

THEON

Maester Luwin came to him when the first scouts were seen outside the walls. “My lord prince,” he said, “you must yield.”

Theon stared at the platter of oakcakes, honey, and blood sausage they’d brought him to break his fast. Another sleepless night had left his nerves raw, and the very sight of food sickened him. “There has been no reply from my uncle?”

“None,” the maester said. “Nor from your father on Pyke.”

“Send more birds.”

“It will not serve. By the time the birds reach—”

“*Send them!*” Knocking the platter of food aside with a swipe of his arm, he pushed off the blankets and rose from Ned Stark’s bed naked and angry. “Or do you want me dead? Is that it, Luwin? The truth now.”

The small grey man was unafraid. “My order serves.”

“Yes, but whom?”

“The realm,” Maester Luwin said, “and Winterfell. Theon, once I taught you sums and letters, history and warcraft. And might have taught you more, had you wished to learn. I will not claim to bear you any great love, no, but I cannot hate you either. Even if I did, so long as you hold Winterfell I am bound by oath to give you counsel. So now I counsel you to *yield*.”

Theon stooped to scoop a puddled cloak off the floor, shook off the rushes, and draped it over his shoulders. *A fire, I’ll have a fire, and clean garb. Where’s Wex? I’ll not go to my grave in dirty clothes.*

“You have no hope of holding here,” the maester went on. “If your lord father meant to send you aid, he would have done so by now. It is the Neck that concerns him. The battle for the north will be fought amidst the ruins of Moat Cailin.”

“That may be so,” said Theon. “And so long as I hold Winterfell, Ser Rodrik and Stark’s lords bannermen cannot march south to take my uncle in the rear.” *I am not so innocent of warcraft as you think, old man.* “I have food enough to stand a year’s siege, if need be.”

“There will be no siege. Perhaps they will spend a day or two fashioning ladders and tying grapnels to the ends of ropes. But soon enough they will come over your walls in a hundred places at once. You may be able to hold the keep for a time, but the castle will fall within the hour. You would do better to open your gates and ask for—”

“—*mercy*? I know what kind of mercy they have for me.”

“There is a way.”

“I am ironborn,” Theon reminded him. “I have my own way. What choice have they left me? No, don’t answer, I’ve heard enough of your *counsel*. Go and send those birds as I commanded, and tell Lorren I want to see him. And Wex as well. I’ll have my mail scoured clean, and my garrison assembled in the yard.”

For a moment he thought the maester was going to defy him. But finally Luwin bowed stiffly. “As you command.”

They made a pitifully small assembly; the ironmen were few, the yard large. “The northmen will be on us before nightfall,” he told them. “Ser Rodrik Cassel and all the lords who have come to his call. I will not run from them. I took this castle and I mean to hold it, to live or die as Prince of Winterfell. But I will not command any man to die with me. If you leave now, before Ser Rodrik’s main force is upon us, there’s still a chance you may win free.” He unsheathed his longsword and drew a line in the dirt. “Those who would stay and fight, step forward.”

No one spoke. The men stood in their mail and fur and boiled leather, as still as if they were made of stone. A few exchanged looks. Urzen shuffled his feet. Dykk Harlaw hawked and spat. A finger of wind ruffled Endehar’s long fair hair.

Theon felt as though he were drowning. *Why am I surprised?* he thought bleakly. His father had forsaken him, his uncles, his sister, even that

wretched creature Reek. Why should his men prove any more loyal? There was nothing to say, nothing to do. He could only stand there beneath the great grey walls and the hard white sky, sword in hand, waiting, waiting...

Wex was the first to cross the line. Three quick steps and he stood at Theon's side, slouching. Shamed by the boy, Black Lorren followed, all scowls. "Who else?" he demanded. Red Rolfe came forward. Kromm. Werlag. Tymor and his brothers. Ulf the Ill. Harrag Sheepstealer. Four Harlaws and two Botleys. Kenned the Whale was the last. Seventeen in all.

