

# THE PRINCE OF WINTERFELL

The hearth was caked with cold black ash, the room unheated but for candles. Every time a door opened their flames would sway and shiver. The bride was shivering too. They had dressed her in white lambs-wool trimmed with lace. Her sleeves and bodice were sewn with freshwater pearls, and on her feet were white doeskin slippers—pretty, but not warm. Her face was pale, bloodless.

*A face carved of ice*, Theon Greyjoy thought as he draped a fur-trimmed cloak about her shoulders. *A corpse buried in the snow*. “My lady. It is time.” Beyond the door, the music called them, lute and pipes and drum.

The bride raised her eyes. Brown eyes, shining in the candlelight. “I will be a good wife to him, and t-true. I ... I will please him and give him sons. I will be a better wife than the real Arya could have been, he’ll see.”

*Talk like that will get you killed, or worse*. That lesson he had learned as Reek. “You are the real Arya, my lady. Arya of House Stark, Lord Eddard’s daughter, heir to Winterfell.” Her name, she had to know her *name*. “Arya Underfoot. Your sister used to call you Arya Horseface.”

“It was me made up that name. Her face was long and horsey. Mine isn’t. I was pretty.” Tears spilled from her eyes at last. “I was never beautiful like Sansa, but they all said I was pretty. Does Lord Ramsay think I am pretty?”

“Yes,” he lied. “He’s told me so.”

“He knows who I am, though. Who I really am. I see it when he looks at me. He looks so angry, even when he smiles, but it’s not my fault. They say he likes to hurt people.”

“My lady should not listen to such ... lies.”

“They say that he hurt you. Your hands, and ...”

His mouth was dry. "I ... I deserved it. I made him angry. You must not make him angry. Lord Ramsay is a ... a sweet man, and kindly. Please him, and he will be good to you. Be a good wife."

"Help me." She clutched at him. "Please. I used to watch you in the yard, playing with your swords. You were so handsome." She squeezed his arm. "If we ran away, I could be your wife, or your ... your whore ... whatever you wanted. You could be my man."

Theon wrenched his arm away from her. "I'm no ... I'm no one's man." *A man would help her.* "Just ... just be Arya, be his wife. Please him, or ... just please him, and stop this talk about being someone else." *Jeyne, her name is Jeyne, it rhymes with pain.* The music was growing more insistent. "It is time. Wipe those tears from your eyes." *Brown eyes. They should be grey. Someone will see. Someone will remember.* "Good. Now smile."

The girl tried. Her lips, trembling, twitched up and froze, and he could see her teeth. *Pretty white teeth*, he thought, *but if she angers him, they will not be pretty long.* When he pushed the door open, three of the four candles fluttered out. He led the bride into the mist, where the wedding guests were waiting.

"Why me?" he had asked when Lady Dustin told him he must give the bride away.

"Her father is dead and all her brothers. Her mother perished at the Twins. Her uncles are lost or dead or captive."

"She has a brother still." *She has three brothers still*, he might have said. "Jon Snow is with the Night's Watch."

"A half-brother, bastard-born, and bound to the Wall. You were her father's ward, the nearest thing she has to living kin. It is only fitting that you give her hand in marriage."

*The nearest thing she has to living kin.* Theon Greyjoy had grown up with Arya Stark. Theon would have known an imposter. If he was seen to accept Bolton's feigned girl as Arya, the northern lords who had gathered to bear

witness to the match would have no grounds to question her legitimacy. Stout and Slate, Whoresbane Umber, the quarrelsome Ryswells, Hornwood men and Cerywn cousins, fat Lord Wyman Manderly ... not one of them had known Ned Stark's daughters half so well as he. And if a few entertained private doubts, surely they would be wise enough to keep those misgivings to themselves.

*They are using me to cloak their deception, putting mine own face on their lie.* That was why Roose Bolton had clothed him as a lord again, to play his part in this mummer's farce. Once that was done, once their false Arya had been wedded and bedded, Bolton would have no more use for Theon Turncloak. "Serve us in this, and when Stannis is defeated we will discuss how best to restore you to your father's seat," his lordship had said in that soft voice of his, a voice made for lies and whispers. Theon never believed a word of it. He would dance this dance for them because he had no choice, but afterward ... *He will give me back to Ramsay then, he thought, and Ramsay will take a few more fingers and turn me into Reek once more.* Unless the gods were good, and Stannis Baratheon descended on Winterfell and put all of them to the sword, himself included. That was the best he could hope for.

