

BRIENNE

East of Maidenpool the hills rose wild, and the pines closed in about them like a host of silent grey-green soldiers.

Nimble Dick said the coast road was the shortest way, and the easiest, so they were seldom out of sight of the bay. The towns and villages along the shore grew smaller as they went, and less frequent. At nightfall they would seek an inn. Crabb would share the common bed with other travelers, whilst Brienne took a room for her and Podrick. “Cheaper if we all shared the same bed, m’lady,” Nimble Dick would say. “You could lay your sword between us. Old Dick’s a harmless fellow. Chivalrous as a knight, and honest as the day is long.”

“The days are growing shorter,” Brienne pointed out.

“Well, that may be. If you don’t trust me in the bed, I could just curl up on the floor, m’lady.”

“Not on my floor.”

“A man might think you don’t trust me none.”

“Trust is earned. Like gold.”

“As you say, m’lady,” said Crabb, “but up north where the road gives out, you’ll need t’ trust Dick then. If I wanted t’ take your gold at swordpoint, who’s to stop me?”

“You don’t own a sword. I do.”

She shut the door between them and stood there listening until she was certain he had moved away. However nimble he might be, Dick Crabb was no Jaime Lannister, no Mad Mouse, not even a Humfrey Wagstaff. He was scrawny and ill fed, his only armor a dented halfhelm spotted with rust. In place of a sword, he carried an old, nicked dagger. So long as she was awake, he posed no danger to her. “Podrick,” she said, “there will come a time when there are no more inns to shelter us. I do not trust our guide. When we make camp, can you watch over me as I sleep?”

“Stay awake, my lady? Ser.” He thought. “I have a sword. If Crabb tries to hurt you, I could kill him.”

“No,” she said sternly. “You are not to try and fight him. All I ask is that you watch him as I sleep, and wake me if he does anything suspicious. I wake quickly, you will find.”

Crabb showed his true colors the next day, when they stopped to water the horses. Brienne had to step behind some bushes to empty her bladder. As she was squatting, she heard Podrick say, “What are you doing? You get away from there.” She finished her business, hiked up her breeches, and returned to the road to find Nimble Dick wiping flour off his fingers. “You won’t find any dragons in my saddlebags,” she told him. “I keep my gold upon my person.” Some of it was in the pouch at her belt, the rest hidden in a pair of pockets sewn inside her clothing. The fat purse inside her saddlebag was filled with coppers large and small, pennies and halfpennies, groats and stars... and fine white flour, to make it fatter still. She had bought the flour from the cook at the Seven Swords the morning she rode out from Duskendale.

“Dick meant no harm, m’lady.” He wriggled his flour-spotted fingers to show he held no weapon. “I was only looking to see if you had these dragons what you promised me. The world’s full o’ liars, ready to cheat an honest man. Not that *you’re* one.”

Brienne hoped he was a better guide than he was a thief. “We had best be going.” She mounted up again.

Dick would oft sing as they rode along together; never a whole song, only a snatch of this and a verse of that. She suspected that he meant to charm her, to put her off her guard. Sometimes he would try to get her and Podrick to sing along with him, to no avail. The boy was too shy and tongue-tied, and Brienne did not sing. *Did you sing for your father?* Lady Stark had asked her once, at Riverrun. *Did you sing for Renly?* She had not, not ever, though she had wanted... she had wanted...

When he was not singing, Nimble Dick would talk, regaling them with tales of Crackclaw Point. Every gloomy valley had its lord, he said, the lot of them united only by their mistrust of outsiders. In their veins the blood of

the First Men ran dark and strong. “The Andals tried t’ take Crackclaw, but we bled them in the valleys and drowned them in the bogs. Only what their sons couldn’t win with swords, their pretty daughters won with kisses. They married into the houses they couldn’t conquer, aye.”

The Darklyn kings of Duskenale had tried to impose their rule on Crackclaw Point; the Mootons of Maidenpool had tried as well, and later the haughty Celtigars of Crab Isle. But the Crackclaws knew their bogs and forests as no outsider could, and if hard pressed would vanish into the caverns that honeycombed their hills. When not fighting would-be conquerors, they fought each other. Their blood feuds were as deep and dark as the bogs between their hills. From time to time some champion would bring peace to the Point, but it never lasted longer than his lifetime. Lord Lucifer Hardy, he was a great one, and the Brothers Brune as well. Old Crackbones even more so, but the Crabbs were the mightiest of all. Dick still refused to believe that Brienne had never heard of Ser Clarence Crabb and his exploits.

“Why would I lie?” she asked him. “Every place has its local heroes. Where I come from, the singers sing of Ser Galladon of Morne, the Perfect Knight.”

“Ser Gallawho of What?” He snorted. “Never heard o’ him. Why was he so bloody perfect?”

