

THEON

Theon wiped the spittle off his cheek with the back of his hand. “Robb will gut you, Greyjoy,” Benfred Tallheart screamed. “He’ll feed your turncloak’s heart to his wolf, you piece of sheep dung.”

Aeron Damphair’s voice cut through the insults like a sword through cheese. “Now you must kill him.”

“I have questions for him first,” said Theon.

“*Fuck* your questions.” Benfred hung bleeding and helpless between Stygg and Werlag. “You’ll choke on them before you get any answers from me, craven. Turncloak.”

Uncle Aeron was relentless. “When he spits on you, he spits on all of us. He spits on the Drowned God. He must die.”

“My father gave *me* the command here, Uncle.”

“And sent me to counsel you.”

And to watch me. Theon dare not push matters too far with his uncle. The command was his, yes, but his men had a faith in the Drowned God that they did not have in him, and they were terrified of Aeron Damphair. *I cannot fault them for that.*

“You’ll lose your head for this, Greyjoy. The crows will eat the jelly of your eyes.” Benfred tried to spit again, but only managed a little blood. “The Others bugger your wet god.”

Tallhart, you’ve spit away your life, Theon thought. “Stygg, silence him,” he said.

They forced Benfred to his knees. Werlag tore the rabbitskin off his belt and jammed it between his teeth to stop his shouting. Stygg unlimbered his axe.

“No,” Aeron Damphair declared. “He must be given to the god. The old way.”

What does it matter? Dead is dead. “Take him, then.”

“You will come as well. You command here. The offering should come from you.”

That was more than Theon could stomach. “You are the priest, Uncle, I leave the god to you. Do me the same kindness and leave the battles to me.” He waved his hand, and Werlag and Stygg began to drag their captive off toward the shore. Aeron Damphair gave his nephew a reproachful look, then followed. Down to the pebbled beach they would go, to drown Benfred Tallhart in salt water. The old way.

Perhaps it's a kindness, Theon told himself as he stalked off in the other direction. Stygg was hardly the most expert of headsmen, and Benfred had a neck thick as a boar's, heavy with muscle and fat. *I used to mock him for it, just to see how angry I could make him*, he remembered. That had been, what, three years past? When Ned Stark had ridden to Torrhen's Square to see Ser Helman, Theon had accompanied him and spent a fortnight in Benfred's company.

He could hear the rough noises of victory from the crook in the road where the battle had been fought... if you'd go so far as to call it a battle. *More like slaughtering sheep, if truth be told. Sheep fleeced in steel, but sheep nonetheless.*

Climbing a jumble of stone, Theon looked down on the dead men and dying horses. The horses had deserved better. Tymor and his brothers had gathered up what mounts had come through the fight unhurt, while Urzen and Black Lorren silenced the animals too badly wounded to be saved. The rest of his men were looting the corpses. Gevin Harlaw knelt on a dead man's chest, sawing off his finger to get at a ring. *Paying the iron price. My lord father would approve.* Theon thought of seeking out the bodies of the two men he'd slain himself to see if they had any jewelry worth the taking, but the notion left a bitter taste in his mouth. He could imagine what Eddard Stark would have said. Yet that thought made him angry too. *Stark is dead and rotting, and naught to me*, he reminded himself.

Old Botley, who was called Fishwhiskers, sat scowling by his pile of plunder while his three sons added to it. One of them was in a shoving match with a fat man named Todric, who was reeling among the slain with

a horn of ale in one hand and an axe in the other, clad in a cloak of white foxfur only slightly stained by the blood of its previous owner. *Drunk*, Theon decided, watching him bellow. It was said that the ironmen of old had oft been blood-drunk in battle, so berserk that they felt no pain and feared no foe, but this was a common ale-drunk.

“Wex, my bow and quiver.” The boy ran and fetched them. Theon bent the bow and slipped the string into its notches as Todric knocked down the Botley boy and flung ale into his eyes. Fishwhiskers leapt up cursing, but Theon was quicker. He drew on the hand that clutched the drinking horn, figuring to give them a shot to talk about, but Todric spoiled it by lurching to one side just as he loosed. The arrow took him through the belly.

The looters stopped to gape. Theon lowered his bow. “No drunkards, I said, and no squabbles over plunder.” On his knees, Todric was dying noisily. “Botley, silence him.” Fishwhiskers and his sons were quick to obey. They slit Todric’s throat as he kicked feebly, and were stripping him of cloak and rings and weapons before he was even dead.

Now they know I mean what I say. Lord Balon might have given him the command, but Theon knew that some of his men saw only a soft boy from the green lands when they looked at him. “Anyone else have a thirst?” No one replied. “Good.” He kicked at Benfred’s fallen banner, clutched in the dead hand of the squire who’d borne it. A rabbitskin had been tied below the flag. *Why rabbitskins?* he had meant to ask, but being spat on had made him forget his questions. He tossed his bow back to Wex and strode off, remembering how elated he’d felt after the Whispering Wood, and wondering why this did not taste as sweet. *Tallhart, you bloody overproud fool, you never even sent out a scout.*

They’d been joking and even *singing* as they’d come on, the three trees of Tallhart streaming above them while rabbitskins flapped stupidly from the points of their lances. The archers concealed behind the gorse had spoiled the song with a rain of arrows, and Theon himself had led his men-at-arms out to finish the butcher’s work with dagger, axe, and warhammer. He had ordered their leader spared for questioning.

