

GAME OF THRONES
A NEW ORIGINAL SERIES FROM HBO

#1 NEW YORK TIMES BESTSELLER

GEORGE R.R.
MARTIN



A FEAST FOR
CROWS

Praise for
GEORGE R. R. MARTIN
and
A SONG OF ICE AND FIRE

A FEAST FOR CROWS

“Of those who work in the grand epic-fantasy tradition, Martin is by far the best. In fact ... this is as good a time as any to proclaim him the American Tolkien.... What really distinguishes Martin, and what marks him as a major force for evolution in fantasy, is his refusal to embrace a vision of the world as a Manichaeian struggle between Good and Evil.

Tolkien’s work has enormous imaginative force, but you have to go elsewhere for moral complexity. Martin’s wars are multifaceted and ambiguous, as are the men and women who wage them and the gods who watch them and chortle, and somehow that makes them mean more.

A Feast for Crows isn’t pretty elves against gnarly orcs. It’s men and women slugging it out in the muck, for money and power and lust and love.”

—*Time*

“The complicated machinations as various characters jockey for power and position are only half of the reason to pick up this immensely entertaining series. With his introduction of characters that aren’t as black and white as those typical of the genre, Martin has brought depth and believability to the usually cartoonish fantasy genre.... Martin’s A Song of Ice and Fire series is that rare, once-in-a-generation work of fiction that manages to entertain readers while elevating an entire genre to fine literature.”

—*Milwaukee Journal Sentinel*

“Martin’s command of English and of characterization and setting remains equal to the task of the fantasy megasaga.... Good news for readers of robust appetite.”

—*Booklist*

“What’s A Song of Ice and Fire? It’s the only fantasy series I’d put on a level with J.R.R. Tolkien’s *The Lord of the Rings*. It’s way better than the Harry Potter books and definitely not for children. It’s a fantasy series for hip, smart people, even those who don’t read fantasy.”

—*Detroit Free Press/Chicago Tribune*

“A Song of Ice and Fire is firmly at the top of the bestseller lists, probably because it’s the best fantasy series out there.”

—*Detroit Free Press*

“George R. R. Martin has created the unlikely genre of the realpolitik fantasy novel. Complete with warring kings, noble heroes and backroom dealings, it’s addictive reading and reflects our current world a lot better than *The Lord of the Rings*.”

—*Rolling Stone*

“Martin has created a full, rich and interesting world filled with colorful characters. Some are heroic, some funny, some sinister, and alliances and betrayals come fast and frequently. Beautiful faces as often as not hide ugly minds, and few people are what they seem at first glance. One is just as likely to be tortured and killed at the hands of a priest or nun as a knight or bandit.... The plots and subplots are too tangled to try and unravel here; the intrigue is thick, the action brutal and the sex and violence worthy of at least an ‘R’ rating. This is a series for adults, not children, and readers expecting clean-cut Harry Potter will find themselves less than comfortable in Martin’s world. But if you’re looking for a thick and delicious book to curl up with on rainy and cold fall evenings, this is just the ticket.”

—*Portland Oregonian*

“Mainstream readers ... have a great treat ahead of them in Martin. *A Feast for Crows* is a fast-paced, emotionally complex, masterfully written adventure.... Most fantasy writers follow the battle-of-good-and-evil model of their great predecessor, J.R.R. Tolkien. Not Martin. He draws his protagonists from several warring families and shows what’s happening through their eyes, switching with each chapter and telling their stories so compellingly that we root for them all to win—even though if any of them does, it will be a disaster for the others.... Martin’s writing is as good as ever: His imaginary places are as vivid and

thoroughly imagined, his characters as consistent and believable, his blood as wet and red. As for the missing characters, like the long, looming winter, they're coming soon."

—*Newsday*

"Another splendid installment."

—*Time Out London*

"Featuring a large, well-fleshed-out cast of characters, excellent writing (of the sort that made T.H. White's *Once and Future King* a classic), gritty details and a page-turning plot, Martin's latest novel in his A Song of Ice and Fire fantasy series continues to do the genre proud."

—STL today.com

"For a succinct summation of Martin's medieval fantasy series, imagine a mix of the literary quality of T.H. White's *Once and Future King*, the in-your-face, you-are-there grittiness of a movie like *Braveheart* and the sort of intricate character development found in a quality television show like *Lost*.... Vast, complex and undeniably entertaining.... Once in a while, there are books and writers that manage to elevate an entire genre. Stephen King did so with horror. George R. R. Martin's A Song of Ice and Fire series has taken fantasy out of the two-dimensional, black and white realm where it once happily existed and dragged it kicking and screaming into a land of believable characters, ambiguous situations, and bloody, sometimes uncertain denouements.

—*Denver Post*

"Martin doesn't disappoint.... A Song of Ice and Fire is a thrilling fantasy series.... Martin's world and characters are so complex that one wonders whether there can ever be an answer to all the riddles."

—*Daily Californian*

A STORM OF SWORDS

"One of the more rewarding examples of gigantism in contemporary fantasy ... richly imagined."

—*Publishers Weekly* (starred review)

“George R. R. Martin continues to take epic fantasy to new levels of insight and sophistication, resonant with the turmoils and stress of the world we call our own.”

—*Locus*

“Martin creates a gorgeously and intricately textured world, peopled with absolutely believable and fascinating characters.”

—*Cleveland Plain Dealer*

“High fantasy doesn’t get any better than this.”

—*Portland Oregonian*

“A riveting continuation of a series whose brilliance continues to dazzle.”

—*Patriot News*

“Enough grit and action to please even the most macho ... a page turner.”

—*Dallas Morning News*

“The latest and the best in a powerful ... cycle that delivers real people and a page-turning plot.”

—*Contra Costa Times*

“Like a cross between a complicated game of chess, a quirky Stephen King tale and *Braveheart*, Martin’s epic advances his series with gritty characterizations, bold plot moves and plenty of action.”

—*St. Louis Post-Dispatch*

“The third volume of what is shaping up to be one of the major fantasy works of all time ... even the minor characters are realistic and engaging. This is one of the major fantasy events of the year, and the series as a whole is likely to achieve the same status as the works of Caball, Tolkien and Eddison. If you are a fantasy fan and you’re not reading Martin, you’re cheating yourself of some of the best the field has to offer.”

—*Science Fiction Chronicle*

“Martin’s magnum opus is a powerful and stunning achievement. Don’t miss it.”

—scifi.com

A CLASH OF KINGS

“A truly epic fantasy set in a world bedecked with 8,000 years of history, beset by an imminent winter that will last ten years and bedazzled by swords and spells wielded to devastating effect. Here he provides a banquet for fantasy lovers with large appetites.”

—*Publishers Weekly* (starred review)

“Martin amply fulfills the first volume’s promise and continues what seems destined to be one of the best fantasy series ever written.”

—*Denver Post*

“High fantasy with a vengeance.”

—*San Diego Union-Tribune*

“Rivals T. H. White’s *Once and Future King*.”

—*Des Moines Register*

“So complex, fascinating and well-rendered, readers will almost certainly be hooked by the whole series.”