It was warmer in the godswood, strange to say. Beyond its confines, a hard white frost gripped Winterfell. The paths were treacherous with black ice, and hoarfrost sparkled in the moonlight on the broken panes of the Glass Gardens. Drifts of dirty snow had piled up against the walls, filling every nook and corner. Some were so high they hid the doors behind them. Under the snow lay grey ash and cinders, and here and there a blackened beam or a pile of bones adorned with scraps of skin and hair. Icicles long as lances hung from the battlements and fringed the towers like an old man's stiff white whiskers. But inside the godswood, the ground remained unfrozen, and steam rose off the hot pools, as warm as baby's breath.

The bride was garbed in white and grey, the colors the true Arya would have worn had she lived long enough to wed. Theon wore black and gold, his cloak pinned to his shoulder by a crude iron kraken that a smith in Barrowton had hammered together for him. But under the hood, his hair was white and thin, and his flesh had an old man's greyish undertone. *A*

*Stark at last*, he thought. Arm in arm, the bride and he passed through an arched stone door, as wisps of fog stirred round their legs. The drum was as tremulous as a maiden's heart, the pipes high and sweet and beckoning. Up above the treetops, a crescent moon was floating in a dark sky, half-obscured by mist, like an eye peering through a veil of silk.

Theon Greyjoy was no stranger to this godswood. He had played here as a boy, skipping stones across the cold black pool beneath the weirwood, hiding his treasures in the bole of an ancient oak, stalking squirrels with a bow he made himself. Later, older, he had soaked his bruises in the hot springs after many a session in the yard with Robb and Jory and Jon Snow. In amongst these chestnuts and elms and soldier pines he had found secret places where he could hide when he wanted to be alone. The first time he had ever kissed a girl had been here. Later, a different girl had made a man of him upon a ragged quilt in the shade of that tall grey-green sentinel.

He had never seen the godswood like this, though—grey and ghostly, filled with warm mists and floating lights and whispered voices that seemed to come from everywhere and nowhere. Beneath the trees, the hot springs steamed. Warm vapors rose from the earth, shrouding the trees in their moist breath, creeping up the walls to draw grey curtains across the watching windows.

There was a path of sorts, a meandering footpath of cracked stones overgrown with moss, half-buried beneath blown dirt and fallen leaves and made treacherous by thick brown roots pushing up from underneath. He led the bride along it. *Jeyne, her name is Jeyne, it rhymes with pain*. He must not think that, though. Should that name pass his lips, it might cost him a finger or an ear. He walked slowly, watching every step. His missing toes made him hobble when he hurried, and it would not do to stumble. Mar Lord Ramsay's wedding with a misstep, and Lord Ramsay might rectify such clumsiness by flaying the offending foot.

The mists were so thick that only the nearest trees were visible; beyond them stood tall shadows and faint lights. Candles flickered beside the wandering path and back amongst the trees, pale fireflies floating in a warm grey soup. It felt like some strange underworld, some timeless place between the worlds, where the damned wandered mournfully for a time

before finding their way down to whatever hell their sins had earned them. *Are we all dead, then? Did Stannis come and kill us in our sleep? Is the battle yet to come, or has it been fought and lost?*

Here and there a torch burned hungrily, casting its ruddy glow over the faces of the wedding guests. The way the mists threw back the shifting light made their features seem bestial, half-human, twisted. Lord Stout became a mastiff, old Lord Locke a vulture, Whoresbane Umber a gargoyle, Big Walder Frey a fox, Little Walder a red bull, lacking only a ring for his nose. Roose Bolton's own face was a pale grey mask, with two chips of dirty ice where his eyes should be.

Above their heads the trees were full of ravens, their feathers fluffed as they hunched on bare brown branches, staring down at the pageantry below. *Maester Luwin's birds.* Luwin was dead, and his maester's tower had been put to the torch, yet the ravens lingered. *This is their home.* Theon wondered what that would be like, to have a home.

Then the mists parted, like the curtain opening at a mummer show to reveal some new tableau. The heart tree appeared in front of them, its bony limbs spread wide. Fallen leaves lay about the wide white trunk in drifts of red and brown. The ravens were the thickest here, muttering to one another in the murderers' secret tongue. Ramsay Bolton stood beneath them, clad in high boots of soft grey leather and a black velvet doublet slashed with pink silk and glittering with garnet teardrops. A smile danced across his face. "Who comes?" His lips were moist, his neck red above his collar. "Who comes before the god?"

