

THE SACRIFICE

On the village green, the queen's men built their pyre.

Or should it be the village white? The snow was knee deep everywhere but where the men had shoveled it away, to hack holes into the frozen ground with axe and spade and pick. The wind was swirling from the west, driving still more snow across the frozen surface of the lakes.

"You do not want to watch this," Aly Mormont said. "No, but I will." Asha Greyjoy was the kraken's daughter, not some pampered maiden who could not bear to look at ugliness.

It had been a dark, cold, hungry day, like the day before and the day before that. They had spent most of it out on the ice, shivering beside a pair of holes they'd cut in the smaller of the frozen lakes, with fishing lines clutched in mitten-clumsy hands. Not long ago, they could count on hooking one or two fish apiece, and wolfswood men more practiced at ice-fishing were pulling up four or five. Today all that Asha had come back with was a chill that went bone deep. Aly had fared no better. It had been three days since either of them had caught a fish.

The She-Bear tried again. "*I do not need to watch this.*"

It is not you the queen's men want to burn. "Then go. You have my word, I will not run. Where would I go? To Winterfell?" Asha laughed. "Only three days' ride, they tell me."

Six queen's men were wrestling two enormous pinewood poles into holes six other queen's men had dug out. Asha did not have to ask their purpose. She knew. *Stakes*. Nightfall would be on them soon, and the red god must be fed. *An offering of blood and fire*, the queen's men called it, *that the Lord of Light may turn his fiery eye upon us and melt these thrice-cursed snows*.

"Even in this place of fear and darkness, the Lord of Light protects us," Ser Godry Farring told the men who gathered to watch as the stakes were

hammered down into the holes.

“What has your southron god to do with *snow*?” demanded Artos Flint. His black beard was crusted with ice. “This is the wroth of the old gods come upon us. It is them we should appease.”

“Aye,” said Big Bucket Wull. “Red Rahloo means nothing here. You will only make the old gods angry. They are watching from their island.”

The crofter’s village stood between two lakes, the larger dotted with small wooded islands that punched up through the ice like the frozen fists of some drowned giant. From one such island rose a weirwood gnarled and ancient, its bole and branches white as the surrounding snows. Eight days ago Asha had walked out with Aly Mormont to have a closer look at its slitted red eyes and bloody mouth. *It is only sap*, she’d told herself, *the red sap that flows inside these weirwoods*. But her eyes were unconvinced; seeing was believing, and what they saw was frozen blood.

“You northmen brought these snows upon us,” insisted Corliss Penny. “You and your demon trees. R’hllo will save us.”

“R’hllo will doom us,” said Artos Flint.

A pox on both your gods, thought Asha Greyjoy.

Ser Godry the Giantslayer surveyed the stakes, shoving one to make certain it was firmly placed. “Good. Good. They will serve. Ser Clayton, bring forth the sacrifice.”

Ser Clayton Suggs was Godry’s strong right hand. *Or should it be his withered arm?* Asha did not like Ser Clayton. Where Farring seemed fierce in his devotion to his red god, Suggs was simply cruel. She had seen him at the nightfires, watching, his lips parted and his eyes avid. *It is not the god he loves, it is the flames*, she concluded. When she asked Ser Justin if Suggs had always been that way, he grimaced. “On Dragonstone he would gamble with the torturers and lend them a hand in the questioning of prisoners, especially if the prisoner were a young woman.”

Asha was not surprised. Suggs would take a special delight in burning her, she did not doubt. *Unless the storms let up.*

They had been three days from Winterfell for nineteen days. *One hundred leagues from Deepwood Motte to Winterfell. Three hundred miles as the raven flies.* But none of them were ravens, and the storm was unrelenting. Each morning Asha awoke hoping she might see the sun, only to face another day of snow. The storm had buried every hut and hovel beneath a mound of dirty snow, and the drifts would soon be deep enough to engulf the longhall too.

And there was no food, beyond their failing horses, fish taken from the lakes (fewer every day), and whatever meagre sustenance their foragers could find in these cold, dead woods. With the king's knights and lords claiming the lion's share of the horsemeat, little and less remained for the common men. Small wonder then that they had started eating their own dead.

