

BRIENNE

They came upon the first corpse a mile from the crossroads.

He swung beneath the limb of a dead tree whose blackened trunk still bore the scars of the lightning that had killed it. The carrion crows had been at work on his face, and wolves had feasted on his lower legs where they dangled near the ground. Only bones and rags remained below his knees... along with one well-chewed shoe, half-covered by mud and mold.

“What does he have in his mouth?” asked Podrick.

Brienne had to steel herself to look. His face was grey and green and ghastly, his mouth open and distended. Someone had shoved a jagged white rock between his teeth. A rock, or...

“Salt,” said Septon Meribald.

Fifty yards farther on they spied the second body. The scavengers had torn him down, so what remained of him was strewn on the ground beneath a frayed rope looped about the limb of an elm. Brienne might have ridden past him, unawares, if Dog had not sniffed him out and loped into the weeds for a closer smell.

“What do you have there, Dog?” Ser Hyle dismounted, strode after the dog, and came up with a halfhelm. The dead man’s skull was still inside it, along with some worms and beetles. “Good steel,” he pronounced, “and not too badly dented, though the lion’s lost his head. Pod, would you like a helm?”

“Not that one. It’s got worms in it.”

“Worms wash out, lad. You’re squeamish as a girl.”

Brienne scowled at him. “It is too big for him.”

“He’ll grow into it.”

“I don’t want to,” said Podrick. Ser Hyle shrugged, and tossed the broken helm back into the weeds, lion crest and all. Dog barked and went to lift his leg against the tree.

After that, hardly a hundred yards went by without a corpse. They dangled under ash and alder, beech and birch, larch and elm, hoary old willows and stately chestnut trees. Each man wore a noose around his neck, and swung from a length of hempen rope, and each man's mouth was packed with salt. Some wore cloaks of grey or blue or crimson, though rain and sun had faded them so badly that it was hard to tell one color from another. Others had badges sewn on their breasts. Brienne spied axes, arrows, several salmon, a pine tree, an oak leaf, beetles, bantams, a boar's head, half a dozen tridents. *Broken men*, she realized, *dregs from a dozen armies, the leavings of the lords*.

Some of the dead men had been bald and some bearded, some young and some old, some short, some tall, some fat, some thin. Swollen in death, with faces gnawed and rotten, they all looked the same. *On the gallows tree, all men are brothers*. Brienne had read that in a book, though she could not recall which one.

It was Hyle Hunt who finally put words to what all of them had realized. "These are the men who raided Saltpans."

"May the Father judge them harshly," said Meribald, who had been a friend to the town's aged septon.

Who they were did not concern Brienne half so much as who had hanged them. The noose was the preferred method of execution for Beric Dondarrion and his band of outlaws, it was said. If so, the so-called lightning lord might well be near.

Dog barked, and Septon Meribald glanced about and frowned. "Shall we keep a brisker pace? The sun will soon be setting, and corpses make poor company by night. These were dark and dangerous men, alive. I doubt that death will have improved them."

"There we disagree," said Ser Hyle. "These are just the sort of fellows who are most improved by death." All the same, he put his heels into his horse, and they moved a little faster.

Farther on the trees began to thin, though not the corpses. The woods gave way to muddy fields, tree limbs to gibbets. Clouds of crows rose screeching from the bodies as the travelers came near, and settled again

once they had passed. *These were evil men*, Brienne reminded herself, yet the sight still made her sad. She forced herself to look at every man in turn, searching for familiar faces. A few she thought she recognized from Harrenhal, but their condition made it hard to be certain. None had a hound's head helm, but few had helms of any sort. Most had been stripped of arms, armor, and boots before they were strung up.

