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THE ARMS OF THE KRAKEN

THE PROPHET

Aeron Damphair was drowning men on Great Wyk when they came to tell him that the king was dead.

It was a bleak cold morning, and the sea was as leaden as the sky. The first three men had offered their lives to the Drowned God fearlessly, but the fourth was weak in faith, and began to struggle as his lungs cried out for air. Standing waist deep in the surf, Aeron seized the naked boy by the shoulders and pushed his head back down as he tried to snatch a breath. "Have courage," he said. "We came from the sea, and to the sea we must return. Open your mouth and drink deep of god's blessing. Fill your lungs with water, that you may die and be reborn. It does no good to fight."

Either the boy could not hear him with his head beneath the waves, or else his faith had utterly deserted him. He began to kick and thrash so wildly that Aeron had to call for help. Four of his drowned men waded out to seize the wretch and hold him under water. "Lord God who drowned for us," the priest prayed, in a voice as deep as the sea, "let Emmond your servant be reborn From the sea, as you were. Bless him

with salt, bless him with stone, bless him with steel."

Finally it was done. No more air was bubbling from his mouth, and all the strength had gone out of his limbs. Face

down in the shallow sea floated Lmmond, pale and cold and peaceful.

That was when Ihe Damphair realized that three horsemen had joined his drowned men on the pebbled shore. Aeron knew The Sparr, a hatchet-faced old man with watery eyes whose quavery voice was law on this part of Great Wyk, His son Steffarion accompanied him, with another youth whose dark red fur-lined cloak was pinned at Ihe shoulder with a ornate brooch that showed the black-and-gold warhorn of the Goodbrothers. *One of Gorold's sons*, the priest decided at a glance. Three tall sons had been born to Goodbrother's wife late in We, after a dozen daughters, and it was said that no man could tell one son from the others. Aeron Damphair did not deign to try. Whether this be Greydon or Gormond or Gran, the priest had no time for him.

He growled a brusque command, and his drowned men seized the dead boy by his arms and legs to carry him above the tideline. The priest followed, naked but for a sealskin clout that covered his private parts. Goosefleshed and dripping he splashed back onto land, across cold wet sand and sea-scoured pebbles. One of his drowned men handed him a robe of heavy roughspun dyed in mottled greens and blues and greys, the colors of the sea and the

Drowned God. Aeron donned the robe and pulled his hair free. Black and wet, that hair; no blade had touched it since the sea had raised him up. It draped his shoulders like a ragged, ropy cloak, and fell down past his waist. Aeron wove strands of seaweed through it, and through his tangled, uncut beard.

His drowned men formed a circle around Ihe dead boy, praying. Norjen worked his arms whilst Rus knell astride him. pumping on his chest, but all moved aside for Aeron. He pried apart the boy's cold lips with his fingers, and gave Emmond the kiss of life, and agait and again, until the sea cam« tfirehinji from his mouth. The boy began to cough and spit, and his eyes blinked open, full of fear.

Another one returned It was a sign of the Drowned God's favor, men said. Every other priest lost a man from time to lime, even Tarle the Thrice-Drowned, who had once been thought so holy that he was picked to crown a king. But never Aeron Greyjoy. He was the Damphair, who had seen the god's own watery halls and returned to tell of it. "Rise," he told the sputtering boy, as he slapped him on his naked back. "You have drowned and been returned lo us. What is dead can never die."

"But rises." The boy coughed violently, bringing up more water. "Rises

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again." Every word was bought with pain, but that was the way of the world; a man must fight to live. "Rises again." Emmond staggered to his feet. "Harder. And stronger."

"You belong to the god now," Aeron told him. The other drowned men gathered round, and gave him each a punch and a kiss to welcome him to brotherhood. One helped him don a roughspun robe of mottled blue and green and grey. Another presented him with a driftwood cudgel. "You belong to the sea now, so the sea has armed you,"

Aeron said. "We pray that you shall wield your cudgel fiercely, against all the enemies of our god."

Only then did the priest turn to the three riders, watching from their saddles. "Have you come to be drowned, my lords?"

The Sparr coughed. "I was drowned as a boy," he said, "and my son upon his name day."

Aeron snorted. That Steffarion Sparr had been given to the Drowned God soon after birth he had no doubt. He knew the

manner of it too, a quick dip into a tub of seawater that scarce wet the infant's head. Small wonder the ironborn had been conquered, they who once held sway everywhere the sound of waves was heard. "That is no true drowning," he told the riders. "He that does not die in truth cannot hope to rise from death. Why have you come, if not to prove your faith?"

"Lord Gorold's son came seeking you with news." The Sparr indicated the youth in the red cloak.

The boy looked to be no more than six-and-ten. "Aye, and which are you?" Aeron demanded.

"Gormond. Gormond Goodbrother, if it please my lord."

"It is the Drowned God we must please. Have you been drowned, Gormond Goodbrother?"

"On my name day, Damphair. My father sent me to find you and bring you to him. He needs to see you."

"Here I stand. Let Lord Gorold come and feast his eyes." Aeron took a

leather skin from Rus, freshly filled with water from the sea. The priest pulled out the cork and took a swallow.

"I am to bring you to the keep," insisted young Gormond, from atop his horse.

He is afraid to dismount, lest he get his boots wet. "I have the god's work to do." Aeron Greyjoy was a prophet. He did not suffer petty lords ordering him about like some thrall.

"Gorold's had a bird," said The Sparr.

"A maester's bird, from Pyke," Gormond confirmed.

Dark wings, dark words, "The ravens fly o'er salt and stone. If there are tidings that concern me, speak them now."

"Such tidings as we bear are for your ears alone, Damphair," The Sparr said. "These are not matters I would speak of here before these others."

"These others are my drowned men, god's servants, just as I am. I have no secrets from them, nor from our god beside whose holy sea I stand."

The horsemen exchanged a look. "Tell him," said The Sparr, and the youth in the red cloak summoned up his courage. "The king is dead," he said, as plain as that. Four small words, yet the sea itself trembled when he uttered them.

Four kings there were in Westeros, yet Aeron did not need to ask which one was meant. Balon Greyjoy ruled the Iron Islands, and no other. *The king is dead. How can that be?* Aeron had seen his eldest brother not a moon's turn past, when he had returned to the Iron Islands from harrying the Stony Shore. Balon's grey hair had gone half white whilst the priest had been away, and the stoop in his shoulders was more pronounced than when the long-ships sailed. Yet all in all the king had not seemed ill.

Aeron Greyjoy had built his life upon two mighty pillars. Those four small words had knocked one down. *Only the Drowned God remains to me. May he make me as strong and tireless as the sea.* "Tell me the manner of my brother's death."

"His Grace was crossing a bridge at Pyke when he fell, and was dashed upon the rocks below."

The Greyjoy stronghold stood upon broken headland, its keeps and towers built atop massive stone stacks that thrust up from the sea. Bridges knotted Pyke together; arched bridges of carved stone, and swaying spans of hempen rope and wooden planks. "Was the storm raging when he fell?" Aeron demanded of them,

"Aye," the youth said, "if was."

"The Storm God cast him down," the priest announced. For a thousand thousand years sea and sky had been at war. From the sea had come the iron-born, and the fish that sustained them even in the depths of winter, but storms brought only woe and grief. "My brother Balon made us great again, which earned the Storm God's wrath. He feasts now in the Drowned God's watery halls, with mermaids to attend his every want. It shall be for you who remain behind in this dry and dismal vale to finish his great work." He pushed the cork back into his waterskit "I shall speak with your lord father. How far from here to Hammerhorn?"

"Six leagues. You may ride pillion with me."

"One can ride faster than two. Give me your horse, and the Drowned God will bless you."

"Take my horse, Damphair," offered Steffarion Sparr.

"No. His mount is stronger. Your horse, boy."

The youth hesitated half a heartbeat then dismounted and held the reins for Damphair. Aeron shoved a bare black foot into a stirrup and swung himself onto the saddle. He was not fond of horses—they were creatures from the green lands, and helped to make men weak—but necessity required that he ride. *Dark wings, dark words.* A storm was brewing, he could hear it in the waves and storms brought naught but evil. "Meet with me at Pebbleton beneath Lord Merlyn's tower," he told his drowned men, as he turned the horse's head.

The way was rough, up hills and woods and stony defiles along a narrow¹ track that oft seemed to disappear beneath the horse's hooves. Great Wyl was the largest of the Iron Islands, so vast that some of its lords had holdings that did not front upon the holy sea.