Asha had been as horrified as the rest when the She-Bear told her that four Peasebury men had been found butchering one of the late Lord Fell's, carving chunks of flesh from his thighs and buttocks as one of his forearms turned upon a spit, but she could not pretend to be surprised. The four were not the first to taste human flesh during this grim march, she would wager—only the first to be discovered.

Peasebury's four would pay for their feast with their lives, by the king's decree ... and by burning end the storm, the queen's men claimed. Asha Greyjoy put no faith in their red god, yet she prayed they had the right of that. If not, there would be other pyres, and Ser Clayton Suggs might get his heart's desire.

The four flesh-eaters were naked when Ser Clayton drove them out, their wrists lashed behind their backs with leathern cords. The youngest of them wept as he stumbled through the snow. Two others walked like men already dead, eyes fixed upon the ground. Asha was surprised to see how ordinary they appeared. *Not monsters, she realized, only men.*

The oldest of the four had been their serjeant. He alone remained defiant, spitting venom at the queen's men as they prodded him along with their spears. "Fuck you all, and fuck your red god too," he said. "You hear me, Farring? *Giantslayer*? I laughed when your fucking cousin died, Godry. We should have eaten him too, he smelled so good when they roasted him. I bet the boy was nice and tender. Juicy." A blow from a spear butt drove the man to his knees but did not silence him. When he rose he spat out a mouthful of blood and broken teeth and went right on. "The cock's the choicest part, all crisped up on the spit. A fat little sausage." Even as they wrapped the chains around him, he raved on. "Corliss Penny, come over here. What sort of name is Penny? Is that how much your mother charged? And you, Suggs, you bleeding bastard, you—"

Ser Clayton never said a word. One quick slash opened the serjeant's throat, sending a wash of blood down his chest.

The weeping man wept harder, his body shaking with each sob. He was so thin that Asha could count every rib. "No," he begged, "please, he was dead, he was dead and we was hungry, *please ...*"

"The serjeant was the clever one," Asha said to Aly Mormont. "He goaded Suggs into killing him." She wondered if the same trick might work twice, should her own turn come.

The four victims were chained up back-to-back, two to a stake. There they hung, three live men and one dead one, as the Lord of Light's devout stacked split logs and broken branches under their feet, then doused the piles with lamp oil. They had to be swift about it. The snow was falling heavily, as ever, and the wood would soon be soaked through.

"Where is the king?" asked Ser Corliss Penny.

Four days ago, one of the king's own squires had succumbed to cold and hunger, a boy named Bryen Farring who'd been kin to Ser Godry. Stannis Baratheon stood grim-faced by the funeral pyre as the lad's body was consigned to the flames. Afterward the king had retreated to his watchtower. He had not emerged since ... though from time to time His Grace was glimpsed upon the tower roof, outlined against the beacon fire

that burned there night and day. *Talking to the red god*, some said. *Calling out for Lady Melisandre*, insisted others. Either way, it seemed to Asha Greyjoy, the king was lost and crying out for help.

“Canty, go find the king and tell him all is ready,” Ser Godry said to the nearest man-at-arms.

“The king is here.” The voice was Richard Horpe’s.

Over his armor of plate and mail Ser Richard wore his quilted doublet, blazoned with three death’s-head moths on a field of ash and bone. King Stannis walked beside him. Behind them, struggling to keep pace, Arnolf Karstark came hobbling, leaning on his blackthorn cane. Lord Arnolf had found them eight days past. The northman had brought a son, three grandsons, four hundred spears, two score archers, a dozen mounted lances, a maester, and a cage of ravens ... but only enough provisions to sustain his own.

Karstark was no lord in truth, Asha had been given to understand, only castellan of Karhold for as long as the true lord remained a captive of the Lannisters. Gaunt and bent and crooked, with a left shoulder half a foot higher than his right, he had a scrawny neck, squinty grey eyes, and yellow teeth. A few white hairs were all that separated him from baldness; his forked beard was equal parts white and grey, but always ragged. Asha thought there was something sour about his smiles. Yet if the talk was true, it was Karstark who would hold Winterfell should they take it. Somewhere in the distant past House Karstark had sprouted from House Stark, and Lord Arnolf had been the first of Eddard Stark’s bannermen to declare for Stannis.