—*Oregonian*

“The richness of this invented world and its cultures lends Mr. Martin’s novels the feeling of medieval history rather than fiction—except, of course, that he knows how to entertain.”

—*Dallas Morning News*

A GAME OF THRONES

“Reminiscent of T. H. White’s *The Once and Future King*, this novel is an absorbing combination of the mythic, the sweepingly historical, and the intensely personal.”

—*Chicago Sun-Times*

“I always expect the best from George R. R. Martin, and he always delivers. *A Game of Thrones* grabs hold and won’t let go. It’s brilliant.”

—Robert Jordan

“Such a splendid tale and such a fantistorical! I read my eyes out.”

—Anne McCaffrey

“Martin makes a triumphant return to high fantasy... [His] trophy case is already stuffed with major prizes, including Hugos, Nebulas, Locus awards and a Bram Stoker. He’s probably going to have to add another shelf, at least.”

—*Publishers Weekly* (starred review)

“A vast, rich saga, with splendid characters and an intricate plot flawlessly articulated against a backdrop of real depth and texture.”

—*Kirkus Reviews*

“The keen and complex human characters and the convincing force of their surroundings operate as magic ... setting George R. R. Martin’s first fantasy epic well above the norms of the genre.”

—*Locus*

“It is perhaps the best of the epic fantasies—readable and realistic.”

—Marion Zimmer Bradley

“The major fantasy of the decade ... compulsively readable.”

—*Denver Post*

“George R. R. Martin is one of our very best science fiction writers, and this is one of his very best books.”

—Raymond E. Feist

“We have been invited to a grand feast and pageant: George R. R. Martin has unveiled for us an intensely realized, romantic but realistic world... If the next two volumes are as good as this one, it will be a wonderful feast indeed.”

—*Chicago Sun-Times*

“I would be very surprised if this is not the major fantasy publishing event of 1996, and I’m already impatient for the next installment.”

—*Science Fiction Chronicle*

“A colorful, majestic tapestry of characters, action and plot that deserves a spot on any reader’s wall ... the pages seem to pass in a blur as you

read.”
—*Albuquerque Journal*

“George Martin is assuredly a new master craftsman in the guild of heroic fantasy.”
—Katharine Kerr

“*A Game of Thrones* offers the rich tapestry that the very best fantasy demands: iron and steel within the silk, grandeur within the wonder, and characters torn between deep love and loyalty. Few created worlds are as imaginative and diverse. George R. R. Martin is to be applauded.”
—Janny Wurts

“A dazzling fantasy adventure ... with a great cast of characters that weave a tapestry of court intrigue, skullduggery, vicious betrayal and greathearted sacrifice.”
—Julian May

“Terrific, incredibly powerful, with phenomenal characterizations and exquisite writing.”
—Theresa Medeiros

“The characterization was superb, the story vivid and heartbreaking ... when is the next one coming out?”
—Linda Howard

BY GEORGE R. R. MARTIN

A SONG OF ICE AND FIRE
Book One: *A Game of Thrones*
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A FEAST FOR CROWS

**BOOK FOUR OF
A SONG OF ICE AND FIRE**

GEORGE R. R. MARTIN



BANTAM BOOKS • NEW YORK

A Feast for Crows is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places, and incidents either are the product of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously. Any resemblance to actual persons, living or dead, events, or locales is entirely coincidental.

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Published in the United States by Bantam Books, an imprint of The Random House Publishing Group, a division of Random House, Inc., New York.

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Originally published in hardcover in the United States by Bantam Spectra, a division of Random House, Inc., in 2005.

This book contains an excerpt from the forthcoming book *A Dance with Dragons* by George R. R. Martin. This excerpt has been set for this edition only and may not reflect the final content of the forthcoming edition.

ISBN 978-0-553-58202-4

eBook ISBN 978-0-553-90032-3

Maps by Jeffrey L. Ward

Heraldic crests by Virginia Norey

www.bantamdell.com

v3.1_r10

for Stephen Boucher
wizard of Windows, dragon of DOS
without whom this book would have
been written in crayon

