Summary

Jaime and Brienne love each other with an all-consuming depth, the truest emotion either of them has ever known. Their inner selves overcome with desire, longing and fear of losing, whilst the outside world brings obstacles to their door. United they fight the ultimate war – to settle their pasts, protect their bond and forge their future together.

Notes

Dear Fellow Braime Shippers,

This will be my longest fic to date, over nine months in the making. A tale filled with romance, emotion, angst, drama, fluff and the true love shared between Jaime and Brienne.
It is fully written, so the ending is done, with chapters getting gradually longer as the story progresses.
The title is based upon the song which triggered this tale - ‘War of Hearts’ by Ruelle

Thank you to Ro_Nordmann for the beautiful cover artwork! <3
Why were unplanned outbursts the only emotional reaction which she was capable of?

Her feelings suppressed until they became a flood, flowing forth from her in cataclysmic waves, crashing upon his shores. Quaking with anger, angst or fear, her body quivering with the effort of denying them until they manifested themselves as an eruption, catching him off guard and cracking open fissures in his own hardened heart. Birthing resonate stirrings in the very depths of his soul.

For over a moon’s turn they had been a couple, together yet still distant.

Brienne always seemed determined to conduct herself as an aloof creature. Indifferent and oddly removed from the general population. Reserved and introverted. She spoke little and seldom betrayed her thoughts, keeping her expression neutral, pressing her lips together firmly to silence speech before it could even find purchase on her tongue.

Jaime by contrast rarely possessed a thought he didn’t voice aloud. He was comprised of passion and impulse. He found it difficult to ascertain the inner workings of the Lady Knight’s mind. He tried to provoke her to reaction, to tease her into speaking, yet still her reticence and methodical manners endured. It had been this way with her for years.

Cersei had always run hot. Screeching if displeased, shooting venom like an adder when she was unhappy. If she wanted sex she demanded it, if she needed something from him, she commanded. Her passions and emotions dictating her moves, whether to her benefit or detriment. He knew how to handle his twin – she was the same as him.
By contrast, Brienne was stoic and silent to an infuriating point. She followed Sansa around Winterfell like a stalwart sentinel, only speaking when spoken to. Leaving him to his own devices by day as he walked around the grounds resembling a displaced stray dog. He would often try to catch her eye, to distract her, tempt her to smile – but when she was on guard, nothing could shift her focus.

He often worried that duty was the death of love.

Love….. there was the thing. Did she love him?

He didn’t want to question or wonder, but the query kept raising its ugly head in his mind. Jaime had sought her out the night of the banquet, gladly following her when she left the room. During the drinking game she had performed one of her trademark exits, withdrawing from the fun before it came to encroach upon her privacy. Her personal self which she defended more fiercely than even Lady Stark. Of course she had to remove herself at that point, Tyrion had struck a nerve and she would leave the situation before - peril of perils - she actually displayed a human reaction.

But Jaime – he was driven by compulsion, desire. He wanted her, needed to hear that he had not arrived too late and her affections may be otherwise entertained. He had barged into her chambers, knowing that if he waited for an invitation it would never come. So transparent had he been, she had seen through him. Caught sight of his jealousy and intentions. Called him out. But still – she would not let slip even the slightest hint if she felt the same way.

Actions speak louder than words, he had told himself. Brienne would say ‘piss off” but it held no real conviction. When she unlaced her own shirt before removing his own, he considered it a monumental triumph. When her knees buckled at his kiss his heart soared.

But then after…she had withdrawn inside herself again. Rolling away, sleeping apart from him, choosing to face the wall.

He had stared at the ceiling, not understanding. How could she run so cold when they had just been so close? But there was nothing to be done for it. Eventually he had surrendered to sleep, resolved that she was probably embarrassed and they would talk it over tomorrow.

The next day she was her usual uncommunicative self. He had asked her if she planned to go with the armies and she responded that her place was with the Stark girls. Jaime had then volunteered to remain with her. She had accepted his offer with a nod – in a similar manner to which she had granted him permission to join her forces for the Long Night. It was only afterwards he found out that she had arranged his guest right with Lady Sansa.

She must have feelings for me, she did that for me.

So he had stayed with this strange detached woman and felt himself growing more bonded by the day whilst still questioning if his feelings were returned by her own.

She was obliging between the furs, welcoming him back into her bed each night without ceremony or needing to remark upon the matter. Often as they lay there afterwards he would chat about
battles and wars, the Gold Road, charging a dragon and she would listen attentively until she drifted to sleep. Slowly she evolved to slumbering on her back with her head facing towards him, especially when she fell asleep mid story. Jaime considered it progress.

The majority of days he would find her gone the next morning, slipping out before he woke.

And so they continued. . .

The problem was, he needed to know. Genuine affection was something which he craved. Every minute he spent with Brienne of Tarth, she settled more beneath his skin. Forcing her way into his heart which he had always thought entirely occupied. Each day she claimed a little more of it, pushing out his affection for Cersei. It frightened him.

What if he rose one day to discover that she possessed all of him, yet she did not reciprocate?

Could she not see he had given up everything to be with her? That he rode North for her?

Was he still the enemy? Would honour still compel her to fight him if she had to?

Or did he truly mean more?

He feared the answer was no. It sent daggers through his heart.

When the news of Cersei’s imminent demise had reached his ears earlier today it had instigated a panic within him which he was unable to suppress. Cersei had spent her life proclaiming to love him. Whispering in his ear how nothing mattered but the two of them. They were two halves of one whole.

But Jaime was in the cold, wintry North, spending his days desperately trying to evoke a reaction out of the woman who commanded him body and soul.

Whilst the Queen in the South, sat upon her throne of swords thinking herself quite clever but not seeing the bigger picture. She was surrounded by lickspitfles and glory hunters who only had their own interests at heart. Her position was precarious and those she foolishly thought loyal would soon turn their backs on her. She had always been blinded by her own conceit and ignorant when it came to reading people. Jaime had been the sole person who had genuinely cared about her dark sadistic self. He had reminded her that he was all she had right before he left, but it made little difference.

Cersei would die alone – lamenting and questioning why her twin and the father of her child had abandoned her so readily. Never pausing to consider it may have been her own fault.

But still it pained him to imagine her, desolate and watching…waiting.

Waiting for her brother to rush to her aid. For a rescue which was never coming.
In her twisted way she did love him, Bronn’s assassination attempt had proven that. Cersei’s hurt had to have cut deeply for her to readily plot his death.

All his most despicable deeds had been to keep her safe and now he was just going to step aside and let her burn. It ate at him. Gnawing at his conscience.

He had watched Brienne for the rest of the afternoon, silently imploring her to give him a reason. Needing a verbal reassurance that his new ties of loyalty were not misplaced. Thoughts of leaving his Lady Knight made agony blossom inside his own chest – but by the time the sun set Jaime Lannister had decided that Brienne Tarth did not love him.

It cut him to the quick but settled his decision. He consoled himself with the knowledge that he would only be wounding himself in the process. Not her.

*If she would give me just one sign….one declaration….*

Jaime had been overtly demonstrative when she arrived at their chambers. Tactile and insistent upon touching her, holding her. She had just wrinkled her brow in that delightfully endearing but bewildered way. Shrugging him off as she hung up her cloak and making enquiries about his thoughts on the war. He had sighed heavily, saying he had no desire to discuss it.

Tilting her head to the side she regarded him thoughtfully, a depth of comprehension in her blue eyes which swelled his heart and reminded him why he adored her. But still she did not speak. No reassurances poured forth, nor sweet sympathetic words which would balm and soothe. She just quietly approached him and began removing his tunic, staring into his eyes in the intense contact which only the two of them were capable of producing. Jaime had almost convinced himself once again that perhaps words were unnecessary. As they fell into bed it seemed so natural – yet each time her lips parted to sigh or moan his entire body leapt in anticipation that this could be the moment.

One word of love to escape her mouth and all thoughts of returning to his twin would be hastily abandoned, knowing his devotion was returned.

But she drifted off not long after, quiet as ever, as he nudged her and tried to entice her to spend some quality time with him that didn’t involve politics or fucking.

As her breathing deepened, he gave up, kissing her goodnight and sliding from the bed. Dressing in his leathers and staring into the fire. Resolve overtaking him.

*She does not love me.*

*Cersei needs me.*

*This is right.*

*I am a hateful person…. but what else can be done?*

*Cersei will die if I do not go to her and Brienne doesn’t return my affections.*
It had seemed so simple.

Then…. 

Jaime pulled his horse to an abrupt halt as the images tormented his addled heart. 
His breath coming heavily as tears pricked his eyes.

Brienne had fallen apart.

In a thousand scenarios he had never pictured it, could barely imagine it.

The torrent of tears that streamed down her face. The heaving sobs which echoed across the yard after him.

“Stay here. Stay with me.” Her voice was broken and desperate. Her hands clutching his face like he was the most precious thing to her in the world. It had caught him off guard, but he had already forged steel shields around his emotions. It was too late. Was it truly?

“Please stay.” She was so earnest, so desperate. He could see her bottom lip trembling, her walls shattering. Begging him to remain at her side.

Tears cascaded from his own eyes and his horse stomped impatiently, blowing steam from both nostrils as it surveyed the road ahead.

I am truly hateful. Why did I persevere?

She said please….

It wasn’t a declaration, but it was more than enough to convince him.

He wheeled his horse around and kicked it into a full gallop back towards Winterfell.
Chapter Summary

Cover Art by: Ro_Nordmann

*I can't help but love you, even though I try not to...*
Lyrics, War of Hearts by Ruelle
Chorus, Line 1 & 2

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes
His horse was severely winded by the time it charged headlong back through the courtyard gates, narrowly avoiding catastrophe as its hooves slid and clattered against the icy ground.

Jaime was conscious of every second, fearing how much time had elapsed; the irreversible damage caused whilst he grappled with his epiphany, only to conclude that he despised himself more than any outsider ever possibly could.

His self-loathing only intensified threefold when he spied her crumpled form kneeling on the frosted cobblestones. Arms embracing her own waist, in an attempt to comfort herself.

Brienne's head hung low as soul crushing sobs violently shook her shoulders. They grew quieter when she tried to rein them in, swiping angrily at her face with the back of her hand before they poured anew, and she clutched herself tighter. In the faint moonlight he saw translucent teardrops glisten as they fell, mingling with the snow and freezing. He knew her tender heart was undergoing the same progress.

Jaime vaulted from his palfrey's back, rushing across the small remaining distance and throwing himself down in front of her.

"Brienne..." His voice was choked and raw. He felt unworthy to speak to her, to use the familiarity of her name. What could he possibly say that would negate the harm he had needlessly inflicted upon them and the splendour of their fledgling relationship?
All brought about by his own insecurities and pitiful need to be reassured that he was loved.

But mayhaps that was exactly what she needed right now. Pride and ego be damned. His reddened eyes would attest to the integrity of his declarations.
"...I'm sorry. I'm so sorry. I love you.... I can't leave you. I want to stay, I want you. I love you."

He leant forward to press his lips to her forehead but she shied away. Her blue eyes darkening in the dim, so full of hurt and betrayal that he could scarcely meet her gaze. Her chin still wobbled but her mouth set into that familiar grim, determined line. Fresh pools springing forth within her glassy orbs as she regarded him and shook her head.

"I always knew you would leave me." Gathering the fabric of her robe in her hands, she raised
herself up to full height. "I tried to convince myself that our love was real...that you might mean it. That it wasn't convenience and pity." She sniffled through her reddened nose, trying her best to appear altogether and dignified. "But it was only a matter of time." She swallowed. "Please don't demean us both by continuing this pretence of affection. There is nothing to be gained from it."

Jaime's eyes widened to saucers as he scrambled, rising to meet her head on. "This is not artifice Brienne. Never has it been. I have given you naught but my full heart and love since arriving here. Since following you here... It is you who has been pushing me away. With your silences and withdrawals. How is a man supposed to think Brienne? Your behaviour indicates indifference at best."

She shook her head, looking up to the heavens in indignation and disbelief. "That is the most scurrilous misrepresentation of the facts I have ever heard."

"How Brienne? How can it be?" He moved forward and seized her cheek in his hand as she had done to him not so long ago. Needing her to look at him and see the truth. A barb penetrating his heart when she flinched at his touch. "I just told you that I love you. Did you hear it? I love you. I will say it again. I will repeat it a thousand times because I mean it. But not one phrase of sentiment do I ever hear in return. One Brienne, just one and I would have been reassured."

"You do me an injustice Ser. Have you never learnt to weigh a person by their actions? I have lain with you every night." She stepped back from him again as a wave of tears threatened. "I gave you my maidenhead. My honour. I staked my word on you. My reputation. I pathed the way for you to stay. And you are telling me you need words out of my mouth? To reassure you that your affections are not misplaced? If your feelings warrant that much reinforcement, I strongly suspect it is not mine which are insincere."

"Well see? This is officially the most phrases on the subject of us - I have ever heard you speak! And I will pay actions being the true measure because yes - I believed Brienne. I clung to what you gave me when other gestures spoke a different truth. But it is difficult when the woman you love rolls away after you have just coupled. When she denies you a kiss of greeting in public or the grasping of her hand...."

"You only have one! To hold it would be impractical!"

"But worth it! If I must lap my soup at dinner like a dog from a bowl then so be it! For it would be worth it to feel a connection to you. To anchor myself to you where all can see. On display where we don't have to hide. Or are you too ashamed of me? Is your honour brought too low by your lust for the crippled Kingslayer to make you wish to hide me in the shadows."

"Are you sure it is not you who is ashamed of me? You certainly had several opinions on my appearance when we first met. Am I to assume they faded into insignificance? My face is still the same I will remind you!"

"Stop that!"

"Stop what?"

"Hiding behind your looks when you know everyone sees you as far more than that by now. You use it as a mask, as an excuse to keep other human beings at a distance. Especially the man who loves you."
"Men who are in love don't depart a bedchamber in the middle of the night. And certainly, attractive women are not callously left, so their lover can return to an incestuous relationship with their twin sister."

"Now it is you who is being unfair. Never once did I say I was going back to be with her in a romantic sense. Never once in my spiel did I even imply that I don't love you or that my feelings had somehow changed. I felt compelled to go and save her - that is all. I even said that I was hateful, for I hated myself for leaving you."

"I asked you to stay."

"And so - here I am."

"If you loved me - you would never have left."

"And if you loved me you would have held me all night after seeing my distress and chased away my doubts."

Brienne shrugged. "So, then I am not right for you. And Cersei being your twin and everything you could possibly need - is. Therefore go get her and cease berating me about my purported failings so I can go back to nursing my broken heart. Oh wait. That's right. I don't love you and never have. These tears must have been for happiness that I am free. For I was so grateful to have given my all only to watch the man I invested everything in ride away when I begged him to stay. To let me know once and for all that I am not enough and never will be."

"Marry me."

“What?” Her complexion matched the snow as confusion crossed her face. More timid than the moonmaid in the haze of the yard.

“You heard me.” Jaime stepped towards her, tilting his head to the side. “Need I fall upon bended knee? Because I will.” He stopped in front of her, pushing his cape out behind him, falling to one knee against the cobbled stones and sporadic drifts. Brienne’s breath came in rapid bursts as he looked up at her, marvelling at exactly how very tall she was from this angle. “Put your actions, where your emotions claim to be and marry me.”

She let out an indelible snort. “You are challenging me to marry you?”

“Yes and no.” He explained, ignoring the pain in his knee and trying not to feel his age – it had been a long day. “If you love me as you assert then it is not a big ask – we have been living as though man and wife. I love you – to have you as my wife is not a stretch in thought for me.”

“Marriage is forever Jaime. Not long ago you were leaving me.”

“Not in my heart and I considered you indifferent. Things change – though you are yet to back up your protestations. I however am kneeling here completely willing to bind myself to you in matrimony. Effectively putting you ahead of everyone else and proving to any who may doubt, yourself included, that you are most certainly enough.” He smiled. “Marriage is the most sacred of oaths and ties is it not?”
He could see her jaw working in stress. The tension tangible in her form. He wanted to wrap his arms around her waist, kiss the firm muscles of her taut stomach and tell her to stop being so stubborn. Part her robe and take her back to their room where he could chase away all her misgivings now that he knew her detachment was a front.

Yet he waited instead, insistent. Needing to push for that further assurance. Now the words were out his mouth, he would not be satisfied until she agreed. The compulsion to marry suddenly becoming a burning want. Flowing through his veins like an oxygen he hadn’t known he needed until it had tumbled from his mouth.

“This is ludicrous.” She buried her tear stained face in her hands before raking her fingers through her mussed-up hair. “What good would come if I agreed to a betrothal? It doesn’t prove anything. It doesn’t alter our situation. I pledge myself to you tonight in this courtyard and you can change your mind upon the morrow when the war worsens or I become too austere for your liking.”

Jamie pushed himself to his feet, his leg was going to sleep and he needed to address her when they were of a height - she technically still had an inch or two on him but at least they could look each other in the eye. “Fair point. So we wed tonight. Now.”

“You have truly lost your mind.”

“Why? I believe I am thinking more clearly than I have in over a month. There is a heart tree, a Maester in residence. Our union could be consecrated within the hour. The Old Gods are unlike the Faith of the Seven, they stand less on pomp and ceremony and more about efficiency. An aspect which at this point in time, I could get behind.”

“We are not of their Faith, how would it be binding?”

“The religious aspect is only belief based. In the South we still acknowledge couples married in the North. A Maester witnesses and records the vows, then sends the confirmation to the Citadel for registration. It would be lawful.”

She stared over his shoulder at nothing in particular, deep in rumination. Jaime resisted the urge to tuck a strand of hair behind her ear, lest he disturb her train of thought. His stomach had started to churn as he pondered the phrasing which she would contrive to tell him no. He just hoped it wasn’t with complete finality. Ending both his spontaneous suggestion and their relationship. He would be hurt when she turned him down but it would be his turn to weep in the snow if she severed their romance completely.

Although it would only be fair….

Brienne’s gaze returned to his face. “Fine then.” She stated matter-of-factly.

Jaime was puzzled. “Fine meaning…?”

“I will go dress. You rouse Maester Tarly.”
With that she strode back inside the stronghold.

Chapter End Notes

I have decided upon a Chapter Release Schedule. From now on new chapters will be posted every Wednesday and Saturday AEST. Next update will therefore be in two days! :)
Chapter Summary

Come to me, in the night hours....
Lyrics, War of Hearts by Ruelle
Verse 1, Lines 1 & 2

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes
From the positioning of the constellations high above in the night sky, Jaime gathered the hour was well beyond midnight. The Heart Tree’s stretching branches obscuring his vision of the crescent moon as he inhaled freezing lungfuls of air. He jiggled on the spot to keep warm and smiled apologetically at Maester Tarly. “Thank you for agreeing to come. It is cold.”

“That’s alright.” The cheerful man beamed. “Gilly and I are pleased to be a part of this. Quite romantic really.”

Jaime guffawed. If Sam had known the night he and Brienne had shared, the last thing he would describe their eventuation in the Godswood as would be ‘romantic’.

But perhaps it is…..

He was standing here, in the dark of the night. Illicitly marrying the woman he loved. Whilst the castle slept and wars waged in the South, they were forging a peace for themselves.

Jaime was still in shock that she had agreed. Whether it was to rise to the challenge, to bind him to stay with her or to call his bluff he didn’t really care. Brienne was going to wed him. After all these years he would have a wife. He could call her his.

“You were raised in the Faith of the Seven.” Jaime mused aloud. “How do you know how to perform this?”

“Gilly is of the Old Gods. She insisted we say vows when she found out we had another little one on the way…. In secret of course.” He added conspiratorially. “Maesters aren’t allowed to wed. But I figure we can keep each other’s secrets.”

“Deal.” Jaime chuckled.

The crunching of snow and fallen red leaves drew his attention. Gilly cleared her throat.

Brienne strode into the Godswood, in her leathers and fur lined cloak. She had brushed her hair into its smooth, slicked back style and Oathkeeper hung from her hip. The expression she gave Jaime was of genuine shock, as though she had expected him to run and not be waiting for her. He
raised his eyebrows and grinned mischievously in response.

You will not be getting out of this that easily my love...

“Ser Brienne… who will be presenting you to the groom?” Samwell enquired.

“I speak for myself.”

“Very well.” The shy Maester was abashed by the severity of her tone but composed himself nonetheless. “Shall we begin?”

Jaime nodded in encouragement.

“Who comes before the Old Gods this Night?”

The Lady Knight stooped down so Gilly could whisper the phrasing in her ear. She straightened and replied. “Brienne of House Tarth comes here to be wed. A woman grown, trueborn and noble. I come to beg the blessing of the Gods. Who comes to claim me?”

It was nearly issued as a dare. Each waiting for the other to break and withdraw from the ceremony. Jaime was enjoying it immensely.

Sam gestured for him to step forward. “State your titles and lands in the same manner.” He whispered.

“Jaime of House Lannister. Lord of Casterly Rock and liege of the Westerlands.”

Maester Tarly looked to the tall blonde who stood before them. “Lady Brienne, will you take this man?”

The lion held his breath, the pause when her blue eyes trained upon his seemed to last a lifetime.

Finally, her lips parted, declaring. “I take this man.”

Jaime smiled as Maester Tarly inclined his head toward his ear. “Take her by the arm. Lead her to the tree. You must both kneel in front of it in silent prayer.”

Gilly was instructing Brienne in a similar manner.

Jaime edged forward and offered his arm to his new wife. She accepted, weaving her arm through his as they walked towards the heart tree. Both kneeling in the snow amongst its gnarled roots and littered foliage, the Old Gods watching through the sombre face carved into its blanched trunk. He was not certain how to pray to this strange deity, what to ask or how to show reverence. So he simply repeated through his mind that which he earnestly longed for.

May she love me as I love her. May we never be parted, and if we are, may we always find our
way back to each other.

May we grow old together. May I hold her.

May I be blessed to see her smile the way she did the evening I knighted her, the way she did at the banquet.

May she know that I love her, may she understand my many flaws.

May she always be mine…

Next to him he heard the scraping of steel as Brienne removed Oathkeeper from its scabbard. She laid it upon the ground between them before the tree, fingers lingering on the hilt. The way a Knight swore a vow.

She looked to him and he mimicked her actions, unsheathing Widow’s Wail and placing it beside its counterpart. Gently crossing points so they touched. Maintaining contact with the pommel, he reached across with the tips of his fingers towards her hand, thrilled when she likewise responded. He caressed her long digits with his own, lacing his end two fingers between hers. She sighed deeply and gave them a squeeze.

Maester Tarly’s voice broke their silence. “I will go and write to the Citadel. I want to send the Raven before first light.”

“Thank you again Samwell.”

“Yes –” Brienne echoed his sentiment, her voice unusually soft. “-Thank you.”

“You are both welcome.”

The Maester and his unofficial wife, exited the Godswood, leaving them alone amongst the hush and rustling of branches. Jaime pushed himself to his feet, keen to stretch out his legs. His breeches were dampened from the melted slush where he knelt and he brushed errant leaves from his thighs.

Brienne rose next to him like a tower, still quiet and contemplative. It irked Jaime, he always needed to talk. “I’m sorry I didn’t have a cloak to drape around you.”

“No matter. I have my own and do not need your protection. I am quite capable of defending myself.”

Side by side they began the walk back towards the castle, Jaime slowing his pace to let her unknowingly lead. Uncertain how to proceed.

“I do have to dispute that.” He kept his tone jovial even though his statement held weight - he did not wish to be considered redundant by his woman. “You seemed to need my protection when you were overcome by wights on the frontline.”
“And you in a similar manner upon the ramparts.” She countered.

“What about when captive with Locke?”

“Your trial in front of Lady Sansa and the Dragon Queen.”

“The Bear Pit.”

“Nearly drowning in your own bath.”

He stopped under one of the covered archways, confounded and awe-struck when their history was put so plainly. She frowned, turning to face him, perturbed by his actions. Every look she gave him since he rode away on horseback seemed laced with misgiving.

He ensured his expression was gentle as he summarised. “Perhaps we can conclude that we need each other.”

Jaime knew she was loathe to accept any weakness, yet she nodded once in response. “We are married now. We must stand together.” Brienne seemed to emphasise the last part. “We are sure to be tested.”

“And we will weather the storms.” He inched closer, taking her chin in his gloved hand. Dancing his leather clad thumb over her bottom lip, teasing it, hoping she would part them to welcome a kiss.

“You know I haven’t kissed my wife yet…” Leaning closer, he hesitated when she did not move to meet him. His green eyes studied her face, the immense sadness which still lingered in her countenance. Pulling away he looked to the ground, ashamed. “I am sorry Brienne. I honestly did not believe my departure would hurt you. If I had known, I never would have inflicted it upon you.”

“It is done now Ser Jaime. I cannot be erased.” Her blue spheres were glassy and she studied the bricks above his head, endeavouring to restrain her emotions.

“Can you forgive me?” His voice was pained. “I came straight back.”

“Forbearance – I will manage. I have little other option. My woman’s heart betrays me. But I don’t believe I will ever forget. Your blade was sharp Ser, it has penetrated to the centre of my chest. The wound may heal but it will leave a scar.”

“I hate myself for doing that to you. The stupidity of a few minutes, to mar the trust and rapport of years. You may come to forgive me Brienne, but I doubt I will ever forgive myself.”

“Nothing can be done for it. We move forward. We have since made a choice. To bind ourselves in matrimony to one another. That says a lot…” She swallowed, taking him by the hand. “Come Ser Jaime.”

“Where?”

“To our chambers. Our marriage must be consummated.”
She halted when he did not move to follow her. “Jaime? Have you changed your mind?”

“You baffle me Brienne. Truly you do. This must be how I became confused. You do not wish to kiss me and yet….”

“If our union is not physically sealed – it can be placed aside. I am not leaving you that option.”

Now he smirked. “In the spirit of that we have been ‘consummating’ for weeks. I hardly think those grounds a concern.”

“Nevertheless, I will not risk it. It troubles me that you could have an out.”

Jaime studied her again, scrutinising her stance, her expression. He realised suddenly that perhaps he read her incorrectly and had been all along. That often her motives were disguised beneath actions which could be seen as duty bound or proper. When really they were cleverly crafted ruses to disguise weakness and fragility.

This is where he would usually employ a snappy retort, reminding her that he was the one who suggested their marriage. Instead he drew on the feelings from his heart, the ones which had been silenced by his head when he had made the foolish decision earlier that day. His emotions knew her better. She had once called him out on his true intentions, when he tried to pass off jealousy as teasing or a game. Now he achieved the same feat.

“You want to be close to me, you want to reconnect. I understand why you don’t want to admit it, that you don’t want to appear vulnerable with me, especially not after I hurt you so badly.” He sidled up to her, bringing his lips to her ear. “I feel the same way, I want it too. I need our intimacy, I need to comfort you – to be there for my wife…. You don’t have to pretend with me Brienne.”

She swallowed and gave him another nod, leading him down the arched corridors towards their bedchamber.

There were still no words but something had shifted. A sensory realignment of their ties that bound. Jaime could feel it. Her kiss was more insistent, needier. He found himself responding in kind, deep and urgent, as though he could absorb every doubt and replace them with certainty. Her hands wandered and clutched at him when they normally rested in one place. Her legs seemed to hold him closer and at one stage he saw a tear escape the corner of her eye. It caused several of his own to succumb to gravity, descending from his tired bloodshot eyes. Inconcealable from the woman beneath him on whom they fell.
She kissed his cheeks, the newest salt tears captured by her lips and her captivating gaze brightened slightly.

Brienne found her voice, the three words which she chose to speak different to the ones he had been yearning to hear, but tonight the desire for this particular set to reach his ears trumped the other. “I forgive you.”

“Thank you.” He buried his face in her neck, breathing in her scent. “I needed that.”

“And I needed this.” She confessed.

Being husband and wife had enveloped them both in a sense of security. Safe in the knowledge that in the eyes of Gods and men they were inseparable. The reassurance both of them sought, that they weren’t going to lose the other – to another person, to their divided loyalties or more importantly, through the actions of their damaged selves.

“See how much better this is?” He had drawn the furs up past their shoulders and positioned himself to be nose to nose with Brienne. The tips of them almost touching until his entire line of vision was comprised of her face.

“This is very close.”

“That’s the point.”

The Lady Knight sighed, repositioning her legs uncomfortably beneath the blankets, her hand reaching over to grasp his stumped wrist.

His body jumped when she gripped it.

“Does that bother you?” She enquired.

“No, it’s just… I’m not used to contact there. It’s a part of me best avoided.”

“I don’t hold the same belief.” Brienne drew it over to her chest, clasping it in both hands as she shut her eyes. “I am very tired Jaime.” She announced. He knew it was for his benefit.

“It is our wedding night.” He protested.

“And if we continue on this path, it will be our wedding morn and I will be dead on my feet
tomorrow.”

“We only made love once….”

She huffed. “Earlier tonight does not count?”

“Pre-courtyard incident. It already feels like a week ago.”

“I’m exhausted and drained. I am lying facing you, even though it makes me awkward. Be grateful for my concessions and let me slumber.”

Jaime kissed her once on the lips as she allowed her eyes to close, watching her lids shutter over their heavy blue. Once they were closed, he almost immediately noticed that she squeezed his stump tighter, acknowledgement of the intimation behind the gesture dawning upon him.

She is holding onto me this time – ensuring I cannot steal away while she sleeps.

Pressing his mouth to her temple, he murmured in her ear. “I’m not going anywhere my love.”

Laying his head back in the depression of his pillow, Jaime wondered if tomorrow he would consider this night a tragedy or a great success.

A loud banging on the door made him sit up with a start.

Brienne gasped in shock, disturbed from her short-lived slumber.

“Ser Brienne.” A gruff male voice called from beyond the wood before rapping on the door again with growing urgency.

She blinked to clear the sleep and replied loudly. “Yes?”

“Come to the door, I have a message to deliver.”

Rolling from beneath the covers she retrieved her robe, threading her arms through it and tying the sash before standing next to the door. “Relay your message, we can speak through the wood. It is well into the night and I am not suitably attired.”

“Ser Brienne. Lady Sansa insists on your presence in her chambers immediately.”

“Then I will be there presently.”

Crossing the room to fetch a fresh set of clothing she pursed her lips.

“This is unusual.” Jaime observed.

“Perhaps there has been another development in the war.”
“Couldn’t it wait until morning?” He yawned, wondering how on earth she had found the energy to dress.

“As my Lady commands, I obey. I am her sworn sword.” Walking over she kissed Jaime on the forehead. “You may as well rest. One of us should get some sleep.”

“I will miss you – you keep me warm.”

“I have put another log on the fire.”

“That’s hardly the point.”

“You married a woman with responsibilities Jaime. The realities of it begin now.”

He smiled to himself as she fastened Oathkeeper around her waist and made for the door.

“Brienne…”

“Yes?” Hand on the knob she turned to behold him.

“I like being awake when you leave. It feels less cold and dismissive. We can talk, exchange thoughts and you kissed me goodbye.”

He watched her toy with a thought, wondering whether to tell him something. The impulse winning out as she replied.

“It seems what you did not know did indeed hurt us …. I kiss you farewell every morning.”

Chapter End Notes

Comments make my day. <3
Tonight I finished writing this fic. I will update with the Chapter total once editing is complete.
I can't help but be wrong in the dark...
Lyrics, War of Hearts by Ruelle
Bridge, Line 1

There was a haunting emptiness to walking the corridors at night, the high walled halls of stone which bustled with activity by day, transformed into a funnel for echoes and torchlight.
Brienne had never been required by her Lady at such an odd time. The only prior instance where she had been summoned in the befittingly titled ‘Hour of the Ghosts’ had been during the Long Night. And likewise, she felt just as battered as she had when the armies of the undead finally fell.

Shaking off her fatigue, Brienne attempted to dislodge the lingering sensations from her private life. Needing to isolate them to their place so she could focus on whatever task her Lady may require.

It was easier said than done. Her heart had taken a beating and Brienne had long since been able to recover more swiftly from physical injury than she could from emotional. She thought she had evolved past fragility. That she had been hardened against hurt from year after year of mockery, taunts and rejection. But when the blow came from the one person she lowered her guard around - providing him with a direct avenue to her vulnerable core - the resulting damage was earth shattering.

*How could he think I do not love him?*

She was aware she had trouble expressing her feelings, but she honestly thought Jaime knew her regard. That she had shown him in what ways she could. To contemplate that he interpreted her efforts as indifference wounded.

*Do I really seem that cold?*

The alternative was worse – that he was grasping for excuses. That Jaime earnestly wanted to return to his sister’s side and was looking for justification to leave. Could diminish what they had shared to alcohol and familiarity, a way to ward off the chill on a cold winter’s night.

Brienne inhaled a shuddering breath, stretching out her arm to brace herself against the stone of the alcove. Memories of his flight from their bed earlier in the evening churned within, slicing her open and exposing the most sensitive of nerves to the frigid air.

Words could not describe how it had felt to wake and find him gone. The anguish which snatched her heart as she hunted him down in the courtyard. The knowledge that if she had not awoken, Jaime Lannister would be long gone by now and she would have slept through the most devastating moment in her life, completely ignorant of what excruciation awaited her in the morn.

*The hours since have changed that fate – it is not yours, do not linger in morbidity. Dwelling on possibilities cannot serve anything but to injure.*

But even now, leaving their room ate at her more keenly than a starving man who had stumbled across a stockpile. With each step she had to convince herself that Jaime would remain. He was
her husband now. He was sleeping and she would see him upon her return.

Brienne was ashamed of her weakness, in part for allowing him back into her body and bed. She should have personified the detached woman he painted her to be and cast him aside as brutally as he might have done to her.

Instead she had said marriage vows, binding herself irreversibly with this disconcerting man and consecrated their union further through their coupling.

Jaime swore that he loved her, and she wanted to believe. He had never told her as such before this accursed night and she was sorry that it had to come about the way it did. Her chest had rejoiced to hear the words in the wake of his departure and clung hopelessly to any thread which may keep him at her side. Beneath the Heart Tree she had prayed that her gamble would be successful, knowing that if she were toppled from the heights twice by his betrayal; from the second time there would be no recovering.

So, she had listened to his apologies and his declarations, longing to trust in the sincerity of his assertions and when they consummated their union, she had found herself holding him a little tighter. Drawing him closer, needing to feel him. Touching him as she thought – nay feared - she never would again.

And most reassuring of all had been his reaction… the tears which fell from his eyes could not be manufactured. When he looked at her, he truly saw, and his kiss conveyed that which words could not.

Safe in this knowledge, she let go of her anger, accepting that they were mutually at fault and as she lipped away his salt teardrops, she ordained they would start afresh from that moment forward.

Letting go of the wall, Brienne accelerated her pace, keen to make up for the time she had lost.

*If I cannot have faith in my Lord husband - I should not have made oaths to him.*

Jaime would be true to his word and she needed to become Ser Brienne her Lady’s Guard, not Brienne Tarth….

*No wait.*

Brienne Lannister - newly made wife.

A small smile tugged at her mouth as her tired brain made the connection.

*Push it aside, you have responsibilities.* She gave herself a stern reminder, rounding the final bend.
“My Lady.” Brienne bowed deeply as she entered Sansa’s solar. The windows intended to be illuminated by the sun instead showing the black empty expanse of the night. Household guards stood to either side of the doorway, permitting her entrance and announcing her arrival. She recognised one’s voice as the man who had been sent to summon her.

“Ser Brienne.” Sansa’s tone was clipped and short. “I am greatly troubled.”

“What plagues you My Lady? It must be grave to have you up in the dead of night.” Brienne approached, noting that the Lady of Winterfell was fully dressed.

*She has been awake for some time...*

“Distressing news of a betrayal has reached my ears. A traitor within my own stronghold.”

“Speak their name.” Brienne furrowed her brow and placed her hand on Oathkeeper’s hilt. Whomever had transgressed against the hospitality of the Stark’s would be brought to swift justice.

“Surely you are aware of whom I speak—“ The red head regarded her with cool eyes, tinged with sympathy. “-Ser Jaime Lannister has ridden South to re-join the ranks of his sister.”

Brienne’s mouth dropped open slightly.

*I was not prepared....*

“Stablehands disturbed by Lord Lannister when he retrieved his horse witnessed your exchange. They thought it best brought straight to my attention.” Sansa inhaled, pursing her lips and extending her hand to rest on the Lady Knight’s forearm. “I am sorry if you are hurting. He betrayed you most of all.”

Mention of the still raw wound made tears spring to her eyes. Brienne valiantly banished their translucent film, reconjuring the image of her new husband snuggled softly in their sleeping furs. She was about to explain how it was all a misunderstanding when Sansa continued talking.

“Naturally he is now an enemy. We were wrong to trust him in the first instance but at least we can attest to giving him the benefit of the doubt.” She returned to her desk and Brienne noticed several parchments neatly laid out upon its surface.

*Signed decrees.*

“I have issued orders for his arrest and sent riders out to apprehend him. Treason is a most grievous crime and he will be punished accordingly.”

Brienne felt her blood turn to ice in her veins. She forced her enquiry out, past her tongue which
had grown thick in her dry mouth. “And what sentence would you pass on him My Lady?”

“She penalty for treason is death.”

*Death….execution….*

This time her pained reaction must have shown. Sansa calmly clasped her hands in front of her, adopting a placating tone as she addressed her sworn sword.

“I know the two of you had an attachment. That is why I wished to meet with you immediately. His crimes are too great Ser Brienne, he will not be pardoned this time. Not even if you still, *inexplicably*, feel compelled to speak for him. When we capture Ser Jaime, he may believe he can appeal to you. I know you were lovers, though surely tonight demonstrated how he played you for a fool. You are a good woman, even when slighted it will be hard for you to walk away. Therefore, I feel it necessary to officially issue you with the following orders… for your own good.”

Lady Sansa stood straighter, taller, her shoulders back. Her inflection commanding as she instructed the woman sworn to obey her. “I expressly forbid you from providing any assistance or aid to Ser Jaime Lannister and prohibit any attempts at interference or to obstruct the path of justice. I charge you to stand aside and let him be brought to account for his numerous crimes. Any act to the contrary will be in direct violation of my orders, resulting in immediate removal from my service and rendering you in a position similar to his own.”

Once again, the Stark girl stepped forward, reaching up to grasp her guard’s shoulder. “It is for the best Ser Brienne. Now get some rest, the next few days are going to be a trial. As a Lady I must be firm with you but as a woman…. I am truly sorry.” She released the Lady Knight, her voice soft. “You are dismissed.”

Brienne tried to keep her pace measured as she travelled back to her chambers, all the better not to rouse suspicion. Internally, panic flooded, and she fought to quash her instinct to run.

Fumbling with the keys, she cracked open their bedroom door just enough to squeeze through. Instantly shutting it tight behind her and locking it from within. She leant her back against the timber, her chest heaving as she took in the familiar comforts of the room.
The fire still burnt brightly within the hearth. Jaime was breathing deeply, his glorious self sprawled across the majority of the bed, his golden head nestled comfortably in the pillows. Her heart leapt that he was here - just as promised - but was subsequently constricted with terror.

She had thought if her life ever came to this moment, the choice would not be difficult. Jaime himself had baited her about the hypothetical dilemma several times. The decision between her obligation and her feelings should be simplistic to determine.

Brienne was an oath-bound woman. Loyal and respectful. She staked her honour on her word and had always been unflinching in performing what was asked. She was sworn to obey Lady Sansa. Had pledged her life to her service.

*That is what being a Knight amounts to….*

But now that she lived it - there could be no hesitation. There was only one course of action.

“Jaime!” She hissed, quiet but urgent, throwing herself across the bed and crawling over to him.

*We need to keep our voices low.*

“Jaime!” He grumbled when she shook his shoulder, waking just enough to manage a sleepy smile.

“Morning already wife? Or can’t you get enough of me?” His arm moved to catch her in an embrace, trying to pull her to him.

“Jaime, I need you to get up.”

The edge to her tone finally hit home and his green eyes popped open, fully awake and alert.

“Something has happened. We have to leave. Now. We don’t have much time.” She jumped off the bed and moved frantically about the room, gathering up their things.

*Right at this moment guards could be stationed outside our door. I am beyond immediate scrutiny for the time being, whilst they presume I am sleeping or coming to terms with the evening’s developments. But I know it will not last.* She began stuffing necessary belongings in a pack, working hurriedly.

“Brienne what’s wrong?”

“Lady Sansa has a warrant out for your arrest.”
“Why?”

“For betraying the North. You were seen. She believes you on the road, returning to your sister.”

“Did you tell her otherwise?”

“It would be pointless Jaime; she cannot be swayed. I could see the resolve written on her face. If I spoke, it would only result in them swarming in here and seizing you.”

“Where can I go? They are likely combing the roads South as we speak.”

“They are. We will travel North. That is the last direction they would suspect. After a while we will turn East. Find passage via the ocean.”

Leaning over, Jaime grabbed her by the arm, his eyes wide with disbelief and happiness. She knew it was the third time she had said it. “We?”

“Yes, Jaime. My loyalty is to you now husband. We are united – come what may.”

He flew from the bed, the blankets falling away to reveal his nakedness. She glanced aside, still prone to blushing despite their intimate developments, grunting in surprise as the lion scooped her up in his arms. “Do you know how much that means to me?”

He planted kisses on her lips and although his joy was infectious, she held him at bay. “We don’t have time.”

“Right.” Jaime began dressing, Brienne rushing to help him with his laces and ties. They ceased conversing lest their voices inside the room give away his presence within.

*First, we have a long jaunt across the castle grounds, then we must obtain horses. Much still lies ahead if we are to succeed.*

The risk was great and there was a high chance of failure. But regardless of the odds, she stood with her husband and would until her dying breath.
Chapter Summary

Cover Art by: Ro_Nordmann

*Shadows creep and want grows stronger...*
Lyrics, War of Hearts by Ruelle
Verse 2, Lines 3 & 4

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes
The hallway was silent as Brienne cracked open the door. The hour of the nightingale well upon them. Many of the castle guards had been despatched in pursuit of Jaime. It would work to their advantage.

Oathkeeper hung at her side, armour shining in the torchlight whilst her pulse pounded deafeningly behind her ears. She had never done anything like this before. Sneaking, subterfuge, betrayal. It left a pit in her stomach.

But even worse was the idea of Jaime being apprehended – the vision of countless men holding her back whilst her husband’s head was severed from his neck frightening her enough to persevere. She motioned for him to follow and they left the safety of their room.

Brienne tried to affect a casual air as she walked. She was to remain a few steps ahead – her presence in the castle would not be questioned or out of the ordinary.

“Remember what I said.” Jaime whispered from behind. “If we get caught, turn on me.”

The Lady Knight had squeezed her eyes shut tight against the notion, her Lord instructing her to perform the most heinous of tasks should their luck run out. To capture him or kill him. Pretend she had gone after him and was delivering him to Stark justice.

“Rather at your hand than theirs, My Love.” He murmured just before they departed. “At least then the last image I see, will be your eyes.”

It was a noble suggestion – one she did not believe she had the backbone to carry out should the need arise.

I will make sure it doesn’t….

Lifting her hand as they neared a corner, she signalled for him to stop.

A group of four guards stood having a conversation, blocking the exit to the yard. Brienne gulped. She knew she could take them, but she was not inclined towards spilling the blood of these innocent men.

Perhaps a more tactical ploy.
“Soldiers.” She strode powerfully around the bend, employing her commander’s tone. They stood to attention at her approach. “Lady Sansa requires the Southern Ramparts to be densely manned. As you may have heard a fugitive is on the run and she requests more eyes on the walls. Disperse to your new postings immediately.”

“Yes M’Lady.”

“Right away Ser.”

“As you command.”

One lingered behind as the other’s departed, narrowing his eyes in her direction. “They may be scared of you but I ain’t.” He sneered. “You’re up to something.”

“I am following orders as you should be.” She grasped Oathkeeper’s hilt in silent threat when he entered her personal space. There would always be men who sought to challenge her authority. Brienne was steely. “I will warn you that the Stark’s do not look kindly on those who disobey their superiors.”

_A lesson which I may learn soon enough...._

“I’ll go as soon as you answer this one question –“ He edged closer to her face, reeking of alcohol. “-What kind of whore struts around in mail and plate, thinking she can command Northern men whilst fucking a Lannister traitor?”

“My wife.” A lion growled, dragging his blade across the man’s throat from behind and opening his jugular. Giving him a quiet death before he could shout and sound the alarm. Brienne stepped back as a shower of blood flowed forth, spattering upon her boots and staining the floor in crimson.

Jaime let the corpse slide from his grasp. “We have to move fast.”

“Wait.” Brienne wrenched the steel helm from the body. “Put this on, in the dark it may be enough to disguise you.” Removing her fur lined cloak, she draped it around Jaime’s shoulders, pulling it shut at the front to conceal his leathers. His own cape was Southron in style and did little to make his appearance blend in. “There.” She breathed.

Jaime was staring at her, a whimsical look overtaking his eyes. “My Lady, perhaps I do need you to cloak me in your protection after all.” He leant forward and pressed his lips to hers. “Just in case, we do not make it – I have quite enjoyed marriage so far. What about you?”

She pushed him roughly in the shoulder to get him moving. “Talk later, we need to get to the stables.” Glancing down at the fallen guard and growing lake of blood, she knew their window of time had just narrowed. _I have chosen my side and therefore I must live with the consequences. Failure simply isn’t an option._ “Keep your face lowered.”

They crossed the yard at a measured pace, looking purposeful but not rushing. The grounds were
active, Lady Sansa’s orders for a lion hunt stirring the sleeping garrison, but most had already ridden out and the square was nowhere near as crowded as it would be come break of day. A few fighting men nodded deferentially to her when they passed and she ignored the pangs of guilt, studying their features to ensure they did not recognise Jaime beneath the helmet. *They all know me as steadfast and loyal, they do not expect a turncloak. A newly married lioness amongst the wolves.*

Ducking into an alcove she spoke through gritted teeth. “From what I can determine, most of the horses are gone from the Southern stables. They are being ridden by the soliders seeking you. Besides, those grooms are where the information first came from. They are responsible for reporting your movements.”

“We head to the Northern stables then.”

“It will be more difficult to explain our presence there and we will have to tack the horses ourselves, a trifling task when we are time poor.”

“Do we have another option?”

Brienne huffed. “No. Come.”

She continued across the open space with Jaime hot on her heels, before turning into a private garden covered in snow and shaded by the stronghold rising around them to all sides. “This way.” The Lady Knight, whispered, barely audible. Utilising the knowledge gained from serving Lady Sansa she navigated their way through isolated walkways and alleys, travelling in shadow until they reached the Northern yard.

“Stop.” Her tone was hushed, and she shot out an arm to block Jaime. Halting under the veil of darkness before they ventured into the exposed winter air. “Someone is already in the stables.”

At first glance the courtyard was abandoned, devoid of life. Icy blasts the only thing disturbing the still of the night. Cobbled stones and creaking wood the sole witnesses to their duplicitous intentions.

But then the wind would carry with it a sound. A tell-tale rustling from deep within the walls. The low whinny of horses interacting with a human.

“What choice do we have?” Jaime muttered. “It is unfortunate for the poor soul but we either surrender or fight. I will do it. Then the blood need not be on your hands. Gods know, I have enough murders to account for – what is one more?”

There it was again. His self-hatred and despair. Creeping in to darken the goodness of the man she knew.

“Together.” She squeezed his arm. “That is how we must be from now on. In everything. This was my decision too. Whoever swings the sword is irrelevant, it is both of us that brought the act to fruition.”
Gazing up at the ramparts, she checked for watchers upon the walls, relieved to find their run clear. Brienne bolted across the open stretch to the stable walls, cringing each time her armour scraped against itself, producing a distinctive metallic grate. She had to wear the suit – it would be too heavy to carry and would protect her if it came to a fight. But when attempting to travel in silence it was a hindrance, giving the game away.

Shrinking against the mounting posts she waited for Jaime to catch up. “Do you think we were heard?”

“That was loud enough to wake the dead Stark’s in their crypts. But at least it ought to flush him out. I would prefer a fair fight.”

Jaime’s wish was granted with the crunching of boots against straw and snow, accompanied by the clip clopping of horse’s hooves as the beast was led out into the open. The lion straightened, drawing Widow’s Wail. Brienne unsheathed Oathkeeper, muscles coiled and ready to leap forth. She started slightly when her husband nudged her in the shoulder, a look of confusion on his face as he indicated with his head towards the posts. Two horses, stood tethered to the rails on the opposite side, fully saddled and bridled.

“Who else would be escaping this night?” He mouthed. The rhythmic steps both human and equine growing louder as the mystery person drew nearer. Puzzling as it may be, she did not have time for hesitation. Counting the footfalls, she timed her move with the precision of a seasoned warrior, seamlessly springing from her position to lay her blade at the stranger’s throat.

“Make but one sound and it will be your last.” Brienne threatened through gritted teeth. For a heartbeat, the only noise was the horse whickering nervously as the breath was sucked from her lungs in shock.

“M’Lady, Ser.” Podrick did not flinch, he knew the edge to Oathkeeper was deathly sharp, but he also trusted in her control.

Carefully she lowered the sword away from her Squire, her highbrow etched in concern, tone quiet but vehement. “Pod! What are you doing out here?”

“Waiting for you.” He answered simply, dimples forming to either side of his close-mouthed smirk when he noticed the man standing just behind her. “Ser Jaime.”

“Podrick…” Jaime nodded, eyes flicking between the Knight and her comrade. He tensed as he feared the worst – that they would have to fight him. “…. best explain your meaning.” Both Valyrian blades were lowered but still gripped.

“Lady Sansa summoned me before she spoke with Ser. She told me what happened, thinking I would need to know to be prepared for Lady Tarth's reaction, heartbroken as she was by the stableboys accounts.” He turned his attention to his mentor. “She charged me with keeping an eye on you M’Lady, making sure you didn’t do anything reckless.” Podrick warily eyed the naked
steel as Brienne’s hand quivered on the hilt. She could not fathom harming him –

*I can’t. I couldn’t. But what if he leaves me no choice?*

*Another decision,* her brain taunted derisively. *Your husband or your Squire….*

“But you are my family.” Pod smiled at them in the most heart melting way. “The only family I’ve got. Whatever course of action you decide Ser, I follow you, not Lady Stark….and Ser Jaime - without you I would never have squired for M’Lady. You both protected me in the Long Night. I owe the two of you my life.”

He offered the reins of the mount to Brienne and she took them in her off-hand whilst he continued talking. “I did not believe for a second that Ser Jaime would leave you for good. You may have had a disagreement, because you argue a lot – but you love each other. I have known that for a long time.” Pod began to untie one of the other Palfreys. “I knew M’Lady would go after you Lord Lannister, so I figured I would prepare our mounts… but then I thought about it more.” His grin broadened as he was bringing a horse around for Jaime. “The Stark men didn’t find you. And as likely as it was that Ser would pursue you, it was just as likely that you would ride back to her. By that time all the horses in the Southern stable were gone, so I got a head start here.”

The last part he added with a touch of timidity. “But first, I supplied wine infused with sleeping draught to the guards on the ramparts and ensured the portcullis was raised. Maester Tarly was not in his chambers and it was easy to obtain. I know it wasn’t honourable Ser, but it was pre-emptive. Lord Tyrion taught me to try and think ahead.”

“Pod….” Brienne’s voice was filled with admiration and warmth. “You could have been killed if you were caught.” Slipping Oathkeeper back in its scabbard she pulled him into a one-armed embrace. Relieved and filled with a sort of affectionate pride.

“I know but it’s my risk to take Ser. Everyone has something to fight for and mine is my family.”

Jaime clapped him on the back as Brienne released him. “You’re a good lad Podrick. I always said as much.”

Brienne swallowed around the lump forming in her throat, the emotional upheavals kept coming in waves, allowing her no respite for recovery.

*We need to get out of here before we are discovered. Before the guards are roused from their stupor or discovered passed out at their post.*

But her protective instinct extended further than just herself and Jaime.

“I appreciate all that you’ve done Pod. But I cannot allow you to accompany us – we will be on the run until we escape the North and we have no allies to which we can appeal. Not here nor further South. You are young, I will not ask you to throw your life away on a fight which is not yours.”
“You’re not asking me Ser. I’m volunteering.”

“Still Podrick, think carefully. Your allegiance to me, need not extend to this insubordination. The ramifications of absconding in the night like this…”

She could see Jaime suppressing his amusement as he awkwardly tied his pack onto the horse’s saddle. Spectating with fascination whilst for the first time in their history, Podrick ignored the directives of the Lady Knight.

Undeterred, her Squire fetched the final horse for his own usage and replied. “In all due respect M’Lady, you are not obliged to align yourself with Ser Jaime – yet you are.”

Brienne huffed, allowing Pod to hold her horse’s reins so she could mount. The two men hastily following suit, vaulting into their saddles.

_We have squandered enough time on this conversation already._

Spurring her horse into a brisk walk, she steered it around the back of the stable, sticking to the cobblestones to avoid leaving tracks where they could. Exiting through the postern gate and warily eyeing the murder holes above. As promised by Podrick the portcullis was indeed still raised, allowing them to pass through.

She knew from experience that hunting parties and rangers used this particular passage - should they be caught off-guard outside the castle grounds by a blizzard or brigands, it was with the Stark’s permission that they be allowed to return within the protection of the stronghold. A provisional clemency permitted solely for the harsh winter. The responsibility of re-lowering the great iron gate fell to the watchers on the walls above but they were often easily distracted from such a tedious task.

_As proven by Podrick’s offer of laced liquor._

Emerging on the other side, Brienne reminded herself it was too early to breathe a sigh of relief. They needed to make a swift, clean break from the castle. Reining up her horse in the pitch-black blind spot afforded by the shadows of the walls, she waited whilst Jaime pulled up beside her, needing to assess their options. “The cover of snow is soft…it will leave tracks.”

He shrugged. “If more snow falls it will mask them.”

“But make the journey even more treacherous for our mounts – conditions will be slippery, and we need to move at a brisk pace.” Thinking further she added. “We cannot afford to remain on the roads.”

“I agree, I believe the cover of the Wolfswood is our best bet.”

She squinted out into the darkness, knowing that the dense forest lay in the distance to the Northwest. It was a touch out of their way but once concealed within, they would be difficult to follow. It had its drawbacks though. “And if one of our horses stumble? A broken leg will end our campaign. The uneven terrain will force us to take the trek slower, we could lose our head start.”
“But the litter will obscure our trail…”

She pursed her lips, turning in her saddle to try and locate the treeline. She knew in which direction they needed to travel but would have preferred to have a visual bearing. “This is far from ideal.”

Podrick hung back quietly whilst the two knights debated it out – wise enough not to interrupt nor attempt to come between their combination of bickering and brainstorming.

Brienne jumped slightly as something furry brushed against her neck. She turned to see Jaime leaning over from his horse, wrapping her cloak back around her shoulders.

“You will have to do the clasp My Lady.” The timbre of his voice was both apologetic and caring. “It is cold.” The sweetness of the gesture and love in his eyes caused a simmering in the farthest reaches of her soul, temporarily overcoming her fears and newly inflicted emotional scars.

*Whatever perils lie ahead, it is most certainly worthwhile. I made the right choice.*

“How are we to locate the camps?”

Podrick cleared his throat. “I have shared ale with one of their archers, he grew up here and knows the lay of the land. He tried to convince me to join them on an expedition. According to his directions, there is a small brook which has frozen over, not far from the forest edge. If we follow it Eastward, the first camp is just beyond a rocky outcrop.”

“It must be a minor branch off the White Knife.” Brienne mused. “It could serve.”

Jaime smiled. “As good a plan as any….”

Pod voiced aloud the question which remained unsaid. “And if we come across any of the hunters?”

The golden lion looked pointedly at their swordbelts. Brienne uneasily toyed with Oathkeeper’s pommel, the gravity of their reality sinking in. Borrowing a line said to her by Jaime in a distant tent a couple of years ago, she tried to provide reassurance to her Squire. “Let’s hope it does not come to that.” Out of the corner of her eye she was certain she saw Jaime beam as he recognised his own words.

Employing her most commanding tone she sat taller in the saddle. “Alright men, the sooner we embark, the better our chances of avoiding conflict.”
Jaime smirked, extending his arm in a flourish. “Lead the way Ser Brienne.”

Nudging her horse into motion, she cantered away from the mighty silhouette of Winterfell’s walls. The looming shade giving way to faint starshine and the filtered blaze of distant torches. Soon they would be plunged into darkness as the forest obscured what natural light the slivered moon afforded and the castle she had called home for over a year, faded slowly into yesterday.

Brienne knew better than to look back, it would only unnerve and make their task seem ever the more insurmountable.

When leaving Tarth all those years prior, she had resisted the urge to peek over her shoulder when the boat sailed from the harbour, terrified that nostalgia and nerves would have her island draw her back in to a life of domesticity and a marriage of political advantage.

Ever since she had been stoic, quashing the urge each time she rode away from something significant in her life, knowing that a chapter was closing.

Only twice had she ever given in to temptation – once when a glorious Knight bid her farewell by a tree lined path on the outskirts of King’s Landing. The desire to gaze upon his face one last time mingling with the curiosity to see if his own stare followed her. She had been astonished when it had. The feelings which it conjured within both confronting and bewildering to a staunch maid.

Then again in a rowboat, just outside of Riverrun, her golden lion watching her from the ramparts, exchanging a wave farewell.

It would seem when it came to Jaime Lannister – she was fated to break her own rules. Her rigid guidelines compromising and bending without coherent instruction.

And he thinks I ignore the callings of my heart….

“Podrick.” She slowed her horse to a trot, bringing it alongside his as he mimicked her actions. “You were misinformed in a statement you made earlier.”

“I was Ser?”

“Yes – fear not, you couldn’t have known.” Brienne made certain her features remained impassive, not wishing to unintentionally imply even the slightest hint of her meaning.

“Ser…? Known what?”

“You mentioned that I am not obliged to take Ser Jaime’s part – yet by the commonly accepted laws of men, I am.” She permitted herself enjoyment at his clueless expression before adding. “He is my husband.”

Kneeing her horse in the sides, she broke away with a burst of speed, closing the distance to the cover of the trees and leaving Podrick reeling in her wake.
As an obsessive fangirl, I fact check like crazy to ensure canon compliance. To follow their journey or simply to get your bearings, I have included the web address below to my favourite map of Westeros which was used while writing this tale. :) 
https://quartermaester.info/
Determination vs Limitation

Chapter Summary

"Deeper than the truth...."
Lyrics, War of Hearts by Ruelle
Verse 2, Line 5

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes
There were no further opportunities for conversation throughout the hours that followed. Navigating the treacherous and uneven ground in the gloom of the night. The woods were silent, except for the odd wolfen cry which unsettled the horses. Brienne was glad Podrick had wisely chosen Northern palfreys – they were more acclimatised to the conditions and less likely to spook at the unseen canine predators.

The first camp was exactly where the archer had described, recently utilised and certainly tempting - but Brienne insisted that they push on. It would not take long for the Starks to realise the direction which they had chosen to pursue, especially if Bran aided his sister and sent the Ravens to seek their location.

Picking their way along game trails and other well-beaten paths, they came across another outpost by first light. It was here they dismounted to allow their mounts a respite.

“We should rest as well.” Jaime stated, worry evident as he studied her wan features.

Brienne looked away, busying herself by removing her pack from the palfrey’s saddle, not wishing to provide him with further fodder for argument. “Stopping is not an option. These first days are the most critical, we must put as much distance between ourselves and Winterfell as we can. We will remain here only long enough to tend to the horses and then we push on.”

“Where are we going Ser?” Podrick enquired.

“An excellent point Pod.” She lowered herself down on one of the logs surrounding the established firepit. The ashes long buried by snowfall, making any hope of rekindling the frozen branches a lesson in futility. The smoke and glow of the flames would be hazardous anyhow, it could reveal our location. Ignoring the exhaustion seeping into her bones, she waited for the men to seat themselves. “That is exactly what we need to discuss.”

Podrick sat opposite her whilst Jaime produced a flask from his own saddlebag. She raised her eyebrows at him in question as he settled on the frost-bitten wood beside her. Brienne strongly suspected it didn’t contain water.

“You brought wine?” It was half query, half accusation. He kept a carafe in our chambers?

“What? You said necessities only.” He offered her the flask and she shook her head. Jaime took a large swig before passing it to Pod.
Brienne sighed. She wanted them all to have clear thinking, not befuddled by alcohol. *Too late now to stop them.*

Taking a deep breath, she began. “From my knowledge of the North, we are currently on the outskirts of the Wolfswood. Our sole hope for passing safely into the South would see us travelling via the ocean, so we must continue our trek eastward. From the last information we received, Queen Daenerys has her forces concentrated around Dragonstone and we can safely presume the defending fleet guard the mouth of Blackwater Bay; therefore any passing vessels should be able to stay clear of conflict by remaining in open waters. But first – we have to get ourselves to the Shivering Sea. We need a harbour town where we can buy passage on a ship - one which is not so populated that we risk being seen but also not so small, that our presence draws unwanted attention.”

“White Harbour is the largest but the Manderleys are Stark loyalists through and through.” Jaime grimaced. “Too risky in my opinion.”

“Agreed. Besides, that route would take us too close to the King’s Road. The main search parties will be concentrated there.”

“The most direct path would be past the Dreadfort...” Podrick ventured. “…I am guessing you won’t wish to go that way Ser.”

“Most definitely not.” Brienne shuddered. Even though she had abandoned Lady Sansa in loyalty to her new husband, the Stark girl remained dear to her. She would not entertain the thought of entering the lands previously dominated by the Boltons. Where walked the ghosts of flayed men and even worse crimes too horrific to contemplate.

“Two more options –“ Jaime chimed in. “- Ramsgate or Widow’s Watch.”

“I dislike the sentiment behind the name Widow’s Watch.” Brienne mumbled; she knew it was silly but her tired brain was surrendering to superstition. *In a world where a shadow can slay a king, is it really so childish?* “And it will take unnecessary travel. The likelihood of obtaining a ship there is questionable, it is only a small holdfast. Ramsgate on the other hand….”

She shut her eyes, envisaging the map in Sansa’s War room. “…the journey to Ramsgate will take us through the Sheepshedd Hills. They can provide us cover. Navigating the Northlands could be perilous as none of us were raised here, but the Broken Branch has its source in those hills. It then runs through Hornwood and to the ocean…”

“With Ramsgate at its mouth.” Jaime caught on to her reasoning, nodding. “We can follow it, use the Hornwood to stay hidden – potentially fish when supplies become scant.” He grinned. “On the run again, just like the good old days in the Riverlands.” Pod had returned the flask to Jaime and her new husband elbowed her playfully as he took another drink.

“There is the chance the river is frozen over but it can still be used to guide the way.” Brienne blinked several times, clearing her bleary eyes. “Are we settled upon this course?”

“Aye.” Jaime raised his wine.
“Aye Ser.” Pod smiled. They were both clearly feeling a lot more well rested than she was.

Shaking off the fatigue, the Lady Knight placed both her arms on her knees, pushing herself upwards from the log. “It is agreed then. We ride on.”

The sun had begun its descent from the apex when Brienne began to slump in her saddle, eyelids drooping as she struggled to remain awake. The dappled golden beams filtering through the trees not potent enough in the grey winter sky to disturb the beckoning of slumber. Her horse plodded along steadily, the rhythmic rocking lulling her in her seat.

Before long she was upon the ocean, the sapphire blue waters of Tarth surrounding the small sailing vessel. She was younger – merely a child, the gentle waves lapping against the wooden hull, jostling them upon calm seas as her elder brother laughed.

What exactly had amused him she could not recall. Only that this memory was both filled with the innocent joyfulness of youth and tinged with a sadness of knowing what was to come. For this day was picturesque, an idyllic fantasy as she learnt to sail. But one day in the not too distant future, it would be these same straits that swallowed Galladon, dragging his life away with their salty clutches.

Brienne so wished she could save him, warn this jubilant boy that the waters he had known his whole life could not be a trusted friend.

Never turn your back on the ocean… some aging fishwife had once told her.

As an adult she was not like to forget such a caution. But in this dream, warnings fell to the wayside.

Already tall but still a little girl, the child version of herself stretched out an arm, wanting for some reason to retrieve a bushel of seaweed which floated upon the azure surface. She strained to reach it, leaning over too far and sending herself tumbling overboard.

Strange. She had never recalled that happening before…

It was not too much of a catastrophe – although she initially flailed in panic, she had long since
been taught to swim, though the unpredictability of the currents meant safety could never be taken
for granted. However she was not under long when Galladon caught her beneath the arms and
heaved her back aboard….

Brienne awoke with a gasp. She still sat astride her palfrey, the swaying motion of its meander
continuing in its measured strides - but her cheek was pressed against something warm and
leathery, her neck skewed at an awkward angle, the steel of her armour digging into the soft flesh
of her chin.

Slowly becoming aware of her surroundings, she noted a pair of strong arms wrapped around her
waist holding the reins, one hand of flesh and the other of gold.

“Jaime, what happened?”

“You drifted off, nearly lost your balance. I thought I had better ride with you, seeming as you
insist on continuing.”

She cringed in embarrassment; she had not intended falling asleep. Like a tragic damsel in distress
who required a Knight to ride with her in order to prevent from taking a tumble. She did not need
such aid; she was a Knight in her own right. Self-sufficient and entirely capable.

“It is alright now, I’m awake.” Too late she heard her own tone and thought it a touch too
dismissive. The notion of being seen as weak or fragile making her prickly.

“I know - though it’s a shame. I quite liked riding with you. We haven’t shared a horse since we
were taken prisoner but then we were in much more awkward positions.”

From across the path she heard Podrick chuckle.

“We were back to back.” Her cheeks flamed a brighter shade of pink. “I’m sure my horse would
appreciate you returning to your own mount. We are both far too heavy to be burdening this one
poor creature after such a long trek.” Taking the reins from him, she halted her palfrey and
gestured for him to dismount.

She heard Jaime sigh, a long-winded exasperated noise of irritation as he slid from behind her,
crossing to the bridle to release the rope which tethered her horse to his own.

“You know Brienne, I appreciate independence, admire it even - but there is no harm in admitting
you were tired or accepting help from your husband. Especially considering all you are risking for
me. You push yourself too hard and shove away those who would ease your burdens.” Jaime’s
voice had that edge again. The one he used when he was displeased. It was eerily similar to how
he sounded when he accused her of not loving him.

Tilting her chin upwards she could only respond with defiance. “Thank you for your concern Ser
Jaime but I assure you I do not need further assistance. I was fatigued, as you know I only snatched
a moment of rest last night. You are fortunate that you were able to sleep, even if for a limited
time. Now – let us continue.”
Rubbing her horse’s neck by way of apology she set it into a trot, pulling ahead, keen to leave the shame far behind. But her mind ran in circles.

Part of her thought she was too harsh, another part chided her for being so pathetic as to nod off in her saddle, another quadrant dissecting her defensiveness towards the man she had married – injured pride and high expectations allying with residual wounds from the other night she had not yet faced.

And another distant echo of her brain still dwelt within her dream. Analysing it – wondering why it had been called to the forefront and what significance it could possibly have to impart.

Chapter End Notes

Notes on Canon Compliance:
Many, many online resources have been used to calculate a realistic timeline for their journey in order to fit into what show canon portrayed. Although the travel time on the show was made to appear at rocket speed, in reality this was far from the case. Using maps to calculate distances and tonnes of internet research to establish average speeds in medieval travel (ship, horseback etc), I then figured out how long it would have technically taken one man travelling on a single horse from Winterfell to King's Landing. This then became the measure of time I had to play with.
I spent ages then deciding what could have been accomplished in this time frame (in some cases it took me nearly as long as it did to write the chapters, LOL).
I include this information as it was really important to me to be realistic in what could have happened in that missing chunk of time. I take no liberties and play by the rulebooks. Once again though - I am very thankful for so many holes in the show's plot.
Chapter Summary

Cover Art by: Ro_Nordmann

"'Cause thoughts devour...
Lyrics, War of Hearts by Ruelle
Verse 1, Line 5

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes
"Brienne," Jaime's hushed voice roused her in the hour of the nightingale. "It is your turn to take the watch."

She nodded, wriggling from the furs spread across the forest floor and collecting Oathkeeper from where it lay beside her in its scabbard. They had ridden hard all day, finally stopping not long after sundown when she noticed the trees were thinning. Tomorrow would see them depart the cover of the Wolfswood, and all agreed it would be better to make the transition at dawn.

A solid night’s rest and the light of breaking day would allow them to gallop their horses across the upcoming stretch of open lands, lessening the chance of being seen and quickening their journey. If her memory’s calculations were correct, they could expect to reach the White Knife by morn. From there they would locate a bridge and cross the raging currents, putting a physical barrier between themselves and their trackers, before disappearing into the rugged terrain of the Sheepshead Hills.

But for the purposes of tonight, the shelter of trees would make for a more suitable camp and permit them a small fire.

It was freezing, the temperature plummeting after the sun slipped below the horizon. They were bundled up in the few cloaks and blankets they had brought with them, but it did little to ward off the gelidity. Brienne had even dared to remove her armour in order to rest soundly, the cold metal becoming frosted to the touch and worsening the chill of the surrounding air, her padded gambeson proving a far preferable option. After eating their rationed portions, Podrick had offered to take first watch whilst Jaime tended the horses. Brienne had collapsed into her bedroll, falling instantaneously into an exhausted dreamless sleep, the warmth of the nearby blaze a gift from the god’s themselves.

Stretching out her limbs she gave her husband a small smile. “Jaime, you may take my furs if you wish. They will already be warmed.”

“Are you offering me your body heat?” Removing his cloak, he draped it around her shoulders, leaning in to plant a chaste kiss upon her chapped lips. They had not spoken at great length in the hours which followed their terse exchange, and gestures of affection had been far from their minds since fleeing their bedchamber in Winterfell - but a glance at the ground let her know that Jaime had purposefully laid his sleeping furs alongside her own.

In the plateau which followed their hasty marriage and life or death escape, Brienne reflected with sadness that they had not yet seen the aftermath of that fateful night. How it had transformed their relationship for the better or the worse.

If the iron bars which still constrict my chest provide any indication, I am far from shaking its damage.

Her recollection merely had to replay the sight of him riding away, or relive the shattering of her heart when he prised her hand from his cheek to summon the pressure of threatening tears.

“It is practical.” Brienne replied. “Make the most of them before they cool.”

Giving his arm a squeeze, she walked to the large oak near the fire. Settling herself upon the ground with her back leant up against its mighty trunk. Listening to the sound of crackling wood
and the spitting of the blaze. The flames were kept low so as not to betray their location, emitting only a faint amber glow and producing fine tendrils of smoke, the small wisps dissipating swiftly amongst the barren branches above. Regardless of its size, the emanating heat was a blessing, a comfort they sorely needed to avoid freezing to death out in the harsh wilderness.

*Though that is only one of the challenges we face…*

They had so much to sort out, their problems far from solved. With every issue they conquered, a dozen more emerged from the abyss. Determining their heading had in truth been the simplest part. Her mind leapt ahead to future hurdles, obstacles inevitable and numerous.

*What about when we get there? Where do our allegiances lie? What is our ultimate plan?*

However, she could hardly advise solutions for the two men who accompanied her, without first wading through the muddled melee of her own heart. A pulsating organ which sustained her life but was better left unexplored.

Her head could rationalise and strategize. Sift through options with the analytical mind of an army commander. But this foreign body which housed her love and loyalties was a constant beating contradiction to her brain. Compelling her to adore, go forth blindly, embrace risk and protect those she held dear. Her stomach twinged, flinching in fear.

She could not lose Jaime again. Not in the manner that she had. A cold separation in which she had little choice. Severed forever, as though an edge sharper than Valyrian sliced through every tie which bound them. Cutting her loose and leaving her with broken edges and tattered strands.

But then Jaime had returned to her, bringing with him a more solid union. Taking away the fraying ribbons and replacing them instead with chains of consecrated steel. Marriage vows joining them, the fortified links a stronger foundation – one in which Brienne could place her faith.

Though she knew a war still waged in the South.

His twin sister remained in mortal peril.

And….

*Cersei is carrying his child.*

How many nights had it been when he finally told her? Three? Four? Like she was a Septa to whom he was confessing.

Strangely, the revelation had only come as a caution to her. As if Jaime was trying to protect her from an eventuation she might not want.

He had only just pulled away from her body, her chest rising and falling rapidly, heaving from their climax. Jaime’s lips spiriting over hers, offering a final satisfied kiss, his pupils dilated to impose upon the green of his eyes.
“Brienne…” He was breathy, hoarse from the roar which accompanied his pleasure. “…. you do realise the risk associated with this don’t you?”

She had just stared at him, attempting to catch her breath, quivering with the remaining vibrations of ecstasy as his fingers stroked the sensitised flesh of her inner thigh.

“There is the very high chance if we continue in this manner, I could get you pregnant - if you are not already. We have hardly been restrained…”

Part of her wanted to scoff at him. *He decides to speak of this now? After just having spilled inside me once more?*

But in her satiated euphoria she could not bring herself to rebuke her lover, their physical relationship being so new and precious. So instead she had not responded.

“It is a high probability.” Jaime had continued talking, his fingertips tracing circles absentmindedly on her skin. Rekindling want within her and once again silencing her logical self - telling her to listen to his words; he was right, they were being reckless. “I… my… seed is generally quite potent. Once is all it took this time – or so I’m led to believe. I’m never really sure.”

She had tilted her head to the side in question, wishing him to explain himself more clearly. As warriors they were gifted with the ability to read each other’s body language and it was this she called upon when her tongue thickened in her mouth. Jaime’s eyes took on a shade of shame, shifting his focus to study their blankets rather than meeting her steady scrutiny.

“Cersei.” He swallowed. “She is expecting.”

Brienne had sucked in a long intake of air. Holding it in her clenched jaw for a suspended moment in time, pointedly removing his hand from her thigh and depositing it on top of the furs. Jaime watched her from beneath his brows, head hung low. It was not often an explanation of his misdeeds elicited such an abashed reaction from him.

Exhaling, she replied with only one word. “Yours?”

“Yes. Well… most likely. She tells me it is… and…” His voice dropped several decibels and he fidgeted nervously. “… it is physically possible.”

She had blinked once, slowly and deliberately. Trying to force out the image of him lying in bed with his sister in a similar fashion to how they were now. Of course, Brienne had long been aware of his previous lover, a part of his history and journey. She just hadn’t been prepared for it to be so recent. *Or fruitful.*

“Goodnight Jaime.”
Rolling away and turning her back to him, she had retreated inside herself for solace. The warmth she had felt in the wake of their coupling rapidly cooling to ice.

“Brienne…?” She heard him appeal to her. Felt him nuzzle against her neck. “You always knew – about Cersei and I. Does it really make a difference?” He had pressed kisses behind her ear, wanting a reaction – whether it be anger, tears or a storm of both. But that was not something she was willing to give this night. “Cersei is marrying Euron Greyjoy. The baby could be his and even if it’s not, she will convince him otherwise.” Jaime’s breath blew hot against her shoulder as he sighed. “It is not as if I would get to be a Father in any form. I’m disposable in this scenario and the baby belongs to her and her alone. I’m happy - here with you.”

She had shifted further away and did not deign to respond.

By the next morning she had sorted the news into its rightful place. The past.

Where Jaime’s choices and behaviours were dictated by his previous love. The complexities of his and Cersei’s chequered history was not hers to take responsibility for.

Men took lovers and sired bastards constantly - it didn't make it right, but it was a widely accepted norm.

Jaime had already fathered three children on his sister. She knew this - and had fallen in love with him regardless.

The conception was prior to their own bedding; therefore she had no right to feel jealous or categorize it as a betrayal. And Cersei had decided to make Euron the baby’s father. Whether truthful or not, with that choice, she was pushing Jaime out of the equation.

Safe in this knowledge she had visited with Maester Tarly and requested the herbs required for Moon Tea.

In her chambers that night, Brienne awaited his routine visit (it would be a several more days before they both yielded, dropping the pretence of propriety and moving him into her chambers on a permanent basis), placing the pouch, teapot and cup in pride of place. On display in the centre of the table, in the middle of her room. An unmissable statement, entirely for Jaime’s benefit.

When his tentative knock on the door came, she wordlessly ushered him in, giving him time to settle and notice her efforts whilst she set water to warm upon the fire.

Taking initiative, she had pushed him to the bed, making a point of riding him to completion, savouring the awe and gratitude reflected in his admiring gaze. Basking in the pride of her own daring.

Jaime had moaned with enjoyment when she had allowed him to finish within – reaching for her, grabbing her possessively into his arms.

“Let me hold you.” He had begged, showering her cheek with kisses as she struggled against his affectionate stranglehold. But she had pushed away from him, having a further task which needed attending. Slipping on her robe and approaching the furiously bubbling pot on the fire, the liquid
nearly half evaporated away from the time elapsed.

Brewing the herbs with a rigid determination, she intentionally let Jaime observe as she sipped the bitter liquid, her blue eyes trained on his face.

In her opinion it required no further addressing. Enough had been said without a single syllable needing to be uttered.

Now though….

Leaning her scalp back against the icy bark she exhaled, her breath creating a frosty cloud in the stillness.

Both mother and unborn baby are in danger. Jaime’s twin, Jaime’s child.

Surely that was a catalyst in his decision to race to their side - an honourable motive.

Can I really hold that against him? If the desire to protect them remains, it is arguably understandable….

The crunching of leaves in snow disturbed her much needed introspection and she instinctively reached for Oathkeeper.

“Easy there, Ser Brienne - lest you make a widow of yourself before you’ve truly had the time to be a wife.” Jaime smirked at her, the dancing flames casting shifting shadows across his handsome face.

She huffed, placing her sword back by her side. “You should be asleep. Rest is important for our journey ahead.”

“I know, I know.” He brushed off her lecture with his usual flippancy, lowering himself down beside her, blanket tucked under his arm. “But I’m lonely. I am not accustomed to sleeping alone anymore. I miss you.”

“You seemed to slumber quite soundly when I left you abed to attend to Lady Sansa.”

“That was different.” He arranged the fur across her knees and wrapped it around himself. “It is nearly a rite of passage to sleep soundly post-coital.”

Brienne rolled her large blue marbles at him. “Only for old men like you.”

“Now as I recall…” He brought his face within inches of hers, a habit he did when he was teasing. “…I was encouraging you to stay awake whilst you could barely keep your eyes open. So I in-fact wore you out.”

“I was emotionally drained. That is completely different.” She shook her head at him, knowing when he was trying to vex her for sport. “Now piss off. I am trying to keep watch and you are distracting me from my duties.”
Knowing him as she did, Brienne should not have been surprised when he did the precise opposite – but she was. Jaime made an exaggerated show of shuffling down beneath the blanket, laying his head upon her lap.

“What are you doing?!” She demanded.

“Going to sleep like you told me.” He nestled his nose into her stomach and folded his arms across his chest.

“Not there surely.”

“Mmmmm.”

“Jaime…” The Lady Knight squirmed, already feeling crowded in. “This defeats the purpose of a watch! If we come under attack, you will impede my defence.”

“Then you will wake me straight away and we will fight them together.”

She bounced her legs in an attempt to dislodge him, the sensation of being pinned in place by his head and the blanket stifling.

“Brienne… please. Just let me lie here. Allow me to be close to you. Don’t push me away like you did today.”

Guilt. It washed over her like a wave. Gritting her teeth, she bade herself be still. To permit this imposition.

For to her that is what this was. Brienne had always considered herself a loner by nature.

Podrick’s presence had been a nuisance which she had learnt to tolerate over time. But Jaime was a completely different kind of company…

He encroached constantly on her personal space. Seemingly oblivious to the need for alone time or freedom.

*He was like this in the Riverlands*, she recalled. *With all his incessant prattling and attention seeking.*

It had been unbearable at the time and his requirements hadn’t lessened with the passing of years. *But what if he continued galloping South and you never saw him again?*

Brienne looked down at the golden man – once her enemy but now her husband.

His breathing had deepened to an even tempo, revealing that - he had in fact - fallen straight into slumber. As if she were indeed the sole thing missing from his night, something he required to relax and feel safe. The thought steadied her discomfiture and transformed her iron into tenderness.
Raising her hand hesitantly, she brushed the hair back from his face. Running her long fingers through the deep blonde locks, twining the strands between her digits and noting each flecking of silver. *More now than when we first met.* Though she was sure she had aged too. *Our world takes its toll.*

It was far easier to be demonstrative with Jaime while he was asleep - when her behaviour was uninhibited, temporarily liberated from her constant fear of mockery and rejection. Where only she bore witness to the true nature of her emotions, exposing the womanly facets of her spirit she vehemently denied in the public eye. For so long she had sequestered her sentiments, suppressing her incomprehensible love for Jaime Lannister. Enduringly pessimistic in her belief that her feelings would never be returned by one as glorious as he.

*But do I truly have them now?*

She wanted to have faith. However, she feared that confidence in his reciprocation would eternally evade her doubtful heart.

A rogue tear broke free, spilling down her face. Another traitor to her strength, symbolic of her weakness. She sniffed back the burning not wanting to disrupt her husband.

“Ser?” Podrick whispered, approaching with caution. “Can I sit for a moment?”

Her Squire crouched down on the side opposite to Jaime, pushing Oathkeeper gently out of the way.

*So much for my alone time. I am being interrupted from all directions.*

“What is on your mind Pod?” Her hand ceased caressing Jaime’s hair, fingers stilling in place. Suddenly self-conscious about their intimate positioning and her open display of attachment.

“It is not my mind I wish to speak about – it’s yours.”

“How do you mean?”

“You can talk to me Ser - like we did once when you told me about Renly and the ball. I know you don’t like to open up, but if you need an ear. I’m here.”

“I think that listening to my troubles goes outside your responsibilities as my Squire Pod. Thank you just the same.”

“I don’t believe so. Besides, this isn’t a Squire duty, it’s more like friends or family.” He picked up a stray twig and began prying the icy layers from it, awkwardness in conversation a trait both of them had in common. “I didn’t get a chance to congratulate you on your marriage. Though I wish I’d been invited.”
She mentally chastised herself. *I am thoughtless, I never stopped to consider that poor Podrick may feel discluded.* “I am sorry. It was careless of me to overlook you. Though if truth be told the wedding was not planned. I spent the whole ceremony wondering when it would be called off.”

“It was a strange turn of events Ser, if you don’t mind my saying. From what Lady Sansa described about your parting in the courtyard…” He gulped. “…you must have been very pained.”

Brienne nodded, her chin trembling of its own accord at the memory. “Broke my heart.”

They were three simple words, but speaking them aloud was enough to release a dam, several more tears streaking down her cheeks. “But it’s mending. Slowly I will piece it back together.”

“Why *did* he do it Ser?” Her Squire gave Jaime a sidelong glance, ensuring the Lord was still asleep. Brienne remained attune to his breathing, ensuring it did not break from its methodical pattern. “I mean, I know the reasons that he said – his sister, his past and the war. The stablehand was very forthcoming with what he overheard and Lady Sansa wanted me well informed. But I also know he loves you – it’s why I was sure he would come back. Everyone could see his devotion - he didn’t even try to hide his feelings. It was plain from the second he arrived in the North. Even if Ser Jaime wanted to help them - I just can’t see him leaving you like that…”

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“He thought I didn’t love him.” It was a strain to push the words past her lips. “Quite possibly still believes it.”

“Truly?” Pod’s gaze flicked to her lap, where her hand still rested amidst the lion’s mane. “How did he come by that conclusion?”

“Jaime and I are so different - sometimes I fear we shall never meet in the middle. That we are wrong for each other.” Now the sentences tumbled from her mouth there was no stopping them, pouring forth in an outflow of bottled emotion. “He says I seem indifferent – cold and distant - which *I am*. You would know it well Pod – you have suffered my company for even longer than he has. I am not good with people. I am best left on my own…” She swallowed to quell the sob in her throat.

“...But Jaime is so needy and demanding. He clings to me – he is always there. Wanting to touch, asking to hold me, mewing for attention like an insecure kitten. He is *everywhere*…At my table, in my chambers, in my bed. I fall asleep and he’s still trying to draw me into his arms and if I oversleep, I awaken to his beard scratching against my shoulder. He is dependent and seems determined to make me reliant as well. And I cannot afford to take that step, to make that gamble. Jaime accused me of keeping him at arm’s length and perhaps he’s right. Because I am always waiting – waiting for the axe to fall, the joke to be revealed and I am the hideous punchline. Then it happened – he left me - and despite all of my efforts, my world fell apart. I broke…into a million infinitesimal pieces and I could only be grateful that I had retained some small part of me on which I could rebuild and now he wants to take that away from me as well.”

“M’Lady – do you doubt that he loves you?”
It was a question which she hadn’t asked herself. Not seriously. She always chased the query away with her long ingrained faith in the total impossibility.

*How could he love a woman so plain and mulish?*

Brienne closed her eyes and thought about every subtle implication since Jaime had arrived in Winterfell. Each gesture and look…

Following her out to the training yard, procuring a chair to place beside his own and insisting she join them. Calling her ‘My Lady’ to the ears of his brother and any keen listener, who would hear him place emphasis on the ‘my’ and the way he said ‘lady’ without any hint of a jape.

His hand over her own on a wine goblet. His humility in asking to serve under her command. Knighting her and the way his eyes had locked onto her own, seeing straight into her soul.

They had done the same in front of the fireplace as they bared their skin and wants. And once more as he claimed her maidenhead. The way he did that, unbroken eye contact, let her know – that in those moments he was with her – Brienne of Tarth - and no one else occupied his thoughts.

“He does love me.” She breathed it out, as improbable as it seemed. It felt good to say the phrase, making reality of fantasy. “I worry that I do not take precedence in his heart. That there may be another who always will – but for the most part, I know his feelings are genuine. Jaime is mine…. And I am his.”

*Just like the vows from a Southron wedding – I know it is real.*

Podrick smiled lightly. “Look where he is Ser…. annoying as you may find it. He wants to be close to you. If that isn’t a man in love – then what is?”

He furrowed his forehead in thought before adding. “I don’t know much about relationships but from what I can see, the only thing preventing the two of you from being inseparable - is yourselves. That distance which you use as a safeguard, is the same chasm which keeps you apart. You use space to reassure yourself that you can function without him, fearing that the love you have is too great and it may destroy you. But Ser Jaime needs closeness to reinforce his belief that he will always have you to rely on. M’Lady – you have always been alone, and you find security in that, but Lord Jaime has always been reliant on another person, without constant connection he feels lost.” Pod shrugged. “Both of you want the same thing – each other. Both of you fear the same thing – losing the one you love. When you put it like that all this aching and worry seems rather pointless.”

A crease appeared between Brienne's brows. “When did you grow wise beyond your years?”

“It’s not wisdom Ser, just observation.” He scrambled to his feet. “Think on it for me. I didn’t mean to interfere but… watching the pair of you today - it truly confounds.”

“I will Pod, I promise. And thank you for speaking with me. I honestly feel better.” Her tears had dried upon her cheeks, the catharsis of release freeing her from the talons which had sunk deeply,
strangling her chest.

“You are welcome M’Lady – now I best go and begin preparing breakfast.”

Brienne turned her gaze to the horizon, the sky beginning to lighten, dawning a new day.

Attentively she resumed brushing Jaime’s hair, swearing to herself fresh starts. Wrapping her other arm around her husband’s shoulders, for once drawing him in closer.

Chapter End Notes

Please never be shy of leaving comments - I absolutely love to hear from anyone who reads - whether it be one word, an emoji or an essay. I appreciate you all, you keep me going. <3
Knights vs Ladies

Chapter Summary

The next day saw them travel across the White Knife and up into the Sheepshead Hills. The hillocks and valleys providing protection from both the weather and prying eyes. Their mission was to find the source of the Broken Branch and from there the river would guide their journey.
But with winter coating the springs and creeks with ice, it was not as simple as listening for the babbling of flowing water.

Their days were spent cresting rises and travelling down gullies, ambling climbs and slow descents, the cover of snow forcing them to dismount and lead the horses. At night they huddled in the lower regions, finding an inlet or ravine, the walls of earth and rock to either side blocking the worst of the cutting winds.

On their second day into the hills they happened across some locals and after observing them from afar, noted with much excitement that the men were returning from ice fishing. By now their provisions were growing scarce and the idea of cooked fish delighted them more than even the discovery of the headwaters.

Brienne knew how to fish; growing up on an island dotted by anglers, the process was part of everyday life – it required patience, silence and determination – all traits the Lady Knight possessed. She just had to adapt her skills to a colder climate.

However, the two men she was travelling with had no such abilities. Brienne managed to despatch one of them to set up camp, preventing his presence from becoming a bother.

*But the other....*

“How much longer does this take?” Jaime whinged from beside the small hole they had punctured through the ice. Peering in at the darkness and wrinkling his nose.

“Forever if you keep talking...how many times must I tell you? Fishing is about sitting still and keeping *quiet.*”

“Remind me never to become a fisherman.” He grouched, returning to sit by her side. Brienne’s long legs were cramped as she hunched upon the low rock, her knees almost at equal height to her shoulders - but *she* was not complaining.

“Look at you.” Jaime chuckled. “Have you ever noticed the way that you sit?”

“I can’t say I have…. And I’m so glad my reminder brought us precisely ten seconds of silence.”

“Your legs go on forever, no wonder you position yourself the way you do.”

“And how exactly is that?”

She watched Jaime bite the inside of his cheek, smirking. “Like a man.”

“I will add it to the list.” Brienne remarked wryly, positively *thrilled* that her *husband* had pointed out one of the many masculine traits she had adopted since her adolescence. An unforgiving time when her growth spurt continued without end and any aspirations of transforming into a delicate, fetching lady fell away like autumn leaves. “Now will you stop frightening my fish?”
“No.” His smile was a mix of mirth and affection. “Do not mistake me My Lady, I think it endearing. I noticed it first when we were captive all those years ago and it intrigued me even then - mainly because it was unlike any woman I had seen before. Though truthfully I do not think your size would allow you to sit yourself another way, it is just a most curious thing to witness. Most noblewomen are taught from a young age to….ah….“….keep their knees together.”

*Is this insult or compliment? So often with him I cannot tell...*

She huffed, indignation creeping in. “I wear breeches! What else would you have me do?”

His nose was freezing as he pressed it to her cheek, left hand sneakily sliding up the inside of her leg. “Fear not Lady wife, I find it adorable. I relish that you are different, there is an innocence about it which is quite becoming...” Jaime trailed kisses down the length of her jaw. “...Those long limbs of yours can envelope me fully and I enjoy knowing that the only person who can experience and appreciate the wonder of you - is me.” He pressed his mouth to hers, coaxing her lips apart with his tongue.

*Ahhh - he meant it kindly.*

They hadn’t kissed properly for what felt like an age and she hungered for it. The melding of their mouths unbridled and without constraint. She may sit like a man, but she responded to him like a woman.

Turning to lean into him, she clasped his cheek in her gloved palm, running her other hand down the back of his head and knitting her leather clad fingers in his golden mane. Massaging them against his scalp and encouraging him nearer.

Jaime’s right arm snaked around her middle and she heard the tell-tale clink of his golden prosthetic colliding with her armour. His flesh and blood hand gripping her thigh, roguishly prompting her legs further apart so he could push closer.

“Brienne…” The timbre of his voice was raw, and she anticipated a request for more physical pursuits than those they were already engaged in. “....my love…” She kissed his nose which was red with cold, and he gazed at her with a spark in his eyes which drove all chill from her body. “….the fish.”

“Fuck!” She dove from the rock, frantically scrabbling upon ice and amidst snowdrifts, searching for the line which she’d dropped. The sound of Jaime’s booming laughter making her grunt in annoyance.

That night they supped upon rations from their packs.
The next day they followed the brook downhill, where the mounds of earth gradually grew smaller and the trickle became wider. Morphing into a fully-fledged river, faster flowing and therefore resistant to freezing over. Jaime and Pod chatted away happily over the sound of the trickling current whilst Brienne surrendered to her own thoughts. Pausing every so often to appreciate the camaraderie between two of the people she held most dear.

By the following evening they were on the outskirts of the Hornwood, positioning their camp between the shielding trunks just inside the treeline. Their stripped branches trading foliage for ice crystals, which glimmered almost mystically in the fractured light. The gurgling of the nearby river providing a tranquil overture to the infinite, clear night sky. A world of grey, white and muted tones broken only by the fire’s glow, the rich warmth bathing their immediate surrounds in a more earthy hue. The orange seeming both foreign and welcoming in this uninhabited corner of the realm.

Standing tall in front of the blaze, Brienne’s figure cast a long silhouette amidst the trees, her shadow so lofty and straight it was almost indistinguishable from their own. She stared into the flames, deep in contemplation, vaguely aware of the clatter behind her as Podrick finished repacking their dinner utensils.

Brienne herself had prepared their meal (still far from confident in Pod’s cooking skills). Jaime took the duty of tending to the horses and now sought solitude to bathe, braving the frost of the Broken Branch to scoop handfuls of water upon himself.

Always logical, Brienne had queried the necessity of the task at this hour, knowing the water would be freezing and that even submerging his hand would likely set him to shivering. The Lady Knight herself had sensibly chosen to wash during the daylight hours, when the winter sun brought the surface of the liquid up to a slightly more tolerable temperature.

But Jaime had insisted he was tired of smelling like their equine companions and saw no point in freshening himself before he had settled their beasts for the night.

*He overestimates his ability to withstand such harsh conditions, ego and cockiness make for foolish bedfellows. Nevertheless, my husband will come back chilled to the bone, in desperate need of heat…*

"Podrick..." Her tone carried a timidity to which her Squire was not predisposed. It made him pay swift attention.

"Yes M’Lady?"

"I hate to ask this of you, but I require a favour."

"Of course, Ser."

"Might you go collect firewood? We may require more kindling for the night."

Podrick eyed the plentiful pile which lay beside the flames, they had well and truly ensured they were in surplus supply before sundown. "Firewood?"
Brienne’s shoulders slumped, curling in on herself from shyness, voice barely audible as she mumbled. "My husband and I are in need of some alone time. After his return from the stream - I would appreciate it if you could make yourself scarce for a while."

She knew it was a hefty request in the dark winter’s night, but she sorely missed her husband’s touch. A desperate craving for their physical intimacy had been swelling within her and as each day passed it grew more undeniable.

Podrick’s act of accompanying them had been selfless, a mark of true loyalty which saw him join their plight and pledge his sword alongside their own. But the unforeseen consequence was his constant presence betwixt them as a couple. Stagnating the development of the newlywed’s relationship, hindering their reconnection in the aftermath of their flight.

"I'm sorry to do this to you Pod, but these are tumultuous times and I don’t know how many nights together Jaime and I have left. I would give him warmth - in the way only a woman can." Her cheeks burnt at the admission, but she would not lie to her faithful squire.

His own round face flushed with embarrassment, comprehension dawning. "I will walk to the rock formation we saw upon approach. It is a good distance from the camp and should be a suitable place to set up watch." At the end he muttered. "I shan't return without express permission."

"Thank you Podrick. Be sure to take an extra cloak, or two… and your sword. I would not have you cold or defenceless. If anything happened to you because of this – I would never forgive myself."

"I will be fine M’Lady. It is a well-lit night. Bandits and wolves alike will not be lurking."

Ducking his head, he collected the items as instructed and scurried away before either of them could become further mortified by the situation.

Busying herself, Brienne retrieved their bed rolls from their packs, laying her own out in prime position by the fire. Every night Jaime slept in separate furs beside her, remaining as close as possible without making her awkward in Podrick’s company, the gap between their bundles acting as a buffer against impropriety.

Rather than repeat the established routine, she commandeered Jaime’s two blankets for different purposes.

Brienne shook one out, expelling any clinging leaves which remained from the previous evening before rolling it into a makeshift pillow. Placing it at the head, then lying his blanket over her underlay. For extra warmth she added her own fur over the top of it, hoping it would be enough to chase the chill from his body.

*If not – I intend to help.*

For a beat she jittered nervously on the spot, unsure how to proceed. *My mind has never had a turn for the art of seduction; practicality is far more my skill set.*
Utilising the rational part of her brain instead, she took off her padded tunic, depositing it beside the makeshift bed. With long, sure fingers she untied the knot of the laces on her woollen undershirt, deeming that enough. *It is too cold to shed further layers.*

With a nervous glance around at the trees, she kicked off her boots and slid beneath the covers, her chest both tightening at the idea of being exposed and fluttering with anticipation. Reminding herself that she was courageous of spirit - and that her one-handed husband would be glad of the consideration - she removed her breeches and smallclothes, folding them neatly, placing them discreetly with her tunic so as not to give away the game. Taking deep steadying breaths and allowing herself to be comforted by the furs preserving her modesty. The soft feel of them like silk against her tired legs, a delicious mix of liberating and inviting.

Brienne sat up as she heard Jaime approach, straightening the blankets across her lap and trying to frame what she might say. As a quiet person, it often felt like she measured every sentence, weighing her words to ensure they were sufficient. By contrast, true to form, her lion chatted without any such qualms.

“Listen attentively wife, for I am about to say something which you will very likely never hear again.” He huddled close to the fire, hugging his arms to his chest. “You were right – that was without a doubt one of the coldest and most ridiculous notions I have ever had.”

Brienne smirked despite herself. “I would say ‘I told you so’ but I don’t think it necessary. Gloatimg loses its appeal when you are clearly shivering.”

“You have no idea.” He turned his back to the fire, rotating like a rabbit on a spit, which only served to broaden her grin. “I only have one hand – sluicing water over yourself takes twice as long and then I had to redress whilst quaking with cold.” He snorted in amusement at his own stupidity. “Why didn’t you stop me?”

“Have you ever tried to talk you out of something? Take heart Jaime, it is still not the most foolhardy move you’ve ever made. You did tell me you charged a dragon…”

Chuckling at his own expense, he looked around the camp. “Where’s Podrick?”

“He took first watch – over by that mass of stones we saw earlier. It is a good vantage point.”

“Is that where we are taking watch tonight? I’m not keen on that, too far away from the fire.”

Revelling in his ignorance of the true intentions behind Podrick’s absence, she smiled gently and patted the spot beside her. “Come husband.”

“Good suggestion, I will heat up quicker with some extra layers.” Crossing to his pack, he looked confused when he couldn’t locate his sleeping furs. Turning around to face her, he furrowed his brow in concern. “Have you seen my ….”

“They are here.” She replied simply, shifting her top cover of grey to show his brown one beneath. “Jaime ….” Her tone was low and infused with undercurrent. “…. Join me.”
He didn’t have to be asked a third time.

Walking over, he hastily removed his boots and slipped into their makeshift bed, sighing in contentment. “It is a lot warmer in here.”

“I know how you hate being cold.” She placed her hand flat on his collarbone, smoothing the fabric with her thumb, contacting his icy skin on the edge. Their eyes met, their exclusive signature, the intensity of their blue-green connection magnetising and unbreakable. His breathing so shallow his chest barely rose, and Brienne suspected he may be awaiting her next move with bated breath.

Traversing down, she sought the hem of his undershirt, this time slipping her hand beneath the material and running it up his abdomen. Rubbing his taut muscles, dappled with gooseflesh until he moaned. She wedged her torso close to his, creating friction and lending him her body heat. “Feeling better?”

“Getting there…” Gravel imbibed his voice with his unspoken request for more.

“Is there a way I can help?” Brienne made the enquiry as innocently as she could, wishing she were more than she was. Prettier, fairer. A dainty slip of a woman who could master the art of being coy and ignite an inferno within her chilled husband.

But perhaps – dare she acknowledge it - she was enough….

It certainly felt that way from the manner in which he growled, dragging her into his arms and claiming her mouth in a passionate kiss, rolling her into the middle of their furs. She heard a sigh escape her lips of its own accord, responding to the exquisite weight of Jaime pressed against her. His stubble grazing beneath her chin as he sucked at her neck, nipping his way down her throat to her clavicle. Pushing apart the vee of her neckline, stretching the criss-cross laces to their limit as he sought her breasts.

He grumbled deeply when he did not succeed, hating being thwarted in his endeavours and her ribcage was racked with tremors as she laughed at his chagrin. Drawing his face back to hers she laved his jaw, the sensation of both his soft skin and the prickles of his beard dancing a fine line between pleasure and pain against her lips.

“Brienne…” His timbre was hoarse, his eyes darting as she knew they did when he waged a war within himself. “… You are my wife, a noblelady. I can’t take you on the hard forest floor – much as I want to. You need a bed, a mattress, a blazing hearth.”

“I am hardly a Lady, Ser. You said it yourself – I am a Knight, a soldier, a commander. Knight’s travel in camps and snatch sleep between marches. I feel more at home here, out in the wilds, than I do amidst the finery.”

“It still does not give me leave to treat you less like my woman and more like a camp follower.”
Stroking the back of his head she shook her head in disagreement. “We are wedded, no such insult
is taken, at least not in my mind.” She patted his shoulder with her other arm, knotting her fingers
in the fabric of his shirt. “What brought on this bout of chivalry?”

He swallowed. “A recollection of Locke and his men.”

Sitting up slightly she wrapped both her arms around Jaime’s shoulders, fitting her cheek to his and
shutting her eyes. The terror of that night, would stay with her forever but she hadn’t drawn the
parallel. The fact that Jaime had ….

*He loves me. He indisputably loves me.*

Holding her hand to his cheek she kissed him fiercely. Pulling back and addressing him in earnest.

“Chase it away. The only thing all that horror boiled down to was you and I. What we would
come to mean to each other. Jaime I will never see a similarity between you and them… I…” She
blinked away the threat of tears. Out of the many blaring differences in the circumstances, there
was one which dwarfed the rest - it thumped within her chest, permeated her dreams. But it
refused to be spoken aloud, catching in her throat.

*Why can I not say it?*

Clearing her tone, she began again, with a less intimidating declaration. “You worry that it would
be treating me as less than a lady but the most ladylike thing which I wish to do in this moment is
attend to my husband.”

Jaime nodded, accepting her reason, wincing and enquiring. “Did I spoil the mood?”

“No.” Her response was sincere. “You gave this more meaning.”

This time when he kissed her it was slower, sweeter; laying her head back down upon the rolled
blanket with the softness of a Lord to his Lady. A rare gentleness between them, for the warriors
tended to favour fervour and ardour for their couplings. Their tongues danced languidly, his hand
and stump trailing slow pathways down her sides.

“Hmmm.” His eyebrows raised, contacting bare skin in place of her deerskin breeches, beaming in
pure delight. “You planned this.”

Her gaze zeroed in on his own again as she murmured another proclamation. “I want you.”

The heavens above the canopy of the trees were a canvas of velvet, the constellations twinkling
down upon them. The art of their arrangement above echoing the art of their lovemaking below.

The Galley sailing across its inky expanse, a favourable omen for the journey which they
undertook. A golden haze enveloping the Crone’s Lantern, lighting the way for travellers...and for
her.

Brienne inhaled and exhaled, exalting in every brush of Jaime’s lips against her neck. Each thrust
of his hips bringing her closer to rapture in their conjugal bliss. Somewhere deep within her steely core, she heard the metallic clinking of bolts unlocking. The iron gates which surrounded her heart unfastening with her husband’s touch. His purring voice whispering vows of fidelity and adoration into her ear. “It’s you Brienne… only you, my love.”

Her defences were falling, the blood rushing in her ears the sound of their demise, for years they had stood, reliable and impenetrable. Keeping every possible hurt and vulnerability well-guarded. Now they crumbled for one man, in spite of her best efforts he had found his way in. Her trademark silence no match for the outpouring of emotion which spilled from the open floodgates. “I love you.” The three forbidden words came tumbling out as she yielded the last part of herself to him. The most precious piece which she had valiantly fought to keep free of Jaime’s all-consuming hold. It was his now, along with the rest of her. “God’s help me Jaime – I love you.”

The night was silent around them, human and beast alike in reverent hush in the wake of her confession. Only the elements remained oblivious to the significance of her metamorphosis, the fire crackling its way through the wood and the stream purling continuously.

Hot breaths mingled with the frosty air as they snatched oxygen. Brienne sucked in deep lungfuls, steadying and finding her centre. Reacquainting herself with the surrounds of the tangible world as she returned from a transient place which still remained beyond her understanding. Bewildered by the way she took delight in things which would previously have seemed abhorrent – the droplet of perspiration which ran its way down the length of her spine, the stickiness of her inner thighs, the contact of skin on skin where Jaime squeezed close to her. She closed her eyes, attuning herself to the movements of her husband beside her, his own gasps ebbing as he nestled into the crook of her neck, pulling her woollen undershirt aside to press his lips to her shoulder blade.

*Making himself a tad too comfortable when I intend getting up.*

Pushing herself upright with her elbows, it was not startling to find her way barred by a stumped muscular arm.

“Stay.” Jaime entreated. Not so long ago it was her making the same request in a courtyard.

“I cannot, we are being selfish.”

“Just a minute more…. Please.”

She dropped back down with a defeated groan. “One minute.”

“Such odious requests I make Ser Brienne….” His voice carried the mocking lilt she knew so well
as he nibbled playfully at her earlobe. “…. however will you cope?”

“I am trained for endurance. I will grin and bear it.” Even so, she swatted at him in annoyance when the ticklish sensation became too much.

Jaime chortled, resting his chin on her bicep, drifting into thoughtfulness. “You don’t have your herbs.”

“It matters not. We are man and wife. It would be unnatural if we were not trying to conceive.”

“I agree - it is expected. But are you willing in the midst of these wars?”

“Do you really think they have another nine moons in them? Rest assured Jaime they are coming to a head. We will see the conclusion of this violence soon.”

He suspired, the blast of hot air washing over her neck. “Is a babe something you want?”

Brienne turned her head from studying the barren branches above to regard him. “Contrary to popular belief I am a woman, I was raised an heir. I know my duty.”

“That’s not what I asked.” Jaime nudged her with his scarred wrist. “You’re a Knight, that’s what you’ve always striven for. Is motherhood in those plans?”

“I have never thought about it in the capacity of want. Once I shunned my betrothals it has always been off the table.”

“Well think about it now…”

“Give me time Jaime. You move in leaps whilst I edge forward. I believe I have relinquished enough ground to you for tonight.”

“Fair point My Lady – and I appreciate it.” He brought his wrist to her chin, always pleased when it didn’t cause her offence. Tilting her face towards his, he smiled. “I love you.”

Leaning in, she offered her response by way of a swift kiss before sitting up and collecting her clothes.

Gracelessly, she shimmied into her breeches and undergarments whilst remaining hidden beneath the covers and Jaime observed the show with great amusement.

Rolling from the blankets and standing, she retied the strings of her undershirt and slipped her gambeson over her head.

“Pull up and lace up please.” She angled her head in the direction of his crotch. “We must retain what dignity we can in this situation.”

“Yes Commander.” He bit his lips to keep from chuckling.
“This isn’t a jape. Poor Pod was very understanding with my less than honourable request. The least I can do is fetch him back by the fireside as swiftly as possible. I intend taking over the watch.”

Jaime yawned, stretching beneath the furs, resembling the leisurely lion of his sigil. “It is too soon, his watch is not done. I would much prefer it if you wouldn’t.”

“But I am.”

“Then compromise. Share the bedroll with me tonight.”

“Jaime I cannot – it will make Pod uncomfortable.”

“It will make you uncomfortable. He knows what we are about Brienne, we are married. Why subject us both to the cold?”

Fastening her cloak around her shoulders, she worked her jaw in stress. “If I agree, we will sleep apart within. Opposite sides, facing away. I have no desire to flaunt our affections in front of my Squire.”

“Ah, so it will be no different to a typical night in our bed at Winterfell.” He gave her a pointed look.

Raising her chin, she looked down at him from her towering height, her voice taking on its no-nonsense edge. “Do you adhere to the conditions or is it to be separate furs?”

“I agree.” Jaime grumbled, his mien falling with disappointment.

Crossing over to him, she bent to kiss his golden head.

“I warned you Ser – I have given you ample concessions tonight; I ask that you don’t push me for more.” Her hand traced his stubbled beard before she pulled on her glove. “I will wake you when it is time for your watch.”

His answer of ‘goodnight’ was muffled by the makeshift pillow.

Walking away she smirked to herself as Jaime drifted off to sleep, noting that once more, she had sapped his energy.
“Podrick.” Her boots crunched against the caked snow as she fetched him back to camp, thankful for the chilly atmosphere dampening the flush of her cheeks. She stopped a few feet from her Squire, trying to muster the bravado to look him in the eye. “Return back by the fireside. We will sit watch from there and I will relieve you of your post.”

He raised from the rock on which he had seated himself, addressing his boots more than his mentor. “My shift is not over yet M’Lady. We divide the night by three.”

“Surely you have earnt a reprieve - I do not mind taking a longer watch.”

“If you insist upon my resting now Ser, I will wake early and take the final stretch before the dawn. That way it remains fair.”

They began the trek back to camp, looking ahead instead of at each other.

“That is very considerate of you Pod. I thank you. For – both shifts.”

“You are welcome M’Lady.” Although the quiet was awkward, both seemed quite content to avoid speaking.
Chapter Summary

Cover Art by: Ro_Nordmann

"Thoughts of you consume..."
Lyrics, War of Hearts by Ruelle
Verse 1, Line 6

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes
Jaime could scarce remember ever being so warm. Luxuriating in the act of slowly awakening to faint morning light and a supple heated body nestled close to him. The cosiness of the furs and entwined flesh so glorious he briefly considered he may still be asleep and dreaming. This was all he had ever wanted, to many men it would seem a base desire, but to the lion of Lannister it had always floated teasingly out of reach.

He yearned to be loved. To give his heart and soul in its entirety and have the same be returned. Born with a fundamental need for company and contact, Jaime withered when he was left out in the cold. His capacity for commitment and adoration eclipsed that of others - boastful human beings who professed to understand what this all-encompassing emotion truly entailed, only to fall short when put to the test. By contrast, Jaime would never intentionally give his partner cause for grief.

Cersei had always been too cocksure in his blind devotion, though it was justifiable to an extent. He had followed her obediently, giving of himself without question. Even when it hurt him, wounded his soul, left him desolate. Suffering through deprivation of his own hopes and dreams in order to keep her happy. All he had ever asked in return was one thing – that she reciprocate. Echo his affections in kind. But for some strange reason, this too was denied to him, too great a request. The realisation had ached.

His whole life Jaime had felt as if he was battering himself against a resistant tide. Swimming against the current. The love he so desperately sought, kept upstream. If he pushed himself further, gave that little bit more, surrendered another chunk of his soul or his pride, perhaps for one moment he would grasp it. But each time he drew closer, the affection flowed further away.

This had been his fear with Brienne, that the process would repeat, another struggle in vain. He had dragged the baggage with him, hang-ups lingering from his previous toxic relationship. But now he hated himself for allowing his past to harm her and their trust.

*But hopefully not our future…*

Murmuring softly, he nuzzled in further, his senses singing with delight as he felt her warm breath against his neck.

Jaime absolutely loved his warrior woman. She was stubborn, mighty, curt and very reserved. In many ways the opposite to him. But she was a hidden gem, a treasure in his life. Never had anyone been there for him in the ways she had, supporting him and spurring him on. Believing in him and accepting his faults where nobody else would.

He had fallen hard for her secret softness, the tender loving woman who hid beneath the bristly exterior and snappy retorts. The gentle, selfless creature whose heart was as gigantic as her stature. The idea that she too might never return his love had brought him to the brink of temporary insanity. It would be understandable if she did not care for him – *Gods know there is many a valid reason* - but utterly devastating all the same.

Jaime knew he would never be good enough for a pure maid such as she, virtuous both of body and
mind. What he deserved could only be the hateful spite and conditional love which Cersei provided, applied generously with a dose of manipulation.

But miraculously, Brienne did love him. She had told him as much last night.

Somehow this noble paragon had come to care for him, Jaime Lannister. So, was it wrong that he - a man so undeserving and tarnished - claimed her?

Absolutely – but I am entitled to some selfishness. After all, he always openly admitted his iniquities. Why stop now? Especially when happiness is finally within reach.

And the euphoria he basked in this morning made everything worthwhile…

When Brienne had woken him to take over the watch, she told him to rouse Pod before dawn. Only too gladly, he had counted down the hours before returning to the bedroll. Blissfully happy to be spending the remainders of the night in furs shared with his wife.

Jaime had respected her wants when he hunkered down. Lying on his side but facing the middle, quite accustomed to the sight of her back being the last image he saw. But somewhere between closing his eyes and being stirred by first light, Brienne had broken her own rule.

Now they lay - for the first time - enveloped in each other’s arms.

Jaime revelled in how large she was, a size which felt substantial to cuddle with, an equality which allowed him to deposit the weight of his leg or head upon her without fear of bruising a lithe frame. He felt the same when they made love and it inspired him to more vigorous passions, enjoying that his Brienne could give as good as he gave.

My Brienne… He beamed and inhaled the scent of her white blonde hair. No one else’s.

Not a King’s, nor a pirate’s. Or a fucking red-haired wildling’s with a nerve and audacity I could easily have wiped off his unkempt face.

Mine. My wife.

Knowing this uninhibited embrace would be short-lived - an indulgence quickly quashed as soon as the Lady Knight’s senses returned - he took the opportunity to test his boundaries a little further. Rubbing her cheek with his nose and seeking her lips. She favoured him with a moan, shifting closer and Jaime stole sleepy kisses from his drowsy wife.

They had never been like this before and to him it was beautiful. The entirety of the North and battles over a twisted metal throne, melting away until it was just them. Two people in love, a man and woman wed. He rolled his hips against her thigh, showing her how much she was wanted, letting her feel the throb of his manhood as it begged for her once more. “Jaime…” Brienne’s
voice was deep and silky as she wrapped her arms around his neck, fingers threading through his hair, nipping behind his ear. Then she tensed.

Jaime stifled a laugh; he didn’t need to see her face. *Fun is over, she’s awake.*

“Jaime!” Her scolding tone was severe, pushing him away roughly and sitting up straight. Head turning right then left, searching for her squire in a wild panic.

“He’s not looking.” His grin was wolfish. “Pod’s preparing breakfast.”

“That is scarcely a few yards away.” Brienne hissed; her face set in a scowl. *I know that expression, I am about to be reprimanded. Little does she know it was her doing rather than mine.* “We had an agreement.”

He resisted the impulse to chuckle, though jocularity still tinged his retort. “Which you broke. I must say, you are a lot more pleasant when you’re sleeping.”

His wife huffed loudly.

“Don’t spoil our morning…. It was one of the best awakenings I’ve had.” He kissed the soft woollen fabric cladding her shoulder, wishing it were bare skin.

“Well I’m getting up…. before we make any more of a spectacle of ourselves. Besides we must get moving.”

“You can be in a hurry all you want - but I’m afraid I must stay put for a while.” Casually leaning back on his elbows, the lion gestured towards his lap, the obvious bulge in the blankets highlighting his arousal. Wiggling his eyebrows, he added. “Unless you care to do something about it.”

“Really?” Brienne was sceptical as she slipped her padded tunic over her head, taking an unusual amount of time to pull on her boots. *Passing odd, she is generally efficient.*

Checking that Podrick wasn’t within sight, she knelt on top of the furs, giving his erection an appraising glance. “Am I correct in thinking you were requesting my assistance in this matter?”

The lion’s eyes sparked. “Yes wife.”

“As you wish.” Reaching beneath the covers, she loosened his laces slightly with her left fingers, shoving her right hand down the front of his breeches.

“Fuck!” Jaime swore loudly, bolting upright in shock. Startling Snow Shrike’s alighting in the neighbouring trees. *Her hand is like a frozen block of ice!*

Withdrawing and rising to her feet, she rubbed her palm against the fabric on her thigh, trying to regain feeling in her numb digits. Her hand was red with cold and it was only now Jaime noticed the depression in the snow, beside the spot where her boots had spent the night. Wincing he pouted like a chastised little boy. Half amused and half dismayed as he grumbled. “I knew I got
of too lightly."

“M’Lady? Is Ser Jaime alright?” Podrick appeared, concern creasing his forehead.

“He’s fine Pod. His Lordship just realised how chilly it is this morning.” Picking up his snowflake dusted cloak, she shook it out before rolling it into a ball and throwing it in his direction. Jaime let out an exaggerated grunt when it hit him square in the chest, glowering playfully from beneath his blonde brows. *Rough and sportive - my woman is magnificent.* He flashed her a rakish smile, wide and toothy. *Let the games commence My Lady.*

Brienne barely blinked, the quintessence of composed as she informed him. “Best rug up well. We break our fast and then ride out.”

Retaliation in a game of decorum and denial was a tantalising thing to plot – besides their journey was far too dull and uneventful.

Jaime reined up his horse to walk alongside his wife’s, calling to mind her smug countenance when she had brought their potential morning escapades to a grinding halt. He understood her reasons, the golden knight was well acquainted with the moral high ground of the scrupulous Maid of Tarth. He had been familiarised with her righteous inflexibility since long before even the thought of relinquishing that title to his indecorous intentions had flitted through her mind. Yet the urge to ruffle her poised demeanour remained a past time which could bring humour to even the most tedious of treks.

*Far be it from me to pass up an opportunity.*

Slanting towards her in his saddle he proudly announced. “I keep thinking about last night.”

Immediately he was rewarded with a scowl, the Lady Knight tossing her head with annoyance in Podrick’s direction.

“What? The lad’s not listening.” In truth he observed the Squire’s shoulders tense, knowing full well that he heard every word. The surrounding forest was quiet and it would be impossible for their conversation not to carry. *But that is the plan.* “Now...” He resumed conspiratorially. "...I’m trying to decide which part *exactly* was my favourite—"

“Jaime, cease this instant!” She cut him off short. He could almost see the steam radiating from her broad shoulders, her temper igniting. “It is vulgar and unseemly.”
Perfect, now this is a debate. He knew some diversion was in order.

“How is it unseemly? We are married. Copulation is an expected part of matrimony, is it not? What were you saying about duty? An occasional roll in the bed is taken for granted.” Leaning close, he staged a loud whisper. “Though for us it is more frequent than seldom – it is all part of being warriors, we have a healthy appetite for the physical.”

Brienne’s nostrils flared. Jaime adored watching these little signals that she was fuming. His wife snapped but avoided shouting. Grabbed but never lashed out. She was far too restrained, her quiet dignity a trait which he highly admired, but also found tempting to trifle with. One day she will crack... Maybe today.

The Lady Knight paused to regain control, plotting every word in her austere way. When he noticed her swallow, he knew the answer was coming. It’s one of her tells.

“Whether assumed or not there is little need to discuss it.” She spoke through gritted teeth. “Especially not in the company of my Squire.”

“Why all the fuss and worry about Pod? He is far from a child. A man grown.”

What amused him the most was that as her anger grew, so did the volume of her voice. And she doesn’t even realise it.

“Respectability Ser Jaime. You may do well to remember it. Pod is one of the few men who regard me as a Commander and a Knight and I would prefer it remained that way. More so, it is inconsiderate of you. Podrick took great risks to accompany us on this traitorous expedition, suffering freezing temperatures and limited provisions just as much as we have. You should not rub his nose in the fact that you enjoy…..marital comforts. He need not witness nor be exposed to such conduct.”

Jaime yanked his horse to an abrupt halt, not believing his ears. He could not have been more victorious if he’d just struck gold. He suddenly understood how the men must have felt, toiling deep within the Lannister gold mines, labouring for hours, days and weeks only to finally tap a vein and unearth a trove of riches.

The lion cocked his head quizzically to the side. “What did you just say?”

Brienne turned her own palfrey, bewildered by his sudden shift in behaviour. “Don’t tell me you weren’t listening!” Her statement came in exasperated bursts.

“Oh no – I was listening. I’m just ensuring I comprehended correctly…. A few yards ahead, Pod stopped his mount, waiting for the two Knights to keep pace. “…My Lady – are you by any chance attempting to protect Pod’s….?” Jaime struggled not to scoff.…..innocence?”

“What? Ye- Well I…-” The way she stammered and the adorable little line between her brows
gave away how perplexing she found this question.

Trotting his horse over to hers, Jaime grinned wickedly. “You do realise that he has squired for two men before you – one of which was Tyrion?”

“I am fully aware of that fact.” Brienne was defensive, he knew she misliked being perceived as slow or dim-witted but that was not the implication Jaime intended.

“Wife, your motherly instincts towards the lad are admirable but sometimes you need to learn that not everyone you encounter is as virtuous as you or I.”

Now it was her turn to deliver a derisive snort. “Virtuous – you? Surely you jape. In poor taste Ser Jaime.”

Unbidden he was overtaken by affront, a frown tipping the corners of his lips downward, self-defence spewing from his tongue. "Why would you go and insult me in such a manner? You know full well I have only ever lain with two women in my life! One of which is you.”

From the path up ahead, he heard Podrick cough, a strangled rendition of the noise, unnatural and inauthentic. Jaime recognised the deliberate manoeuvre, a sound employed to mask surprise. The lion knew most men didn’t understand his limited experience with women and it was certainly something he avoided voicing aloud amongst them, lest he lose respect and be mocked. But the remark had flown from his mouth without prior thought of who else was listening.

*Suddenly the boot is on the other foot, Gods poetic justice is painful.

But you just made the wrong move Squire, this is going to be fun....*

Brienne’s own countenance had softened. “I did not mean to cause offence. I would never cast your fidelity in a derogatory light. It is a laudable quality and from my perspective an endearing one.” He favoured his wife with a small smile. Jaime knew deep down she was attracted to this very aspect of his personality. “It is just difficult to marry an image of you and virtuous in the same sentence considering your choice of conversation.”

“But that is the point my love…” Never missing a beat in both swordplay and wordplay, Jaime knew how to twist their interaction back to his aim. He stood in his stirrups to reach over and place a peck on her lips, crooning all the while. “…. There is nothing lewd about our interactions – verbally or bodily. Hence, you need not feel humiliated nor seek to conceal such facts for shame sake. And especially not from Podrick of all people! Everything being considered....” He grimaced slightly and trailed off, sitting back in the saddle. *Come on My Lady, take the bait.*

Brienne turned her horse to face forward, her expression flummoxed. “What do you mean by that?”

“Surely you’ve heard the rumours? He’s Squired for you for years after all.” Jaime’s smile was sharp, his green eyes gleaming with mischief. He stared dead ahead, noting the sudden pallor of Pod’s complexion. The lad hastily gathered the reins in his hands, wheeling his horse around and
urging it onwards. *He is making a quick retreat.*

“I tend not to listen to gossip. It is nearly always malicious and often untrue.” Brienne began rationalising aloud, their two palfreys resuming a leisurely pace, ambling side by side as their riders talked. “But no – whispers about Podrick have never been brought to my attention.”

“Makes sense.” Jaime shrugged. “You are unaware because you’re not a man. It is common knowledge amongst the gents, most tend to talk when in their cups. My brother especially. And Bronn.” *Did Pod’s horse just quicken its gait?*

Brienne pursed her lips, consternation writ across her features as she herself noted the Squire’s increasingly rapid departure from their company. “The women exclude me from their circles and the men guard their tongues in my presence – just not when it’s about me.” She solemnly shook her head. “It is little wonder I am often uninformed.”

“I tell you the truth. Always have.” He winked. “You can ask me you know. Usually I wouldn’t consider breaking the confidence of the brotherhood but seeming as you’re a Knight now, you should probably be an honorary participant. And it somewhat affects you anyway.” Jaime couldn’t help but laugh. “A female knight with a male squire of *his* reputation – why if I didn’t know firsthand of your chastity I could be concerned. How many nights have you spent alone together on the road?”

Her blue eyes became saucers. “With that last statement it seems I have little choice but to enquire.” She looked from her husband to the back of Podrick’s head. Jaime believed the lad still rode within earshot. “He and I have talked Jaime. Many times. He has made no mention of anything.”

“It does not surprise me – he respects you.” *One more prod.* “And you’re a woman.”

She gulped. “Very well, I have to hear this - but not from you. I will have it from him.”

Jaime tried to suppress his triumphant smile. “As you wish My Lady, allow me to fetch him.”

He kicked his horse into a canter, overtaking the Squire and cutting off his path. His tone singsonging waggishly. “Oh Pod. Our Lady Knight requires a quick word.”

“Ser Jaime...” The young man begged, all brown puppy-dog eyes imploring for intervention to spare him from this fate, positively mortified at the prospect of coming clean.

“Come now Podrick. We are all honest here.” Resembling every inch the lion with prey in his sights he added. “You heard *my* history.”

“I - I didn’t mean to listen…. or to make that sound. I was just – surprised at what you said, it’s not often you hear that from a Lord or Knight. I’m sorry Ser...”

“Podrick.” Brienne’s brusque tone sounded from behind them. The squire looked crestfallen.

Jaime would have been almost apologetic if it were not so damn entertaining. “Too late lad.” He patted the Squire on the shoulder. “I accept your apology and wish you good luck.”
Pod turned to face his mentor. “Yes, M’Lady Ser?”

“What repute is Jaime speaking of? I know you have been privy to our conversation, you just admitted as much.”

The younger man sighed. “A nickname Ser. Along with a couple of tales. That is all. It was Ser Bronn who started spreading it. In fact, it was him who began a few rumours….” He gave Jaime a sidelong glance. The Lannister Lord grinned broadly; he knew the other tattle as well.

“Jaime…?” His wife fixed him with her unwavering stare.

“Bronn had it about that we were bound for the bed, or rather ‘fucking’ as he termed it. I didn’t find out until Winterfell of course. But – it was accurate.”

Satisfied with his explanation she turned her attention back to her Squire. “And the whispers about you? Do you intend to tell me? And I would enquire why you haven’t previously?”

“I can’t M’Lady. I can’t say it to you.”

“Why?”

“Ask Ser Jaime. He can tell you. I give permission.”

“That’s cravenly Podrick. After the many conversations we’ve had.”

“I know Ser…. but when you find out you’ll know why I didn’t want to repeat it.”

“Do you know the courage it took for me to tell you the truth last night?” Brienne imparted her lesson with her usual even fairness. Humbling him by pointing out that she asked nothing of Pod which she didn’t of herself. In that moment, the lad looked very much the boy again and as he sunk further into the saddle, Jaime found himself feeling remorseful for the turn his jest had taken.

But it was all in the service of a greater purpose and Jaime swiftly reminded himself that the resulting reaction from his wife would be well worth the awkwardness.

“Husband.” Brienne called to him, without shifting her focus from Pod. “My Squire appears to have swallowed his tongue. Can you please tell me the nickname he has earnt himself?”

_Alright, mayhaps this is still a little funny._ “Pod of the Magic Cock.” The lion volunteered.

His wife’s mouth formed a firm line. Jaime noticed the beginnings of a blush creeping up her neck, yet she fought it off heroically, remaining stony faced. “And _how_ did you earn such a title?”

“Whores mainly M’Lady.” Pod mumbled his response, refusing to meet her gaze. “They wouldn’t take payment.”
Jaime guffawed and the Lady Knight silenced him with a withering glance. Inhaling deeply, she summarised her next query in a single word. “Mainly?”

“Yes Ser, there were others. Serving girls and the like.”

“Brienne –” The lion heard himself interjecting before he fully processed what he was going to say. _First, I create the mayhem, then I attempt to allay it. Sometimes I even confound myself._ “- he is a young man. You have been in King’s Landing and many an army camp, you know the culture. Men have needs.”

“Yes Jaime. I know full well…. his past actions are not my concern. Although it _would_ have been considerate for my Squire to apprise me of his renown, with my own reputation at stake.” She huffed. “But by the same token, his conduct whilst in _my_ service is not only relevant but most certainly important.” Turning towards Podrick, she addressed him with a level octave, simultaneously grim and patient. “I try my utmost to avoid hypocrisy Pod, I know my liaison with Jaime was scandalous, but I never denied nor hid the truth from you and I undertook discretion wherever possible to avoid public disgrace. Tell me – during our time at Winterfell did you engage in dalliances or keep the company of whores without my knowledge?”

“Yes M’Lady.”

Jaime couldn’t help but notice how much they reminded him of a mother and son. For anyone to think there was anything sexual between them was completely ludicrous. But Brienne was correct – his behaviour as her Squire did indeed reflect back on her and his reputation as a ladies man would raise questions and eyebrows at their close relationship.

Red-faced and chastened, Podrick muttered his excuses. “I’m sorry Ser. I- I didn’t know how to tell you. You have such high expectations and strict guidelines for my behaviour - even when it comes to drinking. I’ve always been proud to be your Squire, but you are a noble Lady. I could hardly confess to needing a woman in that way.”

Disappointment was evident on her face as she appraised the young man before her. Jaime was certain that up until this moment she had seen Pod as a boy. _She will make a fine mother one day. Maybe even sooner than we think after last night..._

Taking a deep breath, her large sapphire eyes found Jaime’s own viridescent spheres. “Husband….” Her tone was neutral – difficult to gauge. Regardless, he cherished that she had taken to calling him by his new title.

“…. We will share one bed roll from this point forward.”

Ending the discussion, she kicked her horse into motion. Keen to make up the ground they had lost.
Jaime sipped from his wine flask, listening to the sounds of the Hornwood around him. He was moderating his nightly allowance of the precious liquor, noting how the flask grew lighter each night and dreading when it inevitably ran out. This cold Northern wasteland had little room for the creature comforts to which this Southron Lord was accustomed. He had packed two for their journey, and after Podrick’s help with the first was already well into the second.

*Something has to make passing the hours bearable.*

Sitting watch seemed entirely pointless and he had told Brienne as much. Even prior to the march of the undead armies, the majority of smallfolk had fled to the safety of the various strongholds, where shelter, protection and provisions were abundant. The paths which they followed were clear of strangers and they had remained undisturbed by a single soul. Jaime was confident no brigand in their right mind would brave the elements on the chance of happening across equally lack-witted travellers. Nevertheless, Commander Brienne insisted upon vigilance and her loyal men obeyed.

The hush was split by the sound of twigs cracking and the lion turned his head to witness Podrick returning from the woods. *Most likely pissing.*

Whenever Jaime needed a thought to gladden himself, he recalled the image of Brienne’s unimpressed face as he theatricised relieving himself on a tree in the Riverlands.

*If she knew then that she would be my woman…. that I would know every contour of her body and how my manhood would make her come undone.* He laughed to himself. *She would never have believed it.*

“Ser Jaime.”

The Knight quickly concealed his prized flask beneath his cloak – lest he have to share. *He only knew about the first one and I think it’s best if it stays that way.* “Evening again Pod.” His tone may have been a touch too cheery as he tried to cover his hasty movements.

Approaching tentatively the Squire’s countenance was serious. “I just wanted to make sure that there was no ill-will between us. For earlier today.”

Jaime smirked. “I’m pretty certain we called it even.”

“Still… I was wrong to eavesdrop like that and – I didn’t mean to judge you.” Pod sat down next
to him. “I was just – shocked I suppose. I guess I don’t know you that well and you’re quite
different to your brother in that respect.”

“Very much so. I love Tyrion but on the topic of women we have never seen eye to eye.”

“But I understand better now -” Pod glanced over his shoulder towards the mound of furs under
which Brienne slept. “-How you are a match with Ser – she disapproves of such conduct. She tries
to hide it, to fit it with the men. But she is very….”

“Idealistic?” Jaime ventured.

“That’s a good word for it. She has made me better than any of my previous masters, but I don’t
think I will ever live up to her expectations, as much as I want to.”