So far as Asha knew, the gods of the Karstarks were the old gods of the north, gods they shared with the Wulls, the Norreys, the Flints, and the other hill clans. She wondered if Lord Arnolf had come to view the burning at the king’s behest, that he might witness the power of the red god for himself.

At the sight of Stannis, two of the men bound to the stakes began to plead for mercy. The king listened in silence, his jaw clenched. Then he said to

Godry Farring, “You may begin.”

The Giantslayer raised his arms. “*Lord of Light, hear us.*”

“*Lord of Light, defend us,*” the queen’s men chanted, “*for the night is dark and full of terrors.*”

Ser Godry raised his head toward the darkening sky. “*We thank you for the sun that warms us and pray that you will return it to us, Oh lord, that it might light our path to your enemies.*” Snowflakes melted on his face. “*We thank you for the stars that watch over us by night, and pray that you will rip away this veil that hides them, so we might glory in their sight once more.*”

“*Lord of Light, protect us,*” the queen’s men prayed, “*and keep this savage dark at bay.*”

Ser Corliss Penny stepped forward, clutching the torch with both hands. He swung it about his head in a circle, fanning the flames. One of the captives began to whimper.

“*R’hllor,*” Ser Godry sang, “*we give you now four evil men. With glad hearts and true, we give them to your cleansing fires, that the darkness in their souls might be burned away. Let their vile flesh be seared and blackened, that their spirits might rise free and pure to ascend into the light. Accept their blood, Oh lord, and melt the icy chains that bind your servants. Hear their pain, and grant strength to our swords that we might shed the blood of your enemies. Accept this sacrifice, and show us the way to Winterfell, that we might vanquish the unbelievers.*”

“*Lord of Light, accept this sacrifice,*” a hundred voices echoed. Ser Corliss lit the first pyre with the torch, then thrust it into the wood at the base of the second. A few wisps of smoke began to rise. The captives began to cough. The first flames appeared, shy as maidens, darting and dancing from log to leg. In moments both the stakes were engulfed in fire.

“*He was dead,*” the weeping boy screamed, as the flames licked up his legs. “*We found him dead ... please ... we was hungry ...*” The fires reached his

balls. As the hair around his cock began to burn, his pleading dissolved into one long wordless shriek.

Asha Greyjoy could taste the bile in the back of her throat. On the Iron Islands, she had seen priests of her own people slit the throats of thralls and give their bodies to the sea to honor the Drowned God. Brutal as that was, this was worse.

Close your eyes, she told herself. *Close your ears. Turn away. You do not need to see this.* The queen's men were singing some paeon of praise for red R'hllor, but she could not hear the words above the shrieks. The heat of the flames beat against her face, but even so she shivered. The air grew thick with smoke and the stink of burnt flesh, and one of the bodies still twitched against the red-hot chains that bound him to the stake.

After a time the screaming stopped.

Wordless, King Stannis walked away, back to the solitude of his watchtower. *Back to his beacon fire*, Asha knew, *to search the flames for answers.* Arnolf Karstark made to hobble after him, but Ser Richard Horpe took him by the arm and turned him toward the longhall. The watchers began to drift away, each to his own fire and whatever meagre supper he might find.

Clayton Suggs sidled up beside her. "Did the iron cunt enjoy the show?" His breath stank of ale and onions. *He has pig eyes*, Asha thought. That was fitting; his shield and surcoat showed a pig with wings. Suggs pressed his face so close to hers that she could count the blackheads on his nose and said, "The crowd will be even bigger when it's you squirming on a stake."

He was not wrong. The wolves did not love her; she was ironborn and must answer for the crimes of her people, for Moat Cailin and Deepwood Motte and Torrhen's Square, for centuries of reaving along the stony shore, for all Theon did at Winterfell.

