

BRIENNE

The gates of Duskendale were closed and barred. Through the predawn gloom the town walls shimmered palely. On their ramparts, wisps of fog moved like ghostly sentinels. A dozen wayns and ox carts had drawn up outside the gates, waiting for the sun to rise. Brienne took her place behind some turnips. Her calves ached, and it felt good to dismount and stretch her legs. Before long another wayn came rumbling from the woods. By the time the sky began to lighten, the queue stretched back a quarter mile.

The farm folk gave her curious glances, but no one spoke to her. *It is for me to talk to them*, Brienne told herself, but she had always found it hard to speak with strangers. Even as a girl she had been shy. Long years of scorn had only made her shyer. *I must ask after Sansa. How else will I find her?* She cleared her throat. “Goodwife,” she said to the woman on the turnip cart, “perhaps you saw my sister on the road? A young maid, three-and-ten and fair of face, with blue eyes and auburn hair. She may be riding with a drunken knight.”

The woman shook her head, but her husband said, “Then she’s no maid, I’ll wager. Does the poor girl have a name?”

Brienne’s head was empty. *I should have made up some name for her.* Any name would do, but none came to her.

“No name? Well, the roads are full of nameless girls.”

“The lichyard’s even fuller,” said his wife.

As dawn broke, guardsmen appeared on the parapets. The farmers climbed onto their wagons and shook the reins. Brienne mounted as well and took a glance behind her. Most of the queue waiting to enter Duskendale were farm folk with loads of fruits and vegetables to sell. A pair of wealthy townsmen sat on well-bred palfreys a dozen places behind her, and farther back she spied a skinny boy on a piebald rounsey. There was no sign of the two knights, nor Ser Shadrich the Mad Mouse.

The guards were waving through the wayns with scarce a look, but when Brienne reached the gate she gave them pause. “Halt, you!” the captain cried. A pair of men in chainmail hauberks crossed their spears to bar her way. “State your purpose here.”

“I seek the Lord of Duskenale, or his maester.”

The captain’s eyes lingered on her shield. “The black bat of Lothston. Those are arms of ill repute.”

“They are not mine. I mean to have the shield repainted.”

“Aye?” The captain rubbed his stubbled chin. “My sister does such work, as it happens. You’ll find her at the house with the painted doors, across from the Seven Swords.” He gestured to the guards. “Let her pass, lads. It’s a wench.”

The gatehouse opened on a market square, where those who had entered before her were unloading to hawk their turnips, yellow onions, and sacks of barleycorn. Others were selling arms and armor, and very cheaply to judge from the prices they shouted out as she rode by. *The looters come with the carrion crows after every battle.* Brienne walked her horse past mail shirts still caked with brown blood, dented helms, notched longswords. There was clothing to be had as well: leather boots, fur cloaks, stained surcoats with suspicious rents. She knew many of the badges. The mailed fist, the moose, the white sun, the double-bladed axe, all those were northern sigils. Tarly men had perished here as well, though, and many from the stormlands. She saw red and green apples, a shield that bore the three thunderbolts of Leygood, horse trappings patterned with the ants of Ambrose. Lord Tarly’s own striding huntsman appeared on many a badge and brooch and doublet. *Friend or foe, the crows care not.*

There were pine and linden shields to be had for pennies, but Brienne rode past them. She meant to keep the heavy oaken shield Jaime had given her, the one he’d borne himself from Harrenhal to King’s Landing. A pine shield had its advantages. It was lighter, and therefore easier to bear, and the soft wood was more like to trap a foeman’s axe or sword. But oak gave more protection, if you were strong enough to bear its weight.

Duskendale was built around its harbor. North of town the chalk cliffs rose; to the south a rocky headland shielded the ships at anchor from storms coming up the narrow sea. The castle overlooked the port, its square keep and big drum towers visible from every part of town. In the crowded cobbled streets, it was easier to walk than ride, so Brienne put her mare up in a stable and continued on afoot, with her shield slung across her back and her bedroll tucked up beneath one arm.