“Don’t worry Pod. Neither will I.” Jaime sighed. “Brienne sees me as much more than I am. She
believes I’m a good man. It kills me. She went from thinking me a monster to placing me upon a
pedestal, an honour to which I have no claim. I know I will only disappoint her and that is the last
thing I want to do.”

Podrick shook his head. “You cannot compare the two issues. I have to strive to reach an
impossibly high bar – which as today proved - I never will. But you can do little wrong,
irrespective of whether or not you think you deserve her esteem, Ser is in love with you. Even
when you fall short, she will forgive.”

“That is still quite the responsibility.” Jaime allowed a warm rush to pass through him, it reached
his eyes but not his mouth, in much the same manner it had when Brienne came to his defence
during his trial. “How is it that you have always been so sure of her love for me, yet up until
recently I remained uncertain?”

“You honestly could not tell?” The lad was dumbfounded. “No offence meant Ser Jaime, but
Lord Tyrion is the smarter brother.”

At this Jaime could only chortle. *The lad has a point.* Attempting to lighten the mood, he
suggested. “Maybe it is because of my limited experience with women.”

Pod’s countenance was dubious at best. “It’s true that M’Lady does not wear her heart upon her
sleeve - I didn’t have a clue there was a romantic connection brewing until I saw the two of you
together. It really seemed quite startling when Ser Bronn first suggested it.” The Squire took a
deep breath. “But when you Knighted her… did you see the way she looked at you? Magic cock
or not - no woman has ever looked at me like that. Then at the banquet, she lit up, in a way I’d
never seen. You were the only person at that table to Ser. Even when she was supposed to be
focussed on Tyrion, she glanced back your way. If that’s not love Ser Jaime – what is?”

“So…” Jaime ventured. “… I’m a dolt?”

“Perhaps –” Pod shrugged, prompting the lion to snigger again. “- but not completely. You
fucked up but you realised and set it to rights. I know you love Lady Brienne.”

Jaime arched a knowing eyebrow. “Did you by any chance give my wife a similar speech to this
one?”
The Squire intently studied the snowdrifts and Jaime saw it as an admission. When the lad excused himself to return to his bedroll, the Knight let him go without pressing further, issuing a simple thank you and leaving the rest unsaid.

Time passed slowly in the hours after midnight, the conversations and recent events running rings around his head. The wars to the South waging on but paling into insignificance when pit against the whirling eddies of emotion in his chest. Try as he might to sort through a larger issue, the only person he cared to think about was his wife.

Her trust, her dedication, her faith. It both trilled a blissful melody and descended a heavy load. Jaime knew he would spend the rest of his life making sure that her conviction in him was not misplaced - and it was not an unpleasant thought. The idea of committing himself to being a better version of himself, all in the name of striving to be worthy of his Lady Knight’s love… quite frankly it sounds like the most honourable pledge I could make.

His purpose would be shaped around lavishing Brienne with all the tenderness he could, providing the adoration which she had been deprived of her whole life. And the sweetest reward would be the gleam of love in his wife’s eyes, his heaven brought to earth.

Jaime tossed another log upon the fire as it started to burn down low. Stoking the embers into angry glowing coals, encouraging them to lick at the frost-bitten branch. Crouching and watching the icy sheen dissolve into steam and vanish.

His ears pricked at a strained noise coming from Brienne’s vicinity and he pivoted to check on his woman, noting with dismay the trembling of her furs and another distressed murmur. In three short strides he had lowered himself beside her sleeping form, brushing dampened locks from her forehead and carefully loosening the tucked blanket to keep it from restraining her.

The lion was no stranger to night terrors. The beastly visions plaguing even the most seasoned solider. He knew better than to wake her with a shock, instead resting his stump reassuringly against her own arm, soothing her by running gentle fingers through her short blonde hair. As she began to thrash, he spoke to her. Softly calling her name, summoning her back to the land of the waking, where the horrors which tormented her genteel soul would disappear. “Brienne…. It’s just a dream. It can’t hurt you. Come back to me Brienne, it’s just a dream.”

A gasp accompanied frenzied blue eyes flying open, darting frantically as her senses returned. Jaime shifted his stump to her chest, pressing his forearm against her rapidly beating heart, her ribcage racked with shallow breaths. Tenderly he wiped the beads of perspiration from her forehead with his thumb. “It’s gone now, my love. Whatever it was has returned from whence it came. Never to be seen again.” He placed a kiss to her heated brow. “And good riddance I say.” The corners of his eyes crinkled as her sapphires wordlessly searched his emeralds. Always thinking but never speaking – something he could now live with. “You know – perhaps keeping watch was a wise idea after all. At first, I resented it for keeping me away from you, but I will sit up each night if it means I can frighten away your bad dreams.”

Kissing the top of her head, he pushed himself up, not wishing to crowd her, understanding her
need for personal space. Removing himself from her proximity was never something he enjoyed but it was made tolerable with the knowledge that he had been there for her when she needed him.

His Brienne could fight enemies by day, slashing them apart with Oathkeeper, utilising her brute force to stop them in their tracks - but there was little she could do when her own subconscious became her nemesis. Maybe, just maybe, in those moments, she could come to rely on her husband. Just a little bit.

The idea made him beam.

Seating himself back in position he granted himself another swig of wine. This one in celebration. Shaking the container to assess its contents and grimacing at the mainly hollow sloshing.

Several minutes had passed when her towering shape obscured the light from the fire. Having donned her cloak and gloves she was ready to take over the watch from him. It was still too early for a change of shift, but Jaime knew she wouldn’t want to return to sleep.

Her conscientious stare was trained upon him as she asked in disbelief. “You still have wine left? However have you managed that?”

“I like to take my time with things I enjoy, draw it out, make it last longer.” The silk in his voice made no effort to disguise his double entendre. Extending his hand, he offered the flask to his wife. “Here – it helps keep the shadows at bay.”

She gingerly took it from his outstretched fingers, peering in and swirling the liquid in the bottom. “I would not – I don’t relish it the way you do. Besides, there is barely any remaining and you have been saving it.”

Raw emotion imbued his tone, simply replying. “I would give you anything.”

Falling to her knees, she knelt in front of him, still needing to stoop slightly so they were at equal eye level. Raising a leather-bound hand, she cupped his cheek, her fingertips softly weaving their way through the stubble of his beard to the curve of his chin. He nestled into her palm, wishing he could feel the warmth of her skin as the weight of her mesmeric gaze pulled his own into her depths.

A speechless conversation passed between them, the precise phrasing he could not translate verbatim, but spiritually he understood the meaning. Something profound was occurring, cosmically realigning their established energies. A blending of two separate entities which now merged to form a stronger whole. Brienne was no longer resisting, and Jaime no longer questioned.

Leaning in, she fit her mouth to his, only parting enough to gently tug at his bottom lip. Causing arrhythmia and sending shock bolts through his system from this most plain and vestal of gestures. Keeping the moment chaste so as not to spoil its sanctity.

*What a fool I have been, she does not need to speak, words are wind. This – her kiss, her touch - is
He watched the dreamlike moment end as she pulled away, retreating back inside her protective shell, only the ghost of a shy smile remaining to hint at their silent exchange. Its tug playing at the corners of her lips, well hidden, visible only to those who could read her intricate subtleties, but there, nonetheless. *I see you My Lady, in all your complex perfection. And I love you for it.*

Brienne’s long white throat moved as she swallowed, locating her voice locked away and scratchy from disuse – *Or is it emotion?*

“I will take the watch. Get some sleep my husband.”

Chapter End Notes

Just wanted to say a big thank you to anyone who is reading this tale. It means the world to me.
We have reached the point where we are going to start seeing some longer chapters coming through (like this one). :)
Over the past couple of days, the Hornwood had proven a far more hospitable environment for their travels. The dense branches above blocked the worst of the snows and the ever-widening flow of the broken branch led them surely towards their destination.
That very morning they had slipped quietly past the stronghold which borrowed its name from the surrounding forest, and as its immense shadow loomed in the distance behind them, their luck took a turn for the better, chancing upon an abandoned wooden skiff bound amidst the reeds. It would be a tight squeeze for the three of them, but it would drastically increase their pace if they were able to travel via the river.

When the sun sunk low on the horizon, ending another short, grey winter day; Brienne declared that they would make camp early, utilising the excess time to test their balance in the rowboat and procure themselves a decent meal. Fish were more easily caught in the iceless waters and before too long they had successfully managed both to secure dinner and prove that the vessel could hold them. Whilst adrift they noticed the mouth of a cave, the yawning opening calling to them from the cliff-face that rose on the opposite side of the river, strokes of oars pushing against the current to steer them towards the prospect of shelter.

They explored the cavern with blades drawn, all at once optimistic but wary. Knowing many varieties of creatures could be lurking within the darkness, all none too happy about having their hibernation disturbed. Regardless, necessity drove them forward into the black shade, the unknown occupancy only a fleeting deterrent. As experienced survivors they knew if a fire were made out in the open tonight, they risked drawing the attention of the nearby castle inhabitants. But the alternative was a dinner of raw fish and the potential of freezing to death in their sleep. The discovery of the natural hideaway was a godsend, one they did not intend to squander.

Hours later, sated with full bellies – it was another hunger which took precedence.

The long tunnel of the cave exuded warmth and a homely ambience, the radiant incandescence of twirling flames beating the shadows back into nooks and crannies. Its joyous warmth intimidating the grey silhouettes to remain immobile, not permitting them to show their dank presence in their makeshift bower. The welcome comfort of an actual roof over one’s head increasing the feeling of cosiness and relaxation. At the entrance, far from sight, Brienne knew Pod sat watch, the lone threshold easy to guard and quite pleasant with the natural stone walls providing breakers from the howling wind. She could map the distance in her mind, the expanse of limestone and jutting rocks, the free-form architecture of their abode, with its subtle bends presumably eroded from years of running water.

She and her husband were lounging in their bedroll, chatting quietly about nothing of import, when their conversation transformed into their signature banter.

Jaime made a nonsensical remark about the firelight illuminating blue flames in her eyes, dancing joyously in their own hypnotic waltz, or something of similarly ludicrous phrasing, delivered in his overtly flattering way. The Lady Knight rolled them exaggeratedly in response. “Such a thing is not possible - fire is orange.”

“No, that is untrue - you saw Viserion’s scorching breath as plainly as I did.” Her lion never seemed more brilliant than when she challenged a point he was trying to make, her counter arguments awakening his competitive spirit in a way that brought him roaring to life. “So…. you cannot deny – indeed we saw ‘blue’ fire.”
His own emeralds were ablaze, making him appear incredibly sensual, turning her tone to velvet as she enquired. "Then what does that make yours?"

"Wildfire I suppose."

A smirk spirited across her face. "Seems befitting." Jaime was a man of passion and impulse, unrepentant and dauntless. Both on the battlefield and in the bedroom.

*Wildfire certainly suits....*

Brienne rolled over, willing sleep to chase away the erotic visions fleeting behind her eyelids. Yet still her pulse quickened, the fantasies refusing to be ignored.

*I am besieged by desire; this is a new affliction. I have never been driven to distraction in such a way before.....*

“Sit up for a moment.” Jaime’s voice broke into an illusionary scene which had resulted in a blush on her cheeks.

“Why?” Grumbling seemed the best cover for her heated bother, as she moved at his request, propping herself up while Jaime slipped his right arm beneath her head. Lowering back down, she made a pillow out of the corded muscles of his upper arm, offering no resistance when he pulled her spine flush against his chest.

“That’s better.” He nibbled at her earlobe, strumming his fingertips up and down her abdomen. Feather light across the tapered waist and flat stomach which she hid beneath her manly garb. *His instincts are on point, it is as if he knows my plight....*

Letting out a sigh, she turned her face up for a goodnight kiss, feeling his arm shift when he moved to meet her lips, before settling himself down behind her. Although she could no longer see Jaime, she was attuned to every slight motion of his physique as he began to relax, lulling himself by absentmindedly caressing her body.

Cuddling, fondling – relentlessly stoking the embers which flared within her, his moves either unintentional or fiendishly designed to entice.

Brienne watched the flames, yielding her internal fight with want, happy to be given over to the sparks which Jaime produced against her skin. She smiled to herself, knowing that if he looked upon her now there could be no disguising her libidinous intent. Her lust would be disclosed by the tip of her tongue moistening her lips, pupils so dilated from stimulation, they would make her blue iris’ near imperceptible.

*I concede...*

Reaching down with her free arm, she began to untie her own laces. Shimmying her breeches and smallclothes down past her hips. Her original thought was to lower them only as far as was necessary to allow her husband access but in her urgency, she wound up kicking them off beneath
the furs.

“Jaime – I desire you.” She almost didn’t recognise her own timbre, hushed and thick with yearning. Contorting her arm to lean behind, reaching between them to rub his crotch in encouragement. “We must be quiet. Not a sound. That is the condition. Consider it a command.”

The only drawback to the wonder of this stoneforged haven was its ability to funnel and amplify noise. A veritable echo chamber of acoustics which made their current activities even more challenging and scandalous.

As Jaime began to fumble with his own laces, she brought her hand back around to the front, running trails back and forth along the length of his forearm, nuzzling in against his muscular bicep. Her entire vision was comprised of his right arm and the fire, extending out in front of her nose, ending at his stump. A disfigurement he loathed and generally hid - but to her it meant so much.

With one of her own arms pinned beneath her, there was not much she could do, her ability to touch him limited by their angle and the bulk of her own body. Stretching out, she grasped the scarred flesh of his wrist, clutching around the deformed tissue more dearly than if he still possessed a hand to hold, a palm to mould against hers.

But I can scarcely imagine if his right hand were still in play, his ministrations doubled, twice as many fingers skimming across my thighs - oh, how that is a dangerous thought. He is tantalising enough with just his left…

Audacious digits had made their way to her entrance, seeking her wet heat. Boldly claiming the exclusive privilege of their union, the private places on her only he had ever touched.

“Gods Brienne….” His speech was husky. “…you are already ready for me…”

“Shhh.” She admonished gently, reminding him without the severity of scolding. Remaining quiet during intercourse would prove a challenge for her husband - with her he had always been vocal. “One more word out of you and I call the whole thing off.”

Contrary to her assertions, she repositioned herself against him in excited anticipation of his ingress, bending her knee and bringing it forward, giving him room to move.

It is an empty threat – but Jaime doesn’t have to know that….

Seamlessly he followed her leg with his own, aligning himself with her entrance and she smirked at how easily he had seen through her bluff.

…though it would seem he already knows.

The soft furs pooling around their waists secreted their joining, Jaime’s slightly shorter height landing his mouth at the apex of her shoulders. His left hand roamed over the taut plains of her front, from slipping beneath the fabric of her undershirt to tweak and tease her meagre buds to sliding further down where dexterous fingers could tend to her most intimate of parts.
He interchangeably sucked and nipped on the rarely explored flesh on the back of her neck, running his nose through the cropped blonde tresses of her hairline until she swore every last strand must have possessed nerve endings due to how electrifying it felt. She leant back into the exquisiteness, helping the reach of his lips. His attentions intensifying in tandem with the rocking of his hips, climatic heat pulsating from each sensitised point on her body which he brought to life with his innate talents.

Brienne writhed as a wave of pleasure coursed through her, curling forward and pressing her lips into the flesh of his arm to keep from crying out. Muffling her whimpers with his skin, rapidly turning the gesture into burning kisses. It took every effort not to bite down when another swell built inside her, more powerful than the first and she raked her teeth against his bicep, ragged breaths all she would permit herself to express her ecstasy. From the groans behind her, Jaime was struggling to keep silent. Low growls of frustration teetering precariously close to breaking her rule. But he was determined and sadly she knew, well versed in discretion.

_One of his many facets, his past shaping the interactions of his future...._

But she didn’t want to think about his sordid behaviours of days gone by. Nor of how improper and licentious her own urges had grown. Drawing comparisons against the people they once were, could only lead to shame and inhibition. This was today, this was now. Her and Jaime. Husband and wife.

They belonged together, to each other. They could shed the skin of their previous forms as hastily as they did their clothes – it was who they were as a couple that counted from this point forward.

Brienne clamped her mouth shut, knowing she was getting louder as Jaime’s thrusts were driven by his own ardour. Faster, furious and strong – until he found that one place inside her which couldn’t be denied, sending her hurtling towards a crescendo of immeasurable fulfilment. Her nails dug into his wrist and she hoped it did not hurt him. Her other hand tore at the furs beneath them, drawing them into her clenched fist. Burying her face into Jaime’s arm, it took all her will power not to scream into the cave and be damned who fucking heard her. Her lips were drenched from being drawn into her mouth, swollen and almost broken through from where her teeth sunk in. They left damp tracks when she amorously kissed his muscles, showing her appreciation through the limited avenue which was available to her.

She was faintly aware of Jaime grappling with his own climax, his hand stilling, palm spread at the base of her ribcage. His intakes of breath beyond laboured, gasping, air whistling as it was pulled through clenched teeth, low moans in his throat. Suddenly, he yanked her to him, burying his face into the juncture of her back and neck as he spilled. Successful in keeping his word, even though her often ignored sentimental tendencies longed to hear him call her name.

The Lady Knight allowed them both a moment to recover, sucking in much needed oxygen, coming slowly down from the dizzying heights. Jaime’s breath blew in hot gusts on the apex of her shoulder and she felt him quiver against her back, riding the aftershocks of orgasm. Brienne wondered if her own reactions were much the same, if perhaps his persistent longing to hold her close in the minutes of respite which followed their love was to feel her tremble in his arms, deriving the same indescribable pleasure which she was experiencing now. Feelings which went beyond carnality, lodging themselves within her psyche.
I am the cause of Jaime’s ecstasy, I made him feel that way…and he does the same to me.

The intensity of it all had intimidated her previously, prompting her to roll away and emotionally remove from the situation. A queer kind of compulsion produced by a game she played with her own emotions. A battle of denial and refusal, where she tried to convince herself that if she maintained a chasm between them, she might trick herself into believing that Jaime Lannister didn’t leave her fragile heart vulnerable. That every thrumming beat of her pulse which sent blood rushing behind her ears, didn’t yell the same chant night after night, session after session.

I love him, you love him, I love him.

It made her hands shake, paralysing her muscles until she could no longer respond to his touch. Causing her to seize up whenever he tried to draw her over to him.

Danger. Love is weakness.

He would leave her exposed. She never dropped her sword when defending her person, so how could she justify lowering the shields of her heart?

But incredibly, as each day of their journey passed, her perspective changed. She surprised even herself with this revelation – an unbelievable occurrence following how she had crumpled in the courtyard, forcing her to acknowledge that catharsis accompanied the realisation of your innermost fears.

He left her. It had happened. It was done. She had survived. And most importantly – so had they.

Coming out of the worst-case scenario with a fresh suit of armour, fashioned around them as a couple rather than separate entities. Within their private iron walls, she was safe. Dare she think it - secure.

She felt Jaime’s arm tighten around her stomach as he withdrew, his teeth grazing against her ear, gradually returning to a status where he could function like a capable being.

“Fuck….” His voice was hoarse in a way that made her insides clench. “….that was incredible…and unexpected.”

“Why?” Her own low tones were brought down a further octave by her determination not to let their conversation carry. Hoping the fire’s ceaseless consumption of wood could drown out their pillowtalk. Slowly she rolled over in his arms, lying upon her back. Gazing up at him for a change. A unique opportunity given that her height enabled her to peer down at most men – a trait which she loathed in her youth but maturity had made her relish.

He is still irritatingly handsome from every vantage point.

Jaime somehow managed to appear sheepish when he offered his clarification. “Remember a certain… stipulation, shall I say… that you asserted during our first few nights together?”

Brienne furrowed her brow, locating her breeches with her foot, grateful to find her smallclothes
still within. Wriggling beneath the blankets, she found her way back into the leg-holes, pulling both articles back up and adeptly tying them in place.

*Just in case Pod should raise the alarm and we need to spring from position.*


“Preference then.” Jaime ventured. “Stated quite forcefully, I might add. But then again, Commander Brienne states everything with vehemence.” He chuckled at her expense. “Not that I minded, everyone has their line in the sand and at that stage I knew you were still quite shy about everything.”

“I’m glad you listened.” Absentmindedly she began righting Jaime, assisting with his laces. A familiar and routine gesture which they had acquired progressively without discussion. She found it intimate – two prideful warriors for once taking humbleness and humility within their stride. Her willingness to help and his subsequent acceptance the product of the life-changing experiences they had shared.

Tending to Jaime, came to Brienne without pause but it was a testament to devotion how seldom now she felt the need to bring it to his attention. Their bouts of bickering won or lost without the need to bring his menial struggles into the equation.

*Perhaps I have softened since our first night, when I smacked his hand away from the ties of his undershirt…*

Her deduction was indisputable - she could feel the changes occurring day by day. Her harsh rigid corners were slowly rounding out, becoming arcing curves which smoothed a path towards co-habitation and marital contentment.

*And so, the former maiden becomes a wife.*

“Things were…. Different then.” The Lady Knight gave him a sly grin, loosely knotting the tie on his waistband, ensuring it could be easily unravelled with a simple left-handed pull. “I was still guarded.”

His eyebrows knit in an over the top portrayal of confusion. “And you’re *not* now?”

Brienne thumped his shoulder half-heartedly with her fist. “I have reassessed my viewpoint on the matter. I feel…. “ Those two words hovered in the air, the statement unfinished. Conveying her emotions did not come naturally. “…. Loved.” She shrugged, summarising her conclusion as simplistically as she could. Pride at her own succinct achievement blossoming within when Jaime responded with a smile which could melt glaciers to puddles. “Besides – you did not know the reason.”

“I never thought you would tell me.” His thumb tickled her forehead as he smoothed back a stray lock of her hair. “You can be prickly when I ask personal questions. Especially of a sexual nature.”

When her nerves twitched at the blatant way he spoke about coupling, her self-praise plummeted again. *Unfortunately, I haven’t come as far as I thought.*
Swallowing her hesitance, she reconjured the sensations of warmth and safety which had brought out her talkative side, keen to continue the flow of conversation.

_This is Jaime - my husband. If I cannot confide in him, I will never confide in anyone._

“When I …” Another gulp, suppressing the lump in her throat. “… first flowered, my Septa explained the ways of man and wife. She told me …” Her breath shuddered a little as she inhaled, forcing herself to trust and divulge inner torments. “… she told me that the only way my husband would want to take me - would be from behind. So, he did not have to look upon me…my face in particular.”

Anger flared in his enchating green eyes, a scowl darkening his usually jovial features. “Well she must have been the most attractive Septa in the whole of the Seven Kingdoms or else who gave her the fucking right to put those ideas in your head?!”

“No Jaime, she was of average looks.” Brienne’s tone was even and tolerant, dismissing his juvenile qualities whilst being simultaneously engulfed by adoration for him. “Septa Roelle thought she was preparing me – for the realities which faced a woman of my undesirable appearance.”

“Which you carried with you… through your life and to our bed.”

“You do remember the things you said to me about my homeliness and stature? When we first met?” The ceiling of the cave above suddenly seemed much easier to study than his countenance. “I was afraid of her prediction coming true. I never wanted you to mount me like that, treating me as though a mare or heifer. Less woman and more receptacle to rut…”

“Brienne – I would never-” She glanced back at Jaime when he shook his head vehemently, his horrified expression making the surge of affection within her expand. “-We are so much more. Even before our relationship morphed, I already respected you. I know I said some horrible things when we first crossed paths, but I don’t see you like that. I should never have been so cruel. I’ve told you many times, I am a hateful person. I’m sorry….”

“Jaime-“ She silenced him with a hand upon his cheek. “-I know. Hence my altered stance.” Reaching up, she joined her lips to his in a firm, warm kiss. “Every time you’ve bedded me, since the beginning – you have looked into my eyes. My eyes. In this plain, broad, ugly face. You never shied away from it, from me. I have never doubted that you are with me in the moment, you have never given me cause to wonder if you’re thoughts are of another. With us, it’s not like she said. You are my man and –“ It was amazing the things she found difficult to say. “- I like to believe I am your woman.”

“You are…but not just that. You’re my wife. My lover. Future mother of my children….” As he once again brought up the topic of them breeding, he gave a cheeky smirk. “Brienne – you’re the person I’m going to spend the rest of my life with.”

“I know.” Snuggling closer into the crook of his arm, she inhaled his scent and the newfound certainty. His next remark vibrating through her system from his mere proximity.

“Just as soon as fucking stupid Westeros and its many claimants sorts itself out.”
He makes a good point – certainty remains at large. But the problems do not stem from him and I. Our relationship is solid.

Her voice lost its melliferous quality as more serious issues took priority in her mind. “Where do we fit in this grand scheme?”

“As it stands…displaced fugitive wanderers.”

“Thank you, Jaime. I did know that.” Brienne toyed with strands of his hair, her brain becoming pre-occupied with the bigger picture. The threats and dilemmas which existed outside of their recently harmonised duo. Trio – I mustn’t overlook Podrick. He is in this too.

After a few minutes of continual silence, Jaime lay his golden head against her shoulder.

“Your watch is soon.” Her husband reminded her gently, yawning and making himself comfortable. “You haven’t had one wink of shut-eye. Do you want me to take it?”

“No – it is fine.” Suddenly, the idea of sitting alone with her thoughts was a welcome opportunity. “I’m actually wide awake.”

Long after Jaime had dozed-off, she remained alert and contemplative. Epiphanies and assurances turning tables in both her established patterns and her plans for their future.
Chapter Summary

"'Cause I'm overcome in this war of hearts...."
Lyrics, War of Hearts by Ruelle
Bridge, Line 2

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes
“Jaime-“ Brienne called to him over the sound of the rushing river. They had moored the small skiff on the frosty riverbank, giving them all a chance to make water, freshen up and have a bite to eat. The sun shone high today although it lacked the strength to truly increase the temperature. At best it set their surrounds to glistening, ice crystals capturing the beams and making the torrents shimmer. A different kind of sparkle when compared to how the rays beat against the warm ocean surrounding Tarth. “- I would have a discussion with you - if it is not inconvenient.”

Her husband straightened from sorting their utensils back into their packs, busying himself with a trifling task which she usually assigned to Podrick. She knew Jaime missed the horses; he had always volunteered to be their caregiver, but the creatures could not accompany them downstream.

*We would have had to part with the beasts eventually anyway.*

They had bid them farewell when they first boarded the boat, reasoning that in the nearby vicinity of the stronghold, their mounts would not go without a home for long. *Then technically the small vessel is not stolen - we traded for it. Three steeds is generous recompense for the finder, all were castle-bred animals.* She only hoped they would be well away before someone made the discovery.

“This sounds ominous.” He gazed at her quizzically, tilting his head to the side.

“Not necessarily – but serious, yes.” She gestured to the rocks on the riverbank. “Will you sit with me Ser Jaime? We must await Podrick’s return anyhow.”

Her Squire was taking the opportunity to bathe and had disappeared for privacy. Aside from the tumbling of the current, their surrounds were tranquil, and Brienne was confident that if he called for aid she would hear.

“So formal, Ser Brienne.” Jaime’s tone took on its usual mocking quality. “You have my curiosity piqued. Lead the way….”

Indeed, she was being proper. The gravity of the conversation at hand needing her to switch gears and become the noblewoman she was born to be. All morning her taciturn demeanour had been even more unforthcoming than usual, absorbed by weighing the decision which cemented itself within her brain during the small hours of the night.

Swiping the coating of ice away with her gloved hand, Brienne’s armour clanked as she lowered herself upon the stone. Oathkeeper pressing snugly against her thigh in its scabbard, her constant protection and symbol of security. She indicated for Jaime to sit opposite her, two knights and equals ready to discuss the state of the realm. Or the parts of it that concerned them at least.

“My Lady.” Jaime nodded to her, spreading hands of both flesh and gold out in front of him as he took his seat. “To what do I owe the pleasure?”

*Where do I begin?*
She took a deep breath, steadying herself to commence. “As you know – our travels are swiftly reaching their destination. Like all things, this expedition must come to an end and with that our issues resurface. It is easy to pretend that the wars and trials are beyond our notice, but it was not very long ago when I was serving Lady Stark and you were riding South to return to your sister.”

“For a few minutes at most. I reversed my decision hastily; must we keep dredging it up?”

“Yes – because it is important. Do not misread me Ser, I not speaking out of anger or hurt this time, I am just stating the facts. Rest assured you will be surprised at the conclusion I have drawn.”

He huffed, his warm breath misting in the air. “Please tell me it is to forget about everything and start somewhere anew. Do you know what the weather is like in Braavos at this time of year?”

“Jaime.” Her mouth was set in a firm line. “We are not cowards. Nor do we shirk our obligations. If you believed anything less than that, you never would have ridden North in the first place. I know you – I know you are isolating the larger problems, pushing them aside to a smaller inconsequential space in your mind rather than face them in all their difficulties. I do not blame you for it – it is the only way you cope. For when the burden of your loyalties descends you feel compelled to take action. Correct me if I’m wrong – but it was one of the reasons you got on the horse that night, wasn’t it?”

His green eyes were clouded and troubled, but he did not try to hide the truth from her. “Yes. Sansa’s words –” He shuddered involuntarily. “- No matter what happens, regardless of what Cersei’s done and my own feelings about it - she is my blood Brienne. They are my blood. What manner of man am I if I leave them to their fate?”

“And I admire you for it Jaime. Your compassion, your sense of responsibility. Without it you wouldn’t be the person I married.” She swallowed. “That is the crux. Everything has changed and neither of us realised it. We are wed. I don’t think I fully embraced the meaning of that until I stopped to ponder it. Nor do I think have you.”

She let her comments hang in the hushed air, allowing her husband the chance for them to sink in. The Lady Knight watched him mull them over, looking for the hidden conclusion to which she alluded. Brienne saw the moment he abandoned pursuit, choosing to take the avenue of avoidance. The easy road which circumvented all their dilemmas, protecting their sphere of blissful ignorance. And putting a supreme effort into procrastination...

“You are my wife, I love you.” Leaning over he squeezed her knee, wearing a half grin designed to charm. “What is there left to decipher?”

“My identity. My stance. Jaime - do you realise who I am now?”

“My nagging better half who seldom smiles, is deadly with a blade and makes for a fantastic bed partner?”

Ignoring his japes and charisma, she pressed on. “Lady Brienne Lannister.” She emphasised her last name. “They are my family too.”
Jaime’s eyes widened as he made the connection. “But you disagree with everything Cersei stands for! She is ruthless, diabolical, an enemy to your allies…”

“That is all true. But she is also my good-sister. And your twin, whom I know you still care for, despite significant moral and personal disagreements. She carries my stepchild Jaime. At worst, veiled in deceit and cover ups - a niece or nephew. With scrupulous honesty and complete transparency - my husband’s baby.” Exhaling, Brienne tried to release the tension inside, an inexorable side effect whenever she thought about the numerous atrocities committed at Cersei’s behest. “My personal opinions aside - I strive to be an honourable woman. I can see the value in familial loyalty. If we are truly each other’s, if I am yours and you are mine, then the same goes for our kin. I would expect you to have my back if I had to defend my Father. Podrick sides with us out of a mere perception of this same obligation. My course is set. United we stand, divided we fall.” She smirked notwithstanding the sombre mood. “Hear me roar.”

“Fuck.” He swore. “You have no idea what that just did to me.”

“You have yourself a lioness now Jaime, whether you realised it or not.”

He looked as though he may just pounce on her then and there - snapping the leather straps which held her armour in place, pressing her back flat against the frosted rock and mating like lions out in the open. But instead, after a lengthy pause, the ardent fires dimmed, the gloom regathering in his countenance. “This cannot be…. Jaime stood and paced. “…you should despise Cersei. You have every single right to…."

“I never said I liked her.” Brienne shrugged. “You were avowed to Lady Catelyn but dare I say you held no affection for her.”

“Lady Stark had her faults, but she was far from contemptible. Providing her with assistance did not impeach upon your honour.” He grumbled, plonking back down in defeat. Shoulders slumped, wearing a frown which seemed mismatched upon his handsome face. “It’s different.”

“No, it’s not. Be it Knightly vows or marriage vows, they are binding just the same. To deny their existence would indeed infringe upon my honour. Besides…” She dug deep, coaching herself to articulate. “….I love you.”

This time he leapt from the boulder, forcefully capturing her lips with his own, tongue seeking entrance against their chapped flesh. She pushed him back, not wanting arousal to corrupt their logical thinking. “Perhaps if I explain some of my reasoning, you will better comprehend how I arrived at this conclusion.”

“Alright-” Instead of returning to his own boulder, Jaime insisted upon squishing next to her. Well-shaped buttocks intruding upon the limited stone surface, his full weight pushing flush against her thigh, nearly knocking her off the edge. Brienne ground against him in annoyance, her expression comprised of a warning scowl, her displeasure highlighted by the low rumble in her throat, until he moved just enough that they could both achieve balance. Though not comfort. Even more exasperatingly, the more she grimaced - the more he beamed. “-I love you too.”

“Shut up.”

Jaime burst out laughing.
“Stop it! I am trying to have an adult conversation with you, and you are behaving like a juvenile Squire!”

“Fine.” He held up his gloved hand, signalling for a truce. “Apologies My Lady - both for being joyful and for adoring you, even when you’re cranky. Which is pretty much always.”

She released the breath in her lungs, venting her frustration. The rush of air channelled upwards by her bottom lip, the hot blast warming her chilly nose. “Do you want to know the reasons why, or not?” Turning her head, she fixed him with a stern stare. “There were two more factors which cemented my decision. One is simplistic – the other more complex.”

“I do want to hear them.” Jaime trained his wretchedly attractive face upon hers and she tried not to let her displeasure dissipate just because he was endearing.

_Traitorous female heart. I needs must remember he is infuriating._

Clapping a determined hand down upon each leg, she bade her thoughts to flow freely from her mouth. “My brother, Galladon. Have I ever told you about him?”

“No.” Jaime looked genuinely taken aback. “I thought you were an only child?”

“Just because I was raised as one doesn’t mean I always was.”

“I suppose I admitted that I was only surmising at the banquet but - why didn’t you ever correct me?”

“It was a long time ago. I have limited memories of him. At least the ones I am blessed with are all pleasant. He was a kind big brother.”

“May I ask what happened?”

“He drowned when I was four, Galladon himself was only eight. The riptide was too strong for him.”

“My love.” Jaime wrapped his arm around her, a completely pointless gesture, encumbered by layers of metal, but still it was consoling. “I’m so sorry.”

Brienne looked down at her lap, toying with the leather-bound fingertip of her glove. “I began dreaming about it all again. Being with him, out on the water. These dreams carry with it the strangest sensation, not just a memory – some sort of undercurrent, the wisdom of hindsight. I know what’s to come, but I’m powerless to stop it. I feel like I should warn him, try to save him - however I can’t.” She turned to meet Jaime's eyes, finding the moral within her tale. “Because he’s already gone and it’s just a dream.” The Lady Knight placed her large hand upon her husband’s knee. “I only knew my older brother for four short years. Less if you don’t count when I was but a babe and could not comprehend nor remember. Yet still I’m haunted by wanting to save him. By wishing I could have done something for him. I cannot begin to imagine if my sister - my twin – and worst still my unborn baby were in mortal peril and I sat by and did nothing to
save them. That is what my subconscious has been trying to tell me by stirring up these recollections. So that by some small measure, I can empathise with what you’re going through.” She gulped despite herself. “The difference is – it’s not too late for them. If we are to save them - the time is now.”

The cogs were turning behind Jaime’s gaze, she could see them clear as day. Working over her rationale, raising objections. “It makes sense, but I’m not certain how you can justify it after all the despicable things she’s done. I struggle and Cersei and I shared a womb.”

Speaking slowly, Brienne braced herself. Voicing aloud the next confession would take guts. Explaining that she understood sibling ties and had compassion for his plight was the simple, logical point. The second would be infinitely more complicated. “There are enough people howling to hold Cersei Lannister accountable for her crimes and even more who wish to see her brought to justice – whether it be from headman’s blade or dragonfire. I need not blacken my own soul by adding ‘kinslayer’ to my list of titles. However…. There are also certain personal matters which I would like laid to rest and that can only be achieved if my good-sister survives.”

“Such as?” Jaime prompted, his tone brimming with interest.

Inhaling deeply, she cut straight to the point. “I don’t want you by default.”

His eyebrows almost disappeared beneath his blonde hairline, expelling his own bated breath in a long drawn out gust. Opening his mouth to answer, Brienne silenced him with a raised hand, fingers hovering an inch from his lips. “Don’t Jaime. I can predict what you’re going to say and there is no point in it. I am not doubting that you love me. I am not questioning us anymore. I would not be so foolish as to voice this suggestion if I did not have faith. Last night I experienced harmony. Complete oneness and security in our relationship. I know we are real. But I am still fighting demons in here.” She belted her breastplate twice with her fist for emphasis, leaving her palm hovering over her heart. “And they whisper to me that things may not always stay this way, if I become the reason your twin dies alone. If one day you resent me for being the woman who stood between you and your family. Costing you a child, a sister. I do not want that – any more than you do.”

“That is a rather bleak outlook wife.”

“But realistic. It’s not always going to be smooth sailing.”

He seemed almost amused. “What part of our entire acquaintance, fleeting courtship, transition from enemies to comrades to lovers, has ever been smooth sailing?”

“Then we do not need more troubled waters! Why add turbulence to the tide?!”

“Do you really think that I would resent you?”

“This is not a reflection on you Jaime, I am not passing a judgment on your character. There are things which I may come to regret as well if we do not act.”
“Like what?” A tinge of concern permeated his voice, lines of worry forming across his brow. He is listening, his focus undivided. Now is not the time to hold back...

“I cannot guarantee that I would not come to wonder – that if Cersei had not died, would you still be with me?”

“She is still alive, and I am with you now!”

“Shush! Jaime let me finish.” She snapped at him, a common occurrence, but this time there was no playful edge to her pitch. Brienne was solemn and she needed him to know it. “That if you were faced with both of us, in the room at once – would I still be your choice?” Squeezing her eyes shut, she willed the threat of tears away at the thought.

It is one thing to love me – beastly Brienne – when his other option is miles away. But when offered her - beautiful, sultry, regal Cersei or his ungainly, manly wife – will he really still crave me? With my non-existent teats and my broad disproportionate body. My brusque manners and my unyielding ways...

She felt a hand grip hers, warm lips pressed to the centre of her forehead. “You forget…” Jaime whispered against her skin. “…We don’t get to choose who we love. Your heart decides and that is all there is to it. Mine is committed Brienne, my love is yours.”

Opening her big blue eyes, she discovered that she peered straight into his emeralds. “Jaime, I don’t want to chance it, what we have is too precious for me to endanger. I won’t risk you building resentment, me surrendering to doubts….”

“Isn’t that what you’re doing in giving credence to this notion?”

“No. Because I don’t believe it is a gamble.” She touched his cheek and tried not to remind herself again of the courtyard and how she wept. “I do think our connection is strong enough. That I can send you back to her and still your heart will be mine. So, I am not going to bury my head in the sand, hoping that my good-sister perishes in King’s Landing and rejoicing when I get you all to myself. Instead – I am going to support you in this, and we are going to save them.” Nodding her head, she asserted her agreement to her own resolve. “I just haven’t figured out how yet.” Raking a hand through her cropped flaxen hair she found herself wishing there were more to the plan than she had stated. A concrete strategy in place. But we can tackle that together.

“You overlook one aspect.”

Brienne huffed. Of course, he would find another hurdle for us to overcome. “Please enlighten me.” Sarcasm dripped from her tone.

“Cersei is livid at me - she tried to have me killed! I left her. She is not going to welcome me back with open arms.”
In spite of it all, the Lady Knight chuckled. “You weren’t worried about that when you rode off in the night.”

“It crossed my mind but all that familial loyalty you spoke of earlier was louder. Besides, when you are certain of imminent death you become less concerned with the ‘who’s’ and ‘hows’, you just know it is going to happen and that any efforts to evade your fate will be futile. That night, I cared little for my own existence, I accepted it was forfeit and thought I would be mourned by none.” Leaning over, he murmured in her ear. “But I was wrong and now I have a dreamlike future to live for…. a life to lead with my extraordinary wife… and I have it on good authority that she loves me. Somewhere beneath all her prickles and stings.”

She restrained the upwards quirk at the corner of her lips. “You shouldn’t listen to hearsay; it gives you false ideas.” His japes were no match for her wry delivery.

“Quite the opposite. I had it from the horse’s mouth.”

“Don’t you mean aurochs or cow?”

“Now I know I imbibe… but I must have been rather drunk to mistake some beast of burden amidst the sleeping furs for my Lady wife.”

“Knight.”

Jaime arched an eyebrow. “Electing titles now are we?”

“You gave me the Knighthood, the least you could do is call me by it.”

“Terribly sorry My Lady but I refuse to address you as Ser when I refer to our marriage bed. I’m not Dornish… or your first crush for that matter.”

Catching him off guard, she shoved him off the rock, revelling in the stunned look on his face when he hit the snow packed Earth. Standing, she towered over him with her arms crossed, donning an unmistakably unimpressed expression.

Unperturbed, her husband made himself comfortable, leaning casually against the ground as though he fully intended landing in the cold with a bone rattling jolt, peering up at her with a wicked grin. “I suppose I deserved that - but I think I made my point. I’m not sitting here lamenting and asking, ‘if Renly were still alive would you be with me?’ See how preposterous you’re being?”

Brienne remained unmoved. “You’re a dolt.”

“In what way?”

“In many ways. Get up.” She yanked him roughly by the arm.

“It would seem you and my sweet sister already have a talking point in common - you both think I’m lack-witted.”

Roughly dusting the caked snow from his bottom half she mumbled. “I do not think you are entirely stupid husband. Just when it comes to women.”
“And you would be the expert?”

“More so than you. Contrary to popular belief, I am a woman and if you dispute that then perhaps you and Renly have some common ground.”

“Well met wife. I do enjoy it when we bicker.”

She stomped back to perch on the rock, folding both hands in her lap, still shaking her head in disbelief. “You honestly think that if you suddenly appear in King’s Landing, Queen Cersei will give the command and your head will be mounted upon a pike?”

“Isn’t that how it goes?”

“Not with a woman Jaime. Not one in love anyhow. We tend to be foolish, forgiving creatures.”

His mien softened as he realised she was referring to herself. “But Cersei is….”

“What? Harsher? Colder? She would be hard strapped to be more uncompromising than me Ser.”

“I was going to say heartless.”

“Do you believe that to be true? Or is that just what you think you should say?” Giving him a pointed stare, she waited for the earnest reply.

Jaime sighed, seating himself beside her again. “Not entirely. She loves her children. Couldn’t care less about strangers.”

“And you?”

“I like to think she loves me on some level. Beneath the ambition and twisted layers that have corrupted her spirit and warped her mind.”

“There is nothing like facing down death to make someone re-evaluate.”

“I know.” He turned his face towards her. “It was one of the points that drove me to consider leaving. I pictured her sitting there, not understanding my betrayal. Waiting for me to arrive and save her. Confused as to why I didn’t come.”

“Made worse by her love for you. Her hormones running rampant. Your child within her womb. She is not my favourite person in the world Jaime – far from it - but I have felt the wound inflicted by the sight of you turning your back and leaving. Heartbreak and despair ravage a woman’s psyche. It leaves scars on the heart. All you can think of is the man you love returning to you, making it all go away with a few kind words.”

“Truly?”
“Every woman wants to hear that nothing else matters. Whether it’s true or not – you will spend your life questioning. But it goes some of the way to mending the hurt.”

“Funny you should say that. . . Cersei always told me that nothing matters but us.”

“And here you sit debating whether she holds affection for you? Jaime for shame.” She swung her head left and right, punctuating her disapproval. “Do you see why I called you a dolt? It seems you are blind when it comes to seeing the love women hold for you.”

“But they are two very different shades of the same colour. One is true, deep, solid and dependable and the other is manipulative, controlling, and changeable.”

“I am not making this case to judge the quality of love Jaime – just to prove its existence and have some sympathy for my good-sister who I know, in some capacity, will have been left hurting by your departure.” She smiled. “Though I’m glad you can at least tell the difference.”

“It’s rather evident. Do you think for a second if the roles were reversed, Cersei would be having this same conversation on your behalf?”

“Let’s not waste our time talking about something that is less likely to happen than the Dragon Queen deciding Westeros isn’t to her liking after all.”

Jaime gingerly fingered the intricate patterns on her vambrace, walking his fingers up the length of her long arm. “You’re my woman you know….and even though I didn’t think it humanly possible, this entire conversation has only served to make me love you even more.”

“The hard part is still ahead of us.”

“I know. . .” He trailed off thoughtfully before adding. “…now it’s my turn.”

“To do what?”

“I need you to swear something to me.”

Brienne frowned. “I take my vows very seriously Jaime, what would you have me pledge?”

“You’re not going to like it. But I ask you to keep in mind that I have just heard you out.”

“Go on.”

“I need you to promise me that when I go to King’s Landing – you will not follow.”

“No!” It was involuntary, the refusal erupting from her with a force that rivalled the doom of Valyria. “Jaime we are doing this together.”

“Absolutely not. This is my family Brienne….?”
“Our family.” Panic made her speech quiver. “Don’t disclude me or shut me out.”

“I’m not–” He squeezed her hand. “-I’m protecting you. I must protect you. It is of no use if we go rushing headlong into danger, undertaking a mission to save my sister – only for it to come at the cost of the woman I love. I will be unable to concentrate on the task at hand, all I will be worried about is your safety.”

“I can take care of myself. I am capable. I have faced worse odds. We are in this together husband.”

“And if I die? What then?” His eyes were marbles, full of sincerity, tenderness and fear. “Think about the larger picture Brienne – as you very emphatically pointed out, this is bigger than just the two of us now. You are my wife.”

“All the more reason why I should be at your side.”

“All the more reason why you should be far away from the conflict. Brienne - staying protected as the new Lady of Lannister is your top priority.”

She scoffed; it was all so ludicrously chivalrous all she could do was roll her eyes. “How do you figure?”

“Because if Cersei, Tyrion and I die – which are all highly probable outcomes in the impending war – you will be the last of our House and quite possibly carrying the sole chance of our line’s continuity with you.”

The bridge of her nose wrinkled in confusion. “I am a Tarth, Jaime. Marriage or not, I am not a Lannister by blood. I cannot claim those lands or titles.”

“You’ve forgotten, haven’t you? Gods Brienne! One minute you are lecturing me on how you are a woman - then the next it has slipped your mind entirely and you continue as if you are the same as every other foot soldier. You are drumming into me familial obligation - quite rightly I might add - but not stopping to think about your own responsibilities now. The importance of which outweighs the rest.”

“Yes! Staying with you – my husband, my family and keeping each other safe, the way we did in the battle against the Wights.”

“No – remaining far away from all those who mean the Lannisters harm – in case you are pregnant.”

All the colour drained from her face.

“Oh fuck.” He was right - the possibility had evaded her notice. Caught up in the whirlwind of personal awakenings and strategizing their next move, memories of their previous conversation had eluded her usually logical self. *He even mentioned it last night, but I was away on different currents...*
“Yes, my love.” She knew he saw her pallor, his tone patient. “If we all die - you and the possibility of my trueborn heir will be the only ones left to brandish the Lannister standard.”

*This can’t be happening.* Brienne buried her face in her hands, her voice muffled by her gloved palms. “I don’t know if I am.” *My last moon’s blood visited whilst we were in the Wolfswood. We have lain together since... “I can’t know – we don’t have enough time to wait.”

“So, we must proceed as if you are.”

“I want to go with you. I am not a woman to stay behind and wait for her man to return like a damsel or a brood mare. I am strong. I can do both.”

Jaime tugged her hands away from her face. “Brienne I know – and if this were any different war or battle I would want you at my side. Hells, you would be the one keeping *me* safe. You’re my commander.” He smiled at her. “But this is the beginning of the end for the Lions of the Rock, for *us*. If I die on this extremely unfair fool’s errand protecting my Queen, at least let me pass imagining you, safe and sound, possibly with my babe swelling your belly. Give me that. Because this stand-off between Cersei and the Targaryen is not going to resolve peacefully and at the end of the day, it’s not your fight.”

She worked her jaw, annoyed with herself and the world. Outraged by the injustices she continued to face because of her gender. Whether or not she was widely accepted as a Knight and a warrior, she was still born a female and it seemed her biological role was inescapable.

Jaime watched her reaction with keen interest. “You seem frustrated.”

Never had she thought she would be the subject of a man’s eagle-eyed gaze. She had despised and avoided scrutiny her whole life, always fearing it laced with criticism. Now it cheered her to a degree, knowing at least there was a person who cared enough to seek her viewpoint and knew her well enough to interpret her facades.

“I am.” *I may as well be frank.* “This is not how I envisioned this conversation panning out, nor my role in our future.”

“Brienne....” He looked helpless, at a loss for words to pacify and soothe. “You were the one who originally said it - it would be unnatural if we weren’t turning out attention towards producing heirs. Especially when our need is so pressing.”

“It was with a different mindset Jaime!” She flung her arm out sideways, slicing at the empty air as if it were a foe. “I thought we would ride out the wars, forge our way together.” Her exasperation was palpable, the vacant atmosphere providing little release for her pent-up aggravation. Brienne pressed two fingers to each temple, elbows braced against her armoured thighs as her voice grew smaller. “I suppose I never foresaw myself being sidelined so soon. Squashed into a stereotype whereby I must remain inert whilst my husband risks life and limb. Reduced to a mere spectator whilst history is made.”

Taking this in, Jaime regarded her with the wisdom afforded to a man only through time and experience. His years of trial and error when placating a loved one’s outburst shaping each phrase
he uttered. “I can only apologise to you Brienne, for the things I cannot change. The imbalances and unfairness of existence which I don’t have the power to alter. All I can do is ask you - what do you truly feel is right? I know better than to come between you and your hard-headed ways wife. I have given my opinions, but you can overrule me and defy convention in the way you always have. Gods know it has been successful in the past. When push comes to shove, the choice is yours. I don’t control you, nor seek too. But I will stand by you and love you, respecting whatever road you choose. As always - you are in charge.” He cocked his head, eyeing her reverently. “What's your decision?”

The Lady Knight pursed her lips, feeling the weight of a new set of burdens settle upon her broad shoulders. Watching the continuous flow of the broken branch she tried to find a way to manage their load, mentally flicking through scenarios which could bypass their stalemate.

But ultimately Brienne knew - be it a hypothetical or already taking shape, she must step up to her responsibilities.

"So we find ourselves having to say goodbye again." Scuffing a snowdrift with her boot she maintained her usual composure. Even if the thought tore at her heartstrings like razor sharp claws. “I had hoped our days of parting were over.”

“Me too.” The fingers of his left hand combed through her curled locks, ensuring they stayed tucked securely behind her ear. He took his time, letting his digits brush her skin as they mapped a trail to the long column of her neck.

Jaime knew better than to bring his gold hand to her tender flesh, her soft ivory seeming to repel the jarring metallic coldness. The superficiality and pretence of it reviling her authentic soul. She would rather his scars than his prosthetic. They were more genuine.

To Brienne, the absence of his hand did not make him a cripple – that title was only a scar he wore on the inside. A perception of inadequacy he carried within. His sense of identity tied to an extremity. In the past she had categorised it as the loss of his sword hand, but now she understood he had parted with something far greater. The instrument through which he expressed himself, conveying the sentiments which his pride prevented him from admitting.

*Jaime uses touch to cement himself.*

Brienne had never known what a demonstrative man he could be until their relationship had changed form. Thereafter it had been an assault on her senses. Constant nosing and embracing, insistent grabbing and stroking. In hindsight she knew she had not been receptive. The opposite in fact. Her palisades had been built to resist any attempts at physical contact and were not adaptable enough to create an exception seemingly overnight.

*It was little wonder we misinterpreted each other.*

But being both pillars of ego, curiously neither had stopped to clarify or explain. To try and bridge
the gap which was straining their burgeoning love affair.

So, it went unaddressed and wreaked havoc.

To Brienne speech only muddied the water, providing further opportunity for them to irk or inflame each other. It was through observation rather than conversation that her understanding had grown, triggered by Podrick’s invaluable insight as an outsider, spectating their unique dynamic and calling out their idiosyncrasies.

And what I learnt is invaluable…

In stark contrast to his fits of passion, Jaime was absurdly cautious when he reached for her. As if he was waiting for her to react negatively - to flinch or balk and toss him aside. She recognised the signs as it was a precise mirror reflection of her own behaviour. Only her anxieties had inhibited her from trying altogether, forcing her inward and to become withdrawn. Whereas Jaime courageously fought through the fear, his need for caresses outweighing his concerns.

This only served to heighten her intrigue regarding the origins of his hesitations.

Hers were simple, she need only her looking glass. A glance at her face told her story of rejection and ridicule. But Jaime was born to privilege with the bone structure of a deity, he should have had confidence to burn and the world at his feet, not inhibitions when he sought touches or constant reassurances of devotion.

Perhaps, he was an affection starved child, who grew into a tactile adult…? His Father must have made him feel weak for possessing emotions, Lord Tywin had a fearsome reputation.

But then she dug further, to a shadowy sordid place where her thoughts would rather not tread. Though in order to understand her conundrum of a man she would brave far worse.

She deduced that it must have come from the only other woman with whom he had been romantically involved.

Cersei – damn her - she never deserved his devotion, nor does she deserve what we are about to risk for her. She is the one responsible for damaging his psyche. From his behaviours, she must have wielded affection as a weapon, flung him away like an unwanted rag. Made him feel pathetic for needing her love.

Then it all added up. How he could have decided that her own actions, equated to a lack of love. Jumping straight to the most drastic of conclusions instead of identifying her motive as her own insecurities.

Just as Brienne was determined the problem was always her - she was ugly, she was unlovable, she was repulsive - so too, somehow this gorgeous man had come to a similar impediment.

It was him – he was hateful, he was corrupt, he was tainted.
Although she disagreed, it was in his mind. A loathing which poisoned all faith in love being true, finding it impossible to believe that your feelings could be reciprocated. The blight of the undeserving and unworthy.

So now she bore each doting touch with the dignity and good grace with which she handled most things. Knowing and appreciating that with every caress he sought reaffirmation. That Jaime’s gestures were always the true reflection of his inner feelings. The coarse words which often carelessly tumbled from his mouth paling and losing their impact with her newfound understanding of his subtleties.

Jaime gripped the nape of her neck, his thumb rubbing circles on a pressure point as he breathed.

“At least this time we are both on the same page. Besides our parting will only be temporary - we have always found a way back to each other.”

Belief, hope and trust.

A trinity of elusive feelings – both for them individually and as a pair.

But all their soul-searching could not be in vain. Every milestone of personal growth mutually achieved, contributed towards meeting in the middle. She had always regarded Jaime Lannister as her opposite but now she acknowledged that the chasm might never have been as wide as they perceived.

With this Brienne could dare to let herself fall back upon these three paragons, shining blessings which had always belonged solely to the optimists. She was valiant and a pioneer. In this she could lead the way, both for herself and her husband.

*I am his match. Not Cersei. And all the might of the Seven Hells will not tear us apart.*

She grasped his upper arm, placing her other hand on his shoulder, squeezing, showing her strength. Her eyes blue steel as they glinted with conviction, avowing aloud.

“And we will again.”
“That is suicide.”

Brienne suppressed a groan whilst Jaime smiled in amusement. The small skiff jounced endlessly with the current and the Lady Knight used the oar to steer, ensuring they were kept well balanced. Not only was the water freezing but she was still in her plate. Her husband had assured her that in a full suit of armour even the strongest swimmer became a sinker of leaden weight.

“I’m sorry to disagree with you both so openly but it has to be said.” Podrick wore what was quite possibly the sternest expression she had ever seen on his face. They had just finished giving him a brief rundown on the developments of the afternoon.

“It is no longer up for discussion Pod.” Her tone was clipped and final, her mood bordering on cranky. Both legs were awkwardly cramped into the limited space and it was beginning to be painful, contorting her muscles and making them seize. She did not want to continue thinking about the topic. She couldn’t allow the bleaker eventualities of their plan to find purchase in her soul.

“You’ve been outvoted lad.” Jaime had more patience than she did. “I know you are just caring but our decision is final. We go our separate ways at Ramsgate.”

Her Squire slapped the second oar irritably against the surface of the water, a scowl darkening his usually friendly features as he stared out from under his eyebrows at the ripples. Then his head flew up abruptly, swiftly turning towards her husband, his tone more man than boy. “And when you die Ser Jaime?” She was stunned when Pod motioned in her direction. “If M’Lady is with child? What then?”

The lion of Lannister sighed. “Then I am glad that she has you to look out for her.”

Brienne grit her teeth, greatly disliking this masculine conversation in which she was invisible. “I do not need protecting!”

“My love please…. Let me speak with him.” Jaime’s green orbs were trained on her Squire. “He is just worried about you and quite angry with me. Which is admirable. I am pleased you are so protective Pod; it puts my mind at ease.”

“That was just my intention Ser. To put your concerns to rest so you can run off to save your sister with a clear conscience.”

“Podrick!” Brienne snapped. “This was my idea!”

“M’Lady loves you M’Lord!” Her Squire’s eyes were wide and frantic, imploring to Jaime with all his might. “Death is final! How can those pieces be put back together when you’re gone? Especially if she has a babe in her belly!”

“My wife is stronger than you give her credit for.”

“Don’t you think I know that?! I’m her Squire. But you underestimate her love for you Ser.
Neither of you seem to realise how much you need each other. I do. I can see it.” He shook his head violently. “I swear the two of you won’t accept it until it’s too late.”

The Lady Knight exchanged exasperated glances with her husband. They could cut the tension in the small vessel with a knife.

“Podrick…” Jaime began. “It is family loyalty. Plain and simple. I know you understand that sentiment, it is the reason you followed us here and it is also the reason why we are pursuing this course of action. Ultimately it is for our future. I assure you; Brienne and I are both looking ahead. The dire urgency of our situation just gives us more incentive, further drive and determination to succeed. But I need to know she is safe. I cannot help it if I feel better knowing you have her back. Be angry with me if you like but… Promise me you will look after her. She may not want anybody at her side, but I need you to be. I am entrusting you with everything that is dear to me Pod. My wife, my world - my heart.”

Her Squire sighed and softened. “Of course, I will. She’s like a Mother to me.”

Brienne’s mouth dropped open slightly at the revelation, turning to look at Jaime in bewilderment. It is unexpected and yet …also endearing.

“Well you certainly look nothing alike but you’re a brave lad and you had to get it from somewhere,” The lion chuckled. “Are we in agreement then?”

“Yes, Ser Jaime.” They exchanged a cumbrous left-hand shake and Brienne found herself wondering what odd male bonding she had just witnessed.

Not wanting to be left out entirely, she huffed. “Don’t drop the oar… we need both to keep us steady.”

Pivoting her eyes to the sky, Brienne imagined that even the Gods above were tittering, though whether it was at her chagrin or at the inane macho blustering, she would never know. Tossing her head in defiance, she sardonically muttered her last phrase on the subject, drawing the conversation to a close. “Look after me indeed.”

Chapter End Notes

This was the longest chapter so far! :)

Today vs Tomorrow

Chapter Summary

“Stay with me, a little longer...”
Lyrics, War of Hearts by Ruelle
Verse 2, Lines 1 & 2

“So, this is what ‘counting one’s coppers’ feels like?” Jaime’s tone was pervaded by the highest
snobbery. “I can’t say I care for it.”

His wife kicked him roughly in the shin beneath the wood, and it was most surely going to leave a bruise. The three travellers crouched over a corner table at a seedy winesink – the type of place which was only good for refilling his flask with whatever piss they were trying to pass off as alcohol. They had not long arrived at Ramsgate and phase two of their journey had commenced. Which was essentially comprised of a period of planning for phase three.

“Keep your voice down.” Brienne growled. “We do not want to be robbed.”

“Do you truly think any of these drunkards could successfully rob us?” Jaime snorted with derision. “I’d like to see them try.”

“You are not accustomed to blending with the smallfolk are you?” His Lady Knight frowned at him.

“Ser Brienne, should you really be the person to lecture me on fitting in?” The lion’s witty riposte was lightning quick as he goaded his wife. “You walk into a room and draw attention to yourself by your height alone.”

“That I can’t help – your mouth I can.”

“And that I would very much like to see you try….”

“At this rate, never mind the Southern War taking your life. Whatever poor sailors I inflict you upon are likely to toss you overboard before you ever reach your destination.”

“Will you avenge me My Lady?” He mock-pouted and she looked away in disgust.

“No – I will come to their defence when they stand trial.”

Podrick cleared his throat. “Is this a real argument?” The lad seemed confused and Jaime almost barked with laughter. No boy - this is us flirting. He took a mental note to continue provoking his wife in such a manner. By the time we lay down tonight…. He felt a stirring in his groin at the mere thought.

“Unfortunately Pod, this is just Jaime being himself and we all must grin and bear it.” She studied the untouched contents of her cup. “Until tomorrow at least.”

“I don’t see much grinning.” Jaime nudged her playfully, keen to chase away the grim reality of his imminent departure. Blue eyes tinged with sadness lifted to meet his own, telling their own story, making words unnecessary. ‘I know what you’re doing.’

Instead she said. “Do you want this?” And pushed her cup over towards him.

Laying both palms flat on the timber surface, Brienne returned to business mode. “Alright, what have we established?”
“This bag is Lord Jaime’s passage South.” Podrick lifted one of the small pouches on the table before gesturing to the other bundles. “This is the funds we will need to sustain ourselves and this is what’s left over.”

“Which I will send with Jaime in case he needs bribes.”

“No.” The lion shook his head. “This war goes beyond monetary incentive and you have not given yourselves enough to live comfortably.”

“We can make do.”

“Wife…. I will not have you going without and sleeping outdoors.” All joking had left his tone. She raised a sceptical eyebrow at him. “Remind me - how did we get here?”

“Different circumstances, that was necessity. I do not require bribes. If it came to that I have all I need right here on me.” He tapped the golden hand concealed beneath his glove and sighed. “Those spare funds are for two things….” Jaime poured out the contents of the third pouch and began counting coins. “A roof over our heads for tonight, a hot meal for our bellies and –” He looked pointedly at his woman hoping she would follow his train of thought. “- a room with a half decent straw mattress. We need a solid night’s rest before we embark.”

By the way Brienne avoided his gaze and Pod suddenly became fascinated with his winecup, Jaime wondered why he bothered with the pretence at all.

*Because you love her and you know being blatant about these things makes her uncomfortable.*

“And the last of the coin?”

“You take.” Jaime pushed the low tower over to her. “Use it for whatever you may need. I will feel at ease knowing my better-half is provided for.” It was not the first time he had furnished her with funds. He had supplied her with ample finances when he sent her off in search of the Stark girls, already compelled by the desire to keep her safe and provisioned.

“I don’t feel right. They are your coins Jaime – the money you brought North with you….”

“They are ours My Lady.” He squeezed her hand. “Think about all possibilities – you need them more than I do.”

Finally she nodded, motioning for Podrick to add the sum to their bag. Solemnly pushing herself up from the table, always dutiful and resigned to the tasks which lay ahead.

“We begin.”
It surprised Jaime how busy the local inn was come suppertime. Though if he was being fair - it was the only place for travellers to find a warm bed in the small town. During their afternoon of exploration, they had found that although Ramsgate was not a major city, it was a hive of activity. A place where sailors could make port on their respective trips (the most common being voyages to and from Braavos), with less exposure and expense than docking at White Harbour.

The trio had split up in order to complete their respective tasks – Jaime’s was to sell the skiff and arrange their accommodation for the night, Brienne and Podrick’s to secure him passage to King’s Landing. Or rather – finding a boat leaving tomorrow with a crew and Captain bold enough to take him close to Blackwater Bay, a perilous venture with Euron’s fleet patrolling the coast.

*The insane Greyjoy will definitely NOT be glad of my return.*

Brienne had grown up around sailors and ports, therefore believed it would be better if she negotiated the terms. From sight she could assess the vessels for speed and seaworthiness, the crew for their daring and honour.

She’d spoken truthfully, for it was not long before she returned and reported a successful mission. He would be leaving at dawn the very next day. Jaime observed how even as she smugly reported the triumph, her shoulders sagged, the corners of her mouth drooping noticeably downwards. Her usual dour expression darkened by a more morose shade.

*She knows it means this is actually happening.*

Now hours later, the sun long gone, and their duties completed, they sat in the teeming dining area. He watched as Brienne sipped imported cider - *who drinks that?* – tearing apart the last of her hard bread with strong fingers. They crammed themselves upon the ends of the long, narrow benches which ran parallel to the table that easily seated two dozen. Positioned opposite each other, their knees bumped beneath the timber as her lengthy legs struggled to fold themselves into the limited space. Jaime savoured each brush of her doeskin breeches against his own and grinned at her in a familiar way. Podrick sat beside her, regaling Jaime with how she haggled with the Captains and Brienne swivelled her eyes to the ceiling in mock of his elaborate praise for his mentor.

*She never could take a compliment. Though I would adore to have her listen and believe….*

His Lady Knight shook her head, telling Pod to shush. Turning her astonishing gaze back on Jaime as she bit her lip and smirked. It was incredible how in a crowded room, she could make all the
voices fade away to a low drone. Somehow the constant hum in the background seemed to make him home in on the little details more, noting the one or two faded freckles spattered on her face or the scars which peeked from beneath the collar of her jerkin. The way she moved her hands reminding him of how they felt gliding through his hair or her blunt nails being scratched down his back.

Regardless of the warmth emanating from the fireplaces, Jaime was certain all the heat in the room was generated by her, shining like the sun which his world revolved around.

He took a large gulp of wine to try and cool his thoughts. They had been building this lovestruck momentum all day, the phrase ‘our last night together’ flitting ominously through his mind, his subconscious trying valiantly to ingrain the sombre message. Regardless of its mighty efforts, he would not allow melancholia to take hold. Not yet. Not when she was here in his sights and he need only reach across the wooden tabletop to feel the sure and gentle comfort of her skin.

Part of him felt they were betraying their remaining hours by sitting here and eating, when he could be upstairs worshippin every inch of her body – mapping and marking it with his teeth and tongue so the physical mementos would remain with her long after his ship sailed over the horizon.

Maybe she already has something of mine within her...

There was no way of knowing and that tugged at his heartstrings. Jaime knew he courted death in King’s Landing and it made his throat constrict as he swallowed past the forming lump.

What if she is pregnant and I never see my child born?

But he had to remind himself of another babe – the main reason why he was doing this. The seed he planted within Cersei’s womb.

If it’s even mine.

There was only one possibility that it was. The night of alleged conception an error he’d rather not recall. He despised his weakness. He had thought himself strong. He had told Cersei no – an unprecedented event. But she was insistent and knew how to manipulate him. He had not been powerful enough to resist and now it cost them all.

“Are you alright?” A tiny crease formed between Brienne’s blonde brows, sensing his thoughts wandering to a shady realm. Her fingertips tentatively creeping over towards where his left hand clutched his wine cup, offering the softest of caresses as she danced them across his flesh, always shy of being seen.

“With you – always.” Jaime replied, speaking the God’s truth. He leant closer, a wolfish smile brightening his face. “You know you can touch me My Lady, it would not cause an uproar. Nobody knows who we are and besides – within marriage it is proper.”

When he addressed the Innkeep upon arrival, he had seen the way Brienne paused at his words.
“Greetings again - we spoke earlier, and I arranged two rooms, one for my wife and myself, the other for my nephew. We agreed you would provide meals as well….”

It was the first time he had mentioned their matrimony in public and although her cheeks had flushed, she also beamed.

“We should not make a spectacle.” Her voice was low, but her eyes ignited. They were her sole tell when the rest of her was kept in check, guiding flames more reliable than a lighthouse in the dim. “We cannot know who is watching… it would be unwise to draw attention to ourselves.”

“I disagree.” Jaime drained what was left of his wine. “We should live a little, whilst we still can.”

He slammed the cup down, stretching to lean across the expanse of wood which separated them, bringing his face close to hers. “Kiss me.”

“Jaime no!”

“Are you afraid?”

Pod had begun to snigger, both from amusement and the fact that he already had a few ales under his belt.

“I’m not afraid of anything Ser – it is just unseemly and….” His grin grew broader as he watched her grasp for excuses. “…. You do not wish to be seen kissing me anyway. Odds are at least half the occupants of this room think me a man.”

“Then I shall inform them otherwise, for I have explored every curve of your physique and can confirm that you are indeed a woman.”

“Husband! Have some decorum.” Brienne almost choked on the words, turning a brilliant shade of scarlet. Looking hastily left and right to see if he was overheard.

“Now see? This is all your fault. If you’d have kissed me like I suggested, then my mouth would be otherwise occupied right now and this-” He waved a finger back and forth between them. “- wouldn’t be happening.”

“I. Will. Not.” She articulated each word with vehemence, but he detected a modicum of joy sizzling beneath her composure.

“You never have. Not in public anyway. What if our wedding had been in the Southron tradition? Would you have denied me the right of sealing our union with a kiss?”

“I… I hadn’t thought that far ahead. It matters not anyway, we were married in the Northern style, it is done.”

“Are you ashamed of our love My Lady?” His tilted his head, conveying sincerity. In the background he was faintly aware of lively chatter and people shifting furniture. The cover of sound giving them the chance to talk. An opportunity to glean an answer from his reticent mate.

“Not at all.”
“Then why?” He whispered, keeping his voice low so that only they could hear. “I have always had to hide my affections in shadows. With you I want to proclaim it to the world - but you won’t let me.”

“Because it’s private Jaime. Between you and I. Why open us up to mockery and judgment? What we have is precious to me.” Her eyes welled and she batted it away by blinking rapidly. “I have had enough scorn and gaping to last me a lifetime. I don’t want what we share to be marred by the opinions of others. In the bedchamber I am yours. Yours and yours alone. Just the two of us. Is that not enough?”

“You know I’m proud to be with you, don’t you? That I don’t give a toss what people think. Because you’re unique and extraordinary and I love you.”

The delight which spirited across her expression was unconcealable, too late to disguise or cover with her customary stoniness. She shyly ripped her gaze away, tracing the patterns in the unpolished woodgrain with the nail of her index finger.

The melodic wail of musicians strings' cried out from behind, tuning their instruments in preparation for a performance. Dozens of pairs of feet shuffled against the floorboards, keen participants grappling to find a partner, assembling themselves in the newly cleared space.

But nothing could distract Jaime’s focus from her, his woman. _My wife._

It was the way the light caught in her hair, illuminating spun white-gold. How the supple leather of her jerkin fell upon her form, obscuring her female shape and tricking the unobservant into overlooking the treasures which Jaime knew lay beneath. He continued to fix each element in his memory, even when Podrick was stolen away by a giggling serving girl. He was transfixed by her long arms and longer digits, highbrow, elegant neck and... _I can’t see her eyes._

“Brienne-” The call of her name made her raise her sapphires back to his face. “-Dance with me.” He extended out his flesh and blood hand.

The Lady Knight glanced at it in terror, countenance contorting as if pained. “Why must you ask these things of me?”

“It’s just a dance. I know you can... I’ve heard stories. Ones that make me jealous.”

She huffed yet appeared slightly pleased at the prospect of him being envious. “Well that’s ridiculous given the _things_ we’ve done.”

“Yet it remains.” Jaime shrugged. “I offer you an ultimatum wife. Kiss or dance. The choice is yours.”

Her line of vision travelled warily behind him, where the gathering of boisterous couples were already engaged in a lively jig, her top row of teeth worrying at her bottom lip.

“Come now wife - make your choice before I claim both.”
Brienne drummed her fingers on the tabletop, her awkwardness warring with . . . What is it?

She actually wants to. Jaime realised victoriously. Her nervousness stemmed from the company rather than the act itself. My Brienne would like to dance with me.

His heart leapt at the knowledge, finding another way to coax her. “Think about it – if you refuse me now, will you come to regret it? One night in the distant, unforeseeable future… do you think there is any chance your soul may ache with longing? Wishing you could turn back time and dance with your husband when he’s just told you how much you mean to him…”

With a sigh she reached over, grabbing and downing the remaining contents of Pod’s ale. Jaime chuckled gleefully as she gagged, screwing up her nose in disgust, before sliding her hand into his. Demurely she let him guide her up from the table and over to the spinning couples.

“I don’t know whatever dance this is.” She groaned, resignation tinged her exhale. “We are going to be graceless.”

“Save your concerns over grace for swordplay, this is about fun.” He laced his fingers through her own, yanking her flush against his body, the forward momentum ramming her into him so suddenly their noses almost collided. “And given your height and strength, leading you is going to be no mean feat.”

He strained his arm up as high as he could manage, intending to twirl her but finding she still had to duck to fit beneath. That was when Brienne’s features illuminated, an irrepressible smile bursting across her face with the dazzling beauty of dawn’s first light. His Lady Knight forgot herself, letting her serious demeanour fall away like autumn leaves, merriment seizing control of her large frame and prompting an immeasurable thrill to course through his own veins.

When she smiles it is so seldom, it is more dazzling than the sunrise…

“You could just let me lead.” She teased, proposing a solution to the difficulties brought about by her height.

“Ahh, because that would do wonders for those who were questioning your gender My Lady.”

“I thought you didn’t care?”

“I don’t.” He paused for a moment, allowing her to assume the stance typically reserved for the man, his cheeks beginning to ache from grinning when she giggled involuntarily. Rare and precious.

“I have a confession good Ser.” Jaime sidled up to his wife, exaggeratedly batting his eyes. “I’m not a maiden.”

“Oh, for fuck’s sake.” Brienne pinched the bridge of her nose, her shoulders shaking with barely contained mirth, the fact that they were supposed to be dancing slipping her mind as she stopped abruptly. Another couple bumped into her from behind and she mumbled her apologies. Fitting herself back into Jaime’s outstretched arms. “Perhaps you best lead after all.”
Even though the music called for gaiety, Jaime pulled her close, his whiskers tickling against her smooth cheek. Basking in the act of holding his wife in sight of all and sundry.

Be envious, be questioning, be scandalised – I don't care. I am in love with this woman.

He chanced nipping at her jaw, continuing to murmur vexing comments with the full intention of igniting her blood. “Am I a better dancer than Renly? Hmmm….” He blew gently against her earlobe, revelling in the way it made her squirm against him.

“Different.”

“That’s not an answer.” He pulled back to study her. “Tell me – who took the role of the woman there?”

Brienne gave his bicep a mild slap, refusing to take the bait. Jaime could sense the fear descending over her, its grey shroud snuffing her glow, rendering his attempts at distraction ineffective.

Drawing his wife nearer with his stumped arm, he felt her splayed hand glide up the back of his muscular shoulder, fingertips digging into the fabric, holding him fast against her.

Yes, gestures are her declarations.

Angling in towards her cheek, he nuzzled against her warm skin as she squeezed.

“Never forget this moment–“ Jaime’s voice was hushed and raw, emotion creeping in. “-not at long as you live. You are being held by your husband who positively adores you. Come what may - I never want you to doubt that fact. As the tides change, as the winter recedes, as the whispers start and the gossips question. I love you. My heart is yours even when my body is elsewhere.”

Her throat constricted as she gulped, swallowing her dread and nodding, pressing chaste lips to his temple. Blonde eyelashes brushed against his brow, their kiss feather light and dotted with dampness, repressing the sheen of tears which transformed blue sparkling gems to watery lakes. “I love you too.” Brienne’s voice rasped, the intensity taking its toll.

I must whisk her away from here. From prying eyes and frivolous souls – who could never in an eternity grasp what transpires between us.

Jaime suddenly understood the sanctity of being alone with her. The solitude which his wife cherished and so vehemently defended. Where they could breathe, love and just be themselves with one another. All at once every onlooker in the room felt like an intruder upon the secret beauty of their bond.

Leading Brienne by the hand, he tugged her away from the dancefloor and they moved in unison towards the stairs.
The air in the small chamber was thick – heady with the scent of perspiration and arousal.

A lock of sweat soaked hair fell forward as he moved within her, hanging loosely, almost in his eyes. His wife instinctively combed it back with her strong fingers, raking them through his tousled golden mane. Their bodies in perfect sync, attune to each shift and change.

“Jaime…” Brienne arched her back, meeting every roll of his hips, blunted nails dragging down the base of his neck in response to her rapturous upsurge. Clawing at his flesh, as if she could find a way inside and they could be one being.

His muscles gloriously burned, striving to meet every need of his warrior woman, gripped between her impossibly vice-like thighs and tight insides. The sweet precipice of pain and enjoyment producing a groan from the back of his throat.

“My woman.” He growled possessively, sucking at her neck, his hand clinging to her hip, struggling to hold on. “All mine. Only mine.”

Uttering his assertions aloud spurred him to greater heights, increasing his rhythm and sending his woman spiralling into oblivion. His ears thrilled at every grunt and sigh, not dissimilar to when they sparred, but even more primal, more wanton. Tonight she screamed her pleasure, letting it out, unable to hold the declarations back.

“Yes, Jaime. Yes…”

He knew just where to touch her in this heated frenzy. He knew how to elicit further cries and pleas for more. The haze of sex lending a gravelled quality to her already deep voice, calling to previously untapped wells of need. Igniting latent urges to please and cause more incredible moans from his woman.

“There….fuck….yessss….. there…..”

Then forming words became too much and her encouragements splintered into mewling, shrieking, otherworldly sounds which he knew she only produced for him.

_My woman. My Brienne._ Thoughts became interspersed with actions. His mind laying claim with each stroke of his fingers and manhood. _Solely. Only. Mine._

Once more his wife called his name, reaching the peak of her climax, hitting unearthly notes. Her usually reserved conduct pushed over the edge into insensibility. It evoked the same reaction from him as he shuddered, swearing every eternal devotion to her when he found his release. Burying his face in her hair, inhaling her scent whilst his body recovered.
“Mmmmmm….” Her adroit fingers massaged the back of his head, creating the most sensual feeling. “My lion seems sated.”

“Never.” Jaime hummed against her neck, planting a kiss there. “I cannot possibly get enough of this.”

“Yet you seem sleepy.” He could hear the smile in her tone, a quiet self-assurance. It made him grin.

*Who would have thought? That awkward, shy maid would be proud of herself for a performance in bed.*

“Lions can have cat naps. Then we are ready to go again.” Proving his point, he rolled them both, reversing positions so she lay atop of him. Brienne folded her long arms on his chest, levelling him with her steady blue gaze.

*Now I will never think clearly, her eyes are completely diverting….*

“You should get some rest.” Always pragmatic, she sketched patterns absentmindedly through his chest hair as she lectured. “You have a long journey ahead of you tomorrow.”

“Fuck tomorrow. I don’t care for it. All I care about is now…and this.” He leant forward to kiss her, teasing her lips with his tongue. In the firelight they were the most succulent shade of deep pink, plump and too inviting to resist. “It’s been too long since we could be like this.”

“Like what?” Even after over a month of lovemaking, she could still be so guileless, so innocent. It was achingly endearing.

“Uninhibited. Just the two of us, a bed, completely naked…..” He ignored her eye roll. “…. Free to express our pleasure.”

“Jaimeee - stop.” He adored the way she dragged out his name, purposefully softening her request. The corners of her mouth twitching upwards, the rose of her cheeks beginning to match her lips.

“Why? You were quite a vocal lover tonight.”

“Shush.” She punched him half-heartedly. “I know how I sound when I get physical. I have heard myself in the practice yard – you don’t have to draw attention to it.”

“I’m not complaining – I like to hear you. It is far preferable to ‘Jaime we have to be quiet, my Squire’s a sensitive soul.’”

“That’s not quite how it went.”

“Really? That’s how I remember it.”

“You’re impossible.”

“So are you.”
Their needling drifted into a comfortable silence as she lay her head upon his shoulder. The gesture so intimate he nearly dare not breathe for fear of startling her away. Brienne’s displays of affection were like stumbling across a doe, exposed in a clearing. Even the slightest flinch could draw her attention to the vulnerability of the situation and send her scampering back inside herself.

Hence Jaime found himself stunned when she was the one to break the hush.

“I don’t think we’ve ever been like this.” Her hand timidly drifted across the planes of his chest and he summoned all his knightly training to focus, maintain a level head and heed her words.

“Explain my love.”

“How you were describing… I don’t think we have ever honestly been like that. We were always careful not to be overheard in Winterfell. Then we were personally cautious, dealing with our insecurities, trying to gauge the other’s thoughts, and second guessing how we may end up hurt. This is the first time we have truly belonged, without reservation.” She inhaled deeply, puzzling it all out. Working through the monumental undertaking that was putting her thoughts into words. Fighting against the taciturn tendencies that dictated her everyday life. “Jaime do you think this is what our marriage would be like?”

“Will be like.” He corrected, beating back the gloom. “And I’m not sure. But I definitely hope so. I could live with this. Could you?”

“Perhaps. My pillow is quite argumentative.”

He nudged her playfully, enjoying her sportive side. Relishing the game of verbal skirmish which he took full credit for teaching her. Their unique brand of communication.

“I suppose we will find out when these wretched wars are over.” Jaime mused, the idea sending a tingle coursing through him. “We can live as husband and wife.”

“That will be strange.” Her nose wrinkled as she spoke.

“Hey! What is that for?” Jaime flicked the creased skin with the tip of his finger. “Is the thought of domestic life with me so horrid?”

“It’s not entirely that….” She smirked at his expense and he tucked a stray curl of hair behind her ear. “It is just that I have avoided marriage my whole life. It seems odd to surrender to it now.”

“Avoided? You mean by travelling and seeking the life of a Knight?”

“Not exactly…. ”

Brienne rolled from his chest onto the furs, staring up at the ceiling as she contemplated divulging to him her secrets. It was a miracle to have her talking, though at the same time, Jaime felt the rise of irrational panic. He beat it back bravely. *She is not Cersei, she is honest with me, I have nothing to fear from these revelations.*
“….. I have been betrothed before.”

“Really?” His eyes widened to saucers which earned him another fist to the chest.

“Try not to be so astounded. I am a highborn Lady and an heir. Even for one as frightful as I, matrimony comes with the territory. We can’t all join the Kingsguard to sidestep our duty.”

“Yet you seem to have managed it nonetheless.” He propped himself up on an elbow so they could have this chat. “And don’t speak about my wife like that.” He had longed for conversations like this for an age – but the subject did somewhat catch him off guard. The sheer idea of his Brienne belonging to another man caused a squirming in his gut.

“I was fortunate they fell through…. well, with the exception of the last. I had a hand in that.”

“THEY?!” Jaime nearly choked. “How many times have you been matched?”

“Three.”

“Including me?”

“No…. then four. Though we weren’t really betrothed for very long – so I’m not certain if it counts.”

The calm way she was relaying this was only serving to make his curiosity nearly burst at the seams.

“Brienne! Why have you never told me this?”

“It never came up. You tormented me relentlessly in the beginning Jaime, I was not about to tell you I had three broken engagements to my credit. It would only give you fodder. Besides…. I did hint.”

“When?”

“I told you ‘one or two tried.’”

Fragments of past exchanges flitted through his mind as he desperately tried to sift through the recesses of his memory, pinpointing that precise phrase.

“Seven Hells wife. You would summarise something as groundbreaking as this in such a short statement? I thought you were just fobbing me off.”

“I was.” Brienne stared at him placidly, her blue orbs sparkling in the firelight. The serenity within them both exasperating and immersive. She ran the back of her index finger leisurely down his stubbled jaw. “You can ask me now – I will answer.”

_What can I do but love her?_

He shook his head, letting out a bark of laughter, pecking her finger when it neared his mouth.

“Alright Lady Lannister, tell your husband – how did you come to evade marriage three times?”
“My first intended fell ill and died. My second rejected me cruelly upon seeing my face. The third I – taught a lesson.”

“And what was that?”

“He wanted to bring me to heel. Teach me a woman’s place. He was far older than I and not willing in anyway to accept my life choices. So, I declared I would only submit to a man who could best me.”

“Now this I can picture – I myself have duelled with you before – can I venture to guess he came out the worse for wear?”

“Shattered collarbone, broken betrothal.”

The lion collapsed onto his back as he chuckled. His brain infiltrated with imagining a younger version of his warrior woman obliterating the old cunt. Beating him into submission and leaving him battered in the dust.

As if reading his mind, she peered over the rise of his chest. “I told you Jaime – all my life I’ve been knocking men into the dirt.”

His emerald eyes gleamed with a deep-seated pride. “And that’s why I love you.” Bringing his hand to her cheek, he connected the odd faint freckles he had spied earlier, counting his blessings that she had chased away any rivals to her hand. “Will you tell me their names? Odds are I know the fools and would welcome the chance to ‘pay a debt.’ For offences caused against my Lady wife.”

“Jaime if you were to hunt down every man or woman that has ever treated me with scorn, you would leave a body count higher than the Night’s King.”

The bitter truth of her statement crushed down upon his chest like the Smith’s hammer.

Quietness filled the air, save for the crackling of the hearth. The peacefulness extending until Jaime felt compelled to fill the silence by making a correction of his own. Promoting further understanding between himself and his new wife.

“You were mistaken about one thing... I didn’t join the Kingsguard to sidestep my duty – although the potential match my Father had lined up for me most certainly wasn’t to my taste – I donned the White Cloak out of blind stupidity. The actions of an arrogant adolescent befuddled by sex and thinking himself in love. All the wrong reasons really.”

Now it was Brienne who turned onto her side, giving him her full attention. She pursed her lips, trying to comprehend what she was hearing. “Surely more went into the decision than that. The Kingsguard is the highest honour for a Knight....”

“No.” His golden head turned on the pillow until he could see her honest face. “It was decided in one night. A single evening where Cersei fucked me until I agreed. Until she convinced me I
couldn’t live without her.” He sighed. “It was her idea you know – the whole thing. The
Kingsguard was never my ambition. I was the Lannister heir. I knew I was disappointing my
Father. But I could let down everyone around me - bar Cersei - and that became my life’s biggest
downfall. It still is... tomorrow I’m leaving you to go and attempt to rescue her. Bailing her out of
whatever pit her power-hungry soul has dug for itself. Madness really. And yet I go – because I
was born a twin, amongst our plethora of additional reasons.”

Brienne was shocked, her mouth fell open before she hastily clamped it shut again.

“Say what you wish my love. Do not suppress. You cannot find any criticism which I haven’t
already raked myself with.”

“You forswore so much …. your title, your birthright. Back when I judged you, I wondered why
you would don a white cloak only to soil it. Then once I knew about Aerys, I assumed you truly
wished to embody the knightly ideals only to be foiled by a cruel twist of fate. Now I discover – it
was all contrived by Cersei. A decision based upon a night of, I’m sorry Jaime, but manipulative
intercourse. How could you not see that she was exploiting your bond?”

“I was weak. I was ignorant. I was blind. Even not so long ago. I can’t defend myself Brienne, I
was the worst version of myself for her – and now once again a child is being dragged into the
mire. We deserve condemnation to the Seven Hells.”

“Don’t be so harsh on yourself.”

“You just were….”

“I can be. I adore and see the good in you. Far more than you do in yourself. Whatever I say, you
can rest assured in the knowledge that I care for you just the same. But your self-loathing is
something greater and I will not let it find purchase. The derisive way you berate yourself is
second only to my own and that is an affliction I do not want spreading its vile corruption within
the man I love.” Alighting a kiss upon his forehead she added. “Especially not when I am about to
send you back to her clutches.”

“You have nothing to fear. It is easy to be obtuse when you have no comparison. Now I do – there
can be no reverting.”

“In my heart I believe it but in facts and figures, it seems quite audacious.” Brienne worried at the
edge of the blanket with her nails as she spoke. “A bond is a bond. You are tied to her and tied to
me. Sex is just what it is – sex. You have been her lover for years, now you are mine. It would be
easy for you to relapse, there is comfort in the familiar. Especially amidst turmoil.”

“No.” Jaime was firm. “It is not like that at all. You cannot marry the two of you together so
plainly. I am the only one who can attest to this Brienne – as I am the constant. I have been in
both scenarios. My bond to Cersei is possession and control. My bond to you is hope and guiding
light.”

He inched closer until their noses were almost touching. “Cersei and I fucked.” Brienne’s nostrils
flared at his crudeness but he ploughed on. “Yes, I’m being coarse, because I need to be, to make
you understand. We fucked. It was bodily. It was lustful. It was a means to her ends. It wasn’t
like what we have. I mistook it as more because I never knew the difference. But now I’m with you….”

He clasped the side of her head and covered her mouth with his, as if he could pour into her all the certainty that existed within him. “…..You and I make love. We worship each other. We connect. It’s inexplicable and electrifying, in many regards it terrifies me with its intensity and yet all I want to do is bathe in it. Submerse myself into this depth of feeling which I know can never be equalled.”

He was radiant, the veracity of his synopsis bubbling up and spilling over. Jaime believed in them, the way he had never believed in anything before.

“And I have always wanted to be married and settled. To treasure the love I have been gifted and raise a family. There is nothing more I could ask for.” He became excited as he spoke. Not for the dangers and peril that lay ahead, but by the possibility which awaited them beyond it. A life on the other side of the shadows. A beacon splitting through the darkest hours of the night. “So, I will square away my past. Put to right these wrongs and atone for my sins, so we can forge anew and be like this Brienne…. every night. Until we grow old and grey.”

She grinned shyly at him, looping her arms around his neck. “Show me how it will be once more.”

Sinking back into the furs, their kiss sparked the flames of hope and their subsequent lovemaking fanned the blaze into an inferno which would burn throughout the bleak hours which lay ahead.
Idle vs Achieving

Chapter Summary

Cover Art by: Ro_Nordmann

"I know that I'd die without you..."
Lyrics, War of Hearts by Ruelle
Chorus, Line 4

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes
The embers smouldered in the hearth, having been allowed to burn down to a mere simmer. Brienne frowned as she set another log upon the amber glow, stoking them back into life – neither husband nor wife had stirred to tend the blaze during the night.

Their eventual slumber has been deep, the dreamless kind where you lose track of your surroundings and time. Hours slipping by without waking to take watch or make water, both lost to the rare luxury of a warm bed, appreciating the circle of each other’s arms, before circumstances would force them to sleep apart.

*The room should be kept warm until he departs…*

“It is not even dawn.” Jaime mumbled, yawning and stretching beneath the blankets. His mouth drooped at the corners, an unusually sombre sight for her lion. When he first arrived in the North she had noticed his frown lines, the resignation and misery in the set of his jaw. It had startled her somehow, her golden man tarnished at the edges, his gleam dulled. She had not seen him so despondent since he lost his hand and tried to starve himself away.

Whilst he dwelt at Winterfell, the old cheerful Jaime was visible only in sporadic bursts; sitting beside a fireplace, eyebrows raised over the rim of his cup, cockily watching the wildling’s pathetic attempt to woo her. Or meeting her in the practice yard and poking fun at her solemnity. She had written it off as his usual teasing and thought no more of it. Then when he had laughed heartily over the table at the Banquet Hall, teeth gleaming and eyes bouncing with euphoria and candlelight, she had believed it a by-product of relief and wine. But after, he had knocked upon her chamber door and for a brief moment she entertained the notion that perhaps she was the reason for his twinkle reappearing.

The thought did not last long before she dismissed the idea as foolishness, chasing such egotistical fantasies from her head in her usual self-deprecating way.

However, over the course of the last sennight or so, his melancholy alleviated. Evaporating to the wind. Even with the wars and stress, his mood was jolly and Brienne did not think it too presumptive to conclude that the return of his happiness coincided with their marriage and journey together.

*He spoke truth – all he has ever wanted is love…*

“My ship leaves at sunrise.” Brienne stated matter-of-factly, continuing to buckle her armour into place, the procedure well practised and methodical. At times like this she could only draw
comfort from the familiar and routine. “I intend to be well away by then.”

“How can you leave our bed so readily?” He held out his arm, inviting her to grasp his hand and allow him to pull her back in. “We could enjoy each other for at least another hour.”

The Lady Knight studied the floorboards as she turned towards him, knowing the sight of him reaching for her would prove too much for her heavy heart. “We shall say farewell here, so that I may get a head start.” Brienne knew he was confused, and she forced her brimming azure pools to meet his clouded emeralds. “I cannot watch you leave again.” She swallowed, hearing the threat of her voice breaking. “It would be too much. This time I will go – on my terms. I want no more haunting memories of your receding back.”

At this Jaime moved to throw back the covers, preparing to leap from the bed to envelope her in an embrace. She raised her palm, her tone a command. “No. Stay.”

His expression was forlorn as he stilled, trying to adhere to her requests whilst failing to interpret her motives. Brienne would not leave him wondering. Three brisk strides and she was lowering herself to perch upon the edge of the furs, the weight of her armour making her sink into the straw mattress.

She clutched her leather gloves in one fist, the supple surface bearing the brunt of her tension. Her other hand lifting to his face, trailing long shaking fingers down the stubble lining his jaw. “It seems one way or another I am fated to request that of you.” Her chin began to quiver, and she bit her lip so hard she almost drew blood. “If you rise and hold me Jaime, this will be too difficult. I have lived a painful parting once, it was nearly too much, even for me. Do not ask me to tear myself from your arms.”

He nodded in understanding, leaning into her touch and she tried not to feel the ghost of the courtyard.

*Things are different now....*

Inhaling sharply, she ignored the slight sniffle which betrayed the presence of unshed tears. Jaime was not talking, the surest sign that he too was struggling. Combing his hair back from his forehead, she summoned what parting words she could muster.

“But again, I will beg you to stay Jaime - stay for me. In every way and every capacity I can ask it, for that is all I can do.” Her timbre was edged with emotion and steel, too seemingly contradictory elements but present just the same. Bringing her thumb to the centre of his chin, she gripped it firmly, staring him directly in the eyes. “Stay focussed – your reason is honourable. Don’t be distracted from it. Family is why you are doing this and that remains your mission. Stay strong – no matter what the Gods throw at you. Single handed or not. Aged or not. You are still one of the mightiest men I have ever encountered, and you are capable of so much. You have overcome monumental obstacles Jaime; you are a true Knight and I know you will fight for what you believe in.” Her intake of air shuddered but she managed to keep her voice steady as she relayed the most important instruction yet. “Stay alive – you have a wife who loves you.”
He covered her hand with his own, lifting it to his lips and kissing her knuckles. His words and whiskers skimming across the back of her hand, warm and heavy with feeling. “My Lady – you are my greatest legacy and more than I deserve. If I have done any good in my life it all amounts to you. Protecting you, knighting you, loving you.” His glassy eyes seared into her own. “Brienne, I am so very proud of you. The greatest honour I have ever had bestowed upon me, is getting to call myself your husband.”

Two sets of trembling lips met in the middle, devouring the other’s quaking and replacing it with memory. Trying to convince themselves it was not the last whilst making it unforgettable - just in case.

Brienne battled against the overarching desire to freeze a portion of time, suspending existence and shrinking it down to this room, their bodies, these kisses. Here she could live and prosper, never facing the cruel uncertainly of tomorrow, thriving with her mouth conjoined with Jaime’s forever.

But no amount of longing could halt an insidious tide and as the dark of night receded, chased by the sun edging closer to the horizon, she knew entertaining thoughts of postponing the inevitable was grasping at an impossible fantasy.

With a grunt of strain, she prised herself away. The separation feeling as though she were flaying off a layer of skin. Breaking off a part of herself which she had come to rely upon. But despite the invisible agony, she was not bleeding, and it was time to take her first steps across the room.

She found her feet, planting them flat on the floor and pushing off with all her resolve, cementing her legs like tree trunks and willing them to be stable and reliable, held aloft by her brawn and sheer determination. Brienne pulled on her gloves, the leather now gouged by deep scratch marks, carrying its own set of scars. Each indentation a reminder of how her nails dug into the hide, worrying away the texture, physically manifesting the angst eating at her soul.

Jaime watched her despondently, awe and sorrow flitting interchangeably across his handsome features. The Lady Knight set her mouth in a grim line, favouring him with a small, sad smile and an adamant nod.

Striding to the door, she fingered the knob, a towering image of Knightly valour and womanly anguish, granting herself one final glance over her shoulder.

“I love you Brienne….” He blinked once slowly, capturing her image, branding it into his mind’s eye so he could hold it close to his heart in the weeks to come. She recognised the signs; her subconscious was doing the same. “…. Believe it. Remember it. Because nothing I could ever say, could ring with greater truth. I love you.”

“I know.” The affliction of choking heartbreak strangled her tone. “And I need you to know that you are the only man for me. Now and for the rest of my life….”

The weight of her promise hung thick in the air as she turned the doorknob, stepping through to
once again face the world without a lion by her side.

First light streaked across the water, its ripples breaking the reflection, casting an abstract aura upon the glassy surface. Even from afar Brienne could watch its growth as the beams became brighter, irradiating the inky depths to a dull grey.

She pulled her cloak tightly around her shoulders, a Winter breeze blowing in from the salty expanse of the Shivering Sea, toying with her blonde locks just as Jaime would in private moments.

Though high upon the clifftop she felt removed from his caresses, the oceanic air which had balméd her soul since childhood instead carrying him away upon its currents. For this she both blessed and cursed the little vessel, lifting her thoughts to the heavens above.

_Crone guide him, Warrior fuel him - Mother have mercy upon him. Allow him to atone but then come home. He is the match to my soul._

“Ser? What is our direction?” Podrick startled her from her litany of prayers.

“I had thought to make for White Harbour. We can easily find ourselves passage there and it should keep us clear from the Wars.” Dragging her gaze from the tiny wooden speck bobbing in the distance, Brienne kneed her horse into a brisk walk.

She had made purchase of their two mounts from the Innkeep, using the money Jaime acquired selling the skiff.

_First three horses for a boat – then a boat for two horses. Everything comes full circle it would appear._ Though these Rounseys were far from the quality their original castle-bred beasts had been, they would serve just the same.

Pod soon reined up beside her, taking Jaime’s role of filling the quiet of the morn with chatter as they began their own journey. “Ser Jaime is determined M’Lady. I know he will come through it all – he wants to be with you.”

“I do not doubt him Pod, it is the world around him I dislike.”

“Still – there isn’t a point in anything, if it all unravels so easily….”

“How do you mean?”
“Love. Finding someone. All that we’ve been though. It can’t have been for naught. If I have to believe in something, then you and Ser Jaime seem like a safe wager.”

Brienne permitted herself a small smile. “That is very sweet of you – whilst reeking of naivety. This whole place is a great gaping void, it only exists to take, never to give. It has consumed everyone and everything I’ve ever cared about. To hope for an exception, seems like I’m setting myself up for a devastating blow.” Studying the reins in her hands, she silently commanded the familiar wobble of her chin to subside. Realisation biting viciously in her chest as she acknowledged her new reality – she had just said goodbye to her husband, most likely for the last time.

“I know you would think that M’Lady but often I reckon Westeros is smaller than we give it credit for - and friendlier. Why just last night, after dancing had finished and you and Ser Jaime went upstairs - I was talking to some fellow travellers over a tankard of ale….”

“I wondered where you ended up, I deduced you would find a diversion of some kind.” Glad for the distraction, she fixed her Squire with a stern appraisal, raising one eyebrow slightly and asking. “Was this at the Inn or another less reputable establishment?”

He pointedly avoided looking directly at her, mumbling his response. “It may have been a brothel Ser.”

Brienne huffed, blowing steam into the morning air. “Do I want to hear the rest of this story?”

“It is not unsavoury M’Lady! I would never regale you with that. It’s just that I was speaking with some older men who had arrived in Ramsgate looking for work. They came South all the way from Cerwyn and I thought perhaps it best if I gathered what information I could about the Northern forces.”

She inclined her head in indication for him to continue. *He is right, knowledge of troop movements could be beneficial…*

“They were talking about how they were past fighting age so didn’t go South and then asked me why I wasn’t on the march. I made up a story about having just recovered from injury, so was dismissed from duty. But then they spoke about a travelling companion they had for much of the journey. A Southron sellsword who was keeping a low profile but had some tall tales to tell when in his cups about the Lordships he was owed and the women he’d have.” Brienne yanked her horse to an abrupt halt as Pod chuckled. “If I didn’t know better, I would think they were speaking of Ser Bronn.”

The Lady Knight was not laughing, her brain racing at a mile a minute. The beginning formulations of a plan taking shape. “Where did they say he was headed?”

“Oldcastle. But M’Lady surely it can’t be him – why would he be in the North?”

“Because he was sent on a mission to kill Ser Jaime and Lord Tyrion.”

“What?!” Podrick was aghast, the colour draining from his face. “He *is* here?”
“Yes – he would have murdered them both, only Lord Tyrion promised him Highgarden in return for their lives. Ser Bronn slipped away to wait out the wars and claim his prize when the smoke had cleared.” There was a certain smugness in being privy to intel. Even if it was whispered to her across a pillow after she had soothed her lion’s unsettled nerves with her body. “Jaime told me everything when he returned to our chamber. He was quite perturbed, Ser Bronn fired at him with a crossbow.”

Pod shook his head rapidly, as if he were trying to clear the fog and make all the new information click into place. She knew he had been quite chummy with the sellsword. “I suppose he is another person best avoided then.” He rationalised aloud.

“No. Quite the opposite.” Sitting straighter in her saddle, a new glint had entered her eyes. One of determination and ferocity.

_I am not a woman to sit and wait…._

“If Ser Bronn thinks he can remain upon the sidelines during the greatest wars in decades and then surface to claim grandiose titles and lands, he is wrong. Merely _sparing_ the Lannister brothers is nowhere near enough. Mighty deeds warrant hefty rewards.” Tapping Oathkeeper on her hip, she raised her chin. “We ride for Oldcastle at full speed.”

Her teeth chattered as she stood in the shadows, the freezing night air forming a frosty film upon her armour, transforming the deep blue to a mottled slate. Brienne fidgeted her numb fingers upon Oathkeeper’s pommel, keeping the blood flowing, ensuring her muscles did not seize nor her reflexes grow weary. Her gaze was trained on the rear door of the rustic building - level, unwavering, determined. Poised to move when her target emerged. It was the first time she truly felt like her new sigil – a lioness waiting to pounce the instant her prey was in sight.

Their journey to Oldcastle had been swift, the roads well-trodden and landscape flat. They spelled the horses only when necessary in order to make good time and chanced travelling upon more commonly occupied routes. Their fast pace had given little opportunity for passers-by to place their faces.

Upon arrival in the small Northern town, Brienne hastily instigated the second phase of their quest. Furnishing both herself and Podrick with sufficient coin, they had begun the task of buying information from each tavern owner and Madam in the district.
The quaint size of the city had both its benefits and detriments – the Lady Knight knew they would not have to search far, but by the same token she knew their arrival would soon be noted by the resourceful sellsword. Remaining inconspicuous when you were a freakishly tall woman in plate was not a meagre task.

She and Podrick had split the locations in order to cover double the ground but unfortunately for Brienne that had meant stepping foot in venues which she ordinarily would never even have neared.

It had taken a large breath and much bravado to stride into the brothels, trying not to notice the scantily clad women, writhing in various compromising positions as they entertained their patrons. The burning which scalded at her cheeks somewhat dampening the intimidating effect of her height.

_For Jaime, I am doing this for Jaime....._

Her mind became preoccupied with imagining the boyish delight on his face and the infectious roar of his laughter when she told him she had visited a house of ill-repute. It helped to ease her discomfit, as she met with dead ends and was forced to repeat the process again and again.

_They say third time’s the charm._

Clearing her throat, she had mustered her most commanding tone as she negotiated with the woman in front of her, whom regardless of being a head and shoulders shorter than the Lady Knight made up for it in confidence and gall.

“I have coin – I will pay for any leads you can provide – if they be found truthful and credible.”

The Madam, whose name she had learnt was Tecila, raised her eyebrows but offered no further indication of interest. “Good Lady, my establishment is built upon a foundation of discretion and client satisfaction. Neither of which I would be able to maintain if I were to sell information to every rampaging partner who sought me out, waving a bag of coin.”

“All the more reason why I have a credible hunch you may be familiar with the man I seek.”

“We have a reputation to uphold.”

“I can assure you my interests in this individual have nothing to do with jealousy – it is merely unfinished business.”

“Of what nature?”

“I am giving you the option of selling your knowledge – not the other way around.” Brienne narrowed her eyes, determined to stare the woman down.

Indeed, Tecila broke the contact first, her vision flicking high then low, taking in the immensity of the Lady Knight’s hulking form. Brienne tried not to squirm under the scrutiny, bracing in
anticipation of an incoming insult.

“You know - when first you entered, I mistook you for a man. Are you sure you have not come here to fulfil some private fantasy of that nature? I have girls who can cater to such.”

“I am certain. I have a husband who fulfils me in every way.” Pride surged inside her when stunned astonishment crossed the Madam’s face. It felt good to make such declarations, to subvert preconceptions and remind the doubters that she too was a woman and could be desired. “The only way you will be obtaining my coin is by providing the information which I seek. The winter has been long and harsh – surely you are not in the habit of turning away funds? Although perhaps I am mistaken…. In which case I bid you good day.”

Pivoting on her heel, she had not taken two steps when Tecila’s apologetic and slightly panicked voice called her back.

Now hours later, with Podrick back at her side, the instructions were clear and the plan set in motion. Ser Bronn did indeed frequent this particular establishment, preferring it to the seedier brothels which lined the harbour. The prices by the sea may be more affordable but the sailors made it overcrowded and he preferred to get special privileges and attention from more than one woman at a time. Brienne had instructed Tecila to ply him with watered down ale and ensure when nature came calling he would use the back exit. Needing to piss was an unavoidable side effect of alcohol consumption – one which would draw him out into the open and prevent causing a scene.

However unlike the sellsword, the Lady Knight believed in fair fights and she would not have his senses dulled. She needed him to recall the conversation they would have with vivid clarity.

The wooden door creaked, its hinges rusted from the accumulation of ice, the nearby torches melting the frost whenever it built, ensuring a neverending cycle.

Ser Bronn was instantly recognisable as he trudged out into the snow, hurriedly unlacing his breeches to relieve himself on a nearby tree. Averting her gaze, she adjusted her grip on Oathkeeper once more, waiting for the tell-tale gushing to cease, freakishly calling to mind Jaime in the Riverlands.

Why do men make such a show over pissing?

Pod tapped her arm, indicating it was safe to look again. Squinting in the dim she evaluated his weaponry, spying the scabbard hanging on his hip.

I guessed as much, the sellsword is a seasoned fighter, he would never go anywhere unarmed.

Unsheathing her Valyrian blade, she stepped from between the trees, the distinct scraping of steel awakening Bronn’s finely tuned senses. With lightning speed, he drew his own sword, whirling to face his challengers, an ironic grin twisting his weathered features when he recognised them. “Brienne of fucking Tarth. Well I’d never.” Glancing to the right he acknowledged her Squire. “Podrick.”

“Ser Bronn.” Pod nodded in greeting but remained rooted to the spot. The Lady Knight had
instructed him to keep to the sidelines.

“So tell me –” He shrugged, eternally brazen, holding both arms out to the sides. The edge of his finely-honed blade glinting as it caught the moonlight. “-to what do I owe the honour?”

“Yes, honour is most certainly the subject matter – you tried to kill Ser Jaime.”

“Getting touchy about that fact since you started fucking him hey?” Bronn theatrically checked the empty snow behind her. “Where is he? After all them years of throwing pitiful looks at each other I didn’t think he’d stray far from your cunt once he finally got his end in.” His words were offensive and coarse to her ears but she had heard worse in the army camps.

*He is not going to distract me.*

“Don’t change the subject. You served the Lannister brothers for years and then you accept a mission to kill them – where are your scruples?” Brienne was aware it was a moot point – this was Bronn she was speaking with - but she was leading him down a purposeful road.

He laughed at her, a harsh grating sound which caused her blood to fire in her veins. Its echoes coming too close to resembling mockery. “Scruples? I spit on ‘em. What good are they in the end? Now money – that talks. I’m to be a Lord have you heard? Lord Paramount of the Reach. Has a nice ring to it doesn’t it?”

“And what makes you think you have earnt that honourific?”

“I didn’t put a crossbow bolt through your toff’s blonde head - that’s what.”

“So in essence – nothing. A man without a shred of decency betrays the brothers whom he has fought beside, threatens their lives and thinks that by turning his cloak once more he deserves to be rewarded with the riches of Highgarden?” She scoffed. “That will never come to pass – not when I have something to say about it anyway.”

Brienne gauged his reaction, knowing full well she was baiting him. *The small amount of liquor he ingested will be rampaging through his system, making his temper flare.*

Success was evident in the curl of his lip, his voice an overconfident sneer. “Well you don’t get to have a say about it.”

“Care to gamble a Lordship on that?” She paced in front of him, warming up her muscles for the bout ahead, tapping Oathkeeper against her boot. “For mark my word Ser Bronn, if you do not accept the task which I have come to charge you with – I will be intervening and you can bid your titles goodbye.”

“I ain’t doing no fucking task. Not for those Lannister cunts and most certainly not for you.”

“Then Ser Bronn you shall remain.”
“I don’t know what you think you’re playing at.” Spittle began to spray from his lips as he spoke. “But I ain’t letting any more rich fuckers come between me and my Lordship.” Bronn stabbed the air with his finger, emphasising his thinly veiled threat. “I was promised a fortune, and I intend to get it.”

“Therefore, it is in your best interests to accept my terms.”

His teeth shone menacingly in the half light, his smirk turning sinister. “Not if I kill ya.”

He assumed fighting stance – the cue she had been waiting for - and Brienne mirrored in kind. Ser Bronn only knew two languages – gold and steel. If she wanted his assistance, she would have to prove her merit with both.

They circled around one another, each sizing up their opponent. The sellsword contriving taunts with the intention of shaking her confidence. “Your one-handed bastard couldn’t have beat me on his best day – what makes a big bitch like you think she can?”

*You will have to do better than that to unnerve me, I have been shouldering insults for years.*

The Lady Knight raised her head in defiance. “You’ll find out.”

He ran at her and the clashing of swords rang into the night. It was a brief flurry, testing her strength, before stepping away. So light on his feet, his boots barely left a footprint in the snow.

*He’s fast….*

They stood motionless, their breath forming clouds in the freezing air. Assessing options, weighing stratagem.

*…And both Jaime and Podrick have warned me he fights dirty.*

The thought prompted her to chance a peek at her Squire, a fleeting glance from her peripheral vision. Pod stood slightly crouched, coiled and ready to strike. If the bout did not go in her favour, she was confident in the knowledge he had her back, but he was obedient to her instructions and would not intercede unless her life was at stake.

*Because I fight with honour.*

True to his notorious reputation, her brief shift in concentration provided the sellsword with the opportunity he sought. Brienne snapped her focus back, raising Oathkeeper and blocking the sudden onslaught of blows with only seconds to spare. Using her size to her advantage she planted her feet firmly in the sludge, determined not to let him press her backwards as she fended off the furious attack.

Tuning her attention to his posture, she endeavoured to read his body language. Remembering the fundamentals of her training with Ser Goodwin.

*Wait and watch…Bronn is just another man keen to underestimate me. With him vigilance will be key…*
But Brienne’s armour was heavy, and her size had always been cumbersome. She found it difficult to adapt to his ever-changeable fighting style, struggling to keep track of the nimble figure darting first from one direction, then the other. Ser Bronn wove circles around her, slashing wildly from odd angles, trying to render her giddy as she spun to keep up.

_**I need a new tact...**_

With a grunt she caught his blade with Oathkeeper, bracing steel against steel, using her brute force to fling him away. The sure-footed man never even faltered, springing upon the balls of his feet, reassuming attack position. This time she went on the offensive, lunging forward only to have him feint to the left, his sword scraping painfully against the side of her armour, rattling her within. Brienne quickly regained her footing as another deluge of swings rained down upon her, Valyrian blade singing its high-pitched wail, absorbing jolt after jolt.

**How did he know I would attack?**

A taunt from Jaime long ago floated to the surface of her mind.

‘You shouldn’t grimace before you lunge, it gives away the game....’

Both Jaime and Ser Bronn were intuitive fighters. They knew how to interpret an opponent’s tells, delighting in using the garnered knowledge to their advantage. The sellsword believed himself unreadable and therefore he grew arrogant, a complacency born from thinking his cryptic technique was indecipherable. But now the Lady Knight knew his trick.

_Let his unpredictability become his predictability._

Every fighter had a pattern, every warrior had a style. Even Bronn. He was not exempt.

She and Podrick had exchanged notes during their journey. Her Squire relaying what underhanded tactics he knew the sellsword was wont to use.

_Surely even they are from a playbook, methods perfected and tested against combatants who are unfamiliar with him. He has not been tried against somehow who knows his game._

Her success would come from letting him think he had figured her out – only to be profiling him instead.

Parrying, she whirled to the left, ramming into him with her shoulder, hoping to catch him off guard. He recovered easily and she purposefully grimaced as she lifted Oathkeeper.

Expecting her to thrust forward, Ser Bronn shied sideways, where instead she brought her blade down upon his with such jarring force it reverberated up his arm. Instinctively his left hand lashed out, cracking her across the cheek and splitting her lip. She responded with a swift kick behind the knees, causing his legs to buckle as she licked the trickle of blood, the daze in front of her eyes
Wheeling on each other again, she noticed Ser Bronn place his feet slightly apart, a stance which would traditionally indicate defensive posture. But she recalled from Pod that it was a ploy.

Pretending to buy into his trick, she purposefully let him see her look down, anticipating his fist when it flew forward. Brienne dodged it gracefully, dancing to the side and ramming Oathkeeper’s lionshead pommel into the back of his neck.

He swore loudly, stumbling forward, raising his blade in front of him – the cocksureness behind his eyes evaporating, replaced by the sudden awareness that he was outmatched. Brienne had come to collect mental impressions of those expressions over the years, they provided a treasure trove of salve, mollifying her whenever she was mocked or tormented.

They collided once more in a storm of flying steel, the crashing and grating echoing throughout the night, filling the chilly atmosphere with puffs of exertion. Employing another underhanded manoeuvre, the sellsword landed a sideways kick to her shin, attempting to knock her legs from beneath her, ramming the greave into her flesh with such impact it was surely going to result in a massive bruise.

But Brienne grit her teeth, holding her ground. Enduring the pain and keeping her leg sturdy, determined he would not be successful.

*I will not stumble.*

It proved worthwhile, the might behind his blow meeting with her unexpected inertia sending him ricocheting backwards, and she slammed her fist into his jaw, knuckles connecting with a sickening yet satisfying crack.

*Now is my chance….*

Barrelling into him, she seized his sword arm in her left hand, muscles screaming as she used her strength alone to push the danger of the blade away, throwing her full weight and impetus behind herding him the small distance towards the treeline. Forcing his legs to shakily cross over each other in an effort to keep his balance and stay upright. Oathkeeper’s sharp length warding off his left arm, thwarting any attempts to dislodge her grip.

Roughly pinning him up against a trunk, she rammed the unforgiving metal of her right vambrace into the soft flesh of his throat, squeezing against his windpipe, commanding. “Yield!”

His free arm scrabbled against her armour, looking for purchase, still trying to gain the upper hand. Brienne knew it would not be long before he produced another weapon.

*No doubt he has more blades concealed.*

Yanking him violently, she shoved him into the trunk once again, smacking his head against the bark. “I said yield you shit.” She growled, digging her fingernails painfully into his wrist and...
twisting, her sheer strength enough to almost snap the bone as she demanded he surrender and relinquish his hold on his blade.

Bronn’s laugh rasped insolently, breath sour and stinking of ale. “If you wanted me this much you should have just said - I’d fuck ya.”

She applied more pressure to his neck, cutting off his air, watching his complexion change from red to blue. Oathkeeper’s deadly edge just inches from his jugular – it would take only one clean swipe to sever it entirely. “You tried to kill an unarmed man sharing a drink with his brother.” He fell silent, seeing the murderous intent in her eyes, hearing the disdain in her voice. “You will atone, or your life is forfeit. On my word there will be no Lordships or castles.” She hissed. “Only death at my hand.”

Brienne heard the soft thud as his sword fell to the snow.

Podrick rushed forward, collecting the blade, tossing it far from Bronn’s reach before commencing a thorough search for hidden steel. The Lady Knight held the sellsword firmly in place, her ferity birthing unease in his usually dauntless eyes as her Squire uncovered two daggers – one from the back of Bronn’s belt and another from his boot.

*Fortune smiles upon me, both locations he couldn’t possibly have accessed from his current position.*

Bronn had ceased struggling, self-preservation winning out and taking precedence over wounded ego. His expression reverting to neutral, resembling a civilised being once again.

*Or as reasonable as Ser Bronn is ever likely to become…*

Satisfied that he was unarmed, she loosened her grip and stepped away; Oathkeeper still tightly clasped in her fist. Podrick dashed to retrieve the fallen sword from the snow, slipping it into his own swordbelt and returning to stand at her flank.

Bronn’s hands flew to his throat as he wheezed, doubling over and catching his breath.

“You’re a fierce bitch.” He coughed. “I’ll grant ya that. I’m surprised that blonde fucker ever got near enough to screw ya, you’re more likely to bite his cock off. He’s braver than I thought.” Spitting a gob of blood, he chuckled at his own jape, resulting in a second wave of hacking.

“When you are quite finished amusing yourself. We have an agreement to discuss.”

“Tell me –“ He leant back against the tree trunk, acting like they were old friends having a chat. “Why is it Brienne Tarth is here making a deal with the likes o’me? It just doesn’t make sense. I already have a bargain, struck with Lord Tyrion.”

“And what is that arrangement technically?” Her blue stare was unflinching. “That the Lannister brothers stay alive?”
“Not necessarily – just that I don’t kill ‘em.”

“And if they are dead how do you plan to collect?”

He shrugged. “I’ve got double me chances. The Little Brother is with the Dragon Queen and the taller one is shacked up North with you.”

“No – Lord Jaime is on his way to King’s Landing. To save his sister from the pending invasion. A mission he is undertaking unaccompanied and at great risk to his safety.”

Arching an eyebrow, the sellsword’s expression turned questioning. “What are you getting at?”

“You are going to follow him.” Brienne gestured at him with the tip of her sword. “You will aid and assist Jaime from afar, however and wherever you can. Keeping him safe and ensuring he is successful in his mission.”

At this he guffawed. “Why on Earth would I do a stupid thing like that? I’ve seen them Dragons. That place is going to roast, and I intend being very far away when it does.”

“Only then - your Lordship goes up in flames along with the city.” The Lady Knight regarded him impassively.

“Hang on just a minute…!” He waggled his finger at her. “If the Dragon Queen wins, Lord Tyrion lives, and he will pay up…”

“Not when I tell him you refused to assist his siblings.”

“And why would he listen to you? You’re just some cunt his brother used to keep warm.”

“I do not believe you have all the facts Ser Bronn. Situations change. Status alters -” Now it was her turn to smirk. “- You are currently speaking with Lady Lannister.”

“Seven Hells!” The sellsword did little to hide the hilarity he found in that statement. “Are you saying the fucker married ya?”

“Yes, he did – and now you can consider me either your third safety net, or your potential downfall.” Brienne strode closer, her immense figuring casting a massive shadow over the man, only serving to amplify her newfound power and formidability. “I have spared your life tonight Ser Bronn – but it comes with conditions. You would be very familiar with ultimatums so I offer the following: Make your way to King’s Landing – follow my husband and see he is safely returned to me and I will help ensure that nothing stands between you and Highgarden. But – if you disappear once again, leaving Jaime to face the dangers alone, without providing assistance - I will become your greatest ruination. Not only will I vow to stand between you and your precious Lordship – but I will also make it my personal mission to hunt you down and remove you from this earth for the shameful, craven, oathbreaker that you are.”

Pod watched on proudly, raising his eyebrows triumphantly at the sellsword as she asked. “Do we
Bronn sighed in resignation. “Yeah. Alright. I think we understand each other.”

“Good.”

“Stubborn bitch.” He grumbled. “Does that stupid Lannister know what he has tied himself too?”

“Very much so.” She felt it – that begrudging respect men sometimes offered her – generally when she had just defeated them, and their pride had taken a more severe beating than their bodies.

“How exactly do you recommend I help him? I betrayed Cersei as well I’ll remind ya – I was supposed to bring her the heads of her brothers.”

“Stay out of sight. Do what you can. I am not an unfair person; I intend to aid you both by whatever means possible. I will use every resource that is available to me.”

“Then why didn’t you go with him?”

Brienne had been waiting for that question. “I would be with him if I could - but I will not betray an oath I made to my husband. Ser Jaime bade me to stay away from King’s Landing. Therefore, that is what I must do.”

“I take it you have a plan….”

“Of sorts.” She beckoned Podrick to her side and began walking. “Come Ser Bronn, we have much to discuss.”

Chapter End Notes

Chapter total has been updated! As I continue to edit this fully written fic, I can now proudly report that I have officially outlined the chapter divisions. :)

Approval vs Judgment

Chapter Summary

Cover Art by: Ro_Nordmann

"I can't help but want oceans to part..."
Lyrics, War of Hearts by Ruelle
Bridge, Line 3

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes
The bite of cool salt air licked at her skin, dandling her lengthening hair where it brushed against her neck, as familiar and sweet as her husband’s caress. She smiled nostalgically to recollect the first night he had reached for her, his touches ranging from passionate force to gentle tenderness. Both were equally exquisite as far as she was concerned.

Bending over the railing of the small ship, she watched the bow slice through the azure water, sending arching waves fanning out across the surface.

Brienne had chosen the swiftest vessel she could find moored at Oldcastle, paying the crew what she was able, with the promissory offer of further reward when they reached their destination.

Funds were running short, even though she had once again on-sold their mounts. Much of their extra coin had gone upon the bribes to the Madams and then the rest had been spent finding a second captain foolhardy enough to risk the voyage to King’s Landing – only this time with Ser Bronn aboard. Thereafter attention had turned towards obtaining passage for herself and Podrick, the sheer mention of their destination marking it as much more than a small voyage. A difficult sell when pockets were shallow.

It had taken quite some convincing that her claims to nobility were valid, and her heart near broke when as a last resort she offered Oathkeeper as collateral upon her word. It pained her to even suggest such a trade – but the name of the sword, coupled with the sheer presence of the Valyrian steel, gave credibility to her story. It remained on her hip (even though the crew seemed kindly, she would not reside unarmed upon a boat filled with men) with the understanding that if payment was not made in full upon arrival, the blade would be forfeit. After agreeing she had assuaged herself with the knowledge that there would be no need for them to collect.

Tarths are true to their oaths and Lannisters always pay their debts…

It was now nine days ago that they had left the bay for open ocean, utilising the icy winds of the Shivering Sea to propel them further South. Land had been kept far from sight, the conflicts taking place upon the edge of the continent best avoided. It was with a heavy chest that she had stopped trying to gauge their bearings – knowing when they were passing by King’s Landing would have gnawed at her soul.

Subsequently Brienne had chosen to stay below deck a good portion of the time, the solitude of her cabin providing prime opportunity to mull over the chaotic events of recent weeks.
Trying to make sense of everything was like attempting to count the grains of sand upon a beach, so many infinitesimal elements had contributed that she couldn’t possibly reconcile them all. She had always considered herself a woman of reason, but love had proven to be the one condition which defied all prerequisites. It was an intrusive, immeasurable emotion, always with her, never departing. Instead it seemed to grow stronger in the absence of its object.

The Lady Knight found herself struggling to ignore the coldness which seeped beneath her skin every time she woke to an empty bunk. Missing Jaime’s annoying presence, breathing too loudly or nudging her awake to regale her with an errant thought.

*This is ludicrous – I have been alone my whole life, my time spent romantically with Jaime is the blink of an eye in comparison.*

*Yet still....*

Occupying her mind seemed the most effective method to stave off the fits of pining and her new focus became trying to put these incomprehensible sentiments into words. The bulk of her strategy required her to secure a particular ally – one who could rival her in immovability.

Therefore - *somehow* - she had to overcome her taciturn ways enough to make another person understand the feelings which she barely grasped herself.

*My status that just...is. An invasion of my heart.*

*Perhaps in another part of me as well....*

Brienne tried not to dwell on whether or not she could be with child. The variable too great and the time elapsed too small. She nearly couldn’t imagine such a thing. It would be difficult not to resent a presence which kept her out of battle, marking her with a stereotypical female fragility she had waged a lifelong campaign to repel.

She attempted to picture herself cradling a babe in her oversized arms, letting a squalling creature suckle at her teat. It caused her to feel quite squeamish and she banished such thoughts to the backburner.

Until she imagined a golden-haired little boy, who looked quite like Jaime, running and playing with wooden swords.

*Mayhaps this is my angle....*

Brienne pursed her lips, her eyes trained on the horizon, waiting for the familiar shape to emerge. The atmosphere was warmer here, but evidence of winter lingered. A fine mist hung heavily in the air, spiriting across the white caps and lending an ambience of mystery to a place she knew like the back of her freckled hand.

*Even if it has been many, many moons.*
“Is it always like this Ser?” Podrick asked.

“No – during the Summer the days are clear. Until the tempests roll in.”

“At least the fog makes for smoother sailing than a squall would.”

“I still predict a storm Pod. Just not born of the weather.” She turned to lean her back against the rail, sighing deeply.

“How long has it been since you even wrote your Father M’Lady?”

“Years.” She admitted. “Last he heard of me - I was a prisoner requiring ransom. I doubt he even knows I still live.”

“Why did you never send a raven?”

“Old wounds, Pod. Disappointments, misunderstandings. I led the troops of Tarth, when King Renly called his banners. My Father would have preferred I stay at home and provide Evenfall with heirs.” Brienne drummed her fingers against the wood, narrating the memory. “Do not assume the worst – it is not as if we parted on ill terms. Father allowed me to command the men, having long abandoned his hopes of a match for me. It was a concession, albeit a reluctant one, just like when he permitted me formal training at arms. No cross words were exchanged – the Tarth family are descendants of Kings; we need not sully ourselves with raised voices - it is that which remains unsaid that speaks volumes.”

Pod grimaced. “He is like you then?”

“Very much. Scarily.”

“Are you worried about telling him?”

“Whether I am concerned is of little consequence. It must be done. My new position demands it – my husband’s life rests upon it. I only hope I can convince him to support me and that this all leads to a favourable outcome.”

“It will not be long until we find out Ser.” Tapping her upon the arm, Podrick gestured to the sea beyond her shoulder.

Turning back around she spotted the high peaks of Tarth’s mountainous terrain peeking through the mist like slumbering green giants. Brienne sucked in a lungful of oxygen – she may not be going to war, but she had her own battles to fight.
“Five gold dragons for the Captain, ten silver stags for the First Mate and coppers for the crew - I will personally deliver the funds to their hands.” The harbourmaster stood in his office, counting out the coin. His countenance stern as he eyed the Lady before him like an apparition or ghost of the past.

*For once it is fortunate that my appearance is so distinctive.*

She knew how he felt – placing feet upon her childhood shores felt like walking into memory, the rose and blue livery of her house emblazoned everywhere she looked. It appeared to delight Podrick, he glowed with pride as he beheld another side to Brienne of Tarth – the Lady and heir rather than the thistly Knight he usually served.

“I thank you Sorrel.” The Lady Knight nodded her appreciation. “I shall see that you are compensated accordingly.”

“I serve the Tarth family M’Lady. Have for nigh on five decades. I remember the day you departed and am just glad to have lived to see your return.” The older man tried to sound deferential, but she could hear the tinge of judgment. “You have been gone for seasons.”

“Indeed.” Brienne kept the conversation clipped; she was not about to be answerable to a staffer. Not when providing explanations to her own sire lay ahead. Reporting to him like a wayward child instead of a woman grown. *Best get it over with.* “I would ask word be sent to my Father immediately, I intend to make my way straight to Evenfall Hall.”

“It already has been My Lady. The moment you stepped ashore. An escort awaits outside to accompany you.”

*It begins…*

The island was small. Its people loyal to the bone. News travelled more swiftly than a leaf caught in an updraft.

“My gratitude once again.” Her smile was tight and did not touch her eyes. “Podrick, let us make haste. My Father has been anticipating my return for many a year, it would be inconsiderate to make him wait any longer.” She sang the first pretty song of her visit. A melody hollow and trite, echoing the pleasantries of the Lady people thought she should be, rather than the person who she truly was.
Emerging from the building, her heart sank at the retinue which awaited them. Helmed guards and a horse drawn coach. Instantly her jaw set with tension, behind her Pod stifled a chuckle.

“Welcome back M’Lady.” One of the men ceremoniously opened the door, gesturing for her to enter. “Your Father awaits your presence at Evenfall.” Brienne cringed inwardly at the imminent awkwardness of clambering inside in full armour.

“I would sooner ride.”

“Lord Selwyn asks that word of your arrival be kept to a minimum for the time being. He wishes to herald your return by way of formal announcement. The coach will help to shield its passengers from prying eyes.”

She bit her lips to keep from retorting whilst her insides recoiled and curled. Tying themselves into repressed knots.

"I’m a fucking Lady again."

The coach bounced and jostled, whilst Brienne rested a hand to her temple. Each bump and ditch in the dirt path causing her armour to vibrate and jarring her teeth.

“We would have to take the longest possible route up to the Stronghold, because we are in this ambling monstrosity….

At least Podrick seemed to be enjoying the experience. He peered through the cracks in the sheer fabric covering the windows, granting glimpses of sparkling waters and cerulean sky.

“Your home is breathtaking.” He beamed. “After all the horrors we have seen - this island is truly beautiful Ser.”

“Yes.” Brienne agreed, distaste tainting her voice. “I am the only unsightly thing this place has ever produced. The oddity who does not fit.” Acerbic thoughts ran rampant. “Now, now Podrick, best not pull back the curtain. We would hate to be seen prematurely.”

Withdrawing back onto the seat opposite her, Pod smiled sympathetically. “Surely your Father
will be proud. Look at you.”

“Yes, look at me. Cropped hair, steel plate, same plain face. Older, hardened, jaded, bitter. The picture of the daughter every Lord wishes to parade in front of the inhabitants of his oasis.”

Another bone rattling jolt made her wince and unbidden her hand moved to her abdomen. Fear seizing her for the first time.

*Perhaps this rough travel isn’t advisable if Jaime has indeed placed a babe within me.*

Even though she attempted to cover her slip, Podrick noticed the gesture.

“You’re afraid.” He observed. “This is the only occasion I have ever seen you truly anxious. Never before. Not once. Not against Bolton’s men or the armies of the undead. You usually hide it so well. What is it that troubles you M’Lady? You are far from harm.”

“But Jaime is not.” She pursed her lips, grappling with the explanation. *How I loathe having to speak....*

“I am terrified of failing him, one way or another. Either by being unable to provide him help or......” Brienne looked down at where her hand came to rest. As if the moronic gesture of pressing her palm to the metal had the power to truly alter the outcome. “All of this is superficial Pod. These titles, this fanfare, this pretension. None of it is real. Skin deep and goes no further. What Jaime and I have is everything. He sees me, as preposterous as that is. He loves me for this wretched creature that I am and somehow I have to make my Father believe it and - even more unlikely - approve.”

“Then tell him that....”

“Do you really think it will be that easy?”

Her body lurched forward as the coach pulled to a stop outside the castle.

*Evenfall may as well be the place that time forgot.....*

Brienne and Podrick were escorted through marble tiled halls and up spiralling stairwells in the sprawling stronghold she had once called home. The cool hues and open architecture dominating the Western cliffs of the Island, providing unobstructed views of the sapphire straits. The oceanic
mist had cleared, dissipated by the midday sun, revealing a stunning panorama beneath.

Untouched by war and famine, her homelands nestled themselves snugly off the coast and allowed the world to pass them by. Detached from hardship and suffering, clueless to the plight of the relentlessly harried and war-torn.