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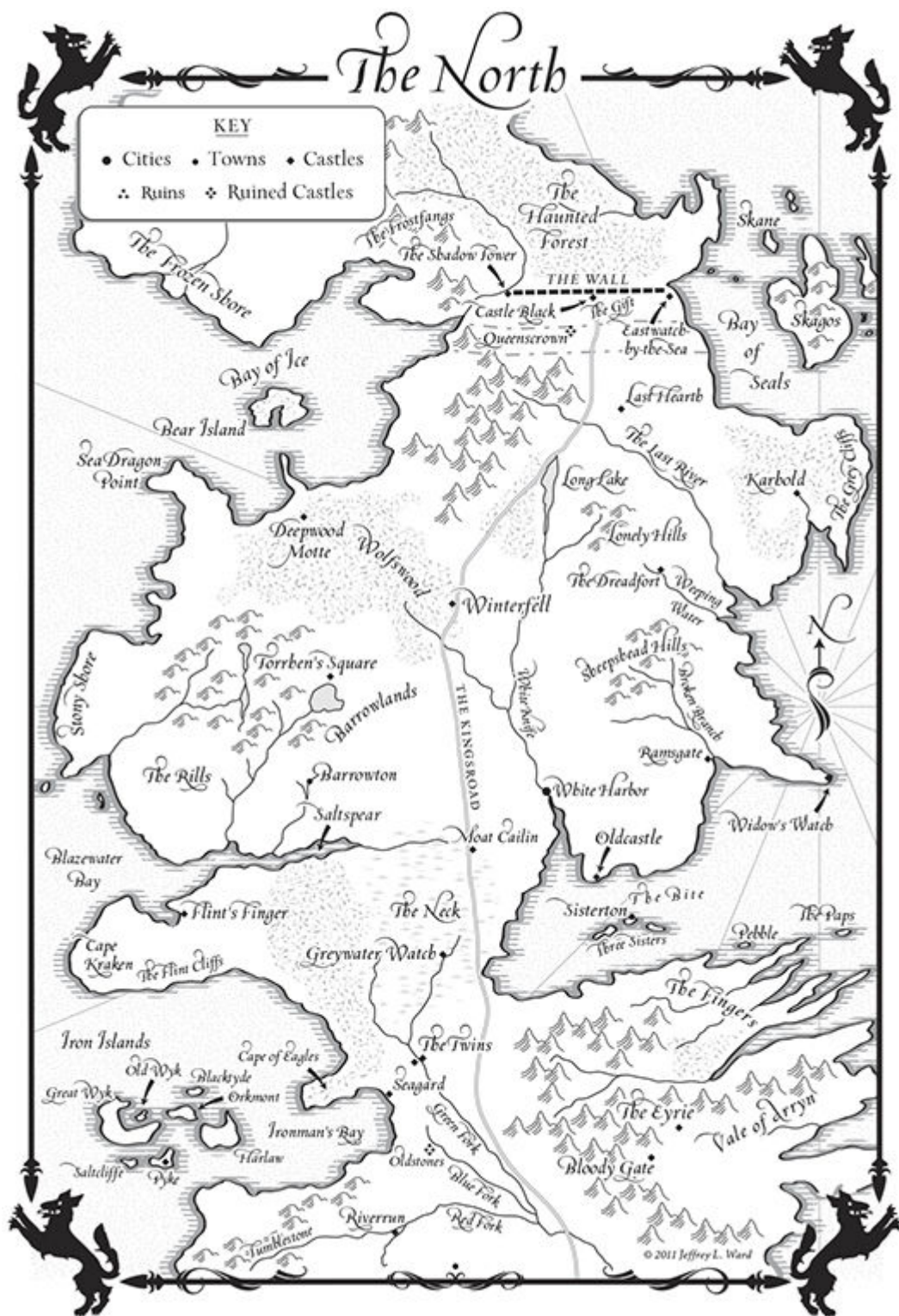
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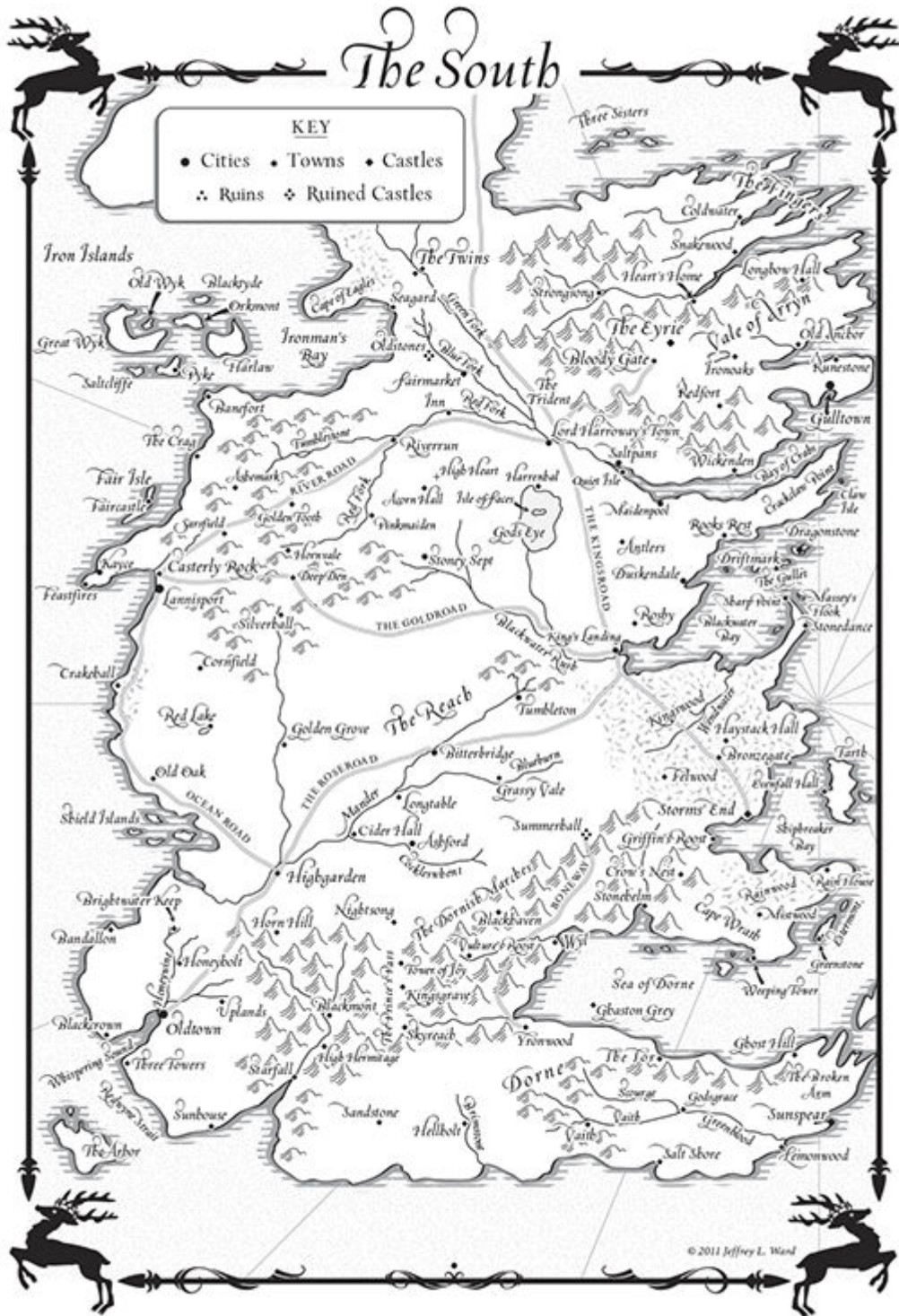
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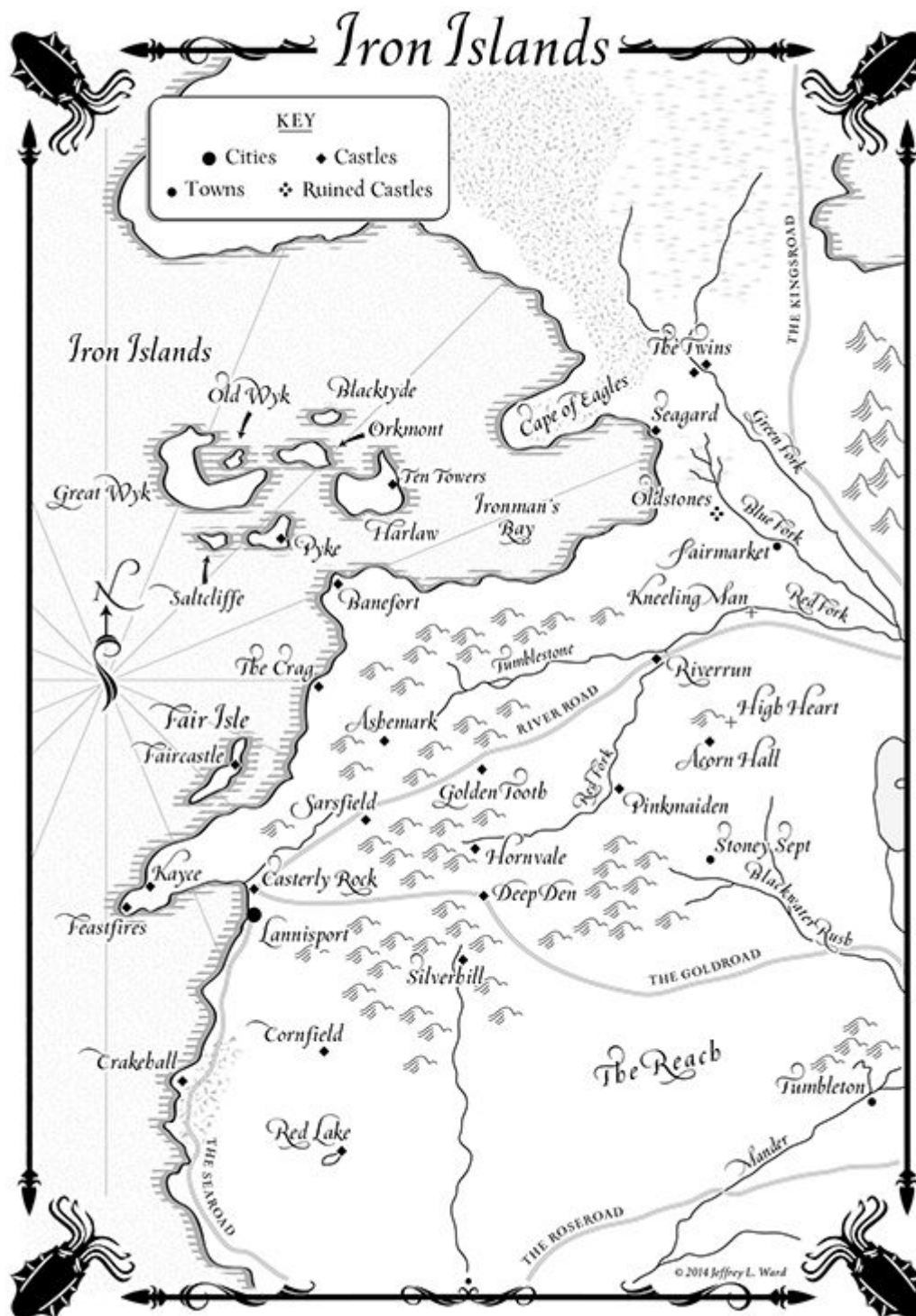
Acknowledgments

