

THE KRAKEN'S DAUGHTER

The hall was loud with drunken Harlaws, distant cousins all. Each lord had hung his banner behind the benches where his men were seated. *Too few*, thought Asha Greyjoy, looking down from the gallery, *too few by far*. The benches were three-quarters empty.

Qarl the Maid had said as much, when the *Black Wind* was approaching from the sea. He had counted the longships moored beneath her uncle's castle, and his mouth had tightened. "They have not come," he observed, "or not enough of them." He was not wrong, but Asha could not agree with him, out where her crew might hear. She did not doubt their devotion, but even ironborn will hesitate to give their lives for a cause that's plainly lost.

Do I have so few friends as this? Amongst the banners, she saw the silver fish of Botley, the stone tree of the Stonetrees, the black leviathan of Volmark, the nooses of the Myres. The rest were Harlaw scythes. Boremund placed his upon a pale blue field, Hotho's was girdled within an embattled border, and the Knight had quartered his with the gaudy peacock of his mother's House. Even Sigfryd Silverhair showed two scythes counterchanged on a field divided bendwise. Only *the* Lord Harlaw displayed the silver scythe plain upon a night-black field, as it had flown in the dawn of days: Rodrik, called the Reader, Lord of the Ten Towers, Lord of Harlaw, Harlaw of Harlaw... her favorite uncle.

Lord Rodrik's high seat was vacant. Two scythes of beaten silver crossed above it, so huge that even a giant would have difficulty wielding them, but beneath were only empty cushions. Asha was not surprised. The feast was long concluded. Only bones and greasy platters remained upon the trestle tables. The rest was drinking, and her uncle Rodrik had never been partial to the company of quarrelsome drunks.

She turned to Three-Tooth, an old woman of fearful age who had been her uncle's steward since she was known as Twelve-Tooth. "My uncle is with his books?"

“Aye, where else?” The woman was so old that a septon had once said she must have nursed the Crone. That was when the Faith was still tolerated on the isles. Lord Rodrik had kept septons at Ten Towers, not for his soul’s sake but for his books. “With the books, and Botley. He was with him too.”

Botley’s standard hung in the hall, a shoal of silver fish upon a pale green field, though Asha had not seen his *Swiftfin* amongst the other longships. “I had heard my nuncle Crow’s Eye had old Sawane Botley drowned.”

“Lord *Tristifer* Botley, this one is.”

Tris. She wondered what had happened to Sawane’s elder son, Harren. *I will find out soon enough, no doubt. This should be awkward.* She had not seen Tris Botley since... no, she ought not dwell on it. “And my lady mother?”

“Abed,” said Three-Tooth, “in the Widow’s Tower.”

Aye, where else? The widow the tower was named after was her aunt. Lady Gwynesse had come home to mourn after her husband had died off Fair Isle during Balon Greyjoy’s first rebellion. “I will only stay until my grief has passed,” she had told her brother, famously, “though by rights Ten Towers should be mine, for I am seven years your elder.” Long years had passed since then, but still the widow lingered, grieving, and muttering from time to time that the castle should be hers. *And now Lord Rodrik has a second half-mad widowed sister beneath his roof,* Asha reflected. *Small wonder if he seeks solace in his books.*

Even now, it was hard to credit that frail, sickly Lady Alannys had outlived her husband Lord Balon, who had seemed so hard and strong. When Asha had sailed away to war, she had done so with a heavy heart, fearing that her mother might well die before she could return. Not once had she thought that her father might perish instead. *The Drowned God plays savage japes upon us all, but men are crueller still.* A sudden storm and a broken rope had sent Balon Greyjoy to his death. *Or so they claim.*

Asha had last seen her mother when she stopped at Ten Towers to take on fresh water, on her way north to strike at Deepwood Motte. Alannys Harlaw never had the sort of beauty the singers cherished, but her daughter

had loved her fierce strong face and the laughter in her eyes. On that last visit, though, she had found Lady Alannys in a window seat huddled beneath a pile of furs, staring out across the sea. *Is this my mother, or her ghost?* she remembered thinking as she'd kissed her cheek.