Gorold Goodbrother was one such. His

keep was in the Hardstone Hills, as far as from the Drowned God's realm as any place in the isles. Gorold's folk toiled down in Gorold's mines, in the stony dark beneath the earth. Some lived and died without setting eyes upon salt water. *Small wonder that such folk are crabbed and queer.*

As Aeron rode, his thoughts turned to his brothers.

Nine sons had been born from the toins of Quellon Greyjoy, the Lord of the Iron Islands. Marlon, Quenton, and Donel had

been born of Lord Quellon's first wife, a woman of the Stonetrees. Balon, Euron, Victarion, Urrigon, and Aeron were the sons of his second, a Sunderly of Saltcliffe. For a third wife Quellon took a girl from the green lands, who gave him a sickly idiot boy named Robin, the brother best forgotten. The priest had no memory of Quenton or Donel, who had died as infants. Harlon he recalled but dimly, sitting grey-faced and still in a windowless tower room and speaking in whispers that grew fainter every day as the grey scale turned his tongue and lips to stone. *One day we shall feast on fish together in the Drowned God's watery halls, the four of us and Urri too.*

Nine sons had been born from the loins of Quellon Greyjoy, but only four had lived to manhood. That was the way of this cold world, where men fished the sea and dug in the ground and died, whilst women brought forth short-lived children from beds of blood and pain. Aeron had been the last and least of the four krakens, Balon the eldest and boldest, a fierce and fearless boy who lived only to restore the iron-born to their ancient glory. At ten he scaled the flint Cliffs to the Blind Lord's: haunted tower. At thirteen he could row a longship's oars and dance the finger dance as well as any man in the isles. At fifteen he had sailed with Dagmer Cleftjaw to the Stepstones and spent a summer reaving. He slew his first man there, and took his first two salt wives. At seventeen Balon captained his own ship. He was all that an elder brother ought to be, though he had never shown Aeron aught but scorn. *I was weak and full of sin, and scorn was more than I deserved. Better to be scorned by Balon the Brave than beloved of Euron Crow's Eye.* And if age and grief had turned Balon bitter

with the years, they had also made him more determined than any man alive. *He was born a lord's son and died a king, murdered by a jealous god, Aeron thought, and now the storm is coming, a storm such as these isles have never known,*

It was long after dark by the time the priest espied the spiky iron battlements of the Hammerhorn clawing at the crescent moon. Gorold's keep was hulking and blocky, its great stones quarried from the cliff that loomed behind it. Below its walls the entrances of caves and ancient mines yawned like toothless black mouths. The Hammerhorn's iron gates had been closed and barred for the night. Aeron beat on them with a rock, until the clanging woke a guard.

The youth who admitted him was the image of Gormond, whose horse he'd taken. "Which one are you?" Aeron demanded.

"Gran. My father awaits you within"

The hall was dank and drafty, full of shadows. One of Gorold's daughters offered the priest a horn of ale. Another poked at a sullen fire that was giving off more smoke than heat. Gorold Goodbrother himself was talking quietly with a slim man in fine grey robes, who wore about his neck a chain of many metals that marked him for a maester of the Citadel.

"Where is Gormond?" Gorold asked when he saw Aeron.

"He returns afoot. Send your women away, my lord. And the maester as well." He had no love of maesters. Their ravens were creatures of the Storm God, and he did not trust their healing, not since Urri. *No proper man would choose a life of thralldom, nor forge a chain of servitude To wear about his throat.*

"Gysella, Gwin, leave us," Goodbrother said curtly. "You as well, Gran. Maester Murenmure will stay."

"He will go," insisted Aeron.

"This is my hall, Damphair. It is not for you to say who must go and who remains. The maester stays."

The man lives too far from the sea, Aeron told himself. "Then I shall go," he told Goodbrother. Dry rushes rustled underneath the cracked soles of his bare black feet as he turned and stalked away. It seemed he had ridden a long way for naught,

Aeron was almost at the door when the maester cleared his throat and said, "Euron Crow's Eye sits the Seastone Chair."

The Damphair turned. The hall had suddenly grown colder. *The Crow's Eye is half a world away. Balon sent him off two years ago, and swore that it would be his life if he returned.* "Tell me," he said hoarsely.

"He sailed into Lordsport the day after the king's death, and claimed the castle and the crown as Balon's eldest brother," said Gorold Goodbrother. "Now he sends forth ravens, summoning the captains and the kings from every isle to Pyke, to bend their knees

and do him homage as their king."

"No." Aeron Damphair did not weigh his words. "Only a godly man may sit the Seastone Chair. The Crow's Eye worships naught but his own pride."

"You were on Pyke not long ago, and saw the king," said Goodbrother. "Did Balon say aught to you of the succession?"

Aye. They had spoken in the Sea Tower, as the wind howled outside the windows and the waves crashed restlessly below. Balon had shaken his head in despair when he heard what Aeron had to tell him of his last remaining son "The wolves have made a weakling of him, as I feared," the king said. "I pray god that they killed him, so he cannot stand in Asha's way." That was Balon's blindness; he saw himself in his wild, headstrong daughter and believed she could succeed him. He was wrong in that, and Aeron tried to tell him so. "No woman will ever rule the ironborn, not even a woman such as Asha," he insisted, but Balon could be deaf to things he did not wish to hear.

Before the priest could answer Gorold Goodbrother, the maester's

mouth flapped open once again. "By rights the Seastone Chair belongs to Theon, or Asha if the prince is dead. That is the law."

"Green land law," said Aeron with contempt. "What is that to us? We are ironborn, the sons of the sea, chosen of the Drowned God. No woman may rule over us, nor any godless man."

"And Victarion?" asked Gorold Goodbrother. "He has the Iron Fleet. Will Victarion make a claim, Damphair?"

"Euron is the elder brother . . ." began the maester.

Aeron silenced him with a look. In little fishing towns and great stone keeps alike such a look from Damphair would make maids feel faint and send children shrieking to their mothers, and it was more than sufficient to quell the chain-neck thrall. "Euron is elder," the priest said, "but Victarion is more godly."

"Will it come to war between them?" asked the maester.

"Ironborn must not spill the blood of ironborn."

"A pious sentiment, Damphair," said Goodbrother, "but not one that your brother shares. He had Sawane Botley drowned for saying that the Seastone Chair by rights belonged to Theon."

"If he was drowned, no blood was shed," said Aeron.

The maester and the lord exchanged a look. "I must send word to Pyke, and soon," said Gorold Goodbrother. "Damphair, I would have your counsel. What shall it be, homage or defiance"

Aeron tugged his beard, and thought. *I have seen the storm, and its name is Euron Crow's Eye.* "For now, send only silence," he told the lord. "I must pray on this."

"Pray all you wish," the maester said, "it does not change the law. Theon is the rightful heir, and Asha next."

"*Silence!*" Aeron roared. "Too long have the ironborn listened to you chain-neck maesters prating of the green lands and their laws. It is time we listened to the sea again. It is time we listened to the voice of god." His own , voice rang in that smoky hall, so full of

power than neither Gorold Goodbrother nor his maester dared a reply. *The Drowned God is with me,* Aeron thought. *He has shown me the way.*

Goodbrother offered him the comforts of the castle for the night, but the priest declined. He seldom slept beneath a castle roof, and never so far from the sea. "Comforts I shall know, in the Drowned God's watery halls beneath the waves. We are born to suffer, that our sufferings might make us

strong. All that I require is a fresh horse to carry me to Pebbleton."

That Goodbrother was pleased to provide. He sent his son Greydon as well, to show the priest the shortest way through the hills down to the sea. Dawn was still an hour off when they set forth, but their mounts were hardy and sure-footed, and they made good time despite the darkness. Aeron closed his eyes and said a silent prayer, and after a while began to drowse in the saddle

The sound came softly, the scream of a rusted hinge. "Urri," he muttered, and woke, fearful. *There is no hinge here, no door, no Urri.* A flying axe took off half of Urri's hand when he was ten-and-four, playing at the finger dance whilst his father and his elder brothers were away at war. Lord Quellon's third wife had been a Piper of Pinkmaiden Castle, a girl with big soft breasts and brown doe's eyes. Instead of healing Urri's hand the Old Way, with fire and sea water, she gave him to her green land maester, who swore that he could sew back the missing fingers. He did that, and later he used potions and poltices and herbs, but the hand mortified and Urri took a fever. By the time the maester sawed his arm off, it was too late.

