

THEON

She was undeniably a beauty. *But your first is always beautiful*, Theon Greyjoy thought.

“Now there’s a pretty grin,” a woman’s voice said behind him. “The lordling likes the look of her, does he?”

Theon turned to give her an appraising glance. He liked what he saw. Ironborn, he knew at a glance; lean and longlegged, with black hair cut short, wind-chafed skin, strong sure hands, a dirk at her belt. Her nose was too big and too sharp for her thin face, but her smile made up for it. He judged her a few years older than he was, but no more than five-and-twenty. She moved as if she were used to a deck beneath her feet.

“Yes, she’s a sweet sight,” he told her, “though not half so sweet as you.”

“Oho.” She grinned. “I’d best be careful. This lordling has a honeyed tongue.”

“Taste it and see.”

“Is it that way, then?” she said, eyeing him boldly. There were women on the Iron Islands—not many, but a few—who crewed the longships along with their men, and it was said that salt and sea changed them, gave them a man’s appetites. “Have you been that long at sea, lordling? Or were there no women where you came from?”

“Women enough, but none like you.”

“And how would you know what I’m like?”

“My eyes can see your face. My ears can hear your laughter. And my cock’s gone hard as a mast for you.”

The woman stepped close and pressed a hand to the front of his breeches. “Well, you’re no liar,” she said, giving him a squeeze through the cloth. “How bad does it hurt?”

“Fiercely.”

“Poor lordling.” She released him and stepped back. “As it happens, I’m a woman wed, and new with child.”

“The gods are good,” Theon said. “No chance I’d give you a bastard that way.”

“Even so, my man wouldn’t thank you.”

“No, but you might.”

“And why would that be? I’ve had lords before. They’re made the same as other men.”

“Have you ever had a prince?” he asked her. “When you’re wrinkled and grey and your teats hang past your belly, you can tell your children’s children that once you loved a king.”

“Oh, is it love we’re talking now? And here I thought it was just cocks and cunts.”

“Is it love you fancy?” He’d decided that he liked this wench, whoever she was; her sharp wit was a welcome respite from the damp gloom of Pyke. “Shall I name my longship after you, and play you the high harp, and keep you in a tower room in my castle with only jewels to wear, like a princess in a song?”

“You *ought* to name your ship after me,” she said, ignoring all the rest. “It was me who built her.”

“Sigrin built her. My lord father’s shipwright.”

“I’m Esgred. Ambrode’s daughter, and wife to Sigrin.”

He had not known that Ambrode had a daughter, or Sigrin a wife... but he’d met the younger shipwright only once, and the older one he scarce remembered. “You’re wasted on Sigrin.”

“Oho. Sigrin told me this sweet ship is wasted on you.”

Theon bristled. “Do you know who I am?”

“Prince Theon of House Greyjoy. Who else? Tell me true, my lord, how well do you love her, this new maid of yours? Sigrin will want to know.”

The longship was so new that she still smelled of pitch and resin. His uncle Aeron would bless her on the morrow, but Theon had ridden over

from Pyke to get a look at her before she was launched. She was not so large as Lord Balon's own *Great Kraken* or his uncle Victarion's *Iron Victory*, but she looked swift and sweet, even sitting in her wooden cradle on the strand; lean black hull a hundred feet long, a single tall mast, fifty long oars, deck enough for a hundred men... and at the prow, the great iron ram in the shape of an arrowhead. "Sigrin did me good service," he admitted. "Is she as fast as she looks?"

"Faster—for a master that knows how to handle her."

"It has been a few years since I sailed a ship." *And I've never captained one, if truth be told.* "Still, I'm a Greyjoy, and an ironman. The sea is in my blood."

"And your blood will be in the sea, if you sail the way you talk," she told him.

"I would never mistreat such a fair maiden."

"Fair maiden?" She laughed. "She's a sea bitch, this one."

"There, and now you've named her. *Sea Bitch.*"

That amused her; he could see the sparkle in her dark eyes. "And you said you'd name her after me," she said in a voice of wounded reproach.