"Unhand me, ser." Every time Suggs spoke to her, it left her yearning for her axes. Asha was as good a finger dancer as any man on the isles and had ten fingers to prove it. *If only I could dance with this one.* Some men had faces that cried out for a beard. Ser Clayton's face cried out for an axe

between the eyes. But she was axeless here, so the best that she could do was try to wrench away. That just made Ser Clayton grasp her all the tighter, gloved fingers digging into her arm like iron claws.

“My lady asked you to let her go,” said Aly Mormont. “You would do well to listen, ser. Lady Asha is not for burning.”

“She will be,” Suggs insisted. “We have harbored this demon worshiper amongst us too long.” He released his grip on Asha’s arm all the same. One did not provoke the She-Bear needlessly.

That was the moment Justin Massey chose to appear. “The king has other plans for his prize captive,” he said, with his easy smile. His cheeks were red from the cold.

“The king? Or you?” Suggs snorted his contempt. “Scheme all you like, Massey. She’ll still be for the fire, her and her king’s blood. There’s power in king’s blood, the red woman used to say. Power to please our lord.”

“Let R’hllor be content with the four we just sent him.”

“Four baseborn churls. A beggar’s offering. Scum like that will never stop the snow. She might.”

The She-Bear spoke. “And if you burn her and the snows still fall, what then? Who will you burn next? Me?”

Asha could hold her tongue no longer. “Why not Ser Clayton? Perhaps R’hllor would like one of his own. A faithful man who will sing his praises as the flames lick at his cock.”

Ser Justin laughed. Suggs was less amused. “Enjoy your giggle, Massey. If the snow keeps falling, we will see who is laughing then.” He glanced at the dead men on their stakes, smiled, and went off to join Ser Godry and the other queen’s men.

“My champion,” Asha said to Justin Massey. He deserved that much, whatever his motives. “Thank you for the rescue, ser.”

“It will not win you friends amongst the queen’s men,” said the She-Bear. “Have you lost your faith in red R’hllor?”

“I have lost faith in more than that,” Massey said, his breath a pale mist in the air, “but I still believe in supper. Will you join me, my ladies?”

Aly Mormont shook her head. “I have no appetite.”

“Nor I. But you had best choke down some horsemeat all the same, or you may soon wish you had. We had eight hundred horses when we marched from Deepwood Motte. Last night the count was sixty-four.”

That did not shock her. Almost all of their big destriers had failed, including Massey’s own. Most of their palfreys were gone as well. Even the garrons of the northmen were faltering for want of fodder. But what did they need horses for? Stannis was no longer marching anywhere. The sun and moon and stars had been gone so long that Asha was starting to wonder whether she had dreamed them. “I will eat.”

Aly shook her head. “Not me.”

“Let me look after Lady Asha, then,” Ser Justin told her. “You have my word, I shall not permit her to escape.”

The She-Bear gave her grudging assent, deaf to the japery in his tone. They parted there, Aly to her tent, she and Justin Massey to the longhall. It was not far, but the drifts were deep, the wind was gusty, and Asha’s feet were blocks of ice. Her ankle stabbed at her with every step.

Small and mean as it was, the longhall was the largest building in the village, so the lords and captains had taken it for themselves, whilst Stannis settled into the stone watchtower by the lakeshore. A pair of guardsmen flanked its door, leaning on tall spears. One lifted the greased door flap for Massey, and Ser Justin escorted Asha through to the blessed warmth within.

Benches and trestle tables ran along either side of the hall, with room for fifty men ... though twice that number had squeezed themselves inside. A fire trench had been dug down the middle of the earthen floor, with a row of

smokeholes in the roof above. The wolves had taken to sitting on one side of the trench, the knights and southron lords upon the other.

The southerners looked a sorry lot, Asha thought—gaunt and hollow-cheeked, some pale and sick, others with red and wind-scoured faces. By contrast the northmen seemed hale and healthy, big ruddy men with beards as thick as bushes, clad in fur and iron. They might be cold and hungry too, but the marching had gone easier for them, with their garrons and their bear-paws.

Asha peeled off her fur mittens, wincing as she flexed her fingers. Pain shot up her legs as her half-frozen feet began to thaw in the warmth. The crofters had left behind a good supply of peat when they fled, so the air was hazy with smoke and the rich, earthy smell of burning turf. She hung her cloak on a peg inside the door after shaking off the snow that clung to it.