About The Author

Excerpt from A Dance with Dragons







Click here to view the maps in greater detail:

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PROLOGUE

Dragons,” said Mollander. He snatched a withered apple off the ground and tossed it hand to hand. “Throw the apple,” urged Alleras the Sphinx. He slipped an arrow from his quiver and nocked it to his bowstring.

“I should like to see a dragon.” Roone was the youngest of them, a chunky boy still two years shy of manhood. “I should like that very much.”

And I should like to sleep with Rosey’s arms around me, Pate thought. He shifted restlessly on the bench. By the morrow the girl could well be his. *I will take her far from Oldtown, across the narrow sea to one of the Free Cities.* There were no maesters there, no one to accuse him.

He could hear Emma’s laughter coming through a shuttered window overhead, mingled with the deeper voice of the man she was entertaining. She was the oldest of the serving wenches at the Quill and Tankard, forty if she was a day, but still pretty in a fleshy sort of way. Rosey was her daughter, fifteen and freshly flowered. Emma had decreed that Rosey’s maidenhead would cost a golden dragon. Pate had saved nine silver stags and a pot of copper stars and pennies, for all the good that would do him. He would have stood a better chance of hatching a real dragon than saving up enough coin to make a golden one.

“You were born too late for dragons, lad,” Armen the Acolyte told Roone. Armen wore a leather thong about his neck, strung with links of pewter, tin, lead, and copper, and like most acolytes he seemed to believe that novices had turnips growing from their shoulders in place of heads. “The last one perished during the reign of King Aegon the Third.”

“The last dragon in *Westeros*,” insisted Mollander.

“Throw the apple,” Alleras urged again. He was a comely youth, their Sphinx. All the serving wenches doted on him. Even Rosey would sometimes touch him on the arm when she brought him wine, and Pate had to gnash his teeth and pretend not to see.

“The last dragon in *Westeros was* the last dragon,” said Armen doggedly. “That is well known.”

“The *apple*,” Alleras said. “Unless you mean to eat it.”

“Here.” Dragging his clubfoot, Mollander took a short hop, whirled, and whipped the apple sidearm into the mists that hung above the Honeywine. If not for his foot, he would have been a knight like his father. He had the strength for it in those thick arms and broad shoulders. Far and fast the apple flew ...

... but not as fast as the arrow that whistled after it, a yard-long shaft of golden wood fletched with scarlet feathers. Pate did not see the arrow catch the apple, but he heard it. A soft *chunk* echoed back across the river, followed by a splash.

Mollander whistled. “You cored it. Sweet.”

Not half as sweet as Rosey. Pate loved her hazel eyes and budding breasts, and the way she smiled every time she saw him. He loved the dimples in her cheeks. Sometimes she went barefoot as she served, to feel the grass beneath her feet. He loved that too. He loved the clean fresh smell of her, the way her hair curled behind her ears. He even loved her toes. One night she’d let him rub her feet and play with them, and he’d made up a funny tale for every toe to keep her giggling.

Perhaps he would do better to remain on this side of the narrow sea. He could buy a donkey with the coin he’d saved, and he and Rosey could take turns riding it as they wandered *Westeros*. Ebrose might not think him worthy of the silver, but Pate knew how to set a bone and leech a fever. The smallfolk would be grateful for his help. If he could learn to cut hair and shave beards, he might even be a barber. *That would be enough*, he told himself, *so long as I had Rosey*. Rosey was all that he wanted in the world.

That had not always been so. Once he had dreamed of being a maester in a castle, in service to some open-handed lord who would honor him for his wisdom and bestow a fine white horse on him to thank him for his service. How high he'd ride, how nobly, smiling down at the smallfolk when he passed them on the road ...

One night in the Quill and Tankard's common room, after his second tankard of fearsomely strong cider, Pate had boasted that he would not always be a novice. "Too true," Lazy Leo had called out. "You'll be a former novice, herding swine."

He drained the dregs of his tankard. The torchlit terrace of the Quill and Tankard was an island of light in a sea of mist this morning. Downriver, the distant beacon of the Hightower floated in the damp of night like a hazy orange moon, but the light did little to lift his spirits.

The alchemist should have come by now. Had it all been some cruel jape, or had something happened to the man? It would not have been the first time that good fortune had turned sour on Pate. He had once counted himself lucky to be chosen to help old Archmaester Walgrave with the ravens, never dreaming that before long he would also be fetching the man's meals, sweeping out his chambers, and dressing him every morning. Everyone said that Walgrave had forgotten more of ravencraft than most maesters ever knew, so Pate assumed a black iron link was the least that he could hope for, only to find that Walgrave could not grant him one. The old man remained an archmaester only by courtesy. As great a maester as once he'd been, now his robes concealed soiled smallclothes oft as not, and half a year ago some acolytes found him weeping in the Library, unable to find his way back to his chambers. Maester Gormon sat below the iron mask in Walgrave's place, the same Gormon who had once accused Pate of theft.

In the apple tree beside the water, a nightingale began to sing. It was a sweet sound, a welcome respite from the harsh screams and endless *quorking* of the ravens he had tended all day long. The white ravens knew his name, and would mutter it to each other whenever they caught sight of him, "*Pate, Pate, Pate,*" until he wanted to scream. The big white birds were Archmaester Walgrave's pride. He wanted them to eat him when he died, but Pate half suspected that they meant to eat him too.