"I did." He caught her hand. "Help me, my lady. In the green lands, they believe a woman with child means good fortune for any man who beds her."

"And what would they know about ships in the green lands? Or women, for that matter? Besides, I think you made that up."

"If I confess, will you still love me?"

"Still? When have I ever loved you?"

"Never," he admitted, "but I am trying to repair that lack, my sweet Esgred. The wind is cold. Come aboard my ship and let me warm you. On the morrow my uncle Aeron will pour seawater over her prow and mumble a prayer to the Drowned God, but I'd sooner bless her with the milk of my loins, and yours."

"The Drowned God might not take that kindly."

“Bugger the Drowned God. If he troubles us, I’ll drown him again. We’re off to war within a fortnight. Would you send me into battle all sleepless with longing?”

“Gladly.”

“A cruel maid. My ship is well named. If I steer her onto the rocks in my distraction, you’ll have yourself to blame.”

“Do you plan to steer with this?” Esgred brushed the front of his breeches once more, and smiled as a finger traced the iron outline of his manhood.

“Come back to Pyke with me,” he said suddenly, thinking, *What will Lord Balon say? And why should I care? I am a man grown, if I want to bring a wench to bed it is no one’s business but my own.*

“And what would I do in Pyke?” Her hand stayed where it was.

“My father will feast his captains tonight.” He had them to feast every night, while he waited for the last stragglers to arrive, but Theon saw no need to tell all that.

“Would you make me your captain for the night, my lord prince?” She had the wickedest smile he’d ever seen on a woman.

“I might. If I knew you’d steer me safe into port.”

“Well, I know which end of the oar goes in the sea, and there’s no one better with ropes and knots.” One-handed, she undid the lacing of his breeches, then grinned and stepped lightly away from him. “A pity I’m a woman wed, and new with child.”

Flustered, Theon laced himself back up. “I need to start back to the castle. if you do not come with me, I may lose my way for grief, and all the islands would be poorer.”

“We couldn’t have that... but I have no horse, my lord.”

“You could take my squire’s mount.”

“And leave your poor squire to walk all the way to Pyke?”

“Share mine, then.”

“You’d like that well enough.” The smile again. “Now, would I be behind you, or in front?”

“You would be wherever you liked.”

“I like to be on top.”

Where has this wench been all my life? “My father’s hall is dim and dank. It needs Esgred to make the fires blaze.”

“The lordling has a honeyed tongue.”

“Isn’t that where we began?”

She threw up her hands. “And where we end. Esgred is yours, sweet prince. Take me to your castle. Let me see your proud towers rising from the sea.”

“I left my horse at the inn. Come.” They walked down the strand together, and when Theon took her arm, she did not pull away. He liked the way she walked; there was a boldness to it, part saunter and part sway, that suggested she would be just as bold beneath the blankets.

Lordsport was as crowded as he’d ever seen it, swarming with the crews of the longships that lined the pebbled shore and rode at anchor well out past the breakwater. Ironmen did not bend their knees often nor easily, but Theon noted that oarsmen and townfolk alike grew quiet as they passed, and acknowledged him with respectful bows of the head. *They have finally learned who I am*, he thought. *And past time too.*

Lord Goodbrother of Great Wyk had come in the night before with his main strength, near forty longships. His men were everywhere, conspicuous in their striped goat’s hair sashes. It was said about the inn that Otter Gimpknee’s whores were being fucked bowlegged by beardless boys in sashes. The boys were welcome to them so far as Theon was concerned. A poxier den of slatterns he hoped he’d never see. His present companion was more to his taste. That she was wed to his father’s shipwright and pregnant to boot only made her more intriguing.

“Has my lord prince begun choosing his crew?” Esgred asked as they made their way toward the stable. “Ho, Bluetooth,” she shouted to a passing

seafarer, a tall man in bearskin vest and raven-winged helm. “How fares your bride?”

“Fat with child, and talking of twins.”

“So soon?” Esgred smiled that wicked smile. “You got your oar in the water quickly.”

“Aye, and stroked and stroked and *stroked*,” roared the man.

