

## BRIENNE

“I am looking for a maid of three-and-ten,” she told the grey-haired goodwife beside the village well. “A highborn maid and very beautiful, with blue eyes and auburn hair. She may have been traveling with a portly knight of forty years, or perhaps with a fool. Have you seen her?”

“Not as I recall, ser,” the goodwife said, knuckling her forehead. “But I’ll keep my eye out, that I will.”

The blacksmith had not seen her either, nor the septon in the village sept, the swineherd with his pigs, the girl pulling up onions from her garden, nor any of the other simple folk that the Maid of Tarth found amongst the daub-and-wattle huts of Rosby. Still, she persisted. *This is the shortest road to Duskendale*, Brienne told herself. *If Sansa came this way, someone must have seen her.* At the castle gates she posed her question to two spearmen whose badges showed three red chevrons on ermine, the arms of House Rosby. “If she’s on the roads these days she won’t be no maid for long,” said the older man. The younger wanted to know if the girl had that auburn hair between her legs as well.

*I will find no help here.* As Brienne mounted up again, she glimpsed a skinny boy atop a piebald horse at the far end of the village. *I have not talked with that one*, she thought, but he vanished behind the sept before she could seek him out. She did not trouble to chase after him. Most like he knew no more than the others had. Rosby was scarce more than a wide place in the road; Sansa would have had no reason to linger here. Returning to the road, Brienne headed north and east past apple orchards and fields of barley, and soon left the village and its castle well behind. It was at Duskendale that she would find her quarry, she told herself. *If she came this way at all.*

“I will find the girl and keep her safe,” Brienne had promised Ser Jaime, back at King’s Landing. “For her lady mother’s sake. And for yours.” Noble words, but words were easy. Deeds were hard. She had lingered too long and learned too little in the city. *I should have set out*

*earlier... but to where?* Sansa Stark had vanished on the night King Joffrey died, and if anyone had seen her since, or had any inkling where she might have gone, they were not talking. *Not to me, at least.*

Brienne believed the girl had left the city. If she were still in King's Landing, the gold cloaks would have turned her up. She had to have gone elsewhere... but elsewhere is a big place. *If I were a maiden newly flowered, alone and afraid, in desperate danger, what would I do?* she had asked herself. *Where would I go?* For her, the answer came easy. She would make her way back to Tarth, to her father. Sansa's father had been beheaded whilst she watched, however. Her lady mother was dead too, murdered at the Twins, and Winterfell, the great Stark stronghold, had been sacked and burned, its people put to the sword. *She has no home to run to, no father, no mother, no brothers.* She might be in the next town, or on a ship to Asshai; one seemed as likely as the other.

Even if Sansa Stark had wanted to go home, how would she get there? The kingsroad was not safe; even a child would know that. The ironborn held Moat Cailin athwart the Neck, and at the Twins sat the Freys, who had murdered Sansa's brother and lady mother. The girl could go by sea if she had the coin, but the harbor at King's Landing was still in ruins, the river a jumble of broken quays and burned and sunken galleys. Brienne had asked along the docks, but no one could remember a ship leaving on the night King Joffrey died. A few trading ships were anchoring in the bay and off-loading by boat, one man told her, but more were continuing up the coast to Duskendale, where the port was busier than ever.

Brienne's mare was sweet to look upon and kept a pretty pace. There were more travelers than she would have thought. Begging brothers trundled by with their bowls dangling on thongs about their necks. A young septon galloped past upon a palfrey as fine as any lord's, and later she met a band of silent sisters who shook their heads when Brienne put her question to them. A train of ox carts lumbered south with grain and sacks of wool, and later she passed a swineherd driving pigs, and an old woman in a horse litter with an escort of mounted guards. She asked all of them if they had seen a highborn girl of three-and-ten years with blue eyes and auburn hair.

None had. She asked about the road ahead as well. “’Twixt here and Duskendale is safe enough,” one man told her, “but past Duskendale there’s outlaws, and broken men in the woods.”

