

The Only Way Out Is Through

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The Only Way Out Is Through

by [Purplenightling](#)

Summary

Jaime is an actor plagued by strange dreams. Brienne is lead stunt coordinator on his first film. More than anything, all they want is to keep one another safe.

Jaime x Brienne Fic Exchange 2020 This fic was written for TeaandBanjo's prompt: "Jaime and Brienne find a clue. They disagree about its relevance or importance."

Notes

This story takes place in a post-canon Westeros, about 800 years following the close of the story, in the film industry. In terms of technology, it's right at the beginning of talking pictures, so our late 1920s/early 1930s. In order to answer my own questions and explain this modern Westeros, I had to make some decisions about how the books could conclude, so it's been a heady thought exercise.

Thanks to TeaandBanjo for the great prompts and to the organizers of the Jaime and Brienne Fic Exchange 2020 for their hard work!

Chapter 1

There's a creaking sound, somewhere in the dark; not the plaintive groan of ancient floorboards underfoot, or the stretch and flex of ropes pulled taut, no. What Jaime Lannister hears, here in this space between waking and sleep, denotes *encroachment*. In most of his dreams, something stalks him through an unfamiliar forest - has done for as long as he can recall - and with each shift and snap and rustle he feels his pursuer close in *just that much more*.

Jaime's pulse picks up, and suddenly each beat announces a different image, flickering before him as if projected onto the backs of his eyelids. Flashes of pasts and futures, most of which are foreign to him, cut together and illuminated in the arc-bright glow of carbon through celluloid.

Now, the stringent reek of camphor coats his nostrils, and Jaime's sure this is it: the end of his reel. He waits for his heartbeat to be supplanted by the *tick, tick, tick* of film run out.

Only, the ticking grows faint, blends into the din of wherever his body is in the waking world. Jaime hears another creak, but this time it's the unmistakable sound of someone sitting in a chair. A warm, callused hand holds one of his own and he awakens to the most perfect blue gaze.

Brienne is drenched in sweat by the time she locates the production's tiny hospital, which has been slotted into an abandoned barber shop. A dented red and white pole sits out front, caved in on one side by some past act of violence, but it does its job as an identifying landmark just fine, even so.

The front window pane has gone wavy with age, and is coated in a wintry mix of mud, salt, and snow. Brienne presses up, closely as she dares without touching, to peer through the grime and chips of paint left by the former shop's name and pricing scheme desultorily scraped from the glass. She can faintly make out Maester Sam's silhouette at a desk near the front; everything else is in shadow.

Behind her, wrought iron street lamps fire up as the sun goes down, splashing pools of orangey light along the sidewalks to guide various townies and film crew as they go about business as usual.

But it shouldn't be business as usual, she thinks.

A small light turns on inside the hospital, startles Brienne, and she smacks her forehead into the window with a resonant *thunk*. Maester Sam looks up from his desk, now illuminated by

the offending light source, and waves at her before moving towards the front door.

Brienne has scant moments to swallow her embarrassment and uncertainty before Sam is standing in the entry and gesturing her inside. “Miss Tarth, good evening! I’m glad I caught you.”

She squares her shoulders and follows him into the waiting area, which seems like it hasn’t changed much from its former setup. There are a handful of wood and leather chairs circling a low central table covered in stacks of outdated sporting, gossip, and style publications. Right on top of the closest stack is a fan magazine featuring Jaime Lannister on its cover. He’s grinning and looking off behind the camera and the headline reads: “*The Lion of Lannister Lands on All Fours as He Transitions from Stage to Screen!!!*”

Maester Sam must note where she’s looking because he whispers, “That’s a good interview. Have you read it?”

Brienne huffs nervously. “No, but after it came out he memorized the most sterling accolades from the interview to recite at me when he feels I’m not appreciating him.”

Sam chuckles, “Yes, that sounds on brand.” He perches against the edge of his desk, which is bolted into the holes where the shop’s register and counter once stood. The floor is white linoleum, worn but definitely clean, and the walls are light gray tile. Everywhere else in the space is curtained off into discrete, and hopefully discreet, hospital spaces. “Well, I just want to update you and let you know where things stand.”

He produces a chart from a stack behind him. Absurdly, the smoothness of the motion reminds Brienne of a cartoon character pulling something out of empty space behind their back- a mallet, or maybe a bomb with its fuse already lit- and it’s a struggle not to wince at how painfully out of sorts she feels right now. Fortunately, the maester is too busy parsing what’s written to notice.

“So, obviously stunt coordination is not my purview, it’s yours, but this is the third time Jaime has been injured on set,” Maester Sam says. Brienne’s chest pinches with anxiety and shame.

He continues, “This time he’s got a pretty nasty concussion and a boxer’s sprain in his right wrist, as well as some scrapes along the forearm on the same side.” Sighing, he closes the chart and looks Brienne dead in the eye, “All that is to say- and I don’t want to overstep here- but as a physician and caretaker I’ve got to ask-”

Eyes stinging, Brienne cuts in, “Why haven’t I been fired?”

The man looks horrorstruck. “What?! No, Miss Tarth. I was going to ask if it’s absolutely necessary that Jaime continue to do his own stunts.” He smiles weakly and rushes on, “It’s just that, his stunts have been modified a number of times, and I know that you very carefully design and test them, and no one else has gotten hurt except Jaime, so perhaps it would be best to just chalk it all up to bad luck and finish out the project with a double?”

Oh .

It takes a moment, but she finds her words. “I’ve been pushing to switch to a stunt double for him, but the execs keep insisting that audiences are becoming too sophisticated and will be able to tell if it’s not Jaime.”

“But these executives are new to the industry, right? You’ve been doing this in one form or another for most of your life, not to mention that you’re the chief stunt coordinator, and a damned good one. So the big question is: do *you* think Jaime will be safer with a stunt double?”

Brienne can’t help smiling and doesn’t even feel the usual urge to hide her teeth. “I do.”

“Great!” Maester Sam claps his hands together, “that’s all I need to hear. I’ll tell the bosses I can’t sign off on the insurance forms unless Jaime has a double for all instances our stunt coordinator deems necessary. Now, why don’t you come with me?”

He turns and pushes between two curtains. Brienne tags after him, slipping into a narrow hallway with drapes along both sides. In the dim light she can see humanoid shadows through the surrounding material. The maester stops beside the last section on the right side and gently parts the opening into the area beyond.

Jaime is asleep on a white wooden cot while a nurse rubs a salve on his injured hand and wrist. His face is a little bruised up, but for all that he’s still the most gorgeous man Brienne has ever seen.

“How long has he been out?” she asks.

The maester pulls out an ancient-looking pocket watch; it ticks loudly, almost balefully, in the quiet. He depresses the catch and checks the time. “I’d say about three hours.”

“May I sit with him?” She tries not to worry about how wistful she sounds.

“Yes, of course. Go ahead and take that chair on the other side of the bed, and let myself or the nurse know if you need anything. We’ll be back later to splint his hand.” He departs with a kind nod.

Brienne edges carefully around the bed, ever cognizant of her size compared to small spaces, and folds herself into the chair at Jaime’s bedside. The nurse finishes applying the liniment and bustles out into the hall before Brienne can even tell her thanks.

It sounds as though dinner is being delivered to the other patients, but it’s quiet and warm in this little corner with Jaime, and now that she has a moment to breathe and reflect, the tears she’s been holding back for the last few hours begin to fall. She takes his hand and murmurs, “I’m sorry, Jaime.”

She swipes at her tears half-heartedly with her free hand, and when she looks back at Jaime his eyes are open, alert and so green, and focused intently on her.

Chapter 2

Once, when he was just getting his start in theater, Jaime overshot his mark and walked clear off the stage into the orchestra pit; as it was a straight play, there was no one below upon whom to land, so fortunately the biggest casualty of that incident was Jaime's pride. Thinking back on it never fails to pique his shame, but that's a pale shade to how he feels at this moment.

You absurd, golden fink. You've made the dame cry.

His head sears with pain, which doesn't surprise him in the least, considering the last thing he recalls is losing control during a rappel down an icy embankment and smacking his head every which way but loose on the descent.

A powerful urge to dry her tears strikes, but he stops himself before reaching out with his injured arm. Instead, Jaime rotates his left hand in Brienne's grasp to press their palms together, fingers entwined.

She blushes so readily, with barely a touch.

It's not the winsome blush of a cinema ingenue, but that hasn't stopped Jaime from spending copious amounts of time conjuring more ways to fluster and tease out the color in her cheeks.

"Do you weep for my sake, Blue Serge? Why, if you aren't careful I might come to think you're fond of me," he drawls.

Brienne goes even redder and scowls. "Is this a joke to you, Mr. Lannister?"

"Oh, not in the least," he assures. "Apparently this is serious enough that you're dusting off the honorifics. That's a tad old fashioned, if you ask me, but what do I know? Perhaps we should call for a chaperone." He lifts their clasped hands for inspection. "Now tell me, is this how babies are made?"

She extricates her fingers from his and sits back, arms crossed. The only indication she'd been crying is a slight puffiness around her eyes and nose. "What's wrong? Did they not teach you that in refinement school?"

"Sadly, I must have been out for that module," his smile sharpens, honing to a wicked edge, "but I'm sure a dame like you could instruct me in the matter."

Emotion flashes in her lovely eyes- something hot and sharp that pierces his heart, but it's doused in those blue depths just as quickly. She studies him now, all cool professionalism. "I'm taking over all of your stunts."

"Brienne, no."

“*Jaime*, yes.” She sighs, a deep and weary thing. “This is the third time you’ve been hurt by one of my stunts-”

“Now, hang on-”

“- and I’d thought it could be because you’re new to film, but-”

“No, Brienne, you don’t understand, I know what I’m doing! I know it probably doesn’t seem like it right now, but I already knew wha-”

She cuts across him, voice raised, “Exactly! You know what you’re doing because we’ve rehearsed and run through protocol so much that I can only assume that I’m the one screwing up here! So instead of risking your safety anymore, I’ll double for those shots.”

A sickening weight settles in Jaime’s stomach. “It’s not your fault, I swear.”

She frowns. “Do you deny I designed the stunts?”

“Do you deny that other crewmembers set them up?”

After a moment she leans back and stares at the ceiling, “*Jaime...*”

If I tell her the truth she’ll think I’m insane.

“Brienne, I-”

Just as he works up his nerve, the curtain at the foot of his cot is yanked open by Miss M, executive assistant to the studio head.

“Well. Mister Lannister. Miss Tarth. We’ve got some business to discuss.”

Brienne isn’t sure why she’s surprised to see Miss M, not when the head honchos have such a keen interest in creating an “unshakable verisimilitude” with their current film production: *The Battle for Dawn*.

Six months have passed since a coterie of zealous cinephiles amassed their wealth and purchased Ladder Pictures, a middling film company best known for a series of silent slapstick comedies featuring the daring-do of stunt performers like Brienne.

Ladder spent years trying to get into the epic genre film game, at which they’d failed most spectacularly when the leading man of *Inundation: The Tale of Moat Cailin* drowned during shooting, along with four extras.

Despite the tragedy, Petyr Baelish didn’t sell his studio until the current owners turned up earlier this year.

Since then, Brienne has found herself at constant loggerheads with Miss M, though perhaps it would be more accurate to say that the conflict is between her and whomever Miss M speaks for.

While it's nice to see a woman in a position of power, it would be disingenuous for Brienne to say that she likes working with the Red Woman, as Jaime calls her. At best, it's odd, what with Miss M always pushing for more realistic armor and weaponry, and bespoke pieces of mail and plate to outfit even the uncredited extras. At worst, well...

She can't help that she's so stunning, but it makes Brienne terribly uncomfortable to stand near her in mixed company - particularly *this* mixed company. Brienne knows what she, herself, looks like, and if it weren't for her skill in crafting, framing, and executing dangerous feats, Brienne Tarth would be back working travelling shows as "The Dragonsteel Maiden" instead of here, spending all of her emotional energy arguing with sublimely beautiful people.

Today, Miss M is wearing a scarlet sheath dress, no hose, and black leather pumps and driving gloves. The high collar of her dress is pinned with her signature ruby brooch.

Brienne curses herself for not taking the time to change out of her stained blue dungarees and white cotton shirtwaist. *And even in his hospital gown, Jaime looks fit for the rotogravure.*

Seeing no other chair, Miss M glides around to the other side of Jaime's cot to perch at the base before toeing off her heels and stretching her legs out on top of the bed. Her feet land just shy of Jaime's injured hand. Brienne can't help but notice Jaime scoot himself away from his new bedmate.

Gods, even her feet are perfect. Brienne eyes Miss M's perfectly lacquered blood red toenails, and her slender, delicate arches with longing.

Miss M folds her hands in her lap and smiles benignly. "So, I stop in to inquire about Mister Lannister's condition only to discover that our medical consultant won't sign off on our star doing any more stunts." She slices a suspicious glance at Brienne. "Color me surprised."