Urzen was among those who did not move, and Stygg, and every man of the ten that Asha had brought from Deepwood Motte. "Go, then," Theon told them. "Run to my sister. She'll give you all a warm welcome, I have no doubt."

Stygg had the grace at least to look ashamed. The rest moved off without a word. Theon turned to the seventeen who remained. "Back to the walls. If the gods should spare us, I shall remember every man of you."

Black Lorren stayed when the others had gone. "The castle folk will turn on us soon as the fight begins."

"I know that. What would you have me do?"

"Put them out," said Lorren. "Every one."

Theon shook his head. "Is the noose ready?"

"It is. You mean to use it?"

"Do you know a better way?"

"Aye. I'll take my axe and stand on that drawbridge, and let them come try me. One at a time, two, three, it makes no matter. None will pass the moat while I still draw breath."

He means to die, thought Theon. It's not victory he wants, it's an end worthy of a song. "We'll use the noose."

"As you say," Lorren replied, contempt in his eyes.

Wex helped garb him for battle. Beneath his black surcoat and golden mantle was a shirt of well-oiled ringmail, and under that a layer of stiff boiled leather. Once armed and armored, Theon climbed the watchtower at

the angle where the eastern and southern walls came together to have a look at his doom. The northmen were spreading out to encircle the castle. It was hard to judge their numbers. A thousand at least; perhaps twice that many. *Against seventeen.* They'd brought catapults and scorpions. He saw no siege towers rumbling up the kingsroad, but there was timber enough in the wolfswood to build as many as were required.

Theon studied their banners through Maester Luwin's Myrish lens tube. The Cerwyn battle-axe flapped bravely wherever he looked, and there were Tallhart trees as well, and mermen from White Harbor. Less common were the sigils of Flint and Karstark. Here and there he even saw the bull moose of the Hornwoods. *But no Glovers, Asha saw to them, no Boltons from the Dreadfort, no Umbers come down from the shadow of the Wall.* Not that they were needed. Soon enough the boy Cley Cerwyn appeared before the gates carrying a peace banner on a tall staff, to announce that Ser Rodrik Cassel wished to parley with Theon Turncloak.

Turncloak. The name was bitter as bile. He had gone to Pyke to lead his father's longships against Lannisport, he remembered. "I shall be out shortly," he shouted down. "Alone."

Black Lorren disapproved. "Only blood can wash out blood," he declared. "Knights may keep their truces with other knights, but they are not so careful of their honor when dealing with those they deem outlaw."

Theon bristled. "I am the Prince of Winterfell and heir to the Iron Islands. Now go find the girl and do as I told you."

Black Lorren gave him a murderous look. "Aye, Prince."

He's turned against me too, Theon realized. Of late it seemed to him as if the very stones of Winterfell had turned against him. *If I die, I die friendless and abandoned.* What choice did that leave him, but to live?

He rode to the gatehouse with his crown on his head. A woman was drawing water from the well, and Gage the cook stood in the door of the kitchens. They hid their hatred behind sullen looks and faces blank as slate, yet he could feel it all the same.

When the drawbridge was lowered, a chill wind sighed across the moat. The touch of it made him shiver. *It is the cold, nothing more*, Theon told himself, *a shiver, not a tremble. Even brave men shiver*. Into the teeth of that wind he rode, under the portcullis, over the drawbridge. The outer gates swung open to let him pass. As he emerged beneath the walls, he could sense the boys watching from the empty sockets where their eyes had been.

Ser Rodrik waited in the market astride his dappled gelding. Beside him, the direwolf of Stark flapped from a staff borne by young Cley Cerwyn. They were alone in the square, though Theon could see archers on the roofs of surrounding houses, spearmen to his right, and to his left a line of mounted knights beneath the merman-and-trident of House Manderly. *Every one of them wants me dead*. Some were boys he'd drunk with, diced with, even wenched with, but that would not save him if he fell into their hands.

