

BRIENNE

The stone wall was old and crumbling, but the sight of it across the field made the hairs on Brienne's neck stand up.

That was where the archers hid and slew poor Cleos Frey, she thought... but half a mile farther on she passed another wall that looked much like the first and found herself uncertain. The rutted road turned and twisted, and the bare brown trees looked different from the green ones she remembered. Had she ridden past the place where Ser Jaime had snatched his cousin's sword from its scabbard? Where were the woods they'd fought in? The stream where they'd splashed and slashed at one another until they drew the Brave Companions down upon them?

"My lady? Ser?" Podrick never seemed certain what to call her. "What are you looking for?"

Ghosts. "A wall I rode by once. It does not matter." *It was when Ser Jaime still had both his hands. How I loathed him, with all his taunts and smiles.* "Stay quiet, Podrick. There may still be outlaws in these woods."

The boy looked at the bare brown trees, the wet leaves, the muddy road ahead. "I have a longsword. I can fight."

Not well enough. Brienne did not doubt the boy's courage, only his training. A squire he might be, in name at least, but the men he'd squired for had served him ill.

She had gotten his story out of him in fits and starts on the road from Duskendale. His was a lesser branch of House Payne, an impoverished offshoot sprouted from the loins of a younger son. His father had spent his life squiring for richer cousins and had sired Podrick upon a Chandler's daughter he'd wed before going off to die in the Greyjoy Rebellion. His mother had abandoned him with one of those cousins when he was four, so she could run after a wandering singer who had put another baby in her belly. Podrick did not remember what she looked like. Ser Cedric Payne had been the nearest thing to a parent the boy had ever known, though from

his stammered stories it seemed to Brienne that cousin Cedric had treated Podrick more like a servant than a son. When Casterly Rock called its banners, the knight had taken him along to tend his horse and clean his mail. Then Ser Cedric had been slain in the riverlands whilst fighting in Lord Tywin's host.

Far from home, alone, and penniless, the boy had attached himself to a fat hedge knight named Ser Lorimer the Belly, who was part of Lord Lefford's contingent, charged with protecting the baggage train. "The boys who guard the foodstuffs always eat the best," Ser Lorimer liked to say, until he was discovered with a salted ham he'd stolen from Lord Tywin's personal stores. Tywin Lannister chose to hang him as a lesson to other looters. Podrick had shared the ham and might have shared the rope as well, but his name had saved him. Ser Kevan Lannister took charge of him, and sometime later sent the boy to squire for his nephew Tyrion.

Ser Cedric had taught Podrick how to groom a horse and check his shoes for stones, and Ser Lorimer had taught him how to steal, but neither had given him much training with a sword. The Imp at least had dispatched him to the Red Keep's master-at-arms when they came to court. But during the bread riots Ser Aron Santagar had been amongst those slain, and that had been the end of Podrick's training.

Brienne cut two wooden swords from fallen branches to get a sense of Podrick's skills. The boy was slow of speech but not of hand, she was pleased to learn. Though fearless and attentive, he was also underfed and skinny, and not near strong enough. If he had survived the Battle of the Blackwater as he claimed, it could only be because no one thought him worth the killing. "You may call yourself a squire," she told him, "but I've seen pages half your age who could have beat you bloody. If you stay with me, you'll go to sleep with blisters on your hands and bruises on your arms most every night, and you'll be so stiff and sore you'll hardly sleep. You don't want that."

"I do," the boy insisted. "I want that. The bruises and the blisters. I mean, I don't, but I do. Ser. My lady."

So far he had been true to his word, and Brienne had been true to hers. Podrick had not complained. Every time he raised a new blister on his sword hand, he felt the need to show it to her proudly. He took good care of their horses too. *He is still no squire*, she reminded herself, *but I am no knight, no matter how many times he calls me "ser."* She would have sent him on his way, but he had nowhere to go. Besides, though Podrick said he did not know where Sansa Stark had gone, it might be that he knew more than he realized. Some chance remark, half-remembered, might hold the key to Brienne's quest.

"Ser? My lady?" Podrick pointed. "There's a cart ahead."