Of course, small things had been tweaked – the tapestries had a habit of changing annually, always coinciding with the taste of the newest floozy her Father entertained himself with. A small gesture to make them feel welcome, until they were ripped down again and replaced along with the woman. The household staff had altered as well, never to stand in the way of progress. New employees had been found as their predecessors were promoted or moved on to brighter and better things. Leaving them with their current chaperone.

The young attendant led the way as though he were doing a marvellous job and Brienne had to bite her tongue not to remind him that she knew how to navigate the corridors more efficiently than he ever could.

“Not too much further My Lady.” He had gotten her off-side from the onset, when she noted his nostril flare. Taking in her appearance with displeasure.

Arriving at a large double-sided oaken door – it may have been revarnished, but she recognised it still - the attendant rapped three times on the wood, carrying out even this smallest of tasks as though he were the grandest hired help the world had ever seen. Brienne had little tolerance for such pomp.

Another staffer’s voice, deeper and even more formal, resounded from the room beyond. “Who seeks to enter? His Lordship is expecting company and is not to be disturbed.”

“I have brought the Lady Tarth and guest. Her presence is expected.”

Podrick glanced at her in befuddlement and she lifted her eyes to the ceiling.

The doors were opened gradually, each move meticulous and precise but painstakingly slow. The older manservant appraising them, clearing his throat. “And who is accompanying the Lady? So, they may be properly announced…”

The young upstart blanched, panic settling in, realising that he was so full of self-importance, he had never stopped to enquire Podrick’s name.

After the day she had endured thus far, it was more than she could stand.

“Oh, for fuck’s sake.” Muttering under her breath, she shouldered past the bewildered attendants and sauntered into the room. “Father - if we are to stand on ceremony such as this our reunion shall be delayed for yet another moon’s turn.”

“A pleasure to see you again Brienne and I thank you for the warm greeting.” Selwyn Tarth turned from the open window to face his daughter. Silvered hair touched his shoulders (when she left, he
had still possessed strands of pale blonde) and an abundance of lines creased his forehead. But his height was the same – an imposing frame which mirrored her own, neither whittled nor ravaged by age – strong of spine and straight of back. And his eyes were hers, a deep blue which shrunk the unworthy who dared to meet their intensity. “I will remind you that we carry the lineage of Kings.”

“The past will not aid us in this moment – it is the present which concerns me, and I would prefer we did not squander it on formalities.” She could sense Podrick’s presence behind her, sticking close to his mentor. It was difficult not to be intimidated by the Evenstar, he had an imposing bearing. Idly she wondered if she too carried the same weight.

“Very well…” Without expression he assessed her from head to toe, no doubt taking in her unkempt hair and scar lines. Her armour beaten and dented, the blade upon her hip. The image of a Warrior seasoned and blooded. *How one would imagine their son to return after a campaign.*

“...I have been remiss. I suppose I wanted to lay eyes upon you again, to see you home, safe and sound. But surely you must wish to freshen up after your travels. We shall reconvene in due course.” With a wave of his hand, more servants appeared to usher them to their respective quarters.

*Now I remember why I was keen to leave – it wasn’t just to support Renly. It was to avoid my wardrobe....*

Brienne pulled at the gown in annoyance, it was simply cut and plain of colour but still far too feminine. Already she missed her breeches almost as much as she missed Jaime.

*Almost. How he would chuckle at my expense.*

She had washed her face and slicked back her hair before squeezing herself into the sea-green garment. An abhorrent tool for female oppression which pulled across her chest and choked her arms. Making her realise exactly how much her muscle tone had increased since she last departed Evenfall.

*Jaime would describe himself and Cersei as hateful – but that is how I would describe this punishment. This dress is far more heinous than my husband.*

Flat slippers adorned her feet - *most impractical*. They refused to stay on when she attempted a brisk walk. The kind of footwear designed for sipping tea and embroidery rather than the mindset
of someone who was always braced for a fight.

Her gait was half-shuffling as she attempted to keep them on, re-entering her Father’s solar.

This time he smiled when she appeared and upon surveying the room her stomach rumbled at the luncheon spread which had been prepared for their meeting.

“I know it is a little late in the afternoon, but I thought you may be hungry.” The Evenstar gestured for her to sit. “You must feel better in a change of clothes.”

“Do you really wish to know the answer to that?” Brienne remembered her propriety enough to smooth the skirt beneath her as she sat. “Some things may change Father, but personalities and tastes do not.”

“Still denying your sex Brienne?”

“Not my gender any longer. Just the restrictive role being born a woman inflicted upon me – though that too is changing.”

The Evenstar sipped his beverage, regarding her thoughtfully. “How do you come by that conclusion?”

She paused in place, reaching for a ribbon sandwich. Trying not to cringe at the unnecessary wastage which went into the creation of the tiny morsel. Food which would be the difference between life and death in the North. “What conclusion?”

“That the conventional role assigned to a Lady may be rewritten. In my experience traditions stand for a reason. Now I too admit I am guilty of bending the rules – I let you train at swordplay with Ser Goodwin, allowed you to lead our troops. But necessity is the mother of invention and in the absence of a male heir, I let you embody both as was your wish. Sadly for me, it seemed the male tendencies beckoned to you with a strength that made you deny your female proclivities. My leniency rebounded, coming back to bite me and now I rule an island which until today has been without an heir. It makes me wonder how you think this shifting status could become a resounding theme throughout the Seven Kingdoms.”

*Politics and my failings. We are here already.*

With a sigh, she dropped the half-eaten swirl upon her plate. Dusting the crumbs which clung to the fabric of her bodice.

*Another benefit to armour – scraps fall straight off.*

Reaching over she deposited the fine porcelain plate back upon the table, fixing her Father with her azure gaze.

“Westeros is a changing world. We are locked in wars from several sides. Has it escaped your notice Father that the key players in these conflicts are Queens? The Lannister Queen controls the
Iron Throne, the Targaryen claimant journeys from Essos to stake her birthright. Lady Sansa Stark has commanded the Northmen since her return to Winterfell. It seems the turning tides are glaringly obvious.

“One could argue if they were better suited to the positions, then the battles would have been fought and won, instead of subjecting the lands to prolonged hardship.” As always, their tones were level, regardless of their opposing views. The Tarths both measured and controlled during their discussion.

_Mayhaps that is why we came to be called Evenstars._

Her Father gauged her reaction to his rebuttal, admiration and condescension illuminating intermittently in his eyes. Finally, he added. “Though I assume you dispute that point.”

“I do. The War of Five Kings was started by men, only they leave the women to finish it.” She inhaled. “And finish it they will.”

“And where do you fit Daughter? In all of this.” He placed his own cup aside, clasping his hands together and leaning forward. “You have been absent a long time – where do you declare loyalty? To whom do you swear your sword? What ill wind finds my only child needing to wash up again upon our shores? Not that you are unwelcome. I thought you lost and could only hope for your return. But I am not so gullible as to believe it was a sudden onset of homesickness. You have my undivided attention, so I entreat – tell me of you.”

Brienne swallowed, her mouth turning dry. She truly hated being put on the spot. “It is difficult to know where to begin.”

“Is it true you slew Renly?”

Her jaw dropped open, face contorting in shock. Although it made sense. _He has not had word of me, it only stands to reason he would be back there._

“No! I would never do such a thing. Stannis murdered Renly – by way of dark arts. Blood magic, forces beyond my control.” The memory still hurt. “I was wrongly accused by circumstance.”

“It did not sound like you. A far too dishonourable act. I am pleased to hear you refute it and that you were not found guilty. How did you come to avoid trial?”

“Lady Catelyn Stark vouched for my innocence. She was a wonderful woman. I ended up in her service.”

“The Starks. A good, decent family. Lady Catelyn would have my gratitude if she still lived. What became of Stannis?”

“I killed him.” Raising her chin, she did not flinch at the confession. “Justice was served by my hand.”

Lord Selwyn raised his eyebrows and nodded approvingly. “It seems Ser Goodwin’s fears were unfounded. He worried that your woman’s heart would falter when it came to taking a man’s life –
“Very much so.” Brienne had lost count of the number of men who had fallen by her sword. Once she had kept track – but no longer.

Her Father’s expression darkened as he framed his next query. “The last I heard of you; I was sent a request for a ransom. A dire situation for a Father, over half a continent away. The sum was rejected, though here you sit. How did that come to be? Did you escape unscathed?”

“That is an ambiguous question, for I do not think it truly possible to come out of a hostage situation completely unmarred.” She knew her Father was probing for details, finding out if she had been despoiled, debauched, tortured. With a smirk she channelled her husband, his audacity and way with words which both taunted and endeared. “Though I did emerge ‘unbesmirched.’”

The Evenstar frowned, not comprehending the meaning behind the amusement which tugged at her lips.

*Good, let him wonder. It will make it easier when it comes time to tell.*

“Care to elaborate?”

*Let’s test the waters – it all begins with a name.*

“Ser Jaime Lannister came to my rescue. The ransom was not needed.”

It was a hard admission, the phrasing dealing a brutal blow to her claims of independence when it left her mouth. She took pride in conducting herself as a tower of strength and had spent much of her adolescence trying to convince her Father of her capability. But in the retelling of her adventures with Jaime, somehow she wound up cast in the role of damsel in distress, with him being the only man who had ever played the part of her White Knight.

How she had begrudgingly fought against that knowledge years ago, appreciation warring with her inner sense of failure. Now with the new title of wife settling upon her skin like an unworn cloak, she could tolerate the bigger picture, acknowledging the larger design sculpted by the Gods and showing gratitude for their wisdom. Unfortunately, it put her on a back foot for her argument in favour of women’s aptitude and autonomy.

*As if I could ever have persuaded Father anyway.*

Lord Selwyn barely masked his disdain for the name she had dropped. “The Kingslayer. Never would I have deigned to imagine, I would need to give credit for one of his actions. I pity you, of all the cruel twists of fate it must have been a dismal thing to end up indebted to him. Perhaps I would have considered dying with my dignity and integrity intact.”

Brienne could feel the blood rushing to her cheeks in anger, her Father misconstruing her sudden ruddiness for embarrassment.
“Do not mistake me, I do not judge you for accepting his assistance. Staring death in the face is a daunting task for even the most courageous of men. It is just that I personally would never stoop to that level, I could never again hold my head high if I owed the likes of him.”

“But you do.” Her voice was calm threat, carrying the quiet thickness of the air before a storm. Menacing in what it held back, knowing that at any moment a fury could be unleashed. “Your only heir is alive and well - sitting in front of you. Many Westerosi Father’s would trade everything they possessed for the same blessing. And whether you like it or not - you owe that fact to Ser Jaime.”

“I knew nothing of the Kingslayer’s part in this….”

“You do now.” She was unflinching, ice and iron in her veins. “Your child, your daughter was almost violated by a company of men. She was tossed into a bear pit with a wooden sword, to be ripped apart by claws and jaws for their entertainment. Your raven’s letter with your promise of dragons did nothing to prevent it – your words meant nothing to them. Lord Lannister’s did. He is a man of action and he is the reason I sit here today. You admit your gratitude to Lady Catelyn, but you would deny him the same courtesy?” Brienne shook her head. “Do not speak to me of shame. And his name is Jaime. Not Kingslayer.”

“Should I be concerned Daughter?” The Evenstar’s eyes narrowed as he studied the set of her jaw, the rigidity of her shoulders. The unbridled flame which licked in the blue of her iris’. Knowing that she must take the slight against Ser Jaime personally, in order for it to ignite such a reaction in his characteristically austere offspring. “A titled Lady defending a man with such vehemence, one could mistake it for attachment.”

“Well see there you are incorrect.” Brienne watched the relief flood him, miscomprehending to which part of the statement she was referring.

\[\text{That is twice he has failed to read me accurately – he does not know me at all.}\]

It only served to incense her further. “I choose not to go by the title of Lady anymore.”

“What?! Do not be absurd. By what other title could you be referred?”

“Ser. I am a Knight.”

His mirth and sympathy were enough to make her want to scream. “That is not possible. It is not done.”

“Untrue. It has been. With witnesses. I have been dubbed into the sacred order and I am now hailed as Ser Brienne.” A small part of her had hoped this would meet with his approval. Her trailblazing and forging ahead into unchartered territory. Being brave and earning her title through honour and noble deeds.

“A woman cannot be a Knight.”
“Any Knight can make a Knight. If the recipient be deemed worthy.” When she had stared into Jaime’s eyes from her position kneeling upon the stone floor, she had honestly thought her heart may burst. From the joy of receiving the title and from the wanting and loving of him. The highlight of her life – until a couple of evenings later she found herself in Jaime’s arms. Atop the furs, pinned beneath the warmth of his chiselled body, his mouth exploring the dip between her breasts, his hand gripping her hip and her legs wrapped around his thighs. Then she knew bliss.

Her Father’s patronising tone scattered the memory into splinters and shards. “And who would dare to flout history by committing such an act?”

The answer flew from her without coherent thought. “My husband.”

His bark of laughter stung more sharply than the rake of bear claws down her shoulder. “Excuse me? Tell me you are making a jape. Though I never knew you as the jovial sort Brienne, times do change.”

“I am not speaking in jest. The man whom I now call husband bestowed upon me my Knighthood.”

“Most Ladies are courted with flowers. You with displays of false titles. I can only hope you are not so foolish as to believe it sacrosanct. The Knighthood and wedding both.”

“My marriage is legal Father. It was overseen by a Maester and registered with the Citadel.”

Now his gaze clouded, troubled shadows deepening the blue. “Is this the lackey who accompanied you here? A boy green as summer grass and tremulous as a Maid on her wedding night…..” Panic descended upon him like a shroud. “By the Grace of the Gods Brienne, by the Maiden and the Mother I pray – tell me this effrontery hasn’t been consummated?!”

“That ‘lackey-’” She repeated his insult so he could feel the full impact of its slander. “-Is my Squire! His name is Podrick Payne and he is an incredibly loyal lad. I am only glad that he is downstairs and not present to hear these allegations. He and my husband both would be greatly offended by any innuendo of misconduct and I for one am appalled by your assumption. But in answer to your other charge – yes - I have lain with my husband. On multiple occasions. As is befitting of a wife.”

“What have you done? What commonfolk have you thus thrust upon us? A grasping social climbing hedge-knight who would sweet-talk you out of your island and coax your legs to uncross by making a mummer’s farce out of a Knighthood? I thought after the years of suitable matches I presented you with, you would know better. I felt secure in the knowledge that you would not submit to any man who could not best you with a sword. Now my daughter has returned to me and rather than rejoice in what could be, I must cope with her folly.”

“You must support me in my choices. Whether you agree or not. It is best for the happiness and well-being of your daughter and the continuation of your line.”

“Very tactical Brienne. You return when it is too late. Where I must acquiesce or end up in a
position worse than when I started.”

“I have commanded armies Father, I know how to flank my position, where and what makes for good ground. It is not my wish to produce a stalemate, but I am afraid failure to obtain your assistance is not an option for me.”

“Ahhhh. So we come to the crux of it. What do you need?”

Brienne had him where she needed him but still her chest was heavy. It was all business with none of the emotion. As if negotiating with a stranger instead of her own flesh and blood.

“Father…. Although I do not deny that I came here seeking your help. Will you not ask me even one question as a parent and not a ruler? Who he is, why I chose him, if I am happy –” She knew the next statement sounded juvenile but to her it mattered. If Podrick came to her in the same manner, she would want to know the reason, care about his motive. Eager to discover what moved him to such drastic action. “- if I am in love?”

He set his mouth in a grim line, steepling his fingers and regarding her. “Such queries are not required. The entire circumstances of the situation make it plain that this was a reckless choice of the heart and if the match’s identity was one which would please me, you would be immediately forthcoming.” The Evenstar sighed, lowering his hands to rest upon his knees, reinforcing his own posture, bracing for the revelation to come.

“Who are you now daughter? Who sits before me? Not my child of Tarth but a woman grown, wedded and pledged to another house. Or does your spouse carry no titles? Instead will the blood of King’s be interbred with nomadic bastardry of unknown origins? Speak now Brienne – you compelled me to enquire – has there yet been a whelp produced from your coupling?”

“Not thus far – our association is long but our vows still new – though there is every chance my womb is occupied and the pregnancy yet to make its presence known.” A protective instinct coursed through her veins, taking her by surprise. The urge to defend the possibility of their unborn bolstering her confidence.

Mayhaps I have maternal inclinations after all….

“And my partner is of noble descent, claims of which dwarf ours in terms of land, wealth and might. He is an anointed Knight, my Lord and husband – this knowledge may hearten you.”

“Though you continue to evade disclosure? It must be grave indeed. Perhaps beneath your convincing show of being affronted lurks the vestiges of ignominy.”

“You may wish it to be so Father, such misapprehensions may alleviate your discomfit with my marital status but they could not be more erroneous.”

Lord Selwyn shook his head in disappointment, silver hair brushing over the collar of his doublet with the action. “Say the name Brienne. I have already deduced it. I am not naïve. The priming and preconditioning you put in place, paving the way for the divulgence, quite gave you away.
Though it churns my gut, a piteously insufferable disgrace. Pray, end this charade and come clean daughter, the least you can do is look me in the eye and tell it to me straight. What am I to call you?”

“Ser Brienne Lannister.” She pointedly tried to ignore the way his mien collapsed, his body recoiling ever so slightly. She gritted her teeth in an effort to stem her outrage, observing the way her Father rapidly closed his eyes in order to suppress his reaction and maintain his stalwart composure. In response she rallied, her tone assured, her shoulders squared. “Wife to Ser Jaime Lannister.”

His eyelids retreated again, his blown pupils the only sign manifesting his displeasure. Determined to portray the ever-collected Evenstar. “If you think for one moment that I will offer any support to the cause of that family you are sorely mistaken. The Lions of Casterly Rock have long since dug their own graves – profaned the institution of the Crown, putrid in their machinations, hands so coated in blood they will never run clean, utterly corrupt with power…”

“I agree.” Brienne brought his rant to an abrupt halt. “But Jaime is not his Father, nor is he the same as his Sister and neither am I.” A corner of her mouth twitched triumphantly. “I will remind you, when you speak of the Lannisters in such a fashion, so too do you speak of me.”

“That is different, you are a Tarth by birth…”

“And a Lannister as sanctified by the Gods, chosen by my own volition instead of being thrust upon me by happenstance of accouchement. Can there be any greater wilful display of joining their ranks?”

He shook his head stubbornly. “Addled by fallacious notions of love, blinded by flattery and random acts of kindness. You are one of them, but you cannot be held accountable, nor tarred with the same brush.”

“So, you admit that there can be exceptions within a family?” She tilted her head victoriously. “We see eye to eye on this Father. You view me as the anomaly – and in the same light I view Jaime.”

Now he pointed his index finger, punctuating his words, leaning forward in his chair as he became seized by a fit of pique. “I will not provide aid to them…”

“Would you have me a widow?” Her calm delivery halted him mid-spiel. She had been waiting for the chance to play her trump card. The one she hid up her sleeve until the time was ripe. Until she had revealed the other cards in her hand, and they lay spread upon the table in plain sight.

This argument was the difference between winning and losing. The nucleus of every phrase that came before, the head of the comet, the pivot to the wheel.

“I beg pardon? I think I may not have accurately heard you?”

“You did hear me Father. I asked if you would make a widow of me?” Brienne let him see the
repressed sadness in her depths of blue which so closely resembled his own.

I know how he feels about Mother, I know he loves her still – it is why he never took another wife. No other woman may have permanent residence in his heart. He has lived as a widower for many a year – he needs to think if he would condemn me to the same fate.

“Leave me in a state of perpetual mourning, where I could never again find any beauty in the basic pleasures of life. Robbed of that which made me shine and brought meaning into my existence. Whose laugh was infectious, whose smile could move me to tears, whose joy and pain and angst and ecstasy all become your own – because you are just that connected.”

She swallowed, the muscles in her neck visibly constricting. “This is the way I feel about Jaime - when I think about how I may lose him it makes it difficult to breathe. Imagining walking empty corridors haunted only by his shade for company, clutching an infant to my chest whom I can barely look upon for it so reminds me of his likeness.” Brienne cleared her throat, silently praying to her Mother to send him clemency, to bend the rigidity for which he was renowned.

“Deny me my simple request and that is what you impose upon me Father, that is a vision of my future – closely imitating yours. Be as disgruntled with me as you wish but ask yourself if you can live with that outcome. The possibility of a fatherless babe screaming into the night, the echoes of my sobs reverberating down your halls. Always knowing there is nothing you can do to mitigate the agony now – but you could have. Way back when your daughter asked you.”

The Evenstar let out a single shuddering exhale, his voice softening. “Name your boon, Brienne. I shall see that you have it. The fate of the grief-stricken is not one I would wish upon my worst enemy, let alone my child.”

Relief coursed through her. Thank you, Gods, spirits. You have my gratitude.

“I require your swiftest seafaring ship with a seasoned crew. A sizeable sum of coin and the services of our Maester, he also will be embarking upon the voyage.”

Her Father scrutinised her face, as if he could lift her intentions from her mind and skin through his appraisal alone. “Where will they be going?”

“I will give them their heading. The fewer that know the particulars the better.” Brienne was firm.

“And will you be joining them?”

“No.” Her voice was tinged with sadness. She wanted desperately to go but knew her place in the grander scheme of things. “With your blessing, Podrick and I will remain here.”
Just saying hello to any readers on this journey with me, I really appreciate you all. Every comment I receive means so much and keeps me going. <3
Chapter Summary

And so with a sigh I say....show canon ahead. It pains me to have to deal with the collapse of the Red Keep, but it had to be done in order to reinterpret the events. <3

See the end of the chapter for more notes
As a seasoned warrior, Jaime Lannister had confronted his own mortality more times than he could count. Facing innumerous instances where his lifespan flashed before his eyes and he was forced to contemplate the end.

The end.

In all its definitive finality. The one bridge that when crossed, there could never be backtracking. The sole road which led down an irreversible path.

Jaime had always thrived on courting death, savouring the thrill which coursed through him as he laughed and danced on the brink of peril with the agility of a cat nimbly stalking a ridgepole. It seemed alluring then - the prospect of danger.

There was a romance to his flippancy, his name made legend by his detachment to survival itself, the status which other weaker souls clung to desperately, preserved at all costs, poignantly begged for with their final breaths.

Not he. The golden Lion had always goaded the Stranger, content in the knowledge that if he misstepped and shirked his mortal coil, his renown would endure in the pages of history.

Only recently had he come to understand - the cognizance pressing down upon him like a drenched blanket, chilling his bones and weighting his steps – back then, he had nothing to live for.

Of course, at the time he believed he did – but in truth he didn’t. Far from it in fact.

An existence devoid of real meaning, filled solely by emptiness.

His days comprised of deceit and shadowed dalliances, lies which further compounded each other, adding another fetter to his ankle and clamp upon his heart. So nihilistic was he, that once he even tried to starve himself away, convinced that his sword hand had been the measure of his value.
It was all incredibly twisted to think back on, an imbroglio within his mind, un navigable even to himself. The extent of his misconceptions and the lack of self-awareness a testament to how far a person could go to fool themselves.

*If I was truly happy with Cersei, if I thought we were two inseparable halves who were destined to die together – never would I have taken steps to suicide in the distant Riverlands without her…. *

Hindsight was a staggering thing. Jaime’s subconscious had recognised what his forefront did not and taken action accordingly.

But this same quadrant of his psyche, had also responded to the interventions of Brienne’s voice. His true self, his deep self, gravitating intuitively to his mate.

*And now…*

He would laugh bitterly if he weren’t in so much pain. He would scream, shout and curse the Gods if only he had the strength.

*Now I have ambition and meaning. A wife whom I adore, whom I wish to flourish beside. Appreciating each hour on this earth, raising and nurturing our future children, making impassioned love when we return to our chambers at night.*

*Living precariously and a glorious death be damned - I want to die old and grey in my bed, nuzzled against my Lady Knight.*

*In the arms of the woman I love.*

Circumstances were the product of choices. A plethora of infinitesimal decisions made in the heat of the moment seemingly without consequence – but all amounting to an undeniable whole when the Stranger came calling.

Jaime had travelled South as per their arrangement. He had attempted to bribe his way past enemy lines, offering his golden hand as incentive. He had been captured. He had been held prisoner. He had been grateful… an external force had interrupted his suicidal mission.

But his relief was short-lived – the entire incident simply prolonging the inexorable. Consigning him to a tent, awaiting a death sentence at the hands of the Dragon Queen instead of a warzone.

Sitting for hours, shackled to the pole like a beast of burden awaiting slaughter, his tormented spirit had lamented. Missing his wife and torturing himself by fixating upon his last glimpse of her watery blue eyes. Growing bitter and resentful of where he was and how the Gods ruthlessly sought retribution for his past sins. Their methods despicably cruel.

They had tantalised him, showing him the life he could have led - warm and loved with Brienne – only to set him on a course of self-destruction.
It was only worsened by how Jaime knew he deserved it. To be lashed to Cersei and condemned to sink within their sea of transgressions a condign punishment. If he listened closely, he could hear the wicked laughter of the fates, taunting and intoning, ‘Be careful what you wish for.’

Atonement came too late for the lion of Lannister, epiphany arriving at the eleventh hour, when the powers that governed life and death had already determined his penance.

Apathy for any plight had completely taken over by the point when Tyrion entered the tent. His little brother offering valiant but utterly misguided wisbons in an attempt to stoke a fire within Jaime’s torpedied veins.

Citing Cersei as though she were still the wind in his sails. Forgetting Brienne and paralysing him with how easily his beloved wife was disregarded by even his own kin.

Then Tyrion had the audacity to mention the innocents of King’s Landing. The population which dubbed him Kingslayer and spat his name. The very people Jaime had once saved, their unsung champion.

Decades ago, a Knight in his prime had shot himself in the proverbial foot, so they could continue their mundane existence, carrying on blissfully unaware of how close they came to annihilation. In all the years since they had repaid him with naught but disdain. His deeds never acknowledged – his character repeatedly vilified.

Jaime knew some of the blame was on him, he had chosen not to trumpet his heroics, feeling no need to make the smallfolk worship at his feet. But that too had gone against him. He was the ‘oathbreaker’ and 'man without honour,' whilst others cried their charitable acts for all to hear.

Daenerys Targaryen proclaimed her liberations. Hailed herself the saviour of the slaves. People openly adulated her, forgiving her lack of modesty because she was the ‘Breaker of Chains.’

But it seemed the Gods did not take humility – or lack thereof - into account, for the Dragon Queen was loved. For her generous (if not self-serving) act of freeing thralls, she would be rewarded with a crown. Whereas he had spared thousands from a far worse fate, only to have the universe arrange his downfall.

When he told his brother how he didn’t care about the innocents and never had, Jaime thought that he had reached his lowest point. Embodying and embracing the villainy which all were determined to see within him.

All except Brienne.

But then Tyrion had mentioned the baby and his ears had pricked. Floating the possibility of escape to Pentos before him, offering him an out. A chance to accomplish his goal, regardless of how small the window of opportunity may be.

This was his purpose after all, to protect his sister and unborn. To preserve family and decency, to make reparation for his wrongs. To strive to be a good man, worthy of Ser Brienne of Tarth, the
first female knight of the Seven Kingdoms and ruler of his miserable heart. To personify the version of himself reflected in her marbles of oceanic blue instead of the odious wretch he so often saw glowering back at him from looking glass or stream.

Accepting the mission had been easy, a glimmer of hope in the dread. If his motives were pure, just perhaps the deities would find solicitude within their aloof divinity and allow him to succeed.

He had rung the bells, pealing the Crown’s surrender. The rope grating against his palm as he sacrificed precious time to do the right thing.

He had fought the honourable fight. The dagger twice buried into his flesh, his price for another of Cersei’s contrivances, delivered by her sycophantic paramour. A pirate driven mad by jealousy, ambition and ego, never quite reconciling that he was just another cat’s paw to the dowager Queen.

Jaime had always imagined the Stranger’s voice would be that of a battlefield and dying men. But it seemed instead his beckon was a Dragon’s screech, the groan of bricks and mortar. The unique death knell accompanied by Cersei’s frantic mutterings and frightened sobs.

*Brienne was right – beneath the egomania is a frangible Mother-to-be…*

For the better part he remained silent. Unable to conjure conversation. Choking for air and bereft of words. In a more hospitable environment perhaps they would have talked or yelled. The twins requiring clarifying conversation for him to impart his emotional awakenings and their new demarcation.

But in their crumbling cairn, he could think only of his wife. Brienne’s steady image staving off his own hysterics, staring through his sister rather than at her like she wanted; going away inside as he had practised for years, to a place where cerulean eyes matched the sky and Valyrian steel was tapped impatiently against a leather clad thigh. Muscles rippling beneath the hide, zephyrs tossing strands of short flaxen hair.

Mayhaps given Cersei’s fragility, Jaime’s removal from his reality was a crime within itself. His singular ability to love only one rendering him unable to give either woman what they truly needed when he took his final bow.

Leaving his soulmate to a life of solitude and failing his twin in his duty of care.

As was so often the case, Brienne’s voice became his guide. Recalling her insights and wisdom from when they talked by an icy stream.
“Heartbreak and despair ravage a woman’s psyche. It leaves scars on the heart. All you can think of is the man you love returning to you, making it all go away with a few kind words.

Every woman wants to hear that nothing else matters. Whether it’s true or not – you will spend your life questioning. But it goes some of the way to mending the hurt.”


He comforted with a brother’s love, maintaining the platonic line. Attempting to shield her with his body, for the sake of their child who would never enter the world. Squeezing his eyes shut as the destruction grew closer.

Black behind his lids gave way to verdant grass and a smirk stretching up an ivory cheek.

“Are you just going to stand there all day?” Brienne demanded. “I never took you for craven - duel with me.”

Jaime looked down at two hands, left and right. In his escapisms he was always whole. He tossed Widow’s Wail from one to the other, wrapping his fingers leisurely around the hilt. “We must be gentle.” He insisted. “I will not risk harming you.”

“Because of this?” His wife turned to the side, allowing him to view the bulge of her stomach, placing two pats affectionately on their growing babe. “Our child is the merging of both of us husband – I am sure it can withstand a bout or two of swordplay.”

She resumed defensive stance and he smiled, his entire face lighting up at the sight of his magnificent woman. Eyes crinkling at the corners, beatitude making his heart soar as external oblivion claimed him.

Chapter End Notes

This was a shorter chapter - but the next one (coming on Saturday) is longer to make up for it. :)
Optimism vs Rationale

Chapter Summary

Cover Art by: Ro_Nordmann

"I will wait for you..."
Lyrics, War of Hearts by Ruelle
Verse 1, Line 3

Chapter Notes

Hello folks!
First of all, I want to say a big thank you for the lovely supportive comments on the last chapter, it really means a lot to me, especially as we continue on our journey of re-interpreting show canon. Addressing the last two episodes of the series is always difficult (I even write it with a heavy heart), but also necessary in order to move the story on and past the finale.
Therefore, in line with compliance and realism, the next two chapters come with an unavoidable angst caution.
Know that there is a light on the other side of them. Hugs! <3
The role of a woman is unforgivingly cruel.

Brienne stared out an arch window, stopping her ascension to Evenfall’s rooftop. Pausing upon one of the landings placed intermittently up the winding staircase, their positioning intended to allow the climber respite. The black speck she had spied in her peripheral vision slowly growing larger against the midday sky.

Unbidden her thoughts turned to Catelyn Stark and the way her Lady’s heart had bled. The fierce woman had tried desperately to hold onto her husband and children, to keep them safe from harm. But her efforts were to no avail and she watched powerlessly as one by one they slipped between her fingers like water.

I’m sorry my Lady, I never understood you. And when faced with your losses I could only provide trite words of comfort. Now here I stand, at the mercy of a parchment scroll, where all the things of greatest import are wrested from my control. I have done all I can for the man I love and now I must bide my time. My role amounts to patience and disquietude. Just as you warned me....

She perched upon the marble sill, the stonework beneath scraping her doeskin breeches, well-worn boots crinkling as she braced the ball of her foot against the floorboards. Training her gaze upon the inky blot, watching its approach, forcing the air through her windpipes whilst she waited for undefined edges to become noticeably feathered wings. Reminding herself this ineluctable day was a forward progression, a positive sign. The next step necessary to be reunited with her husband’s caress.

The wait upon Tarth had been torturous. A callous hush which loomed with unequivocal foreboding, making each day seem a year. She’d received no word from her Maester or crew – but
she did not expect to, not at this stage. It was Brienne herself who had advised their silence. Messages could be intercepted, the most perfectly laid of plans foiled by an impulse to communicate. She would not take that chance – as far as she knew, the Crown was yet to be settled around a sovereign’s temples.

She was not optimal company, her stern and snappy ways aggravated by her apprehension. Emitting a dour aura and a near permanent scowl as her myriad of worries swirled and battered against her skull like bats in a cavern. Soon even Podrick had deemed it wise to leave her to her own devices. Though he was sure to manifest daily at noon, sword drawn, ready to duel. Honing his skills whilst providing her an outlet. He remained quiet for the better part - conversation a talent Brienne lacked under the best of circumstances - and she appreciated her Squire’s astute perception. When she eventually helped him up from the dust, he gifted her with only commiserating smiles, reading the weight of the world in the lines which creased her brow.

By day she circled the practice yard, the familiar scent of dirt and metal granting her small comforts as she stalked her old stomping ground. Beating any hapless takers into submission until she had bested each of the household knights and those of lesser prowess were too daunted to submit a challenge. In their absence she hacked away at straw dummies, slicing them to ribbons of hessian. Each stuffed inanimate torso transformed in her mind’s eye to an aggressor in Jaime’s path. An enemy which she could vanquish for him from afar. Eventually she would cease from sheer exhaustion, bent over in panting breaths. Perspiration dotting her brow and slickening her palm against the hilt, until the slippery metal became difficult to grasp.

That was another thing she had noticed. The cold was receding. The evenings growing more tolerable, blunting the crisp nip of the westerly blasts which came in from the straits.

Against the backdrop of the setting sun, she would pick her way down the rocky slopes until she hit cool sands. Removing her boots and carrying them with her amongst the dunes, finding a place to sit. There she sank her bare feet amidst grains of salt and grit, hugging her knees to her chest as she watched the amber fireball slip beyond the horizon, casting a golden pathway to infinity across the rapidly darkening waters. Here in her seclusion she could be truly alone with her thoughts, the inner reckoning which she quashed with hours of strenuous exercise. Berating herself for her decision making and agonising over the uncertainty of her future.

My moon’s blood has not come, not since the Wolfswood. But this is not unusual for me…

If I am with child, is it reckless of me to be training so rigorously? But it is my only release…

Why did I do this to myself? Suspend myself in limbo. I could be with Jaime now. Seeing what he sees, battling at his side. He came to me, flanked my side against the undead. How could I leave him to face this? Abandoned, without allies or a helping hand. Save for Bronn - and that is only if the sellsword comes through.

I deserve all I am going through. If I had gone, I would know if he is…
No. Duty first. I am where I need to be. Where Jaime needs me to be.

But then - am I doing the right thing? Am I looking after myself? Or am I bungling that as well?

I do not know how I should be – I have no Mother, no ladies, no guide. My Maester is at sea. I am ignorant of these ways and am surely flailing. I cannot sleep, I have no appetite, I am stressed, I miss my husband, I fear for his safety. This is a cycle I cannot break. Not even for my potential pregnancy…. Though that makes me incompetent in every regard.

But then – what if I’m not expecting? All this panic is for naught, my sidelining fruitless and unnecessary.

I don’t know if I am. I cannot know. My moon blood would be my surest sign, but even that is unreliable…

Her thoughts ran in rings. Her tension too rigid to be alleviated by the beauty and serenity of the surrounding nature. In frustration she would rise, unfolding her long legs and brushing the clinging sand from her thighs in the gathering gloom. Making her way back up to the stronghold to repeat another night of insomnia.

All that is about is change…. 

The raven was visible in detail now, swooping lower, angling its flight towards the unmanned Maester’s tower. Its training guiding it towards delivery, expecting rest and a meal as its reward.

Leaping to her feet, she descended back the way she came, bounding down the steps two at a time.

The new era begins today.
Urgent Summons for the Evenstar of Tarth.

Immediate Mandatory Attendance at King’s Landing.

Summit to be held at the Dragonpit in due haste.

Representative Lords and Ladies of each Kingdom called to audience.

No claimants to the Crown remain.

The fate of the realm is to be decided.

“Hmmmm.” Lord Selwyn placed the correspondence back upon his desk, neutral of expression but contemplative. “What do you make of this daughter?”

Brienne paced an agitated line back and forth in the solar, arms crossed upon her chest in equal measure self-defence and solace. “I am quite stunned. I fully expected that note to be advising of the Dragon Queen’s victory. Instead it would indicate she is deceased.”

The Evenstar folded his arms in a similar manner to her own, his steady blue eyes following her as she pivoted on the spot and changed direction to begin another lap. “You have been so reticent during your stay that you are unaware of the talk of the dockyard. The sailors say that King’s Landing smoulders. The Targaryen unleashed her black beast, burning the Keep and a great deal of the city to the ground. We can assume she perished in the process or that her inhumanity was repaid in kind by the hand of justice.”

The Lady knight wheeled around, mouth falling slightly agog before she checked herself.
Jaime prevented a fiery massacre by murdering Aerys decades ago - only to have the same crime exacted at the hands of The Mad King’s daughter.

“If this be true, then I am glad she is gone. For such an atrocity she deserves no less punishment.” Brienne’s expression was flinty. “Besides, I did not fully trust in her pardon for the crime of Kingslaying, the decree was never explicitly issued. It was merely the Starks who outnumbered her and stayed her wrath. With Daenerys on the Throne our future remained uncertain.” She let out a small disconcerted huff. “Not that my good-sister was a viable option either.”

“And does your husband share this opinion?” Lord Selwyn’s tone was dark. “Much is said about the twin Lion’s closeness.”

“Cease Father, I know what you are implying. You will not undermine our relationship; Jaime and I keep no secrets from each other.”

He raised his eyebrows ever so slightly, choosing to change the topic. Tapping the parchment where it fell amongst the other reports and documents pertaining to the running of their island. “What does this correspondence infer about the wellbeing of your husband?”

“It doesn’t.”

“Do not be so hasty to answer daughter. The Lannisters were the ruling family, technically he was in line…”

At this a flicker of pride caused a tug at the corner of her mouth.

My lion is cut from a different cloth. Immune to the seduction of power and station. He cares about more meaningful pursuits - honour and kin.

“It makes small difference. Jaime wouldn’t want the throne, even if it were offered. He is not that way inclined. A statement about claimants would not be relevant to him.”

“A Lannister without ambition? There’s a wonder.” Her Father’s remark was dry, disbelieving.

“You don’t know him how I do.” The declaration of the exclusive insight gave her satisfaction. Never had she dreamed there would be another being with whom she could profess such intimacy.

“Evidently.” He scrutinised her face, searching for information which she may be masking beneath her surface. “Have you received word you have not shared?” Brienne shook her head, allowing him to see her perturbation. Once appeased, he continued. “I was going to ask you to attend in my stead.”

She took three long strides forward, gripping the back of the chair opposite him. The seat she should have been occupying had she not been unable to keep still, every fibre of her being charged with anxious energy. “In truth Father, that is exactly what I was hoping. I mean no offence to your
position, but you do not know the key players as I do. This decision is not one to be made when partially uninformed and I am eager to learn the outcome of all involved. My husband most especially.”

“Then safe journey daughter.” Lord Selwyn’s stare was penetratingly grim but not uncharitable. “I suspect it shall be many moons until you return once more. If ever.”

Dragonfire was elective in its destruction. Random fingers reaching out, its prints immortalised in debris and sediment. Eerily without pattern, smelting architecture and reforming it anew, the abstract sculptures framing an instant in history.

Brienne walked the desiccated corridors of the Red Keep, inhaling the clinging aromas of ash and sulphur, conjuring memories of another fight, when the undead rose in continuous loops and the unique odour of a scaled beast’s breath symbolised relief as opposed to terror. For the residents of King’s Landing – the same was untrue.

Impressions of the carnage were still being cleared, the haunting wraiths of human silhouettes, their pale outlines contrasting against the scorched and blackened walls. Others entombed in liquefied granite, casting ghastly statuettes, capturing the moment animation ceased and the Stranger snatched the soul from their physical shell. It was enough to make a more squeamish person queasy, surveying the complete disregard for human life, the mass hecatomb an abomination to Gods and mortals alike.

The Lady Knight came to a standstill at the base of the White Sword Tower, fingering the solidified drizzles of mortar running down from the ceiling above the entrance. The petrified minerals creating a bizarre mural, a map of vertical unchartered rivers, wild in the artistry of pure defacement.

Craning her neck upwards she beheld blue sky – roof and floors levelled by hellfire, the blast slicing clean through several stories. Yet miraculously not three paces to her left, the residence of the Kingsguard remained untouched. As whole and inhabitable as a normal day.

*Surely the Seven could not condone such arbitrary arson. To steal life in droves but spare inorganic history. This must bear the trademark of more malevolent, indiscriminate forces. Rhllor*
who sends shadows to do his bidding and only succours those who incinerate innocents for his worship.

How I hope Jaime took refuge here. In the halls spared from roaring flame. Somehow it would be an even greater tragedy to lose my love for the want of a few feet in the opposite direction.

The creak of floorboards drew her attention and Brienne did a double take when she noticed the boy watching her, his wheeled chair buckling the weakened wood as it rolled closer. She released the breath which had caught in her chest, steeled nerves the only thing which prevented her hand from flying to her heart. “I apologise My Lord – I did not hear your approach. I’m afraid I was deep in thought.”

“Yes, that was plain.” Bran Stark nodded, she could see he was attempting to convey an apologetic mien but his long-standing detachment from his physical body skewed the expression, diminishing it to a miniscule flinch of facial muscles. “It was not my intention to startle you.”

“It is alright, this holdfast is rife with phantoms. Had it not been you I may just as soon find myself drawing my blade in defence against a trick of the light.” Her countenance was soft when compared against her usual austerity but still she kept her appearance impassive.

The gathering of leaders came with the assurance of diplomatic immunity, King’s Landing and the Red Keep’s remains deemed neutral territory for the duration of the summit.

Dignitaries arrived in the city flying a peace banner above their sigil, signifying their acceptance of the terms. An armistice to which all adhered in exchange for their position on the panel which would become legend. Breaches and violations of the treaty were met with zero tolerance.

Brienne knew her dealings with the Northerners would be strained in the wake of her disappearance, anticipating avoidance in lieu of confrontation as per the conditions of their attendance. Yet here before her sat a wolf – nay raven – and the Lady Knight found no reason to flee his company.

I do not know him; his character is foreign to me.

During her time in Winterfell she had minimal grounds to pursue a bond with the enigmatic lad, her promise to Lady Stark pertaining solely to the girls.

But this boy was Catelyn’s and although I was not sworn to him, still she would want me to care. He sits a cripple due to my husband and even though they have made their peace, I still feel the twinge of responsibility.

“Permit me, My Lord.” Striding towards him, she took the handles of his wheeled chair, rolling him forward. “I do not trust the integrity of the floor on which we stand, from my vantage I can see it warping beneath our weights. We cannot know what eradication has occurred under our feet.”

She began the walk down the long hallway to more stable ground, ensuring the path ahead was
clear of obstacles.

“You are most kind to consider me-” The young man spoke primarily in monotone but perchance she detected a slight lilt. “-Especially given the state of the realm. For many it would be simpler if I plummeted once more.” A small grunt sounded low in his throat which she interpreted as his portrayal of amusement. “One less piece upon the board.”

“Well not I.” Brienne reassured. “I have little to no interest in this meeting, as long as the Kingdoms fall into capable hands who bring about continual peace I will be at ease.”

“Then why do you come?”

“Duty. Responsibility to the population of Westeros and a more personal errand…” Brienne trailed off, unable to divulge her true motives.

“I know more than most Ser Brienne. Fear not…” This time he turned back to look at her, a smug smile toying on his otherwise inscrutable face. “…I long since let bygones go with your husband and seek no retribution. It was all part of a greater plan.”

*Did Samwell break and disclose our matrimony? Or was this insight gained through more unconventional means…*

Remaining quiet – not wishing to either confirm or deny his assertion - she steered Bran into an abandoned sitting room.

The chamber was lit by afternoon sun, bearing only the scars of flame and hint of smoke, the pungency infused into the wood. Parking the young Lordling into a warming ray she straightened and nodded at him respectfully. “I should take my leave.”

“There is no need.” Bran folded his hands together, resting them upon his lap. “Stay and speak with me awhile. We shan’t be disturbed if that is what troubles you.”

She resisted the compulsion to peer suspiciously around the room. “How can you know that?”

“The ravens watch. They are my eyes and often ears.” He fixed her with his dark brown pools, the pitch black of pupil melding with earthen mud, spookily resembling the birds of which he spoke. “Can I tell you an observation of mine? It may seem obscure.”

“As you wish.” Brienne crossed one leg over the other and leant against the mantlepiece, disturbing its fine coating of dust and cinders. Collecting the grey film between two of her fingers she frowned.

*It will take an age to restore the capital to its prior splendour.*

The boy spectated her actions with fascination, bobbing his head and beginning to talk. “I can now attest to much knowledge of the world we live in. Elaborate on events both past and future. But oftentimes it is the queerest of findings that shape our interactions.” He took a deep breath. “I had a friend once. A true friend, the likes of which are seldom to come across. His name was Hodor and for years he carried me upon his back, acted as my guard.”
“From the way you speak of him, I can deduce that he is amongst the casualties of recent years.” Brienne lowered her eyeline in an act of condolence. “I am sorry, it is a dreadful thing to lose someone who is dear to you.”

“I thank you. His death troubles me still. I was to blame, from every angle I revisit it, his blood is upon my hands. I know the burden of being unable to forgive one’s self, of causing harm to those you did not intend to. You see... I cannot blame Ser Jaime. Not when I have done worse.” He retreated inward, reliving images of horror and Brienne waited patiently for his return to the present. After a beat he blinked, refocussing on her and the topic at hand. “I mention Hodor not to be morbid. I do so as I’ve noticed a correlation between stature and nature, that frequently it is the tallest people who have the largest capacity for caring. Hodor protected me without concern for himself, and you demonstrate only selflessness and loyalty - it reminds me of him.”

The Lady Knight shook her head dismissively. “That is very courteous of you to say but I regret I cannot accept such a compliment when it is undeserved.”

“I have viewed you from afar Ser Brienne – in the North leading the left flank, defending Ser Jaime, and in your interactions with my sisters. I do not give out commendations lightly. I meant what I said.”

“Then I’m sure you would agree that your sister would take an opposing stance upon the topics of my allegiance and reliability.”

“I do not deny that Sansa is aggrieved but mayhaps of late the Lady Stark breeds discontent.” He pursed his lips, withholding his next sentence and Brienne was overcome with the distinctive feeling that relations between the Northern siblings may be fraying. “If you will excuse me Ser, I do not wish to be impolite but as my abilities of sight expand it seems speaking at length becomes more taxing and I find myself fatigued.”

“I understand.” Brienne kept her reply short, equally as eager to withdraw from the awkward exchange. Highly suspecting he had let too much slip and was terminating the conversation.

*Fine with me.*

“I will take my leave.” She bowed graciously, heading for the door, only to pause before crossing the threshold. *If he does possess a wealth of knowledge... “Lord Stark...”*

The young man raised his head in response, gazing at her blankly. Prompting himself to respond to the name he would have claimed in a previous life.

*It is worth asking.*

Since arriving she had devoted her time to trawling the Keep, seeking clues as to the whereabouts of Jaime whilst they awaited the Dornish retinue. Having the greatest distance to travel, the Martell representative would round out the assortment of nobles who now inhabited the capital.

She did not for one second expect that Jaime would be in attendance, in fact she would estimate he was far removed from the unfolding revolution. Especially if he had been successful in spiriting away Cersei and their unborn.
But someone must have information… I will not be so bold as to enquire after my husband directly – that would be impudent and possibly counterproductive. An isolated interaction is not enough to secure trust.

“…do you happen to know the whereabouts of Lord Tyrion?”

Bran tilted his chin slightly, registering his version of surprise at her lack of intel. “He is held prisoner, for multiple offences against the late Dragon Queen. It is his fate too which we will be deciding at the summit.”

The title of Queen was a fearsome thing, the exaltation of the honorific and its accompanying whiff of power capable of transforming a person. Seldom for the better.

“You defied me.”

Brienne turned in the direction of Sansa’s voice, halting her descent from the raised platform.

The meeting in the Dragonpit had taken many unexpected turns and her brain remained in turmoil. But the Lady Knight would never concede to cowardice. Newly decreed monarch or not, she would face her former liege and answer the accusation accordingly.

“Time was of the essence and my alternatives were slim.” Sadness filled her as she beheld the young woman to whom she had been sworn. Affection for her charge unable to melt away as simply as winter snows. “It was never my intention to betray you My Lady- Your Grace.” Brienne corrected herself, making the adjustment. “I will not stand before you and make excuses. I know what I did was dishonourable. I apologise sincerely and humbly for the slight I have inflicted. Be assured that guilt will follow me throughout the years - an oathbreaker’s shroud. But sometimes in life, choices must be made and that night my loyalties realigned.”

The red head peered down the bridge of her nose, glacial eyes reminiscent of frost. Their respective positions in both politics and physical situation enabling the Stark girl to look lowly upon her former ally. “I made my orders implicitly clear. I had assisted you up until that point against my better judgment. I permitted the Lannister to stay, gave the enemy hospitality under my roof and you repaid me with treachery. Covert marriages and collusion, fleeing under the cover of darkness.”

*She knows - though after what Bran said, it does not come as a shock. There are many ways Sansa...*
could have become privy to the information. It matters little now anyway...

“You left me with no other option. Under normal circumstances I would never have wilfully broken trust with you, but my husband took precedence – it is expected of a wife.”

“It is expected – for a sworn sword to obey commands.”

“I love him.” A line formed in the centre of Brienne’s brow as she tried to interpret the frigidity which enveloped the Northern Queen. Her new carapace of ice impregnable to emotional pleas. “Can you not for an instant put yourself in my place? Feel the panic and upheaval which the events of that night caused in my heart?”

Sansa didn’t even blink. “I warned you of the consequences…”

“Sister.” Their new King’s voice was steady as he pointedly interrupted. “Does it not give us great security in our new roles to know that the political immunity stands until all parties have returned to their respective Kingdoms?” He regarded her with his eyes of hickory, the undercurrent thinly disguised.

Lady Stark’s cheekbones were chiselled and sharp, her perception just as keen. “Of course brother, which is why I was about to suggest that Ser Brienne resume her duties in the North…”

“I’m afraid that won’t be possible. Lady Lannister is both liege of the Westerlands and heir to Tarth. Both provinces under my dominion. I know you will be sorry to part with her Sansa, but her new responsibilities bind Ser Brienne here.”

The Queen of the North gathered her skirts in her hand, expression pinched. “The boundaries of our realms and governance are clear.” She shot Brienne a withering look. “I would suggest they are abided by.” Rotating on her heel, Sansa withdrew with Arya by her side.

Bran looked somewhat pained. “I fear I have just forged a rod for my back. But what is one to do? Familial bonds compel us to make decisions, even when our instincts tell us otherwise.”

“I can appreciate that Your Grace. I myself have faced similar quandaries in recent times.”

“I’m sure you have.”

Brienne glanced at him, grateful for his intercession and curious as to how he would navigate his way down from the platform. “Do you require any assistance Your Grace?” Her long legs made quick work of the small steps to stand at his side.

“Thank you but Ser Davos has already offered and first I must treat with my Uncle.” His tone was resigned. “I suppose this is the measure of my life from here on in.”

“I do not know what to say Your Grace. Your new position inspires equal measures of congratulations and commiserations.”
This seemed to amuse him, and he raised his eyebrows ever so slightly. “You will be seeking my new Lord Hand I assume?”

“It had occurred to me.”

“I have sent him to freshen up, recover from his imprisonment. When you are ready, my attendants shall gladly direct you to his chambers.”

“I appreciate it. Everything.” Brienne bowed formally. “If I can be of any aid, please do not hesitate to summon me.”

That response pleased him, a small bounce of light illuminating the mysterious depths of his eyes. “I will most certainly bear that in mind.”

When did a doorknob become the enemy? A panel of hinged wood less a barricade and more a safeguard?

Her hand lingered just shy of the circular brass; the other fist poised to knock but coming up short. With a laborious sigh she leant her forehead against the varnished oak, mollifying herself with deep steadying breaths.

Hours had passed as she dawdled in her room, fortifying her layers of composure and endurance. Deluding herself that she was being considerate and giving Tyrion the opportunity to recuperate after his ordeal.

The truth was …her good-brother lay beyond the grain. The lone person with the highest likelihood of providing answers about her husband - whether they be to her benefit or detriment.

Yet here she was, stalling in the hall. Her resilience a brittle leaf, having plummeted from the verdant branches on high, crashing to the ground dehydrated and fragile. Stripped of moisture by harsh conditions, just as her tear ducts had been purged in an abandoned courtyard. The remaining corporeality a fragile husk, easily prone to damage. She could cradle her remaining hopes in her palm, handling them as gently as she would the transparent, thin foliage but with the simplest of pressures applied, it would disintegrate to irreparable fragments. An effloresce of both nature and soul.

This I not me – where is my conviction? I should be ashamed of myself for entertaining such
pessimism, giving doubts purchase, yielding to the nightmare.

Though even as she squared her shoulders, her knuckles delivering three sharp raps to the door, images of the razed city surfaced, logic compelling her to consider the inescapability of the annihilation.

“If it is the Unsullied come to exact their vengeance, then at least have the decency to wait until I am drunk.” Tyrion’s dismayed tones sounded from within. “I am only halfway there.”

“It is not.” Brienne called back, wondering if the closed door muffled the distinctiveness of her voice.

Boldly she closed the distance to the knob, cool brass unceremoniously connecting with her pale skin as she turned it and invited herself inside, clicking it shut behind her once again when she entered. Unconcerned with being found alone with her new kin.

*We are siblings by marriage – it is not untoward.*

The chamber was sizeable, though too tiny by half to be considered auspicious enough to house the King’s Hand. It had been chosen for its inhabitability, being for the better part untouched by dragonfire save for a few patched holes in the adjoining wall on the far side of the room. Her good-brother sat in a plush chair by the fireside, the furniture notably mismatched as functioning pieces were salvaged from the wreckage and put to practical use.

“Ser Brienne.” His brows disappeared beneath his shaggy fringe as he took a lengthy slurp from his goblet. “Forgive me, I was not expecting visitors. Most especially not you.”

“Pray - do not ask me to depart. I have come to talk.” She lowered herself into the chair opposite him, the upholstery charred by flame and gilded legs weakened for their ordeal. They creaked painfully as they bore the bulk of her mannish frame and she leant forward, clasping her hands between her knees and staring Tyrion dead in the eye.

“A change for you.” He remarked with amusement. “Last we spoke – you weren’t much of a conversationalist.”

“I mean no offence but last we conversed your question was not very tactful.” She chose to be direct, deciding that the most successful manner of communication with the younger Lannister would be similar to how she handled Jaime. “Though I think we both know that topic is now a nonissue and best placed aside.”

Tyrion grimaced, his eyes widening at her candour, pushing the pitcher of wine in her direction. “In that case pour yourself a cup. It sounds like you need it almost as much as I do.”

“No thank you. My drinking the night of the banquet was the exception not the rule.”

“I don’t pretend to understand, but I can appreciate that it leaves more for me.” He refilled his own chalice, leaning back and looking at her expectantly.
"Where do I begin?"

“I need to ask you questions and I would hope that our association has given you enough confidence in my character, that you feel you can answer me honestly. In turn, I have some divulgences to confide.” Brienne swallowed. “I implore you for sincerity and I promise the same in return. We need not dance around formalities and mince words. Without frankness the point of this meeting is moot.”

“Because you welcomed my forthrightness so well last time.”

“Things change. Necessity reshapes us.” Her blue gaze was steel, waiting. The patience of a woman with time on her hands combined with the staunch obstinance of an interrogator, just waiting for their subject to crack. “Do we have an agreement?”

“Hmmm, you have piqued by curiosity and I’ll wager I can anticipate several of your enquiries.” Tyrion mused theatrically, sloshing the burgundy liquid around the vessel, his expression a vivid mockery of deep rumination before dropping all pretence in one quick move. “Ask your first.”

“Have you seen Ser Bronn?”

“Bonn?!” She was pleased that his cocksure demeanour had hastily been replaced with confusion. “That sorry whoreson? What in Seven Hells do you want with him?”

“Don’t answer a question with a question.”

“Alright.” He blinked several times in succession. “Fine we will play it your way. Yes – I did as a matter of fact happen across him. It was quite unexpected, last we crossed paths he broke my nose and aimed a crossbow at our heads. Yet there he was, yanking me behind a tent in Daenerys’ camp. I damn near soiled myself until I realised it was Bronn. He talks a big game, but at the end of the day he has a coin purse in place of a heart and a man like that is easily tractable. I do not even know how he got through the lines! But then, I have never been able to wrap my head around half the things that crafty bastard has accomplished…”

“I sent him.”

“You what?!”

“Ser Bronn was operating under my employ rather than Cersei’s. I struck a more unmediated bargain with him shall we say.” Brienne revelled in how she had floored him. You and the sellsword both. “More to the point Lord Tyrion. What did he want?”

“Information. Primarily how to get inside the Red Keep without detection. I assumed he was making his way back to claim some sort of payment before the monarchy lay in ruins, but with a dirk at my throat I don’t tend to ask questions. He had told me he intended to lay low in the North but that was before he showed up outside King’s Landing. I gave him the same information as I gave Jai-”
“You stopped.”

Tyrion’s stare became furtive, his eyes glazed. “Are we to discuss my brother?”

“Jaime is the reason I’m here.” Her octave was low, reserved. Brienne was unaware what poorly contained emotion must have shown on her face, but whatever it was made him soften.

“I know not what transpired between the two of you after I left. But I did meet with Jaime. He had been taken prisoner by the Unsullied.”

Her breath hitched. “And…?”

“I released him, disobeying the Dragon Queen and tasking him with ringing the bells to signal the City’s surrender. After he was to follow the hidden tunnels which lead into the Keep, stealing away with Cersei and …” A panicked glance.

“I know about the babe.” She reassured.

“Oh.” He recovered well but she still detected his surprise. “I had arranged a rowboat to be awaiting them, giving them passage to begin their new lives in Essos.”

This time he did not try and mask his bated breath, gauging her reaction, awaiting her womanly outburst of jilted heartbreak.

Instead she exhaled and nodded. “Good. That works brilliantly with my plan.”

“Your plan?” Tyrion Lannister was bewildered. Always accustomed to being the smartest man in the room, a league ahead of the pace, letting the rest of the court play catch up. But he had learnt some harrowing lessons of his own of late. About what happens when you miscalculate, read a situation incorrectly. A pang of empathy engulfed her heart.

“Jaime didn’t tell you?”

“In all due respect – tell me what?” He edged forward on his chair, balancing on the very edge, his brow furrowing as he peered out from under his haphazard mop of curls.

She worried her lip, rationalising aloud, piecing together her husband’s thought process. “You must have angered him greatly. Caused deep offence for him to keep such a secret from you. Though in all likelihood you are not to blame.” Her lips twitched upwards, an affectionate smile ghosting across her features as she thought of her complex mate. “Jaime can be far touchier than he lets on. As you probably know a sensitive soul lies beneath his bluster.”

“Ser Brienne…” Tyrion grasped at every syllable, dumbfounded whilst he attempted to make mental connections of his own. “…You speak of him with so much love, such evident devotion. When he returned here for Cersei.”

“Yes. As per our mutual agreement. We are man and wife.” She permitted her grin to broaden, the radiance of her pride outweighing her concern over crooked teeth or unattractive appearance. “It is fitting that I would seek to spare my step-child and good sister.”
It was only as the glow of her euphoria ebbed that she registered how his face became drawn. The quiver of his bearded chin, his eyes inundating with watery tears. The most loquacious of the Lannister siblings parting his lips to speak, only to silently snap them shut again, covering his mouth with a quaking hand.

Dread and gooseflesh spread across her skin, the surface rising with pimpled peaks even beneath her padded tunic, carried by the cold rush of blood which solidified her arteries. Her stomach found her boots and continued falling, through the floorboards to the unexplored mazes below whilst her heart squeezed its way into her throat. Suffocating her intake of air and amplifying her pulse, until it hammered deafeningly in her ears.

Brienne knew what he was going to say. His face said it all. Haemorrhaging hope, light and love from her life through the severed strings of her heart.

“Say it.” She begged, needing to be put out of her misery. The mercy of a killing blow.

“Jaime and Cersei did not make it out.” His mismatched lakes produced a bulbous drip, falling from his sockets with a plop. Shattering against the arm of the chair in an inaudible crash. Though to her ears it was loud enough to rouse sleepers. “They died in the tunnels below our feet. Buried by bricks – I discovered them myself. Saw it with my own eyes. Uncovered their faces. I had so little time, but I had to know what befell them.” He swiped at his eyes angrily. “My misjudgement with Daenerys cost me my family. She took all from me, even after I threw my pin back at her, it was too late. Recriminations could not reverse what had been done… but I can only surmise my outburst tipped her off. They imprisoned me and during that time the bodies were taken. I presume she burnt them, not wanting to risk a shrine to her enemies. I am glad at least I saw them one last time – I was robbed of even a funeral and now I’m even more sorrowful. For I know she took that rite from you as well.”

Inwardly Brienne crumbled, ribcage jouncing with shuddering expirations. The sob of a drought, where cheeks ran drier than creek beds and tears refused to come even though they may provide blessed release. The empty skies promising no rain.

Pessimism was an affliction and a kindness. Alleviating a bereaved system of shock. Her shattered psyche hysterically screaming that she always knew it would come to this. Love was not made for the likes of her - it was far too decadent. She an anomaly of creation who had miraculously survived despite the odds. The exquisite emotion was crafted for graceful maids, elusive women of beauty draped in gossamer who inspired dreams to take flight. Enchanting men and whisking away their hearts to ride on clouds of fantasy brought to fruition. For her it was an ever-evasive mark, the universe wielding harsh reminders of her own unworthiness whenever she dared to court even the passing notion. Snatching away the object of her infatuation through a waterfall of blood from a gorget or the pounding of a horse’s hooves as it passed beneath Winterfell’s gates.
Throughout her month-long affair in the North, she had earnestly believed the worst was coming, the ending nigh when it had only just begun. Yet the crash was spectacular when she was proven correct, a heart warned, but still left vulnerable by the act of opening even slightly.

But then Jaime returned, obliterating her cynical certainty. Dangling the temptation of ‘them’ – living and loving together forever - on a string, cemented by vows before the Old Gods.

And she had unravelled for him, let herself have faith. Bonded irreversibly and grown accustomed to the fit of his frame against hers. The husky murmur of his voice in her ear. Dependent and afraid, besotted and reliant. Risky, precarious, glorious belonging. Hard come by optimism where she braved looking ahead, dared planning a future where an eternity with him would never be enough.

*Why did I chance to believe I could have it? Have him. Jaime was a dream for me, an exquisite illusion come reality. Why let me taste it to have it taken away? Why torment by giving that which I’ve never known, to rip it from me...*

*Never has there been a cut so cruel. A bite so vicious. And now I’m too numb to mourn. Paralysed by the eventuation of the grief I always knew was on the horizon.*

She gulped down her devastation, an apparent answer presenting itself.

*Surely, I’m with child. Certainly, that is the purpose. To ensure the lineage does not cease, that Jaime’s trueborn progeny is born to inhabit the new world. This is the reason for my calm, upset would rattle his babe in my womb.*

Embodying the inner strength which always was her signature, she calmed her breathing, stilled her mind. Returning awareness to her good-brother and the chamber, ignoring the receding shade of sorrow which misted the peripherals of her vision.

“Where is Ser Bronn?”

Fortunately, the King’s Hand did not press on the topic of her anguish, recognising the need to carry on. *Likely he has functioned since in a similar manner.*

“I’m afraid I do not know. I have not seen him since the encounter I relayed.”

“I gave him my word he would be compensated if he tried to aid Jaime. From your account he held true to his end of the bargain.”

Tyrion nodded sadly. “I myself have several debts to settle with the sellsword. Fear not, I already have a plan for his due remuneration which I am sure will cover us both.”

“Thank you. I should like to hear from him. See if there is any further light he can shed on the
tragedy.” She sniffed once, her passages burning. The desire to cry overwhelming but the manifestation absent.

“I as well. Now I know the significance of his role.”

Brienne nodded, shakily rising to her feet. Needing to be alone and address the aching chasm which engulfed where her heart had been.

The King’s Hand watched her go, interrupting her departure when she reached the door. “We will find Bronn.” He pledged, glancing down into his wine cup before adding. “I know we are very different people but now I know that we are family – do not be estranged good-sister. You are the only kin I’ve got.”

She nodded stoically, escaping into the hallway.
Purpose vs Provision

Chapter Summary

Cover Art by: Ro_Nordmann

"Shadows creep..."
Lyrics, War of Hearts by Ruelle
Verse 2, Line 2

Chapter Notes

Hang in there folks - this is the last chapter that deals with show canon. Just a few more heavy, angsty, necessary points from the final episode to work through.

See the end of the chapter for more notes
“Where?” Brienne’s low voice echoed in the vastness of the cavern, reverberating back to her even over the din of workers clearing rubble. Her legs trembled ever so slightly, knees threatening to buckle as her brain manually transmitted instructions to remain strong. Replacing her sinew and marrow with metaphorical mortar. Cladding her chest in an invisible cuirass solely constructed to deflect emotion.

Tyrion stood merely a few feet from her, his face etched in concern and woe. Eying her cautiously as though she were a vat of wildfire, combustible and liable to erupt at any moment.

She almost envied her good-brother his time of imprisonment. If only she could be sequestered, shutting out the world without interruption. Giving her fraught spirit a period to process how she would never again hear Jaime’s laugh, be gifted with his easy smiles and glinting emeralds.

*To have them extinguished in such a miserable place…*

Brienne sucked her lips into her mouth, biting down on them hard as she looked about. The scent of dust was strong and the mountains of bricks seemingly endless. To some extent she felt removed from it all, trapped in a nightmare sequence which she was waiting to come to an end. A small part of her longing for the dawn when Jaime would nose her awake.

*Mayhaps I will choose confinement when the times comes- surely then I would have the solitude I seek. But until then I must persevere.*

The Lady Knight felt displaced. Her direction undefined for the first time in years. Beholden to the Gods that she at least had purpose, the lone comfort which she clung too, pouring all her energy into a possibility. Needing to believe that she would fulfil Jaime’s wishes and give him a child.

*A babe he will never hold.*

It was surreal the way an outcome which she had never been sold upon, was now her sole salvation. The adverse effects distress could have on her reproductive system, keeping her seams stitched tight, threads knotted. Reinforcement against falling apart. Her golden lion had loved his children, the urge to save his and Cersei’s unborn a huge catalyst in his ultimate demise. She owed it to her husband to keep herself healthy, to bind her dolour, for it would only cause harm to their prospective scion.
Lord Tyrion had requested she remain at King’s Landing for a sennight at the minimum. Insistent that she linger long enough to come to terms and feel adequately composed to speak with him. The Hand of the King was eager to learn what unfolded after he left Winterfell, how she came to be his good-sister and the intricacies of their scheme.

An enquiry to which she had only despondently responded, “It matters little now. The constructions of a plan are only interesting if it was successful. Otherwise it is just an elaborate lesson in failure.”

Nevertheless, he was determined not to part with her, his own grief still raw and appearing bolstered by a fellow mourner. So, she had acquiesced and remained for the extra days.

*Though they are swiftly coming to an end.*

Podrick raised his head from assisting in the clean-up, seeking her location and giving her an empathetic smile. It had become habitual for him to check on her. Rapping on her door at regular intervals throughout the night, only leaving when she told him in a strong, clear voice that she was fine. He was immensely caring but depriving her of the isolation she required just the same.

Brienne had sent for her Squire the morning after discovering Jaime’s fate, her original intention had been to leave him at Evenfall, far from harm’s way until she surveyed the political climate. But with her destination undecided and the Kingdoms entering an era of relative calm, it was best to have him by her side.

“It is hard to say.” Tyrion was choked up, grappling to ascertain his bearings. The changing scope of the debris strewn landscape making every mound of bricks resemble their tomb. He tottered a few paces to the right, assessing distances from archways to wall. “I estimate somewhere in this area.” He waved his hands in a circular motion in front of him, encompassing a small section of the tunnel. When he noticed her crestfallen expression, he hung his head. “I’m sorry. I wish I could be more specific. It wrenches my gut that this is what’s become of us. That this imprecise place is the closest we have to a memorial.”

Brienne crouched beside him, stretching out her long fingers towards the silty ground. Squeezing her eyes shut, before pressing the five pads to its surface. Trying to forge a connection to her husband, to his final moments. To feel his presence as if the sediment and earth could have absorbed some of his essence, carry traces of his energy.

*He always did have boundless zeal. Perhaps too much for one man. The way he jested and maddened me. What I wouldn’t give…*

Behind her eyelids green marbles blinked at her, sitting upright bare chested in a bed, golden hair mussed from sleep and passion. The last look from when they parted.

*Our last look ever.*
The squall of ache was almost too much this time. Her dry spell broken by a dream late past the hour of the nightingale, the sombre clouds gathering in her slumber, when her subconscious roamed unchecked and her heart conversed with her mind. Overpowering the will of the sleeper, to bring her visions of evanesce.

Transporting her to an ephemeral plane, tinged orange by ambient flames and distorted by billows of smoke. Where thermal gales howled in her ears and a distant roaring raised the hackles on the back of her neck.

Here Jaime stood before her, in all his resplendence and charisma, arms opened wide to beckon her within their benevolent strength, pearly teeth gleaming as his smile crinkled the corners of his eyes.

She ran to him, her wide strides eating up the charcoal strewn earth, throwing her arms about his shoulders, relieved to see him alive and well. But her limbs only ever touched air as he dissolved upon contact, the physique she knew so well disintegrating into grey powder beneath her hands. The man she called husband scattered into nonexistence, blown amidst flying embers into the ether.

Brienne had awoken to tears pattering upon her pillow, as light as a springtime shower – but with none of the joy or rejuvenation.

Now they threatened again - she could feel the pressure of moisture collecting beneath her lashes, pleading for her to let it fall. The constriction of her chest wanting to wail and sob. To personify the widow, the woman bereaved. Though the actions were all futile, providing catharsis and piteous else. Empty expressions of grief which didn’t change the status quo. She could yearn for nothing more than Jaime. And in the absence of her tears reanimating ash, the next best thing to do was to remain calm for the sake of her womb.

“Thank you, Tyrion.” She forced out. “I know it must have been difficult to bring me here.”

The Lady Knight felt his small hand upon her shoulder, her pose making them almost of a height. Brienne opened glassy blue eyes, taking in the troubled mien of Jaime’s little brother.

“Not half as gut-wrenching as it must be for you.” He tilted his shaggy head to the side. “You know – no one expects you to be strong Brienne. Podrick and I would think no less of you if you broke down. I know I was distraught when I first came here.”

“Your caring is appreciated but remaining composed serves my purpose more.” She rose to full height whilst he pondered her meaning. “Does the King still want to meet with me this afternoon?”

“Yes.” Lord Tyrion nodded. “He wishes to see you in the White Sword Tower.”
Brienne brushed her hands against her breeches, removing the coating of dust which clung to fingers damp from perspiration. “Then tell him I will be attending.”

“I beg pardon Your Grace.” Brienne blinked several times, her digits pensively tracing the etchings in the ancient table. Her concentration diverted by the memories this room evoked. “Can you please repeat that? I’m certain I must have misheard.”

The King appeared depleted, having exhausted his stores of vocalisation. Bran stared beseechingly at his Hand who sighed, lacing his fingers together and leaning upon the table.

Poor Tyrion. Translating on behalf of a monarch who spends most his life in other’s minds or navigating the labyrinth of time - to a woman out of her body with pining, plagued by mirages of the past. An unenviable role.

“You are being offered the position of Lady Commander of the Kingsguard.” Tyrion’s delivery contained a dose of apology. “I know this is sudden and unexpected. Especially following so closely upon the tail of your husband’s death.” Maintaining a front of all business, she noted how her good-brother avoided calling Jaime by name. Distancing himself from the grief in order to continue on matter-of-factly. “But you keep bringing up the subject of your leaving and His Grace is quite adamant on having you fulfil this office.”

Bran gave one of his little almost-smiles. “You will recall our conversation.” He lifted his chin, his nose raised proudly. “I have always had the tall and noble of nature for my personal guard.”

Brienne swallowed, on one hand this was the opportunity of a lifetime, the pinnacle of achievement. Validating and cementing all that she had striven for throughout the rough and tumultuous years. But on the other hand, the gloomy reality of being considered for her husband’s replacement made his loss all too permanent. As if he was a cyvasse piece, shuffled aside and moved from the board, no longer in play. His vacancy ready to be occupied by another able body.

She could not stand the notion of supplanting him, of being the one who’s presence dimmed recollections of her predecessor. Of becoming the paragon comparison point - the White Lady Knight superseding the corrupt Kingslayer.

“I am not so noble.” She countered. “In fact, I am inherently flawed. I absconded from my last
two positions of similar description. Once from Renly’s camp, the next from your own sister’s service – as I’m sure you haven’t forgotten.”

“The fact that you acknowledge it proves your regret. I am confident it will not repeat.” Their King was immovable on the subject. “Lord Hand – what do they say about the third time?”

“Third time lucky. Third time’s the charm. Good things come in threes.” Tyrion shrugged. “There are many valid options – all of which amount to the same thing…”

*The people will use me as an example to belittle him, further desecrate his memory. To a lesser extent it is already happening in this very room…*

“Ser Brienne.” The youngest Lannister fixed her with a look of earnest. “I know there may be aspects of this offer which you struggle with, but I entreat you to consider how venerable it is. Our monarch has requested *you* - personally and specifically for this highest honour. I am sure those dearest to your heart would approve.”

*He means Jaime.* Images flashed through the recesses of her skull, the pride in his eyes when he lowered his blade to her shoulder, knighting her and being the first to title her ‘Ser.’

*He would be happy for me. He knows how much this honour would mean to me. More than anyone else ever could - Jaime would understand.*

The men gave her silence to think as she inhaled and exhaled slowly, training her gaze upon her lap. Analysing the dents and dings in her beloved blue armour.

*From now on, I would wear the Kingsguard white and gold.*

Whenever she pictured those colours in a suit of plate, she instantly saw her husband. Where once her mind had jumped to remembering images of historical artwork - White Cloaked knights of renown from the books of chivalry she read as a girl - in recent years she instead thought about how handsome Ser Jaime had looked, stealing concerned glances at her from across the festivities at Joffrey’s wedding.

*From the day I accept, they would be mine too; a pristine cloak and aureate mail – in a way that is soothing. Another string uniting us across the eternal divide.*

This room itself was a vessel of impression, making her feel closer to him. In this role she would eat where he ate, walk the same halls – sleep in his bed.

*And if I decline – all those blessings will belong to another. Someone who never knew him or didn’t appreciate him. Who will slander his name in the White Book and ensure the erasure of all mementos…*
That concept ignited a fiery resolve within her, the protective compulsion blazing to life. Bringing a temporary heat to her veins, a lava flow beneath her surface of cold marble.

No. I cannot let that happen.

I am his wife; I will preserve his legacy. This opportunity was preordained, the posting destined to be mine.

Then she traced a scrape upon her stomach, the location reminding her of the potential of a prior, more pressing duty. Prompting her patterns of thought.

“If I were to agree – I would require stipulations.” Brienne assertively raised her eyeline, unwavering as she entered negotiations. “Many aspects of Westerosi tradition have been revised through recent events. In that respect I would like an amendment or two of my own.”

Tyrion raised his eyebrows, slanting sideways in his chair to confer privately with the King beside him. After a moment of indecipherable murmurs, he addressed her again.

“Please.” He moved his arms out in front of him, palms facing upwards, the backs grazing against the timber tabletop. “State your conditions. His Grace is willing to consider them.”

Mother give me strength. There are words which I must say which will cut me to the quick.

“Widowed I may be.” The title sliced like a razor. “But still in every regard do I consider myself a married woman. As such – the placement of myself as Lady Commander would be unprecedented in more ways that just the immediately obvious. A person bound in wedlock has never before assumed position in the Kingsguard.”

“Though your husband is unlikely to interfere with your responsibilities.” Tyrion warily guided them both along this precarious precipice of emotion.

“That may be true – but it does bring into question the devotions of my heart. Where foremost dedication is supposed to lie with duty, my loyalties are divided. My sentiments would never countenance taking a role which would wish my matrimony obsolete. I will not hide my marriage, nor brush it under the carpet. I want my status as Jaime’s wife to be known. The wedding vows in the Faith of the Seven state, ‘until the end of my days,’ and I very much still breathe.” Even though we were married before the Old Gods, both Jaime and myself were raised in the Southron religion, we uphold the pledges of that ceremony. “In the eyes of the Gods I am his, it will not be kept secret.”

“No one would expect nor ask a wife to have her place at court rival her allegiance to her spouse. The oaths of man and wife are presided over by the laws of the Gods and creation both. I know these misgivings likely stem from your previous position and what was asked of you - but once again we can safely assure you that the King and myself are satisfied that we do not find it an infringing conflict of interests.”

Tenacity do not fail me.
“And what of the natural consequence of marriage?” Brienne gave them both a pause to grasp her implication. “Surely such would cause an upset within the ranks? An insurmountable obstacle?”

Bran was slower to make the link, separate almost entirely from the concept of physical love. Her good-brother however was lightning quick, practically leaping from his seat to lean across the table, his features illuminating in a way she hadn’t seen since Winterfell. “Are you?”

“I can provide no definitive answer.” She appreciated his enthusiasm. “But the possibility is strong.”

“This is why you have been keeping yourself tranquil. Why you did not assist my brother firsthand…”

Brienne nodded. “Jaime was—* How I hate speaking of him in past tense.*—very astute. Fully attuned to the probability. He insisted I remain safe for the sake of his line. A contingency plan, for if the unthinkable occurred.”

Bran had finally caught on, the slightest aura of bother seeping through his mien. “Then you will see Maester Tarly and find out for certain before taking your vows…”

“No.” She misliked his keenness to square the prospect of her condition away, it spoke at contrast to the earlier assertions of comfort with her marital status. “If I am expecting, it will become indisputably evident in due course. But prior we will have reached an accord, whereby Your Grace commits to clauses in my vows. That my marriage is upheld, acknowledged by the Crown and Faith – with your full support of its sanctity. Customarily joining the Kingsguard requires outside claims to be renounced, but for the sake of my potential scion, that cannot be absolute. It must be publicly recognised that first and foremost, before the world turned on its head – I became a Lannister, a wife to my husband and any legitimate fruit of our union will bear his name and titles.” * Deep breath.*

“Secondly, that I will be honourably released from service when it is plain, I am bearing a child.” Her jaw set with determination. “What I ask is not unreasonable and it only remains applicable under these specific circumstances. Where a married woman waits to learn her maternal fate, aspiring to gift her husband a healthy heir. You have already agreed that my matrimony is upheld as sacrosanct – this is a branch of that same union. If you want me Your Grace these are my two conditions. I will have them written, witnessed, ratified by the High Septon and registered with the Citadel.”

The lad looked young in this moment, torn between the displeasure of a King and the will of a boy who was fixated upon his goal. After what seemed an eternity, he nodded at Tyrion signalling his approval.

“Well.” The Hand smirked, impressed by her skills in acquiring her objective. “Is there anything else?”
“Yes.” Brienne knew she had won a great battle already but there was still another request which resided close in her chest. “With the permission of the Crown, my first act as Lady Commander will be to both knight and raise Podrick to the Kingsguard – if he wishes.”

If she didn’t slam the cover – she might never close it. The concise words seeming too final, his page written, chapter concluded. Each methodical move forward felt like another goodbye. As though she were filing Jaime away into a place in her past.

*But that will never be true.*

It had almost become too much the day she attempted to pack up his chamber, the scent of him strong in his wooden clothes chest. She had taken two long whiffs, shutting it firmly not long after opening, wanting to preserve the aroma, an intoxicant of which there was limited supply. She would have to mete her dosage – lest she consume it all in one sitting, making it cease to exist.

Thereafter she had wandered about the room in a trance like stupor, lifting objects purely to set them down again. Precious few personal effects dotted the bland interior and regardless of lucid theories suggesting letting go was a necessary step in processing loss, Brienne found she had no inclination. She would gladly share her space with these items which belonged to her husband. Relics from a time when he stalked the circumference around the bed, stowed his armour on the same stand, discovered the creak in a specific floorboard.

*Though in that time he did not belong to me... years we could have been together which we squandered with lonely arms and empty beds. Mine significantly emptier than his – for yes, he had his sister in brief interludes - but he has also told me of its shallowness. The way she used intimate gestures to disguise guile. How true depth for him only came in the weeks of our love.*

Brienne lowered herself sadly to the featherdown mattress, casting her disconsolate gaze around the deserted chamber. Lamenting how sleeping here would be the closest she would ever come to sharing her husband’s bed again.

Now by some miracle she had maintained dry eyes, forbidding her tears from soaking the parchment, restraining herself so as not to smudge the inked calligraphy of her own handwriting.

In the last fortnight she had become adept at fending against their watery siege, staving off more salt droplets than she had White Walkers. Their stinging attack on her eyes and passageways just
as relentless as the undead hoards.

*Only more painful.*

Her new suit of raven armour rattled when she strode from the room, winding her way downstairs and through corridors in various states of restoration. The fit - although tailored to her unique build - never quite reached the level of comfort which her blue set did. Though Brienne admitted her bias, knowing the contours of her original suit were crafted from Jaime’s observations, how precisely he had mapped the curve of her waist and length of her legs. Achieving an accuracy with his eyes alone which several measurements and trial sessions had failed to accomplish this time round.

“Lord Tyrion!” Brienne stepped back hastily, almost colliding with her good-brother as she marched briskly through the entrance to the Small Council chamber. She had not anticipated him to be exiting. “Is there not to be our first meeting this afternoon?”

“I have rescheduled it.” The Hand of the King gave her a wan smile. “There is no point whilst we are still missing half the council. Ser Davos’ return from visiting his family has been delayed by unfavourable winds and I still lack a Master of Coin, Laws and Whispers.”

The Lady Commander tried not to let her face fall; the underlying meaning of his decision apparent. “Ser Bronn still remains unaccounted for?”

“Sadly yes.”

She drooped every so subtly, leaning her weight against the arched frame of the doorway. The pillar at her back offering great support whilst she weathered another disappointment. Tyrion was much the same, craning his neck upwards to regard her dispiritedly, the pair of them making an awkward spectacle to any onlookers.

The two remaining Lannisters – one by marriage, the other by blood. The tall and short of it. Both at a loss when it came to knowing how to proceed.

“I am still working on it.” Tyrion attempted to make his tone encouraging. “Bronn will want his due, so I am confident he will surface eventually.” Her good-brother eyed her sideways, an impish gleam entering his gaze. When he opened his mouth to speak again, Brienne could practically see the question teetering on his tongue. “And your … respective mission? Any developments that I should know about?”

She shot him a stern glare, ill at ease with the concept of a man making such private enquiries.

“I am still working on it.” Mirroring his phrasing she turned on her heel, mentally reworking her afternoon in accordance to her gained time. “Let me know when the meeting is to be held.”

“I shall…” Tyrion called out after her, his voice reverberating down the hallway, bouncing off the scorched brick walls and chipped tile floor. “…But you must keep me informed as well!”
Brienne bolted upright in bed, chest heaving with panic for a reason indiscernible to anyone but her. The chamber was tranquil in the night, the pillows plush and inviting, the logs in the hearth being eaten away at a leisurely pace, the crackle of their demise the only sound occupying the space other than her ragged breathing.

Beyond the confines of the Lady Commander’s bower, halls were quiet - undisturbed. Lulled guards dozed at their posts, devoid of reason to remain alert. No shouts of discord were present to rouse sleepers, the clangour of alarm bells inaudible to common hearing.

But contained within the walls of her ribcage and skull, they screamed more emphatically than a warhorn, thundering heartbeats keeping the rhythm for its foreboding solo.

A sticky dampness clung to her thighs beneath the blanket, a wetness familiar since adolescence yet chilling her to the bone.

*Perspiration.* She chided, deluding herself. *I am sweating from a night terror.*

But her arms were not clammy to the touch - from the back of her neck to the base of her spine was cool and dry. The glands of her body in a state of rest, arid when compared to the nauseating slick she felt lower. And she could not recall any particulars of a fever dream.

Hesitantly she brought her hand to touch below, swiping the pads of her fingers against the inside of her upper leg, testing the substance for its consistency. Withdrawing her digits from the shelter of the covers, bringing them to hover in front of her face.

She stared at her fingertips. The ivory flesh stained vermilion.

When everything in her chamber was white – the presence of blood red struck a stunning contrast.

*No.*

Brienne clambered to her knees, throwing back the top fur. Desperate to cling to denial whilst ripping out the barb. Knowing the pain of irrefutability was coming and issuing in its arrival with due haste.
Please no. Please no.

She repeated the silent prayer as she wrangled the tangle of covers away. Assessing the state of the mattress by dwindling firelight.

Why? A strangled sob forced its way through her pressed lips. Gods - why are you so cruel?

The dying flames cast their soft golden glow across the sheets. The moon filtering through from beyond the lofty tower window bathing the other half of the room in silvery beams. Both sources of illumination highlighting the third colour present – the malign shade of pooled crimson.

“Damn you.” Through gritted teeth she cursed the lunar presence, watching her destructive discovery with its expressionless face. The celestial object’s constant cycle of feminine ties ravaging her last shred of hope.

Searing acid tears filled her eyes like a thousand wasp stings, swarming her vision and blurring her view of the heinous evidence. Irrationally she clawed at the sheet, bunching the fabric into her fists, rolling it into a ball and flinging it over the side of the bedframe.

“Damn you to all Seven Hells!” It was half shriek, half cry. The volume and pitch of the agonised scream which followed tearing itself from her throat of its own volition. A beast comprised of anguish, bereavement and heartache breaking loose from its cage.

Brienne was faintly aware of her cries of ‘no’ interspersed between her sobs as she collapsed in a heap. Hugging her knees to her chest and shaking uncontrollably. Her body shuddering, quaking violently, a deluge which could transform the deserts of Dorne into a flourishing rainforest spilling down her cheeks.

For weeks she had held it inside - though mayhaps it was longer.

The repression of a lifetime. The courtyard incident scratching the surface, a spring spurting forth from her underground well. Now it was a geyser. The tidal hole amongst the rocks at Evenfall. Her raging ocean swelling up to fill the cavern until it explosively erupted, uncontrollable with its ferocity.

Since the Summer of her youth, through to the Autumn of her adulthood she had been dogged by a self-imposed expectation.

By the arrival of Winter’s icy core it had transferred onto others, their perception of her personality ingrained. Eventually everyone she met summarised her nature by this same measure, new faces pre-disposed by her reputation, long before making her acquaintance. The inflexible rigidity in her set precedent passed by word of mouth across armies, camps and strongholds.
Brienne of Tarth carried herself with an air of invulnerability. A hard-outer shell which challenged iron for durability and ice for coldness.

At first, she had taken pleasure it in – when the whispering judgment of her comrades shifted. Transitioning from pitying her homely appearance to begrudgingly respecting her mettle. When maidens were afraid, she was dauntless. When men folded, she had stamina. When others crumpled, she stayed strong.

Such pressure she had inflicted upon herself. A pattern of behaviour she could never let slip. Tyrion had touched upon it in the tunnels, remarking how their opinion of her would not lessen if she openly wore her grief.

But it is untrue.

The only persona she had was the unyielding warrior. Behind it was just an ugly woman, too tall, ungainly and austere. To strip away the work of years would be to roll over and show her belly, expose herself to their criticisms once more.

But by the opposite face of the same coin, as the floodgates opened and the dams of her eyes and emotions burst their banks in rapid torrents – continuing her façade was an impossible task.

I have presented myself as unbreakable – but I’m splintering apart.

Contrary to popular belief - I am not stone. I am not a hollow. I am woman with feeling and love. Who craves the touch and sweet embrace of my husband…

Shuttered away behind doors of oak and walls of stone, a wife wept for once without restraint. Crying openly for her soulmate, for their lack of child, for the life they would have led together.

Her face which had never been considered attractive became increasingly repellent as it scrunched and reddened, streams of salty liquid leaving tracks in their wake, tumbling over cheeks and chin. Cascading waterfalls of raw emotion too agonising to withhold. Strings of spittle clung to her lips, nose flowing like the Trident in the wet season.

Her voice which was too masculine and deep, which made men tremble in their boots as she barked commands, mutated into an abraded rasp of choking howls. The keening bouncing and carrying in the architectural acoustics of the tower, her wails resembling the myths of dispossessed eidolons, sentenced to walk the floors in misery, undulating their dirge for the deceased. Too stricken to be concerned who heard their threnody.

“My Lady?” Podrick’s knock was accompanied by an octave of pure sympathy. “Ser… is there anything I can do?”

She tried to muster the will to answer him but all that resulted was another gulping, hiccupping sob.
“I understand if you do not wish to talk Ser.” Strange scrabbling noises were followed by a tell-tale clunk. The cracked line of light beneath her door becoming obscured by a sitting form. “So, I just want you to know that I’m here. You’re not alone.”

“But I am.” Whether he heard her reply, she was uncertain. “The love of my life is gone, as is all promise of something more - something beyond murder and scheming and a parade of constant disappointment.” Hidden in her room – their room – the one she and Jaime both inhabited in history’s page, she felt emboldened to divulge her inner monologue. Her dignity already flayed from her in a chorus of snivelling whimpers.

“With Jaime I glimpsed a future I never thought attainable… not for a hulking beast of a woman like me anyway.” She roughly raked the back of her wrist over her eyes, prying herself from the foetal position and away from the source of her breakdown, slumping to the floor on the opposite side of the door, positioning herself beside the wood. Here she could remain invisible – even from casting a shadow beneath the slit - but close enough that he could decipher her nonsensical ramblings through her blubbers.

*Pod has listened when I was low before in the Wolfswood. He has already seen me cry. He is the closest thing to a son I will ever have. If I cannot be honest with him, I will be a wreck of turmoil, bottling these wretched emotions forever.*

“The old fables would have you believe it is admirable to strive. That ill-fate befalls the wicked and the righteous rise against adversity.” Brienne sniffled, tilting her head backwards against the hard-stone wall, the rough texture scraping against her scalp and mussing her short blonde hair. From this angle the quiet tears slipped in an orderly fashion over the apples of her cheeks, trickling from her earlobe to drench the collar of her nightshirt.

“Though these are the same tales where all maidens are born fair and knights exemplify chivalry… leaving no room for the outsiders. The oddities born with neither comely face nor masculine liberty. Nonetheless I believed – if I couldn’t be the Lady, I could be the Knight. I could make a difference, live up to that ideal – and I tried Pod. I swear I did. Even when my spirit fractured, even when I was dealt blows… I denied my own emotions, championing the downtrodden, always another summit to climb. If it was moral - it was right, and I came second to such important tasks. A life of servitude in place of the self-indulgent heir I was born to be. And the more I gave the more the world asked, a harsh mistress always taking, until it felt as though whenever I dared to snatch something for myself I was punished tenfold. If I glimpsed happiness it was destroyed before my eyes. But each time I avowed anew to do better next time, to push harder, adding another layer of chainmail to my heart and rallying with determination. Thus it birthed a pattern, the repetition of my existence. A vicious continuum of expectation where I consistently fail.”

She knew the theme of this tragedy, had lived it firsthand. The price of affection, the cost of pride.

“Nothing is more hateful than failing to protect the one you love. I told you that once didn’t I? Back when the list of people I had let down was significantly shorter. My Father – For I could never be the son he wanted nor the daughter he needed. Renly – I swore to guard him, to give my life for his, yet he died within feet of me and I was powerless to intervene. Catelyn – I promised her my sword but when the Frey’s slit her throat I was nowhere to be seen. Sansa – I knelt before her, gave her my pledge. Then I abandoned her in the night, without word nor explanation. Jaime
The sheets of water fell heavily now, the frequency of individual salt droplets increasing until they merged to a steady constant. Her voice hitching on his name. “I failed him more so than anyone. I failed him in every regard. He who bestowed wonders upon me, the first person who ever made me feel loved. I had grown jaded by the time I realised how much I adored him, so filled with doubt. Even when my heart begged me to be selfish just this once. To snatch at something for me, to indulge in this euphoric splendour. Still for weeks I denied, gave only my body never my sentiments, partially convinced even the dalliance itself was folly. Believing the truth behind his eyes to be a jape.”

The ceiling was as bland as the rest of the chamber, a canvas which remained blank. The abode of those who forfeited their true potential and desires. “But all Jaime wanted was for me to love him. To give him what he never had. A simple want, so modest. The perfect mirror of my own.”

Brienne fixated on a crater in one of the stones, a small chunk which had dislodged either through time or the razing of the city. Her vision bore into that hole now, as if she could channel her pain into its inanimate impartiality whilst she spoke the most dreaded of her confessions aloud. “So then I surrendered to our love and I forgot the most important lesson. That when I love – I lose…”

Her speech cracked with a squeak, the devastation of the admission taking its toll. “…And now my Jaime is gone. Wiped from existence with neither resting place nor memorial. An inferno snuffed out with the snap of Gods’ fingers. I failed him - and the only thing I can lay claim to is playing an integral role in his demise.”

“My Lady – you must not say that.” Pod adopted a stern tone, his timbre suffused with an unfamiliar manliness as he endeavoured to quash her self-beration. “If anyone was Ser Jaime’s downfall - it was his sister.”

“Blame us both then. But I sent him back for her and his child. I instilled in him a sense of honour which compelled him to make the choices he did. And whilst he died the most horrible death – where was I? Upon my island miles away. Failing at providing an heir.”

She heard him inhale sharply, deducing the trigger for her outburst. “I’m sorry Ser.”

“You have nothing to apologise for – but I do. I didn’t fulfil my duty, not as a woman and not as a Knight. I am not carrying his child and if I wasn’t pregnant then I should have been there by his side.”

Pod continued to murmur reassurances, but the individual statements dulled to a distant drone. Brienne lay back down on her side, curling into a ball as the sadness consumed her.
Ok - that was a tough one - but our beloved Brienne had about a decade's worth of repressed emotions which were bound to come tumbling out. Our poor heroine was due a meltdown, though it was tough to write. In the next instalment, things take a turn for the brighter. <3
Lows vs Highs

Chapter Summary

Cover Art by: Ro_Nordmann

"Deeper than the truth..."
Lyrics, War of Hearts by Ruelle
Verse 2, Line 5
“I found him.”

“What?”

Tyrion’s exuberance awakened her from near catatonia. The trance like state she dwelt in whilst she performed like a marionette. Organs functioning, limbs mobile, mouth moving. Acting the part, playing her role but vacant within. No more of sentience than the Night King’s minions or a Mummer’s puppet.

“Bronn!” He related excitedly, pulling out a chair opposite her at the long timber table. The dining room in the White Sword Tower empty but for the morose Lady Commander, watching her cup of tea congeal untouched. Her good-brother pushed the offensive liquid away, scraggly face and buoyant eyes demanding her undivided attention.

“Or more accurately he found us. Sailed into Blackwater Bay not two hours passed. Brazen as ever! He had the Captain throw out anchor in the Royal mooring. We were alerted by the harbourmaster. Davos had an entire retinue of guards deployed – ready to confront whatever rogue pirate had the nerve to enact such an obvious affront to the Crown. But who should be standing cross-armed at the helm but the sellsword himself! He is awaiting us in my solar.”

Brienne sprang from her seat with more zeal than she had felt in weeks, not even bothering to push her chair back into place as she briskly tromped down the hall. Tyrion trailed behind her, puffing and whining as he attempted to catch up. “Lady Commander! Wait for me! Your legs are significantly longer than mine - you are at an unfair advantage.”

She pursed her lips in annoyance, scowling deeply whilst she waited. Her reticence had increased since mourning had swallowed her whole. Her desire to speak infrequent and always succinct. Especially around her brother-in-law. The embarrassment of admitting her inability to provide him with a niece or nephew festering like an open sore.

“Besides-“ He wheezed, doubling over and holding up a finger to indicate he would continue. “-I had something else to mention.” Straightening he gave her a half-grin. “Apologies, I’m starting to think my age and love-affair with wine are catching up with me. Shall we continue at a more reasonable pace?”

Brienne nodded, keen to get moving again.

_I hope to goodness that was not the groundbreaking afterthought he had to impart._

As if reading her dour expression, he continued. “The ship Bronn so ceremoniously guided into port carries the heraldry of House Tarth.” Tyrion was impressed, always admiring her gall. “Why Ser Brienne – it is with acclamation I discover that you went to greater lengths to elude Daenerys than even I was aware of.”

“Necessity dictated. Ser Bronn’s use of it pertained solely to the mission.” She kept her eyeline dead ahead, her voice detached. Rivalling the King himself with her disembodied aloofness. “It will be returned to my Father now its purpose has been served.”
The Lady Knight shouldered through the door to the Hand’s chambers, holding it open for Tyrion with her sturdy frame.

_Jaime had the truth of what has become of the Kingsguard. Sentries and doorstops, gargoyles wrought of flesh and armour instead of stone._

Brienne had notions of bringing about changes, of reinvigorating the institution. Restoring them to an order of legend and greatness. But that was before her heart was cut from her chest. When she entertained fantasies of a small golden-haired boy, listening enraptured to tales of his Father and Mother. The legacy they forged for their next generation, a new batch of Knights of Summer.

“Look who the cat dragged in.” Tyrion’s voice pulled her consciousness towards his solar and she strolled across the main room, his newest acquisition of a singed Myrish rug muffling her footfalls.

Brienne pulled up short of entering, instead choosing to hover by the doorway, concealed from immediate view.

_My presence may alter the dynamic. Best see how Tyrion fairs on his own first_...

The gap beneath the hinges was wide enough that she could witness their reunion without interrupting, their voices and image sufficiently unobscured.

The sellsword lounged irreverently behind the desk - in the Lord Hand’s very own high-backed chair; boots crossed upon the wooden tabletop, crinking and soiling a stack of important documents with his heels. Beside the pile, a dagger lay in plain view, ready to grab with feline quick reflexes, its presence a silent reminder of his labile loyalties.

He munched leisurely upon an apple, filched without permission from the arrangement in the main room.

“It was a ship, not a cat.” Bronn countered, a fine sprinkle of juice flying from his lips.

_I find him repugnant but if I want information, I must play the game._ She reined in her disdain, letting the two men continue their uneasy banter.

“Make yourself at home Bronn.” Her good-brother splayed his hands out in front, dripping with irony.

“I have.” The sellsword took another bite, chewing with his mouth open. “Not bad. This is from _my_ Reach isn’t it?”

“That part is not official yet. You must be physically present to accept the office from his Majesty and seeming as you have only just arrived…”

In a blur of movement, the dagger was snatched up, its hilt twirling masterfully in Bronn's hand as he waved it to punctuate his next remark. “You Lannister fuckers always say you pay your debts – so you better come good.”
Observation has ended, that was a threat...

On instinct she stepped forward, moving into view. Entering and shielding Tyrion with her bulk. Narrowing her eyes in warning at Ser Bronn.

“Ahhhhh…” He leant backwards, tossing the apple core aside, it hit the floorboards with a thud, rolling and coming to a stop. Slightly behind her, Tyrion’s shoulders twitched, startled by the sudden movement and noise. Brienne did not flinch.

Toying with the dagger between two fingers, the sellsword snickered, an odd sort of amusement crossing his face. Craning his neck, he spoke around her, addressing Tyrion. “Hiding behind this one now are ya? Not that I blame you. She’s pretty fucking terrifying.”

“I strive to be nothing in the vicinity of ‘pretty’ Ser Bronn.” Brienne ushered Tyrion into a chair, taking the seat beside him. “But I dare say you have some explaining to do – before any titles are handed out.”

“My lawful sister has informed me that the two of you reached an accord. A detail you neglected to include when we crossed paths in Daenerys’ camp. Nonetheless I intend to see any promises Ser Brienne made upheld and rewarded in kind. If she deems your endeavours satisfactory.”

“Oh - I think she might.” There it was again. That arrogant swagger. A secret behind his gambler’s eyes which yelled ‘I know something you do not.’ But he was a shark, adept at circling his prey, with an appetite for riches equivalent to bloodlust. The Lady Knight knew he would not reveal his hand prematurely. “But then – mayhaps I will hold on to my information.” Bronn feigned mulling it over with disinterest. “Unless you offer me adequate incentive.”

“Lord Paramount of the Reach is not incentive enough?” Tyrion kept his tone equally level.

“I was already getting that. What else you got?”

“I made it clear it was all or nothing,” Brienne chimed in. “Here we sit, and your title is not set in stone – yet you believe you are in a position to demand more?” Today would be the most she had spoken in weeks, her tongue feeling thick and foreign as it moved in her mouth.

“You will like what I have to say. And I wager you would deeply regret not hearing it.”

“And I’ll wager you’d rue your gameplaying when you are left to rot in a Black Cell.”

“I’d like to see you try…”

“I’ve bested you before and care little about my own life - why fear death when my husband awaits me in the next world?” There was something frightening about how she displayed a lack of concern for her own mortality. The removal of the biggest bargaining chip in every existence unnerving for a man like Bronn. His business depended upon that very survival instinct. Knowing
people would give all to extend their thread of time.

Brienne could smell his discomfit and it gave her a fleeting shadow of an emotion akin to glee. The battle rush which used to sustain her before she knew the incomparable rapture of her lover’s caress. “-Do not bank on what you cannot predict Ser Bronn. Lord Tyrion himself will assure you I am volatile in my state of bereavement.”

“Well there you have it Bronn – what’s it going to be?” Her brother-in-law glanced at both of them in turn, his head pivoting from side to side whilst his grin broadened, engulfing his face almost maniacally when he heard that she had beaten the sellsword in arm to arm combat. I neglected that detail in my retelling. “And in case you were questioning the veracity of Ser Brienne’s assertion – I will let you know that she is not bluffing. I have no doubt that at present she wouldn't blink an eyelid at having to kill you, even if it came at the cost of her own life. Oh! And futhermore…”

Tyrion held up a finger as another thought occurred to him. “…If you are thinking of appealing to me, that would also be misinformed. I possess no sway over my good-sister - so do not for a second think I can stay her hand. I wouldn’t even try! If I have learnt nothing from my recent follies it is that powerful women can change the scope of a playing field in ways that leave men petrified. Now if I were in your position - I definitely wouldn’t trifle with her - but then we all know how attached I am to dying of old age.”

Bronn’s lip curled in displeasure, but he also knew when to raise the stakes. Lifting his shirt with his free hand, he removed a sealed envelope tucked beneath his belt. “Want to know what this is?” He waggled it teasingly between thumb and forefinger, the parchment slapping against the air, whilst both Brienne and Tyrion suppressed the urge to study its exterior. Itching curiosity at odds with the steely nerves required to resist dancing to the beat of his drum.

The sellsword chuckled. “Of course you do - you stubborn fuckers. Don’t play pretend with me. You wouldn’t be here if ya didn’t want to know and I wouldn’t be here if I didn’t want my reward.” Lowering his boots from the table, he sat up straight. “Let’s cut through the horseshit. What I ‘ave here is a letter from that fancy Maester of yours.” He pointed towards Brienne with the correspondence. “And it contains things you’ll want to hear. But it – and my version of events, come at a price. So tell me what’s on offer or I can burn it just as easily as I can hand it over.”

The Hand of the King shrugged. “We can just head to the docks and speak to him directly.”

“What if he’s not on the boat? What if only I know where he is?”

His mannerisms and audacity strongly suggest this is the case. He must not be goaded too much…

“Surely, the crew will tell their Lady.”

“Maybe they will. Maybe they won’t. Maybe they don’t know themselves.” Bronn raised a nonchalant shoulder, mirroring Tyrion’s posturing. “Maybe they prefer coin over Tarth strictness. You wanna take the chance?”
Brienne turned to look at her good-brother. Her communication wordless but unmistakable. 

*I want the correspondence. I need to know.*

“Very well Bronn…” Tyrion laced his fingers together, crossing one leg over the other and resting his hands in his lap. “…Offer on the table. If the song you sing appeases Ser Brienne, not only will I make you Lord Paramount of the Reach but you will be given a place upon the Small Council in the capacity of Master of Coin.”

If Ser Bronn’s aim was to remain impassive, he did not succeed. The gleam of avarice in his eyes betraying how much the office appealed. “Me in charge of the Crown’s Gold?” He scoffed but recovery was futile. Both she and Tyrion saw his enthusiasm. “I guess I could live with that.” With a push, he slid the letter across the polished veneer of the desktop. The parchment coming to rest directly in front of her. Now it was within her reach Brienne hesitated, eager to learn and trusting of Tarth’s Maester, but unsure if she could shoulder more heartbreak. Especially not with company.

Noticing her reluctance Bronn raised his eyebrows, his forehead crinkling with the lines of a ruffian who had seen humanity’s worst and lived to tell the tale. Though all compassion had yet to be leech’d from his blackened soul, the perplexing duality which dwelt in a tiny neglected region of his conscience stepping into the light. His peculiar semblance of allegiance which had made him dive into a river or aim his crossbow bolt slightly to the right. “How ’bout I start? It’ll make more sense then. Lord Hand – that flagon of wine you were hoping I didn’t see in the corner? Bring it ’ere and pour us all one will ya? You’re gonna need it.”

The look Tyrion gave him could have formed ice crystals on Bronn’s backside, but he obliged nonetheless, muttering to himself all the while. “It is a grim situation indeed where I find myself a serving maid. Next thing you know, you will wish me to seat myself in your lap, giggling girlishly at your crude jokes and batting my eyelashes. I know not where you’ve been Bronn but may I suggest – if I am your idea of comely perhaps you’ve been too long at sea.”

“Listen ’ere.” Bronn jabbed a pointed finger in Tyrion’s direction. “I might get a certain satisfaction at watching a rich toff like you pour my wine, but it will be a cold day in the Seven Hells before I find you attractive.”

“Enough!” Brienne’s no-nonsense tone snapped them both to attention. “You may entertain yourselves by exchanging an imbecilic commentary, but I find nothing about the present circumstances amusing.” She glared at both of them in turn, shoving the cup of wine away in disgust. “Spare me from enduring this idiocy and save it for after the meeting is adjourned. Focus on the topic at hand.”

Adequately chastened, Tyrion nodded at Bronn to proceed.

The sellsword cleared his throat. “As you both know – I was sent after Lord Jaime. Turns out
when you Lannister boys act the dumbass, I ’ave to get you out of the tight spot and thanks to Ser Humourless over there, this was no exception. And I picked up before, that you two ’ave filled each other in on the rest, so I will jump to the part you ‘aven’t heard.” His pervading cockiness seemed to increase drastically.

“I made it into King’s Landing, and I got to the tunnels. And ’ere I was thinking this just might have become easy money for me when there was a rowboat sitting right there for the taking. Getting out to sea was gonna be the hardest part and that was solved for me. Then there was the pirate - already dead with your fancy toff’s sword stickin’ outta him, so I knew I was on the right track. I pulled it out for safekeeping, figured you’d want the Valyrian back – for a price - and if not, I scored myself a nice ancestral blade….”

Widow’s Wail. The mention of Oathkeeper’s counterpart made her pulse quicken.

“…But then the whole place shook, and the archways sealed over. I couldn’t get in and I guessed that any high-born idiots who may have been coming that way, couldn’t get out either. It took me fucking ages to dig through, clearing a path through the rubble. I nearly quit at least three times and then decided I was gonna renegotiate to be paid by the brick.” Bronn chortled, a harsh grating noise which she didn’t appreciate.

“Without the theatrics Ser Bronn.” Brienne folded her arms across her chest. “If you could stick to the facts. This is the death of my husband we are discussing.” She tried to instil in him some respect, a hint of empathy for the suffering of all involved.

But still his irksome smirk endures.

“Anyhow….” He dragged out the word as if she was tedious and bothersome.

Gripe all you want; I care not one bit what you think of me. I would sooner seek my horse’s good opinion than the likes of yours.

“….I dug through. Didn’t have to search far either. Here they were, half buried, blonde heads and a gold hand sticking out.”

“I did that.” Tyrion revealed.

“Well ain’t that something’-” The sarcasm came fluently, his tolerance waning. Bronn’s capacity for patience smaller than a thimble. “- But I dug ’em out completely and hauled ’em both to the dinghy. Not an easy task, I might add. Fucking unbearable in fact….”

Transient puzzlement flitted through her mind as the sellsword grumbled. Questioning what aspect made the task especially vexing. She opened her mouth to speak but was sidetracked by his next statement.

“…I rowed it out into the Bay and that’s when you came good on your word.”

“I gave you no cause to mistrust.” The Lady Knight sat straighter in indignation. “I am true to my oaths.”
“Yeah, yeah alright.” He rotated in his seat to fill Tyrion in. “She had that Tarth ship waiting off the coast. They picked us up, so I didn’t have to row across the Narrow Sea.”

“I am glad. It was fortuitous that my plan married up with Lord Tyrion’s. Both of us coming to the conclusion that the only logical escape was by ocean to Essos. If only every other aspect had run as smoothly.” Brienne swallowed, the lump in her throat a near permanent fixture. A solidified representation of the grief she carried, the threat of devastation surging again within her like the tide.

Passing days did not diminish its inundation, it simply found its rhythm. Like the ebb and flow in all of nature. At low tide she operated as best she could, forcing the ocean of anguish backwards. Keeping a wary eye on its constant presence in the background, dry cheeks and sands a temporary status. But high tide was always just a throbbing heartbeat away, a twinge on the right nerve. Then the sea swept in with crushing breakers, leaving her just seconds to flee before she was engulfed.

She could tell it was nearing that time. “Did my men see their bodies properly treated? Where is my husband’s final resting place? Was it a burial at sea? Or perhaps it was cold enough to make it to land?”

*Answer with haste so I can take my letter and fall back. I will not wilt in front of you.*

“Neither.” Bronn’s eyebrow arched. “It’s hard to dispose of someone who isn’t dead. Folks like you generally frown on that sort of thing.”

The blood drained from her face, ivory washing out to near colourlessness.

*This is the cruellest of japes to have ever been concocted.*

“Such is not a tool for vengeance Ser.” Brienne tried in vain to keep her voice steady, but its octave jerked as she awaited the commencement of his coarse laughter. “Loathe me, spit on my name if it makes you feel somehow vindicated – but do not taunt a widow in this manner. It is despicably barbaric.”

Tyrion’s small hand alighted on her wrist just below the vambrace. “My Lady, I have known Ser Bronn a long time and despite our differences…” A reassuring squeeze. “…I believe he is telling the truth.”

With a stare of piercing blue, she appraised the sellsword. Trying to peer past the layers of snark and rapacity. The type of eye contact which she feared – for he would undoubtedly see the rims of red within her own, harbouring unshed tears.

Yet her vision remained fixated, rendering him transparent, locating the place where a soul may hide. Laying him bare to her scrutiny until she could ascertain his sincerity.
“I ain’t fucking with ya.” He swore genuinely. And it was echoed by the language his posture spoke, the nuances of his weathered face. “The blonde cunt you call husband is living and breathing still. Holed up in a small manse in Pentos.”

My Jaime lives.

“Ser Bronn…” Brienne sucked in a breath to quell the pooling, the same process as when she had risen from her knees a newly made Knight. Battling an irrepressible happiness which would be the undoing to her ego, changing the emotion behind the clear liquid waterlogging her vision but making her ducts pump all the faster. A pure unadulterated joy, that she simply did not know how to process.

The hope of any such miracle had been a faint pinprick in the distance, so far and miniscule it was indistinguishable from the saturation of darkness. The work of delusions and mirage but not reality. At least not for her.

Until now.

“… you saved Jai-” She stuttered, her husband’s name lodging in her throat. His moniker held so many definitions to her; first longing, then passion and finally ultimate love - a condition which became traumatizingly synonymous with loss.

Now it could mean love again, along with wonderment.

“.Thank you.” It was all she could force out, nowhere near sufficient but the only phrase within her capabilities.

Tyrion was in a similar state of shock but he collected his thoughts articulately. Coming to her rescue with composed aplomb. “How is this possible with what I saw?”

“Did you look ‘em over properly?” Bronn asked scornfully. “You know check ‘em for breath or a pulse maybe?” He rolled his eyes at Tyrion’s stunned silence. “And to think they used to say you were smart.”

“I do generally consider myself intelligent, but I openly admit my judgment at that time was impaired.” He suddenly jumped forward in his seat, gripping the armrests so tightly both knuckles went white. “Wait – did you just say ‘them?’”

Bronn tensed his jaw, lips pulling back to expose his teeth. Clucking his tongue almost apologetically. “Yep, I did.”

Brienne’s head shot up, the elation which filled her simmering on a plateau. Searching for her feelings on this follow up development.

This is what you wanted – remember?
Her expression must have been amusing because now the sellsword did permit himself to snigger. “Why do ya think the trip was hell?! Her fucking majesty woke up when I was pulling her from the bricks.”

Brienne clicked the door shut to her chamber, barricading herself from the world. The metallic rattle of gears echoing in the rafters as she turned the key in the lock, the sound immediately relaxing her muscles. She slumped against the wood, forehead pressing into its abrasive surface, fingers still squeezing the key so tightly its image impressed into her skin. In her other hand she clutched the envelope, fierce grip creasing the parchment, bending it in the middle whilst light perspiration seeped from her pores, darkening the patch where it contacted.

Reacting to news of this nature had no precedent, odds so improbable it defied the realms of expected norms. Leaving her without guideline, a jumble of emotions so overwhelming it could only be compared to a flock of starlings against the cerulean sky. Their black bodies forming a pulsating mass which moved both as one but separate. The phenomena of their murmuration a spectacle which mesmerised those watching from below.

Such were her insides, bursting as though those feathered wings fluttered against the confining shell of her skin. Somewhere between soaring through the clouds and twirling in such vertigo inducing acrobatics she needed to heave. Each avian body an individual thought or feeling, dodging and weaving, finding its place amongst the throngs. But the resounding theme was jubilation, the sensation of freedom and flying.

*Jaime is alive. I will hold him again. Touch him. Hear his voice.*

Hurriedly she stripped off her armour, removing the raven crests and plate without her usual pedantic care. Clunking them on top of the clothes chest rather than arrange them on the stand.

*Our mission was accomplished - not a dismal tale of foundering and worst-case scenarios. But of*
narrow escape and meticulous orchestration with a high survival rate.

It belied belief how her circumstances had changed in the blink of an eye. A pessimistic outlook turned upon its head in the space of a few sentences. Brought about by unprecedented, prodigious good fortune. Components coordinating with more precision than the individual metal scales upon the gauntlets she wore in melees. Each disc overlapping in perfect symmetry, flexing and bending just enough to achieve the impossible. The unison of their alignment providing protection when it was needed most.

Thank you to whichever God took pity on our predicament. If I knew your name I would kneel at your feet and kiss your gracious hand. I am sorry that I ever doubted you.

Relieved of her Kingsguard panoply she sat upon the foot of her bed, sinking into the mattress and cracking the wax seal. The Essosi insignia it bore was a stranger to her knowledge base, but upon unfolding the parchment the distinctive penmanship of Maester Cyril gave her assurance that the letter was not counterfeit. His writing instantly recognisable to her, impeccably formed with orderly lines and flourishing calligraphy. The same style he had taught her which now decorated Jaime’s page in the White Book.

That will need amending…

Brienne took a deep inhale, calming and centring her flummoxed mind so she could focus on its contents. Ser Bronn had given her no hint as to Jaime’s health, brushing off her enquiries dismissively. "I’ve done enough, I told ya he’s alive, the rest is what that dull Maester’s for."

Letter in hand she had made her immediate departure from Tyrion’s quarters, keen to read of her lion’s well-being and allay her lingering angst.

The rest of my thoughts and feelings I can sort at a later date. For now the only thing of consequence to me is Jaime....

Smoothing and flattening the folds, she coached herself in pacing. Telling herself to read slowly and not to rush. To ignore the arrhythmia threatening her concentration.

Dear Lady Brienne,

I write to apprise you of the developments surrounding the tasked extraction from King’s Landing and subsequent abscondment to Essos.
I operate under the assumption that Ser Bronn has relayed the details of the role he played, which resulted in the successful recovery of both your husband, Lord Jaime Lannister and his sister, former Queen Cersei Lannister from a dinghy in Blackwater Bay.

Thereafter responsibility of their care was passed into my jurisdiction and I administered constant medical treatment to both patients whilst the Captain sailed us to Pentos.

Upon landing ashore (as per your instructions) we have taken up residency, using the supplied funds to secure a modest manse. Adequate accommodation was selected for a party of our size without excess expenditure upon luxuries and frivolities. I assure you we are well provisioned so expend no energy in worrying about how we fare.

Now to the important matters – the condition of my charges.

Your Lord Husband, Ser Jaime Lannister – I regret to say – suffered the worst of the injuries. During an altercation he incurred two deep stab wounds to the lower abdomen which required extensive suturing but fortunately missed piercing any vital organs. These penetrations caused severe blood loss and had to be monitored for signs of infection.

In addition, his body received the majority of damage from the falling debris. His back and legs were majorly impacted, as well as a blow to the cranium. His recovery has been long and arduous, with many induced states of unconsciousness and a heavy reliance upon administration of milk of the poppy. I am however pleased to report, that his condition is stable and in the days prior to composing this letter, his dosages have been weaned and his waking periods are increasing. His sole enquiry when I tend him – is requesting word of you.

Brienne lowered the paper for a breather, a rush of sentiment flowing through her system when she pictured her husband - injured, bedridden and far across the sea but still asking about her. It made her want to run to him, nurse him herself as she had done once before when he lost his hand. Give him the kind of care only a doting partner would, pandering to his whims and applying both tinctures and affection in equal doses.

But I have duties here and he is there, all the way in Pentos. And as strong as my love for him is - I doubt he can feel it across the miles.

Sighing she resumed reading. A glower darkening her pale features whilst she digested the next
His sister also lives, and she frequents his bedside (though in my opinion this is not always to the betterment of the patient).

The Lady Knight felt her first pinch of envy and the draught was bitter. The first of many I imagine.

A taste resembling bile rose up her throat, but Brienne swallowed it down, determined to be beyond such niggly peevishness.

I am glad he has a familiar face. I would rather he have his twin than be alone.

Regaining control over her own reactions, she worked out the kinks in her neck, loosening her stiffened muscles before beginning the passage about Cersei.

This brings me to the condition of Lady Cersei Lannister (apologies if her title is inaccurate but her present rank is unknown to me).

The former monarch was also struck by debris in the skull but was spared from the worst of the impacts. I am of the understanding - both from the positioning reported by Ser Bronn and inspection of her bruising - that Ser Jaime shielded her with his own body. Protecting her and subsequently – the child within. It has been confessed by the patient herself that in order to create confusion surrounding the paternity of the unborn she had not been eating sufficiently for an expectant Mother and had been restricting the physical manifestations with corsetry. I chastised her at length for malnourishment and inhibiting her baby’s growth. Since arriving in Pentos, she has been eating and the clothing we supplied her is loose fitting. I am pleased to report that she now appears rounded and in fine health. I can confirm that the babe within moves and seems to have come out of the ordeal unscathed.

He protected the innocents after all – both by ringing the bells for King’s Landing and by shielding the contents of Cersei’s womb.

When Tyrion had told her that the Bells did indeed chime before all hell was unleashed, Brienne had known in her heart it was Jaime - an opinion they both shared. Just like now she knew instinctively that Jaime had wilfully used his body to block his unborn babe. For that was the measure of her man - not the cavalier sinner who crippled children and spouted empty threats - but the selfless protector who would put his life on the line for the greater good, love and family.

Now in her hands she held the report of his noble labours, detailing his accomplishments and as difficult as it was for her to envisage Cersei blooming with Jaime’s child - so too was it relieving.

Jaime will be pleased. If he had lived but been unsuccessful in sparing his child, the guilt and pain would have been shattering for him. He needs this – he deserves this second chance. Far be it
from me to resent it. I made my peace with this long ago when I sent him South.

She had reached the concluding paragraphs too quickly, guzzling down the information like a wanderer in the desert who happened upon a flagon of water. The life reaffirming goodness swallowed up with such enthusiasm, it was no longer there to enjoy.

**In summary, I congratulate you My Lady on your successful endeavour. With your instructions we were able to save three lives and I am sure they will express their gratitude when the time is right.**

**Ser Jaime – despite his determination - is not yet fit to engage in communications personally, so I have put quill to ink in my official capacity in his place. I left it as long as possible to provide you with the most up to date information, but today brings favourable winds and Ser Bronn is ready to depart.**

**Lady Cersei is unaware of the identity of her benefactress and none of the Tarth attendants believe it is their place to inform her. As suggested by yourself, all heraldry was kept concealed for the duration of our voyage and residency.**

**During the initial weeks whilst we allowed Westeros time to settle, Ser Bronn was the only familiar face to the former Regent and the natural target for her queries. Therefore, in pre-emptive measure I ensured he made his presence scarce. It is unfortunate that I must relay how he chose to frequent establishments of ill-repute, staying in accommodations on the premises, and I am deeply apologetic that a portion of our funding had to be used for such immoral pursuits. Though I hope you shall concur that it was preferable to the risk of Lady Lannister questioning Ser Bronn about the rescue. Her knowledge of these matters is personal and has been left to the discretion of Lord Jaime and yourself.**

**I hope this letter is delivered to your hands swiftly and that it brings you glad tidings.**

**Please find enclosed the reference for our closest ravenry. I have engaged their cooperation and we will be able to send more frequent correspondence as soon as I have received your explicit permission.**

**I remain ever faithful to House Tarth and am humbly at your service.**
Smiling to herself, Brienne refolded the letter with great care, rising from the bed and storing it in the top drawer of her dresser. Here it would be kept safe and within arm’s reach of her pillow – for she was certain she would reread it more than once before the day was done.

There is no time for such indulgences now.

Crossing to her easterly facing window, the new Lady Lannister peered out at the sprawling city below. A clutter of tiny buildings leading to Blackwater Bay and finally the Narrow Sea. Far across that expanse, in foreign Pentos, was Jaime. Distant from her and worse for wear but most importantly - alive.

Brienne hugged herself, both arms crossed over her chest, thumbs rubbing self-soothing lines against the sleeves of her tunic. If she let her imagination stray, she could almost feel the encircling warmth of his embrace.

“I have much to do my husband. It will take quite the arranging…” She spoke aloud under her breath, promises to herself and to Jaime. “…. But now I know you are out there; I will move heaven and earth to see us delivered back to each other.” Hearing it uttered in her own voice gave it gravity, a new vow cased in cement. Thoughts could drift away easily upon the wind, but her declarations were immovable, solid concrete impervious to gale. They carried weight.

And I am exactly where I need to be to make this happen.

Brienne thought of the tools at her disposal, the influence and allies she had at court. The scope of avenues open to her that only her position offered. A realm of possibilities which would have been lost if she were gestating on an island. For the first time she saw the divine beauty in her circumstance. Watching the pieces fall into place.

The heavy horse gallops into dominance, clearing a path for the spearmen. Tyrion would be proud.

He had taken great pains to teach her cyvasse. Trying to distract her melancholy by enlivening her military mind. Even if she’d lost to him more often than not, she’d learnt, and now she was ready to graduate to the real game. The one of Kings, Knights and Lords turned vagabond.
The Lady Commander nodded to herself, seeing her importance once more. Driving impetus hurtling back, rousing from its dormancy.

“This – *I* can give you.”
Chapter Summary

Cover Art by: Ro_Nordmann

"Come to me..."
Lyrics, War of Hearts by Ruelle
Verse 1, Line 1

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes
“How the mighty have fallen.” Cersei’s discontent was enough to make his head throb, the thick tension she emanated causing his wooziness to resurge. His sister had a knack for filling his small room with her suffocating unease, her visits less about checking on his recovery and more an opportunity to bemoan their present circumstances.

“So you’ve said.” Jaime raked a hand across his beard, collapsing back onto the bed and willing his vision to stop swimming. “In excess of eight times in the last hour if my head is not making me miscount.”

“You never were skilled in academics brother.” She grimaced at him and he knew she only saw weakness. “I would suggest using your fingers to keep track but that would only get you so far.”

“Seriously, a hand jape? Do they not become tiresome?”

“What does it matter? Everything in this droll existence becomes tiresome.” Her skirts swept over the floorboards as she approached his bedside, looking over his supine posture with distaste. “How much longer do you intend pitying yourself? Infirm isn’t a becoming status for a Knight. I am up and about – I do not see why you should enjoy such indolence.”

“Maester Cyril said I should stay abed.” Regardless of his protestations, his wounded ego compelled him to sit up again, the haste triggering another head spin.

“He is a cosseting lackwit. Qyburn was far superior…”

“Qyburn was a good deal insane.”

“But loyal to me…” She resumed her pacing, folded arms resting on the swell of her stomach. A caged lioness scratching at anyone who came near. “…When I was Queen and all of Westeros rightly bowed before me.” Cersei grit her teeth, staring out the window at the Narrow Sea, as if she could still see King’s Landing and the throne to which she was so attached. “Now look at me. Fugitive. Exiled. I cannot say they are titles which I care for.”

“I thought all you cared about was the baby?” Jaime dripped irony; he knew with the removal of certain death her priorities would instantly revert to her appetite for power. He swung his legs slowly over the side of the mattress, preparing to get up.
Inch by inch if I aim to prevent dizziness.

“Is it not caring to wish for a future for our child with a crown on its head, rather than a target on its back?” She narrowed her eyes at him. “I thought you had the best interests of our baby at heart?”

He sucked in a deep breath, raising his gaze to the ceiling. Channelling patience and tolerance which seemed in scant supply. “What’s done is done Cersei. It is best not to look behind.”

“How quaint. Did they teach you that in the North?” Her bitterness was palpable. “Please do share what other gems of self-discovery you unearthed on your traitorous venture.”

Upon the word ‘gem’ his memory flashed unbidden to a bed in Winterfell. Brienne lying beneath him, long pillar of neck exposed to his lips, head thrown back upon her pillow. Soft, sweet sighs - which he never imagined her producing - escaping from her parted mouth as she felt the first strokes of his manhood within her. Maiden’s blood painting their joining but the sensation of their coupling too incredible to give either of them pause. When her eyes had returned to his, her pupils were so blown, sapphires darkened to black diamonds and all he could do was kiss his transformed virgin, revelling in the light of pure love she shone within him.

But that moment is sacred between the two of us. Never to be tainted by Cersei’s snide scrutiny.

“I learnt that I am rather adept at dodging crossbow bolts.” He deadpanned. “But you wouldn’t know anything about that now – would you?”

Cersei wrinkled her nose but had the good sense for once to keep her mouth shut. There was much that went unaddressed between them. His wife being the primary topic. Maester Cyril had versed him in how they had cultivated Cersei’s state of ignorance and Jaime found he was not of the disposition to contradict it. Coping with her foul mood was already taxing enough, let alone having her rage at him over loving another. He knew she would only press him for details, pick at his silence. Destroying every titbit he offered with her acid tongue.

No – my relationship with Brienne is not fodder for her desecration.

It was in this stretch of hush that Maester Cyril entered the room. He made a point of keeping the door pinned open whenever Jaime had his visitor – a fact the one-handed knight found both amusing and offensive.

His loyalty to Brienne is commendable but the insinuation stings. He sighed audibly. I should know well that a reputation of incest once gained is seldom lost.

“Ser Jaime – how pleased I am to see you feeling well enough to maintain an upright position.
Does your head bother you?”

“It ebbs.” The lion responded politely. “Nothing I cannot endure.”

“That is great progress My Lord – but if you change your mind and require some alleviation. I have a draught prepared.”

Cersei scowled at the pair of them. “I am uncomfortable and you did not offer me any elixirs.”

The Maester smiled tightly, the expression resonating with forced politeness. “I am afraid that the irritations which you speak of are only those synonymous with pregnancy and I have nothing to prescribe which would be beneficial.”

Jaime suppressed a snigger. The dynamics between his sister and his wife’s Maester his lone source of entertainment. The man was always diligent and courteous, but his favouritism was poorly masked. A sennight ago when they were alone, Jaime had extended his thanks to the physician. But the older man had simply replied. “You are the husband of Lady Brienne. I have known her since she was a girl. I taught her numbers and letters. If she asks for you to be given the best of care, I will go to every length to provide it.”

But that same devotion seemingly does not extend to Cersei. He adopts the necessary impartiality to perform his duty – but no ingratiating attentions. My sister is definitely not used to being so insignificant.

“I came with purpose.” Maester Cyril slipped the tip of a folded document from his sleeve, flashing it lightning quick for Jaime’s eyes only before concealing it again. “I do apologise Lady Cersei but I require privacy with my patient. However on my journey from downstairs I perchanced to notice that lunch was being prepared. I suggest you go see if it is ready. You must eat for two to ensure a healthy delivery.”

Cersei threw her twin a dark look, tromping across the floorboards and out. A low grumbling trailing in her wake about ‘being given orders by an insubordinate geriatric.’

“I’m sorry.” Jaime offered sympathetically. “I should just write a dozen apology notes to the staff and distribute them as required – though my supply would not last me a day.”

“She is a woman grown; you are not accountable for her tongue. Nor for making contrition on her behalf. I have seen many twins in my time and there must always be someone there to give timely reminders that they are separate entities.”

Jaime decided to ignore the implication behind that pearl of wisdom. Instead responding cheerily.
“What is the parchment you have?”

“Ah.” Maester Cyril produced the sealed letter. “This is for you.” A knowing smile. “From our Lady.”

The lion practically snatched it in his eagerness. *Damn, now I should be offering my own apologies.*

Fortunately the Maester just chuckled, removing the block which kept the door open as he departed. “I shall tell the servers that you will be taking your own meal in an hour.”

“Thank you.”

With the turning of a knob, Jaime found himself alone with Brienne – or as close to it as their locations would allow. He conjured her voice in his mind, letting him hear her mellow octaves whilst he perused its contents. Tackling each word slowly like his Father drummed into him, illiteracy never an acceptable option for a Lannister of the Rock.

Jaime quietly beamed, focussing upon every letter, realising he had never seen his wife’s handwriting before.

*Her penmanship is as exemplary as she is, like it was copied from a book of the highest standard. That is my Brienne - she never does things by halves.*

*Dear Ser Jaime,*

*Please forgive my formality. Never before have I written to a lover and fear I do not know where propriety ends, and sentimentality begins when committed to a page.*

*Part of me worries this will fall into the wrong hands and my outpouring could become the subject of mockery and used as a weapon…*

*But husband – I need you to know how I’ve missed you. I cannot begin to impress upon you in a few lines the extent of my grief in the months since our parting. I believed you dead and the toll it took upon my heart has no scale on which I can measure to convey an accurate comparison.*

*She loves me.*
An eddy of elation, adoration and guilt, churned within his chest and stomach. Confounding him and pulling him in two directions at once. One towards happiness and the other towards self-blame.

