaime shakes his head. “She will take her revenge. Bronn’s message says he’s already packed up Lollys and her bastard and they’re on their way here while he goes into hiding. He only hopes his wife and her babes can be kept safe in Casterly Rock…if she doesn’t lose the one she’s carrying from the journey.”

Brienne’s fingers bite into his arm. “What of Margaery?” she asks.

He shakes his head again, then turns sharply as there’s another knock on the door. He opens it to find Maester Creylen this time, another message clutched in his hand. Jaime recognizes the Royal seal and his heart sinks.

“It just arrived, my lord. I saw the seal and hurried it to you.”

“Yes, yes, thank you,” Jaime says, taking the message and closing the door on the maester’s curious face. He breaks the seal and unrolls the message to see Cersei’s familiar hand.

The note is short. “Come at once,” it reads, “our time is now. I love you, I love you, I love you.”

Jaime crumples the paper in his hand and refuses to look at Brienne.

“I must return to King’s Landing,” he says through numb lips, “as quickly as possible.”

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Chapter End Notes

A/N: I’ve been dying to get to this plot point ever since Jaime and Brienne returned to King’s Landing from the Quiet Isle. This is the one thing (other than J/B, of course - LOL) that I really want to see happen in the books. When I looked at the list of Margaery’s accusers and realized there were six of them who were still alive, who were knights/swordsmen/warriors, and were under the care of Qyburn…it’s a plot twist just
begging to happen.

In support my tinfoil, Margaery’s accusers are:
1. Osney Kettleblack (held by the High Sparrow and likely going to die or be sent to the Wall)
2. Jalabhar Xho – exiled prince from the Summer Isles
3. Bayard Norcross – knight of House Norcross
4. Ser Tallad the Tall – a hedge knight
5. Hugh Clifton – member of Margaery’s personal guard
6. Hamish the Harper (old and already dead)
7. Lambert Turnberry – knight from House Turnberry
8. Mark Mullendore – knight from House Mullendore
9. The Blue Bard (tortured to madness and now held by the Faith)

Please, GRRM, please make that over-the-top list of those accused of fornication with Margaery and her cousins have more reason to it than just Cersei being Cersei!!
Casterly Rock/King's Landing

Chapter Notes

**Warning1:** Spoilers for the season 6 finale.

**Warning2:** Smut appears to have happened. Well, not very graphic smut, but much more than just the fade-to-black I usually write. I am as shocked and appalled as anyone.

**Warning3:** As always, canon-compliant coarse language ahead.

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**Brienne**

Brienne pales and holds out her hand so she can read the message for herself. She scowls when Jaime shakes his head and abruptly turns away.

“All right,” she says slowly, letting her hand drop to her side. “What are we going to do when we arrive in King’s Landing?”

He turns to face her, his expression all arrogant lion. “We are not doing anything, my lady. You shall stay here in Casterly Rock and govern in my stead.”

She crosses her arms as her scowl deepens. “It was not necessary for me to stay here when we were going into the Riverlands.”

“We were going with a small army at our backs and I would have been there to kill Lady Stoneheart if it came down to it. Do you wish to go into the Riverlands without me? Are you prepared to drive your sword through the woman you once swore to serve?”

“Of course not,” she snaps, “and you are deliberately misleading me. What about the oath you swore to me? Wherever we go, we go together.”

His hand clenches round the note in his hand. “Not for this.”

She considers him thoughtfully, then says, her voice flat, “She has sent for you.”

Jaime smiles his knife-like smile. “That is no great leap to make, my lady.”

“And you will go.”

His smile disappears, his eyes shards of green ice. “I have shit for honor, my lady, or have you forgotten?”

“Your honor isn’t shit, Jaime, but you cannot expect such an announcement to be met with nothing but agreement! You can’t simply refuse to explain yourself when I question you!”

“Are you questioning me, Brienne, or have you already judged me and found me wanting?”
“By what right does the wolf judge the lion? Is that it?”

He raises an eyebrow. “Are you a wolf, Brienne?” he purrs.

“I am your wife!”

His smile is cruel. “Oh, so now you claim me?”

She snarls as she stomps to him, cups his face and kisses him with all the passion she’s learned to show. They’re both panting by the time she ends the kiss.

“Aye, I claim you,” she growls. “You’ve sworn yourself to me not once but four times, and I will keep what’s mine.”

He buries his face against her shoulder and laughs helpless, pained laughter. “You are already too much a Lannister and we have not even been married half a year.”

“Depends on which wedding you count from.”

He laughs again, then says, more gently now, “I will not allow you to go with me.”

She releases him and steps away. “Do you truly think you can stop me?”

“I’ll have you locked in these chambers until I’m well away,” he says.

“And you’ll regret it when I catch up with you on the Gold Road.”

“She’ll kill you, Brienne!”

“She will try.”

“I will not take you with me!”

“I won’t let you go without me.”

Jaime throws up his hands and prowls the bedchamber. “You mad, stubborn wench!”

“Why don’t you want me to go with you?”

“Because I love you, you lackwitted fool, and she’ll kill you!”

Brienne’s jaw drops and Jaime looks confused as the words he just shouted break through his frustrated anger.

They stare at each other in abrupt, charged silence and Brienne’s suddenly terrified of how vulnerable she feels to hear such words. For a moment, she worries about what this may mean for their future then curses herself for a fool. Jaime has just told her he loved her and he looks even more uncertain at saying the words than she is at hearing them.

She blinks nervously. “Well,” she finally manages, “I—I love you, too.”

He snorts. “I know,” he growls and she gasps.

“You did not!”

“You truly are a bad liar, Brienne,” he says then shakes his head. “And this is all madness! I will not allow you to come with me to King’s Landing and as your husband—”
“Oh, don’t you dare! I am still better with a sword than you are!”

“Not when I’m wielding Widow’s Wail!” he snaps in injured tones.

“Against seven undead abominations? You would have no chance!”

“And I have no choice!” He thrusts the message against her chest and she grabs it, smooths it out and reads the words his sweet sister had sent him.

She scowls then raises angry eyes from the note to her now-pacing husband. “What do you intend to do when you get to King’s Landing?”

“I will destroy these creatures, or—” he stops, pressing his lips tightly together.

“Or you will destroy Cersei,” she says flatly.

He blows out his breath and nods. “She must be stopped, Brienne.”

“Aye, she must,” Brienne says, “but I will not allow you to face this alone.”

He gives her a rueful glare. “Is there any hope of changing your mind?” he asks.

“None.”

He sighs in rueful surrender. “Then let us make preparations, my lady, and leave as soon as possible tonight. The weather is cold but the moon is full and shall light our way.”

Brienne strides to the door then hesitates and turns back to find him close behind her.

“Jaime,” she says, then chews on her lip and blinks nervously.

Jaime frowns then his expression softens as he cups her cheek. “I love you, Brienne,” he says, “truly,” and he gives her a sweet, gentle kiss.

“Why didn’t you tell me before?” she whispers when the kiss ends.

“Would you have believed me?” he whispers back.

She slowly shakes her head and he chuckles and kisses her again.

“I know you don’t truly believe me now,” he says, “and we have no time for me to prove it to you.”

“No,” she says so sadly that he laughs again before leading the way out of their chambers.

They send ravens to Highgarden and Oldtown and King’s Landing, writing and sealing the messages before watching Maester Creylen and his stewards attach the notes and send the ravens on their way. Once the birds are safely on their way, they rouse Ser Damion and Lady Shiera from their bed and tell them they needs must leave that night. Jaime asks them to make ready for the arrival of Lady Lollys and her babe and to do all they can to make them comfortable to keep them safe. Once they have soothed his cousins’ concerns, Jaime leaves to speak to his army commander while Brienne finds their squires and sets them to work.

Pod begs to go with them but Brienne holds firm: none of the squires will be attending them on this journey. She doesn’t know what’s going to happen in King’s Landing and at least there is some
semblance of safety in Casterly Rock. Besides, she tells the boy, they’re taking two horses each and will be riding as quickly as the weather and the road and the moonlight will allow. With luck, it will only take them two weeks to arrive in King’s Landing instead of the usual month, but the journey will be brutally difficult and they will be sleeping on their horses more often than not.

Pod’s still not happy when he leaves with the others to gather provisions and ready the horses.

Brienne’s wracked with guilt because Pod is her squire and should be treated as such, but there are still nights when she dreams of him dangling from that tree, his feet desperately kicking as the rope strangles him. With what little she knows about what they’ll face in King’s Landing, she cannot bring herself to put him in any more danger because of her.

She returns to their chambers and finds Jaime already there with Peck, gathering the few belongings they will bring with them. They leave in the bright light of a winter’s moon. With the snow, it lights the way almost as brightly as the sun. Brienne prays they will be as able to see as clearly every night on their journey to King’s Landing. The days are growing ever shorter—although it sometimes feels like some are longer than others—and she does not enjoy travelling in darkness.

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They see the plume of smoke while still half-a-day’s ride from King’s Landing. They stop the first travellers they see: a family of four, clad far too lightly for the weather as they head west on the Gold Road. The family fearfully stops when Jaime hails them, and Brienne can’t fault them for their caution. She and Jaime are obviously high-born but travel-worn and filthy, wearing nondescript armor and with the pommels of their swords well-wrapped to hide them from view.

“What’s burning?” Jaime asks, nodding towards the city.

“The Great Sept of Baelor is aflame, m’lord,” the father says while his wife and children edge away from them, poised to flee into the woods.


“Four days ago, a great fire erupted and consumed the building in an instant, killing all inside. They’ve been fighting the spread of the flames ever since.”

Jaime pulls in a hissing breath.


The mother and children take a hurried step away and Brienne quickly says, “Please, we’re not going to harm you. We just wish to understand what happened.”

The father hesitates, then says, “The Rose Queen is dead, so they say, although none I know have seen her body. The Queen Regent still lives but there has been no sign of the King or Princess Myrcella since the Rose Queen’s death—more than a week, m’lord. The rumors in the city are that the Queen Regent lit wildfire ablaze and burned the Sept and everyone in it, including the High Septon and many of the Faith Militant. The Kingsguard and the Gold Cloaks have been hunting the rest through the streets of the city.” He swallows and glances fearfully towards King’s Landing.

“I’ve heard these new Kingsguard hunt down any who speak against the Queen Regent, no matter how softly. I’ve heard they are not like other men, that any one of them can defeat seven enemies and never suffer a single cut nor ever make a sound.” He turns back to them and lowers his voice. “I’ve heard they do not bleed.”
They leave the Gold Road so they can enter the city through the Gate of the Gods. They ride in silence past the still-smouldering ruins of Baelor’s Sept on Visenya’s Hill. The city seems unnaturally quiet to Brienne, and the smallfolk glance at them then quickly scurry away. She knows their horses alone reveal their high-born status, even if their faces are hidden behind scarfs crusted with frost from their breath.

They take rooms at an inn where the owner does little more than take their coin and avoid their eyes. They speak little, and Jaime’s silence would amuse Brienne if she wasn’t dreading the morning when he will leave her to present himself to Cersei at the Red Keep. She already knows the waiting for word from him will chafe but in a moment of exhausted weakness on their journey, she had promised to allow Jaime time to speak with Cersei and mayhaps persuade her from continuing this madness.

They both know he will fail but Jaime cannot yet bring himself to admit it.

They ask for a meal to be served in their room and then hot water so they can scrub the dirt of travel from their skin. Spending this night in the inn is a risk, Brienne knows, and they can only hope that Cersei does not have her Master of Whisperers watching for Jaime’s arrival.

There’s an almost grim desperation in Jaime’s face when they finish bathing and he reaches for her. Brienne moves willingly into his arms and trembles against him. This is the first time they’ve been able to touch like this since the night before they left Casterly Rock. This is the first time since Jaime told her he loved her and, of course, they must part on the morrow to play their separate roles in whatever is to come.

The room is chill, but she quickly warms as Jaime touches each of her scars in turn and follows the trail of his touch with mouth and tongue, kissing each blemish on her body with a reverence she had never seen before—or mayhaps she had never allowed herself to see before.

He’s magnificently golden in the firelight as he looks at her as if she’s the most precious thing in the world. She wonders when he began to look at her like that—or if he had always done so and she had been unable to see.

Beneath his eyes and touch and mouth and tongue, she feels soft and feminine, dainty as any other maid and yes, yes, she will admit it, just this once: he makes her feel beautiful. It’s ridiculous and absurd and patently untrue, but she doesn’t know what the next few days will hold so she relaxes and allows herself to revel in the way he makes her feel...just this once.

As always, he talks to her, but this time she allows herself to truly hear him. She hears him whisper her name against her skin with a hundred different meanings. She hears him tell her she’s wonderfully strong and her skin is like silk. She hears him say her legs are beautiful, her ass is amazing, that the muscles moving beneath her skin are mesmerizing, her eyes are magnificent, her lips luscious, her cunt delicious.

None of this is new, she dimly thinks as he lowers his head to the juncture of her thighs, as his tongue sweeps over her folds and finds that one point that always makes her gasp and buck and strain towards something she’s never reached, but it all feels new: like she’s hearing the words, feeling his touch, for the first time, and she allows herself to believe.

She relaxes, opens herself to his questing tongue and the pleasure he gives her. She arches as he gently fondles her breast and rolls her hardened nipple between his fingers and she gasps his name.
There’s something different this time in the familiar pleasure curling and building in her belly. She lifts her head to watch as Jaime laves her with his tongue, as he sucks and soothes and teases the tender flesh between her legs. She’s never allowed herself to truly watch him before, but she does now and the sight stirs her in a way she never expected. Suddenly his tongue finds that sensitive place and she tightens and arches against his mouth and tongue. Her eyes slam closed as, without thinking, she tangles one hand in his hair to guide him closer and the other presses his hand tight against her breast while she cries out his name.

He lifts his head and she cries out again, this time in protest. He searches her face with a frown which gives way to dawning realization and a wicked grin. When he returns his mouth to between her legs, he’s no longer teasing, he’s demanding, and when his tongue hits that particularly sensitive spot, and she moans, he focuses his attention there, riding her rocking hips as she gasps and writhes against him, her hands clutching at his hair, his shoulders, his shoulders, any part of him she can reach, and the pleasure is building, building, building—and suddenly she’s flying or falling, tumbling over or under—she can’t tell—her body is pulsing and shuddering and nothing else matters but Jaime’s arms locked round her hips and the feel of his mouth and tongue between her legs.

The ecstasy lasts forever—or mayhaps only moments—and as the pleasure eases, she relaxes with a small sigh beneath Jaime’s now soothing tongue, gentle against her too-sensitive flesh.

He drops one last kiss before he lifts his head to smile at her.

“Do you think you can do that again, sweetling?” he growls, husky with need.

“I didn’t know I could do that once,” she sighs and he chuckles, then flows up her body.

“Never, Brienne? Truly?”

She shakes her head, sated and relaxed and almost ready for sleep—a feeling erased in a moment when Jaime lazily kisses her and rubs the hard length of his cock against her. She moans against his mouth, her hands gripping his hips. She tastes herself on his tongue and lips and to her surprise, she feels the pleasure begin to build again in her belly. Now that she knows where that pleasure can lead, she’s almost frantic as she touches and kisses him.

He chuckles in her ear even as he slows her down and she groans, loudly, with pleasure as he slowly pushes inside her. He pauses once he’s buried to his hilt to rest his forehead against the side of her neck, his breathing harsh in her ear.

“I love you, Brienne,” he whispers before he slowly withdraws then just as slowly pushes back inside, “I love you.”

Brienne can’t get words out as Jaime moves in and out of her body. She can only moan and occasionally gasp his name but it seems to be enough because when she wraps her arms and legs round him, his control snaps and suddenly they’re striving, pounding against each other, faster, faster, faster, and for the first time, she is as intent on her own pleasure as she is on his.

The room fills with their grunts and the slick sound of their bodies moving against each other, and Brienne is meeting his passion with her own and then Jaime pauses and fumbles his hand to where they’re joined and she cries out when he finds the sensitive bud he’d explored so thoroughly with his tongue and the pleasure is almost painful as he thrusts once—twice—three more times and then she’s soaring and falling and clenching round him as he roars his own release and shudders against her.

She doesn’t know how long they lie there, panting, sated, joined together, but the sweat is cold on her skin by the time Jaime finally stirs enough to lift his shaggy, golden head to blink sleepy green
eyes at her.

“I love you,” he rasps, and presses a gentle, soothing kiss against her mouth.

“I know,” she whispers.

He smiles at that, then says, “No matter what you may see or hear, no matter what Cersei may say or do: I love you, Brienne.”

She tangles her fingers in his hair, rubbing soothing circles against his scalp as she looks deep into his eyes.

“I know,” she says. “I trust you. And I love you, too.”

“I know,” he whispers and kisses her again.

Jaime

It takes all his strength of will to leave Brienne in the morning. He doesn’t want to leave her alone in a hostile city even if she is far from defenseless. He only hopes she will not be alone for long.

But he cannot run from what must be done and he must have faith that Brienne will keep herself as safe as possible, so he hugs her tight, breathing in her scent and taking comfort in her warmth and the gentle strength of her arms.

Then he kisses her and walks away without looking back.

He stops to rub dirt into his face and hair and hand, then enters the Red Keep, dressed in his travel-stained clothes. It should be enough to convince anyone who sees him that he’s just arrived in King’s Landing.

He dismounts and hands his horses to an obvious frightened stable-boy before he strides into the Red Keep and asks for his sweet sister.

The answer he receives makes his blood run cold before he rushes to the Throne Room.

He arrives in time to see the crown placed on Cersei’s head.

Tommen, he thinks, Myrcella, and his heart twists as he stares at his sweet sister, now Queen in her own right.

She’s beautiful, as always, and Cersei’s short cap of hair shines almost as bright as the crown, but not nearly as bright as the almost manic victorious pride on her face. She catches sight of him and he tries to decipher the look in her eyes before she smiles, lifts her chin and turns her face away.
Jaime

The sun has been gone for hours by the time Cersei finally sends for Jaime. He’s bathed and shaved and changed into clean clothes and looks once again like the Kingslayer or Lord Lannister, and Jaime misses Brienne’s stolid presence with every breath he draws.

He keeps his face carefully expressionless as he’s escorted past the two Queensguard standing silent on either side of Cersei’s door to her private rooms and ushered into Cersei’s presence. She’s at the sideboard, watching him through the mirror above it. Her back is to him, as always when she’s expecting him, he thinks cynically. The serving girl who escorted him backs away after announcing him then scurries out after one last frightened glance.

Cersei is still dressed in her coronation gown: black and snug, clinging to every curve of her body and he allows his gaze to drift down the length of her. Not that long ago, the promise of a taste of what lay beneath that gown would have been enough to make him hard and willing to do whatever she asked. Now, it simply leaves him wary.

He lifts his eyes to meet hers in the mirror and she gives him a smugly triumphant smile before turning to face him.

“I’m pleased to see your love for me has not waned since your marriage,” she says as she glides towards him. “Mayhaps it has even grown since you’ve been forced away from me for so long.”

She places her hands on his chest and slides them up round his neck. She tugs his head down and kisses him, her tongue demanding entrance to his mouth. He stands unmoving, lips firmly closed, until she finally pulls away with an angry scowl.

“Are you still angry that I removed you from the Kingsguard and forced you take on the Rock and a bride?” she says with a sneer as she releases him and returns to the sideboard.

He raises an eyebrow and marvels once again at Cersei’s ability to recast the past into whatever she wishes it to be.

“Much has happened since that day,” he says carefully, “and you were not best pleased the last I saw you.”

She pours herself some wine. “You mean when you refused to fuck me on your wedding day? Of course I was not best pleased!” She tosses back the wine and pours more. “You fucked me on my
wedding day, after all. It seemed only right that I should do the same for you.”

He remembers the morning of her wedding, his anger and despair and jealousy as he fucked her, knowing that in a few hours, she would be spread open beneath that oaf pretending to be a king. They should have run away then, he thinks bitterly. If they had fled to the Free Cities, where even their father couldn’t find them, then all that has happened could have been avoided. They might even have been happy.

He meets Cersei’s contemptuous gaze in the mirror and realizes he’s once more weaving a mummer’s tale for himself. They never would have been happy. Cersei had been determined to be Queen, and their father would never have forgiven being humiliated in such a fashion. Tywin would have hunted them relentlessly, never resting until he had found and destroyed them. Although mayhaps it would have finally forced Tywin to accept Tyrion, flaws and all.

Jaime shakes his thoughts away.

“What has happened in my absence, Cersei?” he asks wearily.

“Did you miss the ceremony this morning, sweet brother?” Cersei asks, sweet sarcasm dripping from her words. “I swear I saw you in the Throne Room.”

“Aye, I saw you crowned Queen in your own right,” Jaime says, holding on to his patience with an effort. “What I do not understand is how you ended up on the Iron Throne.”

“That is a long tale, Jaime, and I have other plans for how we are to spend the next few hours.” She turns to smile at him and smooths her hands down the front of her dress. “Does this look not suit me, Jaime? Do I not wear power well?”

Jaime swallows down the bile rising in the back of his throat.

“What happened to Tommen and Myrcella?” he asks, his voice harsh.

She lifts her chin and glares. “Do not look at me like that, Jaime—you look just like our father with that expression upon your face.”

With an effort, he smooths out his features.

“Forgive me, Your Grace,” he says, lightly sarcastic, “but I left this city under the rule of a King, with his sister as heir, and have returned to find you sitting the Iron Throne in your own right. Mayhaps you would be so kind as to explain what has happened in my absence?”

Cersei’s expression hardens. “Have a care with your tone, ser. I have punished men for less offense than that in the last few weeks.”

He grits his teeth and bows his head. “My pardon, Your Grace,” he says. “Would you please be so kind as to explain what happened to your children?”

“They were no children of mine,” she says coldly. “They turned away from me—my once-sweet and biddable Tommen and my once equally obliging daughter.” She turns back to the sideboard and pours herself more wine. Jaime mentally raises his eyebrow and wonders how long it will be before Cersei is too drunk to speak clearly.

Cersei drinks deeply and says, “They tried to protect her, so Qyburn tells me. The Rose Bitch. When I sent the Kingsguard to arrest her—”
“Arrest her? On what charge?”

She glares over her shoulder at the interruption and says, “Treason, of course. She conspired against the Crown, even if that ridiculous creature you wed somehow managed to win the trial by combat.”

Jaime stares and wonders if Cersei truly doesn’t remember that she had manufactured the tale of Margaery’s infidelities—but it did not matter. The girl was dead regardless of the truths or the lies of it all.


Cersei heaves an annoyed sigh as she refills her glass and turns to give him a haughty look. There’s a blankness in her eyes that Jaime’s not certain is caused by the wine or by the magnitude of all that has happened while he was away.

“I sent Qyburn along with the new Kingsguard to arrest the Rose Bitch for treason. She was in her private chambers, surrounded by all her clucking hens and their new admirers—and Tommen and Myrcella as well. How they managed to slip past the Kingsguard to arrive there is still not explained to me.” She sips her wine and says, “The Rose Bitch resisted—resisted! Tommen ordered the Kingsguard to stop but they only listen to me and then, Qyburn tells me, both Tommen and Myrcella picked up weapons and attempted to protect the Rose Bitch! Protect her! Against my commands!”

“The Kingsguard killed them?” he asks, horrified.

For the first time, a spasm of grief passes over Cersei’s features. “Yes, the Kingsguard killed them. Bashed in their heads; all of their heads.” She turns away and gulps down her wine. “They were unrecognizable when Qyburn returned them to me. We buried them quickly, without fanfare, wrapped in gold shrouds.” She seems to shrink in on herself before she straightens and lifts her head. She pours more wine then turns to face him, her lip lifted in a sneer. “But not the Rose Bitch, of course—her oh-so-beautiful face wasn’t even bruised.” She sips her drink. “That was fine,” she says. “It made the funeral so much better when the mourners could recognize her face.”

Jaime swallows, his mind racing. “Her family?”

“Lady Olenna had returned to King’s Landing to vex me,” Cersei says, irritated, “although she claims it was because she could wait no longer to see her sweet grandson, Ser Loras.” Cersei shudders. “Not so sweet to look upon after being doused in boiling oil, I assure you! He was even more hideous than that creature you married!”

Jaime’s blood chills. “When the Great Sept was destroyed—”

“It was during the Rose Bitch’s funeral, of course,” Cersei says and a drunken giggle escapes her lips. “The High Sparrow was performing the rites and all the mourners were weeping.”

He stares.

Cersei simply smiles and sips her wine.

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Cersei, walking very precisely, leads the way into her dining room. Jaime follows, feeling like he is the one who has been drinking too much wine. A small meal has been placed on the table but he eats and drinks sparingly. His lack of appetite catches Cersei’s attention.

“Come, Jaime,” she says, her voice tight, “you cannot mean to tell me you’re upset about Tommen
and Myrcella! You never thought of them as your children and you certainly never mourned Joffrey!

Joffrey was a monster, he thinks, and when I learned he was dead, I had been locked in a cage for a year and had lost my hand to a different monster.

But those memories make him think of Brienne and he doesn’t dare let his thoughts wander to her while Cersei is sitting beside him with watchful, drunken eyes.

“They were sweet children,” he murmurs, “and did not deserve to die the way they did.” He glances at her. “Any of them.”

Another spasm of grief crosses her face. “They are all three gone now,” she says, “and the realm needs a ruler. With Stannis in the north and in rebellion against the throne, and with no other Baratheons or even Targaryens, well...” she shrugs. “I was truly the best choice.”

“Of course,” he murmurs and thinks the smoke from the sept and the abominations at her side no doubt helped guide whatever highborn folk are left alive in King’s Landing to make that decision.

Cersei drinks deeply from her wine glass and abruptly says, “Is your blushing bride with you?”

Jaime frowns. “No.”

“Pity,” she sighs. “We could have been rid of her that much sooner.”

He scowls. “Rid of her?”

“It’s been how many turns of the moon? Four? You must be deathly bored with her by now.”

He remembers Brienne’s gasps and moans the previous night as she finally found release, the taste of her on his tongue, the heat of her squeezing him tight.

“You have no idea,” he murmurs with a slight smile.

Cersei’s eyes narrow. “Good. You can send for her on the morrow, begging her to hurry to your side. I’m sure the besotted cow will walk through fire to be here as quickly as possible.” She leans forward, eyes glittering. “I’m assuming you’re still on friendly enough terms after all this time…or did you call her by my name on your wedding night? Do you dream of me when you fuck her? Or have you stopped trying to force yourself to get her with child, stopped trying to do what a good little lord should?”

Jaime grits his teeth.

“What are you planning?” he asks.

Cersei smiles. “’Tis time for you to be rid of her and past time for me to begin paying my debt to Qyburn.”

Jaime pours them both more wine and is pleased his hand is so steady when all he wants to do is wrap his fingers round her neck.

“You are certainly loyal to Qyburn,” he says mildly. “Mayhaps too much so.”

“Jealous, sweet brother? No need. Qyburn has given me an invincible Queensguard who obeys me without question.” She sips her wine and says, “I don’t even have to fuck them—or even Qyburn! —to have them do as I say! That…means much to me.” She frowns and blinks blearily at him and
Jaime wonders if she’s aware of what she just said. She shakes her head and says, “Qyburn can work miracles; he even thinks he can return your hand to you.”

Jaime recoils. “Return my hand?”

“You would have me touch you with—what? Another man’s hand attached to my body?”

“You will touch me whenever and with whatever I tell you,” she purrs, a cruel edge to her tone. “That’s a monarch’s prerogative, isn’t it? To fuck whomever they want, whenever they want?”

“Is that why you bid me to rush back to your side?” Jaime asks coldly. “Your note said our time was now. It said you loved me not once but three times. Yet it seems you do not want me as husband—”

“I will never marry you, Jaime—get that thought out of your head once and for all!” Cersei says, eyes burning as green as wildfire. “I do intend to rid us of your so-called wife as soon as she arrives in King’s Landing, but that’s because you belong only to me. If you insist on some public acknowledgement, then you can take your place by my side as my most trusted advisor and mayhaps even my acknowledged lover—who is there to tell us nay? Mayhaps I’ll even allow you to give me another child to replace the three I’ve lost.” She shakes her head. “If only my Joffrey had lived, none of this would have happened.”

“Why did you send for me?” Jaime asks softly.

She shrugs carelessly and staggers from the movement. "I could not take the throne without you by my side, sweet brother. You are the other half of me. We are one soul in two bodies and I’ve been regretting forcing you to marry since you left King’s Landing. We belong only to each other and nothing else matters but the two of us.” She grimaces with sudden pain. “And I have no one left but you,” she says with aching grief. “I need you by my side.”

Jaime’s heart breaks a little as he looks at his sweet sister, remembering that golden girl who had been his salvation during his worst moments.

Then Cersei leans closer, swaying a little. “Oh…and I’m taking back Casterly Rock.”

Jaime’s jaw drops in surprise and Cersei smiles.

“I need gold,” she says carelessly, “and you and Damion are far too cautious in producing it.” She leans bonelessly back in her chair. “I expect you to support me in all that I do, Jaime. I will not put up with you trying to stop or control me.”

Jaime’s lips quirk into a bitter smile. “I would not dream of doing either, Your Grace,” he murmurs and pours her another glass of wine.

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He calls a serving girl to put Cersei to bed and returns to his bedchamber with a heavy heart.

As he undresses, he wishes Brienne were there, warm and stolid, with her broad, honest face and
beautiful, calm eyes. She would let him mourn the loss of his children, let him rage that Cersei will strip him of his birthright once more and Brienne’s stubborn, honorable nature would cleanse his palate after his evening with Cersei.

He slides beneath the blankets of a bed that seems too large and empty without the wench and stares up at the ceiling, wondering what the next few days will bring.

*Brienne*

Time lays heavy on Brienne’s hands once Jaime takes his leave.

Not that she sits idle. She hides her features with her scarf and ventures out into the frigid streets of the city to listen to the fearful gossip of the smallfolk in the streets and the markets and the pubs.

Her heart shatters when Margaery’s fate is confirmed, along with most of her family. When she learns that Cersei has been named Queen in her own right, Brienne realizes Tommen and Myrcella are also dead. She returns to her room that night and weeps for that sweet boy who had loved his kittens and only wanted to play with his stamp and seal. She weeps for that sweet girl, brightly beautiful despite her scars and with her father’s natural talent with a blade. And she weeps for Margaery Tyrell, who had been nothing but kind to her, for Lady Olenna, who seemed too clever to be dead so suddenly, for Lord Mace, and for Ser Loras—another of Renly’s knights, gone.

She wipes away her tears and curls up beneath the blankets on a bed that seems far too large and empty without Jaime beside her, and vows that if she ever sees Casterly Rock again, she will finally host that formal dinner party and wear with pride the gown Margaery and Myrcella gifted her.

She stares into the darkness and wishes Jaime were beside her, and wonders what the next few days will bring.

*She goes out again the next day and hopes Jaime will send word to join him in the Red Keep. She doesn’t care what mummer’s tale they need to spin for Cersei, Brienne just wants to be by his side.*

But there is no message when she finally returns to the inn.

She’s not comfortable with these games of guile, she tells herself that night as she glumly dines in her inn’s pub, listening to the fearful gossip round her about the King—no, the Queensguard now—about the Queensguard’s latest foray into the city and how they routed a dozen members of the Faith Militant from where they had been hiding in Flea Bottom. The streets were red with blood, the gossip says, and the speaker swears he saw two of the Queensguards stabbed clean through but they didn’t bleed and they never made a sound.

*On the third day, Brienne goes to what remains of the Great Sept of Baelor. The ruins are still smoking but there are no more flames. Nothing left to burn, she tells herself as she slowly climbs Visenya’s Hill.*

It’s silent except for the sound of the still-crackling embers as Brienne bows her head in prayer.

When she finishes, she paces round the ruins. She remembers kneeling at the Father’s Altar when she heard the news of Tarth’s fall to the Targaryen pretender’s army, now perched behind the walls
of Storm’s End. She remembers her first sight of the High Septon and meeting Lady Olenna once again. She remembers her wedding, with Jaime so handsome in Lannister gold and red, and she in her blue gown.

It all feels like a hundred years ago—and yet it’s only been five turns of the moon since their official wedding day and not quite a full year since she found Jaime at Pennytree and lured him into the Riverlands.

She slowly returns to the inn to discover there’s still no message from Jaime. She eats dinner before climbing the stairs to her room to ready herself for another night in her lonely bed. She decides she will wait one more day and then she will go to the Red Keep and see what’s happening with her own eyes.

Even if Cersei tries to kill her as a result.

She’s in the market the next day, browsing through distressingly bare stalls while listening to the fearful murmuring of the crowd, when she hears screams and shouts and men begging for their lives. She hurries towards the noise to find a member of the Queensguard, helmed and silent and reacting not at all to the pleading of the three unarmed men in front of him. The Queensguard makes short work of the first man as the other two scramble away with one getting tangled in the wares of the neighboring stall. The Queensguard stalks towards him, blood dripping from his sword.

“Stop!” Brienne shouts, “he’s unarmed!”

The Queensguard doesn’t react, doesn’t appear to have heard her at all. She draws Oathkeeper and runs, and manages to knock aside the knight’s sword before he can drive it home into the hapless merchant.

“Go,” Brienne tells the merchant even as the Queensguard turns his helmed head towards her. “Run!” she yells and is suddenly fighting for her life.

They dance up and down the narrow lanes of the market, gathering a crowd of onlookers. The Queensguard is skilled and quick and tireless. As the battle continues, she’s beginning to pant but her opponent hasn’t even begun to breathe heavily.

She cannot see him breathing at all.

The world narrows to the figure in front of her and the blow after blow after blow he’s raining down against her sword. She finally she sees an opening and takes it. She swings Oathkeeper against the Queensguard’s neck and everything seems to slow as she removes the helm from his shoulders.

No blood, she thinks as the helm flies gracefully through the air, no blood. The snowy white cloak remains pristine...and the Queensguard remains upright.

The helm clatters to a stop and Brienne hears screams—slow and muffled as if from a great distance—and her jaw slowly sags open as she watches the headless body stroll to the helm, pick it up and replace it on its shoulders. She doesn’t think she’s the one screaming—but mayhaps she is—as she stands frozen, horrified, disbelieving while the watching smallfolk scramble out of the creature’s path.

It is all so slow and she wonders if she’s dreaming—if she calls for Jaime, will his voice save her from this nightmare?
The creature finishes buckling the helm back into place as best it can, then turns towards her. She sees now the eye sockets are black and empty and she clamps her lips against the whimper struggling to escape.

She’s going to die here, she thinks, despairing, because how do you kill something that has no head and doesn’t bleed or tire and moves faster than it should for being a dead man?

She watches the creature’s arm swing back and time seems to snap forward as the blade comes towards her and she grunts as she parries the blow. The creature seems to have gained strength, or mayhaps she’s weakening, as she does her best to block the rain of blows flashing towards her. But like when she was battling the Ironborn in Oldtown, Oathkeeper seems to know where it needs to be before she does, and each strike is parried, each blow jarring her deep in her core.

But she’s tiring—her opponent is not—and there is no escape even if she could have attempted it, and she desperately uses every trick in her arsenal, including the less honorable ones Bronn had taught her eons ago in Stokeworth.

But the creature cannot be distracted and if it cannot be stopped when she removed its head (what head? a distant part of her gibbers), then what hope does she have?

And then she remembers their plan for Lady Stoneheart and grits her teeth.

A hundred cuts, she thinks as she redoubles her efforts. The creature lands a glancing blow with its elbow and pain explodes behind her eyes as her nose breaks with a sickening crunch. She reels as blood gushes over her mouth and chin but she manages to lift Oathkeeper to parry another punishing blow and ducks as a sword blade flashes past her left side and completely severs the creature’s sword arm.

*Jaime,* she thinks—but instead finds Samwell Tarly, his skin a sickly grey, a Valyrian steel great sword in his trembling hands. Another sword blade flashes from her other side, and the creature’s helm flies off once again.

She turns in that direction to see Ser Bronn of the Blackwater. His stunned expression as the creature turns to retrieve the helm would amuse her if she wasn’t so terrified.