Theon answered. "Arya of House Stark comes here to be wed. A woman grown and flowered, trueborn and noble, she comes to beg the blessings of the gods. Who comes to claim her?"

"Me," said Ramsay. "Ramsay of House Bolton, Lord of the Hornwood, heir to the Dreadfort. I claim her. Who gives her?"

"Theon of House Greyjoy, who was her father's ward." He turned to the bride. "Lady Arya, will you take this man?"

She raised her eyes to his. *Brown eyes, not grey. Are all of them so blind?* For a long moment she did not speak, but those eyes were begging. *This is your chance*, he thought. *Tell them. Tell them now. Shout out your name before them all, tell them that you are not Arya Stark, let all the north hear how you were made to play this part.* It would mean her death, of course, and his own as well, but Ramsay in his wroth might kill them quickly. The old gods of the north might grant them that small boon.

“I take this man,” the bride said in a whisper.

All around them lights glimmered through the mists, a hundred candles pale as shrouded stars. Theon stepped back, and Ramsay and his bride joined hands and knelt before the heart tree, bowing their heads in token of submission. The weirwood’s carved red eyes stared down at them, its great red mouth open as if to laugh. In the branches overhead a raven *quorked*.

After a moment of silent prayer, the man and woman rose again. Ramsay undid the cloak that Theon had slipped about his bride’s shoulders moments before, the heavy white wool cloak bordered in grey fur, emblazoned with the direwolf of House Stark. In its place he fastened a pink cloak, spattered with red garnets like those upon his doublet. On its back was the flayed man of the Dreadfort done in stiff red leather, grim and grisly.

Quick as that, it was done. Weddings went more quickly in the north. It came of not having priests, Theon supposed, but whatever the reason it seemed to him a mercy. Ramsay Bolton scooped his wife up in his arms and strode through the mists with her. Lord Bolton and his Lady Walda followed, then the rest. The musicians began to play again, and the bard Abel began to sing “Two Hearts That Beat as One.” Two of his women joined their voices to his own to make a sweet harmony.

Theon found himself wondering if he should say a prayer. *Will the old gods hear me if I do?* They were not his gods, had never been his gods. He was ironborn, a son of Pyke, his god was the Drowned God of the islands ... but Winterfell was long leagues from the sea. It had been a lifetime since any god had heard him. He did not know who he was, or what he was, why he was still alive, why he had ever been born.

“Theon,” a voice seemed to whisper.

His head snapped up. “Who said that?” All he could see were the trees and the fog that covered them. The voice had been as faint as rustling leaves, as cold as hate. *A god’s voice, or a ghost’s.* How many died the day that he took Winterfell? How many more the day he lost it? *The day that Theon Greyjoy died, to be reborn as Reek. Reek, Reek, it rhymes with shriek.*

Suddenly he did not want to be here.

Once outside the godswood the cold descended on him like a ravening wolf and caught him in its teeth. He lowered his head into the wind and made for the Great Hall, hastening after the long line of candles and torches. Ice crunched beneath his boots, and a sudden gust pushed back his hood, as if a ghost had plucked at him with frozen fingers, hungry to gaze upon his face.

Winterfell was full of ghosts for Theon Greyjoy.

This was not the castle he remembered from the summer of his youth. This place was scarred and broken, more ruin than redoubt, a haunt of crows and corpses. The great double curtain wall still stood, for granite does not yield easily to fire, but most of the towers and keeps within were roofless. A few had collapsed. The thatch and timber had been consumed by fire, in whole or in part, and under the shattered panes of the Glass Garden the fruits and vegetables that would have fed the castle during the winter were dead and black and frozen. Tents filled the yard, half-buried in the snow. Roose Bolton had brought his host inside the walls, along with his friends the Freys; thousands huddled amongst the ruins, crowding every court, sleeping in cellar vaults and under topless towers, and in buildings abandoned for centuries.

Plumes of grey smoke snaked up from the rebuilt kitchens and reroofed barracks keep. The battlements and crenellations were crowned with snow and hung with icicles. All the color had been leached from Winterfell until only grey and white remained. *The Stark colors.* Theon did not know whether he ought to find that ominous or reassuring. Even the sky was grey. *Grey and grey and greyer. The whole world grey, everywhere you look, everything grey except the eyes of the bride.* The eyes of the bride were

brown. *Big and brown and full of fear.* It was not right that she should look to him for rescue. What had she been thinking, that he would whistle up a winged horse and fly her out of here, like some hero in the stories she and Sansa used to love? He could not even help himself. *Reek, Reek, it rhymes with meek.*

