

BRIENNE

It was Hyle Hunt who insisted that they take the heads. “Tarly will want them for the walls,” he said.

“We have no tar,” Brienne pointed out. “The flesh will rot. Leave them.” She did not want to travel through the green gloom of the piney woods with the heads of the men she’d killed.

Hunt would not listen. He hacked through the dead men’s necks himself, tied the three heads together by the hair, and slung them from his saddle. Brienne had no choice but to try and pretend they were not there, but sometimes, especially at night, she could feel their dead eyes on her back, and once she dreamed she heard them whispering to one another.

It was cold and wet on Crackclaw Point as they retraced their steps. Some days it rained and some days it threatened rain. They were never warm. Even when they made camp, it was hard to find enough dry wood for a fire.

By the time they reached the gates of Maidenpool, a host of flies attended them, a crow had eaten Shagwell’s eyes, and Pyg and Timeon were crawling with maggots. Brienne and Podrick had long since taken to riding a hundred yards ahead, to keep the smell of rot well behind them. Ser Hyle claimed to have lost all sense of smell by then. “Bury them,” she told him every time they made camp for a night, but Hunt was nothing if not stubborn. *He will most like tell Lord Randyll that he slew all three of them.*

To his honor, though, the knight did nothing of the sort.

“The stammering squire threw a rock,” he said, when he and Brienne were ushered into Tarly’s presence in the yard of Mooton’s castle. The heads had been presented to a serjeant of the guard, who was told to have them cleaned and tarred and mounted above the gate. “The swordswench did the rest.”

“All three?” Lord Randyll was incredulous.

“The way she fought, she could have killed three more.”

“And did you find the Stark girl?” Tarly demanded of her.

“No, my lord.”

“Instead you slew some rats. Did you enjoy it?”

“No, my lord.”

“A pity. Well, you’ve had your taste of blood. Proved whatever it is you meant to prove. It’s time you took off that mail and donned proper clothes again. There are ships in port. One’s bound to stop at Tarth. I’ll have you on it.”

“Thank you, my lord, but no.”

Lord Tarly’s face suggested he would have liked nothing better than to stick her own head on a spike and mount it above the gates of Maidenpool with Timeon, Pyg, and Shagwell. “You mean to continue with this folly?”

“I mean to find the Lady Sansa.”

“If it please my lord,” Ser Hyle said, “I watched her fight the Mummerys. She is stronger than most men, and quick—”

“The *sword* is quick,” Tarly snapped. “That is the nature of Valyrian steel. Stronger than most men? Aye. She’s a freak of nature, far be it from me to deny it.”

His sort will never love me, Brienne thought, no matter what I do. “My lord, it may be that Sandor Clegane has some knowledge of the girl. If I could find him...”

“Clegane’s turned outlaw. He rides with Beric Dondarrion now, it would seem. Or not, the tales vary. Show me where they’re hiding, I will gladly slit their bellies open, pull their entrails out, and burn them. We’ve hanged dozens of outlaws, but the leaders still elude us. Clegane, Dondarrion, the red priest, and now this woman Stoneheart... how do *you* propose to find them, when I cannot?”

“My lord, I...” She had no good answer for him. “All I can do is try.”

“Try, then. You have your letter, you do not need my leave, but I’ll give it nonetheless. If you’re fortunate, all you’ll get for your trouble are saddle sores. If not, perhaps Clegane will let you live after he and his pack are

done raping you. You can crawl back to Tarth with some dog's bastard in your belly."

Brienne ignored that. "If it please my lord, how many men ride with the Hound?"

"Six or sixty or six hundred. It would seem to depend on whom we ask." Randyll Tarly had plainly had enough of the conversation. He started to turn away.

"If my squire and I might beg your hospitality until—"

"Beg all you want. I will not suffer you beneath my roof."

Ser Hyle Hunt stepped forward. "If it please my lord, I had understood that it was still Lord Mooton's roof."