Brienne saw it: a wooden oxcart, two-wheeled and high-sided. A man and a woman were laboring in the traces, pulling the cart along the ruts toward Maidenpool. *Farm folk, by the look of them.* "Slowly now," she told the boy. "They may take us for outlaws. Say no more than you must and be courteous."

"I will, ser. Be courteous. My lady." The boy seemed almost pleased by the prospect of being taken for an outlaw.

The farm folk watched them warily as they came trotting up, but once Brienne made it plain that she meant them no harm, they let her ride beside them. "We used to have an ox," the old man told her as they made their way through the weed-choked fields, lakes of soft mud, and burnt and blackened trees, "but the wolves made off with him." His face was red from the effort of pulling the cart. "They took off our daughter too and had their way with her, but she come wandering back after the battle down at Duskendale. The ox never did. The wolves ate him, I expect."

The woman had little to add. She was younger than the man by twenty years, but never spoke a word, only looked at Brienne the same way she might have looked at a two-headed calf. The Maid of Tarth had seen such eyes before. Lady Stark had been kind to her, but most women were just as cruel as men. She could not have said which she found most hurtful, the pretty girls with their waspish tongues and brittle laughter or the cold-eyed ladies who hid their disdain behind a mask of courtesy. And common

women could be worse than either. “Maidenpool was all in ruins when last I saw it,” she said. “The gates were broken and half the town was burned.”

“They rebuilt it some. This Tarly, he’s a hard man, but a braver lord than Mooton. There’s still outlaws in the woods, but not so many as there was. Tarly hunted down the worst o’ them and shortened them with that big sword o’ his.” He turned his head and spat. “You’ve seen no outlaws on the road?”

“None.” *Not this time.* The farther they had come from Duskendale, the emptier the road had been. The only travelers they’d glimpsed had melted away into the woods before they reached them, save for a big, bearded septon they met walking south with twoscore footsore followers. Such inns as they passed had either been sacked and abandoned or turned into armed camps. Yesterday they had encountered one of Lord Randyll’s patrols, bristling with longbows and lances. The horsemen had surrounded them while their captain questioned Brienne, but in the end he’d let them continue on their way. “Be wary, woman. The next men you meet may not be as honest as my lads. The Hound has crossed the Trident with a hundred outlaws, and it’s said they’re raping every wench they come upon and cutting off their teats for trophies.”

Brienne felt obligated to pass along that warning to the farmer and his wife. The man nodded as she told him, but when she was done he spat again and said, “Dogs and wolves and lions, may the Others take them all. These outlaws won’t dare come too near to Maidenpool. Not so long as Lord Tarly has the rule there.”

Brienne knew Lord Randyll Tarly from her time with King Renly’s host. Though she could not find it in herself to like the man, she could not forget the debt she owed him either. *If the gods are good, we will pass Maidenpool before he knows that I am there.* “The town will be restored to Lord Mooton once the fighting’s done,” she told the farmer. “His lordship has been pardoned by the king.”

“Pardoned?” The old man laughed. “For what? Sitting on his arse in his bloody castle? He sent men off to Riverrun to fight but never went himself. Lions sacked his town, then wolves, then sellswords, and his lordship just

sat safe behind his walls. His brother 'ud never have hid like that. Ser Myles was bold as brass till that Robert killed him."

More ghosts, Brienne thought. "I am looking for my sister, a fair maid of three-and-ten. Perhaps you've seen her?"

"I've not seen no maids, fair nor foul."

No one has. But she had to keep asking.

"Mooton's daughter, she's a maid," the man went on. "Till the bedding, anyways. These eggs, they're for her wedding. Her and Tarly's son. The cooks will need eggs for cakes."

"They will." *Lord Tarly's son. Young Dickon's to be wed*. She tried to recall how old he was; eight or ten, she thought. Brienne had been betrothed at seven, to a boy three years her senior, Lord Caron's younger son, a shy boy with a mole above his lip. They had only met the once, on the occasion of their betrothal. Two years later he was dead, carried off by the same chill that took Lord and Lady Caron and their daughters. Had he lived, they would have been wed within a year of her first flowering, and her whole life would have been different. She would not be here now, dressed in man's mail and carrying a sword, hunting for a dead woman's child. More like she'd be at Nightsong, swaddling a child of her own and nursing another. It was not a new thought for Brienne. It always made her feel a little sad, but a little relieved as well.