“Ser Galladon was a champion of such valor that the Maiden herself lost her heart to him. She gave him an enchanted sword as a token of her love. The Just Maid, it was called. No common sword could check her, nor any shield withstand her kiss. Ser Galladon bore the Just Maid proudly, but only thrice did he unsheathe her. He would not use the Maid against a mortal man, for she was so potent as to make any fight unfair.”

Crabb thought that was hilarious. “The Perfect Knight? The Perfect Fool, he sounds like. What’s the point o’ having some magic sword if you don’t bloody well use it?”

“Honor,” she said. “The point is honor.”

That only made him laugh the louder. “Ser Clarence Crabb would have wiped his hairy arse with your Perfect Knight, m’lady. If they’d ever have

met, there'd be one more bloody head sitting on the shelf at the Whispers, you ask me. 'I should have used the magic sword,' it'd be saying to all the other heads. 'I should have used the bloody sword.'"

Brienne could not help but smile. "Perhaps," she allowed, "but Ser Galladon was no fool. Against a foe eight feet tall mounted on an aurochs, he might well have unsheathed the Just Maid. He used her once to slay a dragon, they say."

Nimble Dick was unimpressed. "Crackbones fought a dragon too, but he didn't need no magic sword. He just tied its neck in a knot, so every time it breathed fire it roasted its own arse."

"And what did Crackbones do when Aegon and his sisters came?" Brienne asked him.

"He was dead. M'lady must know that." Crabb gave her a sideways look. "Aegon sent his sister up to Crackclaw, that Visenya. The lords had heard o' Harren's end. Being no fools, they laid their swords at her feet. The queen took them as her own men, and said they'd owe no fealty to Maidenpool, Crab Isle, or Duskendale. Don't stop them bloody Celtigars from sending men to t' eastern shore to collect his taxes. If he sends enough, a few come back to him... otherwise, we bow only to our own lords, and the king. The *true* king, not Robert and his ilk." He spat. "There was Crabbs and Bruness and Boggesses with Prince Rhaegar on the Trident, and in the Kingsguard too. A Hardy, a Cave, a Pyne, and *three* Crabbs, Clement and Rupert and Clarence the Short. Six foot tall, he was, but short compared to the *real* Ser Clarence. We're all good dragon men, up Crackclaw way."

The traffic continued to dwindle as they moved north and east, until finally there were no inns to be found. By then the bayside road was more weeds than ruts. That night they took shelter in a fishing village. Brienne paid the villagers a few coppers to allow them to bed down in a hay barn. She claimed the loft for Podrick and herself, and pulled the ladder up after them.

"You leave me down here alone, I could bloody well steal your horses," Crabb called up from below. "Best you get them up the ladder too, m'lady." When she ignored him, he went on to say, "It's going to rain tonight. A cold

hard rain. You and Pods will sleep all snug and warm, and poor old Dick will be shivering down here by myself.” He shook his head, muttering, as he made a bed on a pile of hay. “I never knew such a mistrustful maid as you.”

Brienne curled up beneath her cloak, with Podrick yawning at her side. *I was not always wary*, she might have shouted down at Crabb. *When I was a little girl I believed that all men were as noble as my father*. Even the men who told her what a pretty girl she was, how tall and bright and clever, how graceful when she danced. It was Septa Roelle who had lifted the scales from her eyes. “They only say those things to win your lord father’s favor,” the woman had said. “You’ll find truth in your looking glass, not on the tongues of men.” It was a harsh lesson, one that left her weeping, but it had stood her in good stead at Harrenhal when Ser Hyle and his friends had played their game. *A maid has to be mistrustful in this world, or she will not be a maid for long*, she was thinking, as the rain began to fall.

In the mêlée at Bitterbridge she had sought out her suitors and battered them one by one, Farrow and Ambrose and Bushy, Mark Mullendore and Raymond Nayland and Will the Stork. She had ridden over Harry Sawyer and broken Robin Potter’s helm, giving him a nasty scar. And when the last of them had fallen, the Mother had delivered Connington to her. This time Ser Ronnet held a sword and not a rose. Every blow she dealt him was sweeter than a kiss.

Loras Tyrell had been the last to face her wrath that day. He’d never courted her, had hardly looked at her at all, but he bore three golden roses on his shield that day, and Brienne hated roses. The sight of them had given her a furious strength. She went to sleep dreaming of the fight they’d had, and of Ser Jaime fastening a rainbow cloak about her shoulders.

It was still raining the next morning. As they broke their fast, Nimble Dick suggested that they wait for it to stop.

“When will that be? On the morrow? In a fortnight? When summer comes again? No. We have cloaks, and leagues to ride.”

It rained all that day. The narrow track they followed soon turned to mud beneath them. What trees they saw were naked, and the steady rain had

turned their fallen leaves into a sodden brown mat. Despite its squirrel-skin lining, Dick's cloak soaked through, and she could see him shivering. Brienne felt a moment's pity for the man. *He has not eaten well, that's plain.* She wondered if there truly was a smugglers' cove, or a ruined castle called the Whispers. Hungry men do desperate things. This all might be some ploy to cozen her. Suspicion soured her stomach.