Tarly gave the knight a venomous look. "Mooton has the courage of a worm. You will not speak to me of Mooton. As for you, my lady, it is said that your father is a good man. If so, I pity him. Some men are blessed with sons, some with daughters. No man deserves to be cursed with such as you. Live or die, Lady Brienne, do not return to Maidenpool whilst I rule here."

Words are wind, Brienne told herself. *They cannot hurt you. Let them wash over you.* "As you command, my lord," she tried to say, but Tarly had gone before she got it out. She walked from the yard like one asleep, not knowing where she was going.

Ser Hyle fell in beside her. "There are inns."

She shook her head. She did not want words with Hyle Hunt.

"Do you recall the Stinking Goose?"

Her cloak still smelled of it. "Why?"

"Meet me there on the morrow, at midday. My cousin Alyn was one of those sent out to find the Hound. I'll speak with him."

"Why would you do that?"

"Why not? If you succeed where Alyn failed, I shall be able to taunt him with that for years."

There were still inns in Maidenpool; Ser Hyle had not been wrong. Some had burned during one sack or the other, however, and had yet to be

rebuilt, and those that remained were full to bursting with men from Lord Tarly's host. She and Podrick visited all of them that afternoon, but there were no beds to be had anywhere.

"Ser? My lady?" Podrick said as the sun was going down. "There are ships. Ships have beds. Hammocks. Or bunks."

Lord Randyll's men still prowled the docks, as thick as the flies had been on the heads of the three Bloody Mummies, but their serjeant knew Brienne by sight and let her pass. The local fisherfolk were tying up for the night and crying the day's catch, but her interest was in the larger ships that plied the stormy waters of the narrow sea. Half a dozen were in port, though one, a galleas called the *Titan's Daughter*, was casting off her lines to ride out on the evening tide. She and Podrick Payne made the rounds of the ships that remained. The master of the *Gulltown Girl* took Brienne for a whore and told them that his ship was not a bawdy house, and a harpooner on the Ibbenese whaler offered to buy her boy, but they had better fortune elsewhere. She purchased Podrick an orange on the *Seastrider*, a cog just in from Oldtown by way of Tyrosh, Pentos, and Duskendale. "Gulltown next," her captain told her, "thence around the Fingers to Sisterton and White Harbor, if the storms allow. She's a clean ship, 'Strider, not so many rats as most, and we'll have fresh eggs and new-churned butter aboard. Is m'lady seeking passage north?"

"No." *Not yet*. She was tempted, but...

As they were making their way to the next pier, Podrick shuffled his feet, and said, "Ser? My lady? What if my lady did go home? My other lady, I mean. Ser. Lady Sansa."

"They burned her home."

"Still. That's where her *gods* are. And gods can't die."

Gods cannot die, but girls can. "Timeon was a cruel man and a murderer, but I do not think he lied about the Hound. We cannot go north until we know for certain. There will be other ships."

At the east end of the harbor they finally found shelter for the night, aboard a storm-wracked trading galley called the *Lady of Myr*. She was

listing badly, having lost her mast and half her crew in a storm, but her master did not have the coin he needed to refit her, so he was glad to take a few pennies from Brienne and allow her and Pod to share an empty cabin.

They had a restless night. Thrice Brienne woke. Once when the rain began, and once at a creak that made her think Nimble Dick was creeping in to kill her. The second time, she woke with knife in hand, but it was nothing. In the darkness of the cramped little cabin, it took her a moment to remember that Nimble Dick was dead. When she finally drifted back to sleep, she dreamed about the men she'd killed. They danced around her, mocking her, pinching at her as she slashed at them with her sword. She cut them all to bloody ribbons, yet still they swarmed around her... Shagwell, Timeon, and Pyg, aye, but Randyll Tarly too, and Vargo Hoat, and Red Ronnet Connington. Ronnet had a rose between his fingers. When he held it out to her, she cut his hand off.

She woke sweating, and spent the rest of the night huddled under her cloak, listening to rain pound against the deck over her head. It was a wild night. From time to time she heard the sound of distant thunder, and thought of the Braavosi ship that had sailed upon the evening tide.