When Podrick asked the name of the inn where they hoped to spend the night, Septon Meribald seized upon the question eagerly, perhaps to take their minds off the grisly sentinels along the roadside. "The Old Inn, some call it. There has been an inn there for many hundreds of years, though *this* inn was only raised during the reign of the first Jaehaerys, the king who built the kingsroad. Jaehaerys and his queen slept there during their journeys, it is said. For a time the inn was known as the Two Crowns in their honor, until one innkeep built a bell tower, and changed it to the Bellringer Inn. Later it passed to a crippled knight named Long Jon Heddle, who took up ironworking when he grew too old to fight. He forged a new sign for the yard, a three-headed dragon of black iron that he hung from a wooden post. The beast was so big it had to be made in a dozen pieces, joined with rope and wire. When the wind blew it would clank and clatter, so the inn became known far and wide as the Clanking Dragon."

"Is the dragon sign still there?" asked Podrick.

"No," said Septon Meribald. "When the smith's son was an old man, a bastard son of the fourth Aegon rose up in rebellion against his trueborn brother and took for his sigil a black dragon. These lands belonged to Lord Darry then, and his lordship was fiercely loyal to the king. The sight of the black iron dragon made him wroth, so he cut down the post, hacked the sign into pieces, and cast them into the river. One of the dragon's heads washed up on the Quiet Isle many years later, though by that time it was red with rust. The innkeep never hung another sign, so men forgot the dragon and took to calling the place the River Inn. In those days, the Trident flowed beneath its back door, and half its rooms were built out over the water. Guests could throw a line out their window and catch trout, it's said. There

was a ferry landing here as well, so travelers could cross to Lord Harroway's Town and Whitewalls."

"We left the Trident south of here, and have been riding north and west... not toward the river but away from it."

"Aye, my lady," the septon said. "The river moved. Seventy years ago, it was. Or was it eighty? It was when old Masha Heddle's grandfather kept the place. It was her who told me all this history. A kindly woman, Masha, fond of sourleaf and honey cakes. When she did not have a room for me, she would let me sleep beside the hearth, and she never sent me on my way without some bread and cheese and a few stale cakes."

"Is she the innkeep now?" asked Podrick.

"No. The lions hanged her. After they moved on, I heard that one of her nephews tried opening the inn again, but the wars had made the roads too dangerous for common folk to travel, so there was little custom. He brought in whores, but even that could not save him. Some lord killed him as well, I hear."

Ser Hyle made a wry face. "I never dreamed that keeping an inn could be so deadly dangerous."

"It is being common-born that is dangerous, when the great lords play their game of thrones," said Septon Meribald. "Isn't that so, Dog?" Dog barked agreement.

"So," said Podrick, "does the inn have a name *now*?"

"The smallfolk call it the crossroads inn. Elder Brother told me that two of Masha Heddle's nieces have opened it to trade once again." He raised his staff. "If the gods are good, that smoke rising beyond the hanged men will be from its chimneys."

"They could call the place the Gallows Inn," Ser Hyle said.

By any name the inn was large, rising three stories above the muddy roads, its walls and turrets and chimneys made of fine white stone that glimmered pale and ghostly against the grey sky. Its south wing had been built upon heavy wooden pilings above a cracked and sunken expanse of weeds and dead brown grass. A thatch-roofed stable and a bell tower were

attached to the north side. The whole sprawl was surrounded by a low wall of broken white stones overgrown by moss.

At least no one has burned it down. At Saltpans, they had found only death and desolation. By the time Brienne and her companions were ferried over from the Quiet Isle, the survivors had fled and the dead had been given to the ground, but the corpse of the town itself remained, ashen and unburied. The air still smelled of smoke, and the cries of the seagulls floating overhead sounded almost human, like the lamentations of lost children. Even the castle had seemed forlorn and abandoned. Grey as the ashes of the town around it, the castle consisted of a square keep girded by a curtain wall, built so as to overlook the harbor. It was closed tight as Brienne and the others led their horses off the ferry, nothing moving on its battlements but banners. It took a quarter hour of Dog barking and Septon Meribald knocking on the front gate with his quarterstaff before a woman appeared above them to demand their business.