The sun was half-hidden behind a bank of clouds when they emerged from the blackened trees to find Maidenpool before them, with the deep waters of the bay beyond. The town's gates had been rebuilt and strengthened, Brienne saw at once, and crossbowmen walked its pink stone walls once more. Above the gatehouse floated King Tommen's royal banner, a black stag and golden lion combatant on a field divided gold and crimson. Other banners displayed the Tarly huntsman, but the red salmon of House Mooton flew only from their castle on its hill.

At the portcullis they came upon a dozen guards armed with halberds. Their badges marked them for soldiers of Lord Tarly's host, though none was Tarly's own. She saw two centaurs, a thunderbolt, a blue beetle and a green arrow, but not the striding huntsman of Horn Hill. Their serjeant had

a peacock on his breast, its bright tail faded by the sun. When the farmers drew their cart up he gave a whistle. "What's this now? Eggs?" He tossed one up, caught it, and grinned. "We'll take them."

The old man squawked. "Our eggs is for Lord Mooton. For the wedding cakes and such."

"Have your hens lay more. I haven't had an egg in half a year. Here, don't say you weren't paid." He flung a handful of pennies at the old man's feet.

The farmer's wife spoke up. "That's not enough," she said. "Not near enough."

"I say it is," said the serjeant. "For them eggs, and you as well. Bring her here, boys. She's too young for that old man." Two of the guards leaned their halberds against the wall and pulled the woman away from the cart, struggling. The farmer watched grey-faced, but dared not move.

Brienne spurred her mare forward. "Release her."

Her voice made the guards hesitate long enough for the farmer's wife to wrench free of their grasp. "This is none of your concern," one man said. "You mind your mouth, wench."

Brienne drew her sword instead.

"Well now," the serjeant said, "naked steel. Seems to me I smell an outlaw. You know what Lord Tarly does with outlaws?" He still held the egg he'd taken from the cart. His hand closed, and the yolk oozed through his fingers.

"I know what Lord Randyll does with outlaws," Brienne said. "I know what he does with rapers too."

She had hoped the name might cow them, but the serjeant only flicked egg off his fingers and signaled to his men to spread out. Brienne found herself surrounded by steel points. "What was it you was saying, wench? What is it that Lord Tarly does to..."

"...rapers," a deeper voice finished. "He gelds them or sends them to the Wall. Sometimes both. And he cuts fingers off thieves." A languid young man stepped from the gatehouse, a swordbelt buckled at his waist.

The surcoat he wore above his steel had once been white, and here and there still was, beneath the grass stains and dried blood. His sigil was displayed across his chest: a brown deer, dead and bound and slung beneath a pole.

Him. His voice was a punch in her stomach, his face a blade in her bowels. “Ser Hyle,” she said stiffly.

“Best let her by, lads,” warned Ser Hyle Hunt. “This is Brienne the Beauty, the Maid of Tarth, who slew King Renly and half his Rainbow Guard. She’s as mean as she is ugly, and there’s no one uglier... except perhaps for you, Pisspot, but your father was the rear end of an aurochs, so you have a good excuse. *Her* father is the Evenstar of Tarth.”

The guards laughed, but the halberds parted. “Shouldn’t we seize her, ser?” the serjeant asked. “For killing Renly?”

“Why? Renly was a rebel. So were we all, rebels to a man, but now we’re Tommen’s loyal lads.” The knight waved the farm folk through the gate. “His lordship’s steward will be pleased to see those eggs. You’ll find him in the market.”

The old man knuckled his forehead. “My thanks, m’lord. You’re a true knight, it’s plain to see. Come, wife.” They put their shoulders to the cart again and rumbled through the gate.

Brienne trotted after them, with Podrick at her heels. *A true knight*, she thought, frowning. Inside the town she reined up. The ruins of a stable could be seen off to her left, fronting on a muddy alley. Across from it three half-dressed whores stood on the balcony of a brothel, whispering to one another. One looked a bit like a camp follower who had once come up to Brienne to ask if she had a cunt or a cock inside her breeches.

“That rounsey may be the most hideous horse I’ve ever seen,” said Ser Hyle of Podrick’s mount. “I am surprised that you’re not riding it, my lady. Do you plan to thank me for my help?”

