**Before Destruction**

by renaissance

**Summary**

It is a truth universally acknowledged that a young governess must be in want of a more exciting way of life – and if she does not want it, it will nonetheless seek her out. When a new family moves into the area, Brienne Tarth finds her comfort turned on its head, sweeping her away into a life of society, intrigue, and romance. As she balances between pride and destruction, will she lose her way, or will she adjust to the changes around her?

**Notes**

Because Darcy thinks Elizabeth has "fine eyes", and Jaime thinks Brienne has "astonishing eyes". This crossover was clearly meant to be. Hope you enjoy!
Chapter 1

She could not claim to be the most handsome woman nor the most hideous, nor could she declare herself happy with any confidence, but she was not sad either. She lacked neither wit nor graces, but hers were not the polished social weapons of other girls that bewitched the dance hall and dinner table alike, and she could neither play the piano nor sew without giving up any claim to dignity. She was not rich and she was not poor, she had no great prospects but neither was she destined to a life of drudgery on the streets. But there were moments, when she looked down at her young charges wrestling with the needle and thread and committing verses to memory, that she longed to be a commonly-born girl, with no obligation but to cook and breed. It would be a deal easier than playing at governess to the Stark girls, deceiving herself that she was accomplished enough to school two young daughters of a great family in the art of achieving greatness.

It was not uncommon for Brienne Tarth to spend an afternoon drowning in a crippling sense of inadequacy. After two years as a governess she might have acclimatised to the repetitivity of her life, but she had yet to shake off her childhood fancies of joining the army just like her father. He had seen fit to shatter her dreams by informing her kindly that the Red Coats did not allow girls amongst their ranks, and would not make an exception, not even for Major Tarth’s only child. Sometimes, working with her charges almost made up for not being able to join a regiment. It was tantamount to sitting calmly on a chair watching two armies engaged in open warfare.

“I heard from Jeyne that the Lannister family have moved in with the Baratheons in Storm’s End,” Sansa said idly, not looking up from her needlework. “All the Lannisters.”

“And how would Jeyne know that?” Arya rolled her eyes. The amount of disdain she had for the London society-types who set up residence in the countryside was legendary and unparalleled, which was a remarkable thing for a girl of thirteen.

“Jeyne’s father is well-connected,” Sansa explained slowly and laboriously, not bothering to hide her own sense of superiority, which was, to be fair, justified, since she was possessed of an encyclopaedic knowledge of the Lords and heraldry of the great families.

“Not as well-connected as our father was!”

Arya’s words were followed by a dull silence. Sansa looked away sharply.

Coughing, Brienne put aside her stitching. “Let’s go for a walk,” she said quietly, glancing at the clock. It was just gone three in the afternoon, and by now Jon would have put the horses away, but they could make it to town by half-past on foot. Arya jumped up faster than was seemly for a girl in a dress and made for the door, Sansa following more reluctantly. Brienne glanced over the room, checking that it was tidy, and followed the girls out. Sansa had gone to put on her walking shoes but Arya had unsurprisingly been wearing hers the whole time, and was halfway down the path.

Mrs. Stark stopped Brienne with a hand on her shoulder, just as she was about to follow Arya out of the house. “Where are you taking them?”

“For a short walk to the Winter Town,” Brienne replied. She was a woman of few words, and
Mrs. Stark understood that, keeping conversation to a minimum.

Nodding, Mrs. Stark absently rearranged a few dying roses in the vase that occupied a permanent place of respect just to the side of the door. “Ask Sansa to pick a few blooms on the way back,” she suggested. “These are beginning to take on an air of shabbiness about them.” She paused, looking beyond the doorframe, beyond Arya jumping up and down at the gate, beyond even the trees in the distance. Since the letter had arrived from the Royal Militia expressing their sincere apologies, she had not been quite the same. She was less focused and less sociable. “And we will need new roses here,” she added after a moment, turning back to Brienne, “as I have reason to believe we will be receiving guests tomorrow.”

“Guests?” Brienne asked. She did not enjoy guests, and not only because she was loath to talk to them. The last guest had been a horrid lawyer who seemed to work for the Bolton family, coming with the terms of the late Brigadier Stark’s last will and testament. He had spent half the time leering at Mrs. Stark and Sansa in turn, and the other half obsessing over the minutiae of a most complex inheritance. On top of that, he smelt foul, as though someone had left a wheel of blue cheese in the sun for two hours, rinsed it in river water and painted it across his skin.

“Guests,” Mrs. Stark confirmed solemnly. “You must have heard from Sansa - she’s been telling anyone who’ll listen that we’ve recently acquired new neighbours.”

“The Lannisters,” Brienne said. “She told me they’ve moved into Storm’s End.”

“It’s typical,” Mrs. Stark says with a sting in her tone. “That witch of a woman Cersei Baratheon has moved into her late husband’s manor before he’s cold in the ground. It is a mark of great disrespect.”

“And the younger Baratheon had no say in the matter?” Brienne asked, quite deliberately leaving out the youngest from her question.

“By rights the lands belong to the boy Joffrey now. And even if they didn’t, Stannis Baratheon is a renowned anthropologist and has no interests other than documenting his strange religions in the orient. It is rumoured that he has renounced all claim to the lands. And the youngest, Renly Baratheon, is too busy fashioning himself as the embodiment of London society, nor is he old enough to inherit. You knew him once, I believe?”

*Don’t think about Renly*, Brienne told herself, and kept her face blank. “He stayed with us for a season when I was younger. It has been a long time since our paths last crossed.”

Mrs. Stark nodded. “I can assure you they are not about to cross again any time soon. You may express relief, if you wish. I will forgive you for not being fond of that arrogant young man. The only Baratheons we’ll have to worry about are the widow and her children. If Sansa is to be believed, they have be joined by the dwarf and the cripple, but I daresay we shan’t have to worry about their presence for a while. Our guests tomorrow will be Lady Baratheon and her children Joffrey, Myrcella and Tommen. I am assured that they are delightful, but I must confess I look forward to watching their cultivated civilised expressions shatter in horror when they meet Arya.”

Sansa appeared in the doorway, her outfit completely changed for the walk.

“Sansa of course will be the very picture of politeness to our guests, won’t you, my dear?”

“Guests?” Her whole face lit up. “Mama, are we receiving the Lannisters?”

“They are Baratheons,” her mother reminded her, patting her on the shoulder. “Now go on. Miss Tarth will take you to the Winter Town.” Turning to Brienne, she added quietly “Make sure Arya
doesn’t go wandering to the blacksmith’s forge, if you would.”

Brienne nodded. “Come on, let’s catch up to your sister,” she said to Sansa, leading the way down the path to the gate. The pine trees surrounding them teetered vaguely in the breeze. Brienne loved Winterfell’s pine trees, and from her room she could smell them clearly. It was nostalgia that drew her to them - her home was surrounded by pines too, and these trees ensured that she never wanted for comfort when her mood tended to pining for her childhood.

Arya was waiting at the gate, kicking the dirt. “No need to hurry!” she snapped.

“Calm down,” Brienne said. “If you behave on the walk to town I’ll take you to the forge and we can look at Mott’s swords.”

This drew a gasp from Sansa. “But mama said to keep Arya away from there!”

“She said not to let her wander there,” Brienne corrected, much to Arya’s delight. “It’s not the same if I take you both.” Sansa frowned but didn’t say anything. She knew she was defeated.

The walk to the Winter Town was an easy one, all things considered. There were no steep hills or chances for accidental social encounters, only a narrow road that was straightforward enough to follow. Brienne had done this walk so many times now that it felt as though her feet went without her needing to direct them. She knew every fence and every tree, and she knew them far too well, as she had very little to do while she walked other than listen to the girls argue.

This time the girls were silent. Perhaps it had been Arya’s earlier comment about their father that had silenced Sansa, or perhaps Arya was too excited about going to the forge to say anything. Perhaps both. Brienne relished the silence, given that in the Stark household the moments without some noise intruding on her thoughts were few and far between. She enjoyed the quiet in a way she could not quite articulate.

By the time they reached the town the sun was lower in the sky and their shadows trailed behind them like slender ghosts. Sansa had succeeded in keeping her mouth shut until the milliner’s store appeared in her view, at which point she squealed that she needed a new bonnet and ran off to inspect the shop window.

“She always needs a new bonnet,” Arya muttered.

“You mustn’t mock her, you know,” Brienne told her, feeling as though it was the Right Thing to say as a governess. “She is interested in bonnets, and you in swords, but she is still your sister.”

“I know,” Arya said. “You’re always right about these things, of course.”

“I am your governess, and therefore you must pay heed to my guidance,” Brienne agreed. “But I doubt I am right about everything. You must also learn to form your own opinions.” She repeated word-for-word something her father had once said to her.

Arya nodded gravely. “Perhaps we should aid Sansa in her choosing of a bonnet.”

Brienne smiled down at her. “An excellent idea, Miss Stark.”

The two of them walking over to the milliner's store made a curious sight. Arya was small for a girl of thirteen, and Mrs. Stark eternally despaired for what others thought of her - how was she to excuse her child's underfed appearance? Remove her frocks and bonnets, and she could pass for a dirty street urchin. Brienne, by contrast, was tall and graceless, qualities which she was condemned to forever hear called "ill-suited to a woman of her station", nor did she lack for muscle. Both girls, however, were used to being accused of being more man than woman, Arya
because of her unladylike proclivities, Brienne for her looks.

If she was surprised that they had decided to join her, Sansa did not show it.

“Do you think the blue ribbon would suit me better, or the green?”

Arya pretended to weigh up the choice for a few moments, although it was evident just how little she cared. Brienne felt a small sense of pride in the girl at the back of her mind, but pushed it away quickly.

“Blue, I think.”

“Blue,” Sansa echoed, deep in thought. “Yes, I think the blue will suit me well. Should I choose the thick or the thin trim?”

It was with a pained expression on her face that Arya decided on the thick trim, and it was that expression that set the tone for the rest of their afternoon.

They never did make it to the forge.

By the time they made it back to Winterfell, the sky had been swallowed by an ink-blue shroud and the stars were slowly starting to appear. The pines were rustling quietly and they seemed to numb Brienne and her charges into a somewhat uneasy silence. People always talked of the manor’s beauty, and before Brienne arrived there she had heard numerous tales of the stately home that had painted it in nothing but the most rose-tinted of lights, but now that she knew it intimately she had come to realise that the tales altered the truth somewhat. At night, Winterfell felt almost haunted, and in the cold light of the early mornings it gave off an otherworldly glow to which it had taken some weeks for Brienne to acclimatise. Of course, there were also the ghosts of Brigadier Stark and Officers Stark and Greyjoy wandering the halls and corridors, casting a morbid light on every word uttered in their shadows.

Mrs. Stark was there to greet them at the door, the ghosts standing behind her, using her as a conduit for the despair they radiated. “You’ve been out so long,” she said, “it’s almost time to take our meal. Run upstairs now and change.”

Once the girls were gone, Mrs. Stark turned to Brienne, standing awkwardly in the doorway. “Thank you, you may take your leave for the night.”

That was how it went - once her work was done for the day she took her dinner in the servants’ quarters and then returned to her room to spend the night in the company of her wildest fancies.

The next day was a Sunday, her day off, and she would spend the day preparing a lesson plan for the coming week and she might even walk to the Winter Town, for want of anything better to do.

“Your presence will be required tomorrow, Miss Tarth.”

Brienne had nothing to say to that. She paused, waiting for Mrs. Stark to continue. “I would like you to attend tea tomorrow, when Lady Baratheon and her children visit.”

Her eyes widened. “Mrs. Stark – surely you do not mean for me to socialise in such company!”

“You are much mistaken, Miss Tarth,” she said, an almost mischievous look in her eye. “I expect you to be the very epitome of sociability. Or, if you cannot meet this standard, then you must at least be present in order to keep my daughters in line.”

“Mrs. S-stark, of course I will be present,” Brienne stammered. She despised such formal
occasions, and was in no way excited for a return to society after her first and only ball at age fifteen, only five years ago but a lifetime away.

“Good. You cannot run from society forever, Brienne,” Catelyn Stark said, putting a hand on her arm. “You are a young woman who will one day inherit a respectable fortune. You will need to find a husband.”

Brienne simply nodded and excused herself. Such discussion - of fortune and marriage - made her resolutely uncomfortable. She had formed an attachment to a young man once, and it had ended in tears. Thrice had she been betrothed by her father, thrice had a betrothal been annulled. She was as happy as she would ever be as a governess and did not wish to rise above that station.

By the time she reached the servants’ quarters, dinner had already finished, and those left in their dining room were the ones who did not have to serve or cook the meal. She was always grateful for the quiet. Tonight, the only people there were the groundskeeper Rodrik and the men from the stables, the chief horse trainer, Hullen, and the stableboys, Hullen’s son Harwin, simple-minded Hodor and the bastard Jon. Jon was the first to notice her enter.

“Evening, Miss Tarth,” he greeted her. “Busy day?”

“Is Winterfell ever not busy?” Harwin countered.

“Today has been relatively quiet,” Brienne said. She liked talking to Jon and Harwin - they expected nothing from her, which was a welcome change from most other men she met. “But I cannot expect the same comfort tomorrow.”

“Oh yes, the guests,” Harwin muttered.

“Mrs. Stark has requested my presence at tea,” Brienne mumbled, pulling out a chair at the communal table and serving herself some stew.

“And are you going to oblige her?” Jon asked, in a tone of voice that suggested he wished Mrs. Stark would invite him to tea.

“I have to,” she said. “It is my duty to keep the girls from misbehaving, and if there’s anywhere they’ll be like to misbehave, it is around other children.”

“Sansa won’t misbehave,” Jon pointed out. “She is much too keen on impressing those Lannisters.”

Harwin seemed to agree. “I don’t see why a governess should be forced to take tea with the family.”

“Hodor,” Hodor added helpfully.

“I will do as I am bid.”

“Will you tell us, then, what they’re like?” Harwin asked. “The Lannisters, I mean. Since you get the privilege of making their acquaintance.”

“It is hardly a privilege,” Brienne said. “And it will just be a widow, by all accounts a quite unsavoury one, and her three children. It is hardly something to write home about.”

“I’ll wager that the children are worse than the mother,” he said.

Brienne said nothing. She would not enter into such aimless speculation. The temptation to be
immediately prejudiced against Cersei Baratheon, the woman who was scorned by everyone to whom Brienne had ever spoken, and who was still called Lannister to her face despite having been married into a great family for so many years, was strong, but Brienne’s willpower was stronger still, and she would judge the formidable woman and her children when she would meet them.

That night she retreated to her quarters early, ostensibly to prepare herself for her upcoming social engagement. The words that Mrs. Stark had said about her needing to find a husband still echoed in her ears, however much she wished that they did not. It was not just her previous luck with betrothals that turned her off the matter. She had precisely chosen to become a governess to move away from that obligation, but as her father grew older and the chance of his marrying again and producing a male heir grew fainter, the chance of her having to make a very delicate choice grew higher: either she would have to marry so she would have any hope of inheriting Evenfall Hall, or she would watch the home in which she was raised being handed over to a distant relative she had not seen since she was an infant.

It was a choice she hoped never to need to make.

She spent the night in turns staring at the ceiling above her bed and reading one of Sansa’s romance novels that the girl had lent to her, a tale of a brave man whisking away an unfortunate girl from a life of sadness on his trusty steed. She preferred the ceiling.

Chapter End Notes

Thanks for giving this fic a look, dear reader; feel free to leave a comment!

(I'm a full-time uni student who has only just got back into writing, so I can't make any promises as to when this will update. However, I will try to do so as quickly as possible!)
Hey so first up, thank you so much to everyone who read, commented and left kudos on the first chapter of this fic. I was completely overwhelmed since I never expected it to get this sort of reaction! Which is really exciting.

Just before we get on with the show, a couple of people asked me about Mrs. Stark referring to "the cripple", so I figured I should clear that up. Yes, that is Jaime. No, I cannot tell you anything more. That would be giving spoilers ;)

See the end of the chapter for more notes

It was, by all accounts, the perfect Summer day for morning tea. The sun rose yellow and cast a light over Winterfell that coloured it as an illustration from one of the antiquated volumes in the manor’s library. The rose bushes in the garden seemed so bright that they almost reflected the sunlight and the pines had given up their usual foreboding air for one more welcoming. And they would need to be welcoming, for they would soon be receiving most illustrious guests indeed.

The kitchens were abuzz with preparation when Brienne awoke, and it was still only seven in the morning, by the old clock on her mantle. She could hear the scrubbing of crockery and whisking of eggs coming down the hall, and perhaps it was that which woke her, or perhaps it was the sunlight slipping through her threadbare curtains, but whichever it was, she was now awake and, disappointingly, found that she could not return to sleep. The novel she had been reading lay abandoned on the floor beside her bed, the page marked with a single strand of loose cotton from her nightdress. Loath as she was to admit it, she would keep reading to know what happened to the brave heroine and her knight.

It was several moments before she forced herself to leave the bed, each limb feeling heavier than the last as she peeled it off the mattress. The Baratheons were expected at eleven, but the preparations for tea would start well before breakfast, and Brienne would need to be ready at a moment’s notice; it was her duty.

Despite this, she was deliberately slow in getting ready. When she was not engaged in a lesson, she was superfluous. Occasionally one of the girls would request her presence at dinner, but that was as close as she ever made it to stepping outside the line of duty. But for this particular meal, Mrs. Stark had suggested with her vaguely heavy-handed hinting that Brienne would be there as a guest of the Starks, a ward, not a governess. A young lady in need of a husband.

After washing amongst the chattering ladies maids, all of whom steadfastly ignored her towering presence, Brienne struggled into her loosest, most casual dress and made her slow way to the garden to take in the sunlight before the guests arrived. She passed the kitchen and stood briefly to watch Gage fussing over lemon cakes and Osha looking bored as she stirred a bowl of batter. Osha noticed her though, and gave Brienne her customary scowl, the signal to move on.

Thankfully, where the kitchen was akin to a London bank at midday, the garden remained as tranquil as ever. She headed straight for groundskeeper Rodrik’s small hut, where she had no doubt the kindly old man would be breaking his fast. She preferred to visit this area of the garden when there was no-one around, but there was to be no lack of company that day, so she would allow Rodrik the trespass on his own grounds just this once. He knew what she was here for.
She knocked on the door of his hut and he answered almost immediately, pulling it open with a spoon still in hand from his morning meal. “Miss Tarth! Good morning to you.”

“And to you, Mr. Cassel.”

His formidable white whiskers moved to the tune of his broad mouth stretching outwards in a grin. “Of course, I know why you’re here.” He wedged the spoon between his ear and his considerable side-whiskers and disappeared behind the door for a moment. When he re-emerged, he had in his hand a long and thin wooden pole that had perhaps once been the handle of a broom. “Am I correct?”

“You most certainly are,” Brienne confirmed, taking the outstretched pole and allowing herself a brief moment to readjust to the feeling of wielding a weapon, as crude as it was. “Thank you,” she added, for there was no doubt that she was most thankful to Rodrik for this small pleasure he allowed her by the lending of the pole.

He smiled back. “You are welcome. Now go on, get to your practise before you’re needed in the house.”

She nodded.

Brienne knew Winterfell’s gardens much as well as she knew Evenfall Hall. The house itself was still a mystery, and there were many rooms that she dare not enter, corridors she would never be able to pass without feeling the chill of the ghosts that lived within, but on the grounds she was free to explore. She had found herself lost in the pine forests that the manor backed onto so many times that now she no longer needed to watch where she was going, so well did she recognise each tree and turning in the path. The rose gardens were indubitably lovely, but it was among the pines that she found solace.

She did not venture too far from the main house so that she would not lose track of time and miss morning tea, but she made sure she was sufficiently obscured by pines so that she would not be noticed. She positioned herself facing a tree and balanced the pole in her hand. It was not a foil, not like those with which she had learnt to fence in the capable charge of her father’s generous friend Captain Goodwin, but it did the job well enough. It was long, not like Arya’s sword “Needle”, the gift from her half-brother Jon that she had kept a secret from everyone except Brienne. Arya had kindly offered her governess the use of Needle for her practise, but Brienne had declined - it was too light in her hand, far too short and with a pathetic reach when compared to someone her height. The pole was a much better substitute, although it did not bend like a foil when it hit its target.

Today the target was Ronnet Connington, Brienne’s third – and last – betrothed. To help her concentrate, she would turn the trees into someone she knew in her mind. More often than not it was Connington, but there were other men who had treated her worse than she deserved, and they too had their turns. The pine needles transformed into his detestable red hair as she stepped forward on her right foot and turned to her left, bent her knees and extended her right arm. A knot in the bark became his face, and she concentrated on it, his spiteful words ringing in her ears as she went through the motions. She drew a square over Connington’s torso, muttering the names as her arm moved – *sixte, quarte, septime, second* – and then flipped her wrist downwards and returned the way she had come – *octave, prime, quinte, tierce* – and she repeated this pattern several times before moving on to her études, simple drills that Sir Goodwin had taught her. When she danced, on the several occasions she had been forced to do so, she thought of them as études, moving her feet in a preordained pattern instead of her hands.

And then she lunged and stabbed at Connington’s heart, scratching a notch in the tree with the
force of her pole. It was not the first.

Brienne smiled with satisfaction. In her training, she had killed Connington a hundred times over. 

Her arms dropped to her sides, pulling the pole away from the pine. She felt sweat pooling under her arms and down her legs, but she ignored it as she realigned her dress on her shoulders and walked back to Rodrik’s hut. She knocked but there was no response, so she leant the pole against the side of the hut and walked quickly back to her room. She had left a clean garment across her dresser and it took longer than she wished to peel off the sweat-covered clothes and exchange them for something more suitable to polite company.

And it was good timing, for at that very moment there was an uproar from somewhere within the house as a man shouted that he saw a carriage coming down the road beyond the pines.

From there, everything seemed to happen at once.

The kitchens came to life with whisking and chopping, the maids and butlers ran noisily down the corridors and the girls began to shout, the loudest sound of them all. Brienne bent down to see herself in the looking glass and, as satisfied as she would ever be with her appearance, she put on her most neutral expression and made the long walk to the entrance hall.

As the figures of Cersei Baratheon and her children grew larger coming down the path, Brienne's senses were overwhelmed by the fresh roses by the door. Sansa had chosen them most elegantly. Lady Baratheon would surely be delighted.

They lined up for the reception. Mrs. Stark stood front on, facing the door with one daughter on either side. Brienne stood offset to the side, just behind Arya. It had been a long while since she was last required to attend to guests, but she did not need to be told where to stand.

Soon the sound of footsteps on the path made it to their ears. Their footman Jory opened the front door to allow a glimpse of the approaching party. As they gradually came into focus, it became clear that Cersei Baratheon was every bit as regal as Brienne had heard. She was not a tall woman, but her bearing commanded a certain sort of respect. Her dress was a deep crimson, quite contrary to the fashion for paler colours that was present in every store in the Winter Town, but suiting her pale skin, green eyes and golden hair. Her curls, two perfect thick ringlets artfully dangled from under her bonnet, so neatly framed her face, and for a moment Brienne felt the sharp point of jealousy’s sword in her chest – Lady Baratheon’s hair could have been the same colour as hers in another light, but Brienne’s hair would never so much as form a ringlet from its waves, let alone emulate such beauty. It was a passing feeling. She could never genuinely hope to look as stunning.

Lady Baratheon’s children were no less easy on the eye. The eldest, Joffrey, was taller than his mother and had a mean, pointed look to his face, but there was no denying that he was handsome. His looks were somewhat offset by the evident distaste on his face as he took in Winterfell. No doubt he was used to the majesty of Storm’s End and the Lannister family home, Casterly Rock, as must have been the other two children, but they seemed altogether much more agreeable. Myrcella was a miniature of her mother, her face betraying no emotion. Brienne wondered if she might be uncomfortable in such situations. Tommen, however, had no such elegance. He was a small and plump boy with a permanent smile on his face, immediately asking Arya if she owned a kitten, and being incredibly disappointed to hear that she did not.

Once brief pleasantries had been exchanged, a coating of frost on every word spoken, the party took to the drawing room for tea. Lady Baratheon appeared amused that Brienne was following them.
“Is your maid going to be joining us for tea?”

“This is no maid,” Mrs. Stark said, perhaps more harshly than she ought to have done, “this is the governess to my daughters and my ward, Miss Brienne Tarth.”

Lady Baratheon gave Brienne an appraising look, one eyebrow raised and a small smile. Although Brienne was almost a foot taller, the look that the older woman gave her was no less terrifying. "Tarth, you say. You are the daughter of Major Selwyn Tarth, I presume."

“Yes, my lady,” Brienne mumbled, avoiding eye contact as best she could.

“A shy governess,” she remarked with something like a laugh. "Next you will be telling me that your daughters were raised in the jungle."

“I was raised in the jungle,” Arya commented, earning herself a sharp look from her mother.

“Were there many cats in the jungle?” Tommen squeaked.

“So many,” Arya said, and the little boy have her a huge grin.

“You must excuse my youngest,” Lady Baratheon said as they sat down to lemon cakes and a pot of tea brought in by a maid, "he is obsessive, and he likes nothing so much as cats."

Tommen looked bashful, and Brienne felt instant sympathy for these children. Their mother's intolerance of harmless folly, something Mrs. Stark tended to excuse, began to colour Brienne's forming opinion of the Lady. She did not wish to outright dislike her, but at that moment it seemed as though there may be no other option.

It came as a surprise when, his expression slightly softened from its previous indignation, Joffrey spoke directly to Sansa. “Miss Stark, would you care to show me about the garden?”

Sansa cast a longing look at the lemon cakes before nodding sweetly. “It would be my pleasure, Lord Baratheon.”

He offered Sansa his arm and led her out of the room, Lady Baratheon’s eyes following their exit. “It’s so sweet to see youth arm in arm, don’t you think? I do hope they will dance together at the upcoming ball.”

“A ball?” Mrs. Stark asked. “I am afraid that we have received no invitation to a ball, Lady Baratheon.”

“Well of course you haven’t,” she replied, all smugness and superiority, “for I have not invited you yet. The ball will be held at Storm’s End a week from today. That should give you all time enough to buy dresses for the occasion, I presume?”

Brienne had never seen Catelyn Stark look more shocked in her life. “Dresses– yes! Naturally, we would be delighted to attend. Sansa will be most excited to hear this news, I believe.”

Mrs. Stark had artfully avoided referring to Arya for a very good reason. The younger girl sat gaping at Lady Baratheon as though she were speaking another language. She had never been to a ball before, so this would be Arya’s coming out, and none too welcome, Brienne guessed.

“And your ward is also invited, of course, if she wishes to join us,” Lady Baratheon added, not so much as a glance at Brienne. There was something about her tone of voice that suggested to Brienne all sorts of things that had not needed to be said. Let her come – if she can find a dress to fit her, if she thinks any man would willingly partner her. Women like Cersei Baratheon were the
very reason that Brienne hated balls.

“Miss Tarth?” Mrs. Stark looked pointedly at her. “Will you?”

Brienne nodded. She would suffer the humiliation of being taller than all the women and looking for all the world like a man in a dress, if only so she would be there to look out for Sansa if there were any disappointments on the dancefloor. “I shall,” she said.

She listened for the next few minutes to the two ladies discussing society and allowed her mind to wander. It had been years since she had been to a ball. Not since she had danced with Renly Baratheon at Evenfall Hall, in fact. Fitting, then, that the ball she was about to attend was being hosted by another Baratheon. She briefly wondered if Renly might be there, but immediately checked herself. It was a stupid thought. Renly was in London, and, last she heard, engaged to Margaery Tyrell. She would put Renly out of her mind for good. And perhaps she would even dance with a man twice as handsome and twice as interested in the fairer sex.

At that thought, she stifled a laugh at the back of her throat. There would be no men asking her for a dance, not then and not ever. She did not doubt that there would be any number of suitors, not least of them Joffrey Baratheon, lining up for Sansa’s favour. She was fifteen and beautiful, and would make a fine wife for any man who chose his dance partners on such shallow auspices. Arya too would have her fair share of partners; she was not beautiful like her older sister, but she had a pleasant face, and was a Stark no less. It was to be expected that the Stark girls would attract all the attention at the ball, them and Lord Baratheon. Myrcella and Tommen would be too young to attend, and Brienne fleetingly wished to be their governess for the night, looking after them while their mother entertained.

It was not soon enough that Lady Baratheon declared that she had seen her son and Sansa in the gardens, and that they should join them, just as Brienne began to pay attention to the conversation again. She had drifted, and the sun was now in the middle of the sky, the pines casting no shadows.

The party left the drawing room, Mrs. Stark leading them into the gardens and pointing out the various species of rose on the way. Tommen and Myrcella followed Arya as she left her mother with a declaration that she did not care to look at roses, and a promise to show the young Baratheons her favourite trees for climbing. She whispered that last part, and Brienne was certain that neither mother heard, or they would have expressly forbidden it – Lady Baratheon for fear they would hurt themselves, Mrs. Stark for fear that Arya would embarrass them all.

They came upon Sansa and Lord Baratheon under an orange tree towards the edge of the garden. “Sansa, my dear,” her mother said, “we are invited to a ball at Storm’s End!”

Sansa returned a smile that would have been smug if she were not clearly so jubilant. “I know; Lord Baratheon has already told me,” she said, barely containing her excitement, “and he has asked to dance the first two dances with me!”

“Brilliant,” Lady Baratheon said. “It gladdens me to see the two of you are friends already. But now I am afraid I must summon my other children from the younger Miss Stark’s clutches, and we must take our leave.”

“It makes no matter,” Mrs. Stark said, “for I am sure you have other matters to attend to. And we shall see you soon enough at the ball.”

They parted on good terms, with Sansa looking longingly after the young Lord. Brienne expected they would hear of an engagement within several months. Whether the attachment was of Lord Baratheon’s choosing or his mother’s was not clear yet, but Brienne had a rather good idea of
which it was.

As soon as the Baratheon carriage was out of sight and Arya and Sansa had gone back in the house, Mrs. Stark’s smile turned sour. Brienne had turned to follow her charges, but Mrs. Stark signalled that she might stand with her in the garden a while.

“What do you think of her, Brienne?”

She chose her words carefully before answering. “I do not find her to be a very genuine woman.”

“No, nor I,” Mrs. Stark agreed. “I knew the late Lord Robert Baratheon; he and my Eddard were raised together. He had very distinct looks, and I can tell you one thing for certain about Lady Baratheon: there is no way on Earth that those blonde-haired dolls of hers could be Lord Robert’s children.”

Chapter End Notes

Let me know what you thought!

(Yes, I know RonCon was not her third betrothed, but I took that liberty for emphasis. Oops. And, still no Jaime or Tyrion, sorry! But you should be meeting them very soon* indeed...)

* “soon” as in “whenever I get time to write in between two uni assignments SIGH
For the week between the Baratheons’ visit to Winterfell and the ball at Storm’s End, Brienne was forced to remember how to dance. Sansa seemed to genuinely feel it was a kindness that she owed her governess. “It is only fair,” she had said, “since you have taught me so much, that I teach you the dances that will likely be danced at the Storm’s End ball.”

She had known them all once, of course. No young lady should be without the necessary skills of deportment in a ballroom, but Brienne was no ordinary young lady and she had ceased going to balls at about the same time her father gave up on betrothing her and she began her training to become a governess, and now Mrs. Stark had decided to ease her out of her fledgling career and make her a lady once more. Mrs. Stark was around five-and-thirty years, roughly of the age that Brienne’s mother would be if she lived, and was in many ways her replacement. It was perhaps because of this, then, that Brienne obliged her, dancing in the hallways with Sansa, dredging her best dress out of the depths of her closet and dusting off a pair of shoes she had not worn since her feet were somewhat smaller.

Despite all of her preparation, as their carriage drew to a halt in front of Storm’s End, Brienne felt as nervous as she had the day of her first ball. She dismounted into the cool evening and took a deep breath to steady herself. She would need every ounce of confidence she could muster for the impending evening. Her pale blue dress clung to her body uncomfortably as she followed Mrs. Stark and her daughters down the hallway leading to the ballroom, which was already teeming with guests. Brienne saw a few people she knew, for the main part families from the area, including Starks’ closest neighbours the Pooles, as well as the Cerwyns, the Glovers and the Hornwoods. Notably, the Boltons seemed not to be present; on whose part this was a deliberate snub she was not sure.

The dancing had not yet begun, for which Brienne was grateful, because it meant that she would have enough time to blend into obscurity just in case a man was desperate enough to wish to partner her.

Lady Baratheon almost immediately picked them out of the crowd and swept over gracefully in a gown of crimson, which seemed to be her colour of choice. Her eldest son was by her side, and there was another man hovering a few feet behind them. Brienne made the obvious choice of paying attention to the tightness of her shoes instead of the Baratheons.

“My dear Catelyn,” Lady Baratheon began, and Brienne wondered when they had become so close in her mind. “I do not believe you have had the pleasure of meeting my brother, Captain Jaime Lannister.”
“I have not,” Mrs. Stark confirmed, as Lady Baratheon turned to look at the man behind her, and he stepped forward obligingly.

Captain Jaime Lannister was without a single doubt the most handsome man that Brienne had ever beheld in her life. Like most people, he was shorter than her, but it could only have been by an inch or thereabouts. He had the same golden hair as his twin sister, and it fell to his shoulders with a softer curl than hers. Brienne might have said he was more feminine than herself, but his face spoke otherwise. He had bold features with a hint of the weatherbeaten about them, and though he wore no facial hair but for a neatly styled moustache, his impressive jawline more than compensated for that lacking masculine feature. And his eyes were such a startling green. Brienne had not noticed it in his sister, but she must have had the same eyes, although they were nowhere near as captivating as the Captain’s. She could not have imagined his like, not even as a hero of one of Sansa’s romances.

Brienne had heard Mrs. Stark refer to him as “the cripple”, but she saw nothing wrong with his person. He was a perfect specimen of man, and she thought desperately that there must be some flaw, something that would tarnish him in her eyes so that she might not be tempted into wholly unholy thoughts.

And so it came as a great relief when he proved himself to be hardly personable at all. With barely a smile on his face he welcomed Mrs. Stark to the ball and kissed her hand.

“It is an honour to make your acquaintance, Captain Lannister. I have heard great tales of your former prowess in the militia,” Mrs. Stark said.

He looked almost wistful for a moment, and Brienne remembered hearing once that he had been honourably discharged from the army following an injury. Again, the question of him being crippled arose in her mind. Whatever it was, he must have recovered, she reasoned.

“And I of your late husband’s,” he said. “I was greatly saddened to hear of his passing.”

Mrs. Stark nodded, clearly not wishing to dwell on that particular though. “Allow me to present to you my daughters, Sansa and Arya, and my ward Miss Brienne Tarth.” Brienne was none too comfortable in hearing that her title of governess had been dropped entirely from this introduction. But she was certain he would know – his sister would surely have told him.

Captain Lannister smiled stiffly at the Miss Starks before his eyes settled on Brienne. She was almost certainly blushing a deep red, though she could not tell for herself. Their eyes were almost at a level, and Brienne found her own eyes connecting to his for a brief moment, before she focused instead on his perfect eyebrows. But she had seen the way looked at her, the way so many men had looked at her before, as though they could scarce believe that such a creature existed, a woman so tall and broad and with no figure to speak of. She was not surprised that someone so handsome as him was disgusted by her appearance.

It seemed that Brienne’s presence had stunned him into silence, or at least he could not think of anything more to say in such company, so his nephew adopted the conversation and took Sansa’s hand, kissing it gently.

“Miss Stark,” he said, “you have arrived just in time, for the dancing is about to begin. May I escort you to the ballroom?”

“But of course!” Sansa said, blushing as he led her away. Brienne supposed she should feel happy for her.

There was another heavy, expectant silence, and it seemed that both Mrs. Stark and Lady
Baratheon were willing Captain Lannister to ask the younger Miss Stark to dance, but Arya responded obliquely by stating that she intended to observe her sister dancing, and without another word dashed after Sansa into the ballroom.

“Will you be dancing tonight, Captain Lannister?” Mrs. Stark asked cordially.

He laughed, and it was not a pleasant laugh. There was something very uncomfortable about his amusement, something that made Brienne wish to be elsewhere.

“I shall not,” he said. “However, I will gladly escort you to the ballroom.”

He offered her an arm, which Mrs. Stark took, and they walked towards the ballroom closely followed by Lady Baratheon, with not another look at Brienne. She let out a breath she had been holding since he had laughed, but she would have to join them. The ballroom loomed imposingly ahead of her, but before she could take a step forward and meet her fate she heard a voice call her name.

“Miss Tarth, was it?”

She glanced around, but there was no-one to either side of her.

“I think you will find more success looking down,” the voice suggested. She took his advice and there in front of her stood the smallest man she had ever seen. It was hard not to gape, but she held her features in check. She was all too used to people looking at her as she now looked at this man.

And then she remembered Mrs. Stark’s words: “the dwarf and the cripple…”

“You are Lady Baratheon’s other brother,” she said at once, remembering. She tried not to bend down to talk to him.

“Correct. Tyrion Lannister. A pleasure to meet you, Miss Tarth. I had no idea a woman could attain such a height, but the wonders of this world have never failed to surprise me as yet.”

“I suppose you must be used to much shorter,” Brienne said, the words escaping her mouth before she could stop herself. “I mean–”

It was something of a surprise to hear him laugh, a much more pleasant sound than that of his brother. “Oh, I do like you. A woman with a sense of humour will always have a place by my side, no matter how tall she is. May I escort you to the ballroom?”

“Humour?” she stammered. “I did not mean... I only, I think perhaps the greatest humour would be someone of my stature being escorted by someone of yours...”

“Quite right,” he said, frowning. “We shall walk side-by-side, then, and I shall not attempt to take your arm.”

Nonetheless, they would have made a comical sight as they entered the ballroom, Brienne attempting to look anywhere but at the couples beginning the first dance. The diminutive Mr. Lannister moved to the side of the room and she saw no other option but to follow him. From there she could see Sansa partnered with Lord Joffrey and Mrs. Stark taking to the floor with a Lannister cousin. Arya too seemed to be dancing, having been co-opted by a Cerwyn boy. The only person of note, apart from Captain Lannister, who seemed not to be dancing the first round was Lady Baratheon herself, who stood talking to her brother by an open window across the dancefloor. The Captain looked in equal parts bored and amused with what his sister had to say, and Brienne was suddenly taken by an overwhelming desire to know what their conversation held. It was not like her to be nosy, but she needed to find more concrete reasons to despise Lady
Baratheon and Captain Lannister than her current vagaries of judgement.

“You will excuse me, Mr. Lannister,” she said, “I am going to take a short turn about the room to familiarise myself with it, should I unfortunately find myself dancing later this evening.”

He smiled knowingly up at her. “But of course. You do not have to beg your leave from me; I am no-one of note.”

She nodded uncomfortably and with one final glance at him began to make her way slowly around the room. She watched the matriarchs Mrs. Dustin and Mrs. Hornwood by the sides of the ballroom commanding a small army each, and the young gentlemen left unpartnered soliciting similarly deserted women for the next dance, among them a boy Brienne recognised as a Glover trying his luck with Sansa’s friend Jeyne Poole. She watched the old men looking out on the dancefloor with nostalgia in their eyes, and the girls who were still new to society watching with eagerness.

And before she knew it she was mere feet away from the Lannister twins, though neither of them noticed her. At first she could barely make out their conversation, but after some straining their words came through clearly.

“You cannot be serious, Cersei. I told you I would not dance, and I mean to keep my word.”

“My sweet, stupid brother. It would be poor form not to dance with one of the Stark girls. They are our guests of honour and must be treated accordingly. Sansa is pretty enough; I am sure Joffrey would not mind you taking her away from him for one dance.”

“And you know very well I have no intention of doing so. I would sooner dance with their mannish governor than either of those girls.”

Lady Baratheon laughed cruelly. “Jaime, you astound me. Off with you, then! Go and ask the beautiful Miss Tarth to lend you a hand or two.”

Brienne felt ill. She had heard far too much and, suddenly overcome by a desperate need for fresh air, rushed to the end of the ballroom where it backed onto a part of the manor’s impressive gardens. She may have accidentally knocked several shorter people as she pushed past them, but she would not have noticed in her haste.

The gardens were beautiful by night. They could not compete with the pines of Winterfell in Brienne’s mind, but objectively they were much more stunning, much more majestic. She leant against a low wall and took several deep breaths until she became more steady on her legs that had just before seemed too weak to bear her weight. Perhaps in a moment she would feel well enough to return to the ballroom.

But when she turned around to look back at the house and its bright lights, she saw Captain Lannister approaching her and was struck again by a faintness. Surely he had spoken in jest! He could not really want to dance with her.

“Miss Tarth,” he said, extending his left hand, “might I have the honour of the next dance?”

There was no joy in his words, and Brienne knew instantly that he was only doing this because his sister had urged him.

“You do not want to dance with me,” she said, beginning to make her excuses, “you will find me to be a singularly graceless partner, far too tall, and unconversational besides...”

“And yet you are talking a great deal now,” he said, almost smiling, but not quite. “You are not
much taller than I, nor do I wish to dance with you because I think you to be graceful and
elegant.”

It was simply too much for Brienne. “Then I must entreat you to retract your offer.”

“My sister wishes me to dance, and you are the least abhorrent partner present.”

“Please, if you would listen–”

“Miss Tarth, I wish to dance with you because you are the only woman who has not wasted a
considerable amount of the evening staring at my hand.”

For a moment, Brienne was not sure she had heard correctly. “Your hand? I do not–”

He raised his right arm in explanation, and at first Brienne thought he must have been wearing an
iron glove. It was a moment before she realised that there was no hand below the glove, and
perhaps no arm beyond. Her confused thoughts about his supposed injury began to make sense.

“... the dwarf and the cripple...”

“You have no arm!” she exclaimed.

And now when he laughed, it was sincere. “It is just the hand missing, and a bit more above the
wrist. Did you not even notice? Well, that has made up my mind. If you do not mind holding iron
in the place of flesh, I would have the next two dances.”

All the blood drained from Brienne's face. Two dances? She had once had a governess who had
said in no uncertain terms that a girl like her would be unlucky for a man to wish to even dance
one with her. The memory of that “advice” was clear in her head as she reluctantly nodded her
agreement and took Captain Lannister's left arm, allowing him to lead her out of the night and
back into the unforgiving ballroom.

“I have not danced in several years,” the Captain remarked. He seemed impervious to the
numerous faces that turned their way with something akin to disapproval written into their
features. But perhaps he was used to disbelieving looks, being such a handsome man with such an
unnatural appendage protruding from one sleeve.

“Nor I,” she admitted.

“We shall be evenly matched. Neither of us having danced in a while, and hampered by my iron
hand and your... height... we shall be the laughing stock of the ball.”

“You should not have asked me to dance,” Brienne muttered, some colour returning to her cheeks
in the form of a blush.

“Do you not enjoy being laughed at? I must confess I find a perverse joy in the judgement of
others.”

She could not articulate just how little joy she took in being constantly judged, so she did not
reply.

They went into position alongside the other pairs on the dancefloor amidst some whispering, and
Brienne became more uneasy every second with the knowledge that somehow Captain Lannister
was enjoying this. Sansa gave her an encouraging smile from further down the line but it did not
do anything to assuage Brienne’s fears.
And then before she had time to remember where to put her feet the music began, and they were
dancing. She had memorised the footwork for this particular reel and moved hesitantly at first,
keeping her eyes to the ground. Once or twice her own hand came into contact with Captain
Lannister’s metal one and she felt a shiver through her body. The cool air had made it chilling to
the touch and had done nothing to make it any less confronting to Brienne. True, it did not repulse
her as he had implied it did for other people, but the thought that his arm just ended beneath the
glove conjured a myriad horrifying images in her mind. Her former fencing master, Captain
Goodwin, had lost a finger on one hand, the digit ending abruptly in a stump, but she could scarce
imagine it on such a large scale.

“You are not so frightful at this, governess, for someone so poorly-built for the humble art of the
dance,” Captain Lannister said as they crossed each other in the lines and briefly made contact
with their left hands. “Although you are not so good as I am, even without rehearsal, I am sorry to
say.”

Brienne did not reply. What was there that could she say to that? She did not even recognise
whether he meant to compliment or insult her.

“I’m not sure that I like your dress,” he said the next time they were close enough to exchange
words. “It seems somewhat impractical for faster dances. At the next ball we both attend you
should wear something different.”

“You imply that I would dance with you again after these two,” she said quietly.

“And you imply that I would ask you to dance again after this pitiful display of footwork, even if
we happened to be in the same ballroom at the same time.”

A part of Brienne yearned to show him just how pitiful her footwork was. He would not think her
so useless if he saw her with a blade in her hand. But it was too fanciful a notion. She would
almost certainly never be able to fence someone of his kind.

“You have not responded,” he pointed out. “I think I prefer you when you respond; conversation
makes dance much more interesting, would you not agree?”

Again, she chose not to gratify him with her speech.

“I wish you were so bad that you stepped on my toes. It may liven up this reel a bit, don’t you
think?”

The two dances she had promised him could not end soon enough. When the music of the second
ended, Brienne made her excuses and slipped away from Captain Lannister, not bothering to look
back at the smirk that would no doubt be on his face. She had never before met such a rude,
presumptuous, arrogant man! Any thoughts she might have had of his handsomeness were swept
aside by a dislike so fervid it eclipsed even her hatred for his sister.

Almost instantly Sansa took her arm and pulled her aside. “Miss Tarth! I could not believe my
eyes when I saw you arm-in-arm with Captain Lannister, of all men! How did you find him?”

“I despise him, Miss Stark,” she said. “I utterly despise him.”

Brienne glanced over her shoulder and saw him talking to his sister and could only guess how
they laughed at her. She wished silently to never have anything to do with the Lannisters ever
again.
Ok I'd just like to take this opportunity to address a couple of points. You may have noticed that Jaime is not the haughty Mr. Darcy of Austen's novel, nor is Brienne as outgoing as Lizzy. I just couldn't do it. I had to keep them true to their characters and part of that was doing a bit of a switcheroo from the Darcy/Lizzy dynamic - making Jaime talkative and snarky, and Brienne quiet and of course insecure. Trust me, it'll work.

Now, as to Tyrion. I've done a bucketload of research for this fic and nowhere have I found anything about attitudes to dwarves in the Regency era. This is a compromise I was willing to make - after all, I've had to eliminate "sideburns", "mutton chops" and "prosthesis" from my vocabulary because the words simply did not exist in the same context back then. I was going to give Jaime a hook hand but I found out that there was no way someone so rich wouldn't have had a replica hand. I did a lot of research into the type of dancing at balls and the types of hairstyles a regency man would have worn (Jaime's is super-continental). And one of the most exciting things was finding that I could basically just use my knowledge of modern fencing because it's barely changed since then. I even did a bit of digging to see if it was realistic that Brienne had a clock in her room (it was). The internet is an amazing resource but there is nothing about dwarves - I kept getting dwarf bookcases and stuff like that. So if anyone has any information on how dwarves lived in that era please send it my way! At the moment I'm working on the assumption that he lives comfortably because he's a Lannister but he has no prospects in life or anything. So basically the same as in canon. Are we seeing a trend here...

Let me know what you thought of this chapter! C:
Another chapter! I'm having so much fun writing this; thank you to everyone reading for your flattering feedback - it really keeps me going! Getting towards the pointy end of semester so updates will be infrequent for a while, I should have the next one up in around two weeks but you never know.

This one's a bit of a girly bonding chapter. I had a lot of fun with it, though. Enjoy!

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

“I simply cannot wait until tonight,” Sansa gushed, looking up from the flowers she was stitching. “If only the morning could pass faster.”

“Patience is a virtue,” Brienne reminded her. “The evening will come, and in time you will see your young man again.”

Sansa blushed. The messenger from Storm’s End had arrived that morning with a letter from Lady Baratheon with the envelope addressed specifically to “the elder Miss Stark”:

My dear friend,

Since we were last in your company, my children and I have been suffering the ill-effects of cruel boredom. Lord Baratheon in particular requests to see you for dinner this evening. Do join us.

Yours lovingly,

C. Baratheon

Of course, Mrs. Stark had already begun planning the wedding, saying they would have to marry in the chapel at Storm’s End, but that it would make no matter, all of Winterfell would be in attendance. Sansa would wear a gown of purest white and would be the envy of every girl in England, the wife of such a great Lord. Sansa had weakly reminded her mother that there was no indication for any marriage, despite the young Lord’s obvious attentions.

“Indeed there is not,” Mrs. Stark had said, “but I am sure they will follow after a suitable length of acquaintance.”

Sansa had no reasonable argument against that, so instead she took over the reigns of wedding speculation from her mother and proved herself exceedingly more enthusiastic than she had first let on.

And so she fidgeted her way through the morning’s lessons, dropping more stitches than usual and staring out the window far too often.

“It’s unfathomable,” Arya commented, “that someone so sensible as my sister could be so
hopelessly in love with a boy after only one ball.”

“Morning tea and a ball,” Sansa corrected, not noticing the sarcasm in Arya’s voice when she said the word “sensible”.

Brienne had long since given up dispensing romantic advice to her charges. There was the small matter that she herself was possessed of the utmost bad luck when it came to romance, but apart from that, she had learnt that the girls’ inclinations were never going to be straightforward. Sansa wished all men could be true gentlemen, dashing and mysterious, like the heroes of her novels, and Arya had shown more interest in the smith’s apprentice than any of the young heirs that Mrs. Stark had not-so-subtly mentioned at various meals over the years. Brienne was in no place to question their dubiously-placed affections; the only man she had ever loved had broken her heart in the kindest way possible, which had only made it worse. And besides, she was but ten-and-six when she had fallen for Renly Baratheon – Sansa was only just ten-and-five.

“I don't like him,” Arya said. “I think you are too hasty in thinking so fondly of him.”

“You do not know him as I do,” Sansa sighed. “Lord Joffrey is kind and understanding. He is so cultured for one so young.”

“Well, he’s older than me, and I say he’s a cad,” Arya declared, as though pronouncing the final judgement on the matter.

“Let’s not argue this morning,” Brienne suggested.

“He is not a cad!” Sansa cried, throwing down her needlework.

“He could be.” Arya shrugged.

“He is not!”

Sansa stood up dramatically and dashed out of the room, looking close to tears.

“Perhaps I pushed that point too far,” Arya mused, frowning.

“I should go and see if she’s alright,” Brienne said, putting aside her own sewing.

She found Sansa just a few feet away from the schoolroom, sitting at the top of the stairs and sobbing into her hands. Tentatively, Brienne sat down next to her and put a hand on the younger girl’s shoulder.

“She was only joking,” she said.

“Jokes can be just as hurtful as insults,” Sansa mumbled.

“They can,” Brienne agreed. “Many a time I have been told cruel things, been called by mocking names, words excused by their perpetrators as mere jokes. But your sister means you no harm.”

“I know,” Sansa said. “But that is because she does not understand. She does not understand what it is to have such unspoken pressure on you to marry well, and to finally find someone who is worthy of your affections and rich, and then to be told that he may well be a cad!”

“It is worse to find him out to be a cad than to be told in jest. So far, we have seen nothing to suggest that your Lord Baratheon is one. And if he turns out to be untrue, then you may console yourself that you did not marry him.”
“Have you ever been in love, Miss Tarth?”

Brienne was thrown by the question. She had spoken to the girls about her betrothals, but she had never told them any of the details, nor of her short-lived attachment to the youngest Baratheon brother.

“Once,” she confessed, “I thought myself in love. Whether I actually loved him or loved that he tolerated me, I still do not know.”

“Tell me about him,” Sansa said. “It may cheer me up to know of your past love.”

“It will not please you to know that it came to naught,” Brienne said.

“Still, you loved him, even if perhaps it was a mistake to do so. What was it about him that made you love him?”

Brienne took a deep breath. She was a terrible liar, so she resolved to tell Sansa the truth, leaving out only a few important details. “He was kind to me,” she said. “I had been thrice-betrothed and none of those men would ever so much as say a single friendly word to me. I desperately looked for some reason to like them, each one, so that my father might not be disappointed in me for breaking off a betrothal. And yet each time I disappointed him, because I could not marry for aught but love. And I did not love anyone until I met– until I met this particular young man. He was amiable and charming, and he asked me to dance the first time he met me at a ball at Evenfall hall.”

“Captain Lannister asked you to dance the first time he met you,” Sansa pointed out. “Will you fall in love with him, too?”

“That is suggesting the impossible,” Brienne said with a laugh. “It was not only that he danced with me. The next day, he asked me to show him the gardens, and he spoke kindly with me, and the days after that. He was a good man. We were of an age, and for a while I entertained the fancy that he might ask for my hand...”

“... but he did not,” Sansa finished. “The greatest loves too often end in tragedy!”

“I would not call this a great love. He simply did not return my feelings, and soon he left Evenfall Hall and I have not seen him since. There is no tragedy in that.”

“If he was truly kind to you, there must have been some other reason for him not to propose to you! Was there influence from his parents? Was he an heir?”

“No, not an heir, not even a second son, but a third. My prospects were greater than his and he would have had nothing to lose in marrying me. He simply did not love me, and I can understand that he did not wish to marry someone he did not love.”

Sansa sighed. “A love not returned. Do you still think of him?”

“On occasion,” Brienne said. “But I have given up hope of seeing him again.”

“I wish you would fall in love again,” Sansa said. “You are an excellent governess, of course, but I cannot imagine a happier picture than you finally marrying a man worthy of you.”

Brienne had no words for her, so she settled on a small smile directed at nothing in particular. They sat side-by-side on the stairs in silence for several minutes before Sansa spoke.

“Shall we return to our needlework?”
“I think that would be a good idea,” Brienne said.

Arya was sitting right where they had left her, but her poor attempt to hide a smile suggested to Brienne that she had been eavesdropping. There were no more stitches on her cloth than there had been before, either.

The rest of the day passed in a pleasant manner, interrupted in its tranquility only by luncheon. There were no more fights between Sansa and Arya, and all too soon it was time for Sansa to leave for Storm’s End.

“It has become quite cloudy,” Sansa noted, hiding her nerves rather well. “Might I not have the carriage? I said I would walk, I know, but I am beginning to have doubts…”

“Do not worry, my dear,” Mrs. Stark said. “You will be quite alright; the walk to Storm’s End is far from arduous. And the Baratheons will be delighted to see you, I am sure.”

Sansa forced a smile. “Of course you are right.”

“I shall send the carriages to pick you up,” Mrs. Stark promised, “but for now the fresh air will do well for your complexion.”

She sent her daughter off with a kiss on the cheek and a wave as Sansa walked down the pine-edged path.

Supper was to be a quiet affair without Sansa. Mrs. Stark had commented that it was too silent when Brandon and Rickon were away at school, and Sansa’s absence only deepened the sense of emptiness that pervaded Winterfell. Brienne sat with the family that night at Mrs. Stark’s invitation, although not without some amusement from the servants.

“First a ball, now you’re dining with them,” Harwin said. “Soon Mrs. Stark will be stealing you away from your father for good.”

Brienne paled at the very suggestion. “She will not, I can assure you! I am only joining them for the meal because Sansa is away.”

“And they need someone to eat the extra food,” Osha said. “As though they could not just have us make less.”

“The lady makes a good point,” Harwin said. “Very well, leave us. But do not attempt to rise above your station, Miss Tarth!”

“I shall endeavour not to do so,” Brienne muttered. She wondered if Harwin knew that she was not commonly born like he was, or whether he chose to ignore it.

As she made her way up from the kitchen where they had been talking, she registered the sound of rain and instantly her thoughts went to Sansa. The poor girl would still be walking – Brienne could only hope that the weather had not yet reached her, wherever she was. She paused at a window before entering the dining room. It was raining more heavily than it had in a long while.

Brienne did not notice Mrs. Stark approach behind her but for her voice.

“Sansa is a brisk walker,” she said. “She will have reached Storm’s End long ago.”

“I hope you are right,” Brienne said.

“Come, let us dine. We will speak no more of Sansa; I am certain that she is perfectly safe and
They moved into the dining room, where Arya was already seated at the table. She looked sullen and moody, no doubt put off by the rain. She had never been too pleased with anything that came between her and spending hours in the garden, generally climbing trees. Brienne sat down opposite her, with Mrs. Stark taking the head of the table and signalling to the maid that they were ready for the food to be served. The first course arrived without fanfare and was eaten in silence. Brienne did not once look up from her plate for fear of catching the eye of a servant she knew, or worse, accidentally initiating eye contact with Mrs. Stark that would lead to conversation.

She was not sure whether or not it was a mercy that the pregnant silence of the meal was interrupted by a loud banging on the front door. The sound of the rain had stopped and was replaced by the footman’s hasty steps as he approached the entrance hall. There was muffled whispering before the footman appeared in the dining room, his face solemn and in his hands a dripping letter.

“My lady,” he began, and Mrs. Stark rose immediately, “an urgent missive from Storm’s End.” Brienne and Arya stood too, although Brienne held back from leaving the table.

“It reads that Sansa has been taken ill,” Mrs. Stark said, her knuckles white from gripping the letter. “We must leave immediately for Storm’s End.”

“It is too dark and dangerous for a carriage to leave in this weather,” the messenger put in, appearing in the dining hall wet and bedraggled. “My horse had enough trouble as it is. Milady Baratheon assures me that Miss Stark is being well-cared for.”

“Nonetheless I would feel more comfortable knowing that she is safe,” Mrs. Stark said in her sternest tone.

“I will go,” Brienne offered, not realising the full implication of her words until they had well and truly left her mouth. “I– I can walk; it is not so far.”

“It is a dark night, and cloudy,” the messenger said, “and no place for a young woman, begging your pardon.”

“I am of a stronger constitution than Miss Stark,” Brienne assured him, although she was convincing Mrs. Stark more than anyone. “I will stay with her the night and as many nights as it takes until she is well enough to return home.”

“That is brave of you, Brienne,” Mrs. Stark said, “but I cannot let you walk on your own in such weather.”

“The rain has stopped,” Brienne said. “Please, Mrs. Stark, allow me to do my duty as governess and look after your daughter.”

There was a pause in which Brienne could only hear the rain dripping off the messenger’s coat and onto the floor and the wind blowing the pines outside. It would not be a pleasant walk, but it would take no toll on her. What worried her most was what waited at the other end. With any luck she would be taken straight to Sansa and would not have to spend any time whatsoever with the residential family, with perhaps the exception of Tyrion Lannister, whose company she would not mind. Brienne knew her luck too well however, and she would no doubt be forced into playing at being a lady with Cersei Baratheon. But she had offered to go, and so she would go.

“You may go,” Mrs. Stark said. “Do take some warm clothes.”

Brienne nodded.
Within ten minutes she had forced two changes of clothes into a small portmanteau and pulled her hair into a bonnet to keep away the wind. She wore a jacket over her dress but the night air was no less biting than it might have been if she were wearing nothing at all. She bade farewell to Arya and Mrs. Stark and set off in the messenger’s tracks. He had left not long after she had resolved to go, to bring news of her arrival to Storm’s End, and the hoofprints from his horse’s path were still fresh on the muddy ground, which would be helpful lest Brienne lost her sense of direction.

If there had not been so much mud, she reflected, it might have been a pleasant night for a walk. There was a breeze, but out in the open air it was hardly noticeable, and after a while she was numb to its chill. Every so often the clouds would let loose a modicum of rain, but not so much that her bonnet did not keep her dry. About halfway through the walk she removed the bonnet and allowed her hair to lie loose and blow in line with the trees. She would of course tie it up again when she reached her destination, but until then, there was nobody else on the road and she quite fancied being removed of some of her constraints as a respectable young woman.

A short while after letting her hair out, other inhibitions followed. She stopped avoiding the mud so religiously and allowed her hem to trail along the ground, gathering dirt as she went. She veered off the road and cut through a field, and jumped over fences without any care for who might see her lift her skirts, for there was no-one for miles around. She even found herself laughing when a flurry of rain momentarily blinded her and she stumbled over a bump in the ground, righting herself before she could fall. She was dulled by the wind but drunk on the night, and she began to lose track of time as Storm’s End came into view.

Too late she realised that her hair was a damp mess and her ankles and skirts were splattered with mud. She was in no state to be received by the elegant Lady Baratheon and her well-dressed brothers and cultivated children. They would not see a governess come to care for a sickly young girl, they would see an ungainly tall woman attired as though she had just crawled out of a lake. Hopefully, a servant would receive her and they would not have to see her at all.

All hope was thwarted when a lamentably familiar voice rang out across the manor’s front gardens.

“Miss Tarth!”

He was still a distance off, but she could tell by the way the moonlight caught his iron hand that it was definitely Captain Lannister. He had been sitting on the steps but appeared to have stood as soon as he caught sight of her. He has come to welcome me, she thought, to rile me and ruin my evening.

Soon they stood an arm’s length apart, as close as they had been when dancing. He looked her over, and she could not help but blush at the state of her appearance – he would be looking at her dirty dress and her tangled hair and skewed bonnet, hastily shoved into place.

“Your walk has done wonders for your complexion,” he said, a teasing smile widening as he spoke. “I have never seen a woman look half so beautiful.”

Chapter End Notes

Yes. Yes, I am just ending it there. Don't be shy; leave a comment! C:
(And finally I had an excuse to shove in details about Bran and Rickon. Phew. That's a weight off my mind.)
Chapter 5

Chapter Notes

I've been looking forward to writing this chapter since I first came up with the idea for this fic and that's really all I've got to say about it.

Oh and also big thank you to ssstrychnine for having a look over some of this for me beforehand! :'D

What a humourous man this Captain Lannister was turning out to be; such a wildly unbelievable joke as Brienne Tarth being “beautiful” was the very height of mirth.

Brienne could not even open her mouth to answer his false compliment before he took a large step forward and his left arm was reaching out to her face. She managed to stammer a few syllables as he removed her bonnet and placed it lopsidedly on his own head. He pushed a strand of hair from her eyes and shrugged.

“I would help you with your hair, only I seem to be one hand short of being useful. However, with the obfuscation of your bonnet removed by my good self, you may easily affix it into whichever form the young ladies are wearing their hair lately.”