Only the soldier pines and sentinels still showed green; the broadleaf trees had donned mantles of russet and gold, or else uncloaked themselves to scratch against the sky with branches brown and bare. Every gust of wind drove swirling clouds of dead leaves across the rutted road. They made a rustling sound as they scuttled past the hooves of the big bay mare that Jaime Lannister had bestowed on her. *As easy to find one leaf in the wind as one girl lost in Westeros.* She found herself wondering whether Jaime had given her this task as some cruel jape. Perhaps Sansa Stark was dead, beheaded for her part in King Joffrey’s death, buried in some unmarked grave. How better to conceal her murder than by sending some big stupid wench from Tarth to find her?

*Jaime would not do that. He was sincere. He gave me the sword, and called it Oathkeeper.* Anyway, it made no matter. She had promised Lady Catelyn that she would bring back her daughters, and no promise was as solemn as one sworn to the dead. The younger girl was long dead, Jaime claimed; the Arya the Lannisters sent north to marry Roose Bolton’s bastard was a fraud. That left only Sansa. Brienne had to find her.

Near dusk she saw a campfire burning by a brook. Two men sat beside it grilling trout, their arms and armor stacked beneath a tree. One was old and one was somewhat younger, though far from young. The younger rose to greet her. He had a big belly straining at the laces of his spotted doeskin jerkin. A shaggy untrimmed beard covered his cheeks and chin, the color of old gold. “We have trout enough for three, ser,” he called out.

It was not the first time Brienne had been mistaken for a man. She pulled off her greathelm, letting her hair spill free. It was yellow, the color of dirty straw, and near as brittle. Long and thin, it blew about her shoulders. “I thank you, ser.”

The hedge knight squinted at her so earnestly that she realized he must be nearsighted. “A lady, is it? Armed and armored? Illy, gods be good, the *size* of her.”

“I took her for a knight as well,” the older knight said, turning the trout.

Had Brienne been a man, she would have been called big; for a woman, she was huge. *Freakish* was the word she had heard all her life. She was broad in the shoulder and broader in the hips. Her legs were long, her arms thick. Her chest was more muscle than bosom. Her hands were big, her feet enormous. And she was ugly besides, with a freckled, horsey face and teeth that seemed almost too big for her mouth. She did not need to be reminded of any of that. “Sers,” she said, “have you seen a maid of three-and-ten upon the road? She has blue eyes and auburn hair, and may have been in company with a portly red-faced man of forty years.”

The nearsighted hedge knight scratched his head. “I recall no such maid. What sort of hair is auburn?”

“Brownish red,” said the older man. “No, we saw her not.”

“We saw her not, m’lady,” the younger told her. “Come, dismount, the fish is almost done. Are you hungry?”

She was, as it happened, but she was wary as well. Hedge knights had an unsavory reputation. “A hedge knight and a robber knight are two sides of the same sword,” it was said. *These two do not look too dangerous.* “Might I know your names, sers?”

“I have the honor to be Ser Creighton Longbough, of whom the singers sing,” said the big-bellied one. “You will have heard of my deeds on the Blackwater, mayhaps. My companion is Ser Illifer the Penniless.”

If there was a song about Creighton Longbough, it was not one Brienne had heard. Their names meant no more to her than did their arms. Ser Creighton’s green shield showed only a brown chief, and a deep gouge made by some battle-axe. Ser Illifer bore gold and ermine gyronny, though everything about him suggested that painted gold and painted ermine were the only sorts he’d ever known. He was sixty if he was a day, his face pinched and narrow beneath the hood of a patched roughspun mantle. Mail-clad he went, but flecks of rust spotted the iron like freckles. Brienne stood a head taller than either of them, and was better mounted and better armed in the bargain. *If I fear the likes of these, I had as well swap my longsword for a pair of knitting needles.*

“I thank you, good sers,” she said. “I will gladly share your trout.” Swinging down, Brienne unsaddled her mare and watered her before hobbling her to graze. She stacked her arms and shield and saddlebags beneath an elm. By then the trout was crisply done. Ser Creighton brought her a fish, and she sat cross-legged on the ground to eat it.