“A big man,” Theon observed. “Bluetooth, was it? Should I choose him for my *Sea Bitch*?”

“Only if you mean to insult him. Bluetooth has a sweet ship of his own.”

“I have been too long away to know one man from another,” Theon admitted. He’d looked for a few of the friends he’d played with as a boy, but they were gone, dead, or grown into strangers. “My uncle Victarion has loaned me his own steersman.”

“Rymolf Stormdrunk? A good man, so long as he’s sober.” She saw more faces she knew, and called out to a passing trio, “Uller, Qarl. Where’s your brother, Skyte?”

“The Drowned God needed a strong oarsman, I fear,” replied the stocky man with the white streak in his beard.

“What he means is, Eldiss drank too much wine and his fat belly burst,” said the pink-cheeked youth beside him.

“What’s dead may never die,” Esgred said.

“What’s dead may never die.”

Theon muttered the words with them. “You seem well known,” he said to the woman when the men had passed on.

“Every man loves the shipwright’s wife. He had better, lest he wants his ship to sink. If you need men to pull your oars, you could do worse than those three.”

“Lordsport has no lack of strong arms.” Theon had given the matter no little thought. It was fighters he wanted, and men who would be loyal to *him*, not to his lord father or his uncles. He was playing the part of a dutiful

young prince for the moment, while he waited for Lord Balon to reveal the fullness of his plans. If it turned out that he did not like those plans or his part in them, however, well...

“Strength is not enough. A longship’s oars must move as one if you would have her best speed. Choose men who have rowed together before, if you’re wise.”

“Sage counsel. Perhaps you’d help me choose them.” *Let her believe I want her wisdom, women fancy that.*

“I may. If you treat me kindly.”

“How else?”

Theon quickened his stride as they neared the *Myraham*, rocking high and empty by the quay. Her captain had tried to sail a fortnight past, but Lord Balon would not permit it. None of the merchantmen that called at Lordsport had been allowed to depart again; his father wanted no word of the hosting to reach the mainland before he was ready to strike.

“Milord,” a plaintive voice called down from the forecastle of the merchanter. The captain’s daughter leaned over the rail, gazing after him. Her father had forbidden her to come ashore, but whenever Theon came to Lordsport he spied her wandering forlornly about the deck. “Milord, a moment,” she called after him. “As it please milord...”

“Did she?” Esgrid asked as Theon hurried her past the cog. “Please milord?”

He saw no sense in being coy with this one. “For a time. Now she wants to be my salt wife.”

“Oho. Well, she’d profit from some salting, no doubt. Too soft and bland, that one. Or am I wrong?”

“You’re not wrong.” *Soft and bland. Precisely. How had she known?*

He had told Wex to wait at the inn. The common room was so crowded that Theon had to push his way through the door. Not a seat was to be had at bench nor table. Nor did he see his squire. “Wex”, he shouted over the din and clatter. *If he’s up with one of those poxy whores, I’ll strip the hide*

off him, he was thinking when he finally spied the boy, dicing near the hearth... and winning too, by the look of the pile of coins before him.

“Time to go,” Theon announced. When the boy paid him no mind, he seized him by the ear and pulled him from the game. Wex grabbed up a fistful of coppers and came along without a word. That was one of the things Theon liked best about him. Most squires have loose tongues, but Wex had been born dumb... which didn’t seem to keep him from being clever as any twelve-year-old had a right to be. He was a baseborn son of one of Lord Botley’s half brothers. Taking him as squire had been part of the price Theon had paid for his horse.

When Wex saw Esgred, his eyes went round. *You’d think he’d never seen a woman before*, Theon thought. “Esgred will be riding with me back to Pyke. Saddle the horses, and be quick about it.”

The boy had ridden in on a scrawny little garron from Lord Balon’s stable, but Theon’s mount was quite another sort of beast. “Where did you find that hellhorse?” Esgred asked when she saw him, but from the way she laughed he knew she was impressed.