Perhaps it was the fearsomely strong cider—he had not come here to drink, but Alleras had been buying to celebrate his copper link, and guilt had made him thirsty—but it almost sounded as if the nightingale were

trilling *gold for iron, gold for iron, gold for iron*. Which was passing strange, because that was what the stranger had said the night Rosey brought the two of them together. “Who are you?” Pate had demanded of him, and the man had replied, “An alchemist. I can change iron into gold.” And then the coin was in his hand, dancing across his knuckles, the soft yellow gold shining in the candlelight. On one side was a three-headed dragon, on the other the head of some dead king. *Gold for iron*, Pate remembered, *you won’t do better. Do you want her? Do you love her?* “I am no thief,” he had told the man who called himself the alchemist, “I am a novice of the Citadel.” The alchemist had bowed his head, and said, “If you should reconsider, I shall return here three days hence, with my dragon.”

Three days had passed. Pate had returned to the Quill and Tankard, still uncertain what he was, but instead of the alchemist he’d found Mollander and Armen and the Sphinx, with Roone in tow. It would have raised suspicions not to join them.

The Quill and Tankard never closed. For six hundred years it had been standing on its island in the Honeywine, and never once had its doors been shut to trade. Though the tall, timbered building leaned toward the south the way novices sometimes leaned after a tankard, Pate expected that the inn would go on standing for another six hundred years, selling wine and ale and fearsomely strong cider to rivermen and seamen, smiths and singers, priests and princes, and the novices and acolytes of the Citadel.

“Oldtown is not the world,” declared Mollander, too loudly. He was a knight’s son, and drunk as drunk could be. Since they brought him word of his father’s death upon the Blackwater, he got drunk most every night. Even in Oldtown, far from the fighting and safe behind its walls, the War of the Five Kings had touched them all ... although Archmaester Benedict insisted that there had never been a war of five kings, since Renly Baratheon had been slain before Balon Greyjoy had crowned himself.

“My father always said the world was bigger than any lord’s castle,” Mollander went on. “Dragons must be the least of the things a man might find in Qarth and Asshai and Yi Ti. These sailors’ stories ...”

“... are stories told by sailors,” Armen interrupted. “*Sailors*, my dear Mollander. Go back down to the docks, and I wager you’ll find sailors

who'll tell you of the mermaids that they bedded, or how they spent a year in the belly of a fish."

"How do you know they didn't?" Mollander thumped through the grass, looking for more apples. "You'd need to be down the belly yourself to swear they weren't. One sailor with a story, aye, a man might laugh at that, but when oarsmen off four different ships tell the same tale in four different tongues ..."

"The tales are *not* the same," insisted Armen. "Dragons in Asshai, dragons in Qarth, dragons in Meereen, Dothraki dragons, dragons freeing slaves ... each telling differs from the last."

"Only in details." Mollander grew more stubborn when he drank, and even when sober he was bullheaded. "All speak of *dragons*, and a beautiful young queen."

The only dragon Pate cared about was made of yellow gold. He wondered what had happened to the alchemist. *The third day. He said he'd be here.*

"There's another apple near your foot," Alleras called to Mollander, "and I still have two arrows in my quiver."

"Fuck your quiver." Mollander scooped up the windfall. "This one's wormy," he complained, but he threw it anyway. The arrow caught the apple as it began to fall and sliced it clean in two. One half landed on a turret roof, tumbled to a lower roof, bounced, and missed Armen by a foot. "If you cut a worm in two, you make two worms," the acolyte informed them.

"If only it worked that way with apples, no one would ever need go hungry," said Alleras with one of his soft smiles. The Sphinx was always smiling, as if he knew some secret jape. It gave him a wicked look that went well with his pointed chin, widow's peak, and dense mat of close-cropped jet-black curls.

Alleras would make a maester. He had only been at the Citadel for a year, yet already he had forged three links of his maester's chain. Armen might have more, but each of his had taken him a year to earn. Still, he would make a maester too. Roone and Mollander remained pink-necked novices, but Roone was very young and Mollander preferred drinking to reading.

Pate, though ...

He had been five years at the Citadel, arriving when he was no more than three-and-ten, yet his neck remained as pink as it had been on the

day he first arrived from the westerlands. Twice had he believed himself ready. The first time he had gone before Archmaester Vaellyn to demonstrate his knowledge of the heavens. Instead he learned how Vinegar Vaellyn had earned that name. It took Pate two years to summon up the courage to try again. This time he submitted himself to kindly old Archmaester Ebrose, renowned for his soft voice and gentle hands, but Ebrose's sighs had somehow proved just as painful as Vaellyn's barbs.

"One last apple," promised Alleras, "and I will tell you what I suspect about these dragons."

"What could you know that I don't?" grumbled Mollander. He spied an apple on a branch, jumped up, pulled it down, and threw. Alleras drew his bowstring back to his ear, turning gracefully to follow the target in flight. He loosed his shaft just as the apple began to fall.

"You always miss your last shot," said Roone.

The apple splashed down into the river, untouched.

"See?" said Roone.

"The day you make them all is the day you stop improving." Alleras unstrung his longbow and eased it into its leather case. The bow was carved from goldenheart, a rare and fabled wood from the Summer Isles. Pate had tried to bend it once, and failed. *The Sphinx looks slight, but there's strength in those slim arms*, he reflected, as Alleras threw a leg across the bench and reached for his wine cup. "The dragon has three heads," he announced in his soft Dornish drawl.

"Is this a riddle?" Roone wanted to know. "Sphinxes always speak in riddles in the tales."

"No riddle." Alleras sipped his wine. The rest of them were quaffing tankards of the fearsomely strong cider that the Quill and Tankard was renowned for, but he preferred the strange, sweet wines of his mother's country. Even in Oldtown such wines did not come cheap.

It had been Lazy Leo who dubbed Alleras "the Sphinx." A sphinx is a bit of this, a bit of that: a human face, the body of a lion, the wings of a hawk. Alleras was the same: his father was a Dornishman, his mother a black-skinned Summer Islander. His own skin was dark as teak. And like the green marble sphinxes that flanked the Citadel's main gate, Alleras had eyes of onyx.

"No dragon has ever had three heads except on shields and banners," Armen the Acolyte said firmly. "That was a heraldic charge, no more. Furthermore, the Targaryens are all dead."

“Not all,” said Alleras. “The Beggar King had a sister.”

“I thought her head was smashed against a wall,” said Roone.

“No,” said Alleras. “It was Prince Rhaegar’s young son Aegon whose head was dashed against the wall by the Lion of Lannister’s brave men. We speak of Rhaegar’s sister, born on Dragonstone before its fall. The one they called Daenerys.”

“The *Stormborn*. I recall her now.” Mollander lifted his tankard high, sloshing the cider that remained. “Here’s to her!” He gulped, slammed his empty tankard down, belched, and wiped his mouth with the back of his hand. “Where’s Rosey? Our rightful queen deserves another round of cider, wouldn’t you say?”

Armen the Acolyte looked alarmed. “Lower your voice, fool. You should not even jape about such things. You never know who could be listening. The Spider has ears everywhere.”

“Ah, don’t piss your breeches, Armen. I was proposing a drink, not a rebellion.”