The captain's sister was not hard to find. The Seven Swords was the largest inn in town, a four-story structure that towered over its neighbors, and the double doors on the house across the way were painted gorgeously. They showed a castle in an autumn wood, the trees done up in shades of gold and russet. Ivy crawled up the trunks of ancient oaks, and even the acorns had been done with loving care. When Brienne peered more closely, she saw creatures in the foliage: a sly red fox, two sparrows on a branch, and behind those leaves the shadow of a boar.

"Your door is very pretty," she told the dark-haired woman who answered when she knocked. "What castle is that meant to be?"

"All castles," said the captain's sister. "The only one I know is the Dun Fort by the harbor. I made t'other in my head, what a castle ought to look like. I never seen a dragon neither, nor a griffin, nor a unicorn." She had a cheerful manner, but when Brienne showed her the shield her face went dark. "My old ma used to say that giant bats flew out from Harrenhal on moonless nights, to carry bad children to Mad Danelle for her cookpots. Sometimes I'd hear them scrabbling at the shutters." She sucked her teeth a moment, thoughtful. "What goes in its place?"

The arms of Tarth were quartered rose and azure, and bore a yellow sun and crescent moon. But so long as men believed her to be a murderess, Brienne dare not carry them. "Your door reminded me of an old shield I once saw in my father's armory." She described the arms as best she could recall them.

The woman nodded. "I can paint it straightaway, but the paint will need to dry. Take a room at the Seven Swords, if it please you. I'll bring the shield to you by morning."

Brienne had not meant to overnight in Duskendale, but it might be for the best. She did not know if the lord of the castle was in residence, or whether he would consent to see her. She thanked the painter and crossed the cobblestones to the inn. Above its door, seven wooden swords swung beneath an iron spike. The whitewash that covered them was cracked and peeling, but Brienne knew their meaning. They stood for the seven sons of Darklyn who had worn the white cloaks of the Kingsguard. No other house in all the realm could claim as many. *They were the glory of their House. And now they are a sign above an inn.* She pushed into the common room and asked the innkeep for a room and a bath.

He put her on the second floor, and a woman with a liver-colored birthmark on her face brought up a wooden tub, and then the water, pail by pail. “Do any Darklyns remain in Duskendale?” Brienne asked as she climbed into the tub.

“Well, there’s Darkes, I’m one myself. My husband says I was Darke before we wed, and darker afterward.” She laughed. “Can’t throw a stone in Duskendale without you hit some Darke or Darkwood or Dargood, but the lordly Darklyns are all gone. Lord Denys was the last o’ them, the sweet young fool. Did you know the Darklyns were kings in Duskendale before the Andals come? You’d never know t’look at me, but I got me royal blood. Can you see it? ‘Your Grace, another cup of ale,’ I ought to make them say. ‘Your Grace, the chamber pot needs emptying, and fetch in some fresh faggots, Your Bloody Grace, the fire’s going out.’” She laughed again and shook the last drops from the pail. “Well, there you are. Is that water hot enough for you?”

“It will serve.” The water was lukewarm.

“I’d bring up more, but it’d just slop over. A girl the size o’ you, you fill a tub.”

Only a cramped small tub like this one. At Harrenhal the tubs had been huge, and made of stone. The bathhouse had been thick with the steam rising off the water, and Jaime had come walking through that mist naked as his name day, looking half a corpse and half a god. *He climbed into the tub*

with me, she remembered, blushing. She seized a chunk of hard lye soap and scrubbed under her arms, trying to call up Renly's face again.

By the time the water had gone cold, Brienne was as clean as she was like to get. She put on the same clothes she had taken off and girded her swordbelt tight around her hips, but her mail and helm she left behind, so as not to seem so threatening at the Dun Fort. It felt good to stretch her legs. The guards at the castle gates wore leather jacks with a badge that showed crossed warhammers upon a white saltire. "I would speak with your lord," Brienne told them.

One laughed. "Best shout out loud, then."

"Lord Rykker rode to Maidenpool with Randyll Tarly," the other said. "He left Ser Rufus Leek as castellan, to look after Lady Rykker and the young ones."

It was to Leek that they escorted her. Ser Rufus was a short, stout greybeard whose left leg ended in a stump. "You will forgive me if I do not rise," he said. Brienne offered him her letter, but Leek could not read, so he sent her to the maester, a bald man with a freckled scalp and a stiff red mustache.