Ser Justin found them places on the bench and fetched supper for the both of them—ale and chunks of horsemeat, charred black outside and red within. Asha took a sip of ale and fell upon the horse flesh. The portion was smaller than the last she'd tasted, but her belly still rumbled at the smell of it. "My thanks, ser," she said, as blood and grease ran down her chin.

"Justin. I insist." Massey cut his own meat into chunks and stabbed one with his dagger.

Down the table, Will Foxglove was telling the men around him that Stannis would resume his march on Winterfell three days hence. He'd had it from the lips of one of the grooms who tended the king's horses. "His Grace has seen victory in his fires," Foxglove said, "a victory that will be sung of for a thousand years in lord's castle and peasant's hut alike."

Justin Massey looked up from his horsemeat. "The cold count last night reached eighty." He pulled a piece of gristle from his teeth and flicked it to the nearest dog. "If we march, we will die by the hundreds."

"We will die by the thousands if we stay here," said Ser Humfrey Clifton. "Press on or die, I say."

“Press on *and* die, I answer. And if we reach Winterfell, what then? How do we take it? Half our men are so weak they can scarce put one foot before another. Will you set them to scaling walls? Building siege towers?”

“We should remain here until the weather breaks,” said Ser Ormund Wylde, a cadaverous old knight whose nature gave the lie to his name. Asha had heard rumors that some of the men-at-arms were wagering on which of the great knights and lords would be the next to die. Ser Ormund had emerged as a clear favorite. *And how much coin was placed on me, I wonder?* Asha thought. *Perhaps there is still time to put down a wager.* “Here at least we have some shelter,” Wylde was insisting, “and there are fish in the lakes.”

“Too few fish and too many fishermen,” Lord Peasebury said gloomily. He had good reason for gloom; it was his men Ser Godry had just burned, and there were some in this very hall who had been heard to say that Peasebury himself surely knew what they were doing and might even have shared in their feasts.

“He’s not wrong,” grumbled Ned Woods, one of the scouts from Deepwood. Noseless Ned, he was called; frostbite had claimed the tip of his nose two winters past. Woods knew the wolfwood as well as any man alive. Even the king’s proudest lords had learned to listen when he spoke. “I know them lakes. You been on them like maggots on a corpse, hundreds o’ you. Cut so many holes in the ice it’s a bloody wonder more haven’t fallen through. Out by the island, there’s places look like a cheese the rats been at.” He shook his head. “Lakes are done. You fished them out.”

“All the more reason to march,” insisted Humfrey Clifton. “If death is our fate, let us die with swords in hand.”

It was the same argument as last night and the night before. *Press on and die, stay here and die, fall back and die.*

“Feel free to perish as you wish, Humfrey,” said Justin Massey. “Myself, I would sooner live to see another spring.”

“Some might call that craven,” Lord Peasebury replied. “Better a craven than a cannibal.”

Peasebury's face twisted in sudden fury. "You—"

"Death is part of war, Justin." Ser Richard Horpe stood inside the door, his dark hair damp with melting snow. "Those who march with us will have a share in all the plunder we take from Bolton and his bastard, and a greater share of glory undying. Those too weak to march must fend for themselves. But you have my word, we shall send food once we have taken Winterfell."

"You will not take Winterfell!"

"Aye, we will," came a cackle from the high table, where Arnolf Karstark sat with his son Arthor and three grandsons. Lord Arnolf shoved himself up, a vulture rising from its prey. One spotted hand clutched at his son's shoulder for support. "We'll take it for the Ned and for his daughter. Aye, and for the Young Wolf too, him who was so cruelly slaughtered. Me and mine will show the way, if need be. I've said as much to His Good Grace the king. *March*, I said, and before the moon can turn, we'll all be bathing in the blood of Freys and Boltons."

Men began to stamp their feet, to pound their fists against the tabletop. Almost all were northmen, Asha noted. Across the fire trench, the south-ron lords sat silent on the benches.