Her mother's skin had been parchment thin, her long hair white. Some pride remained in the way she held her head, but her eyes were dim and cloudy, and her mouth had trembled when she asked after Theon. "Did you bring my baby boy?" she had asked. Theon had been ten years old when he was carried off to Winterfell a hostage, and so far as Lady Alannys was concerned he would always be ten years old, it seemed. "Theon could not come," Asha had to tell her. "Father sent him reaving along the Stony Shore." Lady Alannys had naught to say to that. She only nodded slowly, yet it was plain to see how deep her daughter's words had cut her.

And now I must tell her that Theon is dead, and drive yet another dagger through her heart. There were two knives buried there already. On the blades were writ the words *Rodrik* and *Maron*, and many a time they twisted cruelly in the night. *I will see her on the morrow*, Asha vowed to herself. Her journey had been long and wearisome, she could not face her mother now.

"I must speak with Lord Rodrik," she told Three-Tooth. "See to my crew, once they're done unloading *Black Wind*. They'll bring captives. I want them to have warm beds and a hot meal."

"There's cold beef in the kitchens. And mustard in a big stone jar, from Oldtown." The thought of that mustard made the old woman smile. A single long brown tooth poked from her gums.

"That will not serve. We had a rough crossing. I want something hot in their bellies." Asha hooked a thumb through the studded belt about her hips. "Lady Glover and the children should not want for wood nor warmth. Put them in some tower, not the dungeons. The babe is sick."

"Babes are often sick. Most die, and folks are sorry. I shall ask my lord where to put these wolf folk."

She caught the woman's nose between thumb and forefinger and pinched. "You will do as I say. And if *this* babe dies, no one will be sorrier

than you.” Three-Tooth squealed and promised to obey, till Asha let her loose and went to find her uncle.

It was good to walk these halls again. Ten Towers had always felt like home to Asha, more so than Pyke. *Not one castle, ten castles squashed together*, she had thought, the first time she had seen it. She remembered breathless races up and down the steps and along wallwalks and covered bridges, fishing off the Long Stone Quay, days and nights lost amongst her uncle’s wealth of books. His grandfather’s grandfather had raised the castle, the newest on the isles. Lord Theomore Harlaw had lost three sons in the cradle and laid the blame upon the flooded cellars, damp stones, and festering nitre of ancient Harlaw Hall. Ten Towers was airier, more comfortable, better sited... but Lord Theomore was a changeable man, as any of his wives might have testified. He’d had six of those, as dissimilar as his ten towers.

The Book Tower was the fattest of the ten, octagonal in shape and made with great blocks of hewn stone. The stair was built within the thickness of the walls. Asha climbed quickly, to the fifth story and the room where her uncle read. *Not that there are any rooms where he does not read*. Lord Rodrik was seldom seen without a book in hand, be it in the privy, on the deck of his *Sea Song*, or whilst holding audience. Asha had oft seen him reading on his high seat beneath the silver scythes. He would listen to each case as it was laid before him, pronounce his judgment... and read a bit whilst his captain-of-guards went to bring in the next suppliant.

She found him hunched over a table by a window, surrounded by parchment scrolls that might have come from Valyria before its Doom, and heavy leather-bound books with bronze-and-iron hasps. Beeswax candles as thick and tall as a man’s arm burned on either side of where he sat, on ornate iron holders. Lord Rodrik Harlaw was neither fat nor slim; neither tall nor short; neither ugly nor handsome. His hair was brown, as were his eyes, though the short, neat beard he favored had gone grey. All in all, he was an ordinary man, distinguished only by his love of written words, which so many ironborn found unmanly and perverse.

“Nuncle.” She closed the door behind her. “What reading was so urgent that you leave your guests without a host?”