All about the yard, dead men hung half-frozen at the end of hempen ropes, swollen faces white with hoarfrost. Winterfell had been crawling with squatters when Bolton's van had reached the castle. More than two dozen had been driven at spearpoint from the nests they had made amongst the castle's half-ruined keeps and towers. The boldest and most truculent had been hanged, the rest put to work. Serve well, Lord Bolton told them, and he would be merciful. Stone and timber were plentiful with the wolfswood so close at hand. Stout new gates had gone up first, to replace those that had been burned. Then the collapsed roof of the Great Hall had been cleared away and a new one raised hurriedly in its stead. When the work was done, Lord Bolton hanged the workers. True to his word, he showed them mercy and did not flay a one.

By that time, the rest of Bolton's army had arrived. They raised King Tommen's stag and lion above the walls of Winterfell as the wind came howling from the north, and below it the flayed man of the Dreadfort. Theon arrived in Barbrey Dustin's train, with her ladyship herself, her Barrowton levies, and the bride-to-be. Lady Dustin had insisted that she should have custody of Lady Arya until such time as she was wed, but now that time was done. *She belongs to Ramsay now. She said the words.* By this marriage Ramsay would be Lord of Winterfell. So long as Jeyne took care not to anger him, he should have no cause to harm her. *Arya. Her name is Arya.*

Even inside fur-lined gloves, Theon's hands had begun to throb with pain. It was often his hands that hurt the worst, especially his missing fingers. Had there truly been a time when women yearned for his touch? *I made myself the Prince of Winterfell,* he thought, *and from that came all of this.* He had thought that men would sing of him for a hundred years and tell tales of his daring. But if anyone spoke of him now, it was as Theon Turncloak, and the tales they told were of his treachery. *This was never my home. I was a*



*hostage here.* Lord Stark had not treated him cruelly, but the long steel shadow of his greatsword had always been between them. *He was kind to me, but never warm. He knew that one day he might need to put me to death.*

Theon kept his eyes downcast as he crossed the yard, weaving between the tents. *I learned to fight in this yard*, he thought, remembering warm summer days spent sparring with Robb and Jon Snow under the watchful eyes of old Ser Rodrik. That was back when he was whole, when he could grasp a sword hilt as well as any man. But the yard held darker memories as well. This was where he had assembled Stark's people the night Bran and Rickon fled the castle. Ramsay was Reek then, standing at his side, whispering that he should flay a few of his captives to make them tell him where the boys had gone. *There will be no flaying here whilst I am Prince of Winterfell*, Theon had responded, little dreaming how short his rule would prove. *None of them would help me. I had known them all for half my life, and not one of them would help me.* Even so, he had done his best to protect them, but once Ramsay put Reek's face aside he'd slain all the men, and Theon's ironborn as well. *He set my horse afire.* That was the last sight he had seen the day the castle fell: Smiler burning, the flames leaping from his mane as he reared up, kicking, screaming, his eyes white with terror. *Here in this very yard.*

The doors of the Great Hall loomed up in front of him; new-made, to replace the doors that burned, they seemed crude and ugly to him, raw planks hastily joined. A pair of spearmen guarded them, hunched and shivering under thick fur cloaks, their beards crusty with ice. They eyed Theon resentfully as he hobbled up the steps, pushed against the right-hand door, and slipped inside.

The hall was blessedly warm and bright with torchlight, as crowded as he had ever seen it. Theon let the heat wash over him, then made his way toward the front of the hall. Men sat crammed knee to knee along the benches, so tightly packed that the servers had to squirm between them. Even the knights and lords above the salt enjoyed less space than usual.

Up near the dais, Abel was plucking at his lute and singing "Fair Maids of Summer." *He calls himself a bard. In truth he's more a pander.* Lord

Manderly had brought musicians from White Harbor, but none were singers, so when Abel turned up at the gates with a lute and six women, he had been made welcome. “Two sisters, two daughters, one wife, and my old mother,” the singer claimed, though not one looked like him. “Some dance, some sing, one plays the pipe and one the drums. Good washerwomen too.”

Bard or pander, Abel’s voice was passable, his playing fair. Here amongst the ruins, that was as much as anyone might expect.

Along the walls the banners hung: the horseheads of the Ryswells in gold, brown, grey, and black; the roaring giant of House Umber; the stone hand of House Flint of Flint’s Finger; the moose of Hornwood and the merman of Manderly; Cerwyn’s black battle-axe and the Tallhart pines. Yet their bright colors could not entirely cover the blackened walls behind them, nor the boards that closed the holes where windows once had been. Even the roof was wrong, its raw new timbers light and bright, where the old rafters had been stained almost black by centuries of smoke.