Pate heard a chuckle. A soft, sly voice called out from behind him. “I always knew you were a traitor, Hopfrog.” Lazy Leo was slouching by the foot of the old plank bridge, draped in satin striped in green and gold, with a black silk half cape pinned to his shoulder by a rose of jade. The wine he’d dribbled down his front had been a robust red, judging from the color of the spots. A lock of his ash-blond hair fell down across one eye.

Mollander bristled at the sight of him. “Bugger that. Go away. You are not welcome here.” Alleras laid a hand upon his arm to calm him, whilst Armen frowned. “Leo. My lord. I had understood that you were still confined to the Citadel for ...”

“... three more days.” Lazy Leo shrugged. “Perestan says the world is forty thousand years old. Mollos says five hundred thousand. What are three days, I ask you?” Though there were a dozen empty tables on the terrace, Leo sat himself at theirs. “Buy me a cup of Arbor gold, Hopfrog, and perhaps I won’t inform my father of your toast. The tiles turned against me at the Checkered Hazard, and I wasted my last stag on supper. Suckling pig in plum sauce, stuffed with chestnuts and white truffles. A man must eat. What did you lads have?”

“Mutton,” muttered Mollander. He sounded none too pleased about it. “We shared a haunch of boiled mutton.”

“I’m certain it was filling.” Leo turned to Alleras. “A lord’s son should be open-handed, Sphinx. I understand you won your copper link. I’ll drink to that.”

Alleras smiled back at him. “I only buy for friends. And I am no lord’s son, I’ve told you that. My mother was a trader.”

Leo’s eyes were hazel, bright with wine and malice. “Your mother was a monkey from the Summer Isles. The Dornish will fuck anything with a hole between its legs. Meaning no offense. You may be brown as a nut, but at least you bathe. Unlike our spotted pig boy.” He waved a hand toward Pate.

If I hit him in the mouth with my tankard, I could knock out half his teeth, Pate thought. Spotted Pate the pig boy was the hero of a thousand ribald stories: a good-hearted, empty-headed lout who always managed to best the fat lordlings, haughty knights, and pompous septons who beset him. Somehow his stupidity would turn out to have been a sort of uncouth cunning; the tales always ended with Spotted Pate sitting on a lord’s high seat or bedding some knight’s daughter. But those were stories. In the real world pig boys never fared so well. Pate sometimes thought his mother must have hated him to have named him as she did.

Alleras was no longer smiling. “You will apologize.”

“Will I?” said Leo. “How can I, with my throat so dry ...”

“You shame your House with every word you say,” Alleras told him. “You shame the Citadel by being one of us.”

“I know. So buy me some wine, that I might drown my shame.”

Mollander said, “I would tear your tongue out by the roots.”

“Truly? Then how would I tell you about the dragons?” Leo shrugged again. “The mongrel has the right of it. The Mad King’s daughter is alive, and she’s hatched herself three dragons.”

“Three?” said Roone, astonished.

Leo patted his hand. “More than two and less than four. I would not try for my golden link just yet if I were you.”

“You leave him be,” warned Mollander.

“Such a chivalrous Hopfrog. As you wish. Every man off every ship that’s sailed within a hundred leagues of Qarth is speaking of these dragons. A few will even tell you that they’ve seen them. The Mage is inclined to believe them.”

Armen pursed his lips in disapproval. “Marwyn is unsound. Archmaester Perestan would be the first to tell you that.”

“Archmaester Ryam says so too,” said Roone.

Leo yawned. “The sea is wet, the sun is warm, and the menagerie hates the mastiff.”

He has a mocking name for everyone, thought Pate, but he could not deny that Marwyn looked more a mastiff than a maester. *As if he wants to bite you*. The Mage was not like other maesters. People said that he kept company with whores and hedge wizards, talked with hairy Ibbenese and pitch-black Summer Islanders in their own tongues, and sacrificed to queer gods at the little sailors’ temples down by the wharves. Men spoke of seeing him down in the undercity, in rat pits and black brothels, consorting with mummers, singers, sellswords, even beggars. Some even whispered that once he had killed a man with his fists.

When Marwyn had returned to Oldtown, after spending eight years in the east mapping distant lands, searching for lost books, and studying with warlocks and shadow-binders, Vinegar Vaellyn had dubbed him “Marwyn the Mage.” The name was soon all over Oldtown, to Vaellyn’s vast annoyance. “Leave spells and prayers to priests and septons and bend your wits to learning truths a man can trust in,” Archmaester Ryam had once counseled Pate, but Ryam’s ring and rod and mask were yellow gold, and his maester’s chain had no link of Valyrian steel.

Armen looked down his nose at Lazy Leo. He had the perfect nose for it, long and thin and pointed. “Archmaester Marwyn believes in many curious things,” he said, “but he has no more proof of dragons than Mollander. Just more sailors’ stories.”

“You’re wrong,” said Leo. “There is a glass candle burning in the Mage’s chambers.”

A hush fell over the torchlit terrace. Armen sighed and shook his head. Mollander began to laugh. The Sphinx studied Leo with his big black eyes. Roone looked lost.

Pate knew about the glass candles, though he had never seen one burn. They were the worst-kept secret of the Citadel. It was said that they had been brought to Oldtown from Valyria a thousand years before the Doom. He had heard there were four; one was green and three were black, and all were tall and twisted.

“What are these glass candles?” asked Roone.

Armen the Acolyte cleared his throat. “The night before an acolyte says his vows, he must stand a vigil in the vault. No lantern is permitted

him, no torch, no lamp, no taper ... only a candle of obsidian. He must spend the night in darkness, unless he can light that candle. Some will try. The foolish and the stubborn, those who have made a study of these so-called higher mysteries. Often they cut their fingers, for the ridges on the candles are said to be as sharp as razors. Then, with bloody hands, they must wait upon the dawn, brooding on their failure. Wiser men simply go to sleep, or spend their night in prayer, but every year there are always a few who must try.”

“Yes.” Pate had heard the same stories. “But what’s the *use* of a candle that casts no light?”

“It is a lesson,” Armen said, “the last lesson we must learn before we don our maester’s chains. The glass candle is meant to represent truth and learning, rare and beautiful and fragile things. It is made in the shape of a candle to remind us that a maester must cast light wherever he serves, and it is sharp to remind us that knowledge can be dangerous. Wise men may grow arrogant in their wisdom, but a maester must always remain humble. The glass candle reminds us of that as well. Even after he has said his vow and donned his chain and gone forth to serve, a maester will think back on the darkness of his vigil and remember how nothing that he did could make the candle burn ... for even with knowledge, some things are not possible.”

Lazy Leo burst out laughing. “Not possible for you, you mean. I saw the candle burning with my own eyes.”

“You saw *some* candle burning, I don’t doubt,” said Armen. “A candle of black wax, perhaps.”

“I know what I saw. The light was queer and bright, much brighter than any beeswax or tallow candle. It cast strange shadows and the flame never flickered, not even when a draft blew through the open door behind me.”

Armen crossed his arms. “Obsidian does not burn.”

“*Dragonglass*,” Pate said. “The smallfolk call it dragonglass.” Somehow that seemed important.

“They do,” mused Alleras, the Sphinx, “and if there are dragons in the world again ...”