Brienne swung down off her mare. She stood a head taller than Ser Hyle. “One day I’ll thank you in a *mêlée*, ser.”

“The way you thanked Red Ronnet?” Hunt laughed. He had a full, rich laugh, though his face was plain. An honest face, she’d thought once, before she learned better; shaggy brown hair, hazel eyes, a little scar by his left ear. His chin had a cleft and his nose was crooked, but he did laugh well, and often.

“Shouldn’t you be watching your gate?”

He made a wry face at her. “My cousin Alyn is off hunting outlaws. Doubtless he’ll return with the Hound’s head, gloating and covered in glory. Meanwhile, I am condemned to guard this gate, thanks to you. I hope you’re pleased, my beauty. What is it that you’re looking for?”

“A stable.”

“Over by the east gate. This one burned.”

I can see that. “What you said to those men... I was with King Renly when he died, but it was some sorcery that slew him, ser. I swear it on my sword.” She put her hand upon her hilt, ready to fight if Hunt named her a liar to her face.

“Aye, and it was the Knight of Flowers who carved up the Rainbow Guard. On a good day you might have been able to defeat Ser Emmon. He was a rash fighter, and he tired easily. Royce, though? No. Ser Robar was twice the swordsman that you are... though you’re *not* a swordsman, are you? Is there such a word as swordswench? What quest brings the Maid to Maidenpool, I wonder?”

Searching for my sister, a maid of three-and-ten, she almost said, but Ser Hyle would know she had no sisters. “There’s a man I seek, at a place called the Stinking Goose.”

“I thought Brienne the Beauty had no use for men.” There was a cruel edge to his smile. “The Stinking Goose. An apt name, that... the stinking part, at least. It’s by the harbor. First you will come with me to see his lordship.”

Brienne did not fear Ser Hyle, but he was one of Randyll Tarly’s captains. A whistle, and a hundred men would come running to defend him. “Am I to be arrested?”

“What, for Renly? Who was he? We’ve changed kings since then, some of us twice. No one cares, no one remembers.” He laid a hand lightly on her arm. “This way, if you please.”

She wrenched away. “I would thank you not to touch me.”

“Thanks at last,” he said, with a wry smile.

When last she had seen Maidenpool, the town had been a desolation, a grim place of empty streets and burned homes. Now the streets were full of pigs and children, and most of the burned buildings had been pulled down. Vegetables had been planted in the lots where some once stood; merchant’s tents and knight’s pavilions took the place of others. Brienne saw new houses going up, a stone inn rising where a wooden inn had burned, a new slate roof on the town sept. The cool autumn air rang to the sounds of saw and hammer. Men carried timber through the streets, and quarrymen drove their wagons down muddy lanes. Many wore the striding huntsman on their breasts. “The soldiers are rebuilding the town,” she said, surprised.

“They would sooner be dicing, drinking, and fucking, I don’t doubt, but Lord Randyll believes in putting idle men to work.”

She had expected to be taken to the castle. Instead, Hunt led them toward the busy harbor. The traders had returned to Maidenpool, she was pleased to see. A galley, a galleas, and a big two-masted cog were in port, along with a score of little fishing boats. More fishermen were visible out on the bay. *If the Stinking Goose yields nothing, I will take passage on a ship*, she decided. Gulltown was only a short voyage away. From there she could make her way to the Eyrie easily enough.

They found Lord Tarly in the fishmarket, doing justice.

A platform had been thrown up beside the water, from which his lordship could look down upon the men accused of crimes. To his left stood a long gallows, with ropes enough for twenty men. Four corpses swung beneath it. One looked fresh, but the other three had plainly been there for some time. A crow was pulling strips of flesh from the ripe ruins of one of the dead men. The other crows had scattered, wary of the crowd of townsfolk who’d gathered in hopes of someone’s being hanged.

Lord Randyll shared the platform with Lord Mooton, a pale, soft, fleshy man in a white doublet and red breeches, his ermine cloak pinned at the shoulder by a red-gold brooch in the shape of a salmon. Tarly wore mail and boiled leather, and a breastplate of grey steel. The hilt of a greatsword poked up above his left shoulder. *Heartsbane*, it was named, the pride of his House.