Jaime scoffs, shifts as if to poise himself to comment, but Brienne beats him to it.

"With all due respect, Miss M, you and I have already debated this matter, and I find it difficult to believe you weren't anticipating such an outcome." Brienne sits up, tries to steel her spine. "I've made my decision, and I refuse to risk Jaime's safety repeatedly for the sake of an exciting film sequence! Your boss sent you to reaffirm my position as Executive Stunt Coordinator before we even started filming, when it would have been a perfect time to replace me if they don't like how I run my department, and I'll do you a favor right now: I'm not budging on this, and if that's a problem, I suggest you *fire me*."

A tense moment passes before Brienne realizes that she's now standing, thunderous and looming over the other two. She checks on Jaime, only to find him staring at her, face open and alight with admiration and something which could look like desire, if Brienne didn't know better.

The silence breaks with the soft slide of leather and the scratch of a fountain pen on paper. Brienne looks to find Miss M. writing something on a tiny notepad. “Far be it for me to question your expertise, Miss Tarth, only - my concern is that you aren’t going to have time to do Mister Lannister’s stunts on top of your own.” Miss M blows on the ink before tearing off the slip of paper and handing it to Brienne.

“What is this?” she asks. “It’s just numbers.” Brienne’s brow furrows.

“That’s your new rate, Miss Tarth. You’ve been chosen to play Blue Knight across from Mister Lannister’s Goldenhand.”

The revelation hits hard, forcing Brienne to sit back down. She can’t even bring herself to look at Jaime, to see any possible disgust he might feel at being reduced to playing romance with the likes of her. Instead she stares at the numbers on the paper. “Why are you doing this to me?”

Brienne already anticipates what people will say when they see the movie. It’s one thing to act in slapstick comedies, where her size and athleticism are an asset and the tacit agreement is that people are laughing *with* her.

This is something else. A romantic heroine: an invitation for mockery. This film will be a vivid document in her every failing as a woman. *She will not see me cry.*

But that’s a difficult vow to keep when she can feel the day’s pressures finally collapsing on her, caving her resolve under all that force.

She’s saved by Jaime’s hand in hers. He squeezes and clears his throat. “Surely you can’t just force Brie... Miss Tarth into a role she doesn’t want to play.”

Miss M looks between them with interest. “On the contrary, Mister Lannister, that’s the one thing we can do with impunity. When we bought Ladder Pictures, we acquired all standing contracts. Miss Tarth has a binding agreement to act in five films under our umbrella. She starred in three comedies and had a minor role in the unfinished Moat Cailin flick before taking over stunt coordination studio-wide. Mister Baelish was a shrewd negotiator, unfortunately, and the language in the contract is clear: we pick what films Miss Tarth does; it’s been decided that this is one of them.”

Brienne draws strength from Jaime’s support, even as he seems too stunned to speak.

Miss M bestows them with a magnanimous smile, “That said, I don’t see why you can’t take over Jaime’s big stunts, as long as he’s still acting in the fight scenes. We’re planning a lot of close-ups, so you can see why it’s imperative that the action is as convincing as humanly possible.” Smoothing down her skirt, Miss M swings her legs from the bed, slips her feet back into her heels, and stands. “Wonderful. Now that that’s settled, I remind both of you to check the call sheets before going home tonight.”

Jaime and Brienne hum their assent in unison, too shell-shocked to do much else .

“And I’ve arranged to have your belongings moved to the cast lodging, Miss Tarth. Your quarters are right next to Mister Lannister’s. You’ll find a packet of research for the role in your mailbox.” In a streak of red, Miss M is gone.

“Dame, you should kill your agent for letting you sign a deal like that.” Jaime grumbles.

Brienne snorts. “Funny thing is, my agent’s already dead.”

Chapter 3

Chapter Notes

This chapter is where the differences between Westeros during book canon, and the modern Westeros of this AU, start to assert themselves. The biggest difference being that this modern Westeros has a sea known as The Decollation cutting it in two. It starts in what used to be the Bay of Crabs, and cuts straight across the continent, ending North of Casterly Rock. The Westerlands got fuuuuuucked up. The old mineshafts flooded in the mountains around the Golden Tooth, causing catastrophic mudslides and sinkholes. High Heart remains, as well as a few of the highest peaks in the mountains, but the sea is an estuary, and many of the rivers of the Riverlands can no longer provide potable water. Most smallfolk moved south of The Decollation in the years after it was created, leaving the North relatively barren. It took another 400 years before people started moving North again, but by then the land was wild and proved difficult to tame, so most Westerosi STILL live below The Decollation.

Another thing to note is that you're going to see a mix of old and new names. Jaime does have a brother, but his brother is not Tyrion. He's a completely different person. Same with Jaime's father. There are reasons for all of this, and I beg your patience while we take this journey together.

Once the fic is fully posted, I'd be willing to post an info chapter to explain what happened in my version of Westeros, if anyone is interested.

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

It's quite late by the time Maester Sam finishes splinting Jaime's injury and releases him with a list of care instructions nearly as long as the dame. He's overtaken by a fit of giggles as he imagines laying the list and Brienne side-by-side on his bed to find out which one is longer.

Her arm circles his waist as she gamely navigates him around slushy hazards along the town's main street. The pain medication the nurse had him swallow at discharge is on top of him enough that Jaime doesn't think twice about laying his head against Brienne's shoulder as they walk.

"Jaime, you need to stay awake. We're almost there."

He nuzzles closer, grinning into the curve of Brienne's jaw. Her skin is soft and warm. She huffs and bundles him closer in the biting cold. It's a clear, beautiful night. *In the moonlight, my Blue Serge glows*.

They stop to check the call sheets, which are pinned to the bulletin board in the square. There's a large wooden placard nearby, carved into the shape of a sunburst, that reads: "Town of Lodestar". The letters are painted in rich red with gold leaf accents that blaze in the lamplight - much finer than you would expect for a town as small as this.

In the distance you can make out the hulking silhouette of the Wall and Castle Black Historical Museum.

The dame is mumbling to herself as she reads the call sheets. Jaime knows she's scared to play a serious role, but the more he thinks about her playing the Blue Knight, the more sense he sees in the casting. She's strong and brave, but still vulnerable, and her eyes are just the most magnificent things he's ever seen, and...

Before he can open his big mouth and say anything stupid, they're walking again. It's another block to reach the cast housing. At his door, Jaime fumbles for his keys for a few excruciatingly long moments before Brienne sighs and brushes his hand aside. Gingerly, she searches while Jaime tries to ignore how much he's enjoying having her hand in his pocket.

Finally, she locates the key. They stumble together into his flat, where he plops down into the nearest kitchen chair and she busies herself removing his coat and boots.

"Do you think you can manage from here?" she asks.

Jaime's eyes are extremely heavy at this point, and he has just enough wherewithal to question why he was dosed with such a fast-acting medication at the hospital when he could have taken the pills at home. Everything after that is darkness and the warmth of Brienne's powerful arms lifting him from the chair...

He's in the forest again, and this time there are shapes moving in the distance. They almost look like people, but the shadows obfuscate just enough to keep him questioning. Jaime takes a deep breath and walks forward, hoping to investigate, but as he weaves through the trees, tendrils of moss and gossamer keep catching on his extremities, teasing at his edges, wrapping around his fingers and toes, wrists and ankles.

And as always, there's that blasted creaking. It's louder than ever.

Closer, closer, softly he picks his way toward the strangers. He can see them moving, almost bobbing as if in a dance. Up, down, up, down. He can't make out their features, but Jaime can see their eyes. Each one has pupils of either red or green, glimmering like uncut stones against the black velvet backdrop in his dreamspace.

It's getting harder to move, and when he looks down, supple branches and vines wrap his limbs, growing tighter each time he struggles.

One of the strangers, a young woman with abhuman features, sweeps forward, her wrists and ankles bound similarly as his own. He has just enough time to observe how marionette-like her movements are before she's stuffed his eyes, ears, and mouth with thick, peaty muck.

Jaime tries to stay calm as her bony fingers walk over his forehead. In the center, he feels her tap three times.

There's a soft giggle followed by horrific pain as she spears something into his skull.

"Wakey, wakey, Mister Lannister!"

It's 3 am and Brienne is still wide awake. Maester Sam's instructions had recommended that Jaime be woken every hour to check on his cognition, which would be fine except that the medication they gave Jaime for pain has him totally goofed out. As she'd carried him to his bed earlier, he'd begun to wax idiotic about her blue, blue eyes and strong, strong arms, and by the time she had him ready for bed, stripped down to his longjohns, Brienne was thoroughly red with embarrassment.

After getting him tucked in, she went to inspect her new living space next door. Expectedly, it's similar in layout and furnishing to Jaime's place, with rustic white wood flooring and furniture. Her old steamer trunk had been filled with her scant belongings by someone, then deposited unceremoniously just inside the door. As promised, her script and information packet were stuffed into her mail compartment.

A cursory glance in the trunk, cupboards, and icebox proved whomever gathered her belongings lacked the foresight to pack up the food she'd bought with her own money, so she'd decided to raid Jaime's stash for dinner.

When she'd gone back to Jaime's, he'd looked kind of pale, so the easiest solution had been to plop herself onto the floor next to his bed while she ate a cheese and pickle sandwich and flipped through her script. This way she can check on him with a glance and still get some work done.

The pellet stove churns out a cheerful blaze and Brienne is pleasantly cozy as she peruses a stack of research about her new role, the Blue Knight. Just as she gets to an exciting paragraph about a bear pit, Jaime lets out a sharp gasp.

Looking up, she finds him awake, eyes wide and fearful. He's drenched in sweat. She sets aside her papers and crawls up to sit on the side of his bed. "Jaime, what's wrong?"

He looks at her, but it's as though he barely sees. When she carefully places her palm over his forehead, his eyes begin to roam over her features - his expression concerned. His left hand reaches up and grips her wrist; he feels cold and clammy.

"Who did that to you?" he whispers.

"Who did what?"

Jaime points to his cheek and his neck. "You've been injured." He tries to sit up, but Brienne gently encourages him to lay back down.

She touches the places he'd pointed, just to make sure, but there are no injuries. "No, Jaime. I haven't. I think I need to go get Maester Sam." She's not sure where the maester lives, but

certainly there's *someone* at the hospital who will know where to find him. As Brienne goes to stand, Jaime whimpers and clutches at her more tightly.

“Wench, I need you...”

Brienne soothes him by stroking his temples and unsticking his hair from his face. After a moment, she recognizes what he'd called her.

“Jaime, I think you're confused. You called me ‘wench’, but that's what your character calls mine in the script.”

He screws up his face and shakes his head. When he reopens his eyes he seems much more cogent.

“Fuck, I feel like my head's been torn open.” This time when he tries to sit up, Brienne helps. The color has returned to his complexion and he's no longer sweating. He lets go of her arm only to stretch out a finger and trace it along the curve of her cheek and down to her neck. “I could have sworn...”

Brienne shivers at the contact, which pulls Jaime out of his reverie. She feels herself blush violently. His hand drops back to the bed, but the sensation of his skin on hers lingers.

The tension she feels is unbearable, so Brienne busies herself adjusting Jaime's pillows. He catches her eye and gives her the sweetest smile. “Thank you.”

Her throat is dry. “I'm going to check in with Maester Sam. I'll get a PA to come keep an eye on you while you get some rest. I need some sleep, myself. You don't need to be on set today, so just take it easy.”

Jaime simply nods and continues to watch her with a strange combination of awe and familiarity. Brienne's heart swells with feeling.

It's too soon.

Sleep just doesn't want to come the rest of the night. Jaime's exhausted, knows that it would feel so good to rest, but his mind won't stop racing.

The things he'd seen in that dream...

Not since Jaime was a child of eight, vacationing with his family on the shores of the Decollation have the visions been so potent. The last time, he remembers waking up in their beachfront manse at the foot of the Mountains of The Moon, and feeling compelled to go outside. The sand was coarse and heavy with pebbles that rolled against the bottoms of his bare feet, slippery from a receding tide.

Sunrise had just begun on the other side of the mountains, but night still clung to the West, reflecting darkly down on choppy waters as moonglow limned the blackened husk of Harrenhal's ruins - spotted in places with bizarre crystalline deposits and sunken deep within the center of the brackish channel which bisects Westeros. Just past the ruins, Jaime could see the Isle of Faces, a lonesome copse marooned in mists and tragedy - if the songs can be believed. He and his family spent many a school break at their beach house, and his attention often snagged on those massive weirwoods across the water; they looked like pale arms and bloody hands hailing skyward, crying for help. Yet that night had been the first time the island ever *called* to him. Deep down he knew he needed to answer.

The following night he tried to sneak out at high tide and swim to the trees, but when his curious baby brother tried to follow and wouldn't go back inside, their nanny heard the two boys arguing and, spotting Jaime's swim gear and snorkel, quickly deduced key aspects of his plans.