“Archmaester Marwyn’s *Book of Lost Books*.” He lifted his gaze from the page to study her. “Hotho brought me a copy from Oldtown. He has a daughter he would have me wed.” Lord Rodrik tapped the book with a long nail. “See here? Marwyn claims to have found three pages of *Signs and Portents*, visions written down by the maiden daughter of Aenar Targaryen before the Doom came to Valyria. Does Lanny know that you are here?”

“Not as yet.” *Lanny* was his pet name for her mother; only the Reader called her that. “Let her rest.” Asha moved a stack of books off a stool and seated herself. “Three-Tooth seems to have lost two more of her teeth. Do you call her One-Tooth now?”

“I seldom call her at all. The woman frightens me. What hour is it?” Lord Rodrik glanced out the window, at the moonlit sea. “Dark, so soon? I had not noticed. You come late. We looked for you some days ago.”

“The winds were against us, and I had captives to concern me. Robett Glover’s wife and children. The youngest is still at the breast, and Lady Glover’s milk dried up during our crossing. I had no choice but to beach *Black Wind* upon the Stony Shore and send my men out to find a wet nurse. They found a goat instead. The girl does not thrive. Is there a nursing mother in the village? Deepwood is important to my plans.”

“Your plans must change. You come too late.”

“Late and hungry.” She stretched her long legs out beneath the table and turned the pages of the nearest book, a septon’s discourse on Maegor the Cruel’s war against the Poor Fellows. “Oh, and thirsty too. A horn of ale would go down well, Nuncle.”

Lord Rodrik pursed his lips. “You know I do not permit food nor drink in my library. The books—”

“—might suffer harm.” Asha laughed.

Her uncle frowned. “You do like to provoke me.”

“Oh, don’t look so aggrieved. I have never met a man I didn’t provoke, you should know that well enough by now. But enough of me. You are

well?”

He shrugged. “Well enough. My eyes grow weaker. I have sent to Myr for a lens to help me read.”

“And how fares my aunt?”

Lord Rodrik sighed. “Still seven years my elder, and convinced Ten Towers should be hers. Gwynesse grows forgetful, but *that* she does not forget. She mourns for her dead husband as deeply as she did the day he died, though she cannot always recall his name.”

“I am not certain she ever knew his name.” Asha closed the septon’s book with a *thump*. “Was my father murdered?”

“So your mother believes.”

There were times when she would gladly have murdered him herself, she thought. “And what does my nuncle believe?”

“Balon fell to his death when a rope bridge broke beneath him. A storm was rising, and the bridge was swaying and twisting with each gust of wind.” Rodrik shrugged. “Or so we are told. Your mother had a bird from Maester Wendamyr.”

Asha slid her dirk out of its sheath and began to clean the dirt from beneath her fingernails. “Three years away, and the Crow’s Eye returns the very day my father dies.”

“The day after, we had heard. *Silence* was still out to sea when Balon died, or so it is claimed. Even so, I will agree that Euron’s return was... timely, shall we say?”

“That is not how I would say it.” Asha slammed the point of the dirk into the table. “*Where are my ships?* I counted twoscore longships moored below, not near enough to throw the Crow’s Eye off my father’s chair.”

“I sent the summons. In your name, for the love I bear you and your mother. House Harlaw has gathered. Stonetree as well, and Volmark. Some Myres...”

“All from the isle of Harlaw... one isle out of seven. I saw one lonely Botley banner in the hall, from Pyke. Where are the ships from Saltcliffe, from Orkwood, from the Wyks?”

“Baelor Blacktyde came from Blacktyde to consult with me, and just as soon set sail again.” Lord Rodrik closed *The Book of Lost Books*. “He is on Old Wyk by now.”

“Old Wyk?” Asha had feared he was about to say that they all had gone to Pyke, to do homage to the Crow’s Eye. “Why Old Wyk?”

“I thought you would have heard. Aeron Damphair has called a kingsmoot.”

Asha threw back her head and laughed. “The Drowned God must have shoved a pricklefish up Uncle Aeron’s arse. A *kingsmoot*? Is this some jape, or does he mean it truly?”