She stared at him, unable to move. He was so close, close enough that she could reach out and kiss him, just as she had imagined happening with Renly Baratheon so many a time. But this was not Renly, this was Captain Lannister, and the smile on his face was nothing short of the foulest mockery. Blushing, she looked away and began to twist her hair into a loose bun so that she might pin it back as she had done before her walk. She could feel him looking at her, and it burned through her skin and itched most uncomfortably. Once her hair had returned to some semblance of decency she looked back up at him, defiant and thoroughly annoyed by his continued proximity.

“I think I prefer your hair untied,” he remarked, placing the bonnet gently back on her head, holding one side with his left hand and balancing the other side on his iron hand. She snatched it from him as soon as it made contact with her hair and tied it angrily around her neck.

“I did not ask for your opinion on the matter,” she mumbled, cursing the blush in her cheeks for giving away her ineptitude in such situations.

“Nor would I expect it of you,” he returned, turning towards Storm’s End and looking up at it as though he were seeing it for the first time.

“Do you not have a footman to receive your guests at this time of night?” she asked. Her eyes followed his and scanned the exterior of the grandiose manor house. There were few windows with light on the other side, and she wondered which one held Sansa.

“I am a man who prefers to be on foot than on a seat in the drawing room, playing cards with the ladies and denying myself the pleasure of such a lovely night, and such a lovely guest.”

Brienne sighed. If he continued to jest in this manner she would have to tell him just how insufferable she found his company. “I will deny you that second pleasure tonight. I am here to
see Miss Stark, not to distract you from your cards.”

“Very well,” he said, striding down the path without so much as looking back at her, “I shall have our footman show you to the room Miss Stark is staying in.”

She tried her best to ignore the sting in his speech. She did not aim to injure with her words, but it seemed that he could not but throw insults as freely as his long hair. As she followed him, Brienne was almost hypnotised by the way his veritable lion’s mane bounced up and down, moving en masse as individual strands of hair ought not to do. It was far too easy on the eye, and she hated it almost as she hated the man beneath it.

True to his word, when they reached the door a footman appeared and Captain Lannister snapped at him to show Miss Tarth to the East guest room. Without ceremony, he stalked off and left Brienne bewildered and disoriented. The footman turned away from the direction of the ballroom where she had been so recently and entered instead the bowels of the house. It was far too large for Brienne’s taste – she could get lost so easily, and surely would. She follow the footman up a spiral staircase to the second storey and down a corridor with more doors than seemed to fit. He stopped just short of one door and a maid appeared from beyond Brienne’s line of sight. The footman left and the maid took over, knocking on the door.

“Miss Stark, your governess is here to see you,” she called.

The reply was so soft that Brienne barely heard it. “Send her in.”

The maid curtseyed although there was no-one but Brienne to see her and opened the door. Inside, Sansa lay in a bed that seemed to swallow her whole, bolstered by cushions the size of small children. Brienne had never felt quite so large in her life. Sansa was obviously awake, but Brienne walked more carefully than usual, alert for any spots on the floor that creaked under her weight. She sat down on the edge of the bed, forcing Captain Lannister’s cruelty out of her mind and focusing instead on the matter at hand.

“My dear Miss Tarth,” Sansa said quietly. She looked very young and very tired. “It is so good of you to visit me.”

“I am not here to visit,” Brienne said. “I will stay for so long as I need to; until you are well enough to walk to Winterfell and back thrice over.”

“Arya will miss her lessons.”

They shared a small laugh. “She will not mind,” Brienne said.

“Will you sit with me a while? I have not seen anyone since the doctor left, and this room is far too large for just one inhabitant.”

Brienne smiled. “But of course. I did not walk all this way to leave you in boredom.”

“I will be enduring boredom tomorrow,” Sansa pointed out. “You will need to spend the day with Lady Baratheon.”

“Then we shall both be enduring boredom,” Brienne joked. They laughed again, although Sansa’s laughs ended in coughing.

It could not have been long before the maid returned to inform Brienne that the next room had been made ready for her, and that she was free to enter it whenever she wished. Sansa had fallen asleep, and Brienne forced herself to her feet and stepped gently out of the room. When she was in the corridor, it was as though she had stepped back into the fresh air. She savoured that sensation
for a brief moment before entering her bedchamber. It was smaller than the one Sansa had been assigned, but instead of the shades of red, this room was bedecked in blue, which gave it a feeling of more space than it had. The window hung slightly loose on its hinges and the open curtains let in moonlight to complement the candle by the bed. Brienne slowly became aware of her suffocating tiredness. She snuffed out the candle and fell asleep almost the moment her head hit the pillow.

The morning light woke her too early, and for a moment she forgot herself.

It took a whole hour and a lavish breakfast with Lady Baratheon before she remembered just what purpose she had waking in Storm’s End. Sansa.

“My Lady, might I enquire as to the health of Miss Stark this morning?”

“You may enquire, but I can give you no answer,” she answered. “I have not had cause to learn of her health. Doctor Luwin will arrive at midday, and then you may see her. Until then, I think it best that she not be stimulated by anyone’s presence.”

“Quite right,” Brienne said, although she did not agree at all. “I will see her again when it is appropriate.”

“Again?” Lady Baratheon looked startled. “I made it expressly clear that she was to have no visitors last night!”

“Captain Lannister—”

“Ah yes, my dear brother.”

There was such venom in Lady Baratheon’s voice as to surprise Brienne into dropping the bread roll in her hand.

“He— he instructed the footman—”

“Naturally he did.” She stood abruptly. “If you will excuse me, Miss Tarth. I do have other duties to which I must attend.”

“But of course,” Brienne stammered, picking up the roll with as much dignity as she could gather with such short notice; but by the time she had returned her composure Lady Baratheon had left, and she was sat alone at the excessively large table with nothing but her bread roll to keep her company.

Slowly she extricated herself from the pervading strangeness of her mood and walked towards the gardens. The clock in the dining room had just struck ten, so she had just over two hours to put to good use, and the gardens seemed as suitable place as any. She was eager to see them by daylight, after so many unpleasant memories associated with their darkness on her previous visits.

There was a fresh smell in the air, a reminder of the last night’s rain. Brienne followed a path lined with asters and snapdragons down from the main house to the dew-covered lawns beyond. The grass had been cut recently, she noticed, and she yearned to remove her shoes and walk through it with her skirts held up, as she had always done at Evenfall Hall. But her childhood home was a far cry from Storm’s End, open and light where the Baratheon seat was imposing and cast a shadow across half the countryside. She walked further out onto the grass and looked back and the manor from a distance. It was not welcoming, and even if it had all the flowers in the world blooming from its windows it still would not entice her to live there. She wondered how Lady Baratheon’s children felt, locked away in the veritable stone prison.
And then something caught her eye, something akin to a cave chipped into the manor’s stern facade. It was a walled area empty of flowers and cobbled like a city street, leaving to a gated enclosure. And Storm’s End was a very old structure, so it could be—

Brienne set off at a dash towards the place, almost tripping on her skirts with every step. She stumbled down the hill and climbed over the small stone wall into the rectangular space. The gate was hanging open slightly, she noticed. It was too tempting. Before she could stop herself she was pushing the gate forward, and she stared into the largest armoury she had ever seen.

She stood in the gateway for what felt like a long time, gaping at the row of swords hanging from the wall in front of her. They were the finest rapiers she had ever seen, more florid than those in her father’s meagre collection. The handles of each were different; there were the usual patterned curves, but there were also coiled snakes and even ones with antlers made in the image of the Baratheon sigil.

There was no-one in sight, but it could not have been a coincidence that the gate had been left open. Someone had been in recently and forgotten to close it, she thought. That was the best possible explanation, and the explanation that eased her worries as she pulled a rapier off the wall. It had a more simple design than some of the others, but there was a single sapphire resting in the pommel. It felt perfect in her hand. She had almost forgotten what it was like to hold a real sword. She walked away from the wall and turned to the side, thrusting the blade forward and striking the air.

“Perfect,” she whispered to herself.

Without a target, she set about cycling through the positions, and then moved slowly into an étude, revising the footwork she had practised so many times and readjusting to a rapier. Her glorified twig at Winterfell worked well enough, she supposed, but nothing could compare to the feeling of wielding a sword. It struck her that this may be the only chance she’d have in a long while, that she may not return to Storm’s End, or that the next time the armoury would be locked. So she swung the sword ahead of her as she walked away from the gate and deeper into the room, towards a shelf stacked with fencing masks. She lunged and caught one of the masks right where the bridge of the nose would be.

There was a sudden noise from behind her, so soft it must have been in the distance, but nonetheless she turned, in case she might have to put the sword away and pretend that she was a curious young maiden who had somehow lost her way and found herself among unfamiliar objects.

She nearly screamed when she saw Captain Lannister standing at the gate, looking at her as though she was a creature unbeknown to mankind. His surprise soon settled into his familiar smirk, however, and he walked across the armoury floor and pulled the ornate snake-handled rapier down from the wall, turning it about so it sat well in his left hand.

“I had not thought to find anyone here when I realised I had left the gate open,” he said, a note of amusement in his voice. “Your footwork is impressive, for a woman.”

He swung the sword lazily and stepped towards her. Brienne held her own sword firmly and kept it pointed at him as he approached. He pulled his sword back into a salute and reflexively she did the same. They lowered and extended their blades, mirroring each other’s movement, their gazes locked. His eyes had no right to be such a vivid green, she thought.

“My lady, might I have this dance?” he asked, grinning.

“En garde,” she whispered.
He stepped forward and lunged straight away, but Brienne blocked him with a parry to her right. That the sword was in his left hand was unsettling; she was not used to her opponent having so much of their body available as a target yet so awkwardly out of her reach. He laughed and pulled back, moving his sword from the basic *sixte* to a *tierce* and aiming again, but she took a step forward and met his blade, forcing him backwards. “Start slowly,” Captain Goodwin had instructed her. “You have the endurance of a small army; let your opponent wear themselves out and then increase your speed.” It was his words that drove her as she played the defensive, blocking all of his blows, but all the while moving towards him so that he had no choice but to back away. If she could direct him into a corner, she would have the advantage of space as well as speed.

But he was not a man who would play by any linear codes of honour, she realised, and no less did he continue to aim his blows in a different direction each time, but when they reached the gate he turned himself to the side and backed outside into the walled area, and she had no choice but to follow. She began to notice that he stuck to the positions that allowed him more access to her left side, and that while unpredictable, his motions with the blade were very tame; there was no fast slashing or changes in his approach. Every time he went for her left, and suddenly a realisation entered Brienne’s mind.

*He does not think I am good enough to fence him properly.*

The more she looked at him, the more she saw complacency in his face. He would think that she was simply a girl who knew how to swing a sword, no more than that. She cursed her skirts and wished that she had britches instead – perhaps she would be less worried about appearing inexperienced in that case. She had been sticking to the same simple positions as he had, since she was mirroring him in defence, but he would think that she was holding back because she was not talented, not because she wanted to tire him.

She would show him otherwise.

When they had fallen into a pattern, she switched suddenly to *seconde* and lunged at his open right side. His eyes widened but he was quick enough to parry. The lunge had reminded Brienne why she always had to force herself to be patient when acting the defensive, and that made her slightly angry. She pulled back into a familiar *sixte* and drove at him, their blades clashing frequently and loudly, and his parries quickly losing their finesse.

Brienne knew enough to know that she had won, but the bout would not be over until she landed a blow. Neither of them were armed however, and she did not particularly wish to injure the brother of her hostess, so she took a step forward with every slash until the backs of his legs came into contact with the low wall. And yet he was not so easily put off, and continued to attempt to land blows. The hindrance of her skirts was forgotten, and all she saw was her sword and his striking each other. She let him try, waiting for her opening.

It came suddenly, but she was prepared, and when he moved into a *prime* that was clearly aimed at demonstrating just how well he could fence, she lunged. Instead of letting the point of the rapier pierce clothing she lay the blade sideways along his chest and stepped forward. He staggered backwards so that he was half sitting, half leaning on the wall. He was breathing heavily; she had not noticed that while they were fighting.

“Yield,” she said, her jaw clenched in anger. She was closer to him than she had intended.

There was an emotion in his face that she could not read. It may have passed for confusion, but his stare was so unwavering that she did not think he could have any doubt as to his own thoughts, whatsoever they might have been.
“I yield,” he said after a pause. “You fight well.”

“I was taught well,” she said tersely. Frowning, she removed her blade from his chest and took several steps away from him. He stood slowly, eyeing his own blade, before turning back to her.

“I will confess to being amused that you chose the rapier with the sapphire,” he said. “I do not know who owned it, but it matches your eyes exceedingly well.”

She stared at him, handsome even though he was sweating heavily and his hair was thrown out of place. How could he think to say such a thing to her? She forced herself to stop looking at him and returned to the armoury to hang up her sword.

When she came back outside he was still there, sitting on the wall and twirling the snake-handled rapier in his hands. With no regard for her own dignity, a quality she had surrendered the moment she took up arms against Captain Lannister, she brushed her skirts to the side and climbed over the wall.

“You continue to surprise me, Brienne Tarth,” he said. She ignored him and continued up the grassy hill and back towards the front of the manor house.

It became harder to ignore him, however, when he shouted after her that he might leave the gate unlocked more often in the future.

Chapter End Notes

I love all the feedback I’ve been getting from you guys - it really makes my day. So please do keep commenting! I’m so chuffed so many people are enjoying it.
I'm about to descend into an absolute hell of assignments, but hopefully I'll come out the other side having written a chapter in my spare time?? Could be a while, though.

This one goes out to ssstrychnine and frontally because in my haste to post it I didn't give them a chance to beta it properly ;) ;)

If Brienne had sometimes thought that being a governess was the greatest of trials she might ever face, she had been sorely mistaken. Since she had exerted herself fencing against Captain Lannister, it seemed that she could no longer sit still in polite company. Her fingers itched to return to the hilt of the sapphire-studded rapier and fight in the proper attire, wearing a breastplate and a mask, and free to aim the sword right into the middle of the Captain’s chest. She was not sure which aspect of the thought caught her imagination more fiercely – fencing with a real sword, or fencing him.

There was a part of her that thought she might almost enjoy his company if she could but spend it with his horrid smirk imprisoned behind a wire mask, and that thought scared her more than it ought to, so on her third afternoon at Storm’s End while she was not able to visit Sansa – on her Ladyship’s orders – she attempted to banish such foolish notions indeterminately from her mind by agreeing to engage in a game of whist with Lady Baratheon and her brothers. This did little to stop her from imagining Captain Lannister’s infuriating continental hairstyle contained in a fencing mask, but it did distract her somewhat that Lady Baratheon insisted on partnering her, and so they sat opposite at the small card table. Captain Lannister sat to her left and mercifully out of her line of vision.

Mr. Lannister’s presence was a small mercy; he at least made pleasurable company, and might even have been a good measure of the level of social participation Brienne was expected to uphold. She did however choose not to take her cues from his perpetual dismissal of his sister. It would not have been wise to insult her whist partner.

They were four tricks into the game before Brienne realised how utterly inappropriate her presence was.

“The queen of hearts. How apt,” Mr. Lannister muttered as his sister placed down the first card of the trick. He sighed and covered it partially with a two of hearts. Brienne panicked when it came to her turn. She always panicked. It was hard to guess Lady Baratheon’s strategy, but Brienne had no hearts in her hand higher than a ten, so she placed it on the pile. Lady Baratheon winced, and Brienne knew it was a poor move instantly. She looked back at her hand and frowned.

“King of hearts,” Captain Lannister said, pulling a card from the collection wedged into his iron glove and using it to crown the small pile. It took him so long to look through his cards each time, propped up awkwardly in the curve of his metal fingers, and Lady Baratheon did nothing to hide her impatience.

Brienne chanced a look at him to see his customary smug grin in place. It was the first trick he had won, and he reached his left hand forward to take it, at first attempting to clasp all four cards.
between his thumb and forefinger. When it became clear that his nails were clipped too short for this approach to work, he placed his fingers atop the cards and attempted to slide them towards the edge of the table so that he could get a better grip. The queen of hearts stayed stubborn, and Captain Lannister achieved no more than scattering the cards across the centre of the table. Lady Baratheon was scowling at him, but he was so intent on securing the trick that he did not notice.

Before she could judge that it was a bad idea, Brienne put her cards face down in front of her and reached into the middle of the table. She swatted Captain Lannister’s hand away from the cards, collecting them back into a neat pile and tapping the edges together on the table to keep them in line. She reached across his iron hand to place them on his left, so that he might have greater ease in accessing them, and pulled away quickly, snatching up her own cards again and staring furiously at them as though nothing had happened.

The silence was deafening.

Brienne slowly looked up from the table and straight into Lady Baratheon’s cold stare. Captain Lannister was staring at her too, but he looked more amused than annoyed, much to her relief. It was the younger Mr. Lannister who finally broke the silence.

“I think we shall one day take you back to Casterly Rock with us, Miss Tarth. I’m sure our dear brother could use an extra pair of hands.”

Brienne opened her mouth, but closed it when she realised that anything she might have to say would only further inflame her hostess, whose lips were pursed in barely-contained ire.

“An excellent idea,” Captain Lannister said, his left hand poised over the trick he had just won. “Although I would hate to reduce such a fine governess to the position of handmaiden.”

“Miss Tarth will not be accompanying anyone to Casterly Rock,” Lady Baratheon said, her words falling as though she had spat them onto the table. “We are playing whist, not considering the taking of a hostage.”

“An exchange, perhaps,” Mr. Lannister said, ignoring his sister entirely, “that would be an idea. We will send that stuffy relic of a governess that we keep in the attic to work for Mrs. Stark, and when the time comes for my brother and I to return to our ancestral home, Miss Tarth shall make the journey with us and tend to all the children that the Master of the Rock will no doubt beget once a wife has been chosen for him.”

“You know well that I do not intend to marry,” Captain Lannister said, “but I am sure that once your children are born Miss Tarth will never be out of a job.”

The brothers looked at each other for a short moment before laughing. They sounded so alike when they laughed, Brienne noticed. Perhaps she could have been content in observing their merriment, but it was cut short by Lady Baratheon.

“You will marry,” she hissed at her twin brother.

“I will,” he conceded, “as soon as I meet a woman I wish to wed.”

Mr. Lannister made a quiet noise of amusement, which prompted both his brother and sister to glare at him.

Brienne stood abruptly, almost knocking aside the table. “I shall fetch a maid to bring tea,” she said, her words running together out of nervousness.

“Splendid,” Mr. Lannister said loudly.
“There is no need,” Lady Baratheon snapped, rising to her feet. “One of you two sworn bachelors may send for tea if you wish. Miss Tarth, will you join me in taking a turn about the room?”

Brienne was already standing and did not have the energy to refuse. She took Lady Baratheon’s offered arm and let the older woman guide her. The card room was small, and they would not be out of the gentlemen’s hearing, but Mr. Lannister left and the Captain followed soon after, and as she spoke Lady Baratheon did not raise her voice above a loud whisper.

“Do not presume to know us,” she began, “and do not presume that just because my brother and the dwarf have taken a liking to you that you may consider yourself our friend. You are well-born, but you are nonetheless considerably below our station, and you would do well not to forget that.”

“Of course I shall not, your Ladyship,” Brienne said, biting back her annoyance.

“You would be wise, however, to open your mouth on occasion. It would not hurt to remind those men that they shall not be here forever, nor shall you be in their lives for long.”

“I confess I am no great conversationalist. I will remind them with my silence.”

They paused by the window. “I believe you have familiarised yourself with the gardens. Casterly Rock’s lands are larger, and more beautiful. Enjoy these gardens while you can, my dear, for you shall never see their like again.”

“The gardens are most beautiful at my father’s home,” Brienne said quietly. “I am sorry that you will never see their like.”

“I am not,” said Lady Baratheon simply. “You may visit Miss Stark.”

Brienne disengaged herself and left without another word. She passed Captain Lannister in the corridor and attempted to avoid looking at him, but he caught her arm with his iron hand.

“You would do well to ignore every word my sister might say to you,” he whispered.

“I am sick of hearing what I ought to be doing,” Brienne said shortly, shaking him off and walking away without even looking at him. She could feel her face burning and she was not sure that she wanted to visit Sansa in this state. She did not particularly want to see anyone, in fact, so she made for the gardens and sat on the low wall outside the armoury staring at the flowers and begrudging them their beauty.

The days could not pass soon enough until Sansa’s recovery. As soon as Doctor Luwin had determined her to have returned to full health, a messenger was dispatched to Winterfell and returned within the hour to say that Mrs. Stark and the younger Miss Stark would soon arrive by foot.

Brienne and Sansa were waiting for them in the parlour; it would perhaps have been more pleasant to meet them on the road, but it would have been the height of rudeness, especially after Lady Baratheon’s extended hospitality. The Lady herself, however, was conspicuously absent from their reception, leaving the duty of sociability to Mr. Lannister. Brienne privately thought that he was a much more natural host than his sister.

Captain Lannister was not present either, but that was no surprise. Brienne had not seen him since he had spoken to her in the corridor. She could almost still feel the iron on her arm, and she willed the thought away with every possible distraction. Thoughts of Captain Lannister led to thoughts of the armoury, to thoughts of their fight, and the vaguest of feelings that he might not be as objectionable as she had once imagined.
They left Mr. Lannister on good terms, and he ensured them that although Lady Baratheon was unable to receive them, he would relay their regards. Further proving himself to be an excellent host, he requested the messenger to return Brienne’s portmanteau to Winterfell so that she would not have to carry it on her walk, for which she was most grateful.

The weather had reverted to a mild English Summer that promised pleasant afternoon walks, the slow amble from Storm’s End being the first of many to come. Arya and Sansa walked ahead, catching up on the conversations they had missed while apart, and Mrs. Stark and Brienne followed them at a slower pace.

“I had thought we might take a detour to the Winter Town,” Mrs. Stark said. “I’ve had word that the militia are stationed there for the season.”

Brienne did not reply. Mrs. Stark had refused to have anything to do with the military after the deaths of her husband and eldest son, so her suggestion made little sense.

“The girls have not yet experienced that singular youthful folly of making themselves ridiculous in the name of impressing the redcoats. I met my husband when I was a girl enamoured with any man in uniform; it may be that Arya, or even Sansa, will find a worthy match among their number.”

“It seems unlikely that Sansa would,” Brienne commented, “given her attachment to Lord Baratheon.”

“She will make herself ridiculous nonetheless,” Mrs. Stark said with a small smile. “And perhaps Arya will find someone more suitable for her preference than her blacksmith’s apprentice. There is hope for her yet.”

“Gendry is a nice lad,” Brienne said. “She is still young, but at the very least you could be assured he would treat her well.”

“We may find solace in the small things,” Mrs. Stark agreed. “And you, Miss Tarth? Will you be searching for a husband amongst the military men? It would please your father, I know.”

It would, Brienne thought, but that did not mean she would do it. She had already been betrothed thrice, and she was sure that did not please her father one bit.

“I shall refrain from this particular folly, I think,” she said.

“You shall attempt to refrain,” Mrs. Stark joked. Brienne allowed herself to laugh.

The sun was strong when they reached the Winter Town and it reflected beautifully off the red jackets milling about the shops. Their presence reminded Brienne just how long she had been at Storm’s End, and she was struck by the image of Captain Lannister wearing a jacket equally as splendid, and perhaps wielding a rapier like the one she had used, but with a ruby in place of a sapphire, and he would certainly look twice as handsome as any man in this crowd.

Mrs. Stark was immediately recognised and hailed over by a redcoat. As their party approached, Brienne discerned that he was a Colonel from the insignia he bore, and that he resembled Mrs. Stark most closely.

“My dear sister,” he said, grinning brightly. “It has been too long.”

“Brother, you have met my daughters, of course,” Mrs. Stark said, signalling for Sansa and Arya to curtsy for their uncle. “And their governess, Miss Tarth. This is my brother, Colonel Edmure
“A pleasure, Miss Tarth.” If he was uncomfortable at being so much shorter than a woman, he did not show it.

“I had hoped for my daughters to make some friends amongst your men,” Mrs. Stark said, the imminent granting of her request implicit in her tone. “ Might you introduce them to the liveliest you can bring to mind?”

“I could not call them lively, but Lieutenant Hunt and the officers he commands are the most personable young men I have had the fortune to meet. Your girls will enjoy their company, sure enough.”

Mrs. Stark nodded her approval, and Colonel Tully called out to a group of redcoats who seemed to be admiring a tall hat in the window of the milliner’s store.

“Hunt! You are required to be present, and at your most entertaining.”

The Lieutenant strode up to them, his men following close behind. “Allow me to introduce Lieutenant Hyle Hunt,” Colonel Tully said. “Not one of my men, I’m afraid, he is here with Colonel Tarly.”

“It is a wonder they posted you both in the same town,” Lieutenant Hunt said, straight-faced but with a smile in his eyes. “Sometimes even I cannot tell whether I am being called to attention by Tully or Tarly.”

Colonel Tully laughed heartily and turned back to his sister. “I had promised to take tea with my lady wife; will you join us?”

“I have not seen dear Roslin for far too many years,” Mrs. Stark said. “I would be delighted.” She turned to Brienne. “See that they are home before dark,” she said. And with that she walked away with her brother, leaving Brienne, Arya and Sansa standing with Lieutenant Hunt and his men.

“Well, will you introduce yourselves or shall I have Mullendore create names for you? He fancies himself a poet, but I am loath to give him an opportunity to exhibit his arts.”

The officer named Mullendore looked somewhat affronted at the accusation that he was a poet, but before he could open his mouth to protest, Sansa smiled and curtsied.

“I am Miss Sansa Stark, and this is my sister Miss Arya Stark, and our governess Miss Brienne Tarth,” she said, her eyes darting about as though she were unsure which redcoat was most deserving of her stares. “It is an honour to make your acquaintance.”

“An honour,” repeated another officer. “I wonder, since you ladies are local to this area, might you show us any notable landmarks? We are rather lost, I’m afraid.”

“But of course, Officer–”

“Officer Edmund Ambrose,” he said, smiling. He was rather handsome, Brienne noticed, and Sansa seemed to have noticed too, as she all too eagerly pointed towards the dressmaker’s shop, ignoring Arya’s suggestion that a dress shop might not be the best landmark to show a group of young men, although she followed Sansa nonetheless.

“You men go on ahead,” Lieutenant Hunt said. He turned to Brienne and looked her quickly up and down. “I would wish to stay and talk with Major Selwyn Tarth’s daughter. You are his daughter, I presume? Not some cousin or niece?”
“I am his daughter,” Brienne confirmed. She was almost a head taller than Lieutenant Hunt, but there was something in his bearing that made him seem more statuesque. His uniform seemed to fit perfectly and he was the very picture of a military man, with neat brown hair, trimmed side-whiskers and a well-contained moustache. He had a plain face, but his evident confidence and grooming did much to distinguish him.

“I had the great pleasure of serving under your father for a few years before his retirement,” he said, an air of admiration in his voice. “We all agreed on what a pity it was that he was never promoted above Major, but he did not have a taste for command. He was always much more comfortable among his men.”

“He was,” Brienne agreed.

“No, tell me,” Lieutenant Hunt continued, offering his arm, “why have we not yet crossed paths in the days I have been here already?”

“Miss Stark and myself have just returned from Storm’s End,” Brienne explained as she stooped to take his arm. “She was taken ill during a visit, and I stayed with her until she was well enough to return home.”

“That would be today,” Lieutenant Hunt guessed.

Brienne nodded. They had turned away from the main street and walked in a small area of garden.

“I presume, then, that you are on good terms with the Baratheons and the Lannisters? I wish I could say the same.”

At that, she turned to look at him. He had an honest face, she thought. “Do you– do you have an unpleasant history with those families?”

“I shared quarters with the famous cripple when I first joined the army,” he explained. “Captain Jaime Lannister. How I used to look up to him. But I found that the more time I spent around him, the less I liked him.”

Brienne had found the exact opposite, although she did not say so. “Has he always been so singularly rude?” she asked instead.

“Oh, of course, but it wasn’t just that. My lady, I could tell you things about the Lannisters that would make your blood curdle at the very sight of them.”

Chapter End Notes

Quick disclaimer: a lot of the military stuff is me bluffing my way through a rudimentary knowledge of ranks. You’ll learn to forgive me, I’m sure. And for those of you familiar with Pride and Prejudice, this is where you might have to stop second-guessing the plot. I know that Mr. Collins is already in town when the redcoats arrive, but I simply couldn’t resist switching up the order in this case! The first of many minor changes, I’m afraid.

Let me know what you think of this chapter!!
This nearly killed me because I've just recovered from a very intense week and this chapter is a bit of an emotional drain. Your feedback never ceases to warm my heart and motivate me to keep going, dear readers. So, enjoy!

The sight of Winterfell did nothing to calm Brienne’s nerves. Her hands shook as she followed a few paces behind Mrs. Stark and her daughters, and the overwhelming scent of the pines made her queasy. There was nothing that could have prepared her for what Lieutenant Hunt had told her, and she had almost wished that she did not know, that she had not pressed him for information despite his reticence. But he was a good man, an honest one, and should her acquaintance with Captain Lannister have continued she was sure the Lieutenant would have told her eventually. It was better that he had informed her sooner rather than later, so that she would have time to put the whole disastrous affair behind her.

She no longer wished to fence Captain Lannister. She no longer wished even to be in his presence again.

It was inevitable, though, that one day soon they would be forced to meet at a ball, or that he might even request a further dance with her. She would refuse him.

Mrs. Stark’s voice barely registered in her ears as they entered the house. There were words about a letter from Rosings Park and an impending visit from a clergyman, but none of them reached Brienne’s ears. She maintained an air of politeness until she was in her own quarters, at which point she lay down upon her bed and tried to stop thinking.

Not thinking proved to be much harder than she had estimated. Despite her best efforts, Captain Lannister would not leave her mind, nor would Lieutenant Hunt, a man who had shown her more kindness than she deserved. They were so different, she thought. Captain Lannister was all arrogance and easy charm, whereas Lieutenant Hunt, although she had only just met him, had extended genuine friendship to her. The last man whom she had considered a friend had used her friendship to save his reputation, without once causing her offence, and she did not wish to dwell on that.

Instead, she allowed her mind to wander as it had not done in years. Lieutenant Hunt was significantly shorter than her, but in her imaginations there was no awkwardness when she kissed him, when he took her hand and led her from church. She mouthed the words “Brienne Hunt” to herself and smiled, biting her lip although no-one was around to see the change in her expression. He would be a good match, a military man, someone her father would approve of. Perhaps Mrs. Stark had been right in suggesting that she seek a husband among the regiment. She saw herself telling her father that she was to marry a man who had once served under him, and she saw the pride in his face, and she resolved to make an effort not to ruin her chances with Lieutenant Hunt by doing anything stupid, like continuing an acquaintance with the Lannisters.

Time passed quickly while she indulged her fantasies, but when the darkness made its way into her room so that she could no longer make out the details of the wallpaper she realised that perhaps she had lain there too long. She extracted herself slowly from her bed and stumbled half
in a daze to the kitchen where she would take her meal.

The servants’ table was crowded, and Brienne only just managed to squeeze in alongside Jon.

“I haven’t seen you in a while,” he commented as he leant across her to serve himself some mutton.

“No, I was detained at Storm’s End while Sansa recovered.”

“I’m glad she’s well, at the very least,” Jon said. “You haven’t missed much, only the news about our guest.”

“A guest?” Brienne asked.

“Yes, the Reverend Mr. Snow. Lord Bolton’s bastard is making a rare visit from the Dreadfort, so we’re told. He’ll be staying for perhaps a fortnight.”

She remembered what Mrs. Stark had been saying earlier about the clergyman from Rosings Park, and everything began to make sense. Lord Roose Bolton was the patriarch of an ancient dynasty with a sinister reputation – their seat Rosings Park was known as the Dreadfort everywhere but on the grounds itself for all the goings-on reputed to have polluted the manor, and the rose of their sigil was said to take its rich red from the blood of the Boltons’ enemies. Brienne had not heard of Mr. Snow, but if what Jon had said was correct and he was Lord Bolton’s bastard son, then he might bring some of the terror of the family with him to Winterfell, and she did not wish to experience it.

And of course there was another connection between the Starks and the Boltons: the late Brigadier Stark’s younger sister, a sickly girl named Lyanna, was married to their heir Dомeric Bolton. This was precisely the reason that the family had sent a lawyer all those months ago, and was presumably the reason they now sent their resident preacher to harass the Starks. Perhaps they felt that they had a claim to Winterfell, but Brienne wondered if they had not forgotten that Mrs. Stark still had two living sons. The link through Lyanna was tenuous at best, yet the Boltons were nothing if not persistent.

“I fear the worst,” Jon continued, his expression souring, “that he might be attempting to further secure their family’s connections to the Starks by marrying either Arya or Sansa.”

It always struck Brienne as odd when Jon called the girls by their names, but she had not been there while they grew up together. As the Eddard Stark’s bastard son, he had spent his youth as a part of the family, but when his father had died, Mrs. Stark had relegated the reminder of her husband’s deviance to a position as a stableboy. There had been rumours that he was in fact an illegitimate son of Lyanna Bolton and another man, but no-one could prove it, and so there was no chance of his being accepted back into the family with Mrs. Stark at the head. And yet naturally he still cared for his half-siblings, and spoke to them whenever possible.

Unlike Jon, Brienne had no business being so emotionally invested in the Stark family affairs, but she could not help dreading the clergyman’s visit.

Thankfully there was to be a distraction in the meantime.

“But enough on that,” Jon said. “I have heard word of a ball soon to be thrown in honour of the militia’s arrival,” Jon said. “Mr. Poole is holding it, I think.”

Brienne could not help but blush slightly, and hope that Jon would not notice. “And are all the militia invited?”
“Of course,” Jon said, giving her a curious sort of smile.

She imagined herself dancing with Lieutenant Hunt as she ate. He would be the very picture of a gentleman, extending his hand and asking for the honour of a dance, and she would look him in the eye and give her assent as graciously as possible. They would not be the couple to attract the attention of everyone in the ballroom for their flair, but they would dance well and she would not confuse her steps. And if she did, he would forgive her, his warm hand tightening in hers as a gesture of reassurance.

But the ideal situation was sullied by a sudden interloper. Captain Lannister would be at the ball, of that there could be no doubt.

“I will not entertain the possibility!” Harwin called across the table to Jon. Brienne had disconnected her thoughts from the conversation at hand, but Harwin’s loud voice returned her from the realm of pointless imagination.

Yes, she thought, I will not entertain the possibility.

Once the promise of a ball had entered her mind, it would not leave. She found herself increasingly distracted by thoughts of dancing during the girls’ lessons, and she could not sleep at night for her mind being assaulted by a veritable barrage of distracting thoughts. The days began to slur together as she struggled to stay awake over breakfast, as they had not done since the time when she spent her days worshipping Renly Baratheon as the very paragon of gentlemanliness. But now it was Lieutenant Hunt fulling her thoughts, and though they had met but once he would not leave her be.

And yet somehow she endured the days until the night of the ball at the Poole residence. It was a short distance from Winterfell, and so the four ladies arrived on foot. The estate was modest, but in lieu of extensive grounds it boasted a spectacular ballroom, and one most certainly large enough to entertain every redcoat in the Winter Town.

That night it was a sea of red, with ladies in pale dresses weaving trails of light through the vivid crowd. The Starks were greeted enthusiastically by Mr. Poole, an old friend of the family. His daughter Jeyne was of an age with Sansa, and the girls had been close companions since their childhood. While Mrs. Stark and Mr. Poole spoke, Arya disappeared into the throng leaving Brienne to follow Sansa and Jeyne, both of whom immediately began gushing over the redcoats.

“Who do you want to dance with tonight?” Jeyne asked.

“Mr. Ambrose seems the most agreeable of the officers I have met,” Sansa said. “Do you see the tall man with the elegant brown hair to the left of the piano?”

“Oh, indeed!” Jeyne exclaimed with a grin. “He is most agreeable.”

“But I do wish that Lord Baratheon were here,” Sansa added, indicating that she would not forget him entirely just because the militia were in town.

“Their party were not able to grace us with their presence tonight,” Jeyne said, an almost bitter note to her voice. “They had guests for dinner, my father was told.”

“How despicable,” Sansa said, and the girls shared a laugh.

Brienne was nothing short of immensely relieved – there would be no Baratheons and Lannisters present to plague her.

“Who will you dance with,” Sansa asked Jeyne, “since I have claimed Mr. Ambrose for myself?”
“Don’t worry,” Jeyne said, “I would not wish to steal him away from you. Have you met Lieutenant Dondarrion?”

“I confess I have not,” Sansa said.

“Over there,” Jeyne whispered, gesturing towards a tall, red-haired man dancing with a willowy brunette. He had natural good looks and an easy smile; there could be no doubt as to why Jeyne wished to dance with him.

“Oh, he is handsome,” Sansa said, her volume dropping to match Jeyne’s as though someone might hear them discussing Lieutenant Dondarrion and chide them for it.

Jeyne suddenly looked away from him, as though she had remembered something. “Miss Tarth! Will you be dancing this evening?”

“She will,” came a deep voice from behind Brienne. A hand touched her arm briefly, before Lieutenant Hunt appeared by her side, smiling up at her. “That is, if she will consent to giving me the honour of the next two dances.”

Brienne felt as though the floor might be cleft apart beneath her feet and swallow her into an abyss of embarrassment. Lieutenant Hunt had not stopped smiling, and Sansa and Jeyne were grinning at her with an awfully conspiratorial air.

“We have not yet had the pleasure of meeting,” Jeyne said to him.

“You are Mr. Poole’s daughter, are you not?” Hunt asked, and Jeyne gave a proud nod. “I will ask you for a dance later,” he continued, “but for now Miss Tarth is going to partner me.”

Brienne shrunk her shoulders back to make her feel less as though she had just stepped straight into one of her dreams. I am?

“I am,” she agreed. She took his arm and refused to meet Sansa’s eyes as she left her young charge and stood across from Lieutenant Hunt on the dancefloor. The music began, a slow waltz, and Brienne was vaguely aware that her face was red and her palms were beginning to sweat, but nonetheless she let Lieutenant Hunt take her hand and guide her with his other hand on her waist. He danced well – he was perhaps not as fluid in his movement as Captain Lannister had been, but his skill was apparent in his steady footwork. Brienne caught herself wondering if he was a good fencer, but as her thoughts drifted she very nearly stood on his toes, and so she returned her focus to the dance.

Time seemed to pass too quickly as they danced, and before Brienne had adjusted to the rhythm he was letting go of her hands, bowing and saying that he would return to her later in the evening, and moving away. She walked away from the dancefloor, dazed and disoriented, and sought Sansa and Jeyne, both retiring from dances of their own. But before Brienne could reach them, a man stood in her path. They were of a height, and with a start she realised that it was Sansa’s officer of choice, Mr. Ambrose.

“Miss Tarth, is it not?” he asked. Brienne could only nod dumbly. “I hope you are not promised to another for this next dance,” he said, “because I intend to claim you.”

Brienne opened her mouth to speak, but found no words. She stood for a moment gaping at him, before he interjected.

“My lady, you wound me with your silence! I must know – will you dance with me?”
He had such a kind smile, and although the soles of Brienne’s feet were beginning to hurt, she could not help stuttering out a quiet agreement. Mr. Ambrose looked positively delighted as she took his arm. This time she glanced back at Sansa and Jeyne, who were staring at her with what she could only think was plain jealousy. Why they would be jealous of her, she had no idea. A man so handsome as Mr. Ambrose would not ask her to dance for any reason but out of pity. At the end of the day, his kind would always prefer beautiful and dainty girls like Sansa to tall and homely ones such as Brienne.

And yet she danced with him. He was more bold than Lieutenant Hunt and his charming grins more than compensated for any mistake Brienne might have made in trying to keep up with him. He was so incredibly polite that Brienne felt that the heavens had smiled upon the Winter Town when they had chosen to station the kindest regiments there. And, most surprisingly, he was not the last officer to ask her for a dance that evening.

Where Mr. Ambrose was composed entirely of smooth charm, Mr. Mullendore had an infectious humour and liveliness about him. As Brienne danced with him he told stories about his time in the Africas, and joked about how boring he found England upon returning. He seemed to have perfectly picked the most lively rounds to dance with her, and by the end her legs felt as though they might collapse beneath her weight. Yet she still agreed to dance with the statuesque Mr. Beesbury, who was so imposing he made her feel almost short, and soft-spoken Mr. Farrow, who was all gentle smiles and gracious apologies for what he believed to be his own poor dancing, and even the somewhat lecherous Mr. Inchfield, whose hand strayed far too close to her behind as all the while he spoke like a true gentleman.

By the time Brienne had managed to remove herself from Mr. Inchfield’s grasp, Lieutenant Hunt descended on her again, asking for two more dances.

“My apologies, Lieutenant, but I must refuse you,” she said, hardly believing her own words. “I am simply exhausted.”

“A pity,” he said, “I was so hoping to dance more with you this evening, but it seems you were a much more popular partner than I had anticipated. Or perhaps I only anticipated that you would be free because I wished to dance only with you.”

Brienne’s cheeks burned as she stared at his feet. “I would have wished to dance with you more than those other men,” she admitted. “I still would, were my feet not so pained.”

“I shall fetch you a drink,” he declared. “Will you take wine?”

“Water,” she said quickly. “Water will be fine.”

He returned in a matter of minutes with a glass of water in one hand and white wine in the other. Brienne received the water gratefully and drank it in two large mouthfuls. They stood to the side of the room, Brienne nervously turning the glass about in her hands and Lieutenant Hunt leaning casually against the wall. They stood in silence for a few moments before Brienne wondered if perhaps she was boring him, and so resolved to instigate conversation.

“How are you finding staying in the Winter Town, Lieutenant?” she asked.

“It is pleasant,” he answered, “although it does want for excitement. We will be staying the season, though, so I shall have to find my own excitement, shall I not?”

Brienne did not respond, and he laughed softly.

“Of course, there is nothing more charming than a proper country ball such as Mr. Poole has
thrown tonight. And I must confess, I find the company most delightful, not least of all your own, my lady.”

“You are far too kind,” Brienne said, “but I fear that you may be too easily amused if you find the most boring girl in the room to fit your ideal of delightful company.”

“On the contrary, you do not merely fit my ideal, you are my ideal. I do not enjoy anything more than conversation with an intelligent young lady.”

Brienne laughed, feeling slowly more comfortable and less shy in his presence. “Intelligent!”

“Intelligent, indeed! For you must be intelligent to be a governess. No, don’t say anything – I will not hear your disagreement.”

“I would not disagree,” Brienne said, “only–”

“I shall not hear it! You will allow me to think of you as the most intelligent girl in this room, and in turn you will think of me as man not so easily swayed by the words of others. My good opinion is hard won, but you have–”

Lieutenant Hunt stopped abruptly as Mrs. Stark approached them. She turned to Brienne. “Miss Tarth, we will be taking our leave now.”

“Of course,” Brienne said. She looked at Lieutenant Hunt, who smiled at her.

“I will take your glass,” he said. “Walk safely, my lady.”

Brienne bit her lip as though it would keep the blush from her cheeks. She held out the glass to him, but before she could pull away he captured her wrist and kissed her hand gently. “I hope to see you soon,” he said quietly.

She could not spare another look at him for fear that she might give too much away in her countenance, so she turned swiftly and followed Mrs. Stark out of the ballroom. They met with Sansa and Arya, who had been whispering, and when Brienne reached them they broke apart and looked admiringly up at her.

“Is it true that you danced with six officers tonight?” Arya asked.

“Five officers and a Lieutenant,” Brienne said, and she sounded more pleased than she had realised. Perhaps, then, her sore feet were a small price to pay.

Chapter End Notes

Comments are welcome, as always!

Can I just ask you all a huge favour though, please refrain from speculating about the plot in the comments. I’m at the bit of this story where I’m really deviating a lot from Pride and Prejudice and there are quite a few things I’d like to keep as unknowns for now. So if you’re pretty certain where I’m going with the plot (or, indeed, what Lieutenant Hunt might have told Brienne), please don’t say what you think will happen, just in case you’re right... ;)}
The walk to the Winter Town had never seemed longer when Brienne walked it with the anticipation of meeting Lieutenant Hunt at the other end. He had not left her thoughts, nor the other officers with whom she had danced at the Poole ball – but he was first and foremost in her mind. He was kind to her in a way that Renly Baratheon, her last futile love, had never been. He had bade her call him “Renly”, and they had been on most intimate terms indeed, but it was nothing more than a show on his part. Of that she was certain.

There could be no doubt that discovering the truth of Renly’s affections was the worst thing that could have happened to Brienne, and it happened in the worst way possible. She had spoken to her father one night, and he seemed so sure that Renly would propose to her, that a match was a certainty. And after the three terminal betrothals that Brienne had endured, it was such a welcome idea that she might marry a man who loved her.

The twist of the knife was that Renly did not love her.

It was the day after Brienne’s father had told her of the surety of a betrothal, a cool morning towards the beginning of Winter, and she had resolved to go for a ride around the grounds before it became too cold to bring the horses out for anything other than transport. Brienne’s mare was the largest of the brood, white and stately, and it could support her weight with ease. She had thought to ask Renly to ride with her, but she had looked for him in all of his usual haunts and it seemed as though he had disappeared off the face of the Earth.

In fact, he had been in the stables all along. Brienne would never forget his face as he looked up, his eyes wide and his breathing erratic, paused in the middle of an unfamiliar motion as he took the stableboy from behind.

He might still propose, she told herself as she ran from the stables, tears falling unwarranted down her cheeks. Of course, he might, but she could not be convinced to accept it with the knowledge that he would never love her, not truly.

He had followed her shortly. Brienne had longer legs, but Renly was faster, and he caught her by the arm. She could not stand to look at him, although somehow she managed to notice the beads of sweat on his face, the mess of dark hair that was usually so neat, the way his clothes had been replaced in great haste. He had called her name too, several times maybe, but she had not heard. She had kept running faster until his fingers were no longer wrapped around her arm, and she was so far from the stables that she could no longer see them, nor Renly. When she was surrounded by pine trees she stopped abruptly, her throat tight and her vision blurred, and she slumped against rough bark and sobbed for three hours straight.

He left Evenfall Hall the next day, but Brienne did not so much as leave her room to farewell him.

The Winter Town was once again painted red with the regiment, and so Brienne quickly drove the past from her mind. No sooner had she arrived than the charming Mr. Mullendore descended upon her, offering her an arm.

“Miss Tarth, you look positively radiant today,” he began. “And are you here all on your own?”

“I am,” she said. “Winterfell is being readied for the arrival of our guest Mr. Snow, and my
charges are engaged in the preparations.”

In fact, Mrs. Stark had given her the whole day free, and Brienne had decided to use it so that she might perhaps see Lieutenant Hunt. Running instead into Mr. Mullendore was not unpleasant, but nor was it the desired outcome of her journey. She could only hope that his company would lead her to Lieutenant Hunt.

“I have not heard tell of this Mr. Snow,” Mullendore remarked. “I think he must not be a man of the world to have escaped my knowledge.”

“He is a clergyman,” Brienne said, fully intending to continue but cut off by the officer’s sharp laugh.

“Well, that explains it! I am sure he is a most interesting man, but I have not once found myself captivated by a clergyman.”

Brienne was not sure how one was to respond to such a statement. She had been raised in a god-fearing household, but she had her doubts over the existence of a god who might see fit to take the lives of her brother, her mother, and her infant sisters – yet she could not bring herself to speak openly in disrespect of the church as Mr. Mullendore had done.

“You are silent,” he remarked. “Have I offended you?”

“No, indeed,” Brienne said, however she would not elaborate on her thoughts. There were some things in her mind that would never be spoken to anyone, not even one so amiable as Mr. Mullendore. Lieutenant Hunt, on the other hand – she did trust him, but she resolved not to trust him yet with her past.

Just as he crossed her thoughts, he crossed their path. Without thinking of the offence it might cause, she immediately relinquished Mr. Mullendore's arm as they approached Lieutenant Hunt.

“My dear Miss Tarth,” he said, stepping forward to claim her hand in greeting, pressing a kiss to her glove. She remembered the way they had parted at the ball, and how there had been no glove as an obstruction on that night.

“Lieutenant Hunt,” she said, a warmth spreading through her face. “I had not thought to see you here.”

“Nor I you,” he replied, but he caught her eyes and they shared a look that told they had both thought quite the opposite.

“It is a fine day for walking,” she commented, unsure of how else to fill the silence. Though there were many other people around them, Brienne felt as though it were just her and Lieutenant Hunt, isolated in the town. Mr. Mullendore still stood by them, but he might have been a tree for all she cared.

“And a better day yet for riding,” he said. “Do you ride, my lady?”

“I do,” she said.

He held out his arm and she took it almost hastily, carefully avoiding having to look back at Mr. Mullendore, who might have been somewhat annoyed at being ignored. “Perhaps you would care to ride beyond the town. Surely you know the area better than I do. If you could show me the land, I’d be most grateful.”

“It would be my pleasure,” she said.
“You may take Mullendore’s horse for the day; I’m sure he won’t mind.” Lieutenant Hunt began to lead her away, towards the stables where the regiment’s cavalry were kept. It would not have been hard to locate even if Brienne were alone – the horses made almost as much noise as their riders.

“I should mind,” Mr. Mullendore said, following them as they walked, “however it seems I would be playing a losing game in arguing. Very well, you may take the horse.” With a pointed glare at Lieutenant Hunt, he strode away from them.


“I highly doubt that,” Brienne said. “He is simply averse to the idea of a woman taking what is his.”

He gave a short but warm laugh. “You are far too innocent of the motives of men, I fear.”

Brienne remained silent – she knew of which motives he spoke, but she would not gratify his assumption with a refutation. It was too pleasant a day to discuss such matters.

Shortly they reached the stables, and Lieutenant Hunt saddled Mr. Mullendore’s horse for her. Brienne almost refused his offer of a ride when she took note that the horse was a white one, so similar to her own that still resided in the stables at Evenfall Hall. Nevertheless she composed herself and was poised to climb into the saddle when she realised that she was wearing her skirts, and not even proper riding dress.

“I– I cannot–”

“Relax, my lady. You will be content with riding sidesaddle, I presume?”

“Of course,” she said, quickly composing her nerves. It would do no good to convince Lieutenant Hunt that she was the skittish sort of girl, prone to jump at even the slightest movement of an animal. Mullendore’s mare was docile, but even if it weren’t Brienne would have had no trouble mounting and riding it – a youth spent sneaking away from the writing desk to be on horseback did have its merits.

“Where shall we ride?” she asked the Lieutenant once they had left the stables. The middling compound backed onto an open field, green acres of countryside scattered with small hills and with a lake and a stream at its centre. Beyond the stream, the field was Baratheon land, and Brienne was keen not to find herself in that particular area.

Hunt halted his horse and glanced up at the sky. It was a bright, cloudless day. “Away from the sun, for certain,” he said. “But you are the local – show me the most pleasing features of the land, if you will.”

“There is a lake, not a fifteen minute ride from here,” she said.

“Splendid; we shall make for it at once!” He spurred the horse into a trot and Brienne followed close behind.

It truly was a perfect day for riding. They directed their course so that they did not face the sun, but Brienne still felt its warmth on her back. The hills were not steep and their horses managed them easily, with Brienne’s borrowed mount taking to its temporary rider and trotting gently so that she did not fall asunder. She was used to riding in mens’ clothing, a habit her father had indulged in her despite the families in their social circle frowning upon it, and so adjusting to riding sidesaddle when she’d first arrived at Winterfell had not been the most simple of tasks, but
she had adjusted nonetheless. As she rode beside Lieutenant Hunt, she was glad of her this. It would have shamed her greatly to admit to a potential suitor that she could not ride as was expected of a woman of her station.

The lake came into view gradually as they rode up a small hill, the other side of which sloped steeply down to the waters. Brienne noticed a rider approaching from the opposite bank, and it seemed he had noticed her too, for he waved almost instantly.

“Miss Tarth!”

It took her longer than it ought to realise that the voice was from the other rider, not from Lieutenant Hunt, who was a few paces behind her. It took her longer still to realise that the other rider was Captain Lannister. She stiffened and backed her horse away, but the Captain had already broken his into a gallop and crossed the small bridge spanning the stream to approach them. Brienne was not sure whether to cringe at or delight in the change in his expression when he noticed her companion. Lieutenant Hunt had told her much of his shared history with Captain Lannister, and in light of that she would be foolish not to expect some animosity to arise from this encounter.

Her expectations were not disappointed.

“Hunt,” Captain Lannister spat, not bothering to hide his distaste.

Lieutenant Hunt, on the other hand, was all smiles, all politeness. “Jaime, my old friend. What brings you here today?”

“Across that bridge is my sister’s land,” he said. “I may well be asking what you are doing here.”

“Yet you are not asking, it seems, for you are as ever a gracious host.”

“And your simpering never fails to accompany you, I see.”

“Why, you are mistaken. This is no simpering, this is my companion Miss Brienne Tarth.”

Brienne bit her lip and drew back further, not wishing to come between these two men and their past.

“You were always quick with your humour,” Captain Lannister said, a harshness in his face that Brienne had never seen the like of, “and I oft wondered whether it might not be a mask to disguise your own inadequacy. Very well, I permit your attempts to solicit a laugh. It is no wonder you continue to feel inadequate in my presence.”

Lieutenant Hunt laughed. “Inadequate in your presence? Now it seems you are the one being humourous, Jaime.”

“Do not think to call me by my name, Hunt. I may no longer be in the military, but I still outrank you.”

“You will forgive my insolence, Captain. It seems in our time apart I have forgotten my manners.”

“What are you doing with her?” Captain Lannister asked abruptly, urging his mount forward, towards Lieutenant Hunt. Brienne paled – the last thing she wanted was to be the one thing they still had in common, but the conversation seemed to be headed in that direction and she was powerless to stop it. She wished, not for the first time, that her conversational skills were somewhat stronger so that she might interject and stop their arguing.
Hunt smiled and raised an eyebrow. “Miss Tarth was so kind as to show me some of this beautiful countryside. There is no need to be alarmed, Captain, this is nothing untoward. Just a bit of sport.”

The two men exchanged a look, and Captain Lannister’s expression turned darker than a thundercloud. He pulled on his horse’s reins with such a force that it reared upwards on its hind legs.

“You would dare—” he began, but before he could continue, Brienne charged her horse forward and came between the two men. “Stop!” she shouted, sounding every bit as nervous as she felt, hoping to cease their banter before it came to blows, but at the same moment, Lieutenant Hunt’s horse pushed ahead and struck hers.

Brienne fell backwards as her horse bolted, the saddle digging sharply into her side, and she tumbled down the hill to the lake, rocks tearing into her clothes and grass scratching at her skin. The world spun in her eyes and became a mess of green and blue, and the blinding white of the sun, dulling her senses and deafening her to the shouts from somewhere above her. She stopped falling mercifully short of the water, lying on her side and staring across the lake as her vision righted itself.

The first thing she felt as her perception of the events around her was restored to normal was a cold, stiff hand on her neck. Captain Lannister.

He laughed softly. “I sometimes forget that I can’t feel anything with this hand,” he mumbled to himself, switching the iron limb for his left hand. Brienne sat up sharply at the contact, but his hand did not move. “Yes, she’s definitely alive,” he declared.

“I can see that,” Lieutenant Hunt said in a flat but amused tone. He knelt beside her. “My lady, are you quite alright?”

“She just fell down a hill,” Captain Lannister snapped, turning his head away from Brienne and toward Hunt. “She could be seriously injured! This is no time for pleasantries.” He looked back at her, moving his hand from her neck and pushing some loose hair from her face. “Brienne, can you see me clearly?”

She was so startled by his use of her given name that she could not find the words to respond. She opened her mouth but closed it immediately after and nodded. After the momentary shock of falling had worn off, she felt clear of mind although her whole body ached.

“Come now, you are not even looking at him,” Hunt said, more kindly than he had spoken previously.

“And that is how I know she is of sound mind,” Captain Lannister said jokingly. “Miss Tarth never looks anyone in the eye if she can avoid it.”

“You speak as if you know her well,” Lieutenant Hunt commented.

“I cannot claim such a privilege,” Captain Lannister replied, and he almost sounded saddened by his words. Brienne could not believe it.

His tone was not to last, as he stood abruptly, and Lieutenant Hunt with him, leaving Brienne seated to gather her composure.

“If you so much as lay a hand on her, Hunt, I will personally see to your removal from the militia, and the destruction of everything you hold dear.”

“Everything? Including my dear Miss Tarth?”
Brienne forced herself to her feet, brushing the dirt from her hair as she stood. She was taller than both men, and that fact brought with it a rush of courage.

“Gentlemen, I wish you would not argue,” she said.

“There is no fight more noble than the fight for a woman’s honour,” Lieutenant Hunt said. “I do not intend to give this man the satisfaction of besting me in that fight when he is no worthy contender.”

Captain Lannister looked between Hunt and Brienne, as though deliberating whom he should be addressing. His gaze settled on Hunt.

“You sicken me,” he said with a shuddering finality that Brienne had not heard in anyone’s voice before. He turned away from them to walk up the hill and collect his idling horse. Brienne’s eyes followed him and noted that the other two horses had both fled.

“For my honour,” she said under her breath, still watching Captain Lannister as his horse galloped away.

“Do not trouble yourself thinking upon it, my lady,” Lieutenant Hunt said. “It is a fight I think I may have already won.”

“It is no feat to best a man as dishonourable as him in a contest for honour,” she said, “but I thank you for your kindness.”

“You ought to thank him,” Hunt said, frowning. “He was the one who checked to feel for the pulse of your blood in your neck.”

“One small kindness cannot atone for a life of sin,” she countered. She did not quite believe the words as she spoke them, yet, remembering all that Lieutenant Hunt had told her about Captain Lannister, she felt their truth acutely.

He smiled sadly. “Indeed it cannot. May I walk with you to Winterfell? I shall search for the horses later. No doubt they have already found their way back to the stables.”

They did not speak for the duration of the walk, but for exchanging farewells when they reached the estate. Brienne went straight to her bedroom – before anyone could accost her and ask about her dishevelled appearance – and sought clothing more respectable. She lost track of time as she slowly and deliberately catalogued the forming bruises on her body, but when she heard the sound of horses coming down the path she hastily dressed herself and brushed her hair, making for the hall just in time to see their guest arrive.

Chapter End Notes

Well this was one heck of a hard chapter to write. I struggled a lot at the start because I had the skeleton of my ideas (Renly, Hunt vs Lannister, Ramsay arrives) but no actual content to flesh it out. Once I had it though, I have to say writing this chapter, especially that dialogue between Hunt and Lannister, was some of the most fun I’ve had with this fic.

This might be the last update you’ll get for a while because I’m going into Exam Study Lockdown Mode. (Although I can’t rule out the chance that I’ll become a
procrastiwriter and get a couple more chapters done before exams are over.) I was actually going to save this and post it a week or so down the track but I thrive off feedback so I needed to post this straight away, so you guys can let me know what you think in that comment box just below ;)
Chapter 9

Chapter Notes

It's been a long time, hasn't it? Well, I had exams, you know the deal. I lost my drive for a bit, but this chapter really picked up pace today and I've just been churning it out for a couple of hours (with some distraction in between, I will admit). And now it's just gone 1 am, and I just really need to post this...! So I hope you enjoy it!

Oh and by the way, yes, Ramsay's surname is Snow in this, not Bolton. It's been confusing for me to write but I feel it is necessary because the fact that he is not a Bolton is important to his character here. So there you have it. Try not to think I'm talking about Jon with "Mr. Snow", ok? :')

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Ramsay Snow walked into the house as though he owned it, surveying the furnishings with an amused sort of repulsion.

“Mr. Snow,” Mrs. Stark greeted him, “we are delighted to welcome you to Winterfell.”

“Naturally,” he replied, not meeting her eye.

“I will have a footman show you to the guest quarters,” she continued, “so that you may gather your affairs before our evening meal, which will take place in the dining hall.” She turned to the footman. “Cassel, would you be so good as to point Mr. Snow in the direction of the dining hall when you take him to his room?”

Jory nodded, and took Mr. Snow’s portmanteau from the porter.

“It is a pleasure to have you staying with us,” she added as Jory led Mr. Snow down the hall to the staircase.

He did not respond.

Brienne watched as Mrs. Stark’s forced smile transformed for the briefest of moments into a scowl. She was bearing the man’s presence incredibly well – it seemed to Brienne from the little she had already seen of him that Mr. Snow was not even worthy of the most basic courtesies.

Mrs. Stark turned to her daughters and Brienne, the very image of a proud hostess. “Whatever you may think of him, Mr. Snow is our guest. We must at the very least try to be civil towards that man,” she said, looking pointedly at Arya.

Arya frowned defiantly at her mother. “He’s rude,” she said. “I don’t like him.”

“You’ve not even spoken to him,” Mrs. Stark pointed out.

“I still don’t like him,” Arya said.

“I think perhaps Miss Tarth ought to give you a short lesson in manners before our meal,” Mrs. Stark said. It was only when their eyes met that Brienne realised she was not joking.
“Of course,” Brienne stammered. She had given lessons on deportment before but they had never been her forte, given that she was practically incapable of holding conversation while looking someone in the eye, in the fashion you were supposed to teach others as an accomplished governess. It was lucky, then, that the Stark girls had been taught these necessary skills long before Brienne had been appointed.

They walked in silence to the schoolroom and Sansa went straight for her chair by the window where she usually sat for needlework, instead of her desk. Brienne paused, looking between the desks and the much more comfortable chairs, where now Arya had joined Sansa.

“Come, Miss Tarth, sit with us,” Sansa said. “Unless this is to be a formal lesson?”

“I confess I have nothing planned,” Brienne said concessively, taking her chair. She cleared her throat. “However, it seems that your mother is not satisfactorily convinced that you will be on your best behaviour about Mr. Snow during his stay, or at the very least during dinner.” When she finished speaking she felt her mouth quirk into a smile at the corners – it was a good introduction, and perhaps gave her an idea as to where she might direct this lesson.