The largest banners were behind the dais, where the direwolf of Winterfell and the flayed man of the Dreadfort hung back of the bride and groom. The sight of the Stark banner hit Theon harder than he had expected. *Wrong, it’s wrong, as wrong as her eyes.* The arms of House Poole were a blue plate on white, framed by a grey tressure. Those were the arms they should have hung.

“Theon Turncloak,” someone said as he passed. Other men turned away at the sight of him. One spat. *And why not?* He was the traitor who had taken Winterfell by treachery, slain his foster brothers, delivered his own people to be flayed at Moat Cailin, and given his foster sister to Lord Ramsay’s bed. Roose Bolton might make use of him, but true northmen must despise him.

The missing toes on his left foot had left him with a crabbed, awkward gait, comical to look upon. Back behind him, he heard a woman laugh. Even here in this half-frozen lichyard of a castle, surrounded by snow and ice and death, there were women. *Washerwomen.* That was the polite way of saying *camp follower*, which was the polite way of saying *whore*.

Where they came from Theon could not say. They just seemed to appear, like maggots on a corpse or ravens after a battle. Every army drew them. Some were hardened whores who could fuck twenty men in a night and drink them all blind. Others looked as innocent as maids, but that was just a trick of their trade. Some were camp brides, bound to the soldiers they followed with words whispered to one god or another but doomed to be forgotten once the war was done. They would warm a man's bed by night, patch the holes in his boots at morning, cook his supper come dusk, and loot his corpse after the battle. Some even did a bit of washing. With them, oft as not, came bastard children, wretched, filthy creatures born in one camp or the other. And even such as these made mock of Theon Turncloak. *Let them laugh.* His pride had perished here in Winterfell; there was no place for such in the dungeons of the Dreadfort. When you have known the kiss of a flaying knife, a laugh loses all its power to hurt you.

Birth and blood accorded him a seat upon the dais at the end of the high table, beside a wall. To his left sat Lady Dustin, clad as ever in black wool, severe in cut and unadorned. To his right sat no one. *They are all afraid the dishonor might rub off on them.* If he had dared, he would have laughed.

The bride had the place of highest honor, between Ramsay and his father. She sat with eyes downcast as Roose Bolton bid them drink to Lady Arya. "In her children our two ancient houses will become as one," he said, "and the long enmity between Stark and Bolton will be ended." His voice was so soft that the hall grew hushed as men strained to hear. "I am sorry that our good friend Stannis has not seen fit to join us yet," he went on, to a ripple of laughter, "as I know Ramsay had hoped to present his head to Lady Arya as a wedding gift." The laughs grew louder. "We shall give him a splendid welcome when he arrives, a welcome worthy of true northmen. Until that day, let us eat and drink and make merry ... for winter is almost upon us, my friends, and many of us here shall not live to see the spring."

The Lord of White Harbor had furnished the food and drink, black stout and yellow beer and wines red and gold and purple, brought up from the warm south on fat-bottomed ships and aged in his deep cellars. The wedding guests gorged on cod cakes and winter squash, hills of neeps and great round wheels of cheese, on smoking slabs of mutton and beef ribs charred

almost black, and lastly on three great wedding pies, as wide across as wagon wheels, their flaky crusts stuffed to bursting with carrots, onions, turnips, parsnips, mushrooms, and chunks of seasoned pork swimming in a savory brown gravy. Ramsay hacked off slices with his falchion and Wyman Manderly himself served, presenting the first steaming portions to Roose Bolton and his fat Frey wife, the next to Ser Hosteen and Ser Aenys, the sons of Walder Frey. “The best pie you have ever tasted, my lords,” the fat lord declared. “Wash it down with Arbor gold and savor every bite. I know I shall.”

True to his word, Manderly devoured six portions, two from each of the three pies, smacking his lips and slapping his belly and stuffing himself until the front of his tunic was half-brown with gravy stains and his beard was flecked with crumbs of crust. Even Fat Walda Frey could not match his gluttony, though she did manage three slices herself. Ramsay ate heartily as well, though his pale bride did no more than stare at the portion set before her. When she raised her head and looked at Theon, he could see the fear behind her big brown eyes.