“The Damphair has not japed since he was drowned. And the other priests have taken up the call. Blind Beron Blacktyde, Tarle the Thrice-Drowned... even the Old Grey Gull has left that rock he lives on to preach this kingsmoot all across Harlaw. The captains are gathering on Old Wyk as we speak.”

Asha was astonished. “Has the Crow’s Eye agreed to attend this holy farce and abide by its decision?”

“The Crow’s Eye does not confide in me. Since he summoned me to Pyke to do him homage, I have had no word from Euron.”

A kingsmoot. This is something new... or rather, something very old.
“And my uncle Victarion? What does he make of the Damphair’s notion?”

“Victarion was sent word of your father’s death. And of this kingsmoot too, I do not doubt. Beyond that, I cannot say.”

Better a kingsmoot than a war. “I believe I’ll kiss the Damphair’s smelly feet and pluck the seaweed from out between his toes.” Asha wrenched loose her dirk and sheathed it once again. “A bloody *kingsmoot*!”

“On Old Wyk,” confirmed Lord Rodrik. “Though I pray it is not bloody. I have been consulting Haereg’s *History of the Ironborn*. When last the salt kings and the rock kings met in kingsmoot, Urron of Orkmont let his axemen loose among them, and Nagga’s ribs turned red with gore. House Greyiron ruled unchosen for a thousand years from that dark day, until the Andals came.”

“You must lend me Haereg’s book, Nuncle.” She would need to learn all she could of kingsmoots before she reached Old Wyk.

“You may read it here. It is old and fragile.” He studied her, frowning. “Archmaester Rigney once wrote that history is a wheel, for the nature of man is fundamentally unchanging. What has happened before will perforce happen again, he said. I think of that whenever I contemplate the Crow’s Eye. Euron Greyjoy sounds queerly like Urron Greyiron to these old ears. I shall not go to Old Wyk. Nor should you.”

Asha smiled. “And miss the first kingsmoot called in... how long *has* it been, Nuncle?”

“Four thousand years, if Haereg can be believed. Half that, if you accept Maester Denestan’s arguments in *Questions*. Going to Old Wyk serves no purpose. This dream of kingship is a madness in our blood. I told your father so the first time he rose, and it is more true now than it was then. It’s land we need, not crowns. With Stannis Baratheon and Tywin Lannister contending for the Iron Throne, we have a rare chance to improve our lot. Let us take one side or the other, help them to victory with our fleets, and claim the lands we need from a grateful king.”

“That might be worth some thought, once I sit the Seastone Chair,” said Asha.

Her uncle sighed. “You will not want to hear this, Asha, but you will not be chosen. No woman has ever ruled the ironborn. Gwynesse *is* seven years my elder, but when our father died the Ten Towers came to me. It will be the same for you. You are Balon’s daughter, not his son. And you have three uncles.”

“Four.”

“Three kraken uncles. I do not count.”

“You do with me. So long as I have my nuncle of Ten Towers, I have Harlaw.” Harlaw was not the largest of the Iron Islands, but it was the richest and most populous, and Lord Rodrik’s power was not to be despised. On Harlaw, Harlaw had no rival. The Volmarks and Stonetrees had large holdings on the isle and boasted famous captains and fierce

warriors of their own, but even the fiercest bent beneath the scythe. The Kennings and the Myres, once bitter foes, had long ago been beaten down to vassals.

“My cousins do me fealty, and in war I should command their swords and sails. In kingsmoot, though...” Lord Rodrik shook his head. “Beneath the bones of Nagga every captain stands as equal. Some may shout your name, I do not doubt it. But not enough. And when the shouts ring out for Victarion or the Crow’s Eye, some of those now drinking in my hall will join the rest. I say again, do not sail into this storm. Your fight is hopeless.”

“No fight is hopeless till it has been fought. I have the best claim. I am the heir of Balon’s body.”