"Ser Rodrik." Theon reined to a halt. "It grieves me that we must meet as foes."

"My own grief is that I must wait a while to hang you." The old knight spat onto the muddy ground. "Theon Turncloak."

"I am a Greyjoy of Pyke," Theon reminded him. "The cloak my father swaddled me in bore a kraken, not a direwolf."

"For ten years you have been a ward of Stark."

"Hostage and prisoner, I call it."

"Then perhaps Lord Eddard should have kept you chained to a dungeon wall. Instead he raised you among his own sons, the sweet boys you have butchered, and to my undying shame I trained you in the arts of war. Would that I had thrust a sword through your belly instead of placing one in your hand."

"I came out to parley, not to suffer your insults. Say what you have to say, old man. What would you have of me?"

"Two things," the old man said. "Winterfell, and your life. Command your men to open the gates and lay down their arms. Those who murdered

no children shall be free to walk away, but you shall be held for King Robb's justice. May the gods take pity on you when he returns."

"Robb will never look on Winterfell again," Theon promised. "He will break himself on Moat Cailin, as every southron army has done for ten thousand years. We hold the north now, ser."

"You hold three castles," replied Ser Rodrik, "and this one I mean to take back, Turncloak."

Theon ignored that. "Here are *my* terms. You have until evenfall to disperse. Those who swear fealty to Balon Greyjoy as their king and to myself as Prince of Winterfell will be confirmed in their rights and properties and suffer no harm. Those who defy us will be destroyed."

Young Cerwyn was incredulous. "Are you mad, Greyjoy?"

Ser Rodrik shook his head. "Only vain, lad. Theon has always had too lofty an opinion of himself, I fear." The old man jabbed a finger at him. "Do not imagine that I need wait for Robb to fight his way up the Neck to deal with the likes of you. I have near two thousand men with me... and if the tales be true, you have no more than fifty."

Seventeen, in truth. Theon made himself smile. "I have something better than men." And he raised a fist over his head, the signal Black Lorren had been told to watch for.

The walls of Winterfell were behind him, but Ser Rodrik faced them squarely and could not fail to see. Theon watched his face. When his chin quivered under those stiff white whiskers, he knew just what the old man was seeing. *He is not surprised*, he thought with sadness, *but the fear is there.*

"This is craven," Ser Rodrik said. "To use a child so... this is despicable."

"Oh, I know," said Theon. "It's a dish I tasted myself, or have you forgotten? I was ten when I was taken from my father's house, to make certain he would raise no more rebellions."

"It is not the same!"

Theon's face was impassive. "The noose I wore was not made of hempen rope, that's true enough, but I felt it all the same. And it chafed, Ser Rodrik. It chafed me raw." He had never quite realized that until now, but as the words came spilling out he saw the truth of them.

"No harm was ever done you."

"And no harm will be done your Beth, so long as you—"

Ser Rodrik never gave him the chance to finish. "*Viper*," the knight declared, his face red with rage beneath those white whiskers. "I gave you the chance to save your men and die with some small shred of honor, Turncloak. I should have known that was too much to ask of a childkiller." His hand went to the hilt of his sword. "I ought cut you down here and now and put an end to your lies and deceits. By the gods, I should."

Theon did not fear a doddering old man, but those watching archers and that line of knights were a different matter. If the swords came out his chances of getting back to the castle alive were small to none. "Forswear your oath and murder me, and you will watch your little Beth strangle at the end of a rope."

Ser Rodrik's knuckles had gone white, but after a moment he took his hand off the swordhilt. "Truly, I have lived too long."

"I will not disagree, ser. Will you accept my terms?"

"I have a duty to Lady Catelyn and House Stark."

"And your own House? Beth is the last of your blood."

The old knight drew himself up straight. "I offer myself in my daughter's place. Release her, and take me as your hostage. Surely the castellan of Winterfell is worth more than a child."