Lord Quellon never returned from his last voyage; the Drowned God in his goodness granted him a death at sea. It was Lord Balon who came back, with his brothers Euron and Victarion. When Balon heard what had befallen Urri, he removed three of the maester's fingers with a cook's cleaver and sent his father's Piper wife to sew them back

on. Poltices and potions worked as well for the maester as they had for Urrigon. He died raving, and Lord Quellon's third wife followed soon thereafter, as the midwife drew a stillborn daughter from her womb. Aeron had been glad. It had been his axe

that sheared off Urri's hand, whilst they danced the finger dance together as friends and brothers will.

It shamed him still to recall the years that followed Urri's death. At six-and-ten he called himself a man, but in truth he had been a sack of wine with legs. He would sing, he would dance (but not the finger dance, never again), he would jape and jabber and make mock. He played the pipes, he juggled, he rode horses, and could drink more than all the Wynches and the Botleys, and half the Harlaws too. The Drowned God gives every man a gift, even him; no man could piss longer or farther than Aeron Greyjoy, as he proved at every feast. Once he bet his new longship against a herd of goats that he could quench a hearthfire with no more than his cock. Aeron feasted on goat for a year, and named the longship *Golden Storm*, though Balon threatened to hang him from her mast when he heard what sort of ram his brother proposed to mount upon her prow.

In the end the *Golden Storm* went down off Fair Isle during Balon's first rebellion, cut in half by a towering war galley called *Fury* when Stannis Baratheon caught Victarion in his trap and smashed the Iron Fleet. Yet the god was not done with Aeron, and carried him to shore. Some fishermen took him captive and marched him down to Lannisport in chains, and he spent the rest of the war in the bowels of Casterly Rock, proving that krakens can piss further and longer than lions, boars, or chickens.

That man is dead. Aeron had drowned and been reborn from the sea, the god's own prophet. No mortal man could frighten him, no more than the darkness could . . . , nor memories, the bones of the soul. *The sound of a door opening. The scream of a rusted iron hinge. Euron has come again.* It did not matter. He was the Damphair priest, beloved of the god.

"Will it come to war?" asked Greydon Goodbrother as the sun was lightening the hills. "A war of brother against brother?"

"If the Drowned God wills it. No godless man may sit the Seastone Chair." *The Crow's Eye will fight, that is certain.* No woman could defeat him, not even Asha; women were made to fight their battles in the birthing bed. And Theon, if he lived, was just as hopeless, a boy of sulks and smiles. At Winterfeli he proved his worth, such that it was, but the Crow's Eye was no crippled boy. The decks of Euron's ship were painted red, to better hide the blood that soaked them. *Victarion. The king must be Victarion, or the storm will slay us all.*

Greydon left him when the sun was up, to bring the news of Galon's death to his cousins in their towers at Downdelving, Crow Spike Keep, and Corpse Lake. Aeron continued on alone, up hills and down vales along a stony track that grew wider and more travelled as he neared the sea. In every village he paused to preach, and in the yards of petty lords as well. "We were born from the sea, and to the sea we all return," he told them. His voice was as deep as the ocean, and thundered like the waves. "The Storm God in his wrath plucked Balon from his castle and cast him down, and now he feasts beneath the waves in the Drowned God's watery halls." He raised his hands. *"Balon is dead! The king is dead! Yet a king will come again! For what is dead may never die, but rises again, harder and stronger! A king will rise!"*

Some of those who heard him threw down their hoes and picks to follow, so by the time he heard the crash of waves a dozen men walked behind his horse, touched by god and desirous of drowning.

Pebbleton was home to several thousand fisherfolk whose hovels huddled round the base of a square towerhouse with a turret at each corner. Two score of Aeron's drowned men there awaited him, camped along a grey sand beach in sealskin tents and shelters built of driftwood. Their hands were roughened by brine, scarred by nets and lines, callused from oars and picks and axes, but now those hands gripped driftwood cudgels hard as iron, for the god had armed them from his arsenal beneath the sea,

They had built a shelter for the priest just above the tideline. Gladly he crawled into it, after he had drowned his newest followers. *My god*, he

prayed, *Speak to me in the rumble of the waves, and tell me what to do. The captains and the kings await your word. Who shall be our king in Balon's place? Sing to me in the language of Leviathan, that I may know his name. Tell me, oh lord beneath the waves, who has the strength to fight the storm on Pyke?*

Though his ride to Hammerhorn had left him weary, Aeron Damphair was restless in his driftwood shelter, roofed over with black weeds from the sea. The clouds rolled in to cloak the moon and stars, and the darkness lay as thick upon the sea as it did upon his soul. *Balon favored Asha, the child of his body, but a woman cannot rule the ironborn. It must be Victarion. Nine sons had been born from the loins of Quellon Greyjoy, and Victarion was the strongest of them, a bull of a man, fearless and dutiful. And therein lies*

our danger. A younger brother owes obedience to an elder, and Victarion was not a man to sail against tradition. He has no love for Euron, though. Not since the woman died.

Outside, beneath the snoring of his drowned men and the keening of the wind, he could hear the pounding of the waves, the hammer of his god calling him to battle. Aeron crept from his little shelter into the chill of the night. Naked he stood, pale and gaunt and tall, and naked he walked into the black salt sea. The water was icy cold, yet he did not flinch from his god's caress. A wave smashed against his chest, staggering him. The next broke over his head. He could taste the salt on his lips and feel the god around him, and his ears rang with the glory of his song. *Nine sons were born from the loins of Quellon Greyjoy, and I was the least of them, as weak and frightened as a girl. But no longer. That man is drowned, and the god has made me strong.* The cold salt sea surrounded him, embraced him, reached down through his weak man's flesh and touched his bones. *Bones, he thought. The bones of the soul. Balon's bones, and Urri's. The truth is in our bones, for flesh decays and bone*

endures. And on the hill of Nagga, the bones of the Grey King's hall. ..

And gaunt and pale and shivering, Aeron Damphair struggled back to the shore, a wiser man than he had been when he stepped into the sea. For he had found the answer in his bones, and the way was plain before him. The night was so cold that his body seemed to steam as he stalked back toward his shelter, but there was a fire burning in his heart, and sleep came easily for once, unbroken by the scream of iron hinges.

When he woke, the day was bright and windy. Aeron broke his fast on a broth of clams and seaweed cooked above a driftwood fire. No sooner had he finished than The Merlyn descended from his towerhouse with half a dozen guards to seek him out, "The king is dead," the Damphair told him.

"Aye. I had a bird. And now another," The Merlyn was a bald round fleshy man who styled himself "Lord" in the manner of the green lands, and dressed in furs and velvets. "One raven summons me to Pyke, another to Ten Towers. You krakens have too many arms, you pull a man to pieces. What say you, priest? Where should I send my longships?"

Aeron scowled. "Ten Towers, do you say? What kraken calls you there?" Ten Towers was the seat of the Lord of Harlaw.

"The Princess Asha. She has set her sails for home. The Reader sends out ravens, summoning all her friends to Harlaw, He says that Balon meant for her to sit the Seastone Chair."

"The Drowned God shall decide who sits the Seastone Chair," the priest said. "Kneel, that I might bless you." Lord Merlyn sank to his knees, and Aeron uncorked his skin and poured a stream of seawater on his bald pate. "Lord God who drowned

for us, let Meldred your servant be born again from the sea. Bless him with salt, bless him with stone, bless him with steel." Water ran down Merlyn's fat cheeks to soak his beard and fox-fur mantle, "What is

dead may never die," Aeron finished, "but rises again, harder and stronger." But when Merlyn rose, he told him, "Stay and listen, that you may spread god's word."

Three feet from the water's edge the waves broke around a rounded granite boulder. It was there that Aeron Damphair stood, so all his school might see him, and hear the words he had to say. "We were born from the sea, and to the sea we all return," he began, as he had a hundred times before. "The Storm God in his wrath plucked Balon from his castle and cast him down, and now he feasts beneath the waves." He raised his hands. "*The iron king is dead* Yet a king will come again! For what is dead may never die, but rises again, harder and stronger!"

"*A king shall rise!*" the drowned men cried.

"He shall. He must. But who?" The Damphair listened a moment, but only the waves gave answer. "*Who shall be our king?*"

The drowned men began to slam their driftwood cudgels one against the other. "*Damphair!*" they cried. "*Damphair King! Aeron King! Give us Damphair!*"

Aeron shook his head. "If a father has two sons and gives to one an axe and to the other a net, which does he intend should be the warrior?"