*Because of me she has endured so much pain.*

He moved on, wanting to know more.

> Never doubt that your widow was a hollow robbed of her soulmate and as its counterpoint – never question my utter exhilaration at learning you are alive.

Jaime chuckled to himself, finding it difficult regardless of her assertions to picture his stoic Brienne in a state of excitement.

*Unless we are beneath the furs…*

He felt a twitch in his groin and was pleased that at least one part of his body could still boast robustness and quick reaction.

*Even my cock misses my woman.*

> We achieved it all Jaime – a feat so impossible it seemed easier to rearrange the stars. Yet here we are and now my sole focus is on organising our reunion.

As you can imagine much has changed in Westeros. I have written Maester Cyril in addition to this letter, so he is well informed. But in my role as wife, I prefer to tell you of developments in my own words.

*The Dragon Queen is deceased – by Jon Snow’s own hand. He has returned to the Wall as his sentence.*

*The North is independent, ruled by Queen Sansa.*

*The South is united under the monarchy of King Bran the Broken – First of his Name.*

*(Yes Jaime, you read that correctly, I have not endeavoured to jape. The boy whom you crippled is now reigning sovereign of the Six Kingdoms).*

*Fuck!*

Jaime smacked his stumped wrist into the mattress in a fit of temper. *Of all the people other than*
Daenerys who have reason to hate me – it is Bran.

He calmed his breathing. All is not lost – perhaps Brienne can come here.

Though do not despair yet – there is more to come. And it is the silver lining upon
the clouds which gives me leverage to broker your return (and Cersei’s though this
is equally challenging).

Wait – what?! My return? Cersei’s return? Where?

…to Tarth? In secret? How else could it be?

For you see, I am bound here. By pledges which I swore following reports of your
demise.

Jaime – I am Lady Commander of the Kingsguard. I took your post in respect to you
and to keep the company of your memory. It is a small guard at present – comprised
solely of two. Ser Podrick (newly knighted by my own hand) and myself.

I sit upon the Small Council. Alongside your Brother who governs as Hand. Ser
Bronn has taken his newly appointed position - Master of Coin. Samwell Tarly is
Grand Maester. And Ser Davos serves as Master of Ships. The other two seats
remain unfilled.

With the King’s ear and the votes of council I am confident I can come to an
arrangement which sees us together again.

Trust in me Jaime. I uphold our marriage vows with more conviction than any
oaths I have sworn before. I will plead your cases with honour and negotiate your
places at Court. They will not keep us apart.

My thoughts are always with you. My heart and bed are yours alone.

But my pledge binds my body to the Red Keep - guarding the King - and I know you
would not ask me to forsake it.

Write me if you can… I am aware with your left hand it is a struggle. But to hear
from you will make the wait seem less arduous.
I count the rises of the sun until I get to be your wife again in person.

Yours eternally faithful,

In mind, fidelity and love,

Lady Commander, Ser Brienne Lannister

Pushing himself from the bed, he ignored the vertigo to search for ink and quill. Responses and thoughts flying through his groggy head at the speed of a gallop. He tried to snatch them all as they careened by, listing and holding on to them for dear life. The highlights of a thousand conversations of which they were presently deprived.

Lunch can wait for more than an hour – for I will write her back if it takes all night.

The Lady Knight bounded forth when Maester Tarly located her, his friendly face grinning as he produced a scroll. The letter had arrived swiftly by conventional standards but for a lonely spirit - desperate for direct word from her husband – it took far too long.

Podrick didn’t even ask questions when he saw her caress its curled edges with reverent fingers. He just smiled and took her place by the King’s door – effectively relieving her of duty.

Brienne changed and found a quiet place out in the garden. A bench against a wall shielding her from view but not the sunshine. She basked in its glow, drinking it in, pleased to imagine that the same golden rays which touched her hair also fell upon Jaime’s.

I hope he is well enough to go outdoors, to see the beauty of the burgeoning spring. Or at least
that he has a window, gifting him a view - preferably Westerly facing. Where he can gaze across the ocean towards me and have his skin kissed by the last orange beams of the day.

For we share the same earth, the same sun and sky. And as much as I long for him, our current predicament is a vast improvement on his spirit walking the planes of warrior’s passed.

Her pulse quickened when she beheld his childlike scrawl, delighted that the words had come from Jaime himself and not through the Maester.

*Dearest Wife Brienne,*

*Tow-headed Stubborn Aurochs,*

*Love of my Life,*

See how many ways there are to greet each other? I hope from these few salutations (and my paltry handwriting which provides proof within itself) you will know by intuition that this letter came from none other than me - your husband. A direct confirmation of my survival, after mistaken accounts of my passing.

I am well enough. On the mend and gaining strength by the day...although Cersei’s diatribes could make me wish to be unconscious again.

But I miss you. Earnestly. The ache is deep.

All your news came as a shock – but no doubt so did mine to you.

*Lady Commander…. There is none more worthy. Even if I begrudge the position which keeps you from me, I know you will do the role far more credit than I ever could. Though I will need more particulars - you are a married woman – how will this work? I assume your marital status was overlooked due to being a widow? What happens now? I trust you… but I am worried.*

*How is my brother? (Tell him the one-handed man thanks him for supplying a rowboat, he will appreciate the irony).*

*I am beyond sorry for the continued anguish you have suffered as a result of our coupling. I never wanted to cause you more pain. Our plan went awry, and communications were beyond me, so there was naught I could do to prevent it. Do you know when I woke up the first person I asked for was you?*
My hand is beginning to hurt so I must keep this short.

I love you Brienne.

It is evident that without you I cannot thrive. But I simply refused to die without kissing you again.

It is a matter of principle and a husbandly prerogative. A Lannister always pays their debts and you once told me you kiss me every morning when you depart our bed.

I intend claiming all those kisses plus interest accrued.

Please put the wheels in motion beloved. We should be together.

And I was wondering …. Do you have anything else to tell me?

I know with your new appointment it seems unlikely but – I have to ask.

In summary:

I’m here, I’m alive and I’m yours.

But I’m lonesome, I’m amorous and I’m missing my Lady Knight.

All my love,

Jaime

Fantastic. He is desirous and alone in Pentos with Cersei.

Brienne snorted in annoyance, sounding somewhat like a horse. Musing about whether or not the cluelessly exasperating man knew what that statement did to a woman.

Jaime is a faithful lover. He has had opportunities for years but never strayed from his mate. Besides, from all accounts Cersei is unbearable at present and heavily pregnant…

She glanced down guilty at her own tight abdominal muscles. The flatness of her belly a reminder of what she never had.

I know what he was asking but not saying. In my response I must tell him.
Redirecting her focus, the Lady Knight allowed herself a moment of girlish glee, thumbing over the written declarations of love. As a girl she had read of such things – letter’s spouting sonnets from a Knight to their maiden fair – flowery declarations and prose recolouring nature itself in the vividity of passion’s hue. She never imagined she would actually receive one. Brienne rolled her azure marbles.

And mine says ‘tow-headed stubborn aurochs.’

Nevertheless, it caused amusement to bubble inside her in place of upset. Their communication and terms of endearment a dialect only understood by two. He could quote Florian and put the bards to shame – but never would overtly fustian poetry recreate the intimacy of her and Jaime’s in-house jokes and easy banter. Such tropes were trite, commonplace amongst suitors and often insincere. Whereas their language, the one spoken solely by Jaime and Brienne, was exclusive to their love. Esoteric in its originality and she would not trade it for a ballad a hundred stanzas long.

I will reply to him immediately. She decided. There is much he needs to know.

Before heading inside, she permitted herself one last foolishness, by pressing the letter between palm and chest. Laughing at how mortified she would be if anyone caught her in such a sentimental act.

It’s my first love note – I am entitled. Brienne rationalised to herself. And I think perhaps exchanging them will become a pattern….

My vexing, bewildering, irresistible husband Jaime,

You catch me shamefaced Ser and I know not what to impart. As I begin writing this letter a scalding blush still stains my cheeks (which I am sure you can believe) and I hold you to account.

Both my confidant and my tormentor, I feel compelled to regale you with my idiocy, but know I am only arming you for later jests.
For you see – I caught myself with your open letter pressed to the beating of my ribcage. I cannot begin to fathom what has become of me to make me act so heedlessly and so I will blame the sun and call it heat sickness (when truly I miswrite and instead mean ‘heart sickness’).

Mayhaps this will make you smile through your malaise and if so it will be worthwhile even at the cost of my humiliation.

As for your – manly lustful impulses – there is little I can do from afar. And Jaime did you have to commit that to paper?!

Yes – Maester Cyril told me your words upon awakening.

For that gesture - along with the many other instances where I have yearned since our separation - I too have a great deal of affection that I wish to claim in arrears. I will keep my tally husband, and I respectfully suggest you keep a ledger of your own if you want the account to be paid in full upon our next meeting.

I relayed your message to Lord Tyrion after our most recent council. He is in high spirits since he learned of your escape. The sentence he gave me in return contained such profanity I blatantly refused to pass it on. He has been informed to write his own correspondence in the future if he wishes to speak so coarsely.

After much negotiating, your brother and myself have managed to reacquire ‘Widow’s Wail’ from Ser Bronn. Lord Tyrion says it would do you well to never ask the price he paid. It is now here in my care, safely reunited with Oathkeeper.

Know I will not wield it in your absence (its yours, it will always be yours) but have taken to caressing the hilt at night. Your blade awaits your return, to be worn at your hip again. Its rightful place, the partner to my own sword, our matching pair.

As always you confound me. Gliding from insult to compliment with barely a moment’s pause. And as your wife I do wish you would not deprecate yourself in order to give me praise.

I am Lady Commander – you were Lord Commander before me. I have no feats to my name in this role and my page in the White Book is wholly unremarkable. Yours on the other hand makes quite the thrilling read. Remember Jaime; I chose you. To
denounce yourself is to question my judgment. Therefore your attempt at commendation quickly becomes another disparaging.

In short – do not speak so ill of my Lord husband.

Also – do not berate yourself over how our plan played out. I know it was out of your control and that in full health you would have contacted me in due haste. I have made my peace with all – the journey, the misunderstanding and subsequent bereavement. If in the end all the tears bought me your return – I would make the same decision without blinking.

Which brings me to our present quandary. I have taken the matter to the King and Council (with Tyrion’s assistance). The Council is favourable to your return – although they were not as eager to see your sister set foot back upon Westerosi soil. However, the final say in everything naturally lies with our monarch.

After my talks with his Grace I can rightfully declare that fortune has been on our side for the best part. Allow me to explain…

When I agreed to my appointment as Lady Commander, I myself insisted upon an amendment. My outlook was taking into account the possibility of my pregnancy. I had King Bran ratify two changes in the tradition:

The first pertaining to my matrimony. That my marriage and vows be upheld as sacred by the Crown, publicly known and widely acknowledged. I would keep no secret of my name or my title as your wife. I insisted that our union be rightfully respected – it is both legal and consecrated by the Gods – and as they say in Southron weddings. ‘Cursed be he who would seek to tear them asunder.’

This I did for the sake of legitimacy. So I could name our issue your lawful heir.

The second centred around the chance of pregnancy. Very simply, when it became evident I was carrying your child, I would be honourably released from service.

It is these same clauses which I have invoked now - holding King Bran to his word and having him grant your position at Court as Lord Lannister and my husband. I thought he would dismiss me altogether due to my audacity alone (which also would have worked), but his Grace selected me personally to be his guard and is not keen to let me go.
Congratulations - you are pardoned my love.

Now as for Cersei – her restrictions are more severe. I pled the case of sympathy – arguing that a Father could not be separated from his child anymore than a child should be separated from its Mother. I was genuinely surprised when the King agreed to let her accompany you all too easily. He maintains he would prefer Cersei ‘where he can keep an eye on her.’ (I have come to learn with his Grace that such statements do not always mean by conventional methods).

She is however to be stripped of all titles and finances. She will be given a minor position within the stronghold and her upkeep will be ‘dependent upon the charity of her brothers.’ It is also expected that all Lannister’s concerned (myself included) monitor her for any treasonous machinations. Both Tyrion and I assured King Bran that we will keep her compliant. When we left his chamber neither of us were as optimistic, but we will move mountains from their very foundations if it means bringing you back to us.

You are free to return to my side Jaime. It will not be long now until we hold each other.

But alas – alongside my glad tidings there is a dampener.

The answer to your unasked question?

If it had not been for the joyous discovery that you were alive and well – there would have been no need for my preemptive stipulations to ever be called upon.

I am sorry husband; I know this must be disappointing. I wanted to do my all for you – but it seems the Mother did not have plans for me, when the Warrior evidently did.

Please write to me of when you are coming. In preparation I have already begun to retrain myself in sleeping on only one side of the bed.

Yours forever,

Lady Brienne Lannister

Proud wife of Lord Jaime Lannister
Lady Love,

Starshine,

**Blonde Voice of Reason on my Shoulder….**

I have been amusing myself by trying out numerous sentimental nicknames for you, but none seem to fit half as well as Pig-Headed Mule or Frustrating Wench. Back to the grindstone I suppose. Let me start again.

Beloved Brienne (that sounds quite right actually),

Even when you lecture me, still I find a moronic smile plastered upon my face. This must be the parts of love that only married men enjoy. A positively stupefying discovery. Yes, Sweetling (I like this one too), I even miss your nagging. And I only wish I was there to witness the frown of disgust that furrowed your brow when you read the above list of endearments.

You did make me smile when you told me of your sentimental lapse. To place us on even keel and alleviate your concern of reprisal, I will share a private morsel as well. Though I dare say you will be scandalised (if so, I suggest you do not read the next sentence).

I endeavoured to take myself in hand last night I missed you so much. Yes Brienne – I mean exactly what you fear I mean. I grew very used to having you frequently, my hunger building by the day. Consider this the male equivalent of holding a love letter to your chest. My left hand is not to my liking though and my head is too cloudy to lock onto a memory in fine detail. There is something you can do from
Now to a more serious note – I do not blame you in anyway for a lack of pregnancy. The stress of the situation alone was enough to make it a very unlikely eventuation and do not waste another thought on apologies. You are immensely clever and the way you trapped Bran into having no alternative but to agree was downright Lannister. I am awed by you as always wife. Fret not about our heirs – there will be plenty of time for conceiving and your provisions for our future are already made.

The sole person who will be disgruntled about the new arrangements is Cersei, but I care not a whit. She is driving me insane and I only now realise how little one on one interaction we have had since we were children. We have grown apart and become two people with very little in common but somehow, I never saw it. This experience has been startling but clarifying all at once.

Take good care of my sword (you always do) and sleep well at night my woman. Remember not to commandeer all the furs either. Couple habits are hard to learn but all too easily forgotten – and I will be beneath your blankets very soon.

I love you,

Jaime

In continuation….

My Wife,

I took this letter to Maester Cyril this morning. I was chatting merrily to him about all your wonderful work and instructing him to engage the services of a ship and crew. I was seconds from dripping the wax on the parchment when he rained upon
my happiness.

He informs me that Cersei is too close to delivery to chance a sea voyage.

Being an older Mother, she is at risk and he will not give clearance for her to travel.

He says we must wait until after the birth and recovery.

I hate that we have to be apart for longer my love and my heart sank heavily upon hearing his advice. I add this note with a leaden chest but knowing that I in good conscience cannot endanger my child. After all this baby has been through, it would be foolish to court peril now.

Please understand my wife and forgive me for asking you to wait.

My heart is with you even if my body is not.

Your Jaime

My husband,

I would be untruthful if I did not say your letter made my spirits plummet. Of course, I understand that the safety of your babe comes first and must be prioritised above all other more selfish wishes. I could never resent something so honourable.

But I miss you. It is difficult to go from elevated anticipation - when I received your letter, I had high hopes that within it would say you were already on your way - to
discover it a non-event. I rake myself harshly for wallowing in such self-centred thoughts. There was a time in recent memory when I thought never to see you again…. How quickly a heart forgets and gratitude for my many blessings falls away. I will coach myself in discipline and to be thankful for our good fortune.

I am glad Cersei is well and that the pregnancy flourishes. I presume you will tell me when she delivers. Always remember that we are one heart, one flesh, one soul – do not hold back from me for fear I will be begrudging. Jealousy is not my way Jaime and the only way we can be together is if you let me share in your every feeling – joy, frustrations and pains. Include me please. Even if the occasional pang of envy stabs, I can shutter it out. I need to be involved, to feel connected to you.

The position of Lady Commander is a very solitary one and I now know how isolated you felt for all those years. I have always been a loner, so my predisposition made me inherently suited to the requirements of the role. Though since, I have discovered how much I changed when you barged your way into my chamber – my affections, my body and my bed.

My missing you manifests as a constant niggling perception of incompletion. That some visceral part of me is not there. I feel compelled to find it, but it is unachievable even through introspection. Because the piece comes from outside of me. It is you.

And so, with that bout of sentimentality finished, I come to address two particular paragraphs in your letter.

Jaime Lannister! Why you felt it appropriate to waste precious parchment and the strain of your own left hand to write such nonsense I will never comprehend. A string of equally horrendous, sickeningly sweet affectionate terms when my name is perfectly adequate.

(I like when you say it, write it. Solely ‘Brienne.’ There is the suggestion of intimacy between us when you forgo my title, a liberty you have taken since long before our noses bumped and I learned to tilt my head when you kiss me).

The other topic (you know full well which one). No stories of any such theme will be forthcoming. Make do. Or don’t. I couldn’t imagine where to begin in writing such a thing nor would I want to. What if it was read by someone else? What if it fell into Cersei’s hands?

Come to think on it – does she even know about us yet? Does she not question from where her living arrangements stem? Surely she has worked on you to tell her?
See? We have far more important things to communicate, than my feeble attempts at stoking your fires through script when you know full well even talking about such things leaves me tongue tied. Not that I don’t long for you in that way – because I do.

I will thank you though. I spent many an hour whilst guarding running the immodesty of your words over and finding new ways to be aggravated by them. It kept me occupied.

As I conclude, I once again find myself lamenting the romanticism which I lack. I wish I knew how to close a letter to my husband in a way which would stay with you for days. Keep you warm at night. Keep thoughts of me close and carried in your chest.

All I can say is – thank you.

For understanding me, for being so tolerant and for loving me.

Until our next correspondence - you are with me everyday and never far from my thoughts.

Brienne

My Brienne,

I comply. To you alone I bend without breaking.
My teasing falls to the wayside as your letter was delivered to me upon a day where your words were like balm to my soul. I am fully recovered now and feel out of place. I need a sword in my hand, a wife in my arms. You know I crave affection and our letters are my lifeline, more necessary than food and water.

I am missing everything about you. Your sight, taste and smell.

Though strangely it is your voice which I find myself pining for the most today. The way you can shut me down in a firm but loving manner. I don’t think I ever appreciated that before we were together. I thought you were just being bossy. But now as Cersei snaps at me (which is every second sentence, she is very round with child and her temper is frayed) I long for your mellow put downs.

The ones that I know you secretly feel guilty about and will make up to me in the hours when we should be sleeping. There is a thought which will keep me awake tonight and my only comfort is that now I have passed it on to you so we can share the ache. Aren’t I generous?

What’s mine is yours after all wife. So, may we both come away from this newly made insomniacs by hypothetical touches.

To answer your queries. Of course, you will be the first person I tell when my baby enters the world. Not only will I want to share the news with you, but it will also signify the countdown to our reunion. I have no desire to be as awkward strangers when we find ourselves alone once more and this communication is the key to keeping our torch aflame. I adore you wife, but I know you are innately quiet. It is the possibility of the silences that terrify me, that the doors we took so long to open will slam shut again. I was sent over the moon to read that you feel I am a part of you – that you sense my absence as if an extension of your own skin. I know the phenomena of a phantom extremity all too well. I feel it physically beyond my stumped wrist and I feel it emotionally when every night I fall asleep deprived of the sound of your breathing.

Keep being forthcoming with me Brienne, I check each seal upon our envelopes for tampering and our correspondence is kept under lock and key. I beg of you - don’t ask me to burn them for fear of Cersei – to do so would be like a quarterisation all over again.

I know the Kingsguard is unforgivably dull, tedious and boring. But if you will not write me of sordid fantasies then at least tell me of you. So I can picture a day in
your life. Join in your triumphs and woes.

The answer to your enquiries is no. I have not yet told Cersei about us and she continues to be kept in the dark about our marriage. She is conceited and that makes her ignorant. She has drawn her own conclusions about ‘loyalists’ who still ‘bow to the true Queen’ and I am in no mind to contradict her erroneous assumptions.

Please do not misconstrue my actions as a regression to my former loyalties, when in fact the motive preventing my disclosure is in solidarity to our own union.

You see - Cersei profanes all she touches, she will not respect my choice nor will she be able to reconcile the idea of my loving you above all others with the image she had of me being her docile eunuch. When I came to her rescue, she naturally assumed I was crawling back to her and as long as she believes I am right where she wants me, her attitude towards me is mildly tolerable. We skirt around conversations, sniping and implying but never addressing what came to pass in the months of our separation. If she sees the new man I have become – she turns a blind eye.

Part of me longs to set her thoughts to right, to assert independence and the emancipation of my heart. Triumphanty tell her that decades of my enslavement have long since come to an end. To let her know that I returned as a sibling and a father but not a lover. That I now know what it is to have a genuine woman wrapped around me.

But my common sense keeps me silent. Knowing that her condition is delicate and that in our isolation we are each other’s only semblance of companionship. We cannot afford to be at one another’s throats right now. It would make exile in this small manse insufferable and possibly jeopardise our unborn.

Furthermore, there is my own wellbeing, the processes which keep me from going insane. Providing internal sanctuary when I spend my days pretending to be someone I’m not, in a place I would rather not be. In these quiet moments when I go away inside, I silently relive our romance. Recalling the softness of your skin, or the secret places which make you ticklish. These memories are my solace and I will not have them exposed to Cersei’s wrath. I know I do not have the tolerance to bear Cersei ripping us to pieces. Clawing at you and our relationship with vindictive talons, desecrating all I cherish. For that is what she will do Brienne – and I don’t have the patience for it.
I will tell her before we make for Westeros. Or better yet I will tell her when we are on the boat and she cannot dig in her heels or use my child as weapon.

I hope this all makes sense to you and that it gives you no cause to doubt my love. Though I feel you will understand; you once expressed a similar sentiment to me.

Cersei’s time is near, which means our time is near too. We both must hold on a little longer.

I apologise for the delay in receiving this letter. It took me days to write and my left hand is cramping. My script becomes even more illegible as the pain sets in, leaving me no choice but to stop and restart again later.

I miss you wife. It is straightforward – unvarnished by profuse embellishment - but it is true.

Your husband,

Jaime

My Dearest Lord Husband,

Jaime - my constant - you certainly know how to tie my stomach in knots. To amplify the absence which already weighed keenly on my soul. Four simple words declaring that you miss me, hammering home like powerful blows, from which no armour can defend.
I write this letter listlessly, for it is our private conversations which I too seek rather than the written word. The rare privilege of confiding in you as we lie sprawled across our mattress with no interruptions save from the crackling of logs on the fire. I now appreciate what you were cultivating between us at Winterfell when I was still reticent and unreceptive. Although I cannot guarantee you will ever find me a companionable communicator, I can tell you I have a newfound respect for the intimacy of discussions. Knowing there is someone on whom I can rely, where my sentences need not be measured, my thoughts and opinions unguarded.

My memory drifts back to our travels, to the tales we began to entrust into the care of one another. How it felt to have layers of my soul peeled back, the shadows lessened by the shared burden. In many instances conquered, never to resurface again.

I apologise that I am being vague, choosing instead to reminisce rather than address the crux of the issue. The state of the realm is not a topic I can commit to paper, the risk of interception is too great. This leaves me unable to include you in my day to day activities and I bemoan the void between us.

Suffice to say – all is not yet calm upon our continent and tensions surprisingly rise from the most unexpected regions. My duties at present include either standing alone for hours in silence or attending meetings where verbal skirmish creates a lot of noise but achieves precious little.

Regarding Cersei and her knowledge about us – put your thoughts at rest my husband. All you have explained is perfectly logical to me. In fact, to read of how you shield our bond and privacy warms my heart and could have been imprinted directly from my own beliefs. I would not wish for her sole occupation to become ridiculing all we have built and I can easily see how given your present circumstances – with ample time at her disposal but minimal distractions – this is very likely where her attentions would turn. From resentment, from anger, from bitterness.

I have told you before that I have faith in us. Our love is strong enough to weather her storm of undermining without allowing it to damage the integrity of our structure. But I would not inflict her tempest upon you when you are deprived of ally or outlet. Therefore I propose – if it is agreeable to you – we will face her with the news of our marriage when we are together rather than apart. Setting a precedence of our united front.
Each day in our enforced separation seems to drag my Jaime, loitering on and taking longer than any one journey of the sun across the sky has the right to. A strange and barbarous phenomenon, intent upon prolonging our waiting. But I reassure myself daily, that time cannot cease. It will march on, regardless of the perception of the mere mortals below urging its meandering pace to make haste. Every rising of the moon, marks the end of another day, bringing us closer, never farther, from reunion.

I am a patient woman and I know some things are well worth waiting for.

Until we watch the sunset from the same side of the ocean… My devotion is unwavering and my yearning for you is perpetual.

Your wife,

Lady Commander Brienne

Brienne my Wife,

I write with a joyous heart – for I am a Father once more.

My son was born this morning, drawing breath for the first time in this world with mighty lungs he surely must have inherited from his Mother.

He is blonde of hair with emerald eyes, bearing a striking resemblance to both of
He assures me it went smoothly given the tumultuous circumstances which plagued her pregnancy but advises that her recovery may not be as swift as a younger Mother’s would.

My son is healthy, a touch smaller than he ought to be but I am told it is no cause for alarm. The only evidence of the ordeal he carries is a sizeable birthmark upon his belly. A dark pigment, slightly rectangular in shape. Cersei was horrified upon its discovery, but I am amused. Maester Cyril says there are many theories behind its presence, one of the most popular being ‘maternal impression.’ The idea that the Mother had cause for fear whilst the baby was in the womb and an image of the object was somehow projected onto the babe. I thereafter have been referring to it as ‘the brick’ which earns me a solid whack should I be standing too close to the bed.

Cersei had the honour of naming the boy, with no input from me. True to form she has chosen loftily but I do not mind. I am far too absorbed by the simpler treasures. This is the first time I have been permitted to cradle an infant of mine in my arms. I am terrified I will drop him due to only having one hand but am adapting because I long to hold him. Nevertheless, I chuckle, for he is so tiny to carry such a mighty moniker.

His name is Tytan. A derivative of both our Father and Grandfather’s names with the inclusion of grandiosity one comes to expect from Cersei. Much argument has surrounded what last name he should bear with Maester Cyril quick to address the technicalities. Born in Essos – we do not have the customary names for Westerosi bastards as our guide. Cersei argues strongly he should carry the name of our House, for Lannister blood alone runs in his veins. She is maddened that being female she cannot claim him, and I have had to remain very silent on the topic – for I know that my name and titles are only to pass to our trueborn heirs.

She is currently exploring alternative options which grow more ludicrous by the suggestion.

I have already talked her out of Crown and Casterly. Maester Cyril was quick to quash her suggestion of Pentos – stating that considering there is a Titan of Braavos it is a contradictory statement. I personally advocate Waters, as it will make the transition to Westeros smooth with limited explaining. A decision is yet to be
reached on the subject.

I know I have gone on at length, but I cannot help being a proud and excited Father. The only thing which weighs upon my chest is that you are not here to share this moment with me.

I fear that my jubilance will inadvertently inflict hurt upon you….

One day my love, it will be our turn. Our babe which I embrace.

And I will kiss your lips and stroke your sweat-soaked hair.

Thanking you for what you have given me.

Until that blessed moment arrives – our reunion is nearer than ever. With the squalling cries of my infant son, a new era dawns. The chapter which will see us delivered back into each other’s arms.

We have accomplished so much my beloved wife and I urge you to remember.

Without you Tytan wouldn’t be here. Without your help and intervention, none of this would have been possible. Without your selflessness and sacrifice, this innocent little baby would never have survived to see his nameday.

From every angle I view it, you are the bringer of light into my existence.

And I thank you wholeheartedly for it each morn when I open my eyes anew and each night when I lay my head upon my pillow (soon with you beside me).

Bursting with emotion,

Your loving husband,

Ser Jaime
My adorable husband Jaime,

Congratulations are in order – felicitations of which you are most worthy, for none deserve this happiness more so than you.

I put ink to parchment with a smile on my face and a tear in my eye. For ample reasons.

Jaime you very literally walked through the fires of Seven Hells for your child. Risking all so he could be spared the price of other’s sins.

For years you watched as your first three children were birthed into this world; you saw them grow, you saw them marry, you saw them perish. Internalising your pain and sorrow, depriving yourself of your Fatherly rights.

I can think of no other man who goes to such lengths for his offspring. I can envisage no better Father for this child or our babes yet to come.

Relish this moment. Do not squander it on fears of my tears. Rest assured they did surface, but my trifling stirrings are not to dampen your elation. I will not lie to you husband – I am an honest woman. Of course, I wish I were with you. Of course, I wish it were I and not Cersei. That my child was placed into your arms instead of another woman’s. Even if I have never been certain of my own maternal predisposition - I am female. I am tender.

But I am also wiser than pettiness. I know what is important and it is not the odd flutterings of envy.
I am happy for you. So incredibly delighted. Your excitement leapt through the page and touched my heart. Your exuberance is mine. We are connected.

Revel in every second my love, my life. Hold him all you wish and recollect while you deify others yet think harshly of yourself – that without your intervention, he would never have come to be.

Learn to accept this is what you deserve – love and contentment – as it is the same lesson you seek to teach me.

I shall speak with the King, so he knows your return is imminent.

With your consent, I may also address the topic of names - if Waters is your wish, then that should be decreed. Other suggestions may prove inflammatory to the already delicate situation which needs to be handled with tact and aplomb.

I will also dispatch the Tarth vessel and crew back to Essos in all due haste. I retained them here in Blackwater Bay after Ser Bronn told us you were alive (rather than return them to my Father as was the original plan). When Master Cyril grants permission, rest assured it will be there waiting in the Pentoshi harbour, ready to set sail and carry you back to me.

I look forward to meeting Tytan.

But I confess – I look forward to seeing his Father more.

Congratulations again Jaime. To yourself and to Cersei.

In the meantime, I will keep the blankets warm and the hearth diligently aflame, for I can almost picture your ship upon the horizon.

With all my soul,

Your Brienne
“Jaime!” Cersei’s tone was acquiring that unnaturally shrill quality it only got when she was exceptionally short tempered.

Leaning upon the upturned barrel he scribbled the end of his letter as quickly as his left hand would allow.

Yes – I give consent my love. With all my heart I trust your judgment and assistance. Your counsel is always sound, and I would welcome any decision you make…

“If you are not by my side in the next minute, I will withdraw my agreement to this dubious arrangement.” Tytan began to wail, his distress prompted by his Mother’s vicious growl.

I am just about to set foot upon the boat, we are boarding. At long last I am on my way beloved.

Your Jaime.

(Soon to be in your company)

He sloppily dribbled the wax, pressing the seal and handing a couple of coins over to the owner of the ravenry, entrusting him with the last letter. Without a moment to spare he wove through the crowd milling about the dockside, their pulsating bodies had been blocking him from Cersei’s view, granting him one last moment of privacy to inform Brienne of their departure.
Only Cersei could make her voice carry so distinctly it could be heard above the hustle and bustle.

Jaime moved swiftly, plastering on a smile when he saw his twin. An ingenuine expression which didn’t reach his eyes, the gesture purely employed to placate any spiteful notions she may have of changing her mind, inflicting a punishment upon him for the unmitigated gall of keeping her waiting.

His sister scowled at him in return, rocking Tytan roughly in her arms. It was the first time she had entered Motherhood unassisted – dispossessed of handmaidens and nursemaids – requiring Cersei to care for own her babe in its entirety. Proving that gentleness and patience were both traits she did not even maternally possess.

“About time.” Her speech was clipped. Every sentence she uttered sounding more like a command to servants than a conversation with her brother. The trait of queenly demanding carrying into her new life of impoverished obscurity. “Take him. He is restless.”

Jaime gladly bundled his son into his arms, jouncing him comfortingly to soothe his cries. “Perhaps if you stopped shrieking around him, he wouldn’t be so unsettled.” He interspersed his comments with quiet shushes. “Little ones don’t like harsh voices.”

“And how many children have you raised?”

He stared at her impassively, responding only with a sigh.

*She certainly has a unique skill, inherently knowing how to aim for the jugular.*

“That’s what I thought.” Cersei replied smugly. “When I want advice, I will ask for it.”

They began wandering towards the waiting ship – a grand vessel from distant Tarth. He held no recollection of their journey over, but he knew from Maester Cyril that it had collected Bronn in Blackwater Bay, sailed them all to Pentos and then carried the sellsword back to King's Landing. *Now it has returned for our homeward trip - just as she promised.*

He marvelled for the thousandth time at how his wife had provided for them. Brienne’s intelligence and forethought making the impossible seamless.

“Does it not all seem suspect?” His sister narrowed her eyes suspiciously at the waiting boat. “First we must flee from Westeros, now we return. I trust our sympathising compatriot is certain of their sway. I would hate to walk headlong into a trap after we have so successfully evaded the Stranger.”

“Would I put our son in jeopardy?” Jaime glanced down at the infant drifting off to sleep in his arms. “All I have done has been to see him to safety. It is what you said you wanted - ‘for our
“Your answer is precisely why I question…”

“Why after all these weeks would you choose now to become doubtful?”

“Because I had not stopped to ponder your part in all of this.” Cersei stopped in place and fixed him with a verdant stare. Green glass, cold and calculating. “So quiet and contemplative brother. Sending your little notes, thinking I do not notice. You are the emissary of this mission. You broker the arrangements with your correspondent whilst purposefully leaving me uninformed.”

He kept his countenance neutral, masking his shock that she was aware of his covert communications.

_I should have anticipated this. Cersei has never been compliant and is more astute than we gave her credit._

“What you know is sufficient – you need not a sentence more.” His delivery was firm. He did not appreciate her balking so close to the deck. Metres away from beginning his voyage back to Brienne.

As if sensing his panic, she looked to the crew, studying them for livery or sigils. “You speak of our son, but no mention of me. Have I become disposable in this scenario brother? Am I the excess cargo to be jettisoned?”

Jaime exhaled a calming breath, reminding himself to be patient. That beneath her many despicable tendencies she was a woman who required reassurance and tolerance. “I would not do that to you Cersei. We may have experienced a breakdown of trust – but I am not you. I have never sent a sellsword to bring me your head and have given you no cause to question my motives. I will always see you are safe. You are Tytan’s mother and my twin.”

“Interesting choice of phrase.” She pursed her lips. “Do not think your gestures – or lack thereof - escape my notice Jaime…” Cat quick, she leaned in towards him, her mouth angled towards his own, aiming for a kiss. Reflexively he took a backwards step, turning his face away from her advance. His faithful reaction coming to him upon instinct, reaffirming how his affections had permanently shifted.

Cersei’s smirk was dark when he turned back towards her, victory warring with insult. “You have not touched me in passion since last we parted. Not a kiss upon our death, not a night within my bed. If I were not convinced that we are two halves of one whole, you may give me cause for concern.”

Nodding to herself, she trained her gaze ahead. “Luckily for you I am not that fool Daenerys. Holds of power cannot be reclaimed from foreign soil. Titles cannot be regained by those who hide in shame and exile. Here I have only questions – there lies answers. A lioness does not wither away in defeat, she regroups and all those who thought her beaten will hear her roar.” Looking him up and down she grinned, an icy predatory leer. To her, he was possession and property, a thing which had always belonged under her control. “As you pointed out dear brother, you have only ever had my best interests at heart. So - let us re-enter the game.”
Holding her head high, she crossed the gangplank. Leaving Jaime to both dread and gleefully anticipate what lay ahead.

*Take her coat of gold and cloak of red – she still sharpens her claws.*

He couldn’t help but be rueful, rebuking himself for the years he spent allowing her to wield absolute dominion over his life.

*It is all about to come to a spectacular end, when she realises her folly and how she is beholden to my wife. The fallout…*

Jaime shook involuntarily, glancing down to make sure he hadn’t disturbed his sleeping son.

*I shudder to imagine. But at least Brienne and I will have each other to lean upon and I couldn’t want for anything more.*

Chapter End Notes

This is the first in a trio of loooonnnng chapters. :)
I had a tonne of fun writing them.
Thank you again to everyone who is reading this tale and for every single comment.
They are the highlight of my day. <3
Chapter Summary

Cover Art by: Ro_Nordmann

"'Cause I'm overcome in this war of hearts..."
Lyrics, War of Hearts by Ruelle
Bridge, Line 2

Chapter Notes

A long awaited reunion...
**Please note the end of this chapter is NSFW ;) <3
Her hands were clammy. It was driving her insane. Brienne’s fingertips glistened with microscopic beads, giving her skin a crystalline appearance. A sparkling manifestation of her apprehension. The tiny shining rivers of perspiration producing a glimmering map upon her palm, running the lengths of the natural lines like a landscape if viewed from above.

Woods witches would assert that the arrangement of creases foretold your destiny, a unique mirroring of the fate of the individual. An arcane guide of predetermination impressed into your very flesh, like a page written by the Gods in advance, for quick referral should you veer off their intended path.

Brienne had no desire to buy into such concepts, for today at least she needed to believe that to some extent power lay in her hands. A sense of control over the unpredictable, so that all her careful arrangements would not be in vain. She called upon this calm assurance, willing it to eliminate the nagging surges of concern. Even if the adrenaline continued to spike within her, pulsing beneath her palms and pushing more droplets to the surface.

She pressed a hand to her plated thigh, the emanating heat producing an instant fog against the dull gold metal. The smooth steel cooling but non-absorbent, providing little relief from the annoying dampness, her padded layers below too far from reach to wipe against. The Lady Commander had little choice but to endure the discomfort, reclasping Oathkeeper’s hilt, her grip growing increasingly slippery.

The spectators in the great hall were abuzz, the large space serving in place of a throneroom and packed wall to wall by nobles both disconcerted and intrigued. Word of the imminent arrival had passed from lip to lip swifter than a contagion. The return of the fallen Queen and her Kingslayer brother a contender for the greatest scandal since Jon Snow’s dagger slipped between Daenerys’ ribs. The audience tittered and speculated amongst themselves, not even bothering to lower their voices. They had comments to relay, and they wanted them to be heard by all within earshot. Divided opinions giving insight into the fickle nature of purportedly leal subjects.

They changed like the wind, blowing in different directions in turn. Their memory short term, the Dragon Queen becoming their newest monarch to vilify. They despised her now, the Essosi tyrant. She had burnt them, earnt their contempt. It diminished their recollection of Cersei’s own penchant for callousness. Though some amongst them were still wise….

“Will it be a showdown? Surely she will not kneel?”
“An execution is the outcome.”

“Isn’t it outlandish! The former Queen face to face with the new King. It simply isn’t done!”

“I heard she’s coming to pledge fealty….”

“Who is the King’s Justice these days? I would hope he’s honed his blade. A decapitation or two will be scheduled for this afternoon.”

“She offered us shelter behind the Keep’s walls when the great black beast bore down upon us.”

“She trapped us. Nothing more, nothing less. She cares not for the likes of us and mark my word no tears will be shed when King Bran mounts a pair of lion’s heads over his gates…”

Brienne bade herself to exhale, the breath she had been holding making her chest begin to burn. Upon the dais she was within all of their sights, a target for constant scrutiny, requiring unwavering composure.

This was her place, beside the King. But if any of the gathered gossip mongers before her possessed a scrap of intelligence or sensitivity, they would recall how it had been made public knowledge that the Kingslayer was her husband.

Compassionless; dictated by capriciousness and shallow inattention. Overlooking the most important facts. How easy it is to forget that a wife stands before you when she dons masculine garb and wears her plain face. If they gave it a second thought, they may hold their tongues.

The Lady Knight couldn’t help but stew on their lack of empathy, the way consideration for her distress was brushed to the wayside, conveniently disregarded in the face of a prospective drama.

I should not be surprised – history tells its own tale. This is the same court who gathered to watch Ned Stark’s execution and turned a blind eye during Joffrey’s reign of terror.

But when it comes to me, it is more likely they never took heed in the first place. Disinterest and their eyes deciding whether or not they listened to the announcements about the new Lady Commander Lannister on the day I swore my vows. To them I was just the large ugly woman, wed to a deceased man, another able body filling a vacant post. Certainly, it paled when there were more salacious rumours to be had.

She could have scoffed. Her whole life she had been below their notice, save for ridicule and mockery. Jaime was the only one who truly saw her, alighting Widow’s Wail upon her shoulder and announcing that she was worthy of a Knighthood, of respect and acknowledgment. Just as he swore to be her Lord and husband, beneath the carved eerie eyes of a Weirwood tree.

Soon they will remember, they will have little choice. Either my arms will be filled, or my distraught pleas will reverberate off the walls….

Turning her head, she assessed the mood of their new sovereign, taking measure of his temperament, afraid of potential provocation from the crowd.
If Bran heard them, he didn’t show it. Sitting serenely upon his ornate wheeled chair – an elaborately gilded, substitute throne which he saved for official occasions such as this. A stately symbol of power, unique to his reign. His head was cocked to the side, a circlet running around his temples, the small smile on his face only serving to raise more queries.

From the day she brought Jaime’s final letter before the King, there was no going back. The last pivot fitted to the wheels, the wain rolling into unstoppable motion, speeding towards either a spectacular crash or safe arrival at its destination.

Brienne was loyal and honest, forewarning of their coming, wanting the Crown to be prepared and praying it all went smoothly. The combination of her own and Davos’ years of seafaring knowledge able to calculate the ship’s arrival in King’s Landing to the day.

Tyrion had seen to most of the arrangements. Quarters, a Gold Cloak escort and sending out all the necessary notifications - calling minor nobles to official Court. Ensuring everything required was put in place to handle their coming with efficiency and precision. An opportunity to demonstrate power alongside mercy.

But still…

She only had assurances, no definites. Not until the decree was passed in the presence of witnesses, the audience held in accordance to ceremony and the terms observed with mutual agreement. From Jaime’s end it was simple, but with Cersei’s unpredictable nature, the varied possibilities of how it could all unfold were making her anxious.

Will it come to killing for my husband? Defending him against all others? Breaking oaths to uphold the vows dearest to my heart?

And moreover, will I be fast enough to intervene for him? We are outnumbered and so very alone…

“It will be alright.” Tyrion placed a reassuring hand on her forearm as he walked by, sensing her distress and attempting to allay it. Council filed in behind him, arranging themselves to the side of the platform, whilst the Lord Hand whispered in the King’s ear. “They are here. We are ready to begin at your command.”

Brienne caught Podrick’s gaze from the opposite side of the dais. The expression of the boy turned man brimming with kindness and solicitude. He knew the swirling squall within her, how clouds of excitement and anxiety rotated into a ferocious cell. Contained within the boundaries of her outer shell, her stony countenance hinted only at the calm before the storm.
“Very well.” Bran gave consent with the slight nod of his head. “We shall commence - summon Lord Jaime and Cersei Lannister.” His voice carried and the room fell quiet. Brienne sucked in another lungful of oxygen, feeding the internal tempest with inflow.

The double doors opened with a resounding creak that under normal circumstances would have been muffled by the rustling of fabrics and murmuring of chatter. Today it screamed into the hush, the subsequent footfalls thudding so loudly you would think an army entered instead of a small family.

My man…

Rainfall threatened within, the warm kind which quelled. Temporarily softening her fear. If she were alone, the moisture may touch her blue spheres. Natural puddles displaying how the sight of him brought her a peace which defied all external influences. He was home to her now – love, contentment and a sense of completion all wrapped up in his suave handsome face.

His hair was growing longer, regaining its natural waves, locks beginning to curl around his ears and upon his forehead. A scar peeked from beneath its dusty blonde line, unnervingly straight and precise, ticking at the end as though it rounded a corner.

An impact mark – the brick left its imprint upon him but cannot detract from his appeal. He wears it as only Jaime would, like a man who cheated death and carries a trophy from his adversary.

Then she felt it – the heavy magnetism of his eyes. Shifting imperceptibly sideways to find hers, emeralds fusing with azure, transmitting the joy they could not physically express. Brief but emotive, the sight she had longed for through many a tear drenched night and she chased away the resulting impulse to smile.

We are not safe yet. Celebration must wait…

Jaime’s focus returned to the King, dropping to one knee in a well-practised flourish, the tail of this leather coat fanning out behind him as he awaited permission to speak. Every muscle in her face tensed, freezing in place so as not to betray her thoughts.

This is the second time I have had to watch him on trial.

“Ser Jaime.” Bran exuded his signature calm. “We meet once more.”

“Your Grace.” The golden lion lifted only his head, his posture conveying a humility his personality could never quite master. “I thank you sincerely for this audience, you show magnanimity in your lenience and I take this opportunity to congratulate you upon ascending to the
This elicited a series of gasps and whispers from the onlookers, but Brienne’s attention was solely upon her husband.

They do not see his well wishes as authentic, always primed to look for the worse in him. Condemnation by name and past deeds. Jaime please toe the line. I know this is hard for you – but sympathy from the people will never fall your way.

“Your time in Winterfell changed many perspectives.” Bran’s speech was often riddled. A series of implications for the quick witted to decipher. “One could say our past conversation was fortuitously timed.”

Her husband grinned despite himself. “I could not possibly have known what the future was to hold Your Grace. Nor even – if I accurately recall – if there was to be a future. But I can assure you that all I conveyed was said with sincerity.”

“Of course. Very few can navigate the pages of time.” Pride filled the King’s voice, reminding all here present that his dominion was not limited to the earthly plain. “I believe, when you say you spoke truthfully. I will repay in kind, so too will my words be genuine.” He peered beyond Jaime’s shoulder, his countenance darkening a shade. “I am aware you did not come alone.”

“No - I did not.” Jaime glanced nervously to his left. “My sister and....” His first falter. Brienne could practically hear the process which ran through his head. If he named the child as Cersei’s alone, he would renounce his flesh and blood. If he decreed Tytan his, it was a flagrant admission of incest.

Then she knew he would be thinking of her, panicking about her response if he laid claim to his bastard.

I do not mind my Jaime; I am not like Lady Catelyn. Tytan will always know his Father and if that is to be the practice, there can be no secrecy. Be the honest man I know you are and we will shoulder their scorn as we always have. Judgmental souls have never understood the plight of the misfit.

“…. my natural son accompanied me.”

Even if the crowd was appalled, Bran seemed appeased by his candour. The lone person satisfied whilst the masses sneered their disgust. Jaime bore it gracefully, treating it as a burden relieved from his conscience.

Bran saw brother and sister in their carnal pursuits – it cost him his legs. It must be gratifying to hear it confessed, finally out in the open. And Jaime will find it relieving as well, he always disliked hiding in shadow and denying his offspring.

Tyrion gripped the arms of his own chair until his knuckles turned white, fury radiating from him whilst the audience dripped with disdain. “Quiet!” He commanded, in a tone which almost
seemed too imposing for his small frame. Defence of his brother and new nephew making the youngest lion roar. “The gallery will be silent whilst the King is holding Court.”

“You may rise Ser Jaime.” The monarch gave him leave and Jaime sprang to his feet, keen to relieve his knee from the unyielding tiles. “Cersei Lannister will step forward.”

The name struck within Brienne like the city bells in their crumbling towers. A gonging chime bringing the presence of her good-sister back to the forefront of her thoughts. Her vision so consumed by her husband that she had forgotten to look behind him.

Cersei stepped forward with an air of confidence, the deep burgundy of her simply cut dress sweeping the floorboards. Her hair had grown in a similar manner to her brother’s, framing a severe expression but still highlighting her mature beauty. The loose fit of her gown concealed any evidence of her recent pregnancy, the only indicator of a newly made mother her ample bustline, straining against the buttons and purposefully drawing attention. In her arms she cradled a bound infant, the boy small but serene.

The former Queen stopped beside Jaime, submitting to a shallow curtsy, a smirk already playing on her lips. “You must forgive me Your Grace; I would not disturb my babe by prostrating myself upon the floor.”

Jaime’s jaw instantly took on a grim set, whilst Bran’s eyes flicked sideways to his Hand. The message simple and clear. Prove you can rein her in.

“Certainly Cersei.” Tyrion replied, arching one eyebrow. “Neither King nor council would wish to cause an innocent baby distress.” He tented his fingers and leant forward. “Is there a contrived reason why his Father cannot hold him?”

Cersei’s bottom row of teeth flashed into view, anger towards her youngest sibling barely contained whilst she deposited the boy in Jaime’s arms. The searing hatred of her gaze falling upon the dais as she dropped begrudgingly to the marble below.

“I hope this appeases King and Council.” She hissed through a tone of false sweetness. “I would hate to create any ripples. I understand much arranging has gone into brokering our return – though it does make one ponder the motive…”

Tyrion opened his mouth to reply but was stopped by his King. An outstretched hand halting his sentence before it had begun.

“I have my reasons.” Bran replied coolly. “And as you should know, a ruler never has to explain to those who are below his station. My reign shows clemency for the unfortunate and I can see few situations more piteous than your own. I was of the opinion you had come here to bend the knee, securing a stable future for your son…” His inscrutable expression provided the perfect offset to
her cornered outrage. “…I am waiting – Cersei.”

*He makes pointed use of dropping her title, addressing her like a staffer or lowly beggar.* The King tilted his head towards Jaime. “I expect the same oaths from your brother as well.”

*Move hastily my love, prove your intentions.*

They could have been of one mind, for no sooner had the thought passed between her temples than Jaime returned to the foot of the dais, kneeling beside his sister. The smooth agility of the gesture inadvertently proving how simple it was to achieve without disrupting the infant. *Even with only one hand.*

“I pledge fealty and the faith of House Lannister to King Bran the Broken, First of his Name. The one true King of Westeros and ruler of the Six Kingdoms. Our hearth, harvest and swords are at your command Your Grace. I swear this before witnesses and by the light of the Seven.” He fixed his cat-like green eyes on Cersei, a mixture of threat and warning.

“I, Cersei of House Lannister…” Every word sounded strained, like she was forcing them out around a choking blockage. “…pledge fealty to King Bran the Broken, First of his Name.” She stopped as if hoping that would suffice, and Brienne noticed the tip of her husband’s boot nudge his twin to continue. “The one true King of Westeros and ruler of the Six Kingdoms.” Cersei ran the second phrase together so fast it passed in a blur.

“You may both stand.” Bran issued his permission, his dark all seeing stare penetrating both Lannister siblings in turn. The room hung in suspense, awaiting his verdict to be passed.

Brienne tried not to let his deliberation unnerve her, she had become familiar with the peculiarities of their King. He could not be hurried nor spurred to reaction. His pace the gradual movements of a tree reaching for the sky. The forward progression so slow it was near imperceptible, yet surely enough the branches still grew, the leaves still regenerated.

After a stretch, he jerked, coming out of his trancelike state of concentration. “Ser Jaime.”

Her husband passed his son back to Cersei, stepping forward and nodding reverently. “Your Grace.”

“I hereby accept your oath of fealty and offer you a place at court. You shall retain the lands, titles and funds pertaining to the Head of House Lannister.”

An exhale rushed through her nostrils and she prayed her shoulders did not slump in relief. Her lion’s response uncharacteristically humble, if not a little rehearsed. “Thank you, my King. Words cannot begin to impart my gratitude for your generosity.” Bowing low, Jaime stepped backwards, chancing a rogue glance in her direction.
I must not smile…

“Cersei Lannister.” She strode up confidently, emboldened by her twin’s altruistic sentence. Tytan tugged at the neckline of her dress, small hands grasping at the material as he made soft coos and grew restless. “It is favourable for you that I am an unconventional sovereign. One who does not believe in retribution which would sever Mother from babe. In the years of the wars too many children were made Motherless and I would not be the ruler to break the wheel if I were to continue in the same vein.”

The lioness cocked her head, a victorious aura permeating prematurely. Bran narrowed his eyes slightly, continuing on. “However, I will not have you take me for a fool. Quite the contrary. From my experience the greatest threats to a monarch come from those they cannot see. Enemies who hide in snow or across oceans. Consolidating power below the notice of those who think themselves secure. It is under this belief that I extend to you my hospitality and entrust you into the care of your brothers, to remain at King’s Landing or wherever they may reside.” His voice took on its preternatural quality, the kind that raised hackles and alluded to the potential of his power. “I prefer enemies where I can watch them, for it is only those who consider themselves beyond my sight who would dare plot. Make no mistake, I see all. Whether under my roof or across borders, nothing escapes my notice… but in your case, many sets of eyes will make for light work.” Cersei’s triumph slowly melted as she realised the implication.

Yes, good-sister. House arrest. You are not clawing your way back to governance.

“Understood.” The former Queen pursed her lips, the regal inflections of her octave hinting to her displeasure. She held her head high, the epitome of restraint and defiance, rolled into one dignified package. “Your Grace, may I ask you to issue the full extent of your decree?”

“Indeed.” Bran laced his fingers together. “Cersei of House Lannister. You are henceforth stripped of all titles, holdings and station. You may retain the family name of Lannister but your son will be known by the bastard name of the Crownlands – Waters. Your upkeep will be reliant upon the charity of your relations and in accordance you are answerable to them. Your position within the castle will be subservient and you will be given an occupation within the grounds.”

Her face dropped in pure horror. “What doing?”

“I have arranged an appropriate position.” Tyrion chimed in.

“I am Mother to an infant; I cannot possibly be expected to work…”

“I took that into consideration and found you a task that will not interfere with your maternal duties.” Brienne suspected her good-brother was slightly enjoying delivering this news. “You are to be a Wet Nurse.”

“There are many orphans in King’s Landing, resulting from the power struggle.” Bran issued an indirect reminder of the role she played in the devastation. “This will be a method of atonement.”
Cersei’s mouth opened slightly to argue, then she snapped it shut again. Her unhappiness was palpable but she knew better than to publicly oppose the ruling. “Thank you, Your Grace.” Every syllable of her delivery was suffused with agony, the strain of declaring appreciation she did not feel adding insult to the injury.

Nonetheless, Bran accepted her thanks with a gracious nod. If Brienne was not mistaken, she detected a mild sense of glee dancing in his eyes. “Your gratitude is noted – but it was not entirely I.”

A huff blasted through her good-sisters grit teeth, turning to her younger brother. Daggers in her glare and a sharp edge to her voice. “I suppose then, I am expected to thank you as well.”

Tyrion shrugged. “Certainly, I would not refuse a show of appreciation. By all means you may thank me – but your pardon was not my doing.”

Cersei was perplexed, it was writ in the single line which creased her distinguished forehead. A lone indicator of the mental leaps taking place within.

*Her bewilderment is understandable, even I cannot imagine their purpose. Perhaps they are just toying with her....*

Often she wondered if Bran infiltrated thoughts but as he was far from a Weirwood it was more likely just coincidence when he tilted his chin upwards and answered their unasked queries.

“You owe your thanks to Lady Commander Lannister.”

*Seven Hells!*

Brienne’s head pivoted rapidly towards the King, blue orbs wide with shock, peripheral vision spying her husband glancing with amusement at all the key players, quite at ease with the turn events had taken. Whereas her cheek pricked under the piercing gazes of an entire room – and one withering, green female stare which could conjure the Stranger from the realms of death, her intense hatred imploring him to lower his icy scythe upon the Lady Knight’s neck.

Bran by contrast seemed quite jocular and very pleased with himself.

*A King does as he wishes, of course he would decide he got the honour of leaking that particular piece of information.*

She tried not to hunch under the weight of all the scrutiny, talking herself around.

*His intimation was not direct. Perhaps Cersei has not made the connection...*
“Ser Brienne.” The King addressed her directly. “I gladly grant you a reprieve from duty until tomorrow. This will give you ample time to greet your husband.”

*So much for discretion - with everything a cost.*

Brienne hunted down her voice, a weak thing which sought retreat deep in her chest. With willpower she wrangled it to the surface, her brain demanding it be strong and sure. “Thank you, Your Grace.”

“Court is dismissed.” The King announced. “Ser Podrick – if you would be so kind.”

Pod crossed to behind their monarch, his lips squeezed tight to contain his mirth. Brienne stepped closer, issuing instructions for the afternoon. “See that this chair is placed back in the Vault for safekeeping. I have organised in advance the changeover in His Grace’s Quarters and he has requested time in the Godswood this afternoon.”

“Yes, Lady Commander.” The chuckle in his tone was undeniable.

“And Pod –“ Lowering her speech, Brienne leant near to his ear. “- it’s not funny.”

“I respectfully disagree Ser.”

Sighing in annoyance she straightened. Habitually surveying the room for dangers whilst the King, Hand, Council and crowd were ushered out through three sets of double doors. The Gold Cloaks ensuring nobody lingered behind.

Brienne’s vision swam nauseatingly, the Great Hall seeming to grow and shrink all at once. The warm bodies filtering out, eliminating the illusion of close confines. The vast, empty chamber an infinite stage for echoes and isolation, dwarfing the small trio standing in the centre of the room.

But at the same time their world grew smaller, condensing and yelling the new family dynamic into the deafening silence. Reintroductions and the rearrangements of established patterns the agenda which hung unspoken in the atmosphere as all evaluated their next move.

Below the dais her good-sister glowered viciously, censorious eyes sweeping her from top of head to tip of boot. Sourness falling short to describe the distaste at what her appraisal found. Brienne kept her posture perfect, head at a right angle to the floor, spine rigid and linear. She would look neither up nor down to the former Queen, refusing to shrivel under her hateful scowl.

Even if within, her years of suffering derision and contempt floated to the forefront. The instinct to hide away and shield her face from the older woman’s revulsion making her feel like a young ungainly girl again. Throwing her weight against the door of her bedchamber whilst her Septa
pushed and turned the knob, demanding she emerge and play her part.

*Stop it. I am Jaime’s wife. I am Lady Lannister. I am a lioness too.*

It was hard to look away, worrying it would be misconstrued as cowardly but prolonging their staring contest was doing little to advance their positions. Wrenching from the barbs of green, she instead settled upon gazing at her husband. His toothy grin wide-stretched and unreserved when they beheld each other again, crinkles from his eye colliding with the new scar line near his temple.

“Well I for one, would very much like to thank you.”

That got her legs moving again, descending the few stairs of the dais in long strides, approaching the party with her customary equanimity. Cersei’s lip curled on one side as she stared incredulously as Jaime’s uninhibited joy. She made a point of bouncing Tytan in her arms - whether in response to an unscheduled squirm from the babe or in order to draw attention to Jaime’s child – Brienne would never quite know.

Stopping in front of them, the Lady Knight permitted a small, tight smile, her head unintentionally bowing slightly to bring her closer to her husband’s height. Painfully aware of how her towering frame loomed over them both, drawing attention to the masculinity of her build. “Ser Jaime.”

“Ser Brienne.” He was pure light-heartedness, unaffected by the wrath pouring from his sister’s pores. Verdant pools twinkling as he edged towards her. “Or should I say Lady Commander…”

He reached for her fingertips, the brush of his touch spiriting over them. She flinched reflexively, withdrawing her hand without cognitive thought, panic flitting across her face.

*Please understand, I want you to touch me. Just not with her watching…*

She had never been comfortable with open displays of affection, let alone in front of his former lover.

“Brienne is fine between us My Lord. I thought we had established that.” Her tone was gentle, praying he wouldn’t take offence to her formality.

“No - as I recall there were other options.” His focus drifted to her lips and she knew he wanted to kiss her in greeting. The struggles of his tactile nature versus her tendency for restraint which had always dogged their interaction as lovers.

*Patience my love, please. You may have me behind closed doors. Our reunion is not a sport to be spectated upon by critics.*
Catching on, Jaime imitated her posture, slipping into the proper etiquette befitting a Lord.

“Cersei,” He swept his left hand between them. “I believe you have met my wife previously.”

“Lady Brienne Tarth.” Never had she heard her name spoken with such a chilling tonality, the former Queen dragging out her title with a tongue dripping venom. A slow poison, not immediately evident but just as toxic.


“Yes, we have met before. Once at my son’s wedding and again at the Dragonpit. How could I forget such an occasion? Where you so impudently presumed to grab my brother’s arm. It seems now you have sought to grab other parts as well…”

*I will not be goaded. I can resist the bait.*

“Good-sister,” Brienne maintained a level timbre. “I too remember our previous introductions. I am glad to see your child safely delivered and that you are in good health. Both Mother and babe’s wellbeing was of the utmost importance in our mission.”

Cersei harrumphed, unmoved.

“Speaking of which…” Jaime chatted amiably, making a great show of disregarding the festering friction. “… there is someone else I want you to meet.” Stretching out and slipping his left hand around his son, he made to lift the babe from his Mother’s arms, but Cersei roughly snatched Tytan from his grasp, bundling the child into her breast and rotating away.

“I will decide what happens with my son.” She growled, the retaliative move cutting and snide. “And right now, he requires nursing.” Turning on her heel, she clomped away, the icy blast of her snub colder than the Night King’s gales. Footfalls receding from the room.

“I’m sorry.” Brienne breathed, her first instinct to apologise, feeling partially to blame.

For the way Bran’s disclosure had blindsided all involved, for rejection of her husband’s demonstrative display, for the heartlessness of Cersei’s vengeance.

“You have nothing to apologise for - you made all this possible.” He fell into line beside her, indicating with his head that they too should move on.

“But the way Cersei just used your son as a weapon…” She began to walk, letting the familiar cadence of a conversation with Jaime wash over her. Their bond unique in its ability to transcend time and distance. A rapport which manifested effortlessly between their conflicting personalities
but had endured though trials and tribulation.

*They call it soulmates don’t they?*

Her husband raised a shoulder defeatedly. “I would rather she hold him to ransom here than across the Narrow Sea. My twin’s fury will ebb, she has little choice. She is reliant upon us.”

“I doubt she holds the same view.” They exited the Great Hall, meandering slowly into a corridor. The narrow walkway empty save for carpets and sconces, giving them the privacy she craved.

“She will in time, necessity is a potent motivator and Tytan is here, in this castle. Sharing the same roof with me - his Father. Cersei’s wrath may be mighty, but her power is obsolete. She cannot stop me from seeing him, even if she tries. She knows it. I know it. Tyrion knows it. She just wants to feel some semblance of control. Cersei isn’t used to being the lowest rung upon the ladder.” Jaime stopped abruptly, whirling around to face her. A proud smugness, tilting his chin upwards. “And now she is well aware I have a wife. A brilliant tactician to whom she is beholden.”

Brienne shook her head modestly, sighing and studying the plush beneath her boots. “Believe me Jaime, I did not feel half so clever earlier, my heart was in my throat. I can count upon a single hand how many times I have gambled in my life and I swear they all have two things in common.” She raised her index finger as she rattled them off. “Upon each occasion the stakes get higher.” Her middle finger joined the previous. “And all of them revolve around you.”

A second hand interrupted her gaze, this one distinctly masculine, covering her tallying digits with his own and squeezing. The caress he had sought earlier which she had denied. The Lady Commander lifted her head, finally giving herself leave to smile properly at her husband.

“Am I worth it?” He beamed back at her, winking conspiratorially and making her snort at his gall.

“I’m currently reconsidering.” Brienne fibbed, teeth raking her bottom lip.

*He makes me feel half the maid again, as though every encounter between our furs was my licentious imagination and I would burst if he wanted to touch me with ardour…*

“Well then wife.” Jaime used his mocking tone, eyebrows shooting upwards. “If you are to be that way with me, I will not curb my opinions. The blue armour suited you far more.” He waved his golden prosthetic up and down, wrinkling a nostril. “This is too mundane; you appear washed out and very sombre.”

*So this is how he wants to play it.*
Furrowing her brow, she took an intimidating step forward. “And what is this?” Brienne gestured to his face with her free hand. “My husband returns to me with new scars.”

“They make me look ferocious.”

“My armour does the same.”

“The suit I had tailored for you was far better…”

“A fact I am not disputing – but this is my uniform nonetheless.”

“My scars are my badges of honour.”

“A constant reminder…”

“Admit I was worth it…”

“Tell me you love me.” The phrase was out of her mouth unintentionally, her blue eyes widening in shock at herself. Jaime’s did the same, the humour dissipating in a blink.

“I love you.” His took his hand from hers, brushing it through her cropped blonde locks, sliding down to cup her cheek as he searched her face for answers. “Where did that come from?”

That is a fair enquiry.

The origins were as mysterious to her as they were to him. The ghost of insecurity which loomed at the farthest reaches of her peripheral vision. When she put quill to parchment, when she placed her head upon her pillow and reflected upon a manse occupied by the golden twins.

Trust and faith stretched out before her, belief in the unification of her and her husband, the palpable love which pulsed between their forms when they lay close. More than once she had writ her assertion, displaying a confidence which belied her general diffidence, evidence of the certainty they had found in their marital bliss.

Yet still she could sense the presence of the grey phantasm. Questioning, doubting, terrifying. Snarling of rekindled urges and the natural way of man and woman. Old habits dying hard and the ease of the familiar. The sting of salt tears against her cheek, sharp in the gelid night air, slipping in an unstoppable stream and blurring her vision of his back – riding away South to Cersei.

“Jaime - before we proceed, you can confide in me the truth. The things you can say face to face which can’t be committed to a letter. Your place is secured at court now and I can handle the honesty. I am braced.” The Lady Knight swallowed. “Did you seek release with Cersei whilst you were in exile? A kiss? More? You have a rich history and you were away a long time. It is only logical that a man would….”

Her husband brought his thumb to the dent of her chin, shaking his head as she spoke.

“No Brienne.” His voice was gravel and sincerity. “I am loyal to the woman I love. Time and waiting have no bearing when there is only one person I want…”
“You can tell me. I will not yell. I will take it with dignity-”

“I have not touched her. Or anyone else for that matter. Nor would I. Brienne I am your husband, I desire no other woman in my bed. I have been more celibate than a Septon. Chaste and lovesick. Needing my wife.” Jaime buried his nose in her cheek, warm breath washing over her. “I missed you so much.”

“I missed you.” Brienne closed her eyes tight, relishing his touch. Letting belief and security anchor their bond. The radical doubts which had broken free doused, the demon banished with the beacon which was his love’s light. Her fraught emotions reorganising themselves into order. “I’m sorry.” She whispered. “I don’t know where that came from…”

“Yes, you do.” Jaime’s tenor was soothing in her ear. “It came from that pesky place where all our insecurities dwell. I am currently fighting an identical war within – wanting to ask you the same question.”

Now she scoffed, the sound coming out as a scornful chuckle. “Jaime I was serious.”

“So am I – how do I know you have not been romanced away by some Knight wanting favour with the Lady Commander.”

“Because I’m yours.” Her lids lifted, peering sideways through blonde lashes. Borrowing a quote of his own for her answer, the same one she had cited in their letters. “I’ve always been yours.”

Jaime turned her face towards his, emeralds simmering, thumb tracing her angular jawline. “Then where’s my kiss?”

Their noses rubbed first, a gentle collision, soft nuzzling like horses in affectionate greeting. Dragging out each movement, slowing the process down, both prolonging the anticipation. She heard him murmur in appreciative amusement, tilting to the right, closing the gap to her waiting lips. His mouth spiriting across hers, gentler than a butterfly’s wings, barely a glancing flutter.

But her heart responded with a rapid drumbeat, beating a persistent tempo beneath her flesh and steel. Brienne’s breathing quickened, sucking her lips into her mouth to moisten them. Watching her husband’s own tongue flick out to wet his bottom lip as he moved back in to end this glorious torment.

“Sorry to interrupt…”

She seized upon hearing Tyrion’s voice, her husband’s lips hovering a whisker from her own. Panted exhales mingling together, whistling from their parted mouths. Freezing Brienne took a step back, scalding embarrassment impeding her usual collected poise.

“Why little brother you don’t sound sorry at all.” Jaime quipped.
He is only half joking, his annoyance at being disturbed is equal to mine. Only he seems less flustered about it. I suppose I had best get used to such ambushes. I have an extended family now.

“Lord Hand.” The Lady Commander mustered all her courage to look him in the eye. “Is there something you require? You heard that His Grace granted me the rest of today to…” A guilty glance at Jaime. He folded his arms, a cocksure smirk daring her to complete the statement. Brienne could almost hear him teasing. Where exactly are you going with that sentence?

“…become reacquainted.” She finished, satisfied with her word choice.

“I know.” Tyrion seemed incredibly entertained. “And believe me the last thing I want to do is get in the way of your celebrations.” He used an emphasis which was far from innocent. “I simply wanted to invite you both to dinner in my chambers. A little welcome home gathering in honour of my brother’s return.” He sighed. “Only I have to ask Cersei as well. One of the downsides of the arrangement – we have to ensure she is fed.”

Jaime laughed. “Is Tytan invited?”

“Yes. I will be glad to see my nephew from a closer vantage point and there has to be some perks to having our sweet sister there.” Tyrion raised a suggestive eyebrow in their direction. “So what do you say? Will the pair of you be able to prise yourselves from bed long enough to humour me?”

Brienne felt her cheeks flushing a more profuse shade of scarlet. Must he say such things?

“I could not leave you alone with Cersei…” Jaime looked to her for agreement and she nodded. “…therefore I guess we will have to come.”

“Splendid! I will ensure the wine is flowing.” Turning purposefully, the Lord Hand strode away, calling out behind him. “Enjoy your afternoon off Lady Commander, don’t do anything I wouldn’t do!”

“In that case, the sky is the limit.” Jaime mused, his impressed tone almost too much for her. The addled blend of emotions within making her wonder if she wanted to laugh, cry or scream.

Instead she groaned, audibly. “Will it be like this from now on? Our sacred intimacies openly discussed?”

“Most likely yes….and does that mean you have intentions?” He was hopeful, a sauciness to his optimism which just added to her mix of extremes. “Because I very much need my wife.”

And maybe my cure is – I very much need my husband.

Leaning over she took his hand in hers, lacing their fingers and tugging. “Come. To my
“Your chambers?” Jaime’s feet followed at a steady pace, but true to character his mouth ran.
“Aren’t they the Lord Commander’s chambers? They used to be mine.”

“Yes, but now they belong to me.”

“But I’m not dead – so technically they are mine still.”

“You were dismissed from the post?” Brienne felt her proverbial feathers ruffle. The stirrings of vexation and arousal which he fostered low in her belly. Prodding at every little detail which should be plain and straightforward. Her flesh tingled whilst her temper frayed, a combination of sensations which she had missed. *Jaime’s effect on me.*

“But I was the last to occupy them…”

She frowned at him. “We are married so our assets are shared – we will call the chamber ours.”

“Alright.” He nodded. “I will let you have that.”

“No – you’re not ‘letting me,’ the point is logical and true. It cannot be debated or posed as though you are doing me a service by conceding.”

The Lady Knight observed him turn his face to the wall, suppressing and hiding his mirth as they entered the White Sword Tower. She huffed, beginning their climb up the spiralling staircase. “You do this on purpose.”

“Do what?”

“Instigate squabbling. You seem to derive some sort of enjoyment from it.”

“And you don’t?”

“We have just reunited, we shouldn’t argue.”

“We aren’t.”

“Yes, we are!”

She reached the top of the stairs first, using their still joined hands to yank Jaime up the last three steps, escalating his pace and channelling her impatience. Brienne paused upon the landing, releasing him and rotating so her back faced the door, staring deep into her husband’s viridescent spheres.

“It is completely intentional.” She accused, her low contralto ricocheting off the surrounding stone, returning to her ears as a deep chant. “Is it bickering My Lord…?” Blue orb’s flashed in challenge. “…Or mayhaps, is it flirting? And all these years when I have thought you churlish in my company, you were in fact seeking to endear yourself.”

“Better late than never wife.” He angled his head, edging closer, making a detailed study of her lips. “Figuring that out was quite overdue.”
Brienne’s inhale caught in her throat, inclining her own head to the opposite side in response. Body coiled in anticipation of his advance, a tremor ramifying from her centre.

Jaime halted, slowly tearing his gaze from her mouth, emeralds traversing northward to meet her eyes. Within their gold-flecked green, a lion crouched, primal want and hunger roaring against decorous restraints. Holding himself back, just shy of his prize.

The foreshock breached her surface, rippling over her skin, fingers twitching at her sides, jolting back and forth in indecision, waiting for him to move again.

The small passage of space between them, suddenly felt like a yawning chasm. An aching abyss of unyielding air, immovable threads hardening, fusing to form solid stone as they danced cautiously with desire. Hesitation was the binding mortar, a mutual timidity she despised. The side effect of their separation - the divide now inches instead of oceans - hurling them back to this awkward standstill.

Brienne resented the invisible blockade in their radius, its presence closer to his body than she. Empty atmosphere the sole obstacle remaining, a ridiculous self-imposed boundary deserving naught but her contempt. Ludicrous in its mere existence when her husband was here, safe and sound before her. The inches keeping them apart now her enemy, for she wanted no barriers in their way, only to be twined around his neck, his chest - his hips.

How dare we hold ourselves asunder, when we should be pressed flush. Foolishly allowing a partition of vapour to feel like granite. Why aren’t we touching? Why are we granting a distance which neither of us want?

Then realisation dawned - Jaime was waiting. For her indication and nod of approval. The signals of consent she had gifted him since she’d first unlaced her shirt, giving him permission to have her as no other had.

His want crackled into the immobile ambience, meeting the sizzle of her yearning. Charging the air itself with their signature tension, building with each passing heartbeat. She held back a shy smile; acknowledging how this too was their pattern. First erecting a wall of friction and then mutually burning it down in passion. For within their stony barrier was flint, the ingredient to spark their inferno. It needed only gentle persuasion, to strike against each other and ignite.

“Jaime-” Brienne raised both arms slightly in a beckoning gesture, splitting the divide with her movement. He didn’t need further encouragement, swooping in and crushing his lips to hers in a blaze of fervour. Molten warmth and supple wetness reminding her of how it felt to be loved and kissed, feeling flooding back in a rush that weakened her at the knees. Over the past months necessity had transformed her into an hardened pillar, reinvoking her stolid persona – but it crumbled into dust when his tongue slid into her mouth. The woman replacing the warrior whilst his beard scraped its tantalising salutation against her flesh.
She threw her arms around him, fisting a hand in his hair, pulling him to her. Obliterating personal space and limits, vanquishing the imagined blockades into oblivion. He winced playfully when her forceful embrace slammed him into her chestpiece, finding harsh metal in place of her soft skin. His hand skimming down her plated side as he tugged his lips free to murmur. “Are you going to let me in?”

Inflections of lust made her voice rasp. “Our room or my armour?”

“Both.”

They stumbled backward to the door, steel crashing against wood. Her hand fumbling blindly behind her for the knob whilst lips were tugged between teeth, nips eliciting shrieks of pain and pleasure, her knotted fingers twisting in his golden mane when he got too unruly.

“Jaime – it’s locked.” The Lady Knight gasped out. “I need to use the keys.”

“Fuck…” He settled upon her jugular, his growl reverberating down her neck and beneath her gorget. “…Who locks the door at day?”

“I do.” Pushing him away with a shove, she removed the keys from her swordbelt and began unlatching her door.

“You really are conscientious.”

“Don’t you mean diligent?” She swung the door open and he was behind her in an instant, barrelling her through the entrance and kicking it shut with a bang.

“It needs to be relocked.” Brienne swatted him away, squaring her shoulders and giving him her best no-nonsense glare. “You may do it.” Holding out the keys, she dropped them into his open palm. “It is best if I turn my attention to my armour. The straps and fastenings are a task more suited to two hands.”

Her husband chuckled, obediently securing their privacy, the keys jangling together as he plonked them on the dresser. Leaning against the chest of drawers with crossed arms, one leg folded over the other. “Waiting while my wife undresses herself…” His scornful snigger was at his own expense. “…This is novel.”

“This…” Brienne removed her plate piece by piece, arranging them in order upon the stand. “…is efficient.”

“Don’t you ever feel the need to laugh at ourselves?” His teeth gleamed, a smile perfect and liquefying. “Ponder how we ended up here?”

“Some would say it is simple.” She crouched to undo her greaves. “Too much wine at a banquet.”

“No… far from it.” Jaime’s legs had arrived in front of her by the time she lifted her head,
straightening and clutching the last segments of her panoply. Her peripheral vision gifting her a glimpse of the winsome sincerity of his mien. “Our origins are far more complex and meaningful than wine-soaked appetites.”

“I know.” Quietly beaming, Brienne placed the leg protections at the base of the stand. “I just wanted to hear you say it.”

Tugging off her boots, she deposited them neatly by the door, turning around to see Jaime squirming out of his own. She resisted the urge to roll her eyes at the way he carelessly tossed them alongside hers.

Could we be more different? Yet the sight of their footwear side by side called to a sentimental region of her womanhood. We are together.

He peeled off his leather jacket, undershirt pulling taut against his muscular chest and she couldn’t help but admire the sight.

My husband….

Brienne stood serenely before him, stripped down to breeches and shift, drinking in the vision of her man; alive, warm-blooded and within the reach of her arms. Her mind searched for the words, the right thing to say. A sentence which would articulately reflect the love, relief and need coursing through her system. But her soul was harmonious with the hush, the heat of their stare expressing all they could wish to say. Slowly circling around each other, feasting with their eyes, twitching in suspense of approaching touches.

There is a time for verbalising and a time to let our bodies do the communicating. Perhaps enough phrases were exchanged in the letters…

Surging forward it was the Tarth-born lioness who pounced first. Devouring his lips with insatiable starvation, shredding his clothes with her might and claws. The chamber echoed with the rip of parting cotton; his undershirt torn from his chest so she could lay her palms against his skin. Wild kisses spurring them into frenzy as she drove him towards the bed, hands roaming, mouth snatching, tongues reclaiming territory thought lost to them forever.

Jaime was right with her, seams of her own shift parting like butter beneath his strong fingers. She was equally impressed and awed by what he could achieve with one-hand, enthusiasm and greed giving him little concern for her garments. Grabbing him by the shoulders, she whirled them around, collapsing backwards onto the bed and pulling him on top of her. Digits flying in a blur as she worked interchangeably at both their laces, shimmying out of her breeches with a wanton boldness she generally curbed, smallclothes shoved down the length of her ivory legs. Kicking them loose she wrapped mile long limbs around her husband, heels and hands pushing his waistband over the curve of his buttocks.

Bashfulness has no place in our bed this afternoon.
Jaime pulled at the rags which had once been their undershirts, the tattered remnants strewn aside leaving not a thread between their naked bodies. Leaning on his forearms to peer down at her, chests rising and falling simultaneously, lingering in momentary stillness to stare into her eyes. She sucked air through parted lips, swimming in their emotion, returning his unspoken intensity.

Within they glimpsed the meaning which eclipsed physical gratification and pleasures of the flesh. The deeper, profound closeness that transformed fucking into consummate love. The kind that reaffirmed bonds and made them one. She let him see the tears forming, the gathering mist which began to haze her vision of his gorgeous features. The fragility she hid and denied.

Brienne allowed the single sob to wrack her body when he cuddled into her, cooing whispers of how much he loved her, how he was here, alive and would never leave her. His hand petting soothing lines from behind her ear down the column of her neck as she looped her arms around his shoulders, burying her nose in his hair and inhaling deeply. His scent filling her lungs, his voice crooning in her ear, his scalp and skin massaged beneath her fingertips. Every fibre of her body fine-tuned to Jaime, re-establishing to her that he was here, returned to her, not a shade nor a taunting dream.

Senses were the cornerstone of her existence, leaving imprints that lived on in memory and fantasy. Treasures which her subconscious carried, the precious little reminders that events really happened. It was seldom that Brienne could recall exact sequences of her life, precise detail soon faded with age and the embellishment of hindsight. But she knew with certainty the sensations which were branded upon her psyche. The smell of her Mother’s perfume. The sound of seabirds nesting in Evenfall’s highest turrets. The sight of her first steel sword glinting in the sunlight.

But touch has always been the elusive quality. The sense which a guarded girl knew little of, the protective radius around a maiden making the concept seem foreign and frightening. She went so many years without it, never knowing its splendour and power. Its potential misunderstood until Jaime leapt for her mouth in a firelit bedchamber.

His passion had brought a new wave of experience, heady consuming potency. Marrying touch with all four other senses, bringing her out of her shell. Her gradual surrender complete, encompassing from surface to soul, falling into irrevocable, all-consuming love.

When he was gone, she missed everything sensual about him. Smell, taste, sound and sight, left raw and empty, searching for him alone to fill them. The impressions upon her memory keeping him alive whilst leaving her bereft.

But none could conjure such an acute feeling of loss or craving as touch. For to her, Jaime was touch its very self. All she had ever known or ever wanted to know of the sensation. Her body reduced to just a vessel, an aloof instrument without his gentle ministrations to coax her into feeling. Her journey of physical affection beginning and ending with her golden lion and the absence of his caresses cut her to the quick more than she could ever have imagined.
All other senses her mind imitated or found ways to substitute.

**Smell** – His scent clinging to his belongings. The fragrance in the clothes chest she had rationed sniff by sniff.

**Taste** – Brienne had made a point of recollecting. Making her tongue water by putting names to the flavours of his mouth. Actively seeking the things that would mimic its dance across her tastebuds. A tiny sip of red wine, a sprig of mint, the odd tang of blood from when they bit each other’s lips too hard.

**Sound** – Jaime’s voice would echo in her memory. Its clarity so realistic it almost convinced her she could turn towards its perceived source. Find him standing there, calling to her.

**Sight** – Tricks of her eyes, where she would spy a silhouette and think it was him. Or her blankets in the night forming a mound which looked familiar, the deceitful darkness making her believe she could just reach for him….

There it was. The one sense she failed to replicate. The feel of his skin against hers, his body beside her, inside her.

Touch was a cruel thing to miss. The giver of phantoms, a torturous absence which became doubly savage when you realised it was inauthentic. The warmth of the covers bunched against her back, misinterpreted in her sleepy state. A dream too real, her cheek still tingling when she awakened, teasing of a kiss she had never really received.

Then they too faded away. Leaving her with nothing. Only the brush of her own cold hands as she rubbed her arms, doubling at the waist, the hollow inside spewing fountains of tears whilst she tried to recollect how it felt to be held by her husband.

**Now they have all returned. Really, truly, this time they are real…**

“Brienne…” His body ground against hers, full of heat and desire. Arcs and contours fitting into hers like a perfectly chiselled masterpiece. Jaime kissed her from shoulderblade to collarbone, tilting her head so he could peck his way upwards, summiting over her chin to arrive at her lips, expression brimming with caring and concern. “…are you alright my love?”

“The best I have been in a long time.” She drew him into an open-mouthed kiss, rubbing her inner thighs against his haunches, communicating her undampened desire. Reclaiming her mouth, she smiled, a sight she was sure must be a peculiar collage to look upon, her face a picture of contradiction, wet eyes, swollen lips, flushed cheeks.

Batting a stray curl from his brow, she attempted to explain her eddy of thoughts. “You are all I associate with pleasure. Before you there was nothing but toil and despair. The constant companionship of feeling inadequate. Without you, all of that re-emerged and with you I wave it goodbye again. Jaime you taught me joy. You taught me candour, humour. You brought me to the threshold of ecstasy and oneness. A place where I could be comfortable within my own skin, secure enough to let you see my weaknesses. My shortcomings open and on display. Through the benevolence of your love I have found liberties and freedom. You are what I have always lacked. For I only experience that comfort with you….”
She fondled his cheek, toying with the bristles of his beard. “…Make love to me.”

Considerate and eager her husband did not make her beg; his need equal to her own. Tongue gliding into her mouth, his kiss a silken seduction as he sunk into the throbbing core between her legs.

Brienne closed her eyes, luxuriating in every sensation, her body instinctively rocking in complementary tandem to her husband. Accepting, accommodating, welcoming him officially home. The long exquisite strokes of his manhood within her deliberately slow, gloriously erotic.

She traced her index finger down the centre of his spine, delighting when she felt his frame shiver in enjoyment above her. Rippling in response to the explorations of her hands and mouth, rolling hips repaying her twofold with every sublime thrust, spurring her closer to heavenly heights.

His staccato groans filled the air, joined by an odd accompaniment of strangely gentle sighs. It took her a beat to recognise the origin, her voice producing the unintelligible refrains. Soft mewls escaping from between her lips, sweeter than any grunts she produced in the practise yard. Delicate cries of worship, a hymn to her femininity. Readily overlooked, rarely displayed but a part of her, nonetheless.

*Hear me Jaime, I am your woman. I can be both – Knight and Lady. Warrior and Wife. Fearsome in the field and pliant between our sheets. It is not a choice as I have always thought it. The two facets can co-exist in concert…*

She reopened her blue orbs, thirsting for the sight of his body. Lapping up the vision of bulging biceps, golden skin, head thrown back in rapture. Her name falling from his mouth in reverent appreciation.

His flesh shone, tiny pinpricks of perspiration illuminating his godlike physique, merging to form a single droplet which ran down his shoulder. Stretching upwards, she caught it enthusiastically with her tongue, tasting, mouthing all the way up to his jaw. The aroma of arousal and sweat filling her nostrils. Every sense heightened, revelling in their carnal pursuits. Her movements aligning in synchrony with her lover’s, fine-tuned for excellence, balancing intuition and connection. Bodies meeting, moulding, a sumptuous reunion, their parts locking in flawless fit. Matched for height, strength and stamina. Her size ideal for her husband. Made to suit, fashioned for this purpose. They were a hand in glove, a sword and custom scabbard, armour measured for exclusivity. Just his. Just hers. Just right...

“Jaime…” With each plunge into her cavern, her breathing came faster, her urgency increasing. Pulling him closer, nails scratching down his back, fingertips digging in. Wanting him deeper, harder. Vibrations of indescribable pleasure radiating throughout her entire system, individual reactions from every corner of her body merging until she spasmed violently.

*So close… So....*
Brienne cried out, grasping at him, keeping him there, hitting that spot. Again and again. The place which transcended coherence, regressing her to whimpers and gasps.

Jaime's lips travelled to just where they were needed, sucking, nibbling; his hand slipping between their joining. He knew all her secrets, the alcoves and nooks which made her melt. His movements within her coming faster, growing frantic as his need for release built alongside her own.

Then she could no longer keep track of his journey, the will to think of his needs slipping temporarily out of reach. For all that prevailed was the writhing of her body, months of pent up longing erupting with unstoppable force. Exclamations babbling from her mouth between kisses, legs tightening around him, quivering like a leaf clinging to the mighty oak as it whipped through her with the fury of wildfire. The crescendo engulfed her in its blaze of ardour, blinding light and incendiary heat ravaging her system. The roaring in her ears stemming from the inferno of her heart.

She submitted to it gladly, giving herself over to its fever. Content to let it have her, shake her, rebirth her anew. Burning away her grief and loneliness, replacing it with jubilance and gratitude.

Just as it came it went, the rush subsiding, her system quieting. Exhausted and blissfully serene, puffing out sated exhales. Every inch of her left spent but fulfilled. Her nerve endings trembling more violently than after the most rigorous practice session, muscles twitching as she commanded them to stay firm, squeezing Jaime between her strong thighs whilst he shook with his own climax. Guttural, primal mating calls rumbling from his throat, pulse visibly bounding as he spilt, slumping on top of her in a heap of boneless limbs. His weight settling upon her more comforting than blanket.

“That was spectacular.” His voice was strangled, gasping at air but deliriously happy. Languidly lifting his head, gifting her a smile which crinkled his eyes at the corners. “Can I stay here?”

She furrowed her brow, the daze of afterglow dulling her comprehension.

*Why would he ask if he could stay in our bed?*

Then she realised, the comprehension manifesting when he nuzzled into the crook of her neck.

*He means here... In my arms.*

Brienne thought of how she had kept him at a distance in Winterfell, rolling from him straight after their coupling. Then the chilled loneliness of her empty sheets when she thought him gone, her bed never to be warmed by his presence again.

She tightened her slackened legs once more, hooking them over his calves. Draping her arms over
his broad back, fingers splayed and palms flush. Holding him to her.

“Of course-” Brienne breathed. “-Stay as long as you want.” She swallowed past a lump of emotion, the admission, which was once so difficult, coming with ease. “Jaime there's not a part of me that doesn't love you.”
Past vs Present

Chapter Summary

Cover Art by: Ro-Nordmann

"I can't help but want you..."
Lyrics, War of Hearts by Ruelle
Chorus, Line 3

Chapter Notes

The longest chapter yet!
Ahead lies some NSFW, an awkward family dinner and a bit of drama. <3

Authors Note: In this chapter there are several markedly 'old fashioned' concepts mentioned. Please know that they are only delivered as a reflection of the canon appropriate era, in line with the mindset of a medieval setting. :)

...
Jaime stretched indulgently, flexing his stiffened muscles, stomach rumbling softly like a lion waking from hibernation. Content beyond all measure but simultaneously fighting three wars within – one of fatigue, one of hunger and the third of another kind of hunger.

His wife stirred beside him, all gangling limbs and superb nakedness. Somehow in their sleep they’d rearranged themselves, covers sliding down into felicitous bunches, and now he was greeted with a salacious feast for his eyes, the vision he had longed for during his lonely months in exile. The sight of her uninterrupted miles of alabaster skin rousing his groin to go into conflict against his stomach.

*May the greatest need win…*

Brienne smiled lazily, draping her leg enticingly over his thighs. More awake than he was but in no rush to depart their bed. “Am I not fortunate to have such an obliging husband?” She hummed, showering him in sleepy kisses. Sloppy and unrefined but wonderful in their imperfect earnestness. “First so considerate during our coupling, then kind enough to reconsider our plans for the evening….***

*Fuck. He fought the urge to smile. My woman is feeling anti-social and she sure knows how to put forward a convincing argument for staying in…*

She slid atop him in one fluid movement, showcasing the grace she reserved solely for swordplay and satisfaction. The heat between her legs settling invitingly upon his engorged manhood, his length straining through the sheets, desperate to submerge himself back in her tight warmth.

The Lady Knight fist ed the fabric, ready to tear it away but he halted her with a gentle hand upon her wrist. “My love,” Jaime pleaded. “We promised we would attend dinner and I am famished.” He watched her lower seductively on top of him, lying along the length of his body, folding her arms over his chest, running affectionate fingers through the downy hair upon his sternum.

“Surely you cannot be *that* starved – I’m not ready to share you. I have only one night off, and I missed you for months. I want to make the most of it.” Her lips closed around his nipple and his hips bucked into her involuntarily.
Alright four wars – add in the struggle to get my wife to leave the bedchamber. And I cannot believe I am actually arguing against spending the night inside my woman…

“Please Brienne…” He chuckled and groaned, the impulse to mate coursing through his entire being. Save for his stomach, which grumbled again, keen to assert its case in this losing battle. “…You know how trying it is to eat on a sea voyage. It has been a week since I was properly fed. They practically give you dry chaff because all the motion of the tides makes it hard to keep a meal down.”

“I am familiar with the concept… but can’t I satisfy your appetite in other ways?” She kissed his beard, beside his mouth. “I just want to be here with you.”

He wanted to savour the mood, her open frankness. The way she was letting him see the exposed tenderness of her heart. Expressing her love to him through avenues she knew a man would appreciate. The sexual energy between them crackling whilst her sentiment touched him in a way which physically wrenched his chest.

His cock was rallying, sending out its warcry to the farthest reaches of its body. Domineering, unyielding, asserting its control over his decision making. This wasn’t a fight it intended upon losing.

His stomach assembled its allies; exhaustion and guilt over the promise to his little brother. The defences aligning to try and combat the throbbing radiating from his crotch.

_Damn my age, damn my brotherly loyalties._

“Aren’t you hungry?” Jaime cringed at the lame question, feebly grasping to sound convincing. Knowing how desperately short he was falling of putting forward a remotely compelling case.

“Oh I am…..” He knew from the glint in her eye that she didn’t mean for food. “I have all I need here.” Brienne’s teeth raked across his earlobe, grazing down his neck, leaving a hot moist trail as she nipped her way down his chest.

_I have never seen her like this before – consumed by burning lust. What kind of fool am I? Grousing about needing a meal when my wife is craving my…_

He inhaled sharply, the accuracy of his thoughts becoming evident when his woman slipped beneath the sheets. The searing heat of her wet mouth enclosing around his shaft. His vision almost blacking out as he felt supple lips embracing his pulsating girth, tongue laving the sensitive head. Each flick back and forth, teasing his tip, making him writhe and blather.

“Fuck, fuck – fuck…Brienne. This – this….” A growl ripped from his larynx, reverberating through his chest. “….this isn’t fair. You always believe in fair fights.” She had never gone down on him before. He had enjoyed her hand, her cunt, but never her mouth. Her glorious, argumentative, stern, velvet, sopping mouth. Those full, plump lips he kissed now seeing to his
satisfaction. He pushed into her gently, his hips rising from the mattress and he heard her moan appreciatively. The sound you would expect when someone had just been served their favourite treat and was savouring every flavour. “Lady Brienne Lannister –” His voice was a husky shred of its former self, lust abrading his tone. “-Those noises are downright unseemly.”

He felt her lips slip from around him. “Shush.” Brienne’s harsh reprimand was muffled from beneath the sheet. “I don’t wish to be interrupted.” Jaime knew better than to defy her.

Especially not when her teeth are...

Thoughts scattered to the four winds as she bathed his length with her tongue. Long, meandering licks from base to tip. Nibbling sensations that made him begin to leak. He knew from the swipes of movement, the way she focussed on his head, drawing it back into her mouth as she sucked. Sliding up and down his length, finding a tempo which pleased them both.

He growled, through with forming comments. Speechless for a rare moment in his life, crashing backwards to the pillow, hand seeking her blonde hair. Running the cropped blonde locks through his fingers, demonstrating his affection and regard whilst he reverted to something primal. Growling, wild animalistic noises in answer to her murmurs of delectation.

His mind was a blur of memory and bursts of colour, his pleasure so profound he wondered if he was not stumbling in and out of consciousness. Jumping from the indescribable euphoria of under the covers to snippets of their past.

*My Brienne is doing this for me. My Brienne.*

*Rigid, stern, unwavering, fierce Brienne.*

He saw her whirl on him in a snow-covered practise yard, relived the thud of her pushing him blindfolded off a horse, scowling and gesturing roughly to a skiff by the Trident. Drawing her sword on a bridge and meeting him swing for swing. Eyes flashing with a ferocity which could make a seasoned warrior run scared. She who defeated the Hound, slew Boltons’ men, gave two quick deaths and one not so clean.

*But now with me she is different, tender. I am her man. Her exception.*

*Noble, pure, dignified, restrained Brienne of Tarth.*

*Loving me, seeking to gratify me, wanting to keep me to herself, stay making love in our marital bed…*

In his flashbacks she rose before him, surrounded by steam and dripping water. Naked and
unflinching as she glared him down, a goddess of honour and virtue. His weaknesses exposed before her morality and courage.

Then another scene, his steady gaze tracking her hands, bravely unlacing the front of her shift, criss-crosses falling away and material parting, firelight glinting upon ivory skin and elongated digits. More divine than the Maiden, preparing to give herself to him - the unworthy mere mortal.

His whole body seized, convulsing with undiluted rapture. Undone by his soulmate’s lips and tongue, her attentive, selfless act of devotion.

“Brienne, let me go – I’m going to…”

Steady hands gripped his hips, fingers kneading into his flesh, keeping him firmly in place.

Jaime roared, his entire frame jerking violently.

Then they were walking in the Riverlands, acerbic tones and biting remarks. His arrogant demeanour clashing with her solemn austerity. “I’m strong enough.”

“Not interested Kingslayer.”

Yes, she is. She will be yours and you will be hers.

She loves you. Your wife loves you.

That thought sent him over the edge, losing himself in the depths of her mouth and intensity of their bond. His release so powerful it stripped his strength, his entire body going slack. The tiredness which pre-existed swooping in to claim him fully. Through half-mast eyes, he watched his wife. Adoration tugging his lips into a soft smile as she slunk back up his body, throwing herself unassumingly on the pillow beside him. Innocent of the ways she turned his world upside down.

“I am possessed by you body and soul Ser Brienne.” He channelled the dregs of his energy to caress her cheek. “Do you know what you do to me? Your effect on me? How you confound me? You’re so stoic and proper one minute and then the next you’re doing that and letting me finish-”

She placed her index finger to his lips, cutting him off and responding with a nonchalant shrug. “When I was a girl, I learnt to swim in the ocean. Do you know how much salt water I swallowed?” Smirking, she tumbled onto her back. “Of course, I did not know there would be a
comparison.” Brienne peered sideways at him with her pair of amazing blue jewels. “We are one now Jaime – not two. I think that is where I went awry before, back in Winterfell. I still saw us as separates, two knights who shared a chamber and sleeping furs, but I thought that I could keep my feelings to myself. Afraid that letting them run rampant would somehow sacrifice a part of me, make me act in ways which were so terribly contradictory from the high standards to which I clung. Some sort of demeaning quality, tying love in with subservience.”

“I can relate to that misapprehension….for me love always was subservience but that in essence, is not love.”

“Precisely.” Brienne rolled onto her side facing him, propping herself up on an elbow. “I couldn’t differentiate a willingness to please the one you love from the concept of disrespecting myself. I feared the things that love could drive me to do, acts I normally wouldn’t have considered. Like that.” His Lady Knight glanced at his groin and he sniggered.

“I can’t blame you for thinking that way. Look at the example I set – I constantly compromised everything I believed in, wrongly citing love as the cause. As examples go, I am the perfect analogy for what not to do.”

“We are paragons of the two extremes, yet we are together, meeting in the middle. It may be a constant struggle, one that is easier to overcome in the elation of a reunion than it will be in a year’s time, but it is my hope that neither or us revert.”

“Mine too.” He commanded his weighty body to move the couple of inches required to kiss her in agreement. His tongue tasting the faintest hint of himself when it slipped past her lips.

“I was wrong by the way-” Brienne conceded. “-and it is seldom you hear me say that phrase. When love is real - a partnership built upon mutual trust and respect - there is no danger of that bond being exploited. In fact – we endeavour to protect each other from the things that would traumatis us, tackling the world together and all it throws our way.”

Jaime nodded his avid agreement, each movement taking more strength than he had left. Heavy lidded eyes twinkling with mischief when he asked. “And your physical demonstration of this epiphany…” He smiled, nudging her weakly with the back of his hand. “….was it as terribly scandalising as you imagined?”

“You’re not going to make me talk about it?!” His wife grimaced in the most endearing way. “Here I am – finally feeling proud of myself for making progress and you go and ask me to discuss that.”

“I wouldn’t ‘make’ you do anything. I just thought that seeming as you are in a sharing mood, you may have some notes …I never did get that lascivious letter I asked for.”

“Well now I should reward you – as unseemly as it is - because you’ve gone and proven my point. I know you tease me, but I also know you would never insist on something that made me truly uncomfortable.” He could nearly feel the heat emanating from her blush whilst she adopted her most no-nonsense tone. “I have discovered there is nothing lowering about gratifying the person
you love. Many years ago, when I first became aware of the concept – an unfortunate consequence of dwelling amidst army camps - it seemed an abhorrent notion. One which made me shudder to think about. Back then, every man was my enemy and the only exposure I had to sexual activity was the constant threat of violation.” Even through his sleepy gaze he could make out the small crease in the centre of her brow, her sense of decency working at full capacity, trying to string together decorous sentences on a risqué topic. “But now, I will admit… I wanted to. And there was nothing degrading about it. Having a detailed conversation about it however – is another matter entirely.”

She sighed then; a heavy rush of resignation that made him wonder where her thoughts had turned. “Nor is there any harm in my acquiescing another point – though I will forewarn you I don’t intend to make this a habit in our marriage. However… we pledged ourselves to attend Tyrion’s dinner and it would be dishonourable to break a promise to your brother.”

“Thank you.” Jaime kissed her again, shoulders sagging in relief. “And I am even hungrier now.”

“Surprisingly I’m not.”

His chest jounced as he chuckled. Flopping onto his back, letting himself sink into the mattress. “Do you think I have time for a quick nap?”

“I think you’d better; you seem quite depleted.” A smug smile. “Again.”

“Still that old jape wife? Here I was thinking it would have been forgotten.”

“You wish.” Brienne lay in the crook of his arm, head upon the pillow, fingers absentmindedly tracing patterns across his chest and making him purr in contentment. “Now sleep my greying – I mean golden – lion. I will wake you when it’s time to get dressed.”

“You’re late.” Tyrion greeted them with a raised eyebrow and a knowing smirk, ushering them through the door into his chambers. The aromas of savoury and spices making the ravenous Lord’s mouth water.

“Well you should have known better and told us an early evening meal instead of dinner.” Jaime’s tone was jocular, but his mission was plain; kybosh Tyrion’s inquisition in the way only a brother could. Pre-empting and outwitting from the onset in a chivalrous attempt to spare his wife from the inevitable incoming jape. Or at least trying to.

Who am I fooling? I know it is futile.
Tyrion spread his hands out in front of him, feigning innocuousness. “I did not anticipate there would be the need! In my limited acquaintanceship, Ser Brienne has always been punctual, even tracing as far back as Winterfell. Jaime —” He clucked his tongue, tutting exaggeratedly. “— I would hate to think you have been a disruptive influence on our Lady Commander already.”

Jaime opened his mouth to retort, but Brienne was faster. “Not in the slightest. You of all people Lord Hand should know that things change. Look at the Kingdom, the monarchy, ourselves.” The lion of Lannister quietly beamed, happily recollecting his wife’s assertion of unity from earlier…

*From here on in, we are in this together, an indivisible pair. Allies, lovers, keepers of secrets - and Gods know we shall have to lean upon that bond tonight.*

“Quite so.” Tyrion craned his neck to look up at the tower of woman. “And might I remark how radiant you look this evening good-sister. There is an exuding ebullience to your countenance of an origin I just can’t quite put my finger on…”

“Mayhaps take it as a sign you shouldn’t try.” Brienne was unflappable, magnificent. “Some things are better left unaddressed.”

Jaime laughed heartily, drawing both their stares. Enjoying playing spectator to the interaction between his baby brother and his wife. Their conflicting measures of what was appropriate general conversation, clashing in an established pattern of tolerance. A rapport far more mature and refined than when he’d last observed them together.

*How much I’ve missed.*

“Come Tyrion.” He prodded his younger sibling playfully, herding him into the room and away from Brienne. “I could eat the entire feast myself.”

“Ahhhh, worked up an appetite, have you?”

The lion wrinkled his nose. “Been drinking already I gather?”

Tyrion guffawed. “Does the High Septon pray? Our dear sister arrived over an hour ago. We had to endure each other’s company – alone – and already we have come to loggerheads. I tried to tell her that it isn’t wise she imbibes considering her new occupation. Not all babes are raised like Lannisters - with a flask in their mouths instead of a teat.”

Brienne’s brow furrowed. “He is joking?”

“Yes, my love. Though Cersei did drink like a fish throughout her pregnancy. She heeds little advice. From Maester or brother.”
They entered the main room to find Cersei pacing by the fire, empty chalice in her hand. She wore one of the long dresses purchased for her in Pentos, its deep forest green hem sweeping the rug. Tytan slept cosily in a wooden crib, positioned a safe distance from the fire but still close enough to enjoy its blazing warmth. Jaime stooped to kiss his boy on the head, watching attentively out of his peripheral vision as Brienne nodded in polite greeting to his twin. Cersei’s lip curled, turning abruptly in the opposite direction.

*This shall be a long night – one to rival our marathon against the undead.*

As if reading his mind, Tyrion appeared, extending to him a full goblet of Dornish Red. “Take this, you’re going to need it.”

“Thank you.” He accepted it gladly, holding it out and waggling it in his wife’s direction. “Brienne can I tempt you?”

“No unless it’s watered. You know I do not partake on a regular basis.”

He nodded at Tyrion, monitoring carefully whilst his brother poured an inch in the bottom of another cup and grimaced at the sorry sight. “Your wife is quite unfathomable to me.” Pitcher already in hand, she accepted the chalice from Tyrion and topped it up with water. The sploshing of pouring accompanied by a phoney display of dismay from his incorrigible younger brother, covering his face with his hand and crying. “She is defiling it!”

“Lay off.” Jaime strolled into their midst, nudging the imp’s boot with his own. “She is Lannister by marriage, she does not have our drunken predilections.”

“I for one would be immensely concerned if my new husband was suggesting I drink.” Cersei sauntered over, snatching the carafe from Tyrion and refilling her own goblet. “It carries the implication he finds your company dull when sober.”

“That depends upon how you view drinking.” Brienne crossed her long leather clad legs, perching against the arm of a plush chair. Her voice carrying calm and even. “There are those who are surely motivated by a desire to enhance certain qualities within themselves – so yes, I suppose your theory has merit. But amongst soldiers it is customary to drink to forget, befuddle their demons and silence their troubled conscience. Some imbibe simply for recreation and others who drink heavily - I have learnt - do so as a coping mechanism.” She smiled subtly at Cersei. “With this in mind - I guess the interpretation of Jaime’s intentions depends upon his views. But as for the most part, I am fortunate enough to not be afflicted by any of the aforementioned inducements, I choose to decline.”

“Really? You don’t think your personality wants for a certain….” Cersei waved her hand in an all-encompassing circle, before dropping it defeatedly. “….oh why even bother? There are so many aspects which warrant improvement, it would take far more than a tincture of Dornish Red to correct them.”

His wife inhaled and exhaled, dropping her eyeline to the floorboards.
Don’t look down my beloved, she is the one inferior to you.

“We all have opinions Cersei; you are entitled to yours and they carry just as much validity as mine own.”

“That is a statement of gross misinformation. There are many who hold my opinions in the highest of esteem, accept my word as law. My twin brother being one of them…”

“That may have been true once Cersei.” Jaime’s tone sliced through the air with the precision of a dagger. The sharpness of its cut directed straight at his sister and her skewed perception of his loyalties. “But no longer.”

Crossing the room, he drew the battle lines, lacing his fingers through his wife’s and raising her knuckles to his lips. Publicly staking his territory, showing his allegiance.

Two matching pairs of emerald eyes seared into each other, scorching their warning like the hiss of a branding iron.

*She is mine Cersei. You will not hurt what is mine.*

Tyrion clapped his hands together, taking far too great a delight in the suffocating tension in the room. Whether from the alcohol or simply from the pleasure he derived from watching Cersei flounder, Jaime would have to wonder. “Let’s eat!”

The meal he had so looked forward to, was served with a side dish of enmity. The small assembly of four arranged in close confines, the scraping of plates and cutlery intermittently interrupted by another sortie of snide remarks. His sister employing her unique skills to weaponize even the most pleasant and polite of conversations.

Jaime rested his golden hand upon his wife’s thigh, hidden beneath the table, out of the view of Cersei’s scrutiny. Brienne had jumped upon first contact; she had never relished the cold metal of the prosthetic against any part of her body. But even if he couldn’t feel the warmth emanating through her breeches, the mere presence of having his wrist pressed against her anchored him. The best he could manage as his left hand fumbled, repeatedly failing to wrangle his dinner.
“I still cannot believe I sit here with my brother a married man!” Tyrion slurped from his goblet, holding it aloft. “Depriving me of the right to toast at your wedding. I will do it now. To my brother Jaime, for finally finding a woman to whom you are not related – apologies dear sister – and who has the temperament to put up with you. I would say you struck it extremely lucky.”

Jaime clinked his cup against Tyrion’s. “I’m not quite certain she does have the patience to tolerate me, but it makes for an exciting and dangerous ride. I quite like knowing she could kill me at any given time.”

“I won’t though.” Brienne’s lips twitched shyly upwards. “Not unless you really test me…”

The sweetness in her expression made his chest swell, forgetting himself and allowing them to be the newlywed couple. Leaning over to nestle her temple with the tip of his nose, assembling a syrupy cliché to make her squirm or roll her oceanic blues. “Can love be my shield?”

She snorted indelicately on her sip of watered wine, hastily covering her mouth and nose with an oversized hand. “Yours or mine? For after that last comment if you are relying upon mine it may be a paltry, flimsy thing.”

A strangled sound came from Cersei’s throat, a chortle which didn’t quite form. “How positively pathetic – is this the little game you play?” Her index finger straightened from where it was curled around her goblet, pointing back and forth between them. “Who do you think you are fooling with this dismal performance of ‘hard to get’? A ploy best utilised by women with appeal. Instead your rendition is weak and utterly unconvincing. Your desperation for my brother has been evident for years, sniffing around him like a stray bitch on heat after he returned to King’s Landing. I knew you loved him – it was written on your plain face, the weepy look in your eyes. Piteous really – or so I thought.” She tittered at a jape only she understood. “I never for a second thought he would indulge you.”

“Well in all due respect Cersei, I wouldn’t expect you to.” Even in the face of cruelty, Brienne retained her stoic composure. “If you were a fighter you would know better. We learn from an early age never to underestimate our opponent.”

Fire met ice across the table and Tyrion clinked his fork against his chalice, hooting. “This is brilliant! Who’s keeping score?”

Jaime did not share his mirth.

The next round came swiftly after.

“When are you going to rid yourself of that hideous beard?” His twin was quite insistent,
addressing him as though he were still her property. “It makes you look like a nomadic beggar. Shave it off. The horrid thing ages you and I will not have the bristles chaffing upon poor Tytan’s infant skin.”

“I like his beard.” He was surprised when his wife instigated this clash, but he understood the reasons why. The tactical Lady Knight seeing Cersei’s angle for control over his body. She squared her shoulders, weighing in and seamlessly reminding all at table of her new role as the pre-eminent woman in his life.

But his sister was not easily deterred. “Really?” She widened her eyes in mock surprise, buying time to contrive whatever insult she was building in her twisted brain. “Clearly you are not very adventurous in the bedchamber or you would know how it irritates the flesh of inner thighs.” Cersei was pure condescension. “Consider that little pointer a belated wedding gift from someone wiser and more experienced.”

Damn her. She heard our conversation upon arrival this evening, she has figured out Brienne is timid when it comes to speaking of sex.

But to his wife’s credit, she didn’t back down easily. Stunning even him with her bravado. “Not that I have to justify - but I welcome the sensation. It tickles, heightens feeling.” Her glare was steel as she stared Cersei down, the bright red blush igniting across her cheeks at the admission not enough to deter her from her course.

Brienne wanted Cersei to know that. An image designed to haunt. She paid the price of embarrassment to win the round.

But Jaime knew it would only raise the stakes. Brienne was brave, dauntless and determined, but in a skirmish where venom was wielded in place of steel, Cersei had the upper hand. An inherent knack for ruthlessness guiding her towards the chinks in her opponent’s armour. Exploiting hang-ups and picking at old wounds.

Cersei will be out for blood now.

The lapse of time it took for the third wave to hit was lengthier than Jaime would have initially imagined. Really, he should have known better, predicted that aspect as well. They were tutored by the same master – Tywin Lannister. A sage of warfare who had frequently cited ancient wisdoms - tried and tested for their efficacy – drawing upon them to form the foundation of his strategies.

Jaime called one to mind now as the conversation lulled, metal and porcelain competing with the crackle of the fire for the most talkative guest.
Revenge is a dish best served cold.

He was already severely regretting making his beloved leave their bedchamber. Subjecting her to the hostility and unnecessary awkwardness when they could have been putting the construction of their bedframe through rigorous testing.

But the ice needed to be broken, be it frosty and scathing. We would achieve nothing by holing ourselves up in our bed and ignoring the issues at hand. The bandage must be ripped off even the most festering of wounds...

Jaime frowned, stabbing at his steak, mouth-watering at the mere sight of the thick slice of meat, juices mingling with the sauce upon his plate. Spring had certainly dawned across Westeros and the food had significantly improved. Though he had greedily wolfed down his appetisers, it was the main course he had been eagerly awaiting. Such luxuries as this prime cut were not possible with the restricted budget in Essos.

It is grand to be a Lannister again; lion’s need their meat and mead… except they have fangs and claws.

His glower deepened as he struggled to cut through it, clumsily hacking away whilst Tyrion rekindled the chatter with a bawdy story involving Bronn and a brothel. Jaime was only half listening, his focus consumed by the botch job he was making out of dining, enough to cause his Mother to wring her hands in appal from the afterlife.

A Lord knows his manners, there is an art to every forkful.

With a sudden clatter his saviour arrived, Brienne’s fork impaling the steak on his plate and fixing it in place. He rubbed her leg beneath the table in gratitude, finally able to dissect a morsel.

“She helps cut your food?” Cersei’s tone dripped with disdain and he glanced up to see her horrified expression. “Honestly brother – do you have no self-respect? Remind me, who wears the pants in this relationship?” She nodded towards Brienne, whom she knew full well had worn breeches to dinner. “Which one of you has the cock? Because if her looks are considered it is a valid question.”

Brienne shifted uncomfortably in place, all too painfully aware about her manly features.

The fact that she felt belittled, was enough to make him see Lannister red. “That’s unnecessary Cersei.”

“Really? I think not.” His sister sneered. An unattractive expression, disfiguring her beauty into something sinister. “She emasculates you.”
“The only person who ever emasculated me was you.”

She laughed, a trilling bell of ridicule. “So defensive brother, perhaps I’m right. Really you must tell me – who fucks who?”

“We do not fuck.” Brienne’s expression was stony, temper flared but contained. “We make love.”

In a part of his brain, isolated from the heated exchange, he applauded.

*She remembers that conversation, the difference between what we share in our marital bed and what Cersei and I did in shadow.*

But his twin’s laughter increased, disparaging them both by turning their intimacy into a mockery.

*Just as I foretold.*

“How quaint.” Cersei hiccupped over another mouthful of wine, tipping her glass in his direction in a pillory of a toast. “She must be terribly erotic Jaime.”

Brienne blinked, nostrils flaring, inhaling and exhaling to keep her cool. “What goes on in our bed chamber is none of your concern.”

“I was speaking to my brother – not you.”

He snapped. “Cersei – you will be courteous to *my wife.*”

“Your wife? Are you certain? Because it seems she is the husband and you wear the gowns. You cannot even feed yourself without her – how lowly have you stooped? Tell me - does she wipe your arse as well?”

“There is no shame in caring for the man you love.” Brienne was so sincere he could embrace her, speaking from her noble heart, utterly naïve as to the ways a malicious mind would turn her phrasing. Her impassioned statement simply providing fuel for his twin’s fire. “I would be remiss to not.”

The former Queen practically cackled. “Don’t tell me she has - in fact - wiped your arse?”

“Drop it.” Jaime growled, wounded pride mixing with his quickly boiling anger.
Sensing an imminent eruption, Brienne leant forward, lacing her hands together and leaning on the table. Attempting to bring peace by speaking reason. “Some may think these things an act of love, instead of weakness.”

*You really are a true Knight. Idealistic to a fault. Tyrion and I know too well, logic has no place in my sister’s rationale.*

“He is weak. He is crippled. And it will do him much better to be toughened, so he learns to compensate rather than being coddled.”

“You preach tough love – but in truth there is no love in it. He is your brother, your twin, where is your compassion?” Brienne’s jaw dropped open. “When he returned missing a hand did you, for one moment, stop to think about how it was affecting him? Or did you only think of yourself? Your irritation, how it would reflect upon you. How it was inconvenient that your toy had been damaged and now may not be able to perform your every whim?”

“Paint it as you like, your cloying sentimentality will not help him to grow back his hand. Nor stop him from making a bumbling imbecile out of himself in company, when he cannot even slice his own meal.”

“Did you ever ask how he lost his hand?” Disgust and disbelief accompanied his wife’s aghast expression, shaking her head vehemently. To her the lack of solicitude was unconscionable. “Take the time to hear him, discover why? Was he the hero or the victim? Did he act from honour or arrogance?”

“Oh, do divulge!” Tyrion chimed in; his mood far too cheery for the volatile discussion taking place. “Our sweet sister wasn’t in Winterfell to witness his trial, so she hasn’t heard the tale.” He grinned almost manically. “This should be good!”

Jaime studied the tabletop, drumming the fingers of his good hand against the wood in agitation. He had never told Cersei about his time in captivity – neither his stint as a prisoner of Catelyn Stark or Locke. She had always shrivelled at the sight of his wrist, a reaction so extreme, you would be easily persuaded to believe she had witnessed the swing of the arahk herself. At the time Jaime had allayed his own hurt, telling himself that being twins they were connected, and she couldn’t stand to see him maimed. But the truth was a far bleaker reality, one akin to the charges his woman had just laid at Cersei’s feet.

Now years later, sitting at a table with the wife he adored and the twin whom he erroneously and blindly worshipped for so long, he could finally acknowledge that even his secrecy spoke to the existence of his misgivings. That he knew his twin would never understand and to confide in her would be to seek a capacity for empathy she simply did not possess.

Cersei would never have been the kind of woman to hold him while he sobbed or clap him on the
back, congratulating him for his selfless deeds. Only reproach him for his perceived unintelligence and remind him how this would have ramifications for her.

The Lion of Lannister narrowed his eyes, appraising his twin for once with the condemnatory gaze she deserved.

*You would dare to judge Brienne. To critique her on appearance and advise her on pleasing a man.*

*You – a selfish and egotistical creature, would pass censure on the woman who washed the vomit from my beard and mopped the sweat from my fevered brow. Who held me to her naked chest, stopping me from slipping beneath the bath and meeting my watery grave.*

*Yes, you are a world apart…. and you sister – are not fit to shine my wife’s boots.*

If Cersei had even the slightest inkling of his rancour, she did not show it. Leaning back in her chair and lifting her arms dramatically. “Fine, I will bite. Regale me with the *irrelevant* details. How did my brother lose his hand?”

“How did my brother lose his hand?” Brienne cut straight to the point, without finesse or flowery overtures. He knew to her the act spoke for itself, grand and meaningful, requiring no further elaboration to add to its enormity.

“You mean to tell me he sacrificed his right hand – his *sword* hand – for *you*?” Cersei’s disapproval was palpable as she spat. “Even I did not think Jaime so stupid.”

“It is not something I regret.”

*I t’s about time I made my thoughts known – we are discussing my life after all.*

“I would do it again. In a heartbeat.” He took a swig from his goblet, a long leisurely mouthful which loosened his tongue. Smirking to himself as he licked the remaining moisture from his lip and added. “Even if I myself now personally saw to her defloration.”

“*Jaime…”* Brienne breathed his name, dumbfounded. Her cheeks repeating their earlier performance by taking on a rosy hue.

*I’m sorry Brienne, it had to be said. She had to know.*

*I am not Tyrion, I would not seek to belittle you. In fact my aim is the opposite…*

*Cersei had to hear that you are mine alone, an honourable woman beyond reproach, held in the highest of esteem.*
He wished he could reassure her aloud that he had not spoken to cause her embarrassment, rather to hammer home his message to his sister.

*Take heed Cersei.*

*I claimed her. I love her. I would give up anything for her – even you.*

His twin raised her eyebrows, indicating his arrow found its mark. She opened her mouth to riposte but was cut off by Tytan’s cry.

“My son is hungry.” Cersei alighted elegantly from her chair, whipping her skirts which such emphasis that the candles upon the table flickered in the resulting breeze.

Jaime appreciatively seized the opportunity afforded by Cersei’s turned back to check in with his wife. Catching her eye and mouthing ‘I’m sorry, are you alright?’

Brienne edged closer, naturally low octave dropped to even quieter, and he strained to hear her over Tytan’s wails. “I cannot say that your bluntness pleased me, but I know you must have had your reasons. I am made of tougher mettle than this Jaime. Though it is as if my whole life has been a practise session, letting insults wash over me in preparation for this moment.”

He repaid her with a wry smile and a quick kiss on the cheek, unsurprised when she roughly pushed him away. “Kiss me behind closed doors,” she instructed. “I do not want to question if your lips on my skin was for show or her benefit. Give my insecurities no cause to surface and save your love for when I can savour it.”

“Never think that.” Jaime was firm, determined to stomp out the flickers of doubt. The fears rearing their heinous head as a result of a night with Cersei.

*Damn my sister. If she succeeds in driving even the most miniscule wedge between us – she wins.*

“If I kiss you when we have an audience, it is because my lips find you of their own accord. Love makes it difficult to restrain them and I have little reason to - you’re my wife.”

He watched the Lady Knight absorb his words, blinking slowly whilst she weighed their validity, the clacking of Cersei’s shoes against the floorboards growing noticeably louder. “Remember - concessions in small increments husband – today has brought with it many adjustments. Your explanation is my comfort, but my confidence will come with time.”

With that Cersei was back opposite them, lowering into her seat with Tytan cradled in the crook of her elbow. Unfastening the tiny buttons on the front of her dress in preparation to nurse. Brienne’s eyes widened, disconcertion charging the very air around her as she fidgeted in her seat. The abject
shock finally forming into a query. “You intend upon feeding him here?”

“Yes, I am a Mother. I am suckling my babe. I can see why it would make you uncomfortable. I have teats – and you do not.”

“But, we are in the company of your brothers…”

“Your point?” Cersei had always flouted morality, thriving on the discomfit of those around her with lewd enquiries and unabashed demonstrations. Watching people flail only enhanced her sense of power and this was no exception. “For Tyrion it is probably the greatest thrill he has had in a while and as for Jaime – he himself has suckled upon them, so it makes little difference.”

He could hear the air rushing through Brienne’s nose, releasing the deep breath she had taken. “If you think that highlighting your past with my husband in such a crude way will antagonise me Cersei, then I must inform you, that you are sorely mistaken. I am very familiar with the unique dynamic yourself and Jaime shared. I have been apprised of it since the beginning. Referencing it – will not rattle me.”

*Bravo.*

“Then why does it bother you so if I feed – *our* baby-” *Oh, now she includes me, how very convenient. *-Jaime and my child, here?”*

“Contrary to appearances - I was raised a Lady. My Father and Septa both were very strict when it came to drilling me in how a noblewoman should conduct herself under such circumstances. The views they imparted were conservative, placing great emphasis upon propriety. Please do not mistake my reaction as judgmental, I am well aware that my own behaviour – although in a vastly different area - is oft unconventional, and I have no desire to appear a hypocrite. My enquiry simply stemmed from my surprise – I have not been around a nursing Mother before.” Brienne stammered awkwardly over her speech, uncertain where to cast her gaze. “I was taught it is not seemly to feed an infant in the company of men. You are uncovered, without even a shawl to obscure their view…”

Cersei was on the verge of gloating. “You *are* jealous.”

“I-“

Urgent knocking at the door disrupted Brienne’s counter. Sharp raps followed by Podrick’s apologetic holler. “Lord Tyrion – may I enter?”

“Yes Pod! Come in, join us. There’s plenty to be had.” His brother was treating the incursion like
a social call, his wife’s reaction was the complete contrast. Brienne sat straighter, pressing her lips together, suspicion creeping over her countenance.

_She is worried._

Podrick ducked his head as he pushed through the door, an anointed Knight but still timorous in group situations. “I am sorry to disturb.”

He approached the table slowly, until Brienne shot out her hand halting him in his tracks. “Far enough Pod.” She looked considerately at Cersei, who seemed unperturbed by the new arrival. Amusement fizzed within Jaime’s chest.

_I do declare Brienne is trying to preserve Cersei’s modesty – a sweet gesture my love but a few years too late. I guess you do not know about her naked walk through the streets of King’s Landing? It makes sense - in our many talks, I had no need to fill you in on my sister’s colourful history._

Surveying the diners from a distance, Podrick threw a tight smile in the Lion Lord’s direction, obvious concern inhibiting the greeting he would have generally extended. “Welcome back Ser Jaime.”

“It is good to see you again Pod.”

“Ser Podrick – who is with the King?” Switching immediately from leisure to responsibility, Brienne adopted an accusatory note.

_Poor lad, if he thought being her Squire was stringent, I hate to imagine now. My wife is a stickler._

“King Bran is with Ser Davos, Lady Commander. His Grace sent me to fetch the Lord Hand, I was to visit your chambers as well…” He glanced down. “…but I am relieved to find you here instead.”

Jaime snickered. _He would have disturbed us in the most compromising of positions…_

“Fetch?” Tyrion blinked rapidly, clearing the wine-befuddlement from his vision. “His Grace requests our presence?”

“Yes, immediately if possible.”

Beside him, Brienne’s shoulders slumped slightly. Jaime frowned, “He promised my wife the night off.”
“I know My Lord, and His Grace is most apologetic. But unforeseen circumstances have arisen, and he has called an urgent Council.”

A delicate sigh sieved its way through the Lady Knight’s teeth, almost imperceptibly subtle, the variety only an attune lover would recognise. The release of her disappointment and resignation, handled with poise.

_Even a night bandying words with Cersei is preferable to this – at least here we were by each other’s side. Stealing touches and basking in the nearness of the one we adore._

Pushing herself up from the table she declared. “Duty calls. It must be important to issue a summons at such a late hour.” Brienne peered down at him from her lofty height, the sadness in her eyes for his notice alone. “I will meet you in our chambers – you know the way to see yourself back.”

“Yes Ser.” The imp straightened his surcoat, swaying on the spot and attempting to look dignified. Podrick winced, politely holding the door open. The Lord Hand staggered forward, taking it with the light-hearted approach of someone truly soused and calling out. “Jaime is she this bossy in _all_ situations?”

“Heads for me to know and you to speculate.” He crossed his arms, right metal hand at a loss after losing the warm cushioning of Brienne’s thigh.

“Hopefully the meeting will be brief but efficient.” Brienne hovered in the entryway, casting a furtive glance at Cersei and then himself. “I will see you later husband.”

“The sooner the better.” He flashed his wife a reassuring smile and she pulled the door shut behind her.

“Alone again brother.” Cersei traced the rim of her chalice with her index finger. “It could be said this was how it was always meant to be.” She made for quite the spectacle, babe cradled to her chest, wine in her hand. Controversial, unorthodox and quintessentially Cersei. She lowered the cup to the table, freeing her arm to try and rebutton, struggling to achieve the act one handed.

*How ironic.*
Jaime pushed himself up, rounding the table and taking Tytan from her arm. Gently rocking him back and forth, watching his small drowsy green eyes drift shut. “Your Uncle Tyrion will tell you; drinking is tiring work.” He cooed playfully. “Though I don’t think he’s ever gotten so sleepy from just milk….mayhaps it was the dosage of wine it was laced with…. ” He peered at his sister from beneath his blonde brows, but she chose to ignore the implied accusation.

“You have taken well to being a Father-” Cersei was watching him, her expression contemplative and slightly softened. “-it is quite the revelation. When Joffrey came along, all I sensed from you was jealousy.”

“Well, you hardly gave me the chance to bond, did you?”

“Necessity.”

“Extremes.” His reply was harsher than he intended, but she had struck a nerve. “It all unravelled in the end for us - regardless of your efforts to make the children virtual strangers to me. With the wisdom of hindsight and knowing all that came, what harm would it have done if I’d spent an afternoon with Myrcella, taken Tommen riding….”

“No use can come from dwelling on the past Jaime. Those days are gone.”

“Sound advice for yourself.” He threw her a pointed glance, raising his eyebrows slightly. “You who has been carrying on for months as though things have not changed irreversibly between us. Holding on to what we were, instead of what we are.”

She pursed her lips in irritation, refilling her goblet for the umpteenth time whilst he crossed the room, gently depositing Tytan back in his crib. Brushing his chubby cheeks with a curled finger and snugly tucking the lion embroidered blanket around him.

*Out of every misguided act, comes some good. You are the proof of that my son…*

“Does it not bother you?”

He turned towards Cersei’s voice, taking in her glassy eyes, dishevelled dress and furrowed forehead. Miles from the Queen she used to be yet the fire in her spirit still remained, flames stoked by alcohol.

A lioness sprawled in her chair, giving the impression of indolence, repeating flexing her paws. Claws retracted; claws extended, exuding a false sense of docility. When in actuality she was deciding whether to attack.

“To have a wife running off in the night, the only woman closed in a room with a panel of men. But then - she has done so for years, hasn’t she? Flitting from camp to camp. Your ease with the situation is quite unexpected. To my recollection you were always the possessive type.”
Jaime groaned in umbrage. “Did you not hear me earlier? Though I could have sworn you did.... The Lady of Tarth was the purest of maiden’s when I came to her bed. She is not a promiscuous woman Cersei and you know it.”

“Do I? Does anyone? She would deign to question me about feeding my babe at table when she dons plate and goes traipsing around the countryside with a grown man to whom she is not wed. What so called Lady does that Jaime?”

“Pod was her Squire!” He stomped closer, trying to keep his voice down and failing. “A squire I gave to her I might add. The boy looks at her like a Mother…”

“Don’t be naïve Jaime – she has probably had him half a hundred times in your absence. The King too. Probably worked his flaccid little cock to get that position.”

“Brienne’s honour and high morals are unimpeachable.”

“But that’s how she got her Knighthood from you wasn’t it? I asked around today. An interesting price for a sow of a woman, the title of Ser for….”

“No, Cersei.” Jaime leaned on the back of the nearest chair, arms stretched out rod straight, every tendon and vein bulging beneath his jerkin, tense and angry at the injustices Cersei would try to pin on his woman. “My wife-” He enunciated slowly; his tone taut with rage. “-Is not you.”

His sister shrugged. “Well, she is frightfully masculine and homely. It would make perfect sense no man would want her.”

“I know what she looks like Cersei, I know how she dresses.” Jaime lowered himself into the chair. “I know what people say, what they must think and most importantly how unforgivably shallow they all are – but I wouldn’t change a thing about my wife. Not to appease the masses nor to silence the doubters. Because I love her - for her peculiarities and her differences.”

Cersei scoffed loudly.

“Cersei –” He leant over, ensuring he caught his twin’s eye. “-I do. I love her. Brienne makes me happy… happier than I have ever been in my life.”

“So happy that you came back for me?”

Jaime raked his hand over his beard, trying to find a way to skirt around that subject. “Whether you choose to accept it or not – Brienne played a pivotal role in my returning South. I would not
have gone without her blessing and the only reason I would have considered it otherwise was in an earlier time when I foolishly thought Brienne did not love me in return. That concept alone tore me apart because I already knew how deeply I had fallen for her, how I had loved her - from afar - for a very long time.” He halted, allowing that particular piece of information to sink in, Cersei’s scowl intensifying with each phrase he uttered.

“Since I realised that she returned my feelings – my only desire has been to be by her side, in her arms. She and I just fit. She feels more right to me than when I swung a sword in my right hand, than when I slip on my favourite pair of leather boots. We complement each other, we bring one another joy. The kind of which I have never known.”

The lion sighed, swallowing to moisten his dry throat. His thoughts of many years flowing freely from his tongue. “You and I were miserable together Cersei. It was wrong from the onset. Built upon duplicity and sacrifice. Haunted by the spectre of incest and danger of discovery. I gave and gave, never honestly receiving. The illusion of love locking me in an iron cage, from which I was never to be set free, if you had your way.”

Placing his hands of both metal and flesh on his knees, he stood. Feeling empowered around his twin for the first time in his life. “With Brienne, my heart soars. I love everything about her, even the parts which drive me insane. I will ask you once and once only Cersei – don’t. Whatever ideas you think you can place in my head – you can’t. You won’t take me from her. I love my wife with all my heart. So, don’t waste your energy on trying.”

Turning on his heel, he sauntered from the chamber, carrying his head held high.

A first – I am leaving a room in the Red Keep where Cersei and I have just been alone. And instead of being consumed by shame, I may take pride in my conduct.

