

THEON

There was no safe anchorage at Pyke, but Theon Greyjoy wished to look on his father's castle from the sea, to see it as he had seen it last, ten years before, when Robert Baratheon's war galley had borne him away to be a ward of Eddard Stark. On that day he had stood beside the rail, listening to the stroke of the oars and the pounding of the master's drum while he watched Pyke dwindle in the distance. Now he wanted to see it grow larger, to rise from the sea before him.

Obedient to his wishes, the *Myraham* beat her way past the point with her sails snapping and her captain cursing the wind and his crew and the follies of highborn lordlings. Theon drew the hood of his cloak up against the spray, and looked for home.

The shore was all sharp rocks and glowering cliffs, and the castle seemed one with the rest, its towers and walls and bridges quarried from the same grey-black stone, wet by the same salt waves, festooned with the same spreading patches of dark green lichen, speckled by the droppings of the same seabirds. The point of land on which the Greyjoys had raised their fortress had once thrust like a sword into the bowels of the ocean, but the waves had hammered at it day and night until the land broke and shattered, thousands of years past. All that remained were three bare and barren islands and a dozen towering stacks of rock that rose from the water like the pillars of some sea god's temple, while the angry waves foamed and crashed among them.

Drear, dark, forbidding, Pyke stood atop those islands and pillars, almost a part of them, its curtain wall closing off the headland around the foot of the great stone bridge that leapt from the clifftop to the largest islet, dominated by the massive bulk of the Great Keep. Farther out were the Kitchen Keep and the Bloody Keep, each on its own island. Towers and outbuildings clung to the stacks beyond, linked to each other by covered archways when the pillars stood close, by long swaying walks of wood and rope when they did not.

The Sea Tower rose from the outmost island at the point of the broken sword, the oldest part of the castle, round and tall, the sheer-sided pillar on which it stood half-eaten through by the endless battering of the waves. The base of the tower was white from centuries of salt spray, the upper stories green from the lichen that crawled over it like a thick blanket, the jagged crown black with soot from its nightly watchfire.

Above the Sea Tower snapped his father's banner. The *Myraham* was too far off for Theon to see more than the cloth itself, but he knew the device it bore: the golden kraken of House Greyjoy, arms writhing and reaching against a black field. The banner streamed from an iron mast, shivering and twisting as the wind gusted, like a bird struggling to take flight. And here at least the direwolf of Stark did not fly above, casting its shadow down upon the Greyjoy kraken.

Theon had never seen a more stirring sight. In the sky behind the castle, the fine red tail of the comet was visible through thin, scuttling clouds. All the way from Riverrun to Seagard, the Mallisters had argued about its meaning. *It is my comet*, Theon told himself, sliding a hand into his fur-lined cloak to touch the oilskin pouch snug in its pocket. Inside was the letter Robb Stark had given him, paper as good as a crown.

"Does the castle look as you remember it, milord?" the captain's daughter asked as she pressed herself against his arm.

"It looks smaller," Theon confessed, "though perhaps that is only the distance." The *Myraham* was a fat-bellied southron merchanter up from Oldtown, carrying wine and cloth and seed to trade for iron ore. Her captain was a fat-bellied southron merchanter as well, and the stony sea that foamed at the feet of the castle made his plump lips quiver, so he stayed well out, farther than Theon would have liked. An ironborn captain in a longship would have taken them along the cliffs and under the high bridge that spanned the gap between the gatehouse and the Great Keep, but this plump Oldtownier had neither the craft, the crew, nor the courage to attempt such a thing. So they sailed past at a safe distance, and Theon must content himself with seeing Pyke from afar. Even so, the *Myraham* had to struggle mightily to keep itself off those rocks.

“It must be windy there,” the captain’s daughter observed.

He laughed. “Windy and cold and damp. A miserable hard place, in truth... but my lord father once told me that hard places breed hard men, and hard men rule the world.”

The captain’s face was as green as the sea when he came bowing up to Theon and asked, “May we make for port now, milord?”

“You may,” Theon said, a faint smile playing about his lips. The promise of gold had turned the Oldtowner into a shameless lickspittle. It would have been a much different voyage if a longship from the islands had been waiting at Seagard as he’d hoped. Ironborn captains were proud and willful, and did not go in awe of a man’s blood. The islands were too small for awe, and a longship smaller still. If every captain was a king aboard his own ship, as was often said, it was small wonder they named the islands the land of ten thousand kings. And when you have seen your kings shit over the rail and turn green in a storm, it was hard to bend the knee and pretend they were gods. “The Drowned God makes men,” old King Urron Redhand had once said, thousands of years ago, “but it’s men who make crowns.”

A longship would have made the crossing in half the time as well. The *Myraham* was a wallowing tub, if truth be told, and he would not care to be aboard her in a storm. Still, Theon could not be too unhappy. He was here, undrowned, and the voyage had offered certain other amusements. He put an arm around the captain’s daughter. “Summon me when we make Lordsport,” he told her father. “We’ll be below, in my cabin.” He led the girl away aft, while her father watched them go in sullen silence.

