

THE WAYWARD BRIDE

Asha Greyjoy was seated in Galbart Glover's longhall drinking Galbart Glover's wine when Galbart Glover's maester brought the letter to her.

"My lady." The maester's voice was anxious, as it always was when he spoke to her. "A bird from Barrowton." He thrust the parchment at her as if he could not wait to be rid of it. It was tightly rolled and sealed with a button of hard pink wax.

Barrowton. Asha tried to recall who ruled in Barrowton. *Some northern lord, no friend of mine.* And that seal ... the Boltons of the Dreadfort went into battle beneath pink banners spattered with little drops of blood. It only stood to reason that they would use pink sealing wax as well.

This is poison that I hold, she thought. *I ought to burn it.* Instead she cracked the seal. A scrap of leather fluttered down into her lap. When she read the dry brown words, her black mood grew blacker still. *Dark wings, dark words.* The ravens never brought glad tidings. The last message sent to Deepwood had been from Stannis Baratheon, demanding homage. This was worse. "The northmen have taken Moat Cailin."

"The Bastard of Bolton?" asked Qarl, beside her. "*Ramsay Bolton, Lord of Winterfell,* he signs himself. But there are other names as well." Lady Dustin, Lady Cerwyn, and four Ryswells had appended their own signatures beneath his. Beside them was drawn a crude giant, the mark of some Umber.

Those were done in maester's ink, made of soot and coal tar, but the message above was scrawled in brown in a huge, spiky hand. It spoke of the fall of Moat Cailin, of the triumphant return of the Warden of the North to his domains, of a marriage soon to be made. The first words were, "*I write this letter in the blood of ironmen,*" the last, "*I send you each a piece of prince. Linger in my lands, and share his fate.*"

Asha had believed her little brother dead. *Better dead than this.* The scrap of skin had fallen into her lap. She held it to the candle and watched the smoke curl up, until the last of it had been consumed and the flame was licking at her fingers.

Galbart Glover's maester hovered expectantly at her elbow. "There will be no answer," she informed him.

"May I share these tidings with Lady Sybelle?"

"If it please you." Whether Sybelle Glover would find any joy in the fall of Moat Cailin, Asha could not say. Lady Sybelle all but lived in her godswood, praying for her children and her husband's safe return. *Another prayer like to go unanswered. Her heart tree is as deaf and blind as our Drowned God.* Robett Glover and his brother Galbart had ridden south with the Young Wolf. If the tales they had heard of the Red Wedding were even half-true, they were not like to ride north again. *Her children are alive, at least, and that is thanks to me.* Asha had left them at Ten Towers in the care of her aunts. Lady Sybelle's infant daughter was still on the breast, and she had judged the girl too delicate to expose to the rigors of another stormy crossing. Asha shoved the letter into the maester's hands. "Here. Let her find some solace here if she can. You have my leave to go."

The maester inclined his head and departed. After he was gone, Tris Botley turned to Asha. "If Moat Cailin has fallen, Torrhen's Square will soon follow. Then it will be our turn."

"Not for a while yet. The Cleftjaw will make them bleed." Torrhen's Square was not a ruin like Moat Cailin, and Dagmer was iron to the bone. He would die before he'd yield.

If my father still lived, Moat Cailin would never have fallen. Balon Greyjoy had known that the Moat was the key to holding the north. Euron knew that as well; he simply did not care. No more than he cared what happened to Deepwood Motte or Torrhen's Square. "Euron has no interest in Balon's conquests. My nuncle's off chasing dragons." The Crow's Eye had summoned all the strength of the Iron Isles to Old Wyk and sailed out into the deepness of the Sunset Sea, with his brother Victarion following behind

like a whipped cur. There was no one left on Pyke to appeal to, save for her own lord husband. “We stand alone.”

“Dagmer will smash them,” insisted Cromm, who had never met a woman he loved half so much as battle. “They are only wolves.”

“The wolves are all slain.” Asha picked at the pink wax with her thumbnail. “These are the skinners who slew them.”

“We should go to Torrhen’s Square and join the fight,” urged Quenton Greyjoy, a distant cousin and captain of the *Salty Wench*.

“Aye,” said Dagon Greyjoy, a cousin still more distant. Dagon the Drunkard, men called him, but drunk or sober he loved to fight. “Why should the Cleftjaw have all the glory for himself?”

Two of Galbart Glover’s serving men brought forth the roast, but that strip of skin had taken Asha’s appetite. *My men have given up all hope of victory*, she realized glumly. *All they look for now is a good death*. The wolves would give them that, she had no doubt. *Soon or late, they will come to take this castle back*.

The sun was sinking behind the tall pines of the wolfswood as Asha climbed the wooden steps to the bedchamber that had once been Galbart Glover’s. She had drunk too much wine and her head was pounding. Asha Greyjoy loved her men, captains and crew alike, but half of them were fools. *Brave fools, but fools nonetheless. Go to the Cleftjaw, yes, as if we could ...*

Between Deepwood and Dagmer lay long leagues, rugged hills, thick woods, wild rivers, and more northmen than she cared to contemplate. Asha had four longships and not quite two hundred men ... including Tristifer Botley, who could not be relied on. For all his talk of love, she could not imagine Tris rushing off to Torrhen’s Square to die with Dagmer Cleftjaw.