“I am always on my best behaviour,” Sansa said, casting her eyes sideways at her sister. “It is Arya that mama is worried about.”

“Nonetheless, sometimes we all need to refresh our memories as to the proper deportment in a situation such as this,” Brienne said. Including myself, she thought.

“We shall start with–” she began, halting to compose her thoughts. “We shall start with...”

There was a horrid silence in which Brienne attempted to settle on a way to begin her lesson, or at least some words to pass the time until their meal.

“I know!” Arya said, interrupting her governess’s thoughts. “We shall act it! I’ll be Mr. Snow, and Sansa can be me and we’ll have a conversation such as might arise over the meal.”

“I don’t think so,” Brienne said, and Arya’s face fell. “I think it would be best if I were to be Mr. Snow. After all, you will be the ones dining with him this evening.”

Arya grinned, and the girls both held back laughter as Brienne pulled loose a strand of her hair and draped it across her upper lip as a moustache. The hair did not fall aside by sheer virtue of its particular position, and she hoped it would not do so when she spoke. It had been many years since Brienne had played a game of pretence, and she had almost forgotten the joy of – just for a short while – becoming someone else.

“I shall start!” Sansa said. She sat up straight and pursed her lips, thinking. “Good evening to you, Mr. Snow. How do you fare?”

“Well enough,” Brienne said, her expression neutral.

“You are supposed to ask how I fare,” Sansa prompted after a short moment.

“I am assuming the worst of your guest,” Brienne said, letting her moustache slide away, “as should you when talking to anyone. It is easy to lower one’s guard among friends. But if you assume that someone will be rude to you, then you will be at your most polite to them, as you should anyway.”

Sansa slowly nodded in understanding. “I see, so if he does not–”

“No!” Arya interrupted. “If she is nice to him he will try and marry her, I know it.”
“Now you are just being silly, Arya,” Sansa said. “He won’t try and marry me; what reason would he have?”

Arya shrugged her shoulders. “Shall we continue?” Brienne said, uncomfortable with their discussion of marriage.

“Of course,” Sansa said. “I had just asked you how you fared.”

“Well enough,” Brienne repeated.

“I am glad to hear that,” Sansa said, smiling politely. She turned to her sister. “Now you try.”

Arya rolled her eyes. “Mr. Snow, you are impeccably dressed this evening. Wherever did you find such a delightful jacket?”

“That should be of no concern to a young lady,” Brienne chided, deepening her voice almost to Mr. Snow’s register.

“Of course not,” Sansa said quickly, putting a hand on Arya’s arm, “my younger sister is simply curious. You must excuse her.”

Brienne gave a nod of agreement, stopping herself from saying anything more. Brienne would say that of course she excused her, but their mythical Mr. Snow would not.

“You will not tell me where it is from?” Arya pressed. “What a pity.”

Thankfully Brienne was rescued from having to formulate a response to that particularly sarcastic comment by the dinner bell resounding throughout the manor. Mrs. Stark’s assessment of a “short lesson” had been accurate – it seemed they were wasting no time in hastening the meal. Arya jumped to her feet. “Let’s show him just how polite we can be!” she said, dashing out of the room. Sansa and Brienne exchanged a look before following her down the stairs.

“I will make sure she behaves, Miss Tarth” Sansa whispered before slipping into the dining room after her sister.

Brienne took her dinner with the servants, listening intently to the gossip about Mr. Snow. It seemed he had joined the clergy in order to become closer to the Bolton family – as a bastard son he did not have many prospects in the world apart from the military or the church, and he took the option that would allow him to remain close to his father, and to perhaps garner some influence. If one were to believe the tales, he lived quite comfortably, the only obstacle between himself and true happiness being the fact that he was not allowed the right to bear the Bolton name.

After eating, she escaped their chatter and fled to the comfort of the garden. It was a cool night, and as she sat on a bench by the rose bushes she was struck by just how much had happened to her that day. It had been most eventful, which was not entirely optimal in hindsight. She had been riding with Lieutenant Hunt, and they had encountered Captain Lannister, and she had fallen! And now here she was, back at Winterfell as though nothing had happened. It was a most strange sensation.

Interrupting her thoughts, Arya appeared from the house and ran up to her. “Miss Tarth! You must come at once!”

Brienne stood abruptly. “What has happened?”

“Mama is talking with Mr. Snow in the drawing room. Sansa and I are going to listen in; you must
Reluctantly, she followed. Arya’s tone belied the fact that this was in fact of little import, but she would not let her charges make fools of themselves without her guidance.

Sansa was already stood by the closed door of the drawing room, her ear pressed against the wood. She held a finger to her lips as Arya and Brienne approached and, against her better instincts, Brienne joined the sisters at the door. It was Mr. Snow’s voice that first reached her ears.

“... and you are, of course, aware of Lord Bolton’s claim to Winterfell. The late Corporal Rickard Stark, as I need not remind you, stipulated that his estate would pass to his eldest living child.”

“Lyanna,” Mrs. Stark said icily. “Yes, you need not remind me.”

“Of course, it is her decision as to what will happen to Winterfell, and thus far she has been kind to you. If she should choose to change her mind, however...”

“What are you suggesting? Lyanna is sickly but she is not yet at death’s door, and if I may be so blunt as to say this, should she die before my late husband’s brother Benjen, the estate will pass to him and out of your family’s control.”

“What I am suggesting, Mrs. Stark,” he said, drawing out his words as though speaking to an infant, “is that you may wish to be protected, come any circumstance. If anything were to happen to Benjen, for example, it may be that the estate will eventually pass to Lyanna’s husband.”

Brienne could hear Mrs. Stark’s disapproving frown in her voice. “With all due respect, I do not see how you could protect me, Mr. Snow.”

“I will put it to you in plainer terms, then, since you seem to be having such trouble understanding. I would wish to marry one of your daughters. The older one, preferably, but I will take either. If I there was a Bolton married to one of the Starks of Winterfell, there would be less chance of anything happening to your family.”

“I did not allow you here just to be threatened under my own roof,” Mrs. Stark said sharply, and Brienne heard the sound of her chair inching backwards as she stood.

“You cannot force me to leave,” he said calmly.

“And I shall not,” she said. “You will stay the duration of your visit and I will find the forbearance to forget this conversation ever happened if you retract your suit for my daughters.”

Brienne looked at Arya and Sansa, both of whom had gone white as sheets, but seemed to brighten up at their mother’s words.

“They would be hard-pressed to find a more advantageous match, either of them, if I may say,” Mr. Snow said, a lightness to his voice that Brienne disliked.

“Oh, you may try,” Mrs. Stark said, sounding almost amused, “but we have reason to expect a betrothal between my eldest daughter and the young Lord Baratheon.”

Sansa covered her mouth with her hand, her eyes wide with excitement.

“And the younger Miss Stark?”

“You may propose marriage to Arya, by all means, but your chance of success is equal to that of my husband rising from the grave this very evening. Now, if you will excuse me, I will take my
leave of you for the evening.”

Hearing her footsteps coming towards the door, Brienne quickly grabbed hold of the girls’ arms, but they had the same idea, and the three of them rushed soundlessly up the staircase and into the closest room, which happened to be Sansa’s bedroom. Brienne shut the door as quietly as she could, pressing her back to it and breathing heavily.

“Did you hear?” Sansa whispered, climbing onto her bed and beckoning that Arya and Brienne join her. “I am to be betrothed to Lord Baratheon!”

Brienne sat down awkwardly on the side of the bed. “That is perhaps not the main fact I would have taken from their exchange...”

“Mama said reason to expect, not that it will actually happen!” Arya said. “But she said he could try to marry me! How disgusting!”

“I doubt he will be proposing to you after your mother spoke so firmly to him,” Brienne reassured her.

“Do you think it will happen?” Sansa asked quietly. “That Winterfell will go to the Boltons?”

“I am sure it will not,” Brienne said. “I hope for your sakes it will not.”

If anyone had chanced to wake the three young women in the morning, Brienne would have used the excuse that they had stayed up late discussing etiquette and deportment, not that they had fallen asleep in Sansa’s bed after a lengthy conversation on the benefits of marrying a Lord as opposed to a clergyman, and so it was fortuitous that Brienne had been woken by the sun and left before anyone would realise she had been there in the first place.

As it was a Sunday, she escaped the manor and took her stick from Rodrik’s hut, heading into the pines to imagine that she might be actually fencing. She steadied it in her grip, but it was too heavy, and the centre of balance was wrong, and she found herself shamefully wishing for the rapier from Storm’s End. If she could just practise with a proper sword, she might have felt more contentment, but as it was she could not, and so she took out her anger on an innocent pine tree.

The last time she had done this, her opponent had been Ronnet Connington, and he had remained inert, not bothering to defend himself against the wrongs he had done her. Now, he held a rapier in his left hand – his only hand – and instead of standing motionless he fought back, his blond hair swishing from side to side as he parried her, blow for blow. He did not lung, though; he would not come closer, choosing in her imagination instead to push her away.

When Brienne caught the tree in a lunge for the tenth time, she stopped. It was past midday, judging by the shadows, and she thought she ought to take lunch, and then perhaps visit the Winter Town in case she might chance upon Lieutenant Hunt. She let the stick drop to her side and scrutinised the tree she had marked with it. She was sweating from the Summer heat, and her hair had fallen about her shoulders, and she felt the tree staring back at her.

She could hear his voice in her mind, the last time she had stood before him with her appearance in disarray; “I have never seen a woman look half so beautiful,” he had said, mocking her cruelly. She looked in front of her and she saw him again, moving to take her bonnet, as he had done that night they had met in front of Storm’s End. He had been so handsome in the moonlight, and a small part of her wondered if perhaps he had meant those words. Worse things had been said to her in sincerity, and worse still in jest. But it was hard to fathom that a man with such consistently impeccable appearances could find beauty in someone like her, nor one in constant companionship with a beauty such as his sister...
“I will not give you the satisfaction of even thinking about you,” she informed the tree, forcing Captain Lannister from her mind and turning away quickly. Once she had returned the stick to Rodrik’s hut she returned to the house, taking long strides. She ate quickly in the servants’ quarters and then took to her room to dress appropriately for a walk to the Winter Town. The pathway beckoned her, but as she left, Sansa grabbed her by the arm.

“You will stay for tea, won’t you? I can’t stand to be around Mr. Snow without companionship, and Arya has gone with the Glovers to the Winter Town.”

Brienne had only to see Sansa’s earnest smile to agree to stay. Lieutenant Hunt could wait.

Tea was a cold affair, with Mrs. Stark and Mr. Snow trading no more words than the very minimum. Neither Brienne nor the girls would have intimated to Mrs. Stark that they had been eavesdropping the previous night, but Mrs. Stark shared a weary look with Sansa as they sat down to tea that hinted to Brienne that perhaps particulars of the situation had been discussed between mother and daughter.

The only substantial conversation of the affair occurred when Mr. Snow commented on the wallpaper.

“It is not unlike the wallpaper in the dining hall at Rosings Park,” he said. “An inspired choice, to be sure. You simply must visit at some time in the future – I am sure you will all have cause to be my guests soon.”

Sansa nearly choked on her lemon cake, coughing loudly to disguise her discomfort.

“Perhaps,” Mrs. Stark said, pursing her lips acrimoniously. It was clear that she had no more to say on the subject.

Mr. Snow left them to take a walk in the countryside, but Brienne stayed a moment longer with Sansa and Mrs. Stark.

“He is taking too keen an interest in your marriage prospects,” Mrs. Stark said. “I do not like his intentions one bit.” She sighed.

“Can we not just tell him to leave?” Sansa asked. “He is intolerable!”

“We cannot,” Mrs. Stark said, “but we can turn his attention towards other girls, perhaps. I am considering something that I have not done since before your father’s death.”

Sansa looked at her feet, and Brienne took a small step backward, feeling as though she was intruding.

“I think,” Mrs. Stark continued, “it has been too long since I last hosted a ball here at Winterfell.”

Chapter End Notes

Please leave a comment - they absolutely make my day. :D

(Although before you ask, yes, there will actually be some Jaime and Hyle back next chapter. Yay!)
Chapter 10

Chapter Notes

Not much to say about this one, except that it's probably my most focused effort to date. I was worried I'd be going a bit ahead of my schedule but I didn't so that's exciting. I hope you enjoy it as much as I do :D

Also, major thanks to tumblr users idesofapril and taflkarfanfic for their help with Regency detail! You guys are wonderful.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

The doors to Winterfell’s ballroom had not been opened since long before Brigadier Stark’s death, not even by an inquisitive servant or a hiding child, and as such Brienne had never seen the grandeur that they hid. Truth be told, the interior was neither as indulgent in its opulence as the Baratheons’ ballroom, nor as vast as the Pooles’, but it held a casual elegance that she could not but admire. There were no extravagant flower displays such as she had been accustomed to seeing at Evenfall Hall and elsewhere, nor delicate paintings and intricate carpets. The curtains were cream with a golden trim, and when Brienne watched them pulled open, illuminating the shadows of years passed in unexpected quarantine, the harsh light of noon brought out every corner in the panelled walls and every scuff on the wooden floor.

Sansa gasped from beside her. “It’s so much lovelier than I remember it!” She clutched Brienne’s arm. “I simply cannot wait to dance with Lord Baratheon in this room!”

“You will be the envy of all the other young ladies,” Brienne assured her.

Brienne might have held a similar aspiration herself, but it became clear when the invitations were sent out, soon after Mrs. Stark had come to her decision, that Lieutenant Hunt would not be present. Mrs. Stark had invited her brother Colonel Tully, as well as Colonel Tarly, their wives and a few of their best men – but none of the Lieutenants, and as such Brienne had resigned herself to an evening of not dancing, not even if the deplorably persistent Captain Lannister were to sink to his knees and beg.

The invitations were sent out with three weeks of due warning for the guests, and Brienne had walked to the Winter Town to see Lieutenant Hunt, ostensibly to bring him the news but for no real reason other than to be in his company. She had expressed her sympathy that he would not be attending, and he was much more flippant than she hoped he felt.

“It matters not,” he said. “None of my officers were invited either, and it would be wrong of myself to enjoy myself while they were not.” Almost as an afterthought, he added that he and Miss Tarth would have many other opportunities to dance. One ball would make no difference to this.

It was not just one ball; it was a ball at the place Brienne thought of as her home. But she swallowed that thought, because of course Lieutenant Hunt was right. The ball meant nothing, and it meant even less without his presence.

The days each felt a year long in the weeks leading to the ball. At Mrs. Stark’s insistence, Brienne had taken Arya and Sansa to get a new dress each in the Winter Town, with the stipulation that
she was to purchase one for herself as well, and they were given a day free from their lessons. Brienne had struggled momentarily with a dressmaker unenthusiastic to fit a woman of her stature, but she had eventually capitulated and agreed to the task, as long as she was paid almost double for the extra fabric. On top of it all, the dressmaker had overcompensated and in fact the dress was too long, trailing along the floor when Brienne tried it on in the privacy of her bedroom. She stayed awake late, sewing a new hem until her fingers were numb and her candle was no higher than her thimble.

And then by the time she stopped to realise that time seemed to have slowed down, the day of the ball was upon them.

The orange afternoon sun cast the ballroom in a soft light as Brienne and Sansa danced together. Sansa was determined to be in impeccable form for Lord Baratheon, and as such Brienne would have to suffice for a gentleman as they rehearsed. She was nowhere near as graceful as Sansa’s partner ought to be, however, and as such Brienne danced her moves with a slight feeling of superciliousness and wished privately for the ordeal to pass.

They took dinner in silence and they dressed in silence as the sun set, but just as she pulled the last lace on her bodice Brienne heard the clatter of a carriage drawing up outside Winterfell, resonant even in her bedroom, and as if on cue, the first strains of music from the string ensemble joined the noise from the direction of the ballroom. She heard the shouts from the kitchen, just down the corridor, and Osha’s distinct voice yelling that all hell had broken loose.

In fact, it was simply the first guests arriving. The footman received them dutifully in the entrance hall, and after informing them that they were the first to arrive and that there would thus be limited company, he showed them to the ballroom. However, it was not long before more guests started to arrive. Colonel and Mrs. Tully made their appearance as the second guests, and in no time at all the ballroom seemed full.

The dancing had not yet begun, but Brienne kept to the side of the room out of habit. The dancing could not yet begin, as Lady Baratheon had not yet arrived. This was no doubt a ploy on her part to manufacture a dramatic entrance, but it had the unfortunate effect of Mr. Snow imposing his presence upon Sansa.

“Miss Stark,” he said, “if you would be so kind as to honour me with the first dance?”

Brienne watched as Sansa swallowed a rude remark and nodded. “It would be my pleasure, Mr. Snow.”

He smiled with an air of superiority and walked away without another word. Sansa stood tall. It was not long before he had secured Arya for the second dance, and Jeyne Poole for the third; thankfully he seemed not to have registered Brienne’s existence, for at the rate he was asking young ladies to dance she was sure he might have attempted to ask her. She was both relieved and strangely annoyed that he did not even look at her.

Brienne stood, worried, by the wall freshly adorned with delicate roses from the gardens, when at last a blur of crimson appeared in the corner of her vision.

Lady Baratheon was flanked on either side by her son and her twin brother. Captain Lannister seemed to be craning his neck, looking about the ballroom for someone, and Brienne instinctively buried herself further among the roses. From her hiding place, she could however see and hear clearly Lord Baratheon stepping towards Sansa.

“Miss Stark, I trust I can rely on you for the first dance this evening?” he said, giving her a glowing smile.
“I– I have unfortunately already been asked by our guest Mr. Snow,” she replied, blushing and looking away from the object of her infatuation.

“Hang Mr. Snow!” he ejaculated loudly, stamping his foot like a child. Sansa stumbled backwards, visibly shocked. In a moment, Lord Baratheon’s mood had passed, and he returned to his previous composure, despite every pair of eyes in the ballroom trained upon him, with the exception of Captain Lannister’s eyes, which still searched the room though he stood still.

“Pardon me,” Lord Baratheon said, more quietly, “but Mr. Snow may find himself another willing maid for the first dance.”

“Of course,” Sansa said, looking back up at him and grinning broadly.

Mr. Snow, who had been watching this whole altercation with no disguised interest, stepped forward. “I am of course humbled to concede to one such as yourself, my Lord,” he said obsequiously, but Lord Baratheon was not paying attention.

“A waltz, if you would,” he called out, and then musicians sprung to attention, leaving a short pause before they began playing.

In that short pause, a myriad different emotions passed through Brienne. She stepped forward from amongst the roses only to see Captain Lannister walking towards her, his right arm edging forwards as though he came to ask her to dance, and from the same direction she saw Mr. Snow, looking around aimlessly in desperation to find a partner, and she caught his eye, and he strode ahead, soon overtaking Captain Lannister at twice the pace.

“Miss Tarth, was it?” he asked. “Well, never mind. I doubt you are otherwise occupied for the first dance.”

“Indeed I am not,” she said coolly.

“Well now you are,” he said, raising the corner of his mouth in a smile.

Brienne followed him quickly, glancing back to Captain Lannister only briefly before turning away, ashamed to be the person who had put that look of hurt and anger on his face. She could not allow herself to think that such a perverse man had set his heart upon dancing with her, not with her knowledge of him that she could not have gleaned without Lieutenant Hunt’s elucidation. Instead, she focused on dancing with Mr. Snow.

He was a very perfunctory dancer, and it became clear that like Brienne he had simply learn the steps out of obligation – he took no more joy from this task than she did. They neither made a poor match nor an outstanding one, and the dancing seemed to be over faster than the pause before the music had started in which the partnership was agreed upon.

Brienne could see Sansa and Lord Baratheon’s easy smiles as they moved into place to take the second dance together, and Arya’s scowl as she stood across from Mr. Snow. She was glad to be rid of the lot of them.

Captain Lannister was talking dutifully with Mrs. Dustin, and thankfully did not seem to notice that Brienne had disengaged herself from the incipient quadrille. Instead, she made to speak to the younger Mr. Lannister, who seemed to be interesting himself with a drink of some sort by the side of the room.

“Mr. Lannister,” she greeted him. “It is good to see you this evening.”
“And you, Miss Tarth. You are not dancing with my brother, I see.”

Brienne felt her face flush red. “Did you expect me to do so?”

“I will confess it had crossed my mind,” he said, looking amused. “Nonetheless, since you appear not to have seen him, I will have to be the bearer of bad news. I am afraid that this may be my last ball in the area. Jaime and I will not be at Storm’s End come Sunday.”

“You are leaving!” Brienne exclaimed.

“Do not act so shocked – we cannot trespass upon our kind sister’s hospitality forever.”

“Will you return to Casterly Rock?” she asked.

“Eventually, I suppose, we shall have to,” he said, frowning. “In the meantime, however, we have business to attend to at Rosings Park, and after that I will take to my apartments in London. I cannot speak for my brother.”

Brienne took a moment to think over this new information. That Captain Lannister would be so soon gone from her life – it was unthinkably exciting! She may, perhaps, bemoan the loss of his personable brother, but not so long as the militia remained in the Winter Town and she had some friends beyond her charges. And so instead of commenting on the fact that this was not bad news to her at all, she decided to enquire after their business at Rosings Park.

“Does Mr. Snow know you will be following him home?” she asked.

Mr. Lannister laughed. “I think not. Our business with Lord Bolton is none of his concern. Yes, our business – do not look so surprised! It is convenient for the family’s reputation that Jaime appears to be in charge of our affairs, but he is no more than a pretty face. I have managed the financial and legal matters since our late father’s passing.”

“I did not think– I did not mean to look surprised,” Brienne mumbled.

“Never mind,” Mr. Lannister said jovially. “Now that you know the truth about our little charade, you will promise not to spread the tale, won’t you? No need to agree. I know you will.”

“You are a clever man indeed,” she said, “twice as clever as your brother, from my experience. I am not so surprised as you think.”

“Be careful who you say that in front of,” he said. “Our mutual friend approaches.”

Brienne spun around to see Captain Lannister stepping through the crowd and she turned quickly back to face Mr. Lannister. “I must go at once,” she said, and her friend laughed as she dashed away.

*He finds it amusing that I avoid his brother*, she thought. Then perhaps he too was ignorant of Captain Lannister’s sins.

Skirting the edges of the dancefloor, Brienne made her way to the staircase leading to the upstairs gallery overlooking the ballroom. It was illuminated by the same chandelier as the hall, but if one stood back far enough then they could disappear from the eyes of those dancing below. She retreated into the relative darkness and pressed her back to the wall, breathing heavily.

She had thought that Captain Lannister would perhaps understand that she wished to be free of his presence, but she heard his footfall on the staircase and she held a sigh. It was futile avoiding him, and she would have to confront him this one last time. Soon he would be gone.
“Miss Tarth, if I have done anything to offend you, please tell me of it now so that I may never make the same mistake again!” he declared, stepping towards her.

“You–” she began, but the words froze in her throat. “I simply wished to pass the night in silence,” she said.

“I can be silent,” he offered. “No, that is not it. You have been avoiding me for some reason. Perhaps I should have a few words with my old friend Hunt about–”

“No, that will not be necessary,” she said quickly.

“I knew it,” he said, smiling sadly. “You are angry at me for talking so cruelly to your Lieutenant-du-jour.”

She let out the sigh she had been restraining. She would let him believe this if it would keep him away from her for the rest of the ball.

“I only wished to warn you,” he continued. “Hunt is not to be trusted. I have known him longer than you have; would that you could bring yourself to trust me on this matter.”

“I trust no-one but myself,” she said. “I mean– I do not wish to paint anyone as untrustworthy, I meant only that–”

“A wise position,” he interrupted. “Unlike myself, you play your cards close to your chest. Me, I have no choice but to spread them out across the table. It is hard to gamble with one hand, Miss Tarth, as you are well aware.”

He smiled, and she allowed herself to smile in return, remembering how they had unwittingly cooperated to raise Lady Baratheon’s ire.

“In truth, I have missed your company sorely,” he said, “and I will continue to do so. You have heard, no doubt, that Tyrion and I are to quit Storm’s End soon.”

“Your brother has informed me that you make for Rosings Park on business,” she said stiffly.

“He has informed you correctly.” Captain Lannister paused and took a deep breath, each of his next words lingering as though spoken in uncertainty. “ I do not know when we will next return to the area, and I cannot presume to drag you away from your duties as a governess, but...”

“Then do not attempt to do so,” she said.

He looked affronted, and briefly Brienne thought she might regret that momentary lapse in her usual decorum, but his wide eyes slipped away into soft laughter. “Very well, Miss Tarth. I shall not ask anything of you, except one last dance to see me safe on my travels.”

“I cannot reasonably refuse,” she said, vocalising her thoughts. It would have been the height of rudeness to turn him down now, and she had already spoken so harshly...

“No, you cannot,” he said, “so you will dance with me the next two, in memory of our first meeting.”

She nodded, looking away from his face but allowing him to lead her down from the gallery and in amidst the crowd. One dance was just finishing, and they joined in for the next. Brienne remembered her nerves and apprehension the first time they had danced, which had stemmed from the idea of such a handsome and yet such an objectionable man seeming so earnest in asking for the honour. Now the nerves were different. She imagined the disapproval writ on Lieutenant’s
Hunt face were he to see her arm in arm with his former colleague. Yet when Captain Lannister smiled at her it was almost easy to see how they might once have been friends. The two men would have shared an easy charm, a charm that Brienne suspected had always been false in the Captain, or at least had been lost along with his hand.

When their two dances finished, they parted ways, but towards the end of the evening he returned to her and demonstrated just how charmless he could be by commenting once more on her lack of grace and prowess.

“Now that I have had some time to think upon it and observe the other young ladies, I have decided that you truly are a terrible dancer,” he said with a wicked smile. “I will miss it.”

“You are lying,” Brienne said, glaring at him.

“Do you mean to say that you are an excellent dancer, or that I will miss dancing with you? You are certainly right on one count – I will not miss dancing, not the kind of dancing that requires ballrooms and musicians. I do wish that we had perhaps spent more time in the armoury, however.”

“As do I,” she said, the words leaving her mouth before she could realise that she truly meant them.

“Then,” he said, decreasing the distance between them and taking her hand in his, “until we meet again, Miss Tarth.”

He kissed her hand, and Brienne bit her lip, as though that were a reasonable precaution against blushing a tell-tale shade of pink. She could not find it in herself to reply.

“You may reply with something equally as romantic,” he suggested, a teasing smile fixed on his face.

“I will not give you the pleasure, Captain Lannister,” she said, suddenly overworn with a great sense of shame. What was she doing, allowing him to speak in such a manner to her? This was the same cruel, mocking Captain Lannister who had sinned most foully, if Lieutenant Hunt had told it true, which Brienne was almost entirely certain that he had; this was the same Captain Lannister, brother of Lady Baratheon and– she took a deep breath and ensured that her expression was nothing short of glowering sternly.

“That will do,” he said.

“I must go,” she replied, removing her hand from his and walking swiftly away, towards where Sansa and Jeyne stood talking. What had she been thinking, indulging him in such a manner? Her steps were thick with regret but hope beckoned her ahead as the happy prospect of never seeing that man again loomed before her.

Chapter End Notes

Please leave a comment; I love reading every one of them!

p.s. Thoughts on the phrase “incipient quadrille”? I'll admit I indulged myself in some
fun language a bit this time around. Let me know if there's anything that doesn't make sense and I'll attempt to elucidate it ;)}
Winterfell awoke the morning after the ball like a drunkard returning from a tavern, blinded by the light of day and possessed of a strange wariness, a refusal to believe that the revelry had ended and an immediate distrust of the return to normality. Brienne herself was roused by the sun earlier than she might have wished, but it was not surprising given that she had barely slept, her mind alight with an unutterable confusion.

The events of the previous night were a fog that sat low over the estate's grounds and muffled the heightened desires that came hand-in-hand with a ball, the lust of the inexperienced and the hope of those yet to experience disappointment. Of course, Brienne felt neither of these – she was neither inexperienced in the art of longing nor ignorant of the cruel hand of disappointment. Her confusion rather stemmed from her encounter with Captain Lannister and was not romantic in its nature, but there was a longing nonetheless, if only to cross swords again with the damnable man, and the dim thought that there may be somewhat less excitement in her life with his and his brother's departure.

She wasn't sure whether or not that was a good thing.

Shortly after taking breakfast, Brienne came upon Mrs. Stark in the rose gardens.

“I believe I was remiss in my invitations for last night’s ball,” she said, her eyes never leaving the white roses. “I am told there is a particular Lieutenant whose presence would have made the evening much more pleasurable for you.”

Brienne’s cheeks grew hot. “Really, Mrs. Stark, there would have been no need to–”

“You are too kind to me,” Brienne said quietly, “but I would rather stay and fulfil my duty.”

“You are too kind to me,” Brienne said quietly, “but I would rather stay and fulfil my duty.”

“Nonsense,” Mrs. Stark said, “you wish to see your Lieutenant. I remember what it is to be young and in love, and I remember nothing worse than the separation. Go.”

She looked up from the roses, and there was a sternness in her face that Brienne could not refuse. As well as that, she could not kid herself into thinking that she did not want to go to the Winter Town and seek out Lieutenant Hunt. He had not left her mind, even as she agonised over Captain Lannister’s intentions.

And so she began the walk immediately. Mrs. Stark would surely explain to the girls where she had gone, although hopefully not why.

The Winter Town was quiet, as though in due reverence for the section of society still affected by the ball. There were no redcoats, and few villagers, and a strange stillness turned every corner, making the town feel deserted. Brienne was not sure where she might find Lieutenant Hunt amongst this emptiness, but she knew where the militia were garrisoned, or at least she hoped she knew, as it would surely be somewhere near the stables. As she approached she could hear the horses, and it seemed that they too had joined the morning’s quiet.

The silence was broken sharply, with a cry in a voice that Brienne hoped was Lieutenant Hunt’s, but she knew it wasn’t.
“Miss Tarth!”

She searched her mind to put a name to this man’s face, the last of the officers who had danced with her at the Pooles’ ball. “Mr. Inchfield,” she said at last.

He smiled. “I had not expected to see you here, although I am pleased to find you nonetheless.”

“And I you,” she said, unsure of what conversation she might make with this man she barely knew.

He approached her and stood close – far too close by her reckoning, but then he had been like that at the ball too. Perhaps it was just his way and he knew not any better.

“You’re always talking to Hunt,” he said. “Makes it damn hard to find a moment alone with you!”

“I do not see why you would desire that,” she said.

“You do not? Very well then, I may need to educate you on the many ways in which a man can desire to spend time alone with a woman.”

Brienne’s eyes widened and she took a step back, putting a considerable distance between herself and Mr. Inchfield with the length of her stride. “I do not think that will be necessary,” she said.

“No, it won’t,” said an unseen speaker.

She had not noticed Lieutenant Hunt’s arrival, given that he was shorter than both herself and Mr. Inchfield and that he came up behind the latter.

“Next time you want a moment alone with a woman, Inchfield,” he said, “you might not shout her name and alert everyone to her presence. It’s an amateur’s mistake. Run along, now.”

Inchfield was cowed by Hunt’s presence, the fury in his features subdued under the threat of punishment if he disobeyed an order from his commanding officer.

“My lady, I am truly sorry for my man’s behaviour,” Lieutenant Hunt said as the officer in question retreated quickly and Brienne could accomplish naught but to open and close her mouth in astonishment. “I am sure he meant no harm by it.”

“No, he meant no harm, but he would have caused it nonetheless,” Brienne said.

Lieutenant Hunt nodded. “Shall we take a walk to somewhere more pleasant? I feel almost a fool for speaking in this quiet town this morn.”

“That would indeed be... pleasant,” she replied, unable to choose a word more eloquent than that which he had used.

She took his arm and they walked through the field behind the stables. She hoped he did not intend to make for the lake, as she had no desire whatsoever to go there again after what had come to pass. He did not – instead they stopped under a tree and sat down on the dry grass.

Brienne ventured to start the conversation on a point that had been bothering her. “What is it that makes all your officers so interested in me?” she asked. “I have done nothing to provoke their attentions!”

“Oh the contrary,” he said, “you were born to provoke their attentions as the daughter of a universally respected Major. I wish that I could say they see you as I do, as a young woman of
bearing and grace, and one whose company is most pleasurable, but I fear they see only your dowry.”

She had to laugh at that. “Do they not see my face? Perhaps I am too tall for them to see it, and so they are blinded by the idea of marrying into the Tarth line.”

Hunt looked genuinely confused. “What is the matter with your face?”

“Well,” Brienne said, feeling almost courageous in her speech after he had so ridiculously complimented an imagined bearing and grace, “you are the shortest of them all. But now that you are seated on my level you might see that I am plain.”

“‘To me, you are not,” he said.

Brienne went quiet. No man had ever told her anything like that. Most had politely declined to comment on her appearance, or stared in open amazement at her height and plainness, as Captain Lannister had done on the first occasion of their meeting. It was not “beautiful”, or even “pretty”, but “not plain” set Brienne’s heart aflutter. The thought passed her mind that Lieutenant Hunt might have difficulty with his eyesight, but he danced and rode so well that he could not possibly but see her clearly. That was both an exciting and terrifying thought, that a man could possibly find her something akin to attractive.

She had been unsure until that very moment, but it struck her that if Lieutenant Hunt were to propose to her she would accept in a heartbeat.

“Come, now,” he said, gently nudging her arm, “you cannot leave me with silence.”

“I am not a good conversationalist,” she said, returning to her default phrase for such moments.

“I once had a friend who was the very same,” he said, “always talking about how terrible he was at making conversation. But you see, he would never stop saying it – and his excuses turned into conversation in their own right! Do not worry, though, you are not as annoying as him.”

“Yet annoying nonethe–”

“No.”

There was a moment of silence before they caught each other’s gaze and laughed together. Brienne could hardly believe that she was at such ease with him. He seemed to be the perfect man, and a small doubt in her mind wondered if that was not a bit too good to be true. She pushed that doubt away with her happiness, and gave over her last line of defence, her distrustfulness, to Lieutenant Hunt’s honest eyes and kind smile.

They stayed for an hour in the field, telling each other stories about people from their past. He told her of the various men he had fought alongside, carefully skirting any mention of Captain Lannister, and she told him about her life at Evenfall Hall before she became a governess, growing up with a father who allowed her every comfort and freedom, and a stern French governess Miss Rouelle to take those comforts away from her and remind her that her position in society was the only thing that would get her anywhere in life.

It was with the memory of her old governess that she remembered her own duties and regretfully made her excuses. She had enjoyed talking to him far too much than she ought to, and though she was quite infatuated with Lieutenant Hunt, she still felt the need to put her duties first. She tried not to imagine that she might have seen some sadness in his face when she left him and returned to Winterfell in time to take her luncheon.
However, it was not a meal that greeted her but Sansa running down the path.

She ran straight to Brienne and put a finger over her lips. “We must be quiet,” Sansa whispered, “else we’ll ruin the show!”

“The show?”

Sansa said nothing but dashed back down the path, holding onto Brienne’s arm and dragging her behind. They went up to Sansa’s bedroom, overlooking the rose garden, and Sansa unclasped her window quietly, letting in the sound of raised voices.

The two girls leaned forward, and two stories below saw Mr. Snow on one knee, looking up at Arya.

“I absolutely will not!” Arya shouted.

“Tell me why,” he said, “tell me why you will not marry me. You could find no better match—”

“I don’t care,” Arya said, “you’re rude and ugly and I don’t even like you!”

Mr. Snow got to his feet, brushing dirt off his knee contemptuously. “You ungrateful little— you could do no better; your village boys have not got the surety of property that I have, nor the surety of income, nor the great family name.”

Arya laughed. “You forget your own name, Mr. Snow. You’re just a bastard!”

Sansa’s jaw dropped. “How could she say that?” she whispered. “She loves Jon!”

“This man is different,” Brienne said.

He was different. He raised a hand as though he might strike Arya, but thought the better of it and put it down, clenching his fist. “Do not call me that,” he hissed.

“I will call you what I wish,” Arya said, “since I will never be in the position that I must show you reverence as a wife would a husband. I will not marry you, Mr. Snow, and that is final!”

He turned away without another word, his steps heavy as he made his way back inside the house.

Arya looked up and saw Sansa and Brienne. She grinned.

Within minutes they could hear Mr. Snow yelling at Mrs. Stark, but they could not hear her responses. Brienne knew she would be harsh but proud, as was her way, and would tell him firmly that Arya’s decision could not be altered.

The sound of the front door opening and closing and his footsteps on the path a while later confirmed her thoughts.

“He is gone,” Sansa said, sighing, “finally.”

“He will be back, for his clothes at least,” Brienne said. “But I am sure we shall be seeing a lot less of him now.”

They went downstairs to see Mrs. Stark holding Arya in her arms, patting her hair. “I am so proud of you,” she mumbled.

Brienne was sure she could hear Arya squeak out a muffled “let me go!”
Eventually, Mrs. Stark released her daughter from her clutches and smiled at Sansa and Brienne. “The first proposal in the family,” she said, “and the first refusal. I could not be happier.”

“Oh, mama,” Sansa said, “is it not sad that the first proposal in the family had to be from that awful man?”

“It is not,” Mrs. Stark said. “Not all men will be like him, but many will, and it is important to know that the difficult men can be removed from your life just as easily as the kind ones.”

“But the kind ones may stay?” Sansa asked hopefully.

“If it is Lord Baratheon you are worried about,” her mother said, “having spoken to his mother at the ball I can be certain that it will not be long before he proposes.”

Sansa beamed. “You see,” she said turning to Arya, “he is no cad!”

Arya shrugged her shoulders. “I don’t care anymore.”

“I must go and tell Jeyne!” Sansa exclaimed.

“You may, but first you will have lunch,” Mrs. Stark said. There would be no arguing, and so the girls followed their mother to the dining room, and Brienne turned the other direction to take her lunch in the servants’ quarters. It was later than she might usually have taken luncheon, and the kitchen was empty but for the last-minute rush before the family’s meal and the early preparations for dinner, and she sat alone at the dining table.

“Dining alone, Miss Tarth?” Osha asked her as she gracelessly dumped some celery in a large soup pot.

“I am afraid that is the lot in life of a governess,” she said, looking at her plate and thinking of Lieutenant Hunt. She was stupid to entertain fantasies of marriage when she made a living as a governess – it was the life she had chosen, specifically to escape from the threat of marriage, and doubtless she would have to live with that.

Still, all of Mrs. Stark’s talk about her finding a husband was enough to allow hope to flourish where it would usually wither and die.

Brienne finished eating quickly and made her way up to the schoolroom, where Arya sat alone.

“Where is Sansa?” Brienne asked, frowning.

“She’s gone to see Jeyne to gush about her dear Lord Baratheon,” Arya said, pulling a disgusted face. “No good will come of it,” she added. “We are cursed with poor luck with men and marriage, I am sure of it.”

“Do you say that because of Mr. Snow?” Brienne asked, sitting down across from Arya.

Arya grimaced. “I do not wish to dwell on that,” she said. “I spoke boldly to him, but in truth he scares me.”

“You and every other girl who has met him, I am sure,” Brienne reassured her. “As your mother said, he is a difficult man, and it is best to know the worst before you find the best.”

Brienne had known the worst of men. She thought of the men her father had tried to have her marry, and their looks of disappointment when they saw her for the first time. She thought of Renly who she had considered her friend and who had played with her emotions so cruelly, of the
lecherous Officer Inchfield who had spoken so inappropriately to her that day, and of Captain Lannister, who she was told had committed an unspeakable sin, and had done nothing to improve his reputation by being an exceedingly arrogant man.

“Do you speak from experience?” Arya asked.

“Experience of the worst, yes,” Brienne said. “I do not know yet if I have met the best of men.”

She thought of Lieutenant Hyle Hunt.

“I wonder if it is so simple as that,” Arya said. She looked like she might have continued, but thought the better of it.

“Well, we should start a lesson,” Brienne said. “Sansa will be able to catch up when she arrives.”

“History?” Arya asked hopefully. History was Sansa’s least favourite subject – she preferred to focus on the present, perhaps – but Arya loved Brienne’s history lessons, so Brienne took down one of her volumes of world history and opened it to the pages on War of the Roses.

The lesson passed quickly, quicker still because it was cut short by Sansa’s arrival. She threw open the doors to the schoolroom with tears in her eyes, and Arya and Brienne stood up immediately upon seeing her.

“Sansa... ?” Brienne began, unsure how to frame her question.

“It’s Lord Baratheon, isn’t it,” Arya said, evidently trying to make light of the situation.

“No, you idiot!” Sansa snapped. “It’s Jeyne. Mr. Snow asked her to marry him.”

Brienne gasped, and Arya’s eyes bulged wide. “No!” Arya shouted. “Tell me she refused him!”

“She accepted him,” Sansa whispered between sobs.

“I can’t believe it,” Arya said, walking to her sister and hugging her tightly. Brienne stood back awkwardly as the sisters embraced, feeling a fool for intruding on an intimate moment.

“She said,” Sansa continued, “that because she is the youngest child and has older sisters and brothers, she must take what she can get. She said it was the best proposal she was ever like to encounter. A clergyman, with a surety of income...”

Sansa broke down sobbing, and Arya tightened her grip on her sister.

Brienne felt sickened – not by the knowledge of Jeyne’s betrothal, but by herself. She had broken three engagements, adamant that she should only marry for love, knowing that she would never find love, and yet Jeyne was grateful for but one proposal from the most horridly rude and presumptuous man that Brienne had ever encountered. She knew that she too should have been grateful to even find herself engaged once, someone as plain and unmannerly as her, but she had not been, thrice she had not been grateful, and the thought that she would never be grateful, not even if a man as rich and handsome as Captain Lannister proposed to her, that she would be grateful only if she was also happy, embarrassed her beyond belief.

Why should she feel that she deserved any more happiness than poor Jeyne?

“Excuse me,” she said quietly, and left the schoolroom hurriedly before either Arya or Sansa could say anything to her.
She went past Rodrik’s hut for her stick and straight to the sanctuary of her small grove among the pines, and wasted no time on études before attacking the tree with such vehemence as she had not done since her bout with Captain Lannister, and in no time she was exhausted.

She sat with her back to a tree and wept.

Chapter End Notes

I get the feeling a lot of people are hating me right now for this chapter. So do go ahead and express your frustration in the comment box below! I love comments. Seriously. They make this whole process that much more enjoyable.

Anyway, now we're getting into the fun stuff. Keep your peepers peeled, kids. Things are about to kick off. ;)
Chapter 12

Chapter Notes

Buckle up folks, there’s a fair bit of exposition and setting things up in this chapter. I hope you’re in the mood for some ambiguity ;)

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Given the recent news of Jeyne’s engagement, the morning could not have borne its news at a worse time. The news was to arrive in the form of Lady Baratheon making an unexpected morning call, but neither Brienne nor her charges were present to greet her. In fact, Brienne was just about to take the girls out for a short walk when a harried-looking messenger rode down the pathway, rushing to dismount. He approached them hastily and Brienne noticed beads of sweat on his hand as he passed the letter to Sansa.

“You are the elder Miss Stark?”

“I am,” she said. “But is this message not for my mother?”

The messenger gave a quick shake of his head. “I have been given clear instructions that this message is to be read by no other than yourself, and in the company of no other.”

Sansa gaped in shock but accepted the missive nonetheless. The messenger nodded curtly and urged his horse onwards, disappearing as fast as he had made his entrance.

“I must read this at once,” Sansa said quietly, running her finger over the neat script that displayed her name on the envelope.

“Naturally we’ll be happy to wait” Arya said, and Sansa grinned and dashed off amongst the pines, her younger sister’s disdainful tone going unnoticed.

“Who would be writing to her so privately?” Brienne asked.

Arya glanced briefly at where Sansa had been standing. “She has never been the type to keep secrets. We were not always as close as we are now, not before... but she would still tell me everything of intrigue that she knew.”

“Perhaps this is a matter of the heart,” Brienne suggested.

“If it were a letter from her Lord Baratheon, we shall doubtless hear every detail when she returns.”

Sansa took longer than was expected or indeed seemly to read her letter amongst the pines. She returned less enthusiastically than she had left, her eyes red and her cheeks wet with tears.

Brienne rushed to her immediately, but Sansa delayed her with an outstretched hand. “Do not worry, Miss Tarth,” she said, her voice shaky, “it was very good news indeed.”

“I am glad to hear that, but–”

“We must walk to the Winter Town,” Sansa said. “I must attend to some business there.”
“Should we not inform your mother of this letter and the business it bids you to undertake?” Brienne asked.

“We should not,” Sansa said, a cruel edge in her tone that Brienne had not heard before. Arya too seemed surprised.

“I shan’t argue with a visit to the Winter Town,” Arya said. “Miss Tarth, perhaps you might introduce me to some of your redcoats.”

Brienne and Arya followed Sansa, who had set off at a brisk pace. “They are not my redcoats,” Brienne said, “and most of them are not worth our attention.”

“What about Mr. Ambrose? Or your Lieutenant Hunt?”

“Again, he is not mine,” Brienne said, looking away from Arya, “but he is a good man; I would be glad to introduce you to him. I have no doubt that you will enjoy one another’s company.”

“Just as you enjoy his company?”

Brienne sighed. “I suppose I have not made enough of an effort to disguise my... I cannot pretend that I do not admire him.”

“Do you think you will marry him?” Arya asked, blunt as ever.

Brienne stopped abruptly, a cloud of dust that her feet had unearthed from the pathway milling around the base of her legs. “Arya, you must not ask such questions! A woman may only contemplate marriage if she is asked by a man, and only with her father’s permission.”

“Didn’t Lieutenant Hunt serve under your father?”

“He did, although there is small chance he would remember—”

“Then he will surely ask for your hand!” Arya looked quite solemn about the whole affair. “First, however, he must have my approval.”

“If you insist,” Brienne said with a laugh. The talk of betrothals was an uncomfortable one however, and so she decided to change the subject to Sansa’s mysterious rendez-vous. “Who could Sansa be meeting in the Winter Town that privacy is of the utmost importance?”

“I wonder if it might not be Lord Baratheon,” Arya said. “Or perhaps an officer fancies her!”

“So you do think it is romantic?” Brienne asked.

“I cannot see another reason for secrecy,” Arya stated. “Unless it is Jeyne...? But Jeyne would have simply paid a visit...”

Brienne allowed Arya to continue in her musing, and in turn she retreated into her own thoughts. It seemed that everyone knew of her attachment to Lieutenant Hunt, and he had certainly made no secret that he favoured her. She did wonder if perhaps his words to her the previous day, the words so romantic that had her head all in a muddle, might have been false flattery. After all, some of the first words he spoke to her were to enquire whether she was truly Major Tarth’s daughter – perhaps his motivations for her affections were what he claimed as the motivations for his officers’ paying her so much attention.

Could he be so shallow?
Before her vague conceptions of such hurtful ideas could form properly, they had reached the Winter Town, and Brienne allowed herself a short moment to recover from a journey spent mostly in silence. She and Arya had caught up to Sansa, somehow, or perhaps Sansa had been waiting for them.

“I am going for a walk in the fields,” Sansa said, “and I would wish that you did not follow me.”

“Of course,” Brienne said. If anything, that only made her curiosity grow stronger.

When Sansa was out of their sight, Arya turned to her governess. “Shall we follow her?”

“No! We must respect her need for seclusion. The news about Jeyne is still raw in her heart.”

Arya gave an exaggerated sigh. “Very well. We must meet with your Lieutenant, in that case!”

Now that Brienne was certain of the location of the militia’s temporary barracks she led the way with confidence, Arya trailing her like a lit firework. She dreaded coming into contact with Lieutenant Hunt again, especially in the presence of others. She feared that she might be too open with her emotions, and there was no thought that troubled her more than that form of social embarrassment. Brienne had spent her whole life narrowly avoiding the fate of becoming an object of amusement due to her many social inadequacies. She did not plan on something so insignificant as an infatuation leading to her inevitable fall from grace.

Thankfully there was no lecherous Mr. Inchfield waiting for her this time, but Lieutenant Hunt stood alone outside the garrison.

“I admit I may have been expecting a visit,” he said.

Brienne willed a blush away from her cheeks as she smiled in greeting. “You saw me but two days ago,” she said. “Am I so predictable that you knew I would return soon?”

“Perhaps I am so predictable in wishing that you might return, despite what I hoped not to be true.”

“Truly sentimental,” Arya said. “It is a delight to behold!”

Brienne knew her charge well enough to know when she spoke falsely, however in this situation she did not comment on the rudeness.

“And you are the younger Miss Stark, are you not?” Lieutenant Hunt said, looking down at Arya. Brienne wondered if it was a relief to talk to a woman shorter than him after he had spent so long talking to her the previous day. “We have met briefly.”

“Indeed we have,” Arya said, “but I would wish to make your acquaintance formerly. Miss Tarth has told me much about you.”

“All of it depicting me as a most horrid man, I presume,” he said, smiling easily as though had never made a joke that had roused no laughs.

“Oh no, what I have heard has been most favourable indeed,” Arya said. Brienne captured the tip of her bottom lip between her teeth, glancing at her feet in the chance that they might offer some inspiration on how to keep herself calm in such a potentially compromising situation, but her feet were dubiously silent.

When she looked up, Lieutenant Hunt faced her with an expression that she could not comprehend – it was either approval or amusement, or perhaps both. “Does Miss Stark speak the
truth?"

“I have naught to offer but kind words for most people of my acquaintance,” Brienne said, hoping that would relieve her of any responsibility for Arya’s comment.

“Do you not speak ill of anyone, ever?” he asked, raising an eyebrow.

“I try not to engage in the petty gossip that preys upon others’ faults,” she said, knowing well the feeling of being the object of such covert discussion. But then her thoughts fell to Captain Lannister, and how easily she had trusted Lieutenant Hunt’s conveyance of what was essentially petty gossip about his past, and she all of a sudden doubted herself. There was a question in her mind that had not been there before: what if Lieutenant Hunt had made an incorrect assumption about Captain Lannister?

Somehow, he managed to interpret her thoughts without her having to speak them. “Would you not even wish to engage in petty gossip about the Lannisters?”

“I would!” Arya interjected.

“We ought not to...” Brienne said.

“The young lady has spoken, I’m afraid,” Hunt said, “and so now I am honour-bound to tell you! You may leave if you do not wish to sully your reputation as the epitome of kindness with this cruel chatter.”

He smiled so infuriatingly at her that she had no choice but to stay. “Say it then, if you will.”

“Well, I have heard certain rumours about the reason for the brothers’ impending detour that will take them to Rosings Park,” he said, lowering his voice.

“Mr. Lannister told me it was for business,” Brienne said.

“Business, yes,” Hunt said, “but I have heard more than that. I have heard that the Lannisters have come upon financial troubles, and that they wish to borrow money from Lord Bolton.”

“I cannot believe it!” Arya exclaimed.

“Nor could I,” he said, “but my source of this information is not to be taken lightly.”

“This makes no sense,” Brienne said, giving voice to her thoughts. “Why would they not simply live off Lord Baratheon’s estate? They would not ignore such a wealthy connection, surely?”

“I did not fabricate the story,” Lieutenant Hunt said, a glint in his eye that hinted to Brienne that maybe he had fabricated it. “I am only telling you what I have heard, not the reason behind it.”

“Perhaps you have heard wrongly,” Brienne suggested. “It would not be the first time that idle talk has proven false.”

“It would not,” he agreed, although he looked unimpressed at having to concede defeat.

“Oh!” Arya said, breaking the uncomfortable discussion. “I think I see Sansa!”

Brienne followed Arya’s line of sight to see Sansa skipping towards them. She looked much happier than she had earlier, after reading her clandestine correspondence.

“Good morning, Lieutenant Hunt,” she said. “I might have expected to see you with Miss Tarth!”
“It seems I am predictable after all,” he said, his eyes never moving away from Brienne.

They conversed briefly, before Brienne decided that it was time to walk back to Winterfell for their luncheon. She did not wish to leave Lieutenant Hunt, and yet she did not wish to stay in his presence for too long lest she make a fool of herself.

On their walk, Arya was brave enough to ask Sansa who it was she had met out in the field.

“Someone important,” Sansa replied, no hint in her voice as to how important this person had been.

“That is far too inconclusive,” Arya said, to which she received no reply, but Brienne was inclined to agree with her sentiment. She did not enjoy the sensation of something happening around her that she had no knowledge of – Sansa meeting with someone unknown and the new confusion surrounding the Lannister brothers’ visit to Rosings Park both made her uncomfortable in her ignorance.

As they arrived at Winterfell, they walked atop the tracks of a recently-passed carriage, which had presumably brought a morning caller down the pine path.

Mrs. Stark stood to meet them at the front door and Brienne could immediately sense that there were ill tidings to follow. The way she bore herself indicated a mixture of anger and concern that Brienne had not seen since Lady Baratheon had called for tea.

“You have just missed Lady Baratheon,” Mrs. Stark said, her jaw clenched, “although I would count that as fortunate. More fortunate would be to never lay our eyes upon her again.”

“What has happened?” Arya asked.

“Lord Baratheon is engaged,” Mrs. Stark said coldly, “to some girl named Margaery Tyrell.”

Brienne immediately turned her eyes to Sansa, but she was oddly composed in the face of this news. There were no tears in her eyes, and no signs of anger. Brienne knew that people expressed grief in many disparate manners, but from what she knew of Sansa she highly doubted that the girl felt anything at all upon hearing this.

Strangely, Arya seemed to be more angered. “I knew he was a cad!” she proclaimed. “How could he be so cruel as to enter into a betrothal with another when he so clearly fancies Sansa?”

“I am sure it was not his design to marry her,” Sansa said calmly. “This match was made by his mother; there can be no doubt of that.”

“You are bearing this news exceedingly well,” Mrs. Stark said, a hint of pride showing through her anger. “I agree – the young Lord had no hand in this match.”

“Oh!” Brienne said, a memory suddenly entering her head. Was Miss Tyrell not previously engaged to Renly Baratheon?

“I am told that they broke off the engagement, by whose insistence I am not sure. But there can be no doubt that this is a far more advantageous match for this Miss Tyrell.” Mrs. Stark frowned. “I have not heard of the Tyrells,” she added, “and I would think that they are aspirants to the lifestyle of old families. It is a pity that Lady Baratheon would choose a match such as that over a girl from a good family.”

Mrs. Stark looked pointedly at Sansa, and received a smile in return. “Do not worry for me, mama. I will bear this news well.”
Arya looked warily at Sansa. “That is a surprising turn of events if there ever was one,” she mumbled.

Brienne, meanwhile, detached herself from the conversation to ruminate upon the news of Lord Baratheon’s betrothal – or rather, the news that Renly was no longer betrothed. She could not help the small hope that entered her mind; at one time there would have been no greater news, but her affections for Lieutenant Hunt ought to be a distraction from any further thoughts of Renly. It was no light matter to break a betrothal, and that either Renly or Miss Tyrell had done so made Brienne giddy with confusion.

Just then, they were interrupted by footsteps on the path, and because they already stood by the door, Mrs. Stark turned to greet their visitor without sending for the footman.

“Mr. Poole,” she said, “I had not thought to see you here on your own! To what do we owe this pleasure?”

“This is not a pleasurable visit, I am afraid,” he said sadly. “You will have heard that my dear Jeyne is engaged to marry Mr. Snow.”

“We have heard,” Mrs. Stark said, “but is that not pleasurable news?”

“It is,” Mr. Poole said, “but poor Jeyne is most nervous. Mr. Snow has asked that we hasten the wedding so that he may return to his posting at Rosings Park as soon as possible. I am afraid that Jeyne is not ready to be married so soon.”

“And you have come to us for guidance?” Mrs. Stark said, almost chiding him. “A girl must bear marriage as well she can in such a circumstance.”

“Not exactly,” he said. “The wedding will have to be soon, yes, there is no avoiding that, and of course she will leave with him for Rosings Park immediately afterwards. But she will need time to– I think it will be easier for her to become accustomed to marriage if she has your Sansa by her side for comfort.”

Sansa looked more startled by this than she had by Lord Baratheon’s betrothal, Brienne noticed with some amusement.

“She would wish me to stay at Rosings Park with her?” Sansa asked. “For how long?”

Mr. Poole sighed and turned to Sansa. “Ideally, for as long as she would need you there, but I realise that this may not be practicable. As such, I would formally extend the invitation on behalf of my daughter for your good self and your governess to stay with Jeyne for the first two weeks of her marriage.”

“Miss Tarth too?” Mrs. Stark said. “Will you be taking my whole household from me?”

“It is but two weeks,” Sansa said. “Mr. Poole, I would be honoured to accompany Jeyne, as would Miss Tarth.”

Brienne nodded – she could hardly disagree now, as much as she would mislike being taken away from Lieutenant Hunt only to spend two weeks in the same vicinity as the Lannister brothers.

“It is I who am honoured,” he said. “I will tell Jeyne of this at once! Thank you, Miss Stark!”

They farewelled him politely, but after he had left Mrs. Stark gave Sansa an annoyed look. “You did not need to accept his offer,” she said.
“It will be a pleasant change,” Sansa said, “for both myself and Miss Tarth. I am sure Arya will cope without her lessons for two weeks.”

Arya nodded eagerly.

“If you are certain,” Mrs. Stark said, conceding by turning her back and walking towards the dining room. “Perhaps it will take your mind off Lord Baratheon.”

Arya followed her mother, and Brienne was about to retreat when she saw that Sansa had not moved.

“Are you sure— are you truly at peace with Lord Baratheon being betrothed to another?” she asked.

For the first time that day, Sansa gave Brienne a genuine, bright smile. “I would not worry about his betrothal,” she said. “That situation will soon be resolved.”

Sansa left for her meal, and she left Brienne standing in the entrance hall with a pervading sense of unease.

Chapter End Notes

Let me know if you enjoyed it! I did some things I wasn’t expecting to do with this chapter but I think it worked. And honestly, every comment is like a birthday present to me, so please take the time to leave your thoughts!

I hope you’re as excited to read the next chapter as I am to write it, because Rosings is coming...
Chapter Notes

Rosings, finally! Quick note: even I’ve been confusing Lord Bolton and Mr. Bolton in writing this. The former is Roose and the latter is Domeric! And Mr. Snow is Ramsay. Phew, why do I do this to myself?

Anyway this is a bit of a fun chapter so I hope you enjoy it :D

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

After two hours that seemed like half a day, the party reached Rosings Park. Two hours spent in a carriage with Mr. Snow were enough to drive even the most patient and kind person – someone such as Sansa Stark, perhaps – to inflamed fury. So as they dismounted from the carriage, Sansa clenching her teeth and taking Jeyne’s arm, Brienne was angry and tired and felt a telling lightness in her head that was the ominous forecast of a headache, and as such her first impression of Rosings Manor, sitting on the horizon some distance away from Mr. Snow’s cottage, was that it was very big indeed.

The grounds of Rosings Park were verdant with the blessing of the dying days of Summer and showed no hint of the Autumn that would soon consume their colour. The clergyman’s cottage sat amongst a proud example of such greenery, adjoining a modest church. Neither Evenfall Hall or Winterfell possessed grounds large enough to warrant the keeping of their own clergyman, and the sight was almost as foreign to Brienne as the manor itself, which was larger than she could possibly have imagined.

At Mr. Snow’s behest the driver had steered his horses past Rosings Manor on the approach to the cottage, and Mr. Snow had gone to great pains to point out the architectural features that were unique to this particular corner of England and could not be found elsewhere, so exclusive was the quality of their design.

“Of course, you will see it in greater detail when we are invited to dine there. I have not yet received any formal invitation, but I am sure that my father will wish to meet my bride and her companions as soon as is possible.”

He was not wrong; a neat envelope sat on the sideboard in his entrance hall addressed to “Mr. and Mrs. Snow”, and Mr. Snow claimed to immediately recognise the writing as being his father’s. Sure enough, Lord Bolton had extended an invitation for them to join him at luncheon the following day. It was only after Mr. Snow had taken the letter through to his driver that Brienne noticed the tears in Jeyne’s eyes.

Brienne hastily asked the footman to show her where she would be sleeping, leaving Sansa and Jeyne alone. She was not sure why Mr. Snow’s household demanded the presence of a footman, the cottage being so much smaller than Winterfell, but it seemed that the man was one of the many courtesies that Lord Bolton condescended to allow his illegitimate son.

“You will be sharing your room with Miss Stark,” he informed her, lifting her portmanteau and leading her up the creaking staircase.

She followed him hesitantly, one hand gripping the bannister as though she were drowning at sea.
The vast greenery of Rosings Park beyond the cottage came to mind, and she felt even more as if her surrounds had swallowed her. There was a strangeness that accompanied such a place, where everything was so much larger than expected, that made Brienne feel very small and insignificant, despite her abnormal stature.

The bedroom allocated to herself and Sansa was sparse, with two neatly-made beds placed a respectable distance apart. The footman placed Brienne’s portmanteau by the bed nearer to the door, saving her the trouble of making a decision. She was sure that Sansa would be more inclined than herself to appreciate the bed near the window with its view of the distant Rosings Manor.

In a few moments Sansa joined her in the bedroom, sitting down on her bed and sighing.

“Oh, Miss Tarth, Jeyne is so sad. I cannot bear to see it,” she said softly. “I wish she had not married that man.”

Brienne could not reply. How could she reply, when it only returned those desperate thoughts of her own refusal to marry? She pushed the very idea from her mind with such a force that her fingers stiffened into fists.

“That she should marry for aught but love saddens me greatly,” Sansa continued. “I would not wish this unhappiness upon anyone!”

“Yet Jeyne must bear it as best she can,” Brienne said. “And she has an advantage that most other young ladies do not: she has us here to comfort her in her first weeks of marriage.”

“She will not want for anything while we are here,” Sansa said. “Come, Miss Tarth. Let us take her walking before dinner.”

Brienne did not particularly want to walk among the daunting majesty of Rosings Park, however she acquiesced readily. She considered that the fresh air my calm her head after her dizzying journey in the hot carriage. Thankfully there was a breeze blowing through the trees that immediately ameliorated her mood upon stepping outside with Sansa and Jeyne.

