

REEK

The rat squealed as he bit into it, squirming wildly in his hands, frantic to escape. The belly was the softest part. He tore at the sweet meat, the warm blood running over his lips. It was so good that it brought tears to his eyes. His belly rumbled and he swallowed. By the third bite the rat had ceased to struggle, and he was feeling almost content.

Then he heard the sounds of voices outside the dungeon door.

At once he stilled, fearing even to chew. His mouth was full of blood and flesh and hair, but he dare not spit or swallow. He listened in terror, stiff as stone, to the scuff of boots and the clanking of iron keys. *No, he thought, no, please gods, not now, not now.* It had taken him so long to catch the rat. *If they catch me with it, they will take it away, and then they'll tell, and Lord Ramsay will hurt me.*

He knew he ought to hide the rat, but he was so *hungry*. It had been two days since he had eaten, or maybe three. Down here in the dark it was hard to tell. Though his arms and legs were thin as reeds, his belly was swollen and hollow, and ached so much that he found he could not sleep. Whenever he closed his eyes, he found himself remembering Lady Hornwood. After their wedding, Lord Ramsay had locked her away in a tower and starved her to death. In the end she had eaten her own fingers.

He crouched down in a corner of his cell, clutching his prize under his chin. Blood ran from the corners of his mouth as he nibbled at the rat with what remained of his teeth, trying to bolt down as much of the warm flesh as he could before the cell was opened. The meat was stringy, but so rich he thought he might be sick. He chewed and swallowed, picking small bones from the holes in his gums where teeth had been yanked out. It hurt to chew, but he was so hungry he could not stop.

The sounds were growing louder. *Please gods, he isn't coming for me,* he prayed, tearing off one of the rat's legs. It had been a long time since anyone had come for him. There were other cells, other prisoners.

Sometimes he heard them screaming, even through the thick stone walls. *The women always scream the loudest.* He sucked at the raw meat and tried to spit out the leg bone, but it only dribbled over his lower lip and tangled in his beard. *Go away, he prayed, go away, pass me by, please, please.*

But the footsteps stopped just when they were loudest, and the keys clattered right outside the door. The rat fell from his fingers. He wiped his bloody fingers on his breeches. “No,” he mumbled, “*noooo.*” His heels scrabbled at the straw as he tried to push himself into the corner, into the cold damp stone walls.

The sound of the lock turning was the most terrible of all. When the light hit him full in the face, he let out a shriek. He had to cover his eyes with his hands. He would have clawed them out if he’d dared, his head was pounding so. “Take it away, do it in the dark, please, oh please.”

“That’s not him,” said a boy’s voice. “Look at him. We’ve got the wrong cell.”

“Last cell on the left,” another boy replied. “This is the last cell on the left, isn’t it?”

“Aye.” A pause. “What’s he saying?”

“I don’t think he likes the light.”

“Would you, if you looked like *that*?” The boy hawked and spat. “And the stench of him. I’m like to choke.”

“He’s been eating rats,” said the second boy. “Look.”

The first boy laughed. “He has. That’s funny.”

I had to. The rats bit him when he slept, gnawing at his fingers and his toes, even at his face, so when he got his hands on one he did not hesitate. Eat or be eaten, those were the only choices. “I did it,” he mumbled, “I did, I did, I ate him, they do the same to me, please ...”

The boys moved closer, the straw crunching softly under their feet. “Talk to me,” said one of them. He was the smaller of the two, a thin boy, but clever. “Do you remember who you are?”

The fear came bubbling up inside him, and he moaned. “Talk to me. Tell me your name.”

My name. A scream caught in his throat. They had taught him his name, they had, they *had*, but it had been so long that he’d forgotten. *If I say it wrong, he’ll take another finger, or worse, he’ll ... he’ll ...* He would not think about that, he could not think about that. There were needles in his jaw, in his eyes. His head was pounding. “Please,” he squeaked, his voice thin and weak. He sounded a hundred years old. Perhaps he was. *How long have I been in here?* “Go,” he mumbled, through broken teeth and broken fingers, his eyes closed tight against the terrible bright light. “Please, you can have the rat, don’t hurt me ...”

“*Reek*,” said the larger of the boys. “Your name is Reek. Remember?” He was the one with the torch. The smaller boy had the ring of iron keys.