For a time it seemed as though the steady wash of rain was the only sound in the world. Nimble Dick plowed on, heedless. She watched closely, noting how he bent his back, as if huddling low in the saddle would keep him dry. This time there was no village close at hand when darkness came upon them. Nor were there any trees to give them shelter. They were forced to camp amongst some rocks, fifty yards above the tideline. The rocks at least would keep the wind off. "Best we keep a watch tonight, m'lady," Crabb told her, as she was struggling to get a driftwood fire lit. "A place like this, there might be squishers."

"Squishers?" Brienne gave him a suspicious look.

"Monsters," Nimble Dick said, with relish. "They look like men till you get close, but their heads is too big, and they got scales where a proper man's got hair. Fish-belly white they are, with webs between their fingers. They're always damp and fishy-smelling, but behind these blubbery lips they got rows of green teeth sharp as needles. Some say the First Men killed them all, but don't you believe it. They come by night and steal bad little children, padding along on them webbed feet with a little *squish-squish* sound. The girls they keep to breed with, but the boys they eat, tearing at them with those sharp green teeth." He grinned at Podrick. "They'd eat you, boy. They'd eat you *raw*."

"If they try, I'll kill them." Podrick touched his sword.

"You try that. You just try. Squishers don't die easy." He winked at Brienne. "You a bad little girl, m'lady?"

"No." *Just a fool.* The wood was too damp to light, no matter how many sparks Brienne struck off her flint and steel. The kindling sent up some smoke, but that was all. Disgusted, she settled down with her back to a rock, pulled her cloak over herself, and resigned herself to a cold, wet

night. Dreaming of a hot meal, she gnawed on a strip of hard salt beef whilst Nimble Dick talked about the time Ser Clarence Crabb had fought the squisher king. *He tells a lively tale, she had to admit, but Mark Mullendore was amusing too, with his little monkey.*

It was too wet to see the sun go down, too grey to see the moon come up. The night was black and starless. Crabb ran out of tales and went to sleep. Podrick was soon snoring too. Brienne sat with her back to the rock, listening to the waves. *Are you near the sea, Sansa?* she wondered. *Are you waiting at the Whispers for a ship that will never come? Who do you have with you? Passage for three, he said. Has the Imp joined you and Ser Dontos, or did you find your little sister?*

The day had been a long one, and Brienne was tired. Even sitting up against the rock, with rain pattering softly all around her, she found her eyelids growing heavy. Twice she dozed. The second time she woke all at once, heart pounding, convinced that someone was looming over her. Her limbs were stiff, and her cloak had gotten tangled round her ankles. She kicked free of it and stood. Nimble Dick was curled against a rock, half-buried in wet, heavy sand, asleep. *A dream. It was a dream.*

Perhaps she had made a mistake in abandoning Ser Creighton and Ser Illifer. They had seemed like honest men. *Would that Jaime had come with me, she thought... but he was a knight of the Kingsguard, his rightful place was with his king. Besides, it was Renly that she wanted. I swore I would protect him, and I failed. Then I swore I would avenge him, and I failed at that as well. I ran off with Lady Catelyn instead, and failed her too.* The wind had shifted, and the rain was running down her face.

The next day the road dwindled to a pebbled thread, and finally to a mere suggestion. Near midday, it came to an abrupt end at the foot of a wind-carved cliff. Above, a small castle stood frowning over the waves, its three crooked towers outlined against a leaden sky. “Is that the Whispers?” Podrick asked.

“That look a bloody ruin t’ you?” Crabb spat. “That’s the Dyre Den, where old Lord Brune keeps his seat. Road ends here, though. It’s the pines for us from here on.”

Brienne studied the cliff. "How do we get up there?"

"Easy." Nimble Dick turned his horse. "Stay close t' Dick. The squishers are apt t' take the laggards."

The way up proved to be a steep stony path hidden within a cleft in the rock. Most of it was natural, but here and there steps had been carved to ease the climb. Sheer walls of rock, eaten away by centuries of wind and spray, hemmed them in to either side. In some places they had assumed fantastic shapes. Nimble Dick pointed out a few as they climbed. "There's an ogre's head, see?" he said, and Brienne smiled when she saw it. "And that there's a stone dragon. T'other wing fell off when my father was a boy. Above it, that's the dugs drooping down, like some hag's teats." He glanced back at her own chest.

"Ser? My lady?" said Podrick. "There's a rider."

"Where?" None of the rocks suggested a rider to her.

"On the road. Not a rock rider. A real rider. Following us. Down there." He pointed.

Brienne twisted in her saddle. They had climbed high enough to see for leagues along the shore. The horse was coming up the same road they had taken, two or three miles behind them. *Again?* She glanced at Nimble Dick suspiciously.

"Don't squint at me," Crabb said. "He's naught t' do with old Nimble Dick, whoever he is. Some man o' Brune's, most like, come back from the wars. Or one o' them singers, wandering from place to place." He turned his head and spat. "He's no squisher, that's bloody certain. Their sort don't ride horses."