At the footman’s recommendation, they walked in the direction of Rosings Manor, where there was said to be a large lake. They reached it sooner than Brienne had expected, and Sansa suggested that they take off their boots and stockings to feel the grass on their feet as they had apparently done many a time in the fields near the Winter Town. Brienne stepped back and allowed the girls to revel in their nostalgia – she was not their age, nor had she lived near them when she was, and so she elected not to make an intruder of herself unto their memories.

“Miss Tarth, will you not join us?” Jeyne asked.

“It would not be proper for me to engage in the frivolities that youth may excuse for you,” she said, the words sounding stilted to her own ears.

Sansa must also have heard it in her voice. “Ah, but you do wish to wander barefoot around the lake too, do you not?” she said, reaching beneath her skirts to unclip her stockings.

“It would be unseemly,” Brienne said with some finality. And so it was that she stood aside and watched the younger girls, taking care that her stance was one of authority, radiating the impression that she was a suitable governess who would not go as far as to hinder such activities, but would neither take any part in them.

Her facade faltered when she spotted a lone figure further down the bank of the lake. She reflected that perhaps she was developing an annoying habit of encountering Captain Lannister near middling bodies of water – but this would not become an encounter if she pretended not to notice
him, and she trained her eyes back on Sansa and Jeyne. Still, his presence intruded upon her until she glanced again in his direction and noticed with some horror that he was walking towards them.

And then he turned a corner, abruptly taking a route away from them, and Brienne took in a deep breath of air to calm her nerves. In no time he had gone from view; it seemed as though Sansa and Jeyne had not even noticed. Brienne looked back to where he had been standing and walked quickly towards the path he had followed, and she searched until she found the dents that his footsteps had left in the grass as some absurd confirmation that he had not been but an apparition.

“I did not imagine his presence,” she whispered, lowering herself to the ground to inspect the displaced grass. How curious that he should have changed his direction when usually he delighted in making a nuisance of himself to Brienne. Perhaps he had not noticed them, or more likely he did not wish to engage with Miss Stark and Mrs. Snow. She even wondered if finally he had chosen to reciprocate her unfavourable feelings towards him, and avoid her as she avoided him.

“Miss Tarth, are you quite well?” Sansa called.

Brienne stood up quickly, brushing down her skirts. “Quite well, yes. I thought perhaps I had noticed someone by the lakeside, but now I am not so certain.”

Sansa rushed up to join her, Jeyne following close behind. “Could you tell who it was you saw?”

“I could not,” Brienne lied. The very last thing she wished to do was to explain her animosity towards Captain Lannister to the girls.

“It may have been a ghost,” Jeyne suggested.

“Or worse, Lord Bolton!” Sansa added, and the girls covered their mouths in order to disguise their wholly inappropriate laughter.

Brienne bit her lip to better maintain her silence, closing her eyes shortly to remove Captain Lannister from her mind.

She was not to see him in person until the next day, when her party made for Rosings Manor to take their afternoon meal with Lord Bolton and his son – and more importantly, his son’s wife Lyanna, formerly a Stark, and aunt to Sansa and Arya. Sansa had not seen her aunt in many years, not since shortly after she had married Domeric Bolton, and Lord Bolton had thenceforth disallowed her from having any contact with her family. Brienne suspected she had not even been allowed to attend her brother’s funeral. Of course, the reason given for this forced isolation was that Mrs. Bolton's health was far too fragile to facilitate any freedom on her part.

Mrs. Stark saw it solely as a slight against her family.

As such, Jeyne seemed quite scared as she walked up the grand front steps of the manor, arm-in-arm with her husband, but Sansa was all exuberance and excitement.

Lord Bolton did not rise to greet them from his throne at the far end of the long dining table. He did not even smile.

“Mrs. Snow, Miss Stark, Miss Tarth, I am so very glad that you could join us here today.” There was a grating sweetness about his words that told that he clearly could not care less whether or not the ladies were there.

Brienne glanced down the table and saw Mr. Bolton to his father’s right, and Captain and Mr. Lannister to the left. She caught Sansa’s eye and could feel the other girl’s disappointment in her
Mrs. Bolton was not there.

Mr. Snow strode impatiently down the side of the table, putting his hand on the chair next to his legitimate brother, but he was stalled by Lord Bolton raising a hand towards him.

“That is Mrs. Bolton’s place,” he said stiffly, “and despite her illness we will do her no dishonour by leaving her seat unoccupied.”

“Of course,” Mr. Snow said, not bothering to hide the disgust on his face as he moved to the next seat. Jeyne took the place beside him, and Sansa and Brienne moved down the other end of the table, with Sansa next to Mr. Lannister and across from Mr. Snow. Brienne did not envy her the position, and was thankful for the separation between herself and Captain Lannister.

“It is a pleasure to meet you, Mrs. Snow,” Lord Bolton said, and Brienne noted that it took Jeyne a moment to realise that she was being addressed.

“And it is a great honour to meet you, my Lord,” she stammered.

“Do you play the piano?” he asked.

“I do,” she said.

“Do you play well?”

Jeyne blushed and looked down at the table, so Sansa spoke on her behalf. “Jeyne is the most accomplished player I have had the pleasure of hearing in our social circle,” she said, and Jeyne glanced up to smile at her.

“Is that so, Miss Stark?” Lord Bolton said, and Brienne watched with some fascination as he inspected her. He had an air about him that every look was a judgement passed, and no detail was forgotten. “Do you not play yourself?”

“I do,” she said somewhat concessively. “I have not applied myself to the art as well as Jeyne has, I confess.”

“It is the mark of an accomplished woman that she should play well. Has your governess not taught you?”

Sansa turned to look at Brienne, worry in her eyes. Brienne nodded slightly, hoping that Sansa would speak the truth under Lord Bolton’s scrutiny, despite the poor picture it painted of Brienne as a governess.

“Miss Tarth is not well inclined towards the musical arts,” Sansa said, her voice steady. “She is employed to teach us rather in decorum, needlework and history, as well as many other scholarly pursuits.”

“I see,” Lord Bolton said. “And yet she is not musical, so she cannot be truly accomplished in the eyes of society.”

The way in which he enunciated the words “eyes of society” made the room feel colder, and furthermore Brienne knew instinctively that he was referring to his own eyes, and that in their first meeting she had been branded a failure by this formidable man.

“Usually I favour allowing people to speak on their own behalf of their accomplishments,” Captain Lannister said. Brienne had almost forgotten the sound of his voice but refrained from turning to look at him. “However,” he continued, “I have known Miss Tarth for some time now
and she has a habit of understating her own achievements, so I hope you will allow me to inform you that she is among the most accomplished of women in my acquaintance.”

Brienne was almost hesitant to watch as Lord Bolton affixed his attention upon Captain Lannister and raised an eyebrow.

“You are well-acquainted with her then, I presume?”

Captain Lannister looked down the table and for the briefest of moments and Brienne found herself staring straight into his eyes. She could not tell which of them averted their gaze the fastest, and found it passing odd that he seemed unwilling to look upon her, when he had spent so much time in her presence being uncouth in staring at her, no doubt gaping at her unattractiveness. And all this after he had so vociferously defended her before Lord Bolton! She doubted that she would ever understand his way of thinking.

“Indeed I am,” he said. “Very well-acquainted.”

Brienne opened her mouth to protest this claim but thought the better of it and clenched her jaw tightly. She ought to be grateful for his words, and would not ruin them by showing off any animosity.

The food was served promptly, saving her from further disgrace, and she ate in silence while Lord Bolton directed further interrogation at Mrs. Snow between mouthfuls. The only time conversation caught her attention was when Mr. Lannister commented that his brother was not having a particularly easy time of it, balancing a fork in his iron hand and sawing with his weak left in order to cut his food.

“It is a pity that you do not have an aide as you had in one particular game of whist,” Mr. Lannister said, and Brienne coughed to cover up the fact that she had almost choked on a bean.

“I am thinking of employing such an aide at Casterly Rock,” Captain Lannister said, “however I am not sure what kind of person might be inclined to such a job.”

“For the cards or for the food?” Mr. Lannister asked.

Captain Lannister laughed, and soon his brother joined him.

“I gather that this is some private joke,” Lord Bolton said blithely.

“Evidently,” Mr. Bolton said, as the brothers Lannister ceased their cachinnations.

Brienne sat pondering the fact that Captain Lannister had not already employed an aide to assist with such trivial activities that he could not perform unimpeded by his disability. She recalled that during their shared meals at Storm’s End, his food had arrived already cut into small pieces and he had used no cutlery but a fork. Evidently Lord Bolton saw this as poor etiquette and left Captain Lannister to struggle, which Brienne thought was rather cruel, despite her dislike for the man – such blatant humiliation of a guest was not something she could forgive, and for the remainder of the meal she found herself rather disliking Lord Bolton in Captain Lannister’s stead.

As though he knew her thoughts, he redeemed himself as they prepared to retire to the drawing room.

“Miss Stark, it would be remiss of me not to offer you a visit with your aunt. I must warn you, however, that she is exceedingly unwell.”

Sansa’s countenance changed visibly. “Her condition matters little to me, Lord Bolton. I should
He nodded. “And so you shall. Flint! Show Miss Stark to Mrs. Bolton’s chambers.”

Sansa left with Lord Bolton’s footman, and Brienne found herself facing the prospect of a game of whist. Jeyne had been called upon to display her talents at the pianoforte, and Lord Bolton took to the card table accompanied by his sons.

“Captain Lannister, will you make our fourth?” Mr. Bolton asked.

“I am a poor hand at cards,” he replied, “quite literally. I thank you, but I shall not join you.”

“I suppose I shall have to take his place,” Mr. Lannister said, sounding rather amused, and Lord Bolton gave his assent with what seemed to Brienne to be some reluctance.

Brienne felt a moment of relief that she was to be excluded from the card party before that moment soured with the realisation that her companion in exclusion was to be Captain Lannister. However, she glanced at Lord Bolton and Mr. Snow, and suddenly Captain Lannister did not seem to be such a bad companion.

It was with some surprise, then, that she watched as he walked to the door of the drawing room. “You will forgive me,” he said, “but I am feeling quite beset by a sudden desire to take the air.”

“Of course,” Lord Bolton said, and without another word Captain Lannister nodded and made a quick exit. Brienne blinked in incredulity; her suspicion had been confirmed – he was most purposefully avoiding being in her company! This confused her beyond all sense of reason. What could be the meaning by someone who had previously taken pleasure in irritating her, and now spoke highly of her while keeping himself at a distance?

“Miss Tarth,” Mr. Bolton said – shamefully, she realised she was still standing in the middle of the room with no intent – “perhaps you might join Mrs. Snow at the piano?”

“Thank you,” she said, unsure as to why she was thanking him, “I shall.”

She walked over to the impressive piano and pulled a stool from the side of the room to sit beside Jeyne.

“It is sometimes uncomfortable, is it not,” Jeyne whispered, “to be a woman caught among so many single-minded men. It seems all they can do is eat and play cards!”

“Sometimes it does seem that way,” Brienne agreed. “I admit I feel rather superfluous on this occasion.”

“You ought to have taken the air with Captain Lannister,” Jeyne said.

“I do not think he would have enjoyed my company.”

Jeyne laughed quietly, unheard over the chatter of the card-players. “Miss Tarth, you may well be a woman of great accomplishment, but I must say, even a fool could tell that the situation is quite opposite.”

“In what way?” Brienne asked.

“Ah, it is of no matter,” Jeyne said, shaking her head.

Brienne found herself to be more confused than she had been that morning, which was some feat.
As she sat and listened to Jeyne’s playing she thought she might take some inspiration from Lyanna Bolton and feign illness to avoid any further such gatherings, for it seemed that everything about Rosings Park – the grounds, the manor, the people – threatened to overwhelm her.

Chapter End Notes

Comments are my favourite thing ever. Please take some time to leave one!

(P.s. I used my favourite word ever in this chapter - cachinnations, meaning laughter. So please with myself haha)
Chapter 14

Chapter Notes

Yeah, so this is quite soon after chapter 13 and I realise that some of you may not have read that yet, so just make sure you have before you get stuck into this! I'm on a roll and I won't stop until I've finished chapter 15 at least so that it'll be up either tomorrow or the day after. I'm spoiling you lot, really. ;)

This one goes out to the amazing frontally for having a read over for me and assuaging any doubts I had about it!

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Brienne had thought that over the course of her stay at Rosings Park she might become accustomed to the place, large, open and daunting as it was. However this was a painfully incorrect assumption – if anything, she became more uncomfortable as time passed. Perhaps adding to this was that there was very little to do but practise her needlework and accept invitations to dine, and as such she began to feel as though she might wilt into a permanent state of stagnant atrophy.

In times when her mind was unoccupied, such as were becoming worryingly plentiful, she found herself thinking about Winterfell, and the Winter Town, and even Storm’s End. She missed those places more than she missed her home at Evenfall Hall, a thought which bothered her. More than that, she missed the company of Lieutenant Hunt, her honest companion who had been more amiable than any man she knew. She foolishly wondered whether he would find interest in any other woman in her absence, but recognised this as an unhealthy thought and so chose instead to ruminate on the pine trees at Winterfell and the fields nearby.

On their seventh day at Rosings, Brienne awoke early from a vaguely disturbing dream of which she did not remember the specifics, and was not able to return to sleep. She spent the hours of dawn lying on her side, facing the wall so that she did not have to look upon Sansa, who was still asleep. Brienne was fretting over every movement that might rouse her prematurely.

It was several hours before the cottage woke, and the sounds of the servants rushing about echoed in Brienne’s ears like a hammer on an anvil – she was forced to contemplate the unpleasant fact that she may have a headache. It was amusing, then, that she had contemplated feigning illness only to find herself without the need to pretend.

“Miss Tarth, will you be joining us for breakfast?” Sansa asked. She was already dressed, whereas Brienne had her eyes shut, using the bedsheets as a shield against reality.

“I think not,” she mumbled, sitting up slowly and opening her eyes, blinking away the sharp morning sunlight.

Sansa sat carefully on the edge of Brienne’s bed. “Come, you must have something to eat. It may restore your spirits.”

Reluctantly, Brienne stood and dressed laboriously, willing the morning to pass without incident so that she might return to her room and close the curtains as soon as was possible. Breakfast in Mr. Snow’s cottage was a sour affair. Jeyne had become very quiet, and the less she spoke, the
more Sansa attempted to entertain her. Naturally, the more Sansa attempted to entertain Jeyne, Mr. Snow became more irritated.

“If it will placate you, I had thought to take a trip to a nearby village today,” Mr. Snow said, sighing in resignation.

“That sounds delightful,” Jeyne said, sounding not at all delighted.

“I am sure you will find the outing enjoyable,” he replied blandly. “Miss Stark, Miss Tarth, I presume you will be accompanying us?”

“I do not think that I shall,” Brienne said. “I must rest... I am quite unwell.”

She took to her feet and Sansa rose too, grasping her arm. “I will see you to the bedroom,” she said. Brienne left the table with Sansa by her side, far later than she had wished, yet she assured herself that it was better she rest now than push through an outing only to be stricken again so far from the cottage.

Brienne welcomed the darkness as she allowed Sansa to draw the curtains, and she lay fully-clothed upon the bed. She closed her eyes and shortly fell asleep, not hearing the carriage depart with Sansa, Jeyne and Mr. Snow. She was woken only by a knock on the bedroom door. It must have been some time later, but not more than an hour – she could not tell.

“Miss Tarth? There is a visitor to see you.” The maid’s eyes were wide with amazement, and Brienne wondered what sort of visitor might have left the young girl so disoriented. Her curiosity was thoroughly engaged, and her headache momentarily forgotten.

“I shall receive them in the drawing room shortly,” she told the maid, pausing only to fix her hair in the rusting mirror. With only a dim light in the room from the still-closed curtains she took longer than she would otherwise, and by the time she deemed herself presentable the maid had disappeared. She walked down the stairs cautiously, careful that her dizziness would not return, and entered the drawing room.

Brienne had not known what sort of guest to expect, but she did not expect to see Captain Lannister standing there, staring at the floor and drumming his fingers on the mantelpiece. For the duration of her stay at Rosings Park he had been deliberately avoiding her, or at the very least she had perceived his avoidance, even were it not his design.

“Ah, Miss Tarth,” he said, looking up, “it is good to see you!” There was a strange apprehension in his voice that took Brienne by surprise.

“Captain Lannister,” she greeted. “I must inform you that I am the only one here at the moment – Miss Stark and Mr. and Mrs. Snow have left for the day.”

“I shall not let that bother me, because it is you I came to see.” He pulled himself up so he stood maybe an inch taller, and exhaled deeply. “I have struggled– no, I– Miss Tarth, I must tell you–”

“If you would be so kind,” she interrupted, putting an end to his stuttering, “I have been unwell and was resting. Might you be prevailed upon to delay this matter until later in the day?”

“Oh!” He seemed at a loss for words. “Yes, of course. Of course. I shall return.” He bowed in an almost comical manner. “I shall return,” he reiterated.

“I do not doubt that,” she muttered, but he said not another word and swept past her. His countenance and actions were so unusual, and Brienne thought that there must have been a reason for this, as well as his previous avoidance, yet it remained unfathomable and she returned hastily
to the bedroom, willing herself to sleep so that she might forget this incident until Captain Lannister called again.

As though fate were giving Brienne a chance to prepare herself before his return, she awoke in the early afternoon. She ate quickly in the kitchen, despite the fact that she was a guest in this household, and avoided speaking to any of the servants. The sun was still high in the sky, and since her headache was quite well improved, she decided upon taking a walk about the grounds of Rosings Park to pass the time, and perhaps to conveniently be absent when Captain Lannister returned.

The sunlight which had seemed so blinding that morning had softened and it gave Rosings Park a slightly more intimate air to its trees and paths, and Brienne somehow felt confident enough in her sense of direction that she explored an unfamiliar part of the grounds, somewhere far from the cottage and far from the manor. It did not seem possible that so much land could be owned by the one man, and yet there was no indication that any of the routes she walked took her onto another property.

She had been walking for not half an hour when she came upon Mr. Lannister approaching her from the opposite direction.

“I must admit, I am surprised to see you alone,” he said.

Brienne frowned at him in bemusement. “Why should I not be alone?”

“Did my brother not pay you a visit this morning?” Mr. Lannister asked.

“He did,” Brienne said. “I am sure that if he told you of his visit, he would also have told you that I turned him away.”

Mr. Lannister’s eyes widened. “By God!”

“There is no need to look so shocked,” she said, taken aback. “I had a painful headache; I simply asked that he might return later, if his news were urgent.”

“Ah,” Mr. Lannister replied more calmly, “of course. But you are improved now, I take it?”

“Much improved, thank you,” she said.

He gestured around a corner into another part of the grounds. “Come, walk with me.”

“I hope all is well with yourself and your brother,” Brienne said as she followed him. She enjoyed Mr. Lannister’s company greatly, and only wished that he did not force her to think upon the infuriating Captain Lannister by association. Nevertheless, it was only polite to ask about both of them – perhaps she might now learn why Captain Lannister had been acting so unusually.

Instead of answering, her companion sighed. “Miss Tarth, you are not particularly fond of my brother, are you?”

“He is a most respectable man,” she said slowly, choosing her words with great care.

“Yet you do not respect him,” he stated. Brienne did not reply, as anything she said would only serve to further incriminate her. “Very well,” he continued, “I will not force you to answer this question. I would only give you some advice.”

“Any advice from a man so learned as yourself will be greatly received,” she said.
He laughed. “I am but five-and-twenty, Miss Tarth; there are men much more learned than myself who could give better advice. What, may I ask, is your age?”

“I am not yet one-and-twenty,” she replied. “You will comment that it is a young age for a governess, as have many. Of this I am aware.”

“I will comment no such thing! You wound me.”

“Then what is the nature of your advice?”

“My brother has ten more years than yourself,” he said, “and I know that often such a difference in age can lead to differences in opinion between two such people. However, you would perhaps be wise not to distrust him so completely.”

“It is not that I distrust him,” she said, although she most certainly did distrust him, just as she distrusted most men and women of her acquaintance, “but that—”

“You cannot so easily lie to me,” he said. “I simply want you to know that Jaime is a good man, and that despite his manner, which I agree can sometimes make even myself disinclined towards his company, he is kind, and he cares for you deeply.”

Brienne stopped, and it took Mr. Lannister several moments before he noticed that she was no longer walking by his side.

“I am certain that he does not,” she said.

Annoyingly, Mr. Lannister only smiled at her. “I will allow you to believe that,” he said, “for the time being.”

Brienne resumed her pace and they walked further in silence, and quite predictably it was Mr. Lannister who resumed the conversation.

“We leave for London in the afternoon tomorrow, and thence to Casterly Rock for Michaelmas,” he said. “I doubt that we will return to Storm’s End for a very long time, and as such this may be the last time you see us until far into the future.”

“I should not wish it to be so,” Brienne said, wondering if she was speaking only about Mr. Lannister, or about his brother as well. For all his faults, Captain Lannister was a variety, and the Lannister brothers were the sort of variety that very rarely came near Winterfell. Although with the presence of the militia in the Winter Town, Brienne thought she would be able to cope quite well without the brothers as a distraction.

“Nor I,” he said. “When my brother returns his call this afternoon, you might consider making plans to stay in contact with him. However much I enjoy your company, I am certain that his sentiments are tenfold, and he will mislike being apart from you for so long.”

“And yet if his sentiments are as you say, can you not explain why he has been avoiding my company for this whole week I have been here?” Brienne asked, with much more spite in her words than she had intended.

“That is not for me to explain,” Mr. Lannister said. “If you like, that is a question you may ask of him–”

“I do not believe,” she continued, irrationally angered, “that you would not tell me! You are telling me that he cares for me, but I cannot accept that! I am sorry, Mr. Lannister, but I simply cannot!”
Again, he sighed. “Very well. As I have said, I cannot speak any more on his behalf than I already have done. You must ask him. I have no doubt that he will tell you the truth.”

“You place so much trust in him,” she said quietly.

“He is my brother,” Mr. Lannister said simply. “How could I possibly distrust him?”

They paused simultaneously in their walking. “Would I be able to trust in your truthfulness on a delicate issue?” Brienne asked.

“Of course,” he said, raising an eyebrow.

“I have heard— that is to say, I was involved in a conversation that I did not wish to be a part of, and I— the most scurrilous gossip was spoken about yourself and your brother, that I would wish the matter to be put to rest so that I am not wondering endlessly.”

“Then I would wish that you speak it quickly and put me out of my curiosity,” he said shortly.

“It was said that— that the reason you and your brother are currently engaged in business with Lord Bolton is because you are lacking in financial resources,” she said, her words running together in her haste to let them out.

She had not expected his reaction, a burst of loud laughter that would surely have shaken the leaves on the nearby trees. “Oh, Miss Tarth! Would that I knew the joker who crafted that rumour; I should like to shake his hand! The idea of the Lannisters being in any sort of monetary strife at all is laughable.”

“Oh,” Brienne said, unsure how to respond otherwise.

“You must be pitifully uninformed about our family to believe that nonsense – well, I shall put the rumour to rest once and for all. As I recall Jaime mentioning at your first luncheon at Rosings Manor, I too do not like to sing the praises of others, but my dear brother is far too modest to boast of the five Welsh goldmines in his name.”

“Five!” Brienne exclaimed. “You must be—”

“Yes. Every branch of the Lannister family is obscenely wealthy in its own way; landowners and merchants both,” he said. “We are not here to borrow money from Lord Bolton, but to lend it to him.”

“Oh,” she said again.

“I probably should not be telling you of this, but he spends exorbitant amounts of money on maintaining the health of his son’s wife, in the hope that one day she will be well enough to produce an heir,” Mr. Lannister said. “The great Bolton fortune would be naught if the current Lord were not wary enough to borrow, and so shrewd in his business. Thankfully for him, he has not yet had to sell off any of his acreage.”

It took several moments of quiet for Brienne to comprehend this sudden acquisition of knowledge, knowledge that no outsider should have. She could not believe that the Lannisters were so wealthy, that the Boltons were not as wealthy as expected, and that Lieutenant Hunt had fabricated the whole story himself! It could have been that he had been misinformed, or remembered incorrectly, but she remembered distinctly the look on his face as he spoke so gleefully of the Lannisters’ situation, and the uncertainty that had filled her as he told the tale, and she knew instinctively that it was a rumour of his creation, and his alone.
It was then that she realised that Lieutenant Hunt had been deliberately trying to mislead her about the Lannisters. But to what end? He had already told her all he knew of Captain Lannister, and the sins that man had committed. It was clear, then, that he had a basis for his dislike of Captain Lannister, and of course for Lady Baratheon as well, but Mr. Lannister was an innocent in relation to their foulness! Why would Lieutenant Hunt wish her to know that misinformation?

Her head began to spin, and she placed a palm to her forehead to steady herself.

“You will forgive me, Mr. Lannister,” she said, “but I fear my headache is returning. I must make for the cottage at once.”

He nodded. “Naturally I will accompany you, in case you should have an attack of the vapours before we reach any help.

They walked side-by-side through the grounds of Rosings Park, but Brienne’s mind was in another place entirely. She found that she trusted Mr. Lannister’s words, but there were still many things she could not accept, such as his assertions about Captain Lannister’s supposed care for her. Forcing herself not to think about Captain Lannister, she instead allowed the confusion of Lieutenant Hunt’s deception to flood her mind. There was absolutely no reason for it that she could fathom, and so her mind worked in circles, trying to conceive of his motivation, until she felt so faint that she had to pause and lean against a tree to recover her senses.

After a walk that seemed much longer than it must have been, they arrived at the cottage. Brienne found that she was able to breathe more steadily, and stood by the gate momentarily, readjusting to lucidity.

“Thank you for accompanying me, Mr. Lannister, but you need not trouble yourself further. I am feeling far less unwell.”

“I am glad to hear that,” he said. “Do you not wish me to send for a doctor?”

“No, thank you,” she said, “I will have returned to myself in no time.”

They parted ways and Brienne had every intention of heading straight for her bedroom, but then she heard voices nearby. Slipping into the drawing room, she peered through the window to see that Captain Lannister had appeared by his brother’s side, and they were discussing something loudly, but not so loudly that she could make out their words.

After a moment, Captain Lannister pushed through the gate and walked up the path to the cottage door, and Brienne pulled herself away from the window and stood with her back flush to the wall. The uneasiness had moved from her head to her stomach, manifesting itself as a sensation that felt suspiciously like nervousness. She could hear him talking to the maid, and the maid’s steps coming towards her, and she was ready at the door of the drawing room the moment the maid arrived to tell her of his presence.

“Tell him that I will receive him in the drawing room,” she said.

He entered with none of his usual nonchalance, and closed the door behind him. Brienne took several steps away from him, walking towards an armchair. “Captain Lannister, if you would—”

“Miss Tarth,” he said, his eyes fixed on hers, “it will not do.”

Chapter End Notes
Please do leave a comment! C:
Chapter 15

Chapter Notes

Please make sure you have read chapters 13 and 14 before you start on this one!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Brienne stood still, Captain Lannister’s scrutiny rendering her temporarily incapable of movement. “What– what will not do?”

“In vain I have struggled,” he said, “but no longer. My feelings will not be repressed. You must allow me to tell you how ardently I admire and love you.”

Outside the cottage, a light wind blew and shook the leaves on the hedges that lined the white wooden fence, and a leaf fell from a tree across the path, the first casualty of Autumn. From inside, Brienne heard every noise, amplified by the sheer amount of silence in the room. For a moment it seemed as though she had imagined Captain Lannister’s words, but he stood before her in earnest, and the sound of the words “admire and love” hung between them as an anchor clinging to the sea in the eye of a storm. The soft noises from outside were replaced as Brienne became aware of the thudding of her heart, beating out an off-key fanfare in her chest.

“Surely you jest,” she said, barely noticing whether her mouth moved. She stepped backwards, allowing her weight to fall onto the arm of the chair behind her. She felt small all of a sudden, the advantage of height taken from her as she sat to steady herself.

“How could you think that?” he asked. “After all this time, there should be no doubt as to my affections. I will say it again if you think me a fool – I cannot imagine my happiness but for loving you.”

He bowed his head momentarily before lifting it again, and all this time not moving his eyes from Brienne, which made her more uncomfortable than she could articulate. She looked away, at the other armchairs across from hers, at the table by the window, at the candelabra by the landscape painting, and anything other than Captain Lannister, who now stood before her claiming that he loved her! Mr. Lannister had mentioned his sentiments towards her as being more than favourable, but she had not thought–

“It is impossible,” she said, more to herself than to him. “I cannot believe it.”

“You cannot? You cannot think why someone would love you?”

He sounded almost angered by this notion, but indeed Brienne could not think; she had not even been able to perceive more than a passing attraction on the behalf of Lieutenant Hunt, who had been kind to her – and so how might she perceive love in a man who had been so cruel to her on so many occasions?

“Very well,” he continued, “allow me to tell you. Miss Tarth, since we first met at Storm’s End, I have known I would come to favour you above other women of my acquaintance, despite your unfortunate association with the Stark family. You are a stronger spirit than any I have met, and so unique! I have not met anyone so wholly untroubled by my lack of a hand, and you must understand that I had so firmly set myself against the idea of marriage that I did not think... I had
not planned my stay at Storm’s End to be anything other than a mild inconvenience, and I had
most certainly not expected to meet a woman who is my equal with a blade – although you must
understand, I was far superior a swordsman when I was still in possession of my right hand – least
of all a governess! And yet I think you are more the build of a farmhand or a blacksmith, but that
is of no import to me, and I must say that you bear your stature exceedingly well. In short, I am
wholly enamoured of you, and if you would have me, I am irretrievably yours.”

Brienne remained too stunned to speak, incapable of reply. She turned away from him and
allowed herself to take on the form of the armchair, abandoning the idea of using her height to her
advantage and making herself as small as possible.

He sat on one of the other armchairs so that he faced her. “I realise that it goes against several
social conventions for a man of my station to be proposing such things to a governess, even one
from a respectable family such as yours, but if you will allow me to speak plainly, I want to marry
you. I cannot rest until I know that you will accept my offer.”

She looked up, staring straight into his eyes for the first time since he had entered the drawing
room. “Then you shall remain disquieted,” she said, “for I have no such intentions.”

“No such–”

“No, Captain Lannister,” she said, heat rushing to her cheeks, “my answer is no, and my answer
would still have been no, even had you put your proposal to me in a more gentlemanly manner!”

“Gentlemanly?” He leant forward in the chair. “What do you mean by that? I have only spoken
courteously–”

“Would that you could hear yourself!” she exclaimed, fighting to remove the hysterical edge from
her tone. “You spoke of my unfortunate connection to the family kind enough to employ me as
their governess, of my unfortunate height, and of my unfortunate social status! I wonder, could
you possibly have chosen a more unfortunate match for yourself? Seek acceptance elsewhere,
Captain Lannister, from a woman who would marry you solely for your name and your riches, for
I am not and will never be that woman.”

“And I would never want that woman!” he snapped. “Here – allow me to put my proposal to you
in a more gentlemanly manner. I love you, Brienne, and I will not be able to suddenly cease
loving you simply because you tell me I must not.”

“Do not presume to call me by my name,” she said, speaking through clenched teeth. “Perhaps I
did not make myself clear enough – you may recall hearing that my answer to your proposal
would always have been the same, no matter the manner of your asking.”

“Why then am I so repulsive to you?”

“Captain Lannister, you have been nothing but cruel to me since we first met, insulting me in
similar ways to your ungentlemanly proposal. You have made jests about my appearance and my
bearing, and this whole week you have avoided my company entirely!”

“Yes, I have,” he admitted, “because I had wished to avoid intimating my affections to you at an
inopportune moment!”

“Would you not call this moment inopportune?”

“I would not! I still cannot comprehend your evident aversion to the very sight of me! Surely you
must know that what you call ‘jest’ were simply that, and not great declarations of hatred such as
the one you are presenting for me as the perfect specimen of a rejection?”
“But how could I do anything but reject your offer, when–”

Brienne stopped suddenly in her speech, unsure if she wanted to relate to Captain Lannister her knowledge of his most base sin that she had acquired from Lieutenant Hunt.

“Do go on,” he said, standing up. “Tell me what the core of your hatred is, and then I shall take my leave of you.”

She stood up in turn, unwilling to present herself as his subordinate for this particular conversation. “You must not think me ignorant, Captain Lannister. I have heard tell of the unholy relations between yourself and your– and Lady Baratheon. I have–”

Though it felt good to finally vocalise a secret that had weighed upon her mind for so many weeks, she did not finish the thought, because he reacted immediately, staggering backwards as though she had struck his chest with a sharp-pointed rapier. His eyes grew wide before he shut them tightly, pressing a hand to his forehead as he used his iron glove to stabilise himself against the armchair. Slowly, he stood tall again, opening his eyes and stepping forward to face her such that their noses were almost touching.

“From whom did you hear this maliciously-crafted tale?” he asked, his voice quiet and threatening.

Brienne pursed her lips. For all that Lieutenant Hunt had lied to her about the Lannisters’ pecuniary woes, she had not finish the thought, because he reacted immediately, staggering backwards as though she had struck his chest with a sharp-pointed rapier. His eyes grew wide before he shut them tightly, pressing a hand to his forehead as he used his iron glove to stabilise himself against the armchair. Slowly, he stood tall again, opening his eyes and stepping forward to face her such that their noses were almost touching.

“Tell me,” he hissed, sounding uncannily like his sister. Brienne took a step backward, her leg colliding with the armchair. “Who presumes to have such knowledge of me that he spreads this rumour?”

“He has not spread it,” Brienne said, in deference to the Lieutenant’s memory despite his absence, and the fact that he had played a part in crafting her rejection of Captain Lannister, even though he had not gone so far in his affections as to propose marriage. “The details of your affair were intimated to me in confidence and I would not presume to speak of it to anyone else.”

“Lieutenant Hunt,” Captain Lannister spat. “I told you not to trust that man! He is unworthy of you, Bri– Miss Tarth, he is most unworthy.”

“Of course you would say that,” she said, speaking without considering her words, “given that you and he were never on good terms during your time together in the militia!”

Without warning, Captain Lannister stepped forward and grabbed her wrist in his hand. “I will tell you why he is untrustworthy, though you will not wish to hear it.”

They stared into each other’s eyes, Brienne silently daring him to tell her the reasons behind his distrust of Lieutenant Hunt.

“You think he is in love with you?” Captain Lannister asked.

“I would not claim any such thing,” Brienne replied.

“But you believe that he favours you. Do not answer – I know you believe it, for he is an old hand at this game, making women believe that he favours them.” He released her wrist and sighed, taking a step back. “It is game to him, that is all. It is a game he and many others have played since
I still had two hands to serve beside them. At every new village they are stationed in, they take note of the wealthy local girls, and once they have chosen their prey they make a wager. Each man bets a certain portion of his yearly wages, and the man who convinces the girl to marry him wins every other man’s money as his dowry, if you will.”

Brienne stood silent before him. Captain Lannister’s words made too much sense – she recalled Lieutenant Hunt’s initial interest in her, and the officers’ indifference, and she recalled how their attitudes had changed by the time of the ball at the Poole residence, how they had all suddenly asked to dance with her, and had seemed so interested in her. She recalled how Lieutenant Hunt had constantly pushed them away when he was in her presence, and how he had told her that their interest was only due to her relative fortune, compared to their military commissions. It would make sense, too, if he had told her the lie about the Lannisters only to seem more knowledgeable.

And yet she still wished that it were not true. Lieutenant Hunt had been so kind to her, and had paid her so many compliments. She had believed that his affections for her were genuine, and now it seemed that they were not. It felt as though everything she thought she knew had been reversed – that Captain Lannister did not dislike her but was in fact quite in love with her, and that Lieutenant Hunt was not in love with her but had in fact been the organiser of a bet for her hand in marriage. It was an uncomfortable revelation, but she could not ignore it.

“You are silent,” Captain Lannister remarked.

“Would you have me shout so that all the servants can hear?” she said in a harsh whisper. “Would you have me announce this injustice to the world? I do not even know that you are telling me the truth of the matter.”

“Ah,” he said, “so you are still resolved to think me a liar.”

“I– I am not sure,” she admitted. “I had thought... I do not know what I had thought, but it is hard to believe that Lieutenant Hunt could be guilty of such a thing, given his demeanour.”

“Must I tell you again that his demeanour is an act? The man would rival the greatest player at Covent Garden.”

Brienne did not, could not say anything in response. Captain Lannister spoke so surely, and his words, on this matter at least, seemed honest.

“I shall take my leave of you,” he said at last. “I know you do not desire my presence, but I do not regret my actions. Know that I will still love you, for I cannot do otherwise, although I know not when we shall next meet.”

“I will keep that in mind,” she said quietly, for want of any better words.

“See to it that you do,” he replied with a smile.

Instead of following his words and leaving, he stood still in front of her, and not for the first time his continued presence filled her with unease.

“You said you would leave,” she said, realising in hindsight that she had spoken more rudely than the situation necessitated.

“I did,” he said, turning away from her. “Goodbye, Miss Tarth.”

“Yes,” she said. Her mouth couldn’t form anything that made sense, let alone any words more complex than “yes”. There was no reason why she might have said “yes”, where she should instead have said “goodbye”, or something equally as polite, but all she could say was a
monosyllabic word of limited meaning. Her tongue felt heavy in her mouth, as though anything further she might say would carry its extra weight, falling to the floor instead of floating to the intended recipient.

He left without looking back at her, and Brienne collapsed backwards into the waiting armchair. There was no aspect of their conversation that had not left her ridiculously confused, least of all the fact that Captain Lannister had proposed marriage! Her three ill-fated betrothals had been pre-arranged by her father; never before had a man professed his own desire to marry her. The fact that this man had been one she had unequivocally despised only served to complicate matters, as she had hoped that the first proposal she would receive – if any – would be from someone whom she could love in return.

She could not believe that she had been so blind as to not see his affection for her, which with more pondering became increasingly obvious in hindsight to the point that she cursed herself for her idiocy. It had been evident in the times he asked for her honour in a dance, in the way he teased her, and in the look in his eyes when they had crossed swords. She remembered how he had tried to warn her about Lieutenant Hunt, and how he had been so good to her when she fell by the lake. Moreover, she remembered how he had spoken against his sister when Lady Baratheon was so cruel to her.

Momentarily, she allowed herself to entertain the thought that the sinful relationship between Captain Lannister and Lady Baratheon had been simply a product of Lieutenant Hunt’s imagination, and wondered if that might change the nature of her feelings towards Captain Lannister. But there could be no doubting the tale, and if anything, Captain Lannister’s fervent denial further convinced Brienne that there had been an affair between him and his twin, and she could not separate him from this fact. However, it became increasingly complicated with the knowledge that he was in love with her, and presumably not his sister. She had spent so long contemplating his incest after Lieutenant Hunt had told her of it during their first meeting that the notion had almost become commonplace, though no less base and sinful. The idea that a man who could feel affection for a woman as repulsively-mannered as Lady Baratheon could also feel affection for herself was grossly fascinating to Brienne, and if anything she was more curious about Captain Lannister than ever, but nonetheless grateful that it would be some time before she next saw him.

And then of course there was the matter of Lieutenant Hunt. To think on his deception threatened to drive Brienne further into something resembling illness. She had reached a point where she no longer knew whether her headache was borne of natural causes or whether it was the product of an excess of information thrust upon her so suddenly. She felt as though, since her notions of Captain Lannister and Lieutenant Hunt had both been woefully incorrect, her preconceptions and prejudices against many other people she knew would also turn out to be wrong, and she would have to reacquaint herself with everyone in the Stark family’s social circle so that she might re-evaluate her opinions.

This confusion was not unlike the sense of insignificance she had felt upon her arrival at Rosings Park, yet now instead of being swallowed by the vastness of the landscape, she was drowning in a turbulent sea of words, all the cruel words ever spoken to her by men, and particularly Captain Lannister’s poorly-spoken proposal. If he had wished her to know of his love for her, why had he taken great pains to highlight her flaws? It was a similar logic to his avoidance of her – he had explained it, but she still could not understand it.

Brienne turned slightly in the armchair and glanced out the window of the drawing room. The sun was low in the sky, and the clouds in the West had already taken on an orange hue. From the distance, the sound of a carriage approaching grew slowly, and within a minute it pulled up outside and Mr. Snow, Jeyne and Sansa stepped out, looking as exhausted as Brienne felt.
Quickly, she sunk back into the armchair so that they might not see her, and remained motionless until she heard the door open and footsteps that moved away quickly into other parts of the cottage. However, out of the corner of her eye she could see the door to the drawing room slowly opening, and Sansa stepped through it.

“Miss Tarth!” she exclaimed, sitting in the armchair across from Brienne where Captain Lannister had sat so recently. Brienne closed her eyes slowly before looking back up at Sansa.

“Miss Stark, how was your excursion today?”

“It was amusing enough,” Sansa said, “although I must confess I had thought to find you asleep upon our return! Is your headache improved?”

“It is,” Brienne acknowledged, pulling herself into a more respectable seated posture to disguise that she did not know whether or not her headache had improved, or whether it had gone only to return after the events of the afternoon that she did not wish to dwell upon, lest her headache worsen.

Sansa frowned. “And yet you still seem out of sorts. Is anything the matter?”

“No,” Brienne said, “I am quite well.”

Chapter End Notes

So, what did you think? Too heavy-handed? Not obvious enough? Too many things going on? Too few???

Let me know! Because obviously as this chapter was the most fun I've had in a long time, I'm also filled with doubt about many aspects of it. Still, I'm glad so many of you enjoyed my cliffhanger in chapter 14 - which, by the way, I have been excited about for months - and I hope that this was a satisfactory resolution! This point in Pride and Prejudice is exactly halfway through the novel, and although it may be a bit earlier than halfway in this story, it is still a major turning point and a real milestone that I've been working towards for a long time. (Also, Captain Lannister's first line in this chapter is taken almost verbatim from Pride and Prejudice!)

So please do take the time to leave a comment! It would absolutely make my day :D

(I'm probably going to have a bit of a break from writing now, for a week or so maybe? I've been on a marathon since chapter 13 and have barely paused for breath so I need a bit of air!)
Chapter 16

Chapter Notes

So it has been a bit of a wait, but that was totally necessary for me to adjust to being back at uni, and to work out how I'll fit in time to write around my coursework. Anyway, this chapter is me having a bit of fun with a form of lengthy exposition used in Pride and Prejudice, so I really hope that's worked out.

Also, some of this stuff I have been itching to write since day one so I'll admit to letting out a months-long sigh of relief at getting down some words that have been perfectly formed in my head for a very long time now. Hope you enjoy!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Brienne slept fitfully that night, which came as no surprise to her. The memory of Captain Lannister’s proposal was so clear, fragments of his speech repeating themselves in her head as she lay with her eyes open, carefully observing the ceiling. Oddly enough, she did not find herself embarrassed by the altercation, but with the benefit of hindsight she allowed herself to feel anger. If it were not for the fact that she had resolved never to set eyes upon the man again, she would have delighted in challenging him once more with a sword in her hand. With words, she could but raise poorly-built barricades against his cruelty, but with a blade she could push him away with all the sentiments that she would never be able to articulate.

She resolved not to waste her time thinking upon the likes of that man. Instead she enumerated in her mind the many times that Lieutenant Hunt had spoken kindly to her, and of those, she considered which may have been falsities.

She was not sure when she woke, or whether she was asleep in the first place when the sun came into her temporary bedroom, but she already willed it to be the evening, so that she might leave Rosings Park sooner. It was with some surprise, then, that she found herself in acquiescence to Sansa’s suggestion of a morning walk as they sat through another painfully silent breakfast.

“You will do well with some fresh air,” Sansa said, as they were preparing for the walk in their bedroom. “Perhaps it will help clear your head?”

No doubt Sansa was referring to her erstwhile headache, but Brienne could think only of a restoration of her senses after the insanity of the previous day’s events, which had been most taxing indeed.

They took a familiar path towards Rosings Manor – of course, Mr. Snow would wish it to be their destination – and Brienne was thankful that they were not exploring the same part of the grounds in which she had encountered Mr. Lannister. To think that it had only been yesterday that she had learned the truth of his family’s wealth from him! In the hours since then, she had received a deliberate offer for her hand and had learnt the truth of a suitor’s falsities.

While Sansa and Jeyne talked absently, and Mr. Snow led their party, Brienne took the rear and with every slow step drifted further behind them. She did not wish to arrive at Rosings Manor, for it was nearing the afternoon, “the afternoon” being the vague time that Mr. Lannister had given her for his and his brother’s departure. The last thing she would wish was to have to look upon them.
Within fifteen minutes of walking, Sansa and the Snows were so far ahead of Brienne that she paused, allowing for more separation as she stood and pretended to be incredibly interested in some unremarkable shrubbery. If Sansa were to ask later why the usually observant Miss Tarth had lost sight of them and taken her own route through the gardens, she would say that she had been captivated by the local flora, and hope that her voice did not waver, but for the meantime she was content to be left alone.

Once the others had fully vanished from her sight, she returned the way she had come and made for the cottage, wishing only to pass her time in solitude. The grounds were unusually quiet, and there were a few clouds in the sky casting shadows as she walked. When at last she reached the path across from the cottage, having doubled back entirely, she stopped and turned slightly to see that the trees had deposited several more leaves upon the ground since she had last seen one falling.

And without any sound as warning, she saw Captain Lannister approaching from the furthest bounds of her vision. He walked with purpose, but she stood still as though she had taken root in the ground and would soon lose all her leaves for the coldness that suddenly came over her. The cottage was mere feet away from her, and she could easily be within its walls before Captain Lannister reached her.

Yet there she remained.

“Miss Tarth,” he greeted her, his expression almost contrite.

“Captain Lannister.” Brienne’s voice betrayed her, cracking on his name as though she could not bear the memories that came with it. In truth, she could not, and wished that he would state his business plainly so that she might beat a hasty retreat.

“I have not come to apologise for my actions,” he said softly, “for I would rather not have the weight of a lie on my conscience. Nor would I wish you to respond to me in kind, but I have written you a letter so that the many things I told you yesterday may feel less like lies, and more like the truths I intended them to be.” He paused. “It was unfair of me to speak so plainly to you, but there are many things I would like you to know. Do you trust me?”

Brienne’s breathing was fast and sharp, and she clenched and unclenched her fingers by her sides. “I trust in your honesty, if not your honour,” she said finally.

“That is more than I could hope,” he said, reaching into his coat and drawing forth a letter, upon which Brienne could see her name in what was presumably his script. She took it from him and held it with the tips of her fingers, unsure whether or not she wanted to know its secrets.

“Promise me you will not read it immediately,” he continued.

“I can promise nothing of the sort,” she replied.

“Very well,” he snapped, “then I shall not detain you.”

Without further words from either of them, he pushed past her and walked in the direction of Rosings Manor. And, ignoring his rudeness, Brienne tore open the letter and stood in the pathway reading it.

Miss Tarth,
You will forgive my inferior penmanship; I was never a man of letters, but you can imagine the effect it had on my poor script to lose my writing hand. I have worked to cultivate some semblance of propriety with what is left to me, and I only hope that you can read what little I have to say. I shall now endeavour to write shortly on several of the issues that I am sure neither of us wished to be discussing during an unsuccessful proposal.

Perhaps you recall mentioning my “ungentlemanly” conduct throughout my initial proposal, the manner of which I regret, the sentiments of which I do not. It could not be further from the truth that, if it came to pass, I would have considered ours an unfortunate match. Allow me to apologise for my comments regarding your height and your bearing, and your connection to the Stark family, none of which bother me in the slightest amount, but which I mention as a mere formality.

A formality! Brienne scoffed at the thought. It was clear that her connections bothered him to the point of embarrassment, and that embarrassment had driven him to apologise with the utmost contrition. She could have laughed at the absurdity of it all, but instead she kept reading.

I would also apologise for speaking so forwardly to you. If I had known that you were to refuse my proposal, or indeed that it would be so poorly received, I would not have spoken with such surety in my words. In fact I think I ought not to have spoken with that surety in any circumstances, and it was unforgivable of me to be so presumptuous. You will forgive me, I hope.

Brienne frowned at the letter. It was a poor attempt at an apology, but nonetheless it was an apology, and she felt somewhat gratified that he was at least trying to compensate for his poor behaviour.

The next words were scrawled, and if it was possible, his handwriting seemed to be even more untidy than in his introductory lines.

Another point, which I am almost hesitant to put into writing, is that of my alleged affair with Lady Baratheon. You must promise not to allow this paper into the hands of any other but yourself, and indeed it would be advisable to dispose of this letter as soon as you have read it. I humbly suggest fire, although a lake, either the one at Rosings Park or the one near Storm’s End, would work just as well. However, I will tell you the extended truth of the story, as I cannot stand the thought of Hunt having told you what was no doubt just a lucky conjecture on his part, and for you having only heard the story through his telling it.

My sister and I were always far closer than was advisable for a brother and sister as children, and I believed us to have been intended by God to be born as one, and yet we were cursed with being two. I constantly felt the heavy burden of my duty as my father’s heir, but on occasion I allowed myself to revel in the folly of youth, and my sister would indulge me in my disobedience. Perhaps my greatest disobedience was declaring to my father that I had enlisted in the militia without his permission, an act which had been wholeheartedly encouraged by my sister.

And yet a greater disobedience was to follow: at the age of ten-and-four – ten-and-six years ago now – Miss Lannister was betrothed to the new Lord Baratheon, a very handsome young man of ten-and-eight whose parents had died at sea and left him very wealthy indeed. It was, of course,
the most desirable match my sister could possibly hope for, but it did not please her. Lord Baratheon was a drunkard and a lech, and one did not have to go far to hear a tale of his thrusting a bastard upon some local girl. It is hard to admit, but for your sake I must give you the truth. Consequently, my sister approached me to ask if I would take her maidenhead so that she might not have to endure such pain after her wedding. Believing that she loved me, and that it would bring me closer to a union of our bodies as God had willed, I agreed. I am ashamed to place these words before you, but that is the sorry nature of the matter.

Soon after she became Lady Baratheon, I left with the militia, and did not see her again for many months. However, on the occasions that I passed by Storm’s End, and later her London house, I am further ashamed to admit that we continued our relations. Somehow, she had convinced me of her love for me, and I had convinced myself of my love for her. I know not for how long she had been taking other lovers, but given our long periods of separation, it should not have surprised me in the way it did when my brother so ingloriously informed me of her long-standing infidelity to her husband, not knowing that it was also infidelity to myself. My last romantic encounter with her is almost eight years past, yet to this day I am uncertain of the parentage of her children – for a time I believed myself to be their father, but now I am unsure. No doubt this is what Lieutenant Hunt told you, for I am sure nothing could have scandalised you further.

It was, in fact, exactly what Lieutenant Hunt had told Brienne. He had told her of Captain Lannister’s incestuous relationship with his sister, of which he had learnt through accidentally reading his letters to his sister. But since the recent revelation of Lieutenant Hunt’s true character, perhaps he had read the letters quite purposefully, in the hope of finding some great secret. His proclivity for gossip was already quite obvious from his tale about the Lannisters’ financial troubles – it did not seem impossible that the same man would read another’s letters in the hopes of shaming the family of a man he so despised.

For what reason Lieutenant Hunt despised Captain Lannister, however, she could not say.

I cannot imagine what you must think of me given that I made such a great mistake as a younger man, but despite your rejection of my proposal, I would wish that we could remain as friends, although you may not hold me as such. I beg you, if you do consider marrying another, let it not be Lieutenant Hunt.

Another story I must recount to you is the manner in which our acquaintance so quickly turned to animosity: he was the second man I ever shared a room with as an officer – the first was no doubt a fine young man, but I have already forgotten his name, as he fell victim to a disease in the camps not a month after we first left England. Nonetheless, he gave me high expectations of the calibre of my fellow officers, so you can imagine my disappointment upon meeting Hyle Hunt.

Soon after we returned to England between fighting, I discovered that Hunt and some of our fellow officers had begun a wager for the hand of a wealthy girl who lived near the village in which we were stationed. I cautioned him on the dishonour and recklessness of such an activity, but he did not listen, nor did the officer who married that poor girl. It was clear that my words had meant nothing to him, as in the next season, in a new town, he once again instigated such a bet. By this time we had both been promoted to the rank of Lieutenant, and the officers under him were all too keen to take his order and put in their money for another bet.

I could no longer maintain my silence, and I informed Major Tarly, now Colonel Tarly, of their actions. Tarly ensured that the men would never again be promoted as their punishment for engaging in dishonourable activities and the squandering of their money – which is, as you may
have wondered, the reason why Hunt remains a Lieutenant at his age – but he did nothing to stop future such wagers from occurring. I shall never forget his words: “It is the fault of these women for throwing themselves in the path of the men. Do they think that they can flaunt themselves to the extent that they do without attracting such attention? A sporting man has certain needs, a younger man even more so. If more women are foolish enough to seek an officer for a husband, then they ought not to be offended.” It was almost a pleasure to be discharged from the company of that man.

Perhaps now it is clearer to you why I warned you so thoroughly against the company of Lieutenant Hunt, and I hope that if it has achieved anything, this letter has convinced you that a marriage to that man would be the worst possible decision you could make, and I urge you to refuse him as cruelly as you refused me, if he should propose.

I hope also that in time we may become close once more, despite the wrongs I have committed, however now as I leave Rosings Park behind me I know that we shall not speak again for a long time. If you would question me further on any matter, you may write directly to Casterly Rock in December, when my brother and I shall have returned to our home for the Winter.

Ever your servant,

Capt. J. Lannister

Brienne closed the letter slowly, the paper feeling like water across her hands. Captain Lannister’s signature was childlike, and reminded her of the way Arya signed her name. She allowed herself a small smile at the thought – as much as she enjoyed Sansa and Jeyne’s company, she dearly missed the younger Miss Stark. It seemed as though a week was far too long for them to remain at Rosings Park, and that they should depart as soon as possible.

The thought of departures suddenly alerted her to her shadow on the ground, its position telling her that the afternoon had arrived, and that Captain and Mr. Lannister would be leaving Rosings Park for good. Without sparing a thought for decorum she re-folded the letter and concealed it in her bodice, breaking into a run towards Rosings Manor.

The weather was typical of Summer, and instead of the leisurely walking pace that had led her out of the cottage earlier that day, Brienne ran. She ran under the full heat of the sun while her mind grew cloudy with thoughts about the letter she had just read. The story of Captain Lannister’s affair slowly took shape in her mind. More than anything, she was uneasy to have read that he had used what he believed to be God’s will as a justification for his sin. Furthermore, she felt uncomfortable knowing that she was one of three people in the world who knew the truth of the entire tale, and the only person other than Captain Lannister who knew his perspective on the matter. Surely she ought to be thankful that he had chosen to take her into his confidence, but all she could feel was regret that he had come to love her, and that she had come to hate him so much that she wished to hear the story from Lieutenant Hunt when he offered to tell it. At that moment, the knowledge felt more a burden than her own history and obligations.

She reached Rosings Manor sooner than if she had walked, but after a long run that had taxed her energy most frightfully, and was surprised to see Sansa standing alone by the hedges that lined the manor’s entrance path.

“Miss Tarth, we had thought you lost! What has happened?”

“I was distracted,” Brienne said, breathing heavily as she came to rest beside Sansa. “I was– I examined an unfamiliar plant, and when I looked up you were gone from my sight, so I continued
walking at my own pace.”

“So why have you run?” Sansa asked, placing a hand on Brienne’s arm. “Please, steady your breathing!”

Brienne allowed her rhythm to return to normal before speaking. “I had forgotten that the Lannisters were leaving,” she explained, “and I thought to see them off before they begin their journey.”

“I am afraid you have arrived too late,” Sansa said, “for their carriage left for London just a few minutes ago.”

Wiping sweat away from her forehead, she sighed. “A pity. I– I had much to discuss with Captain Lannister.”

“Ah, of course.” Sansa smiled innocently at her. “You have become rather fond of Captain Lannister, have you not?”

“I do not know,” Brienne said. She thought of Captain Lannister’s tactless proposal, and of his great sins, and of his honesty about Lieutenant Hunt, and his kindness and his cruelty, and she felt that despite the lengthy elaboration of his past, she knew nothing about Captain Lannister. But for all that, she knew even less about her feelings towards him.

Chapter End Notes

Please take some time leave a comment! And, thank you to everyone who has been reading and commenting so far - your reviews mean a lot to me :’)}
Chapter 17

Chapter Notes

I have literally got four assessment tasks next week so I took some time out of my busy busy busy life to pump this chapter out as quickly as I could. But I didn't rush it, trust me; I'm really proud of this chapter.

Let's just say, I'm back with a vengeance.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

As the carriage drew out of Rosings Park, Brienne felt a breath that she had been holding for the last two weeks leave her chest, and she leant back upon the seat, keeping her eyes firmly fixed on Sansa across from her so that she would not have to watch the unnecessarily spacious estate retreat from her vision. They did not need words to convey their relief at leaving.

The return to Winterfell seemed much longer than the journey away from the familiar manor, despite the carriage taking the same roads, the scenery only changed by the slow onset of Autumn. Sansa fell asleep towards the end of the journey – Brienne envied her, for she had not been able to sleep properly since Captain Lannister had proposed to her, and had the next day left her with a letter as his parting gift. True to his wishes, Brienne had gone for a walk that evening, ostensibly to clear her head, and had held the letter in the lake until the ink ran and it became illegible, and then tore the paper into miniscule shreds and scattered them amongst a hedgerow.

But she had not forgotten the letter’s contents, as much as she wished to be ignorant of Captain Lannister and his sinful history. The tale he told about Lieutenant Hunt, however, she was glad to remember. She had read it several times again before destroying the letter so that she might memorise the wording exactly. The carriage drove through the Winter Town on its way to Winterfell, and Brienne shrank away from the window when they passed the barracks. She would need to confront Lieutenant Hunt eventually, but she would defer that particular chore for another day.

And yet, as the carriage came to a halt outside Winterfell and Sansa stirred from her sleep, Brienne would have walked to the Winter Town then and there if it were not for the unspoken law that demanded she first greet Mrs. Stark and Arya, such was her fury at Lieutenant Hunt. She pressed her lips together and walked behind the porter as he carried her and Sansa’s portmanteaus to the front door, which was opened by Mrs. Stark herself.

Sansa ran ahead and into her mother’s arms. “How I have missed you, mama!” she said. “I shall never leave Winterfell again!”

“It has been but two weeks,” Mrs. Stark said, an amused smile on her face. “Was Rosings Park that unbearable?”

“Worse than you could possibly imagine,” Sansa said. “But I did see Aunt Lyanna!”

Mrs. Stark pulled away from her daughter but kept her hands on her shoulders. “Lyanna… and is she well?”

“She is very ill,” Sansa said quietly, “but Lord Bolton takes good care of her, for all his faults.”
“I am glad for that,” Mrs. Stark said. Brienne kept silent – she could not bring herself to tell them what she knew from Mr. Lannister, that Lord Bolton maintained Lyanna’s health solely so that she may one day bear a son.

They walked into the house, Mrs. Stark and Sansa leading the way, and Arya came to Brienne’s side. “Was Mr. Snow just as insufferable at his own home as he was when he was here?” she asked.

“More so,” Brienne said. “He seemed only to care about being invited to dine with Lord Bolton.”

“It is comforting to know that we shall never see him again,” Arya said.

“Oh,” Sansa interjected, turning around, “but what if I wish to visit Jeyne again?”

Arya sighed. “Well, if you must.”

Brienne managed to disengage herself from the conversation and make her way to her bedroom, which she had missed more than she thought she would – perhaps it was because she had been sharing a room with Sansa, which was not bad in itself, but at a time when she was so liable to wake at night, having another person in the room was rather unsettling. She wondered briefly how she might cope with marriage if she were so averse to sharing a room, but of course the simple solution to that would be that she must never marry. She had once dreamed of marrying Renly Baratheon, and of late he had been replaced by Lieutenant Hunt, and yet the only man who had ever wanted to marry her was one she could not bring herself to even like. It was a sign, perhaps, to abandon the idea of marriage and hope only that Sansa or Arya wished her to be a governess to their children.

She changed her clothes quickly and ate lunch with Mrs. Stark – who had insisted that she would not dine with the servants until the next day – and her daughters, but found herself distracted by thoughts of Lieutenant Hunt and his gross betrayal of her trust and affections, if indeed it were true. It was strange that she knew it to be true despite having heard the tale from Captain Lannister, and yet in this matter she found herself paying heed to his word.

And so it came that after she had eaten, Brienne left at once for the Winter Town. She was glad for the fresh air after having spent the morning in a carriage, and her pace quickened gradually as she walked, her senses readjusting to the familiar air.

It was a busy day in the town, as became evident the moment Brienne rounded the corner that led to the main road. All of the shops were open, and there were people in every doorway, spending time and money on frivolities. Brienne pushed past them with the ease that her height so often afforded her and was soon at the barracks. She did not have to look for long before she noticed Lieutenant Hunt standing across the road with three of his officers – Ambrose, Farrow and Mullendore – and three young women that Brienne knew as girls who worked in one of the dressmaker’s shops.

Lieutenant Hunt seemed to notice her a short moment after she had caught sight of him, and turned his head immediately, a smile on his face that Brienne recognised as false, and she wondered why she had not seen it before. It was obvious now that he had been giving his full attentions to the girls in a shameless display of flirting, and if anything, that only made Brienne more calm and determined to put the man to shame.

“Miss Tarth,” he said, walking towards her, “I have dearly missed your presence of late.”

“Have you?” she asked.
He opened his mouth to speak, but then closed it. His pause told Brienne all that she needed to know, and she became aware that he knew that her affections had changed. “I have,” he continued after a moment. “Indeed, I am sure you know that I find you to be the most personable companion I have met during my stay here.”

“Indeed,” she said, “and yet I wonder if you would find me half so personable were it not for my father being a former military man of no mean repute.”