“You are still a willful child. Think of your poor mother. You are all that Lanny has left to her. I will put a torch to *Black Wind* if need be, to keep you here.”

“What, and make me swim to Old Wyk?”

“A long cold swim, for a crown you cannot keep. Your father had more courage than sense. The Old Way served the isles well when we were one small kingdom amongst many, but Aegon’s Conquest put an end to that. Balon refused to see what was plain before him. The Old Way died with Black Harren and his sons.”

“I know that.” Asha had loved her father, but she did not delude herself. Balon had been blind in some respects. *A brave man but a bad lord*. “Does that mean we must live and die as thralls to the Iron Throne? If there are rocks to starboard and a storm to port, a wise captain steers a third course.”

“Show me this third course.”

“I shall... at my queensmoot. Nuncle, how can you even think of not attending? This will be history, alive...”

“I prefer my history dead. Dead history is writ in ink, the living sort in blood.”

“Do you want to die old and craven in your bed?”

“How else? Though not till I’m done reading.” Lord Rodrik went to the window. “You have not asked about your lady mother.”

I was afraid. “How is she?”

“Stronger. She may yet outlive us all. She will certainly outlive you, if you persist in this folly. She eats more than she did when she first came here, and oft sleeps through the night.”

“Good.” In her final years on Pyke, Lady Alannys could not sleep. She would wander the halls at night with a candle, looking for her sons.

“*Maron?*” she would call shrilly. “*Rodrik, where are you? Theon, my baby, come to Mother.*” Many a time Asha had watched the maester draw splinters from her mother’s heels of a morning, after she had crossed the swaying plank bridge to the Sea Tower on bare feet. “I will see her in the morning.”

“She will ask for word of Theon.”

The Prince of Winterfell. “What have you told her?”

“Little and less. There was naught to tell.” He hesitated. “You are certain that he is dead?”

“I am certain of nothing.”

“You found a body?”

“We found parts of many bodies. The wolves were there before us... the four-legged sort, but they showed scant reverence for their two-legged kin. The bones of the slain were scattered, cracked open for their marrow. I confess, it was hard to know what happened there. It seemed as though the northmen fought amongst themselves.”

“Crows will fight over a dead man’s flesh and kill each other for his eyes.” Lord Rodrik stared across the sea, watching the play of moonlight on the waves. “We had one king, then five. Now all I see are crows, squabbling over the corpse of Westeros.” He fastened the shutters. “Do not go to Old Wyk, Asha. Stay with your mother. We shall not have her long, I fear.”

Asha shifted in her seat. “My mother raised me to be bold. If I do not go, I will spend the rest of my life wondering what might have happened if I had.”

“If you do go, the rest of your life may be too short for wondering.”

“Better that than fill the remainder of my days complaining that the Seastone Chair by rights was mine. I am no Gwynesse.”

That made him wince. “Asha, my two tall sons fed the crabs of Fair Isle. I am not like to wed again. Stay, and I shall name you heir to the Ten Towers. Be content with that.”

“Ten Towers?” *Would that I could.* “Your cousins will not like that. The Knight, old Sigfryd, Hotho Humpback...”

“They have lands and seats of their own.”

True enough. Damp, decaying Harlaw Hall belonged to old Sigfryd Harlaw the Silverhair; humpbacked Hotho Harlaw had his seat at the Tower of Glimmering, on a crag above the western coast. The Knight, Ser Harras Harlaw, kept court at Grey Garden; Boremund the Blue ruled atop Harridan Hill. But each was subject to Lord Rodrik. “Boremund has three sons, Sigfryd Silverhair has grandsons, and Hotho has ambitions,” Asha said. “They all mean to follow you, even Sigfryd. That one intends to live forever.”

“The Knight will be the Lord of Harlaw after me,” her uncle said, “but he can rule from Grey Garden as easily as from here. Do fealty to him for the castle and Ser Harras will protect you.”