“We are bound for Duskendale, m’lady,” Longbough told her, as he pulled apart his own trout with his fingers. “You would do well to ride with us. The roads are perilous.”

Brienne could have told him more about the perils of the roads than he might have cared to know. “I thank you, ser, but I have no need of your protection.”

“I insist. A true knight must defend the gentler sex.”

She touched her sword hilt. “This will defend me, ser.”

“A sword is only as good as the man who wields it.”

“I wield it well enough.”

“As you will. It would not be courteous to argue with a lady. We will see you safe to Duskendale. Three together may ride more safely than one alone.”

*We were three when we set out from Riverrun, yet Jaime lost his hand and Cleos Frey his life.* “Your mounts could not keep up with mine.” Ser Creighton’s brown gelding was an old swaybacked creature with rheumy eyes, and Ser Illifer’s horse looked weedy and half-starved.

“My steed served me well enough on the Blackwater,” Ser Creighton insisted. “Why, I did great carnage there and won a dozen ransoms. Was m’lady familiar with Ser Herbert Bolling? You shall never meet him now. I slew him where he stood. When swords clash, you shall ne’er find Ser Creighton Longbough to the rear.”

His companion gave a dry chuckle. “Creigh, leave off. The likes o’ her has no need for the likes o’ us.”

“The likes of me?” Brienne was uncertain what he meant.

Ser Illifer crooked a bony finger at her shield. Though its paint was cracked and peeling, the device it bore showed plain: a black bat on a field

divided bendwise, silver and gold. “You bear a liar’s shield, to which you have no right. My grandfather’s grandfather helped kill the last o’ Lothston. None since has dared to show that bat, black as the deeds of them that bore it.”

The shield was the one Ser Jaime had taken from the armory at Harrenhal. Brienne had found it in the stables with her mare, along with much else; saddle and bridle, chainmail hauberk and visored greathelm, purses of gold and silver and a parchment more valuable than either. “I lost mine own shield,” she explained.

“A true knight is the only shield a maiden needs,” declared Ser Creighton stoutly.

Ser Illifer paid him no mind. “A barefoot man looks for a boot, a chilly man a cloak. But who would cloak themselves in shame? Lord Lucas bore that bat, the Pander, and Manfryd o’ the Black Hood, his son. Why wear such arms, I ask myself, unless your own sin is fouler still... and *fresher*.” He unsheathed his dagger, an ugly piece of cheap iron. “A woman freakish big and freakish strong who hides her own true colors. Creigh, behold the Maid o’ Tarth, who opened Renly’s royal throat for him.”

“That is a lie.” Renly Baratheon had been more than a king to her. She had loved him since first he came to Tarth on his leisurely lord’s progress, to mark his coming of age. Her father welcomed him with a feast and commanded her to attend; otherwise she would have hidden in her room like some wounded beast. She had been no older than Sansa, more afraid of sniggers than of swords. *They will know about the rose*, she told Lord Selwyn, *they will laugh at me*. But the Evenstar would not relent.

And Renly Baratheon had shown her every courtesy, as if she were a proper maid, and pretty. He even danced with her, and in his arms she’d felt graceful, and her feet had floated across the floor. Later others begged a dance of her, because of his example. From that day forth, she wanted only to be close to Lord Renly, to serve him and protect him. But in the end she failed him. *Renly died in my arms, but I did not kill him*, she thought, but these hedge knights would never understand. “I would have given my life

for King Renly, and died happy,” she said. “I did no harm to him. I swear it by my sword.”

“A knight swears by his sword,” Ser Creighton said.

“Swear it by the Seven,” urged Ser Illifer the Penniless.

“By the Seven, then. I did no harm to King Renly. I swear it by the Mother. May I never know her mercy if I lie. I swear it by the Father, and ask that he might judge me justly. I swear it by the Maiden and Crone, by the Smith and the Warrior. And I swear it by the Stranger, may he take me now if I am false.”