She'd promptly threatened to tell Jaime's father if he ever tried to go to the Isle of Faces again, which Jaime certainly didn't want, as Tylos Lannister's temper was famously explosive, so Jaime tried to put it out of his mind for the remainder of their stay, and when the next school break came Jaime joined a theater program in lieu of going to the beach with the other Lannisters.

Through the years, he still had the dreams, but never as strongly as that one night in his eighth year; until now, at least.

What he experienced just now was something else entirely. Setting aside the disturbing imagery and marionette strangers, when Jaime woke he felt disconnected from the real world - as if he still had one foot in another realm. And when he'd looked at Brienne...

Fuck .

He knew, intellectually, that they were in his room, but also, as if through double exposure, he saw her superimposed with gruesome wounds and smeared in blood and black dust. A fearsome gouge had pitted her cheek, rimmed in purplish inflammation and weeping a thin fluid, and her *neck* ... it looked as though she'd been hanged! Pinprick bruises mingled with her freckles, a smattering around her eyes, nose, lips; and ringing her throat in starbursts along raw, sunken rope burns.

Once he'd woken up more, he could see that she was truly unhurt, but he had to feel to be sure.

Touching her was... ill advised, you goofy stripling.

Upon first meeting Brienne, Jaime felt her pull. Initially, he'd been loath to chalk it up to attraction, because Jaime had never experienced desire for someone in the same way that his brother Tyrell has always described it. He's had partners, and enjoys sex on a conceptual level, but the people he met in society circles were always so false, and in no time at all the bloom would be off the rose, typically once it became clear that they were more interested in his money than him.

Jaime's position as heir to their family's fortune created pressure to marry - preferably "well" - by the elder Lannisters' collective, stodgy standards, however, as luck would have it, after their father's death, Jaime and his brother managed to lock down historical monument status for their ancestral home, Evenfall Hall. It's now a working museum, with Tyrell sitting on the board and managing its upkeep and curation.

If it weren't for that, Jaime would likely have been forced to find a spouse and take over the estate instead of agreeing to play Goldenhand in *Battle for Dawn*. Making the jump from stage to screen has been a personal goal for at least a decade, but it never seemed possible with his inherited responsibilities threatening on the horizon.

Guilt pricks at him to think that his future looks brighter now, but Jaime had stronger paternal bonds with several boarding school headmasters than with his actual father.

And besides, how else would you have met your Blue Serge?

Something about the dour, emotive, homely giantess is deeply alluring. Her eyes, her smile, her strong, muscular limbs, even her voice and the way she smells. In a few months, Brienne has become his favorite... everything. And by the gods, does he *want* her.

However, the way he felt when he woke up and thought that she'd been assaulted: the ragged, clawing desperation that roared through his chest at the thought of any harm ever coming to her? That shines his infatuation with the dame in a jarringly bright spot. And here's the crux: he's not good at these things! He's a sarcastic dandy with a gnatlike attention span, according to the last person he'd courted. Jaime doesn't know how to woo anyone, let alone a woman who endangers herself for a living just so that idiots like him stay safe and other idiots can cram into a cinema to be entertained. Not to mention that Brienne Tarth is respected as a comedian and stunt director, despite the hurdles women face in the film industry at every turn. She's aggressively competent and damned if that doesn't get his blood going.

And now she's playing Goldenhand's beloved Blue Knight! Between rehearsal, filming, and learning fight choreography, they'll be spending almost every waking moment together. *I'll get to see her in armor ...* As he tries to calm his speeding pulse, a knock sounds at the front door.

Jaime takes a moment to breathe before calling "Enter!" Whomever it is wastes no time. Within moments he hears the tap running and the telltale rattle of a pill bottle.

Josmyn Peckeldon, one of the production assistants, pops his head into the room. "Mister Lannister, so nice to see you again, despite the terrible circumstances, of course!"

Jaime snickers and waves his splinted hand. "Of course."

"I have your pain pills. Would you like something to eat with them?"

"That might be a good idea, they hit me pretty hard before," Jaime confides.

"Ah, they gave you the good stuff, then," Peck grins and sets aside a glass of water before prying open the prescription bottle and shaking out two tablets into Jaime's palm. The

bedroom is dark, but the pills are visible in the light from the fire.

Two large, starkly white pills, unlabeled and speckled by bits of bright red, sit innocuously in his hand. Something about them seems strange, though, and he can't tell what. Also, they have an odd smell that unsettles him. "Say Peck," Jaime murmurs, "are these from the local pharmacy?"

Peck, the PA smiles and nods encouragingly, "Lodestar prides itself on handcrafting most everything sold in town, Mister Lannister."

"S'that so? And who made these?"

"That would be the chemist. Mister Pree, I believe!" Peck's smile holds, but he finally seems to notice that Jaime is just sitting there *not* taking the medication. "Is there a problem, Mister Lannister?"

Jaime wishes Brienne were here. His head is starting to throb again, and he's not sure what's got him so suspicious of a couple of pills which would, in all likelihood, help him feel better, but he can't shake this gut feeling...

"Why don't I go make you something to eat for now?" Peck suggests. "I brought some of my famous chicken soup. Does that appeal?"

"Yes, thank you. That sounds like just the thing." Jaime musters a weak smile for the boy. *Maybe the dame is still awake*. Jaime leans back and presses his ear to the wall behind his head. If he's correct about the building layout, Brienne's bedroom wall should line up with his. Disappointingly, all is silence in that direction. In contrast, the clangor from his kitchen implies Peck can't find the right sized vessel for heating soup.

The bedside clock reads 4:13 am, and Jaime is reasonably certain that if he doesn't go assist the production assistant, he'll be getting an angry early morning visit from the disconcertingly large actor, Joramund, who lives on his other side - so he makes the executive decision to hide the pills under his mattress, take a sizable gulp of the water Peck left, and saunter out to the kitchen with the air of someone who definitely took their prescribed medication and *doesn't* have a blinding headache brewing.

"Peck, my boy, are you trying to *fuck* the cupboard? I have neighbors."

Chapter End Notes

The idea that enough time has passed that the "Ty-" prefix signature to Lannister names would end up being used to name one of the kids "Tyrell" tickles me. Cersei would be yowling in her grave.

Also, if you do have questions about the world, as long as it doesn't spoil anything I'm happy to answer. Thanks for reading!

Chapter 4

“Five bloody months of pre-production and they’ve just now cast the co-star,” prop master Edd mimes a jerking motion at his groin, “more money than sense, these bigwigs. Ah, well. Congratulations, anyhow.”

Brienne agrees with his assessment, but she’s far too tired to say so and risk one of the other crew taking her to task for being *ungrateful*, or whatever other infraction they can latch onto.

Some of the guys in her department are great: supportive and willing to back her up when needed, but still respectful of her authority. Edd is one of them. Others, though... some resent her for her gender, or that she succeeded in comedy where they didn’t, or that she has the audacity to be their superior. Even the fact that she’s too ugly for them to want to fuck offends a few of them.

Following the morning production staff meeting, she’s scheduled battle choreography orientation for the newest group of extras. They’re being cast by the hundreds and brought in bunches to be trained in stage fighting. *Truth be told, this is much more like combat training.*

With each new influx of extras, Miss M has nudged and goaded Brienne and the fight choreographer, Jaquen, into planning vastly more realistic fighting than films typically require. It’s reached the point where they’ve instituted exercises from Jaquen’s paramilitary days, not to mention strict physical fitness regimens for all.

Jaime calls it basic training, and he’s not wrong. *At least the weapons are blunted so none of these ninnies are as likely to kill each other.*

The small group training area is in an old warehouse on the South side of Lodestar. The construction and fittings aren’t new - just your basic concrete and rebar megastorage - but the widows have been updated to keep out any drafts, which is more than Brienne can say about the space they had under Baelish, when Ladder Pictures was based out of Oldtown. Regardless of any other complaints she has about the current management, her overall quality of life has improved and for that she’s grateful.

Orientation goes well, and Brienne is pleased to see that a couple of young women have been cast. As a bonus, no one argued with her or doubted her credentials today, which is a delightful novelty. She’s finishing filling out the training roster in the warehouse’s office when she hears someone tapping on glass. A shadow falls across the clipboard through the large window looking out into the training area. To her surprise, it’s Jaime. He’s grinning, has bright pink cheeks, and is dressed in camel slacks, a dark red sweater, and black peacoat. Bits of snow dust his shoulders and cling to the soft golden curls peeking out from beneath his white wool stocking cap. Brienne can barely breathe for how much she loves to look at him.

A moment later he’s bursting through the door. “I didn’t hear you come home last night! Could it be that you forgot about your poor, ailing knight?” Jaime winks then crowds in behind the desk next to where she’s seated. Mere inches separate them, and through her

cotton shirtwaist she can feel the residual chill off his coat. He points at a pair of names on the training roster. “Shiera and Meera... twins?”

That startles a small laugh out of her. “Not that I’m aware of. Now, hush, I’m nearly done.” She checks the schedule, signs, stamps, and dates it, then hangs the clipboard in its assigned spot before turning her attention to the adult man who’s presently draped himself facedown over part of her desk. “Rough night?”

“As if you care,” Jaime sighs. He turns his head to fix Brienne with a single-eyed glare. Up close, she can see that his eyes are bloodshot and he has dark circles. “Where were you?”

“Sound more petulant. why don’t you?”

He sputters, “I don’t sound *petulant*. What you’re hearing is concern, which is a far more grown-up emotion.”

“Yes, my mistake. What I took as a whinging man-baby implying that I abandoned him is *actually* a whinging man-baby worrying about my welfare.”

“Exactly.”

“Wonderful! Glad we got that settled.” Brienne cracks a genuine smile then leans back in the chair to stretch. She looks up just in time to catch Jaime staring. He clears his throat, stands, and goes to sit on the threadbare settee wedged into the opposite corner.

Surreptitiously, she watches him as he takes in her tiny office. Pegboard lines two of the three available walls, loaded up with the various tools of her trade. A large slate on an easel stands beside the settee, which she and Jaquen use to block scenes before they’re handed off to storyboarding. Tidy stacks of books, call sheets, and old scripts take up almost all remaining space, thus leaving naught but a narrow path from door to desk. In the past, she may have worried that Jaime would judge her for the unprestigious look of the place, but that’s not the sense she gets anymore.

“Anyway,” she continues, “After I left Maester Sam, I woke up Peck and sent him to look after you, then came here to get a jump on prepping for the newbies.”

“So you haven’t slept at all?”

“I took a cat nap on that settee.”

Jaime makes a face. “Dame, this thing is so uncomfortable not even my ass could fall asleep.”

“I’m fine,” she says. She uses the voice which, for most people, indicates that a discussion is closed - for Jaime, however...

“Maybe Jaquen could take over some of your training duties? Or I bet I could badger them into giving you an assistant.” He has that slightly manic *I’m a Lannister!* look that he gets when he challenges the bosses, and Brienne is just too tuckered out to try to rein him in.

“Shouldn’t you be at home resting?” she deflects.

“Couldn’t sleep,” he mumbles.

“That’s odd. Your pain medication knocked your socks off, that first dose.” She writes a quick note to let Jaquen know the schedule is done, then gathers her coat, hat, and gloves before heading to the door. “Well, it’s almost time for your next dose now. I’ll walk you back to your place before my next stop.” For a moment it seems like he’ll protest, but when she holds out a hand to help him up, he takes it and leads the way out.

They walk in companionable silence. Flurries tumble from a satiny, silver sky: the cloud cover is luminous, backlit by the hidden sun. At his door, Jaime stops, turns. “I’ll go with you.”

Brienne tilts her head to the side. “Go with me?”

Jaime huffs, clearly trying to temper any discernible frustration. “To your next stop.”

“Oh, that? I’m just heading out into The Gift to get a couple of measurements. Gotta be sure all those extras will fit. Might take a jaunt through the Castle Black museum just for fun, since I’ve never been.”

Nodding, Jaime says, “Grand! Sounds like a jolly affair. I’ll come with you.”

“Jaime, you need sleep!”

“What’s that they say about glass houses?” he chides.

Brienne grumbles, “Yes, yes. Fair. But, I’d posit that I’m not the one recovering from a head injury.” She chews her lip thoughtfully. *It won’t take long. And perhaps the distraction will help him...* “Ah- very well. Wait here.”

Jaime’s grin is pleased and breathtaking and way, way too much right now, so she bolts into her apartment and grabs a blanket and her surveying equipment, then fills her canteen with water and ties it to the pack containing her theodolite, tripod, and level. From the kitchen table, she grabs the new bottle of Jaime’s medication. This one has a lower dose mixed up this morning by Maester Sam.