When he heard the name Hollard, the maester frowned with irritation. "How often must I sing this song?" Her face must have given her away. "Did you think you were the first to come seeking after Dontos? More like the twenty-first. The gold cloaks were here within days of the king's murder, with Lord Tywin's warrant. And what do you have, pray?"

Brienne showed him the letter, with Tommen's seal and childish signature. The maester *hmmmed* and *hrrred*, picked at the wax, and finally gave it back. "It seems in order." He climbed onto a stool and gestured Brienne to another. "I never knew Ser Dontos. He was a boy when he left Duskendale. The Hollards were a noble House once, 'tis true. You know their arms? Barry red and pink, with three golden crowns upon a blue chief. The Darklyns were petty kings during the Age of Heroes, and three took Hollard wives. Later their little realm was swallowed up by larger kingdoms, yet the Darklyns endured and the Hollards served them... aye, even in defiance. You know of that?"

“A little.” Her own maester used to say that it was the Defiance of Duskendale that had driven King Aerys mad.

“In Duskendale they love Lord Denys still, despite the woe he brought them. ’Tis Lady Serala that they blame, his Myrish wife. The Lace Serpent, she is called. If Lord Darklyn had only wed a Staunton or a Stokeworth... well, you know how smallfolk will go on. The Lace Serpent filled her husband’s ear with Myrish poison, they say, until Lord Denys rose against his king and took him captive. In the taking, his master-at-arms Ser Symon Hollard cut down Ser Gwayne Gaunt of the Kingsguard. For half a year Aerys was held within these very walls, whilst the King’s Hand sat outside Duskendale with a mighty host. Lord Tywin had sufficient strength to storm the town any time he wished, but Lord Denys sent word that at the first sign of assault he’d kill the king.”

Brienne remembered what came next. “The king was rescued,” she said. “Barristan the Bold brought him out.”

“He did,” the maester said. “Once Lord Denys lost his hostage, he opened his gates and ended his defiance rather than let Lord Tywin take the town. He bent the knee and begged for mercy, but the king was not of a forgiving mind. Lord Denys lost his head, as did his brothers and his sister, uncles, cousins, all the lordly Darklyns. The Lace Serpent was burned alive, poor woman, though her tongue was torn out first, and her female parts, with which it was said that she had enslaved her lord. Half of Duskendale will still tell you that Aerys was too kind to her.”

“And the Hollards?”

“Attainted and destroyed,” said the maester. “I was forging my chain at the Citadel when this happened, but I have read the accounts of their trials and punishments. Ser Jon Hollard the Steward was wed to Lord Denys’s sister and died with his wife, as did their young son, who was half-Darklyn. Robin Hollard was a squire, and when the king was seized he danced around him and pulled his beard. He died upon the rack. Ser Symon Hollard was slain by Ser Barristan during the king’s escape. The Hollard lands were taken, their castle torn down, their villages put to the torch. As with the Darklyns, House Hollard was extinguished.”

“Save for Dontos.”

“True enough. Young Dontos was the son of Ser Steffon Hollard, the twin brother of Ser Symon, who had died of a fever some years before and had no part in the Defiance. Aerys would have taken the boy’s head off nonetheless, but Ser Barristan asked that his life be spared. The king could not refuse the man who’d saved him, so Dontos was taken to King’s Landing as a squire. To my knowledge he never returned to Duskendale, and why should he? He held no lands here, had neither kin nor castle. If Dontos and this northern girl helped murder our sweet king, it seems to me that they would want to put as many leagues as they could betwixt themselves and justice. Look for them in Oldtown, if you must, or across the narrow sea. Look for them in Dorne, or on the Wall. Look *elsewhere*.” He rose. “I hear my ravens calling. You will forgive me if I bid you good morrow.”