“She swears well, for a maid,” Ser Creighton allowed.

“Aye.” Ser Illifer the Penniless gave a shrug. “Well, if she’s lied, the gods will sort her out.” He slipped his dagger back away. “The first watch is yours.”

As the hedge knights slept, Brienne paced restlessly around the little camp, listening to the crackle of the fire. *I should ride on whilst I can.* She did not know these men, yet she could not bring herself to leave them undefended. Even in the black of night, there were riders on the road, and noises in the woods that might or might not have been owls and prowling foxes. So Brienne paced, and kept her blade loose in its scabbard.

Her watch was easy, all in all. It was *after* that was hard, when Ser Illifer woke and said he would relieve her. Brienne spread a blanket on the ground, and curled up to close her eyes. *I will not sleep*, she told herself, bone weary though she was. She had never slept easily in the presence of men. Even in Lord Renly’s camps, the risk of rape was always there. It was a lesson she had learned beneath the walls of Highgarden, and again when she and Jaime had fallen into the hands of the Brave Companions.

The cold in the earth seeped through Brienne’s blankets to soak into her bones. Before long every muscle felt clenched and cramped, from her jaw down to her toes. She wondered whether Sansa Stark was cold as well, wherever she might be. Lady Catelyn had said that Sansa was a gentle soul who loved lemon cakes, silken gowns, and songs of chivalry, yet the girl had seen her father’s head lopped off and been forced to marry one of his

killers afterward. If half the tales were true, the dwarf was the cruelest Lannister of all. *If she did poison King Joffrey, the Imp surely forced her hand. She was alone and friendless at that court.* In King's Landing, Brienne had hunted down a certain Brella, who had been one of Sansa's maids. The woman told her that there was little warmth between Sansa and the dwarf. Perhaps she had been fleeing him as well as Joffrey's murder.

Whatever dreams Brienne dreamed were gone when dawn awoke her. Her legs were stiff as wood from the cold ground, but no one had molested her, and her goods remained untouched. The hedge knights were up and about. Ser Illifer was cutting up a squirrel for breakfast, while Ser Creighton stood facing a tree, having himself a good long piss. *Hedge knights*, she thought, *old and vain and plump and nearsighted, yet decent men for all that.* It cheered her to know that there were still decent men in the world.

They broke their fast on roast squirrel, acorn paste, and pickles, whilst Ser Creighton regaled her with his exploits on the Blackwater, where he had slain a dozen fearsome knights that she had never heard of. "Oh, it was a rare fight, m'lady," he said, "a rare and bloody fray." He allowed that Ser Illifer had fought nobly in the battle as well. Illifer himself said little.

When time came to resume their journey, the knights fell in on either side of her, like guards protecting some great lady... though this lady dwarfed both of her protectors and was better armed and armored in the nonce. "Did anyone pass by during your watches?" Brienne asked them.

"Such as a maid of three-and-ten, with auburn hair?" said Ser Illifer the Penniless. "No, my lady. No one."

"I had a few," Ser Creighton put in. "Some farm boy on a piebald horse went by, and an hour later half a dozen men afoot with staves and scythes. They caught sight of our fire, and stopped for a long look at our horses, but I showed them a glimpse of my steel and told them to be along their way. Rough fellows, by the look o' them, and desperate too, but ne'er so desperate as to trifle with Ser Creighton Longbough."

*No*, Brienne thought, *not so desperate as that.* She turned away to hide her smile. Thankfully, Ser Creighton was too intent on the tale of his epic



battle with the Knight of the Red Chicken to make note of the maiden's mirth. It felt good to have companions on the road, even such companions as these two.

It was midday when Brienne heard chanting drifting through the bare brown trees. "What is that sound?" Ser Creighton asked.

"Voices, raised in prayer." Brienne knew the chant. They are beseeching the Warrior for protection, asking the Crone to light their way.

Ser Illifer the Penniless bared his battered blade and reined in his horse to wait their coming. "They are close now."