Reek? Tears ran down his cheeks. “I remember. I do.” His mouth opened and closed. “My name is Reek. It rhymes with leek.” In the dark he did not need a name, so it was easy to forget. *Reek, Reek, my name is Reek.* He had not been born with that name. In another life he had been someone else, but here and now, his name was Reek. He remembered.

He remembered the boys as well. They were clad in matching lambs-wool doublets, silver-grey with dark blue trim. Both were squires, both were eight, and both were Walder Frey. *Big Walder and Little Walder, yes.* Only the big one was Little and the little one was Big, which amused the boys and confused the rest of the world. “I know you,” he whispered, through cracked lips. “I know your names.”

“You’re to come with us,” said Little Walder. “His lordship has need of you,” said Big Walder.

Fear went through him like a knife. *They are only children*, he thought. *Two boys of eight.* He could overcome two boys of eight, surely. Even as weak

as he was, he could take the torch, take the keys, take the dagger sheathed on Little Walder's hip, escape. *No. No, it is too easy. It is a trap. If I run, he will take another finger from me, he will take more of my teeth.*

He had run before. Years ago, it seemed, when he still had some strength in him, when he had still been defiant. That time it had been Kyra with the keys. She told him she had stolen them, that she knew a postern gate that was never guarded. "Take me back to Winterfell, m'lord," she begged, pale-faced and trembling. "I don't know the way. I can't escape alone. Come with me, please." And so he had. The gaoler was dead drunk in a puddle of wine, with his breeches down around his ankles. The dungeon door was open and the postern gate had been unguarded, just as she had said. They waited for the moon to go behind a cloud, then slipped from the castle and splashed across the Weeping Water, stumbling over stones, half-frozen by the icy stream. On the far side, he had kissed her. "You've saved us," he said. *Fool. Fool.*

It had all been a trap, a game, a jape. Lord Ramsay loved the chase and preferred to hunt two-legged prey. All night they ran through the darkling wood, but as the sun came up the sound of a distant horn came faintly through the trees, and they heard the baying of a pack of hounds. "We should split up," he told Kyra as the dogs drew closer. "They cannot track us both." The girl was crazed with fear, though, and refused to leave his side, even when he swore that he would raise a host of ironborn and come back for her if she should be the one they followed.

Within the hour, they were taken. One dog knocked him to the ground, and a second bit Kyra on the leg as she scrambled up a hillside. The rest surrounded them, baying and snarling, snapping at them every time they moved, holding them there until Ramsay Snow rode up with his hunts-men. He was still a bastard then, not yet a Bolton. "There you are," he said, smiling down at them from the saddle. "You wound me, wandering off like this. Have you grown tired of my hospitality so soon?" That was when Kyra seized a stone and threw it at his head. It missed by a good foot, and Ramsay smiled. "You must be punished."

Reek remembered the desperate, frightened look in Kyra's eyes. She had never looked so young as she did in that moment, still half a girl, but there

was nothing he could do. *She brought them down on us*, he thought. *If we had separated as I wanted, one of us might have gotten away.*

The memory made it hard to breathe. Reek turned away from the torch with tears glimmering in his eyes. *What does he want of me this time?* he thought, despairing. *Why won't he just leave me be? I did no wrong, not this time, why won't they just leave me in the dark?* He'd had a rat, a fat one, warm and wriggling ...

"Should we wash him?" asked Little Walder. "His lordship likes him stinky," said Big Walder. "That's why he named him Reek."

Reek. My name is Reek, it rhymes with bleak. He had to remember that. *Serve and obey and remember who you are, and no more harm will come to you. He promised, his lordship promised.* Even if he had wanted to resist, he did not have the strength. It had been scourged from him, starved from him, flayed from him. When Little Walder pulled him up and Big Walder waved the torch at him to herd him from the cell, he went along as docile as a dog. If he'd had a tail, he would have tucked it down between his legs.

If I had a tail, the Bastard would have cut it off. The thought came unbidden, a vile thought, dangerous. His lordship was not a bastard anymore. *Bolton, not Snow.* The boy king on the Iron Throne had made Lord Ramsay legitimate, giving him the right to use his lord father's name. Calling him *Snow* reminded him of his bastardy and sent him into a black rage. Reek must remember that. And his name, he must remember his name. For half a heartbeat it eluded him, and that frightened him so badly that he tripped on the steep dungeon steps and tore his breeches open on the stone, drawing blood. Little Walder had to shove the torch at him to get him back on his feet and moving again.