The cabin was the captain’s, in truth, but it had been turned over to Theon’s use when they sailed from Seagard. The captain’s daughter had not been turned over to his use, but she had come to his bed willingly enough all the same. A cup of wine, a few whispers, and there she was. The girl was a shade plump for his taste, with skin as splotchy as oatmeal, but her breasts filled his hands nicely and she had been a maiden the first time he took her. That was surprising at her age, but Theon found it diverting. He did not think the captain approved, and that was amusing as well, watching the man struggle to swallow his outrage while performing his courtesies to

the high lord, the rich purse of gold he'd been promised never far from his thoughts.

As Theon shrugged out of his wet cloak, the girl said, "You must be so happy to see your home again, milord. How many years have you been away?"

"Ten, or close as makes no matter," he told her. "I was a boy of ten when I was taken to Winterfell. as a ward of Eddard Stark." A ward in name, a hostage in truth. Half his days a hostage... but no longer. His life was his own again, and nowhere a Stark to be seen. He drew the captain's daughter close and kissed her on her ear. "Take off your cloak."

She dropped her eyes, suddenly shy, but did as he bid her. When the heavy garment, sodden with spray, fell from her shoulders to the deck, she gave him a little bow and smiled anxiously. She looked rather stupid when she smiled, but he had never required a woman to be clever. "Come here," he told her.

She did. "I have never seen the Iron Islands."

"Count yourself fortunate." Theon stroked her hair. it was fine and dark, though the wind had made a tangle of it. "The islands are stern and stony places, scant of comfort and bleak of prospect. Death is never far here, and life is mean and meager. Men spend their nights drinking ale and arguing over whose lot is worse, the fisherfolk who fight the sea or the farmers who try and scratch a crop from the poor thin soil. If truth be told, the miners have it worse than either, breaking their backs down in the dark, and for what? Iron, lead, tin, those are our treasures. Small wonder the ironmen of old turned to raiding."

The stupid girl did not seem to be listening. "I could go ashore with you," she said. "I would, if it please you..."

"You could go ashore," Theon agreed, squeezing her breast, "but not with me, I fear."

"I'd work in your castle, milord. I can clean fish and bake bread and churn butter. Father says my peppercrab stew is the best he's ever tasted.

You could find me a place in your kitchens and I could make you peppercrab stew.”

“And warm my bed by night?” He reached for the laces of her bodice and began to undo them, his fingers deft and practiced. “Once I might have carried you home as a prize, and kept you to wife whether you willed it or no. The ironmen of old did such things. A man had his rock wife, his true bride, ironborn like himself, but he had his salt wives too, women captured on raids.”

The girl’s eyes grew wide, and not because he had bared her breasts. “I would be your salt wife, milord.”

“I fear those days are gone.” Theon’s finger circled one heavy teat, spiraling in toward the fat brown nipple. “No longer may we ride the wind with fire and sword, taking what we want. Now we scratch in the ground and toss lines in the sea like other men, and count ourselves lucky if we have salt cod and porridge enough to get us through a winter.” He took her nipple in his mouth, and bit it until she gasped.

“You can put it in me again, if it please you,” she whispered in his ear as he sucked.

When he raised his head from her breast, the skin was dark red where his mouth had marked her. “It would please me to teach you something new. Unlace me and pleasure me with your mouth.”

“With my mouth?”

His thumb brushed lightly over her full lips. “It’s what those lips were made for, sweetling. If you were my salt wife, you’d do as I command.”

She was timid at first, but learned quickly for such a stupid girl, which pleased him. Her mouth was as wet and sweet as her cunt, and this way he did not have to listen to her mindless prattle. *Once I would have kept her as a salt wife in truth*, he thought to himself as he slid his fingers through her tangled hair. *Once. When we still kept the Old Way, lived by the axe instead of the pick, taking what we would, be it wealth, women, or glory.* In those days, the ironborn did not work mines; that was labor for the captives brought back from the hostings, and so too the sorry business of farming

and tending goats and sheep. War was an ironman's proper trade. The Drowned God had made them to reave and rape, to carve out kingdoms and write their names in fire and blood and song.

Aegon the Dragon had destroyed the Old Way when he burned Black Harren, gave Harren's kingdom back to the weakling rivermen, and reduced the Iron Islands to an insignificant backwater of a much greater realm. Yet the old red tales were still told around driftwood fires and smoky hearths all across the islands, even behind the high stone halls of Pyke. Theon's father numbered among his titles the style of Lord Reaper, and the Greyjoy words boasted that *We Do Not Sow*.

