

BRIENNE

This is an evil dream, she thought. But if she were dreaming, why did it hurt so much?

The rain had stopped falling, but all the world was wet. Her cloak felt as heavy as her mail. The ropes that bound her wrists were soaked through, but that only made them tighter. No matter how Brienne turned her hands, she could not slip free. She did not understand who had bound her, or why. She tried to ask the shadows, but they did not answer. Perhaps they did not hear her. Perhaps they were not real. Under her layers of wet wool and rusting mail, her skin was flushed and feverish. She wondered whether all of this was just a fever dream.

She had a horse beneath her, though she could not remember mounting. She lay facedown across his hindquarters, like a sack of oats. Her wrists and ankles had been lashed together. The air was damp, the ground cloaked in mist. Her head pounded with every step. She could hear voices, but all she could see was the earth beneath the horse's hooves. There were things broken inside of her. Her face felt swollen, her cheek was sticky with blood, and every jounce and bounce sent a stab of agony through her arm. She could hear Podrick calling her, as if from far away. "Ser?" he kept saying. "Ser? My lady? Ser? My lady?" His voice was faint and hard to hear. Finally, there was only silence.

She dreamt she was at Harrenhal, down in the bear pit once again. This time it was Biter facing her, huge and bald and maggot-white, with weeping sores upon his cheeks. Naked he came, fondling his member, gnashing his filed teeth together. Brienne fled from him. "My sword," she called. "Oathkeeper. Please." The watchers did not answer. Renly was there, with Nimble Dick and Catelyn Stark. Shagwell, Pyg, and Timeon had come, and the corpses from the trees with their sunken cheeks, swollen tongues, and empty eye sockets. Brienne wailed in horror at the sight of them, and Biter grabbed her arm and yanked her close and tore a chunk from her face. "Jaime," she heard herself scream, "*Jaime.*"

Even in the depths of dream the pain was there. Her face throbbed. Her shoulder bled. Breathing hurt. The pain crackled up her arm like lightning. She cried out for a maester.

“We have no maester,” said a girl’s voice. “Only me.”

I am looking for a girl, Brienne remembered. A highborn maid of three-and-ten, with blue eyes and auburn hair. “My lady?” she said. “Lady Sansa?”

A man laughed. “She thinks you’re Sansa Stark.”

“She can’t go much farther. She’ll die.”

“One less lion. I won’t weep.”

Brienne heard the sound of someone praying. She thought of Septon Meribald, but all the words were wrong. *The night is dark and full of terrors, and so are dreams.*

They were riding through a gloomy wood, a dank, dark, silent place where the pines pressed close. The ground was soft beneath her horse’s hooves, and the tracks she left behind filled up with blood. Beside her rode Lord Renly, Dick Crabb, and Vargo Hoat. Blood ran from Renly’s throat. The Goat’s torn ear oozed pus. “Where are we going?” Brienne asked. “Where are you taking me?” None of them would answer. *How can they answer? All of them are dead.* Did that mean that she was dead as well?

Lord Renly was ahead of her, her sweet smiling king. He was leading her horse through the trees. Brienne called out to tell him how much she loved him, but when he turned to scowl at her, she saw that he was not Renly after all. Renly never scowled. *He always had a smile for me,* she thought... except...

“Cold,” her king said, puzzled, and a shadow moved without a man to cast it, and her sweet lord’s blood came washing through the green steel of his gorget to drench her hands. He had been a warm man, but his blood was cold as ice. *This is not real,* she told herself. *This is another bad dream, and soon I’ll wake.*

Her mount came to a sudden halt. Rough hands seized hold of her. She saw shafts of red afternoon light slanting through the branches of a chestnut

tree. A horse rooted amongst the dead leaves after chestnuts, and men moved nearby, talking in quiet voices. Ten, twelve, maybe more. Brienne did not recognize their faces. She was stretched out on the ground, her back against a tree trunk. "Drink this, m'lady," said the girl's voice. She lifted a cup to Brienne's lips. The taste was strong and sour. Brienne spat it out. "Water," she gasped. "Please. Water."

"Water won't help the pain. This will. A little." The girl put the cup to Brienne's lips again.

It even hurt to drink. Wine ran down her chin and dribbled on her chest. When the cup was empty the girl filled it from a skin. Brienne sucked it down until she sputtered. "No more."