The next morning she found the Stinking Goose again, woke its slatternly proprietor, and paid her for some greasy sausages, fried bread, half a cup of wine, a flagon of boiled water, and two clean cups. The woman squinted at Brienne as she was putting the water on to boil. "You're the big one went off with Nimble Dick. I remember. He cheat you?"

"No."

"Rape you?"

"No."

"Steal your horse?"

"No. He was slain by outlaws."

"Outlaws?" The woman seemed more curious than upset. "I always figured Dick would hang, or get sent off to that Wall."

They ate the fried bread and half the sausages. Podrick Payne washed his down with wine-flavored water whilst Brienne nursed a cup of watered

wine and wondered why she'd come. Hyle Hunt was no true knight. His honest face was just a mummer's mask. *I do not need his help, I do not need his protection, and I do not need him*, she told herself. *He is probably not even coming. Telling me to meet him here was just another jape.*

She was getting up to go when Ser Hyle arrived. "My lady. Podrick." He glanced at the cups and plates and the half-eaten sausages cooling in a puddle of grease, and said, "Gods, I hope you did not eat the food here."

"What we ate is no concern of yours," Brienne said. "Did you find your cousin? What did he tell you?"

"Sandor Clegane was last seen in Saltpans, the day of the raid. Afterward he rode west, along the Trident."

She frowned. "The Trident is a long river."

"Aye, but I don't think our dog will have wandered too far from its mouth. Westeros has lost its charm for him, it would seem. At Saltpans he was looking for a *ship*." Ser Hyle drew a roll of sheepskin from his boot, pushed the sausages aside, and unrolled it. It proved to be a map. "The Hound butchered three of his brother's men at the old inn by the crossroads, here. He led the raid on Saltpans, here." He tapped Saltpans with his finger. "He may be trapped. The Freys are up here at the Twins, Darry and Harrenhal are south across the Trident, west he's got the Blackwoods and the Brackens fighting, and Lord Randyll's here at Maidenpool. The high road to the Vale is closed by snow, even if he could get past the mountain clans. Where's a dog to go?"

"If he is with Dondarrion...?"

"He's not. Alyn is certain of that. Dondarrion's men are looking for him too. They have put out word that they mean to hang him for what he did at Saltpans. They had no part of that. Lord Randyll is putting it about that they did in hopes of turning the commons against Beric and his brotherhood. He will never take the lightning lord so long as the smallfolk are protecting him. And there's this other band, led by this woman Stoneheart... Lord Beric's lover, according to one tale. Supposedly she was hanged by the Freys, but Dondarrion kissed her and brought her back to life, and now she

cannot die, no more than he can.” Brienne considered the map. “If Clegane was last seen at Saltpans, that would be the place to find his trail.”

“There is no one left at Saltpans but an old knight hiding in his castle, Alyn said.”

“Still, it would be a place to start.”

“There’s a man,” Ser Hyle said. “A septon. He came in through my gate the day before you turned up. Meribald, his name is. River-born and river-bred and he’s served here all his life. He’s departing on the morrow to make his circuit, and he always calls at Saltpans. We should go with him.”

Brienne looked up sharply. “*We?*”

“I am going with you.”

“You’re not.”

“Well, I’m going with Septon Meribald to Saltpans. You and Podrick can go wherever you bloody well like.”

“Did Lord Randyll command you to follow me again?”

“He commanded me to stay away from you. Lord Randyll is of the view that you might benefit from a good hard raping.”

“Then why would you come with me?”

“It was that, or return to gate duty.”

“If your lord commanded—”

“He is no longer my lord.”

That took her aback. “You left his service?”

“His lordship informed me that he had no further need of my sword, or my insolence. It amounts to the same thing. Henceforth I shall enjoy the adventuresome life of a hedge knight... though if we do find Sansa Stark, I imagine we will be well rewarded.”

Gold and land, that’s what he sees in this. “I mean to save the girl, not sell her. I swore a vow.”

“I don’t recall that I did.”

“That is why you will not be coming with me.”

They left the next morning, as the sun was coming up.