"The axe is for the warrior," Rus shouted back, "the net for a fisher of the seas."

"Aye," said Aeron. "The god took me deep beneath the waves and drowned the worthless thing I was. When he cast me forth again he gave me eyes to see, ears to hear, and a voice to spread his word, that I might be his prophet and teach his truth to those who have forgotten. I was not made to sit upon the Seastone Chair ... no more than Euroi Crow's Eye. For I have heard the god, who says, *no godless man may sit my Seastone Chair!*"

The Merlyn crossed his arms against his chest. "Is it Asha, then? Or Victarion? Tell us, priest!"

"The Drowned God will tell you, but not here." Aeron pointed at The Merlyn's fat white face. "Look not to me, nor to the laws of men, but to the sea. Raise your sails and unship your oars, my lord, and take yourself to Old Wyk. You, and all the captains and the lords and kings. Go not to Pyke, to bow before

the godless, nor to Harlaw to consort with scheming women. Point your prow toward Old Wyk, where stood the Grey King's hall. In the name of the Drowned God I summon you. / *Summon all of you!* Leave your halls and hovels, your castles and your keeps, and return to Nagga's hill to make a kingsmoot!"

The Merlyn gaped at him. "A kingsmoot? There has not been a true kingsmoot in ..."

"... *too long a time!*" Aeron cried in anguish. "Yet in the dawn of days the ironborn chose their own kings, raising up the worthiest amongst them. It is time we returned to the Old Way, for only that shall make us great again. It was a kingsmoot that chose Urras Ironfoot for High King, and placed a driftwood crown upon his brows. Syllas Flatnose, Harrag Hoare, the Old Kraken, the kingsmoot raised them all. And from *this* kingsmoot shall emerge a man to finish the work King Balon has begun,

and win us back our freedoms. Go *not* to Pyke, nor to the Ten Towers of Harlaw, but to Old Wyk, I say again. Seek the hill of Nagga and the bones of the Grey King's hall, for it that holy place when the moon has drowned and come again we shall make ourselves a worthy king, a *godly* king." He raised his bony hands on high again. "Listen! Listen to the waves! Listen to the god! He is speaking to us, and he says, *We shall have no king but from the kingsmoot!*"

A roar went up at that, and the drowned men beat their cudgels one against the other. "A *kingsmoot!*" *Wty* shouted. "A *kingsmoot, a kingsmoot. No king but from the kingsmoot!*" And the clamor that they made was so thunderous that surely the Crow's Eye heard the shouts on Pyke, and the vile Storm God in his cloudy hall. And Aeron Damphair knew he had done well.

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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 long-

ships moored beneath her uncle's castle, and his mouth had tightened. "They have not come," he observed, "or not enough of them." It was no more than the truth, but Asha had not dared agree with him, out where her crew might hear her. She did not doubt their devotion, their willingness to die for her, but even ironborn will hesitate to throw away their lives for a cause that's plainly hopeless.

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 counter-changed on a field divided bend-wise. 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 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 *Swift fin* amongst the other longships. "I had heard my nuncle Crow's Eye had old Sawane Botley drowned."

"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 Valryia. 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 Gruel'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 two score 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 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 Thar 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 Maesfer Denestan's arguments in *Questions*. Going to Old Wyk serves no purpose. 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."

/ 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 among 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 my days complaining to anyone who will listen 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 Grey/oy/" 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 me 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 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. "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 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 naught 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 would not give me yours either."

I wrote none. In truth, she had been relieved when Tris was sent away. By then his fumbings 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. The Crow's Eye has been gathering men on Pyke. Orkwood of Orkmont brought

land. Behind came *Hardhand, Iron Wind, Grey Ghost, Lord Quelbn, Lord Vikon, Lord Oagon,* and the rest, nine Tenths of the Iron Fleet, sailing on the evening tide in a ragged column that extended back long leagues. The sight of their sails filled Victarion Greyjoy with content. No man had ever loved his wives half as well as the Lord Captain loved his ships.

Along the sacred strand of Old Wyk, longships lined the shore as far as the eye could see, their masts thrust up like spears. In the deeper waters rode prizes: cogs, carracks, and dromonds won in raid or war, too big to run ashore. From prow and stern and mast flew familiar banners.

Nute the Barber squinted toward the strand. "Is that Lord Harlaw's *Sea Song?*" *The Barber* was a thick-set man with bandy legs and long arms, but his eyes were not so keen as they had been when he was young. In those days he could throw an axe so well that men said he could shave you with it.

"*Sea Song, aye.*" Rodrik the Reader had left his books, it would seem. "And there old Drumm's *Thunderer,* with Blacktyde's *Nighrflyer* beside her." Victarion's eyes were as sharp as they had ever been. Even with their sails furled and their banners hanging limp, he knew them, as befit the Lord Captain of the Iron Fleet. "*Swiftfin* too. Some son of Sawane Botley." The Crow's Eye had drowned Lord Botley, Victarion had heard, and his heir had sailed to Moat Cailin with him and died there, but

he'd had brothers. *How many? Four? No, five, by three different wives, and none with any cause to love the Crow's Eye,*

And then he saw her: a single-masted longship, lean and low, with a dark red hull. Her sails, now furled, were black as a starless sky. Even at anchor *Silence* looked both cruel and fast. On her prow was a black iron maiden with one arm outstretched. Her waist was slender, her breasts high and proud, her legs long and shapely. A mane of black iron hair streamed from her head, and her eyes were mother-of-pearl, but she had no mouth.

Victarion's hands closed into fists. He had beaten four men to death with those hands, and one wife as well. Though his hair was flecked with hoarfrost, he was as strong as he had ever been, with a bull's broad chest and a boy's flat belly. *The kinslayer is accursed in the eyes of gods and men*, Balon had reminded him, on the day he sent the Crow's Eye off to sea.

"He is here," Victarion told the Barber. "Drop sail. We proceed on oars alone. Command *Grief and Iron Vengeance* to stand between *Silence* and the sea. The rest of the fleet to seal the bay. None are to leave save at my command, neither man nor crow."

The men upon the shore had spied their sails. Shouts echoed across the bay as friends and kin called out greetings. But not from *Silence*. On her decks a motley crew of mutes and mongrels spoke no word as the *Iron Victory* drew nigh. Men black as tar stared out at him, and others squat and hairy as the apes of Sothoros. *Monsters*, Victarion thought.

They dropped anchor twenty yards from *Silence*. "Lower a boat. I would go ashore." He buckled on his sword-belt as the rowers took their places; his longsword rested on one hip, a dirk upon the other. Nute the Barber fastened the Lord Captain's cloak about his shoulders. It was made of nine layers of cloth-of-gold, sewn in the shape of the kraken of Greyjoy, arms dangling to his boots. Beneath he wore heavy grey chainmail over boiled black leather. In Moat Cailin he had taken to wearing mail day and night. Sore shoulders and an aching back were easier to bear than bloody bowels. The poisoned arrows of the bog devils need only scratch a man, and a few hours later he would be squirting and screaming as his life ran down his legs in gouts of red and brown. *Whoever wins the Seastone Chair, I shall deal with the bog devils.*

Victarion donned a tall black warhelm, wrought in the shape of an iron kraken, its arms coiled down

around his cheeks to meet beneath his jaw. By then the boat was ready. "I put the chests into your charge," he told Nute as he climbed over the side. "See that they are strongly guarded." Much depended on the chests.

"As you command, Your Grace."

Victarion returned a sour scowl, "I am no king as yet." He clambered down into the boat.

Aeron Damphair was waiting for him in the surf with his waterskin slung beneath one arm. The priest was gaunt and tall, though shorter than Victarion. His nose rose like a shark's fin from a bony face, and his eyes were iron. His beard reached to his waist, and tangled ropes of hair slapped at the back of his legs when the wind blew. "Brother," he said as the waves broke white and cold around their ankles, "what is dead can never die."

"But rises again, harder and stronger." Victarion lifted off his helm and knelt. The bay filled his boots and soaked his breeches as Aeron poured a stream of saltwater down upon his brow. And so they prayed.

"Where is our brother Crow's Eye?" the Lord Captain demanded of Aeron Damphair when the prayers were done.

"His is the great tent of cloth-of-gold, there where the din is loudest. He surrounds himself with godless men and monsters, worse than before. In him our father's blood went bad."