"No," said Brienne. On that, at least, they could agree.

The last hundred feet of the climb proved the steepest and most treacherous. Loose pebbles rolled beneath their horse's hooves and went rattling down the stony path behind them. When they emerged from the cleft in the rock, they found themselves under the castle walls. On a parapet above, a face peered down at them, then vanished. Brienne thought it might have been a woman, and said as much to Nimble Dick.

He agreed. “Brune’s too old to go climbing wallwalks, and his sons and grandsons went off to the wars. No one left in there but wenches, and a snot-nosed babe or three.”

It was on her lips to ask her guide which king Lord Brune had espoused, but it made no matter any longer. Brune’s sons were gone; some might not be coming back. *We will have no hospitality here tonight.* A castle full of old men, women, and children was not like to open its doors to armed strangers. “You speak of Lord Brune as if you know him,” she said to Nimble Dick.

“Might be I did, once.”

She glanced at the breast of his doublet. Loose threads and a ragged patch of darker fabric showed where some badge had been torn away. Her guide was a deserter, she did not doubt. Could the rider behind them be one of his brothers-in-arms?

“We should ride on,” he urged, “before Brune starts to wonder why we’re here beneath his walls. Even a wench can wind a bloody crossbow.” Dick gestured toward the limestone hills that rose beyond the castle, with their wooded slopes. “No more roads from here on, only streams and game trails, but m’lady need not fear. Nimble Dick knows these parts.”

That was what Brienne was afraid of. The wind was gusting along the top of the cliff, but all she could smell was a trap. “What about that rider?” Unless his horse could walk on waves, he would soon be coming up the cliff.

“What about him? If he’s some fool from Maidenpool, he might not even find the bloody path. And if he does, we’ll lose him in the woods. He won’t have no road to follow there.”

Only our tracks. Brienne wondered if it wouldn’t be better to meet the rider here, with her blade in hand. *I’ll look an utter fool if it is a wandering singer or one of Lord Brune’s sons.* Crabb had the right of it, she supposed. *If he is still behind us on the morrow, I can deal with him then.* “As you will,” she said, turning her mare toward the trees.

Lord Brune's castle dwindled at their backs, and soon was lost to sight. Sentinels and soldier pines rose all around them, towering green-clad spears thrusting toward the sky. The forest floor was a bed of fallen needles as thick as a castle wall, littered with pinecones. The hooves of their horses seemed to make no sound. It rained a bit, stopped for a time, then started once again, but amongst the pines they scarce felt a drop.

The going was much slower in the woods. Brienne prodded her mare through the green gloom, weaving in and out amongst the trees. It would be very easy to get lost here, she realized. Every way she looked appeared the same. The very air seemed grey and green and still. Pine boughs scratched against her arms and scraped noisily against her newly painted shield. The eerie stillness grated on her more with every passing hour.

It bothered Nimble Dick as well. Late that day, as dusk was coming on, he tried to sing. "*A bear there was, a bear, a bear, all black and brown, and covered with hair,*" he sang, his voice as scratchy as a pair of woolen breeches. The pines drank his song, as they drank the wind and rain. After a little while he stopped.

"It's bad here," Podrick said. "This is a bad place."

Brienne felt the same, but it would not serve to admit it. "A pine wood is a gloomy place, but in the end it's just a wood. There's naught here that we need fear."

"What about the squishers? And the heads?"

"There's a clever lad," said Nimble Dick, laughing.

Brienne gave him a look of annoyance. "There are no squishers," she told Podrick, "and no heads."

The hills went up, the hills went down. Brienne found herself praying that Nimble Dick was honest, and knew where he was taking them. By herself, she was not even certain she could have found the sea again. Day or night, the sky was solid grey and overcast, with neither sun nor stars to help her find her way.

They made camp early that night, after they came down a hill and found themselves on the edge of a glistening green bog. In the grey-green

light, the ground ahead looked solid enough, but when they'd ridden out it had swallowed their horses up to their withers. They had to turn and fight their way back onto more solid footing. "It's no matter," Crabb assured them. "We'll go back up the hill and come down another way."

The next day was the same. They rode through pines and bogs, under dark skies and intermittent rain, past sinkholes and caves and the ruins of ancient strongholds whose stones were blanketed in moss. Every heap of stones had a story, and Nimble Dick told them all. To hear him tell it, the men of Crackclaw Point had watered their pine trees with blood. Brienne's patience soon began to fray. "How much longer?" she demanded finally. "We must have seen every tree in Crackclaw Point by now."

"Not hardly," said Crabb. "We're close now. See, the woods is thinning out. We're near the narrow sea."