"More. You have a broken arm, and some of your ribs is cracked. Two, maybe three."

"Biter," Brienne said, remembering the weight of him, the way his knee had slammed into her chest.

"Aye. A real monster, that one."

It all came back to her; lightning above and mud below, the rain *pinging* softly against the dark steel of the Hound's helm, the terrible strength in Biter's hands. Suddenly she could not stand being bound. She tried to wrench free of her ropes, but all that did was chafe her worse. Her wrists were tied too tightly. There was dried blood on the hemp. "Is he dead?" She trembled. "Biter. *Is he dead?*" She remembered his teeth tearing into the flesh of her face. The thought that he might still be out there somewhere, breathing, made Brienne want to scream.

"He's dead. Gendry shoved a spearpoint through the back of his neck. Drink, m'lady, or I'll pour it down your throat."

She drank. "I am looking for a girl," she whispered, between swallows. She almost said *my sister*. "A highborn maid of three-and-ten. She has blue eyes and auburn hair."

"I'm not her."

No. Brienne could see that. The girl was thin to the point of looking starved. She wore her brown hair in a braid, and her eyes were older than

her years. *Brown hair, brown eyes, plain. Willow, six years older.* “You’re the sister. The innkeep.”

“I might be.” The girl squinted. “What if I am?”

“Do you have a name?” Brienne asked. Her stomach gurgled. She was afraid that she might retch.

“Heddle. Same as Willow. Jeyne Heddle.”

“Jeyne. Untie my hands. Please. Have pity. The ropes are chafing my wrists. I’m bleeding.”

“It’s not allowed. You’re to stay bound, till...”

“...till you stand before m’lady.” Renly stood behind the girl, pushing his black hair out of his eyes. *Not Renly. Gendry.* “M’lady means for you to answer for your crimes.”

“M’lady.” The wine was making her head spin. It was hard to think. “Stoneheart. Is that who you mean?” Lord Randyll had spoken of her, back at Maidenpool. “Lady Stoneheart.”

“Some call her that. Some call her other things. The Silent Sister. Mother Merciless. The Hangwoman.”

The Hangwoman. When Brienne closed her eyes, she saw the corpses swaying underneath the bare brown limbs, their faces black and swollen. Suddenly she was desperately afraid. “Podrick. My squire. Where is Podrick? And the others... Ser Hyle, Septon Meribald. Dog. What did you do with Dog?”

Gendry and the girl exchanged a look. Brienne fought to rise, and managed to get one knee under her before the world began to spin. “It was you killed the dog, m’lady,” she heard Gendry say, just before the darkness swallowed her again.

Then she was back at the Whispers, standing amongst the ruins and facing Clarence Crabb. He was huge and fierce, mounted on an aurochs shaggier than he was. The beast pawed the ground in fury, tearing deep furrows in the earth. Crabb’s teeth had been filed into points. When Brienne went to draw her sword, she found her scabbard empty. “No,” she cried, as Ser Clarence charged. It wasn’t fair. She could not fight without her magic

sword. Ser Jaime had given it to her. The thought of failing him as she had failed Lord Renly made her want to weep. “My sword. Please, I have to find my sword.”

“The wench wants her sword back,” a voice declared.

“And I want Cersei Lannister to suck my cock. So what?”

“Jaime called it Oathkeeper. *Please.*” But the voices did not listen, and Clarence Crabb thundered down on her and swept off her head. Brienne spiraled down into a deeper darkness.

She dreamed that she was lying in a boat, her head pillowed on someone’s lap. There were shadows all around them, hooded men in mail and leather, paddling them across a foggy river with muffled oars. She was drenched in sweat, burning, yet somehow shivering too. The fog was full of faces. “*Beauty,*” whispered the willows on the bank, but the reeds said, “*freak, freak.*” Brienne shuddered. “Stop,” she said. “Someone make them stop.”

The next time she woke, Jeyne was holding a cup of hot soup to her lips. *Onion broth,* Brienne thought. She drank as much of it as she could, until a bit of carrot caught in her throat and made her choke. Coughing was agony. “Easy,” the girl said.

“Gendry,” she wheezed. “I have to talk with Gendry.”

“He turned back at the river, m’lady. He’s gone back to his forge, to Willow and the little ones, to keep them safe.”