“Ah,” he said, his posture relaxing, “could it be that you think me to be on the same level as my shallow-minded officers, who care only for riches and connections? I cannot think where you may have got this notion from, but allow me to tell you at once that it is false.”

“I confess I have been entertaining the thought,” she said, keeping her face carefully devoid of emotion. “In my absence from Winterfell, it was so easy to let my fancy catch on the smallest doubts and turn them into fears.”

“Most understandable,” he said. “The female mind is notoriously prone to entertaining such notions, I have heard.”

Brienne bit her lower lip, willing herself not to respond with an equally brazen and idiotic comment about the male mind. “That may be true,” she said instead, “but there are some ideas that not even a novelist could conjure.”

“Would you happen to be a novelist, Miss Tarth?” he asked. Brienne was glad to note an edge of hesitancy in his voice.

“I am not,” she said. “In fact, I confess I have very little creativity in my spirit. No, the tale of which I am thinking is not one I have fabricated, unlike—”

“And does this tale tell that I care only for riches?” he interrupted.

“Yes,” she said, “among other things. For example, I have recently learned that your rumour of the Lannister family’s financial troubles was grossly incorrect, and I cannot but wonder—”

“This is a tangent to the issue,” he said quickly. “You are not here to talk to me about the Lannisters. Speak what troubles you.”

She sighed. “I will put it to you plainly, Lieutenant Hunt. I am fully aware of your past and present dishonourable conduct towards women in the form of instigating wagers for their hands in marriage, in all of which I can only presume you have not been victorious. I am neither clever nor perceptive, so do not speak to me in riddles. Tell me plainly – am I one of these women?”

Lieutenant Hunt’s face twisted immediately into a scowl. “Is it Jaime Lannister who has been spreading this—”

“Captain Lannister, yes,” Brienne said, “he has told me everything, and I feel a fool for having heard it from him. Would that I had worked it out myself, and indeed I should have, I should have known the moment you first smiled at me, a woman with no beauty, or when your officers asked me to dance, I should have known!”

“You do not know what you are saying,” he said. “Lannister has lied to you.”

“He has not,” she said. “I know he has not. I know that Colonel Tarly has suspended your promotion by way of punishment for your horrible arrogance, and I know that those three men over there have colluded with you in these crimes.”
Lieutenant Hunt did not respond, so Brienne spoke again, this time raising her voice so that the officers and the shopgirls, and perhaps any others nearby, could hear clearly. “How do you think those girls would feel if they knew that they are talking to the kinds of men who would make a bet upon a woman’s honour for the sake of furthering their personal situation – or indeed, solely for sport?”

One of the shopgirls turned around, her mouth hanging open. “You’re the Stark governess, aren’t you?”

“I am,” Brienne told her, “and I am a woman of little consequence, yet these men would wager for even my meager wealth.”

“No!” the shopgirl exclaimed. “Do they know that my father is a merchant in London?”

“Or mine a Captain in the Navy?” another said.

“Of little consequence, indeed!” Lieutenant Hunt said. “Do you think my officers and I have so little taste, Miss Tarth, that we would lay our affections upon any common girl?”

“So you admit to starting a wager for my hand?” Brienne said loudly. “Do you admit it?”

“Yes, I admit it!” he snapped. “But did you think I would have started the wager if I did not truly want your hand in marriage? The money is but a benefit of serving alongside avaricious men who would enter willingly into such a bet.”

Brienne glared angrily at him. “Do you know, Lieutenant Hunt, two weeks ago I would have considered myself inexpert in the matters of men and their intentions, but I am beginning to realise that I understand people more than I have credited myself.”

“And what is it you understand about me, Miss Tarth?”

“I know that you do not want my hand in marriage, not truly.”

She had met but one man who had genuinely wanted her hand in marriage, and when she reflected upon the sincerity of his words, Brienne felt even more the fool for believing Lieutenant Hunt’s hollow platitudes had any bearing on his true motivations.

“How can you possibly know that?”

“I will waste no more time conversing with you on the matter,” she said. “I must return to Winterfell.”

“And you so craven as to retreat from an argument?” he said. The teasing edge in his voice reminded Brienne most uncomfortably of Captain Lannister, and she took a step towards him in defiance of his words.

“I am not craven, but I confess I am afraid. I am afraid of the words that may leave my mouth if I am in your presence any longer,” she said.

“Miss Tarth—”

“Do not expect to ever see me again. If you approach me, I will not be held responsible for my actions.”

She looked away from the speechless Lieutenant Hunt and at the shopgirls, who were smiling encouragingly at her. Brienne gave them a hesitant smile in return, and with one last glance at
Lieutenant Hunt she walked away, glowing with the thought that she would never have to look upon his lying face ever again.

“We should get back to work,” she heard one of the shopgirls say, and within a moment they were at her side.

“Is it true, then?” one asked.

“Every word of it,” Brienne said.

“We will tell all of our friends,” the girl replied. “What are the names of the officers who were part of the bet?”

“Ambrose, Mullendore, Beesbury, Farrow and Inchfield.” She recited the names in the order that they had danced with her at the Pooles’ ball, as though with each name she struck them out of the betting pool. “And Lieutenant Hunt.”

The girl grinned. “I will make good use of those names, governess.” She and her friends ran ahead, and Brienne shook her head in resignation. They may well tell the women of the Winter Town to avoid the officers, but in a few months the militia would move to another town, and would meet new women, and start a new wager, and this incident would be all but forgotten. Brienne knew she could do nothing to stop that happening, and it occurred to her how lucky she had been to learn the truth from Captain Lannister. Were it not for him, she may already have been betrothed to Lieutenant Hunt. The idea that Captain Lannister had essentially saved her from that fate made her frown. Captain Lannister was by no means an admirable man, and she did not wish to owe him any debts of gratitude.

The walk back to Winterfell felt slower than the walk away, and Brienne arrived to find Mrs. Stark awaiting her in the entrance hall.

“Was your visit to the Winter Town profitable?” she asked.

“Most profitable,” Brienne replied.

“And your Lieutenant?”

Brienne did not wish to explain the whole situation to her employer. “I shall hear no more from him,” she said tersely.

“Very well,” Mrs. Stark said. “We shall speak of something else instead. I have not yet had the chance to tell you of the plans that were made while you and Sansa were at Rosings Park. We have been invited to Brighton.”

“To Brighton!” Brienne had never been to Brighton, but she had been raised by the seaside, and although she most dearly loved Winterfell and its surrounds, oft she did miss the sea and the beach.

“Indeed, to Brighton. Lady Baratheon intends to spend two months holidaying there, and since her Myrcella and Tommen are apparently so taken with Arya, she has asked us to accompany them. I do worry it might be taxing for Sansa to spend so much time near Lord Baratheon, but she has duly convinced me that she is no longer infatuated with the boy, and so I am willing to take her as well.”

“I admit this is most exciting,” Brienne said. “I shall enjoy it greatly, I should think.”

“Ah,” Mrs. Stark said. “You will not be joining us.”
The excitement left her immediately and was replaced by the dreadful thought of spending two months alone in Winterfell, or with some other employment. “I will not–?”

“No, you will be going to London.” Before Brienne could ask exactly why she would be going to London, Mrs. Stark produced an envelope from the mantlepiece. “I must apologise; I took the liberty of reading this missive which was addressed to you, as you were still very much at Rosings Park when it arrived.”

Brienne took the letter and almost fainted when she recognised the script of the person who had penned it.

My dear friend Brienne,

By God! it has been a long time since I have spoken to you! I can scarce believe that it has been four years since I was with you at Evenfall Hall, and so much has happened since then that I must tell you about. However, as I am writing with borrowed ink I will keep it short. You may recall my betrothal to Miss Margaery Tyrell, which has since been discarded in favour of her marrying a much wealthier Baratheon, as you will have no doubt heard. Still, she could not get rid of me so easily! Currently I am living in London with herself – she cannot yet marry Lord Baratheon, you understand, not until he comes of age, – her brother Loras Tyrell, and their esteemed father Sir Mace Tyrell. London has its merits, but we yearn for adventure! Loras, Margaery and myself have planned a tour of the Welsh countryside, which we are told is delightful in Autumn. However, Sir Tyrell has – quite rightly – forbade our travels unless Margaery has a suitable female companion. I remembered hearing that you had become a governess – most respectable! – and immediately decided that you would be the very best choice for the position.

We will stay for several weeks in London before leaving for Newport, and progressing from there. Naturally you must come at once! Please do reply promptly; I look forward to seeing you again!

Ever yours,

Renly

Brienne slowly folded the letter, unable to believe what she had just read, least of all Renly’s characteristic but nonetheless astounding lack of formality despite their long separation. “Have you replied?” she stuttered.

“I have,” Mrs. Stark said, “but only to tell him that you were then absent, and that you would reply yourself as soon as you returned. You will go, won’t you?”

“It seems I have very little choice in the matter.”

“Come, now, you will enjoy London. And if your Lieutenant– if you are not expecting any proposals, you may as well try your luck with the men of London. The society there is much more varied than here in the country.”

“I am a governess; it is not my place to be thinking about marriage–”

“But you will, nonetheless,” Mrs. Stark said. “For your own sake, and for your father’s.”

Brienne sighed.
“And if you do not go,” Mrs. Stark continued, “you will be forced to stay alone in Winterfell for two months. Lady Baratheon did not extend our invitation to Brighton to include you.”

“Of course she did not,” Brienne said, twisting the letter in her fingers. “Then I shall go to London.”

Mrs. Stark smiled proudly at her as she left to return to her bedroom and write a letter to Renly Baratheon. She told herself it would not be all so bad. She had successfully turned down a proposal from a most objectionable, and objectionably honest, man, and had spoken boldly to a man who had lied so blatantly to her. Surely it could not be so difficult to face a man she had once loved, even when the last she had seen of him was four years ago while he was engaging in sinful relations?

Chapter End Notes

~Writerly discussion, feel free not to read this~

So I hate giving characters their comeuppance. It always feels really forced to me, especially when I'm working with GRRM's characters, to give the bad guy a fall. But then Lieutenant Hunt happened and the scene just played itself out that way. I guess that's a bit of Austen's more moralistic tendencies slipping through, huh? Gotta make some compromises. I tried to show though that Hunt and his gang really aren't going to be stopped so easily; there will always be men like that, sadly. Did that work for you?

Also I am really enjoying writing the development of Brienne's perspicacity for human emotion, even though she still denies it so fervently. Haha.

Please leave a comment and let me know what you think!
Chapter 18

Chapter Notes

Well, uh, to make up for having a bit of a break to get through some uni work, this chapter is a bit longer than usual, mainly because there was only one way I could end that and it took me a while to get there. Haha.

Thank you all for sticking with me, even through my erratic writing schedule! I hope you all enjoy it!

(p.s. this chapter is dedicated to Taylor for being my unofficial cheerleader! Thanks for keeping me motivated ;u;)

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

No-one seemed to be quite certain as to why Lady Baratheon had included Miss Tarth in her invitation for the Starks to join her for dinner on the eve of Brienne’s departure, especially since she had been quite definitively snubbed from the invitation to Brighton, but it was quite clear in the note that had arrived that “the presence of Mrs. Stark, her daughters, and their governess, was requested by her Ladyship”. As such, Brienne had rescued her best dress from the depths of her portmanteau, packed tightly for the next day’s trip, and stood in front of her mirror for several minutes repeating to herself that she must be civil to Lady Baratheon, no matter how much she despised the woman.

Of course, being in the presence of that family would only serve as a reminder of the secrets that had been intimated to her by Captain Lannister, which she had never desired to know, and yet she had become their custodian, keeping the knowledge between herself and Captain Lannister. At Rosings Park they had shared so much with one another that Brienne often found herself worrying that she would start to think well of him with an optimism afforded by hindsight – in fact, she had never known so much about another person that it almost felt as if she had accepted his proposal, allowing him to tell her of the darkest truths of his past.

But that was absurd – Brienne had never once desired his company, and she would not allow herself to become sympathetic to a man who had been cruel to her despite his love for her.

Since she had returned to Winterfell, her time had been spent deliberately avoiding his mention, and indeed, avoiding any mention of Rosings, any mention of “her Lieutenant”, and any suggestion of a visit to the Winter Town. In short, she had become a very well-focused governess.

And yet the impending dinner promised to force Brienne to spend the entire evening ruminating on her recent troubles with men, and strangely, she found herself looking forward to being in London, if only it meant many miles of countryside between herself and any traces of Lady Baratheon, Lieutenant Hunt and Captain Lannister.

She did not choose to dwell upon her knowledge that Captain Lannister and his brother were currently in London; it was unlikely that she would be unlucky enough to see them while she stayed with the Tyrells. She hoped at least that Margaery would be a quiet sort, disinclined towards socialising, and a suitably studious sort, the type of person with whom Brienne was most able to hold a conversation. As she stepped out of the carriage and walked towards the front entrance of Storm’s End, she told herself that it would do no good to dwell on the idea of what
tomorrow would bring, and that instead she ought to concentrate on carrying herself through the evening with her dignity intact.

Storm’s End held itself with a different grace than it had when she had last been there, the once-verdant grounds beginning to take on the hues of Autumn, and new flowers blooming along the paths. The halls glowed with the orange light of the late afternoon as the Stark party was ushered into one of the drawing rooms, where they were met by Lady Baratheon and her children.

“My dearest Catelyn,” Lady Baratheon said in a whisper, “I am so glad you are here. There is only so much of the company of children a woman can tolerate.”

“I am well familiar with that predicament,” Mrs. Stark replied.

Lady Baratheon gratified her statement with a high-pitched laugh. “Shall we dine?”

Despite having explicitly invited her to attend, Lady Baratheon did not address Brienne once over the four-course meal. For this, Brienne was thankful, and yet she could not help but wonder as to what Lady Baratheon’s motives were. Surely she could not simply have wished for Brienne’s presence to calm the children when they were being particularly noisy – she did, after all, employ her own governess – and there was absolutely no chance that she had desired the wit and liveliness of Brienne’s conversation.

The meal ended with Lord Baratheon, paying particular attention to the elder Miss Stark, suggesting that he take his young guests on a tour of some of the rooms of interest in the manor. He had shown no sign of being engaged to Miss Tyrell, evidently solely interested in Sansa, and while Brienne had been assured that Margaery was a lovely young lady, she could not help but feel a great pity for Sansa and this young man who, while not the most amiable of gentlemen, was clearly enamoured of her. However, this pity ended the moment Brienne found herself left alone with Lady Baratheon and Mrs. Stark.

They took to the drawing room for tea, with Brienne walking several paces behind the older women. She might have felt more comfortable if she had been allowed to follow the children, but she was of the age where she was neither any longer considered a child nor was she experienced enough in the social intricacies of womanhood. As a governess whose days were spent with children, she wondered if perhaps she would never truly be comfortable around women such as these.

It was several moments after they were seated that she realised Lady Baratheon had addressed her.

“I say, Miss Tarth, are you listening?”

“I am, your Ladyship,” Brienne said quickly. “My apologies; I was distracted.”

Lady Baratheon frowned. “Very well. I have reason to believe you were recently in the presence of my brother at Rosings Park.”

“Both of your brothers,” Brienne said. “Yes, their stay at Rosings Manor coincided with ours for a week.”

“And did you see much of Captain Lannister?” Lady Baratheon asked. “He has not written in a while, which is no surprise, since he cannot write at all with his remaining hand.”

Brienne decided it would be best not to mention the lengthy letter that Captain Lannister had written to her, by his own admission penned with his left hand. If he had concealed his ability to write from his own sister, there was surely a reason for it. She did, however, feel some amusement that this seemed to be yet another secret of Captain Lannister’s that she was keeping.
“I saw him on several occasions,” Brienne said, not knowing how to respond to Lady Baratheon.

“And was he well?” she pressed.

“He seemed to be in the best of health,” Brienne replied. It was funny that she had come to this occasion with a determination to not think upon Captain Lannister at all, and yet Lady Baratheon forced her to speak of him. Their faces were so alike, she thought, but his assertions that he had once thought them to be divinely destined towards unity were no more credible than when she had first read the words. She would not allow herself to think kindly of the only man who had ever loved her, a man who had engaged in deeds so sinful, but after her summary interrogation by his sister, Brienne did not wonder that he spoke so bitterly of her in hindsight.

“And you cannot say more about him than that he was ‘in the best of health’?” Lady Baratheon said, sounding oddly amused.

“No, I cannot,” Brienne said. She did not know what Lady Baratheon wished her to say, but she would not give the woman the satisfaction of her saying it.

“Then this truly is good news,” Lady Baratheon said as a maid arrived to pour them each a cup of tea. Brienne’s eyes widened in confusion. “I am sure you will recall our conversation of some weeks ago,” she continued, “in which I mentioned that a friendship with a man so far above your station was highly inappropriate. It seems that you have taken my advice to heart.”

Brienne was so stunned by Lady Baratheon’s bluntness, and by her openness in front of Mrs. Stark, that she could not respond. She pulled her lower lip into her mouth and frowned. The maid left quietly.

“I hardly think that Miss Tarth has ever wished to pursue a friendship with Captain Lannister,” Mrs. Stark said with what Brienne recognised as a nervous laugh in her tone, “nor he with her.”

“It is true that I witnessed animosity between them during Miss Tarth and dear Sansa’s stay at Storm’s End,” Lady Baratheon said, “and yet some days he was so attentive to her that he seemed on the verge of proposing marriage.”

The words hit Brienne like a sword to the chest and the delicate china teacup she had been gripping fell from her hands. It toppled sideways on the carpet at her feet and she could feel warm tea seeping through the toes of her shoes, and she stood immediately. “My goodness!” she exclaimed. “I must apologise–”

“It is no worry,” Lady Baratheon said calmly, not even flinching. “Hetherspoon!” she called, the maid appearing instantly at the sound of her name. “Clear up this mess.”

“Yes, m’lady,” the maid mumbled, dashing out of the room, presumably to fetch a cloth.

“I will have her pour you more tea when she returns,” Lady Baratheon said to Brienne.

“It makes no matter,” Brienne said. “Shall I sit elsewhere, or–”

“Yes, yes, sit wherever you will,” Lady Baratheon replied.

Brienne cautiously moved to take a seat on the other side of Mrs. Stark, mercifully further away from Lady Baratheon, and wrung her hands together in her lap. Mrs. Stark began to speak of her roses, and Brienne sat back in silence, grateful that the ladies had moved onto a topic that did not concern her in any way. Lady Baratheon’s words would not leave her mind so easily, however, and she spent the remainder of the evening contemplating them. Was it possible that Lady
Baratheon knew of her brother’s proposal to Brienne, and was trying to lead her into speaking of it? Brienne did not trust that she believed her brother unable to write, and yet she trusted that Captain Lannister would have spoken of the proposal to no-one. No, there was no way Lady Baratheon could have found out about that incident, unless she had somehow convinced a servant in Mr. Snow’s cottage to eavesdrop upon Brienne’s every conversation.

But that was too ridiculous a notion! The most simple explanation was that Lady Baratheon had noticed her brother’s affections and wished to ascertain the truth. Brienne knew by now that Lady Baratheon’s language was misleading and laden with double-meanings, and she was aware that she was nowhere near quick-witted enough to untangle the threads of malevolent curiosity, and so she remained silent.

They could surely have sat there no longer than half an hour, but by the time that Lord Baratheon returned with the Miss Starks and the Winterfell party took their leave of Storm's End, it felt as though many days had passed in the unpleasant company of Lady Baratheon. Brienne remained silent for the duration of the carriage ride, and she avoided catching Mrs. Stark's gaze lest she be further induced to speak of her imagined relationship with Captain Lannister.

*Tomorrow I will be in London,* she told herself, *and I will no longer have any cause to think of that man.*

Sansa and Arya were unusually quiet as they went through the gates of Winterfell, and as soon as they began to ascend the stairs to their bedrooms, Mrs. Stark turned to Brienne.

“Will you talk with me a while in the drawing room, Miss Tarth?”

“Of course,” Brienne said, following her employer out of the entrance hall. They sat across from one another, and Brienne was uncomfortably put in mind of sitting across from Lady Baratheon, poised to question her.

But where Lady Baratheon gave false smiles and hollow platitudes, Mrs. Stark simply sighed. “Brienne, you know that your happiness is something most important to me. You will tell me if at any time you are unhappy as a governess, will you not?”

“Since I have begun working for you, I have not once been unhappy,” Brienne said.

“Even in the presence of Captain Lannister?”

Brienne nodded slowly. “He is not so cruel to me as I first thought him to be.”

“Perhaps that is what worries me,” Mrs. Stark said. “Lady Baratheon seemed quite convinced that he has formed some sort of romantic attachment to you.”

“Then she would be quite wrong,” Brienne said quietly. “He and I are no more than acquaintances.”

“And you are sure he feels similarly?”

“Quite sure,” Brienne said. It made her uneasy to lie so plainly, but the alternative was admitting to Mrs. Stark that, while she held no regard for the man, Captain Lannister himself was quite in love with her and had gone so far as to propose marriage.

“I am glad of that,” Mrs. Stark said. “It does not please me to agree with Lady Baratheon, but I know that any match between yourself and Captain Lannister would be ill-advised. It does not matter to me how far above your station you might choose to marry, or how far below, but you must understand that the Lannisters are poisonous. Their father was my husband’s commander
when he first joined the militia, and by all accounts he was a cruel man. It would not surprise me should his sons turn out to be the same as him – even the younger Mr. Lannister, despite his wit.”

There was such plain anger in Mrs. Stark’s voice that Brienne wondered that she had even consented to the trip to Brighton. However, it would have ruined the Starks had she turned down an invitation from such a powerful woman, and so Brienne supposed that the worst must be borne in order to retain what little status the Starks had left in the wake of the well-regarded Brigadier Stark’s death.

“You must not worry,” Brienne said, “for there is nothing that could ever induce me to marry such a man.”

“Very well,” Mrs. Stark said, “I shall not detain you longer. You must be well-rested for your trip tomorrow.”

Brienne lay awake for an unusually long time that night, putting aside any hope of being “well-rested”. She had grown accustomed to Winterfell and would miss its familiarity, and more than that, she would miss her young charges and their mother. Being a governess was so perfect an occupation for a reticent and studious young woman, and nothing made Brienne more nervous than large social gatherings. Having only ever attended country balls, she could not begin to fathom how nervous she might become at a ball held in the most populous city in England.

She fell asleep in a state of anxiety, and it seemed as though no time at all had elapsed when she was awoken by the soft morning light. Surprisingly, when she sat up she found her eyes opened easily, and she stood steadily. She was awake, and all of her fears from the previous night had fallen with the moon. Her portmanteau was already packed, and the dress she had worn the previous night sat atop its other contents, neatly folded and prepared to face however many balls it would have to attend in London. For the first time since he had read Renly’s letter, Brienne felt ready to leave.

The servants’ kitchen was busy when Brienne went to take breakfast, but she was lucky enough to find a seat next to Jon.

“Is it today you’re leaving?” he asked, piling some greying scrambled eggs onto a plate for her.

“It is,” she said.

“I’ve not been to London,” Jon continued. “Be sure to write to me as well as to the girls, won’t you? I expect to hear every detail about the noblemen you meet.”

“I shall try to, if I remember,” Brienne said. “I have to write you, and Sansa and Arya, and Mrs. Stark, and my father…”

Jon laughed. “My my, Miss Tarth, you do have a lot of friends!”

Brienne smiled. “I suppose I must,” she said.

When she finished eating, Brienne took her luggage to the porter and found that a carriage was already awaiting her outside the doors of Winterfell. Rodrik Cassel, the groundskeeper, stood beside it.

“I came to see you off,” he said. “Send us a letter or two when you’re in Wales, will you? I’ve always wanted to see the Welsh countryside.”

Brienne could have laughed if not for thinking of the obscene amounts of ink she was sure to use in the coming months.
“I shall make sure to do so,” she replied.

“And your sword will be waiting for you when you return,” he continued, smiling conspiratorially. “Do you think you might be able to get hold of a proper sword while you’re in London?”

“That would be a lucky chance indeed,” she said.

“I hope that you do,” he said. “You haven’t fenced since you’ve been back from Rosings Park, have you?”

“I haven’t,” she said. Brienne had missed it, even if her practise did just amount to bashing a sword against a tree. She thought of the sapphire-studded rapier in the Storm’s End armoury and sighed slightly. It was unlikely that she would ever be able to fight with such a sword again. Perhaps she ought to have married Captain Lannister and made use of any swords he might have stored away at Casterly Rock, she thought bitterly. Yet not even that was cause for regret.

Just then, Mrs. Stark emerged from the entrance hall, followed by her daughters. “Ah, Miss Tarth,” she said, “I had not realised your carriage was here. Are you leaving so soon?”

“I am afraid I must,” Brienne said, “if we are to make good time on the roads.”

“Very well.” Mrs. Stark placed a hand on her shoulder. “You shall be missed, but nonetheless I do not doubt that you will enjoy your time with the Tyrells very much.”

“I will miss you!” Sansa said, walking around her mother to wrap her arms around Brienne’s back in a hug. “But,” she added in a whisper, “do not worry about me. I shall soon be in Brighton, and I could not be more excited!”

“I am excited for you,” Brienne said, placing a tentative arm around Sansa’s back. “It will be quite an experience, I am sure.”

“It will,” Sansa said, pulling away.

“And you will write to us, won’t you?” Arya asked.

Brienne smiled. “I will miss you – of course I shall write!”

“We shall not detain you, then,” Mrs. Stark said, clasping Brienne’s shoulder in her hand.

“Goodbye,” Brienne said, for she was not sure how else to express her gratitude to the woman who had employed her for so long.

The driver opened the door of the carriage and Brienne climbed inside, waving slightly in response to Sansa and Arya’s shouts as she moved slowly away from Winterfell. This carriage would take her as far as the Winter Town, at which point she would disembark and ride post to London. It was not a long journey – five hours, perhaps, – and she would be there by the mid-afternoon.

She sighed, all the calm of the morning leaving her in one breath. In truth, the prospect terrified her beyond words, and she wished to herself that it might rain suddenly, and that the roads would be inaccessible, and that she would be delayed in her journey, giving her more time to adjust to the prospect of reacquainting herself with Renly Baratheon.

It was disappointing, then, when the post carriage drew to a halt outside a London bank, just three
streets down from the Tyrell residence, and the bank’s clock chimed a very punctual two in the afternoon.

“I say, this must be her!” came a voice from outside, a voice that she recognised all too well despite the four years since she had last heard it.

She took a deep breath and stepped out of the carriage.

Chapter End Notes

Please leave a comment! It would absolutely make my day to know what you think.
Chapter 19

Chapter Notes

Ah well, I'd apologise for the wait, but honestly university is just a fact of life so I feel like I'm in no position to argue with that. Anyway, I'm on holiday now, so here's to getting back into the swing of this fic! I've been getting some questions re: whether I have abandoned it, and the answer is of course not! Never! I absolutely adore writing this story so please bear with me while I get it out of my head and into a word document. It's the kind of thing where I can spend like half an hour agonising over word choice, so these chapters take a bit of time to put together. If you're really keen for updates, you can follow me on my tumblr "memordes" (I know, memorde was taken, sigh), where I talk pretty much exclusively about fanfiction.

Anyway, I had ridiculous amounts of fun with this chapter because... well, you'll see. There's a lot of dialogue but every single word is necessary, I promise you. Now on with the show!

A warm breeze greeted Brienne as she descended onto the pavement, and she grabbed onto her bonnet to stop it from being blown to an unseemly angle. She stood still as the driver took her portmanteau down for her and placed it by her side.

"Ah, but I can carry that for you!"

Brienne squeezed her eyes shut before opening them and forcing herself to look at him. He had not changed at all in the four years since she had last seen him – his clothes were impeccably tailored, his eyes were wide with amusement and his mouth was set in a grin, and like Captain Lannister, he wore his hair in a continental style. He was just as handsome as Brienne remembered him being, but somehow she did not blush. She held his gaze and returned his smile.

"It is good to see you after so long, Mr. Baratheon," she said.

In fact, between Captain Lannister and Lieutenant Hunt, Brienne found that she had spent all of her anger towards men and had none left for Renly Baratheon. She did not harbour any resentment, but nor did she allow him forgiveness. She was, however, willing to accept that the events of his stay at Evenfall had long passed, and that his demeanour had perhaps changed since their last unfortunate meeting.

"You must allow me to take your portmanteau," he said. "Oh! But first, I ought to introduce you to my companions! Well, they are your companions now, I should think."

Brienne cast her eyes to the young man and woman standing further behind Mr. Baratheon. They were both short, with the same delicate waves of brown hair framing their faces, as though they were fine portraits brought to life. The girl had a kind smile, but her wide brown eyes were shrewd, and Brienne wondered if she might not be the gentle and amiable companion that had been spoken of in Mr. Baratheon's letter. Her brother, on the other hand, had a trusting look to him despite his scowl – if there had been anything threatening about his expression, it was offset by his finely-tailored clothes.
“Miss Margaery Tyrell, and her brother Loras Tyrell,” Mr. Baratheon said. “They are fine companions, but our party shall be all the finer for your arrival,” he added, leaning closer and speaking almost in a whisper.

“Come, now,” Miss Tyrell said, placing a hand on Mr. Baratheon’s shoulder. “There shall be no secrets between us. Pray, tell us what was so important that only Miss Tarth should hear it.”

Mr. Baratheon laughed. “Ah, my dear Margaery, I was simply informing Brienne that her presence will bring some much-needed joie de vivre to our party.”

Miss Tyrell gasped dramatically. “You do not mean to say that her company is more pleasurable than either mine or my brother’s?”

“On the contrary,” Brienne said, “my company is hardly what one would call exciting—”

“Nonethless,” Mr. Baratheon interrupted, “I prefer moving in a party of four than a circle of three. Do not think to question my eccentricity!” He put an end to the conversation with a wave of his hand. “Come, let us make haste to Highgarden!”

Mr. Baratheon set off at a strident pace down the cobbled street, and Mr. Tyrell quickly fell into step beside him. Miss Tyrell offered her arm to Brienne, and she took it hesitantly, feeling that the great difference in their height would render the action unseemly, but Miss Tyrell did not seem to care.

“Highgarden?” Brienne asked.

“Ah, but of course, Highgarden is the country seat of the Tyrells, but I have taken to calling their London residence by its name,” Mr. Baratheon explained.

“It is a much more pleasant name than Tyrell House, that is certain,” Mr. Tyrell said. It was the first he had spoken, and his voice was somewhat deeper than she had expected, given his boyish looks and slight stature.

“But we must not joke about Tyrell House in front of Sir Tyrell,” Mr. Baratheon said. “He takes it very seriously indeed.”

“In fact, you must not joke about anything in my dear father’s presence,” Miss Tyrell said.

“Except perhaps my brothers,” Mr. Baratheon said sourly. “He does so delight in laughing at my connections. I think it may be because we are from an older family than his.”

“It is not as though they can hear him joke about them,” Mr. Tyrell said, jumping to his father’s defence, “with one in the Orient and the other in the ground.”

“I can hear,” Mr. Baratheon said, and for a moment Brienne thought that the two men might begin an argument, but instead they smiled at one another, and it seemed as though the difference of opinion was forgotten. She realised with a start that perhaps the reason she was here was not to keep Miss Tyrell company, but to allow Mr. Baratheon and Mr. Tyrell to be apart from Miss Tyrell.

Miss Tyrell looked up at Brienne as though she knew exactly what Brienne was thinking. “I do hope we shall grow to be close,” she said. “I have been so long without a true friend in London— you must understand, my close cousins are all still at Highgarden, for they are too young yet to come out, and all the ladies of society resent me because I am so much better-looking than them.”

Brienne was not sure whether Miss Tyrell was jesting, and whether or not she ought to laugh, so
she settled her features into a polite smile. “You are much better looking than myself,” she said, “but I shall not resent you for it. If I were to resent every girl prettier than me that I met, I would be very hateful indeed.”

“But by the same account,” Miss Tyrell said, “you ought not to resent yourself either. The problem with you Northern girls is that there are no good dressmakers in your parts. Tomorrow I will take you to a fine London dressmaker, and you simply must buy yourself something suitable for a ball.”

Brienne refrained from mentioning that Winterfell was not so far North of London – five hours in a fast carriage – and that in fact most of her dresses came from the towns around Evenfall Hall, which was not North of London at all. “I have far too many dresses already,” she remarked instead.

“A young lady can never have too many dresses,” Miss Tyrell said, pressing her lips together into a calculating smile.

“Are we talking about dresses?” Mr. Baratheon interjected, looking over his shoulder at the two women. “Brienne, I simply must take you to my tailor. He cuts ballgowns as well as suits, naturally, and I would consider him the finest in all London.”

“That is because you have never been to my tailor,” Mr. Tyrell said quietly.

“I cannot help that he specialises in clothing for men of a less-impressive stature,” Mr. Baratheon said. “Although I will concede that he chooses exceedingly fine fabrics.”

They continued talking effortlessly about their favoured tailors and dressmakers until they reached Tyrell House, but Brienne had nothing to contribute to the conversation. She envied the ease with which they conversed and the steady wit of their speech. It was so unlikely that she should be in London in the company of such fashionable people, and yet they were open and amiable towards her in a way she had never experienced. It was not kindness in the way that she spoke to her charges, nor in her discourse with the polite servants at Winterfell, nor was it the false flattery afforded to her by men like Lieutenant Hunt, and it was so far removed from Captain Lannister’s misguided admiration. It was something genuine that she remembered faintly from Renly Baratheon’s stay at Evenfall Hall, and it was something that she found herself wishing to experience again.

As a footman opened the wide, green-painted doors to Tyrell House, Brienne thought to herself that she would not be displeased at all to befriend the Tyrells.

“You must meet our father,” Miss Tyrell said, “before I can whisk you away to see your chambers.” She sounded quite dejected about this, despite the fact that being introduced to Sir Tyrell first and foremost was the respectable order of things.

A maid led Brienne and Miss Tyrell through to the drawing room where Sir Tyrell would be, while Mr. Baratheon and Mr. Tyrell handed Brienne’s portmanteau to the footman. Brienne was dismayed that Mr. Baratheon would not be joining her for her introduction to Sir Tyrell, but since she was to be his daughter’s companion, it seemed fitting for Miss Tyrell to take this duty.

Sir Mace Tyrell was a large, round man with respectable hairstyle and conservative clothing, and at a glance it was hard to see how he could be related to his gently-built children. His ruddy complexion lent him the appearance of a particularly disgruntled child’s doll, but he had the same brown curls as his son, however cut in a more dignified manner, as would befit a titled man.

“Father, this is Miss Tarth, my new companion,” Miss Tyrell said. “She is to accompany us to
Wales in three weeks time.”

“Miss Tarth,” he said, rising from his chair to shake her hand, which she took hesitantly, “it is a pleasure to meet you.” If he thought anything of her unusual height and looks, he did not say it, for which Brienne was grateful. “You are Major Selwyn Tarth’s daughter, I presume?”

Brienne held back a sigh – since her arrival at Winterfell she had become all too used to being immediately identified by her surname, and she thought that one day she ought to ask her father how he had managed to encounter so many people in his life, and leave a favourable impression at that. “I am,” she said.

“A good man, your father,” Sir Tyrell said, nodding to himself. “Very well, I have no doubt you wish to rest before we take our evening meal, so I will have Margaery show you to your quarters.”

“Thank you,” Brienne said, unsure how else to respond, as Miss Tyrell took her arm and led her out of the drawing room.

The staircase to the second storey of Tyrell House was designed to be impressive upon sight, with roses worked into the wooden banisters, the balusters modelled after twisting vines, and elaborate vases holding fresh-picked roses resting on the newels. Brienne had not seen any roses around the front of the house, but as she gingerly placed her hand on the banister she caught sight of a door leading to a courtyard, which would no doubt be where the roses were grown.

Every window in the house was adorned with green velvet curtains trimmed in gold, with tassels hanging down so artfully that Brienne thought the maids perhaps arranged them every morning to look so precisely elegant.

“You will be staying in the rooms adjacent to mine,” Miss Tyrell said. “I am sure you will find them most agreeable, for guest bedrooms. I once stayed with some cousins in Brighton – their guest rooms were no better than you’d find at an inn! It left much to be desired, and needless to say I have not returned since.”

“Mrs. Stark and her daughters, for whom I work as a governess, will soon be in Brighton,” Brienne said. She had not even been in London for a day and yet she already grew wistful at the thought of the Stark family.

“Indeed?” Miss Tyrell said. “I do hope they are staying with better hosts than my cousins the Fossways. Do you know where they will be staying?”

Before Brienne could answer, Miss Tyrell stopped outside a door which sat ajar, and when Brienne looked into the room she saw her portmanteau sitting at the foot of the bed. The bed itself had four posts draped in the same green velvet that seemed to be the very foundation of Tyrell House, and was made up in sheets decorated with roses. There was a sizeable wooden wardrobe across from the bed, and a window which looked out onto the courtyard.

“This will be your room,” Miss Tyrell said. “I do hope it does not disappoint!”

“This is more lavish than any room I have stayed in before,” Brienne said with some awe. Even her bedroom at Evenfall Hall had been simple – it had just the right amount of elegance to suit a well-to-do man’s daughter, but Brienne had never known such luxury until she had visited Storm’s End, but even that was not as extravagantly adorned as what little she had seen of Tyrell House. She could not even imagine how much more elaborate the rooms at Highgarden would be.

“And no less than you deserve!” Miss Tyrell exclaimed. “My room is next door but one; we will have to share the bathroom, I am afraid. London homes cannot handle so many pipes as country
She slipped into the room and sat down on the bed, gesturing for Brienne to sit beside her, but Brienne hesitated at the door. “Come, sit with me,” Miss Tyrell said. “Tell me where the Starks are staying in Brighton!”

“They are guests of Lady Baratheon,” Brienne said. “I would surmise that she is in possession of a house in Brighton.”

“Lady Baratheon!” Miss Tyrell exclaimed. “Renly did not tell me you are acquainted with the rest of his family!”

“I have had the misfortune of spending a great amount of time in their company of late,” Brienne admitted, sitting next to Miss Tyrell on the bed.

“But then you would have met Lord Baratheon, of course,” Miss Tyrell said. “My betrothed,” she added, almost as an afterthought.

“I have not spent much time in his company,” Brienne said. “He became quite friendly with the elder Miss Stark and seemed not to have time for anyone else. But of course now that he is betrothed to you, he no longer cares for—”

Miss Tyrell laughed. “Do not worry, Brienne. I enjoy a bit of competition, you know. Oh, but I heard that Lady Baratheon’s brothers were staying with her. Have you met them too?”

Brienne felt slightly uncomfortable with Miss Tyrell’s lack of formality, but no doubt she took her cues from Mr. Baratheon, who insisted upon being called Renly and invariably would call Brienne by her given name. “I have met Mr. Lannister and Captain Lannister, yes,” she said.

“And are they agreeable? My eldest brother, Willas, served under Captain Lannister for some time before he was discharged – he can’t walk now, you see – but he has only kind words for the man. The younger Mr. Lannister, however… I have heard some quite unsavoury tales about his exploits.”

Brienne’s eyes widened in surprise. “I found it quite the opposite,” she said. “Mr. Lannister struck me as a most friendly man, although I will confess that given my height I often found it very hard to hold conversation with him.”

“But of course,” Miss Tyrell said. “One must look the other person in the eye for the duration of a conversation for it to be of any worth.” She held Brienne’s gaze and giggled. “Oh, but tell me about Captain Lannister!”

“Perhaps it is true that your brother found him to be a kind man when he was still in the militia, but I am sure you know that Captain Lannister has since been discharged. Much about a man’s demeanour can change over so many years.”

“You are trying to tell me politely that you cannot stand the man,” Miss Tyrell said. “What is it that he has done to offend you so?”

“He is insufferable,” Brienne said, frowning. “I have never met a man who so delights in making those around him uncomfortable.”

“Perhaps what he considers the appropriate way to talk to soldiers is not quite the best way to talk to women,” Miss Tyrell suggested.

“He is very bad at talking to women,” Brienne agreed. “On the first occasion of our meeting he
Miss Tyrell looked as though she had just heard the most exciting gossip that all of society had to offer, which was ridiculous, because a ball at Storm’s End could hardly be of any interest to a girl as well-connected as her. “You have danced with Captain Lannister?”

“It was not very exciting,” Brienne said. “Of course, he is the very model of a gentleman in his bearing, but his conversation leaves much to be desired.”

“You speak as though you are an authority on the subject,” Miss Tyrell said. “How many times have you danced with him?”

Brienne cleared her throat. “I scarce remember,” she said, most displeased with the direction this conversation had taken.

“That means you have danced with him more than once! Oh, Brienne, this is exciting news indeed, given that he and his brother are currently in London, so I hear. You must introduce us if we ever happen to see him at a ball!”

Somehow, Brienne had managed to forget the fact that Captain and Mr. Lannister would be staying in London before returning to Casterly Rock, and she wondered that she had not done so willfully. “Of course,” Brienne said, “he had mentioned it. I do not intend to cross his path, Miss Tyrell.”

“Please,” she said, “call me Margaery, if we are to be companions for so long a while!”

“As you wish,” Brienne said, with absolutely no intention of ever calling Miss Tyrell by her given name.

“Now, I will let you rest,” Miss Tyrell said decisively. She gave Brienne a smile that could only indicate conspiracy. “You simply must tell me more about Captain Lannister once we have taken dinner!”

Once she had left the room and closed the door behind her, Brienne fell back on the bed and sighed. It was so unusual for her to talk so readily to someone – there was an air about Miss Tyrell that made Brienne curiously comfortable in sharing her secrets. She only hoped that she would not be pressed to the point that she was forced to talk about her encounters with Captain Lannister at Rosings Park.

After lying for a minute or so, Brienne stood and walked to the window. Below was the courtyard, which was furnished as elegantly as she had come to expect from Tyrell houses, with roses of all colours lining the walls, and two large iron benches which appeared to be predictably wrought with rose motifs.

Despite being so near to the centre of London, the bedroom was quiet and insular, and with new friends and old surrounding her, Brienne thought she might just be able to enjoy her time in London with this room to return to every night.

Chapter End Notes

So, what did you think? Please take some time to leave a review C:
Let me know how the translation of Renly and co. to this story works! Regency Margaery was a joy to write but I'm not entirely sure I got her down perfectly. Ah well.
Chapter 20

Chapter Notes

Hey it's been a while again, hasn't it? Well, I'm slowly getting back on track. As those of you who follow my blog will know, between this chapter and the last I wrote 16k words of a Harry Potter fic that I'll not be posting for quite a while, so it's not like I've been unproductive with my writing. I've just... woefully neglected this fic.

Anyway, this is a bit of a fun chapter! I'm really enjoying Renly and the Tyrells. I hope you do too! C:

See the end of the chapter for more notes

During her first week in London, Brienne was sure that she had visited more tailors and milliners than most others would see in the entirety of their life, and her portmanteau would be two dresses heavier for it. The streets had been unwelcoming at first, crowded with people who had no interest beyond the next store they would frequent, but as the days passed, Brienne found herself increasingly comfortable in London, and in the company of the Tyrells and Renly Baratheon.

Miss Tyrell, who continued to insist on Brienne calling her Margaery, was fast becoming a most pleasing companion. She was invasive in her constant questioning, but for every evening she spent pestering Brienne for details of the Stark family’s social circle, she she spoke openly of her own life. It felt as though Brienne now knew every piece of trivia surrounding the Tyrell siblings, although she knew it could not truly be so. Miss Tyrell was far too clever to reveal all of her secrets at once.

Mr. Tyrell, on the other hand, was brash and impetuous, and Brienne did not so much enjoy his presence as his sister’s. He seemed to have the capacity for amicability, but perhaps he exhausted his kindness on Mr. Baratheon, who in turn lavished him with attention.

It was common that the two young men would become so enraptured in their own conversation that Brienne and Miss Tyrell would have to entertain themselves, which proved not to be such an arduous task, and indeed one at which Miss Tyrell was most adept.

At the end of the week, Mr. Baratheon decided to conclude his Grand Tour of London’s grandest fashion houses with a craftsman who specialised in accessories for the sporting gentleman. It came as no surprise to Brienne that Mr. Baratheon boasted most heartily of Mr. Tyrell’s great skill with a blade – much as he boasted of all Mr. Tyrell’s accomplishments, no matter how middling – and insisted that he buy a new pair of gloves for his favoured companion.

The storefront was modest, but Mr. Baratheon assured his companions that it held the finest wares in the city. Indeed, Brienne could immediately tell that the stock on display was of a high caliber. From behind the counter the proprietor received Mr. Baratheon most warmly, and also greeted Mr. Tyrell, however he made it clear that there was nothing of interest in this store for the ladies of the party.

“My dear Mr. Wagstaff, I am seeking the finest gloves you have in stock,” Mr. Baratheon proclaimed, clapping his hands together.

Miss Tyrell took Brienne’s arm and led her to the display of fencing masks in the window. “It is
typical of Renly to save the most *boring* destination for last, but we must bear it as best we can.”

Brienne coughed slightly, covering her mouth with her free hand. “You, perhaps, find it boring, Miss Tyrell, but I am most amenable to these sort of pursuits.”

“Ah, but you must ride,” Miss Tyrell said. “Of course, I can envisage you most comfortably atop a horse. I have never had any sort of aptitude for sporting – I confess I always wished that I could ride as the men did, but my grandmother told me that all young women are to ride sidesaddle. It is only seemly.”

“It is impossible,” Brienne said, shaking her head. “I have never been able to master the ladylike sidesaddle. In the privacy of Evenfall Hall, my father allowed me to learn how to properly ride.”

Miss Tyrell smiled. “And were there any other sports he allowed you to learn?”

“There were,” Brienne said concessively, her gaze flickering to the fencing masks. It was a wrong move, for Miss Tyrell noticed immediately, and her eyes lit up.

“Oh!” she exclaimed. “You are a fencer!”

“You must not say it so loudly,” Brienne whispered. She had been especially careful never to let Mr. Baratheon know about her fencing when he was staying at Evenfall Hall, as she had always wanted him to think her a lady. She had even made an effort to ride sidesaddle with him, but he had easily noticed how uncomfortable she was in the position. From then on, she knew he would not care if she disclosed one more unladylike quality, but some perverse dignity put pressure on her to cling to every last scrap of propriety. “Such pursuits are frowned upon in polite society. My father, however, being a military man, never cared much for polite, but–”

“No, on the contrary, I think it is fabulous!” Miss Tyrell said, clasping Brienne’s arm tightly. “I have met women who can play the piano and thread a needle well enough that they will one day give their husbands something to draw pride from, but I have never met a woman who can fence. Until now, of course.”

“There are many who would not share your opinion,” Brienne said, knowing she ought not be so surprised by Miss Tyrell’s liberal view of womanly pursuits.

“But I know of two who certainly will,” Miss Tyrell said, releasing Brienne’s arm and making her way to where her brother and Mr. Baratheon were inspecting a display of gloves, the lid of the glass case lifted so that they might try different sizes.

“My dear men,” she said, looping her arm through her brother’s, “you will never believe what I have just discovered!”

“And what is that?” Mr. Tyrell asked, his voice weary as though he was used to his sister making fascinating new discoveries.

“Our Miss Tarth is none other than a trained fencer!”

Mr. Tyrell raised an eyebrow, but Mr. Baratheon’s expression was altogether more enthusiastic. Brienne caught his eyes momentarily and quickly looked away, her cheeks growing warm.

“A woman fencer?” the proprietor Mr. Wagstaff said, eyes wide. “Young lady, do not jest.”

“Just because you have never met one,” Miss Tyrell said, “it does not mean they do not exist.”

“And Miss Tarth’s father is none other than the renowned Major Selwyn Tarth,” Mr. Baratheon
said. “It does not surprise me that such a man would teach his daughter the noble art.” He turned to the daughter in question. “Miss Tarth. Allow me to purchase a fine pair of gloves for yourself.”

“I cannot allow you any such thing,” Brienne said. Her eyes stayed firmly fixed towards her feet. She had convinced herself that she was beyond blushing at his kindness, particularly given his probable preference for the company of his own sex, but after so many years she was still affected by his words.

“You can,” he said, “and you most certainly will. You have let the Tyrells buy you two dresses; if you would let me give you a welcoming gift of my own, I would be most obliged.”

Mr. Wagstaff appeared to have recovered from his initial indignation, and cleared his throat. “Is the lady in question a new arrival to London?”

“The lady in question is simply here for a holiday,” Brienne said, drawing some courage to speak plainly from Mr. Wagstaff’s rudeness. If he anticipated an uncouth, uncultured brute of a woman, then she would be most happy to meet his expectations.

“My apologies,” he said hastily. “What sort of gloves are you seeking?”

Mr. Baratheon answered for her. “The finest! The very best you have in stock. I will settle for nothing less than excellence for my oldest friend.”

Brienne bit the inside of her lip, her mouth settling into a frown. Surely it was some falsehood in Mr. Baratheon’s memory that led him to refer to her as his “oldest friend”? There could be no doubt that a young man from a noble family would have been raised surrounded by friends. For whatever reason he was sent to Evenfall Hall, it had certainly not been so that he might make a friend.

“Of course,” Mr. Wagstaff said, putting aside his distaste to play the perfectly obsequious salesman. “We have a fine glove in brown leather that might suit the lady’s hand. This design is noted for fitting the, ah, larger hand.”

“And is there much flexibility for movement? The larger hand is most adept with a heavier blade, but it can do no damage without flexibility,” Brienne said, some part of her attempting to sound menacing.

So many men had spoken to her with the derision that filled Mr. Wagstaff’s words, and it was there in the small London store that she finally felt as though it might be her responsibility to allay that derision, and prove to those men that she was stronger than they would expect. It had taken the cruel Lieutenant Hunt and the confusing Captain Lannister to give her this strength, but over every day she had spent in London she had felt it growing. Here, she was not someone’s governess, someone’s ward or someone’s daughter – she was Miss Brienne Tarth, and with friends by her side, she had more courage than she could ever have imagined.

She remembered her last discourse with Lieutenant Hunt, and the woman she had been then. She remembered how she had turned down Captain Lannister. Now, there was the possibility that she could be that woman all the time, and it hit her suddenly as a wave of unexpected pride.

“Miss Tarth?”

Mr. Baratheon’s words returned her to the situation at hand, from which she had drifted in the shock of her realisation.

“I beg your pardon,” she said.
“No matter,” Mr. Baratheon said. “Mr. Wagstaff was just saying that the leather will be stiff at first, but will become flexible over time.”

“I shall try them on,” Brienne decided, and Mr. Wagstaff retrieved the gloves in question with a scowl. Brienne pulled the gloves onto her hands, clenching and unclenching her fingers. “They fit well,” she said.

“Excellent!” Miss Tyrell said, grinning broadly. “I think they suit you perfectly. Although you must not trust my opinion – I am not so learned as you when it comes to sporting goods.”

“You think me learned?” Brienne said, holding back a laugh. “I am entrusting the final word on this matter to Mr. Baratheon.”

“Indeed, perhaps one who has more experience…” Mr. Wagstaff said.

“I am entrusting him with the final word because it is he who has insisted on paying,” Brienne amended, determined not to let Mr. Wagstaff win this conversation. She knew his views were simply the views of society, and that it was of course improper for a woman to fence. Of this there could be no doubt, but her mood dictated that she take her frustration out on him.

“I will buy them for you,” Mr. Baratheon declared, “and the other pair for Mr. Tyrell. I am feeling most generous with my wealth today.”

“Very well, Mr. Baratheon,” Mr. Wagstaff said. Brienne removed the gloves and handed them to him, and he carried them to the counter so that Mr. Baratheon could pay.

“Come, Miss Tarth,” Miss Tyrell said, “let us wait outside.”

Brienne nodded in agreement and followed her through the shop door and onto the pavement. “I am glad to be out of there,” she said. “I was most uncomfortable.”

“Perhaps I ought not to have pointed out your talent as a fencer,” Miss Tyrell said, mock-pensive, “but then you might never have found those gloves!”

“It is most kind of Mr. Baratheon,” Brienne said. “He should not–”

“He most certainly should,” Miss Tyrell interrupted. “Brienne, you are our guest. You are a novelty in our otherwise quite boring social circle, and as such you must allow us to treat you as such. You must humour our simple pleasures.”

Brienne smiled despite her misgivings. “I will try to do so, Miss Tyrell.”

“How many times must I tell you to call me Margaery?” she said, laughing.

“Until I no longer have any social decency about me,” Brienne said.

Miss Tyrell smiled, and her eyes narrowed deviously. “Ah, you see, now you have given me a goal!”

Just then, Mr. Baratheon and Mr. Tyrell came out from the store, the former with a package under his arm. “Now then,” he said, “shall we return to Highgarden to take our luncheon?”

The Tyrell carriage sat in wait for them at the corner of the street. Brienne sat next to Miss Tyrell, with her knees almost touching Mr. Baratheon’s, and she tried desperately to avoid having to look at him. She was embarrassed enough by his gift and all the memories of her former infatuation – she did not need to make a further fool of herself.
“I hear there is to be a ball next week,” Mr. Tyrell said suddenly, as though he had just recalled the information to mind.

Miss Tyrell pulled an exaggerated face at him. “When did you hear about this, and when were you planning to tell us?”

“I glimpsed the invitation amongst father’s mail this morning,” he said, “and I confess I had quite forgotten about it until now.”

“So who is holding the ball?” Mr. Baratheon asked, every bit as excited as Miss Tyrell.

“The Merryweathers, I believe,” Mr. Tyrell said. “It’s a chance for Sir Orton to show off the wife he brought back from the Indies.”

“He always was an eccentric fellow,” Mr. Baratheon commented, “but I was nonetheless surprised when I first read of that in the papers.”

“Well, I imagine this will be the height of society only,” Mr. Tyrell said. “It is a good thing you have some new dresses, Miss Tarth, for this is the first of many balls we will surely be invited to before we leave for Wales.”

Before Brienne could respond that she was sure the invitation did not extend to herself, Miss Tyrell spoke. “Oh!” she said. “I don’t suppose the Lannister brothers will be in attendance?”

“I should think so,” Mr. Baratheon said. “They wouldn’t let it be known that there was a ball thrown without their presence.”

Brienne closed her eyes briefly and tried to disengage from the conversation. She had known that Captain and Mr. Lannister were in London, of course, but she had not expected that she would be meeting with them so soon after they had parted company. Mr. Lannister, perhaps, she could face in a ballroom without losing her composure, but Captain Lannister was a different matter.

After what felt like too long, the carriage rattled to a halt outside Tyrell House, and Brienne was most relieved to be back. She hoped that the conversation about the ball might cease, and she would finally be able to rid herself of any thoughts of the Lannisters. They ate peacefully and conversation was limited, and afterwards Brienne excused herself so that she might do some reading.

Sitting alone in the guest bedroom was both daunting and calming – daunting in that the extravagance of the room was more than she was used to, but calming in that she had missed silence more than she realised. She missed the Starks too, and as she relaxed onto the bed, every last trace of the strength she’d felt earlier left her. It had been foolish to assume that she could always speak with the same force as she had to Lieutenant Hunt. Mr. Baratheon and the Tyrells gave her a false confidence that she did not deserve. It was much easier to resign oneself to meekness.

Several passages into her novel, there was a knock on the door. Sighing, Brienne came to her feet and opened the door to Miss Tyrell.

“This is becoming a habit, isn’t it?” she said. “My sneaking into your room, that is. Well, I have some good news for you.”

Brienne opened the door wider, and Miss Tyrell sat on the edge of the bed. Brienne had, by now, given in to some degree of familiarity and, once she had closed the door, sat beside Miss Tyrell.

“I have heard for certain that your friends the Lannisters will be at the Merryweathers’ ball!”
“You know very well that they are not my friends,” Brienne chided.

Miss Tyrell’s face said very clearly that she did not care whether or not they were Brienne’s friends. “Still, you will have to bring about a conversation between our parties. Would you believe that Loras and I have never been formally introduced to the Lannisters?”

“Was I in fact invited to this ball, or am I being taken for the sake of novelty?” Brienne asked.

“Oh, novelty, my dear,” Miss Tyrell said. “But that does not mean that you were not invited. In fact, Renly’s invitation read ‘Mr. Renly Baratheon and guest.’ That must surely refer to you!”

“Surely the Merryweathers would not know who I am?”

Miss Tyrell shook her head sadly. “Sadly, I think not. But you cannot fault them for the attempt!”

“Either way, it makes no matter,” Brienne said, “for I will not be able to accept the invitation.”

“No?” Miss Tyrell was smiling, but there was no mistaking the fact that Brienne had just committed a grave offence. “And why is that?”

“I cannot be in the same room as Captain Lannister,” she said. “As you are aware, we have not been on the most cordial terms, and–”

“Nonsense, Brienne,” Miss Tyrell said. “Even if he is awful to you and you to him, you must still come to the ball. Did you not say you have danced with him? Surely you can grace him with one more for the sake of making introductions.”

“I cannot,” Brienne said, more firmly this time. “Miss Tyrell, for various reasons, I simply cannot see him.”

Miss Tyrell’s face took up the expression that Brienne was fast becoming familiar with, the one that said she was concocting some plot in her mind, a plot that would definitely not bode well for Brienne. “Various reasons,” she repeated. “I wonder if you might tell me these reasons? I just cannot understand your aversion to him, I am afraid.”

“He is in love with me.”

Brienne had spoken before she realised her lips had even parted. There were no secrets with Miss Tyrell. She bent forwards and put her head in her hands.

“Oh, Brienne.” Miss Tyrell sighed. “He is in love with you, and you are not in love with him. Would I be right?”

“That is the truth of the matter,” Brienne said. Her face was red with embarrassment when she pulled her head upwards and sat straight. She could still not believe how easily something she had not told to anyone had come forth for her acquaintance of just one week.

“And how do you know this?” Miss Tyrell asked.

“Margaery, you must promise not to tell anyone,” Brienne said, using Miss Tyrell’s given name as a mark of her sincerity. “Recently, I spent some weeks at Rosings Park with Miss Stark and her good friend Jeyne, Mrs. Snow, who had just married Lord Bolton’s natural son. By pure coincidence, Captain Lannister and his brother were guests of Lord Bolton. I know not how it happened, but at some point we were alone in each other’s company, and he… he proposed marriage. Naturally, I refused–”
“–because up until that point, he had been nothing but cruel to you,” Miss Tyrell completed, acknowledging her understanding. “My poor Brienne, how awful that must have been!”

“So you see why I simply cannot attend any ball with him present,” Brienne said desperately. She had given up her last secret – now, she hoped, Miss Tyrell would give up on trying to coax her to the Merryweathers’ ball.

“Oh the contrary,” Miss Tyrell said, her mouth slowly sliding into a grin. “Now I am certain that you absolutely must come.”

Chapter End Notes

Please take the time to leave a review! I'd love to hear what you thought of this chapter, especially since I took a bit of a Major Character Development leap with Brienne. She continues to fail at being a heroine, alas, but at least she's got some friends her own age now. (Yeah, I say that, but Margaery is still only 16. I might type up ages for reference on my blog later.)

So yeah. Drop me a line!
Chapter Notes

So it seems the only way I can write this fic now is by getting a spark of inspiration and then churning out thousands of words in one night, then posting sometime after 1am. Anyway, once again, heinous amounts of apologising, etc. Slowly, I'm getting there.

This chapter sees us navigating some social politics and deviating from the romance to a more friendship-oriented plot, as all my stories inevitably do, among other things. Enjoy!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

After many long hours of contemplation, Brienne acquiesced to Miss Tyrell’s wishes that she attend the Merryweathers’ ball as Mr. Baratheon’s guest. It might not be such a painful experience. Despite their intimate conversations, Brienne did not yet truly trust Miss Tyrell to support her in any social endeavours, and Mr. Baratheon’s presence would provide her no great comfort – but she had faced Captain Lannister in the ballroom before. Perhaps she was expending too much effort in her worry.

On the morning of the ball, Brienne found herself in deep contemplation as she studied her new dresses to choose the most appropriate for the occasion. One of the gowns was a green that she was not sure flattered her as much as Miss Tyrell had insisted it did, but it blended in very well with the colours of Tyrell House, and would surely be a display of where her loyalties lay. The other was a deep red of the kind that Lady Baratheon oft wore, but printed with a paisley design in softer colours to offset the boldness of the red.

Brienne had laid the dresses out on her bed and stood over them when she heard a knock at her bedroom door.

“Miss Tyrell?”

“I am afraid I am not half so beautiful as her,” came Mr. Baratheon’s voice from the other side of the panelled wood. “But I wish you would receive me nonetheless.”

“It would not be proper,” Brienne said, twisting the fabric of her skirts between her fingers.

“And what has convinced you that I am a proper gentleman?” he asked.

She could not argue with his reasoning, and so she walked slowly to the door and opened it cautiously.

“May I come in?”

His face was as charming as it had been when they were first introduced, and Brienne knew she was unable to refuse him. “You may,” she said.

Mr. Baratheon surveyed the room briefly, as though seeing it for the first time. Perhaps he had not seen it before – Brienne did not doubt that there were rooms in Tyrell House that even Sir Tyrell
himself had not encountered. “You have a fine view of the courtyard,” he commented.

“You have a fine view of the courtyard,” he commented. “It is most kind of Sir Tyrell to allow me to stay in such comfort.”

“Sir Tyrell is a most kind man,” Mr. Baratheon said, “and most tolerant. Well, I have spoken to him very little, but he has allowed me to spend so long as his son’s companion, so he must be a paragon of virtue to tolerate me!”

Brienne privately thought that perhaps he tolerated it because Loras Tyrell was his third son – the first a model heir, by all accounts, and the second a Captain in the militia – and so it mattered not that the third was a socialite of dubious preferences. “How many years have you known the Tyrells?” she asked instead.

“Soon after I left Evenfall Hall I met Margaery at a ball in London,” he said, “and we were engaged not long after, at my brother Lord Baratheon’s insistence. I presume you are curious as to why the engagement was broken?”

“I would not presume to—”

“I shall tell you,” he interrupted, “because I know you are too polite to be curious.”