"Not to me." *A valiant gesture, old man, but I am not that great a fool.* "Not to Lord Manderly or Leobald Tallhart either, I'd wager." *Your sorry old skin is worth no more to them than any other man's.* "No, I'll keep the girl... and keep her safe, so long as you do as I've commanded you. Her life is in your hands."

"Gods be good, Theon, how can you do this? You know I must attack, have *sworn*..."

“If this host is still in arms before my gate when the sun sets, Beth will hang,” said Theon. “Another hostage will follow her to the grave at first light, and another at sunset. Every dawn and every dusk will mean a death, until you are gone. I have no lack of hostages.” He did not wait for a reply, but wheeled Smiler around and rode back toward the castle. He went slowly at first, but the thought of those archers at his back soon drove him to a canter. The small heads watched him come from their spikes, their tarred and flayed faces looming larger with every yard; between them stood little Beth Cassel, noosed and crying. Theon put his heel into Smiler and broke into a hard gallop. Smiler’s hooves clattered on the drawbridge, like drumbeats.

In the yard he dismounted and handed his reins to Wex. “It may stay them,” he told Black Lorren. “We’ll know by sunset. Take the girl in till then, and keep her somewhere safe.” Under the layers of leather, steel, and wool, he was slick with sweat. “I need a cup of wine. A vat of wine would do even better.”

A fire had been laid in Ned Stark’s bedchamber. Theon sat beside it and filled a cup with a heavy-bodied red from the castle vaults, a wine as sour as his mood. *They will attack*, he thought gloomily, staring at the flames. *Ser Rodrik loves his daughter, but he is still castellan, and most of all a knight*. Had it been Theon with a noose around his neck and Lord Balon commanding the army without, the warhorns would already have sounded the attack, he had no doubt. He should thank the gods that Ser Rodrik was not ironborn. The men of the green lands were made of softer stuff, though he was not certain they would prove soft enough.

If not, if the old man gave the command to storm the castle regardless, Winterfell would fall; Theon entertained no delusions on that count. His seventeen might kill three, four, five times their own number, but in the end they would be overwhelmed.

Theon stared at the flames over the rim of his wine goblet, brooding on the injustice of it all. “I rode beside Robb Stark in the Whispering Wood,” he muttered. He had been frightened that night, but not like this. It was one

thing to go into battle surrounded by friends, and another to perish alone and despised. *Mercy*, he thought miserably.

When the wine brought no solace, Theon sent Wex to fetch his bow and took himself to the old inner ward. There he stood, loosing shaft after shaft at the archery butts until his shoulders ached and his fingers were bloody, pausing only long enough to pull the arrows from the targets for another round. *I saved Bran's life with this bow*, he reminded himself. *Would that I could save my own*. Women came to the well, but did not linger; whatever they saw on Theon's face sent them away quickly.

Behind him the broken tower stood, its summit as jagged as a crown where fire had collapsed the upper stories long ago. As the sun moved, the shadow of the tower moved as well, gradually lengthening, a black arm reaching out for Theon Greyjoy. By the time the sun touched the wall, he was in its grasp. *If I hang the girl, the northmen will attack at once*, he thought as he loosed a shaft. *If I do not hang her, they will know my threats are empty*. He knocked another arrow to his bow. *There is no way out, none*.

"If you had a hundred archers as good as yourself, you might have a chance to hold the castle," a voice said softly.

When he turned, Maester Luwin was behind him. "Go away," Theon told him. "I have had enough of your counsel."

"And life? Have you had enough of that, my lord prince?"

He raised the bow. "One more word and I'll put this shaft through your heart."

"You won't."

Theon bent the bow, drawing the grey goose feathers back to his cheek. "Care to make a wager?"

"I am your last hope, Theon."

I have no hope, he thought. Yet he lowered the bow half an inch and said, "I will not run."

"I do not speak of running. Take the black."

"The Night's Watch?" Theon let the bow unbend slowly and pointed the arrow at the ground.