The chanting filled the woods like pious thunder. And suddenly the source of the sound appeared in the road ahead. A group of begging brothers led the way, scruffy bearded men in roughspun robes, some barefoot and some in sandals. Behind them marched threescore ragged men, women, and children, a spotted sow, and several sheep. Several of the men had axes, and more had crude wooden clubs and cudgels. In their midst there rolled a two-wheeled wayn of grey and splintered wood, piled high with skulls and broken bits of bone. When they saw the hedge knights, the begging brothers halted, and the chanting died away. "Good knights," one said, "the Mother loves you."

"And you, brother," said Ser Illifer. "Who are you?"

"Poor fellows," said a big man with an axe. Despite the chill of the autumnal wood, he was shirtless, and on his breast was carved a seven-pointed star. Andal warriors had carved such stars in their flesh when first they crossed the narrow sea to overwhelm the kingdoms of the First Men.

"We are marching to the city," said a tall woman in the traces of the wayn, "to bring these holy bones to Blessed Baelor, and seek succor and protection from the king."

"Join us, friends," urged a spare small man in a threadbare septon's robe, who wore a crystal on a thong about his neck. "Westeros has need of every sword."

"We were bound for Duskendale," declared Ser Creighton, "but mayhaps we could see you safely to King's Landing."

“If you have the coin to pay us for this escort,” added Ser Illifer, who seemed practical as well as penniless.

“Sparrows need no gold,” the septon said.

Ser Creighton was lost. “Sparrows?”

“The sparrow is the humblest and most common of birds, as we are the humblest and most common of men.” The septon had a lean sharp face and a short beard, grizzled grey and brown. His thin hair was pulled back and knotted behind his head, and his feet were bare and black, gnarled and hard as tree roots. “These are the bones of holy men, murdered for their faith. They served the Seven even unto death. Some starved, some were tortured. Septs have been despoiled, maidens and mothers raped by godless men and demon worshipers. Even silent sisters have been molested. Our Mother Above cries out in her anguish. It is time for all anointed knights to forsake their worldly masters and defend our Holy Faith. Come with us to the city, if you love the Seven.”

“I love them well enough,” said Illifer, “yet I must eat.”

“So must all the Mother’s children.”

“We are bound for Duskendale,” Ser Illifer said flatly.

One of the begging brothers spat, and a woman gave a moan. “You are false knights,” said the big man with the star carved on his chest. Several others brandished their cudgels.

The barefoot septon calmed them with a word. “Judge not, for judgment is the Father’s. Let them pass in peace. They are poor fellows too, lost upon the earth.”

Brienne edged her mare forward. “My sister is lost as well. A girl of three-and-ten with auburn hair, fair to look upon.”

“All the Mother’s children are fair to look upon. May the Maiden watch over this poor girl... and you as well, I think.” The septon lifted one of the traces of the wayn upon his shoulder, and began to pull. The begging brothers took up the chant once more. Brienne and the hedge knights sat upon their horses as the procession moved slowly past, following the rutted

road toward Rosby. The sound of their chanting slowly dwindled away and died.

Ser Creighton lifted one cheek off the saddle to scratch his arse. “What sort of man would slay a holy septon?”

Brienne knew what sort. Near Maidenpool, she recalled, the Brave Companions had strung a septon up by his heels from the limb of a tree and used his corpse for archery practice. She wondered if his bones were piled in that wayn with all the rest.

“A man would need to be a fool to rape a silent sister,” Ser Creighton was saying. “Even to lay hands upon one... it’s said they are the Stranger’s wives, and their female parts are cold and wet as ice.” He glanced at Brienne. “Uh... beg pardon.”

Brienne spurred her mare toward Duskendale. After a moment, Ser Illifer followed, and Ser Creighton came bringing up the rear.