It was a queer procession: Ser Hyle on a chestnut courser and Brienne on her tall grey mare, Podrick Payne astride his swayback stot, and Septon Meribald walking beside them with his quarterstaff, leading a small donkey and a large dog. The donkey carried such a heavy load that Brienne was half afraid its back would break. “Food for the poor and hungry of the riverlands,” Septon Meribald told them at the gates of Maidenpool. “Seeds and nuts and dried fruit, oaten porridge, flour, barley bread, three wheels of yellow cheese from the inn by the Fool’s Gate, salt cod for me, salt mutton for Dog... oh, and salt. Onions, carrots, turnips, two sacks of beans, four of barley, and nine of oranges. I have a weakness for the orange, I confess. I got these from a sailor, and I fear they will be the last I’ll taste till spring.”

Meribald was a septon without a sept, only one step up from a begging brother in the hierarchy of the Faith. There were hundreds like him, a ragged band whose humble task it was to trudge from one flyspeck of a village to the next, conducting holy services, performing marriages, and forgiving sins. Those he visited were expected to feed and shelter him, but most were as poor as he was, so Meribald could not linger in one place too long without causing hardship to his hosts. Kindly innkeepers would sometimes allow him to sleep in their kitchens or their stables, and there were septries and holdfasts and even a few castles where he knew he would be given hospitality. Where no such places were at hand, he slept beneath the trees or under hedges. “There are many fine hedges in the riverlands,” Meribald said. “The old ones are the best. There’s nothing beats a hundred-year-old hedge. Inside one of those a man can sleep as snug as at an inn, and with less fear of fleas.”

The septon could neither read nor write, as he cheerfully confessed along the road, but he knew a hundred different prayers and could recite long passages from *The Seven-Pointed Star* from memory, which was all that was required in the villages. He had a seamed, windburnt face, a shock of thick grey hair, wrinkles at the corners of his eyes. Though a big man, six feet tall, he had a way of hunching forward as he walked that made him seem much shorter. His hands were large and leathery, with red knuckles

and dirt beneath the nails, and he had the biggest feet that Brienne had ever seen, bare and black and hard as horn.

“I have not worn a shoe in twenty years,” he told Brienne. “The first year, I had more blisters than I had toes, and my soles would bleed like pigs whenever I trod on a hard stone, but I prayed and the Cobbler Above turned my skin to leather.”

“There is no cobbler above,” Podrick protested.

“There is, lad... though you may call him by another name. Tell me, which of the seven gods do you love best?”

“The Warrior,” said Podrick without a moment’s hesitation.

Brienne cleared her throat. “At Evenfall my father’s septon always said that there was but one god.”

“One god with seven aspects. That’s so, my lady, and you are right to point it out, but the mystery of the Seven Who Are One is not easy for simple folk to grasp, and I am nothing if not simple, so I speak of seven gods.” Meribald turned back to Podrick. “I have never known a boy who did not love the Warrior. I am old, though, and being old, I love the Smith. Without his labor, what would the Warrior defend? Every town has a smith, and every castle. They make the plows we need to plant our crops, the nails we use to build our ships, iron shoes to save the hooves of our faithful horses, the bright swords of our lords. No one could doubt the value of a smith, and so we name one of the Seven in his honor, but we might as easily have called him the Farmer or the Fisherman, the Carpenter or the Cobbler. What he works at makes no matter. What matters is, he works. The Father rules, the Warrior fights, the Smith labors, and together they perform all that is rightful for a man. Just as the Smith is one aspect of the godhead, the Cobbler is one aspect of the Smith. It was he who heard my prayer and healed my feet.”

“The gods are good,” Ser Hyle said in a dry voice, “but why trouble them, when you might just have kept your shoes?”

“Going barefoot was my penance. Even holy septons can be sinners, and my flesh was weak as weak could be. I was young and full of sap, and

the girls... a septon can seem as gallant as a prince if he is the only man you know who has ever been more than a mile from your village. I would recite to them from *The Seven-Pointed Star*. The Maiden's Book worked best. Oh, I was a wicked man, before I threw away my shoes. It shames me to think of all the maidens I deflowered."