That, Brienne could not deny. It was so unusual for an engagement to be broken so suddenly that she was certainly not the only one curious about the circumstances.

“It is a sad story,” he continued, “for Margaery was formally introduced to Lady Baratheon and her son at my brother’s funeral. She quickly realised that Lady Baratheon sought a bride for her son, and she felt that such a match would be most advantageous to her family’s position.”

“You speak so openly of her aspirations,” Brienne said, aware that her mouth was hanging open but unable to close it, so affronted by his forwardness.

“As would she, if you were to ask her,” he said, raising an eyebrow. “This way, I will not be forced into… into the act of providing an heir. My brother Robert was very insistent that I marry, but Stannis is, in that regard, much more forgiving.”

“In that case, I am glad for you and Miss Tyrell both,” Brienne replied evenly.

Mr. Baratheon smiled. “And have you had any suitors since—”

“I have not,” Brienne said quickly. She would not make the same mistake twice.

“I had meant to apologise, you know,” he said, his voice dropping to an almost frightening quiet. “On the morning I left Evenfall, I asked to see you. I wanted to explain—”

“There is nothing to explain,” Brienne said. She could not bear to think upon it, and had long since grown adept at burying the memory behind more pressing concerns.

“We did not part as amiably as I might have wished.” He frowned and brushed his fingers through his hair.

“It is in the past. We have been on most amiable terms for these last few weeks, have we not?”

His face returned to its usual smile. “We have. Indeed, we have.”

They stood in an uncomfortable silence, and Brienne cast a glance over her shoulder at the dresses
on her bed.

“The red suits you admirably,” Mr. Baratheon remarked, before turning and showing himself out of her room. Brienne stood in his wake, staring dumbly at the door.

She collected her wits and returned to inspecting the dresses, thinking that indeed that the red dress might be the most suitable for her debut in London society.

The evening came quietly, with no knock on Brienne’s door and no announcement of its intentions. She made her own way to the entrance hall of Tyrell House, where Mr. Baratheon stood waiting for her, his arm extended.

“Did I not tell you it is a good colour for you?” he said as she took his arm.

Miss Tyrell nodded in agreement. “It may do to accustom yourself to wearing red. It is, after all, the colour of the Lannister arms.”

“And why might Brienne be wearing Lannister colours?” Mr. Baratheon asked curiously.

“You shall see when she dances with Captain Lannister tonight,” Miss Tyrell said gleefully. Brienne frowned at her, but she was oblivious and continued smiling as though she had a most wicked plan – something that would not surprise Brienne in the least.

Mr. Baratheon returned Miss Tyrell’s smile as the footman appeared to open the door, revealing a carriage parked outside. Mr. Tyrell joined them promptly, and the party of four stepped out into the chill air. A light rain was falling, encouraging them to hasten.

“I do hope you’ll save the first dance for me, my dear,” Mr. Baratheon said, placing his hand on Mr. Tyrell’s arm to help him into the carriage.

“Certainly not,” Mr. Tyrell said. “If you behave, however, I will give you the last.”

They shared a look that Brienne had not seen in any two people before – there was intimacy, yes, but more than that, there was an understanding, something mutual that she could not describe. She cast her eyes away so that she might not find herself growing jealous of their connection. It put her in mind of the abortive romances that had fleetingly passed her by, and that was not a good sentiment to take into a ballroom.

They arrived shortly at Sir Merryweather’s residence, Longtable, a house comparable to Tyrell House in its exterior, but most markedly different beyond the brick facade. Where Tyrell House adhered politely to a recurring theme, Longtable respectfully left coherency at the front doors and descended into eclecticism as its corridors led away from the road. The walls were lined with artworks from the proudest Paris salons, and artefacts from the farthest reaches of the Empire.

Lady Merryweather was spoken of as the greatest treasure in her husband’s collection, and as such Brienne fancied him to be a bold adventurer with a taste for luxury, but she could not have been more mistaken. She was introduced to him as a personal friend of Mr. Baratheon’s, and Sir Merryweather regarded her quite timidly. He was a short, soft-spoken man with shockingly red hair and a pale complexion, and when Brienne met his wife, it was clear that he regarded her as much more than simply an object of exoticism.

She certainly stood out in a crowd, her dark skin and impressive stature making it hard to not notice her, and from their introduction it seemed that she singled out Brienne as another woman of unusual appearance.

“Miss Tarth, you are Mr. Baratheon’s guest?” she asked in perfectly unaccented English.
“I am,” Brienne said.

“A pity,” Lady Merryweather said. “I have never been fond of the Baratheons, although I suppose he is the most tolerable of them.”

“I have not met his family,” Brienne admitted, “beyond Lady Baratheon’s branch.”

“Oh, I do enjoy Lady Baratheon’s company.” Lady Merryweather looked more pleased at that, and Brienne gaped at her in bafflement that anyone could possibly enjoy Lady Baratheon’s company.

“I have heard that her brothers are in attendance tonight,” Brienne said, allowing herself to make polite conversation in order to learn which part of the ballroom she ought to avoid.

Lady Merryweather inclined her head towards the entrance hall. “They will be in attendance, if they know their manners, however we have not yet had the pleasure this evening.”

Brienne felt her shoulders relax – she had not even been aware that she had been standing tensely. She looked around the ballroom to see Mr. Baratheon speaking to a girl who was blushing so vividly that she would no doubt be left disappointed by him, and Miss Tyrell dancing already with her brother.

“I gather, then, that you are a friend of the Lannisters,” Lady Merryweather continued.

“In a manner of speaking, yes,” Brienne said.

Lady Merryweather smiled, and all too suddenly Brienne saw a resemblance to Lady Baratheon’s visage of distaste. She glanced back to where Mr. Baratheon stood, and noticed with some relief that the girl was in the process of leaving his side.

“If you will excuse me,” Brienne said, dipping her knees in a curtsey.

“Of course,” Lady Merryweather said.

Brienne restrained herself from setting off at too quick a pace, but nonetheless she rushed to Mr. Baratheon’s side.

“I see you have made the acquaintance of the venerable Lady Merryweather,” he said, raising an eyebrow.

“I must confess, she intimidates me greatly,” Brienne said.

“Now, now,” Mr. Baratheon said, “you cannot be put off by her simply because she is foreign.”

“It is not that,” Brienne replied, paling at the very suggestion. “She simply reminds me somewhat of Lady Baratheon.”

“A most unfortunate resemblance,” he conceded. “I think you will find that Lady Merryweather is more inclined to compassion, however.”

“Whereas I doubt Lady Baratheon can show compassion even to her own children.”

Mr. Baratheon grinned. “Since we have become reacquainted, Brienne, I have found that you are much less polite than you used to be. I am rather enjoying it.”

“Do not say such things!” she exclaimed, her cheeks growing red. Was it Mr. Baratheon’s fate to
make every woman who spoke to him take the vapours from his extraordinary charm?

“Ah, you wound me, Brienne, for how am I to keep from speaking the truth?”

“Somehow you must restrain yourself,” she said.

His eyes flickered to the dancefloor, and then back to Brienne. “Will you dance the next with me?” he asked. “It has been so long.”

Brienne smiled, knowing that she felt comfortable enough in his presence to accept.

They danced a minuet, and although Brienne was not overly familiar with the motions, she was glad to be occupying herself in some way other than in conversation. Dancing with Mr. Baratheon held none of the painful memories from their time together at Evenfall Hall, and all of the happiest ones, all of the times they’d danced and laughed together. Brienne thought then that what he had said in Mr. Wagstaff’s shop was true – he was, without a doubt, her oldest friend.

The dance ended, and they moved apart to return to genial conversation, soon joined by the Tyrell siblings. Miss Tyrell was an endless source of society gossip, and she spoke readily about the many betrothals that were being disregarded that evening. It became clear that Longtable was something of a refuge for the more liberally-minded among London’s wealthy, the Merryweathers themselves being able to attest to eccentricity.

However, as Mr. Baratheon was quick to point out, he would still have managed to cause a scandal by asking Mr. Tyrell to join him in the cotillion.

“Not least of all, they would cause a scene by arguing over which of them would have to dance as the woman,” Miss Tyrell whispered to Brienne.

Brienne would have laughed at her comment, were she not distracted by two people who were causing a scene of their own at the entrance to the ballroom. It was considered impolite to arrive so late, but the Lannisters held to conventions of their own.

“Ah, Brienne,” Miss Tyrell said, her voice edged with excitement, “now you must introduce us.”

“I absolutely shall not,” Brienne said.

But having set her eye on the Lannisters, there was no changing her course. She forcibly linked her arm through Brienne’s and dragged her towards where the brothers stood, exchanging pleasantries with Sir Merryweather.

Mr. Lannister was the first to notice Brienne, his mouth forming a thin smile. Brienne wondered if he would be forgiving of her, given how bluntly she had rejected his brother’s proposal. She need not have worried, however, as he stepped away from Sir Merryweather to greet her.

“Miss Tarth, I confess I did not expect to see you here,” he said. “I was not even aware that you were in London.”

“I had not announced the fact,” she said, “but I have been staying with my– with my friends Mr. Renly Baratheon, Miss Margaery Tyrell and Mr. Loras Tyrell. Allow me to introduce you.”

Mr. Lannister seemed impressed with her composure, and stepped forward to greet Mr. Baratheon and the Tyrells. “I have, of course, heard much about you,” he said, and Brienne was almost certain that she heard Mr. Baratheon laugh nervously as he bent to shake Mr. Lannister’s hand.

“And will you also introduce us to your brother?” Miss Tyrell asked innocently.
“But of course,” Mr. Lannister said, but he did not have to turn to attract his brother’s attention – in fact, Brienne was almost certain that Captain Lannister had been watching her since he had entered the ballroom.

Captain Lannister was, naturally, all politeness as he introduced himself to Brienne’s companions.

“I am so pleased to finally meet you,” Miss Tyrell said. “My dear Miss Tarth has told me so much about you.”

“Has she indeed?” Captain Lannister asked, his face carefully blank of any emotion.

“She speaks very highly of you,” Miss Tyrell continued. Brienne turned to glare in her direction.

“In that case,” Captain Lannister began – and Brienne could hear the smile in his words without having to look upon his face – “might I have the honour of the next dance, Miss Tarth?”

Before Brienne could decline, Mr. Tyrell stepped forward. “I must apologise, Captain Lannister, but Miss Tarth had anticipated an evening of boredom, so I have promised her the next two dances.”

Captain Lannister could very plainly not disguise his bemusement, nor could Brienne disguise hers. Her father had often spoken of finding help in unlikely places during his military days – and what greater battlefield to test his aphorisms than in a ballroom?

“Very well,” Captain Lannister said, “I will seek you again after those two dances.”

Still, Brienne did not meet his eye, and she took Mr. Tyrell’s arm and allowed him to escort her to the dancefloor as the music began for the cotillion. They danced in silence for a few moments before she spoke.

“Thank you,” she said. “That was most kind of you.”

“I could not bear to see you suffer in his presence,” Mr. Tyrell said. “I saw how keenly Margaery was placing you in his way, and I have been in your situation more times than I care to admit.”

“Has she always been so… forceful?” Brienne asked.

“Oh, yes,” he replied. “I love my sister dearly, but I do not like to be around her when she decides that her destiny lies in the fine art of match-making.”

“Somehow I imagine this happens far too often.”

“Far too often,” Mr. Tyrell agreed.

He was not as fluent a dancer as Mr. Baratheon – instead, it was clear that he had learnt the motions simply because he had to, and took some pleasure in acting them out, if only because he was demonstrating his own capability. It was almost a relief for Brienne to be dancing with someone who did not make her look exceedingly stilted and pathetic by comparison.

However, Brienne’s two dances could not last the night, and she would have to face the prospect of Captain Lannister asking her to dance. She knew she would not be able to refuse him, as much as she would have wished to, so it was a great relief when Lady Merryweather, the lesser of two evils, appeared beside her the moment she parted with Mr. Tyrell.

“I see you are indeed friendly with the Lannisters,” Lady Merryweather said. “That must be a useful connection at many a country ball.”
“I would not know,” Brienne said tartly, “as they have not frequented many country balls themselves.”

“I do suppose neither of them are great dancers, what with their,” – she paused, frowning, – “respective hindrances.”

Brienne clenched her jaw – how could she possibly have thought this conversation would be more pleasant than facing Captain Lannister?

“Captain Lannister is, in fact, a most accomplished dancer,” she said.

“And you have danced with him?” Lady Merryweather asked, with the kind of curiosity Brienne was now becoming accustomed to facing.

Of course, Captain Lannister chose that very moment to make his grand entrance into the conversation. “On many an occasion,” he said. “I have lost count.”

He looked at Lady Merryweather’s sour expression and put on an expression that Brienne recognised immediately as false contrition. “Oh, I do apologise for interrupting you. I simply intended to ask Miss Tarth for the honour of the next two dances.”

For the first time that evening, Brienne met his eyes. “It would be my pleasure, Captain Lannister,” she said, barely believing that the words were leaving her mouth. She did not even pause to see what sort of affrontery was writ upon Lady Merryweather’s face.

Captain Lannister smiled as he held out his arm, and Brienne returned the expression as she took it with her own.

She was not sure, but she thought that perhaps, she understood.

Chapter End Notes

It was very hard to walk the delicate line between realistic Regency racism and my own, much more modern values. So please let me know what you thought of Taena! And, you know, what you thought of everything. Comments are lovely, and at this stage of the fic, your feedback is all sorts of helpful! C:

(Also, special thanks to my reviewer Courtney who fortuitously gave me the right inspiration at the right time to get a couple of the scenes for this chapter sorted out!)
Chapter 22

Chapter Notes

I feel like this is the longest I've gone without an update, so I'll start with an apology: simply put, life got in the way. This was also a particularly hard chapter for me to write, for whatever reason.

In a few days, it will be one year since I posted the first chapter of this fic, and that is a little bit scary, I'll be honest. But more than anything, I'm really proud of myself for sticking with it and working so hard. This is bigger and better than anything else I have ever written, and I'm just... very emotional about it in general. Many thanks to everyone who's stayed with me and this story for so long. This chapter goes out to all of you!

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Brienne had not yet been dancing with Captain Lannister for very long before he attempted to initiate conversation, as was his habit.

“Red suits you, my lady,” he remarked. “Although I do not remember seeing that dress before.”

“It is new,” Brienne said.

He raised an eyebrow. “A London original, courtesy of the Tyrells, no doubt.”

Brienne did not reply. Captain Lannister had saved her from what would ultimately have been a humiliating conversation with Lady Merryweather, but that did not mean that she would revere him as a hero of society. She had not forgotten his cruelty, nor his ill-considered proposal, and she would not pardon him so easily.

“You would like Casterly Rock,” he continued. “Most everything there is red.”

“So I have heard,” Brienne said, although she had heard nothing of the sort.

Captain Lannister sighed. “When I return there for Michaelmas, I am hoping to change the place somewhat. It bears my father’s mark all too heavily.”

Brienne trained her eyes onto her feet, fixing their image in her head so that she might not have to think about blasted Casterly Rock any longer. She was beginning to realise that her name had become associated with the name “Lannister”, due no doubt to her association with the Starks, or perhaps to the idle gossip of unoccupied minds.

“I had almost forgotten how little you spoke,” Captain Lannister continued, undeterred. “I have so missed your conversational prowess.”

“I ought not to gratify you with a response,” Brienne said – she felt ridiculous as soon as the words left her mouth.

Captain Lannister smiled. “Ah, yet you are still dancing with me.”

Brienne, in turn, frowned – if she were to strand him in the swirling tide of dancing couples and
let him wash adrift, she would be the one marooned on an isle of scorn. Society never turned its
eye on the faults of men, no matter how serious their slight on a woman. Brienne knew it
intimately, had experienced it in the men who had spoken of how ill she had treated them in
breaking their betrothals, when it was their words that had driven her to sever the ties; it would be
a mistake to assume that society would not turn the same eyes on Captain Lannister and ascribe
the cause of his affrontery to her behaviour.

“Yes,” she said, “I am still dancing with you.”

“I am glad of it,” he said.

As soon as her promised dances ended, Brienne fled and sought the comfort of Miss Tyrell, and
wondered when she had begun to conceive of Miss Tyrell’s company as comforting.

“I shall not comment,” Miss Tyrell said, “but to mention that your accomplishments were all the
more prominent when dancing with Captain Lannister than with my brother.”

“You must jest,” Brienne said. “My accomplishments in this domain are few.”

Miss Tyrell gave Brienne a pitying smile. “Of course, my dear, you would not be considered the
most accomplished woman in the room by far. I simply meant that you and Captain Lannister suit
one another.”

“Now I know you jest,” Brienne said.

“Come, now,” Miss Tyrell said. “You know folly is not in my nature.”

“I would argue that folly is your nature,” Mr. Tyrell said, joining the conversation. He was fresh
from taking the dancefloor with a young lady, who had no doubt been quite forceful for him to
have joined her.

Miss Tyrell laughed. “Do not listen to my brother, dear Brienne,” she said. “He is far more
acquainted with folly than I.”

“In fairness, I believe Renly is more acquainted with folly than us both,” Mr. Tyrell said.

“Indeed,” Miss Tyrell agreed, and both brother and sister trained their eyes on a place somewhere
over Brienne’s shoulder. She didn’t dare to turn around to confirm that they were looking upon
Mr. Baratheon.

“I do wish he wouldn’t make such a show of flirting,” Mr. Tyrell said. “He will break their
hearts.”

Miss Tyrell did not respond, and Brienne could not. The three of them stood in silence for a few
moments before Mr. Tyrell declared that he would need to locate some wine as soon as humanly
possible.

The evening drew out long and tortuous – Brienne took great pains to avoid so much as looking in
Captain Lannister’s direction, and was all too relieved when a footman approached to inform
herself and Miss Tyrell that their carriage had arrived. The streets were dark but they were driven
swiftly, as though the driver could have navigated just as well were he blindfolded.

Tyrell House took on a different character at night. The elegant-but-measured rose motifs that
gathered together the corridors and staircases were rent apart by sharp shadows and the ghosts of
roses in the window boxes, and the verdant decorations were faded to the merest suggestion of
colour by the dark.
It was with some trepidation that Brienne wound her way through the dim halls, placing her feet as light as though she were trying to dance. Mr. Baratheon and Mr. Tyrell had their rooms on the other end of the house, but Miss Tyrell followed Brienne to her rooms.

“I do hope you enjoyed your first London ball,” Miss Tyrell said.

“It was agreeable,” Brienne said politely – if she were more honest and less sensible, more like Miss Tyrell, she might have said plainly that she would rather have been reading.

Miss Tyrell, of course, noticed instantly the nuance of her tone and the words left unsaid but implied. “Only agreeable? It matters not, but I’m sure in time you will come to enjoy yourself at this sort of occasion.”

“Perhaps,” Brienne said.

“I will take my leave, in that case,” Miss Tyrell said, “for I am sure you need some time alone to recover.”

“Thank you,” Brienne said. For all her folly, Miss Tyrell could be remarkably understanding, and Brienne was truly grateful.

Unlike the corridors, unforgiving by night, Brienne's temporary bedroom was reassuringly familiar. She would surely miss it upon her departure from Tyrell House. The exaggerated gestures of the decoration by no means gave an air of warmth, but they had become a sanctuary within a world so beyond Brienne’s experience and tolerance.

It was laughable, she thought, just how well she was enjoying herself, despite the sense that she ought to be elsewhere instead.

She could not sleep well that night, her mind occupied with thoughts of balls and dances, of tailcoats and red dresses. Mercifully, the day broke quietly that morning, and for the next weeks of mornings, despite all the balls to which the well-respected Tyrells were invited. Brienne was, of course, expected to attend each ball with them – either as Mr. Baratheon’s guest or as Miss Tyrell’s companion – and she had taken to dancing two with Mr. Tyrell and two with Mr. Baratheon before retiring to obscurity for the remainder of each evening. That was, of course, if Captain Lannister were not present, but Brienne had become most accomplished at avoiding him.

Balls were the staple of London society, and it was easy to see how so many people found them so enjoyable, but Brienne missed the simplicity of country life, where the balls were more scarce and the expectations less onerous. Brienne felt underdressed and underprepared to meet the standards of the London ladies, despite her new dresses and Miss Tyrell’s skilled maids preparing her hair with a deftness she had never before experienced.

The days passed in longing – for Evenfall and for Winterfell – and in the company of such friends, longing never went long unnoticed.

On the morning of their departure for the Welsh countryside, Miss Tyrell sat at the foot of Brienne’s bed as Brienne folded her dresses. “I sense an air of melancholy about you,” Miss Tyrell said. “Come, tell me what troubles you.”

“It is only that I have been overwhelmed by London, as you know,” Brienne said. She had long given up on attempting to evade Miss Tyrell’s questions, and instead answered with sincerity.

Miss Tyrell smiled sadly. “I too grew up in the countryside,” she said. “But one must accustom oneself to London. All women of a certain class will have to learn to do so at some point in their
lives.”

“I am no woman of class,” Brienne said. “I am a governess.”

“You,” Miss Tyrell said, “are a craftsman, one who sells her wares for less than they are worth. But never you mind. Perhaps your second visit to London will bring more comfort.”

Brienne placed the green dress in her portmanteau. “My second visit?”

“When you are Mrs. Lannister,” Miss Tyrell said, grinning mischievously.

Sighing, Brienne began to fold her red dress.

“Come,” Miss Tyrell said, “there is still much time before our carriage leaves. You may fold your dresses later.”

“And what do you propose I do instead?” Brienne asked. “We have already broken our fast.”

“Let us take a turn about the neighbourhood,” Miss Tyrell suggested. “It is a fine day – not a single cloud in sight!”

Brienne looked at the clock on the mantlepiece – it had just passed ten, and their coach would leave in a half-hour. “We do not have the time,” she said. “I ought to have folded my clothes last night.”

“It could not be helped,” Miss Tyrell said. “Our game of whist was vastly more important.”

On the evenings where they were not occupied with balls or dinner parties, Mr. Baratheon had taken to suggesting whist. Brienne still bore the scars of her game with the Lannister siblings, but she carried herself well as Mr. Baratheon’s partner and proved not to be as incompetent as she had previously thought herself.

“I did not win,” Brienne pointed out. Mr. Tyrell was ferociously competitive at the card table, and he would without exception partner his sister, who was either very lucky or had some way of concealing spare aces about her person.

“You will improve, Brienne,” Miss Tyrell said, “you must. It would not do for Mrs. Lannister–”

“Margaery.”

Miss Tyrell laughed. “Oh, I will stop, if you wish it. But I am right, you know. He has not stopped loving you.”

“You did not know him before the Merryweathers’ ball,” Brienne said.

“And still I know that he loves you as ardently as ever.”

Captain Lannister had used the word “ardent”, Brienne remembered, when he had proposed to her. She wondered that Miss Tyrell could sense it just from observing his behaviour from afar.

It felt as though it had been a lifetime since Brienne stood in the drawing room of Mr. Snow’s cottage at Rosings Park and faced Captain Lannister as he spoke so highly of her – and yet he had seemed to hold her so low in his esteem. Now, she was not so certain whether his insults had been intentional, and were not rather the product of his own insecurity.

But that would be patently ridiculous – all of Miss Tyrell’s talk had surely been affecting Brienne’s perception. None of this had happened to Miss Tyrell; it was Brienne’s experience only,
and she would not let anyone else’s thoughts influence what she knew to be true.

She felt less open and trusting than she had previously, but she knew that she would have to forget about it in the coming weeks. She would forget about Captain Lannister and instead enjoy the Welsh countryside with her friends – it would not be so hard, for there would be nothing to distract her, she presumed, but fields of wildflowers and stately manors.

There was the sound of a scuffle downstairs, and Miss Tyrell stood up with a start. “The carriage has arrived early!” she exclaimed. “Brienne, you must hurry!”

“You have changed your tune,” Brienne said quietly, finally placing her red dress in the portmanteau.

Miss Tyrell had already left the room, and Brienne could hear her feet fall as she ran down the corridor, shouting to alert Mr. Baratheon and Mr. Tyrell that they would be leaving soon.

Brienne did not rush – she wanted her clothing to be neatly folded, and packed so that it would not be disturbed within her portmanteau by the uneven country roads. When she was satisfied with her work, she locked the portmanteau closed and pulled it behind her. She looked over her shoulder at the extravagant room, the last luxury she would see for a long while, no doubt, as the Tyrells had made plans to stay at inns all along their journey.

A footman came to her door to take the portmanteau, and Brienne refused his help, but he in turn refused her refusal and took it from her hands before she could object further. The Tyrells were clearly so used to the constant presence of attentive servants that Brienne wondered how they might fare in a poorly-staffed inn.

Once the stagecoach was loaded with their luggage, Brienne was given a perfunctory farewell from Sir Tyrell, and she and her companions set off into the streets of London, bound for Wales.

“Do you suppose that this is such a long journey?” Mr. Baratheon asked. “I should not look forward to spending all day in this small cabin.”

“You are an imbecile, Renly,” Mr. Tyrell said. “We will not make it to Newport for another two days still.”

“I suspect the journey shall be quite boring until we reach Newport,” Mr. Baratheon said.

Mr. Tyrell frowned. “Wales is a country of trade and industry,” he said. “It will be a while still after that before we reach the countryside that we are going there to see.”

“A pity,” Mr. Baratheon said, glancing absently out of the window.

“He is so impatient,” Miss Tyrell said to her brother. “How ever do you put up with him?”

“He will be much better company once we reach our destination,” Mr. Tyrell said. “You were not with us when we journeyed to Brighton last Summer – he did not open his mouth once but to complain about the quality of the roads or the speed of the horses.”

The Tyrell siblings continued talking, but Brienne had stopped paying attention at the mention of Brighton. By now, Mrs. Stark and her daughters would have arrived there with Lady Baratheon’s party. Brienne wondered how they would be enjoying themselves – surely they would be more comfortable by the seaside more than Brienne had enjoyed London, but perhaps their company was not quite so agreeable as hers.

More than anything, Brienne wished that she knew how Sansa was faring in the company of Lord
Baratheon. Sansa had assured her mother that she no longer had feelings for the young Lord, but Brienne was not quite so convinced, and thought that it would surely be a trial for Sansa to be spending so long with him at hand.

It unsettled Brienne to have been away from the Stark family for so long. As governess to Sansa and Arya, she had devoted so much time to worrying about them that it felt remiss to be so unaware of their state of being. Over her time in London, Brienne had written to Winterfell regularly – a letter for Mrs. Stark and her daughters, and a letter for Jon and the other servants – but she had not written in several days, nor had she received any replies. She told herself that it was simply due to the business of Winterfell preparing for the family’s departure.

Brienne would make every effort to write from Wales, but there was no guarantee that there would be horsemen to deliver her missives in all the small villages they were to visit. Indeed, on this sort of holiday there was no guarantee of anything. Brienne had been told little of the details, but she was assured that Mr. Tyrell had constructed the itinerary with the utmost care.

“And is there anything that you are most looking forward to on our travels?” Miss Tyrell asked. It was a few moments before Brienne realised that she was being addressed.

“I am not sure,” she said. “I suppose that I am interested in the architecture of some of the great houses.”

“But of course,” Mr. Tyrell said. “If all goes well, we should pass through Faircastle and Ashemark, both of which have fine manors to their name.”

“I have heard in particular that Ashemark is very grand,” Miss Tyrell added. “There is a rose garden there twice the size of Tyrell House.”

“I doubt it could hold a candle to Highgarden,” Mr. Tyrell said curtly. Brienne idly wondered if the Tyrells’ country seat was just as adorned with roses as their London house. She imagined it crowded with a vase of roses at every corner, and roses on every table, and the thought made her smile to herself.

“Brienne,” Miss Tyrell said, “one day you must visit Highgarden. It is the most beautiful manor house I have ever known.”

Her comment seemed to remind Mr. Baratheon that there was a conversation in progress to which he ought to be contributing. “Ah,” he said, “but you have not seen Storm’s End. It is the most majestic house I know. Brienne! You must tell them about Storm’s End, for you were there more recently than I.”

Brienne shrank backwards into her seat under the anticipating gazes of her companions. “Storm’s End… it is rather imposing, I think.”

“But is it not beautiful?” Mr. Baratheon pressed.

“The gardens are most agreeable,” Brienne said, carefully avoiding having to admit that she found that the size of Storm’s End rather negated any claims to beauty. “And the armoury too.”

That seemed to be enough to placate Mr. Baratheon, and he nodded proudly. “I am surprised you were allowed to see the armoury,” he said. “My brother Robert was not fond of it, and dissuaded guests from fencing while they stayed within his walls.”

“I was wandering the gardens alone,” Brienne explained, “and came upon it by chance.”

“When you come to Highgarden, you will have full use of our armoury,” Miss Tyrell said,
determined to have the upper hand in this conversation. “It is nothing if not elegant, and the ironwork gates are wrought with roses. You will like it, I am sure.”

“All of the gates at Highgarden are wrought with roses,” Mr. Tyrell said quietly, but his sister paid him no heed.

“You will visit, will you not?” Miss Tyrell asked. “I do so enjoy your company.”

Brienne looked down at her feet, rooted upon the floor of the coach. “I am not sure,” she said. “I must return to my work as a governess soon after we leave Wales.”

“Oh, indeed you must,” Miss Tyrell said. “But you will visit when you are Mrs. Lannister.”

Mr. Baratheon covered his mouth to restrain a laugh, and Brienne sighed. It would be a long ride to Wales.

Chapter End Notes

Please leave a comment! I really love hearing what people think of the story!

And while you're here, I feel that I should mention that this story has been nominated for a Best Crossover award in the Fanatic Fanfics Awards, so... click here to give it a vote! (And do vote for all the other JB authors and stories!)
Chapter 23

Chapter Notes

Quite frankly, I am so over apologising for long waits between chapters. You'll just have to believe me when I say that this one was worth the wait ;)

See the end of the chapter for more notes

The sunrise in Wales was no different to the sunrise in England. Sunlight came through the windows of the inn just as it came through the windows of Winterfell, casting the same shadows across the floor, the same dust rising in its rays. And yet it was little comfort for a stranger in unknown quarters.

The comforts of the small inn in Newport were no more than Brienne was used to, and she had suspected that Mr. Baratheon and the Tyrells would seem quite incongruous without luxury surrounding them, but she had been most incorrect. Miss Tyrell in particular did not look out of place on the small bed by the window, her bags at the foot of the bed and her bonnet hanging from the doorknob. Brienne lay on her side with her eyes half-closed as the room slowly became illuminated to the new day.

Later that day their party would leave Newport and make North for Hornvale. They had planned to stay two days in Newport, however Mr. Baratheon had become restless and spoke often of how he longed for the countryside, and as such Mr. Tyrell had been most accommodating in revising their itinerary.

The sun was still low in the sky, and it would be a while yet before Brienne had to rise, so she lay silent in contemplation. At most times, their coach would be ringing with loud conversation between her three companions, but Brienne had so little to contribute that she had become attuned to picking out the spaces between words and filling them with her own thoughts. She found herself thinking about London, and how she had enjoyed herself more than she had expected. She thought also of Mrs. Stark and her daughters, and of what Brighton would be like at this time of year. She thought even of Captain Lannister, although she did not wish it.

“Brienne,” Miss Tyrell whispered, “I know you are awake.”

“I am,” Brienne replied. “But we ought to rest, knowing the extent of the coach ride ahead of us—”

Miss Tyrell laughed softly. “Indeed, we ought to. But we are not women who do as we ought to, are we?”

“You are not,” Brienne said.

“Are you excited to see Hornvale?” Miss Tyrell asked. “I find myself consumed by anticipation.”

“Perhaps,” Brienne said. “In truth, mostly I am consumed by exhaustion.”

“You wound me,” Miss Tyrell said. “I will let you sleep, then.”

They slipped easily back into silence, and Brienne rolled onto her back, forcing her eyes to stay closed. She was more excited than she would let Miss Tyrell know, but she soon fell asleep,
woken again only by a knock on their room’s door.

“My dear sister,” Mr. Tyrell said, his voice muted, “I believe that our coach is to depart on the hour.”

Miss Tyrell sat up, straightening the collar of her nightdress. “And which hour would that be, my dear brother?”

“The next one,” Mr. Tyrell said bluntly. “So make haste, both of you, and we might be in Hornvale before the afternoon.”

Brienne made sure that she was dressed within minutes, but Miss Tyrell took some time longer. Perhaps, Brienne thought, she was not as accustomed to living without a maid as she seemed.

Their coach departed for Hornvale to the sounds of wheels on cobbled stones and Mr. Baratheon complaining that they had left it later than he would have wished. “I forced myself to sleep early for this late start,” he said with a dramatic sigh.

They reached Hornvale by the early afternoon, Ashemark the next day, Faircastle two days after that. The countryside was indubitably beautiful, but despite her initial excitement, Brienne soon grew tired of it. She liked her friends, but she longed for her family – both her father and the Starks. Hornvale’s white walls and marble staircases were not half as beautiful Evenfall’s rocky coastline and muddy stables, and all the roses in Ashemark’s overlarge garden could not match the few in vases on Winterfell’s windowsills. Even the small town near Faircastle, with so many shops selling expensive fabrics and elaborate desserts, was no substitute for the milliners and bakers of the Winter Town.

Brienne’s only consolation in her sadness was that the weather had been consistently clement, and as such their coach rides had been carried through without incident. Their coach was approaching Llanisport when Brienne looked out the window and noticed that their luck may have been changing.

They came to a halt outside an unassuming inn on the town’s main street, and the coach driver wasted no time in unloading their luggage. “Seems like we’re in for rain,” he told them, gesturing at the gathering clouds. “Isn’t much to do in Llanisport when it rains – the markets shut down, and there isn’t much more to Llanisport than the markets.”

“We shall see them this afternoon,” Miss Tyrell assured him. “We do not plan on staying long in Llanisport. There is still Crakehall to visit, and–”

“Come on, then,” Mr. Baratheon interrupted. “Let us settle in our rooms before the moon rises so that we have some time to see these famous markets.”

The inn was called The Lion’s Claw, and it was by far the largest and most comfortable in which they had stayed over the last weeks. There was a maid assigned to Brienne and Miss Tyrell, and a butler to Mr. Baratheon and Mr. Tyrell, despite their assertions that they would not want to be disturbed in their quarters.

Brienne garnered the impression that Llanisport was a wealthy town – The Lion’s Claw and the arrow-straight streets of tidy houses were testament to that – and yet the famed markets were no London high street. By the coast, a maze of stalls and tents had been assembled with little care for order, selling not only local produce but foreign spices and silks, taken directly from the boats that docked at the town’s port. It was clear to Brienne that Llanisport’s wealth was from trade, not from inheritance, as it had been in every town they’d passed through since leaving Newport.
“We must buy some silks, Brienne,” Miss Tyrell said, “and one of those quaint little statues for my father. He will find it such a novelty.”

“It would more suit Orton Merryweather’s mantelpiece,” Mr. Tyrell said. “Although we ought to bring something home for father, I suppose.”

Mr. Baratheon’s attention had been drawn elsewhere. “Buy him a cane from that stall we just passed,” he said impatiently, “and let’s be done with it. Follow me!”

He set off briskly down and Brienne followed close behind. He stopped outside a tent. “I saw the sign from afar,” he said, “and knew we simply had to visit.”

The sign read that the tent was home to a fortune teller, and Mr. Tyrell reacted immediately, clasping his fingers around Mr. Baratheon’s arm. “Renly, I do not like the looks of this place. Must we?”

“I fear we must,” Mr. Baratheon said, feigning severity. “It is fate that has—”

“It is nonsense,” Miss Tyrell said, cutting short his words. “And I will stay in this market until the rain ruins my dress before I will enter that tent.”

Brienne could not have been gladder to leave. The idea of a fortune teller most unsettled her – for what possible comfort could be sought in knowledge of the future? She would rather live in ignorance of tomorrow than for it to follow her as a spectre, and she was most comforted that the Tyrells appeared to agree. Mr. Baratheon had always been prone to his flights of fancy, but Brienne had never thought him to be influenced by spiritualism. Perhaps he spoke in jest – one could never quite tell.

After an hour of walking the length of the market, Brienne’s feet had begun to ache, and when the first drops of rain began to fall, she readily seized upon them as an excuse to return to the inn. Her companions were not so readily swayed – “It will not rain more heavily than this, I am sure,” Miss Tyrell had asserted – but as the clouds shrouded the sun and the raindrops became more frequent, it became clear that it would not be long before the market was forced to close its stalls and the people of Llanisport returned to their homes.

“It makes no matter,” Mr. Baratheon said. “I am sure that The Lion’s Claw will have a card table for us.”

The evening passed in measures of whist – five games before their dinner, seven games before the candles were burned to stubs, and one more game by the light of the moon before the clouds returned and the rain resumed its steady beat.

“I shall not miss Llanisport,” Miss Tyrell told Brienne as they prepared to sleep. “Oh, the market was a pleasant distraction, but this weather does so make me miserable! I am sure we will see the sun in Crakehall tomorrow.”

In truth, Brienne did not mind the rain. It reminded her of Evenfall, a corner of the land so beset by foul weather and storms. No thunder heralded Llanisport’s rain as it did in Evenfall, but it was reminiscent enough to call her home to mind.

“I am sure we will,” she said.

Brienne’s father had once told her that the Tarth family was cursed with the worst possible circumstances whenever they would wish for the best – she had presumed it a joke at the time, but when her travelling party awoke to the news that, due to a torrent of rain overnight, all roads in and out of Llanisport were closed.
Mr. Baratheon was, predictably, the most upset by this. “And how long will we be forced to stay in this small, muddy town?” he asked, pushing a plate of half-eaten breakfast across the table.

“It will not be so bad,” Miss Tyrell said, her voice strained. “The markets will be open, perhaps…”

“Oh, hang the markets,” Mr. Baratheon said. “We saw them yesterday, and now we have seen them, and do not need to see them again. And there is nothing else here – it is just as our driver warned us!”

A maid approached their table and took Mr. Baratheon’s plate. “Begging your pardon,” she said, “but I heard you asking what there is to do in Llanisport.”

“Ah!” Miss Tyrell said. “You are local; pray, tell us your recommendations!”

“Casterly Rock is not two miles out of town,” the maid said. “The road won’t be too wet for a good coach, and they say it’s the grandest house in all Wales.”

“Casterly Rock,” Brienne echoed, her eyes wide.

“Did you not realise how near we are?” Mr. Tyrell asked. “I did not include it on the itinerary, as I did not think we would have time to see it, but it seems as good a destination as any.”

“And I am most curious to see where your friends the Lannisters were raised,” Miss Tyrell said.

The maid rose to her toes. “Milady is a friend of the Lannisters?”

“Not a friend,” Brienne said, glancing at Miss Tyrell. “Merely an acquaintance.”

“You have to see it,” the maid continued.

“Then we shall see it,” Mr. Baratheon decided.

Brienne’s shoulders sagged. Of course, she would not have to face Captain Lannister himself – no, he and his brother were safely in London until Michaelmas – but surely the very reminder of his existence would set her head aspin.

Later in the morning, a local carriage arrived to take their party to Casterly Rock. It was, as the maid had said, a short ride, and the house soon rose from the distance.

Casterly Rock, like Llanisport, sat on the coast, but unlike the town, the front of the house faced away from the sea, with the extensive grounds stretching inland. The estate’s gardens were well-kept – they were neither as severe as Storm’s End nor as sprawling as Winterfell, but the rows of trees stood proudly, and what few flowers there were lined the road to the entrance in elaborate limestone pots. Autumn leaves covered the grounds and floated in the lake, a body of water that seemed to be as large as the house itself.

Their carriage stopped, and it took Brienne a few moments before she could step out onto the ground. The significance of this visit, of her being at Casterly Rock, did not pass by her unnoticed, and she was sure that Miss Tyrell had considered it too. She was not sure if she could endure the mocking title “Mrs. Lannister”, not while she was here.

Each step up to the entrance felt like approaching the gallows.

“It is a beautiful estate,” Miss Tyrell said, looking back the way they had arrived. “I cannot believe
you did not think to include it on our itinerary, brother!”

Mr. Tyrell’s gaze passed over Brienne before settling on his sister. “I felt that it would not be necessary,” he said.

“I am not sure how I shall forgive this grave error of judgement,” Miss Tyrell said.

A maid greeted them and showed them through the entrance hall to Casterly Rock’s many rooms. At every turn, Brienne found herself denying the house its beauty, because she could not begrudge the house its occupants. She recalled Captain Lannister saying that he wished to change the decorations, because they reminded him of his father, but Brienne had trouble associating everything she saw with anything other than the Captain. He so pervaded her thoughts that it left her in constant unease. She expected to see him standing around every corner, leaning on every mantelpiece – it was a wonder that she had lasted so long in the manor.

As they stood in a drawing room overlooking the lake, Miss Tyrell took Brienne’s arm and led her to a window. “To think,” she whispered, “that you could have been mistress of all this!”

Brienne’s face grew hot. “Do not speak of it,” she said quietly.

It was hard not to think about it – that this beautiful house could have been hers, had she only been willing to accept the proposal of a man so unkind, so sinful, so…

“Handsome,” Miss Tyrell said. “I can think of no better word to describe a property such as this.”

“It is,” Brienne said. “Truly.”

“Do you not regret it?” Miss Tyrell asked. “Why, if I were in your position–”

“I do not regret it,” Brienne said.

A small voice of doubt – suspiciously alike to Miss Tyrell’s voice – told Brienne that she might regret it, but she silenced that voice. Her place was at Winterfell, as a governess. She did not deserve a home so handsome as Casterly Rock, nor did she wish to pay the price of marriage for the opportunity to live there. No house was worth that.

Mr. Baratheon approached them, the same glimmer in his eye that had heralded his discovery of the fortune teller at the markets. “Brienne,” he whispered, “Hill has said that she will show us the armoury. What do you say to that?”

Brienne fought back a smile. “I say that I should like some fresh air.”

The maid, Miss Hill, showed them down a flight of stairs to the armoury, which backed onto the cliffs bearing over the ocean. The wind was crisp and waves crashed sharply against the rock, but Brienne would not have noticed her surrounds were there Biblical lashes of rain and Olympian lightning. Her eyes were drawn immediately to row upon row of rapiers, armour and helms, a collection far superior to that of Storm’s End, although she would not tell that to Mr. Baratheon.

“I think we may stay here a while,” Mr. Tyrell said.

Hill nodded. “Very well,” she said. “I shall return in a half-hour to show you the ballroom.”

“You have been so kind,” Mr. Baratheon called after her. When she was safely out of sight, he turned to Brienne. “Now, my dear friend, let us fence!”

It had been so long since she had crossed swords with a Lannister at Storm’s End that Brienne
Brienne could not decline the opportunity to do the same with a Baratheon at Casterly Rock. Mr. Baratheon fought well, but his movements were formulaic, more style than strategy. She found him predictable, and was easily able to land blows.

“I must yield!” he exclaimed. “You are far too skilled for the likes of me. My dear Loras, on the other hand…”

Brienne looked at Mr. Tyrell – he was a short man, and by no means stocky, and Brienne wondered if his fencing was as perfunctory as his dancing. She was pleasantly surprised to find her attacks matched easily and fluently, and her lunges parried effortlessly. He stuck mostly to the quarte and sixte positions, but deviated when it most caught Brienne off-guard. Captain Lannister and Mr. Baratheon had both fenced to show off their skills, but Mr. Tyrell fenced to win.

“I have not seen a bout so enjoyable in many years,” Mr. Baratheon commented as Brienne removed the armour that she was sure she would not have been allowed to borrow.

“I have not fought a bout so enjoyable in many years,” Mr. Tyrell said. “Miss Tarth, you are a most worthy opponent.”

Brienne could not find the words to respond to such praise, but Miss Tyrell gave her a look of encouragement, so she felt she ought to speak. “You are too kind,” she said.

If she had not yet regretted her decision to spurn Captain Lannister’s proposal, after seeing the armoury, she allowed herself even the smallest misgivings. When Hill returned, as promised, to show them to the ballroom, Brienne felt a strange and perhaps misplaced longing.

The ballroom was directly above the armoury, its windows facing the open sea. The curtains were thrown open and, although the furniture was covered by sheets, the room had an air as though there had been dancing on its floor as recently as the previous night. Brienne had to remind herself that she did not care for dancing – else she might have longed to take to the floor, the ballroom lit as it was with the few rays of sun that made it through the clouds.

“We ought to return to the inn,” Mr. Baratheon said. “Perhaps there will be news about the roads.”

“You are so keen to leave,” Miss Tyrell teased. “Would that we could stay a week in Casterly Rock!”

Mr. Tyrell frowned. “It would not do to fall even further behind our itinerary,” he said.

They thanked Miss Hill and left through the entrance hall. A carriage was parked at the foot of the stairs, but it was not the one that they had arrived in.

“Perhaps there are other visitors,” Miss Tyrell mused.

“If the roads are still closed, I would not be surprised that there are,” Mr. Baratheon said.

Brienne opened her mouth to ask where their carriage might have gone, but was shocked into silence as the door of the carriage before her swung open and Captain Lannister stepped out. His right arm hung limply by his side, and he steadied himself on the carriage with his left. He did not turn around, had not noticed them, and Brienne wondered if she might be able to hide behind a tree before he did.

Miss Tyrell was far less adept at hiding her surprise than Brienne. “Captain Lannister!” she called.

He spun abruptly to face them, and as Miss Tyrell approached him, full of salutations and questions, his eyes settled on Brienne, and she found that she could not look away.
She stepped backwards, her only conscious thought spared to hope that he could not somehow sense her regret.

Chapter End Notes

Please leave a comment! Even if you're reading this two weeks, two months, two years after it was published, every single comment in my inbox fills me with delight.

Also, also. It's happening, guys. This story is fast approaching its climax. I hope you're as excited as I am :D
Brienne was no more prepared for her second visit to Casterly Rock than she had been for her first, and yet there was iron in her will as she stepped through the doors of the inn. Captain Lannister had been the cause of so many hours of vexation, had so tormented that she had oft lost her way as she waded through the concerns that clouded her mind. She stilled her spirits and forced a smile onto her face.

On the occasion of their previous encounter, Captain Lannister was nothing but cordial to Brienne’s companions – this, of course, led to nothing but entrenched doubt for his motivations. He had offered thrice and most effusively to fence Mr. Baratheon and Mr. Tyrell, and had dedicated his grounds to the good cause of their party’s pleasure. And as the roads leading Llanisport would be unfit for travel for at least two more days, they had little else better to do.

“Do you not think he is being suspiciously kind?” Brienne asked, stepping into the carriage behind Miss Tyrell. “His invitation was most–”

“Brienne, you must not worry so much,” Miss Tyrell said. “Perhaps he is a truly kind man and you have misjudged his character!”

Brienne frowned at her. “You know that is not the case.”

“Then perhaps he does have a reason for being so kind,” Miss Tyrell said, “but I should think you know exactly what it is.”

The carriage felt very small as it eased into motion. Soon, Casterly Rock loomed large on the horizon. The manor taunted its guests with a winding path to the entrance, alongside the lake and amongst the trees, and Brienne found the grounds more welcoming now that they were more familiar.

Captain Lannister waited at the manor’s open doors, leaning against the doorframe. Before he could so much as greet their party, Brienne noticed that he wore no iron on the end of his right arm. His sleeve, however, hung beyond his wrist to save others the sight.

“It is such a rare delight to see you again so soon,” he greeted them. “I will have Hill prepare tea in the drawing room.”

Miss Hill was a slight woman who had been a maid at Casterly Rock long before Captain Lannister was born, and Brienne remembered from their initial tour of the grounds that she knew the house very intimately indeed. She disappeared to fetch the tea through a door that Brienne had not even noticed was there.
“He seems an excellent host,” Mr. Baratheon said quietly, as Captain Lannister strode ahead. “In truth, he is rather too excellent.”

“It is as I said,” Brienne said, “he is not usually so—”

“Miss Tarth,” Captain Lannister said, a loud interruption to their whispers, “Hill tells me you visited the armoury yesterday. I trust you found it satisfactory?”

Brienne opened and closed her mouth before she felt capable of responding. “Indeed,” she said, “although ‘satisfactory’ is perhaps an understatement.”

“Well said, Miss Tarth,” Mr. Baratheon said. “I could not be more in agreement. Although it does not quite rival the armoury at Storm’s End.”

“I suppose your disagreement cannot be helped,” Captain Lannister said. “I am not so adept with words, but you might care to settle this dispute by the sword.”

Mr. Baratheon looked affronted, and yet amused. “You do not waste time with pleasantries, Captain,” he said. “But I would not take up the sword against a crippled man.”

Brienne had never heard anyone speak so plainly to Captain Lannister but for his brother, and she wondered momentarily if he might take offense to Mr. Baratheon’s bluntness – a great irony, Brienne thought, since both men were equally matched in their flagrant flaunting of social convention.

“And I would not take up the sword against one who fights better with words,” Captain Lannister said. “I may yet have the upper hand, Mr. Baratheon.”

“Very well,” Mr. Baratheon said. “I will fence you, but do not expect to win.”

They sat to take tea, and Miss Tyrell took her opening to dominate the conversation. She had a barrage of questions for Captain Lannister – how many gardeners did he keep? How many horses in the stables? How many staff in the kitchens? – and Brienne listened with the uneasy suspicion that Miss Tyrell was asking on her behalf. The teasing had eased in the last weeks, but Brienne knew that her friend still thought of her as the future Mrs. Lannister.

“My brother, too, will fence you,” Miss Tyrell said. Mr. Tyrell frowned, but did not say anything. “He is more accomplished than Mr. Baratheon.”

“I look forward to it,” Captain Lannister said. “We shall adjourn, then, to the armoury.”

“I should have liked to watch,” Miss Tyrell said, “however Miss Tarth and I have discussed a tour of your gardens.”

Brienne attempted to mask her surprise. More than anything, she would have been curious to see how Captain Lannister faired against his opponents, but she also knew that there was no chance of arguing with Miss Tyrell. Captain Lannister’s face mirrored the surprise Brienne felt, and he glanced at her before speaking. “Naturally I will have Hill give you a comprehensive tour.”

“That is most kind of you,” Miss Tyrell said.

The gardens were, of course, resplendent with the delights of nature and despite the recent rain – one could not fault Casterly Rock in any aspect of its dedication to matching its facade to the Lannisters’ reputation. Yet Brienne would have been more comfortable in the armoury, instead of trailing behind Miss Tyrell and Miss Hill, clasping her skirts to keep the hems from muddying as they walked past rows of orchids.
“This one is particularly beautiful,” Miss Tyrell commented, her fingers hovering above the petals. “Do you know its botanical name?”

“I’m afraid not, milady,” Miss Hill said. “I can ask our gardener, if you wish.”

“Would you?” Miss Tyrell asked, although she doubtless knew the answer.

With the maid gone to fetch the gardener, Miss Tyrell clasped Brienne by the arm. “You will invite me here regularly, when you are—”

“Miss Tyrell!” Brienne exclaimed. “You must not speak like that.”

“I asked you if you had any regrets, and you told me you had none,” Miss Tyrell said. “Might your mind have changed since we have seen how amiable Captain Lannister has been?”

“It has not changed,” Brienne said.

Miss Tyrell shook her head sadly. “It is a great pity that you will not marry the man, Brienne.”

“You make it sound as if it is my fault!” Brienne said angrily. “He has not given me a chance to change my mind, even were it changed of its own accord.”

“He still loves you,” Miss Tyrell said. “I cannot say it more plainly than it is writ on his every feature. He will propose again – I am sure of it!”

“Miss Tyrell, you are—”

“Brienne, you will not listen to me, and yet—”

“Margaery, I—”

“Ladies.”

Brienne spun away from the orchids to face Captain Lannister, standing before her and flanked by Mr. Baratheon and Mr. Tyrell.

“I hope I am not interrupting your conversation,” he said. “Hill said you had asked to speak to the gardener, but I fear he is ill-disposed.”

“I am sorry to hear that,” Miss Tyrell said. “I was so hoping to know what sort of—”

She paused, looking over her shoulder at the orchids. “Oh, I have quite forgotten which one I had asked about.”

“That is most convenient,” Captain Lannister said. He looked up at the clouded sky. “I suggest we take a turn about the grounds before it rains.”

Casterly Rock had grounds for a year of turns, and Captain Lannister suggested that they walk in the grove by the lake. It was a small copse of tall trees, framing one side of the lake and leading up to the stables. They walked closely together at first, but before Brienne could ask where they were going, Mr. Baratheon and the Tyrell siblings had disappeared ahead among the trees, and she was alone with Captain Lannister.

“You will notice I have been making an attempt at friendship,” he said after a brief silence. “It does not come naturally, but I am determined to win you to my cause.”
“Your cause?” Brienne asked.

“My cause is repairing our friendship,” he said. “I would like us to speak on good terms before I– before I further embarrass myself.”

Brienne bit her lip nervously – could it be that he was planning to propose again, just as Miss Tyrell had predicted? “We were never friends to begin,” she said coolly.

“Very well, then,” he said. “My cause is now simply to ensure that we are friends.”

Brienne said nothing, willing the rest of their party to return and rescue her from her predicament. But she would never have such luck – Captain Lannister paused by the lake’s edge. She could not run forever from this conversation, especially not now that she was stuck in Llanisport for the indeterminate future.

“Do you remember how we met?” he asked.

“Unfortunately I do,” Brienne replied.

“And do you remember that you were not daunted by my iron hand?”

“I was not,” she said, “and I still am not. But you have not worn it today.”

Captain Lannister held up his right arm. The stump of his wrist was protected by cloth, and with his left hand he began to unclasp the ties holding it in place. It was clearly not an easy task with one hand, and instinctively Brienne reached forward and helped him, their fingers brushing together.

“I do not need your help,” he said, although there was no malice in his words.

Brienne fought a smile. “You could not pick up a trick of cards without my help,” she said. “Do not think that just because I dislike you, I will leave you to struggle.”

“You astound me,” he said, shaking his head.

The cloth over his wrist came loose, and Brienne pulled it away without looking. She folded it between her fingers nervously.

“You can look,” he said. “I will not begrudge you your disgust.”

“Disgust?” Brienne met his eyes properly for the first time since they had encountered one another in London. She noticed that he was afraid – how could such a proud man be afraid of a physical defect? “I am not disgusted,” she said, looking down at his arm. It was a stump of flesh where a wrist and a hand and fingers ought to have been, but it did not horrify her.

“Shall I fetch the smelling salts?” Captain Lannister joked.

Brienne looked up at his face again, raising her eyebrows. “I was not daunted by your iron hand; I will not be daunted by your bare arm.”

“Then you are stronger than half the soldiers I’ve ever known,” he said.

A breeze blew through the grove as Brienne and Captain Lannister stood in silence. “Is your arm not cold?” she asked.

“It will be worse in winter,” he said flippantly.
“Let me at least fasten this back on,” she said. Brienne had been a governess for too long, and her instincts took over as she replaced the cloth over Captain Lannister’s arm.

“You see, Brienne,” he said, “we are becoming friends already.”

“We are not friends enough for you to speak to me with such familiarity,” she said, pulling the ties sharply.

“Your Miss Tyrell calls you by your name,” he said, “and you by hers. I have known you for longer than you have known her, surely—”

“You are being childish,” Brienne said.

Captain Lannister let out a sigh, turning into a laugh as he brought his left arm up to rest his fingers upon Brienne’s wrist. She flinched backwards – this excess of familiarity had always been a fault of Captain Lannister’s, but Brienne was not sure if it was his touch or the breeze that made her shiver.

“How can it be,” he said, “that although you have nothing for me but cruelty, I–”

“Pray, do not finish that thought,” Brienne said.

Captain Lannister’s fingers tightened. “I do not want you to think that I admire you solely because you are not disgusted by my crippled arm.”

“I do not think that,” Brienne said, although she could think of no other possible reason for his purported admiration.

It was strange, she thought, that this very man had once been so cruel and teasing, who now stood before her with such kindness in his eyes. She could not – would not – believe that his care for her was more than a superficial, fleeting amusement, and that it would pass. As she stood so close to him, in the grove by the lake at Casterly Rock, the full realisation of the fear she had been avoiding since his proposal hit her like the waves crashing against the cliffs of Llanisport – no matter how base or how shameful his actions, she would not believe that anyone could love her, a woman of limited accomplishment and lacking in any sort of beauty.

Men had ignored her, spurned her, outright mocked her whenever she had crossed their paths. Captain Lannister sought her in a crowd, took her arm, protected her from the scorn of others. And if Brienne were truly honest with herself, he had done so even before he made his feelings known. If she had not been so set against him and blinded by her love for Lieutenant Hunt, perhaps she would have seen, might have known sooner–

“I do not think that,” she said again. “I know now that despite your cruel tongue, your pride, your unfortunate family, you– you are a good man, Captain Lannister, and I trust your word, though I can scarce believe it.”

“This again,” he said, a smile forming on his face. “I recall when I told you I loved you, you were not satisfied with my reasons. Must I remind you?”

“No!” she said quickly. “No, you–”

“Ah, but I will not make the mistake of being ungentlemanly again, Miss Tarth,” he said, threading his fingers between hers. “I have learnt from the error in my ways, yet I cannot but speak plainly.”

“Then do not speak, Captain Lannister,” Brienne said.
“You may call me Jaime,” he said. “It is not too familiar if I give you permission.”

“I refuse.”

“And I insist.”

Brienne could scarce believe their closeness, their ease—she worried that they might always have had this ease in conversation, since fencing at Storm’s End at least, but that she had not noticed. She worried at how familiar they had become so quickly, but that, of course, it had not been quick at all. “I recall suggesting that you ought not to speak,” she said, shocked by how small, how quiet her voice sounded.

Captain Lannister opened his mouth to respond, but closed it shortly after. He removed his hand from Brienne’s and brought it to rest on her neck. They stood silently, eyes locked in an unanswered question. Pursing her lips, Brienne nodded slowly.

The reality of the situation hung heavy in the chill air. Captain Lannister leant forward and rested his forehead against Brienne’s. “Tell me now if your feelings are unchanged, and I will go no further,” he said.

“I do not know my own feelings,” Brienne said honestly. “I–”

She paused, distracted by a drop of water landing in her eye. She lifted her hand away from Captain Lannister’s arm and wiped at her eye, embarrassed that she had held his wrist for so long.

He laughed. “Are you weeping, Miss Tarth?”

Brienne pulled her head away from his and looked up at the sky beyond the trees. “That would be ridiculous,” she said. “No, I think it’s–”

Another drop fell through the leaves, and more on the ground around them.

“–raining,” Captain Lannister finished, his tone harsh with disappointment.

The rain was stayed somewhat by the leaves, but soon it fell so heavily that Brienne and Captain Lannister could not even count on the grove for cover.

“Are the stables nearby?” Brienne asked.

“The house is nearer,” Captain Lannister said. “We must run, else we’ll be soaked to the bone.”

“We shall be soaked nonetheless,” Brienne said, but she followed him as he set off briskly through the trees. They ran along the path that the carriage had followed that morning, Captain Lannister gripping his right arm as though it would fall off, and Brienne holding her skirts off the ground but still tripping over them with every step.

Miss Tyrell and Miss Hill were waiting at the entrance when Brienne fell up the stairs, gathering herself before she could make more a fool of herself by collapsing to the marbled floor.

“My dear Miss Tarth,” Miss Tyrell said, “where have you been?”

“I could ask the same of you!” Brienne said, pushing her wet hair out of her eyes.

“We were simply so engaged in our discussion that we wandered ahead,” Miss Tyrell explained. “Perhaps I encouraged it,” she added in a whisper.
Brienne frowned, and looked over her shoulder to where Captain Lannister stood discussing something with Miss Hill. His shirt clung to him like a second skin, his long hair hung limp, and there was dirt all over the legs of his britches, but he had never looked half so handsome in Brienne’s eyes.

“You are quite out of breath,” Miss Tyrell noted. “Hill, might you show Miss Tarth to the conservatory so that she might rest a while?”

“Oh course,” she replied. “If you will both follow me…”

“Our carriage will return soon,” Miss Tyrell said, “so you may change into dry clothes when we return to the inn.”

“I shall have to,” Brienne said, looking down at her ruined dress.

“Miss Tarth,” Captain Lannister said, “the roads will be closed, but I will visit you in Llanisport tomorrow, if you will permit me.”

“You needn’t ask,” she said.

He smiled, and Brienne felt her heart begin to beat faster. “I am glad we are friends enough for that,” he said.

Her eyes followed him up the staircase and out of sight, and Miss Tyrell took her arm and led her to the conservatory, following Miss Hill.

“And I was right to leave the two of you alone, it seems,” Miss Tyrell whispered. “There is something changed in your countenance, Brienne.”

“There is,” Brienne said, “although I could not tell you what it is.”

“Could you not?” Miss Tyrell said.

Brienne thought of Captain Lannister’s hand on hers, of their heads pressed so close together, of his kind words – she found that she could not separate this Captain Lannister from the man who had so oft taunted her when they were new to one another’s acquaintance, but nor did she want to.

And she thought that perhaps she could tell Miss Tyrell what had changed, but she would not. Not yet, not until she was sure that the shivers she’d felt and the quickness of her heart and the shortness of her breathing were not just products of the cold and the running.

Not until she was sure that it wasn’t something else.

Chapter End Notes

Please leave a review! I love to hear what people are thinking of this fic so far C:

(And while it seems like things are getting Serious, we’ve still got some way to go...!)
Chapter 25

Chapter Notes

A few things happen in this chapter. I had a bit too much fun writing it. I should have been working. Oh well. Enjoy. ;D

See the end of the chapter for more notes

“Llanisport has grown on me,” Mr. Baratheon said, reclining in their carriage as it sped towards the Lion’s Claw. “I should not be inconsolably sad if the roads were to remain closed for another week.”

“Nor should I,” Mr. Tyrell responded, “but I might be inclined towards petty annoyance at the disruption of my itinerary.”

Brienne sat in silence – she could not leave Llanisport soon enough. She could not rid her mind of Captain Lannister, and that afternoon’s encounter in the grove by the lake had done nothing to ease her worries. Perhaps their friendship was inevitable, but Brienne would not allow herself to relent to fate with so little resistance. His very presence made her uneasy, filled with such feelings as she could not begin to describe.