A stripling in a roughspun cloak and soiled jerkin was being heard when they came up. "I never hurt no one, m'lord," Brienne heard him say. "I only took what the septons left when they run off. If you got to take my finger for that, do it."

"It is customary to take a finger from a thief," Lord Tarly replied in a hard voice, "but a man who steals from a sept is stealing from the gods." He turned to his captain of guards. "Seven fingers. Leave his thumbs."

"*Seven?*" The thief paled. When the guards seized hold of him he tried to fight, but feebly, as if he were already maimed. Watching him, Brienne could not help think of Ser Jaime, and the way he'd screamed when Zollo's *arakh* came flashing down.

The next man was a baker, accused of mixing sawdust in his flour. Lord Randyll fined him fifty silver stags. When the baker swore he did not have that much silver, his lordship declared that he could have a lash for every stag that he was short. He was followed by a haggard grey-faced whore, accused of giving the pox to four of Tarly's soldiers. "Wash out her private parts with lye and throw her in a dungeon," Tarly commanded. As the whore was dragged off sobbing, his lordship saw Brienne on the edge of the crowd, standing between Podrick and Ser Hyle. He frowned at her, but his eyes betrayed not a flicker of recognition.

A sailor off the galleas came next. His accuser was an archer of Lord Mooton's garrison, with a bandaged hand and a salmon on his breast. "If it please m'lord, this bastid put his dagger through my hand. He said I was cheating him at dice."

Lord Tarly took his gaze away from Brienne to consider the men before him. "Were you?"

"No, m'lord. I never."

“For theft, I will take a finger. Lie to me and I will hang you. Shall I ask to see these dice?”

“The dice?” The archer looked to Mooton, but his lordship was gazing at the fishing boats. The bowman swallowed. “Might be I... them dice, they’re lucky for me, ’s true, but I...”

Tarly had heard enough. “Take his little finger. He can choose which hand. A nail through the palm for the other.” He stood. “We’re done. March the rest of them back to the dungeon, I’ll deal with them on the morrow.” He turned to beckon Ser Hyle forward. Brienne followed. “My lord,” she said, when she stood before him. She felt eight years old again.

“My lady. To what do we owe this... honor?”

“I have been sent to look for... for...” She hesitated.

“How will you find him if you do not know his name? Did you slay Lord Renly?”

“No.”

Tarly weighed the word. *He is judging me, as he judged those others.* “No,” he said at last, “you only let him die.”

He had died in her arms, his life’s blood drenching her. Brienne flinched. “It was sorcery. I never...”

“You *never*?” His voice became a whip. “Aye. You never should have donned mail, nor buckled on a sword. You never should have left your father’s hall. This is a war, not a harvest ball. By all the gods, I ought to ship you back to Tarth.”

“Do that and answer to the throne.” Her voice sounded high and girlish, when she wanted to sound fearless. “Podrick. In my bag you’ll find a parchment. Bring it to his lordship.”

Tarly took the letter and unrolled it, scowling. His lips moved as he read. “The king’s business. What sort of business?”

Lie to me and I will hang you. “S-sansa Stark.”

“If the Stark girl were here, I’d know it. She’s run back north, I’ll wager. Hoping to find refuge with one of her father’s bannermen. She had

best hope she chooses the right one.”

“She might have gone to the Vale instead,” Brienne heard herself blurt out, “to her mother’s sister.”

Lord Randyll gave her a contemptuous look. “Lady Lysa is dead. Some singer pushed her off a mountain. Littlefinger holds the Eyrie now... though not for long. The lords of the Vale are not the sort to bend their knees to some upjumped jackanapes whose only skill is counting coppers.” He handed her back her letter. “Go where you want and do as you will... but when you’re raped don’t look to me for justice. You will have earned it with your folly.” He glanced at Ser Hyle. “And you, ser, should be at your gate. I gave you the command there, did I not?”

“You did, my lord,” said Hyle Hunt, “but I thought—”

“You think too much.” Lord Tarly strode away.

Lysa Tully is dead. Brienne stood beneath the gallows, the precious parchment in her hand. The crowd had dispersed, and the crows had returned to resume their feast. *A singer pushed her off a mountain.* Had the crows dined on Lady Catelyn’s sister too?