Justin Massey waited until the uproar had died away. Then he said, "Your courage is admirable, Lord Karstark, but courage will not breach the walls of Winterfell. How do you mean to take the castle, pray? With snowballs?"

One of Lord Arnolf's grandsons gave answer. "We'll cut down trees for rams to break the gates."

"And die."

Another grandson made himself heard. "We'll make ladders, scale the walls."

"And die."

Up spoke Arthor Karstark, Lord Arnolf's younger son. "We'll raise siege towers."

"And die, and die, and die." Ser Justin rolled his eyes. "Gods be good, are all you Karstarks mad?"

"*Gods?*" said Richard Horpe. "You forget yourself, Justin. We have but one god here. Speak not of demons in this company. Only the Lord of Light can save us now. Wouldn't you agree?" He put his hand upon the hilt of his sword, as if for emphasis, but his eyes never left the face of Justin Massey.

Beneath that gaze, Ser Justin wilted. "The Lord of Light, aye. My faith runs as deep as your own, Richard, you know that."

"It is your courage I question, Justin, not your faith. You have preached defeat every step of the way since we rode forth from Deepwood Motte. It makes me wonder whose side you are on."

A flush crept up Massey's neck. "I will not stay here to be insulted." He wrenched his damp cloak down from the wall so hard that Asha heard it tear, then stalked past Horpe and through the door. A blast of cold air blew through the hall, raising ashes from the fire trench and fanning its flames a little brighter.

Broken quick as that, thought Asha. *My champion is made of suet*. Even so, Ser Justin was one of the few who might object should the queen's men try to burn her. So she rose to her feet, donned her own cloak, and followed him out into the blizzard.

She was lost before she had gone ten yards. Asha could see the beacon fire burning atop the watchtower, a faint orange glow floating in the air. Elsewise the village was gone. She was alone in a white world of snow and silence, plowing through snowdrifts as high as her thighs. "*Justin?*" she called. There was no answer. Somewhere to her left she heard a horse whicker. *The poor thing sounds frightened. Perhaps he knows that he's to be tomorrow's supper*. Asha pulled her cloak about her tightly.

She blundered back onto the village green unknowing. The pinewood stakes still stood, charred and scorched but not burned through. The chains about the dead had cooled by now, she saw, but still held the corpses fast in their iron embrace. A raven was perched atop one, pulling at the tatters of burned flesh that clung to its blackened skull. The blowing snow had covered the ashes at the base of the pyre and crept up the dead man's leg as far as his ankle. *The old gods mean to bury him*, Asha thought. *This was no work of theirs.*

"Take a good long gander, cunt," the deep voice of Clayton Suggs said, behind her. "You'll look just as pretty once you're roasted. Tell me, can squids scream?"

God of my fathers, if you can hear me in your watery halls beneath the waves, grant me just one small throwing axe. The Drowned God did not answer. He seldom did. That was the trouble with gods. "Have you seen Ser Justin?"

"That prancing fool? What do you want with him, cunt? If it's a fuck you need, I'm more a man than Massey."

Cunt again? It was odd how men like Suggs used that word to demean women when it was the only part of a woman they valued. And Suggs was worse than Middle Liddle. *When he says the word, he means it.* "Your king gelds men for rape," she reminded him.

Ser Clayton chuckled. "The king's half-blind from staring into fires. But have no fear, cunt, I'll not rape you. I'd need to kill you after, and I'd sooner see you burn."

There's that horse again. "Do you hear that?"

"Hear what?"

"A horse. No, horses. More than one." She turned her head, listening. The snow did queer things to sound. It was hard to know which direction it had come from.

“Is this some squid game? I don’t hear—” Suggs scowled. “Bloody hell. Riders.” He fumbled at his sword belt, his hands clumsy in their fur-and-leather gloves, and finally succeeded in ripping his longsword from its scabbard.

By then the riders were upon them.