“Lord Botley bought him in Lannisport a year past, but he proved to be too much horse for him, so Botley was pleased to sell.” The Iron Islands were too sparse and rocky for breeding good horses. Most of the islanders were indifferent riders at best, more comfortable on the deck of a longship than in the saddle. Even the lords rode garrons or shaggy Harlaw ponies, and ox carts were more common than drays. The smallfolk too poor to own either one pulled their own plows through the thin, stony soil.

But Theon had spent ten years in Winterfell, and did not intend to go to war without a good mount beneath him. Lord Botley’s misjudgment was his good fortune: a stallion with a temper as black as his hide, larger than a courser if not quite so big as most destriers. As Theon was not quite so big as most knights, that suited him admirably. The animal had fire in his eyes. When he’d met his new owner, he’d pulled back his lips and tried to bite off his face.

“Does he have a name?” Esgred asked Theon as he mounted.

“Smiler.” He gave her a hand, and pulled her up in front of him, where he could put his arms around her as they rode. “I knew a man once who told me that I smiled at the wrong things.”

“Do you?”

“Only by the lights of those who smile at nothing.” He thought of his father and his uncle Aeron.

“Are you smiling now, my lord prince?”

“Oh, yes.” Theon reached around her to take the reins. She was almost of a height with him. Her hair could have used a wash and she had a faded pink scar on her pretty neck, but he liked the smell of her, salt and sweat and woman.

The ride back to Pyke promised to be a good deal more interesting than the ride down had been.

When they were well beyond Lordsport, Theon put a hand on her breast. Esgred reached up and plucked it away. “I’d keep both hands on the reins, or this black beast of yours is like to fling us both off and kick us to death.”

“I broke him of that.” Amused, Theon behaved himself for a while, chatting amiably of the weather (grey and overcast, as it had been since he arrived, with frequent rains) and telling her of the men he’d killed in the Whispering Wood. When he reached the part about coming *that* close to the Kingslayer himself, he slid his hand back up to where it had been. Her breasts were small, but he liked the firmness of them.

“You don’t want to do that, my lord prince.”

“Oh, but I do.” Theon gave her a squeeze.

“Your squire is watching you.”

“Let him. He’ll never speak of it, I swear.”

Esgred pried his fingers off her breast. This time she kept him firmly prisoned. She had strong hands.

“I like a woman with a good tight grip.”

She snorted. “I’d not have thought it, by that wench on the waterfront.”

“You must not judge me by her. She was the only woman on the ship.”

“Tell me of your father. Will he welcome me kindly to his castle?”

“Why should he? He scarcely welcomed *me*, his own blood, the heir to Pyke and the Iron Islands.”

“Are you?” she asked mildly. “It’s said that you have uncles, brothers, a sister.”

“My brothers are long dead, and my sister... well, they say Asha’s favorite gown is a chainmail hauberk that hangs down past her knees, with boiled leather smallclothes beneath. Men’s garb won’t make her a man, though. I’ll make a good marriage alliance with her once we’ve won the war, if I can find a man to take her. As I recall, she had a nose like a vulture’s beak, a ripe crop of pimples, and no more chest than a boy.”

“You can marry off your sister,” Esgred observed, “but not your uncles.”

“My uncles...” Theon’s claim took precedence over those of his father’s three brothers, but the woman had touched on a sore point nonetheless. In the islands it was scarce unheard of for a strong, ambitious uncle to dispossess a weak nephew of his rights, and usually murder him in the bargain. *But I am not weak*, Theon told himself, *and I mean to be stronger yet by the time my father dies*. “My uncles pose no threat to me,” he declared. “Aeron is drunk on seawater and sanctity. He lives only for his god—”

“*His* god? Not yours?”

“Mine as well. What is dead can never die.” He smiled thinly. “If I make pious noises as required, Damphair will give me no trouble. And my uncle Victarion—”

“Lord Captain of the Iron Fleet, and a fearsome warrior. I have heard them sing of him in the alehouses.”