“Cut it to pieces!” she cries, her voice nasal and muffled by the blood still gushing from her nose. “Cut out its heart!”

She’s speaking to Sam and Bronn, but those few smallfolk brave enough to still be watching seem to believe she’s speaking to them because a group of them bear the suddenly struggling creature to the ground, a few of them getting their heads bashed in for their troubles. The creature’s armor is torn from its body and Brienne sees daggers flashing as they repeatedly stab at the creature’s chest.

She stands with Sam and Bronn, gaping, until one of the knives hits home and the creature goes limp. Everything is suspended, as if the world itself is holding its breath, before the smallfolk cautiously back away from the creature’s motionless body.

“Do you think it’s truly dead?” Bronn mutters to Brienne, who slowly sheaths Oathkeeper.

She groans from the pain as she uses her scarf to staunch the blood pouring from her broken nose.

“I don’t know,” she says, then hawks and spits out a gob of blood, “but at least it’s stopped moving.” She turns to Sam. “What should we do with it?” she asks.

“Burn it,” Sam says promptly. “Every piece of it.”
The smallfolk who had stabbed the creature to death glance at each other and as one, they scramble forward and within moments, all trace of the creature is gone.

An unnatural silence falls over the market as Brienne turns to her companions.

“Now what?” she says.

“We can’t go back to your inn—or at least, you shouldn’t, my lady,” Bronn says flatly. “I have no doubt the Master of Whisperers has already learned of what’s happened here and the Gold Cloaks and the rest of the Queensguard are likely on their way.”

“Where can we go?” Sam asks in a shaky voice.

“Follow me,” Bronn says and leads the way out of the market.

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Bronn gets them lost in the lanes of Flea Bottom, taking them to places where, he tells them, it’s worth more than a person’s life to take notice of anyone or anything. By the time darkness falls —“Too early,” Brienne hears Sam mutter—they’re half-way up Rhaenys’s Hill. Sam is panting heavily as they climb but makes no other sound until they’re deep within the ruins of the Dragonpit, huddled round a small fire carefully hidden from any who might look from the outside.

The fire does little to warm them and Brienne shivers, her broken nose and aching head paining her as she does so.

“Is it safe to speak?” she quietly asks Bronn.

Bronn shrugs as he hones his sword’s blade. “Is it ever truly safe to speak, m’lady, in these troubled times?” He glances round the inky darkness and smirks. “But then think of those poor souls who haunt these ruins. Who would believe any that might overhear us?”

Brienne scowls and winces, then nods. She turns to Sam. “You are here much more quickly than we expected, my lord,” she says. “You must have left Oldtown as soon as you received our raven.”

Sam looks startled. “You sent a raven, my lady? I received no message. I left Oldtown as soon as I heard the news weeks ago.”

“You heard of the Queensguard before we did?” she asks, surprised.

Sam blinks. “Queensguard? No. Haven’t you heard?”

“Heard what?”

“The Wall has fallen. The Others are on the march.”

Brienne’s eyes widen. She’s aware of Bronn’s scowl but her gaze is focused only on Sam. She searches his face and sees that, whatever the truth of his words, he believes them.

“What of the armies of the North?” she asks slowly. “What of the Watch?”

“They are doing their best, but they have no hope of holding out against the Others.” Sam shivers, holding his hands close to the meagre flame they’ve allowed themselves, here in this darkened ruin where dragons once dwelled. “The North is united behind Jon Snow as King, but their Houses are decimated, their armies a fraction of their former strength. Winterfell is in ruins, even if once again under the rule of a Stark.” He shakes his head. “They have no choice but to fall back against the advance of the Others, and they have resorted to setting the land on fire as they go. It pushes the
Others back for a time, time that allows the living to put some distance between them and the dead.” Sam stares sightlessly into the flames, then says, almost dreamily, “Have you noticed how the days seem to lengthen and shorten at random? I think it’s a sign that the Others edging further south. It’s getting colder, too.”

“Well,” Bronn drawls, “winter is here.”

Bronn’s skepticism seems to penetrate Sam’s fog because Sam gives him a fearful look even as he shakes his head. “No, it’s colder than usual in the Reach, and it’s tendrils are even creeping into Dorne. Besides, even when winter lasts for years, the days steadily shorten, hold for a time, then steadily lengthen again; they do not lengthen and shorten on a whim!” He shivers again. “Some legends say that winter brings the Others. Mayhaps it’s the other way round.”

Brienne stares, her nose throbbing, her head aching, her mind whirling. There has been too much happening this day and it has slowed her wits even more than usual, it seems. She finally asks the only question she can think of at this moment: “How do you know all this, Sam?”

“The glass candles are burning,” Sam mutters. “When I was at the Citadel, I went to Archmaester Marwyn’s study, where his glass candle cast light so bright it like to blinded me.” He shudders. “I saw and spoke with Melisandre—the red priestess who is never far from King Stannis’ side—as well as Jon Snow. King Jon, now, I suppose, although how odd that is to say.” He shakes his head at his own distraction and says, “Melisandre found a small glass candle in Maester Luwin’s rooms in Winterfell and took it with her when they left the castle’s ruins behind them. Jon—King Jon—told me about the Wall.”

Brienne says, “If you never received our message, then what brings you to King’s Landing and carrying a Valyrian steel great sword?”

“I’ve been struggling to make my way north. I stopped at Horn Hill to warn my—my family and decided to take Heartsbane with me. The fact my father left it behind while he faced the Targaryen pretender was a sign, I thought.” He shrugs sheepishly. “I hoped stealing it would force my father to send at least some men after me to retrieve it and we could use those men to stand against the Others. However, there was no glass candle in Horn Hill. I’m hoping Grand Maester Pycelle had one and since he hasn’t been replaced, I planned to slip into his quarters and search for one.”

Both Bronn and Brienne stare at him in disbelief.

“And just how would you have managed that?” Bronn asks.

Sam’s eyes are terrified but his jaw is set. “I will think of something,” he says firmly, “I can not afford to fail—there is no time left for it. Melisandre’s using her god’s magic to set fire to the whole of the North as they retreat. The flames hold the Others at bay for a time but I fear what will happen when they reach those areas of the North where more dead are buried.”

“They can raise the bones of even those centuries dead?” Brienne asks in shock.

Sam shakes his head. “No one knows for sure. Mayhaps.” He laughs, a sudden harsh sound. “Why not? Dead is dead, isn’t it?”

“Except now, when it appears death has no meaning,” Brienne mutters.

Bronn groans as he viciously stabs the tip of his sword into the dirt and uses it to push himself to his feet. “I don’t know how I got caught up in all this,” he growls. “If I were still a sellsword, I would have been in the Free Cities months ago, leaving the rest of you to live or die as it pleased you.” He
angrily shoves his sword into the scabbard hanging at his waist. “Instead, one way or another, I’m destined to die battling undead abominations, whether I will it or no. No amount of gold and titles is worth this shit!”

“Where are you going?” Sam asks, alarmed.

“To fetch the Kingslayer,” Bronn snaps. “If I’m going to die fighting these creatures, I’m taking whichever Lannister I can find with me.” He stomps off into the darkness, muttering, “I should have let that fucking Imp die in the Vale.”

Jaime

Jaime wakes early the morning after Cersei’s coronation, knowing only two things: he must do whatever it takes to remove his sweet sister from the Iron Throne, and he needs to do it with as little loss of life as possible. He’s amazed the city is still standing after the bloodbath in the Great Sept and he fears it may take just one more nudge to have the smallfolk revolt in full force against the Crown.

Once bathed and dressed, he joins Cersei for breakfast. She eats little, her skin almost as green as her eyes and Jaime wonders if she will ease her drinking now that she has finally achieved her heart’s desire. Jaime eats heartily, hiding his amusement at Cersei’s obvious discomfort at the sight even as he meekly agrees to send a raven to Casterly Rock requesting Brienne to make her way to King’s Landing as quickly as possible.

He leaves Cersei struggling to keep her own small breakfast in her stomach and strolls to the training yards. They’re disturbingly empty; the only men there are young squires, hedge knights and sellswords and Jaime wonders exactly who was in the Great Sept when Cersei had it set aflame.

He wonders how many Houses have no more male heirs.

He watches the sparring for a few minutes, brooding on the question, before he calls for his horse and leaves the Red Keep to go to Visenya’s Hill.

He paces round the ruins of the Great Sept and wishes he could pray.

The next day he makes his way to the small council’s rooms and finds them empty and chill, as if they have not been used for weeks or months. He stands by the table and wonders who sits there now.

Qyburn bustles into the room and stops short when he catches sight of Jaime.

“My pardons, my lord,” Qyburn says. “I didn’t realize someone was here.”

Jaime finds that difficult to believe but says, “Simply wondering who is on the small council now. You, I understand. Still Master of Whisperers?”

Qyburn nods. “And I speak for the Lord Commander of the Queensguard, Ser Robert Strong.”

“Who is the Grand Maester?”

Qyburn shifts uncomfortably. “Ah, the Queen has yet to accept any of the candidates proposed by the Citadel.”
Jaime raises an eyebrow. “It’s unlike the Citadel to allow the Queen—or King—to determine which archmaester will be sent to advise the Crown.”

Qyburn gives him a tight smile. “The Queen makes her own rules.”

Jaime thinks of the burning ruins of the Great Sept and turns away to pace the room. “So she does,” he murmurs. “Lord Mace Tyrell is dead, I understand. Who is Hand?”

“No one, yet. I expect that to change now you have returned to King’s Landing, Ser Jaime.”

Jaime grimaces but says nothing. “Lord Harys Swyft?”

“Unfortunately, Lord Harys was attending the little Queen’s funeral when the Great Sept burst into flame.”

Jaime feels a flash of sympathy for Lady Dorna. That shy and gentle woman is still mourning the loss of her husband and now she’s lost her father—Jaime catches his breath on a sudden thought.

“My cousin, Lancel?”

Qyburn spreads his hands and shrugs. “He was a member of the Faith Militant. He was attending the High Sparrow during the little Queen’s funerary rites.”

Jaime’s heart sinks. The foolish boy should have stayed at Darry, he thinks bitterly, and hopes his gentle lady aunt will be able to weather this double blow.

He scowls off into the distance then says, “Nymeria Sand?”

Qyburn’s eyes slide away from his then return.

“She set off for Dorne several weeks ago. Foreign guests have arrived from the Free Cities, she said, and Prince Doran requested her presence.”

“I see,” Jaime murmurs. “Lord Randyll Tarly is still in the field at Storm’s End...so...that leaves...you as the Queen’s sole advisor.”

Qyburn smiles. “Only until she can name more to the small council, of course.”

A harsh laugh bursts from Jaime’s lips. “Who is left to be named?” he demands. “If they haven’t already done so, the Tyrells will declare themselves at war with the Crown now that most of their family is dead by the Queen’s command. Lord Randyll Tarly will follow his liege lord, and I would not be surprised if they are already on their way back to King’s Landing to forcibly remove Cersei from the throne!”

“And what of the Lannister forces who are with them, sweet brother? Will they not stand to defend me?”

Jaime turns to see Cersei standing in the doorway, clad in another snug, black gown made of rich fabric. She looks healthier than the last time he saw her.

“Ser Addam is loyal, Your Grace,” he says, “but they are surrounded by the Tyrell and Tarly armies. They are unlikely to escape from their midst when friends turn foe.”

“What happened at the Great Sept of Baelor was a tragedy, Jaime,” Cersei says and glides into the room, “and a tragic accident. No one is to blame.”
“Queen Margaery’s death was no accident,” Jaime grates out. “Nor were the deaths of your children. You were having the little Queen arrested for treason—or did you provide a different story to Lord Willas when you informed him of the deaths of most of his family?”

Cersei shakes her head, her lip lifted in a sneer. “I am better at the game of thrones than you, Jaime. Of course I provided a different story, and ensured no messages left King’s Landing without being intercepted by Qyburn first. Lord Willas was told Queen Margaery died as the result of an unfortunate fall from a horse.” She gives him a bitter smile. “Lord Willas has not even enquired about the fate of the Rose Bitch’s fluttering hens. Nor will he, now that so many were so unexpectedly taken from us when the Great Sept was destroyed. I’m sure most are taking it as a sign from the Seven against the preachings of the High Sparrow.”

Jaime’s not certain if he’s struck with admiration at Cersei’s cunning or stunned disbelief at how blinded she is to reality.

“None I have spoken with believe it to be an act of the Seven,” Jaime finally says, “and ravens are not the only way for news to travel. There are also still the deaths of Tommen and Myrcella to explain. If you ever left the Red Keep, you would know the smallfolk are fleeing the city and taking tales of what has happened here with them.”

Cersei shrugs. “Let them go. They are obviously cowards and we don’t need them here. Besides, it is no bad thing to have the rest of the realm fear us.”

“You have seven Queensguard, the Gold Cloaks, those remnants of the Lannister army that are not in the Stormlands, and what few untrained forces we can muster from the Westerlands. What is there about us to fear?”

Cersei and Qyburn exchange a glance and Jaime catches his breath.

“You have more than seven,” he whispers.

Cersei and Qyburn exchange another glance then Cersei says, “If you agree to be my Hand, Jaime, Qyburn will show you the black cells and tell you all that we have planned.”

And Jaime realizes he’s caught.

He bows his head. “As you command, Your Grace,” he growls and curses himself for a fool.

Jaime returns to his room that evening exhausted and worried and missing Brienne more with every moment they’re apart. He’s desperate to send her a message and bitterly regrets leaving all their squires behind in Casterly Rock. Right now, he wants to beg her to leave King’s Landing as soon as she can get to a gate, but he has no one he can trust enough to send to her. He suspects his every move is being watched by Qyburn’s eyes and ears and it would not bode well for either of them if Cersei were to learn Brienne is in King’s Landing and that Jaime knows of it.

He readies for bed and is relieved that at least Cersei is easily plied with wine to distract her from the bedchamber. Although he now understands she doesn’t truly want to fuck him; she just wants to feel she still has the power to command it from him if she chose. It makes him wonder how much of their past relationship had been because she enjoyed the control she wielded over him rather than because she truly loved him.

The question saddens more than angers him as he slides beneath the blankets to stare pensively at the ceiling. When had it changed, he wonders. When had that innocent love they shared turned not-so-
innocent? When had it stopped being love at all on her part and why had he never realized it?

He doesn’t think on it for long; he knows he will not be pleased with the answers if he were to discover them.

He sighs, rolls to his side and places his hand on the bed where Brienne should be. He needs must think of a way to get a message to the wench before she takes it into her stubborn head to come looking for him.

He smooths the empty sheet and imagines the feel of Brienne’s skin beneath his fingers, the taste of her on his tongue, and when he sleeps, he dreams of her glorious eyes.

Jaime busies himself the next day with trying to understand the state of the realm. Without a small council to help him—or anyone he can trust—he finds it tediously slow going. By mid-day Jaime has learned the granaries for King’s Landing are almost empty and with Bronn vanished from sight, there have been no regular shipments from Stokeworth and Rosby for the last several weeks. The Crown has also stopped paying for shipments from the Reach and those, not surprisingly, have slowed as well. Jaime expects there will be no food at all from the Reach once the rumors of what truly happened in the Great Sept reach Lord Willas’ ears.

He sends a raven to Casterly Rock, asking Damion to determine what stores the Westerlands can spare for King’s Landing and to send all he can as soon as possible. He also directs his castellan to settle the outstanding debt to the Reach and then Jaime sends another raven to Highgarden. Their warning to Olenna about the Queensguard was far too late, he thinks bitterly, but mayhaps the effort will at least cause Lord Willas to think somewhat kindly of him—mayhaps enough to at least prevent the complete starvation of the smallfolk living in the city.

He isn’t hopeful, but he needs must make the effort.

Jaime’s in the small council’s room late that afternoon, listening to the royal armorer delicately requesting payment for the Queensguard’s new armor when Cersei and Qyburn storm in.

Jaime takes one look at Cersei’s irritated face and quickly dismisses the suddenly terrified armorer. The man is only too happy to scuttle away and leave them alone.

Once the door closes on the man’s back, Jaime says, “What’s happened?”

Cersei gives Qyburn a disgusted glare. “It appears my invincible Queensguard is not near as invincible as promised.”

Jaime’s jaw drops. “What?”

Qyburn’s forehead gleams with sweat as he says, “The whispers say there were many against one, Your Grace. Even my...erm...found knights cannot hope to stand against a hundred men!”

“What has happened?” Jaime asks sharply.

“We sent Ser Simon Strong to deal with several merchants who have been cheating the royal kitchens.”

Or they were too vocal in demanding payment, Jaime thinks cynically, but only says, “Yes? And?”
“Onlookers took offense at the Queen’s justice and attacked Ser Simon!” Cersei snaps, angrily pacing round the room.

“I’ve been told the knight was killed,” Qyburn says. He spreads out his hands in a helpless shrug. “It may well be true. Ser Simon has not yet returned and we have found no trace of him.”

Cersei turns on them. “These—these—smallfolk have attacked a member of my Queensguard! I will not stand for it! I want these people located and I will have all their heads on pikes!”

“I have already given the other Queensguards the task of hunting for those who participated, Your Grace,” Qyburn says, his voice soothing.

“And how will they do that?” Jaime asks drily. “‘Tis difficult to ask questions to discover the guilty parties when none of the Queensguard will speak.”

“That’s why we’re here,” Cersei snarls. “You will take the Gold Cloaks and escort the Queensguard on their search. I will not have this city laughing at me, do you understand?”

*More than you know*, Jaime thinks as he bows his head and says, “I understand, Your Grace.”

Jaime gives strict orders to the Gold Cloaks that they are to question all smallfolk out of earshot of the Queensguard. He has no doubt the knights have been ordered to kill any person who even hints at being involved in the disappearance of Ser Simon.

The Gold Cloaks—all strangers to him—appear relieved to have him telling them what to do. As they ride through the city, the Queensguard on their flanks, Jaime converses with their commander, a sellsword named Tristan, and learns that most of the men, including the commander, are new to the city and even more new to the city guard. Tristan may be new to the ways of King’s Landing, but he knows enough to be cautious and says little about the Queen or her knights or her orders.

By the time they reach the market where Ser Simon disappeared, Jaime decides that, surprisingly enough, given the state of the city, if Tristan can stay alive long enough, he might actually be a competent leader of the city guard.

As Jaime expects, no one admits to seeing or knowing anything about the missing Queensguard, and Jaime suffers through Cersei’s angry tirade when he tells her they have, as yet, found nothing. He grits his teeth as she casts slurs on his intelligence and his manhood until she finally dismisses him with an angry—and drunken—wave of her hand.

Jaime opens the door to his bedchamber with deep relief—a feeling that disappears when he finds the candles have not been lit and the fire is dying in the hearth, leaving the room chill and dark. He pauses on the threshold, his hand still on the door as he glances round. His skin prickles as he peers at the deep shadows cloaking the far corners of the room.

He draws Widow’s Wail and takes a step inside.

“Is that any way to greet an old ally?” a voice whispers.

Jaime relaxes with relief as he kicks the door closed, but he doesn’t sheath his sword.

“I was wondering when you would crawl out of whichever whorehouse you’ve been hiding in, Ser
Bronn,” Jaime says.

Bronn emerges from a darkened corner and says, “I’ve missed you as well.” He smiles a little. “My pardons for the dramatics but I locked the door to guard against any of the servants happening inside.”

Jaime frowns.

“I unbarred it a long time ago,” Bronn says. “You keep late hours, Kingslayer.”

“The Queen needed much soothing tonight,” Jaime says, and wine, he thinks cynically.

“Soothing? Is that what you call it now?”

Jaime’s hand tightens on the sword hilt in his hand. “Have a care, Bronn,” he growls. “I’ve had a taxing day and I have been too long away from my lady wife.”

“Ah, yes, the Lady Brienne. She’s why I’m here.”

Jaime’s eyes widen and he takes a step closer. “Why? What has happened?”

“She’s mostly unharmed, Ser Jaime, although she looks much the worse for wear. You may have noticed one of the Queensguard has gone missing?”

Jaime closes his eyes and groans. “Why am I not surprised?” he mutters and finally sheaths his sword. “Where is she?”

“I’ve come to take you to her,” Bronn says. “There is much you must learn.”

Jaime scowls. “I fear I am never unwatched.” He glances round at the shadows that surround them. “Or unheard.”

Bronn’s smile is thin. “Well, then you should be grateful your brother was such a lusty bastard. I’ve found more secret ways in and out of this castle...” he shakes his head then turns to his darkened corner and gestures for Jaime to follow him.

Jaime raises an eyebrow and hurries to obey.

*Brienne*

“Do you think Bronn will think to bring back some food?” Sam asks wistfully.

Brienne glances at the boy then says, “Mayhaps he has something hidden here.”

Sam nods without much hope.

“Your friends—” Brienne says, then stops, uncertain of what to say.

“They still live,” Sam says firmly, “else the Others would already be here. Melisandre’s magic seems strong enough to keep the land burning behind them and that gives them some relief—but the cost is high.”

Brienne tries to imagine it: black and bare trees, scorched castle walls, entire towns and villages and all the farms in between, destroyed to their foundations.
“The smallfolk?” she asks.

“They will have joined the retreat or died in the flames.”

Brienne stares at Sam’s matter-of-fact tone and he has the grace to look ashamed.

“Else they’ve fallen prey to the Others and been raised to join the enemy,” he mutters.

Brienne scowls and pokes at the flames of their tiny fire.

“The smallfolk always suffer,” she says bitterly, and Sam glumly nods.

A pebble rattles in the darkness and they’re on their feet in an instant, swords in hand.

“The Kingslayer is about as stealthy as a drunken auroch,” Bronn complains, stepping into the small circle of firelight, and Brienne’s limbs go liquid with relief when she sees the familiar figure behind him.

“Jaime,” she murmurs and quickly sheaths her sword.

Jaime hurries to her and stops close, frowning as he peers into her face. He lightly grasps her chin so he can study her more carefully.

“By the gods, wench,” he says, “why is it that every time I leave you alone, something happens to you?”

She scowls and opens her mouth to respond but her words are stopped by his very gentle kiss. She still winces at the touch and he quickly ends the kiss when she makes a small, pained noise against his lips.

“Forgive me, Brienne,” he whispers against her ear, “only I’ve missed you these last few days.”

“And I, you,” she whispers in return. He gives her a slight smile then releases her and turns to the others.

“Sam,” he says, “I would say I’m pleased to see you again if we weren’t standing in a decaying ruin and my lady wife looks as if I’ve finally managed to defeat her in a fight.”

Brienne snorts and gives a tiny yelp from the pain, and Jaime gives her a fond look.

“Have a care, my lady,” he says, and although he’s amused, Brienne hears true concern beneath the words.

“I’m fine,” she says. “Sam has much to tell you.”

Jaime nods and turns to Sam with an expectant look.

Sam quickly tells Jaime all he knows of the happenings in the North. When he’s finished, Jaime stares at him with an expressionless face.

“Well,” Jaime finally drawls, “at least I now know the days truly are different lengths and it is not simply my mind playing tricks.”

“What are we to do?” Sam asks.

Jaime doesn’t reply but instead turns to Brienne. “One of the Queensguard failed to return to the
Red Keep this afternoon and Bronn claims you are all responsible. Tell me what you know.”

Brienne touches her broken nose and tells him all that happened that day. “I realize how mad it sounds, Jaime,” she finishes, “but I swear there was no head in that helm.”

“The entire world has run mad,” Jaime replies, “and you cannot lie to save your soul. I believe you, Brienne.” He sighs and turns back to Sam. “We have few men to spare for the North and must deal with our own creatures who will not stay dead. And, assuming, of course, that they have not already done so, I also fear the Tarly and Tyrell armies will bend the knee to the Targaryen pretender once they learn the magnitude of my sweet sister’s betrayals against House Tyrell.”

“So it wasn’t an accident?” Sam asks sharply.

Jaime gives him a thin smile. “Wildfire was once placed beneath the sept by the Mad King but it was found years ago and removed. It was no accident.”

“Are you saying we do nothing?” Bronn demands angrily.

Jaime gives him a glimmer of a smile. “I’m telling you all the truth of the situation. Besides an enemy army on the march to our gates, the city is also teetering on the edge of starvation and winter has barely begun.”

“You truly think my father will turn on Queen Cersei?” Sam asks.

“She murdered more than half of House Tyrell in one blast of wildfire,” Jaime says drily, “and you know your father. What do you think?”

Sam gulps and pales.

“This is all well and good,” Bronn snaps, “but what are we to do? About any of it?”

Jaime says, “Sam, you will return to the Red Keep with me tonight. We will say you are an emissary from the Citadel, sent to gather Grand Maester Pycelle’s things—if any are left—and return them to Oldtown.” He turns to Bronn and Brienne. “Do you think you two can gather some sellswords or even smallfolk brave—or foolish—enough to take on the Queensguard?”

Bronn cracks a laugh. “All six of them at once? And one of them the revenant of the Mountain that Rides? Are you mad?”

“If I have them separated so you’re facing only one at a time?”

Brienne scowls. “They don’t tire, Jaime, and if they are all without heads, the only way to kill them is a blade through the heart. That takes skill.” She frowns, thinking. “Or simple brute force once the creature’s disabled enough. The happenings in the market this afternoon proved that.”

“The smallfolk may still love you, Brienne. You stood champion for the little Queen and prevailed, and she was a favorite with the smallfolk. Mayhaps they will be willing to follow you for that reason alone.”

“I’m not certain—”

“What if I can bring the Gold Cloaks to assist?” Jaime asks.

“And how will you convince the city guard to turn on the knights sworn to guard the Queen?” Bronn demands.
“As Hand to the Queen, I’ve been granted access to the black cells whenever I have time to see them. I don’t know yet what exists there, but I somehow suspect that any who look there will do whatever it takes to stop these abominations.” He glances round their small circle. “If I were to give you a day to rally whoever may be brave enough to stand by your side?”

“A day?” Bronn sputters but Brienne carefully nods.

Jaime grins but she sees the worry in his eyes. “And try not to get found out by the city guard before I have a chance to get them on our side, all right?”

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When it’s time for Jaime and Sam to leave, Jaime draws her away from the others so they can say their farewells.

“Let me go to the Red Keep with you, Jaime,” Brienne says, desperately afraid for him.

He shakes his head. “I need you out here, rallying as many smallfolk and sellswords as you can. When I send out the Queensguard, they need to be met quickly and with as much force as you can muster."

“What about you, Jaime? What if the Gold Cloaks turn on you instead of follow you?”

“Then you will need to battle them as well.” She sees his grim smile even in the darkness of the Dragonpit. “Take comfort in the fact that they, at least, still have heads.”

He carefully pulls her into his arms, their armor lightly clanging as they hold each other.

“I love you, Brienne,” he whispers in her ear.

“I know,” she says. “I love you, too.”

“I know,” he replies and she ignores the pain in her face and kisses him.

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Jaime prowls round Qyburn’s room in the black cells and remembers the last time he was here, when he threatened the disgraced maester in order to ensure Brienne’s safety—temporarily, at least. Judging from the other man’s nervousness, it seems safe to assume Qyburn remembers it as well.

Jaime listens to Qyburn chattering about the Queensguard, weaving his mummer’s tale that the creatures wearing the white cloaks are living knights who have been enhanced through methods Qyburn has discovered through experimenting on prisoners under his care. Jaime wishes Tyrion were with him, because his sweet brother would have been able to understand more than half of what the man was saying.

“But I am boring you with all the technicalities of my work,” Qyburn finally says.

Jaime shrugs. “Tyrion was the scholar, I’ll admit. I have always been more comfortable with a sword than a pen.”

Qyburn visibly relaxes and he chuckles. “You will wish to see the soldiers I have prepared for the Queen.”
“Eventually, yes,” Jaime says and continues strolling round the room. He wonders if Tristan and the other two Gold Cloaks gained their positions outside the door early enough to hear all that Qyburn has been telling him.

He wonders if he can truly trust them not to turn on him instead.

Qyburn gives him a knowing smile. “Ah! You first wish to learn how I can give you back your sword hand.”

Jaime blinks, startled. In truth, he had forgotten about that.

Qyburn says, “I know our Queen wishes me to do all I can for you. Simply say the word, my lord, and I will be most pleased to restore you to your rightful place as the best swordsman in Westeros.”

“How could you possibly do such a thing?” Jaime asks, honestly curious. “Is it simply a more realistic false hand, fashioned to fool all into believing I am a whole man once more?”

“Oh, it will be a true hand, my lord, from a skilled swordsman. Who is your most skilled enemy? Speak his name and his hand shall be yours.”

Jaime chuckles. “And have my enemy’s hand near enough to slit my own throat? I think not!”

Qyburn’s smile turns sly. “Then mayhaps a friend’s hand would suit better—mayhaps that of your sweet wife? She is skilled, is she not?”

Jaime freezes. “What is your fascination with the Maid of Tarth?” he asks and is pleased his rage is not evident in his voice.

“I need subjects who have a great deal of...erm...**vigor** to inform my work, and the Maid of Tarth is the most **vigorous** female I have ever seen. I’m curious to see if she is as other women or if there is something different about her. I also feel I will be able to extract much—hmm—fuel from her for my...**experiments**. I have no doubt I will learn many invaluable lessons from her.”

Aye, Jaime thinks, and the lessons would be even more invaluable if she has a sword in her hand.

“So you would offer to attach her hand to the end of my arm?” Jaime asks.

“She is a skilled warrior, woman or no. You could do worse for a swordhand. However, we do have a need for a new member of the Queensguard and she has sworn herself to Kings before. Mayhaps when I am finished with her, she will...erm...agree to guard the Queen.”

Jaime’s eyes are cold. “Will she have a choice?” he asks.

“Trust me, my lord, when I finish with her, choice will not be a concern,” Qyburn says and chuckles—and Jaime draws his dagger and drives it into Qyburn’s neck in one smooth motion.

Qyburn howls and his blood is hot as it spurts out over Jaime’s hand. Jaime pulls out the dagger and drags it across the man’s throat, and Qyburn’s screams turn to gurgles as he slumps to the floor.

Jaime glances round as Tristan and his two companions rush in to the room. He glares at the Gold Cloaks as they gape from him to the body at his feet and back again.

“Did you hear all that?” he growls and knows he will have no time to draw Widow’s Wail if they decide to turn on him.

“Aye,” Tristan says a little shakily, “but I don’t believe half of what I heard.”
Jaime wipes his dagger on Qyburn’s shirt and returns it to its place on his belt. He unsheathes Widow’s Wail and faces the door that leads to the black cells themselves.

“I fear we will not believe half of what we find,” Jaime says, and nods at one of the Gold Cloaks to open the door.

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Jaime steps into the corridor leading to the black cells and his hand tightens on the hilt of his sword.

He walks cautiously. The Gold Cloak behind him carries a torch that does little to push back the darkness of the hallway but it is comforting, nonetheless. Jaime shivers. The last time he was here, he had released Tyrion only to have the blasted Imp murder their father.

He had come then on a mission of mercy, and when the Gold Cloak angles the torch and they see what’s in the first cell, Jaime realizes he is here again for the same reason.

Jaime loses count of the number of cells they look into; all with occupants. He stops cold by one of them when he recognizes the woman behind the creature she had become. She’s different than some of the others because she reacts when she realizes they’re standing there. She stands then sinuously paces her cell, those wounds Qyburn didn’t bother to close flexing as she does so.

Even in death, her every move is a seduction, Jaime thinks in a distant corner of his mind.

He stares at the creature for long moments, pity and revulsion and horror roiling inside him in equal measure. This woman had once been his sweet sister’s closest confidante and he wonders what she had done to deserve this fate.

They find what used to be Nymeria Sand in the neighboring cell.

They finally leave the black cells behind and Tristan and his men look as nauseated as Jaime feels. He’d hoped his days of dealing with this level of depravity had ended with the Mad King.

“What are we to do?” Tristan asks as one of his men retches in a corner.

“They’re...contained, at least,” Jaime says and shudders. “We needs must learn if there are any
others, hidden in more distant parts of the black cells.”

“More of them? There cannot possibly be more!”

“Qyburn and the Queen seemed to believe they have enough of these creatures to make the realm tremble before them. What we’ve seen is frightening enough, granted, but I doubt these few score creatures could hold armies at bay.”

“But how could one man have created so many?”

Jaime glares at the dead man on the floor. “I don’t know,” he growls, “and I pray to the old gods and the new that this—this monster merely lied to the Queen. But I want these dungeons searched, top to bottom, to make sure.”

Jaime also tasks Tristan with briefing the Gold Cloaks and with gathering those brave enough to deal with the Queensguard on the morrow. He only hopes Brienne and Bronn will have gathered some sellswords or even smallfolk willing to join the battle.

Once Jaime parts ways with his companions, he goes to see the Queen.

He pours her wine and says, “We could search the city more efficiently if you were to order each Queensguard to lead a separate contingent of Gold Cloaks.”

“I do not wish them separated,” Cersei says.

Jaime’s heart sinks even as he raises an eyebrow. “Even if it takes longer to search the city?”

Cersei impatiently waves a hand. “Send the Gold Cloaks where you wish, but I do not wish to leave my Queensguard vulnerable to attack again.”

Jaime sighs, then says, “At least put them under my command.”

“Where is Qyburn?” Cersei asks, her eyes narrowed. “The Queensguard obey him as well.”

“There was an incident in his room in the black cells earlier today. A cut. Rather deep, so I’ve been told.”

“How badly is he hurt?”

“The bleeding has stopped. He’s being taken care of now but he will not be available to ride out with us on the morrow.” And not a single word a lie, Jaime tells himself and struggles to keep from laughing, but whether from amusement or horror or despair, he cannot say.

“It is not amusing, Jaime, and you should keep him sweet; he has promised to restore your swordhand—and hopefully your manhood along with it.”

Jaime gives her a thin smile. “Yes, we discussed that before his accident.”

“When will he begin the procedure?”

“He had his accident before we could get into those details, Your Grace,” Jaime says and meets Cersei’s suspicious gaze with an expressionless face.

She huffs an impatient sigh. “Fine.”
Jaime strides to the door and opens it and Ser Robert Strong steps into the room when Cersei calls for him.

“Ser Robert,” Cersei says and the giant figure of the Queensguard silently bows its head in acknowledgement. “Tomorrow, you shall stay here with Ser Luca and Ser Harwin, to guard my person. The others will ride out with the Gold Cloaks to continue the search for those responsible for the death of Ser Simon. While they are outside the Red Keep, they shall be under Ser Jaime’s command.”

She turns to glare at Jaime. “And I command you, Ser Jaime, to keep the Queensguard together during your search. I wish my knights to be protected, and I’m certain you will find they are much more...effective in their questioning if they are allowed to work together.”

Jaime bows. “Your Grace,” he says and, with one last look at Ser Robert Strong, he takes his leave.

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Brienne

Brienne feels awkward and grim as she follows Bronn into the first tavern, searching for sellswords. She knows they need to be circumspect, but they have no time for subtlety.

She strides to the centre of the room and says in a clear, ringing voice, “A bag of gold to every man who picks up a sword and joins us in the square at the foot of Visenya’s Hill on the morrow.”

She’s met by incredulous, insolent stares as they take in her broken nose, black eyes and battered armor.

“Aye,” one sellsword drawls, then hawks and spits at her feet, “and if you meet me in the room at the top of the stairs, I’ll fuck you up the arse.”

She flushes and glares.

“’Tis only the same as you want to do to us,” he says with a shrug, and turns back to his ale.

Brienne storms from the tavern and Bronn follows. She strides angrily towards the next tavern and as they reach the door, Bronn says, “Mayhaps you should let me do the talking, m’lady.”

She glares then grudgingly nods.

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By the time they’re done, they have twenty sellswords—half of whom she doesn’t believe will actually be in the square on the morrow. They have not attempted to recruit any smallfolk although they’ve garnered enough interested stares that she knows the tales will have reached all corners of King’s Landing by morning. She expects there to be a crowd of the curious at the square on the morrow to see what, if anything, is going to happen. She hopes Jaime will be successful in swaying the Gold Cloaks to their cause.