No one can keep them safe. She began to cough again. “Ah, let her choke. Save us a rope.” One of the shadow men shoved the girl aside. He was clad in rusted rings and a studded belt. At his hip hung longsword and dirk. A yellow greatcloak was plastered to his shoulders, sodden and filthy. From his shoulders rose a steel dog’s head, its teeth bared in a snarl.

“*No,*” Brienne moaned. “No, you’re dead, I killed you.”

The Hound laughed. “You got that backwards. It’ll be me killing you. I’d do it now, but m’lady wants to see you hanged.”

Hanged. The word sent a jolt of fear through her. She looked at the girl, Jeyne. *She is too young to be so hard.* “Bread and salt,” Brienne gasped.

“The inn... Septon Meribald fed the children... we broke bread with your sister...”

“Guest right don’t mean so much as it used to,” said the girl. “Not since m’lady come back from the wedding. Some o’ them swinging down by the river figured they was guests too.”

“We figured different,” said the Hound. “They wanted beds. We gave ’em trees.”

“We got more trees, though,” put in another shadow, one-eyed beneath a rusty pothelm. “We always got more trees.”

When it was time to mount again, they yanked a leather hood down over her face. There were no eyeholes. The leather muffled the sounds around her. The taste of onions lingered on her tongue, sharp as the knowledge of her failure. *They mean to hang me.* She thought of Jaime, of Sansa, of her father back on Tarth, and was glad for the hood. It helped hide the tears welling in her eyes. From time to time she heard the outlaws talking, but she could not make out their words. After a while she gave herself up to weariness and the slow, steady motion of her horse.

This time she dreamed that she was home again, at Evenfall. Through the tall arched windows of her lord father’s hall she could see the sun just going down. *I was safe here. I was safe.*

She was dressed in silk brocade, a quartered gown of blue and red decorated with golden suns and silver crescent moons. On another girl it might have been a pretty gown, but not on her. She was twelve, ungainly and uncomfortable, waiting to meet the young knight her father had arranged for her to marry, a boy six years her senior, sure to be a famous champion one day. She dreaded his arrival. Her bosom was too small, her hands and feet too big. Her hair kept sticking up, and there was a pimple nestled in the fold beside her nose. “He will bring a rose for you,” her father promised her, but a rose was no good, a rose could not keep her safe. It was a sword she wanted. *Oathkeeper. I have to find the girl. I have to find his honor.*

Finally the doors opened, and her betrothed strode into her father’s hall. She tried to greet him as she had been instructed, only to have blood come

pouring from her mouth. She had bitten her tongue off as she waited. She spat it at the young knight's feet, and saw the disgust on his face. "Brienne the Beauty," he said in a mocking tone. "I have seen sows more beautiful than you." He tossed the rose in her face. As he walked away, the griffins on his cloak rippled and blurred and changed to lions. *Jaime!* she wanted to cry. *Jaime, come back for me!* But her tongue lay on the floor by the rose, drowned in blood.

Brienne woke suddenly, gasping.

She did not know where she was. The air was cold and heavy, and smelled of earth and worms and mold. She was lying on a pallet beneath a mound of sheepskins, with rock above her head and roots poking through the walls. The only light came from a tallow candle, smoking in a pool of melted wax.

She pushed aside the sheepskins. Someone had stripped her of her clothes and armor, she saw. She was clad in a brown woolen shift, thin but freshly washed. Her forearm had been splinted and bound up with linen, though. One side of her face felt wet and stiff. When she touched herself, she found some sort of damp poultice covering her cheek and jaw and ear. *Biter...*

Brienne got to her feet. Her legs felt weak as water, her head as light as air. "Is anyone there?"

Something moved in one of the shadowed alcoves behind the candle; an old grey man clad in rags. The blankets that had covered him slipped to the floor. He sat up and rubbed his eyes. "Lady Brienne? You gave me a fright. I was dreaming."

No, she thought, *that was me*. "What place is this? Is this a dungeon?"

"A cave. Like rats, we must run back to our holes when the dogs come sniffing after us, and there are more dogs every day." He was clad in the ragged remains of an old robe, pink and white. His hair was long and grey and tangled, the loose skin of his cheeks and chin was covered with coarse stubble. "Are you hungry? Could you keep down a cup of milk? Perhaps some bread and honey?"