“Ser Rodrik has served House Stark all his life, and House Stark has always been a friend to the Watch. He will not deny you. Open your gates, lay down your arms, accept his terms, and he *must* let you take the black.”

A brother of the Night’s Watch. It meant no crown, no sons, no wife... but it meant life, and life with honor. Ned Stark’s own brother had chosen the Watch, and Jon Snow as well.

I have black garb aplenty, once I tear the krakens off. Even my horse is black. I could rise high in the Watch—chief of rangers, likely even Lord Commander. Let Asha keep the bloody islands, they’re as dreary as she is. If I served at Eastwatch, I could command my own ship, and there’s fine hunting beyond the Wall. As for women, what wildling woman wouldn’t want a prince in her bed? A slow smile crept across his face, *A black cloak can’t be turned. I’d be as good as any man...*

“*PRINCE THEON!*” The sudden shout shattered his daydream. Kromm was loping across the ward. “The northmen—”

He felt a sudden sick sense of dread. “Is it the attack?”

Maester Luwin clutched his arm. “There’s still time. Raise a peace banner—”

“They’re fighting,” Kromm said urgently. “More men came up, hundreds of them, and at first they made to join the others. But now they’ve fallen on them!”

“Is it Asha?” Had she come to save him after all?

But Kromm gave a shake of his head. “No. These are *northmen*, I tell you. With a bloody man on their banner.”

The flayed man of the Dreadfort. Reek had belonged to the Bastard of Bolton before his capture, Theon recalled. It was hard to believe that a vile creature like him could sway the Boltons to change their allegiance, but nothing else made sense. “I’ll see this for myself,” Theon said.

Maester Luwin trailed after him. By the time they reached the battlements, dead men and dying horses were strewn about the market square outside the gates. He saw no battle lines, only a swirling chaos of banners and blades. Shouts and screams rang through the cold autumn air.

Ser Rodrik seemed to have the numbers, but the Dreadfort men were better led, and had taken the others unawares. Theon watched them charge and wheel and charge again, chopping the larger force to bloody pieces every time they tried to form up between the houses. He could hear the crash of iron axeheads on oaken shields over the terrified trumpeting of a maimed horse. The inn was burning, he saw.

Black Lorren appeared beside him and stood silently for a time. The sun was low in the west, painting the fields and houses all a glowing red. A thin wavering cry of pain drifted over the walls, and a warhorn sounded off beyond the burning houses. Theon watched a wounded man drag himself painfully across the ground, smearing his life's blood in the dirt as he struggled to reach the well that stood at the center of the market square. He died before he got there. He wore a leather jerkin and conical halfhelm, but no badge to tell which side he'd fought on.

The crows came in the blue dust, with the evening stars. "The Dothraki believe the stars are spirits of the valiant dead," Theon said. Maester Luwin had told him that, a long time ago.

"Dothraki?"

"The horselords across the narrow sea."

"Oh. Them." Black Lorren frowned through his beard. "Savages believe all manner of foolish things."

As the night grew darker and the smoke spread it was harder to make out what was happening below, but the din of steel gradually diminished to nothing, and the shouts and warhorns gave way to moans and piteous wailing. Finally a column of mounted men rode out of the drifting smoke. At their head was a knight in dark armor. His rounded helm gleamed a sullen red, and a pale pink cloak streamed from his shoulders. Outside the main gate he reined up, and one of his men shouted for the castle to open.

"Are you friend or foe?" Black Lorren bellowed down.

"Would a foe bring such fine gifts?" Red Helm waved a hand, and three corpses were dumped in front of the gates. A torch was waved above the bodies, so the defenders upon the walls might see the faces of the dead.

“The old castellan,” said Black Lorren.

“With Leobald Tallhart and Cley Cerwyn.” The boy lord had taken an arrow in the eye, and Ser Rodrik had lost his left arm at the elbow. Maester Luwin gave a wordless cry of dismay, turned away from the battlements, and fell to his knees sick.

“The great pig Manderly was too craven to leave White Harbor, or we would have brought him as well,” shouted Red Helm.