"Our mother's blood as well." Victarion would not speak of kinslaying, here in this godly place beneath the bones of Nagga and the Grey King's hall, but many a night he dreamed of driving a mailed fist into Euron's smiling face, until the flesh split and his bad blood ran red and free. / *must not. I pledged my word to Balon.* "All have come?" he asked his priestly brother.

"All who matter. The captains and the kings." On the Iron Islands they were one and the same, for every captain was a king on his own deck, and every king must be a captain. "Do you mean to claim our father's crown?"

Victarion imagined himself seated on the Seastone Chair. "If the Drowned God wils it."

"The waves will speak," said Aeron Damphair, as he turned away. "Listen to the waves, brother"

"Aye." He wondered how his name would sound whispered by waves, and shouted by the captains and the kings.

If the cup should pass to me I will not set it by.

A crowd had gathered round to wish him well and seek his favor. Victarion saw men from every isle; Blacktydes, Tawneys, Orkwoods, Stonetrees, Wynches, and many more. The Goodbrothers of Old Wyk, The Goodbrothers of Great Wyk, and the Goodbrothers of Orkmont all had come. The Cods were there, though every decent man despised them. Humble Shepherds, Weavers, and Netleys rubbed shoulders with men from Houses ancient and proud; even humble Humbies, the blood of thralls and salt wives. A Volmark clapped Victarion on the back; two Sparrs pressed a wineskin into his hands. He drank deep, wiped his mouth, and let them bear him off to their cookfires, to listen to their talk of war and crowns and plunder, and the glory and the freedom of his reign.

That night the men of the Iron Fleet raised a huge sailcloth tent above the fideline, so Victarion might feast half a hundred famous captains on roast kid, salted cod, and lobster. Aeron came as well. He ate fish and drank water, whilst the captains quaffed sufficient ale to float the Iron Fleet. Victarion lost count of all those who promised him their voices. Many were men of note: Fralegg the Strong, clever Alwyn Sharp, humpbacked Hotho Harlaw. Hotho offered him a daughter for his queen. "I have no luck with wives," Victarion told him. His first wife died in childbed, giving him a stillborn daughter. His second had been stricken by a pox. And his third .. .

"A king must have an heir," Hotho insisted. "The Crow's Eye brings three sons to show before the kingsmoot."

"Bastards and mongrels. How old is this daughter?"

"Twelve," said Hotho. "Fair and fertile, newly flowered, with hair the color of honey. Her breasts are small as yet, but she has good hips. She takes after her mother, more than me."

Victarion knew that to mean the girl did not have a hump. Yet when he tried to picture her, he only saw the wife he'd killed. He had sobbed each time he struck her, and afterward carried her down to the rocks to give her to the crabs. "I will gladly look at the girl once I am crowned," he said. That was as much as Hotho dared hope for, and he shambled off content.

Baelor Blacktyde was more difficult to please. He sat by Vicfarion's elbow in his lambswool tunic of black and green vairy and plush sable cloak, looking more a green land lord than an ironman. "Balon was mad, Aeron is madder, and Euron is maddest of them all," he said. "What of you, Lord Captain? If I shout your name will you make an end of this mad war?"

Victarion frowned. "Would you have me bend the knee?"

"If need be. We cannot stand alone against all Westerns. King Robert proved that, to our grief. Balon would pay the iron price for freedom, he said, but our women bought Salon's crowns with empty beds. My mother was one such. The Old Way is dead."

"What is dead can never die, but rises harder and stronger. In a hundred years men will sing of Balon the Bold."

"Balon the Widower, call him. I will gladly trade his freedom for a father. Have you one to give me?"

When Victarion did not answer, Blacktyde snorted and moved off.

The tent grew hot and smoky. Two of Gorold Goodbrother's sons knocked a table over fighting; Will Humble lost a wager and had to eat his boot; Little Lenwood Tawney fiddled whilst Romny Weaver sang "The Bloody Cup" and "Steel Rain" and the other old reaving songs. Qarl the Maid and Eldred Codd danced the finger dance. A roar of laughter went up when one of Eldred's fingers landed in Ralf the Limper's wine cup.

A woman was amongst those laughing. Victarion rose and saw her by the tent flap, whispering something in the ear of Qarl the Maid that made him laugh as well. He had hoped she would not be fool enough to come here, yet the sight of her made him smile all the same. "Asha," he called in a commanding voice. "Niece."

She made her way to his side, lean and lithe in high boots of salt-stained leather, green woolen breeches and brown quilted tunic, a sleeveless leather jerkin half unlaced. "Nuncle." Asha

Greyjoy was tall for a woman, yet she had to stand on her toes to kiss his cheek. "I am pleased to see you at my queensmoot."

"Queensmoot?" Victarion had to laugh. "Are you drunk, niece? Sit. I did not spy your *Black Wind* on the strand."

"I beached her beneath Nome Goodbrother's castle and rode across the island." She sat upon a stool, and helped herself unasked to Nute the Barber's wine. Nute raised no objection he had passed out drunk some time ago. "Who holds the Moat?"

"Ralf Kenning. With the Young Wolf dead, only the bog devils remain to plague us."

"The Starks were not the only northmen. The Iron Throne has named the Lord of the Dreadfort as Warden of the North."

"Would you lesson me in warfare? I was fighting battles when you were sucking mother's milk."

"And losing battles too." Asha took a drink of wine.

Victarion did not like to be reminded of Fair Isle. "Every man should lose a battle in his youth, so he does not lose a war when he is old. You have not come to make a claim, I hope"

She teased him with a smile. "And if I have?"

"There are men who remember when you were a little girl, swimming naked in the sea and playing with your doll."

"I played with axes too"

"You did," he had to grant, "but a woman wants a husband, nor a crown. When I am king I'll give you one."

"My nuncle is so good to me. Shall I find a pretty wife for you, when I am queen?"

"I have no luck with wives. How long have you been here?"

"Long enough to see that Uncle Damphair has woken more than he intended. The Drumm means to make a claim, and Tarle the Thrice-Drowned was heard to say that Maron Volmark is the true heir of the black line."

"The king must be a kraken," "The Crow's Eye is a kraken. The elder brother comes before the younger." Asha leaned close. "But I am the child of King Balon's body, so I come before you both. Hear me, nuncle ..."

But then a sudden silence fell. The singing died, Little Lenwood Tawney lowered his fiddle, men turned their heads. Even the clatter of plates and knives was hushed.

A dozen newcomers had entered the feast tent. Victarion saw Pinchface Jon Myre, Torwold Browntooth, Left-Hand Lucas Codd. Germund Botley crossed his arms against the gilded breastplate he had taken off a Lannister captain during Balon's first rebellion. Orkwood of Orkmont stood beside him. Behind them were Stonehand, Quellon Humble, and the Red Oarsman with his fiery hair in braids. Rafe the Shepherd too, and Rate of Lordsport, and Qarl the Thrall.

And the Crow's Eye, Euron Greyjoy.

He looks unchanged, Victarion thought. *He looks the same as he did the day he laughed at me, and left* Euron had always been the most comely of Lord Quellon's sons, and the years had scarcely seemed to touch his beauty. His hair was still as black as a midnight sea, with never a whitecap to be seen, and his face was still smooth and pale beneath his neat dark beard. A black leather patch covered Euron's left eye, but his right was blue as a summer sky. *His smiling eye*, thought Victarion.

"Crow's Eye," he said.

"King Crow's Eye, brother." Euron smiled. There was something odd about his lips. They looked very dark in the lamplight, bruised and blue.

"We shall have no king but from the kingsmoot." The Damphair stood. "No godless man-"

"—may sit the Seastone Chair, aye." Euron glanced about the tent. "As it happens I have oft sat upon the Seastone Chair of late. It raises no objections." His smiling eye was glittering. "I ask you, friends, who knows more of gods than me? Horse gods and

fire gods, gods made of gold with gemstone eyes, gods carved of cedar wood, gods chiseled into mountains, gods of empty air ... I know every god there is. I have seen their peoples garland them with flowers, and shed the blood of goats and bulls and children in their names. And I have heard their people's prayers. All over this wide world in half a hundred tongues, they pray the same. Cure my withered

leg, make the maiden love me, grant me a healthy son. Save me, succor me, make me wealthy . . . *protect* me! Protect me from mine enemies, protect me from the darkness, protect me from the crabs inside my belly, from the horselords, from the slavers, from the sellswords at my door. Protect me from the *Silence*." *He* laughed. "*Godless?* Why, Aeron, I am the god-liest man ever to raise sail! You serve one god, Damphair, but I have served ten thousand. From Ib to Asshai, when men see *my* sails, they pray."