Qarl followed her up to Galbart Glover’s bedchamber. “Get out,” she told him. “I want to be alone.”

“What you want is me.” He tried to kiss her.

Asha pushed him away. “Touch me again and I’ll—”

“What?” He drew his dagger. “Undress yourself, girl.”

“Fuck yourself, you beardless boy.”

“I’d sooner fuck you.” One quick slash unlaced her jerkin. Asha reached for her axe, but Qarl dropped his knife and caught her wrist, twisting back her arm until the weapon fell from her fingers. He pushed her back onto Glover’s bed, kissed her hard, and tore off her tunic to let her breasts spill out. When she tried to knee him in the groin, he twisted away and forced her legs apart with his knees. “I’ll have you now.”

“Do it,” she spat, “and I’ll kill you in your sleep.”

She was sopping wet when he entered her. “Damn you,” she said. “Damn you damn you damn you.” He sucked her nipples till she cried out half in pain and half in pleasure. Her cunt became the world. She forgot Moat Cailin and Ramsay Bolton and his little piece of skin, forgot the kingsmoot, forgot her failure, forgot her exile and her enemies and her husband. Only his hands mattered, only his mouth, only his arms around her, his cock inside her. He fucked her till she screamed, and then again until she wept, before he finally spent his seed inside her womb.

“I am a woman wed,” she reminded him, afterward. “You’ve despoiled me, you beardless boy. My lord husband will cut your balls off and put you in a dress.”

Qarl rolled off her. “If he can get out of his chair.”

The room was cold. Asha rose from Galbart Glover’s bed and took off her torn clothes. The jerkin would need fresh laces, but her tunic was ruined. *I never liked it anyway.* She tossed it on the flames. The rest she left in a puddle by the bed. Her breasts were sore, and Qarl’s seed was trickling down her thigh. She would need to brew some moon tea or risk bringing another kraken into the world. *What does it matter? My father’s dead, my*

mother's dying, my brother's being flayed, and there's naught that I can do about any of it. And I'm married. Wedded and bedded ... though not by the same man.

When she slipped back beneath the furs, Qarl was asleep. "Now your life is mine. Where did I put my dagger?" Asha pressed herself against his back and slid her arms about him. On the isles he was known as Qarl the Maid, in part to distinguish him from Qarl Shepherd, Queer Qarl Kenning, Qarl Quickaxe, and Qarl the Thrall, but more for his smooth cheeks. When Asha had first met him, Qarl had been trying to raise a beard. "Peach fuzz," she had called it, laughing. Qarl confessed that he had never seen a peach, so she told him he must join her on her next voyage south.

It had still been summer then; Robert sat the Iron Throne, Balon brooded on the Seastone Chair, and the Seven Kingdoms were at peace. Asha sailed the *Black Wind* down the coast, trading. They called at Fair Isle and Lannisport and a score of smaller ports before reaching the Arbor, where the peaches were always huge and sweet. "You see," she'd said, the first time she'd held one up against Qarl's cheek. When she made him try a bite, the juice ran down his chin, and she had to kiss it clean.

That night they'd spent devouring peaches and each other, and by the time daylight returned Asha was sated and sticky and as happy as she'd ever been. *Was that six years ago, or seven?* Summer was a fading memory, and it had been three years since Asha last enjoyed a peach. She still enjoyed Qarl, though. The captains and the kings might not have wanted her, but he did.

Asha had known other lovers; some shared her bed for half a year, some for half a night. Qarl pleased her more than all the rest together. He might shave but once a fortnight, but a shaggy beard does not make a man. She liked the feel of his smooth, soft skin beneath her fingers. She liked the way his long, straight hair brushed against his shoulders. She liked the way he kissed. She liked how he grinned when she brushed her thumbs across his nipples. The hair between his legs was a darker shade of sand than the hair on his head, but fine as down compared to the coarse black bush around her own sex. She liked that too. He had a swimmer's body, long and lean, with not a scar upon him.

A shy smile, strong arms, clever fingers, and two sure swords. What more could any woman want? She would have married Qarl, and gladly, but she was Lord Balon's daughter and he was common-born, the grandson of a thrall. *Too lowborn for me to wed, but not too low for me to suck his cock.* Drunk, smiling, she crawled beneath the furs and took him in her mouth. Qarl stirred in his sleep, and after a moment he began to stiffen. By the time she had him hard again, he was awake and she was wet. Asha draped the furs across her bare shoulders and mounted him, drawing him so deep inside her that she could not tell who had the cock and who the cunt. This time the two of them reached their peak together.

"My sweet lady," he murmured after, in a voice still thick with sleep. "My sweet queen."

No, Asha thought, I am no queen, nor shall I ever be. "Go back to sleep." She kissed his cheek, padded across Galbart Glover's bedchamber, and threw the shutters open. The moon was almost full, the night so clear that she could see the mountains, their peaks crowned with snow. *Cold and bleak and inhospitable, but beautiful in the moonlight.* Their summits glimmered pale and jagged as a row of sharpened teeth. The foothills and the smaller peaks were lost in shadow.