By that time the ferry had departed and it had begun to rain. “I am a holy septon, good lady,” Meribald had shouted up, “and these are honest travelers. We seek shelter from the rain, and a place by your fire for the night.” The woman had been unmoved by his appeals. “The closest inn is at the crossroads, to the west,” she replied. “We want no strangers here. Begone.” Once she vanished, neither Meribald’s prayers, Dog’s barks, nor Ser Hyle’s curses could bring her back. In the end they had spent the night in the woods, beneath a shelter made of woven branches.

There was life at the crossroads inn, though. Even before they reached the gate, Brienne heard the sound: a hammering, faint but steady. It had a steely ring.

“A forge,” Ser Hyle said. “Either they have themselves a smith, or the old innkeep’s ghost is making another iron dragon.” He put his heels into his horse. “I hope they have a ghostly cook as well. A crisp roast chicken would set the world aright.”

The inn’s yard was a sea of brown mud that sucked at the hooves of the horses. The clang of steel was louder here, and Brienne saw the red glow of the forge down past the far end of the stables, behind an oxcart with a

broken wheel. She could see horses in the stables too, and a small boy was swinging from the rusted chains of the weathered gibbet that loomed above the yard. Four girls stood on the inn's porch, watching him. The youngest was no more than two, and naked. The oldest, nine or ten, stood with her arms protectively about the little one. "Girls," Ser Hyle called to them, "run and fetch your mother."

The boy dropped from the chain and dashed off toward the stables. The four girls stood fidgeting. After a moment one said, "We have no mothers," and another added, "I had one but they killed her." The oldest of the four stepped forward, pushing the little one behind her skirts. "Who are you?" she demanded.

"Honest travelers seeking shelter. My name is Brienne, and this is Septon Meribald, who is well-known through the riverlands. The boy is my squire, Podrick Payne, the knight Ser Hyle Hunt."

The hammering stopped suddenly. The girl on the porch looked them over, wary as only a ten-year-old can be. "I'm Willow. Will you be wanting beds?"

"Beds, and ale, and hot food to fill our bellies," said Ser Hyle Hunt as he dismounted. "Are you the innkeep?"

She shook her head. "That's my sister Jeyne. She's not here. All we have to eat is horse meat. If you come for whores, there are none. My sister run them off. We have beds, though. Some featherbeds, but more are straw."

"And all have fleas, I don't doubt," said Ser Hyle.

"Do you have coin to pay? Silver?"

Ser Hyle laughed. "Silver? For a night's bed and a haunch of horse? Do you mean to rob us, child?"

"We'll have silver. Else you can sleep in the woods with the dead men." Willow glanced toward the donkey, and the casks and bundles on his back. "Is that food? Where did you get it?"

"Maidenpool," said Meribald. Dog barked.

"Do you question all your guests this way?" asked Ser Hyle.

“We don’t have so many guests. Not like before the war. It’s mostly sparrows on the roads these days, or worse.”

“Worse?” Brienne asked.

“Thieves,” said a boy’s voice from the stables. “Robbers.”

Brienne turned, and saw a ghost.

Renly. No hammerblow to the heart could have felled her half so hard. “My lord?” she gasped.

“Lord?” The boy pushed back a lock of black hair that had fallen across his eyes. “I’m just a smith.”

He is not Renly, Brienne realized. Renly is dead. Renly died in my arms, a man of one-and-twenty. This is only a boy. A boy who looked as Renly had, the first time he came to Tarth. No, younger. His jaw is squarer, his brows bushier. Renly had been lean and lithe, whereas this boy had the heavy shoulders and muscular right arm so often seen on smiths. He wore a long leather apron, but under it his chest was bare. A dark stubble covered his cheeks and chin, and his hair was a thick black mop that grew down past his ears. King Renly’s hair had been that same coal black, but his had always been washed and brushed and combed. Sometimes he cut it short, and sometimes he let it fall loose to his shoulders, or tied it back behind his head with a golden ribbon, but it was never tangled or matted with sweat. And though his eyes had been that same deep blue, Lord Renly’s eyes had always been warm and welcoming, full of laughter, whereas this boy’s eyes brimmed with anger and suspicion.

Septon Meribald saw it too. “We mean no harm, lad. When Masha Heddle owned this inn she always had a honey cake for me. Sometimes she even let me have a bed, if the inn was not full.”