They reach the Dragonpit and kindle a small fire, then Bronn says, “I’ll go to the Kingslayer. We needs must confirm our plans. We have far fewer sellswords than I had hoped to find.”

She blinks at him and bites back the urge to beg him to take her with him. She cannot risk being seen in the Red Keep, no matter how much she wants to be by Jaime’s side.
She lowers her gaze to the fire and nods.

“Aye,” she mutters, “and even fewer if they don’t keep their word—or decide to flee once they see who we wish to fight. I don’t think we dare split them into smaller groups.” She scowls and winces as her bruised face twinges. “If we stay in the square and let the tales of our search draw each Queensguard to us…”

“Mayhaps,” Bronn sighs, “except it may draw all of them at once. I don’t like the idea of facing all the Queensguard at once, but mayhaps it will be the only way we can prevail.”

“We only have one chance at this, Ser Bronn,” she says.

Bonn chuckles as he rises to his feet. “We only ever have one chance, Lady Brienne. Let us make the most of this one.”

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In the end, the three Queensguard Jaime leads to the square fall more easily than Brienne had dared hope.

They fought valiantly—if such creatures could be said to be valiant—but the Gold Cloaks and the dozen sellswords proved overwhelming. The watching smallfolk, who swarmed over the Queensguard when they fell, were no small asset either.

When the last of the Queensguard falls, Brienne stands panting at Jaime’s side. They are spattered with the blood of their fallen allies as they watch the smallfolk make short work of disposing of the body.

“Only three,” she says flatly.

“Aye,” Jaime says, equally grim. “Cersei kept the strongest by her side.” He eyes the swelling crowd. “We needs must hasten back to the Red Keep and deal with the last of them there, and we need to go now, before this crowd decides to turn on itself and us along with it.”

Brienne nods, uneasy at the swirling mood of the crowd.

“I fear Ser Robert Strong will not be so easy to kill,” Jaime mutters as they gather their men and hasten away.

“I fear you’re right,” she mutters in response.

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Their fears are realized.

The three remaining Queensguard are stronger somehow, quicker, more deadly. Or mayhaps it’s because Brienne finds them so because she’s tired from the previous battles. She catches glimpses of Bronn and Samwell Tarly, she sees the blood fly as someone is stabbed or sliced or smashed, but she cannot stop to see who or what may have fallen.

For she and Jaime have left the lesser of the creatures to the Gold Cloaks and the sellswords and turned their swords against Ser Robert Strong. Ser Gregor Clegane had been a monster in life and an even greater monster in death, and they would ask none to face him if they dared not face him themselves.
But in death, the first of the Queensguard is quick and more agile than anyone can possibly be—even if living.

There must be some spark of true life left in the creature, Brienne thinks as Oathkeeper is blocked by the creature’s shield, there must still be some desire within the monster to stay living. It fights skillfully and powerfully, and, she thinks, far too quickly to be anything but long-lost magic fueled by a desire to survive. For no matter how quickly she and Jaime and those who fight alongside them swing their swords, the creature is almost too fast for the eye to follow as it blocks each blow with sword or shield.

Yet she and Jaime seem just as quick, their swords there to block the creature’s attacks even as it spins quickly enough to block theirs, no matter when or where they strike.

And just like when they fought the Ironborn, as their blades flash and parry and dance against the creature, the red veins in the Valyrian steel seem to rise, to flicker and glow like fire.

*Brienne fights until her arms ache and shake from Ser Robert Strong’s blows. She’s panting, sweat blurring her sight, but she finds extra speed and strength when the creature smashes its shield into Jaime, sending him rolling in the dirt while Widow’s Wail spins through the air. He’s too still, she thinks as she redoubles her attack with a loud scream, calling more Gold Cloaks and sellswords to their side. Her only thought is to keep the Queensguard away from Jaime’s prone body long enough for Jaime to regain his senses or—

No. She will not allow herself to admit that Jaime may never regain his feet even though there are too many bodies of Gold Cloaks and sellswords and smallfolk littering the courtyard for her to ignore.

She fights on, momentarily the sole focus of the monstrous creature while the other two Queensguard seem to gain strength from Jaime’s fall. She backs away beneath the onslaught, luring it away from Jaime, and she marvels that Oathkeeper flies to where it needs to be almost without her conscious thought. Then, from the corner of her eye, she sees the flash of grey and red veins that dance and twist like flames with the swing of the blade—and the even quicker flash as the creature parries the blow.

Brienne’s heart leaps with relief but then she catches a glimpse of Jaime, still in the dirt but sitting up and shaking his head. She attacks Ser Robert and now sees that Widow’s Wail is being swung by a Gold Cloak, young and terrified and grimly determined, and she yells at him to drop the sword and run. He sets his jaw and redoubles his efforts.

As they try to land a crippling blow against the creature, Brienne sees Jaime wipe blood from his brow as he gains his feet then he limps as quickly as he can towards them.

She screams at him to stay back as he shouts at those battling the other Queensguards to turn their swords against Ser Robert Strong. Bronn and Sam and several others race to engage Ser Robert, and Brienne takes the opportunity to drop back and catch her breath.

Jaime limps to her side.

“You’re mad,” she pants.

“Give me your sword,” he growls, “and go—get Cersei.”

Her jaw drops. “What?”
“We’re not going to beat these ones—not without losing more men than I care to count. Get Cersei! She needs to order them to stand down!”

“What? How am I going to convince her to do that?”

“We don’t have time to argue, Brienne! Give me your sword and go!”

So she does.

The two sellswords Brienne tapped to go with her make short work of the doors to the Queen’s apartment. To Cersei’s credit, she does not run. When Brienne strides into the apartment, she admits that in this moment, Cersei is truly Jaime’s twin and truly a Queen: head held high, golden and beautiful and lion proud.

“I have come to take you to the courtyard,” Brienne says brusquely and Cersei’s lip lifts in a sneer.

“Have you now? You wish to kill me in public and without a trial? Do you think that will endear you to Jaime? As if he’d ever want one such as you.”

Brienne grits her teeth. “I am here so you can save Jaime’s life,” she snarls.

Cersei raises an eyebrow and smirks. “You are such a besotted fool.”

Brienne’s control snaps and she’s across the room in three steps, her hands tight round Cersei’s slender throat.

“I have no time for your madness,” she growls, glaring into Cersei’s eyes, ignoring the woman’s gurgles for breath and the scrabbling of her hands against Brienne’s tight grip. “You will come with me,” Brienne says, “and you will call your monsters to heel or I swear, by the old gods and the new, that I will kill you with my bare hands!” She bares her teeth, knowing she must look as mad as Aerys Targaryen ever had. “Do as I say, Your Grace,” and the title drips with sarcasm, “and I’ll let you live. I may even help you stay on that throne you love so much you sacrificed your own children for it.”

She abruptly releases Cersei, who gasps for air, dropping to her knees on the floor. Brienne turns to the two sellswords.

“Bring her. Carry her, if you must.” She strides to the door then turns. “And if you take any liberties with her person—any at all—I will kill you as well.”

In the end, Cersei goes to the courtyard under her own power, even though she protests having to run.

Her complaints turn to a gasp as they burst out into the courtyard and Brienne sees the carnage is even greater than when she left. She frantically scours those still fighting until she spots the creature that had once been Ser Gregor Clegane and there is Jaime, still on his feet and still swinging Oathkeeper almost as skilfully as if he had his swordhand. Next to him is the Gold Cloak, Widow’s Wail in hand, and Brienne blinks because from this distance the swords do, in fact, look as if they are aflame.

She shakes the thought away and turns to Cersei.
“Order your Queensguard to yield,” she snarls.

“And if I don’t?” Cersei says with a sneer.

Brienne points towards Ser Robert Strong. “Do you truly wish Jaime to die?”

Cersei shrugs. “We came into this world together; we will leave it together.”

Brienne growls and leans closer. “Order your Queensguard to yield, good sister, or I will kill you here, where you stand, and then I will go out into that courtyard and I will kill your monsters and I will save your sweet brother’s life while I’m at it. If you don’t want to die alone, Cersei, then order your Queensguard to yield!”

They silently glare at each other, ignoring the grunts and cries and clashes of swords echoing through the courtyard.

Now it’s Brienne who lifts her lip in a sneer. “Order them to yield, Cersei, and I will do all I can to keep you on the Iron Throne.”

Surprise ghosts across the Queen’s features.

“I swear it,” Brienne says.

Cersei eyes her suspiciously but she must see the truth in Brienne’s words because she turns and calls, her voice carrying even over the clamor of the courtyard, “Queensguard! I command you to stop fighting! Put down your weapons and yield to Ser Jaime!”

As one, the three remaining Queensguard lower their weapons then make their way to where Jaime is standing, sweat-soaked and panting, Oathkeeper still held at the ready in his hand. Each Queensguard in turn place their swords at his feet and the look of dismayed disgust on his face would be amusing if the situation wasn’t so grim.

Brienne turns to the sellswords. “Take her back to her apartment and guard the door.” She raises a hand in warning. “And remember what I told you before about respecting her person.”

She waits until they’ve left and then joins Jaime in the courtyard.

“Shall we kill them now?” she asks. She blinks as three eyeless helms turn in her direction and Ser Robert Strong’s hands clench into fists.

“No,” Jaime says hastily and turns to the Commander of the Gold Cloaks, who is bleeding from half-a-dozen minor wounds, his left arm dangling at his side. “Take them to the black cells,” Jaime says. “Put them in the cells with the strongest bars you can find. Keep them separate.”

Tristan nods and calls several of his men to his side. They surround the three Queensguard and prod at them with their swords, but they stand firm.

Jaime says, “You have been ordered to yield to me. Go with these men, obey them, and they will not harm you.”

The Queensguard stand motionless until Ser Robert Strong very slightly bows its head and the three surviving Strongs allow themselves to be led away.

Jaime hands Oathkeeper to Brienne and accepts Widow’s Wail from the Gold Cloak who had been wielding it.
“My thanks,” he says to the boy. “What is your name?”

“Denys, m’lord.”

Jaime nods. “You did well today, Denys. I will not forget.”

Denys gives him a hesitant smile and bows.

Jaime turns to Brienne. “Come with me,” he says.

They stride towards the Red Keep but pause and turn as one when Sam calls after them. They frown as he hurries up to them, puffing.

“Sam,” Jaime says, “you fought well today.” He nods at the great sword the younger man is carrying. “Did it make you more skilled?”

Sam blinks at the sword as if he’s forgotten he held it. “Oh, yes. I understand what they mean when they say Valyrian steel makes you quick but to be honest, anything would make me a better swordsman.” He shudders. “I did not do much, Ser Jaime, but tried to land blows when I could.”

“You fought,” Brienne says, “and that’s enough. I’m sure you noticed that our blades appeared to flame again. We can discuss it once we’ve secured the Queen and we have cared for the dead and dying.”

“Yes, yes,” Sam says, “but that’s not why I’ve sought you out.”

“Then tell us,” Jaime says sharply, “and be quick with it. There’s much yet to be done before night falls.”

Sam shakes his head. “My pardons, it’s been a most unusual day.”

Jaime and Brienne exchange a grim look and nod.

“I needs must ask you to come with me,” Sam says. “I have something you need to see.”

“You’ve found a glass candle?” Brienne asks sharply. “We can speak with Jon Snow?”

“Yes, yes, eventually—but that’s not—” Sam glances round then leans closer—as if any would be listening in the chaos of the courtyard. “In Pycelle’s chambers—the King. The Princess Myrcella. They’re alive.”

Jaime and Brienne gape at Sam’s words but before they can react, they hear voices bellowing at the gates of the Red Keep, demanding entry, and when the gates swing open, Ser Addam Marbrand, flanked by a score of Lannister soldiers, rides inside.

Jaime curses, low and long and creatively, as Ser Addam and his men stare round with what would be amusing expressions if the day were not so grim.

Brienne puts a strong, warm hand on his arm. “I will go with Sam. Cersei is secured for the moment.” She grimaces. “I put the fear of the gods into the sellswords who guard her, but mayhaps I shall send Bronn to watch over them all.” She nods towards Ser Addam. “Go. I suspect we have another battle to fight, and soon.”
Jaime scowls and nods, then gives her a quick and careful kiss, mindful of her injuries. He then hurries to meet Ser Addam, cursing the man’s timing. He would dearly love to be with Brienne to see for himself if his children still live. More like, he thinks bitterly, they are simply two urchins, caught in the act of robbing Pycelle’s chambers. It’s a pretty tale, he admits as he strides towards his old friend, and likely bought them time to escape.

“Ser Jaime,” Addam says and dismounts.

“Addam,” Jaime says and clasps his friend’s hand.

Addam says, “By the gods, what has befallen this cursed city? We had to fight every step of the way to the Red Keep!”

Jaime grimaces. “I fear the city is burning from more than just the wildfire used to bring down the Great Sept.”

He leads Ser Addam to the small council’s room without another word being said.

Once they’re alone, Addam says, “Have you been burning with the city, Jaime? You look the worse for wear.”

“It has been a trying few weeks,” Jaime says as he walks to the sideboard. “Wine?”

Ser Addam nods. They raise their goblets in a toast then Jaime downs his drink in two great gulps.

“Aye,” Ser Addam says drily as Jaime pours himself another glass, “I can see that.”

Jaime gives him a crooked smile. “Have no fear, Addam, I’m not trying to drink myself insensible, but your timing could not be worse.” He frowns, considering, then shrugs. “Or better, I suppose.”

“You have not asked why I’m here.”

Jaime laughs, guffaws even. “I have no need to ask. I assume the Tyrell and Tarly armies have bent the knee to Aegon Targaryen and his Golden Company?”

Addam nods grimly. “We slipped away as soon as I saw Lord Tarly approach Storm’s End under a flag of truce. We likely have two, mayhaps three, days on their army.”

Jaime sighs. “That should give us enough time to calm the smallfolk, at least. Or mayhaps we should just let the city burn and leave this false Targaryen to deal with whatever’s left.”

“By the gods, Jaime,” Addam explodes, “what’s happened?”

By the time Jaime finishes telling him all, Addam has downed another two glasses of wine himself and they’ve both agreed they would like nothing more than to drink something stronger than Arbor Gold.

“I could have used you earlier, Addam,” Jaime says slouched in the Hand’s chair. “Mayhaps we could have made shorter work of the Queensguard with an army at our backs.”

“You managed,” Ser Addam says with a slightly cruel grin. “And you have not yet destroyed all the Queensguard.”

Jaime shrugs. “I have no doubt two of them will be easy enough to kill. A sword thrust to the heart, and they will be finished. But Ser Robert Strong was once the Mountain that Rides. He never had a heart.”
Addam laughs at that, a slightly crazed sound. Jaime laughs with him, and thinks he sounds just as crazed.

“No more wine for us,” Jaime sighs when they catch their breath. “There is still much to do—and now there is an enemy army marching towards our gates.”

They rise to their feet and Addam says, “What are you going to do?”

Jaime sighs and shakes his head. “Whatever I must.”

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Brienne

Brienne hurries after Sam with a heavy scowl on her aching face.

She’s sure these children Sam has found won’t be in Pycelle’s quarters when they arrive; they’re most like starving orphans who were searching for something they could steal and sell for a morsel of food rather than the dead king and princess. They are dead, she tells herself grimly. The Queensguard she just finished battling would not have allowed them to escape once the children picked up their pitiful weapons in defense of the Rose Queen.

It’s her fault, she thinks as they approach the door to the Grand Maester’s chambers. If she hadn’t started training Myrcella with a sword and dagger, the girl might have simply run away and taken Tommen with her.

Sam raps twice, loudly and rapidly, on the door then, after a pause, he knocks once more and opens the door.

Brienne follows Sam inside and watches as he peers round then calls, “I’ve brought Lady Brienne.”

There’s silence and Brienne turns to Sam, opening her mouth to make an angry comment, when she hears a small, tentative voice say, “Truly?”

She spins and peers round the room, trying to discover the location of that voice.

“Truly,” Sam says firmly.

And there, beside the sideboard, a crack in the wall widens and a scarred face beneath tangled blonde hair peeks out—and Brienne’s breath catches in her throat.

“Myrcella,” she whispers.

The girl looks behind her. “It truly is Lady Brienne,” she says and then she’s flying across the room, followed by an equally unwashed golden-haired boy, and Brienne staggers as they ignore her armor to fling themselves against her.

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Chapter End Notes
A/N: The next chapter may be a little delayed (i.e., I might not update for two weeks). My sister is coming to visit starting on Friday and for some bizarre reason, she insists on spending time with me. What is up with that?! I will update as soon as I can, though.
Warning: Coarse language and some very brief sexy-times. Seriously, it’s hardly worth warning for the sex.

Brienne

Brienne and Sam wrap the children in Pycelle’s cloaks, covering their faces, and hurry them to Jaime’s bedchamber. Sam leaves to arrange for bathwater and food and to find Jaime. When Jaime arrives, he stands for endless moments on the threshold, simply staring at his children.

Finally he steps inside and while the children’s hugs are slightly less desperate than the ones they gave Brienne, their greetings are no less relieved or sincere.

When Jaime straightens, Brienne’s throat closes as she catches a glimpse of the tears in his eyes.

Sam returns shortly after, bearing food, and between ravenous bites, the children explain how they slipped into Margaery’s apartments using the secret passage from Tommen’s apartment that Myrcella and Margaery had found during their explorations of the Red Keep. Once they discovered it, they had used it often to see Tommen with no one being the wiser.

And ‘no one’ truly means Cersei, Brienne thinks with growing rage towards the woman.

They tried to get Margaery to the tunnel while the Queensguard were killing her cousins and the rest of her entourage.

“We had just gotten the door open when the Queensguard began forcing their way into her bedchamber,” Myrcella says. “She pushed us inside and then we heard the door break.”

“She slammed the tunnel entrance closed on us,” Tommen adds then pauses, his chin trembling. “I heard her scream...I didn’t hear her scream again.”

“There was the body of a boy, brought to your mother,” Jaime says gently.

Tommen ducks his head and whispers, “Russell Merryweather.”

Jaime frowns. “He was with you in the Queen’s apartment?”

Tommen shakes his head. “They found him later. I think they were searching for us but we were still in the walls of the Red Keep.”

“Why would they do—?” He stops, his frown turning to a scowl.

“What?” Brienne asks.

“Qyburn wanted Cersei to be queen in her own right,” Jaime says slowly, “mayhaps he thought it was what she wanted.” He looks at Tommen and Myrcella, grief stark upon his face. Brienne thinks on what she had to promise to convince Cersei to save Jaime’s life, and thinks it most likely was
what Cersei wanted. She wonders if Jaime realizes it.

Brienne shakes her thoughts away and says, “Why did you hide away?”

“When we got back to my apartment, there was a Queensguard waiting.”

“Thankfully, his back was to the wall where the tunnel entrance is hidden,” Myrcella says. “We slipped back inside and have been hiding ever since.”

“How did you get to Pyccelle’s quarters?” Sam asks.

Myrcella helplessly shakes her head. “We just kept exploring—there are so many passageways that are connected to each other and we were lost for a long time. I don’t know how long it’s been since we feld to the tunnels but once we found Pyccelle’s chambers and realized where we were, we knew we should be safe—for a while, at least. I slipped out at night to search for food.” She frowns. “The kitchens are very sparse,” she says, looking down at her plate.

Jaime nods, his face grim. “Aye, especially for those who are searching for scraps or are not noble-born.”

They hide the children beneath the blankets on the bed when the bathwater arrives. Brienne banishes Jaime, Sam and Tommen from the room while she assists Myrcella with her bath. When they return, Jaime tells them they’ve found a suite of rooms that will fit all of them and they will move there the next day.

Brienne and Myrcella leave the bedchamber so Tommen can bathe and they cautiously go to inspect the new rooms that have been found. As they explore the spacious apartment, Brienne wonders when or how they are going to reveal Tommen and Myrcella’s survival to the smallfolk and the few noble-born still alive in the city.

She wonders what the news will do to King’s Landing. She wonders what it will do to the realm.

She spares a small thought to her vow to Cersei but with Tommen alive, she knows there is nothing she is willing to do to keep Cersei on the Iron Throne in his stead.

When Brienne and Myrcella return, Sam is gone and Tommen is tucked into bed. Myrcella climbs in beside him and, when asked, Jaime snuggles in beside Tommen while Brienne slides in beside Myrcella.

Brienne reaches for Jaime and he puts his hand in hers, and together they wrap the children in a safe circle. He gives her a sad smile and closes his eyes.

Brienne does the same, her broken nose and bruises aching. But as she drifts towards sleep, she realizes, to her surprise, that she’s happy.

Jaime

In the morning, they take the children to the small council room where Sam, Addam, Bronn and Tristan are waiting. When the others’ shock eases and they’ve been told a shortened version of what
had happened, Jaime escorts Tommen to the King’s chair and they all take a seat at the table.

Ser Addam says, “I am more than pleased to see you both alive, but this leaves us in...in—”

“A shitload of a mess?” Bronn says drily and shrugs as they all glare. “The boy is King and the girl his heir. At least for now. ’Tis time we started treating them as such.”

Jaime sighs. “Ser Bronn is right,” he says, “and we have no time to be coy.” He nods towards the Commander of the Gold Cloaks. “Tristan and I spoke briefly earlier this morning. The city is rioting and we needs must be careful in how we respond else we risk worsening the violence rather than quelling it. We have scores of undead creatures languishing in the black cells, thanks to Qyburn and the Queen Mother. We have the Targaryen Pretender’s armies on their way to the gates of King’s Landing and not enough soldiers to meet them. We do not have enough resources within the city to withstand a siege and only the Westerlands willing to fly to our aid. We have no ships to bring food in by sea and none willing to send us supplies even if we did.”

“We also have one too many monarchs,” Addam says drily.

Brienne waves a hand. “That is easily resolved. Cersei took the Iron Throne because she believed both King Tommen and Princess Myrcella were dead. They are not. Tommen is still King.”

Jaime sees true fear in Tommen’s eyes and his heart aches in sympathy.

“He will not be King for long,” Jaime says and almost laughs at the sudden, tense silence in the room.

“What are you suggesting?” Addam says.

“Surrender.”

“They’ll kill the children,” Brienne says, her eyes thoughtful as she watches him.

“Hopefully we can convince them otherwise,” he says and gives her a warning look. He would suggest he claim them as his own and convince the children he’s lying to protect them, but he’s not certain if doing so would convince the Pretender to spare them or only make him even more determined to execute them.

Ser Addam sighs. “I am almost certain this Aegon Targaryen will be merciful to Myrcella, but Tommen...convincing him to let you live may be impossible.”

“But why?” Tommen asks plaintively and Jaime’s heart breaks even as he curses Cersei for putting the boy in such a mess while keeping him so sheltered from the realities of being King.

“Because you are King,” Brienne says gently, “and where many will no longer follow your mother, they may still be willing to follow you.”

Tomen fidgets in his chair, scowling at his hands.

“The choice will need to be yours, Your Grace,” Jaime says. “If you wish us to fight, then we shall do so but we do not have much time to prepare.”

Tomen’s scowl deepens and Jaime wishes he could take this decision away from him. He’s only ten, he thinks, but the boy has been treated as nothing but a tool to be used by all around him for too long already. He should at least be allowed to decide how it all ends.
Tommen’s shoulders slump and he looks down at the table. “I never wished to be King,” he says then lifts his gaze to face all of them. For the first time, Jaime sees just how much like him the boy truly is. Tommen turns to Jaime and says, “Can you convince them to spare the city at least?”

“I pray so,” Jaime says then startles back with everyone else as a bright yellow light bursts from Sam’s waist, filling the room as they all scramble for their swords, cursing.

“Wait, wait!” Sam screams, fumbling at his belt. “It’s the glass candle!”

Jaime blinks the black spots from his vision as he holds up his gold hand to shield his eyes when the glare intensifies as Sam puts a pouch on the table and opens it. When Jaime can finally see well enough, he sees a small shard of dragonglass, no more than a handspan high and mayhaps three fingers thick that Sam has placed in the middle of the table.

“I don’t truly understand how this works yet,” Sam says in apology. “I have only used the one in the Citadel and that one seemed to do it all itself.” He frowns at the still-glowing thing then leans forward. “Melisandre?”

And faintly, so faint Jaime would have sworn he imagined it, he hears a woman say, “Sam?”

“Yes, it’s Sam! Wait a moment!” Sam quickly stands and removes his cloak and says, “I found that if I trap the light, I can see and hear her much better.” He quickly wraps his cloak round the glass candle, mounding it until all that can be seen is the bright yellow light, beaming now in a single stream towards the ceiling.

Sam leans close and calls, “Melisandre? Are you there?”

“Yes, Sam,” says the woman’s voice, still faint but stronger than before. Jaime thinks he can almost see her in the beam of light, a faint shadow against the bright yellow glare. The shadow makes a motion, like a hand passing over a flame, and suddenly she’s there. Still faint and transparent, but there. “Where are you?” she asks.

“In King’s Landing. It is the first place where I have found a glass candle.”

“Have you pleaded our case to the King?”

Sam glances round the table and at Tommen, a helpless look on his face.

“Yes,” Tommen says clearly and Melisandre turns her head in his direction.

A cold shiver goes down Jaime’s spine and he fights the urge to cleave this thing in two. There have been too many things he cannot control in too short a time and he is beginning to share the maesters’ distrust of magic.

“What is the state of the North?” Tommen asks.

“I shall take you to King Jon and King Stannis,” Melisandre says and then the images in the light are moving. Jaime blinks and squints, trying to decipher the pictures that are flashing by as the woman walks—he assumes—to find Jon Snow and Stannis Baratheon. He glances at Brienne and sees her jaw is set, her eyes glittering, and remembers she had vowed to kill Stannis Baratheon when she had the chance.

She glances at him and relaxes beneath his gaze. Together, they turn back to the beam of light and the fleeting images behind Melisandre. Jaime thinks he sees women and children, men on horses, flashes of armor and steel, and bulky figures swaddled in furs. At one point, he swears he sees what
must certainly be a giant but Melisandre moves too quickly to know for certain.

Finally, Melisandre stops and they can hear her speaking but it’s too faint to understand. And then there are two other faces in the light: the long, solemn features of Jon Snow, and the harsh, dark features of Stannis Baratheon.

They spend little time on the niceties and Jaime fights the urge to laugh at how quickly they have gotten used to this piece of magic. Under the circumstances, he thinks ruefully, they have little choice.

“We have left Winterfell,” Jon Snow says, his young face grim. There’s something in his dark eyes, however, that gives Jaime pause. “We have been burning the lands behind us, using Melisandre’s magic. It has slowed the advance of the Others but never for very long.”

“What are your plans?” Ser Addam asks.

“We are falling back to Moat Cailin. We hope to hold off the Others long enough to get most of the smallfolk and any of the Wildlings’ women and children who will leave on boats, heading south. Can King’s Landing take them in?”

“No,” Jaime says. “We have an army on the march to our gates, under the flag of Aegon Targaryen —”

“Aegon!” Stannis bursts out. “Aegon Targaryen is dead, Kingslayer—your father made sure of that!”

“Well, Ser Gregor Clegane made sure of that, but under my father’s orders, yes. Whether this Pretender is truly Aegon or not matters little. He has an army at his back, and we have naught but a devastated city.”

“So you shall bend the knee?” Stannis sneers.

“Yes,” Jaime says flatly, “and you have much greater things to concern you than which arse is seated upon the Iron Throne.”

“It is mine by right.”

“And you can take it back, if you wish,” Brienne says briskly, “but mayhaps you should concern yourself with the enemy on your flank rather than the enemy you cannot reach.”

Stannis looks startled then he glares. “You? By what right do you sit at the small council table?”

“She is my lady aunt, Uncle Ser,” Tommen says sharply, “as well as my protector and my friend. She is here because I wish her to be here.”

Jaime lifts an eyebrow and silently curses Cersei again because Tommen could have been a good king, if she had only guided him properly.

“Lady aunt?” Stannis says blankly, then shakes his head. “That is not important,” he says. “If you bend the knee, what of the Others?”

Jaime sighs. “If they allow us to live long enough, we shall tell them about the Others. Someone shall…” he pauses, scowling, and looks helplessly at Sam.

“We shall contact you with the glass candle,” Sam says, then pauses. “Once I learn how it’s done...”
When the light finally dims, they look at each other, stunned and silent. Sadness presses heavily against Jaime’s shoulders. He knows there is a very slim chance all of them will still be alive a few days from now.

He sighs and turns to Tommen.

“Mayhaps ’tis best you will not be King for much longer,” he says gently.

Tommen nods glumly. “I miss my kittens,” he mutters, his mouth turned down.

“Mayhaps we can find them,” Myrcella says and glances at the others. “May we go search for them?”

Brienne nods. “Soon,” she says and glances at Jaime. “Should we tell the people of King’s Landing that Tommen is alive and still King?”

“What would be the point?” he sighs and everyone agrees.

“We should at least tell their mother,” Brienne says gently.

Jaime grimaces and glances round the table at the others, then rests his gaze on Tommen and Myrcella. He rubs his hand over his face and nods.

Jaime stands in silence beside Brienne while Cersei stares at her children, her expression changing from disdain to shock to joy to dismay.

“Tommen,” she whispers. “Myrcella...”

She opens her arms but both children shrink back against Brienne.

Cersei’s eyes narrow and now her beautiful face contorts with rage.

“You!” she spits at Brienne. “You have turned my children against me, haven’t you, you great, ugly...beast!”

“No, Mother,” Tommen says, his voice quavering, “you’ve done that yourself. You murdered Margaery!”

“I was arresting her! If she hadn’t resisted—”

“You would have forced me to murder her instead,” Tommen says flatly and now the quaver in his voice is gone. “And what did you do with my kittens?”

“I couldn’t bear to look at them so I had them turned out into the courtyard.” Cersei must realize how she sounds because she softens her tone. “I thought you were dead, Tommen, and the sight of them broke my heart. They are somewhere in the Red Keep, I’m sure.”

Or they’ve been made into stew to fill a starving belly, Jaime thinks as he turns to the children. His hand is gentle on first Tommen’s shoulder, then Myrcella’s.

“Do you wish to say anything else to your mother?” he asks.
Both children shake their heads and he nods. He doesn’t blame them.

“Go with Commander Tristan, then,” he says, “and if you’re cautious, the Gold Cloaks will escort you round the Red Keep to search for the kittens.” He gives them a comforting smile. “Lady Brienne and I, however, needs must speak with your mother.”

After one last, frightened look at Cersei, the children take their leave, accompanied by Tristan and three Gold Cloaks, including Denys, the young man who had wielded Widow’s Wail against Ser Robert Strong.

“The Iron Throne is mine,” Cersei says as soon as the door closes.

“By what right?” Brienne asks.

“By right of the fact I was strong enough to take it! That’s all Robert did, after all.”

“He also had a large portion of the realm united behind him and an army,” Jaime says drily. “You do not.”

“I have the Strongs and the others like them.”

“You have them no longer,” Jaime says flatly.

Cersei glares and says, “You have turned on me as well, you weak-willed coward!” She spins towards Brienne and staggers and Jaime realizes Cersei’s drunk once again—or mayhaps still. He remembers the creature in the black cells that had once been Taena Merryweather and wonders if the wine is his sweet sister’s way of drowning out the memory of all she has done.

“You!” Cersei shouts at Brienne. “This is all your fault, you bleating, ugly cow! You have somehow managed to turn my children from me and you’ve convinced my sweet brother—my twin! the other half of me!—to support you in your treachery! But they are mine! They belong to me! They love only me! And you are a dead woman!”

Cersei spins back to Jaime.

“Prove your loyalty and your love for me, Jaime!” she says and flings herself against him, her hands desperate on his chest, his shoulders, his hair. “Kill her!” she begs. “Kill her, and I will marry you! I’ll let you claim your children and we will rule together!”

His breath is stolen by her words and he looks into her eyes, those eyes he once knew better than his own. He stares at her and thinks of the body he once knew so well he could imagine every detail of it in order to block his ears to Rhaella’s screams.

When? When? he wonders, despairing. When had Cersei slipped into madness? Was it while he was captive to the Starks? Or had she always been mad and he mad along with her? He thinks of pushing a boy from a window, of fucking on a bed while a king snored at their feet, of hunting for a little girl with mutilation on his mind.

He places his hands on Cersei’s shoulders, intently searching her eyes, her face, seeking the golden girl who had shone brighter than the sun, for the Maid he had loved so completely he had willingly given up all he was meant to do in order to stay by her side.

But all he sees is desperate green eyes, so like his own, beseeching him to do as she commands. He lifts his left hand and touches Cersei’s face, tracing the line of her brow, the curve of her cheek, the angle of her jaw before he slides his hand down to rest against her neck.
He feels the smoothness of her skin, the heat of her, the fluttery beat of her heart beneath his palm, and in her eyes he sees dawning triumph, a triumph almost as manic as when they placed that crown upon her head—gods—only seven days ago.

*She believes she still owns me,* he thinks, his heart breaking, *and I will never be free while she still lives.*

He’s suddenly very conscious of his hand round Cersei’s slender throat and for an endless moment he knows what he should do; he can feel it; he can see it: his fingers tightening—tightening—tightening as he looks into her eyes, watching and waiting for that light he had once worshiped to go out.

His fingers twitch and he abruptly releases her and takes a step back.

Then he turns to Brienne.

“Do with her what you will,” he manages to say, his throat tight, then bows his head and walks away.

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**Brienne**

Brienne watches Jaime leave with mixed emotions. She’d had a moment of doubt when he placed his hand on Cersei’s throat. She truly hadn’t known if he was going to kiss the woman or kill her.

As the door closes on his broad shoulders, she turns back to Cersei.

Cersei lifts her chin, regal and defiant, angry and disdainful. “You swore you would do all you could to keep me on the Iron Throne,” she sneers, and Brienne can’t help but admire the woman’s pride and strength of will.

“I did,” Brienne says, “but there’s nothing I can do. Tommen is alive, as is Myrcella. You have no claim to the throne.”

Cersei gives a careless wave of her hand. “Easily solved,” she sniffs. “Tommens is but a child as is Myrcella. It will be the work of a moment to have him abdicate and name me as his heir.”

Brienne scowls. “Do you love that ridiculous chair so much?”

Cersei leans forward, her eyes glittering and Brienne blinks as she gets a whiff of the cloud of wine that clings to her.

“I love what that ‘ridiculous chair’ means, you stupid cunt! I spent seventeen years putting up with Robert forcing himself on me because he had the ‘right’ to do so. I put up with all his whores and the bastards he left in his wake as carelessly as shit left by a dog! Jaime treated me like I was naught but a body to be used whenever he desired it while my father thought of me as nothing more than a broodmare he could whore out for his own political gain. Enough! Enough! I deserve to be Queen in my own right! I deserve to be in control of not only my own destiny but that of the Seven Kingdoms!” She straightens and sneers at Brienne. “Not that you would understand any of that, would you? An unnatural creature such as you has never known or been the object of a man’s passion, have you? You would never understand what it’s like to be used in such a way. But I care naught for your opinion of me—I do care that you made a vow to keep me on the Iron Throne!”

Brienne tilts her head as she thoughtfully considers the older woman. “I made a vow to do all I
could to keep you on the Iron Throne, and I meant it,” she says slowly. “But with Aegon Targaryen on the march towards King’s Landing, what, exactly, do you believe I can do?”

“You can go out and face this pretender as my champion! Defeat him in single combat!”

Brienne can’t help it: she laughs—a harsh, barking sound completely different than her usual shy giggles or chuckles.

“Even if I killed Aegon, his army would kill me then come deal with you. And what of your children? And Jaime?”

“They have turned their backs on me,” Cersei snaps, “so let them face their fates alone, just as they expect me to do.” She scowls at Brienne then says, “If you won’t face these invaders, then send out the Queensguard and the other warriors Qyburn found for me.”

“Created for you, you mean. They are abominations, Cersei, and we will not use them. They exist only until we can determine a way to destroy them.”

“You are a liar and a coward!”

“And you are mad!” Brienne glares at the woman before her, searching her face to find some semblance of care for someone other than herself.