The sea was closer, only five leagues north, but Asha could not see it. Too many hills stood in the way. *And trees, so many trees.* The wolfswood, the northmen named the forest. Most nights you could hear the wolves, calling to each other through the dark. *An ocean of leaves. Would it were an ocean of water.*

Deepwood might be closer to the sea than Winterfell, but it was still too far for her taste. The air smelled of pines instead of salt. Northeast of those grim grey mountains stood the Wall, where Stannis Baratheon had raised his standards. *The enemy of my enemy is my friend*, men said, but the other side of that coin was, *the enemy of my friend is my enemy*. The ironborn were the enemies of the northern lords this Baratheon pretender needed desperately. *I could offer him my fair young body*, she thought, pushing a strand of hair from her eyes, but Stannis was wed and so was she, and he and the ironborn were old foes. During her father's first rebellion, Stannis

had smashed the Iron Fleet off Fair Isle and subdued Great Wyk in his brother's name.

Deepwood's mossy walls enclosed a wide, rounded hill with a flattened top, crowned by a cavernous longhall with a watchtower at one end, rising fifty feet above the hill. Beneath the hill was the bailey, with its stables, paddock, smithy, well, and sheepfold, defended by a deep ditch, a sloping earthen dike, and a palisade of logs. The outer defenses made an oval, following the contours of the land. There were two gates, each protected by a pair of square wooden towers, and wallwalks around the perimeter. On the south side of the castle, moss grew thick upon the palisade and crept halfway up the towers. To east and west were empty fields. Oats and barley had been growing there when Asha took the castle, only to be crushed underfoot during her attack. A series of hard frosts had killed the crops they'd planted afterward, leaving only mud and ash and wilted, rotting stalks.

It was an old castle, but not a strong one. She had taken it from the Glovers, and the Bastard of Bolton would take it from her. He would not flay her, though. Asha Greyjoy did not intend to be taken alive. She would die as she had lived, with an axe in her hand and a laugh upon her lips.

Her lord father had given her thirty longships to capture Deepwood. Four remained, counting her own *Black Wind*, and one of those belonged to Tris Botley, who had joined her when all her other men were fleeing. *No. That is not just. They sailed home to do homage to their king. If anyone fled, it was me.* The memory still shamed her.

"Go," the Reader had urged, as the captains were bearing her uncle Euron down Nagga's hill to don his driftwood crown.

"Said the raven to the crow. Come with me. I need you to raise the men of Harlaw." Back then, she'd meant to fight.

"The men of Harlaw are here. The ones who count. Some were shouting Euron's name. I will not set Harlaw against Harlaw."

"Euron's mad. And dangerous. That hellhorn ..."

“I heard it. *Go*, Asha. Once Euron has been crowned, he’ll look for you. You dare not let his eye fall upon you.”

“If I stand with my other uncles ...”

“... you will die outcast, with every hand against you. When you put your name before the captains you submitted yourself to their judgment. You cannot go against that judgment now. Only once has the choice of a kingsmoot been overthrown. Read Haereg.”

Only Rodrik the Reader would talk of some old book whilst their lives were balanced on a sword’s edge. “If you are staying, so am I,” she told him stubbornly.

“Don’t be a fool. Euron shows the world his smiling eye tonight, but come the morrow ... Asha, you are Balon’s daughter, and your claim is stronger than his own. So long as you draw breath you remain a danger to him. If you stay, you will be killed or wed to the Red Oarsman. I don’t know which would be worse. *Go*. You will not have another chance.”

Asha had landed *Black Wind* on the far side of the island for just such an eventuality. Old Wyk was not large. She could be back aboard her ship before the sun came up, on her way to Harlaw before Euron realized she was missing. Yet she hesitated until her uncle said, “Do it for the love you bear me, child. Do not make me watch you die.”

So she went. To Ten Towers first, to bid farewell to her mother. “It may be a long while before I come again,” Asha warned her. Lady Alannys had not understood. “Where is Theon?” she asked. “Where is my baby boy?” Lady Gwynesse only wanted to know when Lord Rodrik would return. “I am seven years his elder. Ten Towers should be mine.”

Asha was still at Ten Towers taking on provisions when the tidings of her marriage reached her. “My wayward niece needs taming,” the Crow’s Eye was reported to have said, “and I know the man to tame her.” He had married her to Erik Ironmaker and named the Anvil-Breaker to rule the Iron Islands whilst he was chasing dragons. Erik had been a great man in his day, a fearless reaver who could boast of having sailed with her grand-sire’s

grandsire, that same Dagon Greyjoy whom Dagon the Drunkard had been named for. Old women on Fair Isle still frightened their grandchildren with tales of Lord Dagon and his men. *I wounded Eric's pride at the kingsmoot*, Asha reflected. *He is not like to forget that.*

She had to pay her nuncle his just due. With one stroke, Euron had turned a rival into a supporter, secured the isles in his absence, and removed Asha as a threat. *And enjoyed a good belly laugh too.* Tris Botley said that the Crow's Eye had used a seal to stand in for her at her wedding. "I hope Erik did not insist on a consummation," she'd said.