This fool he promised me is like to be my own reflection in a pond, Brienne thought, but it seemed pointless to turn back when she had come so far. She was weary, though, she could not deny that. Her thighs were hard as iron from the saddle, and of late she had been sleeping only four hours a night, whilst Podrick watched over her. If Nimble Dick meant to try and murder them, she was convinced it would happen here, on ground that he knew well. He could be taking them to some robbers' den where he had kin as treacherous as he was. Or perhaps he was just leading them in circles, waiting for that rider to catch up. They had not seen any sign of the man since leaving Lord Brune's castle, but that did not mean he had given up the hunt.

It may be that I will need to kill him, she told herself one night as she paced about the camp. The notion made her queasy. Her old master-at-arms had always questioned whether she was hard enough for battle. "You have a man's strength in your arms," Ser Goodwin had said to her, more than once, "but your heart is as soft as any maid's. It is one thing to train in the yard with a blunted sword in hand, and another to drive a foot of sharpened steel into a man's gut and see the light go out of his eyes." To toughen her, Ser Goodwin used to send her to her father's butcher to slaughter lambs and suckling pigs. The piglets squealed and the lambs screamed like frightened

children. By the time the butchering was done Brienne had been blind with tears, her clothes so bloody that she had given them to her maid to burn. But Ser Goodwin still had doubts. “A piglet is a piglet. It is different with a man. When I was a squire young as you, I had a friend who was strong and quick and agile, a champion in the yard. We all knew that one day he would be a splendid knight. Then war came to the Stepstones. I saw my friend drive his foeman to his knees and knock the axe from his hand, but when he might have finished he held back for half a heartbeat. In battle half a heartbeat is a lifetime. The man slipped out his dirk and found a chink in my friend’s armor. His strength, his speed, his valor, all his hard-won skill... it was worth less than a mummer’s fart, *because he flinched from killing*. Remember that, girl.”

I will, she promised his shade, there in the piney wood. She sat down on a rock, took out her sword, and began to hone its edge. *I will remember, and I pray I will not flinch.*

The next day dawned bleak and cold and overcast. They never saw the sun come up, but when the blackness turned to grey Brienne knew it was time to saddle up again. With Nimble Dick leading the way, they rode back into the pines. Brienne followed close behind him, with Podrick bringing up the rear upon his rounsey.

The castle came upon them without warning. One moment they were in the depths of the forest, with nothing but pines to see for leagues and leagues. Then they rode around a boulder, and a gap appeared ahead. A mile farther on, the forest ended abruptly. Beyond was sky and sea... and an ancient, tumbledown castle, abandoned and overgrown on the edge of a cliff. “The Whispers,” said Nimble Dick. “Have a listen. You can hear the heads.”

Podrick’s mouth gaped open. “I hear them.”

Brienne heard them too. A faint, soft murmuring that seemed to be coming from the ground as much as from the castle. The sound grew louder as she neared the cliffs. It was the sea, she realized suddenly. The waves had eaten holes in the cliffs below and were rumbling through caves and

tunnels beneath the earth. “There are no heads,” she said. “It’s the waves you hear whispering.”

“Waves don’t whisper. It’s heads.”

The castle was built of old, unmortared stones, no two the same. Moss grew thick in clefts between the rocks, and trees were growing up from the foundations. Most old castles had a godswood. By the look of it, the Whispers had little else. Brienne walked her mare to the cliff’s edge, where the curtain wall had collapsed. Mounds of poisonous red ivy grew over the heap of broken stones. She tied the horse to a tree and edged as close to the precipice as she dared. Fifty feet below, the waves were swirling in and over the remnants of a shattered tower. Behind it, she glimpsed the mouth of a large cavern.

“That’s the old beacon tower,” said Nimble Dick as he came up behind her. “It fell when I was half as old as Pods here. Used to be steps down to the cove, but when the cliff collapsed they went too. The smugglers stopped landing here after that. Time was, they could row their boats into the cave, but no more. See?” He put one hand on her back, and pointed with the other.

Brienne’s flesh prickled. *One shove, and I’ll be down there with the tower.* She stepped back. “Keep your hands off me.”

Crabb made a face. “I was only...”

“I don’t care what you were *only*. Where’s the gate?”

“Around t’other side.” He hesitated. “This fool o’ yours, he’s not a man to hold a grudge, is he?” he said nervously. “I mean, last night I got to thinking that he might be angry at old Nimble Dick, on account o’ that map I sold him, and how I left out that the smugglers don’t land here no more.”

“With the gold that you’ve got coming, you can give him back whatever he paid you for your *help*.” Brienne could not imagine Dontos Hollard posing a threat. “That is, if he’s even here.”

They made a circuit of the walls. The castle had been triangular, with square towers at each corner. Its gates were badly rotted. When Brienne tugged at one, the wood cracked and peeled away in long wet splinters, and

half the gate came down on her. She could see more green gloom inside. The forest had breached the walls, and swallowed keep and bailey. But there was a portcullis behind the gate, its teeth sunk deep into the soft muddy ground. The iron was red with rust, but it held when Brienne rattled it. “No one’s used this gate for a long time.”

“I could climb over,” offered Podrick. “By the cliff. Where the wall fell down.”