“And you, Brienne?” Miss Tyrell asked. “I am sure that you will be sad to leave Captain Lannister.”

“Quite the opposite,” Brienne said. If Mr. Tyrell and Mr. Baratheon did not before suspect the nature of her shared history with Captain Lannister, surely now they must have, given Miss Tyrell’s incessant teasing.

“I will be sad to leave him,” Miss Tyrell said. “I will be sad to leave his house. Casterly Rock is quite marvellous. I am most enamoured with its grounds.”

It was hard to disagree with Miss Tyrell’s sentiment. Casterly Rock was perhaps the most splendid manor Brienne had ever seen, and although she had once been determined to detest it due to its owner, he was not so thoroughly worthy of her hatred as she had thought.

The inn seemed uninviting after the warmth of Casterly Rock, though its walls were the same cold stone. It was early still, but the inn’s patrons had returned from the market, sheltering themselves from the rain, and the walls rang with unfriendly conversation.

“I should like to retire to my quarters,” Miss Tyrell said. “That was quite enough excitement for one day!”

“I will join you,” Brienne said. Her clothes were still laden with water, and she felt an utter fool – it would be best that she retired from polite company for the evening.

Once dry and dressed, Brienne took to her bed with a book, a history of Llanisport that the inn kept for guests. Miss Tyrell sat beside her, reading over Brienne’s shoulder.

“Tell me something fascinating about Llanisport, Brienne,” Miss Tyrell said.
Brienne sighed. “This book informs me that the Llanisport markets have been trading since last there was a king named Henry. I wonder if it’s not an exaggeration.”

“I would not be surprised if they had been trading since last there was a king named Æthelred,” Miss Tyrell said. “The markets have an air of the ancient, do they not?”

“I would venture that they do not,” Brienne said. “This town was built on trade, and—”

“And has there not been trade since the Romans first came ashore?” Miss Tyrell pressed.

“There has,” Brienne conceded.

“You have made up your mind to think the worst of Llanisport,” Miss Tyrell said. “Or perhaps you simply maintain a facade. Do you think it is not obvious that you care deeply for Captain Lannister?”

Brienne looked down, her gaze settling on the word “and.” Miss Tyrell had hit upon the matter that most made her uneasy, and she did not wish to speak of it, for fear that she would find the answer for herself, and that the answer would be the one she dreaded the most.

“You do not need to lie to me,” Miss Tyrell continued, “even if you must continue to lie to yourself.”

“In truth I am confused,” Brienne said. “I know not my own feelings. He— he has been unfailingly kind to me since I turned down his proposal, and I know now that I was wrong to think ill of him. I know him to be a good man, but I cannot yet judge the nature of my esteem.”

“It is not wrong to love him,” Miss Tyrell said. “He is, as you say, a good man. He is wealthy too, more wealthy than most girls of your station could ever imagine. And his house—”

“Margaery! You must not speak in that way,” Brienne said. “If I did love him, I would not love him for his worldly possessions.”

“Then I’m sure you are better than every other girl who has loved him,” Miss Tyrell replied. “You may allow yourself some pride in your moral superiority.”

“I shall allow myself no such thing,” Brienne said. “Pride goeth—”

“Pride goeth hand-in-hand with happiness,” Miss Tyrell finished. “I wish for nothing more than your happiness, and if Captain Lannister brings you that happiness, I wish you would not deny it to yourself.”

“I understand your sentiment,” Brienne said, “but as I told you, I do not know if I love him. Would that I could give you an answer.”

“He is visiting you tomorrow,” Miss Tyrell said, “and if I am right – which I often am, you know – I believe he will renew his proposal. Now, how many hours does that give you to make up your mind?”

Brienne did not want to entertain that possibility. “I sincerely hope you are wrong. I cannot just decide whether or not I love him.”

Miss Tyrell laughed, standing up from the bed and stretching her arms to the ceiling. “The very fact that you are considering it means you already know the answer,” she said, before turning to leave the room. “I will see you for our evening meal, will I not?”
“You will,” Brienne said. She looked back down at the book – she had lost her place, and picked up at the description of the first stalls at the Llanisport markets. The words were familiar, so she must have read them before, yet she read them again, and again.

It was a cold night, and Brienne woke the next morning to the sound of rain on the roof. The prospect of Captain Lannister’s visit left her giddy – whether with excitement or fear, she could not tell – and made it hard to return to sleep, so she lay in silence until Miss Tyrell woke. Their party took breakfast together, and Mr. Baratheon spoke excitedly of his plans for the day.

“The rain has eased,” he said, “so we might make a second attempt on the markets. Or I have heard that there is a lesser Lannister manor further out of town – if the roads permit it, that is.”

“I should like to see the grandeur that befits a lesser Lannister,” Mr. Tyrell said.

“I should like to buy some more silks,” Miss Tyrell said. “Might we begin our day at the markets?”

“Most certainly!” Mr. Baratheon said. “And Miss Tarth? Have you any suggestions?”

“You know I must remain here,” Brienne said.

“Ah yes!” Miss Tyrell interjected. “Captain Lannister has promised our dear Brienne a visit, and she cannot – nay, she must not let him down!”

“She might, if it were her will,” Mr. Tyrell said. Brienne remembered how he had danced with her in London to save her from Captain Lannister, and she was grateful that once again he provided some temperance to his sister’s fancy.

“Although,” he continued, “I believe it might be her will to remain.”

Brienne could not respond, in part because she still did not know the answer.

Her friends left for the markets, condemning her to the desperation of waiting, an act that required such forbearance and patience as Brienne was not sure she possessed. She first tried to read the history of Llanisport, but she found that she could not concentrate well enough to form coherence and meaning from the words before her. She spent minutes pacing the room in circles, glancing out the window, returning to her book, jumping to her feet when she heard the scrape of carriage wheels or the whinnying of a horse. There was a knock on her door as a maid came to take her linen, but it left Brienne’s heart pounding nonetheless.

At last, as the sun crossed the middle of the sky, there came a second knock.

A maid stood at the door and greeted Brienne with a curtsey. “Miss Tarth? Captain Jaime Lannister is here to see you!”

She spoke as though she could scarce believe that a Lannister was wasting his time on such a plain and unaccomplished girl – Brienne was used to the tone of surprise, not only in the voices of others, but in her own mind. It was hard enough for her to believe that a Lannister was wasting his time on such a plain and unaccomplished girl.

And yet, their continued association had hardened Brienne to scurrilous whispers. She bore the disbelieving stares with all the dignity that she could muster, unfortunate as she was, and she looked the maid directly in the eye as she told her that she would receive Captain Lannister in her chambers.

“May I call you Brienne?” he asked, by way of greeting. “Or am I still to address you as Miss
“You may address me as Miss Tarth, Captain Lannister,” she said. “We are not yet so familiar that I will allow you to so casually flout convention.”

“I am not half so good at anything as I am at flouting convention,” Captain Lannister replied, adjusting his iron hand.

“I know,” Brienne said. She walked to the chairs by the mantelpiece, gesturing for Captain Lannister to join her. She was not sure how to conduct herself in such a situation — as an unwed woman, it was unseemly to be alone in a room with an unwed man. Perhaps Brienne was as just adept at flouting convention.

“I trust you are recovered from our ill-fated excursion yesterday,” Captain Lannister said, sitting down.

“Indeed,” Brienne said, “I am most well. And yourself?”

“Yes, yes,” Captain Lannister said. “It takes more than some rain to make an invalid of me.”

They sat in uneasy silence. Brienne was not willing to be the first to speak — she did not want to make herself vulnerable to whichever sharpness of wit Captain Lannister chose to send her way, but Captain Lannister was so incorrigible, looking so relaxed and with a conspiratorial smile on his face, that she had to say something, if only to distract herself from his gaze.

“Should I send for a maid to bring tea?”

“I am quite fine without,” he said. “Surely we are not so inept at conversation that we require something to distract us?”

Brienne most certainly was so inept at conversation, but she acquiesced with a nod.

“Are your companions not going to join us?” Captain Lannister asked.

“No,” Brienne said, “they have decided to spend the morning at the markets.”

“I did not know I would be receiving you alone,” Captain Lannister replied.

Brienne smiled, despite herself. “Your tone belies your purpose,” she said.

He laughed. “Ah, you have seen through my ruse! I ought to have known better than to try to fool you. Yes — I came here with the sole intention of seeing you. Does that surprise you?”

“You could no longer surprise me,” Brienne said. “You have already given me the greatest shock of my life when you—”

She could not finish her speech. It was still difficult to acknowledge to herself that he had once proposed marriage, despite everything, and she could not acknowledge it aloud.

“I do not regret my actions,” Captain Lannister said quietly.

Brienne found that her breathing had become shallow, and she gripped the arm of the chair to steady herself. “I wonder if I do regret my actions,” she said.

Captain Lannister opened his mouth to speak, but was interrupted by the third knock on Brienne’s door that morning.
“Beg your pardon, Miss Tarth,” the maid said, “but we’ve just had two letters arrive for you.”

Brienne took the letters – the first was from Arya, and the second from Mrs. Stark. The postage was marked from Brighton on the first and Winterfell on the second – surely they could not have returned so soon? – and had come to Wales via Tyrell House. Both letters were weeks late, the paper warped by rain, and had clearly passed through many hands before making their way to their intended recipient.

“These are from the Starks,” Brienne told Captain Lannister as the maid left. “You will not mind if I briefly read them?”

“Of course,” Captain Lannister said, leaning back in his seat. He did not look pleased – Brienne told herself that she would resume their conversation as soon as she had read the letters. She stood by the mantlepiece and opened the first, written in Arya’s messy hand.

Dear Miss Tarth,

A most unbelievable thing has happened! You will not believe when I tell you, for I can scarce believe it myself. Our dear Sansa has eloped with Lord Baratheon!

This very morning, I awoke in the room we shared to see her bed empty, and a letter addressed to me on the pillow. She wrote most floridly of her love for the young Lord, and that they had been planning a dramatic elopement for many months now. She did not say where she was going – only that we ought not look for her, because she would most certainly be happier with Lord Baratheon than with her family! I am quite proud of her, although I think she might have chosen a better husband than that vile boy. Do not tell mama I said any of that.

Of course, mama has taken to her room ill. She did not react well to the news, and I cannot tell if she is more angry at Sansa for running away, at me for not noticing she left, or at Lady Baratheon for giving birth to Lord Baratheon. Lady Baratheon’s reaction was far more amusing than mama’s – she screamed and shouted for hours, throwing crockery at the maids and berating the footmen for not stopping them from leaving.

I do not know what will happen now. I hope Sansa writes to us soon with news of her marriage, and I will try to write to you again soon. I look forward to your next letter from London!

With love,

Arya

By the letter’s close, Brienne’s mouth hung open in shock. Arya was right – Brienne could not believe what she had just read. Hastily, she tore open the second letter.

Dear Miss Tarth,

I am sure by now you have received Arya’s letter, although you have not replied. I understand that the post is of varying reliability in rural Wales, and I was forced to send this missive first to Tyrell House. I write to further inform you of the situation regarding Sansa and Lord Baratheon’s elopement. It has been just over a week since we returned to Winterfell, as Lady Baratheon no longer desired our presence in Brighton, and there has been no further word from Sansa.
As far as we have ascertained, a coachman drove them to London, and we have been able to track them no further, nor have they been sighted in Gretna Green. My brother Colonel Tully is in London, searching high and low, but thus far he has not written with any news.

We fear the worst: that Lord Baratheon has no intention of marrying Sansa. Please return to Winterfell as quickly as you can – Arya is inconsolable, Brandon and Rickon have been called home from school, and I cannot carry this burden alone.

I hope to see you soon,

Catelyn Stark

Brienne gripped the letters tightly, tears forming in her eyes.

“Brienne!” Captain Lannister exclaimed, taking to his feet. “Are you quite well?”

“I have had some terrible news,” she said – no sooner had the words left her mouth than she began to sob. “It is–”

Without warning, Captain Lannister drew Brienne into his arms, running a hand through her hair, and she leant into his weight, letting him support her as her knees went weak. “Come,” he said, “tell me what has happened.”

Brienne was surprised that he did not already know – but then, he was not on the best of terms with his sister, and Brienne presumed that Lady Baratheon would want to suppress this scandal as best she could.

“Sansa Stark has eloped with Lord Baratheon,” Brienne said, her speech muffled by Captain Lannister’s shoulder. “They have–”

He pulled away from her and stepped backwards. “Eloped?”

“Yes,” Brienne said, “but they have not made it to Gretna Green, rather, Mrs. Stark believes them to be in London, and has sent her brother to search for them, and–”

“I must leave at once,” Captain Lannister interrupted. “Send my apologies to your friends that I cannot stay to greet them.”

Brienne stared at him for a moment, unable to respond. “You must leave–”

“I am sorry,” he said, fastening his coat and dashing from the room. For want of anything better, Brienne followed him. She ignored the stares of the patrons and maids, following Captain Lannister onto the street, where his coach awaited him. His driver seemed surprised to see him so soon, but didn’t say anything as he held open the door of the carriage.

“When will I see you again?” Brienne asked, before she could stop herself.

“Soon,” Captain Lannister said. “Soon, Brienne, I promise.”

His words disappeared into the mist as a gentle rain began to fall. The drops caught in Brienne’s eyelashes and mixed with her tears, her vision so blurred that she could barely see the coach as it sped away, splashing water on the cobblestones outside the inn.

A cold wind blew through Brienne’s skirts and her hair fell into her eyes. She clutched the letters
close to her chest, allowing herself to weep openly. There was no-one on the street, mercifully, to witness her shame.

After such a scandal, Captain Lannister’s promise to see her again felt hollow. If he had previously had misgivings due to her unfortunate connection to the Starks, then now he would not even want to be in the same room as her. The Stark name would be forever besmirched – no-one would despise the Baratheons, though, no-one would blame the Lannisters for what their son had done. Lord Baratheon would recover, he would marry Margaery as though nothing had happened. Arya would never be a wife, Mrs. Stark would fade into societal obscurity, and Brienne would never find work again.

If once she had the prospect of marriage, it was no longer. Brienne felt smothered by the thought that she ought to have accepted Captain Lannister’s offer when she had the chance. Now, he would never propose again, not to a woman so tainted by scandal.

The rain became steadily heavier, its needle-sharp drops directed purposefully to Brienne, striking her with the cold efficacy of a revelation that she had been avoiding for too long. If Captain Lannister had ever loved her, he would not now. He would never love her as she loved him.

Chapter End Notes

Please leave a comment! I’m curious about what everyone’s thoughts are, and all that.

(Also, you can always drop me a line on tumblr if you want to chat!)
So it's been an awfully long time since the last chapter, hasn't it? I've had a lot of queries over whether or not I'm continuing this fic, but please don't worry! This story is very dear to me and I could never bring myself to abandon it. I hope you'll forgive me for taking my time. On the bright side, I did just finish my double major, so yay me! In what little time I've had over the last few months, I've been writing more relaxing things. This isn't really a relaxing fic to write, because there's a fair bit of research and concentration involved, and in the end what it took for me to finish this chapter was setting aside a day and doing nothing else.

Having said that though, I did have a lot of fun with this chapter, and I hope you enjoy reading it!

The carriage left early, with the sun low in the sky and a chill wind cutting through the air. Casterly Rock cast a long shadow on Llanisport, blocking the sun as did the clouds – but when the clouds cleared and the rain stopped, and the roads were reopened, the carriage still drove in the shadow of the great manor. Indeed, Brienne felt she may live her life in the shadow of Casterly Rock.

Since the letters from Arya and Mrs. Stark, Brienne had not slept. She had not the courage to leave her room at the inn until the carriage arrived to bear her to London, and thence to Winterfell. Her friends were to stay in Wales until the conclusion of their itinerary, and they had exchanged a promise to meet again, or at least correspond, when the ordeal came to an end. Of course, the ordeal would not end – Brienne was certain that the damage had been done, and as soon as her back was turned, they would confide in one another that it was not seemly to maintain a friendship with someone so tainted by scandal.

She would not blame them.

For the duration of the journey to London, Brienne composed letters in her mind. She wrote to her father, to inform him of the events, and to say that she would soon return to Evenfall to begin rehearsing her role as the manor’s spinster guardian. She wrote to Sansa, to ask her why, but to nonetheless wish her only happiness. She wrote to Captain Lannister, although she could not say about what.

Winterfell had always brought comfort to Brienne, but after days and nights away, it felt as unfamiliar as Rosings Park. The carriage delivered her to the entrance, and she carried her own portmanteau down the path. The blue roses bore the frost of the encroaching season, and the sky was grey with a threat of rain – not the unmitigated torrents of Llanisport nor the storms of Evenfall, but the weak yet steady raindrops of the North.

Mrs. Stark did not meet her at the door, nor Arya, but the footman Jory, who took her portmanteau with a sort of sadness not usually seen on his face. He gave only a perfunctory greeting.

“There is no atmosphere for cheer in Winterfell today,” he told her.
“I am sure the family are very much shaken by the news,” Brienne said.

“You must be shaken too,” Jory said.

Brienne looked down the entrance hall, almost expecting to see a coating of dust over everything. “I am,” she said. “I am, very much.”

Her bedroom, too, was foreign. She might almost have been more comfortable in an inn in Wales. She sat on the bed quietly, ignoring her portmanteau in the corner. The house was quiet, but her ears rang with a noise – it was one she could not identify, but it plagued her nonetheless.

She could not settle, and so she took to her feet.

The sky was grey as she left her bedroom, a suffocating blanket over the atmosphere. She passed through the servants’ quarters and into the kitchen, deserted but for the cook, who did not stop to acknowledge Brienne’s presence. And unchanged from when last she was there, the groundskeeper Rodrik’s hut stood at the edge of the garden.

Brienne hesitated before knocking at his door.

“My, it is good to see you again, Miss Tarth,” Rodrik greeted her, his usual amiable manner replaced by a more sullen demeanour.

“Good evening, Mr. Cassel,” Brienne said. “How– how have you fared?”

“We have all fared the same for this misfortune,” he said.

Brienne blinked, unsure how to respond. “I wonder if I might–”

She did not need to finish. Rodrik understood immediately, and left to fetch her the wooden pole that acted as a substitute sword. “For all the comfort it may give you,” he said.

Brienne thanked him, and made for the copse of tall pines that backed Winterfell. It had been so long since she had held a sword in her hand, and she longed for the reverberations down her arm in retaliation for a strike. She brought forward her arm and bent her knee.

“En garde,” she said, to no-one in particular.

The pines responded by bristling their needles in the wind, and Brienne lunged.

“Miss Tarth?”

She spun around, lowering her weapon. Arya Stark stood before Brienne, with her fists clenched and her face downcast. Among the tall pines, she looked so small.

“Miss Stark,” Brienne said, willing her voice not to convey her sadness.

“Will you teach me?” Arya asked.

Brienne had not expected the question, and she remained silent for a few moments before responding. “I will,” she said. She extended her hand to pass Arya the pole, but then thought the better of it – it was long and heavy, and her young charge would scarce be able to lift it. Arya seemed to read her thoughts, and knelt to choose a fallen branch from the needle-matted ground.

“Face me as though you would a mirror,” Brienne instructed. Arya wrote with her left hand, and as such, Brienne saw fit to teach her to fence with the same.
“Like so?” Arya asked.

Brienne nodded her confirmation. “Place your– for you, it would be your left leg in front of your right, and bend your right knee.”

“And my arm?” Arya asked.

“Like so,” Brienne said, bending her right arm at the elbow and moving back to put some distance between herself and Arya; room enough for their makeshift foils to meet at the tips.

Brienne took a step forwards, her wrist in quarte, and Arya mimicked her motion by stepping backwards.

“I was so proud of her, at first,” Arya said. Brienne did not need to ask to whom she referred. “I was so proud that she had found someone she loved so much that she would put aside decorum and expectation to run away with him.”

Brienne moved her wrist to sixte, and Arya responded in kind.

“But I should have known better than to expect a cad like him to treat her with the respect she ought to command,” Arya continued. “You have heard, I’m sure, that they are not married. That they never made it so far as Gretna Green. That they are likely never to marry.”

Brienne could not respond. Instead, she demonstrated an étude, cycling through the positions and watching closely as Arya matched her movements. She was keen-eyed, and her natural talent would have her make short work of the basic hand positions and stances.

“I do not care about the shame it will bring to our family,” Arya said. “I do not care if I never find a husband because my name is so tainted. I care that my own sister has been treated so ill!”

Arya lunged forward and crashed her branch against Brienne’s pole. Brienne reacted on instinct and parried the thrust, knocking Arya’s branch out of her hand. It was not until the branch fell to the ground that Brienne realised Arya had not lost control – she had let it slip from her grasp, and she fell to her knees, her shoulders hunched and her hands covering her face.

Brienne knelt beside Arya, her hand hovering over her charge’s back.

“It is not fair,” Arya sobbed, “that he should do this to her. That she–”

Arya broke her own sentence with weeping, cutting through the quiet of the copse. Brienne was never so good at comforting people as she ought to have been, but she rested her arm around Arya’s shoulders nonetheless.

“It is beyond cruelty for him to wrong her so,” Brienne said. “For a boy of such fortune to take it upon himself to ruin the life of such an innocent girl…”

It struck Brienne that perhaps beyond her circle, such tragedies were no doubt common – that a man would take advantage of a woman for his own ends. True proposals delivered with good intention were a rare privilege, not a regular occurrence. Brienne felt foolish all of a sudden, foolish that she had thought a woman of her station and accomplishments could afford to turn down such a proposal.

Because she now felt differently towards Captain Lannister, did that then mean that, if she had lovelessly accepted his proposal, she would have come to feel the same? If she had ignored his cruel words and poor excuses, would she have learnt the depth beyond his sharp tongue?
Had she known, would she have acted differently?

“I wish she had never loved him,” Arya said quietly.

*I wish I had never loved him*, Brienne thought – it would have been so much easier.

Would that she could simply tear Captain Lannister from her thoughts, as though his presence in her life had been imagined, as though the fleeting moments of their acquaintance had not felt like years. He was etched as freshly in her mind as the smell of the pine trees around Winterfell, or the feel of the chill air on her skin. Brienne did not envy Sansa’s position – rather, she envied Sansa’s blind trust in love. Brienne had long since learnt that love was not constant, nor was it ever certain. She had learnt that love did not come for the likes of her. She had been so averse to love that she had not noticed it before her eyes, yet looking back on Captain Lannister’s every action, it was writ in his gestures and sung in his words.

But she was not wrong for turning him down.

For every man like Captain Lannister, every man whose love rang true, there were Lieutenant Hunts and Lord Baratheons tenfold, and there was no way to know which he would be after so brief an acquaintance as hers had been with Captain Lannister at the time of his proposal. As she knelt beside Arya, so many confused thoughts clouding her head, Brienne finally felt closer to clarity – there was no point in rumination and regret. Rather, Brienne would turn her mind to her current duties, as governess to a family wracked by scandal, and to a young girl who needed her now more than ever.

“Come,” Brienne said, “let us go inside and out of the cold. I will teach you to fence another day.”

Arya nodded, wiping her eyes and allowing Brienne to help her to her feet. They walked slowly to the house, and Brienne returned her pole to Rodrik in his hut – that, at least, gave Arya cause to laugh.

“I am impressed that you have been managing to fence without our knowledge,” she said, her voice shaking, on the edge of tears. “I only found you today because I had been informed of your arrival.”

“A governess is many things,” Brienne said, “but above all, she is discrete about her private life.”

“And she is strong,” Arya said, with less tremor in her voice. “She must be, to wield a sword.”

“Any woman can wield a sword,” Brienne said. She left her next thought unvoiced – *it is how she wields it that matters.*

Arya did not reply – they had returned into the house, and their silence was as much deference as fear. “My mother wishes to see you,” Arya said eventually. “She sent me to find you, so she will be impatient.”

“I will make haste, then,” Brienne said. “Is she in the drawing room?”

“She is in her bedroom,” Arya said. “Please – she is not herself. Do not be frightened.”

“I will not,” Brienne promised, yet she could not help be alarmed that Arya would not escort her to Mrs. Stark’s chambers. The flight of stairs had never felt so long a climb.

The door to Mrs. Stark’s bedroom was slightly ajar, but no light came through to the corridor. Brienne knocked quietly, and her knuckles raised dust with no shaft of sunlight to catch it and make it something beautiful instead of something unsettling.
“Do come in, Miss Tarth,” Mrs. Stark said.

Hesitantly, Brienne pushed the door open. Mrs. Stark sat in the dark at her dressing table, staring intently at her mirror as she powdered her face.

“No doubt Arya has recounted to you the full sorry story,” Mrs. Stark said, pausing from her powdering only briefly to indicate that Brienne take the chair beside her.

“She has,” Brienne said, “and I have garnered what I could from your letter.”

“It is a sad state of affairs,” Mrs. Stark continued. “Of course, Colonel Tully is the most suited to be searching for them. If they are in London, I have no doubt that he will find them and force them to marry.”

Brienne thought she oughtn’t mention Lord Baratheon’s betrothal to Miss Tyrell, but she did wonder at the surety in Mrs. Stark’s voice.

“I am sure that, given time, they might have married already,” Mrs. Stark mused. “And given time, they surely will – but I intend for Colonel Tully to ensure the marriage occurs, to allow no room for uncertainty.”

“Of course,” Brienne said quietly.

“They will need to wed at Winterfell,” Mrs. Stark continued. “Or perhaps Storm’s End – I can see some merit in the young Lord marrying at his own seat. My dear Sansa will wear the finest gown in the country, and there will be a prominent feature in the society pages.”

It was uncomfortable to hear Mrs. Stark talk about a wedding with such ideation in her voice. Brienne shrank into her chair until she felt as small as possible.

“You will be in attendance, of course,” Mrs. Stark said, “and I will invite your father as well. I should like to keep Lady Baratheon from making herself present, however.”

“It is her own son,” Brienne said. “I do not think that would please her; and you have been so civil to her–”

“Indeed,” Mrs. Stark said icily. “But the civility must end. She has written to me that she intends for Lord Baratheon to marry his betrothed, your friend Miss Tyrell.”

Brienne bit her lip, willing herself not to speak in Miss Tyrell’s favour. It would not do, but nor would she vocally wish Lord Baratheon on either Miss Tyrell or Sansa.

“How was Wales?” Mrs. Stark asked, as though she was only now remembering Brienne’s previous absence.

“Wales was very pleasant indeed,” Brienne said.

“And did you see much of the countryside?” Mrs. Stark pressed.

“We visited many country manors,” Brienne said. “Hornvale, Ashemark, Faircastle, and indeed, Casterly Rock–”

“Casterly Rock,” Mrs. Stark spat. “I wish you would have nothing to do with those Lannisters. They are all good-for-nothing, Miss Tarth.”

Brienne struggled to keep her mouth from a frown. She had no kind words to spare for Lady
Baratheon, but her brothers… Mr. Lannister was a perfectly kindly man, and Captain Lannister—Not for the first time, Brienne scolded herself that she would not think about Captain Lannister.

“The grounds were quite delightful,” Brienne said, hoping it might distract Mrs. Stark from her anger.

“Oh, I have no doubt they were,” Mrs. Stark said, “for they were lacking their owners. Come, let us talk of something more pleasant. Let us talk of my Sansa’s wedding.”

It seemed that Mrs. Stark could think of nothing else. Her obsession, evident in her speech, was most distressing to Brienne, and she could understand why Arya had warned her not to be frightened. While Mrs. Stark spoke, she clung to her powder brush as though she might drown if she let go. Brienne sat silent, transfixed in morbid curiosity by the details of the flowers and the dresses at Sansa’s wedding.

“And yet there has been no news from my brother,” Mrs. Stark said, her voice suddenly turning downcast.

“Is it just Colonel Tully searching?” Brienne asked. “Or has he enlisted the help of his companions?”

“It is just him, so far as I know,” Mrs. Stark said. “But you make a good suggestion. I must write to him immediately and suggest that he broaden his efforts.”

Brienne did not know why she spoke her next words – only that they had left her mouth before she took pause to consider whether or not they were sensible words, given the circumstance.

“Perhaps I might write to the younger Mr. Lannister,” she said. “He maintains a presence in London, and he has many connections—”

Mrs. Stark dropped her powder brush.

“You will do no such thing,” she said. “You will not mention their name in my household.”

“I must apologise,” Brienne said.

“Do not think I haven’t heard tell of your friendship with Captain Lannister,” Mrs. Stark said, before Brienne could respond.

Brienne’s eyes widened. “Friendship? Mrs. Stark, you are mistaken—”

“Then if he is no friend of yours, you will not mention him.”

That seemed to be the final word on the matter, and they sat in silence for a few moments. Then, abruptly, Mrs. Stark took to her feet, her chair clattering backwards behind her. Brienne flinched, but she was rooted to her own chair by the very fear Arya had told her to avoid.

“Leave me,” Mrs. Stark said firmly, not looking at Brienne. “Leave me, please.”

There was a desperation in her voice that made Brienne feel like the very ground beneath her feet had begun to shake.

“Leave.”

Brienne stood hastily, her skirts clinging to her and weighing her down, pulling her like the tides that drown errant sailors. She did not look back at Mrs. Stark as she left. She walked briskly down
the corridor, her pace quickening when she heard wails coming from Mrs. Stark’s chambers.

Of course, how could she do anything but cry?

Arya was waiting nervously at the bottom of the staircase, clinging to the bannister, and Brienne simply shook her head. She could not be around anyone, and so she fled to her bedroom, the one room in the house where she would not be disturbed.

No harm cut more deeply than the damage dealt by an army flying the flag of love, she thought. There was more pain that in Mrs. Stark’s cries than Brienne could imagine – but, she reminded herself, she knew what it meant to be reduced to tears by love, and she had experienced more than once what it meant to lie slain beneath that flag.

She could not blame Sansa for the destruction she had left in her wake, nor could she blame Arya for initial joy for her sister. She could not blame Mrs. Stark for her sadness, nor for her deeply unsettling optimism. No-one was so guilty as love.

Brienne reached her bedroom and closed the door behind her with a terrible sense of finality. She lay face down on her bed, imagining the world to cease turning about her. She had lost the charge she thought of as a sister, she had left her friends in Wales, and she would likely never again see the man who had so captured her heart.

There had been such a complacency in her happiness, and pride in her own worth, that she had refused to acknowledge. It was as though after Renly had torn her heart asunder, and after Lieutenant Hunt had shattered it to pieces, she had thought there was nothing more to break. But no amount of willing her pride to return would unmake the sadness that had befallen the Stark family. Brienne could do nothing but lie still and helplessly close her eyes to the blinding light of reality as she waited, as they all waited, for news of Sansa’s safety.

Chapter End Notes

Haha, remember how this is called Before Destruction? Now we’re getting into the After.

I feel like I don’t emphasis enough that at its core, and like its progenitor Pride and Prejudice, this is essentially a story about women, their relationships, and the way they fit into a society that is geared against them. So this chapter happened. Please leave a comment and let me know your thoughts; I pretty much always want to discuss fic things. Or, hit me up at memordes.tumblr.com for a chat!
Chapter Notes

For the record, this morning I decided how I wanted this chapter to end, this afternoon I wrote the last scene, and tonight I've written the rest and then tidied it up. I feel like this counts as starting the new year on a good note?

Enjoy!

The days following Brienne’s return to Winterfell saw Brandon and Rickon return from school. Mrs. Stark would not descend the stairs to see Brandon, who, without the use of his legs, was confined to lower levels unless someone carried him. Rickon, however, spent hours in his mother’s room and by her side. Brienne knew she would be glad of the company – Arya had become sullen and refused to spend time with any other than the servants and her bastard brother Jon, and Brienne herself had not returned to Mrs. Stark’s chambers since her first – and last – visit after her return.

It had been weeks since the boys had been recalled, but the headmaster of their school, Mr. Luwin, had refused to interrupt their tutelage. He had written to Mrs. Stark, pleading that the best way for boys in their situation to escape scandal was through continued education, and Mrs. Stark had acquiesced, being, as Brienne estimated, in no right mind to quarrel.

Rickon, perhaps, was too young to fully comprehend what had happened – he talked cheerfully of his first term at school, and of all the friends he had made, without a care for the sombre nature of the household. Brandon – older, and more perceptive – suited his mood to those around him, and spent most days in Winterfell’s library.

Brienne had heard stories of the library – it had not been much used by Brigadier Stark before his death, nor by his wife, but by his sister Lyanna. Since Lyanna’s marriage to Domerick Bolton, it had been in disuse until Brienne’s arrival as governess. Brienne read often on her own, but she read more often with Sansa and Arya. Now, Arya refused to sit indoors for so long, and Sansa was not there at all. Brienne was glad, then, that the library was seeing use again.

With Brandon and Rickon for company, Brienne had taken to dining with them, and she felt the atmosphere of Winterfell might brighten. She wished more than anything that the family might be united, but first, she had to persuade Arya to join them for their evening meal – her brothers had been returned for three days before Arya conceded that she might not dine with the servants, but only for one night.

It had not been easy to persuade her.

“You are doing us a favour,” Jon told Brienne, “in taking this one off our hands for an evening.”

“I am delightful company!” Arya protested.

“You are too delightful for our company,” Jon said, “and I’m sure your brothers miss you.”

“You are my brother,” Arya said.
Jon smiled at her. Brienne thought he always looked so despondent when he smiled.

“Don’t worry about me,” he said. “I’ve got many a friend here.”

Brienne led Arya to the dining room, and they were met with a broad smile from Brandon.

“Arya,” he said. “It’s good to see you properly, at last.”

“I am only here for dinner,” Arya said.

“Will you come to the library with me afterwards?” Brandon asked.

Brienne schooled her features into those of the encouraging governess, and she and Arya exchanged a look.

“Very well,” Arya said.

As the food arrived, Rickon cast a sullen look at Brienne. “Miss Tarth, why does mama never join us for dinner?”

“Mama is unwell,” Brienne said. “It would be impossible for her to leave her room as she is now. But I am sure she will recover soon, so you shouldn’t worry.”

“But she is well,” Rickon said. “I sat with her today! She is already recovered!”

“It is not that sort of sickness, Rickon,” Brandon said quietly.

“Then she must join us,” Rickon declared.

Brienne frowned; she could see that the conversation was heading into hazardous territory. “I will speak to her tomorrow and ask her,” she said.

Of course, she had no such intention – more likely, she would ensure that Rickon was distracted and then ascend the stairs, spending some moments in another room, and then return to tell him that his mother would not spend evenings with her children. Brienne did not like to lie, but she would have liked less to revisit Mrs. Stark. Apart from anything else, she had been doing exceedingly well at repressing her feelings for Captain Lannister, and she knew that if she returned to the scene where she last spoke of him, she would no longer be able to ignore his presence in her mind.

It was funny, she thought, how even such a ruinous love could so corrupt her morals.

“Thank you, Miss Tarth,” Brandon said. “I am sure Rickon will appreciate that.”

“I will,” Rickon agreed.

“It would be my pleasure,” Brienne said.

They sat in peaceable silence for several moments, before Arya’s fork clattered from her hand.

“Miss Stark?” Brienne began. “Are you–”

“She will not come,” Arya said. “She will never come again! Don’t you see, Rickon? She does not care about any of us. All she cares about is Sansa, Sansa who hasn’t even written to us since she ran away!”

“Arya,” Brandon said, his voice heavy with warning beyond its years, “please don’t–”
“I will not!” Arya shouted. “I will not sit here!”

She took to her feet and left the dining room – Brienne knew that they would find her in the servants’ quarters, but it would do no good to run after her. It was clear that Arya did not desire their company, and it would have been wrong to force her.

Although she knew she was right in letting Arya go, Brienne still felt as though she had failed. She had so concerned herself with bringing unity to the Stark family that she hadn’t realised that perhaps what would bring them happiness was isolation. She had been too distracted of late, too caught up in her own sadness to do her utmost as a governess in these times of trouble. She had to devote herself entirely to the happiness of Mrs. Stark’s children, for she was sure that her own contentment hinged on theirs.

“I’m sure she shall return,” Brienne said to Rickon, attempting to smile.

Rickon did not respond, and turned his eyes to his half-emptied plate, downcast. “I do not think I am hungry any longer, Miss Tarth.”

Brienne was neither sure that she could stomach more food. “We will end dinner early, then,” she said.

“Miss Tarth,” Brandon said, “will you join me in the library?”

Although Brandon was never directly her pupil, Brienne always admired the young boy in his maturity, even though it had been forged by tragedy. She had never known Brigadier Stark, his heir, or his ward, but their loss had scarred the Stark family deeply – and as such, the family’s fortitude never failed to impress Brienne.

“I will,” Brienne said. “Rickon, will you join us too?”

“I would like to sit with mama,” Rickon said.

“Then you may,” Brienne said, and he left without another word.

Brienne stood, and signalled for a maid to clear the dining table. Jory appeared too to move Brandon to his bath chair, which Brandon steered towards the library.

“There are so many books to read at school,” Brandon explained, “but no stories. It is not that I don’t enjoy learning, yet… of course, we have many novels in this library that I would not be allowed to waste time with while I am at school.”

“I confess, I have spent much time myself with the novels in Winterfell’s library,” Brienne said.

“It serves as a good distraction,” Brandon said.

They came to the library, and Brienne helped steer Brandon’s bath chair – he was adept at navigating the corridors himself, but corners and doorways posed a challenge, given the chair’s unwieldy size.

The library’s tables were piled with books that Brandon had been reading. Most of the gaps in the shelves were on lower shelves, but there were some higher, where Brienne or Jory had helped him reach for books.

“I hope that soon mama will join me in the library,” Brandon said, his voice soft, as though he was admitting some great secret.
Brienne pulled out a chair at the reading desk and sat facing Brandon. “You must not think that you should take on any responsibility,” she said. “You are the heir to Winterfell and to the Stark name, but that should not mean anything different after—after what has happened.”

“I must be strong,” Brandon said. “If I am not, then what of Rickon? What of Arya?”

“You are strong,” Brienne said. “Your family has weathered greater storms than a scandal in society. And sometimes—,” she paused, choosing a book from the table and picking it up, “—sometimes, it is alright to allow yourself to be weak, too.”

Brienne remembered how she had stood on the street outside the inn in Llanisport, how it had rained and how she had cried until she could no longer tell her tears from the heavens’. She had allowed Captain Lannister to make her weak, and then resolved that she would not let Sansa’s elopement do the same, that she would let the shock of the elopement cover her own feelings, because there was no way anyone could guess why she grieved.

If she were a stronger person, she would tell herself the same things she told Brandon. There was, of course, no shame in weakness. But a weakness brought about by love? There was no honour in such a weakness, no dignity.

“I— I will keep that in mind, Miss Tarth,” Brandon said.

“As will I,” Brienne said.

Brienne kept the book that she held in her hands over the next few days, reading it in her spare time, between tutoring Arya and entertaining Rickon while his mother wept. She would sit by the window in the drawing room, letting the winter sun be her candle.

She did not think much of it when the bell at the door rang, summoning the footman to Winterfell’s entrance hall. Brienne rose from her chair, prepared to deliver a speech she had rehearsed over and again for the eventuality of visitors—seven times, all since Brandon and Rickon’s return, she had told a caller that Mrs. Stark was unwell and would be unable to receive them. She tried not to let the ease with which she now lied worry her.

Jory nodded a greeting to Brienne as she approached the door. “Miss Tarth,” he announced, “Lady Baratheon.”

Brienne could not fathom what possible reason Lady Baratheon might have conceived of to call upon the Starks, but there could be no doubting her intentions. It was, of course, inevitable that Lady Baratheon would wish to gloat about the Starks’ fall from societal favour, and to reassert her own superiority.

“Lady Baratheon,” Brienne said, “I am afraid that your visit comes at an ill time. Mrs. Stark is unwell to receive—”

“Pray, do cease your apologising,” Lady Baratheon said, her tone brusque, “for we both know it is hollow. It is you I wish to speak to.”

“To me?” Brienne asked. She fought to keep her voice calm, but she was too startled to respond otherwise.

“Unless you are Miss Brienne Tarth’s long-lost sister,” Lady Baratheon said.

Brienne felt as though the blood drained from her face—there was a coldness in the way Lady Baratheon spoke that Brienne had scarce experienced before. She remembered her conversation with Lady Baratheon at Storm’s End, after a fateful game of whist, and wrung her hands together
at the memory. “Most droll, my lady,” she said.

Lady Baratheon turned to Jory. “You may leave,” she said sharply. “Miss Tarth – might I trouble you for a tour of the gardens?”

Her sudden politeness was laced with falsity, and Brienne could not but be wary. Still, she had no choice but to lead Lady Baratheon back through the entrance and down the path. There were some flowers in bloom, but not many, and as such Brienne found very little to point out.

“No doubt you have seen Winterfell’s famous pine trees,” Brienne said, filling the silence. “They are at their most majestic now, nearing Christmas.”

“I did not come here to admire your pines,” Lady Baratheon said, “as well you know.”

“Forgive me, Lady Baratheon,” Brienne said, “but I do not see what reason you might have for engaging me in conversation.”

“You do not,” Lady Baratheon echoed – and then, to Brienne’s surprise, Lady Baratheon laughed.

“My lady?”

“Then you are more idiotic than first impressions suggested,” Lady Baratheon said, “and here I thought you something of a bluestocking. How can it be that you are ignorant of my reasons for calling? Are you a fool, or do you play the fool?”

Brienne was vaguely aware that her lack of response only solidified Lady Baratheon’s low opinion of her intellect, but she could not collect her thoughts. Lady Baratheon’s vitriol spoke of something sinister, but Brienne had done nothing of late that she thought might cause affront – she had scarce left Winterfell for the past weeks.

“Well?” Lady Baratheon pressed. “Can you account for the rumours?”

“I must confess,” Brienne said, “I know not to which rumours you refer. If you are here to discuss the elder Miss Stark’s elopement with your son–”

“Now I know you must jest,” Lady Baratheon said. “Do you mean to tell me that you think the public to be unaware of your engagement to my brother?”

Brienne stepped back as though she had been struck. She did not need to ask which brother Lady Baratheon meant – she was certain that she already knew. “Lady Baratheon, I can assure you–”

“Do go on,” Lady Baratheon interrupted. “I would dearly love to hear any excuse, any lie you have for me.”

“I am not engaged to your brother,” Brienne said plainly, “nor do I know how such a rumour came to be.”

“Of course; I doubt gossip reaches so rural a household when its occupants are in seclusion,” Lady Baratheon said. “Nevertheless, you must tell me plainly: do you deny that you are engaged to Captain Lannister?”

“I do deny it,” Brienne said. “I cannot say it plainer than that.”

“Very well,” Lady Baratheon said. “As my brother has not yet replied to my missive, I have no choice to accept your word.”
As the conversation lulled, Brienne breathed deeply and looked to the pines above her. This seemed so sudden, and so baseless – but Lady Baratheon had sounded so convinced that Brienne wondered whether, after all, it was not so unrealistic that she might be engaged to Captain Lannister.

“You must promise me,” Lady Baratheon continued. “Promise me that I will never have to hear that such a rumour is true.”

Before she could collect her thoughts, Brienne opened her mouth to respond.

“I will make no such promise.”

Despite Lady Baratheon’s scandalised expression, despite all the social conventions that rendered such a match improbable, and despite the unfortunately finite history between Brienne and Captain Lannister, it was not a promise she could make. Brienne had sworn that she would marry for love and nought else, and although love had shown its true, ugly nature to her, in that moment, Brienne found that it still bloomed in her. And like the dying embers in kindling reigniting to set a fire ablaze, Brienne felt every hope she had in love swarm together, and they became rage.

“You–” Lady Baratheon began.

“You will not dictate my life to me,” Brienne said. “I– I am sorry, Lady Baratheon, but Captain Lannister is not yours to give away, either. I am not engaged to him, but were I ever, I would not seek your permission.”

“How dare you speak to me in such a way!” Lady Baratheon shouted. Brienne was sure that all of Winterfell would have heard her.

“You asked me to speak plainly,” Brienne said, breathless with audacity, “and I find myself unable to lie.”

“You would do well to reconsider your status,” Lady Baratheon said. “I am the Lady of Storm’s End, and you are but a governess to a fallen family. Do not dream that you could marry someone such as my brother.”

“I do not dream of marrying your brother,” Brienne replied, raising her voice in anger. “I am not some hopeless maiden, Lady Baratheon, lying awake and weeping by candlelight. But if I ever did wish to marry him, and if he wished to marry me, I would not let you stop either of us.”

Brienne’s words felt all too real – once, she knew, Captain Lannister had wished to marry her. Although that would be true no longer, Lady Baratheon did not know that, nor did she need to. Brienne would not let her life be someone else’s to control.

“I have misjudged your character,” Lady Baratheon said. “I had thought you a homely governess and a foolish young girl. Now I see that you are a scheming aspirant. My brother’s fortune is not yours to take at your own whim, Miss Tarth.”

“Nor would I want his fortune,” Brienne said. “It seems that you have misjudged me a second time. What can I say to you that will convince you of my honesty in this matter?”

Lady Baratheon’s eyes were set in a hard frown. “You are a liar,” she said. “I see that plainly now. I cannot even trust your word that you are not engaged to my brother.”

“And yet I remain unattached,” Brienne said.

If they were men on a busy street in London, they might have thrown punches by now, or
challenged one another to a duel – but it was unseemly for women to fight, and it would have been most inappropriate for Brienne to raise her voice further than she already had, although her tone did not yet match her fury.

“You will regret ever involving yourself in my family’s affairs,” Lady Baratheon said.

“You cannot tell me what to regret,” Brienne snapped, “as much as you cannot tell me who to marry.”

“I shall stand for this insubordination no longer,” Lady Baratheon said, her voice wavering with ire. “I will not have both yourself and Miss Stark as my sisters.”

“Miss Stark… ?”

Lady Baratheon’s face changed from anger to glee as Brienne’s heart dropped to her feet. “Truly, no news reaches you in Winterfell.”

“I do not understand,” Brienne said, although she feared that she very much did understand.

“I take no leave of you, Miss Tarth,” Lady Baratheon said abruptly. “I send no compliments to Mrs. Stark. I shall see to it that we have no more cause for contact.”

Brienne did not reply. She stood against a pine to steady herself as she made sense of Lady Baratheon’s words. For if Lady Baratheon was to have Sansa as a sister, then that meant that she would not marry Lord Baratheon, and nor would she marry Captain Lannister, given the alleged rumours that he was engaged to Brienne – it could only mean that Sansa Stark was betrothed, against all common sense, to the younger Mr. Lannister.

Chapter End Notes

Please leave a comment!

(A note: Lady Baratheon's last line is paraphrased from Lady Catherine's parting words to Elizabeth in the scene that this echoes. It was so perfectly brutal that I just had to borrow it. Thanks, Jane!)
The morning loomed sharp on the horizon, breaking through the cold, blue darkness that lined the path. Brienne saw the first herald of dawn as a flickering light filtered through the trees, and hastened her pace. It was the morn of Sansa's return from London, and Brienne had not felt such dread since – well, perhaps of late she had felt more dread than in the rest of her lifetime, but this dread stood out among its sisters as singularly alarming.

In the day following Lady Baratheon’s thankless visit, a letter had reached Winterfell from Sansa herself, with news of her betrothal to Mr. Tyrion Lannister. The letter’s tone was effusive, and so effusion was the sentiment that Mrs. Stark chose to perpetuate. She somehow found the strength to leave her quarters, and made herself busy around the house, claiming to anyone who asked that she was readying the place for the future Mrs. Lannister’s return.

Brienne was not so enthusiastic. She had read something different between Sansa’s happy words – there was no doubting that she was disappointed in the outcome of her elopement, and how could she not be so? She had left Brighton with the intention of marrying a young Lord, and instead found herself engaged to a man of limited stature, both physically and socially.

That Sansa would perhaps now be leaving London set Brienne shivering. She leant against a tree, watching the sun rise, watching the sharp oranges and yellows draw away the comforting navy blanket that had been spread across the sky.

“I ought to return,” she spoke aloud, and in response, a leaf fell from the tree in front of her.

She had rambled so far from Winterfell that it would take near an hour to return, and so Brienne set out on the path back. By the time she reached the house, the sun was higher in the sky and cast a soft light through the morning fog.

The scent of the pine trees floated through Winterfell’s gates and out onto the paths beyond, and the winter roses were in full bloom, but Brienne found no comfort in the familiarity. Instead, her dread was amplified, and she sought refuge in the servants’ quarters.

“A busy morning,” Jon greeted her. “You would do well to stay away from the kitchens.”

“I would not have myself caught up in it,” Brienne said. “I am willing myself to feel some excitement for Miss Stark’s return, but I feel only–”

“–terror,” Jon completed dourly. “I’ve spent many a year putting distance between myself and
Mrs. Stark, but never have I wanted to be so far away from her as I do now.”

“I do not blame her,” Brienne said. “It is no easy thing to go through such a trauma.”

She did not mention that this was only compounded by the loss of Brigadier Stark, because with him had been lost his heir, a close friend of Jon’s by all accounts.

“It is not,” Jon said, “and I do not begrudge her her misery.”

“But nor are you looking forward to Miss Stark’s wedding,” Brienne guessed.

“Indeed, I am not,” Jon said, a touch sourly. “No good can come of deepening our connection with the Lannisters any further.”

Brienne bit her tongue and schooled her features into some semblance of neutrality. She could not – nor would she not – allow her feelings for Captain Lannister to pass through the walls of Winterfell. There was no joy in thinking such things, and for all that she still felt more acutely than she wished, she would not allow it to cloud her actions.

“Then let us pray that this wedding is as brief and painless as possible,” she said.

Jon’s reply, if he had been forming one as he opened his mouth, was cut off by a great yell from the direction of the entrance hall, and Brienne knew that what she heard was the sound of Sansa’s arrival.

“Will you go?” Jon asked.

“I think not,” Brienne said. “This is a moment for the Stark family.”

All too late, she realised how her words might hurt Jon – but he simply smiled, leaning back against a wall. “Then I shall stay with you,” he said.

It was many minutes before Brienne struck up the courage to see Sansa. As she waited with Jon, she fretted over what little sound she heard. From Mrs. Stark’s excitement, she had assumed that there might be a great deal of jubilation, but apart from the initial noise there had been not a whisper. However, as she approached the entrance hall, she heard loud, wracking sobs coming from the drawing room.

Outside, Arya sat with her back rested against the wall. She was fidgeting with her skirts, and Brienne knelt beside her.

“You do not have to say anything,” Arya said. “Sansa… Sansa will not see anyone, will not talk to us. She has taken to her room. Mama was so excited…”

“It is your mother in the drawing room?” Brienne asked.

Arya nodded. “She did not take well to Sansa’s decision. But I do not blame Sansa–”

Another sob, like the wailing of the wind at sea, came from the drawing room. Arya paused, taking a deep breath.

“I do not blame Sansa for not wanting to marry that man,” Arya finished, her voice dropping to a whisper. “It would be better had she not been forced to marry at all. If we could but forget that this whole trial ever occurred…”

Brienne did not know whether Arya understood – perhaps she did, perhaps she did not want to –
but of course there was no way Sansa’s elopment would not have ended in a marriage. If she was with child, then there would be far more disgrace in giving birth out of wedlock. And if she was not – they could not risk it.

“I know it is not what you would want to hear,” Brienne said, “but I have spoken with Mr. Lannister, and I truly believe him to be a good man.”

“It does not matter,” Arya said. “It does not matter if he is a good man, for he will never please my sister.”

Brienne nodded. “I understand,” she said. She stood, finding herself unsteady on her own feet.

“Will you see Sansa?” Arya asked. There was such hope in her voice, and Brienne wondered what harm could come of her simply making an attempt.

“I will,” she said.

Brienne ascended the stairs, feeling that with every step she took her body felt a heavier burden on her feet. There was no sound from the other side of Sansa’s door, so Brienne knocked cautiously.

“You may enter,” Sansa said quietly. When she noticed Brienne, she lifted her head, and Brienne saw the ghost of a smile on her face.

“Miss Stark, it has been so long–”

“Miss Tarth, please, sit with me,” Sansa said, gesturing to the chair next to hers. “I have so missed your company.”

“And I yours,” Brienne said honestly, doing as Sansa bid her.

“Please, do not tell me how you worried about me in my absence,” Sansa said, “for I have heard it all. I have heard every last platitude and, frankly, Miss Tarth, I am sick to death of it.”

“I would not wish to dwell on the past,” Brienne said, “but neither can we shy away from talk of your future.”

“My future,” Sansa repeated bitterly. “I have no future. I am to marry a dwarf who I have only met in passing, and the man I love is to marry Margaery Tyrell. I have heard she is a friend of yours, Miss Tarth, but I will have nothing to do with her.”

“That, I understand,” Brienne said. She did not know how Sansa knew of her friendship with Miss Tyrell, since it was so recent, but she did not dwell on it. “You recall I once told you of a man I loved?”

“I do,” Sansa said. “I was pleased that you had confided in me.”

Brienne smiled. “That man’s name was Renly Baratheon,” she said, “who was soon after engaged to Miss Tyrell. But you must know, that engagement was broken for Miss Tyrell’s engagement to Lord–”

“Do not say his name,” Sansa said. “I will not hear it, and I know the story well. Miss Tarth – did he love her? Did Mr. Baratheon love Miss Tyrell?”

“He did not,” Brienne said. That, she knew for certain.

“I remember,” Sansa said, “I told you that I wished you would fall in love again.”
Brienne looked away. “You also joked that I might fall in love with Captain Lannister, since we danced upon the occasion of our first meeting.”

“And did you?” Sansa asked quietly.

“I did,” Brienne said, regretting her words less than she had thought she might. “It is unbelievable, but I did.”

“Then you must marry him,” Sansa said, louder and more boldly than she had hitherto spoken. “Marry him, Miss Tarth, and let me live with you. Captain Lannister is fond of his brother, is he not? We may live in separate rooms at Casterly Rock – oh, we will have to move to Casterly Rock, you understand, for I cannot stay anywhere near Lady Baratheon and her son so long as they remain at Storm’s End.”

“I am afraid it is not so simple,” Brienne said. “I very much doubt that my feelings are reciprocated.”

“But they must be,” Sansa said. “Miss Tarth, if only you could have heard how he spoke of you in London—”

Sansa cut herself off, clasping her hands together over her mouth.

“You saw Captain Lannister in London… ?” Brienne began.

“Oh, Miss Tarth, I was not supposed to tell you,” Sansa said. “I cannot say more!”

Brienne recalled that Captain Lannister had ridden off the moment he heard of Lord Baratheon and Miss Stark’s elopement, and that he knew they were last seen in London. But she had not thought, could not have hoped that he might have been the one to find them. She had assumed that Colonel Tully had been successful in his search, or that there had been some way, some other way – perhaps she had not considered it because she had put so much effort into not thinking of Captain Lannister.

“You must tell me,” Brienne said, “now that you have begun.”

Sansa sighed, leaning backwards in her chair. “Very well,” she said. “It was him, you know, who organised this match. For all that I resent him for it, I cannot feel such anger towards him now that I know you love him.”

“I am trying my best not to love him,” Brienne said. “You must not treat him kindly for my sake.”

Sansa seemed to find that immensely amusing, for she threw her head back and laughed. Brienne wondered how long it had been since she had last laughed.

“Nonetheless,” Sansa said, “you will see him on the occasion of my wedding. And you must be cordial, Miss Tarth.”

Brienne found it in herself to give a weak laugh at that. “I will try,” she said.

Perhaps, though, it would be better if she avoided Captain Lannister altogether. He would not reciprocate her feelings, and now she had cause to question his actions. Brienne did not doubt that Sansa spoke the truth when she said that Captain Lannister had arranged the match, nor that Captain Lannister thought he was doing anything other than a great deed in finding Sansa a husband. But it was incontrovertible that he had not done anyone any favours, least of all Sansa – and Brienne would not forgive him so easily, even if she did still love him.
Although, after her conversation with Sansa, Brienne felt in better spirits than she had in a very long time, she was still troubled by thoughts of Captain Lannister and his role in these affairs. And in the days, in the weeks following, the mood at Winterfell lifted, until finally the season’s chill in the air was the only coldness that haunted the house and the family.

Sansa became less withdrawn with the passage of time, and spent many of her free hours with her younger siblings. Brienne, in turn, gave lessons to Brandon and Rickon in their absence from school.

As Christmas approached, snow began to fall – and the first day of snow brought with it a carriage, its horses slow to draw it through the growing carpet of white along the path to Winterfell. The news came ahead, from Jon, who sighted the carriage as he rode back from the village, to Jory, and thence to Mrs. Stark.

Mrs. Stark emerged from her quarters, her mood then returned to excitement, however briefly. “Sansa,” she called, descending upon the drawing room, “is this your intended?”

“It may be,” Sansa said, a note of despondence in her voice.

“That would be exceedingly good news,” Mrs. Stark said. “I have longed to discuss with him the particulars of your engagement.”

“Have you indeed,” Sansa said, looking away.

“You may tell him I am ill-disposed,” Arya interjected, getting to her feet and pushing past her mother, out of the drawing room.

Brienne watched her go with no great joy at being left alone with Miss and Mrs. Stark. “Perhaps,” she said, “I will also take my leave–”

“Nonsense,” Mrs. Stark said, “you will stay. My daughter’s betrothed must know the details of her schooling and accomplishment, and I will expect you to have those details at hand.”

“Of course,” Brienne said slowly, wishing she could sink deeper into her seat and allow it to swallow her whole.

Within minutes, there came a knock at the door, and the sound of Jory answering and welcoming the arrived party. Brienne heard the guests’ voices, and she recognised both as ones she knew well – Mr. Lannister, and his brother.

Taking to her feet, Brienne wished that she were not so tall, and that she could disappear without being so readily noticed. “I really must–”

“Miss Tarth, please stay,” Sansa said.

If Sansa too had recognised Captain Lannister’s voice, she did not say, nor would she have had time to mention it before Jory appeared in the doorway to the dressing room with the two guests behind him. Brienne barely had a moment to draw breath before Mrs. Stark’s demeanour changed faster than the ticking of the clock on the mantelpiece.

“I will not have him in my house,” she said, turning to the window.

“Mrs. Stark, I hardly think–” Mr. Lannister began.

“I believe she is referring to me,” Captain Lannister said.
Brienne did not look at him, lest his gaze had fallen upon her.

“I do apologise, Captain Lannister,” Sansa said, rising to her feet. “My mother would wish not to have further contact with your family.”

“She is going to find that quite hard once we are married,” Mr. Lannister said, in the musing tone one might use to ponder the artistic merit of the latest popular novel.

“You are the exception,” Sansa said bitterly, turning her attention at last to her betrothed.

Captain Lannister cleared his throat. “In that case, may I trouble Miss Tarth for a tour of the grounds?”

Before Brienne could speak, Mrs. Stark reeled around as though she had been stung. “You may not,” she said.

Brienne closed her eyes briefly, dipping her head. She would find no better employment than she had with the Starks, nor, in all likelihood, would she find any employment after the scandal of Sansa’s elopement. But although she did not wish to risk her employment by straying on the wrong side of Mrs. Stark’s good graces, she could not allow herself to be dictated to, as Lady Baratheon had tried to do. If Brienne spurned one but not the other, she would feel that she had done her own values a disservice.

“I am sorry, Mrs. Stark,” she said, looking her employer in the eyes, “but I will remove Captain Lannister from your presence so that you and Miss Stark may converse with her intended.”

Brienne turned quickly to the doorway, and Captain Lannister followed as she forged down the entrance hall to the gardens.

“Thank you, Miss Tarth, for that kindness,” Captain Lannister said. “I do not see why my family’s name carries such horror with it, but I am glad to escape its effects.”

“Did you wish to see the grounds, Captain Lannister?” Brienne asked.

“You know well I did not ask you away from them to see the grounds,” he said, wandering towards a bush of Winter roses. “I have seen many fine gardens in my life, but it is not so often that I am in your presence.”

Brienne looked away, certain that she was blushing. For all her conflicted emotions and for every night she had lain awake, wondering what precisely she felt, it seemed that Captain Lannister still had the power to catch her at her worst.

He did not continue, however, so Brienne filled the silence, her head still inclined back towards the house. “I have heard from Miss Stark that you arranged the match between her and your brother,” she said.

Captain Lannister scoffed. “I had asked her specifically not to tell you,” he said, “but it seems she has no control over her will.”

“You must not blame her,” Brienne said, looking back at him. “She is young.”

“You are young,” Captain Lannister said, “and I would not blame you if you did not understand why I had to force the match.”

“Oh, I understand well why you felt you had to force it,” Brienne said. “But why—”
“Why him?” Captain Lannister completed. “Why a man with such lowly prospects, with such an unfortunate appearance? Why a man who would bring Miss Stark even more shame?”

Brienne was silent.

“Because he is my brother, Miss Tarth, and for all his flaws, he is respectful and he is of a reasonable fortune,” Captain Lannister said. “I provide for him, and knowing the shame that this would bring to your family, I sought to provide for Sansa Stark as well.”

“They are not my family,” Brienne said, lost for any other words. Of course, Captain Lannister’s motives had become clearer, but she was still unsure why he would go to such lengths to preserve the Starks’ reputation.

“But you are theirs,” he said. “Can you not see, Brienne – I would not do this if it were not for you.”

“I– I do not know what you could mean by that,” Brienne said.

“You do,” Captain Lannister said. “Or if you do not, then I am sure an educated woman such as yourself will be able to deduce my sentiment.”

Brienne opened her mouth to respond, but there came sounds from the direction of the house, and she turned to see Mr. Lannister exiting, followed by Miss Stark.

“I am sorry,” Sansa said, sounding like she was trying very hard to remain polite. “We will conclude this conversation at a later date.”

“I will next see you at our wedding,” Mr. Lannister said. Brienne sensed that he was annoyed, and she wondered at the fact that she could imagine what had occurred to make him thus.

“Well,” Captain Lannister said, “until the wedding.”