“I want my clothes. My sword.” She felt naked without her mail, and she wanted Oathkeeper at her side. “The way out. Show me the way out.” The floor of the cave was dirt and stone, rough beneath the soles of her feet. Even now she felt light-headed, as if she were floating. The flickering light cast queer shadows. *Spirits of the slain*, she thought, *dancing all about me, hiding when I turn to look at them*. Everywhere she saw holes and cracks and crevices, but there was no way to know which passages led out, which would take her deeper into the cave, and which went nowhere. All were black as pitch.

“Might I feel your brow, my lady?” Her gaoler’s hand was scarred and hard with callus, yet strangely gentle. “Your fever has broken,” he announced, in a voice flavored with the accents of the Free Cities. “Well and good. Just yesterday your flesh felt as if it were on fire. Jeyne feared that we might lose you.”

“Jeyne. The tall girl?”

“The very one. Though she is not so tall as you, my lady. Long Jeyne, the men call her. It was she who set your arm and splinted it, as well as any maester. She did what she could for your face as well, washing out the wounds with boiled ale to stop the mortification. Even so... a human bite is a filthy thing. That is where the fever came from, I am certain.” The grey man touched her bandaged face. “We had to cut away some of the flesh. Your face will not be pretty, I fear.”

It has never been pretty. “Scars, you mean?”

“My lady, that creature chewed off half your cheek.”

Brienne could not help but flinch. *Every knight has battle scars*, Ser Goodwin had warned her, when she asked him to teach her the sword. *Is that what you want, child?* Her old master-at-arms had been talking about sword cuts, though; he could never have anticipated Biter’s pointed teeth. “Why set my bones and wash my wounds if you only mean to hang me?”

“Why indeed?” He glanced at the candle, as if he could no longer bear to look at her. “You fought bravely at the inn, they tell me. Lem should not have left the crossroads. He was told to stay close, hidden, to come at once if he saw smoke rising from the chimney... but when word reached him that

the Mad Dog of Saltpans had been seen making his way north along the Green Fork, he took the bait. We have been hunting that lot for so long... still, he ought to have known better. As it was, it was half a day before he realized that the mummers had used a stream to hide their tracks and doubled back behind him, and then he lost more time circling around a column of Frey knights. If not for you, only corpses might have remained at the inn by the time that Lem and his men got back. *That* was why Jeyne dressed your wounds, mayhaps. Whatever else you may have done, you won those wounds honorably, in the best of causes.”

Whatever else you may have done. “What is it that you think I’ve done?” she said. “*Who are you?*”

“We were king’s men when we began,” the man told her, “but king’s men must have a king, and we have none. We were brothers too, but now our brotherhood is broken. I do not know who we are, if truth be told, nor where we might be going. I only know the road is dark. The fires have not shown me what lies at its end.”

I know where it ends. I have seen the corpses in the trees. “Fires,” Brienne repeated. All at once she understood. “You are the Myrish priest. The red wizard.”

He looked down at his ragged robes, and smiled ruefully. “The pink pretender, rather. I am Thoros, late of Myr, aye... a bad priest and a worse wizard.”

“You ride with the Dondarrion. The lightning lord.”

“Lightning comes and goes and then is seen no more. So too with men. Lord Beric’s fire has gone out of this world, I fear. A grimmer shadow leads us in his place.”

“The Hound?”

The priest pursed his lips. “The Hound is dead and buried.”

“I saw him. In the woods.”

“A fever dream, my lady.”

“He said that he would hang me.”

“Even dreams can lie. My lady, how long has it been since you have eaten? Surely you are famished?”

She was, she realized. Her belly felt hollow. “Food... food would be welcome, thank you.”

“A meal, then. Sit. We will talk more, but first a meal. Wait here.” Thoros lit a taper from the sagging candle, and vanished into a black hole beneath a ledge of rock. Brienne found herself alone in the small cave. *For how long, though?*

She prowled the chamber, looking for a weapon. Any sort of weapon would have served; a staff, a club, a dagger. She found only rocks. One fit her fist nicely... but she remembered the Whispers, and what happened when Shagwell tried to pit a stone against a knife. When she heard the priest’s returning footsteps, she let the rock fall to the cavern floor and resumed her seat.