As she does so, Brienne suddenly realizes that Cersei’s once radiant beauty has faded: her skin is sallow, her hair showing touches of silver, her once smooth and firm skin beginning to wrinkle and sag. Her dress is stretched tight against her breasts and her waist has thickened. And Brienne suddenly realizes Cersei truly has nothing left. Her surviving children have turned from her as has Jaime. Even her looks have fled from her, and now Brienne is about to take away the last thing Cersei still holds dear: her seat upon the Iron Throne.

To Brienne’s surprise, she’s suddenly struck with a sharp wave of pity as she sadly shakes her head and says, “There is nothing I can do.”

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Jaime

Jaime pours himself some wine as Brienne checks one last time on the children. He had told her they were both sleeping peacefully but he’s not surprised she feels the need to see for herself. He understands. He himself has already checked three times.

He sips his wine without pleasure and strolls to the fireplace to scowl into the flames.

Tommen is alive, as is Myrcella, and now the trick is to keep them that way.

Jaime remembers another boy and his expression of horror and disbelief as he fell from that tower so long ago. Jaime had hated doing it but if he hadn’t, Cersei and probably all three of their children would have been executed. His own death was also a given but he hadn’t truly considered it in that moment. He had thought only of Cersei, of her anguish if she lost her children, of how he couldn’t stand the thought of his love being put to death.

But now he’s had this brief, fleeting taste of something almost like fatherhood, of allowing himself to draw cautiously closer to the children he can never publicly claim as his and now...now, yes, he allows himself to feel empathy for Ned and Catelyn Stark. If he could go back to the day Lady Catelyn confronted him in his cage, when she held a sword to his throat and forced him to swear to
return her daughters to her, when she asked what he had done to her son...

If he could go back, he would tell her he was sorry. But...

He turns as the door opens and Brienne steps into the bedchamber. He takes in her swollen nose, her bruised eyes, the scar on her cheek that’s still livid against her pale, freckled skin, and thinks she’s the most beautiful woman he has ever known. He thinks of Tommen and Myrcella in Cersei’s apartment, staring fearfully up at him. He thinks of how much he loves them all.

His stomach tightens.

He would push the boy again if need be, he thinks bitterly, if it would save the lives of his children and the woman he loves, and knows he’s no different than Cersei: willing to do whatever it takes to achieve his goal.

He doesn’t know what Brienne sees in him that’s deserves her devotion.

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Brienne

Brienne gives Jaime a puzzled frown as she loosens her clothing. The room is chill and dark, and he’s golden and somber and beautiful, outlined by the glow cast by the flames, but there’s an oddly bitter, sad expression on his face as he watches her.

“What is it?” she asks and nods when he gestures to the wine and goblets on the table beside him.

“You did not seem to care when Cersei begged me to take your life,” he says as he pours her a small portion of wine.

“I know what goes on between us,” Brienne says. “What care I for a desperate woman’s pleadings?”

Jaime smiles a little at that but he quickly sobers. “I will never be free of her while she lives,” he says.

Brienne frowns. “You will never be free from her even if she dies,” she says and Jaime turns abruptly away.

“So you still believe I love her more than you?” he growls but there’s an anguish in his tone that worries her.

“That is not what I said,” Brienne says slowly, “nor what I meant. She is your sister—your twin—and the mother of your children. She was the love of your life, the talisman you used to shield yourself while guarding a King who had run mad. She is as much a part of you as Tyrion is, and Tywin, and Casterly Rock. She is your House and you cannot escape that.”

Jaime glares at his gold hand, his mouth twisted with disgust.

He mutters, “I thought to have a gold hand because I am a Lannister and I thought Cersei might like that: a hand of gold to hold her tight against me.”

“And yet you’re staring at your hand as if you hate it.”

“I do,” he says fiercely. “I had it made because of my love for Cersei and because of the gold my House controls. But it is naught but a reminder of the man I used to be. A man who would kill his
“I don’t hate it,” she says, surprised. “Why would I?”

“Because it is a reminder of all the horrible things I’ve done. Tell me, Brienne, how can you ignore that part of me enough to love me?”

“I don’t ignore it,” she says.

He frowns.

“Do you ignore my face?” she asks him, brushing her fingers across her ravaged cheek. “Or the scars I bear on my body? Do you ignore my size and lack of a womanly shape? Do you ignore my armor and breeches and my skill with a sword? Those are all considered unnatural for my sex, as you well know.”

“It is not the same. Those are all part of who you are and only make me love you more. Even your hidebound sense of honor and stupid level of loyalty is somehow endearing.”

She smiles a little but refuses to be distracted. “Everything you have done and experienced has made you who you are. I do not love one part of you without the other.”

“I have tried to kill children.”

“Yes,” she says slowly, “and you may someday answer to someone for that, or mayhaps only when you meet the Stranger.”

“You would never have made such a choice,” Jaime says bitterly.

Brienne frowns and finishes her wine, then puts the goblet down. She says, “Yesterday, I gripped your sweet sister’s neck and threatened to kill her with my bare hands. If you had asked me the day before if I would ever do such a thing, I would have answered no without hesitation. And yet...I did it. You can even see the bruises I left on her white skin.

“If I were in the situation you were in when Brandon Stark stumbled upon you and Cersei...” she gives him a helpless shrug.

“No,” Jaime says fiercely, “no! You would never have done such a thing. You are better than I am—and much more honorable!”

Brienne gives him a sad smile. “I am merely human—like you. I can abhor what you’ve done and still love you.” She looks down at her hands and flexes them. “If we hadn’t needed your sweet sister to control the Queensguard, I would have snapped her neck without a second thought and been done with her and her madness. Instead I vowed to do what I could to keep her on the throne. And now I’ve taken everything she has ever valued away from her: her children, the power of the Iron Throne, her freedom...you.” Brienne sighs. “Cersei believes you will always belong to her. Let her keep her illusions if it gives her comfort. She has nothing left and—I’m sorry, Jaime—she likely does not have long to live once the Pretender takes the city.”

“I know,” Jaime says huskily. He clears his throat then finishes his wine. He places his glass on the table and turns to her. “When we surrender, you needs must distance yourself from me, Brienne.”

Her jaw drops. “I will not!”
He strides to her and puts his hands on her shoulder, staring intently into her eyes. “I think I can convince them to spare the children if I offer my life in their stead as well as Cersei’s, but I don’t know if they will spare yours as well. If they will not, then you must denounce our marriage; deny me, tell them you were forced into the union, and mayhaps they will let you live.”

Brienne shakes her head. “You know I will never do such a thing, Jaime. You are my husband and I will not turn my back on you.”

“Even if it might save your life?”

She cups his face and strokes her thumbs against the stubble on his cheeks. “But at what cost?” she whispers. She presses a warm kiss against his mouth then releases him and steps away. “Come with me.”

The sept in the Red Keep is deserted and dark, and Brienne places the lantern she’s carrying between the altars of the Father and the Mother.

“Aren’t you hoping to teach me to pray, Brienne?” Jaime asks, looking round, a bitter twist to his lips. “Mayhaps that will save my soul, at least, even if the Seven will never intervene to save my life.”

Brienne doesn’t bother to answer. Instead she silently lights the candles that are on the two altars before she turns to him.

He raises an eyebrow in question, then frowns as she takes both his hands in hers. His gold hand is cold against her palm but it warms soon enough. She calmly looks into his eyes and she’s suddenly aware of her slight height advantage over him for the first time in a long while. She smiles a little and his frown deepens.

“Jaime,” she sighs, “you are a lackwit and sometimes a thoughtless ass.”

That surprises a chuckle out of him and she tightens her grip on his hands.

Brienne lifts his gold hand, and says, “This is a copy of the hand you used to push Bran Stark from a tower, to arouse your sister, to wield a sword, to kill a king. It is made of gold in honor of your House. It is a symbol of all you used to be and the past deeds that still weigh heavy upon you.”

She lifts his left hand and says, “This is your living hand. This is the hand you use to love me, to wield a sword, to protect me and your children and the smallfolk under your care. It is a symbol of the man you are and the man you will become.”

She lifts first his left hand and then his gold one and presses a kiss against each in turn.

“I do not love one without the other,” she says softly. “I do not accept one side of you and not the other.”

She lowers their hands but keeps a tight grip on both of his and says, “I, Brienne of Tarth, Brienne the Blue, Brienne the Beauty, take you, Jaime Lannister, Kingslayer, Oathbreaker, and an honorable man in your own way, no matter what anyone else may say, as my husband.”

Jaime’s eyes widen and his mouth opens, but she gives him no chance to speak.

“One flesh, one heart, one soul, now and forever. I swear that I will never lay with another. I will never deny you. And I will never, never forsake you. Wherever we go, we go together, because we
Jaime chuckles at that, his eyes shining in the light of the candles and lantern.

“I accept all of you, even if I don’t approve. I vow to argue with you and even face you in battle if the need arises. But you have promised to return my Sapphire Isle to me, with an heir to go with it, and I swear I shall do everything I can to ensure we both survive the winter and your sweet sister so you can keep your oaths.”

Now Jaime’s grinning as he listens to her, his hand gripping hers.

“I take you as my husband,” she says. “Do you take me as your wife?”

Somehow his grin gets even wider. “Yes,” he says and then he’s kissing her and for long moments, Brienne forgets about her body’s aches and pains—and the fact they are in a sept—and simply wraps her arms round him and kisses him back.

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Jaime

They make their way back to their bedchamber, their hands tightly clasped as if touch alone was all that can save them. Once there, they are on each other, struggling to remove their clothes as quickly as they can without breaking contact.

There’s a tinge of desperation in their coupling but when he tries to gentle his kisses, knowing Brienne’s broken nose and bruises are still tender, she will have none of it. Her hands are warm and strong and almost as demanding as her mouth and tongue.

He tries to draw her to the bed but she guides him to the wall instead, with a whispered reminder he had promised to show her how this worked. That makes him laugh and he smiles into her eyes as he hooks her leg round his waist and plunges into her tight, wet heat. She squeaks with surprise and he buries his face in her shoulder and struggles to maintain control.

“See now why breeches are a hindrance sometimes?” he groans against her neck and is rewarded with a scowl and her hands almost painfully pulling at his hair as she drags his mouth back to hers.

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When the sun finally rises, it is to the sight of the Targaryen army marching to surround the city.

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Jaime

Jaime rides with Brienne under a flag of truce to the enemy camp and they are escorted to the man calling himself Aegon Targaryen.

Jaime didn’t know what he expected, but it’s clear that this man—whoever he may truly be—actually appears to have Valyrian blood in him with his silver hair and purple eyes. Jaime searches Aegon’s features, seeking echoes of Rhaegar, shadows of Elia, and finds...only Valyrian. Jaime is grateful there does not seem to be any tinge of Aerys’ madness; the gods have been kind enough for that, at least.

Jaime and Brienne stand tall and proud, their armor burnished to a shine. Aegon watches them curiously, and his eyes linger long on Brienne’s face and form. His advisors sit close to him and range from the equally curious Arianne Martell and Jon Connington, to the regretful Willas Tyrell, now Lord of Highgarden, to the dismissively triumphant Randyll Tarly.

“You have arrived under flag of truce,” Jon Connington finally says briskly. “Tell us what you wish to say. Quickly.”

Jaime calmly meets the young dragon’s gaze, waiting for Brienne to speak. The young man’s eyes are clear and there’s an honesty in them that reminds him of Brienne. If this boy truly is Aegon Targaryen, Jaime hopes the gods allowed the coin to land on kindness and sanity rather than the madness that ruled the boy’s grandfather.

“We have come to sue for peace and offer terms under which we are willing to surrender the Iron Throne,” Brienne says, her voice calm and clear, carrying to all corners of the tent.

Lord Tarly’s lip lifts in a sneer. “And what care we for your terms of surrender? We can crush you and that cursed city behind you readily enough.”

“We wish to spare the smallfolk any more pain,” she says, “and have come to parley with you in good faith, and to beg you to show mercy.”

“Mercy?” Aegon snorts. “To a Lannister?” He scowls angrily at Jaime. “You broke your sacred oath and murdered my grandfather. Your father ordered my sister murdered. My mother raped and murdered. I, too, was to be killed but instead my rescuers were forced to sacrifice some poor child in my place. Why should I show mercy to such as you?”

Sudden fiery rage coils in Jaime’s stomach.

“Do you truly believe you are Aegon Targaryen and not some bastard left behind by Aerys or Rhaegar?” he snarls. “My father would never have allowed the true prince to slip through his fingers. But let us pretend for a moment that you are Aegon Targaryen, son of Rhaegar, grandson of Aerys. Mayhaps we should then also speak of the sins of your House, my lord. Your father kidnapped and raped a high-born maiden and plunged us all into war. And do you truly wish me to detail your grandfather’s crimes? I saw and heard them all, standing there in that oh-so-sacred white cloak, with my brothers whispering in my ear that it was not my place to judge him.” He barks a harsh, bitter laugh. “Tell me, my young dragon prince—do you wish me to tell you what it sounds like when someone burns alive in their armor? Their screams are not the only noise, you know. Or mayhaps you would rather know what they looked like? Or are you more interested in the smells? I
have many such moments to share, Lord Aegon, and I remember them all, every detail. Or mayhaps you would prefer to hear of how your grandfather treated your grandmother? Tell me: do you truly wish to compare the atrocities committed by my House and yours?"

He’s pleased to see the pretender pale. Jaime’s smile is cruel and he knows he should stop but his rage at the Targaryen madness and the blindness of the Kingsguard has grabbed him by the throat.

“I showed your grandfather more mercy than he ever granted his subjects or his wife. At least I killed him quickly. Mayhaps I should have burned him alive; would that have satisfied your Targaryen blood?”

Jon Connington opens his mouth but Aegon raises his hand and stops his words. The boy looks shaken, frowning as he considers Jaime.

Jaime startles at the touch of Brienne’s hand on his. He glances at her wide, worried eyes and after a moment, he bows his head and turns back to the Pretender, struggling to get his emotions in check.

“My pardons, my lord,” Jaime finally manages to say. “I have not come here to make war with you, but to broker peace. Surrender, I find, does not sit well upon my shoulders.”

Jon eyes him suspiciously. “Why would you surrender so readily, Kingslayer?”

Brienne says, “Because it is in the best interests of the realm to do so.”

Jaime thinks their listeners have no idea of the depth of truth in those words.

Brienne says, “Our terms—”

“Your terms?” Randyll Tarly interrupts with a sneer. “As if we would trust a Lannister to keep their word about any terms they offer!”

Brienne’s eyes grow cold. “I am Brienne of Tarth, Lord Tarly, and even you will admit I am a woman of honor. More, I am a true knight, even if it sticks in your craw to admit it.”

“What terms do you offer?” Aegon asks with an annoyed glance at Lord Tarly, and the boy rises a notch in Jaime’s estimation.

“We shall surrender King’s Landing and the Iron Throne and bend the knee to you as the trueborn son of Rhaegar Targaryen. In return, we ask you to spare the lives of Tommen and Myrcella Baratheon and the lives of the Lannister soldiers.”

“I know you shall treat my cousins kindly when they bend the knee,” Jaime says. “They have committed no crimes, after all. But I do have four additional terms, my lords and lady, but you shall find they are small demands indeed.”

Tarly snorts.

Jaime ignores him. “First, treat the Gold Cloaks well. They have had a trying few weeks and months and have done their best to protect the city and the smallfolk from my sweet sister’s follies. Commander Tristan has been an able leader to them and should remain so. You will find he has no particular loyalty to any House and his men and the smallfolk trust him; they were able to quell the recent rioting in less than a day with almost no bloodshed on either side. Second, there is one particular Gold Cloak: Denys. He saved my lady’s life and fought valiantly by my side when he could have easily dropped his sword and fled. I have rewarded him with gold and a knighthood and a small house sitting vacant in Lannisport, waiting for him whenever he wishes to claim it. I ask that
you honor the promises made to him.

“I also have a list of the other Gold Cloaks and sellswords who fought by our side against impossible odds only a few days ago. The rewards they are to receive are listed beside each name. Again, I ask that you honor the promises made to them.”

Aegon watches him with puzzled eyes.

“And the fourth?” he asks.

“That you spare Lady Brienne’s life. She has done nothing wrong except be forced to marry the infamous Kingslayer.”

Brienne turns her head and glares at him.

“If she will allow herself to be spared, of course,” he says and gives her a ghost of a smile.

Aegon’s puzzled frown doesn’t ease.

“And will you allow yourself to be spared, Lady Brienne?” Randyll Tarly snickers. “And if we do spare you, what are we to do with the Kingslayer’s whore?”

Both Aegon and Willas speak sharply to Lord Tarly, but Brienne’s face doesn’t twitch. She glares steadily at the man.

“I am the Kingslayer’s wife, not his whore, Lord Tarly, as you well know. You were at the wedding, after all,” she says, her voice tight with anger. “I am also a highborn woman and an honorable warrior, which is fortunate for you. ‘Tis a pity we are under a flag of truce and offering surrender, for I have had a trying few weeks and would dearly enjoy sending you to meet the Stranger. Instead, I must beg Lord Targaryen’s mercy to ignore my lord husband’s wishes and I only request that I share whatever fate he decrees for Ser Jaime.”

Aegon looks startled.

“You would die with the Kingslayer, if that is my command?” he asks.

“I swore an oath to him,” Brienne says calmly. “Wherever we go, we go together.”

“What if you are with child?”

Tarly snorts at that but thankfully keeps his mouth shut for Jaime’s not certain if Brienne would have stayed still for any more insults. Lord Willas, Jaime notices, gives Tarly a thoughtful look and suppresses a smirk, and Jaime fondly remembers the sparring session with Brienne in Oldtown. One more night together, he thinks wistfully, if they’re lucky.

Brienne flicks her contemptuous gaze over Tarly before turning to Aegon. “I am not with child. And if I were, would you allow the child to live? To bear the Lannister name? To inherit Casterly Rock?”

“I have no wish to extinguish the Lannister line.”

“Then you are unlike your Targaryen ancestors, my lord. Did they not destroy the Blackfyres?”

“Just as House Lannister destroyed the Reynes and the Castermeres.”

Brienne tilts her head in a regal acknowledgement. “So they did.”
Tarly rolls his eyes. “This is all well and good,” he sniffs, “but we can take King’s Landing in half-a-day. I know the forces you have at your command, Kingslayer, and you are not here because you are in a position of strength.”

“But we are here, Lord Tarly,” Brienne says, her voice sharp, and Jaime fights to hide his grin at her arrogance, “and we have little time to waste on your posturing.”

“Lord Tarly speaks rudely but he speaks true as well,” Aegon says. “You would ask us to spare the lives of the Usurper’s children in return for something ripe for the plucking.”

“Mayhaps not so ripe,” Brienne says. “We offer ourselves and Queen Cersei in place of King Tommen and Princess Myrcella. If you must publicly execute someone, then let it be us.”

Tarly laughs. “And we can take the city and kill you all regardless.” He smirks at Aegon. “Useless terms,” he says.

“I am not finished,” Brienne says. “We have...resources you know naught about, Lord Tarly, and I will give the order to unleash them upon you if need be.”

Jaime’s eyes widen although he maintains a stoic expression.


“You speak confidently for one so ill-informed. Do you know the Wall has fallen? The Others have returned and are on the march, bringing winter ever more strongly with them. You do not have as much time as you believe.”

“At least your lies are creative,” Aegon mutters.

“Send trusted advisors to us, under a flag of truce. You have my word no harm will come to them. I will show them what we have and prove that I speak truth about the North.”

“We ask very little in return for surrendering the city without bloodshed,” Jaime quickly adds. “Spare the lives of two children who have been naught but pawns; respect the men who have honored their Houses by fighting for their liege lord; treat the men charged with the safety of the city kindly. We wish no more battles in the streets of King’s Landing. The smallfolk have suffered enough in this bloody game of thrones. The Iron Throne means next to nothing to us. Take it, and may the gods give you luck with it. You’ll need it.”

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As they ride back to King’s Landing, Jaime says, “Resources they know naught about?”

She glances at him from the corners of her eyes. “You know full well what I mean.”

They ride in silence, until Jaime quietly says, “Never make a threat you are not prepared to carry out.”

“You once threatened to return a babe to its father by trebuchet. Did you intend to carry that out?”

“Yes,” Jaime says, “but I knew Edmure Tully would know that as well. I knew he would yield.”

“And if he hadn’t?” she asks, the endless blue of her eyes challenging him.

He shrugs. “The Riverlands were starving. I have no doubt I would have found some poor babe, dead at his mother’s teat, to send over the wall. At that age, none would have known the
difference.”

Brienne stares at him for a long moment then gives him a slight smile. “The ruthless Kingslayer,” she says, softly mocking.

Jaime smiles his knife-like smile. “It helped me take Riverrun without spilling a drop of Tully or Stark blood.”

“So it did,” Brienne murmurs and now her smile is a little wider. “I have no more wish than you to bring out the creatures Qyburn has created, however, doing so would solve at least one problem for us.”

Jaime nods as the gate opens for them. “And throw the enemy into disarray. ‘Tis not a bad plan, Brienne. I only hope it will not be needed.”

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Brienne

Jon Connington, Willas Tyrell, Arianne Martell, and five soldiers arrive the next morning, under a flag of truce.

Jaime and Brienne take them first to Samwell Tarly, who nervously pulls out the glass candle. After several minutes of fumbling, it flares once more into sudden life and their visitors startle back then pale as Melisandre’s face appears.

Melisandre carries her glass candle to Jon Snow and Stannis Baratheon, and as she goes, the images that are in the light are sharper than they had been a couple days before. Brienne doesn’t know if it is because Sam and Melisandre are getting better at using the glass candles or if it’s because those in the north are now somewhat closer to King’s Landing. As Melisandre walks, Brienne sees the mass of smallfolk and Wildlings and Night’s Watch brothers and the armies of the North she passes, the people slowly trudging through the snow, wearing whatever rags they’ve managed to find to ward against the cold, and Brienne’s stomach tightens in sympathy.

When Jon Snow and Stannis Baratheon finally appear, they are quickly briefed on what is happening in King’s Landing and they, in turn, give them a summary of what’s been happening in the North.

“Progress is slow,” Jon says, “and we lost at least ten people in last night’s attack. At least, that was the number we found and burned this morning.”

“Melisandre is using her magic to set the forest aflame behind us,” Stannis says, “but the snow is getting heavier and the cold cuts deeper with every mile. We never seem to gain enough time to put sufficient distance between us and the Others.”

Brienne looks at their guests’ faces and nods to herself. They all look shaken and ashen and she has no doubt they will convince Aegon of the reality and seriousness of the threat coming from the north.

When the light of the candle is extinguished, it’s time to show them what’s in the black cells.

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Tears trickle down Arianne’s cheeks as she stands with her hands clenched into tight fists, staring for a long time at what used to be Nymeria Sand.

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That night, there is more than a hint of desperation in the kisses Brienne shares with Jaime. She does her best to be aware of every touch, every kiss, every sensation, to sear each moment in her memory. Jaime seems to need the same, because he draws everything out for as long as possible, his green eyes intent upon her face.

Neither of them truly sleep. They hold tight to each other and talk quietly of all they would have liked to have accomplished as Lord and Lady Lannister. Together they dream of children, of Casterly Rock, of Tarth. They doze and wake and doze again, until finally it seems it must be morning, even if the sky is still dark, and they dance together one more time.

When it’s all finally over and they force themselves to leave their bed to face the day, Brienne finds the marks left from his mouth and hands on her freckled skin and struggles against the urge to weep.

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Aegon accepts the terms of their surrender and Jaime orders the gates of the city to be opened.

Tommen and Myrcella do not weep when they are brought before the new King, sitting high above them on the Iron Throne, nor do they weep when they are led away to be imprisoned in separate rooms of the Red Keep. Brienne rather hopes the children will discover another secret tunnel that connects them and mayhaps they can then disappear once more inside the walls of the castle if Aegon treats them badly.

Cersei, too, is stoic and proud when she is brought into the throne room, her eyes shooting green fire at the boy upon the chair she had fought so hard to gain for herself.

Jaime and Brienne stand at Cersei’s side as Aegon announces they are all to be put to death, at a time and place of his choosing. Jaime and Brienne are then stripped of their armor and weapons and all three are locked into their own black cell, each far away from the others.

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The blackness is absolute when the torches are taken away, and the air is cold. Brienne thinks she hears Cersei screaming but it may be she is only dreaming it.

She gropes her way round the cell and finds a bucket for her waste, and a pile of damp, stinking straw for her bed.

She reluctantly lowers herself to the straw, praying the creatures Qyburn created are all safely locked in their own cells, and settles herself to wait.

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For the first time in a long time, she dreams of Lady Catelyn and Lady Stoneheart. She dreams of broken oaths piling at her feet, of the Hound’s helm flying through the air. She dreams of a noose round her neck and swinging her sword to remove Jaime’s head from his shoulders.

She wakes, crying Jaime’s name and for a moment she panics at the absolute blackness that surrounds her. It takes her several minutes before she remembers where she is, and then, hidden in the darkness of her prison, she finally allows herself to weep.

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Two days later, Brienne’s guards arrive and swing open the doors.
She gains her feet, her eyes watering against the glare of their torches, her joints aching from the cold of the stone floor and damp straw. She squints against the light then straightens her shoulders.

“So soon?” she says, but they don’t bother to respond.

She’s escorted to the throne room and her heart leaps when she sees Jaime standing at the foot of the steps leading to the Iron Throne, looking tired and dirty but unharmed. His own relief at seeing her shines from his eyes.

They turn as one to face Aegon.

The boy is scowling into space more than at them and they wait for the new King to speak. Finally he sighs and looks at them.

“I have been having the same dream for the last two nights,” he says. “In my dream, I see fire and ice and the shadows of great beasts passing over the world. I also see two swords flickering with red flames and slicing into creatures with shining blue eyes. Lord Willas and Samwell Tarly insist the swords must be Oathkeeper and Widow’s Wail, and the swords will flame only for you. That this proves you are both the hero foretold to come again to stop the Others.”

Brienne and Jaime exchange glances but say nothing.

Aegon sighs again. “I am leading a contingent of men to Moat Cailin, to join Jon Snow and Stannis Baratheon in their fight against the Others. I am ordering you both to join us.”

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King's Landing: Six

Jaime

Jaime and Brienne are escorted to separate bedchambers and Jaime scowls as Brienne’s broad back disappears from view. But he’s accompanied by men of the Reach and he knows there’s no hope of convincing them to let him go with his wife. He yearns to touch her, to convince himself he’s not dreaming, that it’s true they’ve been granted a reprieve.

A reprieve based on a lie, he reminds himself as bathwater and clean clothes are brought to him. As he scrubs the stench of the black cells from his skin, he thinks it must have been Sam who told the Dragon King that mummer’s tale of the swords flaming only for him and Brienne. Besides the fact the swords were never actually aflame, the illusion remained even when Denys Goldcloak was the one swinging Widow’s Wail.

Jaime concedes the swords may very well be magical—there are undead creatures roaming the world, after all—but he suspects it is the swords themselves that are the promised heroes and not whichever person is wielding them.

Well, except mayhaps Brienne, he thinks with a grin. If ever there was a hero worthy of wielding a fiery sword, it’s her.

He relaxes in the hot water and begins to consider ways to ensure they are at least imprisoned in the same room.

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Brienne

In the few days they had been locked in the black cells, the weather turned for the worse. The temperature has dropped and more snow has fallen. Brienne’s wrapped in wool and furs and boiled leather the next morning as she trudges with her guards to the training yards to find Jaime waiting for her, his own jailers watching them with wary faces.

They spar for an hour or more, in the dim semi-light of not-quite-dawn, and she frowns when it seems Jaime’s skill has once more deserted him. She would think he is pretending to be less skilled than he is but the scowl on his face and his curses as he retrieves his tourney sword both have the ring of truth.

When they’re finished, Jaime growls, “Mayhaps they’re right. Mayhaps the swords are magical after all.” He nods his head at the tourney sword in his hand and says, “This feels like swinging lead after Widow’s Wail and Oathkeeper.”

Brienne scowls and nods. “‘Tis the first time we’ve swung a sword in days, though,” she says and Jaime barks a laugh.

“How long,” he says. “I spent a year in cages and chains, wench, and the sword I used against you in the Riverlands felt as light and graceful as ever.”

Brienne nods. She would have dearly loved to have faced him in his prime, she thinks wistfully.

Jaime’s eyes are intent on her face as a smile curves his lips. “It would have been a battle to be sung through the ages, my lady,” he says softly.
To her surprise, she blushes and bashfully ducks her head then gives Jaime a heated glance from beneath lowered lashes.

“Aye,” she murmurs with a soft smile. Jaime blinks then slowly grins.

“Why, my lady, I do believe you’re flirting with me,” he purrs and she lifts her head, eyes wide.

She has no time to respond because he’s there in an instant, kissing her like his very existence depends upon it. All thought of their guards and their still-tenuous position with the King flees from her head and her world narrows only to the feel and the taste of him as she silently curses the armor and wool and fur and leather that is in their way.

“I see Lord Tarly is mistaken.”

They startle apart, blinking owlishly at the Dragon King and his two companions: a shocked Jon Connington and a smirking Lord Willas.

Aegon’s purple eyes are alight with amusement. “It appears the marriage is a true one after all.”

Jaime’s smile is smug. “You will find, Your Grace, that Lord Tarly is a bit of a fool.”

“Mayhaps,” Aegon says, “but he’s a fool with an army at his command.” He tilts his head. “Walk with us.”

Jaime and Brienne fall in on either side of the King with Jon and Lord Willas close behind them, flanked discreetly by their guards.

“Well you were in the black cells, I sent ravens to all the noble Houses that are still standing,” Aegon says. “I told them I have claimed the Iron Throne and they needs must bend the knee. I also told them the Others have come again.”

Jaime snorts. “They may believe one but not the other, Your Grace.”

“‘Tis a risk I have to take,” the King says. He glances at Brienne. “You are the heir to Tarth?”

Brienne nods and swallows, then ventures, “My father? Lord Selwyn?”

“He put up a fine fight, my lady, but he died in battle.”

She nods, keeping her face stoic although the loss of that small hope pains her and remembers kneeling at the altar of the Father in the Great Sept, praying for his soul and that he still lived. She reminds herself that not all prayers are answered and tucks her grief away.

Aegon says, “My advisors are greatly divided in what I should do with the two of you once the Others have been sent back to the frozen wastelands from whence they came. Lord Tarly and Princess Arianne are urging me to send you, Lord Jaime, back to whichever hell spawned you and your family, and since Lady Brienne has begged to share your fate, so be it.”

Jaime makes a rueful grimace but says nothing.

“Lord Willas, however, has argued that you both were great assets when the Ironborn attacked Oldtown and regales us with tales of these swords that flame in your hands and the legends of a hero foretold to save us all from the Others. Lord Jon offers no opinion, except to remind me that you, Ser Jaime, are a Kingslayer and a Lannister and neither can be trusted, and whether you, Lady Brienne, wish to share your husband’s fate or no, that is my choice to make.”
Brienne glares at Jon then turns the glare on Jaime when she realizes he’s giving Jon a grateful nod. Aegon grins then says, “But the strongest voice in your defense has come from a person you didn’t know was watching on my behalf.”

“What?” Jaime says, startled.

“I sent eyes and ears to King’s Landing moons ago, when we first began besieging Storm’s End. I wished to learn how the smallfolk were being treated—among other things. The plan was not entirely successful, especially once we ourselves were besieged in Storm’s End, since information could not be readily received by me. And of course, once we arrived here, you were quick to seal the gates. But I have finally spoken to my eyes and ears and they have shared many interesting tales.”


“From whom?” Jaime demands.

Aegon laughs. “I will not reveal all my spies, Lord Jaime, only one. The Gold Cloak, Denys, is a member of the Golden Company.”

Their jaws drop then Jaime ruefully shakes his head. “No wonder he fought so well against Ser Robert Strong.”

“He is no coward, that is true, but he tells me he has never faced such a creature as Ser Robert Strong before. He says he dearly would have loved to turn craven if he had not already started fighting at your side.” Aegon shakes his head. “Denys tells me you both fought valiantly, taking on Ser Robert Strong yourselves and trying to keep others from dying upon the creature’s sword. He also tells me the destruction of the Queensguard was at your command, Lord Jaime, even though it went against everything your sweet sister desired.”

Jaime says nothing, his eyes wary.

Aegon smiles slightly. “I see Denys is speaking truth.” He turns his gaze to Brienne. “As he is speaking truth about you as well. He too claims your swords were aflame.”

“The swords appeared to flame when Denys was wielding Widow’s Wail as well, Your Grace,” Brienne blurts out then curses herself for a fool. She may have just destroyed the only reason the Dragon King was willing to send them north.

“Aye, I’ve heard that as well,” Aegon replies without surprise. “Although Denys swears the swords did not seem near so bright when one of them was in his hands. Regardless, ’tis not simply the swords—aflame or not—that influenced my decision to show mercy and allow you both to bend the knee.”

Jaime raises an eyebrow but says nothing.

“I have heard tales of both of you, from those who fought at your side and from those who you did not know were watching. Lady Brienne, you fought a Queensguard to save the life of a lowly merchant, at great risk to yourself. Your injuries can still be seen from that encounter. You both took steps to destroy the Queensguard once you understood what they were. Lord Jaime, you killed the madman who created these abominations so he could not create more nor warn the Queen of your intentions. In all ways, you have both done your best to protect the smallfolk of King’s Landing, whether anyone else realizes it or no.”
“If you fight honorably and survive the coming battles with the Others, then know this: I shall return Casterly Rock and the Westerlands to you, Lord Jaime, and the Isle of Tarth to you, Lady Brienne. I had thought to offer you an annullment as well, based upon Lord Tarly’s conviction the marriage between you is a farce, but it seems your union is a true one rather than one based solely upon hasty necessity. While I will hold the Baratheon children in my care as surety for your loyalty, from this point onwards, you shall both be treated as honored guests and in a manner that befits your births and your marriage. I’ve ordered you to be moved to an apartment so your bedchambers may be close together.”

“We need but one bedchamber, Your Grace,” Jaime says, “so long as it contains an extra large—and extra strong—bed.”

Aegon laughs heartily at that. “It shall be done.”

Brienne frowns. “Are the children to be kept isolated in their rooms?”

“They shall remain under close watch, yes, but I have no concerns if they wish to roam the Red Keep. Neither seems inclined to gather followers in order to plot rebellion. I will not, however, allow them into the city.”

Brienne nods. “I doubt that will be an issue for them. If your guards can find Tommen’s missing kittens—well, full-grown cats, really—that will go far in calming him.”

“I will see what can be done to find the cats,” Aegon says with a bemused frown.

“Thank you,” she says solemnly. “Now, what of Cersei?”

Jaime gives her a startled glance.

Aegon’s smile is slightly mocking. “Do you wish me to execute her before we leave for the North? I can make those arrangements easily enough.”

“No,” Brienne says sharply. “‘Tis better if you put her on public trial for the smallfolk and high-born alike to see. The people need to understand why she had to be stopped. There has been too much senseless murder in this city already.” She shakes her head and sighs. “I do, however, ask you to imprison her somewhere other than in the black cells. She is mad, and the black cells will simply drive her deeper into her madness.”

“Cersei’s crimes are too huge to pardon,” Aegon says flatly.

“I do not ask you to pardon her, Your Grace, only that you treat her more mercifully than she would treat you. Imprison her as befits her birth and previous rank and keep her door locked and guarded until you return from the North to put her on trial. But to have her in the black cells is both cruel and dangerous.”

“Dangerous? How?”

“The creatures Qyburn created…as far as we know, they obey only her. If they ever hear her voice…”

They all stop in their tracks, their eyes wide with horror as they stare at her.

She shrugs. “Besides, it is a merciful act, if you’re not able to execute her quickly.”

Aegon considers her in thoughtful silence then sighs. “Time seems to have been stolen from me,” he
mutters, “and not simply because the days are growing steadily shorter.” He shakes his head and says, “I shall grant your request, Lady Brienne, because I do not have time to argue the point.” He looks at Willas. “I shall set some Tyrell guards at Cersei’s door. I doubt they will be persuaded from their duties.”