The walk back to the inn seemed longer than the walk to the Dun Fort, though perhaps that was only her mood. She would not find Sansa Stark in Duskendale, that seemed plain. If Ser Dontos had taken her to Oldtown or across the narrow sea, as the maester seemed to think, Brienne’s quest was hopeless. *What was there for her in Oldtown?* she asked herself. *The maester never knew her, no more than he knew Hollard. She would not have gone to strangers.*

In King’s Landing, Brienne had found one of Sansa’s former maids doing washing in a brothel. “I served with Lord Renly before m’lady Sansa, and both turned traitor,” the woman Brella complained bitterly. “No lord will touch me now, so I have to wash for whores.” But when Brienne asked about Sansa, she said, “I’ll tell you what I told Lord Tywin. That girl was always praying. She’d go to sept and light her candles like a proper lady, but near every night she went off to the godswood. She’s gone back north, she has. That’s where her *gods* are.”

The north was huge, though, and Brienne had no notion which of her father’s bannermen Sansa might have been most inclined to trust. *Or would she seek her own blood instead?* Though all of her siblings had been slain, Brienne knew that Sansa still had an uncle and a bastard half brother on the

Wall, serving in the Night's Watch. Another uncle, Edmure Tully, was a captive at the Twins, but *his* uncle Ser Brynden still held Riverrun. And Lady Catelyn's younger sister ruled the Vale. *Blood calls to blood*. Sansa might well have run to one of them. Which one, though?

The Wall was too far, surely, and a bleak and bitter place besides. And to reach Riverrun the girl would need to cross the war-torn riverlands and pass through the Lannister siege lines. The Eyrie would be simpler, and Lady Lysa would surely welcome her sister's daughter...

Ahead, the alley bent. Somehow Brienne had taken a wrong turn. She found herself in a dead end, a small muddy yard where three pigs were rooting round a low stone well. One squealed at the sight of her, and an old woman drawing water looked her up and down suspiciously. "What would you be wanting?"

"I was looking for the Seven Swords."

"Back the way you come. Left at the sept."

"I thank you." Brienne turned to retrace her steps, and walked headfirst into someone hurrying round the bend. The collision knocked him off his feet, and he landed on his arse in the mud. "Pardons," she murmured. He was only a boy; a scrawny lad with straight, thin hair and a sty beneath one eye. "Are you hurt?" She offered a hand to help him up, but the boy squirmed back away from her on heels and elbows. He could not have been more than ten or twelve, though he wore a chainmail byrnie and had a longsword in a leather sheath slung across his back. "Do I know you?" Brienne asked. His face seemed vaguely familiar, though she could not think from where.

"No. You don't. You never..." He scrambled to his feet. "F-f-forgive me. My lady. I wasn't looking. I mean, I was, but down. I was looking down. At my feet." The boy took to his heels, plunging headlong back the way he'd come.

Something about him roused all of Brienne's suspicions, but she was not about to chase him through the streets of Duskendale. *Outside the gates this morning, that was where I saw him*, she realized. *He was riding a*

piebald rounsey. And it seemed as if she had seen him somewhere else as well, but where?

By the time Brienne found the Seven Swords again, the common room was crowded. Four septas sat closest to the fire, in robes stained and dusty from the road. Elsewhere locals filled the benches, sopping up bowls of hot crab stew with chunks of bread. The smell made her stomach rumble, but she saw no empty seats. Then a voice behind her said, “M’lady, here, have my place.” Not until he hopped off the bench did Brienne realize that the speaker was a dwarf. The little man was not quite five feet tall. His nose was veined and bulbous, his teeth red from sourleaf, and he was dressed in the brown roughspun robes of a holy brother, with the iron hammer of the Smith dangling down about his thick neck.

“Keep your seat,” she said. “I can stand as well as you.”

“Aye, but my head is not so apt to knock upon the ceiling.” The dwarf’s speech was coarse but courteous. Brienne could see the crown of his scalp where he had shaved it. Many holy brothers wore such tonsures. Septa Roelle once told her that it was meant to show that they had nothing to hide from the Father. “Can’t the Father see through hair?” Brienne had asked. *A stupid thing to say*. She had been a slow child; Septa Roelle often told her so. She felt near as stupid now, so she took the little man’s place at the end of the bench, signaled for stew, and turned to thank the dwarf. “Do you serve some holy house in Duskendale, brother?”