No longswords had been allowed within the hall, but every man there wore a dagger, even Theon Greyjoy. How else to cut his meat? Every time he looked at the girl who had been Jeyne Poole, he felt the presence of that steel at his side. *I have no way to save her*, he thought, *but I could kill her easy enough. No one would expect it. I could beg her for the honor of a dance and cut her throat. That would be a kindness, wouldn't it? And if the old gods hear my prayer, Ramsay in his wrath might strike me dead as well.* Theon was not afraid to die. Underneath the Dreadfort, he had learned there were far worse things than death. Ramsay had taught him that lesson, finger by finger and toe by toe, and it was not one that he was ever like to forget.

“You do not eat,” observed Lady Dustin. “No.” Eating was hard for him. Ramsay had left him with so many broken teeth that chewing was an agony. Drinking was easier, though he had to grasp the wine cup with both hands to keep from dropping it.

“No taste for pork pie, my lord? The best pork pie we ever tasted, our fat friend would have us believe.” She gestured toward Lord Manderly with

her wine cup. “Have you ever seen a fat man so happy? He is almost dancing. Serving with his own hands.”

It was true. The Lord of White Harbor was the very picture of the jolly fat man, laughing and smiling, japing with the other lords and slapping them on the back, calling out to the musicians for this tune or that tune. “Give us ‘The Night That Ended,’ singer,” he bellowed. “The bride will like that one, I know. Or sing to us of brave young Danny Flint and make us weep.” To look at him, you would have thought that he was the one newly wed.

“He’s drunk,” said Theon. “Drowning his fears. He is craven to the bone, that one.”

Was he? Theon was not certain. His sons had been fat as well, but they had not shamed themselves in battle. “Ironborn will feast before a battle too. A last taste of life, should death await. If Stannis comes ...”

“He will. He must.” Lady Dustin chuckled. “And when he does, the fat man will piss himself. His son died at the Red Wedding, yet he’s shared his bread and salt with Freys, welcomed them beneath his roof, promised one his granddaughter. He even serves them pie. The Manderlys ran from the south once, hounded from their lands and keeps by enemies. Blood runs true. The fat man would like to kill us all, I do not doubt, but he does not have the belly for it, for all his girth. Under that sweaty flesh beats a heart as craven and cringing as ... well ... yours.”

Her last word was a lash, but Theon dared not answer back in kind. Any insolence would cost him skin. “If my lady believes Lord Manderly wants to betray us, Lord Bolton is the one to tell.”

“You think Roose does not know? Silly boy. Watch him. Watch how he watches Manderly. No dish so much as touches Roose’s lips until he sees Lord Wyman eat of it first. No cup of wine is sipped until he sees Manderly drink of the same cask. I think he would be pleased if the fat man attempted some betrayal. It would amuse him. Roose has no feelings, you see. Those leeches that he loves so well sucked all the passions out of him years ago. He does not love, he does not hate, he does not grieve. This is a game to him, mildly diverting. Some men hunt, some hawk, some tumble dice.

Roose plays with men. You and me, these Freys, Lord Manderly, his plump new wife, even his bastard, we are but his playthings.” A serving man was passing by. Lady Dustin held out her wine cup and let him fill it, then gestured for him to do the same for Theon. “Truth be told,” she said, “Lord Bolton aspires to more than mere lordship. Why not King of the North? Tywin Lannister is dead, the Kingslayer is maimed, the Imp is fled. The Lannisters are a spent force, and you were kind enough to rid him of the Starks. Old Walder Frey will not object to his fat little Walda becoming a queen. White Harbor might prove troublesome should Lord Wyman survive this coming battle ... but I am quite sure that he will not. No more than Stannis. Roose will remove both of them, as he removed the Young Wolf. Who else is there?”

“You,” said Theon. “There is you. The Lady of Barrowton, a Dustin by marriage, a Ryswell by birth.”

That pleased her. She took a sip of wine, her dark eyes sparkling, and said, “The *widow* of Barrowton ... and yes, if I so choose, I could be an inconvenience. Of course, Roose sees that too, so he takes care to keep me sweet.”

She might have said more, but then she saw the maesters. Three of them had entered together by the lord’s door behind the dais—one tall, one plump, one very young, but in their robes and chains they were three grey peas from a black pod. Before the war, Medrick had served Lord Hornwood, Rhodry Lord Cerwyn, and young Henly Lord Slate. Roose Bolton had brought them all to Winterfell to take charge of Luwin’s ravens, so messages might be sent and received from here again.