“She’s dead,” the boy said. “The lions hanged her.”

“Hanging seems your favorite sport in these parts,” said Ser Hyle Hunt. “Would that I had some land hereabouts. I’d plant hemp, sell rope, and make my fortune.”

“All these children,” Brienne said to the girl Willow. “Are they your... sisters? Brothers? Kin and cousins?”

“No.” Willow was staring at her, in a way that she knew well. “They’re just... I don’t know... the sparrows bring them here, sometimes. Others find their own way. If you’re a woman, why are you dressed up like a man?”

Septon Meribald answered. “Lady Brienne is a warrior maid upon a quest. Just now, though, she is in need of a dry bed and a warm fire. As are we all. My old bones say it’s going to rain again, and soon. Do you have rooms for us?”

“No,” said the boy smith. “Yes,” said the girl Willow.

They glared at one another. Then Willow stomped her foot. “They have *food*, Gendry. The little ones are hungry.” She whistled, and more children appeared as if by magic; ragged boys with unshorn locks crept from under the porch, and furtive girls appeared in the windows overlooking the yard. Some clutched crossbows, wound and loaded.

“They could call it Crossbow Inn,” Ser Hyle suggested.

Orphan Inn would be more apt, thought Brienne.

“Wat, you help them with those horses,” said Willow. “Will, put down that rock, they’ve not come to hurt us. Tansy, Pate, run get some wood to feed the fire. Jon Penny, you help the septon with those bundles. I’ll show them to some rooms.”

In the end they took three rooms adjoining one another, each boasting a featherbed, a chamber pot, and a window. Brienne’s room had a hearth as well. She paid a few pennies more for some wood. “Will I sleep in your room, or Ser Hyle’s?” Podrick asked as she was opening the shutters. “This is not the Quiet Isle,” she told him. “You can stay with me.” Come the morrow she meant for the two of them to strike out on their own. Septon Meribald was going on to Nutten, Riverbend, and Lord Harroway’s Town, but Brienne saw no sense in following him any farther. He had Dog to keep him company, and the Elder Brother had persuaded her that she would not find Sansa Stark along the Trident. “I mean to rise before the sun comes up, whilst Ser Hyle is still sleeping.” Brienne had not forgiven him for Highgarden... and as he himself had said, Hunt had sworn no vows concerning Sansa.

“Where will we go, ser? I mean, my lady?”

Brienne had no ready answer for him. They had come to the crossroads, quite literally; the place where the kingsroad, the river road, and the high road all came together. The high road would take them east through the mountains to the Vale of Arryn, where Lady Sansa’s aunt had ruled until her death. West ran the river road, which followed the course of the Red Fork to Riverrun and Sansa’s great-uncle, who was besieged but still alive. Or they could ride the kingsroad north, past the Twins and through the Neck with its bogs and marshes. If she could find a way past Moat Cailin and whoever held it now, the kingsroad would bring them all the way to Winterfell.

Or I could take the kingsroad south, Brienne thought. I could slink back to King’s Landing, confess my failure to Ser Jaime, give him back his sword, and find a ship to carry me home to Tarth, as the Elder Brother urged. The thought was a bitter one, yet there was part of her that yearned for Evenfall and her father, and another part that wondered if Jaime would comfort her should she weep upon his shoulder. That was what men wanted, wasn’t it? Soft helpless women that they needed to protect?

“Ser? My lady? I asked, where are we going?”

“Down to the common room, to supper.”

The common room was crawling with children. Brienne tried to count them, but they would not stand still even for an instant, so she counted some of them twice or thrice and others not at all, until she finally gave it up. They had pushed the tables together in three long rows, and the older boys were wrestling benches from the back. *Older* here meant ten or twelve. Gendry was the closest thing to a man grown, but it was Willow shouting all the orders, as if she were a queen in her castle and the other children were no more than servants.