“It’s too dangerous. Those stones looked loose to me, and that red ivy’s poisonous. There has to be a postern gate.”

They found it on the north side of the castle, half-hidden behind a huge blackberry bramble. The berries had all been picked, and half the bush had been hacked down to cut a path to the door. The sight of the broken branches filled Brienne with disquiet. “Someone’s been through here, and recently.”

“Your fool and those girls,” said Crabb. “I told you.”

Sansa? Brienne could not believe it. Even a wine-soaked sot like Dontos Hollard would have better sense than to bring her to this bleak place. Something about the ruins filled her with unease. She would not find the Stark girl here... but she had to have a look. *Someone was here*, she thought. *Someone who needed to stay hidden*. “I’m going in,” she said. “Crabb, you’ll come with me. Podrick, I want you to watch the horses.”

“I want to come too. I’m a squire. I can fight.”

“That’s why I want you to stay here. There may be outlaws in these woods. We dare not leave the horses unprotected.”

Podrick scuffed at a rock with his boot. “As you say.”

She shouldered through the blackberries and pulled at a rusted iron ring. The postern door resisted for a moment, then jerked open, its hinges screaming protest. The sound made the hairs on the back of Brienne’s neck stand up. She drew her sword. Even in mail and boiled leather, she felt naked.

“Go on, m’lady,” urged Nimble Dick, behind her. “What are you waiting for? Old Crabb’s been dead a thousand years.”

What *was* she waiting for? Brienne told herself that she was being foolish. The sound was just the sea, echoing endlessly through the caverns beneath the castle, rising and falling with each wave. It *did* sound like whispering, though, and for a moment she could almost see the heads, sitting on their shelves and muttering to one another. “*I should have used the sword*” one of them was saying. “*I should have used the magic sword.*”

“Podrick,” said Brienne. “There’s a sword and scabbard wrapped up in my bedroll. Bring them here to me.”

“Yes, ser. My lady. I will.” The boy went running off.

“A sword?” Nimble Dick scratched behind his ear. “You got a sword in your hand. What do you need another for?”

“This one’s for you.” Brienne offered him the hilt.

“For true?” Crabb reached out hesitantly, as if the blade might bite him. “The mistrustful maid’s giving old Dick a sword?”

“You do know how to use one?”

“I’m a Crabb.” He snatched the longsword from her hand. “I got the same blood as old Ser Clarence.” He slashed the air and grinned at her. “It’s the sword that makes the lord, some say.”

When Podrick Payne returned, he held Oathkeeper as gingerly as if it were a child. Nimble Dick gave a whistle at the sight of the ornate scabbard with its row of lion’s heads, but grew quiet when she drew the blade and tried a cut. *Even the sound of it is sharper than an ordinary sword.* “With me,” she told Crabb. She slipped sideways through the postern, ducking her head to pass beneath the doorway’s arch.

The bailey opened up before her, overgrown. To her left was the main gate, and the collapsed shell of what might have been a stable. Saplings were poking out of half the stalls and growing up through the dry brown thatch of its roof. To her right she saw rotted wooden steps descending into the darkness of a dungeon or a root cellar. Where the keep had been was a pile of collapsed stones, overgrown with green and purple moss. The yard was all weeds and pine needles. Soldier pines were everywhere, drawn up in solemn ranks. In their midst was a pale stranger; a slender young

weirwood with a trunk as white as a cloistered maid. Dark red leaves sprouted from its reaching branches. Beyond was the emptiness of sky and sea where the wall had collapsed...

...and the remnants of a fire.

The whispers nibbled at her ears, insistent. Brienne knelt beside the fire. She picked up a blackened stick, sniffed at it, stirred the ashes. *Someone was trying to keep warm last night. Or else they were trying to send a signal to a passing ship.*

“Halloooooo,” called Nimble Dick. “Anyone here?”

“Be quiet,” Brienne told him.

“Someone might be hiding. Wanting to get a look at us before they show themselves.” He walked to where the steps went down beneath the ground, and peered down into the darkness. “*Halloooooo*,” he called again. “Anyone down there?”

Brienne saw a sapling sway. From the bushes slid a man, so caked with dirt that he looked as if he had sprouted from the earth. A broken sword was in his hand, but it was his face that gave her pause, the small eyes and wide flat nostrils.

She knew that nose. She knew those eyes. *Pyg*, his friends had called him.

Everything seemed to happen in a heartbeat. A second man slipped over the lip of the well, making no more noise than a snake might make slithering across a pile of wet leaves. He wore an iron halfhelm wrapped in stained red silk, and had a short, thick throwing spear in hand. Brienne knew him too. From behind her came a rustling as a head poked down through the red leaves. Crabb was standing underneath the weirwood. He looked up and saw the face. “Here,” he called to Brienne. “It’s your fool.”

“Dick,” she called urgently, “to me.”