The priest was shaking, Victarion could see. He raised a boney finger. "They pray to trees and golden idols and goat-headed abominations. False gods . . ."

"Just so," said Euron, "and for that sin I kill them all. I spill their blood upon the sea and sow their screaming women with my seed. Their little gods cannot stop me, so plainly they are false gods. I am more devout than even you, Aeron. Perhaps it should be you who kneels to me for blessing."

The Red Oarsman laughed loudly at that, and the others took their lead from him,

"*Fools*," said the priest, "fools and thralls and blind men, that is what you are. Do you not see what stands before you?"

"A king," said Quellon Humble.

The Damphair spat, and strode out into the night.

When he was gone, the Crow's Eye turned his smiling eye upon Victarion. "Lord Captain, have you no greeting for a brother long away? Nor you, Asha? How fares your lady mother?"

"Poorly." Asha's tone was clipped and cold. "Some man made her a widow."

Euron shrugged. "I had heard the Storm God swept Balon to his death. Who is this man who slew him? Tell me his name, niece, so I might revenge myself on him."

Asha got to her feet. "You know his name as well as I. Three years you were gone from us, and yet *Silence* returns within a day of my lord father's death."

"Do you accuse me?" Euron asked mildly.

"Should I?" The sharpness in Asha's voice made Victarion frown. It was dangerous to speak so to the Crow's Eye, even when his smiling eye was shining with amusement.

"Do I command the winds?" the Crow's Eye asked his pets.

"No, Your Grace," said Orkwood of Orkmont.

"No man commands the winds," said Germund Botley.

"Would that you did," the Red Oarsman said. "You would sail wherever you liked, and never be becalmed."

"There you have it, from the mouths of three brave men," Euron said. "The *Silence* was at sea when Balon died. If you doubt an uncle's word, I give you leave to ask my crew."

"A crew of mutes? Aye, that would serve me well."

"A husband would serve you well." Euron turned to his followers again. "Torwold, I misremember, do you have a wife?"

"Only the one." Torwold Browntooth grinned, and showed how he had won his name.

"I am unwed," announced Left-Hand Lucas Codd.

"And for good reason," Asha said, "All *women* do despise the Cods as well. Don't look at me so mournful, Lucas. You still have your famous hand." She made a pumping motion with her fist.

Codd cursed, till the Crow's Eye put a hand upon his chest. "Was that courteous, Asha? You have wounded Lucas to the quick."

"Easier than wounding him in the prick. I throw an axe as well as any man, but when the target is so small ..."

"This girl forgets herself," snarled Pinchface Jon Myre. "Balon let her believe she was a man."

"I burnt the lion's fleet," Victarion insisted. "With mine own hands I flung the first torch onto his flagship."

"The Crow's Eye hatched the scheme." Asha put her hand upon his arm. "And killed your wife as well . . . did he not?"

Balon had commanded them not to speak of it, but Balon was dead. "He put a baby in her belly and made me do the killing. I would have killed him too, but Balon would have no kinslaying in his hall. He sent Euron into exile, never to return ..."

"... so long as Balon lived." Asha frowned.

Victarion looked at his fists. "She gave me horns. I had no choice." *Had it been known men would have laughed at me, as The Crow's Eye laughed when I confronted him. 'She came to me wet and willing,'* he boasted. *'It seems Victarion is big everywhere but where it matters.'* But he could not tell her that.

"I am sorry for you," said Asha, "and sorrier for her . . . but you leave me small choice but to claim the Seastone Chair myself."

You cannot. "Your breath is yours to waste, woman."

"It is," she said, and left him.

THE PRIEST

Only when his arms and legs were numb from the cold did Aeron Greyjoy struggle back to shore and don his robes again

He had run before the Crow's Eye as if he were still the weak thing he had been, but when the waves broke over his head they reminded once more that that man was dead. *I was reborn From the sea, a harder man and stronger.* No mortal man could frighten him, no more than the darkness could, nor the bones of his soul, the grey and grisly bones of his soul. *The sound of a door opening, the scream of a rusted iron hinge.*

The priest's robes crackled as he

pulled them down, still stiff with salt

from their last washing a fortnight past.

The wool clung to his wet chest, drinking the brine that ran down from his hair. He filled his waterskin and slung it over his shoulder.

As he strode across the strand, a drowned man returning from a call of nature stumbled into him in the darkness. "Damphair," he murmured. Aeron laid a hand upon his head, blessed him, and moved on. The ground rose beneath his feet, gently at first, then more steeply. When he felt scrub grass between his toes, he knew that he had left the strand behind. Slowly he

climbed, listening to the waves. *The sea is never weary. I must be 3S tireless.*

On the crown of the hill four-and-forty monstrous stone ribs rose from the earth like the trunks of great pale trees. The sight made Aeron's heart beat faster. Nagga had been the first sea dragon, the mightiest ever to rise from the waves. She fed on krakens and leviathans and drowned whole islands in her wrath, yet the Grey King had slain her and the Drowned God had changed her bones to stone so that men might never cease to wonder at the courage of the first of kings. Nagga's ribs became the beams and pillars of his longhall, just as her jaws became his throne. *For a thousand years and seven he reigned here, Aeron recalled. Here he took his mermaid wife and planned his wars against the Storm God. From here he ruled both stone and salt, wearing robes of woven seaweed and a tall pale crown made from Nagga's teeth.*

But that was in the dawn of days, when mighty men still dwelt on earth and sea. The hall had been warmed by Nagga's living fire, which the Grey King had made his thrall. On its walls hung tapestries woven from silver seaweed most pleasing to the eyes. The Grey King's warriors had feasted on the bounty of the sea at a table in the shape of a great starfish, whilst seated upon thrones carved from mother-of-pearl. *Gone, all the glory gone.* Men were smaller now. Their lives had grown short. The Storm God drowned

Nagga's fire after the Grey King's death, the chairs and tapestries had been stolen, the roof and walls had rotted away. Even the Grey King's great throne of fangs had been swallowed by the sea. Only Nagga's bones endured to remind the ironborn of

all the wonder that had been.

It is enough, thought Aeron Greyjoy.

Nine wide steps had been hewn from the stony hilltop. Behind rose the howling hills of Old Wyk, with mountains in the distance black and cruel. Aeron paused where the doors once stood, pulled the cork from his waterskin, took a swallow of salt water, and turned to face the sea. *We were born from the sea, and to the sea we must return*. Even here he could hear the ceaseless rumble of the waves, and feel the power of the god who lurked below the waters. Aeron went to his knees. *You have sent your people to me*, he prayed. *They have left their halls and hovels, their castles and their keeps, and come here to Nagga's bones, from every fishing village and every hidden vale. Now grant to them the wisdom to know the true king when he stands before them, and the strength to shun the false*. All night he prayed, for when the god was in him Aeron Greyjoy had no need of sleep, no more than the waves did, nor the fishes of the sea.

Dark clouds ran before the wind as the first tight stole into the world. The black sky went grey as slate; the black sea turned grey-green; the black mountains of Great Wyk across the bay put on the blue-green hues of soldier pines. As color stole back into the world, a hundred banners lifted and began to flap. Aeron beheld the silver fish of Botley, the bloody moon of Wynch, the dark green trees of Orkwood. He saw warhorns and leviathans and scythes, and everywhere the krakens great and golden. Beneath them, thralls and salt wives begin to move about, stirring coals into new life and gutting fish for the captains and the kings to break their fasts. The dawn light touched the stony strand, and he watched men wake from sleep, throwing aside their sealskin blankets as they called for their first horn of ale. *Drink deep*, he thought, *for we have god's work to do today*.

The sea was stirring too. The waves grew larger as the wind rose, sending plumes of spray to crash against the

longships. *The Drowned God wakes*, thought Aeron. He could hear his voice welling from the depths of the sea. *I shall be with you here this day, my strong and faithful servant*, the voice said. *No godless man will sit my Seastone Chair*,

It was there beneath the arch of Nagga's ribs that his drowned men found him, standing tall and stern with his long black hair blowing in the wind. "Is it time?" Rus asked. Aeron gave a nod and said, "It is. Go forth, and sound the summons."

The drowned men took up their driftwood cudgels and began to beat them one against the other as they walked back down the hill. Others joined them, and the clangor spread along the strand. Such a fearful clacking and a clattering it made, as if a hundred trees were pummeling one another with their limbs. Kettledrums began to beat as well, *boom-boom-boom-boom-boom, boom-boom-boom-boom-boom*. A warhorn bellowed, then another. AAAAAA oooooooooooooooooooooooooooooo.