If she were highborn, command would come naturally to her, and deference to them. Brienne wondered whether Willow might be more than she appeared. The girl was too young and too plain to be Sansa Stark, but she was of the right age to be the younger sister, and even Lady Catelyn had said that Arya lacked her sister’s beauty. *Brown hair, brown eyes, skinny... could it be?* Arya Stark’s hair was brown, she recalled, but Brienne was not

sure of the color of her eyes. *Brown and brown, was that it? Could it be that she did not die at Saltpans after all?*

Outside, the last light of day was fading. Inside, Willow had four greasy tallow candles lit and told the girls to keep the hearthfire burning high and hot. The boys helped Podrick Payne unpack the donkey and carried in the salt cod, mutton, vegetables, nuts, and wheels of cheese, whilst Septon Meribald repaired to the kitchens to take charge of the porridge. “Alas, my oranges are gone, and I doubt that I shall see another till the spring,” he told one small boy. “Have you ever had an orange, lad? Squeezed one and sucked down that fine juice?” When the boy shook his head no, the septon mussed his hair. “Then I’ll bring you one, come spring, if you will be a good lad and help me stir the porridge.”

Ser Hyle pulled off his boots to warm his feet by the fire. When Brienne sat down next to him, he nodded at the far end of the room. “There are bloodstains on the floor over there where Dog is sniffing. They’ve been scrubbed, but the blood soaked deep into the wood, and there’s no getting it out.”

“This is the inn where Sandor Clegane killed three of his brother’s men,” she reminded him.

“’Tis that,” Hunt agreed, “but who is to say that they were the first to die here... or that they’ll be the last.”

“Are you afraid of a few children?”

“Four would be a few. Ten would be a surfeit. This is a cacophony. Children should be wrapped in swaddling clothes and hung upon the wall until the girls grow breasts and the boys are old enough to shave.”

“I feel sorry for them. All of them have lost their mothers and fathers. Some have seen them slain.”

Hunt rolled his eyes. “I forgot that I was talking to a woman. Your heart is as mushy as our septon’s porridge. Can it be? Somewhere inside our swordswench is a mother just squirming to give birth. What you really want is a sweet pink babe to suckle at your teat.” Ser Hyle grinned. “You need a man for that, I hear. A husband, preferably. Why not me?”

“If you still hope to win your wager—”

“What I want to win is you, Lord Selwyn’s only living child. I’ve known men to wed lackwits and suckling babes for prizes a tenth the size of Tarth. I am not Renly Baratheon, I confess it, but I have the virtue of being still amongst the living. Some would say that is my only virtue. Marriage would serve the both of us. Lands for me, and a castle full of these for you.” He waved his hand at the children. “I am capable, I assure you. I’ve sired at least one bastard that I know of. Have no fear, I shan’t inflict her upon you. The last time I went to see her, her mother doused me with a kettle of soup.”

A flush crept up her neck. “My father’s only four-and-fifty. Not too old to wed again and get a son by his new wife.”

“That’s a risk... *if* your father weds again and *if* his bride proves fertile and *if* the babe’s a boy. I’ve made worse wagers.”

“And lost them. Play your game with someone else, ser.”

“So speaks a maid who has never played the game with anyone. Once you do you’ll take a different view. In the dark you’d be as beautiful as any other woman. Your lips were made for kissing.”

“They are lips,” said Brienne. “All lips are the same.”

“And all lips are made for kissing,” Hunt agreed pleasantly. “Leave your chamber door unbarred tonight, and I will steal into your bed and prove the truth of what I say.”

“If you do, you’ll be a eunuch when you leave.” Brienne got up and walked away from him.

Septon Meribald asked if he might lead the children in a grace, ignoring the small girl crawling naked across the table. “Aye,” said Willow, snatching up the crawler before she reached the porridge. So they bowed their heads together and thanked the Father and the Mother for their bounty... all but the black-haired boy from the forge, who crossed his arms against his chest and sat glowering as the others prayed. Brienne was not the only one to notice. When the prayer was done Septon Meribald looked across the table, and said, “Do you have no love for the gods, son?”

“Not for your gods.” Gendry stood abruptly. “I have work to do.” He stalked out without a bite of food.