Thoros had bread and cheese and a bowl of stew. “I am sorry,” he said. “The last of the milk had soured, and the honey is all gone. Food grows scant. Still, this will fill you.”

The stew was cold and greasy, the bread hard, the cheese harder. Brienne had never eaten anything half so good. “Are my companions here?” she asked the priest, as she was spooning up the last of the stew.

“The septon was set free to go upon his way. There was no harm in him. The others are here, awaiting judgment.”

“Judgment?” She frowned. “Podrick Payne is just a boy.”

“He says he is a squire.”

“You know how boys will boast.”

“The Imp’s squire. He has fought in battles, by his own admission. He has even killed, to hear him tell it.”

“A boy,” she said again. “Have pity.”

“My lady,” Thoros said, “I do not doubt that kindness and mercy and forgiveness can still be found somewhere in these Seven Kingdoms, but do not look for them here. This is a cave, not a temple. When men must live

like rats in the dark beneath the earth, they soon run out of pity, as they do of milk and honey.”

“And justice? Can that be found in caves?”

“Justice.” Thoros smiled wanly. “I remember justice. It had a pleasant taste. Justice was what we were about when Beric led us, or so we told ourselves. We were king’s men, knights, and heroes... but some knights are dark and full of terror, my lady. War makes monsters of us all.”

“Are you saying you are monsters?”

“I am saying we are human. You are not the only one with wounds, Lady Brienne. Some of my brothers were good men when this began. Some were... less good, shall we say? Though there are those who say it does not matter how a man begins, but only how he ends. I suppose it is the same for women.” The priest got to his feet. “Our time together is at an end, I fear. I hear my brothers coming. Our lady sends for you.”

Brienne heard their footsteps and saw torchlight flickering in the passage. “You told me she had gone to Fairmarket.”

“And so she had. She returned whilst we were sleeping. She never sleeps herself.”

I will not be afraid, she told herself, but it was too late for that. *I will not let them see my fear*, she promised herself instead. There were four of them, hard men with haggard faces, clad in mail and scale and leather. She recognized one of them; the man with one eye, from her dreams.

The biggest of the four wore a stained and tattered yellow cloak. “Enjoy the food?” he asked. “I hope so. It’s the last food you’re ever like to eat.” He was brown-haired, bearded, brawny, with a broken nose that had healed badly. *I know this man*, Brienne thought. “You are the Hound.”

He grinned. His teeth were awful; crooked, and streaked brown with rot. “I suppose I am. Seeing as how m’lady went and killed the last one.” He turned his head and spat.

She remembered lightning flashing, the mud beneath her feet. “It was Rorge I killed. He took the helm from Clegane’s grave, and you stole it off his corpse.”

“I didn’t hear him objecting.”

Thoros sucked in his breath in dismay. “Is this true? A dead man’s helm? Have we fallen that low?”

The big man scowled at him. “It’s good steel.”

“There is nothing good about that helm, nor the men who wore it,” said the red priest. “Sandor Clegane was a man in torment, and Rorge a beast in human skin.”

“I’m not them.”

“Then why show the world their face? Savage, snarling, twisted... is that who you would be, Lem?”

“The sight of it will make my foes afraid.”

“The sight of it makes me afraid.”

“Close your eyes, then.” The man in the yellow cloak made a sharp gesture. “Bring the whore.”

Brienne did not resist. There were four of them, and she was weak and wounded, naked beneath the woolen shift. She had to bend her neck to keep from hitting her head as they marched her through the twisting passage. The way ahead rose sharply, turning twice before emerging in a much larger cavern full of outlaws.

A fire pit had been dug into the center of the floor, and the air was blue with smoke. Men clustered near the flames, warming themselves against the chill of the cave. Others stood along the walls or sat cross-legged on straw pallets. There were women too, and even a few children peering out from behind their mothers’ skirts. The one face Brienne knew belonged to Long Jeyne Heddle.

A trestle table had been set up across the cave, in a cleft in the rock. Behind it sat a woman all in grey, cloaked and hooded. In her hands was a crown, a bronze circlet ringed by iron swords. She was studying it, her fingers stroking the blades as if to test their sharpness. Her eyes glimmered under her hood.

Grey was the color of the silent sisters, the handmaidens of the Stranger. Brienne felt a shiver climb her spine. *Stoneheart*.