“I’m awake!” Jaime bolted upright at the bang of the closing door, roughly batting the sleep from his eyes with the heel of his palm. He cast his blurry gaze around the room, taking in the sight of the dwindling fire, his crumpled mound of outer layers lying discarded on the floorboards. A wooden bath had been crammed obtrusively into the corner of the small chamber, well-intentioned but now an eyesore. Its previously steaming, fragrant water, long gone cold and stagnant. He smiled lamely at his wife, surrendering to the undeniable comedy of the scenario.

“I can see that.” Her response was wry, the toll taken by an entire day's worth of stress showing on
her face.

*My Brienne looks tired…*

She lethargically pulled off her boots with her feet, wriggling to manoeuvre her way out of them without bending at the waist. Shouldering out of her leather jerkin, casting it over the dresser without her trademark fastidiousness.

*A clear sign of the burdens she has to carry – only now not alone.*

He leant back on his elbows, keen to offer her a supportive ear. “What happened?”

“Bran’s ravens tracked the movements of a Northern spy. He was successfully apprehended attempting to flee via the Mud Gate.”

“A spy from the North?” Jaime was confused. “But isn’t that Sansa’s kingdom?”

“Yes.” Brienne dragged her hand across her face, plopping heavily onto the end of the bed. “Remember when I mentioned in my letters that all might not be as peaceful as outwardly portrayed?”

He nodded, sidling closer to rub an affectionate hand down her back. “You eluded to there being an issue but didn’t want to commit specifics to paper.”

His wife sighed into his touch, knotted muscles loosening under his deft fingers. “Sansa is the reason.”

“But didn’t she vote for Bran?”

“No. Not technically anyway.” He increased his kneading and she moaned appreciatively.

*This is fun, not only is she talking but I get to be tactile…*

“She waited until a unanimous vote was cast, then pled her case for independence. It is now a widely held belief that she fancied herself to be elected in place of her brother.”

“Ambitious.” Jaime processed his thoughts aloud. “You were close to her prior to our escape. Did you have any inkling of her aspirations?”

“Perhaps. If I think on it. Sansa did resent the Northmens’ enthusiasm to bow before Jon Snow – she being a trueborn Stark and Lady of Winterfell. Then when Daenerys arrived, Sansa didn’t make any attempt to hide her displeasure. It was always like she was waiting for the Dragon Queen to extinguish her own flame – put an end to the rivalry before it had even begun. Lady Stark was playing a waiting game and as events unfolded, she played it well.”

“What about at the summit?”
“In unbiased truth - I found her quite altered.” His wife tilted her head back as she recollected, relishing his touch. “Certainly, if you’d heard her very public and quite brazen reprimand of her own uncle, you would be left in no doubt that she considers herself qualified to rule.” Brienne exhaled gradually. “She had no intention of kneeling, that is plain.”

“What stance does King Bran take in all this?”

“Initially he was keen to placate, he thought their familial ties and granting her dominion of the North would satisfy. But now she has begun to overstep bounds. She monitors the decisions His Grace makes and disagrees openly, undermining his reign. Initially she would send ravens with her criticisms and demands, then it became emissaries. King Bran soon discovered that her envoys were extending their stays for longer than was necessary, gathering information for her fodder which ensured the cycle sustained itself another round. When he confronted Sansa, she proclaimed that it was only just – Bran’s abilities enable him to infiltrate far and wide, collecting intel undetected. She holds the belief that it is only fair she be granted equivalent access - obviously the Crown disagrees. As you can imagine, things only deteriorated further from there. Both realms are now closed, off-limits to interference from the opposite side and the borders have become a place of near constant surveillance.”

“So that’s what he meant in his speech today - when he was lecturing Cersei…”

“Yes, the inference was evident to all who are privy to the growing animosity.”

Jaime shuffled nearer from behind, throwing one leg to either side of her thighs. Nestling her into the shelter of his body and beginning to work on her rigid shoulders.

“What are you doing?” Brienne enquired with an amused lilt.

“Relaxing you – though it would be easier with two hands.” He held his useless stump aloft and she caught it in her hand, giving his wrist a fond squeeze. Dispelling his unremitting sense of inadequacy. “Continue your tale,” he encouraged, inwardly rejoicing when she didn’t assert her need for personal space. “What became of the spy?”

“He has been subjected to questioning – the Three Eyed Raven’s own unique style of interrogation.” She peered over her shoulder at him, her mouth set into a grim line. “The motivation he uncovered for this particular infiltration was today’s trial – though how she knew about it remains a mystery. It goes without saying that Queen Sansa will not respect His Grace’s decision of clemency.”

“As I recall she was quite gleeful at the prospect of Cersei’s execution, so it would not surprise me.” He furrowed his brow. “Will this mean ramifications for us?”

“No. Bran has made his decision and declaration in front of court. It would be a sign of weakness to buckle to his sister’s pressures on any front. Council agrees this is less about the trial itself and more about a subsequent display of disrespect towards the monarchy. She treats the court of King’s Landing as though it is within her jurisdiction.” Beneath his hand, Brienne let out of frustrated groan. “Jaime – I don’t know what this is coming to. There are talks and meetings,
Tyrion remains with His Grace continuing discussions as we speak; but there is never any resolution. For there can be no resolution – other than the option none of us want.”

“War.” Jaime answered for her. “My Father obliterated the Reynes for less.”

“I know – but none of us wish to descend into violence and bloodshed. We have seen too much of it in only a few short years, the people have had a bellyful of conflict and I cannot say I blame them. Meanwhile, my predisposition towards loyalty is yet to be entirely leeched from my veins, part of me will always see the daughter of Lady Catelyn. The girl I was sworn to protect.”

“I wouldn’t expect any different, you have a heart where others lost theirs along the way. Many would say myself included…”

“They would be wrong. I know exactly where it resides. I can feel it beating against my spine as we speak.”

Jaime pressed his lips to the back of her neck, breathing in, rubbing his cheek against her silky flaxen locks. Always kept controlled and short but adopting a slight wave where the longer strands curled against her hairline. A silent rebellion, alluding to her femininity. He suspired slowly, closing his eyes, arms sliding around her middle. Recognition of the enormity of their journey and developments finally sinking in.

“I have a wife. A woman to hold and love whenever I am low. A bed warmed by her body beneath blankets we share, for everything is ‘ours’. Brienne was right – this is our chamber. Our life. For now at least, until we can leave and make a home of our own. Peace enduring and the Seven willing.

Brienne placed a hand on each of his legs, journeying leisurely from thigh to knee and back again, the span of her wide reach proving useful for more than just swordfighting. Out of the blue, she chuckled. “Jaime – how exactly did you plan for us to fit in that bath? I am guessing that was your intention in bringing it here…”

“Yes, I was applying the rationale of an optimistic romantic when I requested the tub. Envisaging an interlude in tribute to Harrenhal; though I confess I hadn’t quite thought the logistics through –” He nosed his way to her neck. “- I figured we would work it out, we have organised armies and co-ordinated attack strategies. By comparison this is simple… I could sit in the tub, you could fit in my lap, I could fit in you…” She elbowed him roughly in the gut and he chortled. “Does that mean you approve?”

Brienne wriggled against him, stirring his already hardening cock. “It means I think you opportunistic with a large element of the ridiculous.”

“No, it’s very practical. I deduced we both need to bathe – it would help you unwind, and
we did work up quite the sweat earlier.” He tugged her earlobe between his teeth, huskily whispering. “Shall I have the staff refill it?”

Her hands ceased wandering save for her index finger, nail worrying at the fabric of his breeches in agitation.

She is going to refuse, but she doesn’t want to disappoint me.

“I’m sorry, I..I have to be up before the sun. Podrick has taken an extended shift so I could have this evening off, I must take over from him at dawn. Otherwise it just wouldn’t be right….”

“I understand.” The lion kissed her cheek, keeping his arms locked around her. Left hand clasping his stumped forearm, holding her snugly against his chest. “We have plenty of time for these things.” Once more he felt the tightness ease from her frame in relief, twisting sideways in his embrace until she could see his face, brush his beard with her large hand. Her fingertips an enchanting contrast of swordswoman’s callouses and ladylike tenderness.

She is everything I could desire – unique and divine.

Brienne’s mouth twitched upwards at the corners, the retiring smile of a woman slowly overcoming her reserve. “Rock me before I fall to sleep Jaime. Remind me that tonight I am celebrating the return of my husband. Take me away from here, to a place where nothing exists – but us and our bodies.”

She stared into the embers, the opulent room retaining its warmth even when the blaze burnt low. The surrounds far more the style to which she was accustomed than the kennel she had been allocated. A hovel of a room on the outskirts of the servant’s quarters, a stone’s throw from the lowborn wet nurses and a nursery full of snivelling orphans. Their piteous cries had rebounded relentlessly through the halls when she had been given her grand tour by Tyrion today, then afterwards upon arriving at ‘the Hand of the King’s Chambers’ she was subjected to her brother’s tiresome boasting. Crowing on about renovations and how he finally had quarters worthy of this station.

The wretched imp, let’s hope his return takes hours. I should be assigned these lodgings and he the Black Cells.
Cersei had only moved once since Jaime left, shifting to a chair closer to the fire, the room spinning and warping when she detoured to collect the wine carafe. How long ago that had been she wasn’t sure. She sat with her leg outstretched, foot connecting with the crib. Intermittently applying pressure to set the wooden frame rocking. It swayed in front of her eyes and she hoped it would be soothing to the child within. It was only when it proved ineffective and Tytan had begun fussing that she realised the crib was devoid of rockers. A stable construction, upon straight legs.

An easy error, especially when I am distressed and distracted. I should have an assortment of ladies at my beck and call for such menial tasks anyhow. Though it seems they mistake me as the hired help these days…

She glared down at her attire with contempt. The straightforward dress of woollen roughspun a far cry from her samite and silks.

Unflattering and shabby.

“Serviceable and befitting a newly made mother.” She could still hear the horrid Maester Cyril, mocking her with his false show of pragmatism. Pretending to be acting in her best interests instead of exacting his perverted scheme of vengeance. “The integrity of the material is strong, so it will withstand many washes.”

It had been deliberate – of that much she was certain. Especially when he had gone to order it in brown and grey. She had argued for the burgundy and the green, the only colours which would be remotely becoming. “Brown is best, grey modest, it will draw less attention to yourself. Help you to assimilate and blend.” Cersei had been about to suggest what precise ways she could help his rotting cadaver assimilate with the ground when Jaime had chimed in.

“Adjusting to this change in lifestyle is hard enough, it is best we take one small step at a time. Let her have the maroon and forest green.”

Oh, so easily Jaime got his way. I wondered at the time why he held sway with that old coot. Now I know –

“He is her man.” Cersei spat the sentence aloud to the room. “Maester Cyril of Tarth.” With a flick of her wrist she hurled the empty chalice into the dying fire, relishing the shatter of crystal and temporary roar of flames as they consumed what remained of the alcohol.

I was blindsided. I was duped. All by that beast of a woman. Controlling my life, stealing my brother and expecting me to fall at her feet – name her sister. Every step I take is her plotting, my placement in a servile role punishment…

She stood and paced unsteadily, working herself into a fury. “It’s all her doing. Every part. She took Jaime from me, she usurped my life, cornered me to make me beholden!” Her voice raised to a shriek, making Tytan whimper.

“Grow a spine my boy, you have no idea what horrors this world unleashes. Terrors far greater than your Mother’s anguished screams. Foremost being the woman who would call herself your
Aunt, who seeks to dictate our lives and divide your Father from us. She is the enemy, the manipulator, the Stranger. I warned Jaime we could only trust each other but he listened to a harpy instead. Now every scrap I sup upon is hers, each sip of wine at her discretion, even this vile monstrosity of a dress!” Cersei clawed the fabric, gouging deep pulls in its knit. Raking and tearing the skirt until patches of flesh peeked through.

The former Queen stopped, staring hypnotised by the newly made holes. Lifting the material to the hearth and marvelling at how the firelight shone through the weakened slits.

“Your Father would have me believe their bond is indestructible but even the most tightly woven fabric has a loose thread. Wear it enough, pull and tug. It will fray.” She smiled victoriously to herself. “Jaime may be resolute, but Brienne has clearly shown she has weaknesses. Many. All I have to do is find the correct thread – and she will unravel.”
Platonic vs Romantic

Chapter Summary

Cover Art by: Ro_Nordmann

"I can't help but be wrong in the dark..."
Lyrics, War of Hearts by Ruelle
Bridge, Line 1

Chapter Notes

And so, the normality of everyday life begins...
“Rap, tap.”

“Breakfast tray M’Lady, M’Lord.”

Morning had taken the tendency to arrive in ambush, a full-on assault. The dawn always trumpeted jarringly, when she was unprepared. Thrusting her from tranquil drifting to dutiful obligation.

And the ritualistic struggle…

Brienne grimaced, scrunching her face and awaiting the first wave of defence. His routine push back against the unavoidable, a battle fierce but ultimately ineffective and a supreme waste of time. Every sunrise for the last fortnight it had been the same and she knew today would be no exception.

“Nooooooo…” Jaime’s weight rolled on top of her, sprawled inelegantly in an attempt to pin her down. His protest strangely resembling a snore more than an actual argument. An observation only reinforced as he rubbed his head against her shoulder, his breathing deepening once more.

*I am beginning to think I had foresight in Winterfell, relegating us to opposite sides of the bed.*

She wriggled ineffectively beneath him, raising her knees and trying to gain traction by digging her heels into the mattress, bucking repeatedly in an effort to throw him off.

“Stay still.” He grumbled. “I tackled you - I won. Now go back to sleep.”

Brienne huffed. Somehow the mandatory nature of her role and responsibilities was not sinking in. “Jaime – our tray is outside. It’s going cold.”

“Fuck it all. I’m warm and I want my wife.”
She balled her fists at the sides, claustrophobia taking hold. Coaching herself against lashing out and using her strength to overpower him. The heaviness of his body, making her feel trapped, cornered. The Lady Knight forced herself to slow her breathing, slowly inflating her lungs and exhaling.

*It is alright. You love him. He is just trying to keep you here – it is a good thing. A loving gesture. This is not a fight; he is not a wight or an enemy. He is your husband, he is your lion, he is your –*

A noise came from his throat as he drifted back into slumber, a combination snort and growl which made her raise both eyebrows.

*He sounds more like a bear right now – and after that sound perhaps a dead one. The hunter had his quarry this morning…*

“Get up!” Brienne thumped him in the side twice, rolling out from under him. Her lion turned grizzly hitting the mattress with a soft thud.

Lifting his blonde head and scowling. “Why did you have to do that? King Bran still owes you the hours he took from your night off – call them in and come back to bed.”

“A nice sentiment but unfortunately I don’t think he sees it that way.” Brienne collected the cooling breakfast tray from outside the door. She had organised the delivery as a method of rousing them each daybreak.

Depositing it upon the dresser, she smeared butter upon a piece of toast, the surface light golden brown with a crunchy texture, just the way she liked it. Popping it into her mouth, the Lady Knight clenched the slice between her teeth, darting about the room to collect her things. Munching whilst she dressed.

*I’m already behind schedule.*

Brienne stopped chewing to sip her tea, the brew a strong woody black, overwhelmingly smoky with notes of lemon.

*Even the flavours of King’s Landing have come to resemble charcoal and ash.*

Sploshing in a trickle of milk, she gestured roughly towards the tray. “Come get breakfast, it will be a sad affair cold.”

Jaime was sitting upright, blanket draped across his lap, bottom lip jutting out. Doing a great impression of a sulky, petulant child. “I told you, I don’t want sodding breakfast. I want my woman. I want sex. I want to wake up when I damn well feel like it…”

“Then go back to sleep.”
“It’s not the same without you and… what?” Wide green eyes were trying to make her feel guilty. “Do you expect me to make love by myself?”

“You’ve tried before – use your hand.” She remarked drily, unwilling to take his bait.

“Not funny.” His pout deepened. “I have a wife I barely see…”

“Jaime – we’ve been through this.” Brienne hurriedly worked on the straps of her greaves. “I run a Kingsguard which currently consists of two. My options are the night shift – from late afternoon until the small hours, or day – from dawn to the evening. If my early starts are displeasing you, I can reassess my schedule and swap for the night shift…”

“Then we don’t get to have dinner or sleep together…I barely see you as it is.”

“Well that is the alternative if you want me to lie in.”

“That’s not lying in – the morn simply becomes your night. You will not want to be woken by me pawing at you. That would be selfish of me and make for a surly you.”

She raised both arms in defeat, clutching her spaulders in her hands. “Well then I don’t know what you want from me. That is all which can be done….”

“Operating a Kingsguard with only two knights is hideous. The demands of your workload are unfeasible and a great strain on personal lives...”

“I’m avowed to serve and protect the King. According to tradition I am not supposed to have a personal life. Our circumstances are an exception to the rule. The pool of available Knights is smaller since all the battles. Recruits from the North are off limits and I am yet to find Southron candidates which suit the requirements.”

“If you are waiting for model Knights who will meet your exceptionally high standards – I daresay we will be having this conversation when we are both grey.” His tone had that distinctly Lannister quality, permeated with a condescension which weaselled its way under her skin. “You do realise the point of being Lady Commander is to delegate.”

“I don’t need you to tell me how to do my job.” Brienne heard the snappiness in her own tone echoing back to her ears in their small chamber. Knew from the way Jaime flinched that it had bitten deeply.

He cast his gaze down to their furs and she watched the apple of his throat bob as he swallowed. “I didn’t mean to cause offence – I was only trying to help.”

“And I had no intention of being so harsh.” She sighed, eyes searching the roof as though it could somehow provide answers. “Do you not think a part of me would rather be lounging with you in bed? Taking my time and kissing my husband instead of all this rushing. Being pulled in two directions at once…”

“I had hoped - but it’s good to hear you say it aloud.”
When she braved looking at him again, his countenance was all empathy, holding out his hand to her. “It is unfair of me to demand at you, especially when you have so much on your shoulders. But if I’m being honest, it is also unfair of Bran to call on you the way he does. You can hide behind saying it is the equal workload of a limited guard but the truth is we both know he relies heavily on you, he prefers to have you by his side than Pod.”

“Yes.” The Lady Knight agreed. “He is superstitious, understandably so given the forces at play he has witnessed, and which run rampant within his own body. But it is that same partiality which worked in our favour, which got me you.” Dropping the piece of steel plate onto the bed, she slipped her hand into his. Sighing as he rubbed his thumb along the ivory skin. “We have to take the good with the bad.”

“I know – but his dependence on you troubles me. King Bran does realise he will eventually have to let you go? You are My Lady – not just his Knight.” Jaime brought her hand to his lips, gallant and exasperatingly handsome as ever. Peering up at her and cautiously asking. “Without stepping on toes or undermining your authority – do you think there is anything I can do to ease your workload? I am qualified…”

“I would have to seek permission, but I could certainly find you a task.” Brienne brought her other hand to his hair, riffling the gold and odd silver strands between her fingers. “I appreciate you offering. Your credentials are definitely impressive.”

“Kingslayer and all?”

“You included that with your application?”

“It’s in very tiny print, I had it penned by a skilful Maester, artfully worked into the border.”

The Lady Commander smirked, releasing him and returning to buckling on the last of her armour.

Jaime observed her with interest, twitching with energy now he was wide awake. Slipping into his usual incessant conversation. “I am not particular about what tasks you know – anything that occupies my time would be welcomed. Especially if it involves a sword, Widow’s Wail needs a challenge. I spend so much time around the nursery with Tytan they are sure to mistake me for a nursemaid, I may as well start wearing skirts if I keep this up…”

“Don’t say that.” Brienne frowned, shaking her head. “You sound like your sister. I have told you before - I will not have you demeaning yourself.” Finally suited, she bent over the bed, leaning on both extended arms and stretching over to kiss him before she left.

My tradition.
The Lady Knight hummed when he deepened the contact, the tip of his tongue licking softly at her lips, seeking entrance. She pulled away before he got too adventurous, jabbing him playfully in the chest with a gloved finger. “Remember, if you need to be brought down a peg or two that is my job—my exclusive right. And I will not hesitate to take to task any individual, yourself included, who tries to claim that privilege for themselves.” Brienne tilted her head to the side, their noses mere inches apart and she remembered when they stood on a rooftop, tension sizzling between them as they debated in a similar manner. “What do you have to say about that?”

Jaime grinned. “Get back in this bed.”

*You have no idea how much I want to…*

Instead she straightened, smoothing her hair neatly behind her ears. “I have to get going.”

He nodded in resignation; mouth set in a tight line.

*It is disappointment we share husband; you are not alone in this.*

Brienne halted in the doorway before exiting, wanting to leave him with some hope. A promise that things could change. “Jaime - I will ask.”

The afternoons were growing warmer, the breezes from the bay offering a cool respite. It was common for the castle inhabitants to flock to the gardens, the covered pergolas providing shade whilst the fresh air cleared their heads. When she couldn’t locate Jaime indoors, here was the next logical place to check.

Brienne wove past tables and sculptures, traversing the covered walkways. Nodding politely at the groundskeepers as they pruned the trellises overtaken by honeysuckle and climbing roses. The vibrant foliage masking the scars left by dragonfire, disguising where old scorched timber met the newly constructed replacement frames.

It was pleasant to get to walk amongst the perfume and blooms, her outdoor excursions with the King were always relegated to the Godswood. There the Weirwood’s prolific roots greedily
consumed all the nutrients in the soil, making it impossible for any ornamental shrubs to grow. A vastly different variety of garden from that which she now strolled.

The Lady Commander had been given an afternoon tea break, whilst Bran held private discussions with the Lord Hand. Tyrion suggesting that it was unnecessary to make her stand sentry outside the door, considering that the locked room was safe from intruders and their meeting was likely to take a while. Brienne did not argue – her island heritage meant she had a healthy appetite for clean air, a need that all too often went overlooked for duty, suffocated by the still atmosphere in enclosed rooms and corridors.

_**I should like to sit out here from time to time, experience the splendour of the day with my man by my side. When I find Jaime, I will suggest it.**_

She almost smiled to herself. _**And he thinks romantic notions evade me…**_

Male laughter made her ears prick, floating from one of the nearby sitting areas. The low mirthful tones easily identifiable as belonging to her husband. Pursuing its origin, she followed a small cobblestone pathway, its winding trek leading her to a gazebo. Brienne pulled up short of approaching, assessing the scene before her, brain and heart simultaneously processing the images but drawing very different conclusions.

The pillars of the arbour were twined with ivy, green leaves and vines snaking majestically along the white columns. Decorative planters stood in every corner; topiary roses clipped to perfect symmetry. A round metal table sat in the centre, the ironwork of its legs elaborately patterned, the lattice structure mirrored in the matching set of four chairs. Though only two were occupied.

Jaime continued to chuckle, shaking his head rigorously, raising a cup to his lips whilst his shaggy hair fell across his eyes. “Your snobbery knows no bounds…”

“You say that as though it is a bad thing?” Cersei arched one of her perfect eyebrows, drumming her fingers against the side of her own beverage. “They may take my title from me, but they cannot replace the blood which flows in my veins nor the milk from my breasts. Like it or not I am of noble origins and I refuse to feed that squalling little beast.”

“You cannot discriminate based upon those grounds - or any for that matter, it is your duty of care.”

“I can and I will. Name me haughty, I mind not. I take pride in it.” She reclined in her seat, folding her arms across her chest. “It cries non-stop and keeps everyone awake. If it were to starve to death would it truly be a tragedy?”

“You are despicable.” The Lion of Lannister leant forward on the table, refilling his cup from the pitcher. Uttering the correct words of customary appal but letting them lose their impact with his clear amusement. “You do realise how callous you sound?”
“Has that ever impeded me? Honestly Jaime, you should know me better.” The former monarch sighed. “Heavens forbid we rejoice his passing and receive a sound night’s sleep. Unfortunately, it is highly unlikely the little brat will go without and expire. Some other wet nurse will surely be afflicted by sympathy and see to him.”

“Now that is a shame. I am so sorry they disappoint you by ensuring an innocent infant lives to see another day.” Sarcasm dripped from his tone.

Cersei chose to ignore it, a smirk playing on the corner of her mouth. “Thank you. I am pleased someone finally sees my plight. It is bad enough they didn’t let me pick and choose whom I nurse. I was a Queen once – I should at least get the good-looking ones.”

This time Jaime nearly spat his drink.

Brienne released the breath she didn’t realise she was holding. Letting it slowly escape through her nostrils whilst she tried to sort through the muddle of emotions within.

And loosen the clamp which has inexplicably tightened around my chest.

They are siblings. They are twins. There is nothing untoward. They may share an afternoon conversation – what of it?

The Lady Knight closed her eyes against the graphic flash which surfaced unbidden, the first time she had truly imagined the pair of golden lions together in the throes of passion. Jaime’s lips pressed against a neck that wasn’t hers, bodies joined by gyrating hips and sharp manicured nails raking down her husband’s shoulder. It constricted her ribs further, made it difficult to breathe.

Stop it. This must cease. That was the past. He is simply chatting with his sister. Who also happens to be his ex-lover…

Opening her lids, she made up her mind against any further silliness.

You wanted to see Jaime. Yet here you are letting Cersei’s mere presence hold you back, squander your time. Banishing yourself to loiter in the outskirts like the odd one out who doesn’t belong. You are not a twelve-year-old girl, hiding from the prettier maids at Evenfall, fearing their laughter and scorn. You are his wife, with more rights to be here than she has...

Forcing herself into action, Brienne cleared her throat loudly, striding into the gazebo. Heartened when Jaime’s face erupted into a smile. “This is a pleasant surprise.”

“King Bran permitted me an afternoon break.” Before she registered what she was doing, her lips were pressed to his cheek, placing a kiss that lingered a beat too long just beside the corner of his
mouth.

Why did I do that? I do not openly display affection.

Her protestations were weak even to herself; she knew the reason. A gesture staking her territory, communicating her message.

The very act I expressly forbid Jaime from committing...

The pathetic obviousness of the demonstration flooded her with shame.

Fuck, I wish I hadn’t done that. I thought myself better than this.

She continued speaking in an attempt to cover her tracks. “It is such a rarity, I thought I would come find you.”

“I’m happy you did.” Jaime moved quickly, leaping up to pull out a chair. But she saw the flicker of acknowledgment cross his face. The irony of her slip not lost on him.

He is never going to let me forget this.

“Join us.” Her husband waved her into the seat. “We have cider…”

“I cannot drink when I’m on duty nor would I in general.”

“Fear not-“ He began to pour her a cup. “- it’s lacking the key ingredient of alcohol. Tyrion and I are trying to encourage Cersei’s sobriety.”

“How very lucky I am.” His twin spoke for the first time since Brienne’s unscheduled arrival. Throughout the entire greeting Cersei had donned an impassive expression but now she was scowling at her cup. “You could have mentioned that sooner Jaime.”

“Oh?” The Knight feigned forgetfulness. “Did I not tell you that? Must have slipped my mind.”

Cersei rolled her green eyes exaggeratedly, digits tapping upon the arm of the chair in agitation. “And upon that note, now that my inducement to stay has been removed, I shall depart.” She swept from her seat, clasping both hands in front of her and simpering. “Surely the pair of you would appreciate being left in one another’s company. Considering this reprieve from duty is such an infrequent occurrence.”


Brienne glanced from twin to twin, trying not to let her face convey her mistrust of Cersei’s behaviour. “I thank you as well. I bid you a pleasant afternoon good-sister.”

The former Queen gave her a smile which only succeeded in raising the hackles on the back of her neck, choosing to address her brother directly, rather than answer Brienne. “Do not forget, I have been granted free time this evening and thus the last place I wish to be is in that damn nursery. I
trust you will check in on Tytan?”

“Of course.”

“Perhaps this would be a prime opportunity. I understand he has not yet met his Aunt.” The title was pushed through a glimpse of gritted teeth, the struggle with civility glossed over by splaying her arms outwards. The sweeping motion indicating a disinterest at contradiction with her making the recommendation in the first place. “Just a suggestion – consider me gone.”

Brienne watched her receding back, waiting until she was safely in the distance and out of earshot. Jaw working tirelessly as she tried to fathom Cersei’s possible motives. “Did you just get chills?”

Jaime sniggered, unfazed. “I do almost everytime Cersei speaks. Did you hear her before? Her disdain for her own charges?” He lowered his cup onto the tabletop with a metallic clink. “I laughed it off to cover my disapprobation because what else can be done? There comes a time when all must accept that Cersei is set in her ways. You just learn to cope with it.”

“Hmmmn.” The Lady Knight let her own disapproval hum through her nose. “And her change of heart in regards to my interacting with Tytan seems suspiciously sudden.”

“I thought so too at first, but we have been back for a fortnight, things should finally be settling into their rightful place. We cannot have upheaval forever - or so one can hope. I told you about my conversation with her on the night we returned. I made it very plain you are the woman in my life, that no forces in existence can sway my love.”

He ran a fingertip down her cheek, and she dropped her gaze, feeling very undeserving of his tenderness. “Maybe I got through? Maybe she sees it? Or maybe she curses our very names behind our back. Either way, her treatment of you has certainly improved and I don’t intend looking a gift horse in the mouth. Speaking of which…” Edging closer, he kissed her lips. Squinting when she did not return it. “…what’s wrong?”

“You saw what I did upon arriving. Don’t pretend you didn’t notice.”

“How could I miss it? It was quite brazen. Very uncharacteristic, dare I say…obvious?”

Brienne groaned. “That leaves no doubt, Cersei knew what it was as well.” Hunching over, she hid her face behind her hands. “I didn’t mean to – it just happened. After my lecture to you and all my resolve in the face of her taunting… I can’t believe I could err so badly, show such weakness. I am livid with myself…”

“You are human.” Jaime rubbed her back in soothing circles. “And whether or not my sweet sister received your hidden message makes no difference. We are talking about love – not a duel Brienne. You are allowed to misstep; it won’t come with the same cost as it would in a battle. I am yours and you can kiss me whenever and however you wish. I don’t mind the reason; I just want the kisses.”

“Don’t be kind to me. I am a hypocrite. I deserve your censure or at the very least to endure your smug gloating.”
“Well…” His nose tickled the shell of her ear. Timbre rising and falling in a frisky sing-song. “…I was told in a letter, in no uncertain terms that my wife was not the jealous type.”

Brienne straightened so abruptly she almost smacked into him, the back of her cuirass coming within a hair’s breadth of connecting with his shoulder. “I am not jealous. That is a very different beast.” She could feel the redness spreading across her cheeks at the accusation. “It was insecurity. A passing lapse and nothing more.”

“There’s the argumentative woman I admire.” Jaime was triumphant. “Now, I know just how you are going to make up for your gross double standard… tonight you’re going to meet my son.”

The carpeted rugs muffled her footfalls as she made her way to the nursery. Their lengths of plush weave cleverly placed to smother sound and ensure tiny occupants were not disturbed from their rest. The entire wing felt like entering a foreign country to the warrior woman, as though an impostor had wandered into their midst, an outsider unfamiliar with the culture and customs.

Septas and wet-nurses bustled in and out of rooms, summoned by the shrill pitch of an infant’s cry. The Septas were few and far between, their roles primarily concerning the care of the older orphans housed in the floors below. The traditional dove grey colour of their robes marking them as servants of the Faith and striking an obvious contrast with the younger women.

The wet-nurses flitted about in a causal manner, often pausing to chat amongst themselves when they crossed paths. From the sweep of their stare and subsequent whispering, Brienne did not think she was being paranoid to guess the topic was her.

*Either Cersei has done her legwork here or I look every bit the fish out of water I feel.*

The surrounding women were the personification of what she generally avoided. Gossiping, attractive, cliquey. She knew King Bran had filled their ranks by taking in unwed Mothers and widows from the war, the women whom passion and circumstance had left few alternatives. The majority were comely, long hair pulled into haphazard buns or messy braids. Their chests noticeably busty, their swollen bosoms pulling upon dresses fitted with buttons down the front for easy access.

By comparison she was an oddity – the lone warrior, imposingly broad, standing tall in her snug breeches, cotton undershirt and leather vest, the laces sitting comfortably flat with no need to strain over her meagre breasts.
She had gone straight from her shift to bathe and change, her short hair remaining damp, slicked back immaculately from her forehead. The severity of its restrained appearance a world apart from the delicate tendrils which framed the faces surrounding her.

Nevertheless, Brienne attempted to smile as she passed, hoping the awkwardness she felt in this environment was not overtly apparent. Cautiously peering through doors left ajar, spotting row after row of bland, hastily constructed cribs, swaddled bundles fussing or dozing within.

*The toll of war – but they are doing all they can to break the cycle. I pray it will be enough.*

Eventually she stopped, finally conceding that she had no idea where she was headed. The neverending sea of closed doors proving disorienting in corridors which she had never before navigated. Mustering her resolve, she approached two of the wet-nurses, silently lamenting not having been born shorter, softer, shapelier. The type of inhibition she had grappled in girlhood and adolescence, the spectre of its resurgence making a play for dominance over her ego.

*For years I have tried to slay this monster, why today has it found a foothold in my psyche? I have long since reconciled myself with my appearance.*

“Excuse me, may I enquire after a babe named Tytan? I am to meet Ser Jaime here... if either of you would be so kind as to point me in the right direction.” She could hear herself attempting to moderate the stern quality of her general tone.

The elder of the two arched her eyebrows, the vitriol oozing through her countenance. *I would wager Cersei found a friend in this one.*

“Whaddya know Tillie? You guessed right…” Another derisive sweep from her head to toes. “…I wouldn’t have thought a man like that would go there – even for politics.”

Brienne shook her head, letting her disgust show, turning upon her heel and striding away.

*I should not waste my time; it has been this way my whole life. Did I really think it would change?* 

*Lady, Ser, Knight, Wife, my titles make no difference. They will always think themselves superior...* 

“M’lady – I didn’ mean to overhear.” A chamber maid hesitantly called out, wiping her hands upon her apron, and propping her mop against the wall. Leaving the bucket unattended to sidle closer. She was younger than the others, her complexion boasting barely a whisker between her freckles and Brienne fought the urge to smile in solidarity.

*I had many when I was younger, only the majority faded as I grew. Now Jaime seeks them like hidden jewels, following them as if a treasure map, placing kisses in place of x’s to mark the spot.*

“It is alright.” Brienne reassured. “Speak freely if you have something to say.”
“Dey are a horrid bunch, only nice amongst each other and awful to ev’ryone else. Since ‘dey found themselves in the company of a former Queen ‘dey think ‘dey are somethin’ special. ‘Dey are all tight-knit you see, even a few maids ‘ave joined ‘em.” The girl grinned almost gleefully. “Jealous is all, you ‘ave what ‘dey want. Ser Jaime is lovely; he comes every day to see his littleun. Tytan ‘as his own chamber, bought with Lannister gold. Second last door on the left.”

“Thank you.” The Lady Knight breathed, glad to hear some common sense. “And if I might impart some wisdom of my own – ignore the other women if you can. I know it is easier said than done but truly you do not need their approval. The only person whose acceptance you should seek is your own.” The girl nodded, her chin tilted a little higher, step slightly more assured as she scurried back to her chores.

Mayhaps I have done some good – now if only I could heed my own advice.

“Jaime…” Brienne wanted to knock but was also concerned about waking the baby, turning the knob in her hand and peeking around the entryway.

The room was small but cosy, plainly adorned yet far more welcoming that the other more sterile chambers she had passed. The babe afforded luxury when compared to the orphans next door.

“Come in my love.” Her husband smiled from a comfortable high-backed chair; every wooden surface padded to provide cushioning. Tytan was wrapped in a blanket, cradled in the crook of his right arm, Jaime’s left hand resting gently upon the swaddling.

Brienne slipped through the door as quietly as possible, clicking it shut behind her. “Is he asleep?”

“No...” Jaime jiggled him to prove a point, prompting tiny hands to clutch outwards, catching his Father’s fingers. “…we are playing.”

“How does one play with an infant?” She furrowed her brow, taking tentative steps closer, not wanting to disturb or frighten him by rising like a kraken out of the ocean.

“Well you talk to him, tickle his chin, make funny noises, tell stories which he can’t understand.” Jaime turned his handsome face upwards to look at her. “Make a complete idiot of yourself really,
but somehow it is a satisfying feeling.” His candour made her mouth twitch upwards. “Do I get a kiss?”

“I don’t want to startle him by leaning in.”

“Nonsense – you’re his Aunt or Step-Mother depending upon how you choose to view it. He has to get to know you and his Father’s lips are lonely.”

“But I’m large…it will be daunting.”

“Then come down to our height.” He extracted his fingers from Tytan’s, patting his knee invitingly.

Brienne regarded him as though he were insane. “I’m too heavy to sit in your lap!”

“I disagree. If it were for more carnal pursuits, I can assure you I would manage.” His features illuminated brightly. “My what a fantastic idea!”

“Jaime…” Walking up to his legs, she began to manoeuvre herself into a sitting position. “…There is a child present.”

“It’s alright, he doesn’t know what I’m saying.”

The Lady Knight swung her legs over his own until she was seated sideways across his thighs, the arm of the chair bracing against her back. “This can’t be comfortable for you.”

“But it is – the two people I love most in the world, exactly where I want them to be. Safe and wrapped in my arms.” He slipped his left hand around her waist, giving her side a squeeze, stretching his neck to land a kiss just below her earlobe. “You smell delicious.”

“I’ve not long bathed.” Brienne squinted down at Tytan, the baby boy now well within her line of sight. The closest she had ever gotten to studying him, as up until now his Mother always kept him well away from her perceived adversary.

He was the mini identical of his parents – impossible to declare which one he more closely resembled being the offspring of twins. Golden blonde down covering his small cranium, green eyes alert, taking in the image of her as much as she was him.

“Hello Tytan.” She didn’t know what to do, how to speak. Panic settling in irrationally, feeling like she was failing a test. “I’m Ser Brienne, formerly Lady of Tarth but now of House Lannister.”

“So formal.” Jaime chuckled, inadvertently making her more self-conscious. “Now he knows your official affiliations let’s try something more personal.” He removed his left arm from behind her, shifting Tytan onto his hand and forearm. “Put out your arms…”

“Noooooo….” Brienne shook her head wildly, eyes the size of saucers with alarm. “…. Jaime I cannot take him. I do not know the first thing about holding a baby, I am cumbersome, I will break him.”
“No, you won’t. You held me when I was at my lowest. You don’t realise how gentle you are.”

She winced; arms held stiffly as Jaime lowered Tytan into them. The weight of the babe settling into her care. She froze in place, too frightened to move, muscles seizing and locking to ensure she did not drop him. “What now?”

“Give him a cuddle.”

_How do you hug something so diminutive? “I’m not sure…”_

“Like this.” Her husband inched Tytan backwards until he was pressed against her chest. “And you can bend your arms, they are not rods nor boughs. Move with him, cradle him. He will like being held by you; I know I do.”

Jaime’s sentiment was encouraging but it didn’t help her to feel more natural. Brienne willed her leaden limbs to move again, gradually circling around Tytan and creating a barrier so he couldn’t accidentally slip from her grasp. Grimacing at the way her leather-clad ribcage made for a hard wall instead of a nurturing cocoon.

“I’m sorry,” She apologised to the babe. “You won’t find anything to nuzzle into there. Your Father doesn’t either.”

“It’s alright Brienne.” Her lion lowered his lips to her shoulder before resting his chin upon it. Odd especially prickly bristles of his beard piercing through her undershirt to poke at her skin. “You don’t have to apologise for being who you are. Babies don’t judge and nor will I.”

“I just feel so awkward.” The confession was relieving but also increased her sense of inadequacy. “Like I am missing the maternal part of me that is supposed to be innate. I’m fashioned for warfare not mothering. Jaime, I fear I am not made for this…”

“Tell that to Podrick.” Jaime regarded her intently, examining her frown. “The boy whom you have loved and protected more than his own Mother ever did. Now a man grown who looks up to you for guidance and example.” He wrapped his stumped arm around the middle of her front, supporting her hold and embracing her all at once. “You sell yourself endlessly short. You don’t see what I see.”

“If you had heard the way I treated Podrick in the beginning…”

“But it worked. The pair of you are more loyal to each other than most blood relations. There are many methods of parenting Brienne. There are innumerable ways to love. Do you really think I know the first thing about it? I spent years denying that I fathered my own children, but now I have Tytan and I am learning as I go. Adapting, in ways I never thought I would. All I know is that when the instinct takes hold - when your children look at you like you are the most important thing in the world, or at its worst extreme, they are threatened - then something awakens within you. A force primal and inescapable. It exists inside you too, my love. I have already seen it.”

His voice was hot against her neck, tugging at need and hunger inside. Neither relating to the prospect of motherhood.

_I adore his confidence in me even if it seems misplaced._
“If you are right – why can’t I shake the thought that there is something wrong with this picture and the anomaly is me?”

“Then you’re not viewing it with my eyes because from where I sit, I’m marvelling at a vision.” His timbre lowered, permeated with hankerings of his own. “And I cannot wait until I see you ripe with my child, a treasure made of you and me. With your blue eyes and my…well everything else.”

Her frown deepened to a glower. “I would punch you if my fists were not otherwise occupied.”

“I know – I am enjoying this exercise more by the minute.”

Brienne suppressed the urge to groan, instead peering back at the babe in her arms. The little version of Jaime drifting off to sleep despite all odds.

_You are resilient, I will grant you that. First surviving the fall of a city, then managing to doze in the arms of someone entirely inept._

“Were you disappointed?” Jaime’s hushed enquiry caught her off guard, startling her from her reverie. She fixed him with her azure gaze, requiring further clarification. “When I was gone, and you found out we weren’t expecting. We haven’t spoken of it since.” He caressed her wrist beneath the bundle, and she recognised the jagged brush of his scarline. The uneven skin reminding her how they both wrestled against a sense of incompetence. “I know things were disastrous and our decisions were hurriedly made in a rush of necessity and contingency - but now we can discuss the crux of it. The parts we avoided. You have always been an unorthodox woman Brienne, choosing a sword over needlepoint, service over spoiling, relishing the opportunity to be a Knight and spurning your title of Lady. Did you want to be carrying our baby? Do you want to have children?”

She lifted her shoulder, uncertain how to respond. The answer as much of a mystery to her as it was to him. “I suppose you don’t know how much you want something until it’s gone.”

“Meaning?” Jaime prodded.

“It was my duty to provide you an heir. I was charged with carrying on your legacy. I take my responsibilities very seriously and I always have. Failure rocked my very foundations. Cracked the bedrock on which I stand. It was a spiral of perpetual misery – losing you, disappointing myself. When I discovered I wasn’t pregnant, it very near destroyed me. But I would be lying if I told you all my tears were for the babe which we never conceived. More for the feeling of emptiness, at losing the last part of you I had left. In the weeks that I thought it a possibility, I had grown quite fond of one aspect. The idea of a continuation of you flourishing within me, giving me purpose. Motherhood as an aspiration has never appealed to me, but pleasing you, loving an extension of you, bringing a combination of us into existence – that I wanted. And I can only promise that I still find joy in that ideation. My fulfilment in the image comes from giving you a family.”
Brienne shuffled on his lap, moving her weight to spare his thigh from paralysis whilst she found her own moral. “So if you’re asking, will I? Grow round with your child, bear you babes and raise your heirs. Yes – happily so. But I ask you...do not set your expectations high for me, to find an inclination which I may lack. You will want for nothing as my husband Jaime, I will give you all within my power. But the pressure to be a version of a woman I’m not, may be more than I can take.”

“I still think you are doing yourself an injustice.”

“Then let me. Only time shall reveal otherwise, and I need your guidance and tolerance more so than I need your cosseting.”

“Hmmmm…”

Brienne gave him a moment, knowing all she had unloaded was a lot to digest.

*He chose me with all my complexities, now he discovers just how far that extends.*

But Jaime was accepting, her glorious champion. Interpreter of the indecipherable, who somehow managed to comprehend the enigma of her heart. “…I can live with that – only if I have your assurance that you are happy with the prospect. I will not inflict upon you something which you do not want-”

Brienne kissed him, missing her hands and how she would normally pull him in. Settling for letting her lips compensate, delivering him a message far from chaste. “Everytime we have been intimate since your returning, we may have conceived. Have you heard me putting forward any objections?”

“No – I haven’t.” He glowed, left hand creeping up her back, rubbing his thumb against the base of her neck.

“There, that says everything. You know how stubborn I am, I would never venture down a road I didn’t wish to travel.” She pecked at his bearded cheek, her nose scratching against the stubble. “With you, I will tackle the unknown without pause. If we aren’t already, though it is far too early for any symptoms to present themselves, I have been incredibly sensitive today. Do you think that’s a precursory sign?”

“Not a conclusive one I’m afraid. We all have rough days.” He jounced his knee beneath her, and she wriggled to the centre of his lap, resting her back against his chest as he added. “Do want to talk to me about it?”

“No while I’m crushing you.”

“It’s alright, we’ve surpassed pain. The baby is asleep, proving your soothing abilities…”

“Proving he is a couple months old and was awake past his bedtime.”

“…and my lap is numb now – so divulge.”
“There’s nothing to relay, only the same scenarios which have repeated themselves for years. The sole aspect which changes are the individuals involved – but suffice to say I will be quite particular about our choice of nursemaid when the time comes.”

“Were they offensive towards you?” She could hear the Lannister Lord coming to life, the lion preparing to roar in defence of his mate.

“Nothing worthy of your intervention, so you can simmer down. My quarrels are my own and I will choose how and when to fight them. In this instance is it inconsequential and I will be letting it go. Though it did make me wonder whether Cersei has been talking about us…”

“There is an aspect I never considered. My sister making friends and allies. It is enough to cause the shivers.”

“Have you ever overheard anything whilst here?”

“Not once. They are all very courteous when I am around, they keep a respectful distance.”

“Figures.” She scoffed. “Of course, they are kind to you – you’re gorgeous.”

“So are you.”

Brienne pivoted her eyes to the ceiling and exhaled. “That is very nice of you to say husband but I’d rather you didn’t.”

“Can’t you be beautiful to me? Is that such a stretch to your comprehension?”

“Beauty is not subjective Jaime, a flower is pretty, a thistle is not.”

“Then fill my garden with thistles and we shall call this debate a draw.”

She could scream, only it would wake Tytan.

*Why is he at his most endearing when he is making me want to claw my hair out by the roots?*

“Best change the subject.” The Lady Knight declared. “I must apologise to you because I didn’t get the chance to address with the King what we discussed this morning.”

“That is alright. He spent a good portion of today with Tyrion, I never assumed you would have gotten the chance.”

“I still fully intend to do it. I want you to know I’m true to my word.”

“I know that Brienne. I just hope we will not be here much longer…” He patted her stomach twice. “What are the precise terms again?”
“I will be honourably released from the service of the Kingsguard when it becomes plain I am bearing a child. We reside here until I can no longer perform my duties due to pregnancy and then we can move on, begin our lives elsewhere.”

“Well then…” Jaime tapped her back, asking her to rise. “…let’s tuck this baby into his crib –”

Now that she was standing, she could turn to look in his eyes, beholding the suggestive spark within, the slant of his grin betraying thoughts both wicked and enticing as he carefully removed Tytan from her arms. “–we have work to do.”

Their chamber was still but not dark. The sconces sputtering broken flashes of light, fuel beginning to run low. It wasn’t oft they were left burning this late, but it was too humid for the fireplace and Jaime had insisted upon illumination. “To look at you.”

His panting filled the void, bringing her back to earthly awareness. Every wet kiss or slap of flesh amplified by the hush. Nocturnal creatures active whilst the rest of the world slumbered. Empowered by their isolation in the hours with belonged to them alone, the dead of night which was once so solitary turned promiseland, proving insomniacs needed their mate.

“Jaime, Jaime, Jaime…”

Seated upon his lap Brienne astonished herself, never ceasing to be surprised by what inventive lovers could accomplish. Seemingly implausible suggestions, so gratifying, so good.

She bent her knees, folding long legs around his buttocks. Their tangle easing the strain of having them outstretched and locking their grinding hips together. She arched her back, leaning into each upwards thrust, the depth of the angle making her clench and writhe.

*I never thought this would work…*

But it was his arms twined around her which really touched a place inside, going far deeper than their present physical connection when he yanked her closer, bringing their chests flush, her nipples abrading against his chest hair, causing the most exquisite friction. He gazed up into her eyes and face, pulling her in for passionate kisses. Drinking in the image before him, the sight of her in no way off-putting. His ardour increasing when he watched her in pleasure.

“You’re my idea of beauty.”
Brienne grit her teeth, subtly bracing two fingers against her temple. The beginnings of a headache
adding to the cramping pains in her abdomen and waning patience. She was two days into her moon’s blood, feeling uncomfortable and on edge, her thoughts constantly monitoring the growing dampness beneath her armour and willing the Council meeting to end so she could visit the privy.

This is what comes of being a woman in a man’s world. They have no idea of the struggles.

Today’s discussion was especially lengthy, His Grace choosing to be in attendance. The growing animus between the neighbouring Kingdoms requiring concrete plans to be made.

If only that was what they were doing. Instead they just grow louder and continue to run in rings...

“Our royal fleet is not prepared, shipbuilders have been labouring day and night, salvaging what they could from the Dragonfire and starting construction from scratch. But even with all their hard work, production is slow.” Davos’ voice held genuine concern. “Supplies of wood were coming in from the North but now they’ve cut us off. We have only a handful of complete vessels, they are not enough to defend should an attack come from the sea, nor to transport troops if we need to reinforce our border. It leaves us vulnerable and unable to trade with Essos. The Master of Coin should be able to tell us how it has affected the treasury…”

“Hey! You mind your business and I’ll mind mine. The funds may be a bit tight but that’s all the more reason why we should be spending it on what matters. Whatchya need is warcraft. Trebuchets, Scorpions, Ballistas.” Bronn counted them off on his fingers. “Be ready for the Northern bitch when she comes or better yet – go get her ourselves before this gets any bigger.”

“N-now I have to disagree.” Sam was always throwing water upon the flames, his ties with the Stark family compelling him to advocate for peace. “I think if we have clear lines, dividing the infringements and allow both sides to effectively man the borders of their own territory. I suggest the building of a wall…”

“Are you witless? You think some crudely made wall is gonna stop an invading army? How did that work when the dead invaded?...and that was a big fucking wall!” Bronn scoffed. “And what do you propose we make it out of? As the Onion Knight over there just pointed out – we can’t get wood.”

“When did the North become our main supplier of lumber?” Tyrion tented his fingers, leaning back in his chair. “Does the Kingswood have any yield left?”

“Nothing sustainable.” Davos shook his head. “A war with Dragons leaves its mark. Our best bet other than the North is to import from Qohor. But that takes months, funds and ships. It all comes full circle. Let alone the time required to build the fleet which we just don’t have.”

“What about Beyond the Wall?” Sam enquired tentatively. “They have ample forestation there…”

“Grey area I’m afraid.” The Hand of the King clasped the arms of his chair. “Some may see
Beyond the Wall as within the North’s jurisdiction, though I’m certain the Freefolk would disagree. Besides, without travelling through Queen Sansa’s territories the only way to transport it is…” He pointed at Davos.

“By ship.” The old seafarer nodded. “We are stalemated without a fleet.”

“Be buggered we are.” Bronn jabbed a finger in the air. “Take what little lumber you have left and put it to building those siege engines.”

“We can’t be seen to be building weapons!” Sam had become wide eyed. “That could be interpreted as a direct sign of impending war.”

“Where do ya think this is headed?” The sellsword sneered. “A peaceful fucking afternoon tea!!”

“Both must be achieved.” On the rare occasion the King spoke, all fell silent. “I will not leave my people defenceless. Lord Hand – what can be done?”

Tyrion nodded. “I came to the same conclusion Your Grace and steps have already been taken. Though I must confess we have encountered some hurdles.”

“Your solution?” Bran tilted his head sideways, strangely resembling the ravens which so often accompanied him.

“To purchase a ready-made fleet, Your Grace.” Ser Davos sucked his lips into his mouth in thought. “But it is proving easier said than done.”

“Outsourcing to Essos for this is not an option. It gives them too strong an indication of our vulnerability. The last thing we need is an attack from the East. Again.” Tyrion cleared his throat. “The purchase must be made from our own shores.”

“Purchase?” The King seemed perplexed by this notion. “Can they not be pledged to our plight?”

“Only if you are calling your banners, which as per my understanding is not something you wish to do at this stage.” The Lord Hand watched him carefully for reaction. “Does that remain your stance Your Grace?”

“Yes. My foremost aim is to avoid war. My second to defend my Kingdom.” The monarch drifted, seeming thoughtful. “Can we not ask for the fleet as a gift? A generous donation to win the Crown’s favour?”

“We already have Your Majesty.” Davos shuffled through a handful of parchments in front of him. “Our appeal was declined. The Lord in question is happy to organise a fleet for the Crown but insists upon an asking price.”

“Whom did we approach?”

Brienne’s eyes narrowed, misliking the guilt filled glance her good-brother shot in her direction.
“Lord Selwyn Tarth, Your Grace.”

At the mention of her Father, she suspired heavily.

*Oh, heaven forbid – Tyrion you could have warned me.*

She fixed the Hand with a withering glare and watched him squirm, pointedly avoiding her ire.

“Did he give grounds for his refusal?” Bran queried.

“Yes.” Tyrion pinched the bridge of his nose with one hand, motioning with the other. “Ser Davos…”

“First, if His Grace would please note - Tarth is by far the most viable option we have when it comes to securing a fleet. They obtain wood from merchant traders out of Essos and employ some of the best shipmakers in the land. By circumstance they survived the worst of the wars unscathed and as a result have the largest functioning armada in the Six Kingdoms. No other Lord can offer what Lord Selwyn can.”

*The punchline is coming.*

“Yet he opts for payment over favour?”

“Yes.” Now it was Ser Davos’ turn to appear abashed, his expression towards her at least apologetic. “Lord Selwyn writes that seeming as the Crown already claimed his most valuable resource – his sole heir – he thinks it is only fitting he be compensated for a fleet.”

*He would choose to be affronted by my tenure in the Kingsguard, still unswayed upon the topic of my Knighthood and conveniently overlooking that my marriage to a superior House had already superseded my role as his successor.*

If it were seemly to collapse onto her arms, pressing her forehead into the wooden table – she would. But instead Brienne sat stock straight, impassive as always.

*Through it all.*

Bran pursed his lips but offered little else to indicate what he was thinking. “I have never met Lord Selwyn – all his decisions have always been passed on with Ser Brienne acting as his representative.”

“In all due respect Your Grace – that was before she surrendered her birthright by joining the Kingsguard.” Tyrion was quick to point out the technicalities, though the Lady Knight wished they wouldn’t discuss her as though she wasn’t in the room.

“Perhaps it was remiss of me not to hold audience with him personally. It is difficult to instil fealty when a sovereign and vassal have never met. It makes me question…” The King was musing
aloud, methodically sifting through the greater implications of the response. “Lady Commander-”

Brienne blinked, registering that she was finally being addressed. “Yes, Your Grace?”

“Will you converse with your Father, persuade him to our cause?”

*Here goes.* “If I may speak candidly my King?”

“Please.” Bran granted her permission with a single nod. “I expect all my Council to be frank.”

“My Father is a stubborn and proud man. If he has made up his mind that he requires remuneration in exchange for a fleet, then there is precious little my entreaty can do to sway him. You can be assured your purchase would be quality and if Father gives his word then he stands by it. The price he asks for will be fair and not exorbitant, for he is not motivated by greed. But my intervention will achieve nothing other than further antagonising the situation and reaffirming to him that I am no longer his heir.”

*Inflaming his bruised ego and doing more harm than good by rubbing his nose in my external loyalties.*

Brienne took her time, choosing her phrasing carefully. Purposefully omitting any knowledge which may cause offence or reflect badly on either party.

*Diplomacy is all well and good for those well-versed in public speaking. For me even taking the floor is a strain – but reticence and governance do not work hand in hand. How I wish I had Jaime’s silver tongue…*

With that concept in mind she combed through each sentence before it left her mouth, asking herself if it sounded worthy of a Lannister.

*It is too easily overlooked that I am in fact Lady Lannister and it would do well to remind them given this current topic.*

“As for the resources of Tarth, I myself hold no power over how they are distributed. From my position, I cannot commandeer the ships for you, nor negotiate any longer on my Father’s behalf. I surrendered those entitlements when I donned the White Cloak and even if they were not forfeit, I fear it is often forgotten that all which would be mine, is now my husband’s. By the laws of the land my dowry was my inheritance, leaving me with nothing left to give.” She waited for the outcry which never came, slowly permitting herself to relax as she watched Bran’s reaction.

*Hopefully I managed to assuage that fiasco.*

The King’s brown eyes were calm, reflective and accepting. “Thank you for your honesty. You bring up points I had not considered.” He turned his focus to Bronn. “Master of Coin – find the funds required to make the purchase.”
The sellsword nearly choked. “Easier said than done. I’ve already found the coffers to rebuild half the city and the Keep. Our treasury doesn’t extend that far.” He thumbed the air, pointing at Tyrion. “Lannisters are rich bastards. Ask him.”

All heads swivelled to face Tyrion, the Lord Hand seeming rather dumbfounded. “Don’t look at me! I am reliant upon the charity of my House more so than most. The title and holdings pertaining to Lord of the Rock passed to my brother, Jaime. I would suggest you ask his wife to speak with him.”

Five sets of eyes settled back upon her.

*I celebrated my victory too soon.*

“No.”

“Jaime just think about it.” She perched on the edge of a chair in Tyrion’s dining quarters, the White Sword Tower too confined and prone to echoes for a conversation of such magnitude. The Lord Hand had arranged an assortment of cakes and appetisers to be waiting for them - winking and explaining. “Lions tend to growl less when they have full bellies.”

*Turns out he was wrong.*

Jaime had declared it bribery and instead taken to pacing the perimeter of the table, making her already aching brain throb. “I wasn’t good enough for a task. A simple task putting my skills to use – but now I’m convenient for my gold?”

Brienne rested an elbow on her knee, holding her head in her hand. “I am not defending the decision Jaime. You know as well as I how much I could have put your experience to good use, but you did push His Grace from a tower window – forgiven; yes, but forgotten; no. He will only afford you so many privileges.”

“Until he wants something from me?”

“It is necessary for the defence of the realm.”

“Is it a loan or a gift?”
“I would assume a generous patronage to his reign.”

“And why would I do such a thing?”

“Because he spared you? Your son and sister?”

“That is the excuse I use every time he calls upon you in the midst of night with a duty that simply cannot wait. Or his early morning jaunts to the Godwood which steal you from my bed at the crack of dawn. I am a Lannister; I pay my debts and that debt has been repaid. He demands payment with the highest of prices – that I share my wife's time and go without as a husband. Where he sees you more frequently than I do. He cannot ask more from me.”

“Then think of it as an investment in our future.” Her stoicism was wearing thin, eroded away by the endless Council meeting and the spasms which twisted her insides. The resulting pounding within her skull an unavoidable side-effect of the combination. “The funds are going to my Father, ultimately it goes in the treasury of Tarth…”

He was lightning quick with his rebuttal, full of fire and misdirected indignation. “Of which you are not currently heir.”

“That is true, I am no longer to inherit. But it will skip a generation and pass to our heirs.”

“What heirs?” The Lion harrumphed, throwing both hands – gold and flesh - upwards. “We are granted no time together to make them – unless there is something you’re not telling me…”

“No, Jaime. I’m not.” Brienne looked away, still shy of admitting private women’s issues to her man. “You know full well my cycle is upon me.”

With a sigh, his outrage calmed, stepping in front of her to study her ashen face. “You are pale. You should eat something.”

“I’m not hungry. My head feels like it has a hoard of Dothraki stampeding through. I just escaped a Council meeting which seemed as though it was called in perpetuity and my-” Her sense of mortification reared, finding her limit at the idea of admitting how a warrior could nearly be felled by cramps. “-never mind.”

Pushing herself to her feet, she captured his forearm in her iron grip, forcing him to stop his incessant march around the room. “Please Jaime. You are making this more difficult than it has to be. Creating animosity where there needs to amity. We will get nowhere and gain no ground through refusing the King.”

“It is a big decision Brienne. Believe it or not the Lannister pockets do not run as deeply as they once did, a fact Tyrion seems to be oblivious of. My sister left our finances in the capital in ruins and the mines in the West are no longer profitable. What is asked of us will take a lump sum from funds which should be left untouched.”

Releasing her hold on him, she stroked his cheek with her index finger. “I adore how responsibly
and practically you are thinking about our legacy. How your desire to provide is making you cautious. But this is not a heedless act. If the gold was being requisitioned for anyone else, it would be a loss and I would side with you, advising against it. This is my Father; he is not an unreasonable man and I know at your core – neither are you.”

“It’s not your Father who is my concern. It’s the Crown. I have seen monarchs do foolish things with my family’s wealth for years. Squandering and repurposing, I am Lord now, I will not allow it. I will not watch wastage. And I wouldn’t entrust Bronn to manage the purchase of a ham let alone handle this sum of money.”

The Lady Knight gave his shoulder a squeeze. “Then set your terms. Present them to Council. You have nothing to lose.”

“No – not to Council. So, I can be hounded and outvoted, hoodwinked by Tyrion’s clever ploys. If the King wants my coffers, he can negotiate with me himself.”

“Who are you sending? Surely not Bronn to broker such a deal.”

Brienne stood sentinel; stony, motionless. The picture of the perfect Kingsguard, embodying the archetype. Silent as the grave, the mute muscle in the room; but more restless of spirit than an oak during a windstorm.

*When I told His Grace that Jaime requested an audience, I did not anticipate his response would be immediate. I would rather Podrick have been on duty.*

The awkwardness of the meeting between the two men was arduous, the atmosphere between them pulled tight, constantly threatening to snap at any moment. Her anxiety heightened with each passing sentence, knowing how Jaime’s temper was already incited. The same fires which ignited his blood in passion beneath their sheets capable of making him act impulsively. She was hastily learning one of the mantras which would prove a constant as his wife…

*Jaime please tread carefully, mind your tongue.*

It was ironic to think that earlier she was mentally praising him for his glib talents, wishing she could lay claim to his confidence and eloquence. Now it was reversed.

*If only I could gift him some of my caution and respect for authority.*
“I intend going myself.” Bran was phlegmatic, the antithesis to her husband’s heat. Cool, expressionless and difficult to read. He sat in his wheeled chair; hands clasped in his lap. The firelight throwing shadows across his face, adding to the intrigue of the Three-Eyed Raven. His Majesty had requested the conversation be held in his private quarters; the room dim save for the roaring hearth. The King often felt a nip in the air more acutely than most, favouring blankets over his knees and requesting logs be added frequently to chase away the chill. Brienne often wondered if the icy touch of the Night’s King had left an irreversible scar and whether his perception of gelidity had more to do with fearful memories of the undead rather than the actual temperature. She had learned firsthand how seriously he observed both folktale and superstition.

“Yourself?” Jaime blinked. “This is news to me.”

And me…

Of course it is.” She detected a hint of smugness in the King’s delivery. Of the many advantages afforded someone in his position, wielding knowledge as power was the one from which he seemed to derive satisfaction. Brienne strongly suspected it was the reason why a Master of Whispers had never been appointed. “No-one is yet aware. I have decided it would be of benefit to meet with the Evenstar in person.”

The lion of Lannister was always two steps ahead of the game. “Who will be accompanying you?”

“All that is fitting. My Lord Hand, my Master of Ships and my Lady Commander…”

“My wife.” Jaime pointedly reminded. “You intend taking my wife on an expedition that could potentially take weeks.”

“As head of the Kingsguard, her place is with the King.”

Fuck. She could practically see the steam coming out of Jaime’s ears.

I did not foresee this either. Jaime for goodness sake stay calm.

Straightening in his seat, her husband’s eyes narrowed, his manner taking on an imposing air which she could only surmise he learnt from his Father. Tone commanding as he laid out his terms. “I will be coming to oversee the financial exchange. The monetary aspect of the deal will be handled by me personally.”

“It is out of the question.” Bran’s voice didn’t waver nor facial expression change. “Lord Tyrion will be with me and someone must remain in King’s Landing to monitor your sister. It is within the conditions of your return.”

”Surely the urgency of this mission takes precedence. Ser Bronn and Maester Tarly are
councilmen loyal to the Crown. They can keep watch over Cersei’s behaviour whilst we are away and besides, as you are always quick to remind us - the Keep is full of eyes."

"True as that may be, I intend assigning them significant tasks of their own. Although acceptance of the responsibility would have been up to their individual discretion, in this instance I will not consent to have their attention divided by supervisory duties."

“Therefore, exigency dictates. Cersei comes as well. Along with Tytan.”

“Why disrupt a settled babe and Mother? It is unnecessary upheaval.”

“Then take Podrick.” Jaime crossed one leg over the other, casually calling the King’s bluff. 

*He knows Bran is not truly concerned about a disturbance to their routine.*

“I plan upon taking both.” The King’s eyebrows twitched upwards, but he remained otherwise unmoved. “I will be requiring more than one escort. I thank you for pointing it out.”

*Even I am becoming incensed with His Grace now.*

Jaime inhaled, changing tacts. Leaning forward and mimicking the King’s pose by folding his left hand over his golden one. “Brienne is my wife. Where she goes – I follow. Our marriage vows were to be respected, *that* is a stipulation of her position.” He smiled in the way only a cocksure Lannister could. “Did it ever occur to you I may wish to meet my goodfather?”

“This trip is not social.”

“Which is why I’m bringing the funds. The contract can be drafted, overseen by your advisors. I will purchase the fleet for the Crown as a donation to the continued peace and defence of the realm. Payment will be made directly to Lord Selwyn by myself, in person – with my extended family brought to Tarth in addition if that is what it takes to appease both sides and ensure no agreements are breached. The deeds for the ships shall be in your name, property of King Bran the Broken to use as you see fit. These are my terms.”

*It is a generous offer. One the Crown would be unwise to refuse.*

She watched as Bran considered, communicating his accord with a nod of his head.

“Instruct your servants to pack. We have reached an agreement Ser Jaime.”
Chapter Summary

"I can't help but want oceans to part..."
Lyrics, War of Hearts by Ruelle
Bridge, Line 3

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes
“I wonder which one is Selwyn?” Jaime squinted into the sunlight; the blinding glare thrown from its bounce upon the water obstructing his view of the dock. He shaded his eyes with his left hand, making out the most distinct shapes; Bran’s wheeled chair, his wife’s tall towhead, the mass of dignitaries gathered as a greeting party.

The wooden deck creaked under him, groaning its protestations, straining against the ropes and chains which held it at anchor. The cog as displeased with their stationary mooring as he was.

The first surprise of the voyage had been the revelation that they would be travelling on two separate ships.

The council members sailed upon the King’s own galleon. Newly constructed, the ‘Crow’s Nest’ was stately in its appearance and unabashed in proclaiming its agenda. Raven figureheads carved into the bow and every mast.

By contrast Cersei, Tytan and Jaime himself had been relegated to a serviceable cog - an insult considering his wealth and status - but the last-minute notice had left the lion of Lannister with no available time to employ the services of a more impressive craft. He had naturally assumed they would all be journeying aboard the same vessel.

*How very wrong was I.*

Tyrion had of course been profusely apologetic, blaming the baby as a means to explain the slight. The King did not wish to be disturbed by the crying; a reasonable request given that he had granted permission for the entire family to travel. Jaime had argued, seeing that yet again he would be severed from his wife, this time by a body of water. He asserted that Tytan was a calm child who had made minimal noise during their entire trip across from Pentos.

It did little good, Bran was unmoved from his position on the topic and they embarked in two groups. The only difference Jaime’s impassioned pleas had made was providing an opportunity for the fates to prove him wrong twice in a row.

Rounding Massey’s Hook, they encountered turbulent seas. The constant rush of crashing waves only challenged by his persistent infant’s wails. Cersei stalked the rocking cabin, struggling to keep
her balance as the floor slanted beneath their feet, shrieking at Jaime to make him stop. Her yells simply serving to increase the volume and urgency of Tytan’s screams.

When they sailed onto calmer waters, the galleon pulled up alongside them, suspending a gangplank between the two ships. Dressed in comfortable attire, Brienne made the crossing upon steady legs, her years as an experienced seafarer never more evident than when she made the feat look like child’s play. Greeting him warmly, she expressed her intention of spending her downtime onboard with him.

They continued in this manner for two days, establishing a pattern of her crossing over and back.

But their closeness was still inhibited, the restrictive confines of the tiny ship causing a great deal of awkwardness. Necessity requiring the married couple to share the accommodations of a single cabin with Cersei and Tytan.

To fit, they would have to sleep together; which would not have been a problem only the narrow bunks were barely large enough for his broad shoulders, let alone his wife’s mighty frame as well. But with his sister present – Cersei’s often contemptuous glare penetrating them even after the candles were extinguished - Brienne wouldn’t even attempt to join him abed.

Seized by a stroke of genius, Jaime had grabbed his pillow and blanket, thanking the Seven for the blessing of a clear night as he led them to the deck above. There they lay upon their backs, connecting the points of constellations, swapping legends and nonsense until his woman fell asleep against his shoulder.

Jaime decided that experience alone was worth three times the sum of gold he had brought with him to make the Crown’s purchase.

Although he adored the time they spent together, even Jaime eventually had to concede it was folly. The water was growing choppier as they neared the mouth of the Straits, the jouncing causing the gangplank to teeter precariously and increasing the danger of his wife falling overboard. With a saddened heart he told Brienne to stay aboard the Crow’s Nest for the rest of the voyage.

He spent the next night alone in their spot, mourning their stolen moments and watching the distant lights of the faster ship blink in the darkness. Growing resentment festering within when he thought of how Bran had duped him. Stewing upon the cunning deviousness of their sovereign and his unyielding determination to keep Brienne by his side instead of her husband’s.

*The King does not need her there; no danger lurks aboard his own ship in the middle of the ocean... Only if he were expecting an attack by pirates and then we would all be doomed.*

One day away from Tarth, the gangplank was erected again. This time Podrick made the crossing,
bringing with him the official instructions for when they made landfall. The lad attempted to lighten Jaime’s mood, sitting down to share a drink with him and suggesting they play a few rounds of dice. He had smuggled the small wooden cubes in his pocket, keen to share the game taught to him by the on-board crew. The lion appreciated his efforts even if they were futile, the grumpy feline beyond being cheered by idle distractions. Especially given the directives Pod had passed on courtesy of the King.

*Which is why I’m now left waiting while my wife and everyone else goes ashore.*

He walked into the shadow cast by the mast, trying to gain a better vantage point. Eager to catch a glimpse of his good-father as he scanned the crowd.

*I don’t think any of the men have a sturdy enough build to have sired Brienne – I imagined someone, well bigger…*

“Feeling the pinch sweet brother?” Jaime jumped at the sound of Cersei’s voice, she had somehow managed to come up behind him unnoticed, her voice frighteningly close to his ear, her profile visible out of the corner of his vision. “The divide – the segregation. We are second class citizens you and me. The sooner you accept it, the better.”

“It makes sense if you think about the protocol…” He found himself compelled to disagree with her, justifying a decision he had been fuming about all morning.

*I cannot allow Cersei to get inside my head, she wants us to be equal. To claw me down with her. I am a Lord still, she without title. We are different now, but she would have us be the same. It is her way.*

“… I just have to learn patience.”

“I hurt for you.” His sister jutted out her bottom lip, an exaggerated pout affecting a guise of empathy she didn’t truly feel. “To have a wife that would let her job come before her husband.”

“We are fine.” Jamie ensured his tone was iron, attempting to shut her down before she took the conversation any further. But Cersei was not easily dissuaded.

“How many days of sailing did we sleep alone in solitary bunks? Just you and I – and the son we made together.” She touched his spine and he flinched away, pivoting to face her. Keen to avoid any more unexpected contact. “A cabin…a womb… the story of our lives is quite repetitious. I’ve told you before it always comes back to *us*…” He knew the timbre she was using, recognising its mellifluous seductive quality. Once it would have driven him mad with lust - *but no more.*

Now she only makes me recoil, my skin slither with the reverberations of her conniving intent. *She may treat me with scorn, sneering at the man I have become - I care not.*
I no longer court her opinions - to please Cersei means to subjugate myself and I would rather kiss the Mad Queen's boots than continue to be her blind lickspittle. She may sneer at me, it will not even register, indifference is liberating -

But I will not allow her to disrespect my marriage, for then she is treating Brienne with contempt.

“...We could reminisce... what happens at sea stays at sea. We can make them regret leaving us out on the water...” Her fingers made a bold dive for his laces, but his reflexes were sharp, stepping back and catching her wrist in mid-air.

“That’s not happening. It is never happening.” Jaime told her sternly, his entire expression unimpressed, shoving her hand forcefully back towards her. “I am a happily married man.”

Green eyes seared into him, the coquet vanishing. Replaced with a vicious siren, robbed of her prey. “Matrimonial vows meant little to you when you were making a cuckold of Robert.” Cersei spat.

He met her venom with a growl. “The word you seem to have missed in my statement is ‘happily.’”

Roughly she wrested her wrist from his grasp, clomping her retreat back into the dim below. A predator returning to her lair.

It was only when she disappeared from view, he allowed himself to relax, crossing the deck to stand at the railing. Recommencing his countdown until he could escape his floating hell and return to dry land.

On the pier he caught sight of a newcomer to the group, a very tall man with hair of grey shimmering in the afternoon sun. His towering height matched only by the Lady Knight a few yards away.

Ahhhh, that will be him.

The views from the elevated grounds of Evenfall Hall were nothing short of stunning. The sunset tinting the evening sky with hues of amber and rose. A spattering of zealous stars winked in the darkening canvas above, the waters of the ocean evolving before his eyes as if by magic. From
clearest blue to molten gold, set alight by dusk’s fire, deepening to an inky mirror reflecting the heavens.

The gardens themselves had been enchanting in the final bow of the afternoon, the lion Lord choosing to wander and relish the terra firma beneath his soles. The sun had long since begun its descent when they were called into harbour, beginning their short journey up to the castle. Cersei had been unnervingly quiet for the duration of their carriage ride, speaking not a word when she was whisked off with Tytan to settle in the servants’ wing. Jaime was personally relieved, after her disgraceful display earlier he had nothing to say to her and was thankful to finally be emancipated from the scourge of her company.

His spirits found calm as he walked the outskirts of the immense stronghold, leisurely submerging himself in the ambience of Brienne’s girlhood abode. Picturing an unusually tall gangly girl cavorting amongst the yarrow and lavender.

“I’m sorry – it was wrong of them to leave you waiting off the coast.”

The smile which was burgeoning from his daydream morphed to encompass his entire face as he turned towards the sound of Brienne’s voice. Growing wider by the second when he took in the unusual sight of his wife in a gown.

It was plain, cut with a square neckline and straight skirt which fell loosely to just past her ankles, the fabric moving freely when she walked, the toes of her boots peeking out from below the hemline in their hint of rebellion.

But it didn’t need to be ornate or embellished, for the appeal of the colour compensated ten-fold, the unique pink-peach shade of the coral found in tidal pools and offshore reefs.

“Look at you.”

“Shut up.” She cuffed him lightly on the jaw, before kissing it. “Or I will seek an annulment.”

“My Lady, we have consummated far too many times for you to be granted an annulment.” His arms slipped around her waist, taking their time to explore her form through thinner material. “I haven’t seen you in a dress since Harrenhal. You had that blue outfit in King’s Landing, but you still wore breeches beneath if I am not mistaken.”

“Someone took notice.” He could feel her grin against his cheek. “This is my Father’s doing. He has an archaic sense of what is proper female attire and unfortunately for me King Bran has become his co-conspirator.”

“Howso?”

“Turns out I am a casualty in this deal as well. My presence here is not only to guard the King - as I initially thought - but also to appease my sire. His Grace thinks that by permitting me to visit with Father and supporting his paternal opinions, he will garner support. This dress is the result.” She tugged in annoyance at the skirt. “Father was remarking to me about ladylike attire
considering the company I keep. I attempted to hide behind my need for armour in order to serve and then King Bran decided that my duties could be relaxed for my stay and that he will call upon Podrick whenever possible to allow me free time.”

“I complain for weeks on end and your Father succeeds with a single sentence.” Jaime sighed, convincing himself to rejoice in the development, regardless of how it came about. “This is good news for us.”

“You’re not the one wearing a gown.” Brienne buried her face in his shoulder, her voice chagrined and muffled. “The laces are straining across the back and the skirt is too short. None of the atrocities in my wardrobe ever fit me properly and I always chose to wear my breeches and tunics whenever I could get away with it. But Father insists – the King is visiting; I am to dress appropriately. As if the entire court at King’s Landing has not seen me in my preferred garb. I used to dream of a day when he accepted my differences, registering that he only makes me more absurd by trying to gloss over my shortcomings with pretty wrappings. But now I find myself capitulating, taking a higher road by respecting my Father and accepting him in a way he never could in return for me. He is too old and set in his ways, progression is beyond a man of his years. If I could not sway him in my youth, I have little chance now. He has fashioned his entire island as a model for excellence and I am the disappointment who will never come up to par. The least I can do is wear the dress and placate him without complaint.”

At last she had pulled back the curtain, let him glimpse into an image of her past. The catalysts behind her abandoning the comforts of life as Lady of Tarth, far more complex than escaping arranged marriages and choosing to live by steel. Now he understood; she felt out of place at every turn. The heavenly ambience of the island itself which surrounded them adding to her malaise. Its idyllic perfection only highlighting her irregularity, leaving a woman who deviated from the standardised definitions of loveliness feeling even more lacking.

He frowned, peering past her flaxen hair to study the gardens with a different perspective. The appeal diminishing when he thought of the control such impeccability alluded to.

*I wonder if even an odd coloured bloom is allowed to flourish in a bed of uniform shade.*

Jaime had endured his share of pressures being raised as scion to the mighty Lord Tywin, but this was an entirely different superficial mould. One his powerful woman could never be forced to conform with. No matter how much she was squeezed and coerced.

*She fits with me. My way of life, my arms. If she were typical – we never would have met, and that thought is enough to crush me.*

He ran his hand upwards on a quest of discovery, finding the laces she mentioned, pulled tight like a bowstring, their criss-crosses bumping against his palm. He tried not to take too great a delight in the contours of her back beneath his fingers, the knowledge of the cost to her damaged soul dousing his initial amusement.
But by the same token he worshipped the muscles which the fine weave enabled him to feel, the tiny patch of exposed flesh at the top allowing him to caress where her spine met her neck.

“I would never try to change you –” Jaime whispered, thumb skimming across the gooseflesh raised by his touch. “-but I must admit I’m finding this a strange mix of hideous and provocative.”

“The latter will wear off, soon you will only see the element of the ridiculous. You have been going without, you are admiring with your crotch rather than your eyes.” Brienne lifted her head, fixing him with her accusatory stare and raising an eyebrow. “The advantage of the flimsier fabric cuts both ways – you can feel me, but I can also feel you…” Raising her knee, she rubbed it against his hardening manhood. “…did you think I wouldn’t notice?”

“Fuck.” He laughed, shaking his head. “You will think me worse than a green squire. Where is your gambeson and leathers? They prevent me from being discovered.”

“No intervention is necessary; my moon time has passed. You may have me again…” She fit her lips to his and he greedily responded, filling her mouth with his tongue and only serving to encourage his arousal.

“Mmmmm…” Brienne pulled away to snatch breath, biting her lip in her innocent way, utterly oblivious to how it caused a surge of desire in his veins. “…mayhaps you have a point husband, where is your self-control?” She playfully brought her hand to cup his crotch and he shied away without thinking, the lingering vestiges of his earlier run in with Cersei keeping his defences on high alert.

He regretted the act instantly, knowing in his heart it was completely unintentional. But the hurt in his wife’s eyes was too late to rectify. “Perhaps you don’t want me after all.”

“No…Brienne, no.” He cupped her chin with his one good hand. “My love – that’s not it at all. I didn’t mean to withdraw from you, I want you. Believe me.”

Why? Why did I have to do this to us now? Stupid fucking imbecile. She’s your wife, not your sister. The woman you want reaching for your cock.

“I- today-” He stopped and started pathetically, throwing his head back and huffing loudly. “I didn’t want to tell her about it right now, not like this. We are finally together, alone. We were happy… but there is nothing else for it.

“Cersei propositioned me today.” The look of shock and horror on Brienne’s face was enough to make him curse himself. “I refused of course.” Jaime added quickly. “But she tried to grab me there and I backed away. I suppose the aftershocks remain in my system.” He inched closer, bringing the tip of his nose to hers. “I desire you. I love you.”

“Why did she think you would accept her?” Her brow was furrowed deep in thought. “She must
have believed it would be welcome?"

“Because Cersei has always treated me like her prize stud and her ego knows no bounds.” He
gazed deeply into her sapphires, letting her read his soul like an open book. “I gave her no cause to
act in such a way. I’m faithful to you Brienne, my fidelity is absolute.”

Her intelligible spheres seemed to play through dozens of scenarios, thinking it through more
thoroughly than a master strategist in a war room. Within fiends howled with self-doubt, memories
swarming like bees, weighed on the scales of her belief in their love and his veracity.

Just as it came it disappeared, clouds receding to tranquil blue.

“I trust you.” She declared and he thanked her with a kiss, bundling her into his arms.

“I swear to you Brienne, by the Old Gods and New, what we have with each other is the joy of my
existence. I would never take steps to injure us.”

“At times like this, I regret saving your sister.” She confessed it into his ear, her voice laden with
guilt for speaking it aloud. “It makes me rue that we could not devise a way to spare Tytan
without it including her.”

“Guess what?” Jaime confided, heart still pounding at his near brush with losing all the trust they
had built. “Me too.”

“Are you sure he will wish to be disturbed? It is not long past supper…” Jaime followed his wife
obediently up the winding staircase. He was freshly bathed, hair combed, beard neatly trimmed,
nails cleaned, and clothes changed. The quintessence of a picture perfect good-son. “I don’t want
to ruin my already dismal chances of making a good impression by interrupting him at an
inopportune time.”

“My Father is a creature of regimented routines.” Brienne led them down a wide hallway,
acknowledging servants with a polite smile as they nodded in deference. “They have stood for
years and are more predictable than the tides. After his evening meal he takes rum in his solar –
during this time he will receive guests only if they are invited.” Halting just short of a set of
double doors, she glanced back towards him to disguise the rolling of her blue eyes. “He requested
I bring you to him at our ‘earliest convenience.’” It was now he noticed an attendant manning the
entryway, ready to proclaim their arrival.

_A little overstated, Selwyn clearly stands on ceremony._
“My Lord husband has come to meet with my Father.” She announced to the herald. “We are expected.”

“Right away My Lady.” A grandiose show was made of opening both doors at once, his voice booming pompously for a man of mediocre stature. “Lord Jaime Lannister and Lady Brienne to see the Evenstar.”

Now Jaime had to suppress the urge to laugh at the absurdity. “First dinner, now a show. You did not tell me Tarth was known for its entertainment.” Beside him Brienne sniggered, and he leant even closer. “Are you not Ser?”

“Not here.” Her huff echoed in the corridor, filled with sufferance and futility. “In we go.”

He kept shoulder to shoulder with her powerful gait, tackling the introduction as they had the white walkers – side by side and together.

At the opposite end of the room, the older gentleman he had spied earlier stood from his chair, striding commandingly over to meet them. Up close his height had an inch on Brienne and his hands almost managed to dwarf hers when he clasped them in greeting.

“Good evening again Father.” His wife obligingly tolerated the squeeze of her fingers and perfunctory kiss on the cheek. “I have brought my husband to you as I was bid.”

“Rightfully so. It is a paltry thing when a daughter’s marriage has seen the turn of seasons, yet her Father has never been given a formal introduction to her consort.”

“I assure you - the slight was not intended Lord Selwyn and if it allays your rankling any, I have not been in Westeros for the better part of our newlywed months, thus eliminating any opportunity of presenting myself to you at an earlier date. I’m sure a man such as yourself would have an understanding for the calls of duty and would not allow our perceived tardiness to tarnish such a significant event.” He flashed one of his winning smiles, extending his left hand. “I’m Ser Jaime Lannister.”

The Evenstar eyed his hand coolly, making a point of ignoring it and walking across the room towards his waiting carafe.

“Father…” Brienne’s low note held a warning whilst umbrage pooled within him at the personal affront.

*He forgets I am a lion…*

“So, I see it is to be conviction by reputation without a trial.” Jaime marched after him, leaving Brienne watching on in horror. “I would have thought a man hailed as the Evenstar would have a greater penchant for fairness of treatment. Especially for those who are now – whether he likes it or not – family.”
Selwyn had procured a second chalice, pouring anew before topping up his own. He slid it across the polished wood in Jaime’s direction, fingers lingering on the rim as he fixed his good-son with a supercilious glare.

“Seeming as you have such a high regard for social correctness—” Lord Tarth’s tone dripped with irony, undercurrent shouting that he knew full well of Jaime’s many crimes. “—I would ask. If you knew that circumstances and timeline would not allow for your matrimony to be properly observed….would it not have been prudent, nay respectful, to wait and seek approval before rushing headlong into a union which you would soon be absent from?” He released the crystal glass, the condescension lingering long after his words.

“You would have had me leave your daughter with only empty promises? Nothing binding us together, legitimising our love…” Jaime shook his head. “….I don’t know how you define honour but I see no respect in that act.”

“You say ‘love’ but I hear ‘folly.’”

“Hear what you like. But I said love and I meant love.”

“Do you deny your recklessness? A wedding and bedding fuelled by impulse and the heat of the moment rather than wisdom and protocol?”

“No – I don’t deny that. Damn your rituals and propriety, you may send them to Seven Hells and there may they rot. And if that simply serves to reinforce your belief that I have shit for morals then so be it.” He stalked nearer to the column of a man before him, refusing to be intimidated by his size or severe expression. Tilting his head upwards to meet his eyeline, their faces inches apart. “Brienne and my vows were made in the only way they should be – in love. And our coupling – in ardour, in passion. I will not stand here and lie to you, grovelling and bemoaning how it should have happened differently – for I don’t agree, not for one moment.” Jaime stepped back and shrugged. “If I had my time over, I would do the same again. Because in the end, I got Brienne and she is all I care about. I don’t need your approval. As long as I have her, I don’t need anyone.”

His legs ate up the chamber in long strides, seizing Brienne’s hand in his own and raising it to his lips. Indicating with his head that they should leave.

We are but misunderstood souls searching for safe haven and here we will find no port in the storm…

“Wait.” Lord Selwyn boomed, drawing both their gazes. “Even warring nations can at times find concord through common ground.” He gestured stiffly at the waiting chairs in front of him. “I see he matches you in wilfulness Brienne.”
Brienne’s mind contorted into all misshapen angles as she tried to reconcile the strange turn of events over the last hour. Her focus flicked from Jaime to her Father and back again, seeking sense in the insane.

*They clashed. They disagreed. Father did not back down. Nor did Jaime. But somehow this resulted in a ceasefire. An uneasy alliance forged from the most unlikely smithy.*

“Another rum Ser Jaime?”

“Please. It has a unique flavour, quite palatable. I can’t say I have tasted its likeness before.”

“That is because it’s imported. Tarth receives traders from all over Essos. This particular spiced blend is from the Summer Isles.”

*He is not trying to set him drunk, nor is the mix tainted. I asked for a sip earlier just to make certain. Father would never risk my health, especially when he knows we will be trying for an heir. I believe Father is too honourable to resort to such lowly measures anyhow, poison is a woman’s weapon. That is what he’s always said, be it ever so insulting. But I would rather be safe than sorry. Risking Jaime is out of the question.*

She stared lovingly at her husband, the vacillating emotions of the night leaving her exhausted. The ebbing worry from his earlier confession, chased to the sidelines by the raw conviction of his perfervid speech to her father.

*If only it had been vanquished entirely, then I would be happy. Except for this dress…*

“Brienne – are you sure you wouldn’t like some?” Jaime held out his chalice. “You wanted to try it before.”

*I merely sipped the elixir to keep you safe.*

Suppressing the urge to smirk, she shook her head. “No Jaime, as you know, I reserve imbibing for the rarest of occasions.”
Celebrating life and victory, your eyes boring into mine across an oaken table. When you placed your hand atop mine, I could hardly decline. But it wasn’t your persuasive rationale as you surmised. It was the intimacy of the touch, the boldness that you presumed to grab and guide me. I would break a man’s nose for less, yet for you I meekly nodded. I will never understand how you could not know I loved you even then.

“I feel badly drinking in front of you.”

“From what I sampled before you are welcome to it – a deadly substance if ever there was one. I’m surprised you still have a sense of taste. Both of you.”

“That is because rum is a man’s indulgence.” Her Father returned to his chair, crossing his legs. “A female’s preferences are generally sweeter. I could have told you earlier daughter you would not like it – before you sipped from your husband’s cup. I let it go because I suspected you had underlying reasons for the request.”

“I do not deny I did. But that does not mean I agree with you. My tastes are neither for cloying wines nor strong liquor, partialities are individual – regardless of sex.”

The Evenstar sighed loudly. “Ser Jaime – I will applaud one facet of your character; you do not lack for courage. My daughter has been hard-headed since her formative years – fighting the boys until I relented and permitted her to learn how to do it properly. It is not many men who happily take on a woman who challenges her natural role as tenaciously as Brienne does.”

“No accolades are necessary; I find Brienne a marvel. I take pride in her pioneering ways; it is why I alighted my sword on her shoulders.” Jaime sipped from his cup, the rim blocking his face, but she knew from the way his eyes crinkled at the corners he was smiling. “Few men can say that their wife embodies the ideal attributes of both a Lady and a Knight. If I must endure a few bouts of stubbornness from her, I say they are well outweighed.”

“Your progressive attitude may serve you well in a battlefield, but as a husband and Lord, where do you draw the line in the sand?” Lord Selwyn lowered his glass to the table. “Daughter, I will let go our debate on whether or not rum is suitable for a woman; because I will not have you requesting a snifter to prove a point. It is of benefit that you forego alcohol in its entirety because you shouldn’t be drinking at all. Not with the responsibilities which lie upon your shoulders.”

It begins.

“I assure you Father I am well aware of what is required of me.”

“I’m glad to hear it. You mentioned during your previous visit that an heir was a possibility, though it did not escape my notice that you are not with child.”

“Not as yet.” Brienne channelled patience, preparing for the inevitable inquisition.

“Hmmmm.” The Evenstar frowned; his disapproval palpable. “I would hate to think you are getting distracted by notions of Knightly conduct, as if the title alone was not a stretch of
pragmatism but then to further compound it by joining the Kingsguard…”

“Do not underestimate your daughter Lord Selwyn, she is resourceful and astute. Her tenure in the role of Lady Commander is subject to conditions, negotiated by Brienne herself before she agreed to the role. When she is expecting, King Bran will release her from service with his blessing.” Jaime rubbed her arm reassuringly. “Quite ingenious of her, I only wish I had built an escape route into my own vows all those years ago, then perhaps Kingslayer would not be added to my list of titles.”

“This is heartening but regretfully merely posed in hypotheticals until the terms are met. I trust you are trying to conceive?”

*When did the private activities in our bedchamber become open fodder for discussion?*

“Of course we are.” She felt the blush creeping up from behind her ears, placating herself by declaring it irritation in equal measure to embarrassment. “I know my duty.”

“And yet here we sit. An island without a successor and a liege Lord squandering time in the capital, neglecting his provinces and vassals all whilst a noblewoman plays at being a Knight.” His bushy eyebrows knit together in disapprobation. “Your notions of supporting Brienne in her outlandish endeavours may be romantic Ser Jaime, but I think the flaws are self-evident.”

“We are trying Father.” Brienne bristled defensively at the insinuation, her tone darkening to a growl. From his place beside her Jaime was quick to intercede.

“Lord Selwyn, given all we have disclosed to you, I think your grievances unfounded. You do us an injustice to imply heirs are not out priority.”

“You speak of ‘heirs’ as plural, your progeny in multiples. Do you intend having several?”

Jaime gave her an uneasy glance, seeing the trap he had unwittingly stumbled into. “We have not yet ventured that far in our planning…”

“Shouldn’t you have? A responsible ruler would have chartered their course, striving towards goals with logic, achievement at the forefront of your minds. You act as though time is ample, your possibilities endless. I learnt bitterly the importance of having a large family, experienced firsthand how the Stranger can upend your line in one fell swoop.”

Jaime’s head drooped. *He is thinking of Tommen and Myrcella.* “Sadly, I am familiar with the loss of which you speak. There is wisdom in your counsel.”

“You know how to sing a pretty song, but actions are the decider. All these months of marriage and yet my daughter has not been made a Mother. Tell me Ser Jaime – I wager you are older than Brienne – by how many years?”

*First, he blames my placement, then he turns the tables. I will not allow this to become a persecution of my husband where he undermines the suitability of our match and questions Jaime’s virility. It’s ludicrous.*
“Jaime has sired children before Father, I know you are apprised of the rumours.”

“So the charges are true. Three bastards born of incest and perished before they even reached adulthood.”

“I will caution you only once Selwyn, do not speak ill of my children. To the world they may have been in-bred abominations, but they were my flesh and blood.” The lion’s eyes were watery, masculine ego restraining the tears. “I have had many enemies in my time, but the curse of watching the life drain out of your child while they lie helpless in your arms is not something I would wish upon even them.”

“On that I will agree. I fear that is a haunting vision which we share.” Her Father visibly softened, their shared grief and experiences building bridges.

She placed a soothing hand upon Jaime’s back, feeling the rise and fall whilst he controlled his breathing. Shepherding his pain into the secret place inside where it could be locked and contained.

“It is actually four children Father.” Brienne corrected softly. “Jaime’s natural child accompanies us here. Tytan is lodged with his Mother Cersei in our servant’s quarters. They are kept close at my behest; I will not split up a family.”

“That is a revelation.” The Evenstar’s eyebrows almost connected with his hairline. “I’m afraid that piece of information is one I will have to ruminate on before I form an opinion. But it is safe to say in the meantime – your husband and I have much we need to discuss.”

When he stared at her pointedly, it took her a beat to catch on. Was that a dismissal?

“Am I correct in assuming that what you mean by that statement is ‘without me?’”

“Yes. There are conversations which must be had man to man. You may leave us without qualms for I feel we have covered enough ground to be genial.” Her Father favoured her husband with a wry grin. “We must acquiesce that we are stuck with each other Ser. Your marriage is well-established and when the next generation is born, we shall be united by blood.”

Jaime seemed indecisive, trapped between accepting the offering of peace from her Father and peevishness over the way she had been ejected from the conversation. “What say you Brienne?”

Lose the battle, win the war. Father and Jaime being aligned is more important in the grand scheme than my offence at yet another inequity.

“Will you be able to remember your way back to my chambers?”

“I hope so, if not I’m sure someone can point the way.”

“Curious.” Once more the Evenstar was flummoxed. “Most married Lords and Ladies observe separate sleeping quarters.”
Jaime chortled, the rum loosening his tongue and sense of humour. “Make up your mind Lord Selwyn, I daresay it would be difficult to work on conceiving from another room.”

Kissing her husband on the cheek, Brienne decided that was the most opportune moment to take her leave. As she was heading to the door, she could not help but overhear the exchange that followed.

“I do not condemn the choice; you are a man and woman wed. It is just unusual. Most nobles only come together for congress and then retreat to their respective personal space.’”

“Brienne and I are different; we elect to share a bed. We had but a single chamber in the North, the winter was freezing and after the terrors we both witnessed, being together was comforting. It is a habit we grew fond of, sharing a blanket and warmth…. I told you Lord Selwyn, but you didn’t believe me… the reason we are married, together despite the odds – is love.”

Even the sconces had long burnt out by the hour Jaime flopped unceremoniously onto her bed. Startling her awake by landing prostrate, arm and leg flung over her frame. In the confusion of the darkness it took all of her restraint not to headbutt him, instincts deducing an attacker in the night rather than her befuddled husband.

Brienne glowered in the dim, feeling for his golden hand to quell her panic, roughly seizing his mop of messy hair to turn his face out from the pillow. “What took so long?”

Upon finding the prosthetic she released his mane, requiring both hands to untie the straps.

_He will never have the co-ordination to relieve himself of it and he has been wearing it all day. His wrist will chafe._

Teeth grinned at her while she worked, white reflected moonlight, a single eye peeping from beneath an unruly fringe. “We wasss, hashing out the trades detailllssss before tomorrow.” He hiccupped. “And I charmed him. You’d be proud wifes. Our ssshecond born son ssshall inherit Tarths. The funds sslll go into trusht.” Wriggling closer, he nuzzled into her shoulder. “Happy Ssschweetling?”

_Not if you continue to call me that._
She furrowed her brow. “What if we have daughters?” He emitted a low snore, his face smudged against her collarbone. “Jaime!” Slapping him awake with the back of her hand she asked. “What if we have a son and a daughter?”

“Thereys can come to.” His response was muffled by her neck as he rolled onto her chest.

“You’re not taking this seriously. What if we have a boy and a girl? Would you be willing to accept a lioness to rule the Rock?”

“We sshold them long ago…or they died. Theys were in a cage down, down, far belows the grounds. My Grandfather kept them.”

*I will get no sense from him tonight.*

Jaime pushed up on unsteady elbows, nose bumping clumsily into hers. A move which under normal circumstances would have been slow, seductive. “Now there shonly one part left to do… my’s favourite part – the making.” He placed a sloppy kiss on her lips, slobbery and lacking his usual finesse. Brienne wrinkled her nose.

*His mouth is usually my favourite chalice, when his tongue is flavoured by currents or Dornish Red it is as if I’ve sipped from the cup of heaven.*

*This is not comparable.*

Unimpressed she pushed his head away. “There will be none of that. You taste like a drunken sailor and smell like my Father. Besides – you’re in no condition to perform.”

“Perform? Isss there to be a mummer’s farcsh tomorrow?”

“No.” Tossing his gold hand to the carpeted floor, Brienne enveloped him in her arms. “But you need some sleep.”

Chapter End Notes

It's that time again, to say a big thank you to anyone who is reading and a shout out of gratitude to the commenters. This story is long, its journey winding and I appreciate those who continue to travel along this adventure with me. Hearing from you is my motivation and means the world. <3
Purity vs Fertility

Chapter Summary

"And wants grows stronger..."
Lyrics, War of Hearts by Ruelle
Verse 2, Line 3

"Tea tray."

Cover Art by Ro_Nordmann
Brienne fisted the sleep from her eyes, stretching out her cramped muscles.

_I forgot to request a morning tray. It was thoughtful of Jaime to organise it…_

Remembering his stupor from the previous night, she sat up in bed, running long fingers through her pale bedraggled locks and locating his hunched form sitting in the corner. Jaime was dressed for the day but lacking his customary vigour, eerily quiet compared to his usual chatty narration.

He gave her a self-deprecating smile, cradling his forehead in his hands, complexion wan and tinged green. Their chamber pot sitting conspicuously out on the balcony, the visible buzz of flies a gruesome indicator.

“How are you?” Brienne asked softly, being considerate of his head which she knew must be aching.

“Never drinking rum again.” He straightened to standing. “Lannisters are made for wine and ale.” With slow meandering steps he went to retrieve their tray from outside the bedroom door. The process a cacophony of jangling silverware and metallic clatters as he struggled to accomplish the task single-handed, wriggling the tray up onto his forearm. She cringed, imagining the ensuing spillage but not wanting to further bruise his ego by interceding.

After a lengthy series of grunts and muttered expletives, he returned triumphant, clanking it onto the dresser and wincing at the sharp clang. He used a linen napkin to mop up the mess, pulling a face at the scents assailing his nostrils. “I’m glad breakfast was covered.” Jaime remarked dryly, making light of his failure and inclining his chin towards the cloche. “I thought it was supposed to be _you_ we were watching for morning sickness?”

“We have reversed roles.” She observed, smiling at his attempt to jape. “Perhaps some dry toast?”

“I don’t think I can stomach even that.” Wincing, he fixed her with an apprehensive expression. “….did we?”

“No.” Brienne lowered the covers enough to let him see she was dressed in her nightshift.

“Thank the Gods. I wouldn’t have been up to the task. I could have ruined my track record of excellence.”

She rolled her eyes. _His ego never falters._ “Even under the weather you still manage to be overconfident.”

“Once upon a time I had swordplay and bedplay at which to shine. Now that my left hand leaves me sub-par on the field, I must hone the craft I have left.” Jaime winked, glimmers of his usual gall breaking through his lassitude. “Lucky for you.”

“Yes – that is truly what I thought last night when subjected to your drunken overtures.”
“Well I for one am grateful that I have a wife with enough common sense to decline. Making love when mellowed by wine and alleviated of inhibition is one thing. But a pathetic attempt when I’m a blithering idiot would just be mortifying.” Her lion took in a deep breath, steeling himself to face the day. “Are you coming? I am expected in the strategy room for the meeting. The terms must be finalised today, and I get the auspicious task of handing over the coin.”

Squirming from the bed, she quaffed her tea (or what was left of it), lifting the cloche and wrinkling her nose at the mangled array of well and truly scrambled eggs within. Deciding against tackling the miasma, Brienne slammed it down again and located her wash basin. “I will don my armour and be right behind you. It should be my shift with His Majesty this morning.”

“Well seeming as we shall be all business today.” He wandered over to kiss her goodbye, but she leant backwards, recoiling at his breath.

“Perhaps not?” Placing her palm gently on his chest, she pushed him away. “Though I am loath to break my own tradition.”

“Fair point. I agree. You best pass.”

He had one foot out the door when she hollered. “Stop at the herb garden – get some mint.”

“Good idea!”

My marriage... The Lady Knight shook her head, amused at what her life had come to. ...My wildest dreams never could have concocted an accurate picture.

“My Grace?” Her gentler knocks had been ignored, prompting her to rap upon the door with the full force of her gloved fist, causing her vambrace to scrape against the wood.

They must be deep in conversation.

When it was finally opened, she found Podrick standing on the opposite side, fully suited with deep rings beneath his eyes. He smiled at her stiffly, ever compliant and uncomplaining.

He looks tired - he has been taking too many shifts.
“Ser Brienne.”  Bran turned his head, his wheeled chair parked at one side of the table.  The men had arranged themselves into a natural triangle, their respective positioning conveying a triad of power, each differing in role and station.

“I have come to relieve Ser Payne of his duties Your Grace.”

“Thank you Lady Commander I appreciate your avidity – but it has been decided Ser Podrick will attend me for this meeting.”

Her eyebrows lifted slightly but she displayed no other outward reaction.

“The consensus upon my arrival was that there should be only one Lannister representative in the room.”  Jaime’s eyes screamed an apology, trying to explain and assuage the offence he knew she would immediately take.

*All these weeks I have asked him not to feel the pinch of a personal slight and now the shoe is on the other foot. Again.*

“Be gladdened daughter – this meeting is best left for a King to sort with his Lord’s.  Ser Podrick is impartial and simply here to ensure His Majesty is adequately protected.  The Knight in attendance should have no invested interest in the subject of the meeting and you are wife to one participant, daughter to the next and head guard to His Grace.”

Ignoring her annoyance, she nodded stiffly.  “I will take the night shift, my King – if that is agreeable.”

“That will be fine.”

Slinking from the room she closed the door behind her and sighed.

*I hope Jaime does not mind – I had to give Podrick the opportunity to rest.  But it means I will be absent from my husband’s bed once more.*

The practice yard had been the perfect solution to work out her frustrations.  Swinging Oathkeeper’s blade with a fury, the whoosh as it sliced the air and accompanying feeling of power
correcting the imbalance in her psyche. Driving the castle guards backwards, making swift work of uneven odds, four to one still proving a fair match when her blood was trilling with rancour.

*My father sees me as ‘just a woman,’ the King pulls my strings right then left. What I want is never a consideration, what I need is –*

She finished the round, doubling over and panting, a sheen of sweat glistening upon her brow.

*What do I need?*

Grabbing a cloth from the surrounding benches, she wiped her forehead, limbs begging for her to sit. But she was strict when it came to her regimen, knowing what was required to keep her in peak condition.

*My muscles need to warm down, if I rest, they will seize.*

Sheathing Oathkeeper, she began to briskly walk, wandering the castle grounds of her youthful home, deducing that a jaunt around the perimeter would serve to stabilise her breathing and slowly allow her joints to relax.

Being left alone with her own thoughts was always both a pleasure and a pain. Brienne had spent years content with her own company, the sole voice of her inner monologue the only friend which had endured since childhood. Though she conceded that it was a harsh mistress, doling out bitter truths which she would sooner not acknowledge. Always just an errant thought away from turning against herself, giving free rein to the anxieties in her soul.

It was as she roamed and mulled that her logic challenged her, dangling possibilities before her which flew in the face of all she had worked towards.

*You need to be with Jaime. You want to be a wife. Just the two of you – for a week, a fortnight or forever. Until the Mother makes you three, or four. You long to lie in his arms until noon, take him inside you under the cover of night and furs. Share his breakfast, converse over dinner. Listening to his animated voice telling you one of his inane anecdotes, make him smile, be there for him. Be everything he needs you to be…*

It was so prosaic it made her stomach lurch. A concept appalling in how it fit into a variety of clichés. Exactly what her Father wanted, exactly what she fought against.

*My job is what made me happy, the desire to serve and live the life of a warrior. I am a Knight of the Kingsguard, the first Lady Commander. I am not that woman. Maybe I would enjoy it for a day or two, as a novelty. But then I would grow restless.*
It was easy to forget the pain she had suffered without him, that dark place unintentionally overlooked as a terrible chapter closed. Keeping busy numbed its memory until the precise debilitating level of the trauma was difficult to recall. But now and then when she left him sleeping, it lanced through her like a burning blade. Making her want to run to him, embrace him, check he was really there.

It was similar when she thought of the courtyard, though reliving that exchange made her entire body tremble uncontrollably. Where one dagger she named grief, the other was rejection. Both cutting but with a different edge.

Bereavement was a killing blow, slicing her down in a single deadly arc. But abandonment had a serrated blade, sawing slowly into her chest. A prolonged, drawn out end, where his love was gone and with it went the light. The tiny candle in the distance she never realised she’d been following. For years.

Since we met and it ignited.

Can people change to this degree? Can wants reform? Is my essence the woman whom I thought I was or this foreign creature strange and co-dependent?

I felt complete on my own, never lacking. I was whole. Until I met my soulmate – then what seemed full before, always feels empty without him.

My impulse is to fight against the standard, to reject the archetype. It has always mocked me, so I defied it in return. But now it seems I’m warring against myself rather than a typecast. My head battling with my heart over changes within my make-up which I cannot accept.

Though in hindsight I see their emergence, feel my rulebook changing, rewriting. From the first time he tested my boundaries in a bath and made me question all I thought I knew, to opening my door and finding him there. The man I loved, standing exactly where I would have wished for him to be, as if it had been designed by my dreams...

Often she found herself struck with nostalgia. Missing their month in Winterfell. The simplistic straightforwardness of their romance, the grey areas yet undiscovered. The way they would make love ritualistically, part of their nightly routine.

No frills or questions, just two people reaching for each other, expressing their feelings the only way they knew how. Jaime would talk her ear off until she fell to sleep, her breath would catch in her throat every morning upon seeing the godlike man who had deigned to rest beside her. They had been steeped in newness then - both making mistakes they didn’t even realise. Their relationship fledgling in all its innocence, beautiful in its pristine slate.

Neither had blemished or marked its canvas, burdens yet to be borne and regrets only hypotheticals. Jaime never realised how each eve I steeled myself for disappointment until I found him again my chambers. Skipping beats when he was there, wanting to undress me and claim me again. Disbelief and elation mixing into every first kiss of the night. It hurts now to think he thought me indifferent. For me it was heaven sent.
The fates were wicked plotters, their machinations ever malign. For as she lost herself in cogitation, her feet had guided her to an inopportune corner. The sight beyond the bend stalling her in her tracks and interrupting her musings.

The servant’s courtyard was sprawled before her, quaint and lacking finery but charming as per the rest of the island. Lines strung between walls, filled with drying sheets and various articles of clothing, their fabric snapping in the oceanic breeze. Maids worked over wooden washtubs, scrubbing and chatting, others beat at rugs with sticks, sending dust flying skyward.

In the middle sat Cersei, looking for all purposes like Queen of the Attendants, straight of spine and regal on the ironwork bench. Tytan was propped up in her lap, his Mother’s hands supporting his tiny waist, whilst women flocked around them fussing and cooing.

Sunshine struck hair of spun gold, always hitting at a fetching angle, drawing attention to high cheekbones, the envy of every female of lesser breeding. Her son was her mirror image, resembling his Mother just as much as his Father. The infant gifting jolly smiles to his myriad of admirers.

He is truly a good-looking child, a more handsome babe I’ve never seen.

Cersei simpered, lapping up the attention. Fielding compliments from all directions, the nature of which Brienne could not resent for they were well deserved. Remarks upon her beauty, the way Motherhood became her, how Tytan was so comely he was sure to be a breaker of Maiden’s hearts.

How a pretty face opens doors, these same women never paid me heed. I knew many of the housekeeper’s when I was a girl but all I ever overheard was how unfortunate it was I turned out so plain and ungainly.

Brienne leaned against the brick wall, confident that no one would notice her vantage point, obscured by billowing linens. Engrossed in spectating the phenomenon, a situation which to her had always been myth.

Acceptance was the bane of her existence, the plight of the oddity, evading her even in her own territory. She watched the scenario before her with fascination and sadness, trying not to resent the things which could not be changed.

Cersei was often cruel, self-serving to a sickening degree, caring little whom she harmed in her path to success. But her smiles could save her, a dress which accentuated her form, causing men to bend over backwards and women to fawn. Esteem gained at the snap of fingers; fake graciousness sprinkled with niceties.

But I would never want it. Intriguing or not, I do not envy her. I would struggle to handle such attentions.
Remorse began to seep beneath her soul, guilt too easy an emotion as she watched Mother and child. The confession she had whispered to Jaime last night had been one of the most uncharitable things she’d ever uttered. Darkening her soul and detracting from her noble deeds by wishing them undone.

_But she tried to seduce my husband._

That stung. It pierced so profoundly it could bring tears to her eyes.

_Why?_ She asked herself, searching her soul just as much as she studied the picture before her. _Why does it hurt me so?_

She knew. Seeing it laid out before her this way, it was undeniable, plainer than the nose on her face.

_Is he mine – or is he hers?_

Love was not the question, of that much she was certain.

_Jaime loves me, he does. It crackles between us, elemental and primal. But he loves her too. He can’t not. She is his twin, his past, the Mother of his child and when I see them together they look a set and I am the thing that doesn’t belong. They are a family and I am the outsider._

_This was my design, to keep them near each other, to have Jaime with me by choice rather than default. But she is trying to reel him in, away from me – and I am unprepared to lose. I love him too much._

_Her pulse stampeded through her veins, dread taking her in its icy clutches._

_Cersei will rally, she won’t take no for answer – she will try again. His first love, his original._

_Am I love to him? He is my very definition of the word. But how can I ever be his epitome, when she is here, exaggerating my shortcomings, my counterpoint in every way._

_I know what Cersei thinks of me – I am his woman of convenience, his bed warmer, a piece of satisfaction between winter furs. A sad dog who was thrown a bone._

_And the pity of my predicament is her theories have basis….when Tyrion asked me that question over the drinking game I felt the implied shame; ugly, pathetic, belittled and unwanted. Cersei would never accept that I was not desperate; that if I was then the red-haired wilding would have seemed a viable option, when joining the clergy held more appeal by comparison._

_For my love had long since been consigned to Jaime Lannister. My body reserved for him in perpetuity. We have never spoken of it, but he must have suspected. Surely, he saw it in my eyes that night. Did Jaime ever think he would be rejected in my bower? He may have been nervous but he seemed sure. He staked his claim boldly in front of our table in the dining hall, bombarded into_
my chamber and began removing layers. Reached for my shirt without hesitation. And I bared myself to him, silently begging him to take me, offering him all I am on a platter without promise or troth. Just pleased for his touch, his kiss, over the moon that he wanted me.

But not Cersei, their relationship was never so unvarnished. She is experienced and provocative, the woman who makes them chase and plead for her bounty. A Queen won by conquest; her men made to earn her favours with dark deeds. Now she chases him...

My Jaime who loves to be loved. Wants to be wanted. Pursued by the one who never loved him properly in return. The woman who has always been sought after – doing the seeking. Eyes on him as the prize. That would be very attractive to a man, even without their shared history.

And where am I whilst this unfolds? Tangled in a web of politics and morals. Too busy to accommodate his needs. Vacant of womb and scant of time. Admonishing in speech and unyielding of attitude.

She runs hot – I run cold.

He has told me of their couplings; lustful, grabbing, taking. Cersei carries an inferno within, which often burns out of control. Just like Jaime.

Is the dip of my thighs a dead fish by comparison? Am I so frigid?

Brienne winced, recollecting even this morning. Nitpicking and quibbling. Pushing away the kiss which once she would have craved.

I would never spurn you my love. It was practicality, not lack of passion. Do you know me now? Or can I still be misinterpreted?

I may be the ice to her fire, I may be the opposite to you; but I love you more than she ever did – ever could.

I am ablaze for you Jaime; you make me burn. I just do not always show it....

The Lady Knight cast a critical gaze over herself, taking in her appearance from sweat-stained undershirt to thick doeskin clad calves. The odours of exercise which clung to her, more identifiable as male than female. She didn’t need to see her face to know that it was lacking in all things comely. Her looking glass and reflective surfaces an enemy best avoided than confronted.

Why the fuck did he ever want me?

The same solution came to her as swiftly as the first which had sent her down the long road of this bleak introspection. The only reality there could be, the only answer that made any rational sense.

Jaime loves you. Love defies reason, logic and common conception. A heart once affixed blurs flaws and exalts the object of its desire.
She could find comfort in the emotion, knowing she was loved. Praying that it was enough to keep the lascivious and more superficial desires at bay. Her husband was innately faithful, his fidelity one of his most awe-inspiring traits.

*Yes - he was constant to one woman’s bed his entire life. He broke it only – to come to mine.*

*Cersei would say it was poetic justice if he returned to her. I say she held him from manipulation and coercion, never genuine love.*

Exhaling she pushed herself off the bricks, forcing herself to walk away.

*If love is our saving grace, our testament, our truth – then love is what I will foster, cling to.*

*And I will try. To let the heat within bubble to the surface once more.*

*I love you husband, find love in me, I can be all you need. I promise.*

The night shift felt long and tedious, but it was novel to have a change of scenery. Different halls to monitor alone, varying scents in the air. Evenfall was less stuffy than the Red Keep, salt freshness replacing wafts of sewage and squalor, the constant roar of waves giving the illusion of company.

It was late morning by the time Podrick returned to relieve her of duties, bringing an end to the double shift she had endured at her own command. The colour which had returned to his cheeks and his brightness of demeanour making her fatigue well worthwhile.

“Thank you, M’Lady Ser.” Pod smirked, standing on tiptoe to clink his spaulder against hers in greeting. They stood side by side, a few feet away from the King. Keeping watch whilst Bran engaged in conversation with Ser Davos.

“You are getting cheeky Ser Payne – you know my title full well.” Brienne bit her lips to stop her smile from betraying her amusement. “With displays like that, I could accuse you of being too social with my husband.”
“Would if I could. Neither you nor I have much leisure time of late.” He jerked around suddenly, realising what he’d said. Panicked eyes resembling saucers. “I am not complaining, I swear! Duty comes first and you are more deserving of freedom than I am – you have responsibilities outside of the Kingsguard. It was just an observation…”

The Lady Knight clapped him on the armoured shoulder in reassurance. “Fret not Pod. I agree. When we get back to King’s Landing recruiting further guards will become my top priority. We cannot keep up this pace.” She exhaled tiredly. “Only it will become yet another task upon my list.”

“I would help Ser-”

“Thank you - but you are aware it is not physically possible. If I am assessing and training candidates, then you must be with His Grace.”

“Yes, but our King would rather you guard him. Unless we are here and gaining your Father’s approval is paramount, taking precedence.”

Brienne scoffed, keeping her octave low. “So, you picked up on that?”

“I have stayed here with you previously. I know what opinions Lord Selwyn holds.” Pod looked at his feet, shuffling them awkwardly. “I’m sorry about yesterday.”

“You and Jaime both – though it is neither of your faults. Upon Tarth regression rules supreme, under the ever-traditionalistic views of its constant Evenstar. Why look at today – they have been waiting for our change of shifts. His Grace and Ser Davos are accompanying my Father to the warship docks in the south-eastern bay to inspect the fleet. It is quite the journey across the isle; I hope you are up for it.”

“As our monarch requires.” He responded solemnly. “What are your plans?”

“There is only one recreational activity I have in mind right now Pod.” Brienne caught the King’s gaze, giving him a respectful nod to let him know she was departing. “Sleep.”

Upon waking Brienne dressed and searched the stronghold for her husband, unnerved by the emptiness of her sheets. The loneliness rousing her early, making her restless.

It was not uncommon for circumstances to force her to sleep alone, when the midday became her equivalent to midnight, hours spent slumbering whilst the whole world was awake. But it was
often disorienting, confusing. To stir with the sun beating from its heights, humidity causing her
cotton undershirt to cling, air thick and vastly different from the serenity of night.

Her odd schedule meant she had not crossed paths with her husband since the previous day and she
felt the divide between them yawning keenly. The feeling of missing him drowning out more basic
needs and sending her upon a quest of discovery.

She found the halls strangely quiet, deserted. Enveloped in the hush of the afternoon, when nobles
and household workers alike began to unwind, their chores for the day finally accomplished. Faces
both familiar and strange enquired whether they could offer assistance as she popped her head
around a corner or entered a room. Methodically checking all the obvious places.

*Strange - I would guess he’d be with Tyrion.*

In this environment, booming tones would carry far, making the oft boisterous Lannister brothers
easy to locate. The absence of their signature cacophony making her brow knit in confusion.

Returning to her chambers, she opened the drapes to let in the afternoon breeze, eager to disperse
the muggy atmosphere. Walking outside and leaning against her railing, closing her eyes to enjoy
the sporadic threads of breeze against her face.

It was then that the sound travelled to her, carried upon the fleeting zephyrs - and she opened her
blue orbs, squinting to discern the several small shapes on the beach far below. One tall standing
in the ankle-deep wash from the crashing breakers, the other short and halfway up the sand. A tent
of some kind jutted out not far from the dunes, the colour such a bold shade of crimson she could
spot it even from a distance.

Brienne chuckled to herself, pushing off the marble to begin the hike through the castle and to the
shore.

*Found you.*

The trek down to the beach was one she knew well, exploiting every shortcut and forgotten
entrance to shorten the trip. Escorted by memories of herself and Galladon racing, her legs
extraordinarily long at even such a young age.

Back then she lacked the coordination to manage their length and often sent herself sprawling to
the cobblestones like a newborn foal. Early lessons in picking herself up, dusting off and getting
on. Accepting the bitterness of embarrassment and defeat.

*But not anymore.*

Jogging happily, she took the side exit coming out by the armoury, picking her way down a rocky
outcrop to land herself in the grasses at the top of the dunes, circumventing the long walk to the stairs in its entirety.

“Jaime!” Tyrion yelled spotting her, cupping his hands over his mouth so his call would travel. “There’s someone here you’ll want to see!” Brienne rolled her eyes, bounding down the sandy hillocks and approaching.

So much for surprising my husband.

“A new occupation Tyrion? Fancy yourself a herald?” She ribbed the Lord Hand. “Mayhaps I am the forerunner of a search and rescue team. You look somewhat like you have washed ashore from a shipwreck.”

It was difficult not to stare from sheer incredulity, never before had she seen her good-brother so informally attired. Tyrion was dominated by his windswept mop of curls, fuzzy and unkempt from the conditions down by the water. The cuffs of his breeches were rolled up to his knees, an aged cotton undershirt half undone exposing more chest than she wanted to see, and his sleeves pushed into the creases of his elbows.

He grinned impishly. “We grew up by beaches of our own good-sister – though granted the Sunset Sea is significantly rougher and nowhere near as picturesque. Many a time during our youth we convinced our minders to let us explore amongst sand, surf and salt.” He leant closer conspiratorially. “Wait until you see your husband.”

“Tyrion! You make it sound as though we were uncivilised beach urchins.” Cersei pushed herself upright, ivory legs and pointed toes peeking from beneath her simple shift dress. The hem rucked up to just below her knees, no doubt intended to draw the eye.

Jaime’s specifically.

It was the kind of cut which on most would be unflattering, but she somehow turned it sensual. The baggy neckline falling off one shoulder as she tickled Tytan’s chin. An enticing look she made no move to correct. “Some of us know how to be outdoors and retain our dignity.”

Brienne surveyed the former monarch, trying to mask the hilarity she perceived in the great lengths which had been taken to preserve her so called ‘dignity’.

The crudely erected tent-like structure she had spied from the balcony provided shade from the rays of sun. Perish the thought of a blemish interrupting her complexion, it would surely be a tragedy. Cersei must hold my sporadic freckles in the highest of contempt.

But what Brienne hadn’t realised from her vantage point, was how the canopy was accompanied by a soft blanket of a similar colour, the fabric large and widespread, protecting Cersei’s delicate skin from the harsh grains below. A goblet of wine was propped up beside her, stem wedged safely into the sand.

She still believes she is a Queen.
“And others are so concerned about appearing regal, that they are excessively dull and miss the point in the first place.”

Cersei’s nose twitched in annoyance at the retort and Brienne spun towards Jaime’s voice, her jaw immediately going slack, gaping wordlessly as he sauntered up the beach towards them.

_You confident, impossible, breathtaking man…_

He was drenched, golden mane darkened and dripping, sending out sprays to dampen the sands when he flicked it back from his face. Seawater ran in rivers down his bare chest, weaving and winding their way through the spattering of hair, collecting at the waistband of his breeches whilst smaller droplets clung to him like crystals.

_He is half-naked – but I suppose I should not be surprised. He wandered into the baths with me when we were still standoffish and there are no females here present who haven’t seen his charms._

Still the sight of him had not lost its power, wrenching speech from her larynx and making heat pool lower than her navel.

_If it were just us right now…_

“Good afternoon wife.” Jaime had that challenging manner about him, the kind that baited her with tilted head and gleaming wicked green. Just waiting for her to remark on his semi-nudity, his appearance and cavalier attitude. “Fine day to be by the sea.”

“That it is.” Brienne agreed in monotone. “You picked a good location as well; the ocean is often calm by the headland. Conditions are perfect for swimming…”

“Swimming you say?” His top row of teeth gleamed. “Well I’ve been indulging but it seems I am surrounded by cravens. I remain unbeaten in the water.”

“Unbeaten?” _I know where this is headed._ “Tell me – how can one be a victor if there are no competitors? I would say you are the champion by happenstance.”

“Then prove it otherwise. I am guessing a woman of Tarth can swim.”

_Predictable and diabolical. All rolled into one._ “I told you that.”

He winked. “I surmised.”

They both knew the dialogue, exchanging a secret smile. Beside them Tyrion hooted. “Yes! Lady Commander, you simply must put him in his place. He has spent nigh on an hour trying to convince me that I will not die if a wave crashes over my skull. In my youth I was more courageous, but I fear with age I have lost my intrepid qualities. I implore you to entertain him and
“Put us all out of our misery.”

She bit her lip, glancing down self-consciously, lifting her hand to the sodden scruff of Jaime’s neck and pulling him closer so she could whisper in his ear. “I am not sure what I would wear… what would be decent…”

“What do you usually swim in?”

“When I was young I had a bathing shift, but it restricted movement greatly and will not fit any longer…” A blush began to creep over her features. “…believe it or not I have blossomed somewhat since then. Most materials hug the form when wet…”

“Surely you can make-do, find something suitable that can pass for a one off. I want you to join me in the water – it sounds like a brilliant way to pass the afternoon.”

The pleading in his tone was the push she needed, the excitement and playfulness he exuded at the idea of frolicking with her in the waves. It appealed to her as well, to bond in this way. Two souls raised on opposite shores, united by their love of nature and each other.

*I promised myself I would push my boundaries. To bring us closer and be less stringent. We are all family; I must be brave.*

“Leave it with me.” Brienne swallowed her trepidation as best she could. “I will see what I can come up with.”

“You know a *Lady* doesn’t swim.”

Jaime scowled at the disdainful emphasis Cersei put on the honorific, judging his wife abominably before she had even returned. “Then I am very glad I married a Knight.”

“Pfft.” His sister scoffed, stretching back upon her elbows, making a great show of arching her spine and exaggerating her bosoms. “She is not a Knight. I don’t acknowledge it; her own Father doesn’t acknowledge it and our Father would be spinning in his crypt. You seem to be the only fools, deluding yourself about a faux title.”
“Any Knight can make a Knight, there is no falsity in her dubbing. His Grace very obviously chooses to accept it and you of all people should know it is the approval of a sovereign that matters. Kings can legitimise bastards, raise Lords and rewrite laws. If Bran the Broken is content not only to call Brienne Ser but make her head of his Kingsguard, then I would say her title is perfectly sanctioned. And I am relieved that there is at least one topic that he and I can agree on.”

“I was a monarch. And I say it’s piffle.”

“’Was’ is the operative word in that statement sweet-sister.”

“Be careful Cersei,” Tyrion sidled nearer to her, stroking Tytan’s downy hair, his tone permeated with goading. “From all I’m hearing, you are sounding very jealous of our good-sister.”

“Jealous?!” She spat the accusation with venom, outrage so vehement her entire face contorted. “What could there possibly be about her to envy?”

“I would say quite a lot.” Jaime’s focus drifted completely from the conversation as he spotted his wife making her way back from behind the dunes. His feet moving towards her step by step of their own volition, just wanting to be near her.

_Mother, Maiden and Warrior – you outdid yourselves upon the day you crafted her._

Brienne had slipped up the beach, promising him she would find a solution. Nervous energy radiating from her in waves more forceful than those which crashed in the background. He had every faith she was resourceful enough to come up with something but had been completely unprepared for the effect the sight of his powerful wife would have on him.

Like him, she had chosen to keep her long breeches, but where his were loose fitting, hers were tight. The form-hugging hide wrapping her from thigh to ankle, moulding to the curve of her buttocks and tapering in at the waist. Revealing the shape of her that quilted gambeson’s and tunics generally concealed.

Her arms were bare, miles of milk white skin kissed by the occasional lingering freckle, the firm muscles beneath rippling, whilst the elegance of their length mesmerised. It was now he noted that she had removed the underlayer, the leather vest she generally wore over her other clothes pressed tightly to her skin. The front laces fastened incredibly snug, leaving not even the smallest gap at the front.

Jaime smirked. _I wager she doesn’t know about her waist though._ Now and then the pale flesh of her taut belly peeped from between the two garments, vigorous strides separating top from bottom and giving a rare glimpse of skin.

Despite the afternoon breeze chilling his seawater-soaked pants, he could feel himself beginning to harden.

_Fuck, how much can I pay Cersei and Tyrion both to disappear?_
Too late for intervention; Tyrion peeked around from the side of the shadecloth, eyebrows hitting his hairline as he let out a low whistle. “You held out on me with information, my brother who does not kiss and tell. Who would have thought that was the form beneath all her armour.”

“Tyrion-” He growled in warning. “-if we were not related, I would clout you. That’s my wife you’re talking about.”

“It’s a compliment!”

“I doubt she will see it that way, she does not want you gawking at her and nor do I.”

“Lighten up.” His younger sibling stepped from the crimson canopy, sipping from the goblet he had obviously stolen from Cersei. “I admit there was a time when I wondered what appealed – but now I see. She is an enthralling combination, a warrior woman from the race of the Sarnori with the bearing of Duncan the Tall.” Another mouthful. “Must be fun to wrestle all that in bed.”

“You may be my brother, but I swear I will bury you alive in a grave of sand if you keep speaking about my woman in that way.”

Tyrion dismissed his threat, unfazed, “You’ve only got one hand! You couldn’t dig a hole to bury a person, even one of my size!”

“I would give it a damn good try…” Jaime trailed off, watching the makeshift drapery part over his brother’s shoulder, the scarlet held open by tense fingers attached to the end of crossed arms. Cersei peered through, her green slits barely visible past her raised nose, lips set into a scowl. “Masculine.” She declared. “Just as I suspected, if not worse. Her body is more man than woman, it is little surprise she seems unable to give you a child.”

A rumble resonated deep in his throat, the ire barely contained, climbing to his tongue with roiling acid, ready to set Cersei straight-

“Jaime.” Brienne’s voice was timorous, lacking her customary authority. “I did my best.”

He glared at his sister through the split, set to boiling point by her smug expression as she dropped the material, effectively obscuring her from view and claiming her victory.  

*My wife better not have heard that. I would make of this a battle, but I won’t risk subjecting her to more of your insults. I finally saw you accurately many years ago and you reaffirm it still - the sum of you is hateful Cersei. You truly are a hateful woman.*

Expelling the rage from his veins, he pivoted towards his Lady Knight, determined not to allow Cersei’s corruption to ruin their plans. The last of his choler melting away at the vision before him.
Over six foot of endearingly contradictory might and modesty, arms awkwardly fluttering from her chest to her sides. Eyes striking an incredibly vivid blue against the sun-bleached shades of seagrass and sand.

“To what are you referring?” The lion arched a teasing brow, inching closer. Throwing Tyrion a warning glance that he had best make himself scarce. He knew the message was received loud and clear, Brienne’s intelligible face tracking his brother’s hasty retreat back to the blanket before she answered with a sigh.

“You know damn well. I improvised as best I could.” Her fingers fidgeted with the strings on her vest, pulling and knotting them for what looked like the five-hundredth time. “The leather will not become transparent in the water, nor will my breeches. These pieces will most likely be ruined by the time I’m done but it is a worthwhile cost. I would not chance your brother seeing the parts of me which you enjoy.” She mumbled shyly into her chest, still toying with the laces between her fingertips. “There is not much to me – but that exclusive right is yours and always has been. Though my ladylike traits are scarce they do exist.”

“I know that better than most.” Jaime smiled reassuringly, letting her know that nothing she did could ever displease him. “And I would tell you how incredibly alluring you look right now, but I know you won’t believe me.”

She chuckled sceptically. “A behemoth ready to go wading? Yes, I can see the appeal. It is written in the lines of the oldest songs and poems…”

“Continue on like that Lady Lannister and you will force me to prove to you just how irresistible I find you. And I can assure you the display will not be one you wish my brother and sister to witness-”

“Ahh, threats and fancy talk. I thought you learnt very long ago not to overplay your hand?” Brienne marched forward, purposefully bumping him out of the way, her voice a sultry purr against the shell of his ear as she passed. The tickle of it causing stimulated gooseflesh to rise on his chest. “You’d have to catch me first.”

A smile erupted across his face, diving forward to make a grab for her arm. But she feinted to the right, pre-empting his approach, losing her inhibitions in the thrill of the moment. Her teeth biting into her bottom lip in uncontainable glee near stopping his heart with its unassuming perfection.

*I positively adore her.*

The Lady Knight broke into a run, swallowing the beach in long bounds, sprinting for the water and her head start. Transfixed he could only stare, breathless with awe, the cost of her gained ground well justified by the opportunity to gape at the miracle of her legs, her calves, the muscles in her shoulders.

*Give me her over any delectation; even watching her is all the pleasure I could ever need.*
“At least make this a challenge Ser!” Brienne called to him, pausing in her honourable way to ensure a fair fight.

*Coming, My Lady.*

Jaime began down the sand, legs pumping to close the distance, imagination racing far ahead, travelling to minutes from now, hours from now, the entire night.