He brushed his arm against Brienne’s as he walked past to join his brother, and Brienne watched him leave feeling both more and less confused than she had been before. While some things became clearer, others emerged in obfuscation, and her thoughts, so patiently schooled into order, began once again to unravel.

Sansa came to stand beside Brienne as the carriage left Winterfell. “I do not know how I will stand being married to him,” she said. “I hope you have better luck with your Lannister, Miss Tarth.”

“He is not my Lannister,” Brienne said.

Sansa smiled, pulling her shawl tight around her shoulders. “I would wish, for both our sakes, that he will be.”

Chapter End Notes

Please leave a comment! Chat to me about how great it is to be writing Sansa again!!

EDIT: Ok, well, after some questions and stuff that came up in the comments section, I made a post on my blog that'll clear some stuff up about Sansa and Catelyn, I hope.
Chapter 29

Chapter Notes

After so long... hi again! I've had a few questions about whether or not this is abandoned, and finally I can provide conclusive proof that it isn't! Since the last chapter, I made the decision to focus more on my uni work, and on Friday I finished my degree. My honours year was wild, but that's it. My entire degree!!! Anyway, I've written a fair few oneshots since then, and also some other chaptered stuff, so it's a pretty bad excuse, but hey, last chapter I said I'd finish this fic before the end of the year, and I meant it. I wrote this entire chapter today. It's been sitting fully-formed in my head for a while now and, ngl, I'm kinda proud of how it turned out. And can you believe this fic is nearly over? Not long now. Not long at all.

Thank you to everyone who's still reading, and especially thank you to Jo for reading over this chapter!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Brienne had not been to the Winter Town since her return to Winterfell – she had no reason to go there, and yet she had longed to leave Winterfell. Her obligation to the Stark family kept her there, grounded and with the manor’s grounds as her only distraction. So, she had wandered, walked for miles far from the house, but she had never done anything productive such as shopping, anything that would remind her there was a life beyond her duties as a governess.

Nonetheless, it was inevitable that on this one occasion she would be forced to pay the village a visit. Mrs. Stark was still determinedly housebound, refusing to leave until the day of her daughter’s wedding, but Sansa needed a chaperone to accompany her to purchase a wedding dress. She came to Brienne’s room herself, and it was with no meagre surprise that Brienne opened the door to see her standing with a reticule containing what small inheritance she kept at hand, and asked, “Miss Tarth, will you walk to the Winter Town with me?”

It was a pleasure for Brienne to accept, simply to see Sansa well enough to leave the house.

The streets felt foreign as they walked together in silence. It was as though Sansa was silently daring Brienne to speak first, but Brienne was at a loss for any words she could put together to form a sentence. She longed to reassure Sansa, but she knew she would be lying.

After Brienne’s brief but confusing conversation with Captain Lannister, she had reconciled herself with the good faith of his decision, although she maintained that it would never be the right decision for Sansa’s happiness. Sansa would never be truly content in a marriage with Mr. Lannister, but Brienne would do everything in her power to make sure that she would never want for anything, as she knew Captain Lannister was doing too.

That Captain Lannister was doing it for her sake, she had not yet come to acknowledge. It was as though the sentiment were writ clear before her as words on a page, and yet she knew not how to read the language.

When they at last came to the town, Brienne was relieved that it was Sansa who spoke. “Miss Tarth, you will help me choose wisely, I assume?”
“Of course,” Brienne said. “Do you think I would dream of sending you to your wedding in a dress that did not suit you?”

“It is not just that,” Sansa said, a note of hesitation in her voice. “I do not have much to spend, nor do I want to spend excessively.”

Brienne attempted to form her features into a reassuring smile. “You will look beautiful in whichever dress you choose,” she said. Although it felt like an empty platitude to say, Sansa smiled, and Brienne felt that she may manage this after all.

As they entered the Winter Town’s dress shop, there was a gasp from the shopgirl. “Miss Stark!” she said. “You’ve returned!”

Sansa gracefully bowed her head. “I have,” she said, “and I have no doubt you have heard the news surrounding the nature of my return, so I shall not trouble you with the details.”

To her credit, the shopgirl did not react as though anything was untoward. “Very well, Miss Stark,” she said. “I presume you’ve come to buy a dress for your wedding.”

“I have,” Sansa said. That she could say those words must have been a great difficulty, and Brienne was most proud of her.

The shopgirl busied herself sorting through her finest dresses, and though Sansa seemed embarrassed to hear some of the prices, she said nothing. She was drawn to a simple pale blue dress, and as the shopgirl took her to the dressing room to fit it, she spoke to Brienne as she waited outside.

“You must not remember me,” she said, “but I spoke to you on the day you confronted Lieutenant Hunt and his friends.”

Indeed, Brienne did not remember her – it felt as though a lifetime had passed since she had last so much as thought of Lieutenant Hunt.

“It is no matter,” the shopgirl continued, “but I will never forget that day. After that, we told all of our friends to avoid the redcoats. It was a delight to see them so scorned! Oh, but it has been peaceful since they left town.”

“Have they been gone for long?” Brienne asked.

“Yes, for some time,” she said. “In fact, it was soon after the Starks left– oh, Miss Stark, I apologise–”

Sansa cleared her throat. “I do not mind if you speak of it.”

Despite Sansa’s words, the shopgirl did not continue. Instead, the fitting went by in silence, with Brienne standing outside the dressing room and feeling rather useless, rather like a spare part. She tried to remind herself that Sansa needed her, but the thought of marriage and weddings made her uneasy. The walls of Winterfell had contained her feelings for Captain Lannister well enough, but she could only keep her mind off him for so long before she remembered that he would be present at Sansa’s wedding, and that she would have to engage in pleasantries at the very least.

She was still unsure as to where she stood in his regard – there could be no doubt that he held her in some esteem, but their respective situations were neither conducive to marriage nor forgiving to such an unlikely match. There was the ever-present threat of Lady Baratheon’s interference, and Mrs. Stark’s disapproval, and the way society would look down upon a homely woman and such a striking gentleman. No, Brienne would never be able to marry Captain Lannister, she was
certain of it. She would pine for some time, but with luck the feelings would pass, and she would live normally and happily as a governess – that was the best she could envisage.

“Miss Tarth? Do you think it suits me well?”

Returning to reality from her daze, Brienne turned to see Sansa in the blue dress. “It suits you very well indeed,” she said.

Sansa graced her with a small smile. “Then I will take it. I do not wish to stay here any longer – I have already spent enough time today thinking about my wedding.”

Leaving the Winter Town gave Brienne more comfort than she had in venturing towards it, and she wondered if she would be consigned to Winterfell for life, as governess to Brandon or Rickon’s children. She wondered when she would next return to her father’s manor, Evenfall Hall, and whether she might stay. Although Winterfell had become her home, she did not wish to become complacent – she had seen how easily a family’s situation could change.

“Miss Stark,” she began, “I know you do not wish to talk of it, but I must ask: where will you live once you are wed?”

“In truth, I do not know,” Sansa said, frowning. “I had thought we might stay near Winterfell, but Mr. Lannister is determined to return to his home in London. I was there briefly – it was nice enough, I suppose, but I would not wish to live in London forever. I’d sooner stay near mama, Arya and my brothers.”

“If that were possible, it would be wonderful,” Brienne said.

“You will be sure to visit me, will you not?” Sansa asked.

Brienne forced herself to meet Sansa’s eyes and hold her gaze. “Why do you think I would be anywhere other than Winterfell?”

“Of course,” Sansa said solemnly, “you are a governess. But when we are all too old for you to teach us anything new, you will have to find new children to tutor. Children of your own, perhaps.”

“You are far too optimistic,” Brienne said, looking away.

“Perhaps I am,” Sansa said. “But what else have I left but optimism?”

It was not the usual case that a teacher learnt something from her pupil, but Brienne imagined it were possible, and more likely than she might have expected.

So, in the intervening weeks before Sansa’s wedding, Brienne aimed to replicate some of her optimism. She busied herself teaching Arya to fence, and reading with Brandon in the library. Rickon still spent most of his time with his mother, and Sansa preferred to be alone more often than not, but Brienne made an effort to check regularly that they were keeping well. Meals were still quiet and strained, though not for want of trying, and simply for trying, Brienne knew she was accomplishing something.

When the day of the wedding came, though, she could barely leave her room. The prospect of seeing Captain Lannister and losing Sansa in the same day proved too much for her newfound optimism, and she sequestered herself away from the world for as long as she possibly could.

It was with great reluctance that she took her breakfast, late and in the servants’ quarters. She sat with Jon, who was not invited to the wedding, and so was in lower spirits than usual.
“Of course, I would want to be in attendance,” Jon admitted. “You will have to tell me all that transpires, Miss Tarth. You must be dreadfully bored for two during the ceremony.”

“It has been so long since I last attended a wedding,” Brienne said, neglecting to mention that she had, in truth, never attended a wedding. “I am not sure myself what to expect.”

“Do not expect anything,” Jon said. “Then, I am sure it will not disappoint you.”

Brienne was not to travel to the wedding with the rest of the family, and so she went on foot to the church. She suspected her association with Captain Lannister had caused Mrs. Stark to come to this decision, but she could not be sure – perhaps it was simply because she had not awoken early enough, and there was not enough room in the carriage.

There were very few people in attendance. Brienne chose a pew towards the front, deliberately away from the aisle, but somehow this did not stop Captain Lannister from moving from the back of the church to end of her pew. Mercifully, he did not attempt to make conversation, nor even to catch her eye, but Brienne did not have to look at him to know what his intentions were.

_Today is about Sansa_, she told herself. It was neither about herself nor about whatever it was that Captain Lannister felt. And so, Brienne trained her eyes on Sansa, beautiful and understated in her pale blue dress, and filled her thoughts with how often she might be able to visit Sansa in London, how she might convince Sansa to reconcile her feelings towards the Tyrells so that Miss Tyrell might take Sansa into society, and then how many balls Sansa might be invited to.

As Brienne busied herself in speculation, the wedding passed quickly – she reflected that she would not have much of interest to report to Jon – and at the end of the ceremony, the party congregated in the gardens at the front of the church.

“I couldn’t be happier,” Mrs. Stark said, to anyone who would listen. “I am overjoyed to be here today, seeing my eldest daughter married. We are all so proud of her.”

Brienne was proud of Sansa, although she suspected her reasons were entirely different. She watched in silence as Sansa said goodbye to Arya, tears in her eyes, promises to visit on her lips. She could do nothing but watch, her mouth set in a smile which she knew to be forced. She watched Mr. and Mrs. Lannister leave in a carriage that would take them to a coach bound for London, watched as the Stark family and the few friends in attendance began to disperse–And then, inevitably, Captain Lannister found her.

“Miss Tarth, I know it is not far to Winterfell,” he said, “nevertheless, I hope you will allow me to walk with you.”

It was several moments before Brienne could formulate a response. “Storm’s End is in the other direction,” she managed. “It would be a great inconvenience to you–”

“Inconvenience does not trouble me,” he said. “Not when there is your company to be had.”

Brienne swallowed. “Very well. You may accompany me.”

“I cannot thank you enough,” Captain Lannister said. “It has been dreadfully difficult for me to find a moment of peace to visit you – I have heard you are aware that my sister is most set against the idea of our… friendship.”

The way Captain Lannister spoke of his sister with such disgust was heartening to Brienne, yet she could not so easily cast aside any thought of Lady Baratheon. “Were you aware that she paid
a visit to Winterfell not long hence?”

“I was made aware,” Captain Lannister said. “Indeed, soon after my arrival she would not talk of anything but your impudence, and she was distinctly unimpressed with my refusal to confirm whether or not we were engaged.”

“Why did you not tell her the truth?” Brienne asked.

Captain Lannister was silent for a few moments, folding his left hand over his right arm as he walked, tilting his head back to look at the tree branches above their heads.

“I had written a letter to her, while I was in London, denying our engagement, but upon my return I found that it had been lost in delivery, as her first question was not how I found the journey, but whether or not I was to marry you,” he said. “When she told me of your conversation, that you refused to condemn the very possibility, it taught me to hope as I had scarcely ever allowed myself to hope before.”

“I did not say yes by proxy,” Brienne scolded. “I simply told her I could not promise her anything.”

“And that was enough.” Captain Lannister let his arms fall to his sides, swinging them slightly as he walked. “I must say, I was surprised that you had spoken so frankly to her, as you are often so shy.”

“Shy,” Brienne echoed. “I wonder how you think me shy, even after I was so openly blunt to you upon the occasion of your–”

She paused, unsure if she could say the word. But, if she did not say it now, then would she ever have the strength to move beyond it?

“–of your proposal,” she finished quietly.

In contrast to her tone, Captain Lannister laughed. “Indeed, but it was nothing I did not deserve. In many ways, Brienne, your bluntness is more than I was owed.”

“I wish you would not be so familiar with me,” Brienne said, choosing not to dwell on his other words.

“One day,” Captain Lannister said, “I might heed that advice. Or, you will be familiar with me – whichever comes first.”

“You may be waiting some time,” Brienne said.

“Do not jest with me,” Captain Lannister said, his tone all teasing sincerity. “I will wait as long as it takes, for you. Do not think I will not.”

“I have no cause to doubt your tenacity,” Brienne said, “nor the truth behind your words.”

“Then what is it that holds you back?”

In the silence, Brienne could hear her own breath, her heartbeat, louder than their footsteps. The whisper of a breeze through the trees, the calling of a crow in the distance.

“Then, I will address you as you wish me to,” Captain Lannister said. “Miss Tarth, if your feelings are still what they were when we met at Rosings Park, tell me so at once. My affections and wishes are unchanged, but one word from you will silence me on the subject forever.”
For Brienne, the answer was clear.

“In truth,” she said, “my feelings are much changed.”

“Will you indulge me,” he said, “and tell me by how much?”

Brienne pursed her lips, holding back a sigh. “I do wish you would not make a joke of everything. You are ten years my senior, and yet you act like an unruly student.”

“You are dodging my question,” Captain Lannister said. “Shall I put it to you differently?”

“That is not necessary,” Brienne said. “I will answer, if you give me time.”

Captain Lannister, for once, remained silent, and so she continued. “Since you proposed to me, much has happened, both between us and around us. Knowing your true nature to be kinder than my initial estimation allowed me to think differently of you, and your kindness to me continued, despite how little I liked to notice it. I know it is neither seemly nor would many of our acquaintances be able to forgive that—”

“I must beg your pardon,” Captain Lannister said suddenly, “but have to interrupt you. Do you not remember how, when I proposed to you, I spoke so extensively of how unsuitable such a match would be? And do you not remember how you chided me for my uncouth behaviour?”

“I do remember,” Brienne said, her voice softer than she had intended.

“Then,” Captain Lannister said, “you will excuse me for stopping you from doing the same thing. Brienne, I do not care how society sees us – I have a manor in Wales and ten thousand a year, and beyond that I can offer you my love, which has not waned since my last, poor attempt at a proposal. Society will have nothing to say about that, I am sure of it.”

“Captain Lannister,” Brienne said, scarcely believing her own ears, “you cannot mean it.”

“Please, Brienne,” he said. “If your feelings are as you say they are, say also that you will marry me.”

Now, all Brienne heard was silence – not her breathing, not her heartbeat, nor her footsteps, for she had stopped, unable to process both Captain Lannister’s words and the ability to move. She wanted to shout, to cry, anything to dispel the silence, but in her own disbelief and jubilance, she could do nothing but stare open-mouthed at the man before her.

“Yes,” she said, although she did not expect to, “yes, I will.”

Her rash words were worth everything, in the way that Captain Lannister’s face broke into the sort of smile she had never seen on him, and his hand came forward to take hers.

“You cannot know,” he said, “how happy you have made me.”

He lifted her hand to his mouth and pressed his lips to her knuckles in the gentlest of kisses, and Brienne felt lighter than air, that if Captain Lannister’s hold were not tethering her to the ground she might float into the atmosphere.

“I can,” she said, “I can know, for you have given me that same happiness.”

“Then let us marry now!” Captain Lannister said. “Come, take my arm, we will walk back to the church and demand that the vicar marry us forthwith.”
“You are too rash!” Brienne’s laugh was unrecognisable to her own ears. “I must return to Winterfell, and you did promise to walk with me – can we not discuss it as we walk?”

“Very well,” Captain Lannister said. “I will wait – as I said, it will not trouble me to wait – but you must know, I do not know when I last experienced such happiness as you have given me, Brienne.”

Brienne did not know when she had last experienced such happiness herself. She knew this was not an easy decision to make, that there was the question of naming a day, writing to inform her father, writing to Sansa and informing the rest of the Stark family in person, somehow evading the wrath of Lady Baratheon, and that after that she would have to consider the movement of all her worldly possessions to Casterly Rock – Casterly Rock, where she would be living! – and settling into a completely new life, not as Brienne Tarth, governess, but as Brienne Lannister, a lady of leisure. The name sounded foreign in her mind, but somehow it excited her, too. All her concerns lapsed, in favour of this new excitement.

“I am,” she said, Captain Lannister’s hand still clasped around hers, “I am happy too.”

Chapter End Notes

About three lines of dialogue in that last scene were paraphrased from/inspired by a conversation in Volume III, Chapter 16 of Pride and Prejudice.

Please leave a comment to let me know if you're still with me! :D
To keep a secret was an occupation for all the hours of the day – more than being a governess, every minute of the day was spent in subterfuge and secrecy, occluding something that could not possibly become common knowledge in Winterfell. Nonetheless, Brienne guarded her secret tightly and did not allow even the thought of it to leave her quarters. Her heart would jump whenever she remembered it, that she was engaged to Captain Jaime Lannister, and that she was not dreaming. In fact, she had not dreamt in the week since her engagement. It was as though the engagement itself was enough of a dream, and she would regularly have to remind herself she was not in the throes of some fantasy.

Much to her frustration, she had not found a chance to meet with Captain Lannister since then. She could not shirk her duties as a governess, but neither could she forget that soon she would no longer have these duties, and she had not yet told Mrs. Stark. That, too, weighed on her mind.

It had been after only a day without telling anyone that she finally sought to unburden herself, and wrote a long, meandering letter to Sansa. It was hard to address her as Mrs. Lannister – too hard, indeed, since Brienne would soon take that name for herself – and so she kept her use of address to a minimum, writing formally only at the beginning and end of the letter. Beyond her letter, there was still no-one at Winterfell who knew of the engagement, nor indeed at Storm’s end. Brienne had sworn Sansa to secrecy, so that the news would not reach local ears, for she was sure that once it did, it would spread faster than the plague.

She had also written to her father, after that. He had wasted no time in replying – so alike to his manner, the letter was reserved in its approval, but no less supportive. He would make North with much haste, to arrive promptly for the wedding. Brienne did not tell him that they had not yet set a date, but wrote back to apologise that there would not be room for board in Winterfell. She did not say that this was because no-one at Winterfell knew.

To pass the hours not spent teaching, she mostly walked. She did not fence – Casterly Rock’s armoury put the one at Storm’s End to shame, and she would have full access to it once she arrived there, to stay for good. One morning she found herself walking in the direction of Storm’s End, her mind drifting to the rapier with the sapphire on its pommel, and to her spar with Captain Lannister. To think that once she had worried they would never fight like that again! Now, it seemed so close that she could already taste the salty air of the Welsh coast and feel the wind ruffling her skirts.

She had not been to Storm’s End since shortly before her trip to London, and it was an uncomfortable affair, as she remembered it. In truth, she did not remember it overmuch. She had put what she could out of her mind.

Of course, Storm’s End had not changed – it would remain immovable, weathering any storms and scandal that blew past.
The footman met her with a look of undisguised curiosity on his face. “Miss Tarth, I recall,” he said. “And are you here to call on her ladyship? I was not aware that she was expecting you.”

“She is not,” Brienne said, self-conscious under his gaze. “I was hoping to find Captain Lannister – is he not within?”

“Then it is true,” the footman said.

Brienne did not answer him, and he did not seem to expect her to do so. He turned and led her into the house, away from the drawing rooms, and towards the back entrance to the gardens. There stood Captain Lannister on the terrace, overlooking the grassy hillock that faded into the forest beyond, as though it was its kingdom and he, its king. Storm’s End would never truly be his kingdom, though – Brienne recalled how he looked so at home at Casterly Rock. Unable to contain herself any longer in silence, she cleared her throat.

Captain Lannister turned immediately at the sound, with a smile on his face that Brienne could now recognise as fond, and it filled her with pride to know that she had given him cause to smile in such a way.

“Miss Tarth,” he began, “you will see I am acting in the utmost decorum by addressing you formally. This is indeed an unannounced pleasure.”

“I am sorry I did not write ahead,” she said. “I am here on the spur of the moment.”

“It is no matter to me,” Captain Lannister said. “I should think that we are of such intimacy that you may visit me whenever you please. No, it is you I am worried about.”

“Me?” Brienne questioned him only to distract herself from his turn of phrase – intimacy – as she suspected she already knew why he worried.

Captain Lannister turned away, this time looking up the manor’s imposing stone facade. “My sister is in there, you know; somewhere, wherever she seconds herself these days. I would not wish for you to run afoul of her… a third time? Fourth? I do not know how many opportunities she has taken to belittle you, and I fear she would not miss an opening for a fourth or a fifth.”

“I know she would not,” Brienne said. Bravely, she added, “However it does not trouble me. She cannot force us to break our engagement.”

Saying it aloud lent her strength, and she allowed herself, at last, to be proud. She stood tall, much to Captain Lannister’s amusement, although he only quirked his lips in a smile.

As they stood in silence a bracing wind blew around the manor, but they had not yet seen the first snows of the season. Nor would they for some time, Brienne hoped. Sansa had been married on a cool day, but it had been dry and sunny. Brienne feared that, should they be hasty in setting a date, it would be the midst of frozen January. Still, there was some time left in December yet, and Brienne’s father would soon arrive. After him, no doubt, would come Sansa and Mr. Lannister, as Sansa had written back to indicate that she yearned to visit. And Brienne could not spend forever simply thinking on it – soon, she would have to act.

Captain Lannister saved her from the embarrassment of initiating that particular conversation by extending his arm, which she took gratefully. He led her towards the East steps that wound down from the terrace and into the gardens. Brienne remembered running down the Eastern side of the manor towards the armoury, when she had first glimpsed it, and now she retraced her route with her eyes as they walked.
“I am sure you remember your extended stay here,” Captain Lannister said. “Unfortunate circumstances, although young Mrs. Lannister made a full recovery.”

“You mustn’t call her that,” Brienne said, although she could not think of what else Captain Lannister could call Sansa. Nevertheless, she did not appreciate the reminder of Sansa’s unfortunate circumstances.

“I apologise,” Captain Lannister said – quite uncharacteristically, Brienne thought, – “we will speak of it no longer. I simply sought to remind you of those days we spent together in and around this house.”

“I remember quite well, thank you,” said Brienne.

“Then you will have no trouble remembering how we fenced,” Captain Lannister said. Brienne realised now where he was leading her – to the armoury nestled beneath the terrace, its iron gates glinting hopefully in the Winter sunlight.

“I cannot fence you now,” Brienne said. “I wish I could, but I am attired nowhere near appropriately.” Nor was she when they had last fenced. In a way, she was making excuses, but she recalled the intimacy she had felt then, a different intimacy to that of which Captain Lannister spoke, and she had no desire to experience it again while Lady Baratheon was so nearby.

Captain Lannister released her arm and made to unlock the armoury gate one-handed. Brienne did not help him, as she recognised he did not need assistance with every aspect of his activity, and was perhaps better without it.

“Did you know,” he said, “that it was then I fell in love with you?”

The light came in shafts through the armoury gate, and a small whirlwind of dust and frost stirred as Captain Lannister wrenched it open. Although it was dwarfed by the manor, walking through the gate felt like coming beneath a portcullis into a grand castle. Brienne’s eyes went immediately to the wall with the rapiers, searching for the one with the sapphire in its pommel.

“If you are looking for your blade, I have already had it sent ahead to Casterly Rock,” Captain Lannister said, continuing as though he had not just put forward a declaration of love.

Brienne knew he loved her – although it had taken time to believe that it was possible – but he had not said it so bluntly since his first proposal. She was not sure how to respond to it except with silence.

“You may thank me, if you wish,” Captain Lannister added grandly, pressing his palm to his chest in a gesture of deference.

“I do thank you,” Brienne said, her words a mess of nervous earnestness. “I cannot say just how much I am thankful–”

“You do not need to say it,” Captain Lannister said. “I spoke in jest.”

Brienne stood a little taller and squared her shoulders, allowing the tension therein to dissipate, if it would. With the breeze, she tried to let herself lighten. “Nonetheless,” she said, “I am still thankful.”

As though blown by the wind, Captain Lannister moved closer, and took one of her hands in his. Brienne responded in kind, tentatively closing her other hand around his iron glove. They stood almost framed by the arching entrance to the armoury, illuminated by the fading light and then thrown into shadow by a cloud passing over the sun. There, obscured from the rest of the world
and in the dim enclave, Brienne felt more free than she ever had. Free, yet no more prepared for Captain Lannister kissing her, simply and on the lips, for the briefest of moments.

Then, the cloud left the sun and the shadows fled back between the stone walls, and the moment had ended.

“I do not suppose I can entreat you to stay for much longer,” Captain Lannister said, “and so I must make the very most of our time together.”

“When we are married, you will no doubt see enough of me to easily grow bored of my company,” Brienne said.

“I hazard I would do no such thing,” Captain Lannister said indignantly. “There is so much I do not yet know about you, which I will have to learn in due course. And do not think you know everything about me, despite my extensive posturing on the subject.”

Brienne wondered if they were yet familiar enough for her to make a joke. “It seems to be a favourite topic of conversation of yours,” she tried, and was rewarded with a laugh for her troubles.

She could not have said for how long she stood in the armoury, close to Captain Lannister but barely touching, only that more clouds came and went across the sun as it sank lower towards where the forest met the skyline, until there was little light left. They talked quietly and, hopefully, intimately, although they were neither of them people of many words. Where Brienne was more at ease teaching than taking a turn about a ballroom, Captain Lannister was most at ease with a sword in his hand and, being a military man, preferred to err against diplomacy when settling disputes. Still, he admitted that since his forced retirement he had become a more adept conversationalist, if only to find the most amusing reactions to his many witticisms.

And finally, when Brienne took her leave, knowing that she would have to return to Winterfell in time for the evening meal, Captain Lannister kissed her again, or she kissed him; she could not say which, nor did she care. This time, it was expected – the natural progression of their conversation. She still could scarce believe that they were of such a level of comfort with one another, especially before their marriage, but she did not suppose that anyone waited – rather, it was something people said they did to keep up appearances. How could anyone hold back from love, when love, as it was, had such enthralling power?

As soon as Storm’s End was out of sight, it began to snow, light and whimsical and no hint that the snow could become anything more intolerable. It was like a scene in a novel, and Brienne found herself happy walk unprotected. She was not cold, but still she imagined that she drew warmth from the impossible amount of love she felt.

Over the next days she found that love, and mutual agreement thereon, was but the first obstacle towards marriage.

Her father – Major Selwyn Tarth – arrived unannounced, his carriage pulling up directly outside Winterfell. Evidently, he had not received Brienne’s warning missive. She was lucky to have been in the drawing room at the time, stitching with Arya while the snow fell outside, and heard the carriage upon its arrival.

“It will not do for mama to receive guests,” Arya said, looking forlornly out the window.

Mrs. Stark had not been in good spirits since Sansa’s wedding. She had begun well enough, spending most of her hours outside her chambers and wandering the house, busying herself with tasks the housekeepers would have been happy to carry out themselves, but nonetheless they let
her do it. Disagreeing with Mrs. Stark was a crime worse than theft in this household. However, after days of relentless and obsessive housekeeping, Mrs. Stark once again retired to her room – Brienne remembered clearly how, in the early afternoon, she had stalked up the staircase while the world revolved around her, against her motion – and was not seen again for days on end.

“No,” Brienne said, “it will not. I will receive them myself.”

“May I come?” Arya asked. She had become a lot more polite since Sansa’s departure, perhaps in an attempt to fill her shoes as the eldest. “Needlework is dreadfully tedious.”

“It is,” Brienne agreed. “Very well, let us put aside our crafts and attend our guests in the parlour.”

Jory was already at the door and, as he opened it, a flurry of snowflakes blew in and mottled the carpet wet as they melted. And with them, Brienne’s father.

She was unable to contain her surprise. “Papa!”

“My dear girl,” he greeted her, spreading his arms. “It has been so long.”

Like a child – still only twenty, Brienne thought, so she could excuse herself – she ran to his arms and allowed him to enfold her in a strong embrace. Brienne’s father was the only person she knew who was taller than herself, broad and muscled and powerful even in his old age. Despite his journey through the snow, or perhaps in spite of it, he smelt of the Southern coast, of warmer days than Brienne had seen in a long while.

“How I have missed you,” she said.

“And I you,” he said. “Come, now, introduce me to your friend!”

It was only then that Brienne recalled that Arya was still standing behind her, and when her father released her she turned to see Arya with her hands clasped behind her back, standing on her toes and peering up curiously at Major Tarth.

“Miss Stark,” Brienne said, “this is my father, Major Selwyn Tarth. Papa, this is my charge, Miss Arya Stark.”

“A fine young lady indeed,” Major Tarth said. “And I trust my daughter has taught you well?”

“She has!” Arya said, her voice pitched higher with what must have been nerves.

“And my old friend, Mrs. Stark,” Major Tarth said, “is she here to greet me after so many years?”

Brienne turned to Arya, who only looked down at her feet. “Mrs. Stark is unwell,” Brienne said, “and will not be able to receive you. Did my letter not find you?”

“It did not,” Major Tarth said. “Is there some problem?”

“There is no room for you to stay here,” Brienne said, “not for the duration of your visit. I am afraid it was a waste of your time to stop here first, as your bags would have their place in the Winter Town, which is nearby.”

Major Tarth was never bothered by such trivial things. “It is as you say, then,” he said. “It makes no matter – I will travel South with you in due course, as far as London perhaps, and then you may count on my occupation of all your free moments, as I know you have much to tell me.”

“Miss Tarth, you are going South?” Arya asked.
Brienne could not have prepared for such a question, and her train of thought was thrown off course while she composed herself.

“Of course,” Major Tarth said, “after her wedding—”

Arya’s eyes were wide and her hands bunched in her skirts. “Wedding?”

“To a Southern man!” Brienne interjected quickly, her father giving her a contrite look and keeping his lips firmly sealed. “A man— a man who I met on my travels, with the Tyrells and Mr. Baratheon! My trip was not so long ago, as you must remember.”

“And he is come North to wed you?” Arya asked. “I do not mean to cause offence, Miss Tarth, but surely it would have been simpler had you wed somewhere closer to where you met?”

Brienne wondered that Arya could talk of marriage, given her sister’s ill fortune in that sphere. “I have a duty,” Brienne said, “as your governess. I would not throw that away without due notice. I– I have not yet informed your mother of my circumstances.”

“Then I shall not tell her,” Arya promised. “Oh, but you must, and soon! For if your father is here, then the wedding must be soon! You will invite us all, will you not? And your betrothed; when shall I meet him?”

“Oh,” Brienne said, “in due time, I expect.” Overburdened with guilt for lying, she turned to her father. “Papa, you must be tired from your long journey. Let me escort you to the Winter Town, if your carriage still waits.”

“I fear it does not,” Major Tarth said. “But it makes no matter. It has been a long time since I took a bracing walk in such weather.”

After dressing for the cold, Brienne fled as quickly as she could. She could not bear to stay with Arya, nor could she face the thought of returning to Winterfell and to questions about her engagement. Major Tarth was right, though – the walk did her good, and allowed her to clear her head somewhat.

Her father apologised for, as he put it, “ruining such a surprise,” but Brienne assured him it was nothing that he ought to let trouble him. And, to the best of her abilities, she would try not to let it trouble herself either.

Chapter End Notes

Please leave a comment! I’m so excited for the next two chapters, the last. Not long now...
At last, the penultimate chapter! This is wild. It's almost been three years since I started this... I hope you guys are still enjoying it!

Thank you to Kat for looking over this for me :D

On his first day in the Winter Town, Major Tarth was paid a visit by Captain Lannister. Brienne, as it transpired, was not supposed to have discovered this – it was only by chance that her own visit to her father coincided with Captain Lannister’s, and that she happened to be given entrance to his chambers as Captain Lannister was just leaving.

“Miss Tarth,” he said, alarmingly polite in Major Tarth’s presence, “what a coincidence that I should find you here.”

“It is hardly a coincidence,” Brienne said, “that I would visit my own father.”

“Perhaps we are of different worlds,” Captain Lannister said. “If he were still alive, I would not be caught dead visiting my father.”

“I wonder at what a man he must have been,” Major Tarth said. He fixed Captain Lannister with a piercing look, before turning to Brienne. “My dear, I have found your Captain to be quite agreeable indeed.”

“That, I wonder at,” Brienne said.

Her father laughed. “Captain Lannister tells it differently.”

“And well I should,” Captain Lannister interjected. “I am a most agreeable companion.”

“Is he?” Major Tarth’s tone was light, but his expression was serious.

“He is,” Brienne said. “Else I would not be marrying him.”

She marvelled at the fact that she could say it with such ease, when months ago she had despised him with every fibre of her being. How foreign that now seemed! It was not that Captain Lannister had redeemed himself in her eyes – rather, she had not known him until she had seen him in his own environment, and now, to think she would be living there with him…

“I realised that I had not formally asked permission for your hand,” Captain Lannister said, “so I sought your father in every inn until I found him.”

“No easy task,” Major Tarth said, “as there were many inns here for me to choose between.”

“It was remiss of me to not to write and seek your permission first, father,” Brienne said.

“Yet, in circumstances such as these, I will forgive you,” Major Tarth said.
Her father’s word meant more to Brienne than she could articulate. She would have been content with just that, however there was more that he had to say: “I am aware that you have not yet made the engagement public.”

“You are correct,” Captain Lannister said, “although there has been many a rumour, since our appearance together at a ball hosted by the Merryweathers in London.”

“I haven’t a clue who the Merryweathers might be, but I am sure that must have been of much import in society,” Major Tarth said.

“Not as much as my sister would have, if she were to approve of the match,” Captain Lannister said. “Which, as you may surmise, she does not.”

Brienne’s eyes went wide in surprise. “You have told her?”

“I have not,” Captain Lannister said, “and yet, she has told me in no uncertain terms that she does not approve.”

“She is quick to believe hearsay, then,” Major Tarth said.

“She would believe the worst of me from the moment we were first acquainted,” Brienne said. “I do not seek her approval.”

“It is refreshing to hear someone speak so boldly against her,” Captain Lannister said, “but I admit, had she a stake in Casterly Rock, such a union would not be possible. She is the elder twin, but it is my birthright.”

Not for the first time, Brienne felt her heart flutter at the mention of Casterly Rock. She longed to live there, and yet… she had not yet resigned from her position as governess. It discomfited her to think that she would soon have to confront Mrs. Stark about it, and she knew that putting it off did her no good.

While she lost herself in her worries, her father and Captain Lannister continued their conversation on inheritance and society and a myriad other things that Brienne did not wish to concern herself with, not while she was still in a purgatory between working and being wed.

“And when is the wedding to be?” Major Tarth asked.

“We are yet to set a date,” Captain Lannister said, “but when we do, you shall be the first to know.”

“That does little to comfort me,” Major Tarth said. “It will be soon, though.”

It was not a question.

“Yes, papa,” Brienne said. “As soon as we can.”

“Then, who shall we inform first?” Captain Lannister said jovially. “My sister, or your employers?”

“Do not jest on these matters,” Brienne said. “I have told Miss Stark that I am to be wed, although not to whom, and I have no doubt that she will tell someone, who will tell someone else, and so forth.”

“You are too concerned as to what others will think,” Captain Lannister said. “You ought to follow my example and release yourself from such shackles.”
“On the contrary,” Major Tarth said, “I think it is a great virtue to know when to doubt and question others. Pride goeth before destruction, Captain Lannister – you would do well to know a little of my daughter’s temperance.”

Brienne felt a blush rising in her cheeks, but Captain Lannister looked upon her with such fondness that she could not chide her father for drawing his attention to her.

“Perhaps that is true,” Captain Lannister said.

“Perhaps it is,” Brienne said, “but I think it is not wrong to be proud of all that one has achieved.”

Miss Tyrell had told her that. Looking back on their time in London and travelling the countryside, Brienne realised that Miss Tyrell had been a greater influence than she first had acknowledged. She had encouraged Brienne to act as though there were no expectations on her, not from her friends, her family, society – and it seemed to have worked, for Brienne had never felt freer. She wondered if there would be time to invite Miss Tyrell to the wedding.

“I will return to Winterfell forthwith,” she added, “and inform Mrs. Stark of my engagement.”

“You are not only proud, but brave,” Captain Lannister said. “I still have not the nerve to confront my sister.”

Major Tarth inclined his head towards Brienne. “My dear, you have changed. And I am proud of you for it. I do not think that is unreasonable to say.”

“Then I will take my leave,” Brienne said, “and perhaps upon my return we may name a date.”

Captain Lannister reassured her with a smile that sparked like a candle’s flame. “I will await you at Storm’s End. Major Tarth, perhaps I might invite you to join me and take a tour of the grounds?”

“I would be delighted,” Major Tarth said.

And so they parted, Brienne turning to walk in one direction and her father joining Captain Lannister’s carriage in the other. Brienne took each stride with the determination she had expressed before, however she felt it flag as she made for Winterfell. It was one thing to be proud of her betrothal despite all societal bounds, but another to stand up to the woman who had given her so much and announce that she would be giving it back in its entirety.

While she walked, she reflected that it would not have been so unusual for Brienne and Captain Lannister to marry if it were not for her becoming a governess. Captain Lannister was many leagues above her in name and fortunes, but he was from the military, and Brienne was the daughter of such a man. And yet – if she had not become a governess, she would never have met Captain Lannister. It was a curious conundrum, but not one that she cared to think on excessively. What had happened, had happened.

The soles of her feet were sore and the hem of her dress muddied by slush as she neared Winterfell, the pines rising above the horizon to fill her eyes with their comforting breadth, blowing in the winter winds. She would miss Winterfell. It had been her home for so long that she could scarce imagine abiding in any other place.

Hesitantly, she let the gate hang only slightly ajar as she slipped through, treading through snow still fresh on the path to the front door. Jory came to let her in, and she thanked him profusely. He seemed bemused by her overt kindness, and she knew it was unlike herself to display emotions so freely, but when would she next have the opportunity to show how she appreciated all in this house?
Arya sat reading in the study and Brandon in the library; Rickon was playing with one of the servants, ever obliging in keeping him entertained. Brienne made sure to check in on them all before she made her way up the stairs to Mrs. Stark’s chambers.

“Mrs. Stark?”

There was the sound of something shifting from within the room. “Miss Tarth, please do enter.”

“It has been so long since last we spoke,” Brienne said. “There is much that has happened, that I would wish to tell you.”

“Come, sit by my side,” Mrs. Stark said, gesturing to a second chair in the room. “Tell me all.”

Brienne took to the chair – it was too small for her large frame, and she sat indelicately, taking a moment to collect herself. “It brings me great sadness to say this,” she began delicately, “but I must take leave of your service.”

Mrs. Stark did not respond for a very long while. Brienne did not speak either, afraid of what might happen.

“I understand,” Mrs. Stark said eventually, her voice even. “Arya is almost of an age to be wed like her sister, and my sons will soon return to school. It is only natural that you seek other employment.”

“I am not looking for employment,” Brienne said. “Mrs. Stark, I am to be married.”

“Married!” Mrs. Stark exclaimed. It was as though she had flung open the windows and let in the bright white light of Winter. Mrs. Stark’s countenance brightened, and all at once she no longer looked like a frail, sickly woman, but someone young and energised. It was how she had looked when she was still excited about Sansa’s marriage.

“Yes, married,” Brienne said, smiling. “I will not continue working as a governess, for I am to become a wife.”

“And a mother, in due course,” Mrs. Stark said. “You will become a mother, too. Then, my dear, you will know how this hardship has been for me. You will be a wife first, but a mother for longer.”

Mrs. Stark’s words worried Brienne – it was clear that she spoke from her own experience. Brienne hoped their experiences would differ greatly.

“Tell me, then,” Mrs. Stark continued, “who is the young man who you will marry? Will I know him from the village?”

A part of Brienne longed to say that she would be marrying a man from the village. It would be so simple, for a girl of her station. No longer suited to her father’s found suitors, men such as Renly Baratheon – for a governess, it would be the right thing to do. But no man from the village would have her.

“I cannot say he is from the village, and yet you do know him,” Brienne said. “Mrs. Stark, as unbelievable as it seems, I am to marry Captain Jaime Lannister.”

All too suddenly, the room, that had seemed so open and airy for the first time since Mrs. Stark took it for her hermitude, became closed and breathless. No clouds passed over the sun, and yet its light was diminished. Mrs. Stark went as still and silent as a statue, her eyes slipping out of focus,
fixing instead on a spot far distant behind Brienne’s head.

The last time Brienne mentioned the Lannisters in Mrs. Stark’s company, Mrs. Stark had become agitated and asked her to leave immediately. This time, she did nothing at all. It was the absence of any reaction that so frightened Brienne.

“You remember,” she said slowly, “Captain Lannister and myself became more acquainted on my travels with Mr. Baratheon and the Tyrells. He has asked me to marry him, and I have accepted.”

Of course, it was more complicated than she made it seem, but it would do no good to relate the entire story, in all its sordid detail, to Mrs. Stark.


“Yes,” Brienne stuttered.

“Very well,” Mrs. Stark said. “Then you are to leave my house.”

Brienne tried not to laugh; although there was nothing humourous in Mrs. Stark’s reaction, it was less than she had expected, and she was glad for the relief. “Yes,” she said, “I will be leaving as soon as we set a date.”

“No,” Mrs. Stark said, “you misunderstand. I want you to leave my house, now.”

“I–”

“You may pack your bags, and leave,” Mrs. Stark said. “I will have nothing to do with that family, Miss Tarth.”

“Your own daughter is married to a Lannister,” Brienne said boldly. “Would you have nothing to do with her?”

Mrs. Stark got to her feet, and Brienne scrambled to match her. “Enough! I will hear no more of this! I do not want you or any trace of that family in my household! Do you not think they have done us enough harm already?”

“I know,” Brienne said. “I know they have done you great harm. But that was the young lord, and his mother – Captain Lannister and his brother have both been most–”

“Get out!” Mrs. Stark shouted. “Get out of my sight! You – you have betrayed me!”

“Betrayed?” Brienne stepped back, aghast. “With all due respect, I am not marrying for you, Mrs. Stark. I am marrying for myself.”

“Do you think you have the luxury of doing anything for yourself?” Mrs. Stark demanded. “When I took you in, I made a promise to your father. I promised him that I would look after you, that I would keep you employed until such an age that my daughters were too old for your tutelage. And until that time came, I promised your father that I would find you another position, or a husband, whichever I happened upon first. I would help you find your way into the world.”

Brienne did not know. Barely able to speak, she said, “But it did not turn out that way.”

“No, it did not!” Mrs. Stark snapped. “And now I cannot protect you any longer. So leave. I do not want to protect you.”

It did not make sense to Brienne, but on a deep level she understood that it made sense to Mrs.
Stark. Brienne knew that Mrs. Stark was not to blame for her actions, but it hurt nonetheless, as though a wound that was stitched shut had been ripped open afresh.

But Mrs. Stark wanted her to leave – so she would leave.

With tears stinging her eyes, she ran down the stairs and again to her bedroom, where she threw what she could into her portmanteau. She did not have time to fold anything, nor did she particularly care for the state of her clothes, when the state of her heart was a tempest of torment. She would leave, and she would not look back.

There would be no time to speak to Rodrik and thank him for letting her keep her practice sword in his hut for all those years, no time to seek out Jon in the stables. The house had come alive with noise, as though there was a sense that something had happened, although no-one quite knew what.

Mrs. Stark had emerged from her room.

Brienne heard her from the drawing room as she dragged her portmanteau to the door. No footman would help her – she did not know where they were, or how they knew, but they did know, to let her go alone.

“You cannot!” came Arya’s voice. “You cannot make her leave!”

“It is done,” Mrs. Stark said. “No doubt she will have already left by now.”

Balancing her portmanteau against the wall, Brienne unlatched the front doors. They swung open with a heavy clattering noise. Brienne did not know how she would be able to close them behind her without leaving her portmanteau lying in the snow. So be it; she would do what she had to.

She heard Arya sobbing as she closed the doors, and wished that she had time to say goodbye. But they were still arguing, voices raised, and Brienne dared not intervene.

The sun was beginning to set, glowing pink and purple over the icy ground. A brisk wind blew flurries of new snow through the air, sticking to Brienne’s eyelashes as she forged forward, ever onwards, towards Storm’s End. Her footprints disappeared moments after she left them, and the frost made her fingers rigid, fumbling with the handle on her portmanteau. She shifted it between her hands, but by the last leg of her walk the weight became more than she could bear, and she dragged it along the ground.

By the time the manor came into sight, the brown leather was stained wet by the snow in large, ugly patches. Brienne dropped it to the ground when she reached the manor’s doors. She had no force left to do anything other than knock, rapping her fist against the unforgiving wood.

It was several moments before her call was answered. A footman opened the door, and she would have fallen forward into the warmth were it not for the sight of Lady Baratheon standing behind him.

“Miss Tarth,” she said coldly. “I had thought our paths might never again cross. It appears I was mistaken.”

“Captain Lannister,” Brienne gasped. “Is he here?”

“Yes, my brother is here,” Lady Baratheon said. “You ought not to be seeking his company. Did you learn nothing from our last conversation?”

“I learnt much from it,” Brienne said, finding her voice, “about your true nature. Please, allow me
to see your brother.”

“I will not,” Lady Baratheon said. “Whatever predicament you are in that you would have to come here in the dark of a snowstorm, my brother cannot help you.”

Brienne was about to speak, when she heard a footfall in the cavernous candlelit space behind Lady Baratheon. Captain Lannister stood behind his sister with fury writ in his features – Brienne did not think she ever had, nor ever would, be so grateful to see him.

“Cannot help with what?” he asked. “Brienne – Brienne, what has happened?”

“Then it is true,” Lady Baratheon said, her tone filled with disgust. Brienne did not have to spend long wondering what Lady Baratheon had realised to be true. She tried to act as though Lady Baratheon were not present at all.

“What has happened?” Captain Lannister said again, pushing past the footman to lift Brienne’s portmanteau.

“I have left Winterfell,” Brienne said.

“You have been forced to leave, by the looks of it,” Captain Lannister said.

“Either way, I have left,” Brienne said.

Despite the snow blowing into his eyes and beyond the threshold of his sister’s manor, dusting the burgundy carpet with white, Captain Lannister smiled.

“Then I, too, will leave.”

Chapter End Notes

Please leave a comment! And before you say anything, yes, I have been planning this since the very beginning. This was always going to happen. But, well, nothing much more can go wrong, since the next chapter is the last, so don’t worry. And until next time...!
A candle flickered at the altar between them. London saw a dark, overcast night, snow lining the streets and more falling from the sky as cold sleet. Inside the church, however, it was warm. The wooden pews took on the colour of bronze in the dim light, and the stone walls held fast as an ancient fortress, reassuring all those within their confines that they would be safe – that they would come to no harm, not tonight.

Brienne closed her eyes and let herself be surrounded only by sensation, the scent of the hot wax and the shuffling of the people around her, leaning closer in anticipation.

By her side stood her father, his shoulders sodden in the short walk from the carriage to the church door. The heavy wool of his coat would not allow them to dry. He had complained bitterly that he had no finery to wear, but they were insignificant complaints when compared to his disapproval of the way the wedding was to be conducted. Brienne could not fault him – there was no glamour in a special license, obtained at the greatest expediency possible, to grant marriage to two people who might otherwise be forced to live in sin.

On that night, the night that Brienne had been forced to leave Winterfell, she and Captain Lannister had first hastened to the Winter Town, as neither of them felt it would be seemly to act without his consultation. Major Tarth had not been pleased, but he had agreed that the best course of action was to send a rider to London with an urgent missive to obtain audience with the Archbishop to solicit for a special license. And so they remained in the Winter Town that night and set off the following morning as the sun was barely risen.

Over their journey, Brienne had kept her own rooms in whichever inn they took to for respite, and spent much time alone writing letters, which would be sent ahead of them with the post. She wrote to Sansa and to Miss Tyrell, telling them of her circumstances. It had given her some dull pleasure amongst her torment to write that they should address any replies to Casterly Rock.

There was no need for that, however, as Captain Lannister had written to his brother, who, when he discovered that Sansa was also aware of the circumstances, co-ordinated to write to the Tyrells and Renly Baratheon, and arranged for Mr. Baratheon to meet with the Archbishop on their behalf. It was unorthodox, but the Baratheons and Lannisters were of significant fortune to make it worth the Archbishop’s while to issue the license. Brienne did not want to think of the implications of such a sum of money, but if not for Mr. Lannister’s assistance, she and Captain Lannister might have been left waiting countless more days in London, and living apart still. On that account, she was grateful.

Instead of having to wait, they stood opposite one another at an altar, with Miss Tyrell and Sansa sitting together in the frontmost pew. Any animosity Sansa might’ve held towards Miss Tyrell due to her engagement to Lord Baratheon was momentarily placed aside by their shared interest in Brienne’s happiness. Beside them sat Mr. Baratheon and Mr. Tyrell. Brienne still wondered that she could have such good friends, such companions who would support her despite the ill-planned nature of her marriage.

If she had been given the chance to do it again, she would have started planning it earlier, and told Mrs. Stark later. It would do no good to ruminate in such a way on the past, though. Brienne simply counted herself lucky that she was to be wed at all. And wed to Captain Jaime Lannister, with a special license! How the society pages would throw themselves upon such a match. It was
her sole consolation that the society pages would have no idea who Miss Brienne Tarth might be.

But in the space of a moment, she was no longer Miss Brienne Tarth – she was Mrs. Brienne Lannister, Lady of Casterly Rock.

A cool wind blew in through the gaps in the old church’s door, and one of the candles guttered out. It mattered not. Brienne felt that all the light she needed was right beside her, surrounding her in the way her friends and family regarded her so warmly.

And Sansa – Sansa was family now, although it was with a conflicted heart that Brienne accepted this fact. Sansa had not wanted to marry Mr. Lannister, and even now she did not look truly happy, but this, confirmed a feeling that Brienne had felt for many years, even when she was Sansa’s governess. At last, they were sisters.

“I am glad for you,” Sansa told Brienne, taking her hands, “my sister. I hope we can spend much time together now that you will be living closer to London.”

“Is Casterly Rock that much closer than Winterfell?” Brienne mused. “It felt like a long way indeed to travel when last I went there from London.”

“That,” Miss Tyrell interjected, “is because we travelled with many stops and starts. Perhaps one day we will travel again, Mrs. Lannister.”

Brienne did not miss the coy smile with which Miss Tyrell said her new name. She would not give Miss Tyrell the satisfaction of having been right all along, however, and chose not to comment on it. “We may,” she said instead. “However, first I must travel to Casterly Rock, and that in itself will be enough travel for a while.”

“First, we must travel back to my brother’s residences,” Captain Lannister said. “I do not know about you, my dear, but after so long on the road I desire nothing more than a good night’s sleep.”

Brienne did not know how to react to Captain Lannister’s sudden intimacy, so she did not react at all. She schooled her features into something of the professional governess. “As you wish,” she said.

“As I’m sure you wish too,” Captain Lannister said, his green eyes sparkling with humour. Brienne did not think she could ever tire of his eyes – they had struck her upon the occasion of their first meeting, when she still did not care for the man himself.

Captain Lannister, too, had made it quite clear that Brienne’s eyes were her proudest feature. He spoke of them like a poet, which was unusual indeed, as Captain Lannister was not a man who saw beauty in words. He was, after all that had happened to him, still a soldier, and that was how Brienne viewed him. He had fought demons both personal and of bloody warfare, and yet he stood before her in the church as someone she had, unbelievably, come to love.

“Yes,” Brienne said, “I would dearly like to rest.”

“You will still dine with us tomorrow, I hope,” Mr. Lannister said. “For if it is to be your last night in London, we would make the most of your company.”

“But of course,” Captain Lannister said. “Brother, I cannot thank you enough for–”

“Then do not thank me at all,” Mr. Lannister said. “I could say much the same to you.”

The brothers exchanged a significant look, its meaning not entirely lost on Brienne. And yet, it did not trouble her as it might once have. In fact, nothing seemed as though it could trouble her now.
They were to return to Mr. Lannister’s residence for the night, but with a shift in their circumstances – before setting out that evening, Mr. Lannister had boldly informed his housemaid to prepare Captain Lannister’s chambers for two that evening. In typical fashion, he had said this loudly, in the presence of both Brienne and Captain Lannister. Brienne had flushed, but Captain Lannister had taken her by the arm, saying, “You will have to accustom yourself to being spoken of like this.”

It was simply a question of that happening sooner, rather than later.

Returning in a carriage with Sansa and her father by her side and the brothers Lannister across from her, Brienne felt more calmed than perhaps she ever had. There was still something melancholy in the way Sansa carried herself, however Brienne did not begrudge it to her. She had made it clear that Sansa would be welcome at Casterly Rock whenever she desired – she only hoped that, too, would be sooner, rather than later.

In the darkness, they stepped out onto the street at Mr. Lannister’s residence. Brienne had enjoyed her stay; it was neither an ostentatious nor a particularly comfortable house, built not to flourish but to simply protect. It was robust, like she had tried so relentlessly to be. The sleet had subsided, but the ground still obfuscated itself with ice and slush, and Captain Lannister made a great show of holding out an arm to help Brienne from the carriage. She knew she ought to let him – they were married, after all – but her foundations were made of the same stuff as Mr. Lannister’s residence, so she refused him.

“You do not need to prove to anyone that we are married,” Brienne said.

“I know that,” Captain Lannister said, somewhat testily. “I would have helped you even were we still enemies.”

But it was too late, as Brienne had already lowered her feet onto the ground, lifting up the hems of her new dress. Her father had paid for it, and it would do no good to ruin it. “I would not have let you.”

Captain Lannister smiled wickedly. “I know that, too.”

It was strange, now, to think of their enmity. The time when Brienne had regarded Captain Lannister as a scoundrel and had been infatuated with Lieutenant Hunt now felt like a dream, from which she had woken when first she saw the welcoming green surrounding Casterly Rock.

They parted ways with Sansa and Mr. Lannister, leaving Brienne dazed and following Captain Lannister to his quarters. Foolishly, she had not considered the implications of her wedding night until that moment, and the thought filled her with conflicting emotions. She was attracted to Captain Lannister – that much was certain – but she could not have said with any confidence that she was prepared for what came of attraction.

And, perhaps, she still thought herself unworthy of it. She knew that Captain Lannister returned her esteem in kind, but that he could think her a beautiful woman besides… she was not beautiful, so he could not think it, and it would do her no good to contemplate it.

At the door to his chambers, the threshold to Brienne’s new life, she stopped.

“Captain Lannister,” she said, and then, experimentally, “Jaime. I cannot.”

Brienne watched his expression shift from satisfied, as she had used his given name, to confused. “Cannot… ?”

“I understand,” Captain Lannister said. “I would not necessarily expect it of you.”

“Perhaps when we arrive at Casterly Rock,” Brienne said. “I might feel more comfortable in a house I can call my own.”

“I am glad you’re already thinking of it as yours,” Captain Lannister said.

Brienne allowed herself a smile. “I– that is not all.”

Captain Lannister put a hand to his chest, mock-scandalised. “You would have me solely for my property?”

“Not in that sense!” Brienne said, although she allowed herself to laugh at his melodramatic air. “I meant to say, I am not a beautiful woman, as you must know, and–”

“Brienne,” Captain Lannister said. He seized her wrist with his good hand, his grip firm and his eyes unblinking.

“Jaime,” she said. His name sounded so pleasing to her ears; she could not fathom why she had not said it sooner.

“Do I seem to be someone who cares only for beauty?” he asked her.

“I only mean that my looks are so unremarkable, that it could not have escaped your notice,” she said.

Captain Lannister sighed wearily. “Do not make me give you reassurance, Brienne,” he said, “for I have no charm in me and no patience, as you know well.”

“I scarce have more,” Brienne said.

“Then we are suited,” Captain Lannister said. “Let us think not of beauty or any such falsehood, but of our collective lack of charms and graces. In which domain, you may be sure, you outclass me by far.”

“In the eyes of society,” she said, “I fear neither of us have any trace of class remaining.”

“I have long yearned for the day society turns on me,” he said, all too casually. “It matters not. I am not averse to having an ill reputation – so long as there are the two of us, and a home to keep us, we will weather it.”

Like the walls of Casterly Rock, Brienne thought. She drew strength from the idea, and from Captain Lannister releasing her hand, drawing his arm up to run his thumb across her cheek. The gesture was curiously friendly when put beside his usual sharp, quick-witted manner. Brienne could not imagine being married to anyone else.

“Then, goodnight,” she said. “I look forward to our return to Casterly Rock.”

Captain Lannister tilted his neck so their mouths were level, and pressed his lips to hers in the lightest of kisses. “Goodnight,” he echoed, breath close against hers, the word almost lost in the roaring of Brienne’s heartbeat.

This, too, she would come to find normal, given time.

Their last day at Mr. Lannister’s residence passed fleetingly, with Brienne occupied in thinking of
her impending journey to her new home. She could not even sit still long enough for a hand of whist, so diverted was her mind. Although Miss Tyrell visited briefly, Brienne found no solace in their conversation. She busied herself walking about the room as Miss Tyrell babbled about her misadventures at balls.

And then, before she knew it, time had passed, and it was the morning of Brienne and Captain Lannister’s departure.

The weather allowed them a reprieve that day, with the cool light of the sun beginning to melt the snow. As they stood on the street awaiting their carriage, Major Tarth took his daughter’s hands.

“It is with a heavy heart that I must part from you,” he said, looking not at her face but at the end of the street, some distance away. “You will write as soon as you arrive at Casterly Rock, I hope.”

“Of course, papa,” Brienne said. “And you must visit. You will love the gardens, and the woods.”

“I have no doubt I will,” Major Tarth said. He turned to look at Captain Lannister, deep in conversation with his brother, before adding, “And while I am not there to do so, you must look after yourself.”

Brienne smiled, squeezing her father’s hands. “As I have been doing for all these years,” she reminded him.

“This is true,” he conceded. “As you will continue to do. Do me proud, Brienne.”

When he said it like that, it felt less of an obligation and more of an offer, but no less something that Brienne would do for his sake, and for her own.

Then their carriage arrived, and the moment slipped through Brienne’s fingers. No matter how ardently she tried to hold onto it, it escaped her, subsumed by the excitement of the horses’ cries and the clattering of their luggage as the horseman loaded it onto the holding rack. Brienne said goodbye first to her father, and then to Sansa, and had only the briefest moment to say her parting words to Mr. Lannister, as they were pressed for time and had a long way to travel. Leaving London was the hardest thing she had done since allowing herself to love, and be loved – she suspected it was due to so many things she loved remaining in London, while she was to leave them, once again.

She left.

The way was rough in Winter but the journey felt shorter than it had the last time Brienne had travelled these roads. They stopped on fewer occasions, but when they did, Brienne had forgotten that it was seemly for herself and her husband to share a room. But it made no matter – Captain Lannister was content to lie by her side on whichever bed they found themselves, respectable at a distance but comforting in his proximity.

At the end of their travels, Llanisport awaited. It was just as grey as Brienne remembered it, but beneath the clouds it shone like old silverware, the lack of polish only adding to its intrigue. Their carriage trundled by the Lion’s Claw inn, over the very spot in the road where Brienne had stood and watched Captain Lannister leave. She had not known it then, but he had left on her behalf, to rescue a girl he barely knew for the family that Brienne held dear. It had rained on that day, too.

“Welcome home,” Captain Lannister said, as his manor, his domain, became visible through the fog. It was as though he knew how much the words would mean to Brienne.

And it did – it felt like home already, and Brienne’s heart soared.
On the path to the manor, they drove through the greenery and wove along the path like their carriage was designed specifically for this journey. The footman took their luggage; it felt like only minutes, not days, since they had been in London.

Despite the rain – only a light mist, now – Brienne stood on the steps to Casterly Rock and turned to survey the grounds they had just come through. It was so unimaginably vast, so stunning, and it was hers. So too the man beside her.

Captain Lannister took her hand. He did not say anything, nor did he need to. After so long, and after such trials as they had passed through, their silence and their ability to be together in that quiet moment was all that they needed.

She would never be the most handsome woman, the belle of the ball, the toast of society. She lacked neither wit nor graces, nor accomplishments beyond having been tested by what was expected of her, and having survived it. And at times, she still felt followed by the same inadequacy she had always felt, but now, she had discovered something she did not have before: there, between neither happiness nor sadness, Brienne Lannister had found contentment.

That was reason enough for her pride.

Chapter End Notes

It has been about three years since I started writing this fic, and now, it is finished. It feels pretty strange, like my firstborn leaving home, or something. I have been honoured to have such a readership over the course of these three years, and such encouragement even when I had to put this fic to one side for my studies. This is the longest thing I've ever written, at just over 100k, and I'm both impressed with myself and a little bit intimidated. It's a big deal, and the end of this chapter is the end of a longer chapter, too.

Some key acknowledgements: Kat, Billie, Taylor—the original gang. I would not have made it this far without you three, I am absolutely certain of that. It's been so long that I couldn't name every individual thing you guys have done for me, but I'm certain there was beta reading and cheerleading and all that stuff that makes a writer into an author. Jo—thank you for looking over this chapter among many, and for always getting this fic, in our brainstorming sessions or otherwise. You're an absolute champ.

And to everyone reading, whether just as this story comes to its close or sometime in the future, thank you. Your comments and messages on tumblr over the years have given this story its steam. One last time—please leave a comment, and let me know what you thought! I'm always keen for a chat, and always happy to hear from people. Thank you for your support!

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