Brienne shifted in the saddle uncomfortably, thinking back to the camp below the walls of Highgarden and the wager Ser Hyle and the others had made to see who could bed her first.

"We're looking for a maiden," confided Podrick Payne. "A highborn girl of three-and-ten, with auburn hair."

"I had understood that you were seeking outlaws."

"Them too," Podrick admitted.

"Most travelers do all they can to avoid such men," said Septon Meribald, "yet you would seek them out."

"We only seek one outlaw," Brienne said. "The Hound."

"So Ser Hyle told me. May the Seven save you, child. It's said he leaves a trail of butchered babes and ravished maids behind him. The Mad Dog of Saltpans, I have heard him called. What would good folk want with such a creature?"

"The maid that Podrick spoke of may be with him."

"Truly? Then we must pray for the poor girl."

And for me, thought Brienne, a prayer for me as well. Ask the Crone to raise her lamp and lead me to the Lady Sansa, and the Warrior to give strength to my arm so that I might defend her. She did not say the words aloud, though; not where Hyle Hunt might hear her and mock her for her woman's weakness.

With Septon Meribald afoot and his donkey bearing such a heavy load, the going was slow all that day. They did not take the main road west, the road that Brienne had once ridden with Ser Jaime when they came the other way to find Maidenpool sacked and full of corpses. Instead they struck off toward the northwest, following the shore of the Bay of Crabs on a crooked track so small that it did not appear on either of Ser Hyle's precious

sheepskin maps. The steep hills, black bogs, and piney woods of Crackclaw Point were nowhere to be found this side of Maidenpool. The lands they traveled through were low and wet, a wilderness of sandy dunes and salt marshes beneath a vast blue-grey vault of sky. The road was prone to vanishing amongst the reeds and tidal pools, only to appear again a mile farther on; without Meribald, Brienne knew, they surely would have lost their way. The ground was often soft, so in places the septon would walk ahead, tapping with his quarterstaff to make certain of the footing. There were no trees for leagues around, just sea and sky and sand.

No land could have been more different from Tarth, with its mountains and waterfalls, its high meadows and shadowed vales, yet this place had its own beauty, Brienne thought. They crossed a dozen slow-flowing streams alive with frogs and crickets, watched terns floating high above the bay, heard the sandpipers calling from amongst the dunes. Once a fox crossed their path, and set Meribald's dog to barking wildly.

And there were people too. Some lived amongst the reeds in houses built of mud and straw, whilst others fished the bay in leather coracles and built their homes on rickety wooden stilts above the dunes. Most seemed to live alone, out of sight of any human habitation but their own. They seemed a shy folk for the most part, but near midday the dog began to bark again, and three women emerged from the reeds to give Meribald a woven basket full of clams. He gave each of them an orange in return, though clams were as common as mud in this world, and oranges were rare and costly. One of the women was very old, one was heavy with child, and one was a girl as fresh and pretty as a flower in spring. When Meribald took them off to hear their sins, Ser Hyle chuckled, and said, "It would seem the gods walk with us... at least the Maiden, the Mother, and the Crone." Podrick looked so astonished that Brienne had to tell him no, they were only three marsh women.

Afterward, when they resumed their journey, she turned to the septon, and said, "These people live less than a day's ride from Maidenpool, and yet the fighting has not touched them."

“They have little to touch, my lady. Their treasures are shells and stones and leather boats, their finest weapons knives of rusted iron. They are born, they live, they love, they die. They know Lord Mooton rules their lands, but few have ever seen him, and Riverrun and King’s Landing are only names to them.”

“And yet they know the gods,” said Brienne. “That is your work, I think. How long have you walked the riverlands?”

“It will be forty years soon,” the septon said, and his dog gave a loud bark. “From Maidenpool to Maidenpool, my circuit takes me half a year and oftentimes more, but I will not say I know the Trident. I glimpse the castles of the great lords only at a distance, but I know the market towns and holdfasts, the villages too small to have a name, the hedges and the hills, the rills where a thirsty man can drink and the caves where he can shelter. And the roads the smallfolk use, the crooked muddy tracks that do not appear on parchment maps, I know them too.” He chuckled. “I should. My feet have trod every mile of them, ten times over.”