*The possibilities are endless.* He was grinning so much his cheeks hurt. *For now though, I want my woman wet.*

Foam crashed about her knees, salt stinging her eyes and dominating her tastebuds – but she was revelling in every minute of it. Her legs a flurry of blurred motions as they chopped through the white water to evade the snare of Jaime’s arms, seeking refuge in the depths by diving beneath a coming breaker. She surfaced behind it laughing, snorting the water from her nose, raking grit out of her hair and taunting. “Come on Lannister – afraid of a little swell?”

Two brothers responded in tandem.

One cockily proclaiming. “Hardly.”

Whilst the other squeaked. “Yes, as a matter of fact.”

Jaime stood sideways to the waves, perfecting his timing to use the tide to his advantage in order to reach her swiftly. His head swivelled between her and Tyrion, caring etched upon his brow, not wanting to be selfish and leave his younger brother behind. “How many times must I tell you, if you wish to come – my wife and I would never let you drown.”

“That is true Tyrion!” She shouted to be heard over the crash, bobbing up and down, bouncing the balls of her feet intermittently off the sand bar below. “We can keep you afloat and remind you how to swim.”

“Thank you both but it is more a matter of common sense rather than trust.” He was backing up the shore inch by inch, trying not to let them notice his retreat. His clothes already drenched
almost to his armpits from Jaime’s earlier ambush of splashing. “I survived the battle with the undead and the destruction of King’s Landing not to become a Kraken’s supper. I am bite sized and the ocean looks quite like the belly of the beast. I’m afraid self-preservation has always been my theme. Though – given I am departing from you to sit with Cersei, I may be playing with fire.” Giving them a mock salute, he turned and toddled up the shore before either could launch a protest.

“Just us wife.” The hint in Jaime’s tone was lascivious, licking the salt from his lips and bending at both knees, ready to leap into the incoming roll of water.

Kicking from the bottom she began to swim out further, arms flying over her head and slicing the surface, precise strokes she had perfected since childhood, capable of taking her long distances quickly – if she was trying.

Brienne purposefully slowed, triggered by the splashing behind her, coming to a stop where the waves first began to form. Floating serenely upon the weightlessness they brought to her large frame, the ripples rocking her more gently than a babe in its cradle, when arms tackled her around the waist.

“Got you.”

“Hmmm – you’re just too fast for me.” Buoyantly she spun in the circle of his arms, the corners of her mouth tugging upwards. She had seen in their earlier swims that for all his bragging the loss of his hand did slow him down, denying him the balance and propulsion he needed to match her pace.

He smirked, his fingers coming to rest of the curve of her hip, stumped arm keeping her held fast against him. “You’re a terrible liar you know.”

“Fibbing has never been my strong point, but the motivation for the attempt comes from a good place.” She swiped drips of salt water from his forehead before they reached his eyes, knowing his digits were too occupied to complete the task himself.

“Everything you do comes from a place of goodness; your heart is pure gold.” His stump slid up her spine, pulling her to him as they drifted. “It is little wonder I am so hopelessly besotted.”

The way he spoke these things straight to her eyes never ceased to make something inside her concave, another hidden chamber inside her already overflowing heart open wide, flooding with feelings for him which could fill the Straits a thousand times over.

She folded her arms around his shoulders, balancing out their vessel of two, a single ship comprised of a pair of bodies which could weather tidal surges and tempestuous seas as long as they were each other’s anchor.
“I have said it before, but I will say it again. I love you Brienne of Tarth. I love that you are different, I love that you are here with me, I love that you are mine alone to hold, caress and please.” His mouth slipped over hers, wet from sea and warm with want. Kissing her madly beneath sky and submersed in ocean, conveying a passion which put the forces of nature themselves to shame.

Her tongue licked against his, savouring salt and Jaime, the seasoning seeming to amplify his natural flavour, making her hungry for all he had. He felt the same, she knew it, the way his hips rubbed against hers beneath the water, the wild desirous moan which snuck between lips and skin when he moved to lave her jaw.

Salt bit at her rims once more, this time from blissful tears. The king tide within birthing canals which zigzagged down her cheeks, thankfully disguised by the tang of the sea when they reached his mouth.

“I’m yours Jaime, all that I am. I’m yours even when life keeps us apart.” Brienne took his face in both her hands, kissing his lips. “I love you so much.”

Their silhouettes painted the changing water, the sun’s closing rays projecting their love upon the surface. Sunset illuminating one side of her husband’s face, igniting flakes of gold within his emerald sphere. The light and the shadow, the duality of him, further reinforced by his lopsided smile.

Let this image replace the former, when I cradled his cheeks in my palms and begged him not to leave me, instead may I always see this moment. Aglow with romance and desire.

Their touching noses funneled the amber beams, his lips appearing even more rosy and supple in the ambience. Each move of them accentuated as he huskily whispered.

“You are mine tonight, come what may. I will not take no for an answer.”

In the gathering nightfall she dragged herself reluctantly from the surf, the last shades of dusky pink and mauve conceding to darkness when the sun disappeared below the horizon. Too shy to compete with the newly risen silvery moon, its muted aura gleaming in the sheen of water coating their limbs.
“I must be off.” Jaime placed a swift peck on her temple. “I have plans…involving you. But I need some time to prepare.”

“Should I be concerned?” Brienne teased, hugging her arms around herself as the night air cooled her wet skin.

“That’s for me to know-” He walked backwards up the beach, ever theatrical. “-And you to find out.”

She glimpsed his toothy grin before he turned and jogged away, itching to begin work on whatever devious scheme he had in store for her.

_He is incorrigible._

Brienne shook her head, chuckling, blinking through the half-light to make out the abandoned blanket up ahead. Traipsing towards it over the suck and pull of dry sand, the drag on her already tired calves unavoidable in the quest to find something to dry off with.

The shapes became more distinct as she neared, her eyes adjusting, able to identify an unkempt bundle of belongings sitting upon one corner.

_That will be Jaime’s – he leaves things in the same state of disarray in our chambers._

Feeling the nip of the breeze, she trotted the last stretch, bending at the waist and rummaging through the pile of discarded layers. Tipping the sand from his boots and neatly folding his shirt.

_My husband…_

Beneath his jacket, she discovered a linen towel, exhaling a sigh of relief and rubbing it down her dripping torso.

“You make for quite the sideshow…”

The Lady Knight froze in place, Cersei’s cutting tone coming out of the blue. With finely tuned instincts she turned towards the direction of the voice, discerning the faint outline of Cersei lurking in the darkness.

_I could have sworn we watched her depart earlier – mayhaps that was just to deliver Tytan to the nursery. She must have returned while we were swimming and…. Oh. She saw us kissing._

“…all hard lines and muscle. It is not natural for a woman. Upon closer inspection you are quite the abomination.”

Brienne sighed, draping the linen over her forearm, trying not to feel the barb.

_Pity her, that must have been hard to observe._
“Cersei – why persist in this manner?” She kept her voice neutral, calm. Stepping nearer, approaching the lioness with caution, hoping she could be placated. “We are related through marriage - good-sisters - and whether we like it or not that makes us aligned. This continued malice and vindictiveness serves no purpose. It only creates animosity.”

“I do not need nor want you in my family.” The aroma of wine was strong, trapped by the canopy of the tent behind her. “Nor does my brother. He is just yet to come to his senses. But he will.”

“I am concluding you do not mean Tyrion?”

“Of course I don’t mean Tyrion. One freak in our House was enough to withstand. We didn’t need two.”

“Why all this spite? Cersei, do you not want peace? An environment for your son where hatred isn’t the pervading theme?”

“Don’t you speak to me about my son!” The former Queen hissed. “You who cannot even get pregnant, failing Jaime with each moon’s turn. Do you see his disappointment? Before too long he will place you aside.”

That wounded, hitting a raw nerve. The pain ramifying through her system.

_Do not let her win, you and Jaime are happy. She is just vengeful..._

“Your reasons to hate me are founded – I will give you that. If I had lost Jaime, I imagine I would feel much the same…”

“You will.” A malevolent smirk twisted up her cheek, the counterpoint to the kindness in Jaime’s earlier. “He will return to me, my bed. It is only a matter of waiting. He will grow tired of pitying the aberration who proved useful in keeping us alive. He will want curves and femininity. A real woman beneath him, satisfying him in ways you never can. Never could. Because we are two halves of one whole.”

“So much so that you gave yourself readily to others.” Brienne hadn’t intended to bite but she could only be pushed so far. Jaime’s strong sentiments about her chastity giving her a rare advantage. “I think it is quite impossible to deduce that you are his other half, when you have willingly and repetitively coupled with many. Committing betrayals of the flesh right under Jaime’s nose, breaking fidelity and proving yourself an inconstant partner.” She stooped, gathering Jaime’s things into her arms before straightening. “In that I would say I am his match and not you.”

Pivoting on her heel, she trudged into the night, coaching herself to maintain a normal pace,
pretending that Cersei’s remarks hadn’t gashed at her battered psyche.

However, she regretted her decision, lamenting not breaking into a run when Cersei got the last word in, her closing taunt thundering jubilantly from the tent.

“But I am fertile. I can give him what he wants.”
Contentment vs Resentment

Chapter Summary

Cover Art by: Ro_Nordmann

"In the night hours..."
Lyrics, War of Hearts by Ruelle
Verse 1, Line 2

Chapter Notes

I would like to give a special mention to all the wonderful theories I have seen in the comments. Although for obvious reasons I cannot join in the speculation, I want you to know how much excitement it gave me to see readers getting involved in the story and discussing it. Thank you - it made my night. :D

Onto this Instalment...

This chapter is the longest in this entire tale.
It is also predominantly NSFW. :)
Whilst bathing, Brienne let the residual acrimony wash away, dispersing into the water and from her system along with the clinging grains of sand. Digging deep she tried to locate remorse for her counterattack, knowing she should reproach herself for taking aim literally below the belt.

The Lady Knight acknowledged that retaliating had not been the best of strategies, but she was swiftly reconciling herself with the fact that no tactics seemed effective against Cersei’s innate belligerence.

If she responded with tolerance; she was seen as weak. Reticence indicated stupidity or agreement. Reprisal gave the impression that the insult had gotten beneath her skin. It seemed in the catty art of verbal warfare – there was no true upper hand.

*My pleas for peace were rebuffed - but I tried. Her jibes struck hard, but she is ultimately floundering. I really should have found more patience; she is on the offensive because I have the higher ground. I have Jaime.*

Once dry she felt invigorated, more than ready to put the altercation behind her. Wrapping herself in a cloth and happily riffling through her clothes chests, searching for something to wear other than a ghastly gown.

*Knock, knock.* “My Lady, I do not request entry. His Lordship asked that I pass on a message.”

She paused, garments in hand. “Which one?” *I did not think my Father was home yet.*

“Your Lord husband. He asks you to meet him at the Southern Deck. The sitting area overlooking the cove.”

“Thank you.” She smiled to herself, a tingle rushing through her at the choice of location.

*You have a nose for romance husband, that is a beautiful place to sit upon a night like this*…

Taken by a thought she called out, “Are you still there?”

“Yes, M’Lady?” The voice was initially distant but grew louder at her summons.
“Do you know if Ser Jaime is alone?”

“Indeed. He has requested privacy.”

“Thank you again.” Her pulse quickened. “That will be all.”

In double speed she continued to search through the chests, casting aside dozens of unworn garments which appeared as though they should belong to anyone but her. Obtained for the Lady she ought to have been had appearance and personality both not fashioned her for a different life.

Growing frustrated she delved down the side with long arms, fingers feeling for a texture which was pleasing. Her skin felt delightfully fresh following her afternoon swim and subsequent bath; rough, dry flesh scraped away by the coarse grains, leaving it soft and new.

*With the exception of that one sand graze on my elbow from when Jaime and I wrestled in the shallows.*

Though she would gladly have accepted several more, the intoxicating fun of grappling with him sending adrenaline through her system and molten to her nethers.

*I would have pinned him and straddled him right there if I had been guaranteed of no audience.*

She blushed at the mere thought, the conditions of the afternoon bringing her unexpectedly out of her shell. The combination of the coast, her husband and rough play incorporating all the things which lit her up from within, uniting her with the body her spirit called home, a oneness seldom achieved without a sword in her fist.

Her fingertips brushed against something silken, closing around the fabric and tugging it loose from the bottom of the hoard. She rubbed the gauzy material between her thumb and forefinger, spreading out the folds and trying to place the garment.

It was a robe of sorts, intended to be knee length but elegant, a sash around the middle its sole claim to fastening closed. Thin and delicate, it sported an attractive but abstract pattern, the inconsistent colouration both vivid and faded without uniformity. A random blend of blue and green, the two dyes blending and mottling with each other interchangeably, so you could place neither where one ended or the other began.

*It is pretty... Brienne held it up to the light, wincing. …it is flimsy.*

She vaguely recalled its origin, a thank you gift from a Dornish trader. His vessel had struck ground upon a reef and her Father had sent men and ships to tug it loose. Letting them make port whilst they conducted repairs. He had thanked them with a generous package of the finest textiles, including many articles intended for a noblelady. “For the Evenstar’s Daughter.”

Brienne remembered avoiding court that day, thinking at the time how he would have saved his wares if he’d seen her for himself.
This robe is meant to be worn while my ladies attend me. Fixing hair and preparing for a ball or some other function I avoided like the plague. It is little wonder I have never donned it, relegating it to a tomb of timber.

Tempted, she teetered between reserve and daring. Plucking up enough courage to slip the robe up her arms, enjoying its cool caress against her skin. 

It will be short on me, if I bend my smallclothes will show. But Jaime does favour my legs...

Letting out a mortified groan she buried her face in her hands, permitting herself this one act to exorcise herself of bashfulness before tying the front with finality.

A far cry from the dark, decent robe I wore during the heart of winter. He had better appreciate my efforts, if he teases me, I may want the ground to swallow me whole.

Moving to her nightstand, she blew the dust off several small bottles, full to the brim with liquid. Removing the corks and sniffing to see which perfumes had survived without going stale. Finding a scent that would pass, she dabbed behind her ears and wrists, rolling her eyes at herself for being so banal.

There is my contribution to our evening of intimacy – now let’s see what Jaime has arranged.

The night was balmy beyond Evenfall’s confines, a soft symphony of insect song and lapping water accompanying her as she wove along the cobblestone pathway leading away from the stronghold. Palms and tropical blooms lined the walk, providing natural walls of green, the lush foliage broken only by the torches spaced evenly along, igniting her way.

Her Father had once told her the deck was built at her Mother’s behest. A raised platform with thatched roof overlooking the still tranquillity of the cove, a flight of stairs separating wooden floorboards from the dunes. Here you could drink in the best of their island abode, harmony and beauty creating a slice of the Seven Heavens.

When she was little, she would escape to this locale, tall height enabling her to scramble easily upon the cushioned chairs which rimmed the square space, even with a book of knightly heroics tucked securely under her arm. Tales of legends borrowed without permission from her Father’s
library before she was even old enough to read the words. She would sit and commune, thumbing through the pages, transported by the artworks. All the while pretending her Mother was perusing with her, silently approving of the misdemeanour which would earn her a severe scolding from her Septa if she were stumbled upon.

Fortunately, like times of yore, the brush maintained the hideaway’s seclusion and she twinkled when she rounded the bend, finding it unchanged.

*It is just as I remember it, only better. Now I have the company of the man I love...*

Her lion waited for her, his shirt of ivory cotton near transparent, flickering flares of countless torches finding a dancing partner with candlelight, combining with his palpable energy to make even his clothes appear alive. His breeches hung low on his waist, comfortably loose-fitting and she mentally commended herself on correctly guessing the dress-code.

A small crib was pushed into the far corner and she peered in at Tytan’s sleeping form as she passed, his tiny face looking utterly peaceful, resting soundly in the fresh air.

“His Mother left him in the care of strangers.” Jaime explained. “According to the staff she was already quite drunk. He should sleep through; he had a big day. I just didn’t want to risk him waking to unfamiliar faces.” She nodded, the love of a Father for his son requiring no justification.

“What is this?” Brienne raised her hands in question, and he clasped one in his own, her palm meeting his stump on the right when he moved upon instinct, forgetting his handicap. Without thinking twice, she closed her fingers around the end of the wrist, holding it just as she would if his hand were there.

“Fun.” Jaime’s eyes were coruscating gems, housing fire, mischief and ardour, pressing his lips to hers in greeting. “And you-” He spread her arms out wide, devouring the sight of her, and she shuffled awkwardly from foot to foot, counting the seconds until he was done.

“-Fuck.” He breathed; pupils blown so wide they could consume a dragon in full flight.

“That is what you have to say?” Sniggering she tried to hide behind their joined hands. “I feared a jape or at worst a compliment. But an expletive?”

“You did not marry a bard.” Her knight shrugged; perfect teeth exposed in a toothy grin. “But I think the word suffices. It covers all avenues. My speechless amazement…” He pecked at where her collarbone peeked from beneath the silk. “An expression of pleasure…” A kiss to her jugular. “…what I’d like to do…” She writhed against him when he nipped all the way up her neck to behind her ear.
“What no grandiose production?” Brienne’s throaty octave betrayed her true want, even as she teased. “After all the lead-up it seems rather easy.”

_Though I would welcome it…_

“Yes, you are right. Unfortunately for you I have grander designs.” Jaime called her out with a cockiness that made her want to slap him. “Come, My Lady.”

He led her to the cushioned bench, guiding her to lounge in the corner where her back could be propped up by pillows. She folded her legs to the side, leaning forward in suspense.

“Now, no doubt you’ve noticed this.” Releasing her hand, Jaime made a sweeping gesture of the low table. It was dominated by a tray, peculiarly covered by a cloth.

“Yes – why the mystery over supper?” She reached for the veil and he batted her hand away.

“Uh uh.” Her lion tutted. “Not for you to touch.” A wink. “Only me.”

Wrinkling her nose, she looked at him with confusion. Regarding him as though he’d gone insane. “You are aware I can feed myself?”

“Not the way we’re going to do it.” Sitting beside her, he stroked her ankle with his index finger. “As lovers we have never gotten to take our time. To explore and just bask in each other.” He wriggled closer, trailing his finger up her body in a single continuous line, coming to a stop on her bottom lip. “Now I know you don’t like to surrender control and I also know how much of a stickler you are for obeying rules. So, if you want to play, you are going to have to promise me you will keep your eyes closed. I’m going to miss those sapphires but it’s part of the fun.”

“What _precisely_ am I doing?” Out of nervous habit she bit her lip, her teeth instead grazing the tip of his finger.

“Good start.” He quipped, dragging her lip down and leaning in for a kiss, his tongue seeking the entrance he’d made, hand falling to her chin to guide her closer. She hunched slightly, angling into him, reducing her height by the inch required to keep their mouths even. The hubbub of querying and overthinking in her mind slowly silenced by the gloriousness of the contact.

_If this is his game, count me in…._

Then with reflexes like a cat he grabbed her ankle, making a startled gasp fly from her mouth. His kiss an elaborate distraction so he could manoeuvre her to his will, swivelling her around on the cushion until her legs stretched lengthways. Tickling her behind the knees so that she bent them, the hem of her robe sliding precariously down, gifting him a glance of thigh.

_It was all deliberate._
She scrunched her face at him, huffing. Equally impressed by his ploy and petulant about being tricked. “Jaime Lannister, you will disclose this convoluted scheme right now.”

He scooted forward in his seat, occupying the newly made space, looping his foot around the leg of the small table and dragging it closer with a painful scraping noise, ensuring both his woman and the tray were well within his reach. “You’re going to guess what you’re tasting…there is rewards in it for both us.”

Shuffling lower she plumped up the cushions so that she was supported, making sure Jaime could stare into her face. “And I’m not allowed to look?”

“Correct – that would be cheating and most unchivalrous.” He waggled his eyebrows and she guffawed. “Are you going to play?”

“Well yes, after witnessing that display, I am quite keen to close my eyes.”

“Good. Close them…” His fingertips hovered just above her face, skimming her eyelids gently as he coaxed them to drift shut. The last image her blue orbs captured the unbridled elation on his face that she had agreed to participate. “…I’m just verifying.”

She felt the air move slightly, surmising he was waving his hand in front of her nose. “I am a woman honourable to my word.”

“Still, I would be remiss not to carry out the relevant checks.” Jaime's tone was amused, adoring being given the opportunity to shine.

“Satisfied?”

He clucked his tongue, “Not yet I’m afraid, but very soon…”

Brienne waited patiently, listening to the distinctive sounds of pouring and the tinkling of silverware. Angling her head towards the source to better distinguish the noises.

“My Lady, you had best not be bending the rules by listening…”

“I wouldn’t dream of it.”

“I’m ever so relieved.” He chortled and she couldn’t help her ensuing smile. “Though forgive me if I feel the need to talk and cover the hints, nonetheless. I would hate to think you garnered an unfair advantage because I’m clumsy and everything takes twice as long one-handed.”

“If you need any help…” Brienne held her arms out, palms upwards, wriggling her fingers in encouragement.

“I will be fine.” His warm lips seared suddenly against her forehead, a fleeting, tantalising brand and then they were gone. “You really don’t like conceding to the unknown do you?”
“In my experience, submission of any kind does not serve well.” She let her arms collapse, hands folding in her lap.

“Well this is less about succumbing and more about heightened appreciation. The things that are amplified when you don’t have to focus on what’s in front of you. The ingenuity struck me today when we were in the surf. For a while there the setting sun was so glaring it practically blinded me, I had no choice but to shut my eyes. And when I did –" She heard him suspire heavily. “- the flow of the current, the slickness of your skin against mine, the deliciousness of your mouth, I felt so alive. It is a gift for someone who has so often feared himself dead inside. But instead of wanting to keep it greedily to myself, all I could think of was sharing it with you. Making the woman I love feel the same sweet fulfilment. So here is my absurd attempt.”

Upon hearing his heartfelt inspiration, his declaration of selfless consideration and inclusion; the rigidity which always pulled taut and tight inside her, miraculously let go. Like the line of a grappling hook finally giving way, a tent rope ripping loose from its peg in the breeze.

*Why not permit this?* The newfound liberation asked her. *Give in to this harmless diversion, follow him with trust as your assurance, be blind and let his eyes see for the pair of you.*

“Go on.” Her body relaxed, tense muscles turning limber, sinking into the comfort beneath her.

“Open-” Jaime’s knuckle tapped on her chin as though knocking at a door. She felt ridiculous, emitting an abashed groan whilst complying. Caught somewhere between laughter and humiliation when she felt his finger depress upon her tongue. “-now guess.”

Sucking and then testing the consistency, she made her deduction with ease. “Jam.”

“That’s not good enough.” He patted her twice on the side prompting her like he would his horse. Spurring her leg to lash out in a similar manner, kneeing him playfully. Robbed of sight she could only speculate that she contacted ribs, causing Jaime to splutter with laughter. “What?! You can do better than that. Specifics please.”

Having swallowed she could only operate on lingering flavours. “Blackberry?”

“Good. See I knew you could do this.” She pretended she couldn’t hear the clink of a metal tray. “Next one...”

This time the morsel was hard, crunchy and intended to be sugary, but she found the entire thing unappealing, wrinkling her nose. “A biscuit.”

“Type?”

“I don’t know. I’ve never cared for them enough to ask.”

“And so we learn about each other. I had no idea you had a set against biscuits – how can you dislike something so trifling? There is nothing not to like...”
“Exactly. They are bland and all taste the same to me. Not to mention that they are often served by ‘proper ladies’ at afternoon tea parties - another thing I despise.”

“Aha, there’s the crux of it.” She didn’t need to open her eyes to envisage the victorious expression on his infuriatingly handsome face. “Alright, the biscuit is out. Round Three.”

Acclimatising to the routine, Brienne pre-emptively opened her mouth. The competitive spirit inside awakening, wanting to excel.

When she felt the shape, she bit into it, this one taking some work, the texture rubbery but the hints reminding her of nectar. “Strange.” She mulled it over as she continued to chew. “This must be an import. I want to say apricot but it’s not fresh fruit…”

“Well done - that’s because it’s dried.”

“Are you trying to trick me?”

“No, I’m trying to make a challenge worthy of you. It would prove too easy if I selected only fare native to Tarth.” A crystalline ting resonated in her ears. “Time for a palate cleanse.”

She expected something traditional, a citrus or even water but her husband had never been known to miss an opportunity in the service of convention. Tilting upwards, she anticipated the cold, hard rim of a cup, her parted lips pleasantly surprised to instead be covered with his own, mouth flooding with the crisp, dry flavour of wine.

*The only way I relish drinking, whether the blend is to my taste or not, the delivery is exquisite...*

The carafe was empty. The last dregs of the weak red plumping dismally into her goblet, she shook the container, but its supply had been exhausted.

“Watered down piss.” Cersei muttered. “Not fit for a peasant.”

It wobbled when she roughly set it down, rocking on the edges of its base in circular motions before finding its centre of balance.

*What do they think I am?*
“No…. who do they think I am?” She scrunched her face, her tone snide. Regaling the ceiling and carpets with her diatribe. “I wore a crown. Smallfolk knelt and grown men trembled before me. But now they listen to her. An insipid, self-righteous, Shryke. Scaly and unnatural. But the bitch can bite.”

Rising to her feet, she righted her askew dress, neatening her blonde locks with unsteady hands.

“There. I can handle my liquor. It would take more than that to bring me down.” She decided to pointedly ignore the slur in her voice. “I’m a lioness.”

Strolling from her diminutive room in the servant’s quarters it was only a short trip to the kitchens.

*And the wine cellar. Walk straight. There it is simple. One-foot, next foot. One-foot, next foot. I am noble. I am refined. They all wish they were me. Her included.*

Barging into the kitchens she demanded. “Bring me a carafe of strongwine and do not think of buying me off with more of that cheap swill – it is an insult.”

“I’m sorry Cersei but Lord Tyrion said to cut you off.”

“I don’t care what that cretin said!” They all jumped backwards when she shrieked. *Good, they are frightened of me. They should be. I was a Queen. I am a Queen.*

“Who do you think I am?! A common drunk?! A tavern whore?!” Something pinched inside her, a niggling sting she’d been trying to drown. Pesky insignificant observations tossed about by an ugly freak trying to drag her down.

*I walked naked through King’s Landing. I held my head high. I will not be brought lowly by the likes of her.*

“We can’t defy the King’s Hand; we’d lose our jobs.” The old scullery maid was brave, even if her voice shook.

“Do you think I give a shit about your snivelling? Your pitiful lives? Get. Me. What. I. WANT!”

“Sorry to interrupt M’Ladyship – I came whence I heard your distress.” Miriam was one of the upstairs attendants, her position slightly elevated. Cersei had come to know her well during her time spent outside in the courtyard. An intelligent young woman who aligned herself with people of strategic advantage. She had a following of staffers; serving maids who idolised her, doing her bidding and feeding her titbits of information. “Ser Jaime has himself two flagons of the best wines tonight. Came and selected them personally from Lord Selwyn’s private stash. I overheard he is at the Southern Deck.”
“Smart girl.” Cersei trilled. “You could all learn a lot from her example.”

Whirling on her heel, she took off across the castle. Blissfully undisturbed by the usual loyal lickspittles making her answer for her presence in the main stronghold. The majority having the night off in the absence of their King and Evenstar, leaving an unobstructed path to her goal.

How utterly providential.

Concepts carried her upon their currents, mind spinning in gargantuan leaps of logic, the bridges made possible by the aqueducts opened by alcohol.

Alike we are. My twin and me. Always the same. Connected.

She followed a snaking pathway, already planning her seduction. The laughter they could exchange over a goblet or two.

We share the same hair, eyes, soul - tastes.

Rounding the corner, she halted.

There was her golden brother, once so intimidating and strong. The lion of their house, bringing death with his sword and unscrupulously sending their enemies to the Stranger with a cutting smile.

He sipped slowly from the chalice, an errant dribble winding its way down his chiselled jaw, through the atrocity of a beard which destroyed his good-looks and made them appear so very opposite.

Bending, he leant over the creature he called wife and Cersei thought it would be too much to hope he would strangle the daft cow while her eyes were shut, setting them both free.

But instead he kissed her, his action unhurried, meaningful. Sumptuously sampling the wine which spilled from her sluggish lips.

Bile filled Cersei’s mouth, choking it down, almost gagging.

Perhaps not. Our tastes are continent’s apart.

The scene reviled. Nauseating and repugnant. Worse than today by the ocean.

As if I hadn’t endured enough. There is nothing here I want to see.

It was when she spun to leave, she glimpsed the crib in the corner. My son.
The fury had her now, stewing through her pores. They would have my child there to witness that filth. Remove him from the nursery where I placed him. Our lion cub. Our rightful heir. Wholly Lannister, pure of blood, ours.

She dragged herself away, stomping behind the canopy of foliage. Steaming, seething. Her legs carrying her until she was far enough away to rave.

“Jaime didn’t even notice me. See me. All I have put in place, it’s not enough. It hasn’t been enough. What has she done to him? Leech ed all lion from him and left this feeble hull. Crippled, minus paw and cock. Now she’s after my son as well. She can’t fall pregnant, so she is trying to possess him. The same way she stole my twin. Whore. I could poison her, I could do it easily – but I want her to suffer, long-slow, prolonged anguish. I want to take from her what she took from me. Rub her crooked nose in it, make her watch – like I have watched-”

Cersei stopped herself, glancing about to make sure no one had overheard. Taming her fuming to channel it into more constructive avenues.

I need a drink. There must be more than one wine cellar in this dank hellhole. Then I will mull it over, chart my course, plot my next move. Little steps, it all is progress. The beast shows her fangs because she is scared. And whether it be tonight, tomorrow or next week....

When I succeed makes no difference for either way - her fate is sealed.

Their passion prevailed long after the wine had drizzled down her throat. Lips basted in its vinous lustre too intoxicating to deny. Jaime laved a stray trickle from her chin before diving back in tongue first, hand loosening the silken sash around her waist.

"Is it a cider?" He gulped breaths, speaking between kisses. "An Essosi?" She heard the whip of the sash being pulled away, snapping as it flew through the air, the faint thud when it landed on the deck. "Vintage?"

The humid atmosphere hit her bare skin replacing where fabric had been mere heartbeats before, Jaime parting the robe just enough so he could run his hand down from sternum to navel, driving her wild and destroying her ability to think straight.
"I don't know."

_Gods, I've missed his touch..._

"Wines are beyond me." She moaned as he blew in her ear, tugging her lobe between his teeth, large hand splaying on her hip. Squeezing her suggestively, slinking around to cup her backside through her small clothes.

"It's Arbour Gold." The strangle of his timbre gave her an inkling of the agony he felt at pulling away. "Where were we?"

“Guess four.” She swallowed, fighting the impulse to look at him, to see the urgency in his lustful eyes.

_But I promised to remain sightless and that is what I shall do. His theory is definitely working..._

She rubbed her thighs discreetly together, wondering if the gathering dampness could be seen through the sheer layers. The flooding heat emanating from her core growing hotter by the second.

_Jaime make haste, my appetite is not for food._

“Next course my love - time for dessert.” She heard the sound of spittle, determining that he must be trying the treat for himself.

“Hey, I thought it was for me...”

“It was. It is... I just found a flaw in my plan. The temperature is higher than I predicted, the ice chest did not suffice.”

A spongy object skimmed against her lips, initially appearing dry and coarse. But when she bit in, it disintegrated, revealing something startlingly sodden.

Brienne squealed through the mouthful, hands flying up to catch the falling segments in her palms whilst Jaime roared with laughter.

“I told you it went awry!”

“It did, it's a puddle.” She ingested it quickly, licking her lips in an attempt to clean up. Hands held still whilst gritty crumbs and a dripping sensation paralysed her fingers mid-air. “And a mess! What is it?”

“It was cream cake...” His tongue brushed the corner of her lips, capturing a rivulet of melt she’d missed, lifting her fingers to his face, beard rough against her knuckles as he began to suck them clean one by one. Drawing out the process by leisurely dipping each digit into the hot recesses of his mouth, swirling his tongue around their length before withdrawing them again. Every move made meticulously and delightfully slowly.
The Lady Knight threw her head backwards into the pillow, too overcome to object.

*This is halfway between disgustedly obscene and heavenly decadent.*

“I think we both need to wash that down-”

“The Arbour Gold again?”

“No....and this time I want you to guess. You keep bewitching me and making me forget the purpose of this exercise.”

With shut eyes it was easier to hide her mirth at his parchment thin ruse.

*Yes, because quizzing me about naming beverages was the aim, the seduction simply a welcome bonus. My Lord forgets what he told me when we started, this is foreplay.*

"I'm doing no such thing."

“You are not looking from where I am – I can assure you the view is positively enthralling.” The rasp of his voice was downright indecent, making her ponder how exactly she appeared from his current position.

But before she had a chance to over analyse and allow self-consciousness to gain a foothold, she felt the bulk of his form above her. Smiling expectantly, Brienne looped her arms around where his shoulders ought to be, receiving his kiss with triumphant joy. Wrists pushed together, keeping her hands upright, preventing herself from knotting saliva drenched fingers in his hair.

“Mmmmmmm....”

She knew this taste. She knew it well. The aromatic currents of elated disbelief and chances, the deep grapes rekindling memories of firelight and firsts.


Her forearms tugged him in again and this time it was her tongue dashing forward. Fervently plundering the remaining traces from his mouth whilst his hand swept her robe aside. Kneading the small mound of her breast in his palm, rolling her peak with his fingertips until she arched unapologetically against him, the slick between her legs rivalling the straits at high tide.

All she could feel was *him*, all she could taste was *him*, all that she wanted was *him*.

“Jaime,” she panted. “I'm *aching.*”
“Nearly there…”

She whimpered when he left her, alone and needy in the darkness behind her eyelids. Craving things which would leave her weak but sated.

The cushioning beneath her sagged when he sat, his breath hot against her clavicle as he flung the other side of the robe away with his nose, leaving her heaving chest exposed to the night.

A droplet hit her lips, neither warm nor cool. Its pace languorous and dawdling as it flowed to the crevice of her mouth. Several more drips joined it, the soft pats of their impact seeming to come from a height, until Jaime deemed it a satisfactory portion. Urging her to open with a nudge, the sweetness hit her taste buds and she registered it straight away.

“Honey.” It was a simple answer for her pleasure numbed brain. Past the point of thinking clearly.

“Bravo.” His praise was accompanied by the skid of honey glazed fingers, spreading the stickiness over her pert nipple, causing her to wriggle at the unfamiliar sensation.

“We have always been fair in our marriage…” He was all glee and temptation. “So, I will help you, if you help me.”

He popped his fore and index finger into her mouth, murmuring happily whilst she sucked, his arousal digging prominently into her thigh. “Thank you.”

Now he chooses to use his lordly manners - when the last thing I want him to be is proper.

As if hearing her unspoken thought, he announced. “And now I shall see to my wife.”

His tongue circled her already hardened teat, teasing and torturing, his stump pinning her arm against the pillow above her head, giving himself more room to work. His hand creeping downward, sneaking beneath her smallclothes.

In an instant he had found the fountain of her centre, digits working in perfect synchrony with his tongue until two of her pleasure points were being stroked in unison. Jaime’s lips closed around her bud, drawing her breast into his mouth and suckling the honey he had smeared all over her. Fingers stroking the throbbing nub between her legs, gliding lower, slipping inside. Making her exclaim so loudly it resonated from the thatched rooftop.

“I told you there'd be rewards.” Jaime’s gravelled octaves were the paragon of desire in sound. Enough to convince her she was more than any self-imposed limitations or perception of sexiness.
And in this moment, she would grant him anything within her power. Deny him nothing.

“Here... taste.”

Her tongue darted out shyly, doing as she was bid, licking at the offered fingertips. Guessing the answer she was too embarrassed to say aloud and grateful to hide behind closed eyes.

“You.” He answered for her. “My woman. My favourite flavour.”

He slid her small clothes down her legs in one swift practised movement, strong fingers parting her knees, her wetness connecting with the air and making her entire body frizzle with anticipation.

“And now it's my turn for dessert…”

_Fuck._

She brought her arm over her eyes to keep from breaking the terms, mewls ripping from her when he positioned himself between her thighs. Dizzying, stupefying ecstasy taking over as she heard him inhale her scent, nuzzling her folds and burying his tongue in her most sacred of parts.

Too much, too good, too... tooo...

The muscles of her legs went slack, flopping to the cushions, wide and open for him to continue his work.

_No thoughts. Just feeling._

Just Jaime and his wicked tongue. His lapping, masterful, virtuoso tongue.

And nose, he employed that too. And beard… There was that divine scraping against her inner thighs. And lips and...

Her hips bucked involuntarily, and she cried out, his fingers digging into her thigh to keep her from crushing him.

_His tongue wins._
She was shaking with pleasure, seeing stars behind closed eyes.

Later she would tell him again how much she loved him. But for now...

Only one part of her took priority. And for once it wasn't her brain or heart.

“We’re all sticky.” Brienne whined from beneath him, the common sense he knew and loved streaming back whilst the glow from her climax faded. He had draped himself across his wife, covering her nakedness, keeping it possessively for himself. A feat achieved at the cost of twisting his leg at an awkward angle, the twinges of pain long giving way to numbness.

Worth it.

Jaime snuggled into the dip of her collarbone, kissing happily. His line of sight comprised of her pert breast and the chaotic table. The once perfectly arranged assortment now resembling an arena after a melee. Upturned covers, half eaten cake turned to slush, spilled wine and his shirt hanging off the edge, catching upon the pitcher of Arbour Gold. The lightweight material thankfully not heavy enough to topple the metal jug.

I suppose I should have tossed it the other way.

The lion had hurriedly torn it over his head, wanting only flesh upon flesh when he laid upon his woman. A decision he could probably have rethought given his present circumstances.

“Jaime…” Her restless squirming had returned, the tractable wanton intent on pleasure receding into memory as blue spheres opened, blinking against the light. Shielding her eyes whilst they adapted and tapping long fingers against her own skin, grimacing at the resistance when she pulled away. The tacky sounds audible to even his ears. “…we’re like tar.”

“Oh molasses.” Shrugging he pulled himself up, chuckling as his chest hair fixed in the gooey residue. “It’s more like I’m peeling myself off you.”

“It’s not that bad.”

“We are adhered to each other!” They were almost sitting now, separating their flesh one careful inch at a time. She held her hands aloft between them as though they were contaminated. Joining in his laughter at the silliness of it all. “I can’t even touch you…”

“Touch me.” Pecking her nose, he put her hand on his shoulder. “It is only food and us… you forget I’ve drunk piss, been caged in my own squalor. This I really don’t mind.” He began to nibble his way down the pillar of her neck, his pattern thrown by the quiver of her snicker.

“A winsome comparison. The kind every well-loved woman wants from her pillowtalk.”

He grinned against her neck. “You know what I meant.”

“I do.”

Straightening the deadened muscles in his leg, he wandered over to check on Tytan. His baby boy dozing serenely without a care in the world. “You’re a precious babe.” He crooned. “I am blessed that you have such a calm disposition.”

“Did I wake him?” Brienne winced, retrieving her sash from the floor before joining him. “I forgot when you were-” She cleared her throat, stumbling over her words. Making busy by threading the long strip of fabric through the loop at the back of her robe. “-there.”

“He is more comfortable than a dozing housecat.” Jaime’s right arm slipped around her waist, impeding her from tying it closed. “I have discovered he is not easily disturbed from slumber; he likes it too much.”

“Like his Father?”

“Shush.” He bumped her playfully, tugging upon the silken collar. “Seeming as he’s content, why don’t we wander down to the beach. We can wash off with seawater and I get a chance to see this beautiful skin in the moonlight.”

“You never stop do you?” His wife cocked her head to the side, shaking it incredulously and Jaime could just tell she was preparing her argument against his proposal.

*Best not give her the chance.*

“Why would I? I have been hankering to get you all to myself and I don’t intend upon squandering a moment.” Jaime wandered across the deck, starting the descent down the wooden stairs, the boards creaking beneath his feet when he stepped into the open night. Lingering to marvel at the stars above, clear and countless. Their infinity showcased in ways you would never imagine when the smog of city fires hazed the sky. “I can see why the Kings of Tarth styled themselves after the stars. Though I wager the heavens will hold little interest for me soon.”

He favoured her with an exaggerated wink. “Are you coming? I could get lost in the dark. But I’d
best retain my lead, I’m not certain this timber can support us both from the way it’s complaining.”

“It’s driftwood.” Brienne explained, following. “It is still strong, even though it has been here a long time. It does not erode the way other lumber does, it has been subjected to the extremes of nature and can withstand much. The odd groans are expected, like a galley tossed in a swell. It is the give which lets it better bear the weight. Rather than becoming brittle and snapping.”

“Well aren’t you just the wealth of knowledge?”

“Piss off.” He could feel her glare boring into the back of his skull. The same expression as when he remarked upon her diligence back in Winterfell.

*And it worked then as well as its working now...*

“Oh look we’re on the sand.” His feet sunk into the soft grains, cool despite the warm climate. “May as well go down to the water’s edge now.”

Her huff blasted through the night, along with the crunching of her traipsing begrudgingly after him. “All I was going to say... was that our wash basin in our chamber would be more practical.”

She folded her arms over her chest when they reached the shore. Growling when she affixed to her own ribcage. “This is saline water; we will have to wash again when we go inside for double the effort. Upstairs there was fresh water and a bed.”

“Which we will make good use of - both if I have my way. Beds and basins have many uses...” Rolling up his trouser cuffs he stepped into the rippling sea. Wading in up to his calves. “…But how could you expect me to pass up this opportunity?” He cupped the salty liquid into his left hand, splashing himself ineffectively. “See? In about a decade I will be perfectly clean.”

“Let me.” Brienne’s frustrated steps trudged through the water until she stood in front of him. An ethereal apparition of exasperation and compassion, tall, proud and leggy in her gaping silk. Alabaster complexion whiter than Tarth’s famed marble, gilded by platinum beams and reflections off the water.

Leaning down, she dragged his hand beneath the surface, rubbing away the residue with thorough thumbs. Each swipe feeling like a massage and he fought the urge to sigh, not wanting to give away how much pleasure he derived from her ministrations.

She dowsed her own hands thoroughly, then began upon his chest. Sluicing water and scrubbing rigorously, parted front of her robe falling open further as she moved. The front hem dangling in the water every time she bent, riding the length up at the back, her buttocks firm and rounded, the temptation to squeeze near irresistible.
She is so focussed on her task she does not realise. Gods she is fucking gorgeous.

It didn't matter that he'd seen her nude before. Looking once, twice, a million times was never going to be enough. There was always a new curve to discover, a different way to be hypnotised, a fantasy to be made as silver rays turned his merling goddess celestial.

The water was cool, hardening her nipples, the rose teats standing alert through the silk. Peeking out deliciously when she shifted, consuming his notice until she stepped forward with one leg, widening the gap and granting him a glimpse of her cunt. Beads of moisture clinging to her curls from errant splashes, slit just visible, teasing his memory of the pink within.

He licked his lips whilst her nails gently raked his chest, hoping to still find a hint of her flavour, his cock becoming painfully hard.

*I would have her just like this… in the shallows of the ocean. Frightening fish with bellows of rapture that could awaken sea monsters from their depths.*

“You think I don't know?”

He jumped, her voice startling him. Wide green eyes affecting innocence and failing due to the erection straining his laces.

Brienne's neutral countenance did not waver as she continued to bathe him. “I'm never so absorbed in my occupation, that I forget which parts of me are on display Ser.” Now her smirk lit up her face, gloating and blessedly licentious. “Did you think it lucky coincidence that I stepped forward?”

“You are superb.” His voice was abraded, infused with so many emotions it was a husk of its former self.

“I am getting chilly.” She pulled the robe back around her frame, loosely fastening the sash with a single knot.

“It will get wet from your body…” Jaime tried and failed to manage his disappointment; highly suspect that she was toying with him for sport.

“I believe it is safe to declare it well and truly ruined anyhow.” She splashed forward, arms twining around his torso. “But my Jaime, do not fret. I know you have not yet been satisfied.”

Kissing his lips, she took him by the hand. Her bearing commanding but benevolent as she tugged him up the beach. Replicating his earlier manner when he had led her to the cushions. “Come. I must attend to my husband’s needs—” It was all so sweet and solicitous until she added. “—before he passes out on me.”

*So that's the way she wants to play it?*

A beaming grin consumed his face. “Well wife. If my need is dire... who says I can wait that
He pounced, tackling her to the dunes in a cloud of sand and limbs. Brienne's merriment immeasurable as they wrestled and tussled. A rematch to their afternoon bout in the surf.

*Where, in both instances, a second hand would have come very much in handy.*

They grunted and snickered, oomphing and combating the sand almost as much as each other. The grit in his lashes giving her the advantage, his wife successfully rolling him onto his back.

“Yield.”

Jaime threw both arms defeatedly above his head, wiser than arguing with his womanly powerhouse when she held the dominant position. Her deep tones nearly a purr. “Who says I can wait either?”

He lay docilely supine as she mounted his knees, unlacing his crotch with efficiency. “I wanted to do this today.” Brienne confided, freeing his length, pulling his breeches down to his ankles. Walking upon her knees, until she straddled his upper thighs, towering over him in might and splendour. A champion of their duel wanting her prize, every inch formidable and sensual. From the redness of her grazed kneecaps digging into the sand, to the coating of grains on her arms and the saturated wetness of her middle flush against his skin.

Emotion swelled his chest to exploding, phrases of love and devotion his only relief from its endless expansion, growing in adoration of her with every passing moment. He opened his lips to begin his chants of praise...

“I love you.”

It was rare she beat him to it, more often than not he was the one to say it first. Waiting out her tacit reserve to see if she would respond in kind. Sometimes the declaration never came, replaced with a kiss or gesture. Other times it took hours for some form of reciprocation, accepting a nod or half smile in the interim. It was near unheard of that she began the sentiment. Twice in one day almost mythical.

Yet here she was, sitting astride him with bated breath, needing to hear his reply.

“I love you too Brienne. With everything I have to give.” They met in the middle to kiss, her leaning down, him stretching up. Tenderness between the two warriors who were grappling heartbeats prior.

Bracing her palms against his chest the Lady Knight shifted, settling herself over his cock and he cheekily leaned forward, undoing the sash with a swipe of his hand, parting the robe widely until it
barely clung to her shoulders.

"Jaime…” She scolded gently. “Bold.”

He grinned up at her. “I like my woman naked.” He foresaw her protestation.

“I’m out in the open.”

With agile grace he flipped them, depositing her in the bed of sand. “Solved.”

“You're impossible.”

“You are too. Quite the pair we make.”

Their talking ceased with an ardour filled kiss, an idyllic mess of lips and tongues. Her tight, slick passage below enveloping his shaft as he pushed inside, eliciting two simultaneous moans of gratification. Both exactly where they wanted to be, doing precisely what they wanted to be doing. A supreme symmetry of minds and desires, achieving perfect harmony of bodies and souls.

Rage was a storm when she had liquor in her veins, coming in violent blustering gusts. During the eye she had sat, sipped, hatched. Lulled by the grape and transported to a merry realm in the not too distant future. Here she visualised the fall of her adversary, revelling in the abject misery she would inflict. An already frightful face turning grotesque, crumpling red with tears and devastation.

But after a stretch the twitches at the corners of Cersei’s mouth subsided, beginning to droop, then flatten. The gnawing starting to eat at her, make her restless. Mere conceptualisation was not enough. She needed to make it happen, **now**. Bring it forth. Turn figment into reality.

*Why wait?* Commencement only had its benefits; the detriment was all to the hulking joke of a Lady. Sooner was always preferable to later.

Stepping out of the stronghold, her mind’s eye conjured tempests. Gathering swirls of black mass ready to unleash hell upon their parade. Mayhaps she could see them? Lightning flashing menacingly from within, promises of payback and retribution…

Or was it just the fog of inexpensive fermented milk?

Regardless – the thunder would be hers.
Her staggering entrance was counterclimatic, mouth gaping wide, ready to let her tirade fly. But she found the deck deserted. Not a sickening display in sight.

*Cheated again.*

It riled her enough to explode, churning, festering hatred building pressure without release.

She was ready to upend the table, untether the hurricane within. Venting it upon the small sitting area, the enabling accomplice to their crimes.

But a sigh stopped her. A low rustle carried on the breeze.

Cersei’s heels clicked upon the timber, edging closer to the rails, clinging on to prevent herself from losing footing and tumbling down the stairs.

*“Jaime, my Jaime…”*

She squinted into the dim distance below, grogginess blurring their heaving bodies. Lovers entwined and moaning – wrong to her in all conceivable ways.

**Mine. Jaime is mine; he has always been mine. The bitch must be stopped, reminded who he really belongs to…**

Whirling towards her son’s crib, the lioness stalked closer, purring to his sleeping form.

*“My boy – you will help your Mother. It’s all for the cause. Pain is the price for our goal. You will survive it. But now…”* She parted his swaddling, revealing his tiny tummy. Infant skin almost unblemished except for the marring of his birthmark, a defect she wished daily would fade. It made him less than perfect.

*He will make it up to me.*

*“…I need you to scream.”*

Taking his soft skin between her nails she pinched hard, digging in and twisting.

Tytan’s ear-splitting wail of distress sliced the night and she smiled in satisfaction, hastily withdrawing but lingering nearby.
Jaime abruptly stilled above her mid thrust, lips a hair’s breadth from her skin. Mane tumbling back from his brow as he lifted his head, intently listening. “Did you hear that?”

In earnest Brienne hadn’t heard a thing – her senses singing too loudly, ascending to paradise, mere strokes from release. Pulse pounding in her veins, breathing laborious, fibres and nerves twitching in preparation for crescendo. Her cunt spasmed around his stationary manhood, begging for friction. Wringing his cock, inspiriting his zeal; desperate for him to go on…

“There.” He pushed up on extended forearms, barely maintaining balance upon his stump. She instinctively grabbed his wrist to steady him, brought her legs up to cradle his on either side. Holding him securely, fast in place - in her.

“A bird?” Brienne volunteered throatily. “We have many of them here. It can be in the shrubs-”

Then she heard it too, a resonating keening. Panicked, fearful and pained.

“My son.” Jaime sprang to his feet, wrenching his wrist from her grip and length from her sheath, leaving her jarringly empty. “Something has upset Tytan.” He pulled his breeches up, fumbling clumsily with the laces. “He doesn’t usually cry like that.”

“Perhaps he woke with a fright and is confused.” She sat up, bunching her robe around herself. Pressing her legs together in an attempt to lessen the dissatisfied ache. Juices wasting from their joining, leaking uselessly down her inner thigh. It was irrational how vulnerable and abandoned she felt in this moment, shoved down the ladder of importance.

“No. Something’s wrong.” He growled in annoyance at his fastenings, making do with a poorly tied knot. “A parent can tell these things.”

“Of course.” His words stung and she knew they had no right to, that Jaime had only spoken out of caring for his young. But somehow it felt like a wall, a divider between them, segregating the childless from the parents.

Mayhaps it has merit, look at how I was just thinking. Self-indulgent and immature. An innocent babe is crying his lungs out, yet I would sit here feeling hollow and dejected over pleasures of the
flesh. A fine mother I would make. I should be ashamed. The boy is Jaime’s and therefore owns a chunk of my heart. He comes first.

Jaime apologetically caught her eye, intuitively reading into her tone. “I’m sorry.”

“Go. It’s fine. I understand.” Brienne knotted the sash around her waist, preserving what little modesty she had left considering their escapades. “I will be right on your heels.”

With a nod he dashed up the stairs and she bounded upright, brushing the excess sand from her backside and scurrying to catch up. Almost colliding with Jaime at the top of the steps, where he stood frozen in his tracks.

“You call yourself a Father.” Cersei was leaning over the crib, bundling a howling Tytan into her arms. Wrath emanating from her voice as she coddled the baby into her shoulder. “I could hear him screaming from halfway across the castle and you were nowhere in sight!”

“I was on my way to him.” Jaime was stricken at the scolding. “I came as soon as I heard…”

“Well you certainly took your time. I made it here from the servants’ quarters.” Her tone was a hiss, emeralds flashing at him. “What was so important that your son could be left to bawl?”

Cersei’s gaze travelled from Jaime’s hung head to Brienne behind him, taking in both their appearance. Clothes loose, draped crookedly on their frames, limbs coated in grains of sand, hair dishevelled and unkempt. “Oh I see. You left a helpless infant alone so you could fuck.” She shook her head in disgust. “And they rang a bell to proclaim my shame.”

“He-he was sleeping soundly Cersei I swear. If he were remotely unsettled, I would never have stepped away.”

Brienne laid a hand comfortingly on his shoulder, letting him know she was there. Fortifying him against the accusations being laid at his feet. “Tytan was tranquil, I saw it too. His Father cares-”

“You don’t speak!” Cersei lifted a single finger, silencing Brienne. “This is between myself and Jaime about our son. It does not involve you.”

"Brienne is his step-mother, she has every right to an opinion and you will not speak to her with such disrespect!” Even under the stress of the circumstances, Jaime still had her back. Incensing his sister further by taking her to task. *This is what Jaime and I do, we protect each other. Love each other.*

Cersei wheeled on him, reprising her reprimand, the rage in her eyes matched by her deadly tone. “If we are to address disrespect - then shall I ask why he was out here in the first place?! Far from his Mother?!”

Jaime opened his mouth but she cut him off before he could answer. “Don’t bother! I am well aware. Did you think I would not go to him? Check on him? You removed him from the nursery where I had left him as though my decision was somehow the irresponsible one. Then I find him
here, unattended. I suppose rutting in the sand took precedence over being a parent.”

“You were preoccupied with drinking and I didn’t want him surrounded by strangers. I thought he would enjoy the fresh air—”

“Is that what you thought? How quaint. He is a defenceless baby Jaime. Something has bitten him, some monstrous tropical insect has crawled beneath his swaddling, feasting upon our son’s belly whilst you were getting your end in. He has a welt, that is why he was screaming.” She rocked him back and forth, kissing his small forehead. “Maybe I was right for all those years to relegate you to uncle. You are clearly not involved enough to be a Father.”

Horrible woman, she aimed for his weak spot. How could she use his own children against him?

All the colour drained from Jaime’s face, horror and hurt turning him ashen. “Gods, is he alright?”

“He will be. No thanks to you.”

“I’m sorry…” He sounded so distraught, Brienne just wanted to embrace him, but she held back. Watching Cersei's manipulation play out first hand. The emotional blackmail and abuse she had used for decades to keep Jaime compliant. “… I love him. I would never intentionally put him in harm’s way.”

The former Queen was like ice, unwavering and unsympathetic. “Explain that to him. He is in pain.”

Concern creased Brienne’s brow, guilt turning her own chest to lead. Whether or not Cersei is opportunistic does not change the fact that the babe came to harm. “I can arrange for Maester Cyril to check him. Make certain there is no poison, see if an antidote should be administered.”

“That won’t be necessary…” Cersei’s response was lightning quick, flinching backwards, teetering slightly on her heel.

She has been drinking. A great deal I would say. Jaime was right about that.

“…There are elder women amongst the household staff. Experienced wives and Mothers know better than any old coot how to care for a child. I will take him to them.”

Jaime put out his arms, repentant and pleading. “Can I hold him? Please, let me take him.”

Cersei scowled. “It is against my better judgment.” With a reluctant nod she relinquished the baby into his Father’s arms, nails clawing sharply into Jaime's wrist as she warned. “Don’t let us down again.” It made Brienne shudder.

“I won’t.” The lion pressed his lips to his son’s head, murmuring apologies in soothing tones. “Come on, let’s get you inside where it’s safe.”
She is vile - how many years has Jaime been a victim of these atrocities? His emotions weaponised and used against him?

Brienne's heart bled for him as she watched Jaime disappear behind the greenery, folding her arms over her chest. Suddenly acutely aware of how little she was wearing, the flush in her cheeks, the way her hair stuck up in all odd directions.

However, her thoughts vacillated, wavering between the embarrassment she would generally feel and something she couldn’t quite latch on to. A concept out of reach, a sum that didn’t add up.

She regarded Cersei pensively, paying no heed to the critical appraisal held in the other woman’s mossy lakes. Choosing to accept responsibility for the part she played, leaving her deserving of her good-sister’s condemnation but also well-apprised of how the situation was appropriated to further Cersei’s aims.

“I am deeply apologetic too. I would never have perceived that there could be perils out here for a little one. I wrongfully assumed it would be a safe environment.” The Lady Knight stepped closer, struggling against her own discomfort to try and empathise. *Jaime panders in order to lull Cersei into civility. Mayhaps I should adopt a similar method.* “You must be worried about him.”

Though even as she said the phrase the same niggle resurfaced, elements to Cersei’s logic she would never comprehend.

*If he were mine, I would take no chances. I would want the Maester to see to him with due haste.*

“I can only hope you both take a lesson away from this incident.” The former Queen almost smiled and a tingle crept down the length of Brienne’s spine. “That Jaime has learnt how we – his son and the Mother of his child – take priority. And that you finally realise we will always come first.”

*She does little to disguise her true agenda.*

Sauntering nearer Cersei glared up at her, unintimidated where others would quake from her sheer size. Reeking of wine and mastery. “We will always be in his life. When the winter returns again, when our son grows and makes us proud, when the novelty of newness fades and long after you are cast aside.”

Cersei’s footfalls began to recede as she strode smugly away, but Brienne was forging links, the chain assembling itself at the last second. “Cersei.”

“Yes?” She was almost too cheerful, the mask of concerned Mother slipping.

“You said Tytan has a mark.” The new lioness replayed the scene in her head. “If you were only just picking him up as we arrived – how did you know he had been bitten?”
His swaddling would have been in the way. She would have had to search for the source of his upset.

“Intuition.” Her good-sister’s eyes gleamed, glassy and slightly alarmed. “As you can’t even fall pregnant, I wouldn’t expect you to understand. A Mother knows these things.”

The goodbyes were a lengthy procession, the pier crammed with dignitaries and well-wishers, the sheer numbers requiring both Podrick and herself to be on duty, ensuring the safety of their monarch.

King Bran was engaged in deep discussions with her Father, their alliance now firm and iron clad. The pair’s postures relaxed but dignified, lofty pledges of support and loyalty carrying to where she stood.

Brienne inhaled, soaking in the last rays of sun upon her skin, preparing for the long voyage ahead. If it were anything like the trip over, His Grace would have them stay inside his cabin, watching him clutch a sprig of Weirwood, eyes rolling to white. Their sole duty darting forth and ensuring his wheels were firmly wedged whenever the tides changed, and the ship rocked to one side.

I cannot believe I am actually saddened to be leaving. Having my husband here changed the hue with which I view Evenfall, made me picture how it would be if we Summered in these halls.

The previous evening had been admittedly dreamlike until it ended in disaster. The way all her fantasies seemed wont to do. Thrills and laughter turning to tension, a carefree romp resulting in her waiting hours in their room, solitary and sleepless. Her angst only broken by the arrival of a message to her door.

Tyrion had written to advise of their immediate departure the next day, detailing that upon arrival back at Evenfall, the King had been greeted with correspondence from the Capital. The contents were not disclosed but its urgency sounded dire, the news simply adding another layer to her unease.

When Jaime finally returned, she had sat upright, instantly enquiring after Tytan’s health. Her stomach tied in knots, fearing the worst. That a poison had sickened him, that corruption was
taking hold – their heedless leisure spawning dire consequences, a price she repetitively paid whenever she risked lowering her guard and having fun. *If it was truly an insect...*

“He is fine.” Her husband had assured her, finishing changing his clothes and flopping into bed. “Cersei is still fussing of course, but there appears to be no sign of toxin. If there were, I would have insisted upon Maester Cyril seeing him. But Tytan seems to be lapping up the attention, forgetting the ordeal altogether.” He gave her a wan smile. “Babes are surprisingly resilient – adults not so much.” His sigh blasted into the chamber, raking his hand over his face and beard. “I don’t think I will be over this anywhere near as quickly.”

“He is safe. The danger has passed.” Brienne had rubbed her palm up and down his chest, hoping to alleviate at least some of his malaise.

“I know but-”

“Shhhh.” She placed a finger to his lips. “You don’t need to explain. I feel it too. This strange variety of mortification, like we failed in our duty of care.”

“In hindsight it is so obvious, I appear like an absolute dolt not to have foreseen the possibility.” Suspiring heavily, he scratched his head. “But an insect bite never did cross my mind…”

“Did you see the mark?” Propping herself up on one arm, she regarded him seriously, remaining unconvinced about this aspect of Cersei’s account. “I grew up here, Maester Cyril has been around even longer – it is seldom such an incident occurs. It is more common for him to treat stings from sea creatures or pinches from crustacean claws. I cannot begin to imagine what would have done such a thing - perhaps the shape can indicate the type of animal which caused the damage?”

“I saw the welt on his belly. It was quite nasty, red with bruising appearing, whatever it was must have clamped on with some force. But there was no puncture wound or point of entry, that is why I’m readily dismissing the possibility of venom. If there was a chance anything had made it to his bloodstream, I couldn’t even consider sleeping.”

*He really has a mark, that lends credence to her tale.*

*What is the alternative? Any other explanation is too despicable to contemplate. Surely even Cersei is not that ruthless....*

Brienne pursed her lips. “I asked Cersei how she knew so quickly what had happened to him, from what I saw she had only just arrived with no time to assess his condition. She told me it was Mother’s intuition – is that possible?”

Jaime shrugged. “I guess. The bond between parent and child is strong. Some say Mothers have a connection, an invisible umbilicus that remains long after birth.”

*I know little of it, I must accept the events as told.* Reluctantly she let go of her suspicions, unable to prove or disprove her senses which were pricking. “I suppose there are a lot of maternal traits I am unfamiliar with, things I cannot possibly understand.”

“You will.” Her lion shuffled closer to kiss her forehead. “Don’t be too harsh upon yourself,
Tytan is my fourth child and I am only now uncovering these mysteries. Look at how I interpreted his cry, if somebody had tried to describe that to me years ago, I would have laughed in their face. But there is an instinct - I know now and one day you will too. When we have a babe of our own, we can recall this conversation.” Jaime rubbed his nose against hers and she nodded, dismissing the last of her misgivings.

“Speaking of which...” Reaching down she let her hand hover at his waistband. “…I at least found my pleasure with you once tonight, but you have been left wanting.”

He gave her a tired smile, gently shaking his head. “As much as it pains me to admit, I am too drained, both physically and emotionally.”

“It does not have to be intercourse if you need release.” Lowering her eyes, she spoke to his bicep. Still unable to articulate the impure thoughts in her mind with him staring at her. “I will happily stroke you to completion, see to your needs. I know you are a generous lover Jaime, but it would not be selfish. I can gladly repay you for earlier.”

Carding fingers through her hair, his refusal was benign. “May I take that offer and redeem it at a later date?”

“Yes.” She was not disconcerted, if she was being honest with herself, her mood was not where it needed to be either. “By the way – we sail out tomorrow, orders directly from the King.”

“Sleep it is.” Jaime had grunted wryly, pulling the blankets over both their shoulders.

The morning however was a different story. Daybreak ending the night and with it the cloud he carried. “Wake up wife.” A nose in her ear, a kiss on her cheek, obvious hardness pushing into the crease of her thighs. “I would like to claim that generous suggestion now…”

“Now?” Brienne had rolled over into his waiting arms, chuckling sleepily. “The sun is barely up…”

“Then we have time.” Lips tickled against hers, morning breath easily overlooked for the warmth of his tongue.

“Not much-” Returning his kisses, she was well and truly rousing. “-we are scheduled to leave before noon.” She didn’t know why she bothered; Jaime clearly wasn’t concerned. He flung one leg over hers, digits creeping beneath her shift and sliding her smallclothes down.

“Jaime!” Her reproach was tinged with amusement. “I believe my offer involved my hand…”

“Is that a no?” Green eyes bore into hers, reading the truth of her desire within, raising his brows and just daring her to declare otherwise.

“No. It’s a yes.” Brienne admitted, swiftly untying the knot on his night breeches, rolling them down over his buttocks, enjoying the way his skin felt against her fingertips. “But nothing fancy, efficiency is key.”
Her bedframe was still creaking when their breakfast tray was left outside the door, the hearty meal and tea near gone cold by the time it was discovered. They both wolfed it down hungrily anyway, laughing as they realised neither had eaten a sensible dinner the night before.

“Daughter.” Lord Selwyn strode towards her, his austerity chasing away the rose in her complexion along with her erotic recollections. His strong grip closed around her armoured shoulder. “Come, I would speak with you in private before you depart.”

The Lady Knight let him steer her away from the main group, checking to ensure that Podrick remained at his post, waiting until they were out of earshot to ask. “What is it that you have to say Father?”

“I come to you regarding concerns. Both of my own and - even more troubling - the whispers that have been brought to my notice from the staff within my own stronghold.” He lowered his voice, leaning in. “I wanted to speak with you sooner, but our time was cut short. It is regarding your progeny…”

“Father please, we have it well taken care of.”

“No Brienne-” The Evenstar raised his hand, asking her for quiet. “-Hear me out. Your husband has four natural children to his credit. You have none and are a woman who will all too hastily approach the end of her fertile years. It is your responsibility to fashion both Casterly Rock and Evenfall Hall with heirs. In light of his proven potency, the blame rests solely upon you if you fail and given your decades of reckless behaviour - treating your body as if it were a man’s – I would not be greatly surprised if you are incapable of carrying babes at all.”

Brienne’s jaw went slack, the wound he had inflicted evident on her features.

_I cannot believe he just said that to me._

Observing her expression, Lord Selwyn softened slightly. “Brienne, I am not being unduly harsh, I am preparing you. For what they will say, for what can eventuate. I was even going to arrange for you to meet with a senior Wood’s Witch who acts as midwife in town, your Mother consulted with her upon occasion. But you are leaving – so all I can do is warn you. Give him a child Brienne. Quit playing at Knights and put all your focus upon your natural role before your husband places you aside for a woman who can give him what he requires. The last thing I need is a barren daughter returning to my shores; heirless, used of body and with a broken heart.”

Mustering all her forbearance, she kissed her Father on the cheek. “Thank you for imparting your wisdom so candidly. I can be in no doubt of your thoughts on the topic.” The twinge beneath her ribs was sharp but she balmed it with placating thoughts.

_Jaime spilt his seed within me just this morning, perhaps it will take - then all of this will dwindle away._
“Goodbye Father, until we meet once more.”

Walking down the dock she spied Jaime waiting for her, his grin lighting the atmosphere with greater brightness than the sun.

All will fall into place. Mother I have faith. We have love to guide us, the greatest resource in ample supply.

“Lady Commander.” King Bran called to her, gesturing towards the gangplank, summoning her to board his flagship once again.

For a shining moment it had slipped my thoughts.

She felt her heart descend, landing in her boots, the sentiments reflected across the pier as Jaime’s face plummeted. He gave her a wave with his golden hand, and she responded in kind. Remembering a rowboat upon the Trident and the way her soul had felt like a sinker, contemplating if they would ever see each other again.

Look how far we’ve come from there. Things will get better.

Husband and wife exchanged a sad smile, mentally starting the countdown until they were reunited upon the wharf at King’s Landing. Their wordless communication only shattered by the Captain urging Jaime to make haste.

Even so, Brienne stood in lingering vigil, leaving King and Council waiting. Watching until her lion disappeared safely inside the stately ship her Father had loaned his good-son for the journey, joining Cersei and Tytan below deck.
Obligation vs Devotion

Chapter Summary

Cover Art by: Ro_Nordmann

"I will wait for you..."
Lyrics, War of Hearts by Ruelle
Verse 1, Line 3

Chapter Notes

Dear Readers,

I draft this note with a leaden chest and teary eyes - for it has come to my attention that the angst level felt when reading this fic, may exceed what I originally perceived.

In its earliest days of posting, I began this story with a foreword stating that this fic wasn’t for the faint of heart. Regaling you with how I drenched my keyboard with tears whilst writing certain later chapters (I blew my nose and sniffled so much that I received a concerned knock on my door enquiring whether I had caught a cold – true story). The last couple of chapters (25 and 26), I deemed my ‘romance chapters’ and
considered the angst level low. Given the reaction to them, all I can say is ‘yikes.’ I must have underestimated them. And that means there is angst ahead. A lot. Starting now. Please read the tags for a recap, because I worry some of the scarier ones may have gone overlooked (‘character death’ being one of them).

It was never my desire to make readers miserable, merely to remain faithful to the characters we were given in show canon and continue their story in the themes of: True love can withstand being tested, relationships and marriage can be difficult, struggles can either make or break your bond and things don’t always go according to plan. The measure of their love is how they survive and overcome – and for our two beloved, beautiful, complicated souls, they have a lot to work through in the often bleak world of Westeros.

I adore Jaime and Brienne more than words can say, anyone who chats to me knows how much I defend and protect their characters, a constant champion of their joined romantic destiny. I generally write much more lighthearted tales – but this time I decided to test the strength of the pure love I know they have, so I can watch them emerge triumphant against adversity.

Which brings me to now. It doesn't sit comfortably with me knowing that I've made people sad or distressed; the knowledge has kept me up all last night. I have turned this over and over in my head and considered discontinuing, but I have invested so much in this tale, I don’t want to give up on it, no matter how angsty it is. It is fully written, it is here in my laptop and against all odds I am proud of it.
But if I am to apologise and caution about every angst scene from hereon in, my author's notes will be longer than the chapters themselves. (As this one nearly is).

Therefore, here is the plan:
If the angst level so far has been too high for you personally – please step away before it escalates (which it will from this chapter on). I don't wish to cause distress and I know the feeling of needing to quit a story. I have been reading fics for years and I have had to step away myself in the past when the stories became too intense for my own personal tolerances. Go with my heartfelt understanding but please, I ask you not to hold the angst in this fic against me – I am a romance writer generally, and I have far lighter tales currently in progress which will be posted in the near future.

For those who wish to stick it out – I am aiming to fast track the release of chapters. I have a vision of now updating once a day, but won’t make promises as sometimes life gets in the way. I apologise in advance for the inevitable influx of errors (grammatical and spelling) as I rush through my editing process and will likely have a delay now in replying to comments.

For those who will read it in one go at the end – please check back. All going well, this fic will be completely posted within a fortnight.

I appreciate you all, for sharing your time with me and for reading. Writing is the light in my life, just today its glow is dimmed. I sign this off referencing another one of my tags. ‘Angst with a happy ending’

Hugs and eternal Braime Love
<3 M
What else can there possibly be to talk about? Either we are at war or we’re not?”

The kitchen smelt of cinnamon, the buns baking in the woodfire stove making his stomach rumble. Jaime bounced Tytan on his hip, delighting as his son’s tiny arms stretched out to slap excitedly at his cheeks and beard. “Life’s all about waiting it seems my boy. Whether it be for meetings to end or treats to bake. All will come if you just have patience – a trait neither you nor I possess. Sorry about that.” He kissed his pudgy hand. “Though I agree they smell delicious and we are going to be first in line to get them, one for you, one for me and one for Aunt Brienne.” His face darkened. “If she is ever released.”

“Are you stalking my oven again Lannister?” Betsy was one of the cooks and responsible for the delicious aroma permeating. A plump and slightly bossy middle-aged woman whom he managed over the course of several weeks to wrap around his little finger.

Jaime gave her his most dazzling smile. “Well although I agree a kitchen is not a lion’s natural hunting ground, when things smell this good you leave us little choice.”

“Oh such a charmer. You know they were intended for His Grace’s Bannerman. They are having afternoon tea when the meeting is through.”

“Spare some…? We have waited so long.” He pressed his cheek to Tytan’s with an exaggerated pout.

“Fine.” Huffing, she waved her washcloth dismissively. “Lookers the pair of you, could get away with murder and probably have. Just don’t go getting in my way.”

After a short while he had half a dozen buns packed into a tiny basket and covered with cheesecloth, the woman threading it over his stumped arm so he wouldn’t lose grip on the tot. “Kiss.” She tapped her cheek, secretly revelling in the attentions from a Lord.

“Thank you Bets.” Pecking her gently, he sauntered away with his prize.
It was almost an hour later when his wife finally found them in the nursery, sinking into the high-backed chair in full armour. “That was neverending.”

Jaime alighted from his spot on the rug, leaving Tytan to play with his carved wooden toys and crossing to the table. “I’ll say and the fourth this week.” He had set the buns upon a stone plate warmed by the fire, keeping them toasty, immensely proud of his domestic ingenuity.

This is what boredom does.

“Look what we scored-” Whipping the cheesecloth back with a flourish, he revealed his prize. “-Fresh from the oven and not meant for us but your husband has connections. Even if it did mean I had to kiss another woman. Are you jealous?”

Brienne leant on her hand, looking worn to a frazzle, choosing to ignore his nonsense. “Thank you but I’m not hungry.”

“Come on my love.” He knelt on the ground next to her, pushing one under her nose. “Just take a whiff. You have to eat something.”

“I am too tired to eat Jaime. I come off night shifts and go straight into Council. If I’m not in meetings, I am guarding the King. If I’m not guarding, I am drilling the new recruits…”

“I know.” He listlessly dropped the bun beside him, taking her hand, toying with the long digits he missed now even more than his own. “I offered to train the Knights for you. I have nothing better to do with my time. As much as Tytan thrives on my constant attention, I am so much at a loss that I am making a nuisance of myself with the kitchen staff.” Raising her ivory skin to his lips, he kissed the back of her hand. “I miss you. If I can reduce your workload in anyway, by any measure no matter how small – mayhaps we will get some time together.”

“That is sweet Jaime, but you know I asked. Bran won’t allow you to have anything to do with his Kingsguard. His leniency only goes so far, and I cannot say I blame him for being dubious of the man who crippled him. He trusts me but he watches you…” She wearily stroked his beard with her index finger, and he pressed his cheek eagerly into her touch, craving the contact more than the air he breathed. “...For what it’s worth – I miss you too. The bed feels lonely when I snatch sleep by myself.”
“I will not lie to you, I am lonesome. I need my wife. And the last thing I want to do is put another burden on your already overladen shoulders – but it’s the truth.” He exhaled, wanting to hold her but seeing the layers of hard, cold metal in his way.

*It is like this all the time now. I can’t remember the last time I glimpsed her without her plate.*

“Brienne – what are they saying in these meetings? Do you see a light at the end of this tunnel?”

“Sadly, no. His Grace is calling the Crownland’s Banners today, the situation is only intensifying, worsening. Conflict is a beast with a mind of its own and it seems intent upon running rampant against the will of both King and Council. We will postpone as long as we can, but at the same time we must make ready or leave ourselves defenceless.”

“So, no reprieve in sight then?” He tried to think of her, to hide the disappointment in his tone. “Maybe soon the other Kingsguard will take their roles and you can have more time with me.”

“Here’s hoping.” Her murmur was slurred, hand growing limp against his cheek. Jaime cradled it in his own, holding it there, watching as she drifted to sleep sitting upright and kissing her wrist. “I love you wife.”

Supper together was nothing short of a miracle, the long wait in the dining room of the White Sword Tower rewarding in the end. The novelty of sitting across from his woman well worth the congealed stew and bread turned stale from being left out too long.

He twinkled at Brienne from his seat, playfully nudging her boot with his own beneath the table, rubbing against her calves and trying to get her to be in the moment with him.

“The more he sees, the more paranoid he is becoming - and I cannot lay blame at his door because I too find it troubling.” She shifted her chair backwards an inch with an abrupt squeak, scowling at him and pulling her leg away. “Can you be serious?”

Her tone had that snappy quality, the one which she seemed to exclusively reserve for three scenarios: when Podrick was being incompetent, when she was whipping the new Kingsguard into line and when he was being frisky. “Here I am discussing crucial points from my day and the state of the realm - and you are doing whatever the hell that was. I am exhausted Jaime; I am trying to include you. If you aren’t going to be sensible, I may as well save my breath and energy.”

“Sorry…” The lion Lord held up his left hand in surrender, suing for peace. “I just wish our conversation didn’t have to be all politics, doom and gloom. There is enough of that around the castle as it is.”
“Well that is the current climate Jaime, whether we wish it or not. War is upon our horizon and we are all coming to terms with it. King Bran must prepare to fight his own blood and I must steel myself for the conflict within.” She sipped from her water, looking incredibly sombre. “Sansa was my liege for so long, I protected her with my life. It is nearly unimaginable for me to lead a squadron against her. I thought when we successfully escaped Winterfell, I had managed to evade these difficult choices, but it appears that everything eventually catches up.”

“Brienne.” Jaime alighted from his chair, walking around the perimeter of the table to stand behind her. Fingers gently kneading her shoulder as he had once before. “I too have encountered such conflicts in my time. I’ve been pit against my brother, my sister and you.” She glanced backwards at him, her expression drawn and blue eyes dull.

“How did you reconcile it within yourself? So that the spectres don’t come back to haunt you?”

“Well I think you know for the better part I didn’t manage it, they harry me through the night still.” He ran his thumb in circles on the back of her neck, the knot of muscles bunched so tightly he made it a personal mission to loosen them. “All you can do is protect what is yours, those who are dearest to you. They are your immediate circle; they are what matter.”

Leaning down he pressed his lips to her neck, brushing aside her leather collar to access the flesh. “Allegiance, fealty, vows, it sounds good in theory, but it all means shit when you lay upon your pillow. Then the only person you want is the one you love, they keep you warm, hold the demons at bay.” He nipped up to her earlobe, fingers itching to shed her clothing, crotch beginning to throb.

*It’s been too long.*

“Come upstairs…” He rasped. “… I can make you forget.”

The Lady Knight shook her head, swivelling in her seat and standing. “I am sorry. I know this must be difficult for you, but I just don’t feel inclined.” She leant backwards against the table, crossing her legs and arms. “My head is bursting with…so much I cannot silence. Life and death and duty.” Taking a shuddering breath, she buried her face in her hands. “I am so tired Jaime. All I want is to close my eyes and rest.”

“Then let’s go up to bed.” Walking over to her, he tilted his head to the side. Trying to peer through the cracks in her fingers. “Everything seems worse when you are tired. Maybe after a few hours of sleep you will feel more yourself. I will tuck you in and be there when you wake up…” He knew rubbing her arm in this way was suggestive, but he needed her to know how much he was yearning for their physical intimacy.

“I can’t.” Brienne emerged from behind her hands, dragging them down her cheeks in stress. “His Grace wants me on the night shift.”

“What?!” This time there was no keeping the irritation from his voice. “He does remember that you are a *married* woman?! That you have a husband waiting for you?”
“I’m sure he does. I told you before, he is very anxious about the hostility. His superstitions run on high and when they do, he prefers me to guard him. Something about a tall friend of his – Hodor – he made him feel safe and now that onus rests upon me.”

“He is sabotaging us – that’s what he’s doing.” Jaime paced, anger growing by the second. “Keeping you with him both now and long term.”

“How?” She wrinkled her nose. “You are sounding neurotic.”

“You just said it yourself!” He gestured wildly with his stump. “You make him feel secure. You. Because of your height or the line he draws between you and this other person. Either way, he has no intention of letting you go, and he is making damn sure you can’t use your amendment.”

“He can’t possibly control that…”

“You can’t get pregnant if we don’t have sex!” Jaime knew he was exasperated, almost shouting but it was too much. “He takes you away from me night after night and day after day. Monopolising you and running you ragged. When is my time Brienne? I need you too, just as much as he does.”

“I’m trying Jaime.” There were tears forming in her eyes and they cut straight to his quick. “I can’t be everywhere at once. I can’t defy orders. I can’t make the impending war stop. The only thing I can do is ask you to be tolerant. To wait and be there for me and not to make me feel worse than I already do.”

“Fuck.” His anger melted, rushing over to her and bundling her into his arms. “I’m sorry my love.”

He kissed her temple, holding her close. “I’m sorry.”

The iron snare around his heart constricted tightly, hating himself for putting her under more pressure. “It seems all we do lately is apologise to each other.”

Horrible is how she would describe it. A helpless, maddening state of watching your life play out
without you in it. Days and weeks slipping by in monotonous continuity, barely distinguishable from one another. Null of spark, with precious little to set her spirit ablaze.

*This was never how I saw it all unfolding. Things were supposed to improve.*

*Looking to the past, thinking longingly about nights on the run and struggling for our lives seems such a non sequitur.*

*But fighting back to back resulted in lying hip to hip, chest to chest. Where hours were borrowed and expected norms be damned. How I miss not knowing what the future held, for it made us live in the moment...*

Of late the only thing that ignited her blood was inimical. The resignation and reticent envy she felt every time she left Jaime in the nursery or passed by him playing with Tytan in the garden. All too often she observed a lioness in their vicinity, manifesting from the shadows like the shade she had once witnessed, watching, waiting for her chance. Gravitating towards him like a moth to an open flame.

Then Brienne knew she was alive, the searing inside scalding her lungs and heart, setting the days apart with its ferocity but making each incident subsequently harder to walk away from. Knowing that with each step, she was handing her role over to Cersei’s grasping hands. Leaving Jaime vulnerable to her baleful clutches. Essentially giving her antagonist exactly what she wanted. Proving her doubters correct.

*But there are eyes scrutinising me from all corners – not just my role as a wife, but as a Knight as well.*

Her new candidates were a blessing and a curse. Divvying up the workload, each keen to earn their place but requiring her to be exceedingly vigilant. Their tongues were loose and prone to wagging. More often than once she had caught them nattering about having a woman in charge of such a prestigious order. Speculating about who would take her place.

“We won’t have to be answerable to her for long, she has to go play house and give the Kingslayer some little blonde brats.”

Another day she had entered the White Sword Tower to discover a scuffle, several young men clapping and cheering whilst two of her knights rolled around on the floor, laying punches. When she yanked them apart and yelled, she could barely hide her surprise when one was Podrick.

Later - whilst they patched up his busted lip - he reluctantly disclosed the horrid things the lad had said about her. “I was defending your honour, My Lady.”

“You don’t need to do that Pod.” She wrung out the rag and handed it back to him, frowning when he didn’t apply enough pressure. “They are always going to hate me – I’m a woman and I outrank them. You will only make enemies by taking my part.”

“But he was undermining your authority in front of the others...”

“Bound to happen, and has been frequently I wager. The only difference is this time you were
within earshot.” Sighing at the inexorable, Brienne was resigned but not conquered. “That having been said, he’s been immediately dismissed from the running and sent packing. It’s for his own good – if he thought he had trouble with you, imagine when Jaime found out.”

But it was not even as straightforward as her recruits. There were also whispers amongst the Small Council. Bronn speaking too soon, too loudly after a meeting was adjourned, underestimating that he could be overheard.

He tugged roughly on the grey sleeve of the Grand Maester’s robe, getting his attention. “Hey – has she come seen ya?”

“Who?” Poor Sam was immediately confused, and Bronn lacked patience for the boy’s dearth of guile.

“The Lady Commander.”

Maester Tarly frowned, his mien outwardly displaying his disapproval of the Master of Coin’s conjecture. “I would not discuss it even if she had, my code from the Citadel respects the privacy of those who seek my aid.” He worked his jaw, wanting to make an enquiry of his own. “But – might I ask why?”

“We are planning for war.” The former sellsword made the statement like it was self-explanatory. “Her business should be the Council’s business. It would be good to know upfront while we draw up strategies if one of our Generals is gonna have a squirt in her belly. We need soldiers – leaders – not whelping bitches.”

The Lady Knight had been thankful for Sam’s discretion, for in honesty it had been Gilly she’d sought out, her Father’s parting advice running circles between her ears.

“I’m not falling.” Brienne had to force the three words out her mouth, hindered by embarrassment and the ignominy of the disclosure, admitting her shortcomings aloud to a third party.

“Sometimes it takes a while.” The younger woman bounced her second born on her knee, pure compassion and devoid of judgment. “How long since ye’ve been on Moon Tea?”

“More than a year. Not since Winterfell.”

“Oh.” Gilly’s face noticeably dropped, her own bundle in her lap attesting to just how long it had been. “How often ya been tryin’? Can I ask that? I know you Southerners don’t like talking of it openly.”

“Very infrequently of late.”

Please do not make me have to divulge that failure too.
“Well there ya go.” Gilly tapped her armoured knee reassuringly and Brienne frowned at the unsolicited contact. “Just give it some more time ‘tween the sheets. Not a bad recommendation, havin’ more fun with ya husband.” The girl’s smile was so genuine, the Lady Commander forced herself to return it.

“Yes, I suppose so.”

*I barely found a spare moment to come to you. It is easier said than done. And after each Council Meeting, I become less and less certain now is the time to bring a child into the world.*

But then she had sent her husband off to spend another day with his son - and unwittingly his lurking sister by-proxy. And it was as Brienne watched their blonde heads - one, two, then followed by a third – bobbing in the distance, that something inside her became determined to rally.

She *would* achieve, she *could* overcome.

If a Lady could earn a Knighthood, she could do anything she set her mind to. Recondition her thought patterns, scrape up shreds of time, summon reserves of energy buried far within, dousing the worries and bringing her marriage to the forefront.

And so, last night she had stolen a few hours. Trading and wreaking havoc with her own precise schedule. Arriving in their chamber for a regular bedtime.

“Is this a mirage?” Jaime had beamed, arms outstretched, pulling her into an embrace which almost choked her. Both from its ferocity and her own emotions. “No – she is corporeal. She is real.” He made a big show of patting her down, testing her solidity and making her roll her eyes at his fuss. “How was your day?”

With that simple sentence, Brienne adored him so much. The considerate question he had learnt to utter in the small spates of time they were granted. Listening, letting her vent and being there for her to lean upon. She knew then what she had to do.

*He deserves the same generosity in return.*

“I don’t want to talk about it.” It was a rare answer, one she seldom gave, and she watched his bewilderment whilst she perched on the end of the bed.

“Really?”

Brienne nodded, loosening the ties on her jerkin, each movement feeling like she was submersed in tar, taking more energy than she had. *I am so tired.* But still she persevered.

“What do you want to do?” Jaime was empathy and patience. All she could ask for and more.

*Which is why I must be selfless.*
So, although her brain screamed ‘sleep’ she answered. “Reacquaint.” Extending her arms out in beckoning, her thoughts making all the silent requests she knew she could not say in case they were misconstrued.

*Please just do all the work – remove my clothes, climb atop – this will sap what strength I have left to give. But I am glad to give it to you, to satisfy you.*

True to form, she did not have to signal him twice. Within seconds of her making the suggestion he had knocked her backwards into the mattress, smothering her in mountains of kisses, a starving man given his favourite meal.

She conjured enough of a second wind to help him with the laces, his one-handed efforts taking twice as long as it should. Lethargically shrugging and shimmying from her clothes, trying to disguise her torpor lest she offend. Covering up with gentle caresses and quiet sighs.

By the time he lay her down again on the blankets, even her reserves had been depleted. Happy to let Jaime take the reins while she lay beneath him, murmuring appreciatively when he kissed her neck, fondling her petals to make her slick.

“You have no idea how much I’ve missed you.” His voice was velvet, thrumming over her skin. “It is somehow even harder to be apart when you are so near.”

*I know… it is cruel.*

Brienne thought she had spoken the thought aloud. Earnestly she did. Though she didn’t hear it. She was sinking.

Into his arms and the softness beneath her, the rocking motions of his lovemaking more soothing than a lullaby. The feeling of holding close again that missing piece of her soul making her unwind.

*Jaime is my cure; he puts me to rights. I have not been this content in so long…*

Her mind conjured images of where they could be. A roadside inn, a pristine lake, a summer meadow – fresh with dewdrops and dandelions, their white fuzz blowing in the breeze.

*Mmmmmnn, lions. Lots of little golden lion flowers. I picked them as a girl. I picked a big lion as a woman. I am glad we got good weather for it; our coupling would be spoiled by the rain, but the skies are cerulean blue…* 

“You’re asleep.”

She was jerked awake by the brashness of his tone, blinking into green eyes steeped with hurt. Her grogginess too obvious to refute. “I may have drifted off.”

“You come to me for the first time in ages… and you fall asleep?”

*Oh fuck. “Jaime it’s not you.”*
He vaulted off the side of the bed, grabbing his clothes and pulling them on.

“Please, look at me.” Brienne grabbed the blanket, clutching it to herself and trying to mend the damage she had just unintentionally caused. “I am so tired. It turns out I can’t do it all, but I thought I would at least try – for us. I never meant to insult you…”

Jaime was dressing hurriedly, refusing to meet her gaze and making her more desperate to have him understand. “…I did not complain when you went to tend Tytan on Tarth!”

“That is different. He is a baby and that could not be helped.” He glared at her and she saw the full extent of his devastation. “For weeks Brienne, for over a month, I have waited. Through it all I have accepted being relegated to the scraps of your time, grabbing what limited opportunities you give me and trying to make the most of them. Never demanding, never complaining – because I love you. Then tonight, you come to me - at long last - and I’m not even worth staying awake for? If Bran summoned you now – you would find the energy, stand for hours, go without sleep. Why not for me? Am I not important to you?”

Her eyes welled, realising how badly she’d injured the man she loved. “Jaime-”

She moved to grab his arm but fell short, her husband slipping beyond her grasp and storming off into the night.

Brienne hadn’t spoken to him since.

Standing pensively, she watched him from afar. The love of her life talking animatedly to his son, sitting the toddler on top of a wooden fence rail, supporting him with his stumped arm around his belly and pointing to horses with the other.

She took a deep breath. Here goes…

“That’s a Destrier.” Jaime’s phrases became clearer as she approached. “They kick and bite. Knights have them for tourneys. And that one there, with the brown and white patches? That’s a-”

“Palfrey.” Answering for him, Brienne inserted herself in the conversation, leaning against the fence and fixing her husband with apologetic blue eyes. “They have a very even gait – are well suited to long journeys.”

“There, did you hear that?” He kept his tone light. “Aunt Brienne knows her horses well.”

“Jaime-” She waited until he looked at her before mouthing ‘I’m sorry’.

“Bygones.” Nodding he blew air through his lips, making a noise which sounded quite equine and made Tytan laugh, distracting him from the adult conversation. “I overreacted. I know I did. Can
we just move on? Or talk about it civilly when we have the chance? If it ever comes.”

“Yes.” The relief was welcome but her inner turmoil was yet to be quelled.

Crooking a finger, Jaime signalled her closer and she bowed her head when he stood on tiptoes to kiss her crown of blonde hair. Swapping the arm, he held around Tytan to slip his other around her plated waist.

Together they watched the horses being exercised, majestic beasts with coats shining, hooves stamping, and she wished she had the self-control to bite her tongue and not ask the question burning in her skull.

“What were you?”

“Hmmmnn?”

“When you left me last night. Where did you go?”

Jaime scoffed. “Where do you think? I was with Tytan. Other than Tyrion he is the only one that would take me in. But I know better than to knock on my brother’s door that late. Although he insists his ways are reformed, old habits are hard to unlearn and many a time over my years I have discovered him in a compromising position with a lady friend. Or several.” He raised his eyebrows, back to jesting. “Last night that was not something I wanted to see.”

Brienne gave him a half-smile, satisfied with his answer. But wishing she could cease hearing ‘Cersei’ whenever he said ‘Tytan.’ Fearing the Mother was with the son and would know of their quarrel.

*It would be mistrustful to ask, I should not assume they are interchangeable. Often, she is apart from her child now – a wet nurse must work night shifts too.*

She snuggled into the small space she was offered in the crook of his arm, shutting her eyes tight and inhaling. Longing to stay with her husband, prove his concerns of the previous night unfounded.

*But I am needed in the yard.*

Leaving him was even harder today, the way he barely blinked when she extricated herself, showing he was reconciled to her imminent departure – it sliced. Gashing her chest open in deep ravines of red.

So, she hardened her heart, protecting her most valuable organ, adding another layer to its chainmail and convincing herself she was numb - as she had countless times before.

*What alternative is there? Our charges take us to opposite ends of the stronghold, where one goes the other cannot follow.*
Still her brain had a mission, a problem to work upon when she stood in perfect imitation of a column of stone, achieving little more than a protection charm or security amulet. Shielding against things which only existed in the back of His Grace’s skull.

*But if even a minor solution can be dreamt up – I would happily countenance it. Move mountains if I’m able. Something has to give.*
Chapter Notes

Thank you.

Two little words which come nowhere near close enough to expressing the immensity of my gratitude for the lovely, beautiful, heartwarming comments received in response to yesterday’s Author’s Note. I was feeling very low and your support picked up my spirits and gave me the strength to continue. I appreciate it so, so much.

I will respond to everyone individually sometime in the hopefully not too distant future, as I still intend to strive and meet the goal of updating daily – but it sets a gruelling pace.
If I could hug you all I would. Instead all I can say is thank you again.
I think you are all wonderful and as a writer I wish I could convey exactly how much your comments mean to me. <3

PS. This chapter contains a NSFW scene 😊

“The Lady Commander should stay in the White Sword Tower – it is tradition.”

Bran stared out at Blackwater Bay, crows circling and cawing in clear skies above whilst Brienne pushed his wheeled-chair over the gravelled ground, maintaining an even speed to ensure he wasn’t jounced about. Upon hearing his response, she reschooled herself in courtesy, widening her eyes imploringly at Tyrion over their sovereign’s head.

They were on a walk around the battlements, the Lord Hand convincing the King he needed to see the outside world. Long days and nights spent inside the darkened planes behind his clouded eyes rendering their monarch even more withdrawn and quiet than usual. It seemed the further he delved into the Three Eyed Raven, the more disconnected he became with Bran Stark, and right now the Six Kingdoms needed the latter.

It was when the dam of conversation ran dry that the Lady Knight had seized upon her opportunity, putting forward what she had considered a relatively minor request.

*However from his reaction, I am starting to believe Jaime’s theory. He does not want me with my husband…*

“I am aware that tradition should be held in the highest of regard Your Grace. But in equal measure we have all found it lacks adaptability. I was most willing to stay in the White Sword Tower whilst we believed I was widowed, but now that we know better the restrictions of the Tower have become impractical. It is simply built for one. I know there are many free rooms within the Keep – all I ask is accommodation more suitable for two.” She took a lungful of air, adding quietly. “Preferably nearer to the nursery.”
Brienne had spent many an hour deliberating, looking for any tiny amendment which may lessen the strain upon her marriage, the demands upon both of their time which kept them separate.

Frequently she and Jaime found their schedules conflicting and due to the isolated positioning of their chambers, it was commonplace for their paths not to cross.

It was this she hoped to rectify. By organising better situated and larger lodgings, it would not only make the trek to the nursery shorter for Jaime, but it would allow him to bring Tytan into their quarters. A feat which would be impossible and selfish in their current room.

*I will have to adjust to a tot in our bedchamber but – if having Tytan near means keeping Cersei further away, I consider it a small price to pay.*

“What of the new candidates?” The King enquired. “Do they not need your presence in the Tower?”

“In all due respect Your Grace, I am their commander – not their Mother. When they are in their respective rooms it is the one place I do not have authority. Unless there is a breach of the vows - which they are yet to take, therefore not yet bound by - each is entitled to personal space. Having said that, the Tower is quite overcrowded at present, recruits are being housed with two or more to a single chamber until the appointments have been finalised. I have heard complaints that it is extremely cramped. My relocation would free up a much-needed vacancy.”

Bran pursed his lips, remaining mute on the topic, watching the water once more, becoming fascinated with how a flock of ravens navigated the sea birds when their trajectories collided.

*I am losing his focus.*

The rolling movement of his chair ceased, the sudden change snapping him back to the present. The King blinked his dark brown eyes slowly as she crouched beside him, bringing her height equal to his and Tyrion’s. “Please. I have done everything you have bid me. My husband needs to be there for his son, and I need to be available for him sometimes.”

Her entreaty was polite but within housed a message.

*I know what you’re doing. Be fair and just. To refuse me, makes your intention quite obvious.*

Tyrion cleared his throat, detecting the undercurrent and offering assistance. “The lodgings beside my own are available. They are not immense, but I believe they could serve the purpose. I can make the relevant arrangements this afternoon, if it suits…”
“This bed is bouncy.” Jaime sing-songed, trying his best to keep a hold of Tytan’s armpits whilst the toddler stretched and kicked his legs, pretending to jump on the mattress.

*With a hand it would be easy, with a stump – not so much.*

“He had leapt at her proposal to move to new quarters, bundling her into an embrace and thanking her profusely. The location was perfect, near to his brother and his son, the spacious chambers able to house a crib and toys when required. Though his first thoughts were admittedly less of functionality and more of romance.

*This feels more like a home, an abode of husband and wife, a place tailored to who we are now rather than who we were. The White Sword Tower holds too many memories, here we write new ones, make our own history.*

“So, this is the new lair.” He whirled around to find Cersei standing in the centre of the room, looking about in curiosity, hands clasped in front of her as she pondered. “Tyrion’s chambers are finer. But I suppose you must consider anything an upgrade.”

“By all means sweet sister, do come in, no need to knock.” His tone dripped in sarcasm, raising a single eyebrow at his uninvited visitor.

“What?” The former Queen feigned innocence. “The door was open Jaime.” Sighing she waltzed to the door gripping the knob. “If you do not want people wandering in I would suggest…” She gave it a theatrical push, letting it click itself closed. “You shut it.”

“Thank you for the lesson in entryways, now what do I owe the pleasure?”

*At least her mood seems genial, quite uplifted in fact.*
“I need to talk to you about something – as I am a considerate person.”

The bray of laughter came unbidden and she narrowed her eyes at him largely unimpressed. “Oh come now Cersei, you do not expect me to think your motives are purely selfless – what do you want?”

“It that any way to ask me?” Ever haughty, she raised her chin in defiance. Taking Tytan’s hand as he reached for his Mother.

“Fine.” Without forewarning he passed Tytan over to her and she groaned at his weight. Jaime ignored her grunt of protest, instead lacing his voice with irony. “Your thoughtfulness astounds, thank you so much for thinking of me, now what would you like to discuss?”

The Knight watched her immediately walk to the bed and deposit their son upon it, instantly turning her back to the boy and carrying on with her conversation. “I need to reassess our schedule with Tytan.”

“And Brienne worries about her maternal proclivities, Cersei is absolutely useless.

“Jaime – I’m just going to say this-”

_She didn’t miss a beat, so busy talking about herself - did she even notice her son’s near miss? He could have broken his neck._

“-I am being courted.”

“Courted?” The lion blinked, struggling against guffawing once again. _More like fucking._

“Yes, I am an attractive woman and it was inevitable I catch a man’s eye.”

_Is she watching me for jealousy?_ “I am pleased for you.” He smiled, lowering himself to sit on the mattress. Keeping a firm grip on the back of Tytan’s shirt as he roamed the territory of covers.

“Really?” She sashayed one step forward, still gauging his reaction. “Because I feared this wouldn’t sit well with you, it never has in the past.”

He gave an incredulous snort. “Cersei that ship has sailed. How many times do I have to tell you I am rapt in my marriage and very much in love. In truth I would be happy to know you had found someone. My only hope is that he is genuine - and that stems from paternal concern. I do not want any unsavoury characters around Tytan - though I would count anyone an improvement on your
last choice of Euron – that madman tried to kill me you know.” Jaime winked conspiratorially at his boy. “Until Papa impaled him but that’s a story for when you’re older.”

His sister seemed perturbed, as though his response had not been what she was expecting. Regardless, she recovered well, steering the chat back on course. “In that case – I will be requiring you to step up as a Father. Mind him more frequently, especially at nights.”

*Surely she must be jesting? She needs me to be more responsible?* Jaime sighed, trying to let his censure dissipate. *Tytan is better off with me, and Brienne is busy anyhow.*

“Oh of course.” He nodded, not trusting himself to resist his snarkier commentary if he elaborated further.

“Also –” Cersei was never one to sense when she was pushing her luck. “- I would ask you to keep this knowledge quiet. I am a former Queen and I do not want the rumour circulating that I am seeing a commoner.”

Now he spluttered, choking back sardonic chuckles. “Fine - but does he know that? *Lucky* man, I hope he has a thick hide. I know full well how it feels to be kept as your dirty little secret.”

“Some men know how to appreciate a woman of substance, make the most of the thrill that comes with the illicit.”

“You really know how to grovel for favours don’t you? Please, lessen the flattery Cersei I have already agreed to your request.”

“Very well then.” She squared her shoulders. “That will be all.”

“You’re not dismissing me from audience, you are far from the throne room now sister. I think you forget that you are in quarters belonging to my wife and I, disturbing my afternoon with Tytan.”

“Then I will let myself out.” Gathering her skirts in hand, she made for the exit with her head held high.

*Was I too harsh? Especially when I actually consider this news heartening on all fronts.*

“Cersei-” She peered out of the corner of her eye, fingers clasping the knob, refusing to turn back towards him

“I am pleased for you. Choose to believe me or not, that part is up to you. But I think it is excellent, I would welcome a point in the future when we both have partners who complete us. I want you to find what I have with Brienne.”

*Though I believe my Lady Knight and I share a special, deeper kind of love. A bond that is unable to be replicated or equalled.*

*The sentiment is kindly meant though, it would do well to see Cersei settled and happy.*
“Thank you.” Her reply was curt as she disappeared through the door.

The lion Lord leant on the bed, his gaze level with his son’s.

“Can you keep a secret?” He touched a fingertip to his boy’s little nose, not needing an answer other than Tytan’s mischievous grin. “I know you can.”

Pulling himself closer he whispered. “If your Mother has found someone, it means I can relax a bit. Perhaps she will cease the nonsense around Aunty Brienne and we can finally be a family with some semblance of normalcy.”

Jaime was positively thrilled with their new accommodations and seeing him so pleased loosened the shackles around her ankles, lightened the hefty ball of failure which dogged her every step. Affording her a glimmer of success as a wife, furnishing her husband with a place he could call home.

Doubling her pace, Brienne bounded down the hallway, keen to make the most of her brief break between guarding and holding a meeting of the Kingsguard.

*Rather - the two Kingsguard and the potential.*

Today she was issuing them with a progress report, announcing the front runners and inspiring the flames of competition within.

*Maybe that will distract them from gossiping about me for a change. Wouldn’t that be nice.*

Ahead their chamber door opened, and the Lady Knight was taken aback to spy Cersei slipping through, skulking away in the opposite direction.

The sight made her bristle. Flaring a streak of possessiveness and disappointment within. The upset shooting like a comet from the darkness, crashing into the unsuspecting wilderness below.

*She beat me there. Cersei was in our room first – with my husband.*

Barrelling through the entryway, she turned left and right, surveying the scenario, uncertain what
exactly she was looking for.

The abruptness of her arrival startled Jaime who was lounging casually across the bed beside Tytan.

“Alright so today everyone I know is boycotting knocking.” He snickered at his own witticism. “Hello, my Knight, if I had known you were coming, I would have fetched lunch for us both like a good little homemaker.”

“Well I can hear you are in one of your roguish moods.” Stooping to kiss him she smiled at Tytan, giving the blankets a studious sweep at the same time. Greatly assuaged to find no evidence of her good-sister upon their bed. “Did I just see Cersei leave?”

“You did.” He motioned her sideways. “Any chance you can stand there and make sure this rampaging Wyvern doesn’t go flying over the side? I need to straighten out my spine.”

“Yes.” Using her body mass and extended arms to block, it didn’t take a moment from when Jaime rolled over onto his back for Tytan to try his luck. Grinning at her on one side of his chubby face and racing forward unsteadily.

*You are your Father through and through.* “Turn it around young man.”

Catching the tot, she easily redirected him. “It’s going to take more than your lopsided smile to get past me.”

“I don’t know…. it works for me at least half of the time.” Jaime folded his arms behind his head. “You are good with him you know.”

“I’m not sure about that. I just treat him like a smaller version of you – only *he* is more manageable.”

“Brienne – you could let him run straight past you and land on the floorboards right now and I would still think you more proficient than his Mother. Cersei was in here informing me that I will need to take on more responsibility with him so she can have more free nights to herself. Apparently she has a beau, though I’m not to tell anyone because he isn’t of noble birth and so terribly below her station.” He rolled his big green eyes and Brienne smirked.

“She managed to say that to you in full sincerity? When you have Tytan the majority of the time?”

*I am cheered that he volunteered the reason for her visit. I didn’t want to be put in a position where I had to ask or be left wondering.*

“What can I say? Cersei has a unique talent for overlooking her own inadequacies.”

The Lady Knight sat on the mattress, herding Tytan between them and mumbling. “Still – must you have that conversation in here? It’s our bedchamber Jaime.”

“She came in unexpectedly - I can hardly kick her out. Her son is here for a start and we are siblings.”
Brienne frowned. *An unforeseen consequence of our new lodgings, Cersei can come and go as she pleases. But at least I will know when she is with him – most of the time.*

“I would just prefer if it did not become a pattern.”

*I am not the jealous type. I am not the jealous type. I am not the jealous type.*

She just couldn’t help thinking if she repeated it to herself enough times, she would remember. Dousing this unwanted insecurity and suspicion. Each time she thought to bring it under control, another ember broke away from the blaze, unleashing a successive conflagration within her psyche.

*I just love him.*

“Hey.” Jaime pulled on her arm affectionately. “How long have you got? Can you nap with us? You like sleeping more than me of late.”

Shaking her head gloomily, she pushed herself up. “I’ve got to get back.” Kissing her husband on the lips, she made sure Tytan was within his Father’s reach. “What are your intentions for this afternoon?”

"Finishing unpacking our things, then I hope to get to the yard. I need to train, fight. Something to remind me I have a cock.”

“Enjoy it. You well and truly earn your leisure. Pay Cersei no heed – you are a fantastic Father.”

At the compliment his features gleamed, cheekiness overtaking his countenance. “Then any chances you will cancel whatever you have planned and come do things that will make me one again?”

“Deftly done but I’m afraid my schedule is public knowledge in advance.” Straightening her swordbelt she decided to give him some glad tidings. “However – I am on a reduced night shift. I will be joining you abed from the Hour of the Wolf.”

“Really? It sounds nearly too good to be true.”

“My shift had to change – a Council Meeting has been called for brunch tomorrow. The King wanted us all alert and well rested.”

“Finally, something to be happy about with this bloody war.” He gave her fingers a squeeze with his own. “I will count the hours.”

“Me too.”

Brienne felt far brighter leaving their chambers than she had upon entry.

*This silliness about Cersei mustn’t be allowed to continue. It does me no good. Jaime is faithful – what did I seriously think they could be doing? Besides, Tytan is there. Cersei couldn’t have tried again to seduce him even if she’d wanted to. And now I hear that her romantic attentions are*
otherwise engaged - that is cheering.

Once more, she poured cold water over her inferno of inhibition, until a sodden heap remained. Its skeleton making her feel foolish and pathetic.

Yet still one amber spark glowed, menacing and inextinguishable. Its crackling, malevolent voice spreading like smoke tendrils within.

A lover is no deterrent - she has juggled affairs for years. And Tytan’s presence never stopped you on Tarth.

Why would either situation give an unscrupulous woman like Cersei pause?

When she was cosy, sleeping and waking was one fluid, unbroken phase. Like the changes of the moon above, gradual and organic, her orbs of blue metamorphosing from closed plains to slim crescents, then wide full spheres.

Drifting between them smoothly, dreamworld and reality became indistinguishable, for they were both so sublime. The snugness and relaxation she felt unable to be achieved elsewhere.

But slumber had not always been a comfort - no. In times gone by it was oft the enemy, a spawning ground for nightmarish phantasms and predators who stalked maidens when their defences were lowered. It meant danger, the equivalent of a dog rolling over and showing its belly, displaying its vulnerability to the world. The change in her perspective had only come about when Jaime entered her bed, when shuttering her lids had been a sign of satiation and ultimate trust. Lulled by the companionship of her lover, the space between their bodies slowly narrowing.

It was this she had tried to make Jaime understand in the wake of their intimate debacle, that sleeping when he was atop her was less a sign of disinterest and more a demonstration of supreme contentment. With gentle persuasion and tact, they had come to laugh about it, noting how their roles were in constant flux, reversing through time and situations.

From Winterfell when she drifted first, swept up by demands and routine, to their general dynamic when he would be the first to nod off after love, snoring softly like a sated feline.

Their cycle coming full rotation, returning them to their northern ways, their amusement and observations bringing them closer, until by and by the incident was filed away as another chapter in their chronologies of understanding.

But this morning is a fine example of what I described…
Brienne had dozed whilst Jaime collected their tea tray, indolently waving off his enquiries of whether she wanted anything brought over.

_There is only one thing I want here. Yes. YOU._

She snuggled in lazily when he squirmed back beneath their light blanket, using him shamelessly as a pillow, to which she received no protestation. Legs winding around each other more intricately than a cotton tapestry, the chest hair against her cheek downier than a hundred coats of sable, her fingers carding through it across his abdomen and making him suspiré heavily. The rising and falling transporting her into blissful drowsiness again.

There was no perception of how much time had passed when they shifted positions, the Lady Knight flipping onto her back and pulling her husband turned pillow, now blanket with her. Jaime nestled into her shoulder as she snaked a leg underneath him, wrapping it comfortably around the back of his knees and holding onto him with every part of her that could.

He kissed her in appreciation, the kind of kisses which she would only receive in the morning. Syrupy, mushy and unrefined but their unembellished sentiment was like a shot of purity straight to her centre. Her husband at his most tender, unconcerned with panache or sophistication, simply wanting to convey the stirrings from the depth of his soul.

She drank it in with abandon, guzzling it down, mouthful after mouthful of raw feelings, straight from heart to mouth. There could never be enough of it, of late there had been none. This was her vice, her addiction, her intoxicant. Love she could feel, taste, devour. The antidote to all that plagued her, the fountain of immaculate emotion. Reserved by him for her.

It was natural progression when his fingers dipped between her legs, encouraging the wetness which was already pooling. Groggy moans drunk on his love perfectly amenable to his golden head disappearing beneath the covers, tongue taking the place of his digits. She spread her legs wider, giving him full access. Too far gone to care how she knew she was drenching his beard, writhing which each lick. Need had taken control now, fundamental necessity obliterating what most would describe as want. The concept that desire could be controlled, that it was optional.

_It's not true, I need this. I need him. We have gone far too long._

“Brienne… May I?” It was in his eyes when he crawled up her frame, beseeching, dying for the same base necessity of connection, of consummation.

_Do we have the time? Does it even matter? Who cares…_

“Yes.” She yanked him to her. _“We need this.”_

Night shirts were flung, already torn aside small clothes reduced to threads as they were ripped from thighs. His breeches lost somewhere at the end of the bed, swallowed amongst the linens.

There was no resistance when he entered her, even her tight walls begging to be filled, saturated and slick around his girth, the fullness making her groan every time she felt it anew.
“Jaime...”

Strong arms wound around her shoulders, his chest flush to hers, touching from end to end, his lips tending to the skin the rest of him could not. All brushes, strokes and electrifying unity, he was there, they were together, and she never wanted to let him go.

Brienne’s hips arched, gifting him traction, hugging him with every muscle she had, bringing her heels up and digging them gently into his buttocks, sliding her hands down the dip of his back, worshipping, welcoming. Applying just the right amount of pressure to make them both convulse; fever and the waiting having decimated their discipline. She had already been halfway to ecstasy from his tongue, her insides exulting greedily at any part of him she could claim. His hardness sending her galloping, headlong to a place of love and delirium, the penetration so deep and fulfilling, there was no turning back and prolonging the sweet oblivion.

“Yes, yes, yes, yes, yessssssssss……………..”

She must have yelped it ten thousand times. Her original answer to him multiplying and becoming her only intelligible cry. Making him chuckle when they both emerged from the heady mist. Boneless of limb but excessively happy.

“I don't think I've ever heard you so agreeable. What was it that you said? Was that a yes?”

“Yes.” She laughed at her own stupidity; the things exclaimed in the heat of passion. “I'm lucky I know what I say at all.”

I have evolved, now I can giggle at myself. Carry on the conversation without descending into self-consciousness or cutting it off before it has commenced. There is the extent of our development my Jaime, rapport and faith combined. I hope you see its priceless treasure, admire its preciousness the way I do.

“Well at least you speak the common tongue, I think I invent languages.”

“If you do, they are not intended for humans.” Even weakened arms wanted to cuddle and pet, mapping jaws, shoulders and necks.

“So something animal perhaps?” His gorgeous face was so expressive when he mused, she couldn’t resist outlining each dimple and crease with her fingertips, longing to be a painter who could capture the essence of what he was. Power, breathtaking godlike beauty and fun. “May I be a lion? Please tell me I'm not a swine or something abhorrent. I don't think my ego could take two beatings in the one month.”

She pounded him lethargically on the chest. “Hush. We agreed I was forgiven. I was very much awake just then, wasn't I?”

“Yes.” His incorrigibility earnt him another fond whack. “Alright! I shan't mention it again - if I can be a lion in bed.”
Brienne stared at the ceiling giving his compromise great contemplation. “I can see it,” She finally declared. “You do tend to growl more than you grunt.”

“Oh do I now?” His hand slipped up her ribs, massaging her breast and waking up her entire body again. “I can't recall. I think I will have to go again and listen. For research purposes of course.”

This session was longer, more artistic. The masterful lover within her man emerging to taunt and tease each erogenous point, prolonging the experience, wringing every last gasp of pleasure from her.

In the euphoria as she came down from the clouds, slumber stole her away upon its zephyrs. Loving forming the third stage in her innate system of comfort and flawless transitions.

Sleep, wake, love... Sleep.

The realm of the slaked and spent. Rejuvenating in order to repeat.

“Ser!” The hammering on the door was louder than an army of shod hooves, beating against a wooden drawbridge. Steel connecting with timber, beating incessantly. “M’Lady Ser! Are you in there?”

Brienne foggily battled the weight of her eyelids, finding lifting them unwieldly and bothersome.

She stretched out, feeling Jaime beneath her, his sleeping stomach making odd little gurgling noises beneath her ear. *Somebody’s hungry.*

She rubbed her cheek against the flesh, uncertain how she ended up there but thrilled nonetheless. *Somebody didn’t eat breakfast. Somebody left the tray sitting on the table hours ago-*

Her lids retreated hastily, pushed back by her panic, pupils darting, taking in the sun-soaked room, the opulence of day well underway. “*Fuck!*”

Quicker than a bolt from a crossbow she shot across the room to the chest of drawers. Rummaging and whipping out her clothes whilst Jaime slowly propped himself up, dazed and batting at his eyes with his hand. “What’s going on?”

The Lady Knight didn’t have time to fill him in, already halfway dressed, undergarments donned,
knotting the laces of her breeches. “Pod!” She hollered through the wood. “Is it as bad as I fear?”

“Worse.” His mumble was audible even as she yanked her gambeson over her head, hopping from one foot to the other, pulling up her boots.

Running to the tray, she forced herself to gulp down the cup of stone-cold tea and a bite of stale, lifeless toast. Assessing her appearance, she deduced she was decent enough for company, throwing a glance at Jaime who remained naked and only half obscured by covers. With a huff she set aside her hesitation, proclaiming. “You’re not shy.” And bounding over to the door. “You are both men anyhow.”

Turning the key in the lock, she opened it with a jerk, finding Podrick looking exceedingly anxious on the other side. “I know it is not your duty any longer – but help me with my armour? It will halve the work.”

“Of course.” Her former Squire crossed the threshold, keeping his eyes to the floor. Veering wildly to the opposite side of the room when he happened across a discarded piece of clothing. I forgot about that aspect.

Kicking it beneath the bed with her boot, Brienne found she was too mission focussed for embarrassment. “Here.” Handing him a greave, she began upon her chestpiece. “Tell me the extent of it.”

“They are not happy.” Pod peeked up shyly from fastening the steel to her legs. “They waited for you to arrive.”

“Do they wait still?”

“No, they have disbanded. You are wanted in the King’s Solar. I’m sorry I didn’t come sooner but I had to wait until I could slip away undetected, I left two recruits to temporarily guard. Ser Derek and Ser Mortimer are with His Grace.”

“Your meeting!” Jaime’s voice trumpeted, finally catching up. A chuckle bubbling up and out. “Missed that one. I would apologise for ruining your perfect attendance record, but in truth I’m not sorry at all.”

Brienne glowered at her husband from across the room, angrier with herself than him, though unfortunately that was not how it verbally manifested. “It is no laughing matter.” She barked. “I am going to be completely belittled by the time apologising for this dereliction of duty is through.”

“Try not to be so solemn wife. It was but a single meeting, where they talk nothing but horseshit anyway. I assure you our morning was more productively spent.” His mirth was prevailing, tweaking at nerves which were already on edge.
“I am supposed to set an example! How can I lecture and reprimand when I exhibit such irresponsibility and recklessness?”

“Your choice was hardly rash Brienne; you have been irreproachable in your conduct for weeks…”

“As it should be,”

“No – because it meant neglecting another aspect of your life – me. One incident against many still leaves the scales extremely out of balance.”

Podrick kept his head low, remaining quiet throughout their exchange, putting in a fine show of pretending he didn’t see, hear nor comprehend what they were referring to.

“Will you stop.” She hissed through gritted teeth. “I do not wish to discuss the particulars in front of Pod.”

“This again?” Jaime laughed. “He knows Brienne, he just nearly tripped over your nightshirt – or at least that’s what I hope it was.”

“Must you escalate this already mortifying situation by drawing attention to it?!” Hysterics were kicking in, red splashing her cheeks in visible shame, dread about admitting her culpability rendering her an agitated wreck.

Jaime’s brow creased, throwing both his arms in the air in aggravation. “For the millionth time – we are married. There is no indignity in it! Stop treating us like we should be sequestered away, hiding our nefarious acts! We missed each other – plain and simple. It had been too long since I had my wife.”

“I honestly can’t believe you are still talking.” Fully suited, she strapped Oathkeeper around her waist. “But one thing is for certain – this can’t happen again.”

“Please don’t.” Jaime groaned. “Don’t overreact, don’t take the gloriousness away.”

“It is you who is trivialising it! Discussing our intimacies as though it is common fodder!”

“Only to make you see it was right not wrong….”

“Sorry to interrupt.” Podrick loitered by the door, looking every bit like a bashful boy, and shuffling his feet. “But the longer they wait the worse this gets.”

Brienne slumped her shoulders. “I have to go. There is music to face. Backlash which I will shoulder alone. Though it took two to create this calamity.”

“I’m sorry for that part. If I could support you I would - in fact I will if you ask. Barge in there and set them all straight…”
Her snigger was half-suppressed. “That’s the last thing I need, you waltzing in and making it worse in your cavalier way. I will handle it, thank you anyway.”

Joining Podrick she was halfway across the threshold when she heard Jaime call. “I love you.” The sentiment sloughing off layers of ice and toughness, right when she needed them the most.

*I love you too Jaime – I just can’t right now.*

Not since receiving a scolding from her Septa had she felt so small, sitting opposite her King and the Lord Hand. Trying not to shrink beneath the sobriety of Bran’s disappointed stare and avoiding the eye of her good-brother, cajoling herself into believing that her familial tie with him went in her favour.

*Even if it makes this harder.*

“We waited over an hour.” As a monarch, the Stark boy did not yell or threaten, he didn’t need to. There was a chilling quality to his removed monotones, his capability to peer through you, unblinking. Reading the answer written in your brain and judging you by how it compared to the account spewing from your mouth. “You did not even send word that you would be late.”

“It was an accidental occurrence Your Grace. An error of sagacity without premeditation. I cannot begin to apologise enough – believe me when I say I am more displeased with myself than you could imagine.”

“What circumstance could prevent you from being courteous?” He craned his head to the side, eerily crow-like. “It does not take long to relay to a messenger. The castle is teeming with servants.”

“If I may be so bold-” Tyrion repositioned himself in his seat, uncrossing and recrossing his legs. “-from my discussions with His Majesty before this audience, his main source of perturbation is understanding the reasons behind your absence. Until this point you have always been punctual, reliable and most significantly – his most dependable shield. He would wonder what superseded your duty to him and the Crown. Spurred you to unreliability.”

Her stomach lurched, a sickness churning. She detested being tarnished, seen as less than
dependable, had always prided herself upon being steady and constant. A person who did not shirk her responsibilities, whom others secretly despised or cursed for making them appear lax by comparison.

**But my duties are two-fold, mutually exclusive. The wife and the Lady Commander bringing me time and time again to a crossroads, where taking one track leads to forsaking the other.**

*I would spread myself thinner than second skimmings, damage myself and go without rather than voice the reasons for my lapse this morning. But mayhaps Jaime has the right of it – candour is the only opportunity for freedom. I cannot lie to my King, anymore than I can pretend my relationship is not suffering under the pressure of his unremitting demands.*

“I was asleep Your Grace. I lost track of time.” *There. Please accept that as sufficient and ask me no more.*

“Resting?” Finally, he blinked. “Were you not given a shorter night shift in preparation for today? I do not recall the hour, but I believe there was a changing of the guard.” Bran looked to Tyrion for confirmation who simply nodded, bracing his elbow upon the arm of the chair and leaning his forehead into his hand. Knowing he was only compounding the situation for his good-sister but powerless to stop it.

“Yes. But I am tired of late. Sleep has become a precious commodity.” *Just ask Jaime.*

“You have previously mentioned a method for waking on time. Did this fail you? Should a server be reallocated due to incompetence?”

“No.” Brienne was adamant. “My wake-up was as per its regular schedule.”

“Then how did you end up falling asleep again? I do not understand.”

“Me either.” Tyrion shrugged. “Surely Jaime would have woken you?”

*Catch on Tyrion.* The Lady Knight could easily have throttled him.

“I have…” She fidgeted nervously with her hands, scalding heat beginning in the apples of her cheeks. “…more duties than just to the Crown.” Swallowing down the awkwardness was near implausible, a nightmare situation for the moral and tight-lipped. “Duties as a wife.”

Squeezing her eyes shut she forced the admission out. “I have been neglecting them. I am absent almost every night or gone in the morning. It was a rare circumstance that allowed me to lie-in. I could not refuse my husband, nor did I want to.”

The sound of Tyrion inhaling sharply told her he had caught her implication. The King however, was not as astute, unworldly in the ways of man and woman due to his paralysis. Though she could hear the distaste in his voice. “How does that impact upon your attendance at my Council meeting?”

“Allow me to explain -” *Oh Gods no.* Her good-brother swooped in, always keen to discuss the topic. “-It is common for a couple to fall asleep after a bed roll. It can be from fatigue if it was
especially rigorous, an act of bonding or simply a sign of satisfaction.”

*I’m going to kill him.* Brienne crossed her arms, hurling daggers with her eyes.

*You’re not helping, if you were not the King’s Hand I would tell you the same as I do your brother - shut your mouth.*

How she managed to be imposing with a complexion of vermilion and the sting of humiliated tears in her eyes she would never know, but one glance at her body language and Tyrion offered no more pearls of wisdom.

“This is what happened?”

Nodding meekly, she dropped her gaze to her vambraces, studying their colour and pattern.

*The timing is inopportune, but I already feel the size of an ant. I may as well place all my pieces on the cyvasse board, Gods know I will not subject myself to raising the topic again.*

“I am-” Brienne shocked herself with how choked by emotion she sounded. “-very apologetic that I missed the meeting. That I left you all waiting upon my arrival without any indications of my whereabouts. I know that is a grievous oversight on my part. But I will not be sorry for how I spent my morning; I will not diminish the importance of spending a couple of hours being a married woman.”

Her breath shuddered slightly but she continued, pushing through. “I am giving my all, trying to be everything everyone wants me to be and devoting precious little time to the things that matter to my heart, like my relationship. I do this in service to the Crown, I do this with honour, but it takes a toll Your Grace. Not just upon Jaime but upon me. He wants me there just as much as you do, he is entitled to my companionship by right of matrimony and you ask me repetitively to deprive him. I have implored my husband for lenience, to be tolerant of my obligations but now I must ask you for the same in return.”

*You are almost there.*

“Please reduce my workload. I know you want me at your beck and call but nothing short of tearing me down the middle will appease both parties. Have clemency and empathy for my mortal limitations. I am a Lady of Lannister; I have paid my debts in full. Every boon I have requested from you I have repaid in sweat, tears and self-sacrifice. Grant me a spare hour or two in my day and I promise you I will not blunder again.”

Tyrion could see she was exhausted, emotionally and physically pushed to extremes. His mien comprised of solely compassion.

“The Lady Commander is by definition a delegatory role Your Grace, overseeing and assigning as opposed to hands-on work. Right now at your behest, she takes on more tasks than the other Kingsguard and recruits combined. Most Council Members have only the meetings to worry about, Ser Brienne is training the new applicants, assisting in War Council and guarding you in
Bran lifted his fingers from the arm of his wheeled chair, calling for silence. His expression unchanged. “I gave you leave to move chambers. Given your misconduct of today I could revoke my decision, have you moved back to the White Sword Tower where such mistakes never occurred. But I will not – for I know you are remorseful. I consider this in itself more than fair.”

He folded his hands back in his lap. “I hate to disappoint; you remain my most trusted guard and close adviser, but I am afraid this time you ask too much. I require you to continue in my service in the same capacity.”

It was near inconceivable how distraught that ruling left her. “I know you see me as some sort of invincible giantess and a warden against the dark but please my King, remember I am human.”

“Are you expecting?” Bran regarded her gingerly. “Is a babe the cause for your fatigue?”

“No, Your Grace. I am not.”

“Then in accordance to our agreement, there is no need for you to be stood down or lessened in duty, especially not in these uncertain times.” Rolling closer, he tried to affect caring, the display muted by the coldness of a raven’s supercilious air. “Once more, I am dismayed that we had to hold this audience. I take on board your assurance that today’s occurrence will not repeat and hence we shall not discuss it further.”

Hearing her dismissal, she stood bowing obediently, trying and failing to find diplomatic words amidst her upset. Choosing to remain mute rather than risk speaking out of turn.

“I will see you this evening as scheduled Lady Commander.” The King indicated she could leave, and it did not come soon enough.

She was grateful at least to find the corridor outside empty so she could slump against the windowsill, banishing the water from her eyes.

“Lady Brienne!” Tyrion raced after her on his short legs, puffing and wheezing. “I’m so sorry for what happened in there. If I could see any way to stop it-”

“It’s alright. I know.” She blinked away the moisture. “I brought it on myself.”

“By trying to be a good wife to my brother.”

“Believe me Tyrion, I think I am the farthest thing from a good wife. And now I must return to Jaime and tell him how our life is even stricter than before, that my margin for error has disappeared entirely and my plea for pity failed. When he was already disgruntled, going without.”

Her good-brother winced. “Tell me if I am overstepping the line, for I know you of all people can put me back in my place but – how long had it been?”
“Weeks.” The Lady Knight shrugged. “Over a month? I lost track. Everyday for me plays out like the one before.”

His low-whistle and raised eyebrows were not reassuring, shoving his hands in his pockets and swaying from side to side in thought. “I can talk to him if you like – try and get Jaime to keep his proverbial paw to himself for a while.”

“No!”

*Just when I thought things couldn’t get more embarrassing, my good brother is offering to converse with my husband about our martial bed and physical intimacies.*

Brienne’s retort was sharper than she intended, having to take a breath and even out before continuing. “No, thank you. I will tackle it on my own.” Pushing off the windowsill, she collected her composure, wryly adding. “Preferably sorting it within the spare minutes I have before I am due in the yard.”
Head vs Heart

Chapter Summary

"'Cause I'm overcome in this war of hearts..."
Lyrics, War of Hearts by Ruelle
Bridge, Line 3

Cover Art by: Ro_Nordmann

"Pa-pa."

"Jaime"
Jaime froze, scarce believing his ears, part of him thinking it was his overactive imagination manifesting sounds out of boredom, tired of the nursery’s four walls. But where else could he go? What else could he do?

Over the last few weeks, the lion had stalked every inch of the grounds outside, exploring alcoves and alleys he had never even glimpsed during the years of Aerys’ or Robert’s reigns. He had discovered forgotten tunnels, damn near triggering trauma and claustrophobia he thought long overcome. The feelings which lay dormant in the wake of nearly being buried alive by bricks.

*The things you push to the recesses of your subconscious – you never know when they will break free.*

When Tyrion was available, they would share a carafe of wine and chat, but being Hand of the King, he was nearly always busy. Besides, spending time with him had lost its shine since his baby brother had decided to give him a good-natured lecture on respecting the seriousness of his wife’s job and not ‘badgering her for favours.’

*That was terribly awkward.*

He sparred daily in the yard, crossing swords with any willing takers. Even clandestinely testing his mettle against one of the Kingsguard recruits, recognising stances during their bout which could only have come from his wife’s teaching.

*How I miss the way she moves, brilliant and powerful, both in the yard and in bed.*

Jaime had genuinely started to loathe Bran Stark and his entitled, kingly, covetous selfish streak. But virulent monologues would do little to alter the status quo.

*Brienne tried. I know that.*

But did he?

Too many times he had lingered on the more devastating possibility, that life as a knight was her true preferred calling. It had been her ambition since youth and aspirations were seldom accomplished with such honours as she enjoyed. Partiality from the King, the only woman at Council, an order of men under her dominion. It was all the respect and esteem an ungainly girl had dreamt of, realised in living colour. He supposed by comparison domestic life with him seemed unappealing.

*Or at least it does when every day is so repetitive.*

“Pa-pa!” The little shout grew more insistent.

*But bless my boy for making this one special…*  
Whirling on his heel he turned to face Tytan, watching his son’s smile as he raised his arms high,
proud as punch to have formed the word. “Pa-pa.”

That’s me.

Scooping him up in his arms, Jaime pressed his forehead to Tytan’s. Grinning profusely, his chest turning to goo.

*Myrcella only called me Father once, I never heard it from my boys. I have never been present to witness the first time my child speaks – and of all the things in the world to name – he chose me.*

Emeralds glittered with ecstatic tears, kissing the side of his son’s blonde hair.

*I want my wife – she has to hear this.*

“What do you want her to hear?” Cersei was dressed in her customary wet-nurse gown, the buttons at the front fastened in the incorrect loops, indicating she had threaded them in a hurry.

*She must be on duty in the orphanage a couple of doors down.*

“Your voice is booming enough to wake all the little weasels.”

“Come.” He gestured her inside the room, glowing with happiness.

“This had better be important Jaime, I have squalling brats to feed, and the head Septa takes perverted glee in giving me all the biters.” She ambled to the centre of the chamber. “Apparently - she’s not fond of me. Some residual hatred about my burning of the Sept or similar nonsense. Those old crones do like to harp on….”

“Sister, as much as I sympathise…” *I don’t really, but no need to set her off and ruin this joyous moment. Placation is key.* “…Can this story wait? Our son spoke!”

Cersei blinked, her features softening. “He did?”

“Yes, his first word. And you’ll never guess what.” Placing Tytan down in the middle of the carpet rug he stood back and waited. “Go on – just like before.”

The boy just looked from his Father to his Mother, eyes wide and clueless.
“A fine show Jaime.”

“Give it a minute!” Crouching in front of the tot, he tickled his chin with a finger. “Come on, who am I?”

“Someone who spends too much time alone with a boy not long past his first nameday.”

Jaime rolled his eyes. “I did not ask you.”

Tytan continued to stare, quieter than the Winter’s Night when he and Brienne had waited for the undead to arrive. You could hear a pin drop, a mouse scurry – most noticeably his Mother’s scoff.

Straightening the lion frowned. “Perhaps he is shy.”

“No Lannister in history has ever been shy.” Cersei folded her arms impatiently. “If that will be all – I will be down the hall.”

“Just wait Cersei, he’s your son. Do you really want to miss this?”

“You forget; I’ve seen this before. Three times over.”