It had been to bring back the Old Way more than for the empty vanity of a crown that Lord Balon had staged his great rebellion. Robert Baratheon had written a bloody end to that hope, with the help of his friend Eddard Stark, but both men were dead now. Mere boys ruled in their stead, and the realm that Aegon the Conqueror had forged was smashed and sundered. *This is the season*, Theon thought as the captain's daughter slid her lips up and down the length of him, *the season, the year, the day, and I am the man*. He smiled crookedly, wondering what his father would say when Theon told him that he, the last-born, babe and hostage, he had succeeded where Lord Balon himself had failed.

His climax came on him sudden as a storm, and he filled the girl's mouth with his seed. Startled, she tried to pull away, but Theon held her tight by the hair. Afterward, she crawled up beside him. "Did I please milord?"

"Well enough," he told her.

"It tasted salty," she murmured.

"Like the sea?"

She nodded. "I have always loved the sea, milord."

"As I have," he said, rolling her nipple idly between his fingers. It was true. The sea meant freedom to the men of the Iron Islands. He had forgotten that until the *Myraham* had raised sail at Seagard. The sounds brought old feelings back; the creak of wood and rope, the captain's shouted

commands, the snap of the sails as the wind filled them, each as familiar as the beating of his own heart, and as comforting. *I must remember this*, Theon vowed to himself. *I must never go far from the sea again.*

“Take me with you, milord,” the captain’s daughter begged. “I don’t need to go to your castle. I can stay in some town, and be your salt wife.” She reached out to stroke his cheek.

Theon Greyjoy pushed her hand aside and climbed off the bunk. “My place is Pyke, and yours is on this ship.”

“I can’t stay here now.”

He laced up his breeches. “Why not?”

“My father,” she told him. “Once you’re gone, he’ll punish me, milord. He’ll call me names and hit me.”

Theon swept his cloak off its peg and over his shoulders. “Fathers are like that,” he admitted as he pinned the folds with a silver clasp. “Tell him he should be pleased. As many times as I’ve fucked you, you’re likely with child. It’s not every man who has the honor of raising a king’s bastard.” She looked at him stupidly, so he left her there.

The *Myraham* was rounding a wooded point. Below the pine-clad bluffs, a dozen fishing boats were pulling in their nets. The big cog stayed well out from them, tacking. Theon moved to the bow for a better view. He saw the castle first, the stronghold of the Botleys. When he was a boy it had been timber and wattle, but Robert Baratheon had razed that structure to the ground. Lord Sawane had rebuilt in stone, for now a small square keep crowned the hill. Pale green flags drooped from the squat corner towers, each emblazoned with a shoal of silvery fish.

Beneath the dubious protection of the fish-ridden little castle lay the village of Lordsport, its harbor aswarm with ships. When last he’d seen Lordsport, it had been a smoking wasteland, the skeletons of burnt longships and smashed galleys littering the stony shore like the bones of dead leviathans, the houses no more than broken walls and cold ashes. After ten years, few traces of the war remained. The smallfolk had built new hovels with the stones of the old, and cut fresh sod for their roofs. A new

inn had risen beside the landing, twice the size of the old one, with a lower story of cut stone and two upper stories of timber. The sept beyond had never been rebuilt, though; only a seven-sided foundation remained where it had stood. Robert Baratheon's fury had soured the ironmen's taste for the new gods, it would seem.

Theon was more interested in ships than gods. Among the masts of countless fishing boats, he spied a Tyroshi trading galley off-loading beside a lumbering Ibbenese cog with her black-tarred hull. A great number of longships, fifty or sixty at the least, stood out to sea or lay beached on the pebbled shore to the north. Some of the sails bore devices from the other islands; the blood moon of Wynch, Lord Goodbrother's banded black warhorn, Harlaw's silver scythe. Theon searched for his uncle Euron's *Silence*. Of that lean and terrible red ship he saw no sign, but his father's *Great Kraken* was there, her bow ornamented with a grey iron ram in the shape of its namesake.

Had Lord Balon anticipated him and called the Greyjoy banners? His hand went inside his cloak again, to the oilskin pouch. No one knew of his letter but Robb Stark; they were no fools, to entrust their secrets to a bird. Still, Lord Balon was no fool either. He might well have guessed why his son was coming home at long last, and acted accordingly.

The thought did not please him. His father's war was long done, and lost. This was Theon's hour—his plan, his glory, and in time his crown. *Yet if the longships are hosting...*

It might be only a caution, now that he thought on it. A defensive move, lest the war spill out across the sea. Old men were cautious by nature. His father was old now, and so too his uncle Victarion, who commanded the Iron Fleet. His uncle Euron was a different song, to be sure, but the *Silence* did not seem to be in port. *It's all for the good*, Theon told himself. *This way, I shall be able to strike all the more quickly.*

As the *Myraham* made her way landward, Theon paced the deck restlessly, scanning the shore. He had not thought to find Lord Balon himself at quayside, but surely his father would have sent someone to meet him. Syllas Sourmouth the steward, Lord Botley, perhaps even Dagmer

Cleftjaw. It would be good to look on Dagmer's hideous old face again. It was not as though they had no word of his arrival. Robb had sent ravens from Riverrun, and when they'd found no longship at Seagard, Jason Mallister had sent his own birds to Pyke, supposing that Robb's were lost.