Three hours later they came up upon another party struggling toward Duskendale; a merchant and his serving men, accompanied by yet another hedge knight. The merchant rode a dappled grey mare, whilst his servants took turns pulling his wagon. Four labored in the traces as the other two walked beside the wheels, but when they heard the sound of horses they formed up around the wagon with quarterstaffs of ash at the ready. The merchant produced a crossbow, the knight a blade. “You will forgive me if I am suspicious,” called the merchant, “but the times are troubled, and I have only good Ser Shadrich to defend me. Who are you?”

“Why,” Ser Creighton said, affronted, “I am the famous Ser Creighton Longbough, fresh from battle on the Blackwater, and this is my companion, Ser Illifer the Penniless.”

“We mean you no harm,” said Brienne.

The merchant considered her doubtfully. “My lady, you should be safe at home. Why do you wear such unnatural garb?”

“I am searching for my sister.” She dared not mention Sansa’s name, with her accused of regicide. “She is a highborn maid and beautiful, with

blue eyes and auburn hair. Perhaps you saw her with a portly knight of forty years, or a drunken fool.”

“The roads are full of drunken fools and despoiled maidens. As to portly knights, it is hard for any honest man to keep his belly round when so many lack for food... though your Ser Creighton has not hungered, it would seem.”

“I have big bones,” Ser Creighton insisted. “Shall we ride together for a time? I do not doubt Ser Shadrich’s valor, but he seems small, and three blades are better than one.”

*Four blades*, thought Brienne, but she held her tongue.

The merchant looked to his escort. “What say you, ser?”

“Oh, these three are nought to fear.” Ser Shadrich was a wiry, fox-faced man with a sharp nose and a shock of orange hair, mounted on a rangy chestnut courser. Though he could not have been more than five foot two, he had a cocksure manner. “The one is old, t’other fat, and the big one is a woman. Let them come.”

“As you say.” The merchant lowered his crossbow.

As they resumed their journey, the hired knight dropped back and looked her up and down as if she were a side of good salt pork. “You’re a strapping healthy wench, I’d say.”

Ser Jaime’s mockery had cut her deep; the little man’s words hardly touched her. “A giant, compared to some.”

He laughed. “I am big enough where it counts, wench.”

“The merchant called you Shadrich.”

“Ser Shadrich of the Shady Glen. Some call me the Mad Mouse.” He turned his shield to show her his sigil, a large white mouse with fierce red eyes, on bendy brown and blue. “The brown is for the lands I’ve roamed, the blue for the rivers that I’ve crossed. The mouse is me.”

“And are you mad?”

“Oh, quite. Your common mouse will run from blood and battle. The mad mouse seeks them out.”

“It would seem he seldom finds them.”

“I find enough. ’Tis true, I am no tourney knight. I save my valor for the battlefield, woman.”

*Woman* was marginally better than *wench*, she supposed. “You and good Ser Creighton have much in common, then.”

Ser Shadrich laughed. “Oh, I doubt that, but it may be that you and I share a quest. A little lost sister, is it? With blue eyes and auburn hair?” He laughed again. “You are not the only hunter in the woods. I seek for Sansa Stark as well.”

Brienne kept her face a mask, to hide her dismay. “Who is this Sansa Stark, and why do you seek her?”

“For love, why else?”

She furrowed her brow. “Love?”

“Aye, love of gold. Unlike your good Ser Creighton, I did fight upon the Blackwater, but on the losing side. My ransom ruined me. You know who Varys is, I trust? The eunuch has offered a plump bag of gold for this girl you’ve never heard of. I am not a greedy man. If some oversized wench would help me find this naughty child, I would split the Spider’s coin with her.”

“I thought you were in this merchant’s hire.”

“Only so far as Duskendale. Hibald is as niggardly as he is fearful. And he is *very* fearful. What say you, wench?”

“I know no Sansa Stark,” she insisted. “I am searching for my sister, a highborn girl...”

“...with blue eyes and auburn hair, aye. Pray, who is this knight who travels with your sister? Or did you name him fool?” Ser Shadrich did not wait for her answer, which was good, since she had none. “A certain fool vanished from King’s Landing the night King Joffrey died, a stout fellow with a nose full of broken veins, one Ser Dontos the Red, formerly of Duskendale. I pray your sister and *her* drunken fool are not mistaken for the Stark girl and Ser Dontos. That could be most unfortunate.” He put his heels into his courser and trotted on ahead.