“During my lord father’s rebellion, he sailed into Lannisport with my uncle Euron and burned the Lannister fleet where it lay at anchor,” Theon recalled. “The plan was Euron’s, though. Victarion is like some great grey bullock, strong and tireless and dutiful, but not like to win any races. No

doubt, he'll serve me as loyally as he has served my lord father. He has neither the wits nor the ambition to plot betrayal."

"Euron Croweye has no lack of cunning, though. I've heard men say terrible things of that one."

Theon shifted his seat. "My uncle Euron has not been seen in the islands for close on two years. He may be dead." If so, it might be for the best. Lord Balon's eldest brother had never given up the Old Way, even for a day. His *Silence*, with its black sails and dark red hull, was infamous in every port from Ibben to Asshai, it was said.

"He may be dead," Esgred agreed, "and if he lives, why, he has spent so long at sea, he'd be half a stranger here. The ironborn would never seat a stranger in the Seastone Chair."

"I suppose not," Theon replied, before it occurred to him that some would call him a stranger as well. The thought made him frown. *Ten years is a long while, but I am back now, and my father is far from dead. I have time to prove myself.*

He considered fondling Esgred's breast again, but she would probably only take his hand away, and all this talk of his uncles had dampened his ardor somewhat. Time enough for such play at the castle, in the privacy of his chambers. "I will speak to Helya when we reach Pyke, and see that you have an honored place at the feast," he said. "I must sit on the dais, at my father's right hand, but I will come down and join you when he leaves the hall. He seldom lingers long. He has no belly for drink these days."

"A grievous thing when a great man grows old."

"Lord Balon is but the *father* of a great man."

"A modest lordling."

"Only a fool humbles himself when the world is so full of men eager to do that job for him." He kissed her lightly on the nape of her neck.

"What shall I wear to this great feast?" She reached back and pushed his face away.

"I'll ask Helya to garb you. One of my lady mother's gowns might do. She is off on Harlaw, and not expected to return."

“The cold winds have worn her away, I hear. Will you not go see her? Harlaw is only a day’s sail, and surely Lady Greyjoy yearns for a last sight of her son.”

“Would that I could. I am kept too busy here. My father relies on me, now that I am returned. Come peace, perhaps...”

“Your coming might bring *her* peace.”

“Now you sound a woman,” Theon complained.

“I confess, I am... and new with child.”

Somehow that thought excited him. “So you say, but your body shows no signs of it. How shall it be proven? Before I believe you, I shall need to see your breasts grow ripe, and taste your mother’s milk.”

“And what will my husband say to this? Your father’s own sworn man and servant?”

“We’ll give him so many ships to build, he’ll never know you’ve left him.”

She laughed. “It’s a cruel lordling who’s seized me. If I promise you that one day you may watch my babe get suck, will you tell me more of your war, Theon of House Greyjoy? There are miles and mountains still ahead of us, and I would hear of this wolf king you served, and the golden lions he fights.”

Ever anxious to please her, Theon obliged. The rest of the long ride passed swiftly as he filled her pretty head with tales of Winterfell and war. Some of the things he said astonished him. *She is easy to talk to, gods praise her*, he reflected. *I feel as though I’ve known her for years. If the wench’s pillow play is half the equal of her wit, I’ll need to keep her...* He thought of Sigrin the Shipwright, a thick-bodied, thick-witted man, flaxen hair already receding from a pimpled brow, and shook his head. *A waste. A most tragic waste.*

It seemed scarcely any time at all before the great curtain wall of Pyke loomed up before them.

The gates were open. Theon put his heels into Smiler and rode through at a brisk trot. The hounds were barking wildly as he helped Esgred

dismount. Several came bounding up, tails wagging. They shot straight past him and almost bowled the woman over, leaping all around her, yapping and licking. “*Off*,” Theon shouted, aiming an ineffectual kick at one big brown bitch, but Esgred was laughing and wrestling with them.

A stableman came pounding up after the dogs. “Take the horse,” Theon commanded him, “and get these damn dogs away—”

The lout paid him no mind. His face broke into a huge gap-toothed smile and he said, “Lady Asha. You’re back.”