Only he had not expected it to be Benfred Tallhart.

His limp body was being dragged from the surf when Theon returned to his *Sea Bitch*. The masts of his longships stood outlined against the sky along the pebbled beach. Of the fishing village, nothing remained but cold ashes that stank when it rained. The men had been put to the sword, all but a handful that Theon had allowed to flee to bring the word to Torrhen's Square. Their wives and daughters had been claimed for salt wives, those who were young enough and fair. The crones and the ugly ones had simply been raped and killed, or taken for thralls if they had useful skills and did not seem likely to cause trouble.

Theon had planned that attack as well, bringing his ships up to the shore in the chill darkness before the dawn and leaping from the prow with a longaxe in his hand to lead his men into the sleeping village. He did not like the taste of any of this, but what choice did he have?

His thrice-damned sister was sailing her *Black Wind* north even now, sure to win a castle of her own. Lord Balon had let no word of the hosting escape the Iron Islands, and Theon's bloody work along the Stony Shore would be put down to sea raiders out for plunder. The northmen would not realize their true peril, not until the hammers fell on Deepwood Motte and Moat Cailin. *And after all is done and won, they will make songs for that bitch Asha, and forget that I was even here.* That is, if he allowed it.

Dagmer Cleftjaw stood by the high carved prow of his longship, *Foamdrinker*. Theon had assigned him the task of guarding the ships; otherwise men would have called it Dagmer's victory, not his. A more prickly man might have taken that for a slight, but the Cleftjaw had only laughed.

"The day is won," Dagmer called down. "And yet you do not smile, boy. The living should smile, for the dead cannot." He smiled himself to show how it was done. It made for a hideous sight. Under a snowy white mane of hair, Dagmer Cleftjaw had the most gut-churning scar Theon had ever seen, the legacy of the longaxe that had near killed him as a boy. The blow had splintered his jaw, shattered his front teeth, and left him four lips where other men had but two. A shaggy beard covered his cheeks and neck, but the hair would not grow over the scar, so a shiny seam of puckered,

twisted flesh divided his face like a crevasse through a snowfield. “We could hear them singing,” the old warrior said. “It was a good song, and they sang it bravely.”

“They sang better than they fought. Harps would have done them as much good as their lances did.”

“How many men are lost?”

“Of ours?” Theon shrugged. “Todric. I killed him for getting drunk and fighting over loot.”

“Some men are born to be killed.” A lesser man might have been afraid to show a smile as frightening as his, yet Dagmer grinned more often and more broadly than Lord Balon ever had.

Ugly as it was, that smile brought back a hundred memories. Theon had seen it often as a boy, when he’d jumped a horse over a mossy wall, or flung an axe and split a target square. He’d seen it when he blocked a blow from Dagmer’s sword, when he put an arrow through a seagull on the wing, when he took the tiller in hand and guided a longship safely through a snarl of foaming rocks. *He gave me more smiles than my father and Eddard Stark together.* Even Robb... he ought to have won a smile the day he’d saved Bran from that wildling, but instead he’d gotten a scolding, as if he were some cook who’d burned the stew.

“You and I must talk, Uncle,” Theon said. Dagmer was no true uncle, only a sworn man with perhaps a pinch of Greyjoy blood four or five lives back, and that from the wrong side of the blanket. Yet Theon had always called him uncle nonetheless.

“Come onto my deck, then.” There were no *m’lords* from Dagmer, not when he stood on his own deck. On the Iron Islands, every captain was a king aboard his own ship.

He climbed the plank to the deck of the *Foamdrinker* in four long strides, and Dagmer led him back to the cramped aft cabin, where the old man poured a horn of sour ale and offered Theon the same. He declined. “We did not capture enough horses. A few, but... well, I’ll make do with what I have, I suppose. Fewer men means more glory.”

“What need do we have of horses?” Like most ironmen, Dagmer preferred to fight on foot or from the deck of a ship. “Horses will only shit on our decks and get in our way.”

“If we sailed, yes,” Theon admitted. “I have another plan.” He watched the other carefully to see how he would take that. Without the Cleftjaw he could not hope to succeed. Command or no, the men would never follow him if both Aeron and Dagmer opposed him, and he had no hope of winning over the sour-faced priest.

“Your lord father commanded us to harry the coast, no more.” Eyes pale as sea foam watched Theon from under those shaggy white eyebrows. Was it disapproval he saw there, or a spark of interest? The latter, he thought... hoped...

“You are my father’s man.”

“His *best* man, and always have been.”