“Is there some other god he loves?” asked Hyle Hunt.

“The Lord of Light,” piped one scrawny boy, nigh to six.

Willow hit him with her spoon. “Ben Big Mouth. There’s *food*. You should be eating it, not bothering m’lords with talk.”

The children fell upon the supper like wolves upon a wounded deer, quarreling over codfish, tearing the barley bread to pieces, and getting porridge everywhere. Even the huge wheel of cheese did not long survive. Brienne contented herself with fish and bread and carrots, whilst Septon Meribald fed two morsels to Dog for every one he ate himself. Outside, a rain began to fall. Inside, the fire crackled, and the common room was filled by the sounds of chewing, and Willow smacking children with her spoon. “One day that little girl will make some man a frightful wife,” Ser Hyle observed. “That poor ’prentice boy, most like.”

“Someone should take him some food before it’s all gone.”

“You’re someone.”

She wrapped a wedge of cheese, a heel of bread, a dried apple, and two chunks of flaky fried cod in a square of cloth. When Podrick got up to follow her outside, she told him to sit back down and eat. “I will not be long.”

The rain was coming down heavy in the yard. Brienne covered the food with a fold of her cloak. Some of the horses whinnied at her as she made her way past the stables. *They are hungry too.*

Gendry was at his forge, bare-chested beneath his leather apron. He was beating on a sword as if he wished it were a foe, his sweat-soaked hair falling across his brow. She watched him for a moment. *He has Renly’s eyes and Renly’s hair, but not his build. Lord Renly was more lithe than brawny... not like his brother Robert, whose strength was fabled.*

It was not until he stopped to wipe his brow that Gendry saw her standing there. “What do *you* want?”

“I brought supper.” She opened the cloth for him to see.

“If I wanted food, I would have eaten some.”

“A smith needs to eat to keep his strength up.”

“Are you my mother?”

“No.” She put down the food. “Who was your mother?”

“What’s that to you?”

“You were born in King’s Landing.” The way he spoke made her certain of it.

“Me and many more.” He plunged the sword into a tub of rainwater to quench it. The hot steel hissed angrily.

“How old are you?” Brienne asked. “Is your mother still alive? And your father, who was he?”

“You ask too many questions.” He set down the sword. “My mother’s dead and I never knew my father.”

“You’re a bastard.”

He took it for an insult. “I’m a *knight*. That sword will be mine own, once it’s done.”

What would a knight be doing working at a smithy? “You have black hair and blue eyes, and you were born in the shadow of the Red Keep. Has no one ever remarked upon your face?”

“What’s wrong with my face? It’s not as ugly as yours.”

“In King’s Landing you must have seen King Robert.”

He shrugged. “Sometimes. At tourneys, from afar. Once at Baelor’s Sept. The gold cloaks shoved us aside so he could pass. Another time I was playing near the Mud Gate when he come back from a hunt. He was so drunk he almost rode me down. A big fat sot, he was, but a better king than these sons of his.”

They are not his sons. Stannis told it true, that day he met with Renly. Joffrey and Tommen were never Robert’s sons. This boy, though... “Listen to me,” Brienne began. Then she heard Dog barking, loud and frantic.

“Someone is coming.”

“Friends,” said Gendry, unconcerned.

“What sort of friends?” Brienne moved to the door of the smithy to peer out through the rain.

He shrugged. “You’ll meet them soon enough.”

I may not want to meet them, Brienne thought, as the first riders came splashing through the puddles into the yard. Beneath the patter of the rain and Dog’s barking, she could hear the faint clink of swords and mail from beneath their ragged cloaks. She counted them as they came. *Two, four, six, seven*. Some of them were wounded, judging from the way they rode. The last man was massive and hulking, as big as two of the others. His horse was blown and bloody, staggering beneath his weight. All the riders had their hoods up against the lashing rain, save him alone. His face was broad and hairless, maggot white, his round cheeks covered with weeping sores.