Shagwell dropped from the weirwood, braying laughter. He was garbed in motley, but so faded and stained that it showed more brown than grey or pink. In place of a jester’s flail he had a triple morningstar, three spiked balls chained to a wooden haft. He swung it hard and low, and one of

Crabb's knees exploded in a spray of blood and bone. "*That's* funny," Shagwell crowed as Dick fell. The sword she'd given him went flying from his hand and vanished in the weeds. He writhed on the ground, screaming and clutching at the ruins of his knee. "Oh, look," said Shagwell, "it's Smuggler Dick, the one who made the map for us. Did you come all this way to give us back our gold?"

"*Please,*" Dick whimpered, "please don't, my leg..."

"Does it hurt? I can make it stop."

"Leave him be," said Brienne.

"*DON'T!*" shrieked Dick, lifting bloody hands to shield his head. Shagwell whirled the spiked ball once around his head and brought it down in the middle of Crabb's face. There was a sickening crunch. In the silence that followed, Brienne could hear the sound of her own heart.

"Bad Shags," said the man who'd come creeping from the well. When he saw Brienne's face, he laughed. "You again, woman? What, come to hunt us down? Or did you miss our friendly faces?"

Shagwell danced from foot to foot and spun his flail. "It's me she come for. She dreams of me every night, when she sticks her fingers up her slit. She wants me, lads, the big horse missed her merry Shags! I'm going to fuck her up the arse and pump her full of motley seed, until she whelps a little me."

"You need to use a different hole for that, Shags," said Timeon, in his Dornish drawl.

"I best use all her holes, then. Just to make certain." He moved to her right as Pyg was circling around to her left, forcing her back toward the ragged edge of the cliff. *Passage for three*, Brienne remembered. "There are only three of you."

Timeon shrugged. "We all went our own ways, after we left Harrenhal. Urswyck and his lot rode south for Oldtown. Rorge thought he might slip out at Saltpans. Me and my lads made for Maidenpool, but we couldn't get near a ship." The Dornishman hefted his spear. "You did for Vargo with that bite, you know. His ear turned black and started leaking pus. Rorge and

Urswyck were for leaving, but the Goat says we got to hold his castle. Lord of Harrenhal, he says he is, no one was going to take it off him. He said it slobbery, the way he always talked. We heard the Mountain killed him piece by piece. A hand one day, a foot the next, lopped off neat and clean. They bandaged up the stumps so Hoat didn't die. He was saving his cock for last, but some bird called him to King's Landing, so he finished it and rode off."

"I am not here for you. I am looking for my..." She almost said *my sister*. "...for a fool."

"*I'm* a fool," Shagwell announced happily.

"The wrong fool," blurted Brienne. "The one I want is with a highborn girl, the daughter of Lord Stark of Winterfell."

"Then it's the Hound you want," said Timeon. "He's not here neither, as it happens. Just us."

"Sandor Clegane?" said Brienne. "What do you mean?"

"He's the one that's got the Stark girl. The way I hear it, she was making for Riverrun, and he stole her. Damned dog."

Riverrun, thought Brienne. She was making for Riverrun. For her uncles. "How do you know?"

"Had it from one of Beric's bunch. The lightning lord is looking for her too. He's sent his men all up and down the Trident, sniffing after her. We chanced on three of them after Harrenhal, and winkled the tale from one before he died."

"He might have lied."

"He might have, but he didn't. Later on, we heard how the Hound slew three of his brother's men at an inn by the crossroads. The girl was with him there. The innkeep swore to it before Rorge killed him, and the whores said the same. An ugly bunch, they were. Not so ugly as you, mind you, but still..."

He is trying to distract me, Brienne realized, to lull me with his voice. Pyg was edging closer. Shagwell took a hop toward her. She backed away from them. *They will back me off the cliff if I let them.* "Stay away," she warned them.

“I think I’m going to fuck you up the nose, wench,” Shagwell announced. “Won’t that be amusing?”

“He has a very small cock,” Timeon explained. “Drop that pretty sword and might be we’ll go gentle on you, woman. We need gold to pay these smugglers, that’s all.”

“And if I give you gold, you’ll let us go?”

“We will.” Timeon smiled. “Once you’ve fucked the lot of us. We’ll pay you like a proper whore. A silver for each fuck. Or else we’ll take the gold and rape you anyway, and do you like the Mountain did Lord Vargo. What’s your choice?”

“This.” Brienne threw herself toward Pyg.

He jerked his broken blade up to protect his face, but as he went high she went low. Oathkeeper bit through leather, wool, skin, and muscle, into the sellsword’s thigh. Pyg cut back wildly as his leg went out from under him. His broken sword scraped against her chainmail before he landed on his back. Brienne stabbed him through the throat, gave the blade a hard turn, and slid it out, whirling just as Timeon’s spear came flashing past her face. *I did not flinch*, she thought, as blood ran red down her cheek. *Did you see, Ser Goodwin?* She hardly felt the cut.

“Your turn,” she told Timeon, as the Dornishman pulled out a second spear, shorter and thicker than the first. “Throw it.”