Pride, Theon thought. *He is proud, I must use that, his pride will be the key.* “There is no man in the Iron Islands half so skilled with spear or sword.”

“You have been too long away, boy. When you left, it was as you say, but I am grown old in Lord Greyjoy’s service. The singers call Andrik best now. Andrik the Unsmiling, they name him. A giant of a man. He serves Lord Drumm of Old Wyk. And Black Lorren and Qarl the Maid are near as dread.”

“This Andrik may be a great fighter, but men do not fear him as they fear you.”

“Aye, that’s so,” Dagmer said. The fingers curled around the drinking horn were heavy with rings, gold and silver and bronze, set with chunks of sapphire and garnet and dragonglass. He had paid the iron price for every one, Theon knew.

“If I had a man like you in my service, I should not waste him on this child’s business of harrying and burning. This is no work for Lord Balon’s best man...”

Dagmer's grin twisted his lips apart and showed the brown splinters of his teeth. "Nor for his trueborn son?" He hooted. "I know you too well, Theon. I saw you take your first step, helped you bend your first bow. 'Tis not me who feels wasted."

"By rights I should have my sister's command," he admitted, uncomfortably aware of how peevish that sounded.

"You take this business too hard, boy. It is only that your lord father does not know you. With your brothers dead and you taken by the wolves, your sister was his solace. He learned to rely on her, and she has never failed him."

"Nor have I. The Starks knew my worth. I was one of Brynden Blackfish's picked scouts, and I charged with the first wave in the Whispering Wood. I was *that* close to crossing swords with the Kingslayer himself." Theon held his hands two feet apart. "Daryn Hornwood came between us, and died for it."

"Why do you tell me this?" Dagmer asked. "It was me who put your first sword in your hand. I know you are no craven."

"Does my father?"

The hoary old warrior looked as if he had bitten into something he did not like the taste of. "It is only... Theon, the Boy Wolf is your friend, and these Starks had you for ten years."

"I am no Stark." *Lord Eddard saw to that.* "I am a Greyjoy, and I mean to be my father's heir. How can I do that unless I prove myself with some great deed?"

"You are young. Other wars will come, and you shall do your great deeds. For now, we are commanded to harry the Stony Shore."

"Let my uncle Aeron see to it. I'll give him six ships, all but *Foamdrinker* and *Sea Bitch*, and he can burn and drown to his god's surfeit."

"The command was given you, not Aeron Damphair."

"So long as the harrying is done, what does it matter? No priest could do what I mean to, nor what I ask of you. I have a task that only Dagmer

Cleftjaw can accomplish.”

Dagmer took a long draught from his horn. “Tell me.”

He is tempted, Theon thought. *He likes this reaver’s work no better than I do.* “If my sister can take a castle, so can I.”

“Asha has four or five times the men we do.”

Theon allowed himself a sly smile. “But we have four times the wits, and five times the courage.”

“Your father—”

“—will thank me, when I hand him his kingdom. I mean to do a deed that the harpers will sing of for a thousand years.”

He knew that would give Dagmer pause. A singer had made a song about the axe that cracked his jaw in half, and the old man loved to hear it. Whenever he was in his cups he would call for a reaving song, something loud and stormy that told of dead heroes and deeds of wild valor. *His hair is white and his teeth are rotten, but he still has a taste for glory.*

“What would my part be in this scheme of yours, boy?” Dagmer Cleftjaw asked after a long silence, and Theon knew he had won.

“To strike terror into the heart of the foe, as only one of your name could do. You’ll take the great part of our force and march on Torrhen’s Square. Helman Tallhart took his best men south, and Benfred died here with their sons. His uncle Leobald will remain, with some small garrison.” *If I had been able to question Benfred, I would know just how small.* “Make no secret of your approach. Sing all the brave songs you like. I want them to close their gates.”

“Is this Torrhen’s Square a strong keep?”

“Strong enough. The walls are stone, thirty feet high, with square towers at each corner and a square keep within.”

“Stone walls cannot be fired. How are we to take them? We do not have the numbers to storm even a small castle.”

“You will make camp outside their walls and set to building catapults and siege engines.”

“That is not the Old Way. Have you forgotten? Ironmen fight with swords and axes, not by flinging rocks. There is no glory in starving out a foeman.”

“Leobald will not know that. When he sees you raising siege towers, his old woman’s blood will run cold, and he will bleat for help. Stay your archers, Uncle, and let the raven fly. The castellan at Winterfell is a brave man, but age has stiffened his wits as well as his limbs. When he learns that one of his king’s bannermen is under attack by the fearsome Dagmer Cleftjaw, he will summon his strength and ride to Tallhart’s aid. It is his duty. Ser Rodrik is nothing if not dutiful.”

“Any force he summons will be larger than mine,” Dagmer said, “and these old knights are more cunning than you think, or they would never have lived to see their first grey hair. You set us a battle we cannot hope to win, Theon. This Torrhen’s Square will never fall.”

Theon smiled. “It’s not Torrhen’s Square I mean to take.”