Brienne sucked in her breath and drew Oathkeeper. *Too many*, she thought, with a start of fear, *they are too many*. “Gendry,” she said in a low voice, “you’ll want a sword, and armor. These are not your friends. They’re no one’s friends.”

“What are you talking about?” The boy came and stood beside her, his hammer in his hand.

Lightning cracked to the south as the riders swung down off their horses. For half a heartbeat darkness turned to day. An axe gleamed silvery blue, light shimmered off mail and plate, and beneath the dark hood of the lead rider Brienne glimpsed an iron snout and rows of steel teeth, snarling.

Gendry saw it too. “Him.”

“Not him. His helm.” Brienne tried to keep the fear from her voice, but her mouth was dry as dust. She had a pretty good notion who wore the Hound’s helm. *The children*, she thought.

The door to the inn banged open. Willow stepped out into the rain, a crossbow in her hands. The girl was shouting at the riders, but a clap of thunder rolled across the yard, drowning out her words. As it faded, Brienne heard the man in the Hound’s helm say, “Loose a quarrel at me and I’ll shove that crossbow up your cunt and fuck you with it. Then I’ll pop your

fucking eyes out and make you eat them.” The fury in the man’s voice drove Willow back a step, trembling.

Seven, Brienne thought again, despairing. She had no chance against seven, she knew. *No chance, and no choice.*

She stepped out into the rain, Oathkeeper in hand. “*Leave her be.* If you want to rape someone, try me.”

The outlaws turned as one. One laughed, and another said something in a tongue Brienne did not know. The huge one with the broad white face gave a malevolent *hisssssssssssssssss*. The man in the Hound's helm began to laugh. "You're even uglier than I remembered. I'd sooner rape your horse."

“Horses, that’s what we want,” one of the wounded men said. “Fresh horses, and some food. There are outlaws after us. Give us your horses and we’ll be gone. We won’t do you harm.”

“Fuck that.” The outlaw in the Hound’s helm yanked a battle axe off his saddle. “I want to cut her bloody legs off. I’ll set her on her stumps so she can watch me fuck the crossbow girl.”

“With what?” taunted Brienne. “Shagwell said they cut your manhood off when they took your nose.”

She meant it to provoke him, and it did. Bellowing curses, he came at her, his feet sending up splashes of black water as he charged. The others stood back to watch the show, as she had prayed they might. Brienne stayed as still as stone, waiting. The yard was dark, the mud slippery underfoot. *Better to let him come to me. If the gods are good, he'll slip and fall.*

The gods were not that good, but her sword was. *Five steps, four steps, now*, Brienne counted, and Oathkeeper swept up to meet his rush. Steel crashed against steel as her blade bit through his rags and opened a gash in his chainmail, even as his axe came crashing down at her. She twisted aside, slashing at his chest again as she retreated.

He followed, staggering and bleeding, roaring rage. “*Whore!*” he boomed. “*Freak! Bitch! I’ll give you to my dog to fuck, you bloody bitch!*” His axe whirled in murderous arcs, a brutal black shadow that turned silver

every time the lightning flashed. Brienne had no shield to catch the blows. All she could do was slide back away from him, darting this way and that as the axehead flew at her. Once the mud gave way under her heel and she almost fell, but somehow she recovered herself, though the axe grazed her left shoulder that time and left a blaze of pain in its wake. "You got the bitch!" one of the others called, and another said, "Let's see her dance away from that one."

Dance she did, relieved that they were watching. Better that than have them interfere. She could not fight seven, not alone, even if one or two were wounded. Old Ser Goodwin was long in his grave, yet she could hear him whispering in her ear. *Men will always underestimate you, he said, and their pride will make them want to vanquish you quickly, lest it be said that a woman tried them sorely. Let them spend their strength in furious attacks, whilst you conserve your own. Wait and watch, girl, wait and watch.* She waited, watching, moving sideways, then backwards, then sideways again, slashing now at his face, now at his legs, now at his arm. His blows came more slowly as his axe grew heavier. Brienne turned him so the rain was in his eyes, and stepped back two quick steps. He wrenched his axe up once more, cursing, and lurched after her, one foot sliding in the mud...