“Dragons and darker things,” said Leo. “The grey sheep have closed their eyes, but the mastiff sees the truth. Old powers waken. Shadows stir. An age of wonder and terror will soon be upon us, an age for gods

and heroes.” He stretched, smiling his lazy smile. “That’s worth a round, I’d say.”

“We’ve drunk enough,” said Armen. “Morn will be upon us sooner than we’d like, and Archmaester Ebrose will be speaking on the properties of urine. Those who mean to forge a silver link would do well not to miss his talk.”

“Far be it from me to keep you from the piss tasting,” said Leo. “Myself, I prefer the taste of Arbor gold.”

“If the choice is piss or you, I’ll drink piss.” Mollander pushed back from the table. “Come, Roone.”

The Sphinx reached for his bowcase. “It’s bed for me as well. I expect I’ll dream of dragons and glass candles.”

“All of you?” Leo shrugged. “Well, Rosey will remain. Perhaps I’ll wake our little sweetmeat and make a woman of her.”

Alleras saw the look on Pate’s face. “If he does not have a copper for a cup of wine, he cannot have a dragon for the girl.”

“Aye,” said Mollander. “Besides, it takes a man to make a woman. Come with us, Pate. Old Walgrave will wake when the sun comes up. He’ll be needing you to help him to the privy.”

If he remembers who I am today. Archmaester Walgrave had no trouble telling one raven from another, but he was not so good with people. Some days he seemed to think Pate was someone named Cressen. “Not just yet,” he told his friends. “I’m going to stay awhile.” Dawn had not broken, not quite. The alchemist might still be coming, and Pate meant to be here if he did.

“As you wish,” said Armen. Alleras gave Pate a lingering look, then slung his bow over one slim shoulder and followed the others toward the bridge. Mollander was so drunk he had to walk with a hand on Roone’s shoulder to keep from falling. The Citadel was no great distance as the raven flies, but none of them were ravens and Oldtown was a veritable labyrinth of a city, all wynds and criss-crossing alleys and narrow crookback streets. “Careful,” Pate heard Armen say as the river mists swallowed up the four of them, “the night is damp, and the cobbles will be slippery.”

When they were gone, Lazy Leo considered Pate sourly across the table. “How sad. The Sphinx has stolen off with all his silver, abandoning me to Spotted Pate the pig boy.” He stretched, yawning. “How is our lovely little Rosey, pray?”

“She’s sleeping,” Pate said curtly.

“Naked, I don’t doubt.” Leo grinned. “Do you think she’s truly worth a dragon? One day I suppose I must find out.”

Pate knew better than to reply to that.

Leo needed no reply. “I expect that once I’ve broken in the wench, her price will fall to where even pig boys will be able to afford her. You ought to thank me.”

I ought to kill you, Pate thought, but he was not near drunk enough to throw away his life. Leo had been trained to arms, and was known to be deadly with bravo’s blade and dagger. And if Pate should somehow kill him, it would mean his own head too. Leo had two names where Pate had only one, and his second was *Tyrell*. Ser Moryn Tyrell, commander of the City Watch of Oldtown, was Leo’s father. Mace Tyrell, Lord of Highgarden and Warden of the South, was Leo’s cousin. And Oldtown’s Old Man, Lord Leyton of the Hightower, who numbered “Protector of the Citadel” amongst his many titles, was a sworn bannerman of House Tyrell. *Let it go*, Pate told himself. *He says these things just to wound me.*

The mists were lightening to the east. *Dawn*, Pate realized. *Dawn has come, and the alchemist has not.* He did not know whether he should laugh or cry. *Am I still a thief if I put it all back and no one ever knows?* It was another question that he had no answer for, like those that Ebrose and Vaellyn had once asked him.

When he pushed back from the bench and got to his feet, the fearsomely strong cider all went to his head at once. He had to put a hand on the table to steady himself. “Leave Rosey be,” he said, by way of parting. “Just leave her be, or I may kill you.”

Leo Tyrell flicked the hair back from his eye. “I do not fight duels with pig boys. Go away.”

Pate turned and crossed the terrace. His heels rang against the weathered planks of the old bridge. By the time he reached the other side, the eastern sky was turning pink. *The world is wide*, he told himself. *If I bought that donkey, I could still wander the roads and byways of the Seven Kingdoms, leeching the smallfolk and picking nits out of their hair. I could sign on to some ship, pull an oar, and sail to Qarth by the Jade Gates to see these bloody dragons for myself. I do not need to go back to old Walgrave and the ravens.*

Yet somehow his feet turned back toward the Citadel.

When the first shaft of sunlight broke through the clouds to the east, morning bells began to peal from the Sailor's Sept down by the harbor. The Lord's Sept joined in a moment later, then the Seven Shrines from their gardens across the Honeywine, and finally the Starry Sept that had been the seat of the High Septon for a thousand years before Aegon landed at King's Landing. They made a mighty music. *Though not so sweet as one small nightingale.*

He could hear singing too, beneath the pealing of the bells. Each morning at first light the red priests gathered to welcome the sun outside their modest wharfside temple. *For the night is dark and full of terrors.* Pate had heard them cry those words a hundred times, asking their god R'hllor to save them from the darkness. The Seven were gods enough for him, but he had heard that Stannis Baratheon worshiped at the nightfires now. He had even put the fiery heart of R'hllor on his banners in place of the crowned stag. *If he should win the Iron Throne, we'll all need to learn the words of the red priests' song,* Pate thought, but that was not likely. Tywin Lannister had smashed Stannis and R'hllor upon the Blackwater, and soon enough he would finish them and mount the head of the Baratheon pretender on a spike above the gates of King's Landing.

As the night's mists burned away, Oldtown took form around him, emerging ghostlike from the predawn gloom. Pate had never seen King's Landing, but he knew it was a daub-and-wattle city, a sprawl of mud streets, thatched roofs, and wooden hovels. Oldtown was built in stone, and all its streets were cobbled, down to the meanest alley. The city was never more beautiful than at break of day. West of the Honeywine, the Guildhalls lined the bank like a row of palaces. Upriver, the domes and towers of the Citadel rose on both sides of the river, connected by stone bridges crowded with halls and houses. Downstream, below the black marble walls and arched windows of the Starry Sept, the manses of the pious clustered like children gathered round the feet of an old dowager.

And beyond, where the Honeywine widened into Whispering Sound, rose the Hightower, its beacon fires bright against the dawn. From where it stood atop the bluffs of Battle Island, its shadow cut the city like a sword. Those born and raised in Oldtown could tell the time of day by where that shadow fell. Some claimed a man could see all the way to the Wall from the top. Perhaps that was why Lord Leyton had not made the descent in more than a decade, preferring to rule his city from the clouds.

A butcher's cart rumbled past Pate down the river road, five piglets in the back squealing in distress. Dodging from its path, he just avoided being spattered as a townswoman emptied a pail of night soil from a window overhead. *When I am a maester in a castle I will have a horse to ride*, he thought. Then he tripped upon a cobble and wondered who he was fooling. There would be no chain for him, no seat at a lord's high table, no tall white horse to ride. His days would be spent listening to ravens *quork* and scrubbing shit stains off Archmaester Walgrave's smallclothes.