“M’lady,” said the big man. “Here she is.”

“Aye,” added the one-eyed man. “The Kingslayer’s whore.”

She flinched. “Why would you call me that?”

“If I had a silver stag for every time you said his name, I’d be as rich as your friends the Lannisters.”

“That was only... you do not understand...”

“Don’t we, though?” The big man laughed. “I think we might. There’s a stink of *lion* about you, lady.”

“That’s not so.”

Another of the outlaws stepped forward, a younger man in a greasy sheepskin jerkin. In his hand was Oathkeeper. “This says it is.” His voice was frosted with the accents of the north. He slid the sword from its scabbard and placed it in front of Lady Stoneheart. In the light from the firepit the red and black ripples in the blade almost seem to move, but the woman in grey had eyes only for the pommel: a golden lion’s head, with ruby eyes that shone like two red stars.

“There is this as well.” Thoros of Myr drew a parchment from his sleeve, and put it down next to the sword. “It bears the boy king’s seal and says the bearer is about his business.”

Lady Stoneheart set the sword aside to read the letter.

“The sword was given me for a good purpose,” said Brienne. “Ser Jaime swore an oath to Catelyn Stark...”

“...before his friends cut her throat for her, that must have been,” said the big man in the yellow cloak. “We all know about the Kingslayer and his oaths.”

It is no good, Brienne realized. *No words of mine will sway them.* She plunged ahead despite that. “He promised Lady Catelyn her daughters, but by the time we reached King’s Landing they were gone. Jaime sent me out to seek the Lady Sansa...”

“...and if you had found the girl,” asked the young northman, “what were you to do with her?”

“Protect her. Take her somewhere safe.”

The big man laughed. “Where’s that? Cersei’s dungeon?”

“No.”

“Deny it all you want. That sword says you’re a liar. Are we supposed to believe the Lannisters are handing out gold and ruby swords to *foes*? That the Kingslayer meant for you to hide the girl from *his own twin*? I suppose the paper with the boy king’s seal was just in case you needed to wipe your arse? And then there’s the company you keep...” The big man turned and beckoned, the ranks of outlaws parted, and two more captives were brought forth. “The boy was the Imp’s own squire, m’lady,” he said to Lady Stoneheart. “T’other is one of Randyll Bloody Tarly’s bloody household knights.”

Hyle Hunt had been beaten so badly that his face was swollen almost beyond recognition. He stumbled as they shoved him, and almost fell. Podrick caught him by the arm. “Ser,” the boy said miserably, when he saw Brienne. “My lady, I mean. Sorry.”

“You have nothing to be sorry for.” Brienne turned to Lady Stoneheart. “Whatever treachery you think I may have done, my lady, Podrick and Ser Hyle were no part of it.”

“They’re lions,” said the one-eyed man. “That’s enough. I say they hang. Tarly’s hanged a score o’ ours, past time we strung up some o’ his.”

Ser Hyle gave Brienne a faint smile. “My lady,” he said, “you should have wed me when I made my offer. Now I fear you’re doomed to die a maid, and me a poor man.”

“*Let them go,*” Brienne pleaded.

The woman in grey gave no answer. She studied the sword, the parchment, the bronze-and-iron crown. Finally she reached up under her jaw and grasped her neck, as if she meant to throttle herself. Instead she spoke... Her voice was halting, broken, tortured. The sound seemed to come from her throat, part croak, part wheeze, part death rattle. *The language of the damned*, thought Brienne. “I don’t understand. What did she say?”

“She asked the name of this blade of yours,” said the young northman in the sheepskin jerkin.

“Oathkeeper,” Brienne answered.

The woman in grey *hissed* through her fingers. Her eyes were two red pits burning in the shadows. She spoke again.

“No, she says. Call it Oathbreaker, she says. It was made for treachery and murder. She names it *False Friend*. Like you.”

“To whom have I been false?”

“To her,” the northman said. “Can it be that my lady has forgotten that you once swore her your service?”

There was only one woman that the Maid of Tarth had ever sworn to serve. “That cannot be,” she said. “She’s dead.”

“Death and guest right,” muttered Long Jeyne Heddle. “They don’t mean so much as they used to, neither one.”