Yet he saw no familiar faces, no honor guard waiting to escort him from Lordsport to Pyke, only smallfolk going about their small business. Shorehands rolled casks of wine off the Tyroshi trader, fisherfolk cried the day's catch, children ran and played. A priest in the seawater robes of the Drowned God was leading a pair of horses along the pebbled shore, while above him a slattern leaned out a window in the inn, calling out to some passing Ibbenese sailors.

A handful of Lordsport merchants had gathered to meet the ship. They shouted questions as the *Myraham* was tying up. "We're out of Oldtown," the captain called down, "bearing apples and oranges, wines from the Arbor, feathers from the Summer Isles. I have pepper, woven leathers, a bolt of Myrish lace, mirrors for milady, a pair of Oldtown woodharps sweet as any you ever heard." The gangplank descended with a creak and a thud. "And I've brought your heir back to you."

The Lordsport men gazed on Theon with blank, bovine eyes, and he realized that they did not know who he was. It made him angry. He pressed a golden dragon into the captain's palm. "Have your men bring my things." Without waiting for a reply, he strode down the gangplank. "Innkeeper," he barked, "I require a horse."

"As you say, m'lord," the man responded, without so much as a bow. He had forgotten how bold the ironborn could be. "Happens as I have one might do. Where would you be riding, m'lord?"

"Pyke." The fool *still* did not know him. He should have worn his good doublet, with the kraken embroidered on the breast.

"You'll want to be off soon, to reach Pyke afore dark," the innkeeper said. "My boy will go with you and show you the way."

"Your boy will not be needed," a deep voice called, "nor your horse. I shall see my nephew back to his father's house."

The speaker was the priest he had seen leading the horses along the shoreline. As the man approached, the smallfolk bent the knee, and Theon heard the innkeeper murmur, “Damphair.”

Tall and thin, with fierce black eyes and a beak of a nose, the priest was garbed in mottled robes of green and grey and blue, the swirling colors of the Drowned God. A waterskin hung under his arm on a leather strap, and ropes of dried seaweed were braided through his waist-long black hair and untrimmed beard.

A memory prodded at Theon. In one of his rare curt letters, Lord Balon had written of his youngest brother going down in a storm, and turning holy when he washed up safe on shore. “Uncle Aeron?” he said doubtfully.

“Nephew Theon,” the priest replied. “Your lord father bid me fetch you. Come.”

“In a moment, Uncle.” He turned back to the *Myraham*. “My things,” he commanded the captain.

A sailor fetched him down his tall yew bow and quiver of arrows, but it was the captain’s daughter who brought the pack with his good clothing. “Milord.” Her eyes were red. When he took the pack, she made as if to embrace him, there in front of her own father and his priestly uncle and half the island.

Theon turned deftly aside. “You have my thanks.”

“Please,” she said, “I do love you well, milord.”

“I must go.” He hurried after his uncle, who was already well down the pier. Theon caught him with a dozen long strides. “I had not looked for you, Uncle. After ten years, I thought perhaps my lord father and lady mother might come themselves, or send Dagmer with an honor guard.”

“It is not for you to question the commands of the Lord Reaper of Pyke.” The priest’s manner was chilly, most unlike the man Theon remembered. Aeron Greyjoy had been the most amiable of his uncles, feckless and quick to laugh, fond of songs, ale, and women. “As to Dagmer, the Cleftjaw is gone to Old Wyk at your father’s behest, to roust the Stonehouses and the Drumms.”

“To what purpose? Why are the longships hosting?”

“Why have longships ever hosted?” His uncle had left the horses tied up in front of the waterside inn. When they reached them, he turned to Theon. “Tell me true, nephew. Do you pray to the wolf gods now?”

Theon seldom prayed at all, but that was not something you confessed to a priest, even your father’s own brother. “Ned Stark prayed to a tree. No, I care nothing for Stark’s gods.”

“Good. Kneel.”

The ground was all stones and mud. “Uncle, I—”

“*Kneel*. Or are you too proud now, a lordling of the green lands come among us?”

Theon knelt. He had a purpose here, and might need Aeron’s help to achieve it. A crown was worth a little mud and horseshit on his breeches, he supposed.

“Bow your head.” Lifting the skin, his uncle pulled the cork and directed a thin stream of seawater down upon Theon’s head. It drenched his hair and ran over his forehead into his eyes. Sheets washed down his cheeks, and a finger crept under his cloak and doublet and down his back, a cold rivulet along his spine. The salt made his eyes burn, until it was all he could do not to cry out. He could taste the ocean on his lips. “Let Theon your servant be born again from the sea, as you were,” Aeron Greyjoy intoned. “Bless him with salt, bless him with stone, bless him with steel. Nephew, do you still know the words?”