After locking up, she marches off towards the transpo garage without sparing a glance backwards. The depot is two blocks down, a massive, rusted out, pink and purple checkered carport that houses the production company’s vehicles. Brienne keeps her eyes ahead, mentally sussing out which type of truck she should take if it turns out that she needs to go offroad to take any of the measurements. She can feel Jaime watching her while he keeps pace with her ridiculously long stride. *Not many people can keep up with me, but Jaime always can.*

He’s still quiet while she looks over the available trucks, perhaps assuming that she’ll tell him to fuck off back home if he presses his luck. There’s a handsome green military rover, with a

solid roof and paned windows, which is ideal considering how the temperature drops off later in the afternoon.

“Stay,” she tells Jaime, then goes to find a teamster to sign out the vehicle. The man eyes her warily, but doesn’t say whatever it is he’s clearly thinking, which is just fine by her. Quietly, she collects the keys and map he’s dropped on the counter before returning to Jaime at the rover.

At first it appears he’s slipped off somewhere, but upon approach, she spies him bent over, fixing his hair in the side-view mirror. She bangs on the driver’s side door, startling him.

He’s scowling as they both buckle into their seats and get settled. *He’s too cute when he makes that face*. Unfortunately, it seems as though most everything Jaime says or does is tailor made to appeal to some part of her wretched heart.

This truck is heated, as luck would have it. Jaime seems to be holding up, but the last thing he needs is to catch a chill. “Here,” she says, and hands him the blanket. The quilt itself, which was a gift from her brother, has seen better days, but it’s clean and warm. It’s a narrow bench seat, meaning there’s enough blanket to stretch out over both their laps. Lastly, she retrieves the canteen from the back and sets it and the bottle of pills out on the dash. “The access road isn’t plowed right now, so it’s gonna be at least an hour. If you take it now, you can catch some shuteye on the way.”

With the look he’s giving the bottle, you’d think the pills had wronged Jaime on a personal level.

“What’s with the sourpuss?”

The way he prods at the offending object calls to mind the cat they had when she was very young. An orange-and-white tabby she’d so cleverly named Dreamsicle.

“The pills are weird.” He pushes the container with the back of his hand until it’s up against her thigh, doesn’t stop until she bats his hand away. The bottle is brown glass with a cork stopper. The label is written in Maester Sam’s even cursive, detailing the date, new dosage, and pertinent info. The cork is tight, but she manages to pop it out without spilling the tablets everywhere.

“Weird how?” she asks. She’s vaguely aware that they’re still parked in the garage and hopes the guy in the office minds his own business.

Jaime shrugs. “They smell familiar, like a bad memory, but I can’t place it.”

They do smell odd, but not familiar to me. “Did they make you feel ill?” She plunges a finger into the bottle and drags out a pill. It’s smaller than the ones Nurse Selyse gave him last night, but otherwise very similar. “Do you think it caused your nightmare?”

Jaime’s brow furrows; a few times it looks as if he’s about to speak, but then stops himself. Finally, he says, “No, the nightmares have happened for ages.”

“It’s your prerogative whether you take them or not, you know. No one is going to force you.” She tries to smile reassuringly. “The only thing is the maester said you’re likely to heal faster if you keep the inflammation down. The medication helps with that.”

For Crone’s sake, he looks exhausted .

Jaime holds out his hand. She pours out another tablet, then places both into his waiting palm. It’s hard, but she manages not to let their skin brush this time. Driving requires focus, and touching this man does *not* foster a clear head.

Brienne waits until he’s ready, then hands him the open canteen. He takes a large swig and swallows with a grimace. When he’s settled again she reattaches the canteen to her pack.

“Are you well?” she asks. He seems like it.

“We’ll see, I suppose.” Jaime closes his eyes and rests his head against the window.

“Then let’s be off.”

When Jaime wakes, they’re parked in the central lot for the Castle Black Museum. Judging by the light, he must have been asleep for at least a few hours. Fluffy flakes of snow swirl and skirl about the pavement, around fence posts, over and under a couple of cars parked nearby; it’s so soft and peaceful that he nearly nods back off, but the shuffle of papers and a hissed “Shit” draw his attention to the driver’s seat. What he sees is a distinctly Brienne-shaped lump, sitting up with the quilt pulled over her head and tucked in around the sides. The fabric glows, faintly. Whatever she’s doing under there has her whisper-swearing up a storm.

“I always thought ghosts would be scarier,” he muses.

There’s a long pause, followed by a loud *click* before she reemerges - a vision with a flushed face and mussed hair - looking for all the world how he imagines she would after a thorough fucking. His cock stirs beneath the blanket at the thought.

“Oh good, you’re up,” she says. On her lap she’s got her notebook, pencil case, and a portable flashlight. “I figured I’d kill two birds by letting you rest while I got a little work done, but then I started to worry that the overhead light would wake you.”

Sometimes it’s hard not to feel overwhelmed by how thoughtful she is. “You’re too good to be true,” he murmurs.

Her smile is shy, but also pleased. “It’s just basic consideration.”

At that, he can't help but chuckle. "Oh, my Blue Serge, how do you not know how special you are?" It's snowing harder now. Their breath clouds the windows. Brienne looks as though she hasn't a clue how to respond, and he'd love to give her an out - change the subject or something - but for the life of him he can't stop staring at her mouth. Had he his druthers, their first kiss would *not* take place in the Castle Black Museum parking lot, but it's also becoming increasingly clear that if he doesn't make his move sometime soon, it's possible the first time he kisses her will be between their characters during filming, and he doesn't want that. He'd like the first time to be real, if she'll have him.

"Brienne, may I-"

Bang bang bang bang

Jaime and Brienne both jump at the sound of someone rapping on the hood of their vehicle. Too much condensation has accumulated on the windows to see the interloper clearly, but he sincerely hopes they can feel him glaring at them for interrupting what *could* have been a moment.

Brienne opens the driver's side door and hops out, shutting it behind her. A bit of muffled conversation, some laughter, and she's climbing back in.

"He wants to plow this part of the lot, so we have to pull up. You still want to check out the museum, right?" Jaime's throat is dry as dust, but he manages to croak out an affirmative sound of sorts. "Excellent!"

The new parking space right near the main entry, which is pretty much just a mud and gravel path that's slightly wider than the other mud and gravel paths woven between a dozen freestanding stone buildings. Behind all that there's the Wall. You can make out clear demarcations between the original ice and the parts which had to be rebuilt following the collapse years ago. An effort was made to restore the buildings as faithfully as possible, with varying degrees of success.

A tiny ticket shed with a turnstyle sits in the center of the path. The sign hanging in the window says "OPEN", yet the cashier appears to be absent.

"Hello?" Brienne's clear voice rings off the surrounding structures, startling a flock of brooding snow shrikes. There's no response.

"Oh come on," Jaime grouses, "I can *see* people moving in the courtyard!"

Against the shed leans a mildewed plywood sign:

"Castle Black Museum & Experience -

Daypass = 1 Silver

Children under 4 get in FREE

Tours on the hour”

Losing patience, Jaime pulls out a gold piece, slides open the ticket window, and trades his money for two entry tickets, which he tears off a roll. When he hands Brienne a ticket, she just sighs, then steps over the barrier with her insanely long legs. Grinning, he follows her over, though she lends him a hand when he gets his bootlace caught and loses his balance partway.

Several buildings show signs of life, and the air is thick with mouthwatering cooking smells, but as they walk back toward the courtyard, Jaime can't see anyone through the few windows they pass. Up ahead, a tinny whistling begins, sounding out an incongruously cheerful melody; then one whistler becomes many as others join in.

Several people, all cloaked in black, can be seen at work. One of them appears to be chopping wood, another sits on a cask swiping a longsword with a whetstone, and way beyond, at the base of the switchback stair attached to the Wall, someone sweeps snow. The whistling must be coming from these staff members.

Brienne catches his eye and winks. “Well, don't they sound chipper?”

Jaime would laugh, but something about these people makes a chill crawl up his spine. Their movements are somehow uncoordinated and graceful at once. It's as if they move and reset at regular intervals...

Like the strangers in that nightmare .

Chapter 5

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

Everyone in Westeros learns about the Wall, but Brienne never would have anticipated just how *small* it makes you feel. As she and Jaime make their way toward the courtyard, she can't take her eyes off the glittering span that stretches out in front of them, miles upon miles upon miles, both East and West.

In her research for *Battle For Dawn* Brienne read everything she could about Westeros's feudal era, learning quite a bit about Castle Black, in the process. How strange it seems now to stand here and witness the evidence of humanity's greatest strengths, contrasted with their greatest weaknesses.

Ingenuity, adaptability. fortitude: living in and maintaining a place like this requires them all. And yet, the Wall still fell, and Castle Black itself - built without a bailey or any defensible barricade on three sides - is proof positive that sometimes hubris and an unwillingness to understand those we see as enemies can come back to bite you in the ass. *Even so, it's a wonder...*

The refortified sections of the Wall are a slightly different color. She's unsure if that has to do with water purity levels where the new ice was sourced, or if there's any truth to the spellweaving used to create the structure in the first place, but the autodidact in her is dying to know.

She casts around, looking for a worker who isn't busy, when her eyes finally settle on Jaime. He's stock still and pale as an Other, bright green eyes dancing warily between the staff at work in front of them. Brienne hadn't noticed before, but someone is whistling.

"Well, don't they sound chipper?" she jokes, hoping to lighten Jaime's mood. When he doesn't respond, she slips her hand into his. "Hey, hey. What's wrong?"

"These workers. There's something wrong with them. Brienne, look at them."

She observes their hunched forms and unnatural movements. The song they whistle is bright, but haunting, and echoes in a manner that fills the space in ways you wouldn't expect, for such a small group of people. Each person's face appears to be frozen in a pained grimace, and they haven't taken note of Jaime's or Brienne's presence. "Yes, I see what you mean..."

Are my hands trembling, or Jaime's?

Jaime slowly backs away, dragging her along with a viselike grip. "I think we should leave."

"Jaime, this is ridiculous, I'm sure they're just focused. Let me go, I'll ask about the tours." She tries to shake off his hand, but he's holding too tightly.

Daylight is waning and the snow has begun to fall in earnest; it banks along the windowsills and against nearby stonework. Beneath the whistling, Brienne can just make out a deep humming sound that rattles the bones in her feet as it attenuates. The workers don't react at all.

Off to the left, a door slams and rapid footsteps approach from one of the darkened paths between the buildings. Suddenly, a petite woman wearing leathers and a sable capelet dashes into the courtyard.

"FUUUUUUUUUUUUUUCK - I thought I broke these fuckers! Who did this? Who set them off?!" She whirls around, looking ready to stab whatever villain she might find; that's when she spots Brienne and Jaime on the path. "Of course..."

"Sorry, we didn't want to disturb your workers!" Brienne yells, as politely as she can manage.

The woman squints and gestures at her ears. "Hang on, I can't hear you over this racket!" Spinning on her heel, she stalks over to one of the towers edging the courtyard and pries open a door. The angle makes it impossible to see what's inside, but then all the whistles and hums cease and the only sound is the gentle *shush* of snowfall and Jaime's rapid breathing.

He squeezes her hand again. "L-look! They've stopped."

It's true, the workers are all just standing now. The woman has closed up the tower door and is walking towards them.

"Sorry, my husband keeps fixing them as a prank." She smiles brightly, gray eyes sparkling. "He thinks it's the height of comedy, but one of these days I'm just going to set all these creeps on fire, and then what will he do?"

Jaime seems to be coming back to himself, fortunately. "Beg pardon?" His eyes are wide with shock. "You'd harm your employees?"

The woman looks to Brienne. "Is he drunk, or just stupid?"

Jaime scoffs. "I'm *stoned*, if you must know." He rattles the bottle of pills in his pocket. "At least I must be because I have no clue what's happening right now."

Brienne rubs the back of his hand with her thumb. "Miss..."

"Call me Wolf."

Brienne nods, "Miss Wolf-"

"No, just Wolf."

Jaime laughs, "That can't be your real name!"

Wolf marches up and pokes Jaime in the ribs. "Hey, do I go to the pot shop where you work and piss in the bowls of brown?"

It's all Brienne can do not to laugh at the scene before her. This feral young thing is more than a match for Jaime's attitude. Still, probably best not to let him get too much more agitated. "Um, Wolf?"

The little beast snarls at Jaime, then turns a beatific smile on Brienne. "Yes?"

"May I ask... what's, um... with your staff?"

"Oh, them? They're just dummies."

"I have to be honest, I'm not sure the best way to inspire your employees is to speak to them in that way." Brienne tries to make eye contact with the nearest worker, to no avail.

Understanding dawns in Wolf's eyes and she bursts into peals of wheezing laughter. Jaime looks pissed and ready to say so, but then another person arrives. This time an extremely tall man, at least a few inches taller than Brienne herself, with lank brown hair and burn scars on one half of his face. "What's this shit?" he barks.

Wolf is practically doubled over now, one hand clutching her stomach and the other on Brienne's elbow.

"They... thought... the..." a fresh wave of mirth washes over her and she gestures at the other staff, "... thought they... w-were real!"