Lady Stoneheart lowered her hood and unwound the grey wool scarf from her face. Her hair was dry and brittle, white as bone. Her brow was mottled green and grey, spotted with the brown blooms of decay. The flesh of her face clung in ragged strips from her eyes down to her jaw. Some of the ribs were crusted with dried blood, but others gaped open to reveal the skull beneath.

Her face, Brienne thought. *Her face was so strong and handsome, her skin so smooth and soft.* “Lady Catelyn?” Tears filled her eyes. “They said... they said that you were dead.”

“She is,” said Thoros of Myr. “The Freys slashed her throat from ear to ear. When we found her by the river she was three days dead. Harwin begged me to give her the kiss of life, but it had been too long. I would not do it, so Lord Beric put his lips to hers instead, and the flame of life passed from him to her. And... she rose. May the Lord of Light protect us. She *rose*.”

Am I dreaming still? Brienne wondered. *Is this another nightmare born from Biter’s teeth?* “I never betrayed her. Tell her that. I swear it by the Seven. I swear it by my *sword*.”

The thing that had been Catelyn Stark took hold of her throat again, fingers pinching at the ghastly long slash in her neck, and choked out more sounds. “Words are wind, she says,” the northman told Brienne. “She says that you must prove your faith.”

“How?” asked Brienne.

“With your sword. *Oathkeeper*, you call it? Then keep your oath to her, milady says.”

“What does she want of me?”

“She wants her son alive, or the men who killed him dead,” said the big man. “She wants to feed the crows, like they did at the Red Wedding. Freys and Boltons, aye. We’ll give her those, as many as she likes. All she asks from you is Jaime Lannister.”

Jaime. The name was a knife, twisting in her belly. “Lady Catelyn, I... you do not understand, Jaime... he saved me from being raped when the Bloody Mummies took us, and later he came back for me, he leapt into the bear pit empty-handed... I swear to you, he is not the man he was. He sent me after Sansa to keep her safe, he could not have had a part in the Red Wedding.”

Lady Catelyn’s fingers dug deep into her throat, and the words came rattling out, choked and broken, a stream as cold as ice. The northman said, “She says that you must choose. Take the sword and slay the Kingslayer, or be hanged for a betrayer. The sword or the noose, she says. Choose, she says. *Choose*.”

Brienne remembered her dream, waiting in her father’s hall for the boy she was to marry. In the dream she had bitten off her tongue. *My mouth was full of blood*. She took a ragged breath and said, “I will not make that choice.”

There was a long silence. Then Lady Stoneheart spoke again. This time Brienne understood her words. There were only two. “*Hang them*,” she croaked.

“As you command, m’lady,” said the big man.

They bound Brienne's wrists with rope again and led her from the cavern, up a twisting stony path to the surface. It was morning outside, she was surprised to see. Shafts of pale dawn light were slanting through the trees. *So many trees to choose from*, she thought. *They will not need to take us far*.

Nor did they. Beneath a crooked willow, the outlaws slipped a noose about her neck, jerked it tight, and tossed the other end of the rope over a limb. Hyle Hunt and Podrick Payne were given elms. Ser Hyle was shouting that he would kill Jaime Lannister, but the Hound cuffed him across the face and shut him up. He had donned the helm again. "If you got crimes to confess to your gods, this would be the time to say them."

"Podrick has never harmed you. My father will ransom him. Tarth is called the sapphire isle. Send Podrick with my bones to Evenfall, and you'll have sapphires, silver, whatever you want."

"I want my wife and daughter back," said the Hound. "Can your father give me that? If not, he can get buggered. The boy will rot beside you. Wolves will gnaw your bones."

"Do you mean to hang her, Lem?" asked the one-eyed man. "Or do you figure to talk the bitch to death?"

The Hound snatched the end of the rope from the man holding it. "Let's see if she can dance," he said, and gave a yank.

Brienne felt the hemp constricting, digging into her skin, jerking her chin upward. Ser Hyle was cursing them eloquently, but not the boy. Podrick never lifted his eyes, not even when his feet were jerked up off the ground. *If this is another dream, it is time for me to awaken. If this is real, it is time for me to die*. All she could see was Podrick, the noose around his thin neck, his legs twitching. Her mouth opened. Pod was kicking, choking, *dying*. Brienne sucked the air in desperately, even as the rope was strangling her. Nothing had ever hurt so much.

She screamed a word.