I cannot go home, she thought, *but I dare not stay here much longer.* The quiet of the woods unnerved her. Asha had spent her life on islands and on ships. The sea was never silent. The sound of the waves washing against a rocky shore was in her blood, but there were no waves at Deepwood Motte ... only the trees, the endless trees, soldier pines and sentinels, beech and ash and ancient oaks, chestnut trees and ironwoods and firs. The sound they made was softer than the sea, and she heard it only when the wind was blowing; then the sighing seemed to come from all around her, as if the trees were whispering to one another in some language that she could not understand.

Tonight the whispering seemed louder than before. *A rush of dead brown leaves*, Asha told herself, *bare branches creaking in the wind.* She turned away from the window, away from the woods. *I need a deck beneath my feet again. Or failing that, some food in my belly.* She'd had too much wine tonight, but too little bread and none of that great bloody roast.

The moonlight was bright enough to find her clothes. She donned thick black breeches, a quilted tunic, and a green leather jerkin covered with overlapping plates of steel. Leaving Qarl to his dreams, she padded down the keep's exterior stair, the steps creaking under her bare feet. One of the men walking sentry on the walls spied her making her descent and lifted his spear to her. Asha whistled back at him. As she crossed the inner yard to the kitchens, Galbart Glover's dogs began to bark. *Good*, she thought. *That will drown out the sound of the trees.*

She was cutting a wedge of yellow cheese from a round as big as a cart wheel when Tris Botley stepped into the kitchen, bundled up in a thick fur cloak. “My queen.”

“Don’t mock me.”

“You will always rule my heart. No amount of fools shouting at a kingsmoot can change that.”

What am I to do with this boy? Asha could not doubt his devotion. Not only had he stood her champion on Nagga’s hill and shouted out her name, but he had even crossed the sea to join her afterward, abandoning his king and kin and home. *Not that he dared defy Euron to his face.* When the Crow’s Eye took the fleet to sea Tris had simply lagged behind, changing course only when the other ships were lost to sight. Even that took a certain courage, though; he could never return to the isles. “Cheese?” she asked him. “There’s ham as well, and mustard.”

“It’s not food I want, my lady. You know that.” Tris had grown himself a thick brown beard at Deepwood. He claimed it helped to keep his face warm. “I saw you from the watchtower.”

“If you have the watch, what are you doing here?”

“Cromm’s up there, and Hagen the Horn. How many eyes do we need to watch leaves rustle in the moonlight? We need to talk.”

“Again?” She sighed. “You know Hagen’s daughter, the one with the red hair. She steers a ship as well as any man and has a pretty face. Seventeen, and I’ve seen her looking at you.”

“I don’t want Hagen’s daughter.” He almost touched her before thinking better of it. “Asha, it is time to go. Moat Cailin was the only thing holding back the tide. If we remain here, the northmen will kill us all, you know that.”

“Would you have me run?”

“I would have you live. I love you.”

No, she thought, you love some innocent maiden who lives only in your head, a frightened child in need of your protection. “I do not love you,” she said bluntly, “and I do not run.”

“What’s here that you should hold so tight to it but pine and mud and foes? We have our ships. Sail away with me, and we’ll make new lives upon the sea.”

“As pirates?” It was almost tempting. *Let the wolves have back their gloomy woods and retake the open sea.*

“As traders,” he insisted. “We’ll voyage east as the Crow’s Eye did, but we’ll come back with silks and spices instead of a dragon’s horn. One voyage to the Jade Sea and we’ll be as rich as gods. We can have a manse in Oldtown or one of the Free Cities.”

“You and me and Qarl?” She saw him flinch at the mention of Qarl’s name. “Hagen’s girl might like to sail the Jade Sea with you. I am still the kraken’s daughter. My place is—”

“—*where?* You cannot return to the isles. Not unless you mean to submit to your lord husband.”

Asha tried to picture herself abed with Erik Ironmaker, crushed beneath his bulk, suffering his embraces. *Better him than the Red Oarsman or Left-Hand Lucas Codd.* The Anvil-Breaker had once been a roaring giant, fearsomely strong, fiercely loyal, utterly without fear. *It might not be so bad. He’s like to die the first time he tries to do his duty as a husband.* That would make her Erik’s widow instead of Erik’s wife, which could be better or a good deal worse, depending on his grandsons. *And my nuncle. In the end, all the winds blow me back toward Euron.* “I have hostages, on Harlaw,” she reminded him. “And there is still Sea Dragon Point ... if I cannot have my father’s kingdom, why not make one of my own?” Sea Dragon Point had not always been as thinly peopled as it was now. Old ruins could still be found amongst its hills and bogs, the remains of ancient

strongholds of the First Men. In the high places, there were weir-wood circles left by the children of the forest.

“You are clinging to Sea Dragon Point the way a drowning man clings to a bit of wreckage. What does Sea Dragon have that anyone could ever want? There are no mines, no gold, no silver, not even tin or iron. The land is too wet for wheat or corn.”

I do not plan on planting wheat or corn. “What’s there? I’ll tell you. Two long coastlines, a hundred hidden coves, otters in the lakes, salmon in the rivers, clams along the shore, colonies of seals offshore, tall pines for building ships.”