“Last night,” she said. “I sailed from Great Wyk with Lord Goodbrother, and spent the night at the inn. My little brother was kind enough to let me ride with him from Lordsport.” She kissed one of the dogs on the nose and grinned at Theon.

All he could do was stand and gape at her. *Asha. No. She cannot be Asha.* He realized suddenly that there were two Ashas in his head. One was the little girl he had known. The other, more vaguely imagined, looked something like her mother. Neither looked a bit like this... this... this...

“The pimples went when the breasts came,” she explained while she tussled with a dog, “but I kept the vulture’s beak.”

Theon found his voice. “*Why didn’t you tell me?*”

Asha let go of the hound and straightened. “I wanted to see who you were first. And I did.” She gave him a mocking half bow. “And now, little brother, pray excuse me. I need to bathe and dress for the feast. I wonder if I still have that chainmail gown I like to wear over my boiled leather smallclothes?” She gave him that evil grin, and crossed the bridge with that walk he’d liked so well, half saunter and half sway.

When Theon turned away, Wex was smirking at him. He gave the boy a clout on the ear. “That’s for enjoying this so much.” And another, harder. “And that’s for not warning me. Next time, grow a tongue.”

His own chambers in the Guest Keep had never seemed so chilly, though the thralls had left a brazier burning. Theon kicked his boots off, let his cloak fall to the floor, and poured himself a cup of wine, remembering a gawky girl with knob knees and pimples. *She unlaced my breeches*, he

thought, outraged, *and she said... oh, gods, and I said...* He groaned. He could not possibly have made a more appalling fool of himself.

No, he thought then. She was the one who made me a fool. The evil bitch must have enjoyed every moment of it. And the way she kept reaching for my cock...

He took his cup and went to the window seat, where he sat drinking and watching the sea while the sun darkened over Pyke. *I have no place here, he thought, and Asha is the reason, may the Others take her!* The water below turned from green to grey to black. By then he could hear distant music, and he knew it was time to change for the feast.

Theon chose plain boots and plainer clothes, somber shades of black and grey to fit his mood. No ornament; he had nothing bought with iron. *I might have taken something off that wildling I killed to save Bran Stark, but he had nothing worth the taking. That's my cursed luck, I kill the poor.*

The long smoky hall was crowded with his father's lords and captains when Theon entered, near four hundred of them. Dagmer Cleftjaw had not yet returned from Old Wyk with the Stonehouses and Drumms, but all the rest were there—Harlaws from Harlaw, Blacktydes from Blacktyde, Sparrs, Merlyns, and Goodbrothers from Great Wyk, Saltcliffes and Sunderlies from Saltcliffe, and Botleys and Wynches from the other side of Pyke. The thralls were pouring ale, and there was music, fiddles and skins and drums. Three burly men were doing the finger dance, spinning short-hafted axes at each other. The trick was to catch the axe or leap over it without missing a step. It was called the finger dance because it usually ended when one of the dancers lost one... or two, or five.

Neither the dancers nor the drinkers took much note of Theon Greyjoy as he strode to the dais. Lord Balon occupied the Seastone Chair, carved in the shape of a great kraken from an immense block of oily black stone. Legend said that the First Men had found it standing on the shore of Old Wyk when they came to the Iron Islands. To the left of the high seat were Theon's uncles. Asha was ensconced at his right hand, in the place of honor. "You come late, Theon," Lord Balon observed.

“I ask your pardon.” Theon took the empty seat beside Asha. Leaning close, he hissed in her ear, “You’re in my place.”

She turned to him with innocent eyes. “Brother, surely you are mistaken. Your place is at Winterfell.” Her smile cut. “And where are all your pretty clothes? I heard you fancied silk and velvet against your skin.” She was in soft green wool herself, simply cut, the fabric clinging to the slender lines of her body.

“Your hauberk must have rusted away, sister,” he threw back. “A great pity. I’d like to see you all in iron.”

Asha only laughed. “You may yet, little brother... if you think your *Sea Bitch* can keep up with my *Black Wind*.” One of their father’s thralls came near, bearing a flagon of wine. “Are you drinking ale or wine tonight, Theon?” She leaned over close. “Or is it still a taste of my mother’s milk you thirst for?”