“You spoke of the Stinking Goose, my lady,” said Ser Hyle. “If you want me to show you—”

“Go back to your gate.”

A look of annoyance flashed across his face. *A plain face, not an honest one.* “If that’s your wish.”

“It is.”

“It was only a game to pass the time. We meant no harm.” He hesitated. “Ben died, you know. Cut down on the Blackwater. Farrow too, and Will the Stork. And Mark Mullendore took a wound that cost him half his arm.”

Good, Brienne wanted to say. *Good, he deserved it.* But she remembered Mullendore sitting outside his pavilion with his monkey on his shoulder in a little suit of chainmail, the two of them making faces at each other. What was it Catelyn Stark had called them, that night at Bitterbridge? *The knights of summer.* And now it was autumn and they were falling like leaves...

She turned her back on Hyle Hunt. "Podrick, come."

The boy trotted after her, leading their horses. "Are we going to find the place? The Stinking Goose?"

"I am. You are going to the stables, by the east gate. Ask the stableman if there's an inn where we can spend the night."

"I will, ser. My lady." Podrick stared at the ground as they went, kicking stones from time to time. "Do you know where it is? The Goose? The Stinking Goose, I mean."

"No."

"He said he'd show us. That knight. Ser Kyle."

"Hyle."

"Hyle. What did he do to you, ser? I mean, my lady."

The boy may be a stumbletongue, but he's not stupid. "At Highgarden, when King Renly called his banners, some men played a game with me. Ser Hyle was one of them. It was a cruel game, hurtful and unchivalrous." She stopped. "The east gate is that way. Wait for me there."

"As you say, my lady. Ser."

No sign marked the Stinking Goose. It took her most of an hour to find it, down a flight of wooden steps beneath a knacker's barn. The cellar was dim and the ceiling low, and Brienne thumped her head on a beam as she entered. No geese were in evidence. A few stools were scattered about, and a bench had been shoved up against one earthen wall. The tables were old wine casks, grey and wormholed. The promised stink pervaded everything. Mostly it was wine and damp and mildew, her nose told her, but there was a little of the privy too, and something of the lychyard.

The only drinkers were three Tyroshi seamen in a corner, growling at each other through green and purple beards. They gave her a brief inspection, and one said something that made the others laugh. The proprietor stood behind a plank that had been placed across two barrels. She was a woman, round and pale and balding, with huge soft breasts swaying beneath a soiled smock. She looked as though the gods had made her out of uncooked dough.

Brienne did not dare to ask for water here. She bought a cup of wine and said, "I am looking for a man called Nimble Dick."

"Dick Crabb. Comes in most every night." The woman eyed Brienne's mail and sword. "If you're going to cut him, do it somewhere else. We don't want no trouble with Lord Tarly."

"I want to talk with him. Why would I do him harm?"

The woman shrugged.

"If you would nod when he comes in I'd be thankful."

"How thankful?"

Brienne put a copper star on the plank between them and found a place in the shadows with a good view of the steps.

She tried the wine. It was oily on the tongue and there was a hair floating in it. *A hair as slender as my hopes of finding Sansa*, she thought as she plucked it out. Chasing after Ser Dontos had been fruitless, and with Lady Lysa dead the Vale no longer seemed a likely refuge. *Where are you, Lady Sansa? Did you run home to Winterfell, or are you with your husband, as Podrick seems to think?* Brienne did not want to chase the girl across the narrow sea, where even the language would be strange to her. *I will be even more a freak there, grunting and gesturing to make myself understood. They will laugh at me, as they laughed at Highgarden.* A blush stole up her cheeks as she remembered.

When Renly donned his crown, the Maid of Tarth had ridden all the way across the Reach to join him. The king himself had greeted her courteously and welcomed her to his service. Not so his lords and knights. Brienne had not expected a warm welcome. She was prepared for coldness, for mockery, for hostility. She had supped upon such meat before. It was not the scorn of the many that left her confused and vulnerable, but the kindness of the few. The Maid of Tarth had been betrothed three times, but she had never been courted until she came to Highgarden.