“Who will build these ships, my queen? Where will Your Grace find subjects for her kingdom if the northmen let you have it? Or do you mean to rule over a realm of seals and otters?”

She gave a rueful laugh. “Otters might be easier to rule than men, I grant you. And seals are smarter. No, you may be right. My best course may still be to return to Pyke. There are those on Harlaw who would welcome my return. On Pyke as well. And Euron won no friends on Black-tyde when he slew Lord Baelor. I could find my nuncle Aeron, raise the isles.” No one had seen the Damphair since the kingsmoot, but his Drowned Men claimed he was hiding on Great Wyk and would soon come forth to call down the wroth of the Drowned God on the Crow’s Eye and his minions.

“The Anvil-Breaker is searching for the Damphair too. He is hunting down the Drowned Men. Blind Beron Blacktyde was taken and put to the question. Even the Old Grey Gull was given shackles. How will you find the priest when all of Euron’s men cannot?”

“He is my blood. My father’s brother.” It was a feeble answer, and Asha knew it.

“Do you know what I think?”

“I am about to, I suspect.”

“I think the Damphair’s dead. I think the Crow’s Eye slit his throat for him. Ironmaker’s search is just to make us believe the priest escaped. Euron is afraid to be seen as a kinslayer.”

“Never let my nuncle hear you say that. Tell the Crow’s Eye he’s afraid of kinslaying, and he’ll murder one of his own sons just to prove you wrong.” Asha was feeling almost sober by then. Tristifer Botley had that effect on her.

“Even if you did find your uncle Damphair, the two of you would fail. You were both *part* of the kingsmoot, so you cannot say it was unlawful called, as Torgon did. You are bound to its decision by all the laws of gods and men. You—”

Asha frowned. “Wait. Torgon? Which Torgon?”

“Torgon the Latecomer.”

“He was a king during the Age of Heroes.” She recalled that much about him, but little else. “What of him?”

“Torgon Greyiron was the king’s eldest son. But the king was old and Torgon restless, so it happened that when his father died he was raiding along the Mander from his stronghold on Greyshield. His brothers sent no word to him but instead quickly called a kingsmoot, thinking that one of them would be chosen to wear the driftwood crown. But the captains and the kings chose Urragon Goodbrother to rule instead. The first thing the new king did was command that all the sons of the old king be put to death, and so they were. After that men called him *Badbrother*, though in truth they’d been no kin of his. He ruled for almost two years.”

Asha remembered now. “Torgon came home ...”

“... and said the kingsmoot was unlawful since he had not been there to make his claim. Badbrother had proved to be as mean as he was cruel and had few friends left upon the isles. The priests denounced him, the lords rose against him, and his own captains hacked him into pieces. Torgon the Latecomer became the king and ruled for forty years.”

Asha took Tris Botley by the ears and kissed him full upon the lips. He was red and breathless by the time she let him go. “What was that?” he said.

“A kiss, it’s called. Drown me for a fool, Tris, I should have remembered —” She broke off suddenly. When Tris tried to speak, she shushed him, listening. “That’s a warhorn. Hagen.” Her first thought was of her husband. Could Erik Ironmaker have come all this way to claim his wayward wife? “The Drowned God loves me after all. Here I was wondering what to do, and he has sent me foes to fight.” Asha got to her feet and slammed her knife back into its sheath. “The battle’s come to us.”

She was trotting by the time she reached the castle bailey, with Tris dogging her heels, but even so she came too late. The fight was done. Asha found two northmen bleeding by the eastern wall not far from the postern gate, with Lorren Longaxe, Six-Toed Harl, and Grimtongue standing over them. “Cromm and Hagen saw them coming over the wall,” Grimtongue explained.

“Just these two?” asked Asha. “Five. We killed two before they could get over, and Harl slew another on the wallwalk. These two made it to the yard.”

One man was dead, his blood and brains crusting Lorren’s longaxe, but the second was still breathing raggedly, though Grimtongue’s spear had pinned him to the ground in a spreading pool of blood. Both were clad in boiled leather and mottled cloaks of brown and green and black, with branches, leaves, and brush sewn about their heads and shoulders.

“Who are you?” Asha asked the wounded man. “A Flint. Who are you?”

“Asha of House Greyjoy. This is my castle.”

“Deepwood be Galbart Glover’s seat. No home for squids.”

“Are there any more of you?” Asha demanded of him. When he did not answer, she seized Grimtongue’s spear and turned it, and the northman cried out in anguish as more blood gushed from his wound. “What was your purpose here?”

“The lady,” he said, shuddering. “Gods, stop. We come for the lady. T’ rescue her. It was just us five.”

Asha looked into his eyes. When she saw the falsehood there, she leaned upon the spear, twisting it. “*How many more?*” she said. “Tell me, or I’ll make your dying last until the dawn.”

“Many,” he finally sobbed, between screams. “*Thousands*. Three thousand, four ... *aieeee* ... please ...”

She ripped the spear out of him and drove it down two-handed through his lying throat. Galbart Glover’s maester had claimed the mountain clans were too quarrelsome to ever band together without a Stark to lead them. *He might not have been lying. He might just have been wrong.* She had learned what *that* tasted like at her nuncle’s kingsmoot. “These five were sent to open our gates before the main attack,” she said. “Lorren, Harl, fetch me Lady Glover and her maester.”