“They will not.” Willas agrees sadly. “They dearly loved my grandmother and my sweet sister. They will not forget what Cersei has done.”

Brienne bows her head. “Thank you, Your Grace.”

The rest of the day is spent in preparations for leaving for the North. Food in King’s Landing is scarce and while more is now on its way from the Reach, it will take close to a week for any of it to arrive. King Aegon turns then to the granaries of Stokeworth and Rosby to at least feed the smallfolk and officially meets Ser Bronn of the Blackwater for the first time.

Aegon is more amused by Bronn than anything else but after some dancing round each other whereby Aegon’s amusement turns to grudging respect, Aegon formally recognizes Bronn as Lord Stokeworth and in return, Bronn bends the knee then leaves for Stokeworth to arrange for food to be delivered to the city within the next few days.

There is now a small fleet in Blackwater Bay comprised of the ships Aegon took under his command after conquering the Stormlands. Brienne sees one in the distance flying a flag with the sigil of House Tarth. Her heart leaps before she remembers her father is dead and cannot possibly be aboard.

Even the promise of regaining Tarth does not cheer her if it means she must take up the title of Evenstar in her father’s stead.

That night, Jaime and Brienne, along with Samwell Tarly, dine with the King and his advisors. It’s strained and awkward with Lord Randyll Tarly glaring at them all. He at least saves his most disgusted glares to level on his son whenever Sam finally manages to squeeze a sound from his trembling lips.

It’s not until they have been granted leave to return to their separate quarters that Sam tells them, in hurried whispers Brienne barely hears, that Sam is terrified his father will learn he has taken Heartsbane from Horn Hill and use it to skewer him once and for all.

Brienne doesn’t have the heart to ask how Sam hopes to hide the existence of the sword once they join Jon Snow and his followers in the North.

All worries and sadness fly from Brienne’s head once she and Jaime are alone in their room, the door locked behind them. All that’s left as they kiss and fumble frantically at their clothes is the joy in the miracle that she and Jaime are still alive and still together.

Jaime

The raven from Dorne arrives two days later, scant hours before they are to leave for the North.
King Aegon calls his advisors to the small council room along with Jaime, Brienne and Sam and, with worried looks at Arianne, tells them the news from Sunspear.

“Daenerys Stormborn Targaryen is in Dorne. She landed there several moons ago with fifty thousand Dothraki screamers, eight thousand trained mercenaries...and three dragons.”

Jaime’s stomach swoops, but he’s not sure if he’s thrilled or terrified. He can’t help but think of Tyrion and his fascination with dragons and wonders if his sweet brother has learned dragons have returned to the world. He hopes rather wistfully that he has before Jaime shakes thoughts of Tyrion from his head.

“Daenerys Targaryen,” he murmurs then frowns at Arianne. “Why did she land in Sunspear?”

Arianne shrugs. “You shall have to ask her, Kingslayer.”

Jaime’s smile is cruel. “No need,” he purrs, “you have told me all I need to know.”

Aegon gives him a grim nod. “Dorne welcomed Daenerys with open arms although I doubt they truly had much choice in the matter. However,” and he holds up a small scrap of paper, “this hastily written message tells us she turned on her Westeros friends once she learned I claimed the Iron Throne and named Princess Arianne as my betrothed.”

Brienne pulls in a deep, shaky breath. “Turned on them?”

“The note says she has unleashed the Dothraki on the people of Sunspear, Prince Doran is dead, and she is heading north.”

Aegon nods. “Dorne welcomed Daenerys with open arms although I doubt they truly had much choice in the matter. However,” and he holds up a small scrap of paper, “this hastily written message tells us she turned on her Westeros friends once she learned I claimed the Iron Throne and named Princess Arianne as my betrothed.”

Brienne pulls in a deep, shaky breath. “Turned on them?”

“The note says she has unleashed the Dothraki on the people of Sunspear, Prince Doran is dead, and she is heading north.”

Arianne’s face is sharp with anger and pride. “The conquest of Dorne will not be a simple matter of marching,” she spits. “The Dothraki will not find it so easy to defeat us.”

“But if she has dragons—” Sam says.

“Ridiculous,” Randyll Tarly snaps. “Dragons died hundreds of years ago.”

“It doesn’t matter if the dragons are real or no,” Jaime growls, “the Dothraki screamers are real enough.” He scrubs his hand over his face, and says, “You face dire threats from both the North and the South, Your Grace. What do you wish to do?”

Aegon scowls as he stares off into space then shakes his head. “I have no choice but to split my forces. Dorne has not yet officially bent the knee to me, but my betrothal to Arianne made it only a formality. If Prince Doran is truly dead, then Arianne now rules Dorne. They have been invaded and I needs must fly to their aid.”

“But the Others!” Sam cries. “What of the North?”

“Be quiet!” Lord Tarly snaps, slamming his fist on the table, making Sam jump. “A craven such as you has no place here while we speak on matters of war!”

Sam’s chin quivers then his eyes spark. “And you have no place here while we speak on matters of the North!” he shouts, slamming his own fist on the table, and Lord Tarly blinks in surprise. “You know nothing about what my Night’s Watch brothers have been facing for the last few years, my lord! I do, and I will not allow them to continue to face this threat alone! You’ve spoken to Jon Snow and Stannis Baratheon through the glass candle, you’ve seen them! We must go to their aid!”

Randyll Tarly expands, as if he’s about to literally explode, “How dare—”
“Enough, Lord Tarly,” Aegon says sharply. “Sam speaks true. We cannot abandon our friends in the North to the threat of the Others. That is why I am sending the Lannister army, under the command of Lord Jaime, to join with Jon Snow and Stannis Baratheon at Moat Cailin or farther south if the northmen cannot hold their ground there.”

“You cannot trust a Lannister!” Tarly sputters.

“Mayhaps, but I can trust Lady Brienne. Even you admit she is a woman of honor and she has already sworn fealty to me.”

Tarly opens his mouth but Aegon forestalls him. “My decision is made, Lord Tarly.” He gives the older man a thin smile. “You should be grateful. I’m taking you south to face non-existent dragons instead of sending you North to face the Others.”

“Which likely don’t exist either,” Lord Tarly growls, then bows his head beneath Aegon’s glare. “Yes, Your Grace,” he says reluctantly.

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The Lannister army makes surprisingly rapid progress once they leave King’s Landing. They watch for sign of Lady Stoneheart and her followers in the Riverlands but find naught but rotted rope tied to branches and a few bones scattered on the snow beneath the trees.

The small force from Casterly Rock Jaime had ordered to explore the Riverlands joins them on the Kingsroad and they, too, report they have found nothing. Brienne is simultaneously pleased to be reunited with Pod, annoyed he did not stay safely in Casterly Rock, and worried he will not survive the coming conflict. That night, Jaime holds her close and murmurs that the boy is a squire and following their knights into danger is what squires do.

Jaime, too, is pleased to be reunited with his many squires, even if Peck seems to have forgotten how Jaime likes his wine and does not seem as eager to assist with Jaime’s armor as before. ‘Tis only natural, Jaime thinks after he’s dismissed his squires for the night and watches Brienne ready herself for bed. Josmyn Peckledon is already sixteen and boys are not meant to be squires forever. The time will soon be upon them when Jaime must release the young man from his service or risk growing resentment from someone who is by his side each day with a sword.

Jaime’s surprised by how it saddens him to think of releasing even one of his squires from his service. He truly has become fond of all of them, in his own way, and he thinks he mayhaps should release them all back to their Houses only he’s not certain if they still have Houses or if they are all the last of their lines. Brienne holds him close and tells him that with invaders in both the North and the South, the boys are as safe with him as they would be with any other army and she watches him with skeptical eyes as he sputters that it is not their safety that concerns him but his own.

“The heartless Kingslayer,” she murmurs and chuckles softly, and the only response he can think to give is to kiss her senseless.

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The army is harried by wolves through the Riverlands and into the Neck but even the wolves eventually leave them be. They make steady albeit slow progress north, trudging through snow and bitter wind that flings ice pellets into their eyes and against whatever flesh that’s left exposed. The air gets colder each day until eventually it’s too cold even for snow. As they march, they begin to lose men and animals to the cruel bite of the air. At Sam’s insistence, they leave their dead burning behind them on the Kingsroad.
Worse than the cold, however, is the darkness. The days get sharply shorter until they’re travelling more by torchlight than by sunlight and the sky is dimmed even more by the heavy pall of smoke in the air.

By the time the lights of Moat Cailin heave into view, they have not seen the sun in more than a day.

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The North: One

Chapter Notes

A/N1: For those of you not on the J/B forum, I completed the first draft of the rest of this fic over the long weekend. And there was much rejoicing. ;D The good news is: the wait between updates should be less. The bad news is: I have no idea how many chapters are left, since what are currently separate chapters may not continue to be separate...editing, man. Editing is always bad news – LOL.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Brienne

The stronghold of Moat Cailin is teeming with more soldiers than Brienne expects, although it is difficult to see much of anything in a darkness lessened only by the innumerable torches lining the courtyard.

A dour-faced man in a Night’s Watch uniform flicks cynical eyes over them then leads them and Sam into the Great Hall where they find Stannis Baratheon and Jon Snow holding uneasy court. Stannis and Jon are seated in the middle of the table and to Jon’s right is a very young boy and beside the boy—Brienne pulls in a hissing breath when she recognizes the beautiful red-haired girl. Standing behind her is a slender, dark-haired man with calculating eyes.

“Sansa Stark,” Jaime breathes, then in a very different tone, “and Petyr Baelish.”

Baelish watches with glittering eyes as they approach the head table and it takes all of Brienne’s self-control not to grimace in visceral reaction to him.

“Ser Jaime,” Stannis intones. “And...you.”

Jaime’s lips tighten but he says nothing as they bow to the head table. Brienne sees Sansa’s surprised face as she straightens.

“You look just like your mother, Lady Sansa,” Brienne says.

Sansa’s eyes flicker as she bows her head.

“I am sorry for your loss,” Brienne adds awkwardly.

“What is your name again?” Stannis asks.

Brienne straightens. “I am Brienne of Tarth,” she says, knowing he is baiting her.

“Ah, yes. I remember now. Brienne the Blue. That was the name you took, was it not, when you swore yourself to my brother, the false king?”

Brienne’s eyes don’t waver from his. He looks nothing like his brother, she thinks, except for a faint echo in the general cast of his face. Renly had been always laughing and so, so handsome while this
man is dour and whatever good looks he might have once had have long since fled. She feels a sudden stab of pity. It must have been difficult to be caught in the shadows of two such magnificent brothers. No wonder he did not grow to their statures.

“I was one of Renly’s Rainbow Guard, yes,” she says, “and I have sworn to kill you, my lord.”

Sam gasps. “Lady Brienne!”

Stannis gives him a sour look and returns his attention to Brienne. “You may call me Your Grace, Lady Brienne, and you are welcome to try and kill me, if you dare.”

“Much time has passed and many things have happened since the day your sweet brother died in my arms, my lord, and we face a common threat if your messages through the glass candle are true. I am willing to set aside my oath until after we have defeated the Others.”

Stannis’ expression doesn’t change. “I admire your confidence, my lady, which I take to mean you have not yet faced the Others in battle nor seen them. Remember: we have no place for cravens here. If you piss yourself and run crying, I shall grant you no mercy.”

Brienne’s eyes narrow with anger. “Of course not,” she murmurs. “Men like you never have mercy, do you? Tell me, are you great friends with Randyll Tarly?”

“Enough of this bickering,” Jon Snow says suddenly. “Lady Brienne, you and Ser Jaime have brought us an army, which is both a blessing and a curse. The new men will grant us some rest from constant diligence, but our food stores are already stretched.”

“And soon they shall snap,” Sansa says.

“When did you arrive here, Lady Sansa?” Jaime asks.

“Wondering how I’ve managed to elude your sweet sister for so long, Kingslayer?”

Jaime raises an eyebrow. “You have grown sharp of tongue as you’ve grown older, my lady,” he says. “I am curious, I’ll grant you, but I was asking more because we noticed no sign of an army’s passage before us on the Kingsroad. Which means you have been here for some time.”

“You will find that time has little meaning in the always-night,” Jon says. His face is long and solemn, his eyes wary. He turns to Sam and his expression softens. “Mayhaps now you are back, Sam, you will be able to devise a way for us to tell how many hours have passed.”

Sam looks startled then bows his head. “I shall do my best, Your Grace.”

“Oh, gods,” Jon groans, “not you, too! I am still just Jon.”

“You are King in the North,” Stannis snaps, “and you needs must be accorded that respect. Just as I am King in the South.”

“There are two Targaryens who would dispute that claim, my lord,” Jaime says drily.

“Two?”

“Daenerys Targaryen landed in Dorne several moons ago,” Brienne says. “She is currently on the march north.”

“Burning Dornishmen as she goes, so we hear,” Jaime adds. “King Aegon has gone south to meet her.”
“He will fail.”

They turn as one to see the red priestess, Melisandre, walk into the Great Hall and take up position behind Stannis at the head table.

“Mayhaps,” Jaime says. “The gods know the Iron Throne has been bucking them all off quickly enough. Would be a pity if he does fail. He seems a decent enough young man. And he’s made promises to us I’m sure his aunt will have no desire to keep.”

Stannis snorts. “Do you truly believe him to be Aegon Targaryen?”

Jaime shrugs. “Does it matter? He has the look of Valyria about him. Whether he’s some byblow from a distant Targaryen or truly Rhaegar’s son, it matters not. What matters is what people choose to believe. The realm has been bleeding—and burning—for far too long. And there are enemies at the gates that make all this squabbling over such a beastly uncomfortable chair all that more meaningless.”

“‘Tis not meaningless,” Melisandre says. “It is that chair that determines who has king’s blood and who does not.”

“And what does that matter?” Brienne asks, frowning.

Melisandre turns her gaze on her and there’s something in her eyes that makes Brienne’s blood run cold.

“King’s blood is what feeds my magic,” Melisandre says, “and my magic is all that is keeping us safe.”

Jaime

Jaime sees they are well fortified within Moat Cailin but he also sees they have no hope of withstanding a long siege.

Not that the Others besiege them, he’s told. The Others attack, and are able to scale the walls with only their hands and feet, like spiders, so he’s told by smallfolk who seem to have grown numb from their fear. They speak to him with have dull eyes and resigned expressions even though they carry within easy reach whatever small things they can use as weapons.

The children still seem lively enough and they still laugh as they run and play in the frigid air. The snow that hasn’t been trampled by the feet of soldiers and horses has turned to icy pellets, slippery and crisp and painful whenever it meets bare skin.

Jaime walks through the courtyard, speaking with whoever will speak with him and he knows Brienne is doing the same.

He joins Brienne in the Great Hall where they each devour a trencher of thin stew before making their way to their bedchamber. There they share what they’ve learned as they move their bed closer to the fireplace and kindle a small fire in the hearth.

“This place will not support us for long,” Brienne whispers to him, pressed close beneath the blankets and still clad in her breeches and tunic, just like him, to guard against the cold.

He hugs her close and thinks she feels so good even through the clothes that prevent their skin from
“No,” he says. “The food here will not last much longer, and the hunting is sparse.”

“They’ll butcher the horses soon.”

“Aye, and that will leave us in even worse straits once Jon and Stannis finally decide to move south.”

Brienne lifts her head and looks at him. “Is there naught we can do?”

Jaime grimaces. “We are foes who have become temporary allies. Jon and Stannis will take whatever advice we provide only if it matches their own counsel.”

“Surely others are telling them the same thing!”

“Mayhaps.” Jaime sighs. “But there comes a time in every conflict when one side or the other must decide to fight or flee or bend. From what we’ve been told, bending will only doom us all, so it is either fight or flee, and these are people who have been running now for weeks. They’re tired. Until we can come up with a better alternative, the most we can give them is some respite from their constant vigilance.”

“At least until our numbers, too, thin.”

He tightens his grip round her shoulders.

“Aye,” he whispers.

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They sleep and wake to the sound of horns and shouts.

They scramble into their armor and furs then rush to the courtyard with their swords in hand.

“To the battlements!” Jon cries when he sees them and points the way with his own Valyrian steel sword. Beside him is Sam, eyes wide and chins quivering, but Heartsbane held steady in his hands.

Jaime nods and barks orders to his own men before sprinting to the stairs leading to the top of the castle walls.

“Think of the Queensguard, Sam!” Brienne calls and then he hears her running behind him.

The air is sharp and cold in his lungs and he covers his mouth as he reaches the top of the battlements. He finds Petyr Baelish, peering intently into the darkness that surrounds them. Only Littlefinger’s eyes are visible over the scarf that covers his mouth and chin.

“How far are they?” Jaime snaps as Brienne skids to a halt beside him. At least the battlements are clear of snow, he thinks, even if the bricks are slick from the cold.

Baelish shakes his head. “There is no way to tell without more light.” His eyes are frightened as he looks at Jaime. “They say that if you die, there’s a few minutes before you rise again, as an Other.”

Jaime glances at Brienne. “Mayhaps that’s true,” he says. “I just hope we only have to kill each creature once. Has anyone told you anything about that?”

Baelish shakes his head again, his attention back on the looming darkness. “All I’ve heard is when Jon Snow’s sword touches these creatures, they immediately crumble to dust. Most think it’s due to
the Valyrian steel he carries.”

Jaime considers Littlefinger’s words as he, too, stares intently into the inky blackness that surrounds them. Even the moon has hidden her face this night, he thinks grimly. There shall be help there.

“Well,” Jaime finally says, “we shall see if that holds true for my lady and I as well, then.” He glances at Brienne then back to Littlefinger and his smile is feral.

“There,” Brienne says, and Jaime looks where she’s pointing and sees bright blue pinpricks of light. Baelish audibly gulps and Jaime can’t help but chuckle as he adjusts his grip on Widow’s Wail.

“Either draw your sword or get out of the way, Lord Baelish,” Brienne says, readying Oathkeeper. “I have no wish to take your head once you’ve been turned to one of them, but I shall do so if need be.”

Baelish gulps again then turns and hurries away.

Jaime gives Brienne a rueful shrug. “I don’t think he ever was a swordsman, my lady. He prefers pulling the strings of others rather than direct battle.”

Brienne nods at the warriors of the Vale who are hurrying to stand beside the Lannister army and the men of the North. “Let us hope his army is not like their leader.”

That is all the time they have before the Others are upon them and Jaime sees, to his horror, they can climb walls like spiders because they have mounts that look like spiders. He hears Brienne’s terror-filled shout of surprise as the creatures breach the top of the wall.

The white walkers’ eyes are almost blinding in the darkness of the perpetual night as Jaime screams a hoarse battle-cry and swings Widow’s Wail in almost perfect unison with Brienne swinging Oathkeeper—

—and the red veins rise from the Valerian steel like flames and by the gods, the sword sings in his hand, darting, slicing, dancing, and he is one with the sword, whole again, completely alive for the first time outside of fucking and loving Brienne. He strikes and parries, swerves and slices, weaves and stabs.

It is almost like ecstasy and feels like magic.

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Chapter End Notes

A/N2: Yeah, I know. I think I’m going off-canon with the Others here, but…ummm… fanfic? *begs forgiveness*
The North: Two

Chapter Notes

**Warning:** Erm…nothing really, except some mentions of blood. And, of course, canon-level coarse language.

And yes, a really quick update!! Told you the wait would be shorter now!! :D

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**Brienne**

Brienne has no way of knowing how long they stand on the parapets. She watches the wights and their spider-like mounts scrabble up the wall and shudders at the scritching of their claws and the cracking noises that accompany them.  

It’s difficult to see them clearly in the darkness, but she thinks many of them are simply bones held together by translucent skin. When the attack finally ends and she and Jaime make their slow, aching way back to the courtyard, she almost hopes this is all naught but a mad dream. Mayhaps, if she could but open her eyes, she would find herself in a cell on Tarth, tended by Septa Roelle while she’s been lost in this madness.

They’re met in the courtyard by Jon and Stannis and Melisandre, and Brienne blinks at the malevolent rage on Melisandre’s face.

“Where did you get those swords?” the red priestess spits and Brienne frowns.

“These were forged from Ned Stark’s great sword, Ice,” Jaime says. His eyes flicker to Jon Snow then Sansa, who has also run to join them. “My father ordered them made after Lord Stark’s execution.”

“They belong to House Stark!” Sansa snaps.

Jaime raises an eyebrow. “Mayhaps when they were Ice,” he says mildly, “and mayhaps if we weren’t under siege! Or do you intend to wield one of them yourself, my lady? Or will your sweet brother Rickon take one in hand and stand on the wall with his soldiers?”

“Sansa,” Jon says, “it matters not who wields them or which House lays claim to them. They’re here, now.”

“How do they flame?” Melisandre snarls. “Neither of you are Azor Ahai!”

Sam jogs up to them, puffing in the cold air. “It was magnificent!” he pants, grinning, seemingly unaware of the anger surrounding them. “From a distance, it was as if they merged into one giant, flaming sword! Tell me, what happened when you cut down an Other?”

Brienne gives him a disbelieving glare but when he gives her a quick wink, she realizes Sam is not quite as oblivious as he seems.
“Oathkeeper turned them into puddles of icy water easily enough,” Brienne says.

Jaime nods in agreement and then grins. “Widow’s Wail seemed to swing itself. It was almost as if my swordhand had been returned to me!”

“It felt much the same as in Oldtown, or in King’s Landing when we fought the Queensguard, only...more...”

“But neither of you are Azor Ahai!” Melisandre cries and Brienne half-expects the red priestess to stamp her foot in her frustration.

Jaime cocks his head and thoughtfully considers her. “I think it is the sword that makes the hero, priestess, not the hero that makes the sword.”

She rears back. “That is not the prophecy!”

Brienne shrugs. “I care not about the prophecy—but I do care about my aches and bruises. And now that the blood lust is fading, I find it too cold to stand here and argue.”

“Yes, let us go inside,” Stannis says. “We must discuss this further.”

In the end, Jaime and Brienne reluctantly agree that, if nothing else, their Valyrian steel blades must be at the ready at all times, even when they’re sleeping. Sam and Jon claim their own Valyrian steel blades melted the wights into puddles of water and even if the swords do not flame for anyone other than Jaime and Brienne, they cannot have their best weapons idle simply because their true owners need rest.

Once agreed—and Jaime is still scowling angrily at the decision—Sam demonstrates the crude timepiece he has cobbled together: an hourglass calibrated to the movement of the stars. A plan is made to man the walls in shifts, with a small window of time where everyone is awake at the same time. Jaime and Brienne agree that Stannis and Jon will wield Oathkeeper and Widow’s Wail while Jaime and Brienne are sleeping, and Jon agrees to hand Longclaw to Edd Tollett, the dour-faced Lord Commander of what’s left of the Night’s Watch, who seems more resigned than pleased to receive it.

As they ready for bed, Brienne says, “What do you think is driving Melisandre’s anger?”

Jaime shakes his head as he tends the meagre fire in the hearth. “I’m not certain it matters,” he says. “We are sharing the swords now—although it pains me to do so!” He closes his eyes and grimaces. “To be able to wield a sword like that again...” He sighs and rises to his feet. “I do not know if I can allow Widow’s Wail to slip from my grasp now that I have felt again what it’s like to be a great swordsman. It is...” He presses his lips tightly together and shakes his head. “I fear that once we allow others to wield them, Brienne, we will not keep those swords for long.”

Brienne frowns. “Mayhaps we’re not supposed to,” she says slowly. “Mayhaps we were simply the means for them to arrive here, where they are most needed. Melisandre and Sam and Lord Willas all told us about the prophecy and the great hero, promised to return...”

Jaime saunters to her and pulls her against him. “Mayhaps. I, at least, am no god’s idea of a noble hero.” He kisses her before she can voice her disagreement at his words. Then he says, “I still hate the thought of losing the swords! And I do not appreciate simply being a tool for some god’s magic,
even if it is for the greater good.”

Brienne slides her hands over his back, pulling him closer. “Ah, so the arrogant Lion of Lannister is no god’s plaything,” she says.

His grin is wicked. “Only yours, sweetling,” he purrs and lowers her to the bed.

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Jaime

Even with Sam’s crude clock, time feels virtually impossible to measure in the never-ending darkness of the cold night the Others have brought with them.

Jaime and Brienne sleep and fuck, eat and hunt for food. They talk and laugh with their comrades in arms, and teach the smallfolk, even the children, how to use the knives and clubs that are all they have at hand for weapons. They stand their turn at watch and fight when there is an enemy in front of them.

It is the waiting that is the worst, as always and Jaime is almost amused by how much that, at least, is exactly the same as any other battle or siege or war he has ever been in.

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They lose Ser Ilyn Payne almost immediately. Peck gives him the news, covered in the blood of the dead and wounded.

“I saw him fall, my lord,” Peck says, gray eyes wide, hands trembling. “He fought valiantly.”

Jaime nods, thinking of the once-honored knight. He thinks on how they had sparred in the Riverlands, when Jaime was still a Kingsguard sworn to keep Tommen on the Iron Throne. He thinks of all he had confessed to the man and all the man had suffered under Aerys and the kings who reigned after him. Jaime wonders if Ser Ilyn tried to avoid death or gladly went to meet it.

Jaime swallows down his unexpected grief and says, “Make sure his body is burned with the rest, Peck. He served me well and I have no wish to face him as an enemy.”

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When they sleep, Brienne warm and solid in his arms, he dreams one or the other of them fall beneath the enemy’s onslaught. When it’s Brienne who falls and then rises from the dead, her eyes the sharp, shining blue of the Others, he gladly shows her his throat and rejoices in the bite of the blade against his flesh.

It is when he is the one who falls that he wakes, protesting against his dream-self, her name on his lips. If she sleeps through his cries, he burrows, trembling, against her and tells himself it is still just a dream. If she wakes, he allows her to soothe him before he fucks her, and sometimes he feels like he’s trying to burn his love for her into her skin, as if it is something he will be able to recognize if he ever looks at her through glowing blue eyes.

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Brienne

The endless dark and constant threat of the Others takes its toll. She is tired and afraid and her only
relief is that both she and Jaime are still alive. She knows it’s foolish but she feels that so long as they remain together then they are safe.

She refuses to think of all those who have proven her wrong in their short time at Moat Cailin.

At least she thinks it has not been long. Without the sun, it doesn’t feel as if time is passing, even though Sam’s timepiece tells her it is. She knows they’ve been there less than a moon, because she had just finished her moon’s blood when they arrived and it has not yet returned to her. There may be a point where even that way of marking the passage of time will no longer be available to her.

She is almost out of moon tea but she cannot yet bring herself to say so to Jaime.

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They’ve been at Moat Cailin for several days—or mayhaps only a few hours—or mayhaps weeks—when Jon and Stannis finally agree they can stay no longer.

“We have supplies to last for several months, mayhaps even a year, if we’re careful. We also now have men enough to withstand many more attacks before our ranks thin beyond hope—unless, of course, the Others decide to no longer grant us respite from their onslaught. Either way, we are, at best, delaying the inevitable,” Jon says, his long face as solemn as ever. His eyes are difficult to read, however, calm and sad but with a blankness in them that Brienne decides is understandable after all the young man has endured. “We are not winning the war, we are only prolonging the battle.”

“Can we send at least the children away by sea?” Brienne asks. “I’ve seen a few boats still at the dock and the water is not yet completely frozen completely.”

Jon shakes his head. “When we first arrived, we set a dozen ships asail, filled with as many children as we could pack into them and enough men and women to look after them.”

A heavy silence fills the room and dread creeps into Brienne’s belly.

“We could still see the torches on the boats,” Jon finally says, his voice and face grim. “And then...something rose from beneath the waves and the light of the torches disappeared. I can still hear the screams as they were pulled beneath the surface.”

“Dead things in the water,” Sam whispers.

Jon nods. “Those we lost returned from the sea several hours later, their voices cracking like ice. It took us days to beat them back.”

“We have not tried to set sail again,” Stannis says, his jaw muscles working.

“And yet,” Brienne says, frowning, “we encountered none of these creatures on our march north.”

“And it was only the last half a league where we lost the sun,” Jaime adds.

Sam frowns. “True,” he says slowly.

Stannis and Melisandre exchange an indecipherable look before Melisandre says, “My magic has limited their reach. But the spells are weakening and I fear the Others will soon be able to slip past and encircle us before they march further south.”

“Can you recast the spell?” Brienne asks.
Stannis’ hand slowly clenches into a fist as he exchanges another glance with Melisandre.

“The spell was cast at a great cost,” Melisandre says, lifting her chin almost in defiance of Stannis’ cold gaze. “It has a price many are not willing to pay.”

Stannis’ knuckles turn white. “It has a price none should pay,” he growls and turns away.

Brienne can see from the puzzled glances round the room that only Stannis and Melisandre fully understand the unspoken conversation they’re having. Even Ser Davos, the Onion Knight, seems uncertain as to the cause of the tension between his King and the red priestess who serves him.

“Be that as it may,” Melisandre continues, “I will soon have no choice but to cast it again.” Her eyes rest on Lord Rickon, who seems oblivious to the conversation round them, before her gaze moves on to Lady Sansa. Petyr Baelish, ever near Sansa, raises an eyebrow but says nothing. Melisandre returns her attention to Jaime. “We may have already waited too long. We are trapped here now, with still too many children and those unable to pick up weapons and fight. Our supplies will not last forever. We cannot stay and we cannot go by sea, and going by land is as much suicide as by sea.”

“Not quite,” Jaime says and Jon gives him a puzzled frown. “There is still much fuel that can be burned behind us, and even more once we reach the forests of the Riverlands.”

“We have learned it does not prevent the Others from advancing,” Jon says.

“No,” Stannis says slowly, “but it does delay them.”

Jaime’s smile is grim as he turns to Jon. “How is the bog?”

Jon blinks. “‘Tis a bog, my lord. It exists.”

Jaime chuckles. “I mean, how thick is the peat layer and do you believe it is frozen through?”

“It is several feet thick in places,” Stannis says, “and frozen enough to walk upon…most of the time.”

“We have lost a hundred men to the bog,” Jon explains, “and we had to kill them again a few hours later. Why?”

“Peat burns.”

“Dry peat.”

“And mayhaps frozen peat as well. Not well, true, but mayhaps it would still burn hot enough to slow the Others who walk upon it, especially when the flames are created with magic and not flint.”

Melisandre’s eyes narrow and she says, “Do we set it afire before or after we all die attempting to move south?”

“Before, of course, priestess,” Jaime says. “After, we will be fighting for the Others’ side.”

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Melisandre casts her spell and the bog to the north of Moat Cailin is set afire. They begin the slow task of leading the smallfolk away from the false safety of the castle, and Brienne wonders how many have hidden themselves in the labyrinthine corridors of the keep, willing to risk falling to the Others than move another step. They set soldiers searching for them, but in the end, she knows they
leave some behind.

“No matter,” Stannis says when she protests, “we will meet them again soon enough.”

They make good time and distance and Melisandre encloses them with fire on three sides as they march steadily south.

But they are only human, after all, and they needs must regularly rest. They attempt to drag those whose turn it is to sleep behind them but it gains them little. In the end, they all know it is Melisandre’s fire that is keeping the Others at bay, although Brienne imagines she sees their eyes glowing like stars in the darkness behind the smoke and flames.

“There is intelligence somewhere with these creatures,” Stannis says grimly as they ride. “There is something we are missing, some hidden goal driving the enemy.”

Brienne frowns. “Why do you say that?”

Stannis’ eyes and voice are coldly dismissive as he says, “They stop their attacks. They have endless numbers of dead things to call upon to fling against us, they could crush us easily, yet they do not. Instead they send a wave of warriors—for lack of a better term—then fall back and give us time to recover.”

“They harry us just enough to keep us moving,” Jon says.

Jaime and Brienne share a glance. “Keep us moving south,” Brienne says flatly.

“The only direction we have,” Stannis says drily.

“No. You could go east if the dead things in the water allowed you to so do. Or west, to the other coast—but your path in that direction has been cut off as well.”

“They are herding us,” Jaime says.

“For what purpose?” Stannis demands.

“The Others bring winter and the night,” Sam says, “and appear to be the enemy of all living things. There are more of us in the south. Mayhaps they simply wish to get us all in one place so it is easier to kill as many as they can at once.”

“They don’t need to herd us anywhere in order to simply head south and kill more of us,” Jon says, his brow furrowed with a puzzled frown. “They could destroy us and head south unimpeded to wreak their havoc. In fact, we would help swell their ranks.”

Jaime’s smile is sharp. “But we are not so easy to kill, are we?”

“Your Oathkeeper and Widow’s Wail help, ‘tis true,” Jon says, “but we need more dragonglass and Valyrian steel to truly stand a chance against them.” He sighs. “Thankfully we at least received some dragonglass before Dragonstone fell to your King’s forces, Ser Jaime. The weapons we’ve fashioned from it has saved us more than once—but we do not have nearly enough of it.”

“The Others have no choice,” Melisandre says. “The end of this battle has been foretold in ancient prophecy. They cannot move past us, since we have Lightbringer, because the prophecy does not
allow it.”

Jaime’s expression is skeptical. “I agree the swords are magic,” he says, “but I refuse to believe our destinies have been set by words spoken hundreds or thousands of years ago. We survive, and the smallfolk under our protection survive, because of the actions we take now and not because we have abdicated our free will to fulfill a prophecy most of us do not even know.”

“You follow no gods, Kingslayer,” Melisandre sniffs. “You honor no oaths—Oathbreaker. What do you know of the importance of prophecy and the promises of a god?”

Jaime’s smile is cruel. “More than you, priestess, or at least I know when the rewards are not worth the cost. What price did you pay to perform your magic? Or is it that you demanded payment from others?” He turns to Stannis. “Where is your daughter, Lord Stannis?”

The muscles of Stannis’ jaw stand out in stark relief. “She is dead,” he grates out. “She died not long after we abandoned Winterfell. That is all you need to know.”

Brienne’s eyes widen with horror as she looks from Stannis to Melisandre and back to Stannis.

“No,” she whispers.

“King’s blood is needed for the rituals,” Melisandre says calmly, but she won’t quite let her gaze meet Brienne’s. “This is a war that demands much from us, else all will be lost.”

“King’s blood,” Jaime sneers. “These days it seems everyone has declared themselves king or queen at one point or another. My sweet sister was Queen for all of a week; does that give me king’s blood now as well?”

“Thoros needed no such thing,” Brienne says, frowning, before Melisandre can respond to Jaime’s question.

“Thoros?” Melisandre asks, confused.

“He is a red priest, serving Lady Stoneheart in the Riverlands. If he still lives,” Brienne says.

Jaime’s laugh is harsh and humorless. “These days it appears death no longer matters.”

Jon abruptly straightens on his horse. “It matters, Ser Jaime,” he says, “but now in ways no one suspects.” He puts his heel to his horse’s side and gallops away.

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Jaime

They detour to the Twins in order to reluctantly warn the Freys of what will soon be marching on their lands—if the Others have not already attacked them. It matters little to the smallfolk who follow them. They are heading south and that is all they know.

Jon and Stannis hope the stop at the Twins will be a chance to replenish their supplies and mayhaps even send warnings to the castles of the south. Jaime and Brienne are also desperate for news of what has happened since they left King’s Landing. Jaime wonders if the two Targaryens have met in battle, if the dragons are real, if King’s Landing still flies Aegon’s flag or if it now flies Daenerys’. He wonders what their fate may be if they ever return to the city.

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They travel steadily, the moon occasionally helping their torches light the way, and it is the Wildlings who keep their spirits high as they go.

Jaime marvels at their resilience and their almost-mad defiance in the face of the long night and the Others. They laugh long and loudly even when the moon is hiding her face and their battle cries are almost joyful as they throw themselves against the Others. They insisted on dragging along kegs of mead and ale against Stannis’ sour-faced objections and have refused to abandon them even as they curse the things whenever they get stuck in the snow.

Jaime can’t help but think that Tyrion would understand.