“I can protect myself. Nuncle, I am a kraken. Asha, of House *Greyjoy*.” She pushed to her feet. “It’s my father’s seat I want, not yours. Those scythes of yours look perilous. One could fall and slice my head off. No, I’ll sit the Seastone Chair.”

“Then you are just another crow, screaming for carrion.” Rodrik sat again behind his table. “Go. I wish to return to Archmaester Marwyn and his search.”

“Let me know if he should find another page.” Her uncle was her uncle. He would never change. *But he will come to Old Wyk, no matter what he says.*

By now her crew would be eating in the hall. Asha knew she ought to join them, to speak of this gathering on Old Wyk and what it meant for them. Her own men would be solidly behind her, but she would need the

rest as well, her Harlaw cousins, the Volmarks, and the Stonetrees. *Those are the ones I must win.* Her victory at Deepwood Motte would serve her in good stead, once her men began to boast of it, as she knew they would. The crew of her *Black Wind* took a perverse pride in the deeds of their woman captain. Half of them loved her like a daughter, and other half wanted to spread her legs, but either sort would die for her. *And I for them,* she was thinking as she shouldered through the door at the bottom of the steps, into the moonlit yard.

“Asha?” A shadow stepped out from behind the well.

Her hand went to her dirk at once... until the moonlight transformed the dark shape into a man in a sealskin cloak. *Another ghost.* “Tris. I’d thought to find you in the hall.”

“I wanted to see you.”

“What part of me, I wonder?” She grinned. “Well, here I stand, all grown up. Look all you like.”

“A woman.” He moved closer. “And beautiful.”

Tristifer Botley had filled out since last she’d seen him, but he had the same unruly hair that she remembered, and eyes as large and trusting as a seal’s. *Sweet eyes, truly.* That was the trouble with poor Tristifer; he was too sweet for the Iron Islands. *His face has grown comely,* she thought. As a boy Tris had been much troubled by pimples. Asha had suffered the same affliction; perhaps that had been what drew them together.

“I was sorry to hear about your father,” she told him.

“I grieve for yours.”

Why? Asha almost asked. It was Balon who’d sent the boy away from Pyke, to be a ward of Baelor Blacktyde’s. “Is it true you are Lord Botley now?”

“In name, at least. Harren died at Moat Cailin. One of the bog devils shot him with a poisoned arrow. But I am the lord of nothing. When my father denied his claim to the Seastone Chair, the Crow’s Eye drowned him and made my uncles swear him fealty. Even after that he gave half my

father's lands to Iron Holt. Lord Wynch was the first man to bend his knee and call him king."

House Wynch was strong on Pyke, but Asha took care not to let her dismay show. "Wynch never had your father's courage."

"Your uncle bought him," Tris said. "The *Silence* returned with holds full of treasure. Plate and pearls, emeralds and rubies, sapphires big as eggs, bags of coin so heavy that no man can lift them... the Crow's Eye has been buying friends at every hand. My uncle Germund calls himself Lord Botley now, and rules in Lordsport as your uncle's man."

"You are the rightful Lord Botley," she assured him. "Once I hold the Seastone Chair, your father's lands shall be restored."

"If you like. It's nought to me. You look so lovely in the moonlight, Asha. A woman grown now, but I remember when you were a skinny girl with a face all full of pimples."

Why must they always mention the pimples? "I remember that as well." *Though not as fondly as you do.* Of the five boys her mother had brought to Pyke to foster after Ned Stark had taken her last living son as hostage, Tris had been closest to Asha in age. He had not been the first boy she had ever kissed, but he was the first to undo the laces of her jerkin and slip a sweaty hand beneath to feel her budding breasts.

I would have let him feel more than that if he'd been bold enough. Her first flowering had come upon her during the war and wakened her desire, but even before that Asha had been curious. He was there, he was mine own age, and he was willing, that was all it was... that, and the moon blood. Even so, she'd called it love, till Tris began to go on about the children she would bear him; a dozen sons at least, and oh, some daughters too. "I don't want to have a dozen sons," she had told him, appalled. "I want to have adventures." Not long after, Maester Qalen found them at their play, and young Tristifer Botley was sent away to Blacktyde.