“Well I haven’t and I think it is adorable and worth waiting hours for if that’s what it takes-“

“Pa-pa!”

The twin’s heads simultaneously turned to the cub upon the carpet.

“See? I told you!” Jaime’s grin could not get any broader. “He knows who I am.”

“Of course he does.” A smile was even beginning to play on the corners of Cersei’s lips. “He is your mirror image and you spend everyday with him.”

“You are not disappointed that it isn’t you?” Jaime had not paused to consider her possible reaction, suddenly feeling quite self-centred.

If Brienne were here, she would tell me I deserve this moment, that I shouldn’t think myself second to my sister.

“Not at all.” Unexpectedly, Cersei pulled him into an embrace. “I’m happy for you.”

“...Thank.. you?” He returned the hug numbly, unsure how to reciprocate. The lines long blurred between them for platonic affection, making him awkward and tense. But his stress intensified when she kissed him dead on the lips, the unscheduled walk down memory lane turning his body to glaciers before he sprang from her snare. Backing up several paces and glaring at her in accusation.

“What in Seven Hells was that?!”
Cersei sniggered, entertained by his alarm. “We are siblings Jaime. It is familial.” When he continued to scowl, she shook her head in disbelief. “I told you – I have a lover. Do not read into it anymore than it was. Now, I have infants to feed.”

He struggled against the urge to wipe his mouth on his sleeve as she departed, Cersei’s kiss leaving him sullied and ill.

*I tried to include her and this, this is my punishment. A situation I did not encourage nor want.*

Endeavouring to make sense of it all and settle his stomach, he sat on the cushioned chair, lowering his head between his knees and sucking in deep lungfuls.

*Our child just reached a once in a lifetime milestone – under normal circumstances tactile displays would be completely socially acceptable. Though it would only work if I were the Father and she were an Aunt. Brother and sister without incest blackening our history.*

*But it is not like other situations and how it is – is wrong. And she cannot twist and undo it with mockery and flippancy. Mothers, Fathers, Uncles, Aunts. Our warped dynamic is just a muddy reflection of how fucked up we were, a part of my life I wouldn’t repeat if the Gods themselves commanded it. My body repels, my soul screams – both in united agreement.*

*I do not want Cersei touching me in anyway, regardless of the reason - and she just spoilt this day for me.*

There was only one person who could provide counsel and comfort. The woman who had rescued his hateful self from the pit of depravity and corruption.

So, he sat and waited for her. For the balm of her contralto, the succour of her calm level-headed logic, redeeming the afternoon and bringing her beacon to dissolve the shadows of his past into dust.

But she never came.
The late afternoon sun burnt its orange finale outside their westerly facing window, the room bathed in a state of temporary colour, reaching into the nooks and crannies. Highlighting dust missed by chamber maids and stray cobwebs. The last flushed of daylight doing their work before the sconces would have to be lit.

Jaime’s mouth drooped at the sides whilst he observed its slow decent, paralysed, and miserable on an afternoon when he should have been walking on air. Usually at this time he was outside, hacking away at a practice dummy, but motivation evaded him. So instead he haunted their room like an unwanted ghost, the snippets of her schedule branded in his brain telling him that she would return to their quarters soon to change into her armour.

When the thuds of Brienne’s boots materialised, he glimpsed her blonde hair in the reflection of the glass. Appearing for all intents and purposes transfixed by the outside world.

“You are not usually here.” *Is she brusque, or am I transferring my feelings onto her?*

Pivoting slowly, he took her in grimly from head to toe. “Tytan talked today.”

“I know.” *She knows?!!*

“I asked for you.”

“I came.”

Confusion broke his malaise. “Why didn’t you come in?”

“I left almost as soon as I arrived.” Brienne removed her newly polished armour from the stand, arranging the pieces into neat bundles atop the clothes chest. Busying herself and avoiding his gaze. “It seemed like a very *close* family moment. I didn’t wish to intrude.”

*She saw. I don’t know what part she witnessed but she did. This explains so much…*

Jaime took a tentative step towards his wife, sighing, not knowing where to begin. “I was very excited. I wanted to share it with you…”

“Does she put her arms around you often?” Even in profile, he could see her disquietude. The set of her jaw was stiff, her lips puckered, blue eyes analysing and sorting her armour with overt interest.

“No.” He took another two strides closer, his tone losing its piqued edge. The shame suffocating him like a shroud, the repressed self-abhorrence robbing him of speech.

*Cersei kissed me too, did you see that? What must you think?*

He wanted to tell her, purge his soul of the nausea and disgust with all he was and all he’d been - but he gulped it down.

*Why cause her undue pain? You saw how your last confession hurt her when Cersei tried to*
seduce you. Are you that insensitive?

You always inflict your transgressions onto Brienne, making them hers to carry alongside yours. But her soul is spotless, it is only you who taints it and weighs her down.

You are a sinker! A pestilence! A plague! Selfish, selfish man.

His disembodied voice finally scratched out. “That was an isolated incident.”

“Oh?” Brienne lifted her head, but her manner was cold, whatever she was feeling concealed beneath her marble surface. “You know I have an hour before I am due upstairs.”

She was stiff when she approached him, methodical and clinical. Pressing her lips to his, pulling upon the ties of his shirt.

He instantly despised it. “Don’t do that!”

Her hands flew back as though she’d been burnt, frightened doe eyes the only part of her rigid posture he could interpret. “Do what?”

“Reclaim me like it’s some sort of competition.” Jaime dragged his hand through his hair, just about ready to tear it out by the roots. “I want your love to be genuine. You haven’t made overtures to me for sennights and now…?!”

“So, you are refusing me?” The Lady Knight knew how to control her timbre, but the crystalline blue was injured. He could see it.

My lips are still crawling from Cersei, slithering with her unsolicited intimacy and I will find no heat in a rushed encounter with the woman I love emitting frostiness worthy of a blizzard. I would only hate myself further thereafter for allowing us to reduce ourselves to that level.

“Yes.”

Her brisk nod was the regimented solider, even the windows to her soul slamming shut, pulling their drapes. Clamming up and refusing to betray any more secrets of her internal workings. “Very well. I can get in a practice session.”

When she left there was only hollow space, in his heart, in the room where she should be, on her side of the bed which remained empty each night he lay upon the pillow.

And it ached so much his chest could concave.
They kissed.

The armoury was darkening by the time she shoved through the door, shaking fingers struggling to slide the bolt and give herself privacy. Soon she would have to guard His Grace, forget the fact that she was a woman with feelings and a splintering heart.

*I saw them kiss and he didn’t tell me.*

Her knees were buckling, and she grabbed the bench to steady herself, lowering down onto it before they gave way and sent her crashing to the floor.

*Then he refused me.*

*Jaime who has wanted me for nights, steals kisses and touches whenever he can… turned me down. Turned me away. After he…*

Tears slipped down her cheeks and she was thankful to have at least a few minutes in which she could cry and let it out before functioning as a torpefied puppet once more.

“We need to talk.” Steam billowed from the bath chamber off the side of their bedroom, the door ajar just enough to release the white mist, muting the light of the sconces and hinting at the full tub within. Outside the moon shone low in the night sky, her stint by the King’s bedside taking her past the hour of the nightingale. But for once she relegated sleep to second priority.
“I agree.” Brienne deposited her scabbard into the holder by the entryway, running her fingers affectionately over Oathkeeper’s pommel.

*Here it comes. He is going to tell me.*

“You had a bath prepared?” She asked the obvious question, stumped for smalltalk, the tracks of her tell-tale tears long swiped away.

“Yes.”

“Do you think it appropriate?”

“It is not a means of seduction, Brienne. We have a history of doing our best communicating in water. When we are both laid bare and nothing can interrupt us.” Jaime exhaled slowly. “Would you prefer to talk on the bed?”

She flexed her aching muscles, finding the thought of soaking in the warm water inviting.

*If I am fortunate, it will ward off the chill in my blood as well, the kind that causes gooseflesh to raise whenever I relive what I saw today.*

“The bath sounds pleasant. Thank you.”

They shed their layers in silence, keeping their backs to one another. A foolishly pointless dance for lovers long made who knew each other’s valleys and ravines better than they knew their own.

The Lady Knight slipped into the water first, letting the heat envelope her hulking physique. Watching the surface ripple when her husband submersed in the opposite side. The tub was wooden but sizeable, round in construction but comfortable enough to seat two people of ordinary stature but as they were both broad, she had to bend her knees, raising the caps out of the water like twin islands. The comparison to the latter making her nostalgic whilst the former brought a lour to her features. Bottom lip jutting exaggeratedly as she toyed with the water, filling her hand, and then letting it drip through her fingers.

“Would you like to start?” Always remembering his manners, Jaime gave her the option of speaking first but she shook her head sullenly, slapping her hand down upon the surface of the water, letting it sink listlessly to the bottom of the tub.

*I have nothing to relay, but you must tell me of your indiscretion so I can discover if a broken heart will kill me.*

“Very well.” He slumped against the wall of the tub, tipping his golden head back upon the side. Studying the ceiling for answers it could not possibly hold.

*Just say it Jaime, I am as braced as I will ever be.*
“You are withdrawing from me again.”

Brienne sat a little straighter, bewildered by the unforeseen direction of conversation.

*That is not what I thought he’d say.* “I’m not. My duties call.”

“A fact which I am well aware of, however the more time that passes, the more it becomes apparent that demand is never going to change. The Kingsguard will always endure, the King will always want you there. But we have a relationship – a thing of beauty that needs nourishment and devotion in order to thrive. I am not like you Brienne, I cannot walk alone, I don’t know how to not need affection, how to function day in and out apart from my partner without feeling like there is a gaping hole in my chest. Handling the pining, quelling the wondering and breathlessly anticipating moments which are fleeting at best. A knife that cuts both ways for I know afterwards I must wait for ages for the chance to come again…”

*Is this why he is straying back to her? Is that where he’s going with this?*

“…Tell me where I fit Brienne. And more importantly where does our future? Because I am desperate for it to start and we are stalemated. I am just as displaced now as I was in Winterfell and if anything my situation here is worse, because I too have responsibilities. People relying upon me to adhere to the rules. But in this place I am flanked by ghosts of my past, I walk a life which is mine no longer and the demons gather to drag me to their hellscape and I don’t know how to fight them without you by my side. The King calls on you to ward off his spectres whilst mine claw through the rifts in my spirit left by loneliness. I need clear skies and bright beginnings; I *need* my wife.” His timbre was racked with emotion, the pleas so earnest she could not begin to reconcile his impassioned petition with a man who would be unfaithful.

*What if I’m wrong? But what if I’m right?*

She worried at a nail with her fingers, ripping at it beneath the water. “Our future, our plans – I’m sorry but they have to wait.” Reaching over she closed her long digits around his stump. “I know we don’t like it, but impending war takes precedence. We are both still in our prime, we can bide our time…”

“Can we?” His green marbles gazed into hers. “I have gone silent on the topic, I have not mentioned it nor enquired, for I know you have enough to deal with right now. But we mustn’t forget what your Father said, we may be seasoned warriors, but we are not young.”

“I know.” *Truly I do. It is never far from my mind.*

“I had promised myself I would not ask but – are you pregnant? Are there any signs? I was hoping from that morning…”

“No. I’m not.” *I have let you down again husband. I have bled since.*
And I am starting to think that what you want may be beyond my capabilities.

They descended into silence whilst she let him process the disappointment, framing her next phrase as delicately as she could.

We came here to be frank; it must be broached.

“Jaime – what if it is just us?” She watched a droplet run down her kneecap, rejoining the ocean of bathwater. They resemble my tears – if he hasn’t gone back to her but was considering it, I may be about to give him the final push into her arms. “What if we don’t have children?”

Her husband’s jaw went slack, mouth gaping soundlessly before finally sputtering. “Where is this coming from?”

The fact that I believe I can’t bear them for you.

But she couldn’t tell him that, would rather die than see the sorrow she had caused, so instead she simply said. “It is a possibility we must face.”

“Is it really? Or is it a want?” Brienne recognised the signature Lannister bite, deadly in its puncturing aim. “I know you were never keen.”

“Don’t say that.” Bridling at his insinuation, her tone infused with defensiveness. “You know I’ve been trying.”

“Do I? I see little evidence of it. Our time together does not increase, nor our intimacies. You never talk to me about what you’re going through. So instead I’m forced to watch you for signs like an outsider, a spectator to the experiences we should be sharing. Whether it be lows or highs, anticipation or disappointment.”

“Perhaps if you were less distracted by sharing moments with Cersei, I would have the chance.” Brienne glared at him. “It seems we both wish the convenience of being divided down the middle, appeasing and pandering to more than one person at once.”

“I resent that.” Jaime’s jaw set. “Cersei is there, we share a child. I do not court her company, the opposite in fact – I discourage it.”

“Not from what I’ve seen.” Her whisper was deathly quiet, flashes of earlier that day haunting her psyche.

“Brienne – there is nothing romantic nor sexual going on between Cersei and I.” The lion sighed heavily. “Cersei is my twin-sister. She is Tytan’s Mother. That is where it begins and where it ends.”

“I’m sure Robert Baratheon thought the same.”

“Do you not trust me?” His green eyes were wounded. “I’ve asked you similar in a bath before. Because I trust you. Even when you spend your days with dozens of men. I know my past is despicable, but does that mean I’m beyond redemption?”
“His Grace always says we are supposed to learn from the past.” She swallowed. “You say you have learnt from your mistakes, grown past them. But I would be unwise not to take wisdom from the errors of others - and Robert’s lesson was a bitter one.”

“Brienne…do my actions not speak louder? Do you somehow mistake my words?” He was growing testier by the minute. “Because all I talk about is getting out of here. Far away from court and the people who would come between us – whether that be King Bran or Cersei. I long to leave it all behind. Goodbye, farewell, I will be pleased to see the back of this place and never return.” Jaime frowned. “But we endure here, month after month. And the only conclusion I can draw is that you seem to have more interest in being Lady Commander than my wife.”

“That is not a fair accusation.”

“No it hasn’t – I agree. I have doubts and I have fears, but I have never hidden that from you. I know my make-up, I know my faults.” Tremors rocked her now, the pitch of her octave raising, meeting his charges head on. “I am not nurturing but I am stalwart, it only makes sense that I’ve lived my life by my sword – a fact which you loved me for if I recall.”

“And I do. It remains still, I admire all you are and who you are, I would never change you. But you sell yourself short by consigning yourself to this stagnant life, restricting your capacity to give and receive love by these self-imposed boundaries and impossibly high standards. I am not asking you to sheathe Oathkeeper, I just hoped you’d find room in your heart for more.”

“I can find room, I have.” She took instant offence.

*He has no idea the debilitating pain of thinking I will never carry his child. He cannot possibly know because I have hidden it well, burying it beneath my responsibilities and tasks, telling myself next moon’s turn perhaps the crimson flood will not appear and take away my hope.*

“I felt the pangs Jaime. When you were gone and I found out I wasn’t pregnant, it destroyed me. When you wrote to me of Tytan’s birth I concealed my feelings for your sake, but I was envious. I wanted the child you held to be mine, I wanted you to have filled me.”

The Lord of Lannister raised a sceptical blonde eyebrow. “From a fear of failure? From missing me? Or because it is what you wanted? Brienne please give me a straight answer, we have to be in this together, we must be on the same page or we will falter. Don’t just tell me what you think you must.” He placed his hand on the white mountain of her knee and squeezed. “Is a family with me something you want?”

*Yes Jaime – but I don’t think it’s an option and I can’t lose you by disclosing that I am even more defective than we knew I was already. Lacking beauty, charm, grace, warmth, wit and fertility.*
But she couldn’t lie to him – so there was only one answer she could honestly give. “Is it wrong… that I want you more?”

“No.” Her lion swayed his blonde head left and right, his mane slightly flaring outwards, dampened at the tips. “But lately I don’t even think you want me.”

“I do Jaime.” Her chin wobbled. “You just need so much love. For you it’s a constant requirement and when I’m preoccupied or tired it smothers me.”

“And that’s how I feel. Like I’m a burden to you, a painful drain on your time. The nuisance whom you secretly wish wasn’t there pawing at you night after night.”

“You’re not – you are the high point of my day.”

“How can I know that?” Jaime’s usually confident voice grew small, saddened. “I cannot believe we are here again.” He stared into her eyes and she felt their haunted presence touching the farthest reaches of her soul. “When was the last time you told me that you loved me? I tell you every chance I get. Go out of my way to show you every day in ways both big and small.”

“Please don’t think that way Jaime. Don’t misconstrue me. I’m just exhausted.”

“Well I feel alone.”

*Is that why it happened? Or nearly happened? Or hasn’t?*

Her spirit felt like it was in multiple locales at once, pieces struggling to reform and function.

*Cease this – are you insane. You are doing it right now. Overthinking and obsessing over hypotheticals when your husband is here in front of you, laying his heart at your feet.*

“You’re not.” Brienne sloshed through the tepid bath, wrapping herself around him in a bone crushing embrace until there wasn’t room for a trickle of water between them. Melding her cool moist skin to his, burying her face in his damp hair. “I love you. I know this has been difficult, but we are stronger than this.”

“We are.” His agreement was a miraculous choir, convincing her to plod ahead in the dark and find the light at the end of the tunnel. "I love you too.'’

They held each other at length like this, whilst the steam around them evaporated away and the turbulence her sudden movement had caused gradually stilled, the surface appearing like glass again, undisturbed by the presence of their motionless embrace. She considered taking him in hand, guiding him inside her. But her heart asserted that this contact was more valuable than carnal. The way Jaime breathed her in by the lungful, arms clutching the trunk of her torso to him so tightly it could bruise, communicating what he really needed more eloquently than if their discussion had taken until dawn.
When he kissed her, she was struck with a thought. Hand splayed across his beard, parting her lips to let his tongue court hers in its expertly honed mating ritual.

_This is not what I saw. This is not how he and Cersei were locked._

The concept calmed her fears, dismissing notions of raising the subject back to whence they came from.

_If he didn’t tell me, it was with good reason. I trust him and this – here, now – is love... and that is enough for me to have faith._
Chapter Summary

Cover Art by: Ro_Nordmann

"Shadows creep..."
Lyrics, War of Hearts by Ruelle
Verse 2, Line 2

Chapter Notes

Shorter Chapter tonight. I am just chiming in to say another thank you for the comments and support, they have made me float through the last few days and mean the world to me. <3

Trigger Warning: Interpersonal Violence
It was early evening when Brienne wound her way through the halls towards the stables. A breeder had arrived from Essos that morning bringing what by all accounts was an exceptionally fine shipment of Coursers for purchase by the Crown.

War horses. The Lady Knight’s thoughts were bitter. I wonder how many of the mighty beasts will perish in service to men’s thirst for power. Or a woman’s - in Queen Sansa’s case.

As Lady Commander she was entitled to select a trio of new mounts for her own personal usage and had been invited to attend the parade of stallions held for the nobles earlier in the day. True to form, Brienne decided to skip the exercise, preferring to peruse them at her own leisure, away from loud opinions and the bias of men.

Especially the merchant, they have a predisposition towards assuming a woman cannot tell a purebred Palfrey from a Rounsey.

The choice of the correct mount was a symbol of prestige amongst Knights and often the difference between life and death.

I should very much look for a balanced combination of size and speed if possible, though with my frame I must naturally favour size. But larger horses can also be laggard and in battle it is imperative to be swift. Coursers are the more common choice, but I wonder whether he brought any Destriers?

By the time Brienne had reached the ground floor she had turned to analysing the needs of those around her.

The Crown is only paying for campaign horses for those on Council, a gift of sorts for the extra hours spent strategizing. But I wonder if I should purchase Podrick a handful of mounts? The boy had nothing when he became my Squire and I raised him to Knighthood for the Kingsguard. His first horse came from Jaime’s generosity and heavens forbid I recall how he rode back then. He has little funds of his own and he shall need them.

Then what about Jaime? My Lord Husband would definitely need suitable steeds - however he would probably rather pick them himself. That activity in itself may give him joy. A break from routine. Though I must prepare myself to be regaled with his spiel about the superiority of 'Westerland horses' with 'Western bloodlines'.
But the sad truth of it is – during the wars and Winter the Six Kingdoms lost many of its good breeders, that is why we are turning to imports...

Brienne was so deep in thought as she trudged down the narrow corridor, by the time she noticed the other woman’s approach, bumping into each other was near inescapable.

It wasn’t that she actively avoided Cersei, it was just that they naturally moved in different social circles, a concept which pleased them both. On the odd occasion when they did find themselves in the same room, it was generally with Jaime to act as a buffer and the new Lady Lannister had shrewdly noted how the older lioness retracted her claws when her twin was present to witness her behaviour.

I am not so fortunate today.

Plastering a thin smile on her face, she tried not to give credence to the gathering dread in her stomach.

Mayhaps things have changed and this can be swift and cordial.

“A fine evening to you Good-sister.” Brienne extended a greeting, trying not to cringe when Cersei stopped. The disconcerting smirk the former Queen wore lending a spark to her verdant eyes, quite akin to a cat with prey in her sights. Exuding a demeanour of far too much gaiety for it to have anything to do with their chance encounter.

I was hoping we could just pass one another, and I could be on my way.

Unable to avoid conversation, the Lady Knight attempted to contain her introversion, slipping into well practised pleasantries. “You seem happy, I trust this is a sign all is well is your sphere.”

“Of course, I am.” Her self-satisfaction seemed to intensify, filling the limited space of the hallway until it was palpable. “I have all I could possibly want.”

There is nothing I like about her undertone.

“That is glad tidings, I am heartened you could find contentment in your new position.” Whenever the Lady Knight was subjected to standing and speaking with Cersei, she became painfully aware of their differences. Her height and size being foremost. She felt like they were two measuring poles, one the representation of what a woman should be and the other an example of what could go wrong. I need to escape this situation now.

“If you’ll excuse me, I do not mean to appear rude but there is somewhere I am expected.”

I didn’t run from Wights, nor Bolton’s men, nor the Hound. But I flee every time I am cornered by her balefulness. Should I feel the coward? Or is it self-preservation? A toxic conversation can serve neither of us well...
Brienne stepped sideways, intending to go around her good-sister, but Cersei purposefully blocked her path.

“You know Robert was a total fool but at least he did not make it easy. You on the other hand…”

“What do you mean?” The request for clarification tumbled from her lips unbidden and the Lady Knight cursed her reflexive impulse, for throwing herself headlong into the snare she could feel closing in around her. Cersei’s shrill laughter sending shivers coursing throughout her system.

**Walk. Don’t stop or wait or listen, make your legs move. This does not bode well.**

“You’re never there.” The former Queen’s golden curls brushed her shoulders as she giggled gleefully. “You left him needy. Wanting. It was all too simple really.”

*Jaime…*

The spring on the trap snapped shut, clamping around her chest and depriving her of oxygen. Her voice wheezing slightly when she demanded. “Cersei - what are you saying?”

“We are together.” The lioness was wistful, gaze drifting over the taller woman's shoulder as if she were reliving a wondrous moment. “We have been for a while. Jaime, Tytan and I are a family, just as it should be.”

“You’re lying.” Brienne’s low octave growled a warning, protectiveness roaring to the forefront.

*She is a known deceiver. I will not let her taint us. She will not touch us.* Meanwhile another quadrant of her brain desolately whispered. *Even though you saw them kiss?*

“Obstinate and pig-headed – Jaime calls you that doesn’t he?” Cersei shrugged flippantly. “Oh well, play it your way. There will be no denying it soon, it will be evident to all.”

*She will not see me break.* The iron fortress of her façade held strong, masking the turmoil within. *My panic is not her quarry, my pain will not give her more power.*

Denied the pleasure of seeing her opponent crumble, Cersei went for the killing blow.

“I’m pregnant. That is the glow which you see.” Her good-sister beamed. “I am giving Jaime the family he wants - that which you couldn’t, wouldn’t. I really should thank you for that.”

“That’s no proof.” The Lady Commander shook her head, stubbornly determined.
“Be wise Brienne.” She almost shuddered at her name on Cersei’s lips, the disrespect implied by addressing her without title. Wielding the same condescending tone she had used years ago at a distant wedding. “I’ve only ever had my brother’s children. The whole realm knows that.”

Finally satisfied with the damage wreaked, Cersei withdrew. Leaving Brienne a column of stone, standing motionless in the hall, thoughts of horses long forgotten.

“Lannister!”

His wife hadn’t called him that for years with a serious tone, only upon the odd occasion when they were bickering for sport. But it never holds that fury.

Jaime alighted from the window seat, placing aside his polishing cloth and Widow’s Wail whilst the door slammed behind her, vibrating on its hinges with the force. “What’s wrong?”

It was only then he was reminded of the true capabilities of his wife - her brawn and immeasurable strength. Shoving him back with a jarring whack against his chest, ramming him into the bricks of the wall. The collision rattling his skull and reverberating in his bones. “Fuck! Brienne?!”

Her palm pushed into the centre of his chest, forearm pressed horizontally against his jugular, tilting his chin up to stare her in the eye and restricting his intake of air.

“Are you having an affair with your sister?” She spoke through gritted teeth, cerulean orbs wild with a plethora of unnamed emotions, swirling in eddies of anger and torment.

Coughing for breath he raised his hand and stump in surrender, unwilling to fight his wife, especially when she was in such a state. Mind racing as he tried to figure out what exactly was happening.

Unfortunately, his hesitation enraged her more and she shook him again roughly, his scalp scraping against the abrasive bricks. “Answer me!”
“No!” He shook his head as adamantly as he could wedged within her iron grip. “I swear Brienne.”

He felt her grasp falter, but she recovered swiftly, firming it up again and firing another allegation. “Cersei says she is pregnant.”

“I know nothing about that. All I know is she has a lover.” His larynx croaked against the pressure. “I haven’t touched her. On my oath…”

“I saw you kiss.” The way she spoke such an affectionate word with a hiss in her tone was enough to break his heart. “You never told me.”

He brought his hand gently to her forearm, tugging on it to encourage her to loosen the compression, feeling his head getting light.

_I can answer nothing if I have passed out._

Seeing he was struggling, she lowered her arm ever so slightly, allowing more air to pass through. Jaime took a huge gulp, spluttering faintly, blinking to clear the blurry patches which had appeared in his vision. “Because I didn’t want to upset you.”

“That is a paltry excuse even for you…”

“Let me finish.” Swallowing he tried to regain moisture in the back of his throat. “I didn’t tell you - because on Tarth you were so perturbed by Cersei propositioning me that it affected _our_ trust. Because her _unsolicited_ overture made you doubt the integrity of our steadfast relationship. Because when she kissed me in the nursery – I felt like a piece of tainted shit. And because I didn’t want to waste what few moments we get together talking about Cersei. Justifying and explaining something that meant nothing but a flood of unwelcome memories which made my skin crawl.”

His wife’s wrath tempered, the harsh lines in her expression gently morphing to curves again.

_Thank the Gods she believes me. I have done nothing wrong._

“I love you Brienne.” He soothed her affectionately, immensely sorry that these scurrilous imputations had been brought between them. “I would _never_ betray you.”

Jaime could have prayed to the Gods, but instead he silently beseeched his deity. The Goddess who made his sun rise and filled his nights with stars.

_My woman, you know my soul. Please believe me._

Her arm fell away from his throat, palm remaining planted over his rapidly racing heart. “Look me in the eyes.” The beautiful blue was so hopeful and terrified, it shattered him into infinite shards. “Promise me.”
“I swear it.” His green did not waver, fearful to even blink in case it was misinterpreted by his beloved. “On my honour, on my oath, on my vows – both Knightly and of marriage. I haven’t. I wouldn’t. I’m yours.”

“What in Seven Hells did you tell my wife?!” When the lion truly roared it shook the walls and rafters, echoing for miles. Sending birds flying from boughs, horses skittering nervously in their fields.

But the lioness was undaunted by her twin’s bluster, blinking impassively at him from where she sat in her minimalistic chamber, adding embellishments to one of her dresses. Rolling the knot she had accidentally made in her thread between thumb and forefinger. “Pardon?”

“You know damn well.” Jaime snarled. “You told Brienne we were fucking, you lying-”

“I didn’t.” Placing her needlework aside, she drummed perfectly manicured fingernails against the table. “Maybe she leapt to conclusions? I’ve noticed she is not the most secure creature.”

“Don’t even try to pull the wool over my eyes Cersei. She knows facts even I was unaware of, things which could only come from the source - you told her you are pregnant.”

“I am.” She gave him a syrupy sweet smile. “I did tell her that, when we passing in the hall – I was trying to bond. All I can say is that you must have issues within your marriage if she instantly assumed you were the Father. But that is between you and the sow and officially not my problem. I have more serious things to concern myself with – like impending motherhood.”

“I believe my wife.” The Knight stalked over to the table, leaning upon it with hands of gold and skin to loom over his sister, voice dropping to a deadly whisper. “I don’t know what you are playing at Cersei but consider this your final warning. Desist. Stay away from us. My wife and myself. I will converse with you only as necessary pertaining to Tytan and my conditions with Bran – but that is it. I had hoped to salvage some semblance of sibling bond with you but I see now that is impossible; your heart is black, if it even exists. Twin or not, sister or not, Tytan’s Mother or not, it does not matter - if it is a choice Cersei, I will choose Brienne every time. So hear this - if you drive a wedge between my wife and I – I will never forgive you. I will never see nor speak to you again – you will be dead to me, if I don’t choose to make that a fact personally. That is a promise.”
“Brother-” Angling her head up toward him, she was a patronising basilisk with a forked tongue, patting him conciliatorily on the back of his flesh and blood hand. “-It seems like you’re doing a good job of that on your own. You don’t need my help.”
Once again; if you are finding any aspect of this fic distressing, please step away. I understand that some readers may not like the direction it takes, or that some of the decisions made within perhaps just don't sit comfortably. But discontinuing is best for all involved – both the reader who is feeling upset, and the writer who is hyperventilating with anxiety at the thought of posting the next stretch of chapters.

So I say...the upcoming chapters carry a **High Angst Warning**. Starting now.
“I’ve got Blueberry Oatcakes in the oven and a batch o’ Lemon Cakes half made.” Betsy ran her arm over her forehead, moving hurriedly to the basin to rewash her flour covered hands.

“Oatcakes?” Jaime worked his best sulky expression, peeking in a large bowl, hand firmly gripping Tytan’s thigh to keep him balanced on his hip. “I’m sure they’re lovely but they’re not very romantic Bets.”

The kitchen was his third stop after the candlemakers and the flower market, his hoard of goodies stashed upon a stool in the corner.

“Lemon Cakes it ‘tis then.”

He grimaced. “They’re not really what I had in mind, Lemon Cakes were a favourite of an old friend of hers and I would rather not stir up dormant animosities.” I’m also not beyond begging. “Please - I want this evening to be perfect. You have no idea how much I have missed my wife, and this will be the first whole night we’ve had together in what feels like eons.”

The cook braced herself against the counter, blowing out a puff of air and raising her eyes to the ceiling. “Let’s just say I place some of the prepared batter aside and instead of adding Lemon, I added Honey. Turning them into Honey Cakes. Would that please ye’ Lordship?” The sarcasm in her tone was kindly meant and if Jaime hadn’t been holding Tytan he would have hugged her.

“That sounds incredible! Thank you. It means so much.”

I will bring her a pouch of coins when I return to collect them – she well and truly deserves it.

“Alright, but it will take a while.” She waggled a finger at him. “Now be off with ye! You’re holding up my work.”

Next item on my list: wine. Destination: the cellar.

Turning on his heel, the smile which already encompassed his face grew even larger upon spying Podrick watching his antics with avid curiosity. The lad was dressed in his leathers, off-duty for a change.

That’s because my woman has the day shift.
“Did Brienne ever teach you its ill-mannered to stare?” Jaime teased, wandering up to the laden stool and wondering how he was going to manage it all.

_With a toddler and minus an extremity._

“I was just wondering what in the world you are doing…”

“Secrets.” The lion declared mysteriously. “Surprises more accurately. Care to help? Though I must ask you to keep this to yourself, at least until tomorrow.”

“Is there a celebration I’ve missed?” Pod’s brown spheres grew wide and panicked. “Name day? Or is it perhaps your Anniversary? Our routines are so full I can scarce tell one day from the next.”

“No occasion that I know of. Just – love and togetherness. And I think that is worth making special. I haven’t organised anything like this since Tarth and I feel it’s long overdue.”

“In that case I’m happy to help.” The young knight put his arms out. “What do you want me to take?”

“Your choice – you can take the flowers and candles but if you break or crush any, I may be liable to kill you.”

“I will pass then; I have a reputation of clumsiness. What’s option two?”

“Here.” Jaime passed Tytan over. “Go to Uncle Podrick.”

“Uncle Podrick?”

Collecting up his treasures, he couldn’t help chuckling at the younger man’s dumbfounded tone.

“I call everyone an Uncle or an Aunt these days. It just makes life easier. We have Uncle Tyrion and Aunty Brienne – which is far easier for little minds to grasp than Lord Hand and Step-Mother. And then this time around I am Papa or Father because I am _not_ keen to ever explain how technically I’m his Uncle as well.” Straightening he raised a noncommittal shoulder. “Go with it Pod. You just acquired yourself a nephew. Now tell me, are you alright to walk with us? I have to visit the cellar.”

“It’s fine.” Pod seemed quite at ease holding the toddler as they ambled along, though he wasn’t prepared when Tytan knotted a fist in his brown mop of hair. Wincing good-naturedly, he let the little lion pull his head to the side. “Does this mean when you and Lady Ser have one of your own, I can be their Uncle too?”

“That depends on how you see yourself I suppose.”

“How do you mean?”
“I guess I just imagined Brienne and my child looking up to you as a sort of big brother but if Uncle pleases you more, who am I question it?”

Pod freed himself from the tot’s stranglehold, his lips twitching upwards, timorous but chuffed, nonetheless. “May I think on it?”

“Only if I can hear your thoughts.”

They descended the flight of stairs into the cellar and Tytan squirmed, looking about inquisitively at the change of scenery and dim interior, the sconces widely spaced as their voices echoed around them in the odd acoustics.

“Will you be peevish with me if I admit Lord Tyrion and I have talked about your future children?”

“Not at all. I do not doubt my brother discusses my life. His tongue loosens over a flagon of ale.”

The lion neatly arranged his packages on the floor again whilst he talked, freeing up his arms and retrieving the empty flagon he had packed, ready to go in search of wine. “But I will say I am mystified as to what this has to do with my question.”

“I can answer that.” Podrick repositioned Tytan as he talked, trying not to lose his grip as the child flailed restlessly. “See, you know I view M’Lady like my own Mother, so in that regard to be big brother to your children would be splendid. But – and I don’t know whether it’s true or not because he does like to trick me with tall tales – Lord Tyrion says that the firstborn of the next generation should be named after their favourite Uncle. That it’s a Lannister tradition…”

Jaime tried not to snigger. *Gods my brother is full of horseshit – he knows Pod is quite gullible.*

“….So he insists you will be having a little Tyrion and I just thought - I might like to be able to say back to him - that your baby could have my name instead. Seeming as I joined the Kingsguard, so won’t be having any children of my own.”

Raising an eyebrow, the Lannister Lord levelled him with a sceptical stare. “Come now Podrick. I was in the Kingsguard for years – during that time I fathered three children. You mean to tell me your vows of celibacy are sacrosanct? With your reputation with the Ladies?” He scoffed. “I’ll wager there are one or two little brown haired, brown eyed Payne bastards running about King’s Landing.”

“In all due respect Ser Jaime – you are married to my Lady Commander. If there were any truth in your claims, I would hardly be confessing it to you. Though I will go so far as to say that I have no natural children which I know of.” The lad furrowed his brow, struck with a sudden thought. “Though I cannot vouch for in the North….we did leave rather suddenly.”

“Fair point.” Barely containing his mirth, Jaime slipped into the cellar. Laughter bouncing off the stacks of wine. “I have you worried now Pod!”

“I am. I have no way of knowing and if Ser Brienne realises the potential and my carelessness –
she will be disappointed in me.”

Blowing a light layer of dust off a barrel label, he filled the container, grimacing when fumbling with his golden hand caused some of the expensive liquid to spill on the stone floor.

And that is why we generally have servants do this.

“Don’t lose sleep over it boy, contemplating your inglorious history of conquests will be the last thing on my mind this evening, I am not like to mention it.” Emerging triumphantly, he held the Dornish Red aloft. “And I can say with certainty - My Lady will be otherwise occupied.”

Cersei tarried by the doorframe, stooped over, ear cocked slyly towards the keyhole. The speech within carrying to her through the minuscule space far clearer than when it was muffled by solid wood.

She knew that indisputably; she had tried pressing her cheek to the timber to test the theory.

Besides, this way is less obvious.

Her cover was primed, if she were happened upon, she could simply knock, grab the handle, say she was being careful not to enter unannounced. But serendipitously the hall was empty, allowing her eavesdropping to go undisturbed.

“You cannot begin to imagine the dilemmas a man faces when he is striving to achieve romance - but you will one day. Though, Papa only has his left hand and that adds in a larger degree of difficulty.”

The conversation was one-sided, Tytan the unwitting recipient of Jaime’s enthusiastic chatter.

“If I light the candles too early, they will all melt down to a puddle of wax and that is not going to create much ambience. But if I wait too long, it will take me an age and then they won’t be lit when Aunty Brienne gets here for her big surprise.”
Cersei’s mood darkened considerably.

They were supposed to be at each other’s throats, suspicious and on the rocks – if not already broken. He is trying to rebuild their connection, regain trust. My brother always has been persistent in his sentimentality, but it is to my advantage she is not so steadfast. The beast has been the weak link in the chain from the beginning.

Tensions had been high between the twins, Jaime’s sentences to her brief and clipped. Topics always kept to necessities and instructions regarding their son. The former Queen knew he was disgruntled with her, perceiving her contrivances as spiteful and unnecessary.

He simply failed to see the larger picture, so absorbed in believing what he felt for his dour wife was somehow superior to their own everlasting bond. The pacts they had forged as children, the ties that bound them in the womb.

Jaime may hurt but it will be temporary. He will see and thank me in the long run.

She is bad for him; wrong. Changing him, making him live up to impossible ideals. Convincing him to turn his back on me, his flesh, his lover, his twin. He has always been mine, belonged by my side. We are meant to be together, two halves of one whole. He told me, in his own words. Nothing else matters – nothing but us.

“Now as soon as your Mother gets here – which she should have done ages ago – Papa is going to have a bath so he doesn’t smell like the market and kitchens.” She heard him sigh, muttering more to himself than to Tytan. “Hopefully I can be ready before my wife gets here, thanks to Cersei I am running behind.”

I believe that’s my cue.

Rapping loudly, she tried the handle finding it unlocked. Careless brother.

Letting herself in she assessed the room, arching an eyebrow at Jaime lighting candles and employing an innocent tone. “What is all this in aid of?”

“Never you mind.” Blowing out the taper he crossed the room briskly, picking up Tytan from the wooden pen on the floor.

Curt as ever, you spoke to me sweetly once my twin – and you shall again.

“Here are his things.” Jaime shoved a rucksack at her. “He had a late lunch so he will probably not have much of an appetite for dinner, but try anyway, that is no excuse to starve him. Last time you returned him he acted as though he hadn’t eaten for a year.”

“I gave him food.”

“Yes, the nursery staff told me you gave him fare that was entirely inappropriate for a child of his age. I’m just pleased he had the good sense not to eat it or else he may have choked to death. I
have no desire to lose a second son that way.”

While Jaime kissed Tytan on the cheek and bid him goodnight Cersei peered about, noting the immaculate freshly made bed, the strewn petals, the key upon the chest of drawers…

“Ahem.” Her brother cleared his throat loudly, handing her their son. “You can see yourself out.”

He was already loosening the ties on his jerkin when she struggled through the door, juggling both Tytan and his bag.

_I must move quickly, Tillie can take Tytan._ Her feet dashed across the floorboards and down the hall. _I have never been the pious type but now I may be inclined to believe in the Gods – they have surely delivered me all I need._

An entire night to ourselves – I can scarce believe it.

Brienne had mentioned it to Jaime in passing the previous sennight and immediately regretted it, flanking the statement with general observations and hoping he hadn’t taken notice. The last thing she wanted to do was raise his hopes, to have him disappointed by an unforeseen change in plans. The instability in the Six Kingdoms plunging their lives into constant flux.

Luckily her husband had made no inference to it since and the Lady Knight had spent yesterday going out of her way to ensure every possible eventuation was taken care of in advance, not wanting the night she had worked tirelessly towards to be thrown off course at the eleventh hour.

A little over a week ago she had elevated two of the candidates to the position of Kingsguard, commending their suitability to his Grace and observing them take their vows before the Court.

Initially their promotion had meant even more work, arranging their armour and overseeing their seamless integration into the sacred order. Joining them during shifts until their increasingly uneasy monarch came to accept them as trustworthy.

The two knights – Ser Mortimer and Ser Derek – had guarded King Bran before, but never during the nightshift when he felt most vulnerable. In the interest of helping all involved adjust, she and
Podrick had been taking turns providing supervision and reassurance, swapping guard duties in the black of night or just before dawn. Getting them all to the place they were now.

*Liberation – it is finally here. I cannot wait to see the look on my husband’s face when I tell him. To be the bearer of joy instead of dismay.*

She turned the knob, genuinely surprised to be met with resistance.

Odd, he does not usually lock the door.

Giving it no further contemplation, she retrieved the key from her pocket, unlatching it with a firm click. Drifting through when it swung open and happily announcing. “Jaime, I have glad tidings…”

Brienne trailed off, the chamber stretching before her like a scene from her nightmares. Every garish detail scorching into her iris’, birthing un-restrainable tears as the images branded themselves into her memory and soul. The saline liquid scalding her blue to red as it lapped at the rims, rolling down her cheeks like savage acid.

But her chest, it burned.

First from the cold of the shock, then from the hellfire of realisation. Searing away flesh, rendering muscle from bone, leaving her heart exposed to the cruellest breed of agony she had ever known.

White candles of various heights and widths had been assembled around the room, across the windowsills and atop the nightstand, their glow giving the chamber an intimate aura. A bouquet of exquisite wildflowers lay upon the bedside table, bound by silken ribbon and accompanied by a carafe of wine. Two chalices sat proudly in front of it, the burgundy dregs still visible in the bottom of one. Their bed was a tangle of covers, petals caught amongst the crumpled sheets and cascading onto the floorboards below.

Cersei’s golden head lifted from Brienne’s own pillow as she sat upright, hair a bedraggled mess of curls, blanket falling down just enough to bare her naked shoulder and the voluptuous dip of cleavage, a smug smile playing on her plump lips. “Told you.”

Not many survived to recall the instant their heart ceased to beat. Brienne had now lived that moment thrice over.

“Is that you?”

Jaime’s tenor was cheerful, unsuspecting. Ignorant that they had been interrupted, found out. He waltzed from the bathchamber, naked as his nameday, hair damp from what she could only assume was perspiration.
It took only a passing scan for the colour to drain from his complexion, shock and abject horror settling over him when he turned from Cersei in the bed to her standing by the door. “No.” He shook his head in furious erratic patterns. “No!”

The raging pain within her was so savage she could scarcely hear her own thoughts. Her brain the one part of her which remained remotely functional, screaming at her to leave and protect herself from the engulfing ache which threatened to destroy her. The same voice which saved her in the heat of battle, when arms were ready to collapse and couldn’t take another swing.

Move! Move now. Don’t waste another second on her, on him. On them.

Them… It was a violent sob. Them. They will always be a ‘them’.

“Brienne!”

She was edging backwards out the door, flight the only option when there was no fight left within her. Dropped from a height, thrown from a mountain, dashed against the jagged rocks below. Every inch of her impaled upon a vicious spike, the formation which ruined the warrior woman known thereafter as betrayal. It was that which they’d say destroyed her. Not war, blades or even White Walkers. Betrayal. The force which finally defeated her.

“Brienne!”

She had made it to the doorway, one more step and she could flee. But Jaime had her by the arm. Jaime – the man she loved and had been loyal to. The man who was her undoing.

The man who will always want his sister….

Yanking backwards she was free of their room. The room she’d fought for – so they could be together.

So he could have Cersei in your bed.

But Jaime’s grip was adrenaline charged iron, knuckles white, hand latching onto her upper arm. Shaking her, calling to her, saying things which she didn’t want to hear.

“I know what it looks like. I know how bad this seems.” His timbre trembled, along with his jaw, head still swinging right then left in jerking motions. “It’s not. It’s not what you’re thinking…”

“You swore to me.” Where she found her voice, she would never comprehend. An out of body experience watching herself summon courage which she thought evaporated with Cersei’s gratified smirk.
At least she cannot see me now, I can shield my wound from her salt.

“You broke your oaths. You lied to me.” Even if it were a croaking, gulping, weeping reproach, she would deliver it still. He deserves it. He deserves to know. “You looked me in the eyes.”

“I didn’t lie to you. I wouldn’t, I haven’t, I swear…”

“You’re doing it still!” The scream tore from her like a warhorn in the night and Jaime squared his shoulders, raising on the balls of his feet to equal her height, nude in the hall for all to see but seemingly uncaring as he shouted back.

“It’s not how it looks!”

“It is. I’m a fool.” She buried her face in her hands as another wail rocked her. “It’s the courtyard all over again. I’m not enough. I was never going to be enough for you.” Tears leaked through her fingers, pooled in her palms. Her utterances, fractured, disjointed snippets of her spiralling subconscious. “It was always going to be you and her.”

“NO!” The lion jolted her, stump swatting her hands away from her face, forcing her to stare at him. Releasing her arm to splay his digits across the side of her cheek, fingertips digging into her hair. “I love you. Hear me. Please Brienne – you know me inside and out, through and through…” His mossy lakes were despairing, but she was not a reliable judge.

*I thought I could read him so well, but I was gravely mistaken. Or maybe worse still – I was right from the start.*

Jaime’s breath washed over her face. “I am a one-woman man.”

“I know-” Her normal octave returned, so he would know she was resolute, the rivers collecting against her lips the only remaining sign that she was breaking. “That’s what I’ve always feared. You left me once for her, it was always going to happen again.”

Removing his hand from her cheek, she dropped it at his side, turning on her heel and walking away without a backwards glance. Vaguely aware of his anguished cries, calling her name, pleading for her to return.
‘Men don’t cry.’ His Father’s rebuke had always been scathing, deeming the emotion in his son a punitive crime. ‘You get up. You get on. You never show weakness.’

Yes, Father. But did you ever truly love? They say you loved Mother. Did you cry when you lost her? Did those purportedly shameful tears streak down your face as mine do now?

“Brienne.” Jaime wheezed a final, feeble attempt to stall her, his traitorous leaden legs unable to find the strength to move and give chase. Stopped by his head that warned.

She does not want you to follow her. Your presence in her life has only hurt her. If you love her, let her go.

A fresh curtain of water descended from his blonde lashes, and the only thing he had to be thankful for was that the commotion had not drawn spectators, the corridors surrounding their chambers reserved almost exclusively for access to Tyrion’s quarters.

You would disown me for such Father, I am certain. Your golden son standing naked in the hall, crying and screeching for his woman to return. You would say I bring the mighty lion lowly but loving Brienne is my one honour.

Your legacy is a lie. Your teachings of familial loyalty flawed. Your golden twins a tale of regret, incest and abomination. Decimating all we come into contact with.

I tainted the pure, my paragon of perfection. She slipped from my arms and rightfully so, for all I brought to her door was corruption and pain. Still, I am innocent as charged, I have not broken my fidelity. My wife only believes I have because Cersei…

A replacement emotion took hold, expanding and spreading within him faster than a plague through an army encampment. A fever which consumed, drying his tears, turning them into a volatile compulsion.

Here is a concept you are familiar with Father. Vengeance, retribution, reprisal. Would you like to be reunited with your own sweet daughter? Perhaps I can arrange it. Kinslayer would easily add to my list of sins.

His limbs reanimated with a surge of fury, sending him charging through the chamber entrance to
find Cersei dressing happily by the bed. Blind panic entering her green orbs when she recognised the murderous glint in his own, scrambling to escape as he seized her by the throat.

“You cost me my wife!” Jaime bellowed, numb to her fingernails gouging deep ravines in his hand as she flailed. “The woman I love! My heart!”

His twin kicked and scratched, clawing at him, grappling for breath. “Pregnant.”

“You expect me to believe you? Another of your lies to tear Brienne and I apart. I know you Cersei you will do anything to save your hide.” He inclined his head to the side, analysing her face as it began to turn blue. “You are a liar and a poison.”

“Telling…truth.” She coughed out faintly. “Look.”

Jaime’s eyes drifted down to where her hand fluttered, noting the very slight swell of her stomach. Releasing his grip, she slumped to the floor, clutching at her throat and gasping for air.

*I will not kill an unborn babe. The innocent does not deserve to die for the crime of belonging to a heartless hollow.*

“Get out.” He stood over her, unmoved by her display. “We are done, in every possible capacity. You are not my twin; you are not my sister. You can rot in the pits of all Seven Hells. I will never speak to you again.”

Glowering at him from beneath her brows she crawled for the exit, using the end of the bedframe to hoist herself up. When she was gone, he slammed the door behind her, shaking hand barely managing the key to lock her out.

*If I had only locked it in the first place, none of this would have happened. If I had only turned this stupid fucking key, in the fucking lock I’d still have my wife…*

He threw it across the room, the metal bouncing and skidding over the floorboards. Sinking into a heap upon the very spot where his Brienne had stood, their life together and years of trust disintegrating in the blink of an eye. The rough wood digging into his rump and chill creeping over bare limbs dotted by gooseflesh. But he felt none of the physical discomfort, it was dwarfed by infinite fold by the scourge within.

Through swimming vision, Jaime watched the candles burn down to puddles just as he had excitedly told his son not an hour earlier – the only part of the evening which he had accurately predicted. His ideations of romance and inseparability vanishing to the bleak land of broken dreams, afflicted with pessimism and self-detestation which ran bone deep, laughing malignly at his stupidity and conceit.

*Brienne was always too good for you. One day she was inevitably going to wake up and see who you truly are. A shadow of a man - blighted, damaged, blind, stupid... hateful.*
Silent tears tracked the creases at the corners of his eyes, following the natural lines like valleys whilst a devastated lion cursed himself and fate, the way the Gods plotted to thwart and steal all he held dear. *Not the Gods – Cersei. Ruthless, evil Cersei.*

Each weak beat of his crushed heart lanced agony through his chest as he tried in vain to process the unthinkable. His greatest fear becoming a reality.

*I have lost the woman I adore more than life itself.*

Chapter End Notes

Just chatting at the end of an incredibly heavy chapter.

If anyone has wondered, although the lovely cover art was made by the talented Ro_Nordmann, the banners used in this story were made by me (though I am not skilled in this area).

The imagery I chose other than the characters and sigils, is a symbol from the tarot, the "Three of Swords."

This is a little easter egg, which I have included from the beginning to tell/forewarn a lot about the story.

So what does it mean? Well aesthetically it worked due to its relevant imagery to both the fic title and knights, but beyond that, here is a the meaning of the card:

**Keywords: Heartbreak, Emotional Pain, Sorrow, Grief, Hurt Tears**

The Three of Swords depicts a heart pierced by three swords, representing the pain inflicted by words, actions and intent on the emotional and physical self. It tells of a fundamentally sorrowful experience, this may take the form of a lost relationship, an accidental death or speak of wounds not yet healed. The dark stormclouds visible in the background mirror the pain, but offer the hope that just as storm clouds disappear, so too will the pain and hurt you are experiencing.

I thought it worked well for this fic on many levels <3
Chapter Summary

"And I can't sleep, 'Cause thoughts devour..."
Lyrics, War of Hearts by Ruelle
Verse 1, Lines 4 & 5

It all came down to time, the master and composer. The conductor and the melody. Deciding the
overture, turning life from lush to arid in the blink of a tear swelled eye.

One instant, a moment, a step over a threshold to shatter her heart irreparably, to rewrite the memories of a million moments and coat them with a lie. Smashing golden hued reflections of euphoric times and grounding the shards to dust.

Relegating the present to history, snuffing out visions of their future like a candle - burning bright and then it was gone.

“M’Lady Ser – I brought you something to eat.”

Podrick was a benison, the only person to whom she could turn.

He had been startled but not angry when he discovered at dawn that she had let herself into his room in the White Sword Tower. His residence her old haunt, her room of grief. When she moved out to the main Keep, she had given the Lady Commander’s Chamber to her trusted companion.

Now she was back with her tail between her legs and cheeks stiff from crying. Trying not to see Jaime in every brick and sconce, wondering how many times she had bathed these floorboards with her tears.

“I’m not hungry Pod.”

She drew her knees up to her chest, back straight against the wall. Her former Squire had given her the bed, setting himself up a pallet in the limited space between the bedframe and the wall. But she felt guilty for invading and the discomfort of sitting upon the hard surface could at least provide a mild distraction from the debilitating ache beneath her ribs.

“You should at least have a couple of mouthfuls Ser; you haven’t eaten since yesterday morning.”

“There is a knot in my stomach, I couldn’t take a bite.”

“Some warm milk then?”

Pod sat next to her upon his makeshift mattress, crossing his legs and placing two cups of spiced milk between them. Brienne watched the steam rise from the surface but left it untouched. “Was His Grace angry when he heard I wished to be excused from my shift today?”

“Angry? No. But very concerned.” The young knight bit his lip, wanting to say something but holding back.

“Did you tell him I will return to duties tomorrow?”

“Yes – even though I think it is a bit soon.”

“Keeping busy is good for me Podrick. You know that. The Kingsguard is my sole focus now,
that at least will gladden King Bran.”

The same expression crossed his countenance, but he sipped from his milk cup and remained silent.

“What are you not saying?” Brienne prodded, her tone a dolorous rendition of its usual volume. “Speak freely with me, you may be the only honest soul I know.”

“I believe His Majesty may be secretly pleased at the prospect of your marriage no longer causing an interference. But your hurt perturbs him, he is not thinking too kindly of Ser Ja-” He stopped abruptly, brows knitting in worry.

“You can say his name. Just because I cannot bring myself to or that hearing it makes me weep does not mean he ceases to exist. The man is my husband I cannot avoid his mention forever.”

The lad sighed. “We both know King Bran was never fond of him, his favouritism of you makes Ser Jaime’s current position at Court quite dire.”

“Hmmm… I had not thought of it.” Brienne surprised even herself when she felt her protectiveness within uncoil, answering the call of potential danger to her man even after he had sliced open her heart and let all they meant to each other bleed out.

*Love is a curious emotion, it transcends all.*

A sob wracked her chest and she tried valiantly to push it down, mopping at her eyes with her index fingers. “His brother should shield him. Tyrion is Hand, he holds more sway than I.” The Lady Knight slanted her head to the side, studying Podrick’s shifty gaze. “But that is not what you were going to tell me.”

“No, it isn’t.” He confessed guiltily. “It is just one of the things.”

“The next?”

“Only if you drink your milk.”

Brienne raised one of her blond brows, framing eyes which she knew were bloodshot. “Who is in charge here?”

“Debatable. You gave me this room.” He pushed the cup towards her with a scraping sound. “I only say it because I care.”

“I know.” Lifting the liquid to her lips, she forced herself to take a sip. The sweet flavours seeming bland to her, finding no joy in their usual comfort. “There. But please incentivise no more, it reminds me too much of a drinking game.” Inhalng deeply through the sting of her red nose, she used all of her will power to try and suppress her fraught emotions. Pretending she was collected enough to hear what he had to say.
“I went to fetch your things and I spoke with Ser Jaime.”

She snapped her blue orbs shut, attempting not to crumble as she had predicted moments before, steeling herself against the sound of his name.

*The name I said in passion, the name I signed upon our letters, the name I strung alongside myself in so many sentences – believing we were indivisible. Jaime and me. Jaime and I. Jaime and Brienne. Even the stroke of ink and roll of tongue will feel the sever.*

Scrunching her lids tightly, she nodded for Pod to continue.

“He is disconsolate M’Lady. I have never seen a man so crestfallen and dispirited…”

Eyes flying open, Brienne leapt to her feet, pacing in tight quick circles, anger a far preferable response than her moping dejection. “Well perhaps he should have thought of that before he sought comfort between Cersei’s thighs.”

Pod was giving her that look again, the one that meant he was biting his tongue.

“What?!” She snapped, throwing both her hands up in the air. All too aware of how unstable she was acting, her reactions swinging uncontrollably between rage and melancholia. “You are a grown man Ser Podrick – if you want to say something – say it.”

“I don’t think he did it.”

The Lady Knight stopped dead in her tracks, arms falling limply to her sides. “I beg your pardon?”

“I believe Ser Jaime.” Podrick ducked his head, studying his mattress and empty cup. “He swears he was never unfaithful, that it was not how it appeared. He speaks only of how much he loves you.”

“What else can he say?” Brienne shook her head miserably. “I’m sure he is regretful, perhaps the small part of him that holds affection for me is gnawing at him with guilt – but I know what I saw. The things I’ve been noticing for a couple of moon’s turns.”

“And likewise, I know what I saw.” The young Knight lifted his brown eyes to stare into her own. “I would not lie to you M’Lady. If I thought Ser Jaime had betrayed you, I just may run him through myself. But I encountered him yesterday, before we traded shifts. I walked with him, we talked. He was planning a romantic evening.”

“With Cersei. I found her naked in our bed!”

“With you! I know it was for you.”

“This is ridiculous.” She resumed her march across the floorboards, scuffing the same stretch of
timber with agitated repetitive movements. “Did he ever say it was for me specifically? Did he mention my name?”

“Yes! Er-no. Well once.” Podrick stammered under the pressure and she tried to contain her annoyance. “He called you ‘My Lady.’ He said you would be ‘otherwise occupied.’”

“He thought I would be out of the way!” Her tone cracked, another gush of tears spilling down her cheeks, knees giving way as she dropped back to her spot on the timber.

“No Ser – he meant ‘intimately.’ Occupied with him.” It was quite endearing how persistent and optimistic Podrick was, wanting to believe the best for her sake. “We were in the cellar; he was fetching wine.”

“See?” Brienne sniffled. “Who likes wine? All three of us know I don’t really drink.”

“We spoke at length about your future…” He was so earnest it was touching. “...I am certain it was for you.”

“It’s too late Pod. I can play the deluded fool no longer. He was always meant to be with Cersei, I was always meant to be alone.”

“Don’t say that…”

“Even if it’s true?” She licked the salty taste of tears from her top lip. “That’s why we are not supposed to see the future – it breaks you. Look at the toll His Grace’s visions take on him. The Gods designed us not to know what lies ahead, so we can wallow in the present and make ourselves believe, because before too long it’s gone.”

Clapping him lightly on the shoulder, she tried to make herself smile. The gesture appearing more like a distorted frown. “I appreciate you trying and the conviction with which you believe in love. Hold on to that, once lost it’s unable to be recovered.” Withdrawing her hand, she exhaled, the rush of air quavering as it escaped into the room. “I think I will try to get some sleep.”

“Please take the bed.” Her former squire indicated towards it with his chin. “Goodnight M’Lady.”

“Goodnight Podrick.”

Collapsing onto the bed, Brienne relished the darkness behind her eyes. The fatigue of emotional turmoil dragging at her soul. Turning her own words over in her head, finding new sorrow and clarity in the introspection which preceded sleep.

*I never knew that was the last time I would make love to Jaime - on a morn when we were one entity, just two souls combined... I thrived on his love then. I felt it pouring into me. We were*
inextricable, extensions of one another. Was it all in my mind? Our love and connection my own concoction?

How could I have gotten it so wrong?

Maybe we should know the future - because rejection like this breaks you thereafter. Makes you doubt all that was. But then if I’d been warned... I would not have that moment to remember.

Both options rent me in two.

For in hindsight, a morn like that – seems a sublime illusion. And maybe it was a fantasy. Or perhaps it truly was real. Though I know with surety – there can never be a morning like that again. They belong to Cersei now...mayhaps they always did.

Pride be damned.

For the fifth consecutive day he waited at the entrance to the White Sword Tower. Hoping to catch a glimpse of her, deliver a handful of hackneyed protestations, always ending in a declaration of his undying love. The hours of boredom and persistence well worth even the scant snatches of her time as she shouldered past him, brushed him aside.

He had come to measure time now in individual eras.

Before Brienne - his era of sinning and folly.

With Brienne - the pinnacle of splendour.

After Brienne - where all meaning leeches from his world and only pain became the constant.

His first day of After Brienne, Jaime could hardly find the will to breathe. Wandering the confines of their chamber, reminiscing about his woman. By day she was the sun that streaked the carpet,
come evening the brightest star in the sky. Convincing himself they tethered him to her, the same celestials who watched them make love in a snow encrusted forest, gazed at them from a ship’s deck, wash in the shallows of the moonlit ocean.

*My Evenstar. My constant. Rises each night and fades each dawn, always to return again.*

*Return to me in the same way. I prayed before the Heart’s Tree; I pray before you now. May we always find a way back to each other.*

When Podrick arrived to collect Brienne’s things, Jaime had peppered the boy with questions.

Where is she?

How is she?

Can I please just talk to her?

Will she see me?

All his queries went unanswered and eventually his inquisition tapered off, silenced by the lad’s expression which said everything and nothing.

“I didn’t do it Pod. My entire relationship with Brienne, I have *never* bedded another woman, *never* touched Cersei nor anyone else, not once. I would never – my Lady Knight is my every desire.” He had sworn. “You were with me during the day – you know. It was a surprise I was planning for *us*, for her night off.”

The boy sucked in his lips, but his countenance held sympathy.

“I love her, more than words can say. All I wanted was a night with my wife and now I don’t even know if I have one anymore.” The moisture lapping at the edges of his eyes spoke to his veracity.

“Please, help me if you can. I’m falling apart without her. I can’t stand that she is out there - in this castle - and I can’t go to her, hold her, comfort her. And what makes it worse is she thinks I’m the source of her pain and as long as she believes that – I *am* the one who inflicted this on her and I’d never, ever hurt her.” He knew he was rambling, but the former Squire was his only hope.

“Please Pod. Someone has to believe me. I may be a lot of things but unfaithful isn’t one of them.”

Podrick had not said a word, but Jaime was left wondering if had detected a slight nod of his head.

Since that day Jaime had pulled himself together just enough to take matters into his own hand. To fight for his marriage and his innocence.

The second day After Brienne he had stalked their old chamber in the White Sword Tower - her location had not been a difficult deduction once he had calmed his mind enough to think logically -
loitering shamelessly outside the door. When she emerged dressed in her full armour, he had trailed her shadow down the stairs like a stray puppy. Begging for her acknowledgement and to just give him a chance to explain.

But alas, he knew his wife well and she was stubborn to the bitter end. Towards him she was harder than mortar, colder than stone. Brienne had shut him out of her confidence, regressing to her most uncommunicative self, tenfold more resistant than when they had first met, for this time she was responding to a personal slight.

The next day when he arrived, his way was barred by Kingsguard recruits upon her instruction and Jaime had taken up his position by the entrance to the Tower itself instead.

The place which for the last several days had felt more like home than their chamber – for here he was closer to her.

He spent his nights in the nursery, instructing staff to scope the chamber beforehand, keeping Cersei out of his vicinity and sight, lest he not feel inclined to be merciful for a second time. With Tytan he could at least settle enough to stay still and consider sleep, his son’s dimpled, jubilant face the only one which remained genuinely happy to see him. The sole person he could wrap his arms around, hold close and confide in.

On the fourth day, he had brought the boy along to sit and wait, keeping his morose Father company - but it did not take long for Jaime to conclude that it made his toddler privy to behaviours he would rather a tot not witness.

The location in the wide hallway was less secluded and he was openly mocked. Some of the younger Knights seemed to think his tragedy was quite hilarious, pointing and laughing about how the ‘Kingslayer’s wife wore the breeches’ and he ‘couldn’t handle his woman.’

On the fifth day he had lost his temper and clouted one of the lackwits, misliking what he overheard about ‘perhaps her cunt chewed off his cock.’ The act was doubly successful, for not only did it make him feel better, but it drew Brienne from within.

“He disrespected you.”

“That is hardly your concern.” It was the first words she had uttered to him. “None have disrespected me as greatly as you have, and they belong here – whereas you don’t.”

Jaime considered it a positive development. *She spoke to me.*

*That brings me to today – Six days After Brienne. Fifth day of pleading.*

Wandering to the end of the hallway, he checked the positioning of the sun. Tracking Brienne’s shifts in accordance to the shadows cast across the carpets or lawn had been a knack he developed whilst eagerly awaiting her moments of spare time and now he could put the skill to good use.

*Very soon.*
Returning to the doorway he straightened his clothes and cloak, combing his fingers through his mussed hair and over his scraggly beard. The gold and silver flecked waves having gone unshaven since he forgot how to care about anything other than the sound of her voice or the blue of her eyes.

The rattle of armour was unmistakable, her heavy footfalls a distinct mix of masculine and feminine. Jaime quickly ran through his head the words he had planned for today’s brief encounter whilst the thuds grew louder and louder.

*Here she is.*

Falling into step beside her, he walked sideways, trying every trick he knew to catch her gaze.

“My Lady-” When her name had produced a scowl at the informality and Ser sounded as though he were one of her soldiers, the traditional title seemed the best option. “I understand why you won’t talk to me, why you have frozen me out. If I had done the crimes of which I am charged, I would deserve much worse – impaling me upon Oathkeeper would be well justified or I may damn well do it myself for causing you such pain. I could apologise to you a million times and I will if that is what it takes to end this chasm between us – but know I would be admitting to a wrong I did not commit. Upon my life, upon Tytan’s health, upon the undead rising again – I never strayed from our marital bed.”

She stopped and the rhythm within his ribcage skipped a beat. *Maybe it’s working….*

Darting in front of her, he picked up speed in his speech, continuing his flow of declarations and pleading. “I love you, hand on my heart, Gods hear me. I know you Brienne, I know how it must be impossible to silence the voices in your head, how hard it is for you to trust let alone believe the likes of me, asking you to doubt the reliability of what you saw. But things are often grey and I ache each second you are not with me – tell me my love what I can do to commend myself unto you again. Ask me anything and I will see it done.”

“Ser Podrick.” The whole time she glared straight ahead, unflinching, unseeing. Peering over the top of his head and through him as though he didn’t exist.

A second set of footsteps came to a halt behind them. “Ser Jaime-” Pod called to him in a gentle but official tone. “His Grace requests we accompany you to an immediate audience.”
“I would suggest-” Bran the Broken had never held any love for Jaime Lannister but it was never more apparent than this moment.

*I crippled the boy; I cannot blame him. But still he played a hand in Brienne and I unravelling, conspiring to keep my wife from my side, allowing the seeds of suspicion to take route. He will relish this.*

“-you maintain your distance from the White Sword Tower and my Lady Commander.”

“Ser Brienne is my wife.”

“And I am the King.” It was the first time Jaime had truly seen the fires of sovereignty in his dark black pupils. “My orders are final.”

Tyrion sat quietly off to the side, pinching the bridge of his nose between two fingers.

“Was it an order or a suggestion?” The lion narrowed his eyes defiantly.

“A decree.”

“You would issue a decree to keep a Lord from his Lady? Thwarting a union consecrated by the Gods-”

“Brother!” The Lord Hand called, brows disappearing behind his hairline as he tried to communicate the precariousness of the situation without speaking. “I would ask that you listen to His Majesty.”

“Your Grace.” The Lady Knight’s tone was soft, her mien unreadable. *She is maintaining a blank façade so I cannot decipher her feelings.* “Perhaps the alternative?”

“Yes.” King Bran clasped his hands in his lap, changing tacts. “Lord Lannister – you are being sent to the Westerlands to call your banners. From there you are ordered to lead the forces northwards to Fairmarket where my armies will convene.”
“It has begun then.” Jaime tried to keep the woe from his timbre, their short-lived peace coming to an early end, heralding another age of battles and bloodshed.

And I am being sent far from Brienne’s side… and my son.

He sought her steady blue and this time she did not shy away, meeting his stare with her unwavering inner strength.

“Is this what you want?” His wife’s wishes were all that mattered to him, even if it pulverised his chest. If she bid it, Jaime would not fight his fate.

“Yes.” His woman did not balk, and it struck him worse than the rain of bricks ever had.

“There was a time you begged me to stay with you.”

Brienne blinked then, just once. A slow, controlled shutter and reopen, pitting her floodgates against the emotions within, the hint of their presence giving him the slimmest glimmer of hope before it guttered out again. “And now I’m asking you to go.”

“Jaime!” He slackened so Tyrion could keep pace with him, his younger sibling matching him stride for stride. “You agreed – you are going then?”

“So, it would seem.” The lion’s pervading gloom was near impenetrable. “The next time we meet will be in a strategy room or camp I anticipate.”

“Correct.” The Lord Hand shook his head in disgust. “Damn Sansa. Why could the woman not be satisfied?”

“It must not be in her nature. Some nobles have a penchant for power and ruthlessness which others don’t.”

“Speaking of which-” Tyrion tapped his arm. “-you will have to take Cersei.”
Jaime scoffed, his lip curling up at the even the mention of her name. “Be damned. I’ll have nothing to do with her.”

“I cannot watch her! We are marching as well. She must be supervised, and her preference to wait out the war would surely be the Rock.”

“I care not.”

His little brother huffed, shooting him a disapproving look. “Jaime – she’s pregnant.”

“It’s not mine!” The lion’s roar rebounded off the tiles and out the windows to the garden.

I’ve had about enough of this. He always partners me with Cersei, presumes me loyal to my twin. Even when I abandoned her, rode to Winterfell, began a relationship with my Brienne. Still Tyrion propagated the rumour that I was driven South by love, an attachment which instead had long since been only that of a brother to sister, a Father’s concern for his unborn.

“I have never been unfaithful to my wife. I take no responsibility for Cersei or anything she does henceforth, as far as I’m concerned - I have no sister - and the sooner you get that through your head, the sooner you can start looking for someone you can saddle with her, because it definitely won’t be me.”

Tyrion’s mouth gaped open, for once lost for words and Jaime’s cloak snapped as he turned roughly, tromping down the hall and announcing. “Goodbye Brother, I will see you at Fairmarket.”

“I know you don’t understand.” Jaime bounced Tytan upon his knee, trying to maintain the toddler’s attention as he petted his Father’s cheek and tugged the whiskers of his beard. “But Papa has to go away – and as much as I want to, I can’t bring you with me.”

Another hole in my heart, an empty space inside.

“I thought about it – taking you to Casterly Rock. You could be with me for the trip and when I
meet with the Lords of the West. But then I would have to leave you with strangers, in a place unfamiliar to you and that would be worse than this. Here at least you have your room, your toys and your Mother - Gods know she isn’t much, but I figure it’s better than nothing.”

He kissed his son’s forehead, stifling his sadness. Not wishing for his perceptive boy to sense something was amiss, that this parting was any different to normal.

*But what if I don’t return? Many men leave upon campaign and never come back.*

“Papa loves you.”

“Pa-pa!” Tytan grinned proudly, his favourite pastime wearing out the word from overuse. Quickly learning how it made Jaime smile.

“Yes, Papa.” He hugged the wriggling boy tightly, inhaling his scent and keeping his depression firmly in check. “Now the minders will take you back to the nursery.”

Handing him over was excruciating, keeping his finger in Tytan’s little grip until they walked away with him. Waving to him over the staff’s shoulder.

*He will cry when he realises I am gone. He will hate me for abandoning him.*

*In the end I always end up hurting everyone I love.*
Chapter Summary

Cover Art by: Ro_Nordmann

“Thoughts of you consume...”
Lyrics, War of Hearts by Ruelle
Verse 1, Line 6

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes
The camp sprawled for miles, rows after rows of coloured tents, standards fluttering in the breeze. An army worthy of Six Kingdoms and ready to hold back the North.

Brienne wheeled His Grace across the uneven ground, Podrick going out in front to clear branches and rocks from their path, warning of any upcoming bumps or ditches.

After weeks on the road the battalions had united, swamping Fairmarket and dominating the land for as far as the eye could see. They were an efficient operation, orderly and well-prepared, shipping weapons and supplies upriver ahead of them on barges, ensuring everything would be ready in advance.

“Only a couple yards more Your Grace, Lord Tyrion assures me the majority of Lords are already assembled inside awaiting your arrival.”

“Good.” Bran looked back at his Lady Commander. “There is much to be discussed.”

Throngs parted before the King, making way and bowing low, nodding deferentially as Podrick held the tent flap aloft, allowing her to steer the wheeled-chair inside. The interior was dim, her vision adjusting slowly, the shade of the tent making her instantly weary. Sleep deprivation had become a part of her life, but she no longer had His Grace to blame.

Although times were still demanding, sharing the responsibilities amongst four guards enabled a much fairer division of duties but unfortunately when the Lady Knight was given the chance to slumber, she often spent her night fitfully. The emptiness of her sheets making her bed seem incredibly large and cold.

She had built fires in the middle of a balmy Spring, added extra blankets and even requested a replacement mattress, but when her efforts had made no difference she had to concede. Nothing other than Jaime could make the feeling of cosiness and safety return. Brienne had learnt to ignore the dark circles beneath her eyes and after a while Pod had stopped enquiring whether she had rested. Both of them knowing the painful truth that she wouldn’t admit aloud.

She bravely fought off the desire to yawn, quickening her pace.

Within the immense pavilion the low murmur of several conversations merged into a drone, the major lieges and their most trusted bannerman arranged around the perimeter of a long table. All
jumping to their feet at the sight of their King, those who were chatting out of place quickly scurrying to their spot, mumbling apologies.

“Pardon me Your Grace, Lady Commander.”

“Apologies My King, Lady Commander.”

“Excuse me Your Grace, Lady Lannister….”

The title fizzled through her system like a lightning strike, it had been seldom she heard her married name in King’s Landing – if at all – and under the present circumstances of her relationship it had not even crossed her mind. Her head pivoted after the speaker, glimpsing the Boar of Crakehall.

*The Western Lord — Jaime is here, his vassals recognise my marital title.*

With great care she parked the King at the head of the table, ensuring he was settled whilst Podrick bent to secure the wheels, his two Kingsguard arranging themselves to either side of him, his sentinels standing straight and alert.

“My Lords and Sers…” Bran avoided public speaking whenever possible but even he recognized the significance of this meeting and the importance that he lead it himself. “…I appreciate you all answering my call and travelling far.”

Brienne scanned the length of the assembly, first the left side to no avail and then the right, her gaze had not passed over three Lords when it settled upon his red and gold armour, the lion’s heads upon his shoulders.

*Jaime*…

“I shall begin with permitted absences and notes of gratitude. Lord Arryn has requested to be pardoned from this conflict and I have given him my blessing. The Eyrie stands at the borders of both territories and to show preference to either side would be to place the Vale in jeopardy. Lord Robin is a cousin to both Queen Sansa and myself, therefore I respect his plea for neutrality. By contrast my Uncle, Lord Edmure Tully joins our cause….”

The Lord of Lannister’s hair had grown lengthier, beginning to brush his shoulders, the odd streak of silver merely making the gold more distinguished. He had kept his beard like she always asked him, wearing it with his dignified refinement, the bristles drawing her focus to the angular cut of his jaw, the fullness of his lips.

Upon many of those insomnia filled nights she had endeavoured to steel herself for the moment when she saw him again, preparing for the rush of anger and agony. But the stirrings conjured at the sight of him were not what she ever would have anticipated; the kind which she was not galvanised against.
Longing. Missing. That was her husband standing across the tent, her lion Lord and lover. The person she was closest with in all existence, who had traversed the intricate plains of her body and spirit with insightful tenderness and dexterous fingers. She in turn could predict his mannerisms, attune to his subtle shifts in mood and describe his physique down to the finest detail.

And now we are as strangers.

“We arrive not a day too soon, the Mallisters of Seagard have informed us that the Northern forces have ridden South past the Twins. As you are aware the boundaries of Queen Sansa’s Kingdom end at the Neck, therefore they are officially invading – an act of warfare which cannot go unanswered. I have sent word directly to my sister and arranged a parley in three days at Oldstones. This will be our final peaceful request for her surrender but if talks fail, we must be prepared to engage…”

Until this point, she had avoided Jaime’s eyes, the emerald depths which drowned her in all things pleasurable and intense. Windows which she so often fell through, landing in the enigma of his soul…

Pre-emptively she called up the memory, her emotional defences reaching for a weapon, reawakening her resolve.

Their room scented by candles and petals, half-drunk wine and Cersei’s nude body occupying her place in Jaime’s bed.

My heart may be a frail organ, susceptible to his magnetism, pining for the name etched into its very centre - but my brain is a logbook of deceit and unlikely to forget.

Flicking her gaze upwards, she almost started in shock to find him watching her intently in return. A smile tugging at the corners of his lips when he knew he had her attention, growing boldly into a flash of teeth and what could only be interpreted as scintillating joy.

Frigidly she snapped her eye’s frontward, staring down the centre of the table. Unwilling to entertain his misconceptions of her interest any further.

“I will now pass you to the Lord Hand to relay our chosen strategy.”

Tyrion cleared his throat, unrolling a large map and spreading it across the surface of the table, carved wooden pieces at the ready to be accordingly placed. “Thank you, Your Grace. My Lords… as of today we have commenced shipping supplies up the Blue Fork destined for Oldstones. The usage of the River will afford us the advantage of time and weaponry will be ample, ahead of our arrival. Many moons ago, the Crown negotiated passage for its fleet through Ironman’s Bay and I can report that the infantries from the Reach have unloaded at Seagard.”

“Seagard?” Edmure was never one to sit silently. “Why has the Crown diverted forces to there? Surely we need to land a hammer blow from the front?”
“After much deliberation and many Councils, the Flanking Pincer Manoeuvre has been chosen as our attack strategy.”

Mutters of discontent travelled through the tent and out of her peripheral vision Brienne even saw Jaime raise his eyebrows.

“Your Grace…” Lord Gendry’s tone was polite but questioning, conferring with two other Stormlords before putting forward his statement. “…I mean no disrespect, but is it not said that tactic is fraught with risk?”

“Such is said.” King Bran wore his inscrutable smirk. “But not always so.”

Tyrion raised his hands, calling for silence. “In light of this development, we can now assign commands. The army will be divided into three units, the left flank, the right and the van taking the centre. The left flank will be assigned less infantries as it will be joined by the Reach and Mallister forces coming from Seagard. The right flank and the van will be fuelled entirely from the front.”

Brienne listened as the names were called, waiting for her post at the head of King Bran’s forces. She knew from their meetings that when the clash was between two sovereigns, it was a point of honour that his personal army take the Van and centre. Crown versus Crown locked in head to head combat, the glory and honour to the victorious ruler.

With that ground it will be a hard fight, but I lead men against undead monstrosities. These are mortal men of flesh; they can only die one death. Even so, it will be difficult to face Sansa’s soldiers upon the field; they may be men I knew, who once followed my orders. But peace is a noble goal and it has been threatened, therefore we fight to the bitter end.

“Ser Jaime Lannister will command the Western Banners upon the left flank, securing the defence from the South-west whilst Ser Bronn and the armies of the Reach close in from the North-west.”

It’s good ground. The Western army is mighty and Jaime is a seasoned leader. I am glad King Bran listened to Tyrion and myself, I could not have concentrated if his position were vulnerable.

The commentary of her own thoughts gave her pause, trying not to dwell on how her instinctual compulsion was to care how he fared, fearing for his safety even after all he’d done.

The foundations may crack, and the trust may dissipate but love is pervading, enduring. My heart simply does not understand how not to love him…if only I were not so weak.

“And finally, the appointments to the centre. Lady Commander Brienne-” She perked up at the sound of her name. “-will be positioned with His Grace alongside Ser Derek and Ser Mortimer, protecting his royal person at the rear of the Crown’s forces.”
What?! When in Seven Hells was that decided!

“The forward charge will be led by Ser Podrick Payne.” Tyrion pointedly avoided her glare, straightening the papers he was reading and studying them intently whilst Pod displayed nothing but pure shock and apprehension. “Gather your men and collect up your tents. We ride at dawn.”

“Thank you, My Lords.” King Bran’s voice rang out calmly. “This meeting is adjourned.”

In contrast to tradition, they lingered whilst the Lords filed through the exits, Tyrion analysing and shuffling the wooden pieces around, nodding in satisfaction.

On his way-out Jaime gave his younger brother’s shoulder a squeeze, bending to whisper in his ear. “Don’t give it another thought.” She heard the Lord Hand answer. “I have pondered it at length and admit I was wrong.”

The mighty lion straightened. “Join me for a drink later Tyrion, if you have the time.” His green lakes found her face. “That invitation extends to any Lannister who may feel so inclined. I would be delighted with the company.”

Brienne made certain to look away again before her observation could be misinterpreted as an acceptance to his offer.

Time has passed to quell the initial blinding fury and I know it is necessary that we converse. A pressing task which cannot be postponed indefinitely – he is my husband and I his wife.

But any kind of drinking with that man would be dangerous for me, even if it were water and I were sober. For Jaime is the allure, the lodestone drawing me in, stripping my common sense. My yearning for him these last few months has left me impuissant; and if I see his bed, smell the nearness of his skin, sit in the radius of his warmth, the desire will daze my wisdom.

No - I cannot permit it, risk it. I may be homely, but I have self-respect. No matter how sweet the liquid, I cannot drink from a well of lies. Besides, I am needed here. To fix this matter of leadership….

“Your Grace-” With Jaime’s departure she could at least think clearly. “-As Lady Commander is it not my place to lead your forces?” She swallowed her irritation. “From the front?”

“Traditionally yes, but I would rather you were with me.” Bran stated it matter-of-factly, his idiosyncrasies worn plainly. “War is a perilous undertaking and I feel safer with you at my side.”

“I spoke with King Bran in regards to his ruling.” Tyrion toyed with the carved Stag. “He is aware that I advised against his choice - from a tactical viewpoint it is quite impractical.”

“If I may say,” Brienne pressed her hand to her chestplate. “I have every confidence in Podrick, I ascended him to Knighthood myself, but he has never led men into combat whereas I have.”
“It is true.” Pod nodded. “Ser is much more qualified than I am.”

“I appreciate your counsel, but it is my decision.” Bran laced his fingers together, resting them calmly upon his thighs. “I choose to be guarded by Ser Brienne; the announcement has already been made.” He closed his eyes in weariness, talking at length always seeming to take a toll. “If I could be taken straight to my tent. I am retiring early this evening.”

“Of course.” Brienne nodded at Podrick. “Ser Podrick, your shift has commenced. If you’d be so kind.”

Both the Lady Knight and Lord Hand bowed as the King departed, bidding him goodnight before they collapsed into chairs.

“He wouldn’t listen.” Her good-brother raked his hand across his face. “I tried for hours. I knew you wouldn’t be happy.”

“Not happy?!” Brienne’s eyes were saucers. “This is disastrous! He expects me to play nursemaid to him whilst I watch men die.”

“The King will not take risks. Not with your life, nor with his own. He lost Hodor and is quite determined the same will not be repeated.”

“So, I am to be incapacitated due to superstition?”

“Our monarch is the Three-Eyed Raven. His reign is built upon the occult. The rest is just a Mummer’s face, like getting him to speak.”

Brienne groaned loudly. “I have three days to drill Podrick in command and even then, theory and practise are a world apart.”

“I sympathise – honestly I do. But you know I am not one for combat myself. I would relish your position. My experiences in the crypts and watching Daenerys proved more than enough for me. I am glad to be assigned the organisation of the Maester's tents and supplies; preparing for the worst, well and truly clear of the line of fire.”

“Well not me. I fight. That’s what we did during the Long Night and it’s what I would do again. Going in with sword brandished, Podrick at my side and Jai—” She cut herself off, realising she was about to reveal more about her feelings than she intended.

Tyrion appraised her quizzically. “Jaime at your back? I’ve heard from Pod it was a magnificent sight to see. According to him the two of you moved as one.”

Brienne studied her cuisses. “That was a long time ago.”
“Yet you crave it still.” He edged forward in his seat, leaning upon the table with folded arms. “I saw you and my brother looking at each other during the meeting.” A sigh. “It grieves me to say but although we may have brokered a parley, if we haven’t been previously successfully in convincing Sansa to abandon her quest, it is highly unlikely she will change her mind now. This will come to war and the Stranger can be unforgiving, merciless in his indiscriminate summons. A wife may come to rue not returning to her husband’s bed… if come a few days’ time the option of ever holding him again is lost forevermore.”

Don’t say it.

Her lids closed, plunging her into blackness, refusing to admit the validity of his words.

He speaks as though that hasn’t crossed my mind every day of this crusade. But the imminence of death has hounded us for years – it does not eliminate wrongs nor make the betrayal go away.

“You ask too much Lord Tyrion.” Swivelling upon her seat with the metallic creak of armour, she met Tyrion head on. “I arranged Jaime’s trip West to protect him, when Bran was ready to use even the smallest insubordination to mount his head upon a pike. Of course, I do not wish to consider even the slightest possibility that this coming battle could have devastating costs - but I cannot make decisions based upon hypotheticals. We have seen the strategies; we have the numbers on our side. Casualties should be able to be kept to a minimum. When the war goes well, Jaime will have re-endeared himself to King Bran before his return to King’s Landing. Given the reason for our estrangement, I feel I have done more than enough to cater for his well-being.”

“Very well then.”

Brienne watched her good-brother suspiciously as he launched himself off his chair.

He is a Lannister, they generally like to get the last word in.

“Goodnight to you Lady Brienne, it is a shame you will not be joining us in the Lannister tent.”

Walking around behind her, he leant conspiratorially closer. “For what it’s worth, Jaime is quite insistent that he did not Father Cersei’s child nor stray from your matrimonial bed. He yelled it at me in fact. Now I admit I was a doubter, I thought them quite the pair. But my brother does not readily lie, he admits his misdeeds, owns them, wears them. He does not get in a passion unless he is wrongly accused.”

True to family form, he left her with that snippet to stew upon.

Brienne exhaled, reaching over to take the lion from the map, rolling the small piece in the palm of her hand and brushing the mane with her fingers.

I know that too.
From a fenced-off section of her subconscious all of Jaime’s fervent protestations raced forward, Tyrion’s words unlatching the gate and allowing them to spill forth.

Green eyes wide and vehement, wet with tears, begging for her to believe in his character. Countless declarations of love and devotion delivered with sincerity. The trembling she felt in his embrace as he clung to her in a garden, revealing how Cersei had propositioned him and he’d refused. An act following the recoil of his body, the mere memory of his sister’s touches inspiring revulsion.

_He claimed the same in the wake of her kiss..._

She peered into the face of the small carved lion, as if the answers she sought were locked within the totem. The mighty, majestic feline somehow linked to the Lannisters it represented and capable of revealing the truth.

_Jaime has consistently sworn he would never risk our relationship. Likewise, he explained the way Cersei sees him as her property – hers to own, dominate and control. Could she have somehow manipulated the situation?_

_But that’s impossible, I know what I saw..._

_Or is it?_

_Tarth. _The recollection came from the dark caves of her subconscious. The single word rumbling with the ramifications of an instinct which at the time she had struggled to brush aside.

_Did an insect really bite Tytan? When Jaime and I were happy...intimate..._

_Just when you and Cersei had not long exchanged words. Clashing over the very topic of whom Jaime's heart belonged to..._

Under most circumstances, Brienne would attest that she could trust the truth of her own eyes implicitly. But in the case of Cersei Lannister – experience told her all was not always as it appeared on the surface.

_Am I merely floundering? Searching for an excuse or an avenue to alleviate this unmitigated pain in my chest? Is this the wishful thinking of a jilted wife – or the awakening of knowledge I should have realised all along...?_

Sitting the proud lion back upon the tabletop, she pushed herself up on legs rocked by tremors.

_I came to second-guess myself, when my heart cried that I know Jaime better than anyone else, I silenced it with what my eyes beheld._

_Why did it take hearing this from an outsider for me to recognise it?_

_Pod spoke similar wisdom to me many weeks ago..._
Brienne strode from the tent, retreating to absolute solitude for introspection.

*Indeed a war is imminent, far earlier for me than everyone else.*

Within her shell, blades were being drawn, forged of fact and feelings, words and recollections. The conflict fierce and painful, as for the umpteenth time in recent memory, her brain went to battle with her emotions.

Only this time was decidedly different - for her heart held the advantage.

The cawing of the ravens above was the only sound save for the shuffling of horses’ hooves and the odd jangling of bridles and bits. Unheard the synchronised pounding of thousands of pulses, every man and woman waiting to learn their fate.

*It is always the same at parley, two armies taking a collective breath – but will it be released in relief or used to fuel a warcry?*

Jaime narrowed his eyes at the black birds above, unnerved by their shadows as they passed overhead, spooking his mount beneath him. “Whoah, steady.”

*Dark wings, dark words. Let us hope the exchange goes well or else their rasping cries will be the harbingers of death. Pecking eyes and feasting upon a carpet of corpses. They will be the only ones rejoicing the carnage of combat, for they can soar and evade. Away from here or into the fray, reaching their loved one’s side in only a few beats of feathered limbs.*

He spectated helplessly as King Bran rode forward in his specially made saddle, Brienne mounted at his side, another brother of the Kingsguard riding ahead as his standard bearer.

As a commander, Jaime was afforded a place of honour at the head of his men and prime view of the meeting between sovereigns. Though watching his wife canter headlong into an exposed position shook him to the core. His trust in the rules of chivalry and parley too dubious to ever gamble his Lady upon.

*If love gave wings, I could fly to you. Protect you if this goes badly. My life for yours a small*
price if it meant dying in your service, taking my final breaths in the arms of the woman I love.

Jaime’s sole consolation in this whole sorry ordeal had come surprisingly from King Bran himself and the unprecedented announcement three days ago during the strategy meeting. For once the monarch’s blatant favouritism of his Lady Commander had played to the Lion Lord’s benefit. Relegating his wife to the back of the field and keeping her from the way of direct harm.

*I would bet the treasury of the Rock, that Brienne is fuming still. I can just imagine her twitching with repressed outrage, cheeks pink with indignation, steam coming out those adorable ears. She will lament being cossetted and resent the men who charge forth, knowing a hundred of them could not equal one of her with a sword in hand.*

He had to stop thinking about her in the heat of a bout, fawning over the image of her swinging Oathkeeper with more prowess than the Warrior himself, letting out those provocative grunts and groans which he knew she made beneath him as well. The fantasy of it had kept him warm for nights, surrendering to the inevitable hardness and frustration whilst his mental picture faded from her fighting to them fucking and back again.

Jaime yearned for her with everything within him and it was more than just the bed. Her stinted, taciturn conversations, her laugh rarer than Valyrian with twice as much beauty and power, even just lying upon the same pillow, wrestling for the space, watching her blue eyes grow sleepy and listening to her breathing calm.

*This isn’t the time or place.*

Checking his posture, he sat straight and forbidding in his saddle, setting the example for his men to follow, awaiting the words of King and Queen to carry towards them on the breeze.

“Come no further into our lands sister.” Bran raised his chin high, but he was still diminutive in comparison to the icy red head opposite him. “You are past the borders of your territory. Retreat, put an end to your covetous campaign and this can end peacefully.”

“I am afraid that won’t be possible little brother.” Sansa’s tone was detached, aloof. “Your reign is built upon dark arts. No King should have limitless dominion, free to infiltrate enemy and ally alike. You invade our privacy and blur the lines of morality, abusing your skills to expand your rule. I see your Ravens on our parapets, Weirwoods grow in every Northern stronghold. My sources inform me you actively seek the dragon which escaped, a creature of slaughter and destruction. With you as our neighbour - we will never be truly free.”

“You would choose the path of war? After all we’ve seen and suffered?”

“There are alternatives Bran. Surrender your Crown to me, have your people kneel. I shall offer clemency, we are blood.”

“I’m afraid I cannot do that Sansa. I was elected King, charged with a responsibility I did not want
by the vote of the nobles. You were given your Throne upon my orders, for I respected our familial ties, wished to preserve our legacy.” The Three-Eyed Raven grew contemplative, retreating a little inside himself. “What do you think Father would have to say about this enmity between his own children?”

The Queen’s face hardened. “You would seek to use Father against me? Make a manipulative tool out of his death? I will remind you; I was there when his head was taken – you were not. I know more than most what he fought for – and it was justice. He lost his life in pursuit of truth, to undermine power which went unchecked and weed out corruption. He rode forth in Robert’s Rebellion to put an end to a lineage which had turned septic. I am confident, he would understand.”

“Then tell me once and for all sister, for I will not abdicate nor stand aside – can you not be swayed? Is it to be war?”

“It is.”

Upon Sansa’s declaration a series of shouts passed from the front of the ranks to the back, commencing the distant beat of war drums, signalling the parley had come to a close.

*The countdown begins.*

Jaime held his breath as both monarchs turned their horses, Brienne quickly issuing instructions and having Bran quicken his pace, the Crown’s forces parting like a human sea and reforming around the trio, swallowing the King into their protective depths.

*My wife is safe. If nothing else, I have that.*

Warhorns began to trumpet, first from the North then answered by the South. The imminent charge communicating across the Southron army with their foreboding blare. Jaime gave the nod for their own to sound, rallying the West. Pulling his mount around to face his army.

“Westermen; we fight not only for King and our Lands, but for an enduring peace. For generations we have been taught that glory comes in war – but we have seen more carnage in recent years than our forefathers did over the course of decades. During these last few weeks I have spoken with many of you and the opinions held are collective, from commander to foot solider we are united in our condemnation of the North, of the fact that we find ourselves here today. We were promised a change, a Spring of plenty, to tend our lands, hold our wives and be Fathers to our children, and that dream would be alive still – if the treaty between nations was respected, upheld. The North jeopardises our liberty, violates the agreement between Kingdoms and robs us of our due entitlement – to live. A right which we have earnt, through sacrifice and hardship. Our King calls upon each and every one of you today to defend a basic right… and I charge you to fight, to the last man. Not for renown and infamy – but for peace!”
The cheers of assent were deafening as Jaime steered his horse into the front line, smiling at his bannermen and accepting Ser Crakehall’s approving clap on the shoulder. He had taken the time to get to know his men, reintroducing himself and holding conversations whenever they made camp, indiscriminate of titles or status. Finding a collective belief and desire which matched his own.

The warhorns bellowed once more in a single drawn out blast and the lines tightened from end to end. Reins held taut, shields brandished, weapons at the ready.

It was the North who began the assault, their Van rushing forward, leading the masses with their fierce cry. The Crown’s army answered, kicking their horses into a gallop, the human and equine waves moving as a fluid tide, commander after commander spurring their battalions forward.

Jaime wrapped the reins once more around his right arm, pulling it tight, gripping his sword in the left, digging his heels into the sides of his Courser.

“Attack!”

Chapter End Notes

Behind the scenes trivia: When it came time to write this chapter and the next, I actually spent a good portion of the day researching medieval war strategies. Safe to say, writing battles and army formations is not my strong suit, so I ended up drawing stick figure diagrams with tonnes of arrows to figure out the arrangements and army movements.

The things we do for love of writing. <3
Hello readers, we have reached a moment which I have been dreading. The pit in my stomach at the thought of releasing these next two chapters is indescribable, therefore I have made the decision to post them together, as I feel they are best ingested in one hit and the second chapter leaves off on a more positive note.

I am not a writer that enjoys making tough calls, but for this fic I have sought to remain realistic. This means I had to dispense with ‘plot armour’, because war is a terrible thing where precious lives are lost to violence, irrespective of how much they
are loved (by the characters and by me).

Of course, that is not the sole reason for taking this direction and my tissue box can attest to how the decision was not made lightly. I always have my own unique brand of reasoning behind my narrative choices, but I quickly learned how much a plot point note differs from feeling and writing the scene.

Yes – in case you haven’t already guessed, these are the two chapters where I sobbed like a baby. I nearly backed down and rethought this about a hundred times, but I wanted to stick to my original outline even when it was at its most difficult. So instead I blubbered all over my keys, disliking myself very much for the decision and all I can ask for those who choose to persevere through is – please try not to hate me. I promise upon these chapters close, the light at the end of the tunnel will be shining bright.

Anyway, I can procrastinate and delay no longer, so here goes...

Brienne abhorred her King right now, even if her vows compelled her to shield his life with her own.

*How could he immobilise me, demote me to a helpless bystander?*

For days the justifications had been coming thick and fast, Lord Tyrion putting in great pains to talk her around. “It is an honourable position.”

“He values you so greatly…”

“What could be more laudable than guarding His Grace?”

*Fighting alongside my men. Keeping our formation orderly.*

She checked on Bran mounted beside her at the rear of the forces, his eyes were white, his head lolled back.

*Even he can engage in whatever capacity he chooses, whilst I must guard his empty vessel.*
Their marginally elevated position afforded her a sweeping view of the battlefield and although she readily tracked their army’s progress, it was more bane than boon.

*I have never been so frustrated in my entire life.*

Trotting her mount forward slightly, Brienne squinted into the chaotic fray, noting every raven crest and their respective locations, eyes peeled for a glimpse of Podrick’s Kingsguard gold and whites.

To her dismay she noted their squadrons scattered instead of bunched tightly, their organisation faltering as the Northerners pressed them hard, determined to divide and conquer. She inhaled sharply as she witnessed an axe blow knock a soldier from his horse, a flurry of arrows inundating another group.

*Come on Pod, bring your men together, stamp them out.*

With great discipline she tore her focus from their troops and to the enemy, scrutinising and trying to guess their strategy.

In a similar manner to Bran, Queen Sansa was leading from the rear, a distant speck clustered with guards and surrounded by three circles of long-range archers.

*She has taken great pains to defend her person, she knows we have the larger army.*

Their King by contrast had herself, Ser Mortimer and Ser Derek as well as a small contingent of foot soldiers, standing to attention in front.

*Our forces are so great that we would well and truly have time to flee before they overwhelm our lines and come this far. We are more for show than anything else. Though they are giving it their best attempt.*

The Lady Knight chewed the inside of her cheek, watching the shape the opposing army was taking.

A spearhead manoeuvre, its tip pressing into the heart of the Crown’s forces whilst the flanks attempted to hold off their attacks from the side. Through this arrow formation, more and more soldiers were fed, funneling down and entering into the battle directly in front of them. Podrick’s section copping the brunt of their infantry, constantly replenished with fresh Northern warriors.

*They want to wear them down. A forward thrust. If our lead army falls, they will make a push towards us. Towards the King.*

“Your Grace!” Her tone was forceful, but she didn’t care, calling to whatever remnants of spirit remained inside his vacant body. “They are channelling the bulk of their strength to the front. We
need to divert troops for reinforcement!”

Bran did not respond, his catatonic body devoid of life. She brayed in frustration, turning to the other two Kingsguard. “Can you see it?!”

“Yes, Lady Commander.” Ser Derek nodded.

Brienne turned her horse frontwards again, working her jaw in stress. “Something has to give; this must change or they’re all…”

She caught a flash of Podrick on foot in the thick of the battle, his mount gone, armour askew, helmet lost. His lips moving in a shout, gesturing wildly, trying to regroup the men.

*He’s not a commander.* Absentmindedly, her hand travelled to her face, covering her mouth and keeping her from shouting. *He should not have this responsibility. He is out of his depth.*

More fighters were fed down the pipeline, an assortment of footsoldiers and crossbowmen. Upon arrival they maintained a semblance of strategy. The shooters kept to the centre whilst the longswords hacked through the throngs. She watched in horror as a bolt pierced one of their warriors at close range, passing through the armour as if it were butter.

*They are thick arrows with steel tips – they can pierce armour.*

“My King please!” Riding up to Bran’s mount she all but yelled. “Release me from this duty, let me aid them!”

It was no use; Bran Stark was not there.

*The Lady Commander cannot leave her post. Her place is with the King.*

Her orders echoed in her mind, whilst the rest of her began to rebel.

“Lady Commander! Something’s happening!”

Her head snapped around at Ser Mortimer’s yell, vision fixing upon the warzone ahead.

At first, she could only see the same bleak struggle, the fall of men and dying howls. But then she noticed the movement behind, a mounted charge running horizontally from the left. Penetrating the funnel of Northern troops and cutting off the line feeding the forward attack. Severing their tactic with a stampede of hooves and swinging swords. From where she stood it was all a blur, fast moving and brutal – but the colours were distinct. Crimson red and highlights of gold.

*Jaime.*

The new channel of their own was fuelled by Westermen, bursting through the opposite side and wheeling around in an arc, bolstering the Crown’s army and joining in their fight to eradicate the
incursion.

On the left she spotted the heraldry of Highgarden, Bronn’s men moving to fill the gaps in their flanking force.

In the centre Podrick bellowed encouragements, reassembling what was left of the Crown’s troops.

To the right she discerned a Lion’s helm, her husband roaring his orders and pointing with his sword between slashes.

But in the sky above, the air filled with dots. Arching high from the Queen’s personal defences. The zip of hundreds of arrows unmistakable as they rained down in droves upon the Western forces. The whinny of pain-stricken horses and thuds of falling men temporarily dominating the song of steel.

_Fuck! They need cover…_

“Guard the King!” The yell came effortlessly, the defiance without hesitation. “I’m going in!”

Kicking her heels into her horse’s sides, she galloped furiously into the hive of conflict, barking orders to both Westermen and King’s men alike – holding authority over both armies as Lady Commander and as their liege Lady. “SHEilds TO THE FRONT! HOLD THE LINE!”

Unsheathing Oathkeeper she began to hack her way through, her Destrier mowing down enemies, carrying her towards the thick of battle. Her ears filling with whirring from above as a second deluge of arrows poured from the sky, unleashing hell upon the soldiers directly ahead.

Wildly scanning the chaos from atop her mount, she spotted Podrick in front of her and to the right. Her former squire ducked his head, shielding his skull with his arms, the long-range weapons bouncing harmlessly off his backplate.

_He is safe._

Further away, behind Pod, conditions were not as favourable. Her blood running cold, forced to watch on helplessly as Jaime’s horse was riddled with arrows, its dying screams horrendous as it collapsed on top of him, his helm sent flying with the impact.

An ear-splitting cry ripped from her lungs, all at once terrified and feral. A woman fearful for her love and a warrior sent into a frenzy. Swinging Oathkeeper like a creature possessed her Valyrian dripped with Northern blood, obliterating any enemy who dared to stand in the path between her and her husband.

_I’m coming Jaime, even if I have to kill every last one of them myself, they will not stop me._
Brienne stole glances in his direction, her heartbeat racing so fast the thumps were a continuous thrum. Pounding her ears, the rush of blood inundating her senses and muting the cacophony around her. Despairing and panicking as she watched him struggle to disentangle his right wrist from the reins, pain evident on his face when he tried to wriggle from beneath the dead horse’s weight.

Off to her side, Podrick saw him too. His direction of combat changing abruptly, matching her heading and slicing his way towards the fallen lion.

*He is closer than I am. Together we will get to Jaime, it will be alright. We are winning now even if it doesn’t feel like it.*

The arrows continued to fall, but the shields had begun to arrive. Raised up like a canopy whenever the tell-tale whistle of quarrels could be heard.

Well and truly in the firing line, Brienne was forced to dive from her horse, lest she be trapped like Jaime. The hulking woman and Destrier both creating far too large a target.

The Northern forces began to thin, unable to escape both the united fronts and the arrows let loose by their own side.

Without slowing she moved Oathkeeper in a rapid whir, engaged in constant close combat. Unending arcs connecting with steel and locating weak points in armour, stabbing beneath arm pits and cutting throats.

The whole time her focus never wavered from her husband, her goal. He had finally wrenched free from beneath his horse, but she could tell he was injured and struggling to stand.

*I’m coming.* She swore, inching her way towards him step by step, enemy by enemy. Monitoring Podrick’s progress all the while, his head start now delivering him within several yards of her husband.

Directly in front of her a brawny allied solider blocked her view, making her frantic. But a crossbow bolt soon sprouted from his gut, ending his life with the twang of a trigger.

*That was close-range.* Brienne cringed, craning her neck to locate the marksman. *Even I am not safe from his weapon.*

She spotted the shooter reloading, his knees crouched, lining up his next shot. The tip of the crossbow meticulously pointed at…

The Lady Knight’s air was sucked from beneath her ribs. Lungs constricted by the debilitating terror as she realised why the armoured knight in front had fallen.

*At my husband… He is aiming for Jaime.*
“NO!” With a bloodcurdling shriek she broke into a run, Oathkeeper near cleaving an attacker in two as she barrelled towards the bowman.

_I will never make it to Jaime in time, but I can kill this bastard before his quarrel leaves the shaft._

His image grew sharper when she neared, his finger poised upon the trigger, eyes squinted in concentration, perfecting his line.

Three sounds reached her ears in unison.

The crunch of bone and squelch of flesh when Oathkeeper was plunged deeply into the marksman’s middle and the twang of the bolt leaving the crossbow.

Time suspended all around her, the movements of the outside world a sluggish crawl. The projectile sailing towards the love of her life at quarter speed, her anguished screeches seeming silent, the shooter’s body sliding limply from her blade.

_Jaime thinks I will never forgive him, that I don’t love him. But I do…_

Her inner self was a landslide, the desolation she had known without Jaime tearing from its cells of memory and past. Taking her over and eviscerating her chest, plundering equilibrium and the will to go on. Rivers gushing down ivory cheeks splattered in gore.

_I was too late._

_Nothing is more hateful than failing to protect the one you love…_

Only a single person seemed immune in her distorted vision of the scene, mobilised when she stood frozen. She had been vaguely aware of his presence since she registered the heinous snap of the string. Dashing and diving into the bolt’s path, without concern for his own safety.

In the blink of an eye time resumed its normal pace, the bolt darting through the open air, finding an alternate mark by lodging in Podrick’s abdomen. The lad slumping to the ground in a heap.

_“POD!”_

Movement returned to her limbs without warning and before she knew it, she was sprinting. Closing the gap to him. Vaguely aware of the Westermen running alongside her, called into action by her distressed wails.
“Get Ser Jaime!” One of the Knights barked. “Provide cover!”

Throwing herself to the ground over Pod, she saw several men heaving Jaime upright by the armpits, the lion Lord unable to stand unaided. Brienne could hear him arguing and flailing against their grasp to come to her as they hauled him away, whilst other soldiers formed a protective circle around her patch of earth.

But the waging war was of little consequence as she rolled her former Squire onto his back, gasping with a shuddering sob when she saw how deeply the quarrel was buried. The plate of his cuirass concaving with its striking force, shards of metal stabbing into him, blood pumping profusely from the deep wound as she tried to stay the flow with her palm. The cold shaft of the bolt hindering her attempt.

“Pod-” She could barely see his face through her tears, blinking them away rapidly, smoothing his dark fringe back from his big brown eyes, still glistening with spirit but growing glassy.

“M’Lady, Ser…” He croaked, giving her one of his shy smiles and it made a torrent stream down her cheeks anew. Brienne wanted to tell him words of reassurance, that he was going to be alright, but as the hot blood seeped between her fingers she knew it would be a lie - and she was never untruthful with him.

From his expression he knew it too, his kind countenance shining through even in his final moment, locking his gaze upon hers. “…Live.”

“Without you?” Her voice cracked. “Who will I snap at?”

“You will survive without me-” Pod was growing weaker, his colour draining. “-but I saw you when you lost Ser Jaime. He loves you….you love him.”

“That doesn’t mean I don’t need you…”

“He’s your future. Your happiness. I’m just sorry I won’t see it.” His round face became sad for the first time and her heart lurched. “I love you Mother.”

She bent to kiss his forehead, her whole body convulsing uncontrollably, thumb skimming over his temple, wet tears landing amongst his mop of hair. “I love you too.”

When she pulled back, he was gone.

“Podrick…” Brienne wrapped her arms around his shoulders, dragging his still warm body into her lap. “Pod tell me you heard. Please, Pod.” She could feel herself rocking, hear herself keening, drowning in the ocean of grief. For once unconcerned about who saw or heard her feminine fragility, seeing no weakness in her devastation.

*Let them judge - my son just died in my arms.*
Brienne curled into a ball upon her pallet in her tent, chilled to the bone, unstoppable cascades soaking her pillow as she lay on her side, pulling her knees up to her chest. The events of the afternoon ravaging her emotions and leaving her mute.

*I did speak though - when they took him.*

The remainder of the battle had passed in a daze, her bereaved state numbing her perception of time and reality. The field shrinking down to the spot occupied by Podrick and herself, the pair of them upon their final adventure together.

Around her the Northern army surrendered, finding themselves encircled from all sides without escape. Ambushed from behind by an ally Bran himself had summoned from Beyond the Wall. Jon Snow - also known as Aegon Targaryen - swooping South with his forces to put a stop to Sansa’s hunger for power.

The reinforcements did not come as a surprise to the Small Council, they had known all along of the greater strategy. Communications had been exchanged for months between the exiled Jon and King Bran, the former siblings forging an alliance.

Issued with a pardon from his life sentence, Jon was to assume position upon the Northern Throne, taking his cousin Sansa as his bride and ensuring a continued peace. The Northmen gladly kneeling to the commander who had inspired them through the Long Night. His Grace had been travelling with them on and off in raven form, guiding them and delivering messages. Seeing that the plan came to fruition.

*If only it had been sooner, Pod would still be here. If only Bran had let me lead the army.*

*If only, if only*...

Whilst leaders cheered and the enemy Queen was captured, Brienne had stayed in place. Hoping to be forgotten, overlooked until the darkness came to hide her and Podrick from prying eyes. Goodbye a concept she wanted abolished, the idea of parting with him cutting through her like an ice wind.

She stroked his hair until his skin turned cold, making sure he could feel how much he was loved.
Talking to him, murmuring nonsense over and over again, knowing deep down he could no longer hear her.

Eventually, men came for them and the lioness growled within, ready to reach for Oathkeeper and issue threats, only it would mean releasing the arms she had wrapped around her former squire.

“This is why women don’t belong on a battlefield.” She heard one soldier hiss and Brienne could have gutted him where he stood if Podrick wasn’t more important.

“Hush.” Said another, crouching beside them kindly. “Lady Lannister – we need to take his body.”

“Where…?” Brienne sniffled. “Where are you taking my boy?”

“We have a tent prepared.”

“He is not just anyone you know.” A tear ran down the bridge of her nose. “He is a true knight.”

“We know Ser, preparations have already been made especially for him.”

The Lady Knight nodded her acceptance but still they had to prise him from her arms. Even if in her mind she knew there was no other choice, her heart wasn’t ready to let him go.

It was now a little over an hour ago when she had pulled herself up from the earth. Following them, needing to know where Podrick was and ensure he was treated with respect.

When she entered camp, King Bran had been conversing with Tyrion outside the Royal Pavilion, preparing for their victory meeting, his spirit safely housed in his body again. Noticing his Lady Commander from a distance, she saw him gesture for her to be summoned, but the Lord Hand shook his head, regarding her with tear filled eyes of his own. She was exceptionally grateful for his intercession.

A Maester was sent to her, approaching whilst she lingered outside walls of canvas. Within the Silent Sisters’ went about their morbid work, the fabric of the walls separating her from the grim process. The healer tried to persuade her to be checked over, but Brienne brushed his concerns away with a dismissive hand.

_I am physically unharmed; it is those I care about who suffered far worse fates._

The one enquiry she made had been two words. “Ser Jaime?”

“Lord Lannister was wounded - but it is not life threatening. He is being tended in the infirmary as we speak. His injury is agonising, rendering him unable to stand or walk until treated. Yet it took several men to hold him down on the table, he insists upon coming to you.”

Brienne had nodded, striding off to seek the solitude of her tent.
Unfastening her armour had been a near insurmountable task, every strap and buckle reminding her of her Squire. Washing in the basin setting her entire body quaking, the water turning red with the caked blood from her hands.

*His blood.* That had been when she collapsed upon the straw mattress.

Hugging herself tightly she continued to shiver, unable to muster the strength or will to pull up the blanket. The moment the quarrel struck Pod down repeating on never-ending loop in her head, interspersed only with the sadness in his eyes as he said goodbye. “My boy.”

A crack of dim light fell across the bed, her tent flap opening, and she scowled defensively over her shoulder, ready to banish the intruder.

“It’s me.” Jaime lifted his hand in a calming gesture, limping forward slowly, a splint and bandage supporting his knee. His handsome features dotted by cuts and abrasions; his eyes clouded with unshed tears. “You don’t have to talk. I know you won’t want to.”

Brienne watched him shuffle his way over to the bedside.

“But don’t tell me to go.” He sucked in air, scrunching his face in pain as he climbed onto the mattress. “Today it can be just about this, nothing else.”

Too distraught to reply, she lay down once more, keeping her back to him and saying nothing. Crying softly without inhibition, inhaling deeply when he moulded against her spine. Jaime slid his injured leg gingerly between hers, gliding his arms around her middle and squeezing her close.

After a few moments, she heard him begin to weep quietly, the strands of her hair ruffled by his ragged breaths and her hands sought the arms folded around her torso, placing hers atop them and rubbing them comfortingly.

*Yes, we can be here for each other. I want you here...*

Wet, heavy eyes drifted closed and against the odds, she plummeted into a deep, dreamless slumber. Pulled under by the weight of trauma and grief. Her last thoughts noting how for the first time in what seemed like forever and in the most unlikely of circumstances - she felt warm.
"Did you find a singer?"

Jaime had slipped from Brienne’s pallet when he saw her lashes flutter, unaware how she would feel to find him entwined around her upon waking. Their cheeks were both stained with serpentine tracks, his body stiff from the awkward position, knee throbbing from where they had popped his bone back into its rightful place. Its pain was nothing compared to what he felt inside, his heart bleeding for his woman and aching from the loss of a boy he loved like his own kin.

He hobbled about in the dark, the mild dose of milk of the poppy wearing off. When the Maester had offered a larger portion of the pain killer, the lion had refused. Wanting to feel the misery alongside his woman, rejecting the numbness and escape which came with the drug. The solace of having Brienne pressed close dwarfing any alleviation a tincture could provide.

His slow pace meant she was sitting upright before he left, watching him go with eyes sunk low in their sockets and he longed to hold her once more, providing kisses and comfort as a husband would. But he quashed the desire, knowing it unforgivably selfish, how any such attempt at pressing affection could be perceived as advantageous and Jaime would not exploit her bereavement to wheedle himself back into her favour.

She is vulnerable, she is wounded. Perhaps Brienne escaped physically today but emotionally she will be shattered. I would not cause her further angst with my presence, but I will balm her hurt where I can.

Tyrion turned to him in the darkness, the night sky clear with a spattering of stars. “I did. That was a very touching suggestion – for them all. But most especially for Pod.”

“I grew very fond of the lad.” Jaime confessed, shuffling his feet in the rocks and dirt. It was one thing to cry alone with your wife, nuzzled into her blonde tresses, and quite another to do so in public, before your brother and your men.

In truth it feels like losing a son all over again, only I knew Pod better than either Tommen of Joffrey.
“I have sent a Raven ahead to Darry.” His younger brother used small talk to mask his emotions. “Lady Amerei will have no objections, she welcomes company. The castle is small but at least it has a serviceable Sept. The trip downriver will be swift, allowing for proper funeral rights to be observed upon arrival.”

“Well orchestrated.” Jaime praised. “It will be heartening to hold a service.”

Whilst he and Brienne had sought comfort side by side, Tyrion had been organising, arranging the best possible treatment for any fallen Lords and Knights of note. The Northern men required funerals performed in the Faith of the Old Gods and would be returning back to their homelands but for the Southerners who had travelled far the same was not as easy.

Now the barges which had carried weapons and supplies were edged in candles, the prepared bodies lain on biers upon the decks, ready to sail downriver to Darry – the nearest Sept.

Onlookers and survivors crowded along the banks of the Blue Fork to pay their respects, each carrying a flame of their own in memoriam. The amber lights flickering and reflecting in the black mirror of the river surface, creating an illusion of ethereal fireflies.

“The larger vessel which remains moored at the dock has our dear Podrick on board.” Tyrion explained. “We shall all be travelling with him. King, Council, Lady Commander—” The Lord Hand squeezed his brother’s forearm. “—and you have been extended an invitation.”

“I have?” Jaime could have been knocked over with a feather and it wasn’t just because his knee was weak.

“You have. Your valiant efforts today did not go unremarked upon. If you can manage to keep your mouth shut – consider yourself redeemed.”

“Unfortunately, it is not King Bran’s absolution which I seek.” He watched the exit of Brienne’s tent, waiting for her to emerge.

*She will be unaware of the plans for the procession. I hope she will welcome it.*

Tearing his gaze away, they began the very slow wander over to the timber landing, and the lion tried not to grunt every time he placed weight upon his injured leg.

*If not for Pod, it would be much worse. I dare not complain. I am alive.*

“Were you not just in her bed?” His brother cocked an eyebrow. “If so, it would seem you are forgiven.”

“Do not be facetious. It was not like that.” Jaime huffed. “We both lost somebody dear to us. It is natural to want human contact, a warm embrace. Brienne is my wife and she is hurting, I will always be there for her, regardless of what she believes I did or punishes me for. I love her.” He watched the placement of every step, trying not to get wedged in the mud sucking at his boots. The strain of lifting his leg from the bog near excruciating.
“Still – and I will talk about this because I know our friend Ser Pod would approve of me nudging you in the right direction - I will point out there are limited cabins onboard.”

“And ours will remain vacant. I intend standing vigil on deck, and I would wager so does My Lady.”

“Ask her yourself – she is headed this way.”

Jaime’s head shot up, watching her subdued but determined gait approaching, joining up with them just as they reached the wooden decking.

“What is this?” Brienne queried, the tiny crease of concern appearing between her brows. “Where is Podrick?” Her voice hitched in the centre of his name and Jaime fought the urge to wrap her up in his arms.

Tyrion motioned for Jaime to answer, toddling down the jetty to join the King.

“A procession to the Sept of Darry, the send-off for the fallen noblemen begins here and then an official funeral will be held upon arrival for those who wish to attend.” He glanced over at the waiting vessel; the shape of the bier unmistakable upon the deck. “Ser Podrick is already on board.”

The Lady Knight nodded in approval, her chin wobbling. “That is lovely. I was afraid he wouldn’t get-” He heard her sniff back tears, regaining composure and correcting herself. “-he would not receive the memorial that he is entitled too.”

“We would never let that happen.” He assured her, walking them towards the water’s edge. “Pod is much loved.”

Jaime watched his wife absorb her surrounds, the glistening lights and lines of mourners, gathering in tribute for all those who had given their lives for a peaceful future. The eerie beauty of the scene only enhanced as a singer walked out onto the dock, voice carrying over the water.

“High in the halls of the kings who are gone,
Jenny would dance with her ghosts -
The ones she had lost and the ones she had found,
And the ones who had loved her the most…”

The candles bounced in the waters of her eyes, turning their fathomless blue into a looking glass, the feelings in her gentle soul, worn with pride, revealing the woman within. The embodiment of maternal love and tenderness which made him want to sink to his knees and offer prayers to her divinity.
“The ones who'd been gone for so very long,

She couldn't remember their names -

They spun her around on the damp old stones,

Spun away all her sorrow and pain…”

Down by his side, tentative fingers brushed against his hand, reaching, searching for an anchor in the squall of emotion. He turned his palm towards her, sighing when her digits laced between his own. Closing and holding each other steady.

*I will always be your haven my love, even if you do not want me, you can rely on me, I swore a vow to us.*

He watched a tear roll down her alabaster cheek, her other hand swatting it away whilst her nose burned red, complexion blotching as more droplets followed suit. The sight of her in such sorrow touching the farthest reaches of his soul, calling to every instinct within him to protect and cherish the woman he loved.

*Today you lost Podrick, but I promise you will never walk alone. I am here for you Brienne, from this day until the end of my days.*

“And she never wanted to leave, never wanted to leave –

Never wanted to leave,

Never wanted to leave.”
Farewells vs Welcomes

Chapter Summary

"Come to me, in the night hours..."
Lyrics, War of Hearts by Ruelle
Verse 1, Lines 1 & 2
In days of yore - Kingsguard were honoured in the Great Sept of Baelor, the bells ringing out to proclaim the loss to all who would listen. But the building was consumed by wildfire, the tradition fading to dust and even if it stood today, we could never take him that far South.

But in a way I am pleased – Podrick was never a lad to draw attention to himself. Timid and good-natured to a fault. I know he would prefer to be remembered with fondness by his closest comrades, than given a pompous fuss.

The Sept of Darry was serviceable but far from grand, the seven-sided structure flooded with candlelight, refracting through the altar prism and dotting irregular bursts of colour across the ornately carved wooden doors.

Without windows, the tiny flames made the air inside quite stifling, the smoky burning aroma mixing with the pronounced odour of decay and the perfume of the flowers brought in offering. Their sweet fragrance doing more to accentuate than mask the scent.

Brienne bore it with stoicism, grimly determined to see the vigil through unbroken from beginning to end. Her observance had commenced the instant she set foot upon the barge and since then she had not abandoned her post.

It is the least I can do for my Pod, he never left me, and I will do no less for him.

She peered down at her former Squire’s serene face, almost oblivious to the sombre intonations of the Septon.

If not for the stones upon his eyes, he could be mistaken as sleeping. Such cruel tricks of the mind only serve to muddle the heart.

For the better part she considered herself cried out, although upon occasion a stealthy tear would find the chink in her emotional armour, weaving its way through her lashes and escaping in plain view of all assembled.

But not during the funeral. She was stern with herself. I am a knight, his Lady Commander and this is my solemn duty, I will not detract from him with my weeping.

Gulping down another swell, she raised her gaze from his deceptively tranquil expression, choosing instead to stare directly ahead.

Though here too I find another myriad of feelings.

Jaime stood at Podrick’s feet, weary but steadfast. He had not strayed from her side since they began their dedication, matching her hour for hour, from dusk until dawn. His unequivocal affection for the young Knight displayed in his every gesture, the sadness of his mien the only grief which came near to equalling her own. Brienne knew his knee must be causing him severe discomfort, but he bore it in dignified silence, unwavering in his devotion to them both.
Her tongue had been thick in her mouth for days now and prior Brienne hardly considered herself and her husband upon speaking terms, but Jaime never pressed her, nor turned the tragedy into opportunity. His need for incessant chatter gone, banished by the gravity of their shared loss. Replaced by an inherent respect and sensitivity, content to dwell in the hush as they stood like solemn sentries.

*When my words return, I will tell him - how much I appreciate his solicitude. How his company has provided immeasurable support to my battered soul. I’m not sure I could have stood for so long without him, whenever I felt as though I would buckle, I drew my strength from Jaime’s presence. From what we share and what we know - all the legs of our journey. So many of our memories featuring Podrick’s timid smile, through laughter and peril. Risk and reward. Together - we were a family.*

Now the lion’s green eyes sought hers, brimming with thoughtful compassion. His enquiry about whether she was alright unspoken but received, nonetheless. Brienne tipped her head forward ever so slightly, indicating ‘yes’.

When the Septon finished his sermon, the mourners roamed between the numerous bodies, paying their final respects as the Lady Knight steeled herself for the tributes which were about to flow.

Bronn meandered up to them, dry eyed but noticeably subdued, appraising Pod from head to toe and shaking his head. “Pod of the Magic Cock – the women will be bawlin’ all over King’s Landing when word of this gets out.” The former sellsword looked at the two Knights. “Now you’ve left me to deal with these two blonde fuckers all by myself.” He huffed in mock outrage, looping his thumbs over his swordbelt and making to leave. But an afterthought gave him pause, rotating on the spot instead and addressing her directly. “If you hadn’t got the bastard who did it, I would ’ave. Shoved that fucking crossbow up the cunt’s arse.”

*And that is as close to affection as Ser Bronn gets.* Brienne gave him a curt nod and he strode away.

Ser Mortimer escorted the King, the wheels of his chair creaking against the floorboards, fallen petals crushed as they spun, releasing more scents to add into the miasma. Tyrion walked beside them, his usually cheerful countenance drawn and glum, followed by Ser Derek carrying a small wooden step.

“Ser Podrick of House Payne.” The King placed his hand upon the edge of the bier in reverence. “I thank you for your service to the Crown and Realm.” He inhaled, the mortal qualities of Bran Stark the young man fighting to surface beneath the oppression of duty and supernatural capabilities. “And I thank you for what you did for me. You were a true Knight and a loyal friend.” He signalled to Ser Mortimer to turn his chair. “Lady Commander – return to duties only when you are ready. There is no rush. I know this must be difficult for you.”

“Thank you, Your Grace.” Her response was barely above a murmur as the King was rolled away.

Beside her, Ser Derek had positioned the step upon the floor and Lord Tyrion climbed up so he
could see over the top of the bier, his watery eyes sweeping over his old Squire.

This must be hitting him hard too, Pod served Tyrion before I even met him.

“Ser Podrick Payne.” With quaking fingers, the Lord Hand adjusted the folds of the golden shroud, the thin gauze pulled back to allow the mourners a view of Pod’s face during the service. “You know you never did tell me what exactly you did with those whores…”

Brienne tried to turn a deaf ear, but it was impossible in the confined quarters.

“…Guess you wanted to keep that secret to yourself – not that I blame you, if I had made such a discovery, I wouldn’t want others to catch on either.” His grin was tinged with sadness. “I will never forget that you saved my life, now you saved my brother’s too. I have known many people in my time, those who wanted my money, my connections or simply Lannister favour. But I have never met anyone so pure of motive or as loyal as you Pod - and I doubt I will again.” He pressed his hand against Podrick’s chest plate, taking a palpitating breath. “Goodbye old friend. Tonight, I will toast a drink to you.”

Brienne swallowed around the lump in her throat, watching Jaime reach over and clasp his brother’s shoulder, Tyrion returning the comfort by patting his hand before he scurried away.

The Lannister men hide their tears like I did, schooled in the same belief of their ignominy. But as each day passes, I am more at ease with what I feel.

In every respect…

Standing silent for hours had meant a great deal of time for introspection, rearranging and assessing anew all that had been jumbled in the stress and tumult. Gaining perspective through experience, wisdom through loss. Resulting in an inner peace the likes of which she’d never known.

Sentiment is not the enemy, to cry is not a frailty and love does not leave you crippled. It is the enduring, the nurturing, the protective. The force that conquers hate, slays doubt and defies the most improbable of odds. The thing inside you that just knows – without being shown or told, the intuition that guides and the decider of torment or happiness. The intensity inside me which I must trust…

It was applicable in regards to Podrick. And it was true about her husband.

Deep down I’ve always known, my soul immovable on its position. Begging me to take heed and believe in the love I sense, to let it conquer the fiends within, rewrite the page and reveal the truth. In the days before the war I listened and finally saw clearly. And now I will never let another day go by without the people I love knowing how I feel.

The last of the mourners were clearing out, the Silent Sisters in their veils of grey entering from the alcoves and pulling up the shrouds. With head bowed low the old Septon tiptoed quietly over. “It is time to say your farewells so the Sisters can finish their work.”

“We understand, I thank you.” Her voice was a husk of its regular self, rasping from the toll of
emotion. Jaime observed her with uncertainty, and she extended a hand in invitation for him to go first.

Her husband approached the bier, brow furrowing, shoulders hunched as though he were collapsing in upon himself, a fine sheen of water glistening beneath his tired eyes. “Pod-” His strangled tone tore up the few remaining pieces of her insides which remained whole.

*There is something about watching someone you care about in pain that cuts deeper than your own injuries. A sharpness delivered straight through your defences, to where it will cause the most damage.*

“-I don’t have the words. I want to say thank you, but I feel like such a fraud because you deserve to be here far more than I do. You were young and good and kind, the picture of Knighthood and everything I am not. But today I’m standing here, and you are lying there because you decided to do the most selfless of acts and give your life for mine.” Jaime’s shoulders shook, suppressing a sob.

“You were always willing to see the best in people; my incorrigible brother, my stubborn wife, me – the world’s biggest fool. Podrick you were a true friend to me, listening and believing in me when precious few would, and you will never know how in my darkest moments that meant so much.”

He wiped his nose upon the tip of the sleeve peeking out from beneath his armour. “But most importantly you protected the love of my life, you were her constant companion and a consistent champion of our turbulent relationship.”

Despite the irrepresible presence of tears, for the first time in months she also felt the urge to smile.

*What an understatement but I admire his honesty. Podrick would too.*

When Jaime’s octave dropped, she inched nearer, wanting to hear the unbridled truths flowing directly from his heart. “I owe you debts, which I could never repay. So, all I can do is tell you this. I love you like a son. I care for you and know you better than I ever did my first two boys and if my Tytan grows to be even one smidgen of the man you were I would consider myself truly blessed.”

He bent lower and she strained to listen. “And I promise you the same as you once promised me. I will look after her Pod. I am Brienne’s man forever, no matter the capacity. Like you, I will follow her to the ends of the earth and back if that is what it takes. So, do not worry in the Seven Heavens, our Lady Knight will never walk alone. I love her, I have her back.” He straightened, fistimg his sockets roughly with his left hand. “Goodbye son.”

Taking a step away, he gave her the space to say her own parting phrases.

Brienne’s footsteps sounded heavy even to her own ears, each fall of her boots clunking and echoing, the noise she knew would stay with her for years. Reaching beneath the silken shroud she
took her former Squire’s hand cradling it between hers.

“Pod – you of all people know how much trouble I have expressing my inner-self. How snapping is simpler than the struggle of unravelling the knot in my tongue, the blockade in my heart. But I want to confide in you – that I am changing. That in the grand scheme of things my fears of being mocked are inconsequential when compared to the richness there is in my life – and one of those precious things was you.”

She took a breath, trying to soothe the hoarseness of her timbre. “I can say it now – I love you, like a Mother loves her son. You were my boy, I watched you become a man. From letting your mount steer you off-road and insisting upon calling me a Lady – to guarding a King and leading his armies. You achieved greatness and I couldn’t be prouder if you were my own flesh and blood.”

Dropping down to kneel she clasped her hands atop his, shutting her eyes in reverence and praying aloud. “Mother above – if you will hear me, I know Pod was not my natural child, but the love is the same, the bond profound. Look after him I beseech you, take him into your embrace. The loss of him will never leave me but I will continue on in greater contentment to think he is safe in your care. I commend him unto you, Ser Podrick Payne - my boy. The most tender-hearted young man I have ever encountered, the epitome of a faithful comrade and the best son a Mother could ask for.”

Rising back to standing she kissed his forehead, nose touching his hair, ignoring the sickening scent as she whispered. “You learnt from me, but you taught me so much. From now on, I heed your advice, and never again will I hold back my emotions from those dearest to me. That is your legacy Pod and I swear - it will live on. I shall not squander your sacrifice and although I will mourn you, my heart will be eternally grateful for what you did for me. You were right – and it is my greatest ache that you won’t be here to see what you’ve accomplished.”

Giving his hand one final squeeze, it required all her strength to let go. “I love you.”

Walking backwards on trembling legs, she watched as the holy women swept in, pulling the shroud over his head and obscuring him from the world forever.

Only then would she permit the tears to drip, but they were not to her shame and she did not shrink when Jaime sidled up alongside her.

“That was one of the hardest things I’ve ever had to do.” The Knight admitted, studying her with well-meaning curiosity. “May I ask how you are? I know you must be heartsick but…” He stammered to find a sentence which did not pressurise or offend, she could see the cogs turning behind his dewy emeralds. “…I just want you to know I’m here. Without expectations or obligations of reciprocation. Whatever it is you need - please ask me. I am at your service My Lady.”

“There is something.” Brienne licked the taste of salt from her bottom lip. “I quite liked Tyrion’s suggestion – of raising a goblet in toast to Podrick, he would appreciate that.”