He was on one knee, trying to wipe the mud off his robes, when a voice said, "Good morrow, Pate."

The alchemist was standing over him.

Pate rose. "The third day ... you said you would be at the Quill and Tankard."

"You were with your friends. It was not my wish to intrude upon your fellowship." The alchemist wore a hooded traveler's cloak, brown and nondescript. The rising sun was peeking over the rooftops behind his shoulder, so it was hard to make out the face beneath his hood. "Have you decided what you are?"

Must he make me say it? "I suppose I am a thief."

"I thought you might be."

The hardest part had been getting down on his hands and knees to pull the strongbox from underneath Archmaester Walgrave's bed. Though the box was stoutly made and bound with iron, its lock was broken. Maester Gormon had suspected Pate of breaking it, but that wasn't true. Walgrave had broken the lock himself, after losing the key that opened it.

Inside, Pate had found a bag of silver stags, a lock of yellow hair tied up in a ribbon, a painted miniature of a woman who resembled Walgrave (even to her mustache), and a knight's gauntlet made of lobstered steel. The gauntlet had belonged to a prince, Walgrave claimed, though he could no longer seem to recall which one. When Pate shook it, the key fell out onto the floor.

If I pick that up, I am a thief, he remembered thinking. The key was old and heavy, made of black iron; supposedly it opened every door at the Citadel. Only the archmaesters had such keys. The others carried theirs upon their person or hid them away in some safe place, but if Walgrave had hidden his, no one would ever have seen it again. Pate snatched up the key and had been halfway to the door before turning

back to take the silver too. A thief was a thief, whether he stole a little or a lot. “*Pate,*” one of the white ravens had called after him, “*Pate, Pate, Pate.*”

“Do you have my dragon?” he asked the alchemist.

“If you have what I require.”

“Give it here. I want to see.” Pate did not intend to let himself be cheated.

“The river road is not the place. Come.”

He had no time to think about it, to weigh his choices. The alchemist was walking away. Pate had to follow or lose Rosey and the dragon both, forever. He followed. As they walked, he slipped his hand up into his sleeve. He could feel the key, safe inside the hidden pocket he had sewn there. Maester’s robes were full of pockets. He had known that since he was a boy.

He had to hurry to keep pace with the alchemist’s longer strides. They went down an alley, around a corner, through the old Thieves Market, along Ragpicker’s Wynd. Finally, the man turned into another alley, narrower than the first. “This is far enough,” said Pate. “There’s no one about. We’ll do it here.”

“As you wish.”

“I want my dragon.”

“To be sure.” The coin appeared. The alchemist made it walk across his knuckles, the way he had when Rosey brought the two of them together. In the morning light the dragon glittered as it moved, and gave the alchemist’s fingers a golden glow.

Pate grabbed it from his hand. The gold felt warm against his palm. He brought it to his mouth and bit down on it the way he’d seen men do. If truth be told, he wasn’t sure what gold should taste like, but he did not want to look a fool.

“The key?” the alchemist inquired politely.

Something made Pate hesitate. “Is it some book you want?” Some of the old Valyrian scrolls down in the locked vaults were said to be the only surviving copies in the world.

“What I want is none of your concern.”

“No.” *It’s done,* Pate told himself. *Go. Run back to the Quill and Tankard, wake Rosey with a kiss, and tell her she belongs to you.* Yet still he lingered. “Show me your face.”

“As you wish.” The alchemist pulled his hood down.

He was just a man, and his face was just a face. A young man's face, ordinary, with full cheeks and the shadow of a beard. A scar showed faintly on his right cheek. He had a hooked nose, and a mat of dense black hair that curled tightly around his ears. It was not a face Pate recognized. "I do not know you."

"Nor I you."

"Who are you?"

"A stranger. No one. Truly."

"Oh." Pate had run out of words. He drew out the key and put it in the stranger's hand, feeling light-headed, almost giddy. *Rosey*, he reminded himself. "We're done, then."

He was halfway down the alley when the cobblestones began to move beneath his feet. *The stones are slick and wet*, he thought, but that was not it. He could feel his heart hammering in his chest. "What's happening?" he said. His legs had turned to water. "I don't understand."

"And never will," a voice said sadly.

The cobblestones rushed up to kiss him. Pate tried to cry for help, but his voice was failing too.

His last thought was of *Rosey*.



THE PROPHET

The prophet 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 underwater. “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. Facedown in the shallow sea floated Emmond, pale and cold and peaceful.

That was when the 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 the shoulder with an 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 life, 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 the dead boy, praying. Norjen worked his arms whilst Rus knelt 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 again, and again, until the sea came gushing 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 time, 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 to us. What is dead can never die."

"But rises." The boy coughed violently, bringing up more water. "Rises 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 each gave him a punch and a kiss to welcome him to the 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 longships 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 a 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, “it 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 ironborn, 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 us who remain behind in this dry and dismal vale to finish his great work.” He pushed the cork back into his waterskin. “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 the 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 narrow track that oft seemed to disappear beneath the horse’s hooves. Great Wyk 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 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 loins of Quellon Greyjoy, the Lord of the Iron Islands. Harlon, 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 greyscale 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 ironborn to their ancient glory. At ten he scaled the Flint Cliffs to the Blind Lord's haunted tower. At thirteen he could run 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 had 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 that 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 surefooted, 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 seawater, 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 farther 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 Winterfell 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 take the news of Balon's death to his cousins in their towers at Drowndelving, Crow Spike Keep, and Corpse Lake. Aeron continued on alone, up hills and down vales along a stony track that grew wider and more traveled 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. Twoscore 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, O 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 Euron 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 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. *I 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 ...”

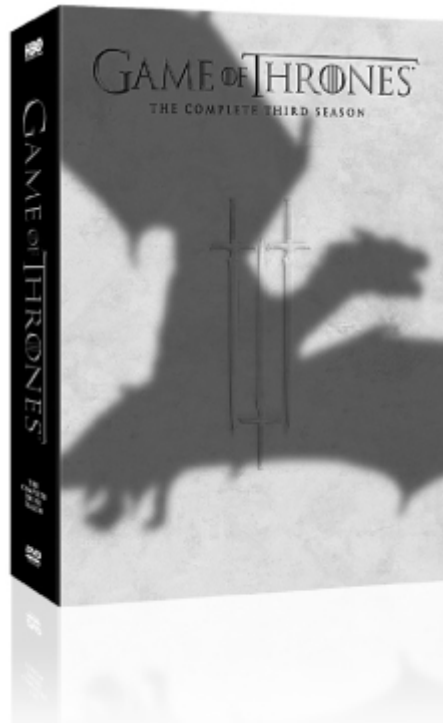
“... *too long a time!*” Aeron cried in anguish. “Yet in the dawn of days the ironborn chose their own kings, raising up the worthiest amongst them. It is time we returned to the Old Way, for only that shall make us great again. It was a kingsmoot that chose Urras Ironfoot for High King, and placed a 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 in 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!*” they 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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