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It is brutally cold but when the moon is out, even if it just a sliver, the light it casts reflects off the snow and gives them some relief from the long night. It feels they have been marching forever towards an uncertain reception at the end of this journey. Jaime doesn’t know if he will be able to convince Walder Frey to open the gates but he hopes he can at least convince him to provide some food and safe passage across the Green Fork. But, Jaime thinks cynically, he doubts they will be able to convince the old man that they only chose this route because they wished to warn the Freys of the threat of the Others rather than because it is the only castle of any size left between the North and the Riverlands that might have food to spare.

“Do you think they’ve already been attacked by the Others?” Jon asks.

Jaime shrugs. “You know the Others better than I. We have seen no evidence the white walkers have attacked anyone outside of our circle.”

“Except mayhaps when those they’ve murdered arrive to battle us with their eyes shining bright,” Stannis says.

“Aye,” Jaime says and grimaces. “I suppose this means we will never be free of the Freys, even after they’re dead.”

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Brienne

They make camp in the midst of a high wind and swirling snow, when even their torches will not light their way. They wait out the storm for what Sam tells them is two days and to Brienne’s surprised relief, they have not lost anyone to the cold and the dark when the wind finally eases. The endless night still shows no sign of lightening, but there has been no attack for some time and though they are cold, the rest was welcome and needed, especially by the children and the pregnant women.

The ‘night’ before they must once more begin to march towards the Twins, the Wildlings take the opportunity to, as Tormund explains, complete some unfinished business. When pressed, he tells them there are couples who wish to be married before they die and one is forced to destroy the other.

“We don’t usually have a formal ceremony, ‘tis true, but these are unusual times, and that fucking mead and ale is getting heavy! So we shall have a celebration that will have the bards singing for years, har! First, there will be much fighting and struggle as the men try to steal their women and their women try to slit their men’s throats. After, we will have feasting and dancing, much ale and mead, and even more fucking, har! When we’ve sent the Others back to their frozen wasteland, there will be many strong babes born from this night!” He raises his arms and the Wildlings shout their agreement.
Jon’s lips curve into almost a smile while Sansa looks equal parts scandalized and intrigued.

Stannis simply looks sour-faced.

Not that it matters. The Wildlings build a bonfire and while the food at their feast is but thinly flavored onion and potato soup with sparse pieces of meat floating in it, it’s hot and plentiful, and with the free-flow of mead and ale, none truly care.

Brienne can’t help but admire the fortitude and resilience of these northern folk as they seem determined to enjoy themselves even more than usual. Surrounded by their burned lands, pursued by implacable enemies, tonight—tonight they celebrate new beginnings and new life and the heat of love and passion.

She watches as the couples perform what seem to be nothing less than a series of wrestling matches as the men attempt to overpower the women of their choice, and the women resist their efforts until they are finally ‘defeated’. The watching crowd cheers and hoots, shouts advice and encouragement, and raises their cups in toasts as one by one the struggling couples battle each other to a draw.

Stannis watches with his usual scowling expression and Brienne wonders, not for the first time, how he could possibly be Renly’s brother. Renly had always been laughing or smiling but she has yet to see a smile curve Stannis’ thin lips. She shudders to think of what it would take to finally make him laugh.

The Wildlings, however, have no such inhibitions. They are loud and boisterous, whether cheering the couples on in their struggles, or raising their voices in song and drunken boasts of their own prowess in battle and hunting and fucking.

Jaime leans close and says, “Would you like to be wed Wildling style, my lady?”

She gives him a horrified look and Jaime doubles over with laughter.

“I said wed, Brienne, not bed! Although the women seem happy enough so mayhaps we should try that, too—oof!”

He rubs the spot on his ribs that just felt the sharp edge of her elbow but if anything it only makes him laugh more as he scrambles to his feet and holds out his hand to her.

“Come, my lady, let us show these northern free folk that a southron couple is strong enough to survive their wedding customs. Besides, we haven’t sparred in far too long, nor have you lately left me in the dust with a well-aimed punch to the nose.” He laughs as she flushes red at the memory. “This time I will not let you off so light, wench.” He gives her a persuasive smile. “At the very least, it will give us a reason to drink even more of the Wildling’s ale.”

She hesitates, then sees the mocking gleam in Jaime’s eyes. She allows him to pull her to her feet and she feels ridiculous as the Wildlings realize what they’re doing and raise a great cheer. She blushes, but Jaime gives her hand a reassuring squeeze and his grip is strong and warm and firm even if his smile is teasing. And suddenly she’s laughing at the absurdity of it all and she says, “I warn you now, my lord, this will not be an easy victory!”

He gives her a wicked grin and says, “I would be disappointed if it were.”

They circle each other and it feels odd not to have a sword in her hand to spar with him, but then he rushes her, and they grapple with each other as the wildlings shout encouragement. They both end up in the dirt more than once but they eventually wrestle to a draw, the competition ending only when Jaime resorts to grabbing her by the hair and kissing her, making her melt against him. A great
cheer goes up and they break apart, panting from more than just their wrestling match.

“You’re ridiculous!” she yells in order to be heard over the exuberant crowd.

“But you love me anyway!” he shouts back and kisses her again.

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For the first time in her life, she dances with a smile and without embarrassment.

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When they finally make it to their tent, their coupling is frantic and fumbling and quick. Their bed is frigid after the heat of the fire, although they warm each other more than well enough. Still, when they finish, they hurriedly replace what little clothing they had removed before huddling beneath the blankets and furs.

“When winter is over, my lady,” Jaime says, shivering against her, “I will take you to a meadow where I will strip you naked and fuck you slowly, in full view of the bright heat of the sun, the way you deserve.”

He yelps a little as she presses her cold nose against his neck, then moans as she presses soft, nibbling kisses against his skin.

“I shall remind you of that promise, my lord, when the sun is high and hot and we have not seen snow in months.”

He buries his fingers in her hair and lifts her face so she looks at him. “Do you swear?” he asks, his eyes solemn.

“I swear,” she whispers, and he smiles as he kisses her.

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They continue their march a few hours later and after a few more days, they realize they are finally seeing the Twins because the blackness of their great walls is somehow thicker than the darkness of the night.

There are no lights.

A cold chill shivers down Brienne’s spine.

There are no lights at all.
Jaime

The Twins is eerily silent as they enter the keep. There is no movement and no sound, except for the beat of their own boots and horses’ hooves against the cobblestones and the sound of their own breathing.

Jaime tightens his grip on Widow’s Wail and finds himself startling at every sound and movement. He peers up at the towers but can see no movement and—thankfully—no pinpricks of blue light.

“You seem nervous, Ser Jaime,” Peck whispers behind him and he sounds almost amused.

Jaime shoots a quick glance over his shoulder. “You have seen too much battle lately and grown too used to the Others if you are so calm, Peck,” he says. The boy flushes and turns away and Jaime returns his attention to the walls surrounding the courtyard as they come to a halt in front of the massive door that leads to the Great Hall.

He dismounts and along with Brienne, Jon and Stannis, and a small number of soldiers and squires, holding torches high, he steps inside to find the remains of a bloody battle. Blood is spattered on the walls, pooled on the floor, and—Jaime looks up at the vast ceilings hidden by the black of endless night—likely there, too. Even in the torchlight they can see the blood is black and dried. Whatever happened here happened a time ago, but how long it’s been is impossible to determine because there are no bodies—not in the Great Hall and not in the immediate corridors of the keep.

Jon shakes his head. “We can go no further right now,” he says. “We needs must secure as much as we can of the castle and make camp. It will do everyone good to get out of the cold and the wind, even if it’s in a place like this.” He turns to Sam. “Set up the sleep schedule, Sam.”

“I don’t like this, Jon,” Sam says, his voice quavering. “It—it feels different, somehow.”

“Blood like this will have that effect,” Jaime says absently. He calls for his squires. “Assist with securing places for the smallfolk. Be as cautious as you can but work quickly.” He glances round, his face set in grim lines.

“Do you think the Others did this?” Peck asks, gray eyes wide in the torchlight, but the boy seems so calm, it worries Jaime that the long night and constant threat may be weighing so heavily, it might break him.

“Mayhap,” Jaime finally says with a shrug. “Mayhaps not. I mocked him, but Sam is right. This doesn’t feel the same.” He shakes his head. “Go. Pod, you’re with me and Lady Brienne. We’ll scout out the other castle.”
They only find more of the same: pools of blood and naught else to show this place once teemed with smallfolk and Freys.

“At least the food stores seem undamaged,” Brienne says as they inspect the granaries.

Jaime nods. “We hope.”

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The attack comes during Jaime and Brienne’s next waking period, when they are still transferring command from Jon and Stannis to Jaime and Brienne.

The men appear from nowhere and everywhere, and without warning. They are not white walkers—their eyes do not glow—but even amidst the chaos and confusion, Jaime realizes there’s a familiar cast to one or two that tell him these are not Frey men, but Lady Stoneheart’s. He recognizes some of them as those who watched while he and Brienne fought for their lives.

It adds strength and skill to his arm, which he’s grateful for, because he and Brienne are left with ordinary swords while Jon and Stannis draw Widow’s Wail and Oathkeeper. The steel blade feels like lead in his hand and he’s not as quick as he has become used to with Widow’s Wail. He pays for his lack of speed with a blade he doesn’t even see slicing into his left arm just below the shoulder.

“No!” he cries as his sword clatters to the ground and he uses his gold hand to block the next strike. It is Brienne’s sword—going clear through the chest—that stops his opponent from taking Jaime’s head. Jaime stares, wide-eyed, into the face of the stabbed man and realizes he knows him: the singer, Tom o’Sevens, one of the men they’d left behind on the Quiet Isle. Jaime’s mouth slowly sags open as Tom smiles, and it’s only then that Jaime realizes that the gaping wound left by Brienne’s sword is not bleeding.

Tom raises his sword, his smile widening—just as his head flies from his shoulders.

Jaime blinks at Peck, whose face is gray as he gapes at the bloodless body at his feet.

Jaime frowns at his horrified squire, who stands unmoving as Jaime presses his forearm against his wound and flexes his hand. The pain is excruciating, but he reaches for his sword and forces his fingers, slick now with his blood, to close round the hilt.

He will die with blade in hand, he thinks grimly. He glances round the courtyard where his men, led by Ser Addam Marbrand, are staunchly battling the intruders and Brienne is shouting at them to take the enemies’ heads or to aim for their hearts. He starts towards a knot of clashing swords and then he hears it: the cracking noise of the Others.

Suddenly, they, too, are pouring into the courtyard and he knows—knows with every fibre of his being—that they’re doomed. They’ll die here in this cursed place, surrounded by Freys of all the damned Houses, and uses his gold hand to hold his fingers closed on his sword as he turns to meet this new enemy.

Only now the undead creatures raised by Thoros turn away from their living foes, and the Others ignore the living completely. Instead, both kind of undead creatures fall on each other, with steel sword and ice sword, with hand and tooth and nail, and those who are destroyed explode in either a flash of flame or an explosive spatter of water.

Jaime’s jaw drops and he doesn’t know how long he stares at the spectacle before Brienne screams his name and pulls him after her.
They huddle in a small room where Sam takes the opportunity to crudely bandage Jaime’s arm before they return to the courtyard. Jaime knows he will not last long in battle, but he is Jaime Lannister, Lord of Casterly Rock, the Lion of Lannister and he will not let his men—or his wife!—face this threat alone.

But it’s almost all finished by the time they return. He and Brienne watch as Stannis beheads the last Other and the body dissolves into water before it meets the ground. Beside him, Jon stabs the last undead creature through the heart, and it burns to ash in a sudden flash of light.

Brienne

Brienne doesn’t know how long it is before she and Jaime finally repair to the room they’ve claimed as their bedchamber, and she can properly tend his wound. When the moon or the stars are in the sky, there is a sense of time passing, but when the clouds are thick, it is as if they are suspended in some never-changing, cold, dark hell.

Mayhaps they are already dead, she thinks and shivers with the thought.

“What is it, sweetling?” he asks softly, wincing as she finishes cleaning the gash left by the sword.

She shakes her head and mutters, “Well, at least we will now be able to mark the passage of time by how quickly your arm heals.”

He smiles a little at that, but his face is haggard and grim. “It will not heal quickly enough,” he says. “The next battle may be my last.”

“Not if you wield Widow’s Wail,” she replies and scowls so ferociously that he blinks then meekly nods.

“Do you know, wench,” he says after a moment of brooding silence, “I once imagined I might become known to history as a diplomat rather than the merely the Kingslayer? Goldenhand the Just, they would call me, and praise me for my wisdom.” He nods at his injured arm. “If I keep going this way, I will be known only as the Lannister with no hands at all.”

She abruptly tightens the bandage and he winces. “You are not going to lose your arm,” she snaps.

Jaime slides his right arm round her and urges her closer. “So long as I keep my cock, my lady, then I shall be happy—as will you!”

She smacks him lightly on his right shoulder. “Do not jest about this, Jaime. I won’t let you lose your arm, but you are not yet out of danger of infection.”

“We still have enough wine to boil, do we not? Or have the Wildlings found the wine cellar?”

“We have enough wine to boil despite the Wildlings finding the wine cellar,” she mutters and is rewarded with his chuckle. She gently brushes his hair from his forehead and cups his bearded cheek. She looks solemnly into his eyes and says, “I’m...afraid, Jaime.”

He lifts his mouth in invitation and she bends to kiss him, then leans her forehead against his.

“I’m afraid as well, wench,” he whispers, “but we cannot let fear control us.”
“Those must have been Lady Stoneheart’s men, raised by Thoros. He created an undead army to serve his leader.”

“Just like Qyburn, aye. But this means Stoneheart isn’t far away. And you must have noticed, Brienne: it was almost as if the Others blinded them to our living presence—and Stoneheart’s undead creatures seemed to blind the Others in the same way. Even those last two Jon and Stannis destroyed were too distracted with trying to kill each other to realize they were about to be die.”

“Aye,” Brienne sighs, “so it seemed, but I have no desire to put my faith in that ever happening again.”

“Nor I. I assume those white walkers were the dead Freys we could not find?”

“I pray so,” Brienne says, “else we have no defense here if the Others can find their way into the courtyards at any time.”

He nods and scowls. “These castles are too vast for the people we have to guard all their walls. We have to think of something.”

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Jaime

The next attack from the Others is small, almost as if they’re afraid they will be met once more with Lady Stoneheart’s undead followers. Or mayhaps they are simply the last of the murdered Freys.

They appear suddenly, and Jaime is—for once—away from Brienne, patrolling alongside Jon Snow and Josmyn Peckledon. But he at least has Widow’s Wail, and Brienne is right: he prevails against the enemy, even with his injury.

Jaime’s white walkers fall quickly and he turns in time to see an ice sword slice deep into Jon’s left forearm, splitting the fur and wool and boiled leather that covers it. It takes a moment for Jaime to understand what he’s seeing—or rather, what he’s not seeing.

He hears Peck gasp behind him, and Jaime’s blood runs cold.

No blood, he thinks as Jon stabs Longclaw into the white walker and it explodes with a burst, water droplets flying. Through the drifting, icy mist, the King in the North meets Jaime’s and Peck’s wide-eyed stares.

Jon frowns, then looks to his arm. His glance flies back to them, his eyes flicking from Jaime to Peck and back again.

“That wound might not be fatal,” Jaime finally says, “but it would bleed.”

Jon’s face is stoic. “Aye,” he says, “so it would.” He turns away. “Come with me, my lords.”

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Jaime and Peck listen without comment as Jon tells them of the rebellion of his Night’s Watch brethren, of his murder and his resurrection.

“Nobody talks about it,” Jon says. “Nobody asks about it. They all think I am the same as I was before, and I do not have the...” his sudden chuckle is grim. “I do not have the heart to disappoint them. Or horrify them.”
“Or give them cause to question which side you’re on?” Jaime says.

“Mayhaps that as well, although being returned to death may be more a blessing than a curse.” Jon’s eyes are solemn as he stares at Jaime for long, silent moments.

Then he says, “I do not sleep. I do not eat. I have no hunger of any kind; not for food nor drink nor women. I do not bleed when cut. There is no rhythmic beat in my chest. My wounds don’t heal; my cock doesn’t rise. I feel no fear, Kingslayer, but I also feel no happiness. I remember my love and devotion to my family and my brothers of the Night’s Watch. I remember passion and lust. But I feel...nothing.”

Jon pulls off his gloves and shows them his blackened hands.

“It is dead blood, pooling in my fingers. My feet look the same. I can still wield a sword, and I can still feel—in a way—the objects I hold in my hands.”

Jon silently pulls his gloves back on.

“I am as much an abomination as anything in your black cells, Ser Jaime, or any that follow Lady Stoneheart, or those that attack us with their eyes glowing in the dark. Death may no longer have any meaning, but it does have its price.”

Peck looks shaken as they walk back to Jaime’s bedchamber. Jaime puzzles over the depth of Peck’s devastation before remembering that the two men are of an age. In other times, they might have been contemporaries, facing each other in tourneys instead of standing side by side in a battle against creatures not seen in thousands of years.

Jaime pauses at the door and clamps a fatherly hand on Peck’s shoulder.

“What has happened to Jon Snow is tragic,” he says as kindly as he can. “There is naught we can do to help him, unless you wish to send him back to the death from which he was rescued.”

Peck’s gray eyes are startled and he shakes his head. He struggles to speak and finally says, “We need him, my lord.”

“Aye, we do, but not as much as he needs us, I think. He is not like the creatures Qyburn or Thoros created, nor like Lady Stoneheart, who is naught but Lady Catelyn run mad with vengeance. Jon still at least remembers he was human. Still is, in all but body. I believe he feels more than he realizes, else his state would not bother him so.”

“He will never father a child,” Peck says.

“Nor ever feel the heat inside a woman’s body again. I know. But fucking is not all there is to love, which you will discover when you’re older, and mayhaps he will find a woman who will love him as he is.” Jaime’s smile is bittersweet. “If I was so fortunate as to find such a one, surely he—a much more honorable man than I—will, too.”

Peck does not look soothed and Jaime gives him an encouraging nod.

“Go. Drink some ale with our Wildling friends. Or find a willing woman to share your bed. Or do both. I am going to join my lady wife and hopefully bring some warmth into her life that matches the warmth she has brought to mine.”
Brienne is already asleep, burrowed beneath the thick blankets as the fire burns fruitlessly against the cold of the room.

Jaime removes what clothes he dares then slides beneath the covers.

She is warm, at least, he thinks as he curls round her. She sleepily protests the chill he brings with him, but she turns, not quite waking, and pulls him close. He presses against her, eyes shut tight as he thinks on Jon’s words. Then he deliberately turns his thoughts to the woman he holds in his arms, and tries to burn everything he feels for her into his mind and body.

They stir much later as the fire dies down and the cold creeps beneath their warm cocoon. Jaime adds more fuel to the fire and Brienne’s awake by the time he makes his way back to bed.

He fucks her slowly, reverently, pressing feathery kisses against each scar and bruise, silently vowing that if he were to be brought back from death—no matter if by ice or by fire—he will remember Brienne, remember the love he feels in this moment, remember her honor and pride and loyalty and ridiculous knightly ideals, remember how she loves him, remember their dreams of a life once winter is over, remember, he tells himself as she gasps softly and clutches around him in her pleasure, remember, he tells himself as he moves inside her, remember, remember, remember—and save her if he can.

When it’s over and they’ve slipped back into their breeches and tunics and are curled together again beneath the blankets, Jaime quietly tells her about Jon.
Warning: Please don’t panic. However, we’re getting close to the end so I feel like I need to warn people that not everyone you meet in this fic is going to survive. If you thought they all would, well…you’re in the wrong fandom.

Brienne

“We can’t go on like this,” Jon says.

According to Sam, it’s been more than two weeks since they arrived at the Twins, and even with fresh supplies, a lull in enemy attacks, and respite from the cold and the wind, there is a growing sense of increasing danger. They suspect the Others are gaining strength and numbers in preparation for a final attack. Of Lady Stoneheart and her undead followers there has been no further sign. Whether it means they have managed to destroy them all or if that creature, too, is simply gathering strength and waiting, none can say.

“We needs must find a place to make our stand,” Stannis says. “Someplace where we can lure these creatures into a trap. Destroy as many as we can at once without replenishing their numbers with our own losses. Someplace where we still have walls to protect those who cannot fight.”

“There is no such place!” Sansa says sharply, her arm round Rickon’s thin shoulders, the boy appears to be sleeping, his head leaning against her. Behind her, as always, is a watchful Petyr Baelish. “There’s been no place since we left the walls of Moat Cailin. We should have made our stand there!”

They’ve been having this same argument for the last few days and Brienne wonders if the others are as tired of the circles they run in as she is. Jaime restlessly paces in front of the head table. They’re in the Great Hall which still bears the faint stains of Frey blood on the floor and walls. He turns abruptly to the others.

“There is a place—mayhaps not with walls to hide behind but possibly with weapons we can use against the Others. But it will take time to get there.”

Brienne frowns. “Where?”

“King’s Landing.”

“You’re mad!” Sansa blurs. “We have no friends there besides the fact that we will never make it!”

“We can make it, Lady Sansa, with Melisandre’s magic and the trees of the Riverlands,” Jaime says. “If there’s one thing there’s plenty of, it’s trees in the Riverlands. Once you cross the Green Fork, head cross-country towards King’s Landing. Melisandre will have more fuel for her flames, mayhaps even enough to sufficient heat to push the Others back a league or two.”

“The magic drains me,” Melisandre says. “I need more king’s blood and soon.”
“Then cut my veins,” Stannis growls, “and take what you need.”

Melisandre’s eyes are calm and calculating. “I need more than you are willing to spare, Your Grace.”

Even without moving, they all seem to slowly lean away from her and Sansa’s grip tightens round Rickon as Melisandre’s gaze flickers over them.

“Thoros never needed king’s blood,” Brienne says, suddenly furious with the red priestess, with those sitting at the head table, with the Others, with everything, “nor did he need to murder children for his magic.”

Melisandre’s expression does not change. “Thoros, then, is not a true follower of R’hllor. Who knows which god truly answered his call? Whatever magic he uses is an abomination, as proven by Lady Stoneheart and her army raised from the dead.”

“So resurrection is an abomination but the murder of an innocent child is not?”

Melisandre lightly touches the ruby at her throat and says, “Your anger saddens me, my lady, but it cannot change what needed to be done. If I had not sacrificed Shireen, we would all be marching south with our eyes shining like stars.” Her eyes flick to Jaime and back to Brienne. “The flames tell me I am not the only one in this room who has harmed a child.”

Brienne flushes and grits her teeth, hands clenched into tight fists. “Yet you are the only one who wishes to do so again. When this is over, sorceress, I will dearly enjoy striking your head from your body.”

Melisandre’s smile is mocking. “It will not be that easy, my lady, but I look forward to seeing you try.”

“Brienne,” Jaime says and Brienne turns her glare on him. “Like it or not, we still need her.”

She slowly unclenches her hands. “Aye. But we will not need her forever.”

The next day five of them stand on the bridge spanning the Green Fork: Jaime and Brienne, Jon, Sansa, and Stannis. They have slipped away from the ever-vigilant Melisandre and Petyr Baelish. It’s cold but the sky is clear, the moon shining on the turbulent water and glinting on the chunks of ice flowing beneath them.

“We needs must go to King’s Landing,” Jaime says quietly, as if he’s worried Melisandre and Littlefinger will overhear him even here.

“Why are you determined to lure us so far south, Ser Jaime?” Stannis says, his voice sharp with suspicion. “What trap are you laying for us?”

“After all we’ve been through these last few months, Lord Stannis, and still you do not trust me?” Jaime’s smile cuts like a knife. “There are alchemists in King’s Landing, my lord. There is wildfire. You remember wildfire, don’t you? It set your fleet aflame during the Battle of the Blackwater.”

“I know what it is,” Stannis grates out.

“My sweet sister commissioned more of it to be made when she planned the destruction of the Great Sept of Baelor. There may be some left or the alchemists are even now creating more. I know there are still caches of it left in the city, buried there by the Mad King and his pyromancers. And thanks
to Qyburn, there are also scores of undead creatures in the black cells—or were when we left. Given the effect Lady Stoneheart and her undead followers had on the Others, we will mayhaps be able to use those creatures as a distraction or a lure, something to draw the Others towards a specific place within the walls of the city.”

“What if Qyburn’s creations have been destroyed in our absence?” Brienne asks.

“I almost hope they have been,” Jaime says grimly. “I have no desire to unleash Ser Robert Strong on anyone or anything, not even the Others. But we are living in desperate times. If they do still exist then we must use whatever weapons we have.”

“What’s the plan, Ser Jaime?” Jon says. “There is no guarantee of wildfire nor even that those abominations still exist. It seems we will only be running to another place we will have difficulty escaping.”

“We draw the Others to King’s Landing and inside the city walls. All the Others, not just the dead creatures they send as their soldiers, but the intelligent ones—the ones directing the soldiers.”

Sansa frowns. “How can we do that? We don’t know if these intelligent Others truly exist or are even nearby.”

“They’re nearby,” Jon says absently. “I can feel them.”

Sansa’s head whips round and she stares at him. “You can feel them?”

Jon looks abashed. “I think it’s them. It’s a...a pull. Or a push. Or something. They’re close by. That’s all I know.”

Jon’s eyes meet Jaime’s and Brienne realizes what Jon is not comfortable saying: he feels these intelligent Others because he, himself, is an undead creature with intelligence.

Like calls to like, Brienne thinks, and is grateful Jon Snow is still fighting on the side of the living.

“So once we lure them inside the walls of King’s Landing, then what?” Stannis demands.

“Then we ignite the wildfire. The Mad King planted a cache in Flea Bottom and I don’t believe it has ever been found.”

“You knew of caches of wildfire beneath the streets of King’s Landing and never sent searchers to retrieve it?”

“And who should I have trusted with that information, my lord? My father? Your sweet brother? Either one, come to think of it. The oh, so honorable Ned Stark? Who most like would have ended up setting the bloody stuff off because he would have insisted on moving it himself. Assuming I could have convinced him that anything I said was truth, that is.” Jaime’s smile is bitter. “I killed the pyromancers who knew where it was hidden. I killed the Mad King so he could not send others to light it. And now it will be used to send these Others back from whence they came.”

“And if there is no more wildfire in the city?”

“Then we will take as many as we can with us before we join them.”

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They argue for hours—days, in truth—but finally they agree.
“We really have no choice,” Sansa says, and Jon nods.

Stannis grinds his teeth and says nothing.

Jaime nods. “Lady Brienne and I will take a boat down the river—”

“And pray there are no dead things in the water,” Sam mutters.

Jaime grimaces. “Aye. We’ll take the boat down the river. With this current and if no white walkers take us, we will only need a day or two to get to the Quiet Isle. We’ll then make our way to King’s Landing. Slow the Others as much as possible. Give us time to get to the city and get the smallfolk moving south, and to set the alchemists to working.” He scowls. “Pray we make it,” he says.

“Make it or no, it makes no difference,” Stannis says. “King’s Landing and its wildfire is the only hope we have. Live or die, it is where we will make our stand.”

Jaime

That night, Brienne says, not quite meeting his gaze, “You know we needs must leave Oathkeeper and Widow’s Wail behind.”

Jaime pauses in loosening his clothes for sleep. His eyes widen and his breathing stops. Then he shakes his head. “No.”

“No. You know they need all the Valyrian steel they can find, and if the swords truly are Lightbringer, then this is where they have to stay.”

“No, I said! I am finally the swordsman I used to be—you can’t—you can’t expect me to give that up again! You can’t expect me to lose that again!”

“I understand,” Brienne says, her jaw set in stubborn lines, “but we have no choice. They need those swords if they are to have a chance of making it to King’s Landing. We do not. You wield normal steel adequately enough for our journey.”

“No,” Jaime says again, only now he’s almost pleading, despite the fact he knows she’s right. “Ordinary steel feels like lead to me now. How can I protect you if I can barely swing a sword?”

“Oh, Jaime,” Brienne says. Her beautiful guileless eyes fill with tears as she cups his face. “You don’t need a sword to be my protector,” she whispers.

“A sword is all I have,” he whispers in reply.

“But it isn’t all you are! You have saved me with your words and your lies, your reckless acts and your promises and your love.” She presses a warm, gentle kiss against his mouth. “You will get used to wielding normal steel again, even if it will never be as easy or as magical as our Valyrian blades. Until you do, trust me to protect us.”

“If we leave them behind, we will never hold those swords again,” Jaime says, and aches with yearning.

“I know,” she says and for a moment her face contorts with grief and regret. “But we cannot take away their best weapons against the Others. And they’re Lightbringer, Jaime. They were never
meant for us.”

Jaime closes his eyes, pressing his lips tightly together. “I know.”

She slides her arms round him. “We will make it through to King’s Landing.”

“I know,” he says, and forces a smile to his lips. “If nothing else, your damned stubborn honor will melt all the snow and warm the air as we pass.”

She smiles at that and kisses him again.

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They leave the squires behind, slide a small boat into the water and step into it. They are taken by the current and all too soon the torches of the Twins disappear from sight and they’re alone in the dark.

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Brienne

While Jaime sleeps, Brienne warily watches glowing blue orbs beneath the water follow them for some time. The creatures appear small, however, and never try to stop their craft. Mayhaps they simply do not have arms, she thinks and shudders with distaste as she wakes Jaime for his watch. She tells him what she’s seen then huddles beneath the furs to get some rest.

The sky gradually lightens to a dark gray as they are pulled downstream then darkens again. By the time they reach the Quiet Isle, the sun is actually edging its way into the sky, and it’s the most beautiful sight Brienne has ever seen.

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The Elder Brother and Septon Meribald greet them with real pleasure and bustle them into the meal hall, placing them near the roaring fire. One of the cowled brothers brings them steaming trenchers of stew and mayhaps it’s because of the light outside, but Brienne cannot remember the last time she tasted anything near as good.

As they gobble down their meal, they tell the monks of all that has been happening in the North and their desperate plan to lure the Others to King’s Landing for one final stand against them.

“Have you heard any news from King’s Landing?” Jaime asks. “Do you know who sits the Iron Throne?”

The Elder Brother shakes his head. “We’ve heard nothing from the city since the Great Sept was destroyed.” His smile is thin. “I suppose because there is none there to remember us.”

Jaime puts down his spoon. “I will remember you, Elder Brother, if I live long enough.” He gives him a bitter smile. “If Cersei hadn’t stolen the throne, I would have tried to lure you to be the High Septon under Tommen, or at least asked you to come to King’s Landing to attempt to temper the High Sparrow. The Seven knows we desperately needed your wisdom.”

“I have turned my back on that world, my lord, but I thank you for your confidence.”

Jaime shrugs. “You may still want to follow with us. I doubt the mud flats will slow the Others.”

“We are far from the path your northern refugees will take to King’s Landing.”
“Aye, but how far the Others’ magic stretches is still uncertain. We also cannot warn anyone in their way. Do you still have ravens? Mayhaps—”

“Who will believe us, Lord Jaime, if they will not believe the ever-shortening day and ravens from the Targaryen who reclaimed the Iron Throne? Whether he still holds it is anyone’s guess.”

“No news from Dorne?” Brienne asks. “Or the Stormlands?”

“None. But there is much smoke in the air, no matter which way the wind is blowing.”

The sun sets just over an hour after it had risen and Brienne fights the urge to weep as it sinks below the horizon.

“Too long without seeing it in the sky,” Jaime murmurs and puts his arm round her shoulders.

She nods and wonders if it will rise tomorrow.

They make themselves useful to the Quiet Brothers by chopping and carrying wood for the fire in the meal hall, and join them for supper. The silence is broken only by the clatter of dishes and the sounds of people easing their hunger. When the meal is finished, the Elder Brother gestures for them to follow him and Septon Meribald. They walk to his quarters and once there, he turns to face them.

“You know the rules of the Quiet Isle,” he says.

Jaime chuckles. “You know we are wed, Elder Brother. Septon Meribald performed the ritual himself.”

“That was a desperate time, my lord,” the Elder Brother says, “and I recall you intended to have the marriage annulled as soon as you arrived in King’s Landing.”

“That wasn’t possible,” Jaime says, “and in fact, we were married for true in the Great Sept several moons before my sweet sister took the throne.”

Both Septon Meribald and the Elder Brother raise skeptical eyebrows.

“Tis true,” Brienne says but is interrupted by Jaime’s laugh.

“It is true,” he says with a grin and twinkling eyes, “but mayhaps both the Elder Brother and Septon Meribald would feel more comfortable if they performed the ceremony again.”

Brienne scowls. “That’s not necessary, Jaime.” She turns to the holy men. “Jaime was released from the Kingsguard by King Tommen and we were married four days later. I swear it.”

Jaime waves her words away, his eyes gleaming. “No, no, let us have them marry us again. Think on it, Brienne! This would make it seven times we’ve exchanged vows in one way or another. Seven! That would surely bless us somehow, don’t you think? And we can use all the goodwill of the gods we can garner!”

She scowls. “Does the one where I wasn’t awake truly count?”

“It counted in the eyes of the Seven…and the Quiet Brothers. It allowed me to share your cottage, after all, even if you didn’t realize it.” Jaime’s grin widens. “Think on it, Brienne. Seven times…”
She takes in his wickedly sparkling eyes and amused grin and finds herself nodding.

Septon Meribald and the Elder Brother take them to the sept and the Elder Brother looks smugly pleased as he stands witness to the ceremony.

They go through the wedding prayers and rites, and Brienne thinks it odd that this is the one that finally feels like an official wedding.

When the ceremony is finished and Jaime chastely kisses her, the Elder Brother takes her hand and says, “I said you would be good for each other.”

She blinks back a sudden, hot rush of tears as she nods, and for some strange reason, it almost feels as if she has received her father’s blessing as well.

They are escorted to the same cottage they had used when she was recovering from her wounds. The Quiet Brothers escorting them give them food and drink and then discreetly leave them alone.

After the door closes, Brienne smiles and says, “That was much more comfortable than our wedding in the Great Sept.”

Jaime chuckles as he strolls to her. “No watching high-borns, mocking us behind their hands?”

“No dress.”

He laughs outright at that, and pulls her close. “Whatever happens in the next weeks, wench, know I have never regretted a single moment we’ve spent together.”

Her smile turns sad and she lifts his gold hand. “You regret at least some.”

“It happened while we were together, true, but it wasn’t your fault. I don’t regret you at all.”

She blushes and ducks her head, and he laughs again as he bears her down on to the bed.

They dance through the night, although they spend long periods simply holding tight to each other, imprinting the feel of the other in their minds and, Brienne thinks, on their bodies. She silently vows that if Jaime falls and she lives, she will never willingly allow another man to be with her this way. No other man will ever be able to truly touch her through the shadow Jaime is leaving on her skin.

Brienne rests her head on his shoulder, sated for the moment, while Jaime strokes her hair.

He says, softly, “One or both of us may die before this is over.”

She closes her eyes against the truth of his words.

“I know,” she says.

“I want you to promise me that you’ll do your damnedest to live, no matter what happens to me.”
She lifts herself up to look into his eyes. “Jaime...”

“Swear it to me, wench,” he says, all fierce lion. “Swear it three times, or seven, or however many times I need to hear it. Do not sacrifice yourself for me.”

“I won’t swear to the last,” she says. “I will never willingly let you die if there’s something I can do to prevent it.”

He scowls, then sighs. “I knew it was too much to ask. Then swear you’ll do your damnedest to live, even if you see me fall.”

She blinks away tears.


“Then love me again before we must sleep. Even in these endless nights, the dawn comes too soon.”

She loves him with all the passion and fire he gave her leave to unleash, and when they’re finished, his weight heavy against her, his breath hot on her neck, she holds him as tightly as she can and whispers, “I love you, Jaime Lannister. Kingslayer, Oathbreaker, Goldenhand the Just. Lord of Casterly Rock. No matter who you are, what name you use, or what you’ve done. I love you and I’ll love you forever.”

He lifts his shaggy, golden head and looks down at her, his lashes spiked with tears.

“I love you, Brienne,” he says. “I’ll love you forever. You’re the most beautiful woman I’ve ever known.”

In the morning, she opens her pouch, looks at what’s left of her moon tea, and hesitates.