He flushed. “Wine,” he told the thrall. Asha turned away and banged on the table, shouting for ale.

Theon hacked a loaf of bread in half, hollowed out a trencher, and summoned a cook to fill it with fish stew. The smell of the thick cream made him a little ill, but he forced himself to eat some. He’d drunk enough wine to float him through two meals. *If I retch, it will be on her*. “Does Father know that you’ve married his shipwright?” he asked his sister.

“No more than Sigrin does.” She gave a shrug. “*Esgred* was the first ship he built. He named her after his mother. I would be hard-pressed to say which he loves best.”

“Every word you spoke to me was a lie.”

“Not *every* word. Remember when I told you I like to be on top?” Asha grinned.

That only made him angrier. “All that about being a woman wed, and new with child...”

“Oh, that part was true enough.” Asha leapt to her feet. “*Rolfe, here*,” she shouted down at one of the finger dancers, holding up a hand. He saw her, spun, and suddenly an axe came flying from his hand, the blade

gleaming as it tumbled end over end through the torchlight. Theon had time for a choked gasp before Asha snatched the axe from the air and slammed it down into the table, splitting his trencher in two and splattering his mantle with drippings. “There’s my lord husband.” His sister reached down inside her gown and drew a dirk from between her breasts. “And here’s my sweet suckling babe.”

He could not imagine how he looked at that moment, but suddenly Theon Greyjoy realized that the Great Hall was ringing with laughter, all of it at him. Even his father was smiling, gods be damned, and his uncle Victarion chuckled aloud. The best response he could summon was a queasy grin. *We shall see who is laughing when all this is done, bitch.*

Asha wrenched the axe out of the table and flung it back down at the dancers, to whistles and loud cheers. “You’d do well to heed what I told you about choosing a crew.” A thrall offered them a platter, and she stabbed a salted fish and ate it off the end of her dirk. “If you had troubled to learn the first thing of Sigrin, I could never have fooled you. Ten years a wolf, and you land here and think to prince about the islands, but you know nothing and no one. Why should men fight and die for you? “

“I am their lawful prince,” Theon said stiffly.

“By the laws of the green lands, you might be. But we make our own laws here, or have you forgotten?”

Scowling, Theon turned to contemplate the leaking trencher before him. He would have stew in his lap before long. He shouted for a thrall to clean it up. *Half my life I have waited to come home, and for what? Mockery and disregard?* This was not the Pyke he remembered. Or *did* he remember? He had been so young when they took him away to hold hostage.

The feast was a meager enough thing, a succession of fish stews, black bread, and spiceless goat. The tastiest thing Theon found to eat was an onion pie. Ale and wine continued to flow well after the last of the courses had been cleared away.

Lord Balon Greyjoy rose from the Seastone Chair. “Have done with your drink and come to my solar,” he commanded his companions on the

dais. “We have plans to lay.” He left them with no other word, flanked by two of his guards. His brothers followed in short order. Theon rose to go after them.

“My little brother is in a rush to be off.” Asha raised her drinking horn and beckoned for more ale.

“Our lord father is waiting.”

“And has, for many a year. It will do him no harm to wait a little longer... but if you fear his wrath, scurry after him by all means. You ought to have no trouble catching our uncles.” She smiled. “One is drunk on seawater, after all, and the other is a great grey bullock so dim he’ll probably get lost.”

Theon sat back down, annoyed. “I run after no man.”

“No man, but every woman?”

“It was not me who grabbed your cock.”

“I don’t have one, remember? You grabbed every other bit of me quick enough.”

He could feel the flush creeping up his cheeks. “I’m a man with a man’s hungers. What sort of unnatural creature are you?”

“Only a shy maid.” Asha’s hand darted out under the table to give his cock a squeeze. Theon nearly jumped from his chair. “What, don’t you want me to steer you into port, brother?”