Even Jaime Lannister had seldom made Brienne feel such a fool. *You are not the only hunter in the woods.* The woman Brella had told her how Joffrey had stripped Ser Dontos of his spurs, how Lady Sansa begged Joffrey for his life. *He helped her flee,* Brienne had decided, when she heard the tale. *Find Ser Dontos, and I will find Sansa.* She should have known there would be others who would see it too. *Some may even be less savory than Ser Shadrich.* She could only hope that Ser Dontos had hidden Sansa well. *But if so, how will I ever find her?*

She hunched her shoulders down and rode on, frowning.

Night was gathering by the time their party came upon the inn, a tall, timbered building that stood beside a river junction, astride an old stone bridge. That was the inn's name, Ser Creighton told them: the Old Stone Bridge. The innkeep was a friend of his. "Not a bad cook, and the rooms have no more fleas than most," he vouched. "Who's for a warm bed tonight?"

"Not us, unless your friend is giving them away," said Ser Illifer the Penniless. "We have no coin for rooms."

"I can pay for the three of us." Brienne did not lack for coin; Jaime had seen to that. In her saddlebags she'd found a purse fat with silver stags and copper stars, a smaller one stuffed with golden dragons, and a parchment commanding all loyal subjects of the king to assist the bearer, Brienne of House Tarth, who was about His Grace's business. It was signed in a childish hand by Tommen, the First of His Name, King of the Andals, the Rhoynar, and the First Men, and Lord of the Seven Kingdoms.

Hibald was for stopping too, and bid his men to leave the wagon near the stables. Warm yellow light shone through the diamond-shaped panes of the inn's windows, and Brienne heard a stallion trumpet at the scent of her mare. She was loosening the saddle when a boy came out the stable door, and said, "Let me do that, ser."

"I am no *ser*," she told him, "but you may take the horse. See that she is fed and brushed and watered."

The boy reddened. "Beg pardons, m'lady. I thought..."

“It is a common mistake.” Brienne gave him the reins and followed the others into the inn, with her saddlebags across a shoulder and her bedroll tucked up beneath one arm.

Sawdust covered the plank floor of the common room, and the air smelled of hops and smoke and meat. A roast was spitting and crackling over the fire, unattended for the moment. Six locals sat about a table, talking, but they broke off when the strangers entered. Brienne could feel their eyes. Despite chainmail, cloak, and jerkin, she felt naked. When one man said, “Have a look at that,” she knew he was not speaking of Ser Shadrich.

The innkeep appeared, clutching three tankards in each hand and slopping ale at every step.

“Do you have rooms, good man?” the merchant asked him.

“I might,” the innkeep said, “for them as has coin.”

Ser Creighton Longbough looked offended. “Naggle, is that how you would greet an old friend? ’Tis me, Longbough.”

“’Tis you indeed. You owe me seven stags. Show me some silver and I’ll show you a bed.” The innkeep set the tankards down one by one, slopping more ale on the table in the process.

“I will pay for one room for myself, and a second for my two companions.” Brienne indicated Ser Creighton and Ser Illifer.

“I shall take a room as well,” said the merchant, “for myself and good Ser Shadrich. My serving men will bed down in your stables, if it please you.”

The innkeep looked them over. “It don’t please me, but might be I’ll allow it. Will you be wanting supper? That’s good goat on the spit, that is.”

“I shall judge its goodness for myself,” Hibald announced. “My men will content themselves with bread and drippings.”

And so they supped. Brienne tried the goat herself, after following the innkeep up the steps, pressing some coins into his hand, and stashing her goods in the second room he showed her. She ordered goat for Ser Creighton and Ser Illifer as well, since they had shared their trout with her.

The hedge knights and the septon washed down the meat with ale, but Brienne drank a cup of goat's milk. She listened to the table talk, hoping against hope that she might hear something that would help her find Sansa.