The man snorts. "I hate this fucking job." Without another word, he leaves.

"So, these things aren't real people?" Jaime asks. His jaw is tight, but at least he's looking more himself.

Finally able to calm herself, Wolf nods. "They're animatronic. They whistle, tell jokes, and there's even a Castle Black theme song called *Wall World* that they sing on a loop, if you let them." She belts out a peppy melody:

It's a world of slaughter,

a world of fear,

we're man's only hope,

we're devoid of cheer,

with this bond that we share,

yes we're keenly aware,

it's a Wall world, after all...

it's a Wall world after all...

it's a Wall world after all...

it's a Wall world after all,

it's a Wall, Wall world

From the direction where that man had disappeared, they hear, "GENDRY, THIS IS YOUR FAULT!" Wolf giggles and takes a bow.

Dusk has fallen, and as her eyes adjust, Brienne can see more of the robotic characters positioned throughout the area. She walks over to the one with the sword and whetstone, crouches down to get a look at its face. Up close, they're very obviously fake. "Jaime, come see."

He squats next to her and inspects the figure. "The Smith really botched this poor bastard." When they stand up, Jaime is smiling again. "Well, anyway, we were hoping to take the tour."

Wolf smirks, "Can't help you today, mister. We've gotta close up for the night."

Brienne checks her watch. "Damn, I was sure I read your hours correctly. I found your flyer in my mailbox last night."

Wolf balls her fists and growls. "WILLOW!!"

A high window opens in the alley just to their right. A head pops out. "Yeah?" It's too dark to make out her features, but she sounds adolescent.

"I told you to stop putting flyers *in* people's mailboxes. Stuff them around the edge or put them between the doors! Now, get to work. We've got guests!"

"Ugh... fiiiiiiine." The window closes.

Wolf starts off toward a large, square building attached to a tower. Jaime shrugs. "After you."

As they walk, Brienne's boots crunch into the snow noisily. It's colder now, and a thin crust of ice is forming on top of the drifts. They're led up some wooden stairs, then through a door into the tower and up more stairs. These are stone, quite worn; Brienne can feel their chill through the heavy soles of her boots. At the top of the flight, they come to a wooden door, banded in iron. Wolf tugs at the handle to open it. "Go on in."

Inside is what appears to be a reproduction of the Lord Commander's solar. Pine floors slatted between stone-and-mortar walls. A few fur carpets lay throughout the chamber - bear or wolf from the looks, one even has the coloration of a mountain lion. Large tapestries depicting men of the Night's Watch line the walls, and rich, black velvet curtains hang over the windows. The room is furnished with a desk, dining table, hearth, and a massive black leather sofa. Near the desk stands a perch with a taxidermied Raven.

Wolf points. “Those doors there lead to the bed chamber and privy.” She flicks aside a curtain panel and looks at the sky. “I’d say this squall will fuss itself out by morning, so if you want a tour then, I can give you one. It’s the off-season, so it’ll likely be just you two.” The door to the bedroom opens and the girl from earlier, Willow, bustles out carrying a pile of linens.

She sticks her tongue out at Wolf before leaving, slamming the door behind her. Wolf returns the gesture, then grins at Brienne.

“So... looks like your bedding is freshened up. I’ll leave you to it.”

Jaime seems as confused as Brienne is. “Wait,” she says, “we weren’t planning to stay the night.”

Wolf holds open the curtain again. “Well, you’re not gonna make it home tonight. It’ll be a white-out on the roads.”

“Oh.” Brienne bites her lip. *There’s only one bed*. “Do you have another room?”

Wolf sucks in a breath. “No, we had some water damage from the Autumn rains. The other rooms are out of commission. Is something wrong with this one? I’ll only charge you the regular room rate, since it’s not like there’s another option, and I wouldn’t want you two freezing to death in your car.”

Red splotches blossom on Brienne’s face, the heat of her embarrassment frustratingly visible to everyone.

Jaime clears his throat and catches her eye; his smile is encouraging. “We’ll be okay. One of us can take the couch. And we’ll pay the full rate for the room,” he adds to Wolf.

She grins. “In that case, your personal steward will be up in the morning with your breakfast! You’ll find appropriate Night Watch attire in the wardrobe, my Lords Commander.” She bows to each of them, in turn.

“We have to pretend to run the place?” Brienne asks.

“Yes, my Lords Commander. All through the tour, if it please you. It’s the *experience* part of the Castle Black Museum & Experience.”

Jaime chuckles, “And how much would we have to pay you *not* to make us play pretend during the tour?”

“Triple,” says Wolf, without missing a beat.

With that settled, their host seems more than ready to be off for the night. “There is a bellpull by the bed. If you need anything, give it a yank. Goodnight, My Lords Commander.” She winks and shuts the door behind her.

This chapter is dedicated to anyone who's wanted to light an animatronic on fire.
Solidarity, friend.

Chapter 6

Chapter Summary

Jaime strikes a nerve, which compels Brienne to reveal her deepest shame.

Chapter Notes

Migraine season came early this year (but seems to be over now, so yay), which has affected my editing schedule for this, but it will be completely up before the reveal. My sincerest apologies for the fact that it's not all posted yet.

And I want to thank those of you who've read, commented, and kudos-ed. It really means a lot.

No other door has ever closed so loudly, Jaime thinks. While, yes, he and Brienne have been together on set, just the two of them late - or even in a secluded room going over stunt logistics - this is the first time they've been truly, resoundingly alone in any capacity that makes him believe he might, just maybe, be able to talk to the dame about his growing feelings for her. He's not unconscious, or confused, and there's little chance of the red woman manifesting to throw a designer wrench into the works like she did yesterday. This scenario, for all of its bizarreness, is as close to a romantic getaway as they're like to get, all things considered, and it feels like a gift. Jaime can't help the giddy rush that surges through his bloodstream.

"What are you grinning about over there?" He looks up to find Brienne watching him, amusement and wariness warring in her expression. She's biting her lip in that delightful way that always has him wanting to soothe the abused flesh with his tongue. *Best not get ahead of myself, though.*

"Oh, just excited for the tour, is all."

"Ah."

"And who wouldn't be? Getting to wear someone's crusty old clothes. Why, I'm getting hard just thinking about it."

He sees her fighting a laugh, but Brienne snorts at that. "What kind of 'privy' do you think that is?" She nods at one of the closed doors.

“My sincerest hope is that I don’t need to use it to find out,” he says. “But, I also can’t help thinking about how whatever they were cooking smells amazing and I want some, so...”

The scents have infiltrated their room, at this point, and the dame’s stomach growls at the tease. “I suppose we should have asked about supper? Damn. Well, I’ll go try the bellpull.” While Brienne disappears into the bedroom, Jaime kicks off his boots, props them next to the door, and goes to look over the tapestries. There are four of them, which doesn’t seem like enough space to chronicle the Watch’s 8,000 year history. *But what the hell do I know?*

“I have no clue if this is actually doing anything,” Brienne calls out from the other room.

He follows her into the bed chamber. “Don’t worry, I’m sure they won’t hesitate to let us know we’ve done it incorrectly!”

The bellpull is a simple ivory silk rope which hangs from a cleft in the ceiling, ingeniously engineered with a notched pulley system which allows multiple areas to be alerted by the one rope. A sign behind it denotes the position for each summon. Brienne has it set for *Kitchens*. The other options are: *Lobby*, *Housekeeping*, and *Security*.

The bedroom looks similar to the main room in color and materials used. There is a heavy wooden wardrobe, simple in design but very sturdy, two side tables, and a cherry wood four-poster bed with black velvet drapes. Opposite the bed sits another fireplace, with a stack of logs nearby, as well as a brass bed warmer and tin bucket for spent embers. Jaime flops on the bed and is overjoyed that the mattress is stuffed with feathers. He’d honestly been expecting straw. Enjoying himself immensely, he takes a moment to luxuriate with a long, feline stretch. He sits up, tugs at where his sweater and coat have ridden up to reveal his abdomen, and notes that Brienne has gone quiet. Her fingers flex against her thighs before she stuffs them in her pockets. *She looks like she would rather eat me*, Jaime realizes.

The moment is broken by a knock on the front door. Brienne shakes herself and yells, “Hold on! I’m coming!”

Not currently, but if you let me work for five minutes, you would be.

Back in the Lord Commander’s solar, Wolf is shouldering in with a wooden tray of dishes, each capped with a mud-brown clay cover. To her belt, she’s tied two lidded carafes. Brienne clears space on the table for the tray, and while the dame and the she-wolf busy themselves laying out the meal, Jaime shivers at the chill coming in through the open door, so he goes to close it. He takes a moment to shrug out of his remaining outerwear. As he wrestles his splint from his jacket, something brushes against his foot.

“Well, hello,” he coos. A gorgeous cat with sharp green eyes and a flowing, golden coat winds around his feet. Jaime bends to let the creature sniff his fingers. “What’s your name?”

Wolf looks up from pouring drinks. “Oh, that’s Meowager Queen Fursei. I’m surprised she’s letting you near. She hates most everyone.”

The cat is purring and bumping her head against Jaime’s hand. “Maybe she’s angry about that name you’ve given her?” He scratches behind her ears.

Wolf chuckles. “She comes by it honestly. She won’t hunt, won’t play, and she’s constantly misstepping. I thought that cats were supposed to be clever and graceful, not bumbling and always breaking shit. All she’s good at is preening, looking pretty, and getting her face stuck in the wine goblets.”

The dame is doing a poor job of suppressing her amusement. “Wasn’t Queen Cersei a Lannister?” she asks, the picture of innocence.

Jaime stands up and brushes his hands off on his pants. “She was. One of my very distant ancestors.” He grins. “Yours too, Tarth.”

Brienne’s are wide with disbelief. “No, we’re not related.”

Wolf watches avidly, gaze bouncing between Jaime and Brienne while she tears chunks off a dinner roll and tosses them into her mouth.

Jaime sits at the table and gestures for Brienne to take the other chair. “Your surname must derive from the island of Tarth, which was the ancestral seat of the Blue Knight’s family, passed down through the generations. And do you know who currently holds that seat?”

Brienne and Wolf shake their heads in unison.

“I do,” he says. “I inherited it from my father. The Blue Knight married Goldenhand, and their descendents inherited Tarth and Casterly Rock. Being a Tarth, I thought you’d know.”

The dame has gone pale now, Jaime notes. She quietly shrinks in on herself while he desperately tries to think of what he’s done wrong.

Wolf clears her throat. “Um, anyway, if you need anything else, use the bell. The snow is piling up out there, so go through the wormwalks instead of trying to walk outside for anything. Out this door and to the left. Follow the signs and the walks’ll get you where you need to go. Fursei, come!” She makes her escape with the cat trailing her heels.

Dinner is an uncomfortable affair. All throughout, it’s clear Jaime fights some internal battle between demanding what he’d done to upset her, but also respecting that Brienne doesn’t want to talk. After several failed attempts to lure her into conversation, and an additional attempt to annoy her into a debate about topics they’ve argued before, he fell silent and finished out his meal in a sulk.

Brienne *knows* it’s not his fault that she’s feeling so raw and distraught; she’s never told him about her family, or how she ended up working at Ladder in the first place, or the fact that her upbringing has left her feeling a dearth of legacy and belonging, and perhaps - if she’s being brutally honest with herself - a deficiency in making lasting, meaningful connections. Yet all of that is entangled with a deep sense of shame that often sends her reeling into a spiral when she gives any of it too much thought.

Upon emptying his plate, Jaime smiles wanly and stands. “ Well, my fellow Lord Commander, I thank you for sharing this repast with me. I’m going to bed down on the sofa, if that’s alright with you.” He bows, and even while buried by her ruminations, Brienne can’t help noticing the careless elegance in his every movement. *I desire and envy him for the same things, it seems* . She manages a perfunctory nod before rising herself and retreating into the bedroom.

Wanting him is one thing she’s ready to admit to; and after that moment in the rover where it seemed like he wanted to kiss her, there was a small corner of her battered heart which hoped tonight would turn into something more for them.

The fire has started to weaken, so she throws on another log and fills the bed warmer with fresh embers before shoving it beneath the sheets. She knows they’re not safe for longer than a few minutes, so to expedite the process she closes the bed curtains.

Brienne takes a moment to admire the work put into restoring Castle Black. From lessons as a child, she recalls that most of these buildings were damaged, if not completely destroyed, by the Wall’s collapse, but you’d never guess to look at the place. The objects on display feel appropriately aged, and upon cursory inspection she can’t spot the replicas amongst the antiques, which is wholly impressive on its own. *It also throws those sad robotic workers into a helluva contrast with the rest of the place* , she muses. It’s hard for her to reconcile that she and Jaime, two highly detail-oriented people, didn’t notice that they weren’t living workers right away, but everything else on the property looks right out of a textbook. *At least Jaime can point to the fact that he was doped up. What’s my excuse?*

Frost flourishes over the windows, rooting into the leaded joints between the diamond-shaped panes and branching out into fern-like patterns that refract and subdue the light as it passes through. The moon is full tonight, and its effect on the Wall is almost painfully beautiful. The ice practically glows, bathing Castle Black in a luminous wash of silvery-blue. For a moment, Brienne is tempted to call Jaime in to see, but she’s still at a loss for how to explain why she’s been off all night.