I am saved, Theon thought. So why did he feel so empty? This was victory, sweet victory, the deliverance he had prayed for. He glanced at Maester Luwin. *To think how close I came to yielding, and taking the black...*

“Open the gates for our friends.” Perhaps tonight Theon would sleep without fear of what his dreams might bring.

The Dreadfort men made their way across the moat and through the inner gates. Theon descended with Black Lorren and Maester Luwin to meet them in the yard. Pale red pennons trailed from the ends of a few lances, but many more carried battle-axes and greatswords and shields hacked half to splinters. “How many men did you lose?” Theon asked Red Helm as he dismounted.

“Twenty or thirty.” The torchlight glittered off the chipped enamel of his visor. His helm and gorget were wrought in the shape of a man’s face and shoulders, skinless and bloody, mouth open in a silent howl of anguish.

“Ser Rodrik had you five-to-one.”

“Aye, but he thought us friends. A common mistake. When the old fool gave me his hand, I took half his arm instead. Then I let him see my face.” The man put both hands to his helm and lifted it off his head, holding it in the crook of his arm.

“Reek,” Theon said, disquieted. *How did a serving man get such fine armor?*

The man laughed. “The wretch is dead.” He stepped closer. “The girl’s fault. If she had not run so far, his horse would not have lamed, and we might have been able to flee. I gave him mine when I saw the riders from

the ridge. I was done with her by then, and he liked to take his turn while they were still warm. I had to pull him off her and shove my clothes into his hands—calfskin boots and velvet doublet, silver-chased swordbelt, even my sable cloak. Ride for the Dreadfort, I told him, bring all the help you can. Take my horse, he's swifter, and here, wear the ring my father gave me, so they'll know you came from me. He'd learned better than to question me. By the time they put that arrow through his back, I'd smeared myself with the girl's filth and dressed in his rags. They might have hanged me anyway, but it was the only chance I saw." He rubbed the back of his hand across his mouth. "And now, my sweet prince, there was a woman promised me, if I brought two hundred men. Well, I brought three times as many, and no green boys nor fieldhands neither, but my father's own garrison."

Theon had given his word. This was not the time to flinch. *Pay him his pound of flesh and deal with him later.* "Harrag," he said, "go to the kennels and bring Palla out for...?"

"Ramsay." There was a smile on his plump lips, but none in those pale eyes. "Snow, my wife called me before she ate her fingers, but I say Bolton." His smile curdled. "So you'd offer me a kennel girl for my good service, is that the way of it?"

There was a tone in his voice Theon did not like, no more than he liked the insolent way the Dreadfort men were looking at him. "She was what was promised."

"She smells of dogshit. I've had enough of bad smells, as it happens. I think I'll have your bedwarmer instead. What do you call her? Kyra?"

"Are you mad?" Theon said angrily. "I'll have you—"

The Bastard's backhand caught him square, and his cheekbone shattered with a sickening crunch beneath the lobstered steel. The world vanished in a red roar of pain.

Sometime later, Theon found himself on the ground. He rolled onto his stomach and swallowed a mouthful of blood. *Close the gates!* he tried to shout, but it was too late. The Dreadfort men had cut down Red Rolfe and Kenned, and more were pouring through, a river of mail and sharp swords. There was a ringing in his ears, and horror all around him. Black Lorren

had his sword out, but there were already four of them pressing in on him. He saw Ulf go down with a crossbow bolt through the belly as he ran for the Great Hall. Maester Luwin was trying to reach him when a knight on a warhorse planted a spear between his shoulders, then swung back to ride over him. Another man whipped a torch round and round his head and then lofted it toward the thatched roof of the stables. “*Save me the Freys,*” the Bastard was shouting as the flames roared upward, “*and burn the rest. Burn it, burn it all.*”

The last thing Theon Greyjoy saw was Smiler, kicking free of the burning stables with his mane ablaze, screaming, rearing...