“’Twas nearer Maidenpool, m’lady, but the wolves burned us out,” the man replied, gnawing on a heel of bread. “We rebuilt as best we could, until some sellswords come. I could not say whose men they were, but they took our pigs and killed the brothers. I squeezed inside a hollow log and hid, but t’others were too big. It took me a long time to bury them all, but the Smith, he gave me strength. When that was done I dug up a few coins the elder brother had hid by and set off by myself.”

“I met some other brothers going to King’s Landing.”

“Aye, there’s hundreds on the roads. Not only brothers. Septons too, and smallfolk. Sparrows all. Might be I’m a sparrow too. The Smith, he made me small enough.” He chuckled. “And what’s your sad tale, m’lady?”

“I am looking for my sister. She’s highborn, only three-and-ten, a pretty maid with blue eyes and auburn hair. You may have seen her traveling with a man. A knight, perhaps a fool. There’s gold for the man who helps me find her.”

“Gold?” The brother gave her a red smile. “A bowl of that crab stew would be enough reward for me, but I fear I cannot help you. Fools I’ve met, and plenty, but not so many pretty maids.” He cocked his head and thought a moment. “There was a fool at Maidenpool, now that I think of it. He was clad in rags and dirt, as near as I could tell, but under the dirt was motley.”

Did Dontos Hollard wear motley? No one had told Brienne that he did... but no one had ever said he didn’t, either. Why would the man be in rags, though? Had some misfortune overtaken him and Sansa after they fled King’s Landing? That could well be, with the roads so dangerous. *It might not have been him at all.* “Did this fool have a red nose, full of broken veins?”

“I could not swear to that. I confess, I paid him little heed. I’d gone to Maidenpool after burying my brothers, thinking that I might find a ship to take me to King’s Landing. I first glimpsed the fool down by the docks. He had a furtive air to him and took care to avoid Lord Tarly’s soldiers. Later, I encountered him again, at the Stinking Goose.”

“The Stinking Goose?” she said, uncertain.

“An unsavory place,” the dwarf admitted. “Lord Tarly’s men patrol the port at Maidenpool, but the Goose is always full of sailors, and sailors have been known to smuggle men aboard their ships, if the price is right. This fool was seeking passage for three across the narrow sea. I oft saw him there, talking with oarsmen off the galleys. Sometimes he would sing a funny song.”

“Seeking passage for *three*? Not two?”

“Three, m’lady. That I’d swear to, by the Seven.” *Three*, she thought. *Sansa, Ser Dontos... but who would be the third? The Imp?* “Did the fool find his ship?”

“That I could not say,” the dwarf told her, “but one night some of Lord Tarly’s soldiers visited the Goose looking for him, and a few days later I heard another man boasting that he’d fooled a fool and had the gold to prove it. He was drunk, and buying ale for everyone.”

“‘Fooled a fool,’” she said. “What did he mean by that?”

“I could not tell you. His name was Nimble Dick, though, that I do recall.” The dwarf spread his hands. “I fear that’s all that I can offer you, aside from a small man’s prayers.”

True to her word, Brienne bought him his bowl of hot crab stew... and some hot fresh bread and a cup of wine as well. As he ate it, standing by her side, she mulled what he had told her. *Could the Imp have joined them?* If Tyrion Lannister were behind Sansa’s disappearance, and not Dontos Hollard, it stood to reason that they would need to flee across the narrow sea.

When the little man was done with his bowl of stew, he finished what was left of hers as well. “You should eat more,” he said. “A woman big as you needs t’ keep her strength up. It is not far to Maidenpool, but the road is perilous these days.”

I know. It was on that very road that Ser Cleos Frey had died, and she and Ser Jaime had been taken by the Bloody Mummies. *Jaime tried to kill me,* she remembered, *though he was gaunt and weak, and his wrists were chained.* It had been a close thing, even so, but that was before Zollo hacked his hand off. Zollo and Rorge and Shagwell would have raped her half a hundred times if Ser Jaime had not told them she was worth her weight in sapphires.

“M’lady? You look sad. Are you thinking of your sister?” The dwarf patted her on the hand. “The Crone will light your way to her, never fear. The Maiden will keep her safe.”

“I pray that you are right.”

“I am.” He bowed. “But now I must be on my way. I’ve a long way yet to go to reach King’s Landing.”

“Do you have a horse? A mule?”