"I wrote you letters," he said, "but Maester Joseran would not send them. Once I gave a stag to an oarsman on a trader bound for Lordsport, who promised to put my letter in your hands."

“Your oarsman winkled you and threw your letter in the sea.”

“I feared as much. They never gave me your letters either.”

I wrote none. In truth, she had been relieved when Tris was sent away. By then his fumblings had begun to bore her. That was not something he would care to hear, however. “Aeron Damphair has called a kingsmoot. Will you come and speak for me?”

“I will go anywhere with you, but... Lord Blacktyde says this kingsmoot is a dangerous folly. He thinks your uncle will descend on them and kill them all, as Urron did.”

He’s mad enough. “He lacks the strength.”

“You do not know his strength. He’s been gathering men on Pyke. Orkwood of Orkmont brought him twenty longships, and Pinchface Jon Myre a dozen. Left-Hand Lucas Codd is with them. And Harren Half-Hoare, the Red Oarsman, Kemmet Pyke the Bastard, Rodrik Freeborn, Torwold Browntooth...”

“Men of small account.” Asha knew them, every one. “The sons of salt wives, the grandsons of thralls. The Codd... do you know their *words*?”

“*Though All Men Do Despise Us,*” Tris said, “but if they catch you in those nets of theirs, you’ll be as dead as if they had been dragonlords. And there’s worse. The Crow’s Eye brought back monsters from the east... aye, and *wizards* too.”

“Nuncle always had a fondness for freaks and fools,” said Asha. “My father used to fight with him about it. Let the wizards call upon their gods. The Damphair will call on ours, and drown them. Will I have your voice at the queensmoot, Tris?”

“You shall have all of me. I am your man, forever. Asha, I would wed you. Your lady mother has given her consent.”

She stifled a groan. You might have asked me first... though you might not have liked the answer half so well.

“I am no second son now,” he went on. “I am the rightful Lord Botley, as you said yourself. And you are—”

“What I am will be settled on Old Wyk. Tris, we are no longer children fumbling at each other and trying to see what fits where. You think you want to wed me, but you don’t.”

“I do. All I dream about is you. Asha, I swear upon the bones of Nagga, I have never touched another woman.”

“Go touch one... or two, or ten. I have touched more men than I can count. Some with my lips, more with my axe.” She had surrendered her virtue at six-and-ten, to a beautiful blond-haired sailor on a trading galley up from Lys. He only knew six words of the Common Tongue, but “fuck” was one of them—the very word she’d hoped to hear. Afterward, Asha had the sense to find a woods witch, who showed her how to brew moon tea to keep her belly flat.

Botley blinked, as if he did not quite understand what she had said. “You... I thought you would wait. Why...” He rubbed his mouth. “Asha, were you *forced*?”

“So forced I tore his tunic. You do not want to wed me, take my word on that. You are a sweet boy and always were, but I am no sweet girl. If we wed, soon enough you’d come to hate me.”

“Never. Asha, I have *ached* for you.”

She had heard enough of this. A sickly mother, a murdered father, and a plague of uncles were enough for any woman to contend with; she did not require a lovesick puppy too. “Find a brothel, Tris. They’ll cure you of that ache.”

“I could never...” Tristifer shook his head. “You and I were meant to be, Asha. I have always known you would be my wife, and the mother of my sons.” He seized her upper arm.

In a blink her dirk was at his throat. “Take your hand away or you won’t live long enough to breed a son. *Now*.” When he did, she lowered the blade. “You want a woman, well and good. I’ll put one in your bed tonight. Pretend she’s me, if that will give you pleasure, but do not presume to grab at me again. I am your queen, not your wife. Remember that.” Asha

sheathed her dirk and left him standing there, with a fat drop of blood slowly creeping down his neck, black in the pale light of the moon.