“What is dead may never die,” Theon said, remembering.

“What is dead may never die,” his uncle echoed, “but rises again, harder and stronger. Stand.”

Theon stood, blinking back tears from the salt in his eyes. Wordless, his uncle corked the waterskin, untied his horse, and mounted. Theon did the same. They set off together, leaving the inn and the harbor behind them, up past the castle of Lord Botley into the stony hills. The priest ventured no further word.

“I have been half my life away from home,” Theon ventured at last. “Will I find the islands changed?”

“Men fish the sea, dig in the earth, and die. Women birth children in blood and pain, and die. Night follows day. The winds and tides remain. The islands are as our god made them.”

Gods, he has grown grim, Theon thought. “Will I find my sister and my lady mother at Pyke?”

“You will not. Your mother dwells on Harlaw, with her own sister. It is less raw there, and her cough troubles her. Your sister has taken *Black Wind* to Great Wyk, with messages from your lord father. She will return e’er long, you may be sure.”

Theon did not need to be told that *Black Wind* was Asha’s longship. He had not seen his sister in ten years, but that much he knew of her. Odd that she would call it that, when Robb Stark had a wolf named Grey Wind. “Stark is grey and Greyjoy’s black,” he murmured, smiling, “but it seems we’re both windy.”

The priest had nothing to say to that.

“And what of you, Uncle?” Theon asked. “You were no priest when I was taken from Pyke. I remember how you would sing the old reaving songs standing on the table with a horn of ale in hand.”

“Young I was, and vain,” Aeron Greyjoy said, “but the sea washed my follies and my vanities away. That man drowned, nephew. His lungs filled with seawater, and the fish ate the scales off his eyes. When I rose again, I saw clearly.”

He is as mad as he is sour. Theon had liked what he remembered of the old Aeron Greyjoy. “Uncle, why has my father called his swords and sails?”

“Doubtless he will tell you at Pyke.”

“I would know his plans now.”

“From me, you shall not. We are commanded not to speak of this to any man.”

“Even to *me*?” Theon’s anger flared. He’d led men in war, hunted with a king, won honor in tourney melees, ridden with Brynden Blackfish and

Greatjon Umber, fought in the Whispering Wood, bedded more girls than he could name, and yet this uncle was treating him as though he were still a child of ten. “If my father makes plans for war, I must know of them. I am not ‘*any man*,’ I am heir to Pyke and the Iron Islands.”

“As to that,” his uncle said, “we shall see.”

The words were a slap in the face. “*We shall see*? My brothers are both dead. I am my lord father’s only living son.”

“Your sister lives.”

Asha, he thought, confounded. She was three years older than Theon, yet still... “A woman may inherit only if there is no male heir in the direct line,” he insisted loudly. “I will not be cheated of my rights, I warn you.”

His uncle grunted. “You *warn* a servant of the Drowned God, boy? You have forgotten more than you know. And you are a great fool if you believe your lord father will ever hand these holy islands over to a Stark. Now be silent. The ride is long enough without your magpie chatterings.”

Theon held his tongue, though not without struggle. *So that is the way of it*, he thought. As if ten years in Winterfell could make a Stark. Lord Eddard had raised him among his own children, but Theon had never been one of them. The whole castle, from Lady Stark to the lowliest kitchen scullion, knew he was hostage to his father’s good behavior, and treated him accordingly. Even the bastard Jon Snow had been accorded more honor than he had.

Lord Eddard had tried to play the father from time to time, but to Theon he had always remained the man who’d brought blood and fire to Pyke and taken him from his home. As a boy, he had lived in fear of Stark’s stern face and great dark sword. His wife was, if anything, even more distant and suspicious.

As for their children, the younger ones had been mewling babes for most of his years at Winterfell. Only Robb and his baseborn half brother Jon Snow had been old enough to be worth his notice. The bastard was a sullen boy, quick to sense a slight, jealous of Theon’s high birth and Robb’s regard for him. For Robb himself, Theon did have a certain affection, as for

a younger brother... but it would be best not to mention that. In Pyke, it would seem, the old wars were still being fought. That ought not surprise him. The Iron Islands lived in the past; the present was too hard and bitter to be borne. Besides, his father and uncles were old, and the old lords were like that; they took their dusty feuds to the grave, forgetting nothing and forgiving less.

It had been the same with the Mallisters, his companions on the ride from Riverrun to Seagard. Patrek Mallister was not too ill a fellow; they shared a taste for wenches, wine, and hawking. But when old Lord Jason saw his heir growing overly fond of Theon's company, he had taken Patrek aside to remind him that Seagard had been built to defend the coast against reavers from the Iron islands, the Greyjoys of Pyke chief among them. Their Booming Tower was named for its immense bronze bell, rung of old to call the townsfolk and farmhands into the castle when longships were sighted on the western horizon.