They emerged from the storm like a troop of wraiths, big men on small horses, made even bigger by the bulky furs they wore. Swords rode on their hips, singing their soft steel song as they rattled in their scabbards. Asha saw a battle-axe strapped to one man’s saddle, a warhammer on another’s back. Shields they bore as well, but so obscured by snow and ice that the arms upon them could not be read. For all her layers of wool and fur and boiled leather, Asha felt naked standing there. *A horn*, she thought, *I need a horn to rouse the camp.*

“Run, you stupid cunt,” Ser Clayton shouted. “Run warn the king. Lord Bolton is upon us.” A brute he might have been, but Suggs did not want for courage. Sword in hand, he strode through the snow, putting himself between the riders and the king’s tower, its beacon glimmering behind him like the orange eye of some strange god. “Who goes there? Halt! *Halt!*”

The lead rider reined up before him. Behind were others, perhaps as many as a score. Asha had no time to count them. Hundreds more might be out there in the storm, coming hard upon their heels. Roose Bolton’s entire host might be descending on them, hidden by darkness and swirling snow. These, though ...

They are too many to be scouts and too few to make a vanguard. And two were all in black. *Night’s Watch*, she realized suddenly. “Who are you?” she called.

“Friends,” a half-familiar voice replied. “We looked for you at Winterfell, but found only Crowfood Umber beating drums and blowing horns. It took some time to find you.” The rider vaulted from his saddle, pulled back his hood, and bowed. So thick was his beard, and so crusted with ice, that for a moment Asha did not know him. Then it came. “*Tris?*” she said.

“My lady.” Tristifer Botley took a knee. “The Maid is here as well. Roggon, Grimtongue, Fingers, Rook ... six of us, all those fit enough to ride. Cromm died of his wounds.”

“What is this?” Ser Clayton Suggs demanded. “You’re one of hers? How did you get loose of Deepwood’s dungeons?”

Tris rose and brushed the snow from his knees. “Sybelle Glover was offered a handsome ransom for our freedom and chose to accept it in the name of the king.”

“What ransom? Who would pay good coin for sea scum?”

“I did, ser.” The speaker came forward on his garron. He was very tall, very thin, so long-legged that it was a wonder his feet did not drag along the ground. “I had need of a strong escort to see me safely to the king, and Lady Sybelle had need of fewer mouths to feed.” A scarf concealed the tall man’s features, but atop his head was perched the queerest hat Asha had seen since the last time she had sailed to Tyrosh, a brimless tower of some soft fabric, like three cylinders stacked one atop the other. “I was given to understand that I might find King Stannis here. It is most urgent that I speak with him at once.”

“And who in seven stinking hells are you?”

The tall man slid gracefully from his garron, removed his peculiar hat, and bowed. “I have the honor to be Tycho Nestoris, a humble servant of the Iron Bank of Braavos.”

Of all the strange things that might have come riding out of the night, the last one Asha Greyjoy would ever have expected was a Braavosi banker. It was too absurd. She had to laugh. “King Stannis has taken the watch-tower for his seat. Ser Clayton will be pleased to show you to him, I’m sure.”

“That would be most kind. Time is of the essence.” The banker studied her with shrewd dark eyes. “You are the Lady Asha of House Greyjoy, unless I am mistaken.”

“I am Asha of House Greyjoy, aye. Opinions differ on whether I’m a lady.”

The Braavosi smiled. “We’ve brought a gift for you.” He beckoned to the men behind him. “We had expected to find the king at Winterfell. This same blizzard has engulfed the castle, alas. Beneath its walls we found Mors Umber with a troop of raw green boys, waiting for the king’s coming. He gave us this.”

A girl and an old man, thought Asha, as the two were dumped rudely in the snow before her. The girl was shivering violently, even in her furs. If she had not been so frightened, she might even have been pretty, though the tip of her nose was black with frostbite. The old man ... no one would ever think him comely. She had seen scarecrows with more flesh. His face was a skull with skin, his hair bone-white and filthy. And he *stank*. Just the sight of him filled Asha with revulsion.

He raised his eyes. “Sister. See. This time I knew you.”

Asha’s heart skipped a beat. “*Theon?*”

His lips skinned back in what might have been a grin. Half his teeth were gone, and half of those still left him were broken and splintered. “Theon,” he repeated. “My name is Theon. You have to know your *name*.”