As Maester Medrick went to one knee to whisper in Bolton’s ear, Lady Dustin’s mouth twisted in distaste. “If I were queen, the first thing I would do would be to kill all those grey rats. They scurry everywhere, living on the leavings of the lords, chattering to one another, whispering in the ears of their masters. But who are the masters and who are the servants, truly? Every great lord has his maester, every lesser lord aspires to one. If you do not have a maester, it is taken to mean that you are of little consequence. The grey rats read and write our letters, even for such lords as cannot read

themselves, and who can say for a certainty that they are not twisting the words for their own ends? What good are they, I ask you?"

"They heal," said Theon. It seemed to be expected of him.

"They heal, yes. I never said they were not subtle. They tend to us when we are sick and injured, or distraught over the illness of a parent or a child. Whenever we are weakest and most vulnerable, there they are. Sometimes they heal us, and we are duly grateful. When they fail, they console us in our grief, and we are grateful for that as well. Out of gratitude we give them a place beneath our roof and make them privy to all our shames and secrets, a part of every council. And before too long, the ruler has become the ruled.

"That was how it was with Lord Rickard Stark. Maester Walys was his grey rat's name. And isn't it clever how the maesters go by only one name, even those who had two when they first arrived at the Citadel? That way we cannot know who they truly are or where they come from ... but if you are dogged enough, you can still find out. Before he forged his chain, Maester Walys had been known as Walys Flowers. Flowers, Hill, Rivers, Snow ... we give such names to baseborn children to mark them for what they are, but they are always quick to shed them. Walys Flowers had a Hightower girl for a mother ... and an archmaester of the Citadel for a father, it was rumored. The grey rats are not as chaste as they would have us believe. Oldtown maesters are the worst of all. Once he forged his chain, his secret father and his friends wasted no time dispatching him to Winterfell to fill Lord Rickard's ears with poisoned words as sweet as honey. The Tully marriage was his notion, never doubt it, he—"

She broke off as Roose Bolton rose to his feet, pale eyes shining in the torchlight. "My friends," he began, and a hush swept through the hall, so profound that Theon could hear the wind plucking at the boards over the windows. "Stannis and his knights have left Deepwood Motte, flying the banner of his new red god. The clans of the northern hills come with him on their shaggy runtish horses. If the weather holds, they could be on us in a fortnight. And Crowfood Umber marches down the kingsroad, whilst the Karstarks approach from the east. They mean to join with Lord Stannis here and take this castle from us."

Ser Hosteen Frey pushed to his feet. “We should ride forth to meet them. Why allow them to combine their strength?”

*Because Arnolf Karstark awaits only a sign from Lord Bolton before he turns his cloak,* thought Theon, as other lords began to shout out counsel. Lord Bolton raised his hands for silence. “The hall is not the place for such discussions, my lords. Let us adjourn to the solar whilst my son consummates his marriage. The rest of you, remain and enjoy the food and drink.”

As the Lord of the Dreadfort slipped out, attended by the three maesters, other lords and captains rose to follow. Hother Umber, the gaunt old man called Whoresbane, went grim-faced and scowling. Lord Manderly was so drunk he required four strong men to help him from the hall. “We should have a song about the Rat Cook,” he was muttering, as he staggered past Theon, leaning on his knights. “Singer, give us a song about the Rat Cook.”

Lady Dustin was amongst the last to bestir herself. When she had gone, all at once the hall seemed stifling. It was not until Theon pushed himself to his feet that he realized how much he’d drunk. When he stumbled from the table, he knocked a flagon from the hands of a serving girl. Wine splashed across his boots and breeches, a dark red tide.

A hand grabbed his shoulder, five fingers hard as iron digging deep into his flesh. “You’re wanted, Reek,” said Sour Alyn, his breath foul with the smell from his rotten teeth. Yellow Dick and Damon Dance-for-Me were with him. “Ramsay says you’re to bring his bride to his bed.”

A shiver of fear went through him. *I played my part,* he thought. *Why me?* He knew better than to object, though.

Lord Ramsay had already left the hall. His bride, forlorn and seemingly forgotten, sat hunched and silent beneath the banner of House Stark, clutching a silver goblet in both hands. Judging from the way she looked at him when he approached, she had emptied that goblet more than once. Perhaps she hoped that if she drank enough, the ordeal would pass her by. Theon knew better. “Lady Arya,” he said. “Come. It is time you did your duty.”



Six of the Bastard's boys accompanied them as Theon led the girl out the back of the hall and across the frigid yard to the Great Keep. It was up three flights of stone steps to Lord Ramsay's bedchamber, one of the rooms the fires had touched but lightly. As they climbed, Damon Dance-for-Me whistled, whilst Skinner boasted that Lord Ramsay had promised him a piece of the bloody sheet as a mark of special favor.