"Never mind that the bell has been rung just once in three hundred years," Patrek had told Theon the day after, as he shared his father's cautions and a jug of green-apple wine.

"When my brother stormed Seagard," Theon said. Lord Jason had slain Rodrik Greyjoy under the walls of the castle, and thrown the ironmen back into the bay. "If your father supposes I bear him some enmity for that, it's only because he never knew Rodrik."

They had a laugh over that as they raced ahead to an amorous young miller's wife that Patrek knew. *Would that Patrek were with me now.* Mallister or no, he was a more amiable riding companion than this sour old priest that his uncle Aeron had turned into.

The path they rode wound up and up, into bare and stony hills. Soon they were out of sight of the sea, though the smell of salt still hung sharp in the damp air. They kept a steady plodding pace, past a shepherd's croft and the abandoned workings of a mine. This new, holy Aeron Greyjoy was not much for talk. They rode in a gloom of silence. Finally Theon could suffer it no longer. "Robb Stark is Lord of Winterfell now," he said.

Aeron rode on. "One wolf is much like the other."

“Robb has broken fealty with the Iron Throne and crowned himself King in the North. There’s war.”

“The maester’s ravens fly over salt as soon as rock. This news is old and cold.”

“It means a new day, Uncle.”

“Every morning brings a new day, much like the old.”

“In Riverrun, they would tell you different. They say the red comet is a herald of a new age. A messenger from the gods.”

“A sign it is,” the priest agreed, “but from our god, not theirs. A burning brand it is, such as our people carried of old. It is the flame the Drowned God brought from the sea, and it proclaims a rising tide. It is time to hoist our sails and go forth into the world with fire and sword, as he did.”

Theon smiled. “I could not agree more.”

“A man agrees with god as a raindrop with the storm.”

This raindrop will one day be a king, old man. Theon had suffered quite enough of his uncle’s gloom. He put his spurs into his horse and trotted on ahead, smiling.

It was nigh on sunset when they reached the walls of Pyke, a crescent of dark stone that ran from cliff to cliff, with the gatehouse in the center and three square towers to either side. Theon could still make out the scars left by the stones of Robert Baratheon’s catapults. A new south tower had risen from the ruins of the old, its stone a paler shade of grey, and as yet unmarred by patches of lichen. That was where Robert had made his breach, swarming in over the rubble and corpses with his warhammer in hand and Ned Stark at his side. Theon had watched from the safety of the Sea Tower, and sometimes he still saw the torches in his dreams, and heard the dull thunder of the collapse.

The gates stood open to him, the rusted iron portcullis drawn up. The guards atop the battlements watched with strangers’ eyes as Theon Greyjoy came home at last.

Beyond the curtain wall were half a hundred acres of headland hard against the sky and the sea. The stables were here, and the kennels, and a

scatter of other outbuildings. Sheep and swine huddled in their pens while the castle dogs ran free. To the south were the cliffs, and the wide stone bridge to the Great Keep. Theon could hear the crashing of waves as he swung down from his saddle. A stableman came to take his horse. A pair of gaunt children and some thralls stared at him with dull eyes, but there was no sign of his lord father, nor anyone else he recalled from boyhood. *A bleak and bitter homecoming*, he thought.

The priest had not dismounted. “Will you not stay the night and share our meat and mead, Uncle?”

“Bring you, I was told. You are brought. Now I return to our god’s business.” Aeron Greyjoy turned his horse and rode slowly out beneath the muddy spikes of the portcullis.

A bentback old crone in a shapeless grey dress approached him warily. “M’lord, I am sent to show you to chambers.”

“By whose bidding?”

“Your lord father, m’lord.”

Theon pulled off his gloves. “So you do know who I am. Why is my father not here to greet me?”

“He awaits you in the Sea Tower, m’lord. When you are rested from your trip.”

And I thought Ned Stark cold. “And who are you?”

“Helya, who keeps this castle for your lord father.”

“Sylas was steward here. They called him Sourmouth.” Even now, Theon could recall the winey stench of the old man’s breath.

“Dead these five years, m’lord.”

“And what of Maester Qalen, where is he?”

“He sleeps in the sea. Wendamyr keeps the ravens now.”

It is as if I were a stranger here, Theon thought. *Nothing has changed, and yet everything has changed.* “Show me to my chambers, woman,” he commanded. Bowing stiffly, she led him across the headland to the bridge. That at least was as he remembered; the ancient stones slick with spray and

spotted by lichen, the sea foaming under their feet like some great wild beast, the salt wind clutching at their clothes.

Whenever he'd imagined his homecoming, he had always pictured himself returning to the snug bedchamber in the Sea Tower, where he'd slept as a child. Instead the old woman led him to the Bloody Keep. The halls here were larger and better furnished, if no less cold nor damp. Theon was given a suite of chilly rooms with ceilings so high that they were lost in gloom. He might have been more impressed if he had not known that these were the very chambers that had given the Bloody Keep its name. A thousand years before, the sons of the River King had been slaughtered here, hacked to bits in their beds so that pieces of their bodies might be sent back to their father on the mainland.