The back roads are the ones the outlaws use, and the caves would make fine places for hunted men to hide. A prickle of suspicion made Brienne wonder just how well Ser Hyle knew this man. “It must make for a lonely life, septon.”

“The Seven are always with me,” said Meribald, “and I have my faithful servant, and Dog.”

“Does your dog have a name?” asked Podrick Payne.

“He must,” said Meribald, “but he is not my dog. Not him.”

The dog barked and wagged his tail. He was a huge, shaggy creature, ten stone of dog at least, but friendly.

“Who does he belong to?” asked Podrick.

“Why, to himself, and to the Seven. As to his name, he has not told me what it is. I call him Dog.”

“Oh.” Podrick did not know what to make of a dog named Dog, plainly. The boy chewed on that a while, then said, “I used to have a dog when I was little. I called him Hero.”

“Was he?”

“Was he what?”

“A hero.”

“No. He was a good dog, though. He died.”

“Dog keeps me safe upon the roads, even in such trying times as these. Neither wolf nor outlaw dare molest me when Dog is at my side.” The septon frowned. “The wolves have grown terrible of late. There are places where a man alone would do well to find a tree to sleep in. In all my years the biggest pack I ever saw had fewer than a dozen wolves in it, but the great pack that prowls along the Trident now numbers in the hundreds.”

“Have you come on them yourself?” Ser Hyle asked.

“I have been spared that, Seven save me, but I have heard them in the night, and more than once. So many voices... a sound to curdle a man’s blood. It even set Dog to shivering, and Dog has killed a dozen wolves.” He ruffled the dog’s head. “Some will tell you that they are demons. They say the pack is led by a monstrous she-wolf, a stalking shadow grim and grey and huge. They will tell you that she has been known to bring aurochs down all by herself, that no trap nor snare can hold her, that she fears neither steel nor fire, slays any wolf that tries to mount her, and devours no other flesh but man.”

Ser Hyle Hunt laughed. “Now you’ve done it, septon. Poor Podrick’s eyes are big as boiled eggs.”

“They’re not,” said Podrick, indignant. Dog barked.

That night they made a cold camp in the dunes. Brienne sent Podrick walking by the shore to find some driftwood for a fire, but he came back empty-handed, with mud up to his knees. “The tide’s out, ser. My lady. There’s no water, only mudflats.”

“Stay off the mud, child,” counseled Septon Meribald. “The mud is not fond of strangers. If you walk in the wrong place, it will open up and swallow you.”

“It’s only *mud*,” insisted Podrick.

“Until it fills your mouth and starts creeping up your nose. Then it’s death.” He smiled to take the chill off his words. “Wipe off that mud and have a slice of orange, lad.”

The next day was more of the same. They broke their fast on salt cod and more orange slices, and were on their way before the sun was wholly risen, with a pink sky behind them and a purple sky ahead. Dog led the way, sniffing at every clump of reeds and stopping every now and then to piss on one; he seemed to know the road as well as Meribald. The cries of terns shivered through the morning air as the tide came rushing in.

Near midday they stopped at a tiny village, the first they had encountered, where eight of the stilt-houses loomed above a small stream. The men were out fishing in their coracles, but the women and young boys clambered down dangling rope ladders and gathered around Septon Meribald to pray. After the service he absolved their sins and left them with some turnips, a sack of beans, and two of his precious oranges.

Back on the road, the septon said, “We would do well to keep a watch tonight, my friends. The villagers say they’ve seen three broken men skulking round the dunes, west of the old watchtower.”

“Only three?” Ser Hyle smiled. “Three is honey to our swordswench. They’re not like to trouble armed men.”

“Unless they’re starving,” the septon said. “There is food in these marshes, but only for those with the eyes to find it, and these men are strangers here, survivors from some battle. If they should accost us, ser, I beg you, leave them to me.”

“What will you do with them?”