“Two mules.” The little man laughed. “There they are, at the bottom of my legs. They get me where I want t’ go.” He bowed, and waddled to the door, swaying with each step.

She remained at the table after he had gone, lingering over a cup of watered wine. Brienne did not oft drink wine, but once in a great while she found it helped to settle her belly. *And where do I want to go?* she asked herself. *To Maidenpool, to look for a man named Nimble Dick in a place called the Stinking Goose?*

When last she had seen Maidenpool, the town had been a desolation, its lord shut up inside his castle, its smallfolk dead or fled or hiding. She remembered burned houses and empty streets, smashed and broken gates. Feral dogs had skulked along behind their horses, whilst swollen corpses floated like huge pale water lilies atop the spring-fed pool that gave the town its name. *Jaime sang “Six Maids in a Pool,” and laughed when I begged him to be quiet.* And Randyll Tarly was at Maidenpool as well, another reason for her to avoid the town. She might do better to take ship for Gulltown or White Harbor. *I could do both, though. Pay a call on the Stinking Goose and talk to this Nimble Dick, then find a ship at Maidenpool to take me farther north.*

The common room had begun to empty. Brienne tore a chunk of bread in half, listening to the talk at the other tables. Most of it concerned the death of Lord Tywin Lannister. “Murdered by his own son, they say,” a local man was saying, a cobbler by the look of him, “that vile little dwarf.”

“And the king is just a boy,” said the oldest of the four septas. “Who is to rule us till he comes of age?”

“Lord Tywin’s brother,” said a guardsman. “Or that Lord Tyrell, might be. Or the Kingslayer.”

“Not him,” declared the innkeep. “Not that oathbreaker.” He spat into the fire. Brienne let the bread fall from her hands and wiped the crumbs off on her breeches. She’d heard enough.

That night she dreamed herself in Renly’s tent again. All the candles were guttering out, and the cold was thick around her. Something was moving through green darkness, something foul and horrible was hurtling

toward her king. She wanted to protect him, but her limbs felt stiff and frozen, and it took more strength than she had just to lift her hand. And when the shadow sword sliced through the green steel gorget and the blood began to flow, she saw that the dying king was not Renly after all but Jaime Lannister, and she had failed him.

The captain's sister found her in the common room, drinking a cup of milk and honey with three raw eggs mixed in. "You did beautifully," she said, when the woman showed her the freshly painted shield. It was more a picture than a proper coat of arms, and the sight of it took her back through the long years, to the cool dark of her father's armory. She remembered how she'd run her fingertips across the cracked and fading paint, over the green leaves of the tree, and along the path of the falling star.

Brienne paid the captain's sister half again the sum they had agreed, and slung the shield across one shoulder when she left the inn, after buying some hardbread, cheese, and flour from the cook. She left the town by the north gate, riding slowly through the fields and farms where the worst of the fighting had been, when the wolves came down on Duskendale.

Lord Randyll Tarly had commanded Joffrey's army, made up of westermen and stormlanders and knights from the Reach. Those men of his who had died here had been carried back inside the walls, to rest in heroes' tombs beneath the septs of Duskendale. The northern dead, far more numerous, were buried in a common grave beside the sea. Above the cairn that marked their resting place, the victors had raised a rough-hewn wooden marker. HERE LIE THE WOLVES was all it said. Brienne stopped beside it and said a silent prayer for them, and for Catelyn Stark and her son Robb and all the men who'd died with them as well.

She remembered the night that Lady Catelyn had learned her sons were dead, the two young boys she'd left at Winterfell to keep them safe. Brienne had known that something was terribly amiss. She had asked her if there had been news of her sons. "I have no sons but Robb," Lady Catelyn had replied. She had sounded as if a knife were twisting her belly. Brienne had reached across the table to give her comfort, but she stopped before her fingers brushed the older woman's, for fear that she would flinch away.

Lady Catelyn had turned over her hands, to show Brienne the scars on her palms and fingers where a knife once bit deep into her flesh. Then she had begun to talk about her daughters. “Sansa was a little lady,” she had said, “always courteous and eager to please. She loved tales of knightly valor. She will grow into a woman far more beautiful than I, you can see that. I would often brush her hair myself. She had auburn hair, thick and soft... the red in it would shine like copper in the light of the torches.”