But Greyjoys were not murdered in Pyke except once in a great while by their brothers, and his brothers were both dead. It was not fear of ghosts that made him glance about with distaste. The wall hangings were green with mildew, the mattress musty-smelling and sagging, the rushes old and brittle. Years had come and gone since these chambers had last been opened. The damp went bone deep. "I'll have a basin of hot water and a fire in this hearth," he told the crone. "See that they light braziers in the other rooms to drive out some of the chill. And gods be good, get someone in here at once to change these rushes."

"Yes, m'lord. As you command." She fled.

After some time, they brought the hot water he had asked for. It was only tepid, and soon cold, and seawater in the bargain, but it served to wash the dust of the long ride from his face and hair and hands. While two thralls lit his braziers, Theon stripped off his travel-stained clothing and dressed to meet his father. He chose boots of supple black leather, soft lambswool breeches of silvery-grey, a black velvet doublet with the golden kraken of the Greyjoys embroidered on the breast. Around his throat he fastened a slender gold chain, around his waist a belt of bleached white leather. He hung a dirk at one hip and a longsword at the other, in scabbards striped black-and-gold. Drawing the dirk, he tested its edge with his thumb, pulled a whetstone from his belt pouch, and gave it a few licks. He prided himself

on keeping his weapons sharp. “When I return, I shall expect a warm room and clean rushes,” he warned the thralls as he drew on a pair of black gloves, the silk decorated with a delicate scrollwork tracery in golden thread.

Theon returned to the Great Keep through a covered stone walkway, the echoes of his footsteps mingling with the ceaseless rumble of the sea below. To get to the Sea Tower on its crooked pillar, he had to cross three further bridges, each narrower than the one before. The last was made of rope and wood, and the wet salt wind made it sway underfoot like a living thing. Theon’s heart was in his mouth by the time he was halfway across. A long way below, the waves threw up tall plumes of spray as they crashed against the rock. As a boy, he used to run across this bridge, even in the black of night. *Boys believe nothing can hurt them*, his doubt whispered. *Grown men know better*.

The door was grey wood studded with iron, and Theon found it barred from the inside. He hammered on it with a fist, and cursed when a splinter snagged the fabric of his glove. The wood was damp and moldy, the iron studs rusted.

After a moment the door was opened from within by a guard in a black iron breastplate and pothelm. “You are the son?”

“Out of my way, or you’ll learn who I am.” The man stood aside. Theon climbed the twisting steps to the solar. He found his father seated beside a brazier, beneath a robe of musty sealskins that covered him foot to chin. At the sound of boots on stone, the Lord of the Iron Islands lifted his eyes to behold his last living son. He was smaller than Theon remembered him. And so gaunt. Balon Greyjoy had always been thin, but now he looked as though the gods had put him in a cauldron and boiled every spare ounce of flesh from his bones, until nothing remained but hair and skin. Bone thin and bone hard he was, with a face that might have been chipped from flint. His eyes were flinty too, black and sharp, but the years and the salt winds had turned his hair the grey of a winter sea, flecked with whitecaps. Unbound, it hung past the small of the back.

“Nine years, is it?” Lord Balon said at last.

“Ten,” Theon answered, pulling off his torn gloves.

“A boy they took,” his father said. “What are you now?”

“A man,” Theon answered. “Your blood and your heir.”

Lord Balon grunted. “We shall see.”

“You shall,” Theon promised.

“Ten years, you say. Stark had you as long as I. And now you come as his envoy.”

“Not his,” Theon said. “Lord Eddard is dead, beheaded by the Lannister queen.”

“They are both dead, Stark and that Robert who broke my walls with his stones. I vowed I’d live to see them both in their graves, and I have.” He grimaced. “Yet the cold and the damp still make my joints ache, as when they were alive. So what does it serve?”

“It serves.” Theon moved closer. “I bring a letter—”

“Did Ned Stark dress you like that?” his father interrupted, squinting up from beneath his robe. “Was it his pleasure to garb you in velvets and silks and make you his own sweet daughter?”

Theon felt the blood rising to his face. “I am no man’s daughter. If you dislike my garb, I will change it.”

“You will.” Throwing off the furs, Lord Balon pushed himself to his feet. He was not so tall as Theon remembered. “That bauble around your neck—was it bought with gold or iron?”

Theon touched the gold chain. He had forgotten. *It has been so long...* In the Old Way, women might decorate themselves with ornaments bought with coin, but a warrior wore only the jewelry he took off the corpses of enemies slain by his own hand. *Paying the iron price*, it was called.

“You blush red as a maid, Theon. A question was asked. Is it the gold price you paid, or the iron?”