Out in the yard, night was settling over the Dreadfort and a full moon was rising over the castle's eastern walls. Its pale light cast the shadows of the tall triangular merlons across the frozen ground, a line of sharp black teeth. The air was cold and damp and full of half-forgotten smells. *The world*, Reek told himself, *this is what the world smells like.* He did not know how long he had been down there in the dungeons, but it had to have been half a year at least. *That long, or longer. What if it has been five years, or ten, or*

twenty? Would I even know? What if I went mad down there, and half my life is gone? But no, that was folly. It could not have been so long. The boys were still boys. If it had been ten years, they would have grown into men. He had to remember that. I must not let him drive me mad. He can take my fingers and my toes, he can put out my eyes and slice my ears off, but he cannot take my wits unless I let him.

Little Walder led the way with torch in hand. Reek followed meekly, with Big Walder just behind him. The dogs in the kennels barked as they went by. Wind swirled through the yard, cutting through the thin cloth of the filthy rags he wore and raising gooseprickles on his skin. The night air was cold and damp, but he saw no sign of snow though surely winter was close at hand. Reek wondered if he would be alive to see the snows come. *How many fingers will I have? How many toes?* When he raised a hand, he was shocked to see how white it was, how fleshless. *Skin and bones*, he thought. *I have an old man's hands.* Could he have been wrong about the boys? What if they were not Little Walder and Big Walder after all, but the *sons* of the boys he'd known?

The great hall was dim and smoky. Rows of torches burned to left and right, grasped by skeletal human hands jutting from the walls. High overhead were wooden rafters black from smoke, and a vaulted ceiling lost in shadow. The air was heavy with the smells of wine and ale and roasted meat. Reek's stomach rumbled noisily at the scents, and his mouth began to water.

Little Walder pushed him stumbling past the long tables where the men of the garrison were eating. He could feel their eyes upon him. The best places, up near the dais, were occupied by Ramsay's favorites, the Bastard's Boys. Ben Bones, the old man who kept his lordship's beloved hunting hounds. Damon, called Damon Dance-for-Me, fair-haired and boyish. Grunt, who had lost his tongue for speaking carelessly in Lord Roose's hearing. Sour Alyn. Skinner. Yellow Dick. Farther down, below the salt, were others that Reek knew by sight if not by name: sworn swords and serjeants, soldiers and gaolers and torturers. But there were strangers too, faces he did not know. Some wrinkled their noses as he passed, whilst others laughed at the sight of him. *Guests*, Reek thought, *his lordship's*

friends, and I am brought up to amuse them. A shiver of fear went through him.

At the high table the Bastard of Bolton sat in his lord father's seat, drinking from his father's cup. Two old men shared the high table with him, and Reek knew at a glance that both were lords. One was gaunt, with flinty eyes, a long white beard, and a face as hard as a winter frost. His jerkin was a ragged bearskin, worn and greasy. Underneath he wore a ringmail byrnie, even at table. The second lord was thin as well, but twisted where the first was straight. One of his shoulders was much higher than the other, and he stooped over his trencher like a vulture over carrion. His eyes were grey and greedy, his teeth yellow, his forked beard a tangle of snow and silver. Only a few wisps of white hair still clung to his spotted skull, but the cloak he wore was soft and fine, grey wool trimmed with black sable and fastened at the shoulder with a starburst wrought in beaten silver.

Ramsay was clad in black and pink—black boots, black belt and scabbard, black leather jerkin over a pink velvet doublet slashed with dark red satin. In his right ear gleamed a garnet cut in the shape of a drop of blood. Yet for all the splendor of his garb, he remained an ugly man, big-boned and slope-shouldered, with a fleshiness to him that suggested that in later life he would run to fat. His skin was pink and blotchy, his nose broad, his mouth small, his hair long and dark and dry. His lips were wide and meaty, but the thing men noticed first about him were his eyes. He had his lord father's eyes—small, close-set, queerly pale. *Ghost grey*, some men called the shade, but in truth his eyes were all but colorless, like two chips of dirty ice.

At the sight of Reek, he smiled a wet-lipped smile. "There he is. My sour old friend." To the men beside him he said, "Reek has been with me since I was a boy. My lord father gave him to me as a token of his love."

The two lords exchanged a look. "I had heard your serving man was dead," said the one with the stooped shoulder. "Slain by the Starks, they said."