The bedchamber had been well prepared for the consummation. All the furnishings were new, brought up from Barrowton in the baggage train. The canopy bed had a feather mattress and drapes of blood-red velvet. The stone floor was covered with wolfskins. A fire was burning in the hearth, a candle on the bedside table. On the sideboard was a flagon of wine, two cups, and a half wheel of veined white cheese.

There was a chair as well, carved of black oak with a red leather seat. Lord Ramsay was seated in it when they entered. Spittle glistened on his lips. "There's my sweet maid. Good lads. You may leave us now. Not you, Reek. You stay."

*Reek, Reek, it rhymes with peek.* He could feel his missing fingers cramping: two on his left hand, one on his right. And on his hip his dagger rested, sleeping in its leather sheath, but heavy, oh so heavy. *It is only my pinky gone on my right hand,* Theon reminded himself. *I can still grip a knife.* "My lord. How may I serve you?"

"You gave the wench to me. Who better to unwrap the gift? Let's have a look at Ned Stark's little daughter."

*She is no kin to Lord Eddard,* Theon almost said. *Ramsay knows, he has to know. What new cruel game is this?* The girl was standing by a bedpost, trembling like a doe. "Lady Arya, if you will turn your back, I must needs unlace your gown."

"No." Lord Ramsay poured himself a cup of wine. "Laces take too long. Cut it off her."

Theon drew the dagger. *All I need do is turn and stab him. The knife is in my hand.* He knew the game by then. *Another trap,* he told himself,

remembering Kyra with her keys. *He wants me to try to kill him. And when I fail, he'll flay the skin from the hand I used to hold the blade.* He grabbed a handful of the bride's skirt. "Stand still, my lady." The gown was loose below the waist, so that was where he slid the blade in, slicing upward slowly, so as not to cut her. Steel whispered through wool and silk with a faint, soft sound. The girl was shaking. Theon had to grab her arm to hold her still. *Jeyne, Jeyne, it rhymes with pain.* He tightened his grip, as much as his maimed left hand would allow. "Stay still."

Finally the gown fell away, a pale tangle round her feet. "Her small-clothes too," Ramsay commanded. Reek obeyed.

When it was done the bride stood naked, her bridal finery a heap of white and grey rags about her feet. Her breasts were small and pointed, her hips narrow and girlish, her legs as skinny as a bird's. *A child.* Theon had forgotten how young she was. *Sansa's age. Arya would be even younger.* Despite the fire in the hearth, the bedchamber was chilly. Jeyne's pale skin was pebbled with gooseprickles. There was a moment when her hands rose, as if to cover her breasts, but Theon mouthed a silent *no* and she saw and stopped at once.

"What do you think of her, Reek?" asked Lord Ramsay. "She ..." *What answer does he want?* What was it the girl had said, before the godswood? *They all said that I was pretty.* She was not pretty now. He could see a spiderweb of faint thin lines across her back where someone had whipped her. "... she is beautiful, so ... so beautiful."

Ramsay smiled his wet smile. "Does she make your cock hard, Reek? Is it straining against your laces? Would you like to fuck her first?" He laughed. "The Prince of Winterfell should have that right, as all lords did in days of old. The first night. But you're no lord, are you? Only Reek. Not even a man, truth be told." He took another gulp of wine, then threw the cup across the room to shatter off a wall. Red rivers ran down across the stone. "Lady Arya. Get on the bed. Yes, against the pillows, that's a good wife. Now spread your legs. Let us see your cunt."

The girl obeyed, wordless. Theon took a step back toward the door. Lord Ramsay sat beside his bride, slid his hand along her inner thigh, then

jammed two fingers up inside her. The girl let out a gasp of pain. “You’re dry as an old bone.” Ramsay pulled his hand free and slapped her face. “I was told that you’d know how to please a man. Was that a lie?”

“N-no, my lord. I was t-trained.”

Ramsay rose, the firelight shining on his face. “Reek, get over here. Get her ready for me.”

For a moment he did not understand. “I ... do you mean ... m’lord, I have no ... I ...”

“With your mouth,” Lord Ramsay said. “And be quick about it. If she’s not wet by the time I’m done disrobing, I will cut off that tongue of yours and nail it to the wall.”

Somewhere in the godswood, a raven screamed. The dagger was still in his hand.

He sheathed it.

*Reek, my name is Reek, it rhymes with weak.* Reek bent to his task.