Big Ben Bushy was the first, one of the few men in Renly's camp who overtopped her. He sent his squire to her to clean her mail, and made her a gift of a silver drinking horn. Ser Edmund Ambrose went him one better,

bringing flowers and asking her to ride with him. Ser Hyle Hunt outdid them both. He gave her a book, beautifully illuminated and filled with a hundred tales of knightly valor. He brought apples and carrots for her horses, and a blue silk plume for her helm. He told her the gossip of the camp and said clever, cutting things that made her smile. He even trained with her one day, which meant more than all the rest.

She thought it was because of him that the others started being courteous. *More than courteous.* At table men fought for the place beside her, offering to fill her wine cup or fetch her sweetbreads. Ser Richard Farrow played love songs on his lute outside her pavilion. Ser Hugh Beesbury brought her a pot of honey “as sweet as the maids of Tarth.” Ser Mark Mullendore made her laugh with the antics of his monkey, a curious little black-and-white creature from the Summer Islands. A hedge knight called Will the Stork offered to rub the knots from her shoulders.

Brienne refused him. She refused them all. When Ser Owen Inchfield seized her one night and pressed a kiss upon her, she knocked him arse-backwards into a cookfire. Afterward she looked at herself in a glass. Her face was as broad and bucktoothed and freckled as ever, big-lipped, thick of jaw, so ugly. All she wanted was to be a knight and serve King Renly, yet now...

It was not as if she were the only woman there. Even the camp followers were prettier than she was, and up in the castle Lord Tyrell feasted King Renly every night, whilst highborn maids and lovely ladies danced to the music of pipe and horn and harp. *Why are you being kind to me?* she wanted to scream, every time some strange knight paid her a compliment. *What do you want?*

Randyll Tarly solved the mystery the day he sent two of his men-at-arms to summon her to his pavilion. His young son Dickon had overheard four knights laughing as they saddled up their horses, and had told his lord father what they said.

They had a wager.

Three of the younger knights had started it, he told her: Ambrose, Bushy, and Hyle Hunt, of his own household. As word spread through the

camp, however, others had joined the game. Each man was required to buy into the contest with a golden dragon, the whole sum to go to whoever claimed her maidenhead.

“I have put an end to their sport,” Tarly told her. “Some of these... challengers... are less honorable than others, and the stakes were growing larger every day. It was only a matter of time before one of them decided to claim the prize by force.”

“They were knights,” she said, stunned, “anointed knights.”

“And honorable men. The blame is yours.”

The accusation made her flinch. “I would never... my lord, I did nought to encourage them.”

“Your being here encouraged them. If a woman will behave like a camp follower, she cannot object to being treated like one. A war host is no place for a maiden. If you have any regard for your virtue or the honor of your House, you will take off that mail, return home, and beg your father to find a husband for you.”

“I came to fight,” she insisted. “To be a knight.”

“The gods made men to fight, and women to bear children,” said Randyll Tarly. “A woman’s war is in the birthing bed.”

Someone was coming down the cellar steps. Brienne pushed her wine aside as a ragged, scrawny, sharp-faced man with dirty brown hair stepped into the Goose. He gave the Tyroshi sailors a quick look and Brienne a longer one, then went up to the plank. “Wine,” he said, “and none o’ your horse piss in it, thank’e.”

The woman gave Brienne a look and nodded.

“I’ll buy your wine,” she called out, “for a word.”

The man looked her over, his eyes wary. “A word? I know a lot o’ words.” He sat down on the stool across from her. “Tell me which m’lady wants t’ hear, and Nimble Dick will say it.”

“I heard you fooled a fool.”

The ragged man sipped his wine, thinking. "Mighten be I did. Or not." He wore a faded, torn doublet from which some lord's badge had been ripped. "Who is it wants t' know?"

"King Robert." She put a silver stag on the barrel between them. Robert's head was on one side, the stag on the other.

"Does he now?" The man took the coin and spun it, smiling. "I like to see a king dance, hey-nonny hey-nonny hey-nonny-ho. Mighten be I saw this fool of yours."

"Was there a girl with him?"

"Two girls," he said at once.

"Two girls?" Could the other one be Arya?

"Well," the man said, "I never seen the little sweets, mind you, but he was wanting passage for three."