“The gold,” Theon admitted.

His father slid his fingers under the necklace and gave it a yank so hard it was like to take Theon’s head off, had the chain not snapped first. “My

daughter has taken an axe for a lover,” Lord Balon said. “I will not have my son bedeck himself like a whore.” He dropped the broken chain onto the brazier, where it slid down among the coals. “It is as I feared. The green lands have made you soft, and the Starks have made you theirs. “

“You’re wrong. Ned Stark was my gaoler, but my blood is still salt and iron.”

Lord Balon turned away to warm his bony hands over the brazier. “Yet the Stark pup sends you to me like a well-trained raven, clutching his little message.”

“There is nothing small about the letter I bear,” Theon said, “and the offer he makes is one *I* suggested to him.”

“This wolf king heeds your counsel, does he?” The notion seemed to amuse Lord Balon.

“He heeds me, yes. I’ve hunted with him, trained with him, shared meat and mead with him, warred at his side. I have earned his trust. He looks on me as an older brother, he—”

“*No.*” His father jabbed a finger at his face. “Not here, not in Pyke, not in my hearing, you will not name him *brother*, this son of the man who put your true brothers to the sword. Or have you forgotten Rodrik and Maron, who were your own blood?”

“I forget nothing.” Ned Stark had killed neither of his brothers, in truth. Rodrik had been slain by Lord Jason Mallister at Seagard, Maron crushed in the collapse of the old south tower... but Stark *would* have done for them just as quick had the tide of battle chanced to sweep them together. “I remember my brothers very well,” Theon insisted. Chiefly he remembered Rodrik’s drunken cuffs and Maron’s cruel japes and endless lies. “I remember when my father was a king too.” He took out Robb’s letter and thrust it forward. “Here. Read it... Your Grace.”

Lord Balon broke the seal and unfolded the parchment. His black eyes flicked back and forth. “So the boy would give me a crown again,” he said, “and all I need do is destroy his enemies.” His thin lips twisted in a smile.

“By now Robb is at the Golden Tooth,” Theon said. “Once it falls, he’ll be through the hills in a day. Lord Tywin’s host is at Harrenhal, cut off from the west. The Kingslayer is a captive at Riverrun. Only Ser Stafford Lannister and the raw green levies he’s been gathering remain to oppose Robb in the west. Ser Stafford will put himself between Robb’s army and Lannisport, which means the city will be undefended when we descend on it by sea. If the gods are with us, even Casterly Rock itself may fall before the Lannisters so much as realize that we are upon them.”

Lord Balon grunted. “Casterly Rock has never fallen.”

“Until now.” Theon smiled. *And how sweet that will be.*

His father did not return the smile. “So this is why Robb Stark sends you back to me, after so long? So you might win my consent to this plan of his?”

“It is my plan, not Robb’s,” Theon said proudly. *Mine, as the victory will be mine, and in time the crown.* “I will lead the attack myself, if it please you. As my reward I would ask that you grant me Casterly Rock for my own seat, once we have taken it from the Lannisters.” With the Rock, he could hold Lannisport and the golden lands of the west. It would mean wealth and power such as House Greyjoy had never known.

“You reward yourself handsomely for a notion and a few lines of scribbling.” His father read the letter again. “The pup says nothing about a reward. Only that you speak for him, and I am to listen, and give him my sails and swords, and in return he will give me a crown.” His flinty eyes lifted to meet his son’s. “He will *give* me a crown,” he repeated, his voice growing sharp.

“A poor choice of words, what is meant is—”

“What is meant is what is said. The boy will *give* me a crown. And what is given can be taken away.” Lord Balon tossed the letter onto the brazier, atop the necklace. The parchment curled, blackened, and took flame.

Theon was aghast. “Have you gone mad?”

His father laid a stinging backhand across his cheek. “Mind your tongue. You are not in Winterfell now, and I am not Robb the Boy, that you should speak to me so. I am the Greyjoy, Lord Reaper of Pyke, King of Salt and Rock, Son of the Sea Wind, and no man gives me a crown. I pay the iron price. I will *take* my crown, as Urron Redhand did five thousand years ago.”

Theon edged backward, away from the sudden fury in his father’s tone. “Take it, then,” he spat, his cheek still tingling. “Call yourself King of the Iron islands, no one will care... until the wars are over, and the victor looks about and spies the old fool perched off his shore with an iron crown on his head.”

Lord Balon laughed. “Well, at the least you are no craven. No more than I’m a fool. Do you think I gather my ships to watch them rock at anchor? I mean to carve out a kingdom with fire and sword... but not from the west, and not at the bidding of King Robb the Boy. Casterly Rock is too strong, and Lord Tywin too cunning by half. Aye, we might take Lannisport, but we should never keep it. No. I hunger for a different plum... not so juicy sweet, to be sure, yet it hangs there ripe and undefended.”

Where? Theon might have asked, but by then he knew.