“So you can dance away and charge me? I’d end up dead as Pyg. No. Get her, Shags.”

“You get her,” Shagwell said. “Did you see what she did to Pyg? She’s mad with moon blood.” The fool was behind her, Timeon in front. No matter how she turned, one was at her back.

“Get her,” urged Timeon, “and you can fuck her corpse.”

“Oh, you *do* love me.” The morningstar was whirling. *Choose one*, Brienne told herself. *Choose one and kill him quickly*. Then a stone came out of nowhere, and hit Shagwell in the head. Brienne did not hesitate. She flew at Timeon.

He was better than Pyg, but he had only a short throwing spear, and she had a Valyrian steel blade. Oathkeeper was alive in her hands. She had never been so quick. The blade became a grey blur. He wounded her in the shoulder as she came at him, but she slashed off his ear and half his cheek, hacked the head off his spear, and put a foot of rippled steel into his belly through the links of the chainmail byrnie he was wearing.

Timeon was still trying to fight as she pulled her blade from him, its fullers running red with blood. He clawed at his belt and came up with a dagger, so Brienne cut his hand off. *That one was for Jaime.* “Mother have mercy,” the Dornishman gasped, the blood bubbling from his mouth and spurting from his wrist. “Finish it. Send me back to Dorne, you bloody bitch.”

She did.

Shagwell was on his knees when she turned, looking dazed as he fumbled for the morningstar. As he staggered to his feet, another stone slammed him in the ear. Podrick had climbed the fallen wall and was standing amongst the ivy glowering, a fresh rock in his hand. “I *told* you I could fight!” he shouted down.

Shagwell tried to crawl away. “I yield,” the fool cried, “I *yield*. You mustn’t hurt sweet Shagwell, I’m too droll to die.”

“You are no better than the rest of them. You have robbed and raped and murdered.”

“Oh, I have, I have, I shan’t deny it... but I’m *amusing*, with all my japes and capers. I make men laugh.”

“And women weep.”

“Is that my fault? Women have no sense of humor.”

Brienne lowered Oathkeeper. “Dig a grave. There, beneath the weirwood.” She pointed with her blade.

“I have no spade.”

“You have two hands.” One more than you left Jaime.

“Why bother? Leave them for the crows.”

“Timeon and Pyg can feed the crows. Nimble Dick will have a grave. He was a Crabb. This is his place.”

The ground was soft from rain, but even so it took the fool the rest of the day to dig down deep enough. Night was falling by the time he was done, and his hands were bloody and blistered. Brienne sheathed Oathkeeper, gathered up Dick Crabb, and carried him to the hole. His face was hard to look on. “I’m sorry that I never trusted you. I don’t know how to do that anymore.”

As she knelt to lay the body down, she thought, The fool will make his try now, whilst my back is turned.

She heard his ragged breathing half a heartbeat before Podrick cried out his warning. Shagwell had a jagged chunk of rock clutched in one hand. Brienne had her dagger up her sleeve.

A dagger will beat a rock almost every time.

She knocked aside his arm and punched the steel into his bowels. “Laugh,” she snarled at him. He moaned instead. “Laugh,” she repeated, grabbing his throat with one hand and stabbing at his belly with the other. “*Laugh!*” She kept saying it, over and over, until her hand was red up to the wrist and the stink of the fool’s dying was like to choke her. But Shagwell never laughed. The sobs that Brienne heard were all her own. When she realized that, she threw down her knife and shuddered.

Podrick helped her lower Nimble Dick into his hole. By the time they were done the moon was rising. Brienne rubbed the dirt from her hands and tossed two dragons down into the grave.

“Why did you do that, my lady? Ser?” asked Pod.

“It was the reward I promised him for finding me the fool.”

Laughter sounded from behind them. She ripped Oathkeeper from her sheath and whirled, expecting more Bloody Mummer... but it was only Hyle Hunt atop the crumbling wall, his legs crossed. “If there are brothels down in hell, the wretch will thank you,” the knight called down. “Elsewise, that’s a waste of good gold.”

“I keep my promises. What are *you* doing here?”

“Lord Randyll bid me follow you. If by some freak’s chance you stumbled onto Sansa Stark, he told me to bring her back to Maidenpool. Have no fear, I was commanded not to harm you.”

Brienne snorted. “As if you could.”

“What will you do now, my lady?”

“Cover him.”

“About the girl, I meant. The Lady Sansa.”

Brienne thought a moment. “She was making for Riverrun, if Timeon told it true. Somewhere along the way she was taken by the Hound. If I find him...”

“...he’ll kill you.”

“Or I’ll kill him,” she said stubbornly. “Will you help me cover up poor Crabb, ser?”

“No true knight could refuse such beauty.” Ser Hyle climbed down from the wall. Together, they shoved the dirt on top of Nimble Dick as the moon rose higher in the sky, and down below the ground the heads of forgotten kings whispered secrets.