“Whole or bloody?” asked Lorren Longaxe. “Whole and unharmed. Grimtongue, get up that thrice-damned tower and tell Cromm and Hagen to keep a sharp eye out. If they see so much as a hare, I want to know of it.”

Deepwood’s bailey was soon full of frightened people. Her own men were struggling into armor or climbing up onto the wallwalks. Galbart Glover’s folk looked on with fearful faces, whispering to one another. Glover’s steward had to be carried up from the cellar, having lost a leg when Asha took the castle. The maester protested noisily until Lorren cracked him hard across the face with a mailed fist. Lady Glover emerged from the godswood on the arm of her bedmaid. “I warned you that this day would come, my lady,” she said, when she saw the corpses on the ground.

The maester pushed forward, with blood dripping from a broken nose. “Lady Asha, I beg you, strike your banners and let me bargain for your life. You have used us fairly, and with honor. I will tell them so.”

“We will exchange you for the children.” Sybelle Glover’s eyes were red, from tears and sleepless nights. “Gawen is four now. I missed his nameday.

And my sweet girl ... give me back my children, and no harm need come to you. Nor to your men.”

The last part was a lie, Asha knew. *She* might be exchanged, perhaps, shipped back to the Iron Islands to her husband’s loving arms. Her cousins would be ransomed too, as would Tris Botley and a few more of her company, those whose kin had coin enough to buy them back. For the rest it would be the axe, the noose, or the Wall. *Still, they have the right to choose.*

Asha climbed on a barrel so all of them could see her. “The wolves are coming down on us with their teeth bared. They will be at our gates before the sun comes up. Shall we throw down our spears and axes and plead with them to spare us?”

“No.” Qarl the Maid drew his sword. “No,” echoed Lorren Longaxe. “No,” boomed Rolfe the Dwarf, a bear of a man who stood a head taller than anyone else in her crew. “*Never.*” And Hagen’s horn sounded again from on high, ringing out across the bailey.

AHooooooooooooooooooooooooooooo, the warhorn cried, long and low, a sound to curdle blood. Asha had begun to hate the sound of horns. On Old Wyk her uncle’s hellhorn had blown a death knell for her dreams, and now Hagen was sounding what might well be her last hour on earth. *If I must die, I will die with an axe in my hand and a curse upon my lips.*

“To the walls,” Asha Greyjoy told her men. She turned her own steps for the watchtower, with Tris Botley right behind her.

The wooden watchtower was the tallest thing this side of the mountains, rising twenty feet above the biggest sentinels and soldier pines in the surrounding woods. “There, Captain,” said Cromm, when she made the platform. Asha saw only trees and shadows, the moonlit hills and the snowy peaks beyond. Then she realized that trees were creeping closer. “Oho,” she laughed, “these mountain goats have cloaked themselves in pine boughs.” The woods were on the move, creeping toward the castle like a slow green tide. She thought back to a tale she had heard as a child, about the children of the forest and their battles with the First Men, when the greenseers turned the trees to warriors.

“We cannot fight so many,” Tris Botley said. “We can fight as many as come, pup,” insisted Cromm. “The more there are, the more the glory. Men will sing of us.”

Aye, but will they sing of your courage or my folly? The sea was five long leagues away. Would they do better to stand and fight behind Deepwood’s deep ditches and wooden walls? *Deepwood’s wooden walls did the Glovers small good when I took their castle*, she reminded herself. *Why should they serve me any better?*

“Come the morrow we will feast beneath the sea.” Cromm stroked his axe as if he could not wait.

Hagen lowered his horn. “If we die with dry feet, how will we find our way to the Drowned God’s watery halls?”

“These woods are full of little streams,” Cromm assured him. “All of them lead to rivers, and all the rivers to the sea.”

Asha was not ready to die, not here, not yet. “A living man can find the sea more easily than a dead one. Let the wolves keep their gloomy woods. We are making for the ships.”

She wondered who was in command of her foes. *If it were me, I would take the strand and put our longships to the torch before attacking Deepwood.* The wolves would not find that easy, though, not without longships of their own. Asha never beached more than half her ships. The other half stood safely off to sea, with orders to raise sail and make for Sea Dragon Point if the northmen took the strand. “Hagen, blow your horn and make the forest shake. Tris, don some mail, it’s time you tried out that sweet sword of yours.” When she saw how pale he was, she pinched his cheek. “Splash some blood upon the moon with me, and I promise you a kiss for every kill.”

“My queen,” said Tristifer, “here we have the walls, but if we reach the sea and find that the wolves have taken our ships or driven them away ...”

“... we die,” she finished cheerfully, “but at least we’ll die with our feet wet. Ironborn fight better with salt spray in their nostrils and the sound of the waves at their backs.”

Hagen blew three short blasts in quick succession, the signal that would send the ironborn back to their ships. From below came shouting, the clatter of spear and sword, the whinnying of horses. *Too few horses and too few riders.* Asha headed for the stair. In the bailey, she found Qarl the Maid waiting with her chestnut mare, her warhelm, and her throwing axes. Ironmen were leading horses from Galbart Glover’s stables.