“Feed them. Ask them to confess their sins, so that I might forgive them. Invite them to come with us to the Quiet Isle.”

“That’s as good as inviting them to slit our throats as we sleep,” Hyle Hunt replied. “Lord Randyll has better ways to deal with broken men—steel and hempen rope.”

“Ser? My lady?” said Podrick. “Is a broken man an outlaw?”

“More or less,” Brienne answered.

Septon Meribald disagreed. “More less than more. There are many sorts of outlaws, just as there are many sorts of birds. A sandpiper and a sea eagle both have wings, but they are not the same. The singers love to sing of good men forced to go outside the law to fight some wicked lord, but most outlaws are more like this ravening Hound than they are the lightning lord. They are evil men, driven by greed, soured by malice, despising the gods and caring only for themselves. Broken men are more deserving of our pity, though they may be just as dangerous. Almost all are common-born, simple folk who had never been more than a mile from the house where they were born until the day some lord came round to take them off to war. Poorly shod and poorly clad, they march away beneath his banners, oftentimes with no better arms than a sickle or a sharpened hoe, or a maul they made themselves by lashing a stone to a stick with strips of hide. Brothers march with brothers, sons with fathers, friends with friends. They’ve heard the songs and stories, so they go off with eager hearts, dreaming of the wonders they will see, of the wealth and glory they will win. War seems a fine adventure, the greatest most of them will ever know.

“Then they get a taste of battle.

“For some, that one taste is enough to break them. Others go on for years, until they lose count of all the battles they have fought in, but even a man who has survived a hundred fights can break in his hundred-and-first. Brothers watch their brothers die, fathers lose their sons, friends see their friends trying to hold their entrails in after they’ve been gutted by an axe.

“They see the lord who led them there cut down, and some other lord shouts that they are his now. They take a wound, and when that’s still half-healed they take another. There is never enough to eat, their shoes fall to pieces from the marching, their clothes are torn and rotting, and half of them are shitting in their breeches from drinking bad water.

“If they want new boots or a warmer cloak or maybe a rusted iron halfhelm, they need to take them from a corpse, and before long they are stealing from the living too, from the smallfolk whose lands they’re fighting in, men very like the men they used to be. They slaughter their sheep and steal their chickens, and from there it’s just a short step to carrying off their

daughters too. And one day they look around and realize all their friends and kin are gone, that they are fighting beside strangers beneath a banner that they hardly recognize. They don't know where they are or how to get back home and the lord they're fighting for does not know their names, yet here he comes, shouting for them to form up, to make a line with their spears and scythes and sharpened hoes, to stand their ground. And the knights come down on them, faceless men clad all in steel, and the iron thunder of their charge seems to fill the world...

“And the man breaks.

“He turns and runs, or crawls off afterward over the corpses of the slain, or steals away in the black of night, and he finds someplace to hide. All thought of home is gone by then, and kings and lords and gods mean less to him than a haunch of spoiled meat that will let him live another day, or a skin of bad wine that might drown his fear for a few hours. The broken man lives from day to day, from meal to meal, more beast than man. Lady Brienne is not wrong. In times like these, the traveler must beware of broken men, and fear them... but he should pity them as well.”

When Meribald was finished a profound silence fell upon their little band. Brienne could hear the wind rustling through a clump of pussywillows, and farther off the faint cry of a loon. She could hear Dog panting softly as he loped along beside the septon and his donkey, tongue lolling from his mouth. The quiet stretched and stretched, until finally she said, “How old were you when they marched you off to war?”

“Why, no older than your boy,” Meribald replied. “Too young for such, in truth, but my brothers were all going, and I would not be left behind. Willam said I could be his squire, though Will was no knight, only a potboy armed with a kitchen knife he'd stolen from the inn. He died upon the Stepstones, and never struck a blow. It was fever did for him, and for my brother Robin. Owen died from a mace that split his head apart, and his friend Jon Pox was hanged for rape.”

“The War of the Ninepenny Kings?” asked Hyle Hunt.

“So they called it, though I never saw a king, nor earned a penny. It was a war, though. That it was.”