...and she leapt to meet his rush, both hands on her sword hilt. His headlong charge brought him right onto her point, and Oathkeeper punched through cloth and mail and leather and more cloth, deep into his bowels and out his back, rasping as it scraped along his spine. His axe fell from limp fingers, and the two of them slammed together, Brienne's face mashed up against the dog's head helm. She felt the cold wet metal against her cheek. Rain ran down the steel in rivers, and when the lightning flashed again she saw pain and fear and rank disbelief through the eye slits. "*Sapphires,*" she whispered at him, as she gave her blade a hard twist that made him shudder. His weight sagged heavily against her, and all at once it was a corpse that she embraced, there in the black rain. She stepped back and let him fall...

...and Biter crashed into her, shrieking.

He fell on her like an avalanche of wet wool and milk-white flesh, lifting her off her feet and slamming her down into the ground. She landed

in a puddle with a splash that sent water up her nose and into her eyes. All the air was driven out of her, and her head snapped down against some half-buried stone with a *crack*. “No,” was all that she had time to say before he fell on top of her, his weight driving her deeper into the mud. One of his hands was in her hair, pulling her head back. The other groped for her throat. Oathkeeper was gone, torn from her grasp. She had only her hands to fight him off, but when she slammed a fist into his face it was like punching a ball of wet white dough. He *hissed* at her.

She hit him again, again, *again*, smashing the heel of her hand into his eye, but he did not seem to feel her blows. She clawed at his wrists, but his grip just grew tighter, though blood ran from the gouges where she scratched him. He was crushing her, smothering her. She pushed at his shoulders to get him off her, but he was heavy as a horse, impossible to move. When she tried to knee him in the groin, all she did was drive her knee into his belly. Grunting, Biter tore out a handful of her hair.

My dagger. Brienne clutched at the thought, desperate. She worked her hand down between them, fingers squirming under his sour, suffocating flesh, searching until they finally found the hilt. Biter locked both his hands about her neck and began to slam her head against the ground. The lightning flashed again, this time inside her skull, yet somehow her fingers tightened, pulled the dagger from its sheath. With him on top of her, she could not raise the blade to stab, so she drew it hard across his belly. Something warm and wet gushed between her fingers. Biter *hissed* again, louder than before, and let go of her throat just long enough to smash her in the face. She heard bones crack, and the pain blinded her for an instant. When she tried to slash at him again, he wrenched the dagger from her fingers and slammed a knee down onto her forearm, breaking it. Then he seized her head again and resumed trying to tear it off her shoulders.

Brienne could hear Dog barking, and men were shouting all about her, and between the claps of thunder she heard the clash of steel on steel. *Ser Hyle*, she thought, *Ser Hyle has joined the fight*, but all that seemed far away and unimportant. Her world was no larger than the hands at her throat

and the face that loomed above her. The rain ran off his hood as he leaned closer. His breath stank like cheese gone rotten.

Brienne's chest was burning, and the storm was behind her eyes, blinding her. Bones ground against each other inside of her. Biter's mouth gaped open, impossibly wide. She saw his teeth, yellow and crooked, filed into points. When they closed on the soft meat of her cheek, she hardly felt it. She could feel herself spiraling down into the dark. *I cannot die yet*, she told herself, *there is something I still need to do*.

Biter's mouth tore free, full of blood and flesh. He spat, grinned, and sank his pointed teeth into her flesh again. This time he chewed and swallowed. *He is eating me*, she realized, but she had no strength left to fight him any longer. She felt as if she were floating above herself, watching the horror as if it were happening to some other woman, to some stupid girl who thought she was a knight. *It will be finished soon*, she told herself. *Then it will not matter if he eats me*. Biter threw back his head and opened his mouth again, howling, and stuck his tongue out at her. It was sharply pointed, dripping blood, longer than any tongue should be. Sliding from his mouth, out and out and out, red and wet and glistening, it made a hideous sight, obscene. *His tongue is a foot long*, Brienne thought, just before the darkness took her. *Why, it looks almost like a sword*.