"You come from King's Landing," one of the locals said to Hibald. "Is it true that the Kingslayer's been crippled?"

"True enough," Hibald said. "He's lost his sword hand."

"Aye," Ser Creighton said, "chewed off by a direwolf, I hear, one of them monsters come down from the north. Nought that's good ever come from the north. Even their gods are queer."

"It was not a wolf," Brienne heard herself say. "Ser Jaime lost his hand to a Qohorik sellsword."

"It is no easy thing to fight with your off hand," observed the Mad Mouse.

"Bah," said Ser Creighton Longbough. "As it happens, I fight as well with either hand."

"Oh, I have no doubt of that." Ser Shadrich lifted his tankard in salute.

Brienne remembered her fight with Jaime Lannister in the woods. It had been all that she could do to keep his blade at bay. He was weak from his imprisonment, and chained at the wrists. No knight in the Seven Kingdoms could have stood against him at his full strength, with no chains to hamper him. Jaime had done many wicked things, but the man could fight! His maiming had been monstrously cruel. It was one thing to slay a lion, another to hack his paw off and leave him broken and bewildered.

Suddenly the common room was too loud to endure a moment longer. She muttered her good-nights and took herself up to bed. The ceiling in her room was low; entering with a taper in her hand, Brienne had to duck or crack her head. The only furnishings were a bed wide enough to sleep six, and the stub of a tallow candle on the sill. She lit it with the taper, barred the door, and hung her sword belt from a bedpost. Her scabbard was a plain thing, wood wrapped in cracked brown leather, and her sword was plainer still. She had bought it in King's Landing, to replace the blade the Brave Companions had stolen. *Renly's sword*. It still hurt, knowing she had lost it.



But she had another longsword hidden in her bedroll. She sat on the bed and took it out. Gold glimmered yellow in the candlelight and rubies smoldered red. When she slid Oathkeeper from the ornate scabbard, Brienne's breath caught in her throat. Black and red the ripples ran, deep within the steel. *Valyrian steel, spell-forged*. It was a sword fit for a hero. When she was small, her nurse had filled her ears with tales of valor, regaling her with the noble exploits of Ser Galladon of Morne, Florian the Fool, Prince Aemon the Dragonknight, and other champions. Each man bore a famous sword, and surely Oathkeeper belonged in their company, even if she herself did not. "You'll be defending Ned Stark's daughter with Ned Stark's own steel," Jaime had promised.

Kneeling between the bed and wall, she held the blade and said a silent prayer to the Crone, whose golden lamp showed men the way through life. *Lead me*, she prayed, *light the way before me, show me the path that leads to Sansa*. She had failed Renly, had failed Lady Catelyn. She must not fail Jaime. *He trusted me with his sword. He trusted me with his honor*.

Afterward she stretched out on the bed as best she could. For all its width it was not long enough, so Brienne lay across it sideways. She could hear the clatter of tankards from below, and voices drifting up the steps. The fleas that Longbough had spoken of put in their appearance. Scratching helped keep her awake.

She heard Hibald mount the stairs, and sometime later the knights as well. "...I never knew his name," Ser Creighton was saying as he went by, "but upon his shield he bore a blood-red chicken, and his blade was dripping gore..." His voice faded, and somewhere up above, a door opened and closed.

Her candle burned out. Darkness settled over the Old Stone Bridge, and the inn grew so still that she could hear the murmur of the river. Only then did Brienne rise to gather up her things. She eased the door open, listened, made her way barefoot down the steps. Outside she donned her boots and hurried to the stables to saddle her bay mare, asking a silent pardon of Ser Creighton and Ser Illifer as she mounted. One of Hibald's serving men woke when she rode past him, but made no move to stop her. Her mare's

hooves rang upon the old stone bridge. Then the trees closed in around her, black as pitch and full of ghosts and memories. *I am coming for you, Lady Sansa*, she thought as she rode into the darkness. *Be not afraid. I shall not rest until I've found you.*