Men left their fires to make their way toward the bones of the Grey King's hall; oarsmen, steersmen, sailmakers, shipwrights, the warriors with their axes and the fishermen with their nets. Some had thralls to serve them; some had salt wives. Others, who had sailed too often to the green lands, were attended by maesters and singers and knights. The common men crowded together in a crescent around the base of the knoll, with the thralls, children, and women toward the rear. The captains and the kings made their way up the slopes. Aeron Damphair saw cheerful Sigfry Stonetree, Andrik the Unsmiling, the knight Ser Harras Harlaw. Lord Baelor Blacktyde in his sable cloak stood beside The Stonehouse in ragged sealskin. Victarion loomed above all of them save Andrik. His brother wore no helm, but otherwise he was all in armor, his kraken cloak hanging golden from his shoulders. *He shall be our king. What man could look on him and doubt it?*

When the Damphair raised his bony hands the kettledrums and the warhorns fell silent, the drowned men lowered their cudgels, and all the voices stilled. Only the sound of the waves pounding remained, a roar no man could still. "We were born

from the sea, and to the sea we all return," Aeron

began, softly at first, so men would strain to hear. "The Storm God in his wrath plucked Balon from his castle and cast him down, yet now he feasts beneath the waves in the Drowned God's watery halls." He lifted his eyes to the sky. "*Balon is dead! The iron king is dead!*"

"*The king is dead!*" his drowned men shouted.

"Yet what is dead may never die, but rises again, harder and stronger!" he reminded them. "Balon has fallen, Balon my brother, who honored the Old Way and paid the iron price. Balon the Brave, Balon the Blessed, Balon Twice-Crowned, who won us back our freedoms and our god, Balon is dead . . . but an iron king shall rise again, to sit upon the Seastone Chair and rule the isles."

"*A king shall rise!*" they answered. "*He shall rise!*"

"He shall. He must." Aeron's voice thundered like the waves. "But who? Who shall sit in Balon's place? Who

shall rule these holy isles? Is he here among us now?" The priest spread his hands wide. "*Who shall be king over us?*"

A seagull screamed back at him. The crowd began to stir, like men waking from a dream. Each man looked at his neighbors, to see which of them might presume to claim a crown. *The Crow's Eye was never patient*, Aeron Damphair told himself, *Maybe he will speak first*. If so, it would be his undoing. The captains and the kings had come a long way to this feast, and would not choose the first dish set before them. *They will want to taste and sample, a bite of him, a nibble of the other, until they find the one that suits them best*.

Euron must have known that as well. He stood with his arms crossed amongst his mutes and monsters. Only the wind and the waves answered Aeron's call.

"The ironborn must have a king," the priest insisted, after a long silence. "I ask again. *Who shall be king over us?*"

"I will," came the answer from below.

At once a ragged cry of "Gylbert! Gylbert King!" went up. The captains gave way to let the claimant and his champions ascend the hill to stand at Aeron's side beneath the ribs of Nagga.

This would-be king was a tall spare lord with a melancholy visage, his lantern jaw shaved clean. His three champions took up their position two steps below him, bearing his sword and shield and banner. They shared a certain look with the tall lord, and Aeron took them for his sons. One unfurled his banner, a great black longship against a setting sun, "I am Gylbert Farwynd, Lord of the Lonely Light," the lord told the kingsmoot.

Aeron knew some Farwynds, a queer folk who held lands on westernmost shores of Great Wyk and the scattered isles beyond, rocks so small that most could support but a single household. Of those, the Lonely Light was the most distant, eight days sail to the northwest amongst rookeries of seals and sea

lions and the boundless grey oceans. The Farwynds there were even queerer than I he rest. Some said they were

skinchangers, unholy creatures who could take on the forms of sea lions, walrus, even spotted whales, the wolves of the wild sea.

Lord Gylbert began to speak. He told of a wondrous land beyond the Sunset Sea, a land without winter or want where death had no dominion. "Make me your king, and I shall lead you there," he cried. "We will build ten thousand ships as Nymeria once did, and take sail with all our people to the land beyond the sunset. There every man shall be a king, and every wife a queen."

His eyes, Aeron saw, were now grey, now blue, as changeable as the seas. *Mad eyes*, he thought, *fool's eyes*. The vision he spoke of was doubtless a snare set by the Storm God to lure the ironborn to destruction. The offerings that his men spilled out before the kingsmoot included sealskins and walrus tusks, arm rings made of whalebone,

warhorns banded in bronze. The captains looked and turned away, leaving lesser men to help themselves to the gifts. When the fool was done talking and his champions began to shout his name, only the Farwynds took up the cry, and not even all of them. Soon enough the cries of "Gylbert! Gylbert King!" faded away to silence. The gull screamed loudly above them, and landed atop one of Nagga's ribs as the Lord of the Lonely Light made his way back down the hill.

Aeron Damphair stepped forward once more. "I ask again. *Who shall be king over us?*"

"Me!" a deep voice boomed, and once more the crowd parted.

The speaker was borne up the hill in a carved driftwood chair carried on the shoulders of his grandsons. A great ruin of a man, twenty stones heavy and ninety years old, he was cloaked in a white bearskin. His own hair was snow white as well, and his huge beard covered him like a blanket from cheeks to thighs, so it was hard to tell where the beard ended and the pelt began. Though his grandsons were great strapping men, they struggled with his weight on the steep stone steps. Before the Grey King's hall they set him down, and three remained below him as his champions.

Sixty years ago, this one might well have won the favor of the moot, Aeron thought, but his hour is long past.

"Aye, me!" the man roared from where he sat, in a voice as huge as he was. "Why not? Who better? I am Erik Ironmaker, for them who's blind. Erik the Just. Erik Anvil-Breaker. Show them my hammer, Thormor." One of his champions lifted it up for all to see; a monstrous thing it was, its haft wrapped in old leather, its head a brick of steel as large as a loaf of bread. "I can't count how many hands I've smashed to pulp with that hammer," Erik said, "but might be some thief could tell you. I can't say how many heads I've crushed against my anvil neither, but there's some widows could. I could tell you all the deeds I've done in battle, but I'm eight-and-eighty and won't live long enough to finish. If old is wise, no one is wiser than me. If big is strong, no one's stronger. You want a king with heirs? I've more'n I can count. King Erik, aye, I like the sound o' that. Come, say it with me. *ERIK! ERIK*

ANVIL -BREAKER! ERIK KING!"

As his grandsons took up the cry, their own sons came forward with chests upon their shoulders. When they upended them at the base of the stone steps, a torrent of silver, bronze, and steel spilled forth; arm rings, collars, daggers, dirks, and throwing axes. A few captains snatched up the choicest items, and added their voices to the swelling chant. But no sooner had the cry begun to build than a woman's voice cut through it. "£r/A/"Men moved aside to let her through. With one foot on the lowest step, she said, "Erik, stand up."

A hush fell. The wind blew, waves broke against the shore, men mur-murred in each other's ears. Erik Ironmaker stared down at Asha Greyjoy. "Girl. Thrice-damned girl. What did you say?"

"Stand up, Erik," she called. "Stand up and I'll shout your name with all the rest. Stand up and I'll be the first to follow you. You want a crown, aye. Stand up and take it."

Elsewhere in the press, the Crow's Eye laughed. Erik glared at him. The big man's hands closed tight around the arms of his driftwood throne. His face went red, then purple. His arms trembled with effort. Aeron could see a thick blue vein pulsing in his neck as he struggled to rise. For a moment it seemed as though he might do it, but the breath went out of him all at once, and he groaned and sank back onto his cushion. Euron laughed all the louder. The big man hung his head and grew old, all in the blink of an eye. His grandsons carried him back down the hill.

"Who shall rule the ironborn?" Aeron Damphair called again. "Who shall be king over us?"

Men looked at one another. Some looked at Euron, some at Victarion, a few at Asha. Waves broke green and white against the longships. The gull cried once more, a raucous scream, forlorn. "Make your claim, Victarion," The Merlyn called. "Let us have done with this mummer's farce."

"When I am ready," Victarion shouted back.