Feeling agitated, she closes the window drapes and checks the wardrobe, sadly finding no suitable stand-in for pajamas. Seeing no better option, she strips down to her camisole and tap shorts, places her neatly folded blouse and pants on the chair near the fire, and empties the bed warmer before laying down.

It’s pleasantly warm and the mattress with just the right firmness for Brienne to find herself drifting to sleep almost immediately.

When she’s startled awake sometime later, she’s certain hours must have passed because the room is *cold* . Sharply cold, in a way that slices into your lungs and skin. And yet, according to her watch no more than an hour has passed..

A furtive shuffling can be heard just outside the bed curtains, interspersed with the occasional shivering groan. She whispers, “Jaime?”

The noise stops. “Damnit, I’m sorry. I was trying not to wake you.”

She peers through the narrow gap in the drapes and sees him standing by the bellpull. “What are you doing?”

“I was trying to summon additional sleeping furs but it's too dark to read the blasted sign. We left your quilt in the car, there's only one thin blanket in the solar, and the fire isn't cutting through the cold out there. Even with both our coats, I'm still freezing!” As if to underscore the situation, Brienne can hear Jaime's teeth chatter faintly as he speaks.

“Why don't you put more wood on the fire in here and then share the bed with me?” In the soft, frosted light she sees him swallow and run his hand through his hair. *I can't let him risk catching a chill just for my modesty*, she justifies.

A protracted silence yawns between them, but he finally murmurs, “Are you sure?”

She can't help but chuckle. “*Yes*, I'm sure. Thank you for checking, though.”

That wins her a lopsided grin. “Okay, then. I'll just...” he gestures to his layers of clothing and begins to undress. Brienne lets the drapes fall closed and sits back against her pillows, covers clutched high against her chest while she waits. It's torturous, only being able to hear the slither of his clothing as he removes each piece. Getting him ready for bed last night was decidedly different in tone. She realizes that she would very much like to help him undress again, but with him awake and watching her. She wants to hold his gaze and unwrap him, then join him in bed and feel him unravel.

As he climbs in, she's certain he'll be able to feel the heat of her blush. She only catches a glimpse before the curtains wrap them in darkness, but he's down to his A-shirt and long underwear, and the play of fire and moonlight along his shoulders and biceps sends a spark of desire licking along her inner thighs and lower abdomen.

By all accounts, this level of wantonness is unbecoming of a young woman, but Brienne is fairly sure that if she reached for Jaime right now, he would come into her arms willingly. Nothing in her entire life has felt correct the way this man does.

He must take her silence as reproach, however, because he says, “I'm sorry, Brienne.”

She groans. “You have nothing to be sorry for.”

“Clearly I do, because I ran my mouth and said something to hurt you.”

Now that her eyes have adjusted, she can see the faint outline of his form. He's sitting up the same way she is. “What you said reminded me of something that hurts, but your words themselves did not hurt me, Jaime.”

“I'm not sure if that's any better,” he grouses.

“Well, I am sure it's better, and my opinion is the one that matters right now.” She hopes her tone is shaped by the small smile spreading over her lips.

She feels his shoulder bump playfully against her own, but when he speaks his voice is soft, and unusually earnest. “Do you want to tell me about it?”

“Yes,” she breathes.

The headboard creaks as he settles back against it. “I’m all ears.”

She pauses a moment to arrange her thoughts; baring her feelings doesn’t come naturally. “Has anyone ever told you how I got into the film industry?”

“Not as I recall. You certainly haven’t,” he teases, gentle.

“It’s a mystery to a lot of people. My face, my body... they’re not photogenic, by any standards.” Her laugh is soft and tinged with bitterness. “But my brother - he was made for film.”

“You’ve never mentioned your brother.”

“Not by name, no.” A deluge of recollection rushes in and threatens to wash her away. She anchors herself by pulling her knees to her chest and placing a hand in the crook of Jaime’s arm. His other hand covers hers, squeezes tenderly. “Everyone thought he used a stage name. Marlen Tarth *sounds* like the sort of balderdash some Stage Door Johnny gives a chorus girl he’s trying to impress.”

Jaime lets out a *hmmm* and rubs his thumb soothingly against the back of her hand.

“But that was him. Marlen Tarth... Our parents died before I was even a year old, and Marlen - he wouldn’t talk about them. Something had happened. The only thing he was willing to cop to was that it was *foul* and he didn’t want to revisit it. So, I didn’t push. I could see how much it hurt and I hated to add to his pain. We spent four years in an orphanage out of old Haystack Hall.”

Jaime gasps. “That’s so close to where I grew up...”

“Is it? How strange...”

“I’m sorry to have interrupted. Please continue.” Softly, his fingers weave themselves with hers.

“It wasn’t a bad place, the orphanage. Perhaps dilapidated, and in want of numerous repairs - as is the way with old structures - yet we were safe, warm, and fed. But, just by their very nature, orphanages are the sorts of places that don’t let you forget your heartbreak, because every other kid there has a broken heart, too, and that knowledge constricts; it pinches. You’re there with all these other children, and you have this massive *thing* that bonds you, and yet the reality of how different you all are keeps you apart in strange ways. Different ages, different stages of development, different amounts of time growing up with a family before ending up there... the only true common ground is in absence, in what you *don’t* have. And what, statistically, many of you won’t have until you’re old enough to go out and find it yourself.

“I was lucky in that I had Marlen. He was five years older, tall, charismatic, and handsome. And he was a fierce protector. The other kids liked him, wanted to impress him, so for the

most part they left me alone. And it didn't hurt that I was exceptionally tall and strong for my age."

Jaime chuckles. "I can imagine you: all skinned knees and knobby elbows and enormous blue eyes."

"I was quite the handful! I practically lived in trees. One day I didn't hear the dinner bell, and by the time my brother and one of his friends found me, it was late enough that we were all risking a scolding, so instead of climbing down I just jumped. It had to be at least a fifteen-foot drop. Marlen was nearly apoplectic with worry that I'd hurt myself, but his friend was duly impressed; by the time supper was through, all the other kids had heard the tale and thought I was amazing. I still have trouble making friends, but they were *nice* to me and asked questions. As a result, I became quite the daredevil, much to Marlen's dismay."

"Well, it's understandable that you'd have felt incentivized to keep showing off."

"I thought so, too. And one day, it paid off. The orphanage would occasionally host socials and fundraisers, and a travelling sideshow set up shop for one of them. A woman called Barra Storm was in charge, and when she found me pestering one of the performers to show me the trick of eating glass, she was understandably baffled by this massive girl of five years who seemed to have no sense of self-preservation."

"You wanted to know *how to eat glass?!* " The shocked whites of Jaime's eyes reflect what little light makes it through the curtains.

"Not only did I want to know how to eat it, I actually learned."

"*You've eaten glass?!?!* "

"Quite a bit. It was part of my regular act as the Valyrian Steel Maid."

Jaime readjusts so that he's facing her. "So you joined the sideshow?" His voice is laced with wonder.

"When my brother found me talking to Barra about all the wild stunts I'd been pulling, she proposed that we work for her. Marlen confessed to aspiring towards acting, and Barra told him that his looks and charm combined with my iron constitution, strength, and dexterity would likely be quite popular; plus, she would allow me to work helping the show's cook in the chuckwagon while I learned tricks and feats of strength during downtime - my safety would be a priority. Marlen was ten at the time, and the matron at the orphanage had just found him work in the amber mines and also revealed to him that, with how quickly I was growing, she would expect me to start working within a year or two as well... so Barra's offer came at an opportune moment.

"Marlen took to show life like a duck to water, and I finally found a group of adults who didn't shame me for not meeting society's expectations. We did well there, and eventually I had my own pavilion. I was the Valyrian Steel Maid and my brother worked his way up to emcee. I was eighteen and he was twenty-three when my brother was scouted by Ladder Pictures. Petyr Baelish was desperate for a dashing Comedic Foil for his new comedy, and

Marlen had the exact look he was going for. While he was incredibly effective as a Straight Man, Marlen didn't have the knack for the slapstick elements the role required; however, at the point, he and I were the same height and build with the same shade of white blonde hair, which Baelish assured us was 'just berries'.

"He financed our relocation to Oldtown, where we lived in a tenement he owned near the studio. He agreed to pay Marlen the standard dayrate for an established Straight Man in exchange for both my brother and I working on the film. I acted as Marlen's double, performing all of his stunts, and because our situation was so precarious, I accepted every challenge - lest Baelish make good on one of his numerous threats to send us packing back to the Stormlands or throw us out on the street."

Brienne can feel the tension off of Jaime. "I want to pummel that Baelish creep," he grates.

"Yes, he seems to evoke that response in most people. But, anyway, the film in question, *Safety Never*, was a success and Baelish agreed to give us contracts." She feels the telltale sting of impending tears, but plows ahead. "My brother was thrilled, but I was unsure. I wanted to go back to the travelling show, where I trusted my coworkers and boss. But Marlen was really into the life. He took to haunting industry bars in fancy hotels, like Chateau Mormont and The Hightower Hills. One night he came home tipsy, and said that he'd met this shark of an agent for us at the Jousting Lounge, that this guy would take care of everything and I could say no if I wanted. 'I swear, Brie, this Egg really knows his onions!', he kept insisting. He was so excited that I let him set the meeting with Baelish." Hot tears sluice along her crooked nose, past the corners of her oversized mouth, then trace along her thick jaw before dripping onto the furs below.

"Afterward, he shows me our contracts and shows me where to sign. I read his first - mostly boilerplate terms, but definitely nothing to scoff at, considering we were both wet behind the ears. Mine was... well, you heard a bit of it from Miss M.

"And I was furious, because the work I did in *Safety Never* was good. Without me, that film would have suffered, but here comes my brother - my best friend, cohort, and staunchest defender - with a legal document that words itself like the studio is doing *me* a favor for deigning to allow me through its gates! I raged, I swore, I threatened revenge, hells - I threatened to leave, as I'd said I wanted to and Marlen said I could... and then I signed the damned thing... I'm such a fool." A sob bursts out of her with such violence that she rocks back into the headboard.

Suddenly, mattress and furs shift and she finds herself tugged down into an embrace. Brienne melts into Jaime as she settles, draped along his body with her face tucked beneath his chin. He presses a kiss to her forehead and hugs her tightly. She holds her loose arm awkwardly against her hip until Jaime takes her hand and presses it flat over his heart. His pulse is racing. After a moment, he asks, "What changed your mind?"

"I couldn't let my brother down."

"Ah. Baelish wouldn't take just him."

"You guessed it." She worries her lip.

“Did that bother your brother?”

“No, I don’t think it did. In his estimation, I was the real talent. He used to tell anyone who’d listen how brilliant my stuntwork was, how I’d contributed to the industry’s knowledge base, and that I had a bizarrely intellectual understanding of slapstick comedy that translated into perfect timing.”

“That’s all true. I’ve seen some of your comedies, Brienne.”

She smiles shyly against his neck, her lips accidentally brushing the apple of his throat. He shivers.

“Are you cold?”

“No.” Under her palm his heart beats out a wild tattoo. “Please go on.”

“Marlen genuinely believed that after I completed my four movies, Ladder would find me so invaluable that my next contract would have better terms. I wanted to trust him because he’d never given me a reason not to, so I stayed and I *tried*, but I began to notice things that were concerning...”

Jaime gently scratches up and down her arm, sending goosebumps rippling over her whole body. She snuggles into him deeper and entangles their feet together. “Like what?” he prompts.

“Mainly that when it came to safety, there was almost no oversight or accountability. There were times when a director would ask me to do a stunt where I got the sense they hadn’t even thought about whether or not it could be done in the first place; yet the task was always worded so that you knew you had to try or they’d just fire you and bring in someone who would.”

“And you being fired would get Marlen the boot, too,” Jaime says. “So you were trapped in a vicious circle. Did you tell your brother about your concerns?”

Brienne’s eyes and voice turn watery again. “I wanted to, but he was so happy. The studio opened tabs for him at all sorts of cushy restaurants and shops. Fans were recognizing him on the streets and asking for his autograph. After a lifetime of too much responsibility and never enough of anything else we needed, my own peace of mind seemed a small price to pay if it meant Marlen got a bit of freedom and joy.”

Jaime clears his throat. “I can’t say I would have done any differently. I love my brother very much.”

“And it’s not like I didn’t try to make things better for people. I took on the most dangerous stunts, when I could, and I spent my free time at the library or with the set builders, learning as much as I could about physics and technological advancements... but I should have done more.