“A *ram!*” a voice shouted down from the walls. “*They have a battering ram!*”

“Which gate?” asked Asha, mounting up. “The north!” From beyond Deepwood’s mossy wooden walls came the sudden sound of trumpets.

Trumpets? Wolves with trumpets? That was wrong, but Asha had no time to ponder it. “Open the south gate,” she commanded, even as the north gate shook to the impact of the ram. She pulled a short-hafted throwing axe from the belt across her shoulder. “The hour of the owl has fled, my brothers. Now comes the hour of the spear, the sword, the axe. Form up. We’re going home.”

From a hundred throats came roars of “*Home!*” and “*Asha!*” Tris Botley galloped up beside her on a tall roan stallion. In the bailey, her men closed about each other, hefting shields and spears. Qarl the Maid, no horse rider, took his place between Grimtongue and Lorren Longaxe. As Hagen came scrambling down the watchtower steps, a wolfling’s arrow caught him in the belly and sent him plunging headfirst to the ground. His daughter ran to him, wailing. “Bring her,” Asha commanded. This was no time for mourning. Rolfe the Dwarf pulled the girl onto his horse, her red hair flying. Asha could hear the north gate groaning as the ram slammed into it again. *We may need to cut our way through them,* she thought, as the south gate swung wide before them. The way was clear. *For how long?*

“Move out!” Asha drove her heels into her horse’s flanks.

Men and mounts alike were trotting by the time they reached the trees on the far side of the sodden field, where dead shoots of winter wheat rotted beneath the moon. Asha held her horsemen back as a rear guard, to keep the stragglers moving and see that no one was left behind. Tall soldier pines and gnarled old oaks closed in around them. Deepwood was aptly named. The trees were huge and dark, somehow threatening. Their limbs wove through one another and creaked with every breath of wind, and their higher branches scratched at the face of the moon. *The sooner we are shut of here, the better I will like it*, Asha thought. *The trees hate us all, deep in their wooden hearts.*

They pressed on south and southwest, until the wooden towers of Deepwood Motte were lost to sight and the sounds of trumpets had been swallowed by the woods. *The wolves have their castle back*, she thought, *perhaps they will be content to let us go.*

Tris Botley trotted up beside her. “We are going the wrong way,” he said, gesturing at the moon as it peered down through the canopy of branches. “We need to turn north, for the ships.”

“West first,” Asha insisted. “West until the sun comes up. Then north.” She turned to Rolfe the Dwarf and Roggon Rustbeard, her best riders. “Scout ahead and make sure our way is clear. I want no surprises when we reach the shore. If you come on wolves, ride back to me with word.”

“If we must,” promised Roggon through his huge red beard.

After the scouts had vanished into the trees, the rest of the ironborn resumed their march, but the going was slow. The trees hid the moon and stars from them, and the forest floor beneath their feet was black and treacherous. Before they had gone half a mile, her cousin Quenton’s mare stumbled into a pit and shattered her foreleg. Quenton had to slit her throat to stop her screaming. “We should make torches,” urged Tris.

“Fire will bring the northmen down on us.” Asha cursed beneath her breath, wondering if it had been a mistake to leave the castle. *No. If we had stayed and fought, we might all be dead by now.* But it was no good blundering on through the dark either. *These trees will kill us if they can.* She took off her

helm and pushed back her sweat-soaked hair. “The sun will be up in a few hours. We’ll stop here and rest till break of day.”

Stopping proved simple; rest came hard. No one slept, not even Droop-eye Dale, an oarsman who had been known to nap between strokes. Some of the men shared a skin of Galbart Glover’s apple wine, passing it from hand to hand. Those who had brought food shared it with those who had not. The riders fed and watered their horses. Her cousin Quenton Greyjoy sent three men up trees, to watch for any sign of torches in the woods. Croom honed his axe, and Qarl the Maid his sword. The horses cropped dead brown grass and weeds. Hagen’s red-haired daughter seized Tris Botley by the hand to draw him off into the trees. When he refused her, she went off with Six-Toed Harl instead.

Would that I could do the same. It would be sweet to lose herself in Qarl’s arms one last time. Asha had a bad feeling in her belly. Would she ever feel *Black Wind’s* deck beneath her feet again? And if she did, where would she sail her? *The isles are closed to me, unless I mean to bend my knees and spread my legs and suffer Eric Ironmaker’s embraces, and no port in Westeros is like to welcome the kraken’s daughter.* She could turn merchanter, as Tris seemed to want, or else make for the Stepstones and join the pirates there. *Or ...*

“I send you each a piece of prince,” she muttered.

Qarl grinned. “I would sooner have a piece of you,” he whispered, “the sweet piece that’s—”

Something flew from the brush to land with a soft *thump* in their midst, bumping and bouncing. It was round and dark and wet, with long hair that whipped about it as it rolled. When it came to rest amongst the roots of an oak, Grimtongue said, “Rolfe the Dwarf’s not so tall as he once was.” Half her men were on their feet by then, reaching for shields and spears and axes. *They lit no torches either,* Asha had time enough to think, *and they know these woods better than we ever could.* Then the trees erupted all around them, and the northmen poured in howling. *Wolves,* she thought, *they howl like bloody wolves. The war cry of the north.* Her ironborn screamed back at them, and the fight began.