Lord Ramsay chuckled. "The ironmen will tell you that what is dead may never die, but rises again, harder and stronger. Like Reek. He smells of the grave, though, I grant you that."

“He smells of nightsoil and stale vomit.” The stoop-shouldered old lord tossed aside the bone that he’d been gnawing on and wiped his fingers on the tablecloth. “Is there some reason you must needs inflict him upon us whilst we’re eating?”

The second lord, the straight-backed old man in the mail byrnie, studied Reek with flinty eyes. “Look again,” he urged the other lord. “His hair’s gone white and he is three stone thinner, aye, but this is no serving man. Have you forgotten?”

The crookback lord looked again and gave a sudden snort. “*Him?* Can it be? Stark’s ward. Smiling, always smiling.”

“He smiles less often now,” Lord Ramsay confessed. “I may have broken some of his pretty white teeth.”

“You would have done better to slit his throat,” said the lord in mail. “A dog who turns against his master is fit for naught but skinning.”

“Oh, he’s been skinned, here and there,” said Ramsay. “Yes, my lord. I was bad, my lord. Insolent and ...” He licked his lip, trying to think of what else he had done. *Serve and obey*, he told himself, *and he’ll let you live, and keep the parts that you still have. Serve and obey and remember your name. Reek, Reek, it rhymes with meek.* “... bad and ...”

“There’s blood on your mouth,” Ramsay observed. “Have you been chewing on your fingers again, Reek?”

“No. No, my lord, I swear.” Reek had tried to bite his own ring finger off once, to stop it hurting after they had stripped the skin from it. Lord Ramsay would never simply cut off a man’s finger. He preferred to flay it and let the exposed flesh dry and crack and fester. Reek had been whipped and racked and cut, but there was no pain half so excruciating as the pain that followed flaying. It was the sort of pain that drove men mad, and it could not be endured for long. Soon or late the victim would scream, “Please, no more, no more, stop it hurting, *cut it off*,” and Lord Ramsay would oblige. It was a game they played. Reek had learned the rules, as his hands and feet could testify, but that one time he had forgotten and tried to

end the pain himself, with his teeth. Ramsay had not been pleased, and the offense had cost Reek another toe. "I ate a rat," he mumbled.

"A rat?" Ramsay's pale eyes glittered in the torchlight. "All the rats in the Dreadfort belong to my lord father. How dare you make a meal of one without my leave."

Reek did not know what to say, so he said nothing. One wrong word could cost him another toe, even a finger. Thus far he had lost two fingers off his left hand and the pinky off his right, but only the little toe off his right foot against three from his left. Sometimes Ramsay would make japes about balancing him out. *My lord was only japing*, he tried to tell himself. *He does not want to hurt me, he told me so, he only does it when I give him cause*. His lord was merciful and kind. He might have flayed his face off for some of the things Reek had said, before he'd learned his true name and proper place.

"This grows tedious," said the lord in the mail byrnie. "Kill him and be done with it."

Lord Ramsay filled his cup with ale. "That would spoil our celebration, my lord. Reek, I have glad tidings for you. I am to be wed. My lord father is bringing me a Stark girl. Lord Eddard's daughter, Arya. You remember little Arya, don't you?"

Arya Underfoot, he almost said. *Arya Horseface*. Robb's younger sister, brown-haired, long-faced, skinny as a stick, always dirty. *Sansa was the pretty one*. He remembered a time when he had thought that Lord Eddard Stark might marry him to Sansa and claim him for a son, but that had only been a child's fancy. Arya, though ... "I remember her. Arya."

"She shall be the Lady of Winterfell, and me her lord."

She is only a girl. "Yes, my lord. Congratulations."

"Will you attend me at my wedding, Reek?"

He hesitated. "If you wish it, my lord."

“Oh, I do.”

He hesitated again, wondering if this was some cruel trap. “Yes, my lord. If it please you. I would be honored.”

“We must take you out of that vile dungeon, then. Scrub you pink again, get you some clean clothes, some food to eat. Some nice soft porridge, would you like that? Perhaps a pease pie laced with bacon. I have a little task for you, and you’ll need your strength back if you are to serve me. You do want to serve me, I know.”

“Yes, my lord. More than anything.” A shiver went through him. “I’m your Reek. Please let me serve you. Please.”

“Since you ask so nicely, how can I deny you?” Ramsay Bolton smiled. “I ride to war, Reek. And you will be coming with me, to help me fetch home my virgin bride.”