“Marriage is not for you,” Theon decided. “When I rule, I believe I will pack you off to the silent sisters.” He lurched to his feet and strode off unsteadily to find his father.

Rain was falling by the time he reached the swaying bridge out to the Sea Tower. His stomach was crashing and churning like the waves below, and wine had unsteadied his feet. Theon gritted his teeth and gripped the rope tightly as he made his way across, pretending that it was Asha’s neck he was clutching.

The solar was as damp and drafty as ever. Buried under his sealskin robes, his father sat before the brazier with his brothers on either side of him. Victarion was talking of tides and winds when Theon entered, but

Lord Balon waved him silent. "I have made my plans. It is time you heard them."

"I have some suggestions—"

"When I require your counsel I shall ask for it," his father said. "We have had a bird from Old Wyk. Dagmer is bringing the Drumms and Stonehouses. If the god grants us good winds, we will sail when they arrive... or you will. I mean for you to strike the first blow, Theon. You shall take eight longships north—"

"*Eight?*" His face reddened. "What can I hope to accomplish with only eight longships?"

"You are to harry the Stony Shore, raiding the fishing villages and sinking any ships you chance to meet. It may be that you will draw some of the northern lords out from behind their stone walls. Aeron will accompany you, and Dagmer Cleftjaw."

"May the Drowned God bless our swords," the priest said.

Theon felt as if he'd been slapped. He was being sent to do reaver's work, burning fishermen out of their hovels and raping their ugly daughters, and yet it seemed Lord Balon did not trust him sufficiently to do even that much. Bad enough to have to suffer the Damphair's scowls and chidings. With Dagmer Cleftjaw along as well, his command would be purely nominal.

"Asha my daughter," Lord Balon went on, and Theon turned to see that his sister had slipped in silently, "you shall take thirty longships of picked men round Sea Dragon Point. Land upon the tidal flats north of Deepwood Motte. March quickly, and the castle may fall before they even know you are upon them."

Asha smiled like a cat in cream. "I've always wanted a castle," she said sweetly.

"Then take one."

Theon had to bite his tongue. Deepwood Motte was the stronghold of the Glovers. With both Robett and Galbart warring in the south, it would be lightly held, and once the castle fell the ironmen would have a secure base

in the heart of the north. *I should be the one sent to take Deepwood.* He knew Deepwood Motte, he had visited the Glovers several times with Eddard Stark.

“Victarion,” Lord Balon said to his brother, “the main thrust shall fall to you. When my sons have struck their blows, Winterfell must respond. You should meet small opposition as you sail up Saltspear and the Fever River. At the headwaters, you will be less than twenty miles from Moat Cailin. The Neck is the key to the kingdom. Already we command the western seas. Once we hold Moat Cailin, the pup will not be able to win back to the north... and if he is fool enough to try, his enemies will seal the south end of the causeway behind him, and Robb the boy will find himself caught like a rat in a bottle.”

Theon could keep silent no longer. “A bold plan, Father, but the lords in their castles—”

Lord Balon rode over him. “The lords are gone south with the pup. Those who remained behind are the cravens, old men, and green boys. They will yield or fall, one by one. Winterfell may defy us for a year, but what of it? The rest shall be ours, forest and field and hall, and we shall make the folk our thralls and salt wives.”

Aeron Damphair raised his arms. “And the waters of wrath will rise high, and the Drowned God will spread his dominion across the green lands!”

“What is dead can never die,” Victarion intoned. Lord Balon and Asha echoed his words, and Theon had no choice but to mumble along with them. And then it was done.

Outside the rain was falling harder than ever. The rope bridge twisted and writhed under his feet. Theon Greyjoy stopped in the center of the span and contemplated the rocks below. The sound of the waves was a crashing roar, and he could taste the salt spray on his lips. A sudden gust of wind made him lose his footing, and he stumbled to his knees.

Asha helped him rise. “You can’t hold your wine either, brother.”

Theon leaned on her shoulder and let her guide him across the rainslick boards. “I liked you better when you were Esgred,” he told her accusingly. She laughed. “That’s fair. I liked *you* better when you were nine.”