She had spoken of Arya too, her younger daughter, but Arya was lost, most likely dead by now. Sansa, though... *I will find her, my lady*, Brienne swore to Lady Catelyn’s restless shade. *I will never stop looking. I will give up my life if need be, give up my honor, give up all my dreams, but I will find her.*

Beyond the battleground the road ran beside the shore, between the surging grey-green sea and a line of low limestone hills. Brienne was not the only traveler on the road. There were fishing villages up along the coast for many leagues, and the fisherfolk used this road to take their fish to market. She rode past a fishwife and her daughters, walking home with empty baskets on their shoulders. In her armor, they took her for a knight until they saw her face. Then the girls whispered to one another and gave her looks. “Have you seen a maid of three-and-ten along the road?” she asked them. “A highborn maid with blue eyes and auburn hair?” Ser Shadrach had made her wary, but she had to keep on trying. “She may have been traveling with a fool.” But they only shook their heads and giggled at her behind their hands.

In the first village she came to, barefoot boys ran along beside her horse. She had donned her helm, stung by the giggles of the fisherfolk, so they took her for a man. One boy offered to sell her clams, one offered crabs, and one offered her his sister.

Brienne bought three crabs from the second boy. By the time she left the village it had begun to rain, and the wind was rising. *Storm coming*, she thought, glancing out to sea. The raindrops pinged against the steel of her helm, making her ears ring as she rode, but it was better than being out there in a boat.

An hour farther north, the road divided at a pile of tumbled stones that marked the ruins of a small castle. The right-hand fork followed the coast, meandering up along the shore toward Crackclaw Point, a dismal land of bogs and pine barrens; the left-hand ran through hills and fields and woods to Maidenpool. The rain was falling more heavily by then. Brienne dismounted and led her mare off the road to take shelter amongst the ruins. The course of the castle walls could still be discerned amongst the brambles, weeds, and wild elms, but the stones that had made them up were strewn like a child's blocks between the roads. Part of the main keep still stood, however. Its triple towers were grey granite, like the broken walls, but their merlons were yellow sandstone. *Three crowns*, she realized, as she gazed at them through the rain. *Three golden crowns*. This had been a Hollard castle. Ser Dontos had been born here, like as not.

She led her mare through the rubble to the keep's main entrance. Of the door only rusted iron hinges remained, but the roof was still sound, and it was dry within. Brienne tied her mare to a wall sconce, took off her helm, and shook out her hair. She was searching for some dry wood to light a fire when she heard the sound of another horse, coming closer. Some instinct made her step back into the shadows, where she could not be seen from the road. This was the very road where she and Ser Jaime had been captured. She did not intend to suffer that again.

The rider was a small man. *The Mad Mouse*, she thought, at her first sight of him. *Somehow he's followed me*. Her hand went to her sword hilt, and she found herself wondering if Ser Shadrich would think her easy prey just because she was a woman. Lord Grandison's castellan had once made that error. Humfrey Wagstaff was his name; a proud old man of five-and-sixty, with a nose like a hawk and a spotted head. The day they were betrothed, he warned Brienne that he would expect her to be a proper woman once they'd wed. "I will not have my lady wife cavorting about in man's mail. On this you shall obey me, lest I be forced to chastise you."

She was sixteen and no stranger to a sword, but still shy despite her prowess in the yard. Yet somehow she had found the courage to tell Ser Humfrey that she would accept chastisement only from a man who could

outfight her. The old knight purpled, but agreed to don his own armor to teach her a woman's proper place. They fought with blunted tourney weapons, so Brienne's mace had no spikes. She broke Ser Humfrey's collarbone, two ribs, and their betrothal. He was her third prospective husband, and her last. Her father did not insist again.