No singer would ever make a song about that battle. No maester would ever write down an account for one of the Reader's beloved books. No banners flew, no warhorns moaned, no great lord called his men about him to hear his final ringing words. They fought in the predawn gloom, shadow against shadow, stumbling over roots and rocks, with mud and rotting leaves beneath their feet. The ironborn were clad in mail and salt-stained leather, the northmen in furs and hides and piney branches. The moon and stars looked down upon their struggle, their pale light filtered through the tangle of bare limbs that twisted overhead.

The first man to come at Asha Greyjoy died at her feet with her throwing axe between his eyes. That gave her respite enough to slip her shield onto her arm. "*To me!*" she called, but whether she was calling to her own men or the foes even Asha could not have said for certain. A northman with an axe loomed up before her, swinging with both hands as he howled in wordless fury. Asha raised her shield to block his blow, then shoved in close to gut him with her dirk. His howling took on a different tone as he fell. She spun and found another wolf behind her, and slashed him across the brow beneath his helm. His own cut caught her below the breast, but her mail turned it, so she drove the point of her dirk into his throat and left him to drown in his own blood. A hand seized her hair, but short as it was he could not get a good enough grip to wrench her head back. Asha slammed her boot heel down onto his instep and wrenched loose when he cried out in pain. By the time she turned the man was down and dying, still clutching a handful of her hair. Qarl stood over him, with his long-sword dripping and moonlight shining in his eyes.

Grimtongue was counting the northmen as he killed them, calling out, "Four," as one went down and, "Five," a heartbeat later. The horses screamed and kicked and rolled their eyes in terror, maddened by the butchery and blood ... all but Tris Botley's big roan stallion. Tris had gained the saddle, and his mount was rearing and wheeling as he laid about with his sword. *I may owe him a kiss or three before the night is done*, thought Asha.

"Seven," shouted Grimtongue, but beside him Lorren Longaxe sprawled with one leg twisted under him, and the shadows kept on coming, shouting

and rustling. *We are fighting shrubbery*, Asha thought as she slew a man who had more leaves on him than most of the surrounding trees. That made her laugh. Her laughter drew more wolves to her, and she killed them too, wondering if she should start a count of her own. *I am a woman wed, and here's my suckling babe*. She pushed her dirk into a northman's chest through fur and wool and boiled leather. His face was so close to hers that she could smell the sour stench of his breath, and his hand was at her throat. Asha felt iron scraping against bone as her point slid over a rib. Then the man shuddered and died. When she let go of him, she was so weak she almost fell on top of him.

Later, she stood back-to-back with Qarl, listening to the grunts and curses all around them, to brave men crawling through the shadows weeping for their mothers. A bush drove at her with a spear long enough to punch through her belly and Qarl's back as well, pinning them together as they died. *Better that than die alone*, she thought, but her cousin Quenton killed the spearman before he reached her. A heartbeat later another bush killed Quenton, driving an axe into the base of his skull.

Behind her Grimtongue shouted, "*Nine*, and damn you all." Hagen's daughter burst naked from beneath the trees with two wolves at her heels. Asha wrenched loose a throwing axe and sent it flying end over end to take one of them in the back. When he fell, Hagen's daughter stumbled to her knees, snatched up his sword, stabbed the second man, then rose again, smeared with blood and mud, her long red hair unbound, and plunged into the fight.

Somewhere in the ebb and flow of battle, Asha lost Qarl, lost Tris, lost all of them. Her dirk was gone as well, and all her throwing axes; instead she had a sword in hand, a short sword with a broad thick blade, almost like a butcher's cleaver. For her life she could not have said where she had gotten it. Her arm ached, her mouth tasted of blood, her legs were trembling, and shafts of pale dawn light were slanting through the trees. *Has it been so long? How long have we been fighting?*

Her last foe was a northman with an axe, a big man bald and bearded, clad in a byrnie of patched and rusted mail that could only mean he was a chief or champion. He was not pleased to find himself fighting a woman. "*Cunt!*"

he roared each time he struck at her, his spittle dampening her cheeks.
“*Cunt! Cunt!*”

Asha wanted to shout back at him, but her throat was so dry she could do no more than grunt. His axe was shivering her shield, cracking the wood on the downswing, tearing off long pale splinters when he wrenched it back. Soon she would have only a tangle of kindling on her arm. She backed away and shook free of the ruined shield, then backed away some more and danced left and right and left again to avoid the downrushing axe.

And then her back came up hard against a tree, and she could dance no more. The wolf raised the axe above his head to split her head in two. Asha tried to slip to her right, but her feet were tangled in some roots, trapping her. She twisted, lost her footing, and the axehead crunched against her temple with a scream of steel on steel. The world went red and black and red again. Pain crackled up her leg like lightning, and far away she heard her northman say, “You bloody cunt,” as he lifted up his axe for the blow that would finish her.

A trumpet blew.

That’s wrong, she thought. There are no trumpets in the Drowned God’s watery halls. Below the waves the merlings hail their lord by blowing into seashells.

She dreamt of red hearts burning, and a black stag in a golden wood with flame streaming from his antlers.