Aeron was pleased. *It is better if he waits.*

The Drumm came next, another old man, though not so old as Erik. He climbed the hill on his own two legs.

and on his hip rode Red Rain, his famous sword, forged of Valyrian steel in the days before the Doom. His champions were men of note: his sons Denys and Donnel, both stout fighters, and between them Andrik the Unsmiling, a giant of a man with arms as thick as trees. It spoke well of The Drumm that such a man would stand for him.

"Where is it written that our king must be a kraken?" Drumm began. "What right has Pyke to rule us? Great Wyk is the largest isle, Harlaw the richest, Old Wyk the most holy. When the black line was consumed by dragonfire, the ironborn gave the primacy to Vickon Greyjoy, aye . . . but as *lord*, not king"

It was a good beginning. Aeron heard shouts of approval, but they dwindled as the old man began to tell of the glory of the Drumms, He spoke of Dale the Dread, Roryn the Reaver, the hundred sons of Gormond Drumm the Oldfather. He drew Red Rain and told them how Hilmar Drumm the Cunning had won the blade from a armored knight with wits and a wooden cudgel. He spoke of ships long lost and battles eight hundred years forgotten, and the crowd grew restive. He spoke and spoke, and then he spoke still more.

And when Drumm's chests were Thrown open, the captains saw the niggard's gifts he'd brought them. Ato *throne was ever bought with bronze*, the Damphair thought. The truth of that was plain to hear, as the cries of "*Drumm! Drumm! Dunstan King!*" died away.

Aeron could feel a tightness in his belly, and it seemed to him that the waves were pounding louder than before. *It is time*, he thought. *It is time for Victarion to make his claim.* "Who shall be king over us?" the priest cried once more, but this time his fierce black eyes found his brother in the crowd. "Nine sons were born from the loins of Quellon Greyjoy. One was mightier

than all the rest, and knew no fear."

Victarion met his eyes, and nodded. The captains parted before him as he climbed the steps. "Brother, give me blessing," he said when he reached the top. He knelt and bowed his head. Aeron uncorked his waterskin and poured a stream of sea water down upon his brow. "*What is dead can never die*," the priest said, and

Victarion replied, "*but rises again, harder and stronger.*"

When Victarion rose, his champions arrayed themselves beneath him; Rafe the Limper, Red Rafe Storehouse, and Nute the Barber, noted warriors all. Stonehouse bore the Greyjoy banner; the golden kraken on a field as black as the midnight sea. As soon as it unfurled the captains and the kings began to shout out the Lord Captain's name. Vicfarion waited till they quieted, then said, "You all know me. If you want sweet words, look elsewhere. I have no singer's tongue. I have an axe, and I have these." He raised his huge mailed hands up to show them, and Nute the Barber displayed his axe, a fearsome piece of steel. "I was a loyal brother," Victarion went on. "When Balon was wed, it was me he sent to Harlaw to bring him back his bride. I led his long-ships into many a battle, and never lost but one. The first time Balon took a crown, it was me sailed into Lannisport to singe the lion's tail. The second time, it was me he sent to skin the Young Wolf should he come howling home. All you'll get from me is more of what you got from Balon. That's all I have to say.'

With that his champions began to chant: "*VICTARION! VICTARION! VIC-TARIONKINO!*" Below, his men were spilling out his chests, a cascade of silver, gold, and gems, a wealth of plunder. Captains scrambled to seize the richest pieces, shouting as they did so. "*VICTARION! VICTARION! VICTARION KING!*" heron watched the Crow's Eye. *Will he speak now, or let the kingsmoot run its course?* Orkwood of Orkmont was whispering in Euron's ear.

But it was not Euron who put an end to the shouting, it was the thrice-damned *woman*. She put two fingers in her mouth and *whistled*, a sharp shrill sound that cut through the tumult like a knife through curds. "Nuncle! *Nuncle!*" Bending, she snatched up a twisted golden collar, and bounded up the steps. Nute seized her by the arm, and for half a heartbeat Aeron was hopeful that his brother's champions would keep the foolish girl silent, but Asha wrenched free of the Barber's hand and said something to Red Ralf that made him step aside. As she pushed past them, the cheering died away. She was Balon Greyjoy's daughter, and the crowd was curious to hear what she would say.

"It was good of you to bring such gifts to my queensmoot, nuncle," she said to Victarion, "but you need not have worn so much armor. I promise not to hurt you." Guffaws sounded, as Asha turned to face the captains. "There's no one braver than my nuncle, no one stronger, no one fiercer in a fight. And he counts to ten as quick as any man, I have seen him do it... though when he needs to go to twenty he does take off his boots." That made them laugh again. "He has no sons, though. His wives keep dying. The Crow's Eye is his elder and has a better claim ..."

"He does!" the Red Oarsman shouted from below.

"Ah, but my claim is better still." Asha set the collar on her head at a jaunty angle, so the gold gleamed against her dark hair. "Balon's brother cannot come before Balon's son!"

"Balon's sons are dead," cried Rafe the Limper. "All I see is Balon's little daughter!"

"Daughter?" Asha slipped a hand beneath her jerkin. "Oho! What's this? Shall I show you? Some of you have not seen one since they weaned you." They laughed again. "Teats on a king are a terrible thing, is that the song? Rafe, you have me, I am a woman . . . though not an old woman like you. Rafe the Limper . . . shouldn't that be Rafe the Limp?" Asha drew a dirk from

between her breasts. "I'm a mother too, and here's my suckling babe!" She held it up. "And here, my champions." They pushed past Victarion's three to stand below her: Qarl the Maid, Tristifer Botley, and the knight Ser Harras Harlaw, whose sword Nightfall was as storied as Dunstan Drumm's Red Rain. "My nuncle said you know him. You know me too—"

"I want to know you better!" someone shouted.

"Go home and know your wife," Asha shot back. "Nuncle says he'll give you more of what my father gave you. Well, what was that? Gold and glory, some will say. *Freedom*, ever sweet. Aye, it's so, he gave us that . . . and widows too, as Lord Blacktyde will tell you. How many of you had your homes put to the torch when Robert came? How many had daughters raped and despoiled? Burnt towns and broken castles, my father gave you that. *Defeat* was what he gave you. Nuncle here will give you more. Nof me."

"What will you give us?" asked Lucas Codd. "Knitting?"

"Aye, Lucas. I'll knit us all a kingdom." She tossed her dirk from hand to hand, "We need to take a lesson from The Young Wolf, who won every battle .,. and lost all."

"A wolf is not a kraken," Victarion objected. "What the kraken grasps it does nor loose, be it longship or leviathan,"

"And what *have* we grasped, nuncle? The north? What is that, but leagues and leagues of leagues and leagues, far

from the sound of the sea? We have taken Moat Cailin, Deepwood Motte, Torrhen's Square, even *Winterfell*. What do we have to show for it?" She beckoned, and her *Black Wind* men pushed forward, chests of oak and iron on their shoulders. "I give you the wealth of the Stony Shore," Asha said as the first was upended. An avalanche of pebbles clattered forth, cascading down the steps; pebbles grey and black and white, worn smooth by the sea. "I give you The riches of Deepwood," she said, as the second chest was opened. Pinecones came pouring out, to roll and bounce down into the crowd. "And last, the gold of Winterfell." from the third chest came yellow turnips, round and hard and big as man's head. They landed amidst the pebbles and the pinecones. Asha stabbed one with her dirk. "Harmund Sharp," she shouted, "your son Harrag died at Winterfell, for this." She pulled the Turnip off her blade and tossed it to him. "You have other sons, I think. If you'd trade their lives for turnips, shout my nun-cle's name!"

"And if I shout *your* name?" Harmund demanded. "What then?"

"Peace," said Asha. "Land. Victory. I'll give you Sea Dragon Point and the Stony Shore, black earth and tall trees and stones enough for every younger son to build a hall. We'll have the north-men too ... as friends, to stand beside us against the Iron Throne. So the choice is simple. Crown me, for peace & and victory. Or crown my nuncle, for

more war and more defeat." She sheathed her dirk again. "What will you have, ironmen?"

"**VICTORY!**" shouted Rodrik the Reader, his hands cupped about his mouth. "*Victory, and Asha!*"

"**ASHA!**" Lord Baelor Blacktyde echoed. "**ASHA QUEEN!**"

Asha's own crew took up the cry. "**ASHA! ASHA! ASHA QUEEN!**" They stamped their feet and shook their fists and yelled as the Damphair listened in disbelief. *She would leave her Father's work undone!* Yet Tristifer

smiling eye upon the captains and the kings, but Aeron could feel his oTher eye as well, the one That he kept hidden.