“I can find something, have it brought to your chambers…”
“Bring it yourself.” Brienne watched him blink in shock, the action sending a tiny thrill coursing through her heavy chest. “Will you join me for a drink? Like you suggested back at camp, before all hell broke loose? We can talk about Pod.”

“Of course.” The sincerity and breathless hope at even her suggestion was enough to make her truly rue her coldness and their distance over the last months.

*We should never have been divided.*

“Good.” As was customary of her nature, Brienne kept her answers short, not wanting to give him any indications of the seismic shift in her centre. *Not just yet, but soon.* “Come to my room in an hour if that is agreeable.”

“It is.”

*Right now he would give assent to anything...*

She closed her fingers around the handle on the huge double doors, admiring the carvings and giving herself permission to say one more phrase. “And Ser Jaime...?”

Using his title kept him on edge but he lifted his head attentively, the spark brewing in his pupils unable to be quenched with just a simple formality.

“....You know the only wine I like.”

When she opened the door, the warmth of her chamber struck him immediately, a small blaze crackling in the fireplace even though it was mid-Spring.

*She likes to keep the hearth fires burning, in her chambers and in my heart.*
Brienne regarded him calmly with puffy eyes, the only remaining evidence that she’d been crying. “What did you procure for us?”

“Is that my entry price?” Jaime asked, lifting the carafe. “Dornish Red. I would bring you nothing else.”

“It will serve.” She pressed her back to the timber, allowing him enough room to amble inside.

“You keep it bloody hot in here.”

“Don’t start that again.” Closing the door firmly, his wife sighed, taking the goblets from where his stumped arm held them against his body. “Would you like me to pour?”

“I can manage.”

“Without spilling?” Brienne raised an eyebrow, lowering herself into a chair by the mantle. “There isn’t a table. We are guests here, it stains.”

“If worse comes to worse I will give Lady Amerei the funds for a new rug.”

She passed him an empty goblet, then they swapped once it was full, only a light spattering making its way to the plush loops below. He waited for Brienne to comment but she was understandably reticent, clutching the rim in her long fingers, waiting for him to take his seat opposite her.

It was clear she had just bathed, the tips of her blonde tresses darker with dampness, the residue of tears scrubbed rigorously from her cheeks, leaving them slightly pinked. He too had freshened up as quickly as possible, possessing zero desire to accept his woman’s hospitality with the stench of a three-day vigil clinging to his skin and hair – which really required a trim.

Do not be ridiculous, Brienne has no interest in your appearance. She is only focussed upon remembering Podrick.

He curbed his optimism, keeping himself in check, trying not to become carried away by thinking this a social call and instead simply savouring her company.

Jaime raised his cup. “To Podrick – may we cherish our memories of you, may you live on in our hearts and may we never forget the happy times.”

“Hear, hear.” Brienne took a slow deliberate sip, physically present but not in the room, her awareness floating away upon the sands of time.

After a stretch he gave her a light verbal prod. “Share your thoughts?” He placed his goblet upon the arm of the chair with a soft click, balancing it precariously so he could convey his interest, cupping his hand around his stump and shuffling to the edge of his chair. “I confess the majority of my memories of Pod feature you, so I have nothing to regale you with that you don’t already know. Tyrion has all the good stories.”

To his delight, the corners of her mouth quirked subtly upwards, “I don’t think I am supposed to
voice aloud what I was thinking just then – especially considering the theme of tonight.”

“Go on.” He tapped her calve with his foot. “I am confident there is nothing you could say that Podrick would mind.”

“You may be surprised, though it wasn’t a great secret between us.” She pursed her lips and he tried not to stare at their rosy hue, tinted by wine and firelight. “I was thinking how I couldn’t stand him in the beginning.”

Despite himself Jaime guffawed, and Brienne shielded her eyes with her hand, a grin beginning to take control of her face. “Don’t laugh! It sounds so terrible now, but it was true.”

“You have low tolerance levels for most people in the outset. You detested me and look how that turned out…” His brows knitted, feigning deep rumination. “Perhaps you should consider trusting those first instincts?”

“I think the opposite. It is those I immediately trust who do the most harm – look at Sansa. But you and Podrick…” She gave him a sly sideways glance. “-grew on me.”

Snatching his cup, he titled it in approval of her wit. “I told you he was a good lad.” Jaime sipped. “Upon occasion my advice can be sound.”

“Even if you saddled me with a Squire who didn’t know you have to skin a rabbit before you cook it?”

That made him splutter. “Tell me you’re joking? Fur is flammable!”

“No-” She shook her head slightly, azure eyes wide. “-I’m not. He stomped it into the dirt and killed it for a second time.”

“May I just apologise then? No wonder you were so churlish towards me – I would have been too. Pod had been Tyrion’s squire for a considerable while, I had no idea he wouldn’t have the skills-” Jaime stopped mid-sentence, halted by her raised eyebrow and sceptical expression. “-Alright.” He conceded, placing his cup aside again to hold up both hand and stump. “I grant that if I’d thought about it at length, I may have been able to deduce that squiring for Tyrion and squiring for you would carry significantly different job descriptions.”

“Really? You’d come to that conclusion?” Her head was on the side and she was leaning forward, long arms dangling between her legs in that uninhibited masculine posture he loved so much.

“Eventually yes.” *Fuck, I would give my other hand to kiss her right now.*

“Well it is all said and done.” She declared, her inflection becoming serious again. “And I admit, without reservation that your choice was right. Podrick was precisely the correct natured person to put up with me, dealing with my ill-humours with aplomb and a smile. Wearing me down until I grew fond of him. Until he wormed his way irreversibly into my affections.” Her sapphire orbs fixed upon him, endless, moist and intelligible. “You have always known what I needed, even
when I didn’t know myself.”

*Can this be happening - is she truly letting me glimpse her soul again? Raising the portcullis, lowering her guard?*

Passing her comment off lightly, Jaime took a swig of wine, smiling and testing her intention. “Mayhaps it was a lucky guess?”

“No…” Brienne shook her head in earnest. “…You knew, and I thank you. Your insightfulness – it is a talent, a rare gift. It is why you loved Tyrion even when your Father shunned him, why you saw through my prickles and stings. You know how to look beyond the surface, a very deep trait. So, I thank you for pairing me with Podrick.”

“I am far from perceptive.” He stared into his cup, spirit sinking under the weight of praise he didn’t deserve. Thoughts of Cersei’s deceit and his own blindness plummeting his soul through the floorboards.

I am unworthy of Brienne’s kindness. If I were capable of what she claims, my sister’s wickedness would not have run rampant. The love of my life wouldn’t have been hurt. We would still be together.

“It was years ago.” Brushing it aside seemed the best method of handling her compliment, without dredging up sore points. “And I would not call my methods effective. I allow emotions to impede my decisions, the results more often for the worse than the better. I am the opposite of shrewd.”

“Your judgment may not always be wise, but it comes from the right place. Jaime you are unafraid of change, of admitting to and learning from your follies – you are not unyielding like me. You grow and expand, wear your heart on your sleeve. A feat I am trying to achieve.” Disbelief filled him as her hand covered his upon the side of the goblet. “Don’t diminish the good that you do and don’t pretend that it is a tendency you’ve lost. I am yet to thank you for the song.”

“The song…?” When he lifted his head, Jaime found her blue spheres inches from his.

“Jenny of Oldstones. Do not try and feign that it wasn’t you. I knew. Not for one moment did I believe that came from Tyrion. It was a gesture straight from your heart.”

“It was the least I could do.” The lion grappled against the hot tears stinging his eyes. “It’s my fault he’s gone.”

*There I said it. She has another reason to despise me, renounce me as her husband, wish to never keep my company again.*

*If I had died, Brienne would still have Podrick. None of this would have happened. Surely she knows it to be true and when her loneliness recedes I will be relegated to a dark role in her history.*

“No – it’s not.” Her hand slipped smoothly to his cheek, thumb raking through the whiskers and
robbing his breath with its softness, his lids closing as he leant into her touch like a needy kitten. “You saved him and his men. You led the charge that rescued the Crown’s forces. I saw it. Pod saw it. He was merely returning the favour…”

Jaime opened his eyes, as she took the cup from his hand, placing it on the ground beside them and the carafe. Watching in amazement as she slid from her seat, kneeling between his knees so they were of equal height. “….and he was protecting me most of all.”

His arms froze, laying prone upon his thighs, itching to touch the strong trunk of her body, feel the heat that would radiate through her clothes. But he was too paralysed to move, afraid of scaring her away, pushing his luck that smidgen too far and then she would realise and recoil.

Brienne brought her other hand to his face, palms cradling his cheeks, her lakes beginning to swell, ripples lapping at the edges. “Because Podrick knows how much I love you. How I would fall apart without you.”

Jaime’s jaw slackened, breaths exhaled in rapid bursts, her explanation too beautiful, too heavenly to be accurate. His pupils darted left then right, searching for a sign this was illusion or that he was misinterpreting.

How can this be? She thinks I was with Cersei? She believes I betrayed her…

His Lady Knight read the worry in his features, responding to his silent panic.

“When I sent you South, I did it in part so I would know for certain where your love resides. So, I could abolish the memory of the courtyard when you left me. I had to know – who would win in this war of hearts? Cersei or me? Did I even stand a chance? But now I realise – I was only hurting myself. By waiting for it to go wrong, by expecting the worst, by testing and questioning the truths and trust I already knew in my soul. Because whether or not Cersei is a part of your life – doesn’t change the fact that we love each other. You love me Jaime - me. How I am and who I am. I sense it, I feel it. You are mine…. And I am yours. I love you. And I want you. I want to be with my husband.”

The tear fell down her ivory cheek like a fountain, an image of love etched in pristine marble.

I could gaze upon her forever.

Jaime raised his finger to her silken skin, catching the tear mid-descent and wiping it away. “If love is the question – it is always the answer.”

How could she not know? It is only her, has only ever been her since Winterfell and even earlier before that…

He imbued his tone with conviction, pleading for her to take the final leap of faith and surrender to their combined destiny. “Every time.” Stroking her jaw, he felt her nod in agreement.

“Life’s too short.” Brienne wriggled closer on her knees, settling between his thighs, bringing
them nose to nose. “You left me once from insecurity. Now I ran from you for the same reason.” Her fingers massaged circles into his hair, her contralto thrumming across his lips. “You returned to my side and I forgave. Now I am returning to you…”

Another waterfall spilt down her face as she inhaled deeply, the action jouncing her chest and he could tell Brienne was summoning courage. “…stay with me?” It was the same question she had asked him that night. “Please stay.”

But this time Jaime knew his heart’s answer, his own tears springing forth as he caressed her cheek.

“Forever.” He pressed his lips to hers. *Like I should have done then.* “I’ll stay with you Brienne – forever.”
Chapter Summary

Cover Art by: Ro_Nordmann

"I can't help but want you..."
Lyrics, War of Hearts by Ruelle
Chorus, Line 3

Chapter Notes

Busy day today, so posting the chapter a little earlier than usual.
Super happy to be on the other side of the angst, thank you to all those who stuck with me through this journey.
Forecast is clear skies and sunny. <3
And....it is NSFW. ;)
In the beginning, love had felt to her like falling – from grace, from a height, from a pedestal. A swan dive into the frightening unknown, where you trifled with a force far greater than yourself, casting your heart upon its mercy and blindly hoping it remained intact. A risk, a submission, giving up the fight and throwing down your sword. A fool’s errand and a huge gamble for a woman who would defend herself to the bitter end.

The term ‘falling in love’ was easy for Brienne to comprehend then, for when his lips touched hers in their first kiss, her knees had given way beneath her, sending her hurtling into his arms without conscious choice or careful consideration.

The earth beneath her simply gave way, his love the only ledge she could catch herself upon. Her woman’s heart had inflicted this fate upon her - green eyes, blonde hair and a wolfish smile weapons more deadly to her than axes or blades. He made her a knight, he made her laugh, he made her feel seen - he made her weak. How she had cursed herself for discarding her shield and leaving herself exposed to his uncertainty.

Then in the middle - love had been soaring. Flying higher than air and birds above. Looking down contemptuously upon the clouds and ascending so rapidly that heaven was within her fingertips’ reach. In the bubble of sentiment, she floated, untouchable to all below. Forgetting its fragility and taking for granted they would always drift along upon smooth currents. Assuming they had paid their dues, ironed out their wrinkles, emerged triumphant on the other side. They were ideal, their love was divine. Nothing could burst their euphoria.

Complacency was the natural nemesis of contentment. Creeping in and sparking regression. Old habits an easy crutch when times grew trying, reverting to effective methods of getting by without even realising. Always assuming they were sound, all their troubles left in yesterday.

But they had overlooked one of the simplest aspects of success – it required work. In the same manner their reflexes, legs and arms needed to be honed daily in the yard – their hearts were a muscle too. Why had they presumed it could be left to sit and not grow slack?

If armour was abandoned it turned to rust. If they allowed their training regimen to slip, their prowess would deteriorate. If the fire ran out of logs, it would burn down to ash. But their love?
For some reason - Brienne had thought it self-sufficient, a thriving organism which could manage itself without diligent tending, always there and well when she spared a couple of moments to bask in its glory. The most precious thing in her life allowed to unravel because she classified it beneath the other tasks which required her time.

*A costly error of judgment – it should have always been on the top.*

And the more important question was why?

Why had she been deprioritising their love from the beginning, relegating it to the final hour before sleep or the five minutes of morning? Did she truly adore her job that much? Was the warrior’s life really her ambition? Or had it been the coping mechanism she turned to when life was brutal to the ugly maiden? When along the way her subconscious became convinced that the idea of being loved with her bristly nature and unconventional looks was a concept beyond her reach? That defying tradition and redefining the Westerosi image of womanhood would be her sole calling?

Brienne did love her sword, her title of Lady Commander, the ideals to which she strove. As a girl books on valour were her night-time stories and by day the yard had called her, the song of steel its alluring serenade. The rush she felt when she commanded or knocked her critics into the dirt was electrifying. Oathkeeper felt like a dream in her hand, combat made her blood sing and the pride of having Jaime’s sword descend upon her shoulders was unparalleled.

But the coldness, the detachment, the constant demands upon her self-control? Her repression and the imprinted idea that in order to succeed in a man’s world, she must not feel. That to follow in the footsteps of greatness, the road must be tread by her alone…

That was not her heart’s true creed.

*Where along the way did my lines become so harsh, I impeded my own emotions?*

*I can love Podrick like a son. I can be maternal.*

*I can love Jaime, revel in having a husband. I can be a wife to him.*

*My sword will still swing as swiftly, my enemies will make the same thud as they land in the dust.*

*And if the men choose not to respect me? They can join the ranks of those I’ve beaten.*

*For embracing my emotions is not tantamount to failure. Their judgments are not worth a life of stone.*

*Love is the death of duty. And so too should it be. Because love takes precedence.*

Jaime’s stump pushed against her spine, digging in, dragging her closer. His thumb resting on her chin, whilst his fingers spirited across her face, angling her to deepen their kiss. The desperation and magnitude of his need, consuming her with each swipe of his tongue.
Brienne kneaded the nape of his neck, her other digits gliding from his cheek, hooking her index finger in the ties of his shirt, tugging the messy knot loose, pulling the lacings one by one, making him moan into her mouth.

He surged forward without warning, his torso ramming into hers, hand skirting down the length of her side, squeezing where her thigh met her buttocks, coaxing her up from her knees. Together they stood, never pausing, the neckline of his shirt parting enough for her to brush his chest, the small patch of golden flesh and chest hair far from enough to sate her wants. She ripped the fabric free of his waistband, lips only parting momentarily as she yanked the article over his head, rearranging his hair into a nest of haphazardous locks.

They grinned at each other, rejoining their lips, and she combed her fingers through the tresses, teasing down the wild mane. “You need a haircut.” Another peck. “Your hair is longer than mine.”

“I took a vow against trimming it until I could kiss you again…”

Brienne narrowed her eyes at him doubtfully, pushing him back by the shoulders to scrutinise his face. “No, you didn’t.” Her arms folded around him once more and he chuckled, the puffs of air warm against her cheek. “You’re full of it.”

“Alright so perhaps it wasn’t a pledge exactly…”

_How can I decipher his riddles when he is kissing my neck like that?

…but I was too miserable without you to care.” His hand skidded up her front, palming her small breast through the fabric. “So, it’s the same thing really.”

“No, it’s not.” Her fingers began to work at her own fastenings, prompted by his unruly paw. “I take oaths very seriously - you should know that.”

“And I take this very seriously.” Jaime’s mouth crushed against hers and she sighed, shrugging her shoulder free from her shift but he stilled her movements with his hand on her arm, drawing back and staring at her soberly.

_Oh - that part he wasn’t japing about._

“Are you sure you want this? Me - back in your bed?” He was uncharacteristically sombre, letting her know how much this meant to him. “Tonight you are hurting, we are both missing the young lad who was a cornerstone in our lives. I don’t want to be something you regret in the morning and push away. A tumble in the covers for comfort and then we live as strangers. _I love you_ – with every inch of me. I know you don’t want to hear it but – _I didn’t_ betray you. If being here for you means just lying side by side, being your shoulder to cry on until we are both drenched with tears then I am more than happy to be that person. It’s _you_ I want Brienne and what we have _together._”

She saw his throat constrict as he swallowed. “I will do whatever you ask. If you just want to be pleasured without obligation, I can be that for you – but just know it will never be only that for
me. You are my woman – my soulmate.” His hand snaked around her bare waist, beneath the back of her shirt and she arched instinctually into his touch, driving her hips into his. “You need to know that.”

“I do know.” It was true, she believed that Jaime loved her. It was in his eyes, his actions, his words.

*I was not mistaken or blindsided by wishful thinking – I know his love for me is real.*

“And I want to reunite with my husband, in spirit* and* body.” Brienne nuzzled into his neck and he trembled. “In life. For life.” She felt his jugular pounding beneath her lips. “Make love to me.”

In three long strides they were at the bed, her shift falling away with ease as he edged her down into the blanket, sliding his body along her length, pressing kisses of worship into her skin. Diligently she saw to his breeches then hers, comfortable and practised in their routine of article removal, a wife knowing when to assist her husband, a man knowing when to set his ego aside.

But his hand fit over hers as she slid down her smallclothes, wanting to participate in that final meaningful task and she let him take them from her knees to her ankles, ceremonially dropping them to the floor. Jaime’s fingers trailed up the inside of her thighs and she felt the familiar wet heat gather in anticipation of his entry, spreading her legs to either side of him, hauling him down on top of her.

“*Brienne.*” His voice was ragged, lost in yearning and receiving. “I thought I’d never get to touch you again.” He buried his face into her shoulder, nipping, laving, taking his time, shaking with the intensity of the emotions rocking his body, submerging his digits inside her with exquisite slowness. “I’ve been so afraid. That my chances had been exhausted, that this time you wouldn’t have me back, that you’d take another to level the field and allay the ache. That I’d lost you forever.”

*I was so angry and wounded - I never thought of how this would affect him, how his own fears would take charge and torture. Years of being at the mercy of a spiteful woman, who weaponised his love and used it against him. Parading her other lovers under his nose.*

*I’m not sure how what I saw came to be – but I believe in his innocence. Nevertheless, my poor Jaime has served the brutal sentence of the guilty.*

*But my faithful heart never once thought of vengeance or another, I only think of myself as Jaime’s.*

His overwrought mutters continued to vibrate against her skin, filling and splintering her chest simultaneously. All cockiness and ego gone, just her Jaime, raw and vulnerable. “I love you so much Brienne. I never strayed. I swear it. Not while we were together, not while we were apart. I never would, I never will. My mind drove me insane with thoughts of you alone, hurting. I could never hold it against you for seeking comfort…”

Fuck – he loves me that much. How did I ever think he would be unfaithful?
“Jaime.” She grabbed him roughly, wrenching his head from the crook of her neck so he could watch her face and know her sincerity. Answering the question, he was too afraid and forgiving to ask. “I didn’t. I couldn’t. I wouldn’t. This is the first I have ever even thought of such, it never entered my mind.” Kissing the corner of his mouth she let the sensitive flesh of her lips linger upon his beard. “I’m in love with you. Madly in love. A madness which defies all reason and all hurt. There’s only you for me, it has only ever been you - since our paths crossed and changed our lives irreversibly all those years ago.”

“Thank you.” Brienne glimpsed the tears which leaked down his face before he wriggled from her grasp. Smothering her collarbone in kisses, conveying his adoration with grazes of stubble and ardent licks all the way to her breasts, his fingers moving rhythmically within her saturated centre. “I love you, I love you…”

His lips closed around her nipple, suckling upon her teats like a babe drawing milk, as though she was giving him meaning again. Reinspiring his reason for living. She could feel the wetness of his tears, the drops merging when he kissed the taut plains below her ribs, tiny trickles running downriver to pool in her navel, before he lipped those too away.

And that was when she knew without a shadow of a doubt. The final clinging, malign vestiges that whispered ‘maybe’ obliterated into nonexistence.

She had never fabricated their mutual devotion. She was not wrong about their unwavering fidelity. Her heart was correct the entire time, the only instinct and organ she had been able to rely upon in the tumultuous labyrinth of her previously insecure psyche.

He wasn’t having an affair with Cersei. He never lied to me.

Jaime is mine and ever since we declared our undying love, he has been constant.

“Come here. I believe you.” Gathering him up in her arms and legs, she kissed him with heedless passion, taking his hand in hers, knitting their fingers together, joining with him in every way she could. Guiding him to her entrance, to where she wanted her man – inside her where he was safe, where he was loved.

This time it was indescribable. The sensations neither flying nor falling. It was simply right as he reintroduced his length to the warmth of her core, her husband practically purring in contentment. And she welcomed him home, every fibre of her rejoicing.

Her walls embracing his hardness, comforting him, holding him within her, sighing as her body recognised its mate. Breasts seeking the friction of his chest, hand reconnecting with his naked skin, centring herself upon each inch, lips unwilling to break from his for even a snatch of air. Her flesh which coupled for life unable to forgive her own rigidity of the last few months, holding a grudge for taking her away from her Jaime, her sun. Her heart the most relieved part of her of all.

This whole time you were searching for a place you had long since discovered. This is home,
Jaime is home. Tarth never was, nor Winterfell and not King’s Landing. That is why they never made you feel complete. The place you belong, is in Jaime’s arms.

And his place – is with you.

The room had grown dark, the handful of logs burning down to smouldering embers, Brienne was pleased. She would never tell Jaime, but he had been right, it made the room too hot.

The small blaze had become her nightly practice, an attempt to alleviate the gelidity in sheets deprived of her husband’s heated body - but it had never worked. Nothing could blanket her like him. And right now, they were sweltering, lying in their slaked state of disarray.

Chests heaving, skin dotted in perspiration, sheet rucked down to their waists, legs kicking free of the cotton confines, feet jutting out and hanging over the side.

Too late they had discovered the bed was surprisingly small, certainly not constructed to suit lovers and especially not two people with their broad frames. Her overnight lodgings in the small castle had only been intended to accommodate a solitary Lady Commander. Not a married couple with months of missed opportunities to catch up on.

The narrowness of the mattress had not been so noticeable when Jaime was on top of her, their amorous fit masking the problem – until the second round when things got vigorous and interesting. More than once they had yanked each other back from a near miss, an unplanned trip to the rug below.

The first time it happened, Jaime had barked with laughter, until she socked him in the ribs.

“Shhhh, you’ll be heard! I’m not supposed to have a man in my sleeping quarters! This stronghold is compact and every room is occupied.”

“It’s my laughter you’re worried about? The bed frame creaks like a weathered galley in a tempest, the floorboards protest every time we shift our weight, I’m rather sure there is now an indentation in the wall and I just stopped you from falling out of the bed!”

“Precisely!” She had hissed. “We are making enough noise.”

“And I didn’t even mention the exclamations…” He ran his stump down the length of her spine and she quivered, his lips skimming the charged flesh at the back of her neck until she let out an involuntary whimper. “…what could possibly make the head of our noble Kingsguard emit such a
ruckus in the night? Hmmmm?”

“Don’t tease.” Her eyes were closed and even as she said it, she wasn’t sure if she was referring to his jesting or his ministrations.

“I’m not...I’m your husband.” Rolling her playfully back into position he had kissed her, resettling himself in the valley of her thighs. “I can make you moan as much as I want.”

“We will discuss it later-” Brienne panted, craning her neck to expose the entire column to his skilful mouth. “-just continue what you were doing.”

But now...

“Jaime…” Brienne warned, swatting his fingers where they splayed across her backside, deliberately squeezing the ivory flesh.

“What?” His pretence of innocence was entirely unconvincing. “It’s not my fault we’re cramped, I need to hold on to something solid lest I wind up on the floor again.”

Retrieving his wandering hand, she deposited it above the sheet with a pointed plop, dropping it from a height and trying to ignore the way it instantly crawled to her exposed leg, fingertips latching on as he flipped them and attempted to rearrange her limbs to his liking.

I will presume he is trying to make us more comfortable and not doing what I think he is...

“A little respectability would be nice – I will remind you we were at a funeral service earlier. If the court has heard, they will think we’re animals…”

“Please.” The lion scoffed. “Half have drowned their grief in drunkenness and the others will be seeking distractions of their own. It’s what you do in the wake of death – you celebrate life.”

His leg shuffled deliberately between her thighs, rubbing tantalisingly against her slick curls and she scrunched her face in the effort to maintain concentration. “You’re being inappropriate.”

“That’s not what you said before…” He bumped his nose playfully into hers.

“Different situation – we were-” Justifications were difficult to form when the sweet traction he was creating sent spasms coursing from her nethers. “- re-consummating.” It’s not a term but it will do. “This is just carnality.” Her teeth sunk into her bottom lip as she caught herself grinding into him.

Jaime grinned wickedly. “We have to make use of this small bed in whatever way we can. Knights are resourceful, we know how to turn a less than ideal circumstance to our advantage.”

“But Pod.” The sadness lingered still, intermingled with guilt.
I shouldn’t be behaving like this when he has just been laid to rest.

Though a less strait-laced part of her carried suspicions that it was exactly what he would have wanted for them.

It seemed Jaime knew it too. “He would approve. Trust me on that.”

Brienne huffed, already unconsciously rocking against his body, responding to his arousal prodding into the base of her belly.

Her husband was smug, he knew he had her upon a technicality. “You know I’m right.”

“Quiet.” Hauling him to her, she devoured his lips swallowing the irritating, self-satisfied smirk. “You’re insufferable when you gloat.”

“Aren’t you tired?” If they lay on their sides they could manage the space, arms snuggled around clammy frames and chests pressed so close they could feel the pounding rhythm beneath each other’s ribs evening out to a normal pace. Brienne burrowed into the pillow they halved between two, blinking serenely at her husband as he nosed into her cheek, drawing arcs and lines with its random movements and humming happily to himself. “Isn’t now when you are supposed to be napping?”

“No - for some reason I feel rejuvenated.” His exhales tickled, his bliss tangible.

“Of all the nights for you to be insatiable. You have a leg which is no doubt troubling you after all our-” She pinked slightly “-strenuous activity. We have stood a three-night vigil, by all rights you should be exhausted….”

“I have languished for my wife for far longer than that. My knee is a minor inconvenience, my fatigue well under wraps. I want to cherish every moment with you, if Podrick’s passing has taught me anything it is how quickly a life can be snuffed out. We lost months.” Jaime planted a small kiss on the space between her eyes. “There is somewhere I forgot to kiss before; I would hate to miss a spot.”

Brienne smiled.
How I have pined for you. How I too regret the moons that escaped us, where we let destructive forces have their way and lay waste to all we had built. But we come back together stronger, wiser, more determined. With opened eyes and fortified bonds, these links will last forever, this chain is forged in honesty and love.

“Jaime…”

“Mmmmm?”

“Seeming as we are not sleeping, let us bridge the unknown. Tell me something I do not know, often our most compelling conversations happen in a bath or in the wake of loving.”

“What would you like to know?” His thumb ran backwards and forwards over a patch of skin on her back. “To you I am an open book.”

“Is there anything I’ve missed? Developments in the West or in King’s Landing which I am unaware of because we weren’t on speaking terms? It can be minor or major – I do not mind. But I want us to be a united front before we return.” Her spirits were heavy when she thought of the information she would be offering in exchange. “We have always known each other’s secrets and there are those who would tear us asunder. I cannot help but think that reticence was the catalyst in a lot that transpired.”

“I agree. But I only have one thing I should disclose, and I didn’t want to bring up the topic in this bed.”

“Do it.” They were eye to eye and there could be no hiding. “When we shy away from difficult subjects, it gives our inner fiends fodder. We have been through the worst – I am confident whatever you say I will shoulder.”

“Very well.” He took a deep breath. “I almost strangled Cersei to death.”

“You what?!?” The Lady Knight’s eyebrows nearly connected with her hairline and she had to stop from shooting upright in shock. Chanting reminders to herself of how it took them ages to achieve this comfortable position. “That is not like you.”

“I know – but I have never been that furious in my life. Doubt I ever will be again.” He glowered even recollecting it, the expression darkening his golden glow. “She set me up Brienne. You as well. She orchestrated and manipulated the entire situation so it would appear like we were having an affair.”

*This rings true to form.*

In the back of her skull the scroll of her memory was rolling, unveiling the full image, revealing parts of the picture she had not seen before. “What do you know of it? How did she manage it? I believe your innocence implicitly but I cannot begin to imagine how someone goes about staging such a despicable act?”
“The plan as a whole was premeditated my love; I am sure of it. But the opportunity? I fear I played right into her hands. Our room was set up for us. I knew you had that night off, you told me the week before. I was surprising you and Cersei came to collect Tytan. She was late getting him, and I needed to bathe so I handed him over and told her to see herself out – next thing I know she is in our bed and you are…” He trailed off, choking up at the reminder.

*Now it all makes sense.*  “Pod was right.” She let out an anguished groan. “He told me he spoke with you.”

“Yes – he held Tytan while I got our Dornish Red.”

*Of course, he was getting our wine. For our romantic evening.*

“Fuck!” With little choice of outlet, she slammed her fist into the top of the pillow.

Jaime regarded her pensively. “You see now why I tried to kill her?”

“Very much.” Brienne squirmed in barely contained anger. “How dare she. Jaime I never told you before, but I had my suspicions she was plotting against us and had been for a long while.”

“What?” His green eyes widened. “How? When? I know there was the incident in the hallway where she implied I had gotten her pregnant but are you telling me it goes further than that?”

Groaning he scrunched his face as though pained. “I am the world’s biggest fool. I am the stupidest Lannister.”

“No, you’re not.” Stroking his cheek, she tried to soothe him. “You can’t know what I didn’t disclose. I kept my misgivings to myself because I was afraid of being seen as petty or paranoid. I also couldn’t quite wrap my mind around the implications, that a person was capable of such cruelty.” *Deep breath.*  “I believe she was behind Tytan’s injury on Tarth. That she did it to regain control over you and to sabotage our romantic interlude.”

“My boy?” Tears flooded his eyes anew, stricken at the notion. “I never thought she would hurt him to get at us. I knew she was hateful but – I thought her own children were at least exempt.”

“Anyone would. Some things are too terrible to contemplate. Like what she did to Tytan - and what she did to us. I’m lying here thinking about it Jaime – turning it over step by step. She must have locked the door from the inside, filled only one of the glasses, divested her clothes, mussed the covers and gotten into our bed.” Her tone growled, then despair kicked in, launching herself at her husband in an apologetic embrace. “I doubted you. I’m so sorry. I never should have – not when I had my inklings of her capabilities.”

“Shhhhh.” He smoothed her hair gently. “This is why I didn’t want to tell you tonight. I didn’t want to increase your upset, you have been through enough. Brienne, you can’t blame yourself for believing, I know how bad it looked; I wouldn’t have trusted me either. Not with all the wheels she’d set in motion beforehand, weaving her web of deceit, undermining our trust. It is why I have vowed to never forgive her; I shan’t speak with her again. To me she doesn’t exist.”
The Lady Knight pulled back, her brow creasing. “But she’s your twin?”

“I don’t care. I’ve done enough for her. I would have crushed her windpipe in - I nearly did.”

He means it. She swallowed, her tone growing quiet. “What stopped you?”

“There was only one shred of truth in her story – she is pregnant. Though I assure you the babe isn’t mine. It must belong to that lover she mentioned, some fool she used as a lackey in her scheme.” Jaime shook his head in disapproval. “Even in my rage I drew the line at harming an expectant woman. When I simmered down, I realised what it would have done to Tytan as well. She isn’t much of a Mother but she’s the one he’s got, and that’s my fault as it is. Though now I discover even her own son is not safe from her malevolence, and it sends shivers down my spine, only serving to reinforce my resolve. I mean it when I say, I will have nothing more to do with her.”

Concern filled his emeralds. “How do you feel about it? Are you angry with me for considering such an atrocious crime? Or mayhaps you are mad that I didn’t finish the job?”

“Neither – though the thought has crossed my mind several times in the last few minutes of killing her myself.” Carding her fingers through his blonde mane, she rationalised aloud. “I respect your decision. I understand why you lashed out and wanted to take her life – in the same vein I understand why you stopped. And I am grateful – not because I value her existence – but because I wouldn’t want that on your soul. Not after all your efforts to save her. You have been a good brother Jaime. Note how I say brother.” A smile somehow made its way onto her face. “You do not need to have another dark deed haunting your conscience because she decides to be a vile human being. I have told you before – you are a good man.”

“Only when I’m partnered with a good woman.” He pressed his mouth to her temple, the heat of his lips seeping sumptuously into her pores. “Alright – your turn. And I strongly suspect you had an item on your mind before you even suggested this conversation.”

“You know me well.” Brienne continued toying with his curls whilst she talked, twirling them around her digits to channel her anxiousness. “Jaime, I have been keeping something from you – since before we even parted ways.”

He pushed himself up slightly on an elbow, frowning, complexion paling. “Why? You know you can tell me anything...”

“I couldn’t bring myself to say this. I was upset with myself, feeling like a failure. But most importantly – I didn’t want to disappoint you.”

Her voice croaked, and he brushed his knuckles lovingly across her cheek. “You could never let me down Brienne. I spend my life trying to be worthy of you...”

“Even if I can’t give you a child?”

“Is that why you clammed up again?” Suspiring in a gust, he appeared more relieved than
perturbed. “I thought you didn’t want to have a family with me. I thought you wanted to stay in the Kingsguard indefinitely.”

“Want and ability are two different things.”

“And how was I to know that if you didn’t confide in me?” His scold was gentle, green lakes only exuding kindness. “I love you. I want you more than I want an entire garrison of heirs.”

“But what if it means I can never be discharged from duty? We will be consigned to the Red Keep forever. A normal woman could bear your children, continue your name…”

“If I am by your side and have your love, I am happy to be stuck anywhere. Be it Winterfell, the Red Keep, Tarth or even a Free City. I don’t resent what you do, you are my Knight. I just wanted time with you, togetherness, for it to be fair. To decide a portion of our own lives and have a reasonable schedule which worked for our marriage. Something to look forward to at the end of the day, the reward of your arms.”

He held her tighter, wrapping her broad shoulders up as best he could. “This right here is all I want. My Lady I think you misunderstand why I mentioned a babe so much. I wanted it because it would be ours. My outlook is like yours. I wanted to meet our child and see how the odd but wonderful combination that is you and me takes form. I admit I desired to see you grow round and potted with my seed—” Brienne rolled her eyes exaggeratedly and he sniggered. “—but you are my woman, how could I not?”

Kissing her forehead, he let the contact linger, as though he could brand his sentiments into her brain. “We do not need a child to be complete – we are complete as we are. The two of us. Our baby would just have added to it.”

“Thank you. I wish I’d found the courage to tell you my fears sooner, I could have used that burden taken from my shoulders months ago.” She hunched up her bulk as best she could to fit beneath his chin, burrowing her face into his strong shoulder. “My Father will be displeased – but that is nothing new. It was you whom I was worried about.”

“Completely unfounded.”

“I even went and spoke to Gilly…”

“That must have been hard for you.” He was so empathetic and tender it made her ache with love for him, the nook where she lay a sheltered paradise for her soul. The scent of Jaime filling her nostrils, the sound of his tenor assuaging her worries.

“It was not my favourite way to spend an hour and it achieved little. Gilly is kind but the conclusion was I cannot know for sure. It is just with all the time that has passed it is seeming less and less likely I am fertile. Surely I would have fallen by now otherwise.” She gently lipped at his chest, enjoying how the spattering of hairs tickled. “I am glad you have Tytan. And I cannot believe I am saying this after all we’ve been through with Cersei – but I still believe we did the right thing. Sending you South and saving them – he is worth it; he is a charming, dear little boy. Just like his Father is a gorgeous man.”
Beneath her cheek she felt him puff up, beaming with pride from the inside out. “I love him. I miss him. I cannot wait to see Tytan again, and now that I know how his Mother treats him, I want to return and ensure she can never lay a harmful finger on him again – only it will mean he spends a great deal of time with us.”

“I welcome it, he is a part of our family.” Her eyelids had begun to droop, the sleep of the cosy calling after what seemed like forever. “Take heart my husband. We will be back soon.”
Blessings vs Burdens

Chapter Summary

Cover Art by: Ro_Nordmann

"Stay with me, a little longer..."
Lyrics, War of Hearts by Ruelle
Verse 2, Lines 1 & 2

Chapter Notes

NSFW - again. ;) <3
“….long overdue.” His wife was a picture of concentration, taking her task very seriously.

_As she does everything._

Jaime grinned, crawling his fingers up her front, seeking the pink peaks which pronounced themselves through the thin material of her undershirt.

_Sometimes I adore Kingsguard Whites._

When Brienne had slipped stealthily into their chamber this afternoon, the first order of business had been relieving her of her armour and gambeson, the weather heating up too much for her to continue to bake in all those layers. He had kissed her passionately, enquiring as to what she carried in the roll under her arm.

_And then the fun began._

Taking one of the pert buds between thumb and forefinger he rolled it through the fabric, craving to draw it into his mouth, wetting the cotton with his tongue and making it cling.

“Oh you think you’re so clever.” She dropped the strands of hair for about the tenth time. “Hold still – you won’t be smirking when I have to keep evening off the length and you end up bald.”

“I’m tired of remaining still.” He pouted. “There are more fun things to do.”

The Lady Knight was sitting astride his lap, tall and extraordinary as ever. Locks of his blonde mane littering the floor below. She had already trimmed off the excess length at the back and now was working on the front. The metal blades cool against his cheek as she balanced them precisely in hand, measuring the lock around his ear. “I think here. I like where it curls but I don’t want your hair touching your shoulders.”

“I trust your judgment.” He announced. “Can we discuss possible inducements for my good behaviour? I assure you with the right persuasion I can be as motionless as a statue.” Jaime licked his lips, with Brienne seated on his thighs her breasts came tempting close to his mouth.

“I would have thought not looking like an idiot would be sufficient motivation?”

“Not with you dressed like _that, sitting there._” He squirmed beneath her powerful haunches,
lowering himself until she could feel how his laces were straining. “Don’t you want to finish this later?”

“If you could see how lopsided your hair is at the sides – you wouldn’t be making that suggestion.” Brandishing the sharp metal, she began again. “You may be frisky, but I know you’re also quite conceited.”

“Never!” His facade of offence was parchment thin. “How could you accuse me of such?”

“Really? I witnessed an exchange in the garden the other day. You will remember – those two chamber maids were fussing over Tytan. But what was it that I overheard?” Brienne squinted, pretending to search her recollection. “Ah yes. They said Tytan was ‘almost’ as good looking as his Father.” The cut hair fell away, and she began to comb the other side. “Almost. And what did you say to your toddler?”

Damn, I was hoping she was out of earshot for that part.

He tried not to laugh, the honed edge precariously close to his cheek.

“You said ‘don’t feel badly my boy – it’s quite the compliment and when you grow you may come to resemble me more.’”

“I was not aware you caught that part.”

“Do I need to remind you that looks are not everything?”

“Do I need to remind you, that I think you are beautiful and would very gladly show you just how attractive I find you?”

She raised her azure orbs to the ceiling in frustration.

“Watch what you’re doing…” He quipped, nudging her. “…you have an important task there.”

“My you take some risks, baiting a woman with a blade in her hand.”

“It wouldn’t be the first time, I like to live dangerously – but I suppose I should have asked for your styling qualifications upfront.”

“Who do you think cuts my hair?” Brienne brushed the itchy fallen strands from his neck with the back of her hand. “I have been keeping my own short for years.”

“I did wonder. Seldom do you hear a Lady tell her maid to ‘lop it all off.’”

“So you see? I am well practised.”

“I concede. You appear to be doing a good job. But I do expect my reward after.” Jaime furrowed his brow as a thought struck him out of the blue. “Speaking of practise – where do the King and Kingsguard think you are?”
Since arriving back in King’s Landing they had endeavoured to keep their reunion low profile. A temporary pretence, preventing any attempts by His Grace to hinder their lovemaking. Buying them more time together by having him believe that for the better part they were still separated.

Eternally honest Brienne had gone so far as to disclose they were working on their relationship, making their daytime strolls on the grounds acceptable and unquestioned. But they had little true indication if the poorly disguised ruse was working and more often than not Jaime doubted it. He believed any Three Eyed Raven worth his salt would be astute enough to notice their inseparability.

They turned up to the yard at coincidentally the same time, crossing swords in the open and locking lips in the armoury. They were back sharing the bed in their chambers each night, Brienne joining him late when the halls were deserted. Curtain kept ajar so she would be woken with the first rays of morning sun, her usual method of rousing via tea tray impossible without alerting others to their routine. Her deliveries instead went daily to the White Sword Tower, where breakfast presumably went untouched or was devoured by the young men. Their new method of reliance upon the sun was effective but not foolproof, especially upon overcast morns or when the pull of lying in and loving for an extra hour became too great. Brienne had bolted for Council meetings, making them with only seconds to spare. The tale of her near miss and flimsy excuses relayed to him by his brother and delighting Jaime to no end.

From that day forward Tyrion just knew – he never had to be told. By his account he could tell they were on ‘friendly’ terms again from the ‘rose in her cheeks’ and ever since had given them plenty a raised eyebrow or sly wink. It had become an in-house game for the Lannisters and even if the jig was up – all three agreed it was worthwhile to maintain their discretion. It remained unsaid that none of them wanted Cersei to become privy to their happiness.

For the stretches when Jaime found himself deprived of his wife, he was never alone. A little person was almost permanently in their chambers, causing mischief as he grew and became bolder. Inquisitive about everything and anything, exploring the world upon short legs and winning over nearly every soul that he encountered.

In the nursery, Jaime had permanently acquired staff of his own. Offering positions to the loyal women who had assisted him back when Tytan’s overnight accommodations became his own. They had been outsiders, maids excluded from the established cliques due to station or appearances, overlooked and snubbed. Now they were promoted to above those who had spurned them, paid handsomely for their vigilance, unable to be swayed by false words or manipulation. Any attempt at such connivances was to be reported straight back to their head - a young woman who was previously a chamber maid, kind natured, perceptive and possessing an abundance of freckles - and in turn to him. The lion lord was determined to protect his son, but it carried its own set of difficulties when the person he required shielding from was his own Mother. Add in the fact that Jaime refused to breathe the same air as his detestable twin and the hired attendants were a necessary aid.

They watched Cersei when she was with Tytan, ensured she was sent elsewhere whenever Jaime was in the nursery and minded the toddler when romance was on the pair of Knights’ agenda. Fortunately, it had been simpler of late – his nursemaids had informed him that Cersei had been relieved of duties and entered her confinement. Tytan was taken to visit her infrequently, in short bursts and only under their supervision. With these measures in place, he could relax, enjoying
marriage and fatherhood without fretting over what went on when his boy was out of sight.

*And I know my wife has been doing some manoeuvring of her own….*

“They do not have time for thinking – they are too busy.” Brienne’s smile ebbed on cheeky, placing down the blades and threading her fingers through his hair to neaten it and test the length. It made him sigh, eyes closing, relishing her touch and listening to her rich voice.

“I have had many discussions with His Grace about filling the remaining vacancies in the Kingsguard. He is very aware that half his time is spent in another realm, leaving the empty shell of his body vulnerable to attack and in the absence of Podrick he becomes increasingly uneasy when he is left with the fresh-faced candidates.” He heard the sadness creep into her speech when she mentioned her former Squire, then the deep breath she took to regain control over her emotions.

His woman had understandably grappled with grief upon their return to the capital, charged with collecting up Podrick’s personal effects and accepting the condolences from court. Jaime supported her in every way he could, providing a shoulder to weep upon, words of comfort or a confidant for when her anger kicked in. He had sat up long nights, listening whilst she raved of injustice, laying culpability at their sovereign’s feet. Resenting Bran’s selfish superstitions that had not only kept them apart but cost Podrick dearly. Of course, he agreed wholeheartedly.

It had taken great forbearance and self-control for Brienne to douse her rightful blaze of fury, digging deep and calling upon her incredible capacity for compassion to continue guarding the King. But she openly admitted that it wasn’t the same, and she regularly delegated to free herself from his company – much to their monarch’s dismay.

“King Bran is quite adamant he can only be alone with those he trusts. I therefore arranged for him to meet with the short-list personally, an inspection of the guard. He can question them and ascertain their suitability himself if he is going to continue being so particular.”

Jaime nodded his approval of her solution, amused by her tenacity. “Did you put it to him in those words?”

“Not quite. I reminded him that previous rulers selected their own Kingsguard. I know he prefers not to socialise but this is the best way to ensure he is comfortable with those who guard him. I told him that my presence as their commander would be intimidating and may inhibit their answers, so Ser Derek or Ser Mortimer will attend during the process. Thus taking the responsibility out of my hands and giving me some spare hours.”

His eyes popped open again when she sat back down on his lap, admiring her handiwork with a tilted head, countenance vacillating between acceptance and critical appraisal before finally proclaiming. “It will serve.”

“Thank you, wife.” She picked stray hairs from his collar with her blunt nails as he pulled her into a kiss.
“This needs a wash.” Her nose wrinkled at his shirt. “All these prickly hairs will irritate your skin.”

“And what about your skin? I know from experience it is far more sensitive than mine.” Jaime pointed to the odd clinging strands of blonde and grey, looping his finger in the loosely bound criss-crosses of her shift. “I would be an uncaring husband not to suggest you remove it immediately.”

Her pearly, slightly crooked teeth gleamed as she opened and closed her mouth, looking for protestations and finding none. Slack jaw metamorphosing into her unique smile as she lifted her arms above her head. “You do it then.”

Thoughts of the shift were short-lived as she continued, “Undressing her like this – I can manage.”

He slipped the shift upwards, the raising fabric unveiling alabaster skin and perfect breasts, drawing him in so irresistibly he couldn’t resist moving straight to them, leaving her half entangled in her own shirt.

Or perhaps I can’t.

“Jaime!” She laughed and battled her way out of its snare, her mirth transforming to mewls as he laved her nipple with his tongue, cupping the other soft mound in his hand until he could attend to it with equal avidity.

Far be it from me to play favourites.

“A haircut and passion,” he mused, blowing seductively across her moistened teat. “I think this a very productive afternoon.”

“Watch your feet.” The afternoon sun was warm but far from hot, the conditions perfect for a training session with the recruits. King Bran had selected only one from her proposed candidates and insisted she dismiss the rest, landing her with a fresh batch to train.

The truth was – she didn’t mind.
These new boys may be green, recently made knights, but there was an endearing quality to their eagerness, fresh faced and willing to learn. In many ways their behaviour still resembled a squire, prompting Brienne to believe they were all too hastily dubbed to replenish the ranks of the lost, unprepared for the title and responsibilities which descended upon their shoulders. Therefore, she drilled them as she had Podrick, holding them to the highest standards, ensuring their egos did not inflate and believe themselves above the more menial aspects of Knighthood. And to her wonder - they listened. They wanted to succeed, which made them strive harder, hanging off her every word, obeying her instructions and taking her criticisms on board with the outlook of impressing her.

*But the Kingsguard only requires Six – it will be a tragedy to have to disappoint the majority. Here are some fine young men. But I will never tell them that.*

Brienne tapped one of them on the calf with the flat of her sword. “…before you lunge, you need to correct your stance, you have a tell. An astute swordsman will read it and know your next move before you’ve even registered it yourself.”

He looked down, nodding and analysing his legs.

“Alright – recommence.” She stood with her arms clasped behind her back, ready for them to begin sparring in pairs once more.

“We can’t Lady Commander!” Another Knight of Spring chimed up from the rear of the group, concern of being considered outspoken overshadowed by a more pressing issue. “There’s a little one in the way.”

“A what?” Stepping around the nearest recruits, her bewilderment turned to bemusement, posture immediately softening when she spotted Tytan running full pelt through the thick of the group, mischievous smirk the epitome of Jaime.

“Sheathe your swords!” Brienne shouted, ensuring they all pointed the metal tips safely into their leather scabbards. Snickering as she watched the toddler’s gleeful sprint, a smile unconsciously illuminating her face. “Somebody got away…”

Bending her knees she extended out both arms, letting him come to her and lifting him out of harm’s way. “Tytan-” Her scold held a sing-song cadence. “-What are you doing?”

“Ello.” His big green eyes were working valiantly to get himself out of trouble.

“Do you know him Lady Commander?” One of the lads enquired, chuckling.

“Yes.” Wrapping a single arm around the toddler, she pushed Oathkeeper's pommel out of his reach. “He is my step-son. My husband’s natural child.” Pressing her forehead to Tytan’s she narrowed her eyes, tickling his chin with a long finger. “Where is your Papa?”

“Dere-” He pointed in the direction from whence he came. “- we see ‘Rien.”
“Can you understand him Ser?”

“Some of the time.” She confessed. “I’m ‘Rien’. He can’t quite say my name yet.”

“Tytan!” Jaime was laughing as he jogged up, his sudden arrival making all the recruits stand to attention, a chorus of ‘My Lord’ and ‘Lord Lannister’ greeting him, accompanied by respectful nods when he passed. It entertained Brienne to no end.

_when I am ‘lady commander’ they forget that I am also ‘lady Lannister.’_

“He got away on me.”

“I see that.” Brienne passed the tot into his Father’s arms. “You were coming to see me?”

“He told you that?” Jaime seemed delighted that she’d interpreted Tytan’s speech. “Yes, I didn’t mean to interrupt this way.” Glancing behind him he shrugged. “Apologies for the invader, I hope you aren’t upset with me. We were making our way here and he just sort of took off when he heard your voice.” Leaning closer he whispered. “He gravitates towards you like I do.”

“I don’t mind. It will do them good to be kept alert.” It was the truth. She had evolved above worrying what her trainees may think or say if they saw her with a child in her arms. If given the choice between watching Tytan’s little face fall or being subjected to a few narrow-minded judgments – she would choose the boy every time.

_I have grown to love him; he is a piece of Jaime. If they would condemn me for embracing my caring side, I would rather know upfront so they can be dismissed from the running. I can instruct them even if I am maternal, I am no less worthy of respect for being nurturing. I can be multi-faceted. I do not need to turn off my heart. “You know I am always pleased to see the two of you.”_

Jaime arched an eyebrow. “Really?”

“Really.”

“Let’s see how far I can push that…” Stretching up, he softly brushed his lips against hers in greeting. From a few feet away she heard a round of nervous titters, some applause and a bold low whistle.

“Grow up!” She barked over Jaime’s shoulder, making him flinch at the sudden outburst. Tytan on the other hand was unperturbed. _his mother is cersei, no wonder he is desensitised to raised voices._ “Lord Lannister is my husband and if you keep that up or repeat this to anyone, you will be out here past sundown polishing every metal object in the armoury!”

“Yes, Lady Commander.” They mumbled, hanging their heads.

The lion was trying his darndest not to chortle. “They’re just teasing – that was good-natured.”

“I know.” Brienne murmured back, barely moving her lips. “But I need them shaking in their
boots with shut mouths."

“So fierce.” His Lannister self was in full swing. “Only I know your other side, the voracious, the sensual-”

Cutting him off mid-innuendo, she covered Tytan’s ears with her hands. “Do you really wish to discuss this in front of him?”

“I suppose not. He tends to repeat words these days.” The sunlight hit her husband’s profile, illuminating the sculpt of his jaw and nose, and she fought to keep her thoughts composed.

_He really is stunning._

Clearing her throat, Brienne tilted her chin up proudly, masking her pull to his charisma. “What did you come to speak with me about?”

“Oh yes. I just wanted to let you know that Tytan and I are visiting town this afternoon. I have to get out of the Keep for a change of scenery and I promised him another of those carved wooden toys he likes so much.” He frowned at the boy on his hip. “Though that was before he made his escape.”

A pang of longing struck within her.

_I want to go, be normal, be a family. Outside of the Keep where people do not know us or monitor our every move._ She chewed her lip in thought, trying to devise a stratagem.

_We have to create our own chances to be together, I need not be so staid._ “His toys – do you obtain them from the Carpenter’s stalls?”

“Yes, my love. Why?”

“Would you mind terribly if I joined you both?”

“You want to come?” His expression brightened. “We would love it. But how will you get away?” Jaime brought his lips to her ear. “For I am surmising you will be inventing a pressing need.”

“Today has taught me something Ser – that perhaps always practising with naked steel is unadvisable. I suddenly have an urgent requirement for wooden tourney blades and shields.”

“Then you will potentially have to go and acquire them.”

“Yes.” Her eyes gleamed. “I shall seek approval at once.”

Jaime sparkled, enjoying her small act of rebellion and their intrigue. “What about them?” He angled his head subtly towards the trainees.

“You know - I do think there is some armour which requires tending after all.”
“Another horse?” Jaime shook his head, furrowing his brow.

He sat on a stool before a trestle table covered in whittled figurines, every imaginable animal in every conceivable pose. Elephants trumpeted, hounds sat proudly upon their haunches, even the rare cockatrice made an appearance. He had already paid the merchant; it was only a matter of deciding which one. A difficult choice with such a broad selection - but Tytan clutched his dozenth steed in his little hands.

“You’re not supplying an army with mounts - don’t you want something new?”

The boy is impossible to bargain with.

The Lord glanced around the open pavilion, the smell of oak and freshly cut timber filing the air.

It is good to see the businesses beginning to flourish again, many struggled after Daenerys burnt their livelihoods to the ground. But as more and more merchants bring supplies in from Essos they too have the chance to start afresh and we can support them in what ways we can.

Brienne strolled amidst the wares speaking with the tradesmen, putting in her order for the Crown. He couldn’t help but gape at her, standing almost a head and shoulders taller than the carpenter in her long leather surcoat, swordbelt around her waist, Oathkeeper at her hip - the noblest and most unique of women.

And she is all mine.

Returning to survey the carved menagerie, Jaime positively lit up when he spied a mighty lion. “How about this one?” He waved it enthusiastically in front of his son’s face. “It’s like the Lannister sigil. Hear him roar!”

Tytan jutted out his bottom lip, wriggling from his Father’s lap and making a quick dash over to Brienne with the wooden stallion in his hands, clinging to her leg and asking. “Up! Up!”

This is priceless.
Rotating in his seat, Jaime continued to watch in rapt fascination.

“Wait.” He heard his wife command, raising a single finger, her tone warm but stern. Tytan wrapped his arms around her shin, standing on the toe of her boot and resting his chin on the suede of her breeches.

“Alright.” Brienne declared, finishing her dealings with the Carpenter, bending down and scooping Tytan up in her arms. “What’s the matter?”

A steady stream of near unintelligible babble flowed from the tot’s mouth, making very little sense at all. Even as the child’s Father, Jaime could only pick out a couple of words. ‘Pa-pa’, ‘No! Lion’ and ‘Orsey!’

“You want the horse?” She deduced and he practically shoved it up her nose in this enthusiasm.

“Orsey – peez.”

Jaime grinned. *What are you going to do my sweetling?*

He watched Brienne’s spare hand fish into the pouch on her belt, counting out a handful of coppers. Striding forward, she tapped the Carpenter on the shoulder, indicating towards the wooden horse and dropping the coins in his outstretched hand.

“It’s all yours.” He heard her say, kissing Tytan on the temple when she thought no one was looking. But Jaime saw and his chest melted.

*My wife and my son a portrait of loveliness. I adore her so much it physically aches.*

As they wandered back towards him, Jaime cocked his eyebrow exaggeratedly. Glancing back and forth between his uncharacteristically demure wife and exhilarated son. “What do we have here Lady Lannister?” Depositing the lion upon the tabletop, he tapped his fingers next to it. “Anything to tell me?”

She plonked Tytan back on his knee, running her hand up Jaime’s bicep as she walked behind him, bending down to peck his cheek and lean on his shoulder. “You wanted the lion more than he did. Now we have both. Problem solved.”

“I do declare you are going soft.” He could barely contain his mirth.

“Hardly.” Brienne denied, backing out of the stall to continue her browsing. “Why just ask my trainees who are scouring rust from old gauntlets and helmets as we speak.”

“You are rambunctious cub.” Pulling his son closer, he lowered his timbre conspiratorially. “Looking like the cat that got the cream. We are going to having to rewrite that expression. From now on it can be the Tytan who got the Horsey.” Signalling for the apprentice, he asked for the lion to be delivered to the Red Keep, tossing the boy an extra copper.

*One toy to track with an absentminded toddler is more than enough.*
Alighting from the stool he made sure Tytan had a firm grip on his treasure. Chatting to him as he sought where his wife had gotten to. “Just you wait until you’re older. I am going to get you the finest Destriers and Palfreys our gold can buy.”

Stopping in place he scanned the square, looking for a tow-headed woman, locating her in front of another carpenter’s display. Drawing closer, he saw that this merchant’s speciality was furniture and his heart lodged painfully in this throat when he noticed what had captured her attention.

Brienne stood stationary, staring down in deep thought. Her expression etched in a near unreadable expression as her lengthy fingers glided reverently over the varnished edge of a cradle, setting it rocking with her touch.

He approached her carefully, slipping his right arm around her waist and kissing her cheek, his voice gravelled with emotion. “Please don’t be sad my love. We have each other.”

Tytan reached for her too, determined that she look at his marvellous horse again and she acknowledged the boy with a small smile. “I’m not. I was just thinking.”

She is so brave – in every way.

Leaning into his contact, she wrapped her digits around his wrist and gave it a squeeze. “Where are we off to next?”

He halted for a moment, considering his options, then led the trio to a small alley between stalls, giving them some space and privacy to talk.

“This is not how I pictured doing this.” Jaime revealed, juggling the boy from one arm to another and retrieving a small pouch from his back pocket. Quickly whisking it out of reach as Tytan tried to grab it, almost dropping his horse in the process, the dangling curiosity on strings too intriguing for the inquisitive child. “But I hope it will cheer you. Either that or I’ve landed myself in trouble.”

Brienne took the bag delicately, bouncing it up and down as if to weigh the goods within. “It’s light.” She asserted. “When did you obtain this?”

“Not long after we got into town – remember when I asked you to hold Tytan’s hand and stand on the grassy patch?”

“Were you not finding a place to relieved yourself like you stated?”

“No.” He sniggered. “That was the only excuse I could concoct on the spur of the moment. I confess there was more than one reason for my trip in today. I didn’t foresee you wanting to accompany us, but I’m glad you did. I have enjoyed it immensely.” Leaning in, he gave her another swift kiss. “Are you going to open it?”
“What is the occasion?” Infuriating woman, always with the questions. “Do you not wish to save it for a special day?”

“Today can be a special day. Love is the occasion…”

And making my wife happy again, it tears me apart to imagine what was going on beneath her surface when she saw that cradle. Even if Brienne is displeased with me over this gift it is preferable to seeing her melancholy.

Nerves about her reaction to the contents were starting to kick in. “…Remember how precious life is Brienne - never wait until tomorrow. I intend making every second with you count.” Her sapphires scintillated and he captured the image in his mind, the way she gazed at him adding to his store of memories that faded his darkness into yesteryear.

Let’s just hope that doesn’t change when she tips out her present. “Go on wife, open it.”

Untying the drawstrings, she upended the pouch, two plain golden bands clinking as they landed in her palm. Her jaw dropped slightly ajar and he heard her take a deep breath.

“I thought it was about time - we got married in such haste.” He tried to gauge her thoughts as she stared at the wedding rings. “Will you wear it?”

“Of course, I will.” Brienne exhaled, closing her hand around them to keep them safe before flinging her arms around his neck, extending her reach to include Tytan in her embrace. “I love you.”

“I love you too.” He was beside himself with joy. “I was worried you may think them fetters.”

“Not at all. I’m proud to be yours and I like the reverse as well.” She skimmed her fingertips over his left hand. “Providence made your marriage finger still available; I think it is about time all those admiring women in the castle had a reminder that you’re taken.”

“Have you read the inscriptions?” Nodding he encouraged her to flip them over and peruse the flowing engraving on the inside.

“‘I am his and he is mine’ and ‘I am hers and she is mine.’” Her cerulean orbs had gone misty. “Jaime that is beautiful – and very romantic.”

“We were both raised in the Faith of the Seven – but we never got to wed in it. I figured this way; we carry the vows with us. And I know how seriously you take vows.”

“You do and I do.” She raised her hand and it trembled slightly with emotion. “Will you put it on me?”

Taking the golden band, he smiled, showing it to Tytan. “My boy, you are about to witness a very significant moment. Brienne – formerly of Tarth – is about to have a ring which proclaims to all
and sundry….” He wriggled it over her knuckle, settling it in place before raising her hand to his lips. “…that she is Lady Brienne Lannister. My wife.”

“And you – Lord Jaime.” Seizing his fingers, she repeated the process. “Are an old married man.”

“Less old, if it please you.”

“You would prefer I fib?”

“Not fib just – let’s not draw attention to it.”

His Lady Knight turned his hand over in hers, checking the fit of the ring and kissing his palm. “I suppose this means our stint of secrecy has run its course? The bands will be noticed.”

“Indeed. Though most knew anyway. I consider the reward of having a ring on your finger worth the gamble with His Grace and she who shall not be named.”

“I agree.” Brienne nodded resolutely. “I believe it’s for the best our reunion is widely known. We can handle whatever shall come of it. We have nothing to hide and are stronger than ever, the worst has been thrown at us and we emerged triumphant. We can hold our heads high.”

They began to amble slowly, Jaime looping his arm through hers, disregarding her grimace at the mawkishness of his gesture. Ebullience growing within him, enticing thoughts circling through his oft salacious mind.

_Hmmmmm – now we can make as much noise in the bedroom as we want._

Naught could compare to the way Jaime made her feel.

No fight, no glory, nor validation, nor vindication.

He was frustrating, to a degree that made her want to tear her hair out in clumps or drive her to produce guttural noises like a lioness warning of attack. Cocksure, vexing, incorrigible, and impossible. But he was hers. Like nothing on this earth had ever been hers before.
When they bickered, when they duelled, it was an inferno within her. When their wrestling turned into kisses she could burst from the inundating, contradictory attraction. Luring her in, demolishing defences. He alone could turn her diffidence into dust, knew the secret to defeating the spectres of insecurity and inhibition. Could unlock the tension in her body and turn it into his ode of love.

_Gods – he will be the death of me._

It built within her for a second time, the mind-numbing ecstasy. Already once she had ruptured and had to collect the pieces of her consciousness from where it had scattered around the room and bed. But still his assault on all her pleasure senses had been relentless until by some incomprehensible sorcery it began to swell again – this time needier, hungrier, wilder.

_“Seven Hells…”_ Brienne gasped and grit her teeth whilst he thrust within her, varying his pace, easing off whenever her yowls betrayed her and indicated she was close. “…when I next get you in the yard you will pay for this – I swear.” He knew what she needed, where she needed it, how. But he was giving it to her in fleeting doses, drawing it out. Admittedly making it phenomenal but torturing her at the same time.

_“Jaime.”_ Her warning’s had little effect, his grin and increase in kisses indicating he was getting far too much gratification from inflicting this prolonged, delicious frustration.

_There is only one way he’ll learn._

Channelling her strength, she squeezed him between her muscular thighs. Pushing upwards and taking him by surprise to roll him onto his back. The astonishment and veneration in his emeralds tingling a thrill down her spine which had nothing to do with their lovemaking.

_“Who’s laughing now?”_

Bracing her hands against his chest she began their rhythm again, this time to the intensity she wanted. Rising and falling, moaning as she received the depth and friction he had been tormenting her with.

She watched his chest heave, head lolling back on the pillow, low growls ripping from within his throat, struggling now to control himself.

_“Fuck, fuck. You’ve made your point.”_ Jaime’s fingers dug into her hip to still her, though her momentum was near impossible to stop. He pushed himself up on his right elbow, kissing her madly. His mutterings frantic, “I know you beneath me is privilege, I know you can best me, I know whatever it is you want me to know.” Brienne bit her lip to keep from smiling, grazing her teeth behind his ear. “Now in the name of the Seven, I beg of you, _behave_ before this glory ends for the both of us.”
She let out a squeak as he tumbled them sideways into the mattress, an ungainly scramble of arms and legs until his weight pressed her divinely down again, her new pillow their mess of covers at the bottom of the bed as they found themselves upside down.

“No..., you behave. It’s my job to keep you in line.” Her contralto crooned, kissing his nose then offering her mouth to his. Giving him leave to plunder and relish, his tongue working in synchrony with his bucking hips to give her what she craved.

*And oh – when he behaves*...
Hello! The remaining chapters really all follow on from each other, so I am going to endeavor to get them posted over the course of the next day or so, wrapping up this tale before the fic exchange (I am very excited, this is the first time I've participated).

:) We are on the home stretch readers! And what a ride it has been. <3

Chapter Content Warning: Character Death
When Tyrion threw her those impish looks, she couldn’t help but wonder if she wore it openly. In her gait, in her mannerisms, her demeanour. Brienne tried to convince herself she was being paranoid, that her good-brother couldn’t possibly read from her face how she had spent last night. And this morning.

Was she less severe when she had been well loved? Her steps lighter, her tone gentler. And if so, could it be helped?

It can’t be helped, because I have no desire to take any steps of rectification. If the options are enjoying our marital relations less or weathering Tyrion’s leers and raised eyebrows I will still elect for the latter.

Surely it is just my imagination though, my good-brother has a nose for the bawdy and a penchant for indecency. He would presume just to irk me, and odds are he will be correct some of the time. Jaime has assured me he does not speak about our bedroom exploits and I believe my husband. Our chambers are relatively secluded, the nearest lodgings are the Lord Hand’s…

She stopped mid-stride. Seven Hells what if he heard us! Surely, we could not have been that loud?! …could we?

Brienne lovingly stroked the gold band on her ring finger. Wearing it was an adjustment, but one which she welcomed. A sign of the security and contentment she felt.

We were celebrating; we had such a beautiful day in town together. There is much to be thankful for and if that means we vocalised a little more than usual so be it.

But when Tyrion tells Jaime we were so loud he heard, there will be no end to my husband’s boasting.

Shaking her head she smirked. That man’s ego really does not need encouragement… though he is a fantastic lover.

Brienne pressed her hands to her cheeks as they began to scald.

Honestly, I need to stop this, it has been a long while now since I was a maiden, quivering when Jaime first touched me, entered me, claimed me as his own. I should have well and truly grown out of blushing.
Reprimanding herself she continued towards their chambers, happy at least that the morning meeting was over.

Upon days when she was required at Council, she cleared her schedule of guarding shifts, assigning her post to other Kingsguard members. Now that the impending war was behind them, the King found no need to attend and it was impossible to predict whether the proceedings would drag on arduously or if they would be brief. The determining factor primarily revolving around whether the men decided to debate utter nonsense the way they usually did and more often than not Brienne found herself subjected to inane commentaries and lengthy tales of little political significance.

Fortunately, today had offered a break from the norm, with ample inferences to Ser Bronn having an ‘appointment’ down the Street of Silk and extending the invitation to the Lord Hand. The meeting was subsequently cut short, granting her an early mark.

*Spare time, two days in a row. Such a luxury I thought I would never enjoy again.*

Arriving in the hallway outside their quarters, the Lady Knight noted that their door was open. Her husband’s voice carrying in a firm and authoritative tone. “She can scream.”

Brienne immediately slowed her pace. *Who can scream?*

From the distance a meek female reply could be heard but not deciphered, however Jaime’s annoyance made him audible. “No. She hurt my wife - the person who means more to me than anyone else in the world, she nearly cost me everything and never did she blink at the pain she caused. You have done your duty by delivering the request, but my answer is definitive.”

“Sorry to bother ye M’Lord.” Gilly apologised as she emerged from the room, politely nodding in respect of his station. Her appearance was harried, her young face displaying stress, pivoting on her heel and bustling down the hallway. Sparing not a second for more than a mumbled “Ser Brienne” when she passed her by.

*What on earth?*

Weighing her options, Brienne turned and trailed after Gilly, concluding that Jaime was best left to his own devices.

*From what I ascertained; his mood could be better.*

The young mother was moving at a rapid speed but the Lady Knight’s long legs could easily keep up, passing through the nursery wing, winding through the narrow stairwells, entering the quarters which accommodated the servants.

That was when she heard the screaming.
A woman’s shrieks of pain echoed down the passageways, panting and weary. Drawn out wails and snatches of breath. Brienne recognised the sounds from her own youth, conjuring buried memories of her Mother and sending a shiver down her spine.

*Labour. And it is not an easy birth.*

Gilly opened a door, darting into one of the rooms, the light inside spilling out and filling the hall, the cries of pain growing distinctly louder as they funneled down the corridor and hit the Lady Knight like a wave.

Brienne inched forward, cautious but also riveted. Her brain connecting the dots with ease, compelled to discover if her conclusion was accurate.

*Deep breath.*

Meekly she peeked around the corner, the scene which greeted her proving her suspicions correct.

Inside Cersei howled, her face scrunched, fingers bunching the sheets to either side of her, fists clenched with whitened knuckles. At the foot of the bed Sam paced in agitated circles, pausing only to whisper with Gilly, their heads bent together, brows lined in concern.

“Jaime?!” Cersei gasped. “Where’s Jaime?!”

Timidly Gilly wandered closer, her countenance filled with sympathy and hesitance as the lioness trapped her in a green glare. “I’m sorry Cersei. He’s not comin’. He said no.”

“What?!” Perspiration beaded on the former Queen’s brow. “He has to come. He’s always been here…”

“Not this time. He was determined. I tried.”

Another spasm seized her, and she hunched forward, ear-splitting yells ripping from her throat as her face contorted, sweat dripping from her temple – and tears from the corners of her eyes.

“I want Jaime.”

Gilly pushed her back into the bed as the labour pain receded. “Rest Cersei, you need to save your strength.”

Giant drops rolled down Cersei’s cheeks, her bottom lip trembling.

“He won’t come?” Her eyes were swamps, drowning in misery, her voice raspy from bellowing. “He always holds my hand.”

“Not much longer to go now.” Maester Tarly tried to sound encouraging. “I know this has been difficult.”
Cersei nodded despondently and Brienne had never seen her adversary so weak, so fragile. Her complexion was ashen, hair stuck to her forehead, chest heaving, lids drooping from exhaustion.

However, the most pervading aspect was her palpable misery, a sadness which thickened the atmosphere around her, a consistency less of air and more resembling an invisible fog. Brienne could sense it from where she stood, the spiritless despair of the spurned, the cold aura of dejection – the hallmarks of a broken heart.

Perhaps it was only tangible to those who had lived through the same agony, for Sam and Gilly certainly seemed oblivious as they darted around the bed, mission focussed. Overlooking the rivers which zig-zagged down pale, greying cheeks, the way Cersei turned her head sideways to the pillow, staring through the walls as if she could see him in the distance beyond.

*Jaime has abandoned her once and for all. She is broken.*

Internally Brienne knew this is where she should gloat, revel in the fall of her greatest antagonist, the woman who certainly would have skipped in gleeful rings if she had seen the Lady Knight in a similar state.

To an extent, her own penchant for pity sparked fresh anger within her, brain hastily dredging up all the hurt Cersei had caused, reminding Brienne of the cruel, malevolent machinations which had torn her own heart apart.

*This is no less than what she deserves, to feel the very sting she inflicted.*

But upon watching and recognising the same breed of torment, the flames of temper doused as quickly as they ignited. The empathetic portion of her soul commiserating with the shattered lioness, all too familiar with the exact variety of hopelessness which consumed her, knowing how much each breath shuddered and burnt, how each beat of a disintegrating heart lanced anguish through every fibre of your being.

*When one says the phrase ‘I wouldn’t wish that type of pain upon my worst enemy’ – this is what I would picture. Now my enemy is here, suffering from the precise affliction.*

*I cannot find the will to rejoice – I am not her. I am not vindictive or vitriolic and to relish this would be to reduce myself to her level. Two wrongs don’t make a right. The high road may be more difficult to climb, but it is the path of the just.*

*Her heart may be small to non-existent - stony, twisted, black. But in her own aberrant, selfish way, I do believe she loves Jaime. That maybe her distorted affection for him and her children is the closest her warped psyche can come to caring for another human being.*

*I know what it is to love, with all its richness. And I know how it feels to be cast aside.*

*Cersei honestly thought that with me removed from the equation, Jaime would be hers again. Instead he cut her out of his life – and she lies bleeding from the deep slice, a wound that doesn’t clot.*
Brienne exhaled the weighty breath which had caught in her lungs. *I have a choice – here, now. I can walk away, forget what I’ve seen. Let it play out as though I were never present.*

*Or I can accept the common threads in our sistership. Overcome the loathing and end the cycle as I once urged Cersei herself to do. She wasn’t capable. I am.*

*A babe should not be born into a shroud of hatred and sorrow, take its first lungfuls of oxygen stale with dolour, taste its Mother’s loneliness with its first cries.*

*In womanhood united we stand – a Lady's battles are won in the birthing bed…*

Stepping over the threshold, she entered the room, swallowing around the lump in her throat.

“Cersei…”

The former Queen attempted to sit up straight, nostrils flaring in outrage and injured pride. “Get out!” She screeched, flinging her arm sloppily towards the door. “GET OUT!”

Then another surge had her in its grips and she doubled over, shaking the glass in the windows with her agonised cries, dissolving into sobs as it ebbed. “Jaime…”

“I am here…” Brienne volunteered, her tall frame casting a long shadow over the sheets as she walked closer. It was only now she noticed multiple spots of deep crimson blemishing the ivory fabric.

*That is not natural – there is too much blood. Even an inexperienced woman such as myself knows that.*

She glanced over her shoulder at Samwell, his appearance was drawn, his mouth pinched - stemming the compulsion to disclose what he shouldn’t. The only indication he would give her a slight shake of his head.

*Things are not going smoothly.*

“Did you come to gloat?” Cersei snarled, though it was a feeble attempt compared to her general venom. “Watch me suffer?”

“No. That is not my intent.” Brienne let her steady blue gaze settle upon her emeralds, hoping the lioness could read the sincerity within. “You may have tried to hurt me and destroy my relationship with Jaime - but I bear you no malice.”

“How could you not?” When she spat the question, she seemed almost disappointed.

“Because you will never succeed. I love Jaime, Jaime loves me. That is unchangeable and if
anything, your attempts to come between us have only served to prove the depth of our devotion.” Pulling over a nearby chair, she sat by the bedside, resting her elbow on the mattress and extending out her left hand. “You can hold my hand. I will support you.”

“Why?!” The concept seemed to horrify her, but it temporarily distracted from her trial.

“You’re my good-sister.”

“Rot in helllllll.” Her abuse was transformed into another scream, clawed fingernails tearing the material below her, grasping for purchase. Sweat and tears gushing from sunken sockets, the eyes held within haunted and afraid.

“In solidarity of womanhood.” Brienne’s hand continued to hover in mid-air.

“Ser Brienne – I will warn you—” Sam’s round face peeked out from the bottom of the bed, lifting the sheet to check Cersei’s progress before respectfully lowering it again. Gilly flitted back and forth, bringing her husband what he required. Preparations now in full swing. “-It is time for her to push, it’s said a woman’s grip in such a state can break bones.”

“I’m strong enough.” The Lady Knight declared, giving Cersei a pointed look. “If she chooses to accept.”

The former Queen was trembling as Gilly helped her into position, wriggling her closer to the end of the bed and propping her back up on pillows. Brienne scraped her chair along in order to remain within easy reach, furtively glancing at the growing amount of blood and feeling her stomach clench.

“Even if you choose to shun my offer, I want you to know I will stay here. I’m sure you consider me a poor substitute for the company you actually want but I am the one who is here, willing to make peace.” She gave Cersei a kind smile, knowing but not caring how the golden woman was probably thinking about how unattractive the Lady Knight was in comparison to herself.

*It’s not about any of that, it never has been nor should have been.*

“We are family Cersei.” Her contralto was gentle. “Why go it alone?”

The lioness began to moan, low in her throat, breathing through her mouth in determined gusts. Gritting her teeth, her hand flew up in one swift movement, slamming into the Lady Knight’s palm and locking on for dear life.

Brienne squeezed back, letting Cersei’s slender fingers twine around her larger digits. “I’ve got you.”

When the birthing pain subsided her good-sister gave their hands a sideways glance, forest green orbs glistening with dewy tears, her whisper disembodied and uncharacteristically small. “So you
are back together…I was unaware.”

Brienne followed her line of sight and saw the gold band, the cold metal pressing into the other woman’s grip. “We are.”

Cersei just nodded, her chin quivering ever so slightly. Acceptance permeating and refilling the pools below her eyes with clear liquid.

*Jaime is mine and I am his. And now she knows.*

Working efficiently, Gilly edged the sheet back over the former Queen’s knees. “It is time.” Samwell announced. “When you are ready Cersei – push.”

“I know. I’ve done this before.” Her tones were an abraded hiss, annoyance with the helpful young Maester evident. But wet streams continued to pour down chiselled cheekbones, their angular cut losing its sharpness when they were slick with tears.

“It’s never felt like this though.” She spoke quietly and Brienne realised the admission was being made to her, that she was being taken into Cersei’s trust and for once on the receiving end of honesty. “Not this painful. Not the blood–”

*She is worried, otherwise she wouldn’t be confiding in me. Her instincts are telling her something is wrong. A woman’s intuition.*

“You are experienced. You know what you’re doing.” Brienne gave her all the comfort she could. “And when it hurts you can grip me – it is alright.”

“I want Jaime…” There was an element of desperation to her imploring, stretching over to knot her other hand in the front of the Lady Knight’s jerkin. “Please – he won’t listen to my request. There are things he needs to know; I have to tell him before-”

“Cersei-” Maester Tarly was becoming more stern with her. “-I need you to push.”

“Please.” She was stalling now, despairing. Dread emanating from her pores, along with another more subdued emotion – resignation. It tempered her signature poison, surrendering to two truths both Lannister women knew. Her mortal danger and which of the two of them had Jaime’s ear.

*Cersei concedes – she knows she has lost. She it is petitioning me in my role as Jaime’s partner, finally respecting our union. And I must do what my conscience tells me is right…*

“Gilly –” Brienne called. “-Please take just a moment to holler for a servant. Tell them to fetch Ser Jaime.” Cersei’s stare penetrated into Brienne’s soul, but for once it was not a cold hatred which touched her, but the tepid warmth of gratitude. “I will pay the messenger for their haste but tell them both to run.”

The young woman scurried up to her wide eyed. “Of course I would M’Lady – but I’m telling ye he won’t come.”

“Yes, he will.” The Lady Knight’s tone was low, she didn’t want to hurt Cersei any further by
stating it aloud, but the former monarch hung off her every word. “He will come if I ask him to. Tell him his wife sends for him.”

Gilly ran out the door, muffled instructions carrying to them over Cersei’s pants and yelps as she writhed, clamping her fingers around Brienne’s, nails digging into the back of her hand.

“You must stop postponing Cersei, it’s doing you and the babe no good.” It was the most forceful she had ever heard Samwell’s tone.

“Jaime will come.” Brienne assured. “But you must listen to Sam - for the sake of your child.”

Answering was too much for the lioness now but the Lady Knight could feel her gathering the scraps of her strength, channelling it lower as she began to bear down.

_A similar process to a second wind in the yard, summoning reserves of vigour which defy mortal limitations, finding more when you thought you had nothing left to give._

Brienne nodded at Sam and Gilly. Cersei was ready to begin.

The next few minutes felt like hours. Shrieks and cries rebounding from the walls and making her ears ring. Her hand hurt beyond belief from Cersei’s iron grasp, but Brienne held on regardless.

*If her clutching is any indication, the pain she is experiencing is monstrous.*

But what was even more frightening was when her grip weakened. Twice her good-sister lost consciousness, blacking out and coming to again, growing pastier with every push, the perspiration drenching her skin. It was terrifying and mystifying to witness, one of the greatest fights for life she had ever seen. A warzone in every regard, filled with screams and blood and struggling.

Before finally, a new cry. The higher-pitched squawks and wails of an infant.

Samwell brandished the squalling babe upwards. “It’s a boy!”

Cersei slumped backwards into the pillows.

“Gilly!” Brienne panicked.

The young woman tapped Cersei’s cheeks and the lioness blinked woozily. “She is exhausted.” Wringing out a towel soaked in cool water, she handed it to Brienne. “Dab her forehead, see if you can get her to fight to stay awake – she has to deliver the afterbirth. I will go tend the baby.”

“Cersei-” The Lady Knight mopped the sweat from her good-sister’s brow. “-Come on, you’re stronger than this. They need you alert; you can’t close your eyes.”

The lioness curled her lip in a tired snarl. “Sadists.”
“After what I’ve just seen I may be inclined to concur.” Slipping her arm around Cersei’s back she lifted her upwards. “But they say it has to be done.”

Using her own might, she kept Cersei sitting, vaguely listening whilst Sam issued instructions to the spent Mother. Her own gaze was trained on the baby boy as Gilly began to wipe him clean.

Healthy child, good set of lungs. Rather dark features though…

If her good-sister didn’t possess the entirety of her sympathies right now, she could shake her head.

All we were put through.

“Lady Brienne-” Sam was calling to her and she snapped back to attention. Gilly had wrapped the babe to keep him warm and when she turned around Brienne noticed how the young woman’s complexion was stripped of colour. “-thank you for your help. You can lie her back on the pillow now. Then I wish to speak with you.”

“Alright.” Edging Cersei down, she grinned at her. “You did so well.”

Even in her fragile state, the former Queen still managed a smug smile. “I want to hold him.” She laid her arms out limply.

“Gilly – Cersei would like to hold the baby.”

Shaking the numbness out of her hand she stood, following Sam to a corner of the room. “What did you wish to say to me?” Brienne had been half expecting a thank you or an expression of surprise at her assistance, but when she passed the end of the bed, she understood Gilly’s pallor.

Oh Gods. Blood coated the sheets, soaking through the hem of Cersei’s nightdress. That cannot be a normal amount.

Covering her mouth with her hand she approached Sam wide eyed. He nodded sadly and whispered. "She’s dying.”

“Surely there is…?”

“There’s nothing I can do to stop the bleeding.” His composure was shaken, his kind-nature easily touched by the plight of others. “I will do what I can to give her some time with her son but I’m sorry. She doesn’t have long.”

The Lady Knight rotated back towards the bed where Cersei was weakly cradling her boy, tears sliding down her cheeks.

We don’t have to tell her; she already knows. She has known since during the labour – she all but said it to me.
“Ser Brienne…” Gilly was blocking Jaime’s entry, keeping him around the corner so he wouldn’t see. “…Do ye wish to talk to him first?”

“Yes.” The Lady Knight knew it was her responsibility to greet him and explain. Reassure her husband that it was not another of Cersei’s tricks and brace him for the worst to come. Wrenching herself away from observing the sad precious moments being exchanged between Mother and child.

“Jaime-” Brienne greeted her husband, catching him by the arm. He was out of air and puffing furiously. “-Thank you for coming.”

“You asked.” His forehead creased as he caught his breath. “Though I am bewildered as to why you would indulge her.”

Taking a steadying inhale the Lady Knight took his hand in hers, staring deeply into his eyes. “I was present at the birth. It did not go well.”

Removing her fingers from his bicep, she soothingly touched her lion’s cheek. “Cersei’s dying Jaime. She’s asking for you, crying for you. She knows she has lost all – that we are inseverable, that your love and heart are mine. I saw the hurt in her eyes when you would not come, and it tempered any anger I had left towards her. Victory is ours, and I cannot condone inflicting further pain upon a woman whose heart is splintering, and life’s blood is draining away. That is not my nature and I know it is not yours. She is your twin Jaime - don’t let your last words with your sister be those spoken in anger and hate.”

It was amazing how after all the resentment and bitterness - a rage which could have taken his twin’s life with his own hand - she could still see the moment the news struck like a dagger in his chest.

I know him well, the parts of our soul which match when wrath is stripped away. The capacity for love within him that harmonises with my predisposition towards forgiveness.

“There’s nothing they can do?”

“No.” She pulled him into an embrace. “I’m so sorry Jaime. You have to go in there and say goodbye.”

“You’re coming with me?” His voice was so timid and petrified, as if he’d never even considered this a possibility.

“If you want me there, I will not leave you for a second.”

He kissed her cheek and she heard him sniffle back tears.

“Come,” Brienne pulled him to the open door by the hand. “We don’t have long and there’s something else I wanted to show you first.” The Lady Knight gestured to the scene inside.
Sam tended to Cersei, telling her to stay awake and not close her eyes, packing her with gauze to try and stem the flow of blood, buying her what time he could. The former Queen gazed down at her baby boy, uncharacteristically serene but teary, the small infant bound except for his head, showing a crop of very black hair.

“I told you the baby wasn’t mine.” Jaime murmured. “I chose you. My woman. The kind of beautiful person who cares for my sister’s wishes, even though she has put us through hell.”

“I believed you months ago.” Brienne pressed her lips to his temple. “But I just wanted you to know that I will never, ever question us again. Consider this the end of all doubt.” Pushing him gently by the shoulder, she nudged him across the entrance. “Now we best go in before it’s too late.”

The Lady Knight walked ahead of him, clasping his shaking hand, tugging to try and prompt his legs to move. She could see his knees quaking, his steps staggering from shock and distress.

“Jaime came.” Brienne announced the greeting with all the warmth she could muster under the terrible circumstances, guiding her husband into the chair she herself had previously occupied.

“Cersei.” His timbre was strangled as she took her position standing beside him, letting her fingers rest consolingly on his shoulder. Watching as he slid his own hand across the bed towards his twin, palm upwards.

The lioness inclined her chin in Jaime’s direction, sobs beginning to violently wrack her chest.

“I wanted to see you.” Cersei fit her pale palm into his. “Thank you. Both.”

He inhaled, the action jolting his body, suppressing his emotions in a display of masculine stoicism Brienne was all too familiar with.

*He should not have to be self-conscious.* “Maester Tarly, Gilly – if you have done all you need, could you please give us a minute?” The pair nodded, quietly exiting the room at her behest.

“Fuck Cersei!” Jaime cursed, “I don’t know what to say or do. I feel powerless – and I am.” The rims of his eyes grew moist. “I can’t save you this time.”

“I know. You came. That’s enough.”

“Who is the Father?” He pressed. “Does he know-”

The lioness gently shook her head, barely summoning the strength for the simple action. “Some lowborn – Kettleblack. I threatened him, he fled. I wanted it to appear like yours.” Her mossy spheres turned to Brienne. “Jaime was never with me. I staged it. To break you up.”

The Lady Knight inclined her head forward once, dignified and solemn, conveying she was well aware. “I know.”

*I am pleased she confessed it though.*
Cersei’s arm grew slack, the baby supported by the presence of her body and his own wrappings rather than his Mother. Anxiety creasing her waxen brow as she felt her vitality draining away. “You will look after Tytan - but what will happen to him? I’ve seen how orphans are treated…”

“We’ll take him.” The words tumbled from Brienne’s mouth without a moment’s pause, eliciting two dumbfounded expressions.

“Are you sure?” Her husband verified and she knew it was something he would have hoped for but never asked her. Brienne nodded.

*I am certain.*

“Will you love him?” Cersei’s concern was far more maternal, reflecting fear that her son would be mistreated, the punishment for being born hers.

“Yes.” Brienne avowed. “I will raise him as my own with Jaime.”

“Is that because you believe you can’t have children?” The former Queen blinked dizzily, her skin becoming more ashen as the sheets beneath her turned red. Her mouth moving soundlessly, struggling to string together sentences, but insistent upon delivering what she had to say. “I… I had your tea dosed, every morning. Tincture of tansy. I bribed, threatened, made promises… Even in Tarth.” She licked her dry lips. “You were never infertile.”

Beneath her hand she felt Jaime’s shoulders tense, posture bridling - but she allayed him with a gentle squeeze, simply remarking. “That explains a lot.”

*File your ire away for later, it cannot mar the present. She doesn’t have long left.*

With an unburdened chest, Cersei seemed more at ease with her fate, her eyes half mast, beginning to slip in and out of this world.

“Her flesh is clammy.” Jaime announced, rising slightly from his chair, gripping his twin’s fingers sharply to bring her back. “Cersei –”

The former Queen’s breathing became laboured, speech itself nearly beyond her, scratchy declarations her chosen parting words. “All I did, was because-” Her breath rattled. “I do love you Jaime.”

“I know.” His lashes were waterlogged, liquid dripping onto the sheet as he leant over the bed, pressing his forehead against hers. “I could never completely hate you, even after all you’ve done. You’re my twin.”

Cersei’s eyes were almost closed, and Brienne knew they would never reopen, her good-sister wheezing out. “Take… him.”

Jaime bundled the baby boy into his arms, a teardrop falling amidst his downy black hair. “We
will call him Cerson.” The lion choked out. “Son of Cersei.”

Brienne watched the vermilion spread, overtaking the bottom of the bed and all efforts to prolong her existence. The lifeforce unstoppably spilling from the woman who had been Queen, the mighty lioness that was Cersei Lannister slipping from the world with a smile tugging at her lips.

*The Gods brought her justice, but she also made her peace. Rest soundly good-sister. Know I’ve got them.*

The Lady Knight wrapped an arm around her husband’s shuddering shoulders, blinking back tears as the sorrow touched her own heart. Nuzzling consolingly into his beard and resting her hand atop the sleeping babe’s head.
Family vs Vocation

Chapter Summary

Here we go! The last chapter and the epilogue, I'm trying not to get too emotional (though I always do when I finish a long fic) - what a journey this has been.

I know I'm exceedingly behind on replying to comments, but I have been reading them all and smiling, so thank you for taking the time to leave them. They are appreciated! I have loved the discussions and theories along the way.

So just to add in a little nod to book canon - Cersei died giving birth to Tytan's 'little brother' or as they'd say in High Valyrian his 'Valonqar'. :)

And with that piece of trivia, on with the story...
Jaime was all too well-versed in fatherly exhaustion, the demands upon his energy and the tugs upon his heartstrings, which he soon discovered were only amplified in the absence of a nursing Mother. A babe who keened every few hours, denied of ever knowing the sheltering consistency of the same face and breast whilst he fed, often making him unsettled. Though by the same school of thought, the lion considered his nephew the luckiest infant in the world – for his adoptive Mother was superb in every aspect.

For the last moon’s turn, Brienne had devoted her time to assisting Jaime in any way she could. At night she walked laps of their chambers, quiet and passive whilst the small voice boomed on her brawny shoulder, rocking him patiently until he calmed. She held him in the crook of her arm, giving him baths and sponging him down, a task Jaime was always too afraid to do himself, lest his one-handed grip falter and the baby slip below the surface.

In the blackest hours, his Brienne would prise her tired body from the warmth of their bed to answer Cerson’s cries, even if she had only crashed beside him an hour before. Jaime would protest of course, say he would do it, arguing that she was tired and had guarded all day, but Brienne would remind him that when she was off-duty they alternated, kissing him on the nose and telling him to go back to sleep. The next shift was his.

After only a week, his Lady Knight had perfected their routine, developing patterns, until the care of the babe was run like a military training schedule. Anticipating when he would wake, sleep and require changing.

Throughout the day Jaime walked him to the nursery for feeding, calling upon the wetnurses who had worked beside his Mother and keeping their private staffers apprised of their progress. The two Knight’s had discussed at length the option of using outside help but both had agreed that whilst their adoptive son was so young, they wished to bond. Nevertheless, Jaime ensured their nurserymaids were updated daily, so that when they were eventually called upon to assist, they would follow the guidelines Brienne had implemented.

In the night his brilliant woman had used hourglasses to time and determine when Cerson would stir and eventually was able to organise the wetnurses to arrive at their room on the hour of the bat, owl and nightingale. Jaime thought she was a miracle worker. He nuzzled into her back, trying to convince her to remain abed whilst the wetnurses tended to the baby but she refused, sitting upright. “He must have a familiar face.”
Jaime truly did. At times he worried he would implode from it, the bones and muscles which occupied his frame crumbling away until his body housed only his heart. Pushing his flesh to its capacity as the organ swelled, growing larger and more enamoured with his wife with every passing day.

Each morning he roused at dawn, ready to assume sole responsibility for his children, the daylight hours his domain whilst she attended Council or oversaw the Kingsguard. He would douse the light streaming from the curtains, letting his wife snatch an extra hour of shut eye, pressing his lips to her forehead, temple or whichever part of her kind face he could access that wasn’t snuggled into the pillow.

In these brief, tranquil moments he looked within, basking in the all-encompassing emotion he felt inside, fingering a lock of her blonde hair and concluding that no man could ever love a woman any more than he loved her, right there, right then.

But during the course of the day or evening, he would stop dead in his tracks, admiring her reassembling her armour with one hand and helping Tytan with his dinner with the other. Or cooing in soft tones to Cerson, whilst she logically explained why there was “no need for his squalling, milk is coming, supply is ample and all is well. Winter has passed and you shan’t go wanting.” Her conversation sounding more like she was addressing a forty-year old instead of a three-week-old. It was uniquely Brienne, absolutely spellbinding and by some miracle his already bursting heart found a way to expand just a little more.

However, love was exactly what they needed, a connection stronger than Valyrian and surer than night followed day. For it was not only the adjustment to caring for an infant which had been a trial.

Jaime himself had grappled with grief, his twin’s funeral hitting him harder than he would ever have expected. The person whom you were born alongside leaving this world whilst you lived on proving a terrible guilt to bear. He had tried to conceal his sense of woe, holding it within, each tear that fell somehow feeling like a betrayal to his marriage. But Brienne had sat him upon their bed, bundled him into her arms and told him stories about when Galladon died. “It is not traitorous to feel your sister’s loss. You were close for years, mirror images. Let it out my Jaime, before it eats you away.”

Though at the same time, his doldrums were interspersed with surges of anger. Cersei’s deathbed confessions encompassing even more scheming than he had ever imagined. The mere idea that she had been preventing them from conceiving, causing his beloved Brienne immeasurable distress and sadness…. Well it made him furious enough to wish his twin alive again, just so he could kill her himself - and this time finish the job.
The conflicting feelings sent him into emotional turmoil, swinging wildly between the extremes of human reaction. He would loathe himself for not strangling Cersei when he had the chance, then gaze upon the little ebon-haired baby boy and be wracked with guilt. For if he’d surrendered to his murderous impulses back then – they wouldn’t have Cerson. And already both he and Brienne loved him dearly.

Once more, his wife was exemplary and serene. His voice of reason, tempering his volatility, a gentle spring rain softly dampening his flames. “What’s done is done Jaime. I understand you are coming to terms, and I am here for you every step of the way. But know that raging cannot change what has come to pass, holding onto the resentment is only tormenting the present.”

“How are you so calm about this?!” He had been slack jawed in astonishment. “Are you not incensed? It would be entirely warranted…”

“Things go how they are meant to.” The tranquillity of her azure oceans was mesmerising, restoring a sense of peace to his soul with their steady gaze. “We are together, we are a family, we love each other. That is what matters.”

The ups and downs of his own bereavement would have been manageable if he were all they had to contend with – but there was another soul who it hit far harder, one who didn’t understand nor comprehend.

Irrespective of Cersei’s maternal shortcomings, Tytan cried when he never saw his Mother again. Asking repetitively for ‘Ma-ma,’ taking off down the nursery hallways in search of her.

Jaime found himself relieved that he had been slowly distancing the boy from Cersei, the pre-emptive measures put in place for his own safety ultimately lessening the extent of his heartache. Regardless, Tytan processed the changes in his own uniquely toddler way.

He clung to his Father’s neck or leg, refusing to let go. Repeating ‘No go’ more times than they could count. Jaime ended up pinned to a chair, with his son snaked around him in a stranglehold, the tot having sobbed himself into an exhausted slumber. “It is because I left to go on campaign.” The lion whispered over Tytan’s crop of blonde hair. “He is afraid he will lose us both.”

“You yourself told me that children are resilient, reassurance will come in time Jaime.” He could see Brienne was moved by the little boy’s distress; her sapphires clouded. “Hold him. It’s all you can do. I will tend Cerson.”

After a few days, Tytan’s dependency lessened slightly, content to follow his Father from room to room, keeping him within sight instead of touch. Again, Brienne was a marvel, cuddling the confused cub, drying the errant tears which still puddled on his chubby cheeks as they sat upon the rug and formally introduced him to his little brother.
It was only when the shadow of mourning began to lighten, the fraught emotions of adult and child alike calming and reverting to a semblance of normality, that Jaime had paused to reflect.

Lying in their bed, staring at the ceiling, knowing that in the corners of their chamber two little human beings were sleeping soundly. Noting with felicity how much their lifestyle had taken a turn for the domestic in the blink of an eye as Brienne nosed into him affectionately. Hand rubbing circles upon his chest, voice hot against his cheek, inciting responses in his crotch which the rest of him was unlikely to back up.

“Do you need passion my husband?” His wife was wide awake, choosing to wait out Cerson’s next stirring rather than interrupt her sleep pattern. Though he had sprung her napping with Tytan during her midday break, which probably attributed to her current alertness. “It has been awhile.”

“The spirit is wanting – but I confess I’m bone tired and we have company.” He chuckled disappointedly at his own expense, turning to stare into her hypnotising pools, watching the affection and sconce light pirouetting within, tracing the arc of her cheek with his finger. “I love you Brienne. So much.” He kissed her lips. “How do you feel about the lost art of cuddling?”

Jaime pulled her in, closing his eyes. Savouring the way she fit against his body, her mouth trailing gentle kisses in the crease of his neck, her hand slipping below the sheets to grasp his length and give him the release she instinctively knew he needed. Her crooning octave fulfilling his ultimate desire, with the phrasing he always yearned to hear. “I love you too.”

That was as close as they had come to coupling of late, but neither were discontent. The bond and intimacy which flourished between them eclipsing everything they thought they knew, taking their relationship to a deeper spiritual level.

The lion Lord knew ardour still simmered within both of them; his own increasing as the grief was dispelled, his system acclimatising to their new habits, finding energy to spare.

Only encouraged by the hungry looks Brienne gave him when he strode from the bath.

*Her expressions are often downright filthy of late.*

His wife had taken to licking her lip, trying to hide the prurient grin which transformed her usually sober expression. “It’s yours when you want it Lady Commander.” He had winked saucily.

“Jaime-” She didn’t have enough hands to cover both Tytan’s eyes and his ears, palms fluttering nervously between the two. “-we can’t. You know we can’t. There are little ones present.” Brienne huffed, muttering under her breath. “It’s time something is done about these living arrangements, they are not sustainable.”

*That must be what today is about…*

Brienne had asked him to meet her outside of King Bran’s solar, having requested an afternoon
audience with His Grace and the Lord Hand.

Jaime was not only enthused by the prospect of her petitioning for better conditions but doubly as delighted when the Lady Commander actually wanted his personal attendance at the meeting. After the numerous times he had offered to stand by her side when she broached controversial topics with the Crown, she had decided to take him up on the offer.

*I will be here for my woman in any role she requires. We are a united front in all things.*

The Lannister Lord had arranged for the boys to be watched by the staff, but Gilly had generously offered to keep an eye on them. He was initially worried about leaving Tytan, promising his son he would be back soon.

But the young Mother assured Jaime that her children would play with the toddler by way of distraction and that she had plenty of experience with babies.

*Isn’t it strange how life turns out - Sam and Gilly helped us to marry and now years later, they assist with our young.*

The lion smiled when he saw his wife approaching, tall and impressive as always, her height accentuated by her long leather jerkin, reaching almost to her knees. She pressed her lips to his warmly. “Thank you for coming.”

“As if I wouldn’t.” He kissed her again. “But where may I ask is Oathkeeper? It’s not like you to be unarmed.”

“Oh…” Brienne glanced down as though she had not noticed the absence of her swordbelt. “…I left it in our chambers this morning, I have been doing paperwork in the White Sword Tower, White Book amendments and the like. The scabbard is bothersome when I am sitting and I don’t like to risk taking it on and off.”

“Are you sure you just didn’t forget to put it on?” He nudged her shoulder playfully. “We are so tired of late we do not know if we are coming or going.”

“Speak for yourself husband, you will find I am very organised.” Rapping on the door, she awaited their permission to enter. “Come – I have planned what I shall say, but I would appreciate your moral support.”

“Whatever you need.” He raised her knuckles to his lips in a showy display of chivalrous courtesy, prompting her to sigh in exasperation.

*May our rapport never change.*

“Enter!” He recognised his brother’s voice and Brienne turned the handle, letting them both inside.

“Lady Commander.” Bran issued his salutations in his usual monotone, though Jaime did detect a
slightly higher note of surprise when the King spotted him trailing behind. “And Ser Jaime…”

“Lord Lannister is here in his capacity as my husband.” The Lady Knight stated matter-of-factly.

“Very well.” Tyrion nodded, knowing the Crown could not dispute a spouse’s presence.
“Greetings brother – I’m afraid we only had one chair prepared.”

“I can stand.” Jaime shrugged, seating Brienne by pulling out the chair opposite His Grace, positioning himself by his wife’s shoulder.

With a bird’s eye view of what is going on. If they give her any hassles about requiring new lodgings again, they will have me to answer to.

“Your Grace, Lord Hand.” Brienne clasped her hands upon her knees. “Thank you for granting me this audience, it has been a while since we last spoke outside of Council and as you know much has unfolded.”

“Indeed.” Bran nodded. “What do you wish to discuss Ser Brienne? You have my undivided attention.”

Jaime observed as she squared her shoulders, preparing for a battle of words in the same way she steeled herself in the yard. “It has been over a moon’s turn since Cersei Lannister’s funeral and as Lord Tyrion would be aware it is the family’s wishes that she be interred at Casterly Rock for her final resting place…”

I didn’t see this topic coming.

The lion peered down at his wife in bewilderment and Brienne glanced fleetingly up at him out of the corner of her eye.

I can practically hear her willing me to keep my mouth shut. Very well my love, I will abide. If only to find out where you are going with this.

“… Her remains are to be sent West and as our infant is now old enough to travel it is high time to discuss our change of circumstances.”

“And what might that be?” For the better part Bran remained impassive, but Jaime could sense the tension in his posture.

“I know that Lord Jaime wishes to raise his children at the Rock. I am his wife; I am needed as a Mother now and so I ask to be honourably discharged from duty.”

Jaime’s hand shot out, steadying himself against the back of her chair, the shock and joy at Brienne’s request almost knocking him to the floor. Tyrion’s cheeks puffed, letting out a loud exhale, all three heads turning to assess His Grace’s reaction.
The King’s lips turned downward in indication of a frown, eyebrows furrowing but far from expressive. His stony countenance obviously perturbed whilst remaining unflustered. “I am afraid that will not be possible Lady Commander. You are required to continue your duties here.”

“We had an arrangement Your Grace. I am Mother now to not one but two children. I cannot possibly juggle both my maternal duties and my service to yourself. I would not be able to dedicate to you the level of commitment an esteemed role such as Lady Commander requires.” Brienne was composed, eerily calm even in the face of his rejection.

She anticipated his refusal. I would have been expecting it too and I do not even know his nature half as well as she does. What game is she playing?

Jaime watched his wife with keen interest, the underestimated intelligence sparkling behind her cerulean spheres.

“The children whom you raise - although a noble act – unfortunately do not fulfil the terms of our agreement.” Bran flexed his fingers upon the arms of his wheeled chair. “You were to be released when it became plain you were bearing a babe. Your adoptive charges cannot count.”

I knew it, I have known it since the start. He will never be willing to let her go.

“They remain the terms Your Grace?” Brienne sought reconfirmation, angling her chin slightly.

“Yes. Just as they were sanctified when you were sworn in for duty. It was to be a child of your flesh, growing within you – for a discharge to be valid.”

“I know.” The Lady Knight agreed with a nod. “Which is why I have come to tell you I am pregnant.”

Pregnant?! Can it be…? Is she bluffing? Brienne is too honest to attempt such a deception, nor would she subject me to witness it. This must be true. Oh, please - Gods let it be true.

Brienne’s hand was on his side, gliding up and down in soothing strokes, gazing up at him with a knowing smile as though a secret had been burning within her for a while, begging to be confided.

He felt himself teeter and she threaded her fingers through his swordbelt, yanking him down to perch on the arm of the chair before he lost his footing. Tyrion was staring at him, eyes agog, crazed grin breaking through his beard.

Bran was nowhere near as joyous. The monarch pursed his lips, tenting his fingers. “I would say this is glad tidings for you both...” He very much seemed to nearly gag upon the words, his reaction far from pleased. “...And I would never doubt your veracity Lady Brienne. But before your clause can be enacted it must be confirmed – through the Maester or as was previously stated ‘when it becomes plain.’”
His wife nodded, smoothing the leather of her jerkin in her hand, the loose-fitting cut pulling taut and moulding around a small but obvious protrusion from her abdomen. The shape unmistakably the swell of expectant motherhood.

*My baby…*

“Will this be sufficient proof?” Brienne enquired innocently. “You can seek confirmation with Gilly as well. Maester Tarly is privy to my condition but it is his wife I prefer to consult with.”

For the first time since he had crippled the boy, Jaime actually felt a pang of pity for the King.

*Albeit short-lived sympathies, he had this coming...first trying to keep us apart then putting poor Pod in the line of fire. He did his utmost to keep Brienne with him, it is little wonder he looks utterly crestfallen.*

“I bid you congratulations Ser Brienne.” The distraught monarch scrambled for alternatives, trying desperately to navigate his way out of the predicament. “May I propose that perhaps a reprieve from duties for the duration of your confinement may be arranged? I have shaped my reign upon rewriting the established rulebook. I am not opposed to keeping a Lady Commander who is also a Mother…”

“Your Grace-” Brienne edged forward in her chair, leaning closer in empathy and sincerity, digging deep for Jaime knew how she herself held Bran partly accountable for Podrick’s loss.

But the excited lion’s focus was trained solely upon the Lady Knight’s abdomen. The gorgeous little bump which her clothes had managed to mask, concealing itself again with her movements.

*My crafty little one, that is where you have been hiding. No wonder your Mother was reluctant for me to enjoy her favours these past sennights - I would have discovered you.*

Now it made perfect sense.

*She was waiting for you to show yourself enough to make this announcement. Clever woman.*

“-serving you has been an honour. I am proud to have been Lady Commander of your Kingsguard and the first female in history to hold such a prestigious position. But I am needed elsewhere now – my husband’s seed has taken root inside me and my life is about to enter a new stage, begin another chapter.”

There could be no questioning Brienne’s maternal qualities now, they were evident for all to see. Not just in the subtle roundness of her womb but in her compassion for the young King from whom she was departing. “I am sorry, but you have to let me go.”

*And I have to hold my wife and kiss every inch of her stomach.*
Getting back to their chambers was a trial within itself. Brienne thought she may have more luck holding a stampede of horses at bay than her husband.

He had shuffled impatiently on the arm of the chair beside her whilst they arranged the terms of her departure. Discussing the appointment of replacements and when she would officially be released from her vows before the court.

Twice she had suggested Jaime wait back in their room and he couldn’t have looked at her as though she were more insane if she’d proposed they tear down all the Septs and build tribute statues to the Night’s King.

Jaime’s eyes barely left her belly and she felt his studious gaze caressing every inch of the rounding even when it wasn’t visible, his fingers twitching in her peripheral vision with the longing to touch.

_As much as you want my husband, I have been aching to share this with you. But business first._

That was all well and good whilst he had the constraints of propriety keeping him contained, but once they stepped beyond the walls of the King’s solar all bets were off. Her pace quickening with every step as he tried to catch her in his embrace.

“Wait!” Brienne laughed. “Not in the hall.”

“Yes, in the hall.” Jaime retorted. “In the hall, by the wall, near the door, all the way across the Keep. If I don’t hold you, I’m going to combust and for goodness sake don’t run you’ll trip.”

“Urgh.” She grunted, lengthening her strides. “I knew the second I told you, my life would become unbearable. I am not porcelain.”

“Your complexion says otherwise.”

“Just keep your hand to yourself until we are in our chamber.”

“No.”
“Do you want me to run? Because I will… I am sure on my feet and I have waited a long time for this moment too and I will have it done properly when we are alone. Not hurriedly in a hallway risking interruption.”

The lion pouted, folding his arms and slowing. “You drive a hard bargain.”

“Always have.”

By the time they waltzed into the bedroom, he was buoyant again, bounding ahead and practically pulling her over the threshold, slamming the door and then pinning her up against the wood so she couldn’t escape his crazed attentiveness. His nose a whisker from hers, green eyes sunnier than a midday in summer.

“Hello husband.” An amused smirk quirked up her cheek.

“Hello wife.” Jaime was positively euphoric, his hand quivering ever so slightly as he held it aloft above her womb. “May I?” His face was so full of longing her soul felt its plea. Recognising and hearing the echoes of rejections past, forbidden claims, a man who had to deny his own issue, never getting the simple pleasure of touching his unborn children though their Mother’s stomach. “Please?”

“All you want.” Brienne kissed him and he beamed. “Though I feel I may live to rue the extent of that permission.”

“Oh - you have no idea.” His palm pressed to the swell, fingers splaying to feel the roundness, outlining the shape through her jerkin. Enchanted into a rare silence, as he worshipped what they had created together.

Brienne covered his hand with her own, cradling it between her and their baby, her own sigh filling the room as she registered just how much she had been yearning for him to touch her there.

She had been aware of her condition for moons, at first tentative and careful not to celebrate prematurely, then growing more optimistic and hopeful with each passing week. From there it had taken all her self-control not to share her secret knowledge with Jaime, the compulsion almost winning out a fortnight ago when she had noticed the tiny being inside her making itself known.

For all the wonder she felt at the changes within her body, it was the exultation of knowing she got to tell the man she loved she was having his baby which made her effervescent.

“I have known for a while – it has been difficult. Concealing my nausea, fending you off between the covers.” Brienne endeavoured to explain as Jaime sunk to his knees, pressing kisses to the bump, following its curve from bottom to top and unwittingly making her head swim with desire.

He has no idea how this pregnancy is making me mad with want. How all I can think of is my husband joining me abed…
She tried to keep her thoughts straight whilst her lustful body turned the sweetest kisses from a Father-to-be into very impure notions. “I wanted to be sure before I got your hopes up. I pray you are not annoyed that I waited so long…”

“How could I be?” Jaime pressed his cheek to the tiny bulge. “This is the most glorious surprise I’ve ever gotten.” Rising from his knees, he enveloped her in his arms. “But you must be quite far along – you are already showing.”

“Yes…” She bit her lip suddenly nervous, about confessing exactly how long she had hidden her suspicions that she was with child.

And I don’t want him to mistrust me, Cersei told so many lies.

“…Gilly and I believe I fell the night of our reunion.” Brienne caught his chin in her fingers, other hand guiding him back to their baby, pressing his digits beneath her palm, his stumped arm twined around her waist pulling them a little closer. “I know we had only just gotten back together after months apart, but you had me many times that night, it makes sense that we conceived.”

“It does.” His eyes crinkled at the corners, twinkling with indescribable happiness. “You’re right, everything fell into place. And now we are here… raising two beautiful boys and having a babe of our own. Brienne I can’t believe it, I love you so much.”

Gliding her hand into his hair, she tilted her head when he brought his mouth to hers, lips parting to receive his congratulatory kiss.

In some ways it does not feel so very long ago when I did not know how to do that – how to prevent our teeth from clicking or how to welcome the brush of his tongue. When my kisses were a crash of messy, unquenchable want, raw with emotion and fear. Quaffing each piece of affection as though it were my last, beseeching the gods above that he wouldn’t change his mind and decide he did not care for me...

A small chuckle bubbled from her making Jaime pause, arching his brow in question as he eyed her lips. “I have to tell you something.” Brienne kept her voice lower than normal, creating an air of intrigue, grin broadening at his rapt reaction. “Expectant motherhood has some unforeseen effects on my system.” Trying to be serious is impossible when he is looking at me like that. “I am…” He leant closer with every syllable she uttered. “…absolutely dying to partake of my husband.”

“Well we can’t have that.” His teeth were so perfect, his features so handsome, his love so complete. Brienne knew she would never stop counting her blessings. “I must keep my wife pleased…”

Each oversensitized fibre in her system sang when Jaime began nipping at her neck, working at her laces.

Yes… if this is what our life is to be like from now on then I sprint towards it. Convention can be rewritten; roles can be redefined. But love like this shakes foundations, heals hearts, throws the sun of its axis and shifts the immovable…
Three hard knocks through the door behind her made her jolt. Halting Jaime with his lips hovering above her collarbone. “Do we ignore it?” He mouthed and she nodded, stretching for his kiss.

“Jaime!” Tyrion’s cheerful tone travelled through the woodwork. “Good-sister! I know you are in there; I can see your shadows under the door.”

The lion sniggered, lowering his forehead to her shoulder in defeat. Brienne carded her fingers through the hair at the nape of his neck, slumping her head back against the timber. “The sooner we are at the Rock the better.”

Extricating himself from her arms Jaime nodded zealously. “It is rare we are on the same page, but I couldn’t agree more.”

“Not so rare these days.” Stepping into the centre of the room, she righted her laces, catching Jaime’s eye and whispering. “I love you too.” The smile he returned her was incandescent as he fetched the door, sending warmth spreading from her chest to her boots. For the first time her hand consciously drifted to her stomach, resting on their child within.

That’s your Papa, the husband I adore.

Beyond the wall of wood, the Lord Hand stood with a carafe of wine in hand and three goblets.

“Congratulations!” He boomed. “Now that the official duties are out of the way, I can stop pretending to commiserate with His Grace – I hear I’m going to be an Uncle again!”

“Brother! What a surprise!” Irony dripped from Jaime’s tone as he pulled on the front of his jerkin, ensuring it covered his arousal. “Do come in…”

“I already am.” Tyrion had indeed wandered over the threshold and was clearing a space on top of the clothes chest. “Now I know Ser Brienne – no need to say it. None for you – you don’t drink. And in your condition that is for the best.” Retrieving their water pitcher from the corner he filled her goblet, before pouring two wines for himself and Jaime. “But the Lannister brothers are toasting to your health.”

“How considerate.” Her delivery was wry but entertained nonetheless.

“Here you are my love.” Jaime brought her the water, placing a lingering kiss on her cheek, the contact carrying promises of what they would do when they found themselves alone again.

“Plenty of time for that.” Tyrion didn’t miss a trick, toddling over to pass Jaime a goblet of wine. Brienne felt her face begin to burn pink. “And no blushing now good-sister – you have a belly-full. Once glance at you and everyone knows what you’ve been up to. Myself as your neighbour especially, I confess I was somewhat waiting for the announcement.”

The lion beside her sniggered and she delivered a swift elbow to his ribs.
Raising his goblet, the Lord Hand proclaimed. “To the continuation of the Lannister line and legacy, to Jaime - finally having a child he can give his name to and who will know him just as Father and not uncle, and to Lady Brienne Lannister, strong as an ox and capable of bearing my brother’s tall children.”

“Thank you so much.” She rolled her eyes, sipping her water whilst her husband sniggered and quipped.

“Such a beautiful verse, you must have spent all afternoon composing it.”

“Now tell me.” Lowering his cup, Tyrion turned serious, slightly subdued. “I will have to remain here, in the capital, so I will miss the blessed event. But is there anything I can do? Any help you need? A way I can be a part of this?”

Jaime shrugged, looking to her for suggestions.

“Yes.” Brienne nodded, an idea immediately springing to mind. “There is a cradle I quite like in the market.”
Peace

Chapter Summary

Cover Art by: Ro_Nordmann

"I can't help but love you...
Lyrics, War of Hearts by Ruelle
Chorus, Line 1

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes
“Podrick…”

Why was his woman still capable of embodying such gorgeous contradictions? Her tone a perfect synthesis of commanding strength and maternal softness. The pillar of her mighty form casting a shade across the field, formidable enough to rival the Rock behind her whilst summer sunlight glinted in her hair, illuminating a loveliness that put the surrounding wildflowers to shame.

His wife’s knee-high leather boots crushed the green grass beneath her heels as she clasped her hands behind her back, striding proudly in front of their three boys and casting an appraising stare over their stances.

“…legs further apart. Back straight.” She took their son by the soldiers, encouraging his chin up with her long finger. “No warrior of mine will have second rate, slouching posture, nor do you need to look down at your boots. Hold you head high.”

“Yes Mother.” Pod gazed up at Brienne with eyes that exactly matched hers. Bluer than the sky above them but coupled with Jaime’s golden hair. Even though he was the youngest of the three, his height already towered over Cerson and he was quickly catching up on Tytan.

Working her way down the formation, she moved on to her next swordsman in training. “Cerson – I know it’s difficult, but you want to both plant your feet firmly and be light on them at the same time. You need to be ready to hold sturdy against a blow just as much as you need to spring back from it.”

Jaime stifled the urge to chuckle. *Her standards remain impossibly high.*

Tytan leant out from the end of the line, appealing to his Father with wide mischievous eyes, mouth moving without sound ‘Papa do something!’

The most spirited of the three, more often than not his eldest son found himself on the receiving end of a lecture.

“I saw that Tytan Waters!”
And today will be no exception. Jaime shrugged helplessly, his mirth starting to take over.

“I was just turning to Father for direction-” His smile was lopsided and exceedingly Lannister.

“Am I to believe that?” Brienne roughly mussed Tytan’s hair, knocking his blonde locks into his green marbles. “You think you can play on your charm to get away with it hmmmm?”

The boy laughed, completely undaunted and Jaime watched Brienne’s stern façade crack, her mouth twitching in amusement. “I wonder where you got that trait from…” She raised her eyebrows at her husband over her broad shoulder.

“I wish I knew.” The lion volunteered, putting in a brilliant show of pretending to be stumped.

“Alright – no more nonsense.” Backing up several paces, Brienne stood stock straight. “Show me your lunge position.”

Three small, carved tourney swords stabbed in precise unison at the air in front of them.

“Upward thrust.”

Jaime watched them with pride, technically his responsibility was studying their movements from a side vantage point, but his mind often wandered.

Can I help it if I prefer gazing at my family? If my wife still drives me to the point of distraction with awe, want and fascination?

“Fall back.” Brienne issued her orders with a commander’s authority. “And finally, defence.”

The boys’ concentration was immense, each trying his best to gain their Mother’s approval.

“Tytan – that wouldn’t block a fly. Cerson – your sword is too low. Podrick – elbow in, you are not imitating a chicken, there is no need for wings.”

Now Jaime spluttered, the guffaw both at his wife’s criticisms and the crestfallen pout on the boys faces.

They are trying so hard...

“They’re not an army my love-” He called. “-there’s no need to drill them.”

Brienne turned towards him, arms flying to her sides in exasperation, palms outward. “I have a reputation to uphold! We can’t have our own boys subpar. Besides, I am exactly the same with everybody I train, across the board. Equal treatment. My family or not. Noble or poor, young or old, boy or girl.”

“Very admirable.” Jaime cocked his head, so she knew he was being playful, his sons snickering away in the background. “Care to pick on someone your own size?”
He flexed his fingers upon the grip of Widow’s Wail, drawing it from the scabbard and assuming position – the very one they were teaching the boys. “Or at least near to - you are very tall…”

“You really want to try me?” He recognised the distinct scrape of Valyrian steel as she drew Oathkeeper, the smile on her face exclusive to when she was rallying to his challenge. Their version of foreplay and poetry.

_A good fight followed by a good fu-_ 

Jaime’s afternoon planning was cut short by her taunt. “You wish to be knocked onto your backside? In front of your children no less.”

“Who says you will win?” He knew cockiness was the way to get both their hearts pumping.

In a rare change of their usual tactic Brienne led the attack, charging at him and testing his own footwork, whilst their sons’ erupted in whoops and cheers.

Jaime furrowed his brow, meeting his wife’s blows and murmuring to her. “Who do you think they are cheering for?”

“I’m not really sure.” The Lady Knight confessed. “And I don’t think I wish to know which parent they favour.”

“Good point.”

Her swings increased in ferocity, trying to disarm him, but Jaime found himself measuring his own.

“Jaime-” Brienne growled, lowering her blade. “-fight me properly or the victory is not honourable.”

“I can’t. We must be careful.” He smiled even when she huffed in frustration.

“I’m not fragile.” Turning on the side, she slipped Oathkeeper back into her swordbelt, running her hand gently over her pregnant stomach.

“I know you’re not.” He hummed, sheathing his own Valyrian. Sidling up and sliding his arms around the pair, inhaling the aromas of leather, sweat and clinging vestiges of lye soap – the latter almost entirely perspired away but still clinging to her hair and the secret spot he liked to nibble behind her ear. “But that’s my daughter in there.”

“Sure, are you?” Her expression was sceptical at best.

“Mother – do we know that it’s a girl?” Podrick was inquisitive, he often liked to ask questions.
“Are we getting a sister?”

“We can’t know until the baby arrives. Your Papa is just guessing.” Turning towards the boys she confided. “I think quite the opposite. I would be greatly surprised if it were not another son. I have spent my life surrounded by men instead of women. It seems only fitting that it continues.”

Taking a deep breath, she squeezed Jaime’s hand, silently indicating that she did in fact need a break. “Why don’t you all take turns sparring with each other? The third boy can watch and give feedback on what they observe. Then switch – so all have a chance to participate and offer advice. No blows below the waists and fair fight tactics only.”

Her instructions were met with enthusiasm, their sons jumping at the chance to put their skills into combat practice.

Exhaling she leant into the crook of his arm. “Stroll with me? I need to warm down before I sit.”

“With pleasure.” He kept his hold snugly around her waist, supporting her back as they walked. “Did you mean what you said? Do you want another boy? I know we both agree that gender will not dictate succession, but I’m curious…”

“I don’t particularly mind.” Jaime could see the thoughts turning over behind her intelligible mien. “The baby kicks me constantly – so if we do have a girl, I would not be expecting a dainty lady. She would be more like me in nature - especially growing up with three brothers - and I would treat her exactly the same as them.” He watched her chew the inside of her cheek, considering her opinions before she revealed them. “I guess if I am being honest – I have grown rather fond of being the only woman in your life.”

“I can live with that.” The summer breeze riffling through their hair, tugging at their clothes. Pushing the fabric and outlining the full robustness of her expectant swell. Jaime couldn’t help but tease her. “What if it’s twins?”

“Gods – don’t wish that upon us!” Brienne swatted him on the shoulder. “As if we don’t have enough to deal with.”

“Can you believe the letters are still coming?” Jaime was impressed by how highly they were in demand. “I know you said you didn’t want to know but I have been reading them anyway.”

“Who is requesting us?”

“You said you didn’t want to know...” He repeated with a lilt. "...That it would gnaw at you.”

“I changed my mind. My prerogative. Besides – it’s not as if I’m travelling like this.” The Lady Knight gestured down at her heavily pregnant stomach, giving up on walking and sinking into a patch of lush grass, pulling him down beside her. A serene smile lighting her features as she watched the boys from afar. “Did you ever think we would be training Squires? Us. Me - unfriendly, snappy with precious little patience and you -”

“The ideal example of what not to do as a knight?” The lion chortled, rubbing his unborn child through its Mother’s belly, stretching out both legs in front of him indolently. “Lesson One – How to kill your King. Lesson Two – Oathbreaking. Lesson Three – How to lose your sword hand…”
Brienne pinched the bridge of her nose between two fingers. “I’ve heard enough. There is a reason why I oversee the structuring.” Stroking his thigh through his breeches, she cuddled closer, lying her head upon his shoulder. “It is an honourable quest. The Six Kingdoms needs true knights – like the books of legends. And you are still one of the best swordsmen there has ever been, right or left-handed. It just might be better if I teach the knightly codes…”

“Yes, Ser Brienne.” He kissed her head.

“So, who wants us?”

“King Bran as usual.”

“Well that’s nothing new, nor will I accept. Who else?”

He widened his eyes, bracing her for what was coming. “The North. King Jon or Aegon or whatever he is styling himself these days offers very generous terms if we will come and train his Kingsguard for half a year.”

“Pfft.” Brienne’s noise said it all. “That will never be happening. I have no quarrels with Jon but in no way will I ever again be providing assistance to his wife, in any capacity. Direct or indirect.”

“As I suspected. That letter can feed the fire. We have one more – Lord Gendry wishes for the Squires of Storm’s End to be intensively drilled, put through their paces to try and accelerate their road to knighthood.”

“Hmm.” She mused. “Doable. I would consider that one. But as previously stated we are not in the position and I haven’t forgotten Tyrion’s scheduled visit to see his new niece or nephew.” Brienne petted Jaime’s hand where it rested on their baby. “Are you glad to be home? Do our adventures grow tiresome for an aging lion like you?”

“I’m going to ignore the aging comment.” Jaime pressed his lips to her temple; he had been doing his best not to fret over the increasing number of silver strands tarnishing his golden mane. “I relish our odd journeys; I think it keeps us young and interesting. I told you – I have always known you are a woman of ambition who lives by her sword and I support that wholeheartedly - as long as wherever we go, it is together as a family, I am content. Though that having been said, it is good to be back at the Rock. Dorne was too hot.”

His wife groaned. “You deny you’re getting on in years yet all you ever do is complain about the temperature. The North was too cold… Dorne was too hot…”

“You didn’t let me finish-” He gripped her a little tighter, affection for his woman making him tactile. “-I was going to add that even though it was sweltering I did enjoy the time we spent alone and naked. The Water Gardens were a particular favourite….remember? That private accommodation we were given for a week in thanks for training their guard? Those lovely pools and fountains…”

“How could I forget? I’m quite sure that was how this happened.” Brienne pointed to her
pregnancy.

“So see? I am absolutely favourable to expeditions. As long as they end that way.”

“Hush.” She tapped his cheek lightly before kissing it, connecting the grey strands in his beard with her fingertips. “Speaking of journeys, Father will expect us to visit when this babe is old enough to travel. He ages and is always keen to see his heirs. It has been awhile.”

“We can add a trip to Tarth into our itinerary. But I thought you sounded keen on Storm’s End...”

“They are only a sail away across the Straits and I crave occupation whenever I am upon Tarth. We will write to Lord Gendry, give him our terms. He will have to wait nigh on a year and then he is going to have to ship the Squires to us at Evenfall.”

“Sorted.” Jaime slapped his knee in emphasis. “I adore how you organise our lives, you make it seem so easy.”

“It is easy – compared to how it used to be.”

“You will hear no arguments from me. Do you know what I’m looking forward to?” He sat up straighter, turning to face her, threading his fingers through hers. “Dying uneventfully. You know Tyrion and I would always talk about how we wanted to go. Well I have decided on a slight amendment - my death will be when I’m very old and very grey, in my bed, in the arms of the woman I love.”

“What?!” To his surprise she took the news with indignation. “You are not dying and leaving me! I’m going first.”

“No way in the world you will pass first – you are younger than me, by more than I care to admit.”

Are we truly bickering over our death’s now?

“But there is nothing apparent which would prove fatal to you husband. I on the other hand shall probably die giving birth to our umpteenth child because you are seldom off me and that is how every woman in both our families has gone. There is a precedence.”

“No.” Jaime shook his head adamantly. “You are healthier than a horse and far stronger than that. If anything, I will die first because you will lose your temper with me one day and kill me.”

“Well I cannot dispute that logic…” She muttered, ripping up a handful of grass in annoyance. How my Brienne hates it when I’m right. “…You are already on borrowed time Lannister.”

The lion beamed, nudging her shoulder. “You love me – admit it.”

“I do.” Her blue eyes held the world to him, a delicate ecosystem of love, family, home and hope. “Gods know in the beginning I tried not to. But I can’t help it. I love you.”
“I love you too.”

In intuitive harmony they leant in to kiss each other, Jaime sweeping his wife into his arms, bringing her as close as he could with their unborn child in the way. *But nothing will ever keep our lips apart…*

Their mouths moved as one, communicating an understanding they had perfected over years of missteps. Emotions and thought patterns synchronised and fine-tuned, until their connection went beyond instinct and unity. A merging and fusing of spirits, minds and bodies – *soul mates.*

This kiss was like no other, their relationship incomparable in its fortitude and invincibility. The kind only born when two contradictory natures crashed upon each other’s shores, complementing, and completing the other to achieve a oneness beyond limitation or constraint.

It was only now that Jaime noticed the absence, faded so far into insignificance he could not even pinpoint when it was conquered. Gone from their bond was the desperation, banished was their fears. The terrors which made them cling, the self-detestation that made them sabotage their own happiness, the doubt which plagued their faith in what they shared. It simply wasn’t there anymore. It did not lurk in his subconscious; he could not feel it behind her kiss.

They were just *them* – content, secure and in love.

To him it felt so familiar and yet somehow also dreamlike. A sense that he had been here before, but he knew he had never lived it.

Then it dawned on him, brighter than the sunrise.

“I had a vision like this once.” Jaime disclosed, resting his nose upon her cheek, bearing his soul to Brienne as he had always felt compelled to. Their matching essences speaking to each other even before their brains and bodies caught on to their symmetry and aligned.

“Did you now?” His Lady Knight toyed with his strands of hair, waiting patiently for him to continue.

“When I was dying or at least when I thought I was about to - you know I used to go away inside. Disappear to a place beyond my reach, where my heart’s desires resided. I was safe there, in a fantasy where I knew only love and happiness. But none of my dreams ever came close to
becoming reality – until you.”

It was the truest of revelations and the resounding theme of his life. Resonating in his spirit, ears and chest when she gave him a fulfilled smile, eyes dancing and misty.

“You know what?” Brienne smoothed his beard with her fingers. “Mine too.”

Chapter End Notes

Dear Readers,

Here we are, just over three months and forty chapters later. My longest and most angst filled fic ever.

I want to say the biggest thank you to the readers who have come along for this ride, through the lows and the highs, through the romance and the drama. You make every tear over character deaths and ridiculously late night worthwhile. I adore writing, every word is a labour of love and having people to share my tales with means so much to me. I was genuinely anxious releasing this fic, the nerves I felt over some chapters was immeasurable, so to have you stick by me and make it to the end is something I treasure. I thank you all from the depths of my soul.

Jaime and Brienne both hold a huge chunk of my heart and I feel honoured that you have taken the time to read my story about them whilst we wait for the next canon instalment. (Come on Winds of Winter!)

In the meantime, I am working on more Braime tales behind the scenes (far more romantic and light, I don’t think I can handle any more angst right now, LOL) and they will be posted in the not too distant future, so please check back or subscribe. My next project is of course in the fic exchange, but that has to be top secret and anonymous for the moment. :D

If any of you would like to chat, I would welcome it. I can be found on Tumblr @nightreaderenigma – please feel free to message me, I love making new friends from the Jaime and Brienne fandom.

A great big thank you once again, for reading, for joining me on this adventure, for the support and for being a part of my days.

<3 Madelyn aka NightReaderEnigma

Please drop by the archive and comment to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!