She looks over at Jaime, her eyes tracing the strong lines of his broad back as he fumbles with the laces of his breeches. Her gaze lingers on his trim waist, the firm globes of his buttocks, the strength in his long legs, and thinks it will all soon be over, one way or the other. She burns the sight of him into her memory because this might be the last time she ever sees him like this. Last night might be the last time she will ever know his body moving against and inside her.

He turns towards her, picking up his tunic, then pauses when he meets her eyes. He lifts an eyebrow in question.

She closes the pouch.

The Quiet Brothers give them horses, lead them through the half-frozen mud and send them on their way with saddlebags filled with what food they can spare.

They hurry towards King’s Landing, knowing the Quiet Brothers will warn whatever smallfolk they can reach. Whether they will be believed is something neither Jaime nor Brienne can do anything about. They needs must get to King’s Landing as soon as possible, both to send the people there scurrying as far as they can go and to set the trap they hope to spring upon the Others.

“At least we see the sun now, even it’s only for an hour,” Jaime says after they almost fall from the
backs of their horses to make camp for a few hours and allow their mounts to rest.

Brienne nods as she kindles a fire. “Is it also a little warmer as well?”

Jaime shrugs. “‘Tis hard to know when you’re cold all the time.” He uses his teeth to pull off his glove and critically examines his fingers. “Not yet black. That’s something at least.”

Brienne warms her own hands on the fire before she sets a small pot filled with snow on to a flat rock resting in the flames. She rummages in her saddlebag for onions and potatoes and two small portions of salted meat, and as she works, she says, “What do you think we’ll find when we get to King’s Landing?”

“A dragon of one kind or another,” Jaime says drily. “If it is Daenerys, I only hope they won’t kill us outright and we will have a chance to make them understand the danger that is bearing down on them.”

“And if we don’t?”

“They die, and most like return with our eyes like stars.” He gives her a humorless smile. “Either way, we will have one more battle, whether we wish it or no.”

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They are only a few miles from King’s Landing when they’re taken by Dothraki screamers.

*/*/*/*/*
Brienne

The young woman-child sitting on the Iron Throne is beyond beautiful. Small, silver-haired, dainty as a flower, Brienne’s breath is taken away. She hears Jaime inhale sharply and she slides a glance his way to find him staring at the woman, his eyes wide and dark.

She can’t blame him, she thinks, turning her gaze back to the Dragon Queen. It is all she can do not to fall to her knees herself.

“The infamous Kingslayer,” Daenerys Stormborn Targaryen says. Her voice is as beautiful as she. It’s soft yet fills the room.

“Princess,” Jaime says and Brienne shoots him a startled glance at his dry tones.

“I see you recognize me.”

“You look just like your father,” he says, “or at least the way I imagine he looked when he was sane.”

Daenerys’ face tightens with anger but she turns to Brienne. “And you are?”

“Lady Brienne,” Brienne says, and is pleased her voice is calmer than she expected. “Evenstar of Tarth and Lady Lannister of Casterly Rock.”

“Lady Lannister? I cannot imagine that sits well with our sweet sister.”

Jaime abruptly turns his head.

“Tyrion,” he breathes as a misshapen form comes into view, waddling towards the throne. There’s a scar crossing the Imp’s face where part of his nose used to be, but he’s dressed richly, and at his throat is a gleaming gold pin in the shape of a hand.

“Jaime.” Tyrion’s smirk is mocking. “I would say you look well, but I would be lying. Not that that matters to a Lannister.” He turns his gaze on Brienne and silently considers her, his mismatched eyes raking up and down her figure. “When I fled King’s Landing, my sweet brother was Lord Commander of the Kingsguard and enthralled with our sweet sister. I have returned to discover half the city burned to the ground, Cersei and her children held as prisoners, and now the Lord Commander of the Kingsguard has taken a wife?” He grins. “What in the seven hells has happened in my absence?”

“That is a question for another day, my lord,” Brienne says. “We have come from the North, where we have been battling a great threat. The Others have returned and you must fly to the northmen’s
aid. They—"

Tyrion snickers. “You have seen the dragons, then, I take it?”

Brienne blinks. “They are real?”

“Aye,” Daenerys says with a quelling glance at Tyrion, “and they are mine to command and mine alone. I care not what petty battles you have been fighting in the North. I am concerned with your arrival here, now, in King’s Landing, scant days after I claimed the Iron Throne.”

“Aegon?” Jaime asks.

“Alive. For now.” Daenerys’ smile is cruel. “He thought he could lure my dragons away from me. He is no true Targaryen, immune to fire. He almost died in Drogon’s flame.”

A grimace of distaste flashes across Tyrion’s marred features before he quickly smooths it away.


“Both decided to bend the knee,” Daenerys says dismissively. “Of course, I had already set their lands ablaze when they still followed the Mummer’s Dragon, but I am sure they will be grateful for whatever remnants I might decide to return to them.”

“We will bend the knee as well,” Brienne says, “but you must listen—the Others—”

Daenerys waves her words away. “I care not for your lies or oaths of fealty that mean less than nothing from your lips. But I have no direct quarrel with you, Lady Brienne of Tarth.” She turns her attention to Jaime. “Unlike with you, Kingslayer, I have no reason to treat your so-called wife cruelly. If she will denounce you and your marriage and swear fealty to me, I shall only imprison her for a short while before allowing her to find whatever life she may without lands or title to support her.”

“I shall not denounce my husband,” Brienne snaps before Jaime can do more than open his mouth. “And I shall speak for myself.”

Tyrion laughs. “Ah, I see you must have married her for love, sweet brother, and not simply as a shield to protect Cersei. Or did you not tell your sweet bride where your heart truly resides?” The Imp’s smile is cruel as he glances at Brienne then returns his attention to Jaime.

Jaime raises an eyebrow. “You have spoken with Cersei, I take it.”

“And she has told us much and more. Raved, in fact, but there were some nuggets of truth to be gleaned. She was...displeased to see me in her apartment.”

“No doubt,” Jaime says drily.

Daenerys pushes herself to her feet. Brienne sees a bright line of red open on the young woman’s forearm as she catches it on one of the swords, but the Queen does not flinch.

“Enough. Throw the Kingslayer into the black cells. Lady Brienne shall be imprisoned in Maegor’s Keep and I shall keep her there until she denounces her claim to the Lannister name and bends the knee.”

“The Others are on their way, Your Grace!” Brienne cries desperately. “There is much that needs to be done and not much time!”
Daenerys’ smile is both confident and cruel. “Let them come,” she says. “I shall meet them with dragons and my Dothraki screamers and my Unsullied. None can stand before me as the Free Cities found to their cost and as I’ve proven in every corner of this continent that I’ve touched. The Others—if they exist—will not last long against me.”

She barks an order to her guards in a language Brienne doesn’t understand but the meaning of the painful grip on her arm and the hard shove against her back is unmistakable.

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Jaime

Jaime is not surprised when Daenerys steps into his black cell some time later. He thinks it’s only been a day, but he’s long-since learned that measuring time while existing in darkness is as easy as re-growing his missing swordhand.

He squints up at the Dragon Queen through watering eyes as she sets the torch she carries in the wall bracket then looks round the dank and filthy cell, smirking.

“You are finally in a place that suits you, Kingslayer.”

“I’ve been here before,” he says with a shrug, leaning back in his filthy straw bed. “How fares my wife?”

“Your whore, you mean? She is certainly strong. I tasked four of my Dothraki with guarding her; they decided to rape her instead.”

Jaime scrambles to his feet, his face taut with rage and Daenerys laughs.

“Have no fear, Kingslayer, your whore is even stronger and more skilled than she appears. She killed two, maimed a third and gelded the fourth.” She smiles. “The Dothraki admire strength. It is the only thing they admire. They shall not try again.”

Relief makes Jaime’s limbs weak but he remains standing.

“You have not come simply to share tales of my wife’s prowess in battle,” he says.

“No.” Daenerys cocks her head to one side. “I have come to take another look at you, the infamous and hated Kingslayer. The man who broke his most sacred oath to betray his king. I have heard tales of you all my life…but you are not what I expected.”

Jaime raises an eyebrow. “And just what did you expect?”

“I expected someone... weak. Wasn’t it weakness that made you stab my father in the back? Your own craven nature that made you slit his throat? You were afraid you would be forced to die for your King, were you not?”

Jaime laughs. “I have never been afraid of death, Princess.”

“I am Queen.”

“So you call yourself, and yet you care nothing for the news we bring from the North and you’ve set fire to every place to the south of us, have you not? Have you burned the Westerlands as well?”

“I am a dragon. I bring fire and blood, not peace and understanding.”
“Is that how you shall rule, as well? What of the smallfolk? How will you feed the masses, Princess, if you’re too busy burning everything down? Or do you intend to be queen only of your barbarian hordes? They build no cities, grow no crops, and obviously cannot withstand the cold. I heard you had fifty thousand Dothraki when you landed in Dorne, but I know armies. The tents outside the city do not hold fifty thousand men. I saw piles of Dothraki bodies on our journey through their camps and into the city, and I saw more in the streets. How many have you lost since you’ve been in King’s Landing, Princess? Five thousand? Ten?”

Daenerys prowls round him.

“That is none of your concern,” she says, “but you’re right about one thing: I do need assistance ruling a realm that is so different from the Dothraki and the Free Cities—which I’ve left burning in my wake as well. Don’t you admire my strength, just as do my Dothraki? But Westeros is new to me and there are more smallfolk dependent upon my goodwill than I expected. Your sweet brother is my Hand but would you like to be my consort, Kingslayer, and rule by my side?”

He watches her warily. “I have no desire to rule,” he says.

“No desire to fuck the Queen?”

“I’ve already fucked one Queen,” he says. “There is no lure there.”

“I’ve seen the woman you call wife, Kingslayer. If you fuck her at all, it must only be in the darkness while you dream of another. You have no wish to set her aside? You must admit, I am more beautiful than she.”

He smiles, mocking. “She is my wife.”

“Easily remedied, now.”

“I will not set her aside, Princess,” he says, a mocking lilt to the title, “and she is more beautiful than you can ever be.”

“What of my sweet brother? What is he to you?”

“He is my Hand, nothing more. He told me you were sweet to look upon but his descriptions did not do you justice. He told me you were blinded with your lust and love for your sweet sister and you have never strayed from her side. But I am younger and more beautiful than she, and I do enjoy a challenge.”

Daenerys stops in front of him, close enough for her body to brush against his. Jaime struggles not to twitch away and instead stands still, looking deep into her purple eyes. He sees cold calculation, contempt, arrogance—but he does not see the madness that had gripped her father. He thinks of Dorne and the Stormlands and the Reach, all burning behind her as she forced her way to King’s Landing. Mayhaps she has simply managed to better hide her madness when seen face to face.

Daenerys lifts one delicate hand and places it flat against his chest.

“I hear you have only ever fucked your sister,” she purrs.

“Just as you were destined to only ever fuck your brother,” Jaime says drily. “How many men have you had between your thighs now, Princess?”
Her palm cracks across his cheek and he laughs. She hits him again but he catches her hand in mid-swing on the third blow.

“I deserved the one because I mocked you,” he growls, “and the other because of your father. But no more. Or do you think yourself immune from a broken neck?”

“If you truly think my guards would let you get away with harming me, then you are more of a fool than I thought, Kingslayer!”

He leans close, eyes glittering. “And you will still be dead.” He releases her, throwing her arm aside. “Bring your guards in here, Princess. My patience is thin and time is short and whether you believe it or no, I have no desire to leave the Iron Throne empty yet again, especially not with the Others mayhaps only days away from the city.”

“The Others! Such a pretty tale you have concocted with your whore!” Daenerys sniffs but she motions with her arm and the door to his cell swings wider. “Lock this behind me. Let him rot.”

It is Tyrion who arrives next, flanked by Unsullied guards. His head is held high and the Hand of the Queen pin at his throat glitters in the torchlight.

Jaime gives him a slight smile. “I’ve been expecting you,” he says. “I would offer you a place to sit, but the straw is already overflowing with vermin and there is no more room for you.”

Tyrion’s smile is mocking. “I’ve missed you as well, sweet brother.”

“I wish you would have missed our father before you disappeared.”

“Tell me, Jaime, what would you have done? What would you have done if our sweet father had done to Cersei what he did to Tysha?”

Jaime stares at Tyrion in silence, then says, “Have you come to gloat, Tyrion?”

Tyrion sighs. “Believe me or no, I thought you might have questions.”

“So many questions,” Jaime says, mocking, “including how all of us golden Lannisters went so wrong. But those are not questions you can answer. Nor do I believe you are here for me. What does your Dragon Queen want?”

“To her own surprise, she finds you...appealing. At least for now. If you denounce your marriage, bend the knee and agree to be her consort, she will let Cersei spend the rest of her days imprisoned at Casterly Rock. Queen Daenerys is even willing to consider allowing your children to live and mayhaps even join their mother in the future but for now she would keep them here as surety for your good behavior...and good fucking, I imagine.”

“And Brienne?”

“The Queen has no quarrel with your so-called wife. She would be freed, even if stripped of her land and titles.”

Jaime frowns. “I don’t believe your Dragon Queen is filled with lust for me.”

Tyrion shrugs. “She likes the pretty ones who are also somewhat dangerous. You murdered her father. You might murder her someday. It doesn’t get more dangerous than that.”
Jaime cocks his head to one side. “I doubt she wants me anywhere near her cunt, Tyrion. She’s toying with me, like a cat with a mouse. She is trying to convince me there’s a chance for mercy, isn’t she? Mayhaps she’s telling Brienne a tale of how I have leapt at the chance to share her bed, hoping to convince my sweet wife to betray me. Tell me, if I agree to her terms, will she name me consort or will she simply show her fangs?” He gives his sweet brother his knife-life smile. “The answer is still no, Tyrion.”

“You haven’t been here long. I’m sure the answer will change once you understand how much danger Cersei truly faces. I believe the Queen is looking forward to making those threats to you.” Tyrion frowns. “Lord Tyrell and his bannermen were quick to bend the knee once their false Targaryen finally fell. Tell me, why were you so ready to accept the boy as your King? You know he is not Rhaegar’s son.”

“Would you have preferred I bolster Cersei’s seat upon the Iron Throne?” Jaime asks, raising an eyebrow.

“Cersei? Tommen still lives.”

“Aye, and if Aegon hadn’t appeared when he did, I would have put him back on the cursed thing, the poor child. Aegon arrived when the city was in shambles. We had no food, not enough men and no way out.”

“Father never would have surrendered.”

“He wasn’t there. He died while taking a shit, Tyrion, in case you’ve forgotten.”

Tyrion’s smile is cruel, his mismatched eyes glittering with malice. “Tell me, sweet brother, am I finally the monster you always thought me?”

Jaime blinks, surprised. “I never thought you a monster.”

“You believed I murdered your son. My King.”

“I didn’t know, Tyrion! And if I had believed it, do you think I would have let you out of these cells?”

Tyrion’s eyes are steady on his, but there must be something in Jaime’s eyes or face or voice because Tyrion takes a startled step back.

“Yes,” Tyrion says slowly, almost wonderingly, “yes, you would have let me out of these cells.”

Jaime’s eyes flicker away then back, but he refuses to speak.

After a moment, Tyrion turns his back and hurriedly hobbles away, leaving Jaime frowning after him.

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He’s dragged from his black cell and thrown on the floor in front of the Iron Throne. Daenerys stares down at him, eyes shining bright with malice.

Jaime struggles to his feet, the chains heavy on his arms.

“Princess,” he says with a mocking bow.

Her eyes narrow. “I have offered your whore trial by combat.”
“She is my wife, Princess, a trueborn lady and a knight of the realm even if none call her so. I shall thank you to treat her with the respect she deserves.”

Daenerys’ smile is sly. “She has offered to fight a trial by combat for your life, instead.”

Jaime grimaces. “She would. The fool.”

“Tell me, Kingslayer, what have you done to deserve such devotion?”

Jaime thinks of all he is and all he’s done and shakes his head. “Not enough.”

“I quite like your Lady Brienne, the Evenstar of Tarth, even though she begs for the lives of a kingslayer and his bastard children. I will hate to watch her die.”

“You won’t have to,” Jaime says. “I refuse her as my champion.”

Daenerys’ smile is cruel. “Do you think that is your choice to make?”

“How long will you hold me in the black cells?”

“Does it already feel like forever?”

“Serving at the feet of your father felt like forever, Princess. The endless night the Others bring with them is forever. I do not ask the question because I am anxious to leave the cells, although I am. I ask because the Others are drawing ever closer and the smallfolk needs must be away before they arrive.”

Daenerys rolls her eyes. “You and your whore are dedicated to your lies at least. She, too, is forever nattering about the imminent arrival of the Others.”

“You have dragons, Princess. Take them and fly to the North, then tell me again how much we lie.”

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It doesn’t take long for time to lose its meaning, but then it has been that way ever since he and Brienne and the Lannister army arrived at Moat Cailin and lived forever without the sun.

Food arrives but if it arrives at regular intervals, he cannot say. It is always the same so he can’t even judge the passage of time by the type of gruel they bring him. So he eats and sleeps and pisses and shits and he...endures, as he always has, by going away inside.

He once fled to thoughts of Cersei while guarding a mad king. Now he dreams of Brienne. He thinks of them sparring and bickering and fucking. In his mind, he again presses kisses against every scar on her body, every bruise, and longs to soothe the wounds he cannot see. He thinks on her eyes, clear and beautiful and guileless, even when dark with lust and pleasure. He thinks on her freckled skin, on the shades of red she turns when she’s embarrassed or angry or aroused, and wishes he had been given time to learn them all.

He hears her laugh, shy and sweet, and sees her equally shy smile. He thinks of the sheer beauty of her and does something he has not done in years.

He prays.

He prays to the Seven, to R’hellor, to the old gods of the North, to any god that might exist and might take pity on a blackened soul like his and grant him the only mercy he prays for: Brienne’s life to be spared.
He prays for Daenerys to show Brienne mercy, for Tyrion to look at Brienne with a mind untainted by hatred for his siblings, for Brienne to denounce their marriage and abandon him to his fate.

He knows the last will never happen, but he prays for it anyway.

He prays Brienne will be spared from the Others and granted a long life, safe on her Sapphire Isle. He cannot quite bring himself to pray she finds another husband to give her the heir he promised her, but he prays for her happiness and if that means another husband, then he prays the man will love her truly and treat her well even as he hopes any other man who touches her will forever live in his shadow.

The last is cruel and selfish and he can’t help but chuckle a little in the inky depths of his cell. Because even here, waiting for death, he is still Jaime Lannister. Kingslayer. Oathbreaker. And a man with shit for honor.

The next time Daenerys arrives to taunt him, the light of the torches hurting his eyes, she says, “You never ask if your whore is alive.”

“She is my wife, and I have no doubt you would throw her body at my feet if she were dead,” he says, his voice raspy from disuse. “How long have I been here?”

“Almost long enough,” she says, then frowns. “The smallfolk seem inordinately fond of you and your whore.”

“Then deal with me sooner rather than later and send the smallfolk away from King’s Landing.”

She waves a graceful hand. “The Others, yes, yes, yes.”

“Have you flown North?”

“I do not follow your commands, Kingslayer.”

Jaime sighs. “How long are the days, Princess? How many hours do you see the sun in the sky?”

For a moment discomfort flickers across her face and he nods.

“I have had enough of this mummer’s farce,” he says. “We are wasting time we do not have. Put me on trial for all to see—or publicly execute me. But whatever it is you are planning, do it quickly, then turn your face to the North and save this realm you swear is yours by right of birth if nothing else.”

“It is mine!”

“I don’t care!” Jaime laughs, a harsh, cruel sound. “You are like everyone else, so blinded by that fucking monstrosity of a chair that you cannot see beyond it! Your realm is dying, you stupid, fucking—Targaryen! You call yourself queen, as if that is all it takes! You set half the realm on fire because of your ambition, and we’ve set the other half on fire in a futile attempt to save it—tell me, which side is more fit to rule the ashes that are all that will be left?”

“How dare—”

“I dare, Princess, because while I have little left to lose, the smallfolk stand to lose everything! You wish to cow me—fine, consider me cowed. You wish to break me. Fine. I am broken. Your
personal hatred of me is getting in the way of saving the people you are most needed to protect, although you have no love for them or the land.” He shakes his head. “Enough. I offer this bargain: my life for Brienne’s. I shall go quietly to my death if you swear to set her free, unharmed and with a sword in her hand and armor on her back. If you swear to that, then I shall say whatever words you need me to say—although I shall not denounce my marriage—and I shall die in whatever manner you deem fit. But the Others are on the march, whether you believe us or no. Tell me, Princess, how cold is it out there? Have many more of your Dothraki savages have died since I’ve been in this cell? You will want to burn their bodies, by the way, else they will turn on you when the Others arrive.” He laughs, harsh and angry. “Dragons and a queen and too craven to seek the truth.”

“Shut up,” Daenerys says and his cheek stings from the strike of her palm.

His grin is all feral lion. “Shut my mouth forever, Princess, but let us stop wasting time nattering in these cells. If I have been here as long as I fear, the Others are on our doorstep, and the smallfolk will be the ones who suffer most.”

Daenerys hesitates. “Why should I accept your bargain? Why should I give you Lady Brienne’s life in exchange for your own?”

“Because you’ve said it yourself: you have no argument with her. She has done nothing to you except marry the wrong man. And because I hope you have some shred of honor in you, elsewise, there is no true difference between us, is there?”

Daenerys glares then reluctant admiration softens her lovely features. “We could be a force to reckon with, my lord. Set your wife aside and agree to be my consort and I shall let you live.”

Jaime’s laugh cracks even louder than the sound of her palm against his cheek.

“I shall never set my wife aside, not for you, not for anyone. I will not break the promises I’ve made her.”

“That oath is more sacred than the one you swore to my father?”

“Yes,” he says without hesitation, “if for no other reason than she is more worthy of my honor than your father ever was.”

Her palm leaves a red mark and stinging pain in its wake but Jaime’s eyes are mocking as he grins at her. “Do we have a bargain, Princess? Do you swear to accept my life for Brienne’s?”

Daenerys’ purple eyes are cold as she nods. “I accept your terms, Kingslayer. Die for your brute of a wife if it pleases you. Tomorrow you shall face my justice—and my champion.”

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A/N: I’m working overtime this week and that, coupled with the fact that I need to rewrite a pretty pivotal section in the next chapter, means Chapters 36 and 37 likely won’t get posted until the weekend/next week. I don’t mean to leave you hanging—it just turned out to be a bad week for me time-wise. :(  

Brienne  

Brienne sits stiffly across the table from her good brother, her shoulders set, her back ramrod straight. It reminds her of the meal she and Jaime shared with Roose Bolton at Harrenhal and feels even more dangerous.  

She is angry and powerless and wishes she could put her hands round the horrid Imp’s throat and squeeze the life from him.  

“I am simply the messenger, my lady,” Tyrion says, amused. “Killing me will not free my sweet brother any more than it will prevent his trial on the morrow.”  

“If he wins, will your Queen free him?”  

Tyrion’s smile disappears. “He will not win,” he says flatly. “The Queen calls it a trial by combat but it is naught but a public execution. It is simply a way to flex her power over a populace that seems inordinately fond of both you and Jaime.” His smile returns, quick and sharp. “She does not appreciate being pestered by fools begging for your lives.”  

“We fought for them,” Brienne says simply. “Have you spoken with Ser Bronn?”  

“Bonn has been notoriously difficult to find. Mayhaps my sweet sister finally managed to kill him, even from behind the doors of her luxurious prison.”  

“There are none who would carry out her orders.”  

“Not even the undead creatures who once were housed in the black cells?”  

Brienne’s eyes widen. “You have not freed them! Have you?”  

“They are out of the cells, yes, but not free to roam the streets of the city! I am not mad, my lady, simply ruthless.” He gestures to the wine on the table. “And I have not poisoned the food or the wine. Your good health seems to matter to Jaime and it costs me nothing to humor him.” Tyrion makes a show of pouring the wine and taking a large gulp of it. “Tell me, are you with child? Did my sweet brother close his eyes and dream of Cersei long enough to perform his duty?” He laughs, harsh, cynical. “If he did, it must have been at her orders. I wonder if he has ever even taken a shit without her telling him to do so.”  

“Your brother is not the man he used to be,” Brienne says, her jaw clenched tight, her hands curled into fists.
Tyrion laughs. “He’s concerned for your welfare, and that’s something new. But do not fool yourself, my lady. He is not much different than he was before I was forced to leave King’s Landing and my life as a Lannister behind me. He still loves Cersei, so she tells me. He would still do whatever it takes to save her. I see no reason to doubt her.”

Brienne begins to laugh and thinks she may be forgiven if there’s a hint of hysteria to the sound. “You have been gone for a long time, Lord Tyrion.”

Tyrion sips his wine, his mismatched eyes coolly thoughtful. “I am here to warn you, Lady Brienne, that Cersei has slipped free of her guards and is even now making her way to the black cells to spirit our sweet brother to safety.”

Brienne’s eyes widen. “How could she possibly…you arranged it all?”

Tyrion shrugs. “I bear no love for my sweet sister, ‘tis true, and if I could torture her to death myself, I would do it and never miss a moment of sleep. But I find, to my horror, I still have some small measure of affection for Jaime, despite the betrayals he’s dealt me over the years. It was that fondness that made me plead with the Dragon Queen to refrain from actually torturing him. Not that she is a great fan of torture herself, truly.”

He waves his words away.

“Be that as it may,” he continues, “I am already a kinslayer, twice over according to some, and I find I have no stomach to watch my sweet brother die on the morrow. I also know he would never leave Cersei alone to face her fate. They came into this world together and they shall leave it together, after all. If I wish to save one, then I needs must save the other.” Tyrion’s smile is almost kind. “I rather like you, Lady Brienne. Anyone who can defeat four Dothraki in single combat is a force to be respected, if nothing else. Because I like you, I shall do my best to ensure the Queen does not blame you for my siblings’ escape, although it would certainly save my life if she did.”

Brienne stares unblinking while Tyrion speaks then says, “Jaime will not flee. Not without me.”

Tyrion frowns. “You truly believe he loves you, don’t you?” he says.

“I know he loves me.”

“How?”

“He’s told me.”

Tyrion doubles over, laughing. There’s an echo of Jaime in the sound and grief twists sharply in her belly.

Tyrion wipes tears of laughter from his eyes. “Ah, Lady Brienne—you should know by now that Lannisters lie!”

“Not about everything,” she says, her jaw set in a stubborn line. “Not about this.”

“You’re a fool.” Tyrion shakes his head then tosses back his wine. He slides off the chair and waddles to the door where he pauses and turns to look at her. “I shall remind you of your words when my sweet brother fails to meet the Queen’s champion on the morrow. He shall choose Cersei, my lady. He always has.”

* * * * *
Jaime

The torchlight is blinding. Despite himself, Jaime’s heart leaps when he hears a woman’s voice speaking in a harsh whisper but it plummets when he hears the rustle of skirts. His hopes drop even more when he sees, through squinting, watering eyes, firelight glinting off golden hair that has a glimmer of silver amidst the strands.

“Cersei,” he says, and is both surprised and somehow not surprised. “How did you manage to slip free of your guards?”

“Even Tyrell guards can be swayed to my side, Jaime,” Cersei says and preens. “Quickly, we don’t have much time.”

“Where are we to go?” he asks, curious.

“Wherever the first ship we can find will take us!”

*There are dead things in the water,* he thinks, and says, “There are no ships, Cersei. Much has happened since you’ve been locked in your chambers.”

Her eyes flash in the torchlight. “Locked in by you and that beast you married. Don’t think I’ve forgotten that!”

“Then why are you here? Flee without me.”

Cersei’s face crumples and she flings herself into his arms. “I can’t leave you to die, Jaime! I love you, why have you forgotten that? I’m sorry I pushed you from the Kingsguard, forced you to take on Casterly Rock, forced you to pretend to be married to that ugly cow.” Her beautiful eyes fill with tears. “I can’t gain my freedom without you, and freedom wouldn’t be worth having without you by my side.”

He laughs. “No?”

“No! Together we will raise an army and come back and push that Targaryen bitch from the Iron Throne and take back what is mine!”

The Iron Throne, he thinks bitterly. “What is it about that fucking chair that drives everyone mad for it?”

“It is ours, Jaime, yours and mine. We’ve suffered for it. We’ve earned it. Now kiss me,” Cersei pleads, desperate. “For all that we were to each other, for all that we will be again. We can go to the Free Cities, and live as husband and wife! Who would know enough to tell us nay?”

Jaime considers her, sadness in his eyes. He sees now that the last few years have dimmed Cersei’s legendary beauty, but if he looks closely, he can still see the bright, golden girl he had loved so desperately, so foolishly—so destructively. For so long, he believed she was the only good thing in his life, his sanctuary as he stood guard over a mad king and his atrocities, his refuge from everyone’s contempt after he killed his king.

He mourns for the illusion he’d loved. He mourns for the reality that stands in front of him, tears filling her Lannister-green eyes. But now he sees not his lover, but his sister, the way he should have always seen her.

“No, sweet sister,” he says, and puts his hand and stump on her shoulders. He pulls her closer and gently presses his lips to her forehead.
“No,” he says again, and, “no.”

Cersei’s face hardens and she wrenches herself away from him.

“Then die tomorrow, sweet brother, and know I shall shed no tears for you.”

“I did not expect it of you,” he says. “Good-bye, Cersei.”

She turns and calls angrily for her conspirators and in this light, she is almost as beautiful as she used to be. In this light, she looks almost like a queen.

The door clangs shut on her back, beautiful and haughty, and Jaime feels a pang of regret.

Her footsteps and the glow of the torches fade into the distance. Jaime stands in silent darkness until finally he says, “Did you hear it all?”

“Most,” his brother’s disembodied voice floats from the opposite direction of Cersei’s path.

A lantern is unshuttered and Tyrion steps in front of the cell door. Jaime gives him a rueful smile.

“Have you come to gloat?” he asks.

Tyrion’s eyebrows rise. “You did not go with her. Are you so determined to die in front of Daenerys?”

“I swore a vow. I struck a bargain. The price is too high if I choose to break my word to your Dragon Queen.” He shakes his head. “I am not afraid of death, sweet brother. With the Wall fallen and the Others on the city’s doorstep, I may be the lucky one—if you promise to burn my body afterwards.”

“I doubt that will be an issue,” Tyrion says drily, “unless you take the escape I have arranged for you. There is a ship, willing to flee with you to the south. If you come now, it will leave immediately.”

Jaime considers the offer. There are dead things in the water but the Others still haven’t arrived; mayhaps they could keep ahead of them if they leave now. “Is Brienne aboard?” he asks.

Tyrion pauses, frowning. “No. She is too heavily guarded. I cannot slip her out of her room.”

“I could ensure Cersei is on it instead,” Tyrion offers.

“Cersei is not my wife.”

Tyrion stares hard at him, then turns his head and speaks low, in a language Jaime can’t quite understand. Then his sweet brother opens the cage and steps inside.

“Why would you offer me an escape?” Jaime asks, tiredly curious.

Tyrion smiles an almost feral smile. “A Lannister always pays his debts.”

Jaime slowly grins then throws back his golden head and laughs.

Tyrion scowls, his gaze searching his face. “You are truly finished with Cersei,” he says, wondering.
“As my lover, yes,” Jaime says, “but she is still my sister and the mother of my children. I would not directly harm her.”

Tyrion smiles. “You have learned to play with words since I’ve been gone.”

Jaime shrugs. “You were gone, and one needs to uphold the family reputation.”

Tyrion looks at him, his eyes solemn. “I have missed you,” he says.

“And I, you, sweet brother,” Jaime says and opens his arms.

The brothers embrace, and Jaime closes his eyes as he hugs Tyrion tight. He had never thought he would hold his little brother again and he savours the moment.

Slowly, reluctantly, they part.

“Will you not take the escape I have arranged for you? Please, Jaime.”

Jaime smiles sadly. “I cannot. You know your queen will kill Brienne in my stead if I make good my escape. My life for hers—that is the bargain. And once this foolishness is complete, mayhaps your queen will finally turn her attention to the threat that is bearing down on you.”

Tyrion sighs. “None has managed to withstand the dragons and the Dothraki and the Unsullied. Queen Daenerys is confident the threat will be dealt with quickly once the Others arrive.”

Jaime chuckles. “She has not seen what the Others can do.” He shrugs. “Mayhaps she’s right and the dragons are all she needs.”

After a moment, Tyrion says, “I had not known the bargain you struck.”

“Known? Or believed that I would care enough for my lady wife?”

“Rather that you cared more for your lady wife than Cersei. That is not the brother I left behind.”

“I chose your life over Cersei’s desire for revenge, sweet brother. I was more this man than you knew.”

“And Lady Brienne has simply brought him to the surface?”

Jaime simply smiles. “I would ask a boon,” he says.

“Depends upon the boon.”

“Brienne may be with child.”

Tyrion’s face hardens. “Do you think I would kill another of your cubs, sweet brother? Kinslayer that I am?”

Jaime’s chuckle is bitter. “You are not the sibling I fear in that respect, Tyrion.”

Realization dawns. “Cersei?”

Jaime nods. “I fear her mind has become fully unhinged, and I don’t know what she will do if Brienne is with child. I would ask you to protect mother and child.”

Tyrion raises an eyebrow. “But not just the mother?”
Jaime smiles without humor. “Brienne managed to fight off four Dothraki intent on rape. She will have no difficulty dealing with Cersei if need be. But not if she’s vulnerable due to pregnancy or child birth. And do you truly think Cersei would allow my legitimate child to live?”

“Do you think Cersei will believe it is yours?” Tyrion asks drily.

“I dare not guess what Cersei would believe,” Jaime says and Tyrion chuckles.

“Do you wish the child—if there is one—to be my heir?” Tyrion asks. “I mayhaps will be able to persuade Daenerys to allow it once enough time has gone by.”

“And assuming you can convince Daenerys to let the child live, of course.” Jaime shakes his head. “I would not presume that you may not yet marry again and father a child of your own. Indeed, I hope you will. And there’s Tommen—a sweet, kind boy still, in spite of his mother.”

“And a bastard.”

“If your Queen decides to make it so. The poor child only played with his stamp and seal. He is not to blame. I hope your queen will find it in her to spare his life and Myrcella’s, and let them keep the illusion of their Baratheon name. If she does, I hope you will find a kind man for Myrcella to marry and allow Tommen to be your heir until you have a son of your own. Casterly Rock should remain in Lannister hands, even if they are called Baratheon.”

Tyrion is silent for long moments.

“I will try,” he says finally. “To save Tommen and Myrcella, and any child your lady wife may still bear for you.”

“That is all I ask. Thank you, Tyrion.”

The brothers fall silent, not uncomfortably so, until Jaime says, almost wistfully, “Will you tell me what befell you when you escaped from King’s Landing?”

Tyrion grimaces. “It is a sordid tale,” he says, “and I am not always the hero.”

Jaime chuckles. “We make our own heroes, sweet brother, and I am no man to condemn your actions. Come. Let us pretend I am not in a prison cell and that I will live past the morrow. Let us pretend we are simply ourselves, two men long separated, who wish to share tales and laughter long in to the night.”

“Let us be brothers?”

Jaime nods. “One last time.”

Tyrion stares sadly at him, then sits on the cold floor.

“Let me tell you about the time I jousted while riding a pig.”

They talk long and longer, and when Tyrion finally leaves, Jaime hugs him again, kisses his ravaged face, and whispers, “Long life to you, Tyrion, my sweet brother, and happiness.”

Tyrion simply hugs him more tightly and leaves without another word.
When Jaime finally sleeps, he dreams of Bran.

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Jaime

Jaime opens his eyes to gray fog and Bran, watching him with a puzzled frown.

“Enough, my lord?” Jaime asks with a mocking bow. “Have I paid my debt to you, at least partially?”

Bran’s smile is bitter. “Your debt to me can never be repaid, my lord. I have gained much since you pushed me from that tower, true, but I still long for my family and my legs.” Then he sighs. “You have shown me my answers, Kingslayer, and for that I thank you.” His expression turns thoughtful. “What will you dream of now?”

“If the gods are kind—or if they exist at all—I will dream of my wife and all we might have shared. I will dream her safe and well and happy, home on her Sapphire Isle.”