"Passage where?"

"T'other side o' the sea, as I recall."

"Do you remember what he looked like?"

"A fool." He snatched the spinning coin off the table as it began to slow, and made it vanish. "A frightened fool."

"Frightened why?"

He shrugged. "He never said, but old Nimble Dick knows the smell o' fear. He come here most every night, buying drinks for sailors, making japes, singing little songs. Only one night some men come in with that hunter on their teats, and your fool went white as milk and got quiet till they left." He edged his stool closer to hers. "That Tarly's got soldiers crawling over the docks, watching every ship that comes or goes. Man wants a deer, he goes t' the woods. He wants a ship, he goes t' the docks. Your fool didn't dare. So I offered him some help."

"What sort of help?"

"The sort that costs more than one silver stag."

"Tell me, and you'll have another."

“Let’s see it,” he said. She put another stag on the barrel. He spun it, smiled, scooped it up. “A man who can’t go t’ the ships need for the ships t’ come t’ him. I told him I knew a place where that might happen. A hidden place, like.”

Gooseprickles rose along Brienne’s arms. “A smugglers’ cove. You sent the fool to smugglers.”

“Him and them two girls.” He chuckled. “Only thing, well, the place I sent them, been no ships there for a while. Thirty years, say.” He scratched his nose. “What’s this fool to you?”

“Those two girls are my sisters.”

“Are they, now? Poor little things. Had a sister once meself. Skinny girl with knobby knees, but then she grew a pair o’ teats and a knight’s son got between her legs. Last I saw her she was off for King’s Landing t’ make a living on her back.”

“Where did you send them?”

Another shrug. “As t’ that, I can’t recall.”

“*Where?*” Brienne slapped another silver stag down.

He flicked the coin back at her with his forefinger. “Someplace no stag ever found... though a dragon might.”

Silver would not get the truth from him, she sensed. *Gold might, or it might not. Steel would be more certain.* Brienne touched her dagger, then reached into her purse instead. She found a golden dragon and put in on the barrel. “Where?”

The ragged man snatched up the coin and bit it. “Sweet. Puts me in mind o’ Crackclaw Point. Up north o’ here, ’tis a wild land o’ hills and bogs, but it happens I was born and bred there. Dick Crabb, I’m named, though most call me Nimble Dick.”

She did not offer her own name. “*Where* in Crackclaw Point?”

“The Whispers. You heard o’ Clarence Crabb, o’ course.”

“No.”

That seemed to surprise him. “*Ser Clarence Crabb*, I said. I got his blood in me. He was eight foot tall, and so strong he could uproot pine trees with one hand and chuck them half a mile. No horse could bear his weight, so he rode an aurochs.”

“What does he have to do with this smugglers’ cove?”

“His wife was a woods witch. Whenever *Ser Clarence* killed a man, he’d fetch his head back home and his wife would kiss it on the lips and bring it back t’ life. Lords, they were, and wizards, and famous knights and pirates. One was king o’ Duskendale. They gave old Crabb good counsel. Being they was just heads, they couldn’t talk real loud, but they never shut up neither. When you’re a head, talking’s all you got to pass the day. So Crabb’s keep got named the Whispers. Still is, though it’s been a ruin for a thousand years. A lonely place, the Whispers.” The man walked the coin deftly across his knuckles. “One dragon by hisself gets lonely. Ten, now...”

“Ten dragons are a fortune. Do you take me for a fool?”

“No, but I can take you to one.” The coin danced one way, and back the other. “Take you to the Whispers, m’lady.”

Brienne did not like the way his fingers played with that gold coin. Still... “Six dragons if we find my sister. Two if we only find the fool. Nothing if nothing is what we find.”

Crabb shrugged. “Six is good. Six will serve.”

Too quick. She caught his wrist before he could tuck the gold away. “Do not play me false. You’ll not find me easy meat.”

When she let go, Crabb rubbed his wrist. “Bloody piss,” he muttered. “You hurt my hand.”

“I am sorry for that. My sister is a girl of three-and-ten. I need to find her before—”

“—before some knight gets in her slit. Aye, I hear you. She’s good as saved. Nimble Dick is with you now. Meet me by east gate at first light. I need t’ see this man about a horse.”