If it *was* Ser Shadrich dogging her heels, she might well have a fight on her hands. She did not intend to partner with the man or let him follow her to Sansa. *He had the sort of easy arrogance that comes with skill at arms, she thought, but he was small. I'll have the reach on him, and I should be stronger too.*

Brienne was as strong as most knights, and her old master-at-arms used to say that she was quicker than any woman her size had any right to be. The gods had given her stamina too, which Ser Goodwin deemed a noble gift. Fighting with sword and shield was a wearisome business, and victory oft went to the man with most endurance. Ser Goodwin had taught her to fight cautiously, to conserve her strength while letting her foes spend theirs in furious attacks. "Men will always underestimate you," he said, "and their pride will make them want to vanquish you quickly, lest it be said that a woman tried them sorely." She had learned the truth of that once she went into the world. Even Jaime Lannister had come at her that way, in the woods by Maidenpool. If the gods were good, the Mad Mouse would make the same mistake. *He may be a seasoned knight, she thought, but he is no Jaime Lannister.* She slid her sword out of its scabbard.

But it was not Ser Shadrich's chestnut courser that drew up where the road forked, but a broken-down old piebald rounsey with a skinny boy upon his back. When Brienne saw the horse she drew back in confusion. *Only some boy, she thought, until she glimpsed the face beneath his hood. The boy in Duskenale, the one who bumped into me. It's him.*

The boy never gave the ruined castle a glance, but looked down one road, then the other. After a moment's hesitation, he turned the rounsey toward the hills and plodded on. Brienne watched him vanish through the falling rain, and suddenly it came to her that she had seen this same boy in

Rosby. *He is stalking me*, she realized, *but that's a game that two can play*. She untied her mare, climbed back into the saddle, and went after him.

The boy was staring at the ground as he rode, watching the ruts in the road fill up with water. The rain muffled the sound of her approach, and no doubt his hood played a part as well. He never looked back once, until Brienne trotted up behind him and gave the rounsey a whack across the rump with the flat of her longsword.

The horse reared, and the skinny boy went flying, his cloak flapping like a pair of wings. He landed in the mud and came up with dirt and dead brown grass between his teeth to find Brienne standing over him. It was the same boy, beyond a doubt. She recognized the sty. "Who are you?" she demanded.

The boy's mouth worked soundlessly. His eyes were big as eggs. "Puh," was all he could manage. "Puh." His chainmail byrnie made a rattling sound when he shivered. "Puh. Puh."

"Please?" said Brienne. "Are you saying *please*?" She laid the point of her sword on the apple of his throat. "Please tell me who you are, and why you're following me."

"Not puh-puh-*please*." He stuck a finger in his mouth, and flicked away a clump of mud, spitting. "Puh-puh-*Pod*. My name. Puh-puh-*Podrick*. Puh-Payne."

Brienne lowered her sword. She felt a rush of sympathy for the boy. She remembered a day at Evenfall, and a young knight with a rose in his hand. *He brought the rose to give to me*. Or so her septa told her. All she had to do was welcome him to her father's castle. He was eighteen, with long red hair that tumbled to his shoulders. She was twelve, tightly laced into a stiff new gown, its bodice bright with garnets. The two of them were of a height, but she could not look him in the eye, nor say the simple words her septa had taught her. *Ser Ronnet. I welcome you to my lord father's hall. It is good to look upon your face at last*.

"Why are you following me?" she demanded of the boy. "Were you told to spy upon me? Do you belong to Varys, or the queen?"

“No. Not neither. No one.”

Brienne put his age at ten, but she was terrible at judging how old a child was. She always thought they were younger than they were, perhaps because she had always been big for her age. *Freakish big*, Septa Roelle used to say, *and mannish*. “This road is too dangerous for a boy alone.”

“Not for a *squire*. I’m his squire. The Hand’s squire.”

“Lord Tywin?” Brienne sheathed her blade.

“No. Not that Hand. The one before. His son. I fought with him in the battle. I shouted ‘*Halfman! Halfman!*’”

The Imp’s squire. Brienne had not even known he had one. Tyrion Lannister was no knight. He might have been expected to have a serving boy or two to attend him, she supposed, a page and a cupbearer, someone to help dress him. But a *squire*? “Why are you stalking after me?” she said. “What do you want?”

“To find her.” The boy got to his feet. “His lady. You’re looking for her. Brella told me. She’s his wife. Not Brella, Lady Sansa. So I thought, if you found her...” His face twisted in sudden anguish. “I’m his *squire*,” he repeated, as the rain ran down his face, “but he *left* me.”