“It was the Moat Cailin flick that changed everything,” she whispered. “I need you to promise me that you won’t tell a soul what I’m about to say.”

“I swear,” Jaime replies, solemn.

Brienne turns in his embrace so that her back is against his chest. He shifts and pulls her close, his arms banded around her protectively and his chin on her shoulder. *It’ll be easier to admit this way*, she thinks. *Better to speak these words against the chill, empty dark than Jaime’s skin.*

“The director brought in for Moat Cailin was a fool. He and Baelish had seen how popular epic films were becoming, and the intent was to move Ladder Pictures away from comedies and into *serious art*.” She scoffs. “Apparently that meant insanely under planned blockbuster action sequences. Are you familiar with the history of Moat Cailin?”

“That’s the swampy area of The Neck, right?”

“Correct. It’s the place where, according to myth, the First Men and Children of The Forest united to fight the Andals, and the Hammer of The Waters was brought down for the second time.”

“The first time being when the Children of The Forest broke the Arm of Dorne to try stop the First Men, right?”

“Right.”

“Those Children of The Forest really didn’t want us here.”

“Seems like,” she agrees. “The movie told the story of the battle at Moat Cailin. Marlen played the King in The North, and I even had a small role as a serving wench -”

“Ooh, I like the sound of you in that costume,” Jaime purred against the shell of her ear.

Brienne is barely able to contain the whimper which nearly escapes her. From the sound of his pleased chuckle, it didn’t go unnoticed.

“Well, it sounds better than it looked, mister,” she chides. “The climax was meant to be a scene where the flood rushes in and the actors are caught in the torrent. The set designer built these fantastically detailed miniature mock-ups of the shooting locations, and up until the day before filming that scene, the intent was to cut in shots of the miniatures with the simulated flood, but the Powers That Be changed their minds; they thought it would be better to rent an empty gasoline silo, rebuild parts of the set inside of it, and then flood the thing in real time while the actors performed.”

“That sounds incredibly stupid and dangerous.”

“It was. I begged to step in and act as Marlen’s double, but the director wouldn’t allow it. And my brother was too scared to risk being recast, so he got in that tank. The door which allowed walk-in entry had been welded shut, so the only point of ingress was a trapdoor on top of the silo. The damned thing was barely wider than a manhole in the street, and the

ladder which descended to the port valves inside was rusted and useless, so everything was lowered in by rope and pulley - including the actors.

“No one wanted to hear my thoughts on how insane the plan was, and how a lot of money was being wasted for shots that might not even look very good. Eventually, Baelish pulled me aside and sent me home for the day. I refused to move until I spoke to my brother, who was waiting in the tank for filming to begin, so they called security to throw me off the lot. It took three men to subdue me. By the time I got home, I had a broken nose, split lip, and a goose egg on the back of my head like you wouldn’t believe.”

“And something went wrong?”

“That would imply that anything was right, to begin with,” she says. “The rentals on the silo and waterproof equipment were costing them a small fortune, so corners were cut. No lifevests, no emergency services, no harnesses with safety lines, and not even time taken for a review of basic preventative protocols. It was a clusterfuck of unprecedented proportions, and that’s saying something given the industry.

“With the lower door welded shut, there was no way to drain the water other than through the sluice valves, which turned out to be broken. The system of piping they’d thrown together as a way to shunt the flow in multiple directions was flimsy and couldn’t withstand the pressure from the hose used for pumping. The film crew were set up in boats held in place by hastily-made cement anchors.

“And so, they called action before anyone bothered to check if the valves could be opened. The water blasts into this twisted mess of rusty pipes, blowing them apart in all directions: breaking lights, tipping one of the crew boats, knocking an extra unconscious. A six-foot-long segment impales my brother through the thigh and embeds into the concrete floor, effectively pinning him in place. The waterproof radio console they rented to touch base with the outside world malfunctioned immediately. Honestly, I can’t be sure anyone bothered to see if that worked beforehand, either. I doubt it.

“Meanwhile, the water is too loud, so no one hears the screams, and of course the person meant to be supervising from above - this malign cretin called Hoat - is down at the water tanker with his friends, swilling from a flask of bathtub gin!” Brienne gulps in bracing lungfuls of frigid air, curled in on herself and shaking like a leaf in a blizzard. Jaime envelopes her, wraps himself around her form rocks gently while he hums into the back of her neck.

It feels like an eternity before she calms, but Jaime holds her throughout. “It’s public that Marlen and four extras died, but not that five crew were also killed. And on the day of Marlen’s funeral, Baelish came by our- my apartment to tell me that the official story is that the accident was due to a rookie mistake by Ladder’s chief stunt coordinator. I asked who that was, and he said it was me...”

“He tried to blame you?”

Brienne’s laugh is brackish and bitter. “Hells, I blame me. I should have *done* something or pushed harder-”

“Brienne-”

“Why didn’t I say anything or drag Marlen back to the Stormlands?!” She can feel herself spiraling into despair. “And now it’s happening again, Jaime-”

“ *Brienne , please ...*” he begs.

“My mistakes got you hurt. I get everyone hurt. For Crone’s sake, I fucking wish I believed in curses so I could point to anything other than my own ineptitude!”

Cat-quick, Jaime extricates his splinted arm from beneath her shoulder and sits up. The sense of loss she feels without his embrace is like a shard of ice lanced through her heart. The bed curtains on his side part when he slips out, and she can hear him stalk across the floor. A beat passes with only the agitated pad of his sock-clad feet as proof that he hasn’t left.

Suddenly, the drapes next to her are flung wide and he’s there, kneeling so that his face is mere inches from hers. The firelight jukes to and fro, casting fitful shadows that dance and partially obscure his expression, but his eyes shine so beautifully: bright as laughter and greener than new grass. He cradles her face with both hands, his thumbs gently wiping away her tears. The linen wrap around his splinted hand feels cool against her cheek.

“I’m a monster, Jaime,” she whispers. Another wave of sadness hits her, but Jaime shakes his head vehemently.

“No.” His forehead meets hers. “ *No* , you’re not. You’re so good, Brienne - you have no idea. You’re everything.”

She cups his hands to her jaw, clinging to him for dear life. Her thumb caresses the back of his hand.

“Jaime, think about it. What did you ultimately hear about the accident in the news?” She needs him to understand, to acknowledge the baleful spectre of guilt which haunts her.

He pauses to think, “Hardly anything...”

“Exactly. And why would that be?”

“Baelish changed his mind about pinning the blame on you...”

“And?”

“Gave you control of the stunt department.”

“And why would he do that?” she prods.

“You blackmailed him.”

She can’t meet his eyes. “He’s hateful, and so am I,” she concludes. A fresh spring of tears wells over and cascades down her face when she tries to pull away. The shame is too much. *I don’t deserve comfort.*

Jaime's fingers tighten just enough that she stops, waits.

"Brienne, look at me." She does. "You are not a monster. You tried to stop it, you tried to help them. You fucking fought for them!" He touches his thumb to the crooked bridge of her nose, the fine scar above her lip; his fingers find the spot at the back of her head where studio security cracked her skull with a nightclub. "You stayed and made people safer by taking control the only way you could. For fuck's sake, he tried to ruin you. Don't you see? Please, Brienne..."

"B-but, I..." she comes up short.

Jaime smiles softly. "And, if you don't count my fuck-ups, how many accidents have happened since you took over, what was it- *three* years ago?"

"None," she whispers, eyes widening.

He looks triumphant. "That's my girl! See? You're amazing!"

Before she has a chance to overthink, she kisses him.

Chapter 7

Chapter Notes

There be fuckin' ahead, mateys.

Note the rating change. There is no plot in this chapter, so if you aren't into reading smut you don't need to worry you'll miss anything plot relevant.

Part of Jaime thinks that he must have done something worthy in another life to have earned Brienne's kiss. She's simultaneously shy and demanding, with her plush mouth teasing and mapping his in a deliciously slow manner, while her strong fingers weave themselves into his hair and *tug* - just short of painfully, but in the best way. Upon shifting forward, his knees crack, and both he and Brienne break apart in a fit of giggles.

"Do you need to get back into the bed, old man?" she teases.

Her skin looks exquisite in the firelight, smooth and flushed and dusted with a whole firmament's worth of freckles. For the first time, he takes in the deep blue silk of her camisole; propped on her side as such, he can see the delicate lines of her collarbone juxtaposed against the defined muscles of her neck and chest. And right where the fabric has slipped down and pooled against the bed, peeks the pale pink of a pebbled nipple. He's breathless and painfully hard.

"May I touch you?" he grits. "Do you want that?"

Her lips part on a gasp and she blushes furiously, and he's dying to get his hands on her but he can be patient for her. For Brienne, he'd wait out the whole damned universe.

"I do want that," she murmurs.

"And how may I service you, sweetling?" He begins to nudge the furs down, enthralled by the miles and miles of velvety skin wrapped around her powerful legs. He traces his index finger from the dent below her ankle up to her outer thigh, delighting in her warmth and the soft rasp of fine blonde hairs that disappear, so tantalizingly, beneath her shorts.

"Sweetling? Is that a new nickname you've got for me?" Jaime guesses she was aiming to sound wry, but her voice is too pitched and strained with desire for it to be convincing.

Still, he takes the bait. Careful of his splinted hand, he climbs up over her and hovers his mouth above hers.

"Sweetling, dame, Blue Serge, wench - let's be honest: those are all stand-ins for what I've been wanting to call you..."

Head tilted, she asks, “And what’s that?”

He leans close to whisper in her ear. “ *Mine* .”

Brienne whines against his shoulder and writhes, bringing her sex in contact with the front of his thigh. Through both layers of their clothing he can feel how drenched she is. The sensation and knowledge of how much they want one another sends a white-hot jolt straight to his cock, causing him to gasp and nearly spend himself in his pants. At a later time, he might be embarrassed by how quickly this woman can take him to the brink, but for now he just revels in her.

Her movements have shifted her camisole enough that her breasts are exposed, small yes, but also firm and perfect and *hers*. He cants his hips forward to give her better leverage, let’s her take her pleasure with every fluid grind of her cunt along his leg, while he gently kisses and sucks her nipples into sensitive peaks. Her orgasm strikes swiftly, causing her to arch off the bed, blunt nails digging into his back and shoulders. When she settles, she smiles at him so sweetly that his heart feels like it could burst. He leans back and gives her a moment to recover.

“You’re still dressed, Jaime,” she says. “I want to see you.”

He smirks, “Only if I get to see you, too.”

Brienne looks uncertain for a moment. Biting her lip, she asks, “You really want that?”

Jaime softens his gaze and takes her hand. “Brienne, I know what people have said to you about your appearance. I also know what this industry is like, and I promise that I understand I’m saying this from the comfort of my position as a conventionally attractive man, but I swear - I *love* to look at you, and what other people find appealing doesn’t matter to me in the least.”

Brienne offers him a shy smile, then shifts up onto her knees. She holds his gaze as she slowly lifts her top off and tosses it to the floor. *She’s a vision and looks half a goddess* , Jaime thinks. Maiden and Warrior in human form. Her hands go to the hem of his own shirt now. He kneels as well and lifts his arms so that she may undress him. With his shirt discarded, her hands are free to roam over his chest and abdomen. She scratches at his chest hair and smooths her palms over his stomach and back up to his shoulders, taking note of every helpless sigh and groan her touch elicits from him.

Next, she removes her shorts, sliding them down at a torturously slow pace, then walking forward on her knees until she can drag them off to be thrown aside. He wants to let her dictate the pace, so Jaime stays as still as he can manage, but the involuntary flex of his fingers gives up just how desperately he wants her.

Some of Brienne’s confidence seems to falter when she touches the waist of his long underwear. He takes a moment to kiss her, deep and thorough, before he takes her hand in his and they remove his pants together. Brienne encourages him to lie on his back, but he holds up a hand and positions himself so that he’s sitting up, leaning back against the headboard. Then he slaps his thighs. “Hop on.”

She raises an eyebrow. "Hop on?"

He shrugs. "Come and get it?"

Brienne laughs. "Worse."

Jaime parts his thighs and gives himself a slow stroke. "How's this, then? Come fuck me until I can't remember any word but *Brienne*."

She blushes again and crawls into his lap, teasing him with timid kisses while she rubs the seam of her cunt against the head of his cock. Jaime bends his knees and breaks their kiss. With his good hand, he pushes lightly after her chest so she'll lean back. He catches her eye, then looks pointedly down into the vee their bodies have created.

"I want to see us joined the first time."

Brienne grins and reaches down to guide his length to her entrance. "I wouldn't have thought you to be so sentimental," she muses.

He fully intends to retort, and he swears later it would have been quite clever, but before he has a chance, Brienne is lowering herself onto his cock and it's all he can do to keep his brain from shorting out from pleasure.