“And if I do not allow it? If I decide instead to make you dream of her death?”

“My life for hers, my Lord Stark. That is the bargain I struck with the Dragon Queen. I will not dream of Brienne’s death because I have bought her life. I shall gladly die on the morrow so long as she lives.”

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He dreams of Brienne.

He dreams he is whole, his gold hand made flesh, and he duels with her, once more one of the best swordsmen in Westeros. He dreams they dance, crossing blades of flaming Valyrian steel, and it is a clash retold in songs throughout the ages.

Then he dreams them dancing in another way, her body soft and yielding, her touch gently strong, and the love they share is the stuff of legends.

Finally, he dreams of Brienne with a sweat-soaked brow, lying in bed, a fragile bundle held safe against her breast, and her bottomless blue eyes shine with love as she smiles up at him.

He wakes to moisture on his cheeks and a guard’s rough shove.

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Brienne

Brienne opens her eyes to gray fog and the boy who reminds her of Catelyn Stark.
“I did not expect to sleep,” she says.

“There is naught you can do now but sleep,” the boy says.

“Why have you done this? Why did you need to see all that we have done and all that we mean to each other?”

“All that has happened has always happened,” the boy says. “The past and present and future are as one for me now. But I needed to understand...there is a moment I see, a moment with you and the Kingslayer, and I needed to understand why and how it could possibly be.”

Brienne scowls in confusion. “What is this moment you see?”

“I cannot say, my lady. I cannot tell you because I have never told you.”

“I...I don’t understand.”

“It is not for you to understand.” His smile is kind although his eyes hold a wolf’s cunning. “I was promised that time would be as one for me, but I find there is a moment where my vision stops, and there are only fleeting glimpses of what lies beyond it. There’s a moment where I feel like fire made flesh, and another, of you and the Kingslayer, and I could not understand.” Now his face and smile turn bitterly sad.

“I once dreamed of being a knight,” he says, “of doing such great and honorable deeds, songs would be forever sung about me after I was gone. I cannot even see if any will know of what I’ve become.”

Pity twists in Brienne’s stomach. “When is the moment your vision stops?”

He gives her another sad smile, and she realizes how young he truly is.

“Now,” he says and gently pushes her away.

Brienne jerks awake, scrambling for a sword she cannot find and wonders what woke her.

She listens intently, but all is still and quiet, so quiet, she can hear her guards snoring outside her door.

She relaxes back against her pillows and thinks she will not sleep again, that she needs to sit vigil for Jaime, pray for his soul even if she cannot dare hope any god will grant his survival. Her eyes drift closed even as she thinks it.

This time when she sleeps, she dreams of Jaime.

She dreams he is whole, his gold hand made flesh, and he duels with her, once more one of the best swordsmen in Westeros. She dreams they dance, crossing blades of flaming Valyrian steel, and it is a clash retold in songs throughout the ages.

Then she dreams them dancing in another way, his body lean and hard, his touch gently strong, and the love they share is the stuff of legends.

Finally, she dreams she has a sweat-soaked brow, lying in bed, a fragile bundle held safe against her
breast, and his bright green eyes shine with love as he looks down upon them.

She wakes to moisture on her cheeks and a guard’s fist pounding on the door.

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There is no sun when she leaves her tower prison.

Brienne wonders how far away Jon Snow and his rag tag army is, and how far behind them follow the Others. The scent of smoke is strong in the air but she doesn’t think it’s any worse than when they first arrived back in King’s Landing.

She is escorted to the tourney fields outside the city walls and finds the area transformed from when she faced Ser Theodan of the Warrior’s Sons. Wooden rows of seats, rising high, have been built surrounding a large, open area. There is a raised dais at one end, a large, ornate chair in the middle with three lesser chairs to the left and one smaller, less ornate chair slightly behind and to the right of it. Brienne is shoved on to a seat several rows up but still at the very edge of the arena on the right of the dais. She and her guards are the first ones there and she watches as servants scurry round, lighting enough torches to push back the black of the sunless day, assisted by the fitful glow of the moon when it’s not hidden by clouds. As they work, a slow trickle of smallfolk cautiously make their way into the seats. Brienne shivers and is vaguely grateful for her breeches as she stares blindly at nothing, waiting for Daenerys and her followers to arrive.

The seats are overflowing when the Dragon Queen and her companions finally walk into the tourney grounds and towards the high dais. The snow crunching beneath their feet is loud as the crowd falls into an almost unnatural silence. Brienne realizes the wind is bitterly cold and she feels a spurt of vicious pleasure when she sees Daenerys shiver. For a moment she fervently hopes they all freeze the moment Jaime dies, then she remembers that their only hope now against the approaching Others—mayhaps a few days away; mayhaps only a few hours—are the dragons Brienne still has yet to see.

The Imp climbs to stand before the chair slightly behind Daenerys’ right side and Brienne turns her glare on him. Tyrion’s eyes flick over her but his face is expressionless and for a moment, Brienne wonders if Cersei and Jaime truly have fled together. She almost hopes they have. At least then Jaime might live just a little while longer, even if he chose Cersei and left her alone to face the wrath of the Dragon Queen.

There’s a stir as Cersei walks into the arena flanked by burly Dothraki guards and followed by Tommen and Myrcella. The former Queen’s face is as set as marble and just as cold, her head held high as she strides to the chair beside Daenerys. She gracefully sits and the Dragon Queen raises an eyebrow and smirks while the children stop in front of their chairs and wait.

Daenerys glances round, arrogant and proud. She speaks for several minutes but her words barely register on Brienne. She hears Kingslayer and Oathbreaker, Aerys and murder; fire and blood, but she can make now meaning out of any of it. Finally Daenerys’ lips stop moving. Her gaze rakes over the crowd and rests briefly on Brienne, then she glances at one of her commanders, gives a slight nod and sits.

Brienne waits, her stomach tightening. She’s horrified Daenerys would subject the children to watching Jaime die; she dreads seeing what’s about to unfold before them all; she’s terrified of the knowledge that the Others are on the march; and she’s sorry there is nothing she can do any longer to protect anyone.

She lowers her head and blinks away her tears.
The best she can hope is that Daenerys will allow her to die battling the Others when they arrive...and that they will burn Jaime’s body before then, else she may be forced to kill the man she loves after all.

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It’s not long before Jaime is shoved into the arena. He’s dirty and unarmed and not dressed nearly warm enough for the cold but someone—Tyrion?—has allowed Jaime to wear his gold hand. He slowly walks into the arena as he scans the crowd until he finds her.

She sees him relax and his lips quirk into almost a smile as his gaze lingers on her. She cannot look away and then she frowns as a dark shadow passes over them, blocking the moon that has finally broken free of the clouds. She thinks she must have imagined it until the shadow passes over again and as one, everyone looks up.

“No,” Brienne whispers as she finally understands what she’s seeing. She stares, numb, as the shadow soars over them one last time and then the beast descends, gracefully landing at the far end of the arena.

The dragon is huge, cream and gold, beautiful and deadly in its beauty. Brienne feels her limbs turn weak as she stares at the thing and knows—knows—she’s about to be forced to watch Jaime be burned alive.

Brienne is dimly aware of the profound silence of the watching crowd and wonders if the smallfolk will break with panic when they truly understand the dragon is now so close it can burn them all just as easily as it can destroy the lone man facing it in the arena.

And then the silence is broken.

With laughter.

Brienne tears her eyes from the dragon to gape at Jaime, now almost doubled over with mirth. Brienne glances fearfully at the dais and sees the growing anger on the Queen’s face, the unchanging expression on Cersei’s face, the horrified fear on the children’s faces as Tommen and Myrcella clutch at each other’s hands. But it is the mix of amusement and pride and love and regret and yearning and loss on Tyrion’s face that truly catches her attention. With a shock, Brienne realizes Tyrion truly loves his sweet brother, and yet he will do nothing.

Not that there is anything that can be done. The time to stop this madness is long past.

She turns her gaze back to the arena. Jaime’s still laughing and the crowd is still silent, unmoving, watching the spectacle with terror writ on their faces.

“You are truly your father’s daughter, Princess,” Jaime shouts, his eyes glittering, his smile cutting like a knife. “Did you ever hear that story? How your sweet father named fire his champion for a trial by combat? I see now you have done the same, only in a form with more flesh.”

He turns to the dragon and spreads his arms, his gold hand glinting in the torchlight.

“Come, sweetling,” he calls to the dragon, “let us dance!”

“No,” Brienne says, but it is only a croaking sound that no one else seems to hear. “No,” she says again and then she’s moving, startling her guards and she leaps in to the arena before anyone realizes what she’s planning.
She’s still rolling in the frozen dirt and snow when she hears Jaime’s shout and she’s terrified she’s too late as she scrambles to her feet.

“No, Brienne,” he cries again, and he’s there, but now he’s no longer amused, he’s terrified.

“Get behind me!” she yells.

“Are you mad? It’ll kill you!”

“Get behind me,” she says again and tries to move in front of him.

“You lumbering great wench!” he roars in frustration even as he darts round her, keeping between her and the dragon. “I am not worth your life!”

“I shall decide that, Jaime!” she snaps even as she takes a closer look at the dragon. She feels her bowels loosen but she refuses to disgrace herself. She is a warrior and a knight, she has fought more undead creatures in the last weeks than she cares to remember, she once stood as champion for a Queen, and she shall die with Jaime rather than allow him to face such a fate alone.

“By the gods, Brienne,” Jaime snarls as they continue dancing round each other, “you swore an oath you would do your best to stay alive, even if I were to fall!”

“And you swore an oath that wherever we go, we go together!”

“Not into death! I made a bargain! My life for yours!”

“I won’t let you die for me, Jaime!”

He curses then grabs her, pulling her into a quick, searing kiss. “Go, you great, hulking fool! I love you too much to have you die for me!”

“And I love you too much to let you face this alone!”

They glare at each other and then Brienne slowly realizes the very texture of the air has changed. She blinks at Jaime, whose eyes are slowly widening, then they both cautiously turn their heads to find the dragon right next to them, watching them with its head tilted to the side, like a curious cat confused by its prey.

They stare silently into the dragon’s eyes and through the gibbering terror that has gripped her, Brienne is mesmerized by the creature’s beauty. Cream-coloured with gold markings and huge eyes the color of molten gold, it watches them with bright interest as it carefully extends its snout and sniffs at them.

“Gods, please don’t let me disgrace myself in front of all these people,” Jaime mutters beneath his breath and Brienne squeezes his arm in agreement but doesn’t take her eyes from the huge beast who’s now tilting its head to the other side, as if it cannot understand quite what it’s seeing.

“Brienne,” Jaime says quietly, urgently, “if I step to the side while you back away, it will hopefully follow me. It’ll give you time to get away.”

“I won’t leave you.”

“Please, Brienne! Don’t die for me. Live for your Sapphire Isle and the smallfolk—and memories of me.”

She scowls even though she doesn’t take her eyes from the dragon.
Then there’s a shout and a thud and she and Jaime jump round to stare at the sword that has landed in the frozen dirt of the arena. It is, unfortunately, too far from their feet to easily reach and Brienne sees Daenerys lift herself in her chair, her expression thunderous.

Then there’s another thud and as one, they and the dragon turn their heads to look at this second sword and then the dragon turns its gaze on them and Brienne swears—swears—there’s amusement in the animal’s eyes.

Then there’s another shout and another thud. Then another. And another.

And then it’s a storm of swords, falling into the arena. Brienne catches a glimpse of one of the men as he tosses his sword, and registers that he’s familiar and has another weapon at his waist. Her gaze flies to the dais to see a livid Daenerys angrily speaking to Tyrion, who is spreading his hands in a helpless shrug.

By the time they stops, there’s a score or more swords on the arena floor, and no time to wonder if this was the mood of the moment or if the Imp or Bronn—if that was indeed him she had glimpsed in the stands—had somehow conspired to at least give Jaime the dignity of dying with a sword in his hand.

She turns her gaze back to the dragon, who’s still watching them both.

“I’ll grab two—”

“You’ll never make it,” Jaime says, “and we couldn’t do much damage even if you could. Now, leave me, Brienne. Let me give the Targaryen what she wants.”

She shakes her head—and then she hears it.

“No,” she whispers.

“Brienne—’

“No, listen, Jaime!”

He frowns and listens, too, and she hears it again: the crack—crack—crack of the Others and the blood drains from her face.

The dragon lifts its head, turning it this way and that, searching for the source of the sound.

And then the ground begins to shake beneath their feet, and there’s a deep, low rumbling that increases in intensity until it culminates in a horrendous splintering coming from behind the city walls. They stare towards the dark mass of the Red Keep, bathed in moonlight where it crouches high on Aegon’s Hill, and watch as it breaks apart like some giant egg, the walls falling in great plumes of dust, and rising from the destruction, amidst the dust and falling towers, giant wings unfurling—

“Dragons,” somebody in the crowd whimpers.

“Those aren’t my dragons,” Brienne hears Daenerys cry, and Jaime and Brienne exchange a horrified look.

“There were dragon bones beneath the Red Keep,” Jaime says.

Brienne hears the screams of the crowd in the darkness behind the torches and then the Others are


upon them. The crowd erupts in screams and panicked scrambling as the white walkers and their ice spiders leap into the arena and onto the back of the dragon almost before Brienne can blink.

In the next blink, Brienne and Jaime are running towards the dragon, scooping up swords and dodging the flames as the creature bucks and turns, roaring, burning those white walkers racing towards it but the three ice spiders on its back cling on while the Others struggle to stab their ice swords into the dragon’s body.

Jaime and Brienne scramble up the sides of the dragon and Jaime loses his sword when he drops it to anchor himself as the dragon unfolds its wings and tries to fly. But now there are Others clutching at its legs and it returns to the ground with a bone jarring thud. From the corner of her eye, Brienne sees Daenerys’ Dothraki guards rushing into the arena and she turns and finally reaches the dragon’s back. She slashes at the nearest ice spider then thrusts her sword into Jaime’s hand.

He looks confused only for a moment then he, too, turns his attention to the Other while Brienne leaps from the dragon’s back, scoops up another sword from the arena floor and clammers back up, something made easier because, like when they faced Lady Stoneheart’s followers, the presence of the dragon seems to blind the white walkers to the living humans. Brienne sees Jaime has used that to his advantage even though his ordinary steel and less skilled left arm has little effect on the creatures.

Together they manage to dislodge one ice spider and its white walker while the dragon’s bucking and short, flying jumps finally causes a second to slip off where the Dothraki warriors swarm over it. Brienne and Jaime then turn their attention to the last Other still on the back of the dragon.

Brienne slashes at the ice spider while Jaime attacks the white walker itself and she sees Jaime instinctively use his gold hand to block the Other’s ice sword as the dead creature strikes at the dragon’s back. Jaime drives his sword into the white walker’s stomach and she follows with a sword blow to the head and both spider and walker dissolve into icy pellets of water.

She hears Jaime curse and she turns to see him gaping at his gold hand, now melded to the Other’s ice sword.

Jaime gapes at his hand, caught on the ice sword just above the hilt. He shakes his arm, but the sword doesn’t budge. He meets Brienne’s confused gaze and they both shrug as they shift their footing while the dragon spins again, flame shooting from its mouth. Above them, a gigantic black dragon drops from the sky to land in front of the dais and swoops away again with Daenerys clinging to its back.

A harsh laugh makes Jaime startle round, both swords at the ready, but he relaxes when he sees Tyrion, climbing up the dragon’s side.

Tyrion’s grin is almost manic. “I see you weren’t lying after all,” he says as he joins them.

Jaime rolls his eyes. “What are you doing here?” he says.

Tyrion’s eyes flick to the sword in Jaime’s right hand. “This is my dragon,” he says. “Is that thing made of ice?”

“Your dragon?” Jaime demands, then, “yes.”
To Jaime’s confusion, Tyrion begins to laugh, almost as hard as Jaime had laughed when he first realized what Daenerys had planned.

“For hands of gold are always cold,” Tyrion says, and laughs harder. Then, still chuckling, “You’ll have to get off. I’m taking Viserion to face the dragons that have risen from the bowels of the Red Keep and I am the only one who can ride him.”

“No,” Brienne says. “You need to take us over the walls into King’s Landing!”

“Even if Viserion will allow it, what do you think you can possibly do there?”

“We have to get as many smallfolk out of the city as we can,” Jaime says. “There’s wildfire hidden everywhere beneath King’s Landing and we planned on luring the Others inside the walls and setting it off. But not if there are still smallfolk inside!”

Tyrion curses as he runs to the front of the dragon and sits astride the animal’s neck. “I can only hope Viserion will allow it but get behind me, and hold tight to my waist.”

“No, Tyrion,” Jaime says even as he does as his sweet brother asks. “If we fall, we’ll take you with us.”

Tyrion’s smile is blinding. “I won’t fall, Jaime. I’ve finally learned to fly.”

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They fly.

Jaime’s only solace is that Brienne screams first.

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Viserion lands by the ruins of the Great Sept and Jaime almost falls to the ground, the cursed ice sword still melded to his gold hand.

“What are you planning?” Tyrion asks.

“Where are the undead creatures you found in the black cells?” Brienne asks.

“In the Dragonpit,” Tyrion says and they look at the dark hill rising in the distance. In the moonlight, they see a steady stream of Others already making their way through the streets towards it. “Do you want me to let them out?”

“No,” Jaime says, and curses the fact his knees still feel like water beneath him. “The longer the Others are distracted by those creatures, the more time we will have to empty the city.” He puts his living hand on his brother’s knee. “Try to keep the dragon fire away from the city unless it’s absolutely necessary. Tell your Dragon Queen we need as much time as you can buy us.” He squeezes Tyrion’s knee in farewell but Tyrion grabs his hand before Jaime can step away.

“How will you get out?” Tyrion asks, urgent.

Jaime’s smile is bitter. “As ashes, if need be.”

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Tyrion and Viserion fly to join the giant black dragon dancing in the sky, roaring flame against the ice dragons that emerged from the Red Keep. Jaime watches them go then he and Brienne run down
Visenya’s Hill into the heart of the city.

Everything becomes a blur.

They tell everyone they find to get to the gates, to pass the word, and they fight any Other they meet. Jaime discovers that the ice sword in his right hand is almost as effective as Valyrian steel and with a sword in each hand and Brienne by his side, they make short work of their enemies.

They stumble upon Tristan and other Gold Cloaks and send them to corral whoever has enough courage to race through the neighborhoods, to pass the word for the smallfolk to get to whichever gate they can, to get out of the city.

They get to the docks too late and Brienne screams ‘no’ as they see the ships and boats casting off only to be dragged beneath the waves by pale creatures whose tentacles gleam in the moonlight. There’s nothing they can do and they return to King’s Landing through the Mud Gate to continue clearing out the city.

They soon realize there are fewer and fewer smallfolk in the streets and Jaime doesn’t know if they’ve made it out or if they’re hiding or if they are now swelling the ranks of the Others, who are single-mindedly forcing their way towards the Dragonpit. His attention is caught by a small burst of flame atop Rhaenys’ Hill and realizes the Others have finally reached Qyburn’s creations.

“We’re out of time,” he mutters to Brienne.

She looks up at the Dragonpit then turns, her blue eyes even larger than the dragon’s had been. She nods, and they run towards the Lion Gate.

The arriving Others are endless, clogging the gates even as the ice spiders pour over the walls like water. Jaime and Brienne fight their way through the gate, slowly creating a path for the smallfolk brave enough to follow.

He tries not to think of all the smallfolk they’re leaving behind, those who are huddled in cellars and other cubbyholes, children hiding beneath beds, those running in circles, changing direction with each new Other they see and ending hopelessly lost in the winding streets. He tries not to think about it; he has no time to think about it, and he blinks the sweat from his eyes to clear his vision as they finally break through the gate.

Brienne

The wooden seats Daenerys had had built are now in splinters and the tourney grounds are teeming with running smallfolk, Others heading towards the city, and living soldiers, doing their best to stop them.

She catches a glimpse of Samwell Tarly, Heartsbane flashing against a white walker that from this angle almost looks like Randyll Tarly with glowing blue eyes, and there, in the distance, are the flames of Oathkeeper and Widow’s Wail. High above, the dragons birthed from the belly of the Red Keep glisten blue as ice in the moonlight while three living dragons, darker than the night, dance round them.
Smallfolk pour from the gates and she can’t allow herself to think of all the ones they’ve missed, hiding in a corners, crying to the gods for rescue. If she does, she’ll break and she refuses to give up the fight until she falls from an Other’s sword.

She stands beside Jaime, who still has an ice sword in his gold hand, and he wields it while he also swings a steel sword in his left hand. Giddy with fear and grief and growing exhaustion, she has the sudden hope that she lives long enough to hear the songs that will be sung about this night.

Because it is always summer in the songs, she thinks and struggles against a bizarre urge to laugh until she cries. It’s always summer, the knights gallant, the maids beautiful and the sun is always shining.

She’s going mad, she thinks, and blinks the sweat from her eyes.

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Jaime

The smallfolk are still running, still pouring from the gates, and the Others keep coming, bounding past them, scrambling up and over the walls.

They fight the ones they can, and Jaime’s vaguely aware that the flaming swords are edging closer until Jaime finally sees that it’s Jon Snow and Davos Seaworth wielding the blades.

“Stannis?” Jaime grates out as he stabs an Other with the ice sword and it dissolves into water. Jon and Davos simply shake their heads.

Jaime nods and there’s a sudden lull, and they stand, panting, the four of them, waiting for the next wave.

They jump back as a dragon lands with a ground-shaking thud in front of them. This one is a deep green and its bronze colored eyes stare fixedly at Jon Snow, who simply stares back, his own gray eyes wide. The dragon sniffs him once, twice, three times then turns and exposes its neck in invitation. Jon steps forward but Davos grabs his arm.

“What are you doing?” Davos hisses.

“What I’m supposed to do,” Jon says, shaking off his grip, and scrambling onto the dragon’s back.

The dragon turns and looks at Jaime and Brienne, and Jaime sees a wolfish intelligence gleaming in its eyes—and then the dragon is gone, flying back to join its kin high above the city where another ice dragon disappears as Jaime watches. Suddenly the cracking of the Others gets louder and, as one, a wave of undead creatures charge towards the city, ignoring the living humans still in their paths.

Jaime automatically bends round Brienne while she tries to bend round him, protecting each other from the stampede. They are bumped and shoved but not attacked, as if the creatures simply cannot be bothered with taking the time to kill them in their rush to get inside the walls of King’s Landing.

Then the stampede is over as suddenly as it began and they slowly lift their heads. They look towards the city walls in time to see the last of the Others disappear inside, and in the sky, the last of the ice dragons disappears in the bright, combined flame of the living dragons.

Then each dragon rises, silhouetted against the full moon, and then as one, they dive towards the city.
“Tyrion,” Jaime breathes, “Tyrion—”

The ice sword in Jaime’s gold hand melts and the sword in Davos’ hand explodes into dust at the same moment the green fireball erupts within the city walls, its flames reaching for the moon.

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Brienne

Those who escaped the city ease their way back to stand and watch the city burn. The fire warms them, at least, even as what they see chills them to the core.

King’s Landing seems to burn as one, a single ball of fire rising above the walls of that city of hills and lies. The fire dances against the black of the sky, green and white and gold and black, and in the twisting flames, Brienne imagines she sees dragons and their riders, horses and wolves, bright swords crossing blades, and eyes shining like stars. She watches, her hand tight in Jaime’s, their arms round Tommen and Myrcella’s shoulders—they were brought to Brienne by Bronn with Cersei being pulled behind him, and as Brienne watches the flames, she begins to cautiously hope she will actually have time to learn how they survived.

But she’s still not certain if the sun will return or if the burning of King’s Landing will be the last light ever seen in the world.

So they stand and watch: she and Jaime, Tommen and Myrcella. Cersei stands a little apart from them under the watchful eyes of Ser Bronn and Lord Willas. The former Queen does not look away from the burning city. Brienne wonders what the woman is thinking as she watches everything she ever wanted burn to ash and Brienne shivers when she realizes there’s a smile playing at the corners of Cersei’s mouth.

To Brienne’s relief, Podrick Payne is there, standing now next to Sam, who is still holding a sword hilt, all that remains of his Valyrian greatsword, Heartsbane. The pouch Sam used to carry the glass candle is hanging at his waist, filled now with dust. Some small distance from Sam stands someone Brienne at first thinks is Josmyn Peckledon but on a second look she sees it is instead a slender, boyish girl clad in breeches and armor. A Wildling, she thinks, and turns her gaze back towards the dying city.

The fire burns and lowers and dims as the sky slowly, reluctantly lightens, and Brienne’s hopes rise along with the sun.

With the dawn, what little is left of the city can be seen through the fallen, blackened walls and in the growing light, the watching survivors creep towards Jaime and Brienne and those who stand with them.

It takes a moment before Brienne realizes Davos is gently urging the children away and then Lord Willas Tyrell and Samwell Tarly are in front of them, each with swords in hand.

Her eyes widen.

And then Sam and Lord Willas kneel—Willas with some difficulty—and lay their swords at Jaime and Brienne’s feet.

One by one, all the survivors surrounding them do the same.

Brienne’s mouth slowly sags open as the wind stirs the remains of King’s Landing. Gray ashes float through the air and drift down upon their heads.
And in the breeze, beneath the smoke, is the scent of spring.

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Epilogue

Chapter Notes

A/N: I just want to say that if I actually had you worried that I was killing either Jaime or Brienne, I’m going to take that as a compliment! I wasn’t trying to psych anybody out; I just didn’t want to spoil the fic. :D On a more serious note, I also didn’t know how to warn for character death when the characters are main characters in the universe but are minor characters in the fic.

Transcript excerpts from the documentary *The Age of Magic*, air date September 18, 2016:

Scholars still debate whether the Age of Magic truly existed. If it did, deciphering the truth of how it ended is no easy task. The burning of the Citadel library a thousand years ago destroyed many of the texts written by contemporaries to the alleged events and the few texts that do survive claim that all magical objects were destroyed at the same moment the last of the ‘dragons’ died. Surviving artifacts are ambiguous at best: a pouch full of dust claimed to be the remains of a magical glass candle; sword hilts that supposedly held blades made of mythical Valyrian steel. Modern historians now struggle to decipher the past using only surviving folk songs, what few texts remain, the family histories of the royal and noble Houses, and the geologic and archaeological records.

On one thing all are agreed: there was a Great Burning that touched every stronghold in Westeros, creating a thin layer of black ash throughout the geography of the continent. This thin layers separates the Age of Magic from all that comes after. The true cause of the Great Burning is, even now, the subject of spirited arguments and the occasional fistfight.

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Records of the events of that time are not entirely lost. There still exist a number of songs that tell of the end of dragons. They tell of a beautiful exiled princess, of three dragons, and the destruction of an ancient, magical and royal family line. There are songs about the last King in the North, and the near-extinction of the Starks of Winterfell. There are songs that tell of the great love between the first Lannister King and his beautiful Queen. There are songs about creatures brought back from the dead by the power of ice and those brought back by the power of fire. There are songs of flaming swords wielded by heroes and cities razed to the ground when fire and ice met in their last great battle.

And there are songs that tell of a great wizard for whom the past and present and future are as one, sleeping in a secret tomb far in the North. He watches over Westeros in his dreams and will wake again if magic and dragons stir once more in the world.

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King Jaime I Lannister and his queen, Brienne I of Tarth, were the last to take the Westeros Throne in the Year of the Six Monarchs and are the only co-rulers in Westeros history to govern the realm without the situation devolving into civil war. The current monarchy and most of the existing nobility can trace their lineage back to the first Lannister King and his Queen. But while they are confirmed historical figures, no physical evidence about them has ever been found—until now.
Last month, a double tomb was discovered bearing their names above the titles of Goldenhand the Just and Brienne the Beauty. Who knows what secrets will be revealed about the Age of Magic and its end once excavations are complete?

Jaime and Brienne lived as happily as can be expected when two strong-willed warriors are forced upon a throne neither desired and are then faced with ruling a realm devastated by war and winter.

The first several years after the death of magic were more difficult than any could have imagined, with the realm in tatters and most high-born Houses decimated or extinct. When winter arrived again only a year later, many more Westerosi were lost to panic and despair.

But the sun never entirely left the sky and winter only lasted for several months, and when the days began to shorten the following year, fewer people panicked. By the third year of regular seasons, the realm began to cautiously hope that the long winters of the past were gone—at least for a while.

Jaime and Brienne finally fulfilled the oath they had sworn to Catelyn Stark when they returned Sansa Stark to what was left of Winterfell—the only one of her Lady Catelyn's children to do so. When Sansa finally married again, her husband took the Stark name because, as everyone knew, there must always be a Stark in Winterfell.

They never told Tommen and Myrcella the truth of their parentage and in the aftermath of the battle between ice and fire, there were none left who truly cared. Tommen was given Storm's End and ruled it and the Stormlands as a Baratheon. Myrcella eventually married Willas Tyrell and became Lady of the Reach.

Jaime and Brienne’s love for each other became the subject of many songs that told of their devotion. Their heroics fueled even more. Songs were sung of the two facing dragons, and wielding flaming swords against creatures raised from the dead. The records of the decisions they made during their reign did not lend themselves to songs but were felt throughout the kingdom nonetheless.

Jaime and Brienne had a clutch of children, the oldest born just seven months after the destruction of King’s Landing. Their children inherited their father’s quick wit, their mother’s honor, and both parents’ skill with swords. Some were as beautiful as their father while others were as ugly as their mother, and their parents loved them no matter how they looked.

Jaime finally fulfilled one of his vows to Brienne when their third child was granted the name of Tarth and given the Sapphire Isle and the title of Evenstar.

When first Jaime and then Brienne died, they were buried together in a shared tomb that read Goldenhand the Just and Brienne the Beauty, and what was truth and what was lie was lost to history.

And as for Cersei, well...
The night is dark and full of terrors.

Cersei staggers to the wine jug and refills her goblet with an unsteady hand. Her quarters are comfortable enough, she supposes, here in this tower room—cell, really—at what remains of Stokesworth. She imagines she can hear them in the Great Hall, laughing at her, mocking her, and she wishes—wishes—she had a sword and could cut them all down. That upstart sellsword would be the worst, she knows, but Jaime—her twin, her sweet brother, the other half of her—would be laughing with them, twisted away from her by that brutish bitch he married.

At least she knows she’s finally beaten that fucking prophecy. Her children live and the younger, more beautiful queens are both dead, and even better: the Imp, the valonqar, is also dead. She watched the burning of King’s Landing with a smile, knowing there would be no hands wrapping round her white throat to choke the life from her. Even now the thought makes her smile.

She gulps down the wine and pours more.

She will get out of this prison, she thinks viciously as she drinks. She will find a way. She had wept for days when his sweet brother’s whore had stolen her throne and given it to the false Targaryen, but the time for tears is past.

She is Cersei Lannister, a lioness, the Queen, dangerous and beautiful, and she will—

There’s a slight rustling noise behind her and she turns, frowning.

Rats? she wonders and shudders. She will beat bloody whoever is supposed to clean this room if there are rats or other vermin here with her. She thinks fondly of Qyburn and his ability to deal with those who she discovered were problems. If only she had given him his chance to have that Brienne—the Beauty, they call her, she thinks with a sneer; Beast more like—as his...guest as he had wanted. She should have given him the bitch when he first asked for her.

She wouldn’t be here if she had.

She turns back to her wine then hears the noise again.

She spins round and through blurry eyes sees a figure slinking from the shadows. Tall, slender, just a boy, really, with a smile curving his thin lips, and eyes as cold as ice.

Her mouth sags open, eyes widening.

“Who are you?” she demands and hates the fear she hears in her voice. “What do you want?”

He draws closer and she backs away. His grin only widens and he stalks her round the room until he has her cornered and there’s nowhere left to go.

Realization dawns, a cold, hard lump in her stomach. “Did he send you?” she spits. “The Imp? He’s dead now and I will pay you more to let me live.”

The stranger’s mouth is a gaping, dark hole as he laughs. “The Imp didn’t send me, Cersei. You’re just the last one on my list.”

He places his hands round her neck and begins to squeeze.

Cersei struggles but she’s weakened by wine and horror.
“Who are you?” she manages to gurgle.

Now the stranger’s face comes into focus and she now sees the feminine cast to the features, the familiar gray eyes and the smile is feral and wolfish on such a young girl’s face.

“I’m no one,” the girl says and laughs but Cersei knows who she must be now.

Oh, she thinks and the world turns black.

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Author's Notes

Author’s Notes:

General:

This fic started its life as one scene in an inn that was supposed to be a little PWP ficlet. If you can tell me what happened, I’ll be forever grateful.

This fic is my official head!canon of where the story is going. That said, there are only two things I’m 100% certain about:

1. Jaime and Brienne are going to get married and bang like bunnies; and
2. I am 100% wrong about absolutely everything else – LOL.

Okay, I really do hope Jaime/Brienne will somehow survive end game and end up on the throne of Westeros (whatever it’s called when it’s all said and done), but I also know it’s extremely unlikely. That, however, is why there’s fanfic. ;D

Dear GRRM:

By the gods, I get it. I wrote one sliver of canon-compliant fic and I took a “Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are Dead” approach to the story, and it’s taken me 6.5 months and the struggle to get the storylines to mesh up was mind-blowing (and I completely ignored a lot of storylines).

Also, the struggle to not write from other POVs was very real. I had started making story notes about what was happening in each area of the world and I had to stop because I was writing whole other fics. Although I have to admit, Dany in Dorne would have been fun to show.

Which brings me to:

Dany:

Yes, I made Dany more cruel and heartless than she seems to be in either show or books. However, I tried to think of what she would be like if she decided to embrace her ‘fire and blood’ persona and this is what I came up with. I also came from the premise that we mostly see Dany from her own POV and everybody’s the hero of their own story. But whether somebody’s a hero or a villain usually depends on which side of the story you’re on. If somebody invaded my country with dragons and a shitload of rapists/pillagers, they would not be a hero to me, no matter who they were.

I also tried to think of just how successful Dany would actually be, landing on a continent that’s already half-destroyed by war and with 50,000 barbarian horsemen in tow. There’s not a whole lot left to pillage and keeping 50,000 of those assholes happy and under control won’t be easy. She also has no supply lines; how is she going to keep her troops fed?

The final thing I considered is the fact that winter has arrived and her troops are only used to warm weather and don’t even have clothes for winter. Seriously, besides the food, how is she going to clothe them all?

Anyway, I didn’t really delve into it very much in the fic, but all I could think was that Dany’s like Napoleon invading Russia. The only thing that saves her, really, are the dragons that let her advance more quickly (north, though!) than she could have without them.
All of this is a long-winded way of saying that if GRRM has Dany easily conquer Westeros with minimal loss of troops, I will be severely disappointed.

The Ending:

Yes, I know dragons are fire made flesh and should therefore be immune to the wildfire that consumed King’s Landing. But the riders would not be (Dany is not immune to fire in the books, according to GRRM) and the idea of riderless dragons running around just was out of scope for this fic - LOL.

I also approached the dragons/Others question with the following logic: IMO, both the Others and dragons are weapons of mass destruction. What happens to most weapons of mass destruction once they’re triggered? They tend to destroy themselves as well as whatever they’re targeting. I then used the premise of Mutually Assured Destruction and the idea that these are the last magical creatures alive in the world and finally twisted it into “one can’t live if the other one dies”.

Another long-winded way of saying that it wasn’t the fire that killed the dragons, but the destruction of the Others. And no, the characters in this fic will never understand that because…how could they?

This idea probably doesn’t align well or at all to canon but…fanfic??

Cersei:

I just find it somehow satisfying to think that Cersei will meet her end and never truly understand who the Another, Younger and More Beautiful truly was (Brienne). And I actually quite like Cersei as a character; I just find it amusing in a twisted kinda way. *shrugs*

Finally:

Thanks to everyone who’s taken this ride with me—whether you were there when I first started posting or if you’ve only read the story now. I hope you loved the journey as much as I loved creating it!

Oh, and that scene that started it all? It ended up on the cutting room floor. Go figure.

Please [drop by the archive and comment](#) to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!