"Fuck, you feel incredible." His words are strained with the effort of holding still while Brienne adjusts. Her weight is so solid and comforting. Their bodies seem to fit together perfectly. She lifts her hips and circles them experimentally, drawing shocked moans from both of them. Her hands find his shoulders and she leans forward, thrusting her hips once more and finding that perfect spot again. She works him in tiny, precise motions, chasing her release and driving him wild. He wraps his splinted arm around her lower back, supporting her while she fucks him relentlessly. He slips his left hand between them to toy with her clit. When she arches, her breasts come close enough that he can get his mouth on her.

This time when she comes, she cries out loudly and shakes in his arms while they kiss. Leveraging his weight, he flips them over and enters her again in a long, slow glide that has her moaning into his mouth and locking her legs around his hips.

He fucks her hard and fast, ignoring the protest in his injured hand because this feels too good. Her walls are fluttering again, tighter and tighter and *tighter*, and then she's falling apart around him. His own climax takes him by surprise, and he barely has time to pull out beforehand. He does manage, though the lion's share of his spend ends up on the furs.

She whistles, low. "That was... wow."

He chuckles and grabs his discarded shirt to wipe his seed from Brienne's thighs and the furs. "I wholeheartedly agree with your assessment." When he's done, he climbs back into bed and pulls the furs up to cover them. "That was very, very *wow*."

Brienne nuzzles against his neck and touches his splint. "Is your hand okay after that?"

Absurdly, Jaime feels a swell of emotion at her concern. “It’s a little sore, but I haven’t taken my pain medication yet, so it’ll be fine.”

“Then I’ll get it for you,” she says, before disappearing into the other room for a couple minutes. She returns with a goblet, carafe, and his pills.

“Wine?” he asks.

She gives him a disapproving look. “Water.”

He laughs and takes his medication. “I’ve gotta say that you, naked and freshly fucked by yours truly, are far more likely than Peck to convince me to take my medicine.”

Chapter 8

Chapter Summary

The Castle Black Experience

The White Cold is coming, Jaime knows. The most important thing is that you find good food to bury for later, but that's harder to come by now that fewer of the tall hairless cats come around. But right now there's a tray in the hall outside the room with the dead raven, and there's bound to be some snick-snacks left unattended that the tall hairless cats won't miss. They're always wasting tasty treats.

Through the twisting burrows, he pads from shadow to shadow, perking his ears for the sound of any who might shoo him away. If Willow-cat has already taken the tray, he'll have to get even by stealing something of hers. Sometimes Hound-cat will leave out a dish of cream and a tin of flaky fish, but it's too cold for that tonight. Jaime *could* go to the kitchens, where the tall hairless cats leave a dish of crunchies out, but crunchies are boring. They are not as good as snick-snacks, no matter what Gendry-cat says.

The fastest way from here to the tray is through the ice cells; those cross part way under the Wall. That goes past the grain cellar, where you can take good naps curled up on a bag of buckwheat, and beyond that is where they put all the Creepy Fuckers, as Wolf-cat calls them, when they're broken or not wanted. The walls are shiny in the ice cells, where you can sometimes see Mirror-cat. Mirror-cat looks identical, with golden fur and green eyes. The tall hairless cats laugh if you try to touch Mirror-cat, and it never works anyway, so Jaime keeps moving.

Near the office Jaime stops at the sound of two voices. At first he's scared, but upon sneaking closer, it's just Wolf-cat and the one they call Miss M. Jaime waits near the door and cleans his fur. Sometimes Miss M gives scratchies. Her claws are good for that.

"I think you've got your job cut out for you, Mel, those two are a disaster," says Wolf-cat.

"I think they'll get there sooner than you're thinking," replies Miss M.

"Well, I can't deny that they spent near the whole time I was with them eyefucking, but before I left Lannister said something that upset her." Jaime ticks his tail at that name. *Lannister*. It sounds familiar.

"Oh? What was that?"

"They were joking about Fursei's name and Brienne's ancestry came up; that seemed to cause some friction."

“Yes, unfortunately that man has always been a bit of a heel when he runs his mouth without thinking. And every so often with thinking...”

Wolf-cat laughs.

“But I’m more worried about getting them both catalyzed than *if* they’ll fall in love. It’s clear they already care for each other, plus I’ve arranged for them to spend copious amounts of time together, but that’s only part of the equation. The other three all insist that we need to replicate as many conditions as possible, but I don’t think it needs to be that literal.”

“You made a good call on the weather tonight. What else do you need me to do?” asks Wolf-cat.

“Just call me with an update tomorrow and tell me if Jaime seems to remember that he’s eavesdropping on this conversation through your cat.” Miss M stands and steps into the hall before scratching behind Jaime’s ears. Then she walks away.

Wolf-cat leans against the door frame. “You’ve got it,” she says to Miss M’s back as she leaves. When they’re alone, Wolf-cat squats down and squints at Jaime. “I hope you’re in there, Lannister, because we’re running low on time.”

Willow practically kicks in the bedroom door with all the *oomph* of a knight storming a castle. “Good morning!” she sing-songs. Brienne doesn’t even get to savor waking up in Jaime’s arms because the sound startles her so violently. The bed curtains are closed, but as Willow moves about the room, stoking the fire, opening the window curtains, and humming, Brienne recalls with horror that their sex-stained underthings are strewn across the floor.

She clears her throat and tries to sound less embarrassed than she feels. “Um, thank you, Willow! We- I mean I will be out soon.”

Willow stops near the end of the bed. “You don’t want me to stay and help with your armor, Lord Commander Tarth?” Brienne isn’t sure, but she thinks there’s a teasing edge to Willow’s voice.

Brienne blushes, trying to work out if Willow has seen the evidence of their coupling. *Damnit, it reeks of sex in here*, she frets. “I- umm,” she stutters.

Jaime’s authoritative voice pierces the air. “Willow, if you would be so kind as to leave, I’d like to enjoy Lord Commander Tarth once more before we break our fast.”

“Very good, Lord Commander Lannister!” Willow replies. “Your clothes and armor are laid out for you and Lord Commander Tarth. Just call the lobby when you’re done and Wolf will arrive to give you your tour. Enjoy both of your meals, my Lord!”

After the outer door can be heard closing, Brienne rounds on him, wide-eyed. “I can’t believe you said that!”

He shoots her a sly grin. “She already knew I was in here.”

“Yes, but, now she thinks you’re going to *enjoy* me,” Brienne sputters.

He kisses her and she melts against him instantly. “Well then, in the spirit of honesty...” Jaime says, as he pushes back the sleeping furs and trails his mouth down her body.

After Jaime brings Brienne off three times, they help each other dress in their assigned Lord Commander garb. To their relief, the clothes don’t have any weird smells and they actually fit. Jaime instructs her on how to put on the chainmail hauberk, plate gorget, swordbelt, and cloak. Everything is black, as is tradition in the Night’s Watch.

Wolf gets there as Jaime and Brienne are finishing their breakfast of ham steak and fried root vegetables. If Willow said anything about the two Lords Commander defiling one another while their breakfast got cold, Wolf gives no indication.

To begin, Wolf presents them with two leather scrolls. One is a map of the castle, and the other is a list of all fifteen other castles on the Wall, along with names, numbers of men stationed at each one, etc. The year listed is 290, which Brienne supposes makes sense, as it was a relatively peaceful time for the Night’s Watch. Certainly the calm before the storm, as it were.

She also gives them a piece of parchment with their itinerary for the day. First up is a short meeting with the Lord Steward (Wolf), Lord Builder (the man from yesterday, who goes by ‘the Hound’), and Master-At-Arms (Wolf’s husband, Gendry). At the meeting, various projects are discussed, and Jaime commits to his role with glee. Brienne feels awkward, but after a bit settles into a cool persona, while Jaime affects an effusive, enthusiastic character.

Really, he’s just in an obnoxiously good mood, which would get on Brienne’s last nerve if she weren’t fairly sure that she’s responsible for his high spirits. Recalling their tumble, she blushes yet again and, of course, Jaime notices and gives her a smug grin.

Wolf leads them through the wormwalks, which turn out to be about what Brienne had expected: packed soil, hewn stone, and wooden supports. They visit the kitchens, where Willow is preparing lunch, then find Gendry at the forge. He shows them how to hammer a blade, and even allows Brienne to swing the hammer a few times. Then they tour the King’s Tower, to see where visiting nobles and dignitaries used to stay.

Lunch is served in their solar; a delicious, nutty cream stew doled out in trenchers of molasses bread. The meal is filling and warms Brienne down to her toes. Jaime wrinkles his nose at the stew initially, but must enjoy the taste because he ends up bolting down two more bowls, slurping like a man starved.

Brienne doubts that dessert was served too often when the Wall was in operation, but modern sensibilities require modern touches, and the vanilla bean acorn flour cake Willow presents them is so delicious that it’s worth a bit of anachronism. Jaime eats two servings of that, as well.

“I take it you’re feeling better,” she says.

He smiles and reaches for her hand across the table. “Thanks to you,” he replies with a wink.

Wolf reappears after their plates are cleared by Willow. “Now I’m going to show you the Wall and talk about its history. Please follow me, my Lords.”

They’re led through another set of tunnels and up a flight of stairs. An iron hatch opens into the area just beside the switchback stair. Sunlight streams weakly through gusts of snow and a hazy sky. The Wall looks dull as stone in this light, but all the more forbidding for it.

Wolf pulls her cape closed against the frigid winds, then guides them under a ledge where the gales won’t pelt them so hard. She points out the elevator winch nearby, which is coated in ice. “It’s not safe for us to use the lift when the winds are this bad, and I’d have to thaw the unit out, anyway. And it’s too windy for the stairs, so we won’t be going up to the top. I apologize, my Lords.”

Brienne shrugs, “That’s fine, Wolf. May I ask, what causes the discrepancy in color between the old ice and the newer sections?”

“The newer sections are clearer because they were frozen mechanically in Lodestar, then transported here. During the freezing process, the vessel was agitated to release any bubbles.”

“Mechanically? How long ago was it rebuilt?”

“Reconstruction lasted a decade, and was completed last year.” All of them are starting to shiver, so Wolf gestures toward the hatch they came out of before. “I’m freezing my tits off, let’s get back in... my Lords.” She chuckles.

Back inside, Brienne busies herself sweeping snow off of Jaime’s cloak, then they switch and he clears hers. Wolf stamps her boots into the packed dirt, shaking off the caked ice.

“I didn’t realize reconstruction was that recent,” Jaime muses.

Wolf nods. “Plans to rebuild the Wall came and went over hundreds of years, I’ve been told, but the cost and logistics of repairing it were a hard sell to a populace that believed their old foes vanquished.”

Jaime cocks his head to the side. “Do you not believe your old foes vanquished, Wolf?”

Wolf smiles enigmatically. “I believe that certainty costs dearly, my Lord. Now, shall I show you our stores?”

They follow the Lord Steward into what she calls the ice cells. “As you’ve likely guessed,” Wolf continues, “we are inside the Wall right now. This is where they kept food that could spoil, but prisoners were also kept here, from time to time.” She points to openings along the floor, too low for anyone to sit or stand. The imprisoned would have been forced to lay prone.

“That’s inhumane...” Brienne whispers.

“That’s the Wall,” Wolf replies. Something catches the woman’s eye over Brienne’s shoulder. When she turns to look, it’s just Jaime. He’s staring at his reflection in the ice, one hand raised as if to touch the mirrored version of himself.

Brienne rolls her eyes. “Jaime, stop primping and come join us!” she calls. When he doesn’t move, she goes to him and pats him on the shoulder. That seems to break whatever trance he’d been in, but he looks pale and his eyes are glassy. “Are you unwell?”

He shakes his head. “I’ve been here before, I could swear...”

“That’s just a feeling people get sometimes, Jaime. It’s our brains recognizing patterns, or things we’ve seen in books but don’t remember having seen.”

Jaime turns and strides down the chamber, stopping short of the exit. “Brienne, I’m serious.”

She snorts. “I don’t think you are.”

His scowl is something to behold. “If you go through this door, you’ll find a room full of burlap bags... a grain storage! And in the corner is a sack of buckwheat on its side with food and trinkets buried underneath.”

Wolf has joined them now, a look of amazement on her face. “How’d you guess that?”

Brienne pulls out the map of Castle Black and points to the room in question. “It says right here. *Grain Storage* . Honestly, you two.”

Wolf gives Brienne a look. “But he was right about the buckwheat. That’s our cat Fursei’s hoard. She naps there and hides things she’s taken when we piss her off.”

Jaime shoots Brienne a furtive glance. “You know, I did look at the map earlier. It might have been a lucky guess?”

Wolf looks unconvinced. “Okay, how about this? You tell me what’s in the room after the grain and I’ll comp this whole experience. You won’t owe me a single star.”

When she looks at Jaime, he meets Brienne’s eyes with a look of deep trepidation.

“Creepy Fuckers. That’s where you store the broken and spare animatronic workers.”

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