

## THEON

The sky was a gloom of cloud, the woods dead and frozen. Roots grabbed at Theon's feet as he ran, and bare branches lashed his face, leaving thin stripes of blood across his cheeks. He crashed through heedless, breathless, icicles flying to pieces before him. *Mercy*, he sobbed. From behind came a shuddering howl that curdled his blood. *Mercy, mercy*. When he glanced back over his shoulder he saw them coming, great wolves the size of horses with the heads of small children. *Oh, mercy, mercy*. Blood dripped from their mouths black as pitch, burning holes in the snow where it fell. Every stride brought them closer. Theon tried to run faster, but his legs would not obey. The trees all had faces, and they were laughing at him, laughing, and the howl came again. He could smell the hot breath of the beasts behind him, a stink of brimstone and corruption. *They're dead, dead, I saw them killed*, he tried to shout, *I saw their heads dipped in tar*, but when he opened his mouth only a moan emerged, and then something touched him and he whirled, shouting...

...flailing for the dagger he kept by his bedside and managing only to knock it to the floor. Wex danced away from him. Reek stood behind the mute, his face lit from below by the candle he carried. "What?" Theon cried. *Mercy*. "What do you want? Why are you in my bedchamber? *Why?*"

"My lord prince," said Reek, "your sister has come to Winterfell. You asked to be informed at once if she arrived."

"Past time," Theon muttered, pushing his fingers through his hair. He had begun to fear that Asha meant to leave him to his fate. *Mercy*. He glanced outside the window, where the first vague light of dawn was just brushing the towers of Winterfell. "Where is she?"

"Lorren took her and her men to the Great Hall to break their fast. Will you see her now?"

"Yes." Theon pushed off the blankets. The fire had burned down to embers. "Wex, hot water." He could not let Asha see him disheveled and

soaked with sweat. *Wolves with children's faces...* He shivered. "Close the shutters." The bedchamber felt as cold as the dream forest had been.

All his dreams had been cold of late, and each more hideous than the one before. Last night he had dreamed himself back in the mill again, on his knees dressing the dead. Their limbs were already stiffening, so they seemed to resist sullenly as he fumbled at them with half-frozen fingers, tugging up breeches and knotting laces, yanking fur-trimmed boots over hard unbending feet, buckling a studded leather belt around a waist no bigger than the span of his hands. "This was never what I wanted," he told them as he worked. "They gave me no choice." The corpses made no answer, but only grew colder and heavier.

The night before, it had been the miller's wife. Theon had forgotten her name, but he remembered her body, soft pillowy breasts and stretch marks on her belly, the way she clawed his back when he fucked her. Last night in his dream he had been in bed with her once again, but this time she had teeth above *and* below, and she tore out his throat even as she was gnawing off his manhood. It was madness. He'd seen her die too. Gelmarr had cut her down with one blow of his axe as she cried to Theon for mercy. *Leave me, woman. It was him who killed you, not me. And he's dead as well.* At least Gelmarr did not haunt Theon's sleep.

The dream had receded by the time Wex returned with the water. Theon washed the sweat and sleep from his body and took his own good time dressing. Asha had let him wait long enough; now it was her turn. He chose a satin tunic striped black and gold and a fine leather jerkin with silver studs... and only then remembered that his wretched sister put more stock in blades than beauty. Cursing, he tore off the clothes and dressed again, in felted black wool and ringmail. Around his waist he buckled sword and dagger, remembering the night she had humiliated him at his own father's table. *Her sweet suckling babe, yes. Well, I have a knife too, and know how to use it.*

Last of all, he donned his crown, a band of cold iron slim as a finger, set with heavy chunks of black diamond and nuggets of gold. It was misshapen and ugly, but there was no help for that. Mikken lay buried in the

lichyard, and the new smith was capable of little more than nails and horseshoes. Theon consoled himself with the reminder that it was only a prince's crown. He would have something much finer when he was crowned king.

Outside his door, Reek waited with Urzen and Kromm. Theon fell in with them. These days, he took guards with him everywhere he went, even to the privy. Winterfell wanted him dead. The very night they had returned from Acorn Water, Gelmarr the Grim had tumbled down some steps and broken his back. The next day, Aggar turned up with his throat slit ear to ear. Gynir Rednose became so wary that he shunned wine, took to sleeping in byrnie, coif, and helm, and adopted the noisiest dog in the kennels to give him warning should anyone try to steal up on his sleeping place. All the same, one morning the castle woke to the sound of the little dog barking wildly. They found the pup racing around the well, and Rednose floating in it, drowned.

He could not let the killings go unpunished. Farlen was as likely a suspect as any, so Theon sat in judgment, called him guilty, and condemned him to death. Even that went sour. As he knelt to the block, the kennelmaster said, "M'lord Eddard always did his own killings." Theon had to take the axe himself or look a weakling. His hands were sweating, so the shaft twisted in his grip as he swung and the first blow landed between Farlen's shoulders. It took three more cuts to hack through all that bone and muscle and sever the head from the body, and afterward he was sick, remembering all the times they'd sat over a cup of mead talking of hounds and hunting. *I had no choice*, he wanted to scream at the corpse. *The ironborn can't keep secrets, they had to die, and someone had to take the blame for it.* He only wished he had killed him cleaner. Ned Stark had never needed more than a single blow to take a man's head.

The killings stopped after Farlen's death, but even so his men continued sullen and anxious. "They fear no foe in open battle," Black Lorren told him, "but it is another thing to dwell among enemies, never knowing if the washerwoman means to kiss you or kill you, or whether the serving boy is filling your cup with ale or bale. We would do well to leave this place."

“I am the Prince of Winterfell!” Theon had shouted. “This is my seat, no man will drive me from it. No, nor woman either!”

*Asha. It was her doing. My own sweet sister, may the Others bugger her with a sword.* She wanted him dead, so she could steal his place as their father’s heir. That was why she had let him languish here, ignoring the urgent commands he had sent her.

He found her in the high seat of the Starks, ripping a capon apart with her fingers. The hall rang with the voices of her men, sharing stories with Theon’s own as they drank together. They were so loud that his entrance went all but unnoticed. “Where are the rest?” he demanded of Reek. There were no more than fifty men at the trestle tables, most of them his. Winterfell’s Great Hall could have seated ten times the number.

“This is the whole o’ the company, m’lord prince.”

“The *whole*—how many men did she bring?”

“Twenty, by my count.”

Theon Greyjoy strode to where his sister was sprawled. Asha was laughing at something one of her men had said, but broke off at his approach. “Why, ’tis the Prince of Winterfell.” She tossed a bone to one of the dogs sniffing about the hall. Under that hawk’s beak of a nose, her wide mouth twisted in a mocking grin. “Or is it Prince of Fools?”

“Envy ill becomes a maid.”

Asha sucked grease from her fingers. A lock of black hair fell across her eyes. Her men were shouting for bread and bacon. They made a deal of noise, as few as they were. “Envy, Theon?”

“What else would you call it? With thirty men, I captured Winterfell in a night. You needed a thousand and a moon’s turn to take Deepwood Motte.”

“Well, I’m no great warrior like you, brother,” She quaffed half a horn of ale and wiped her mouth with the back of her hand. “I saw the heads above your gates. Tell me true, which one gave you the fiercest fight, the cripple or the babe?”

Theon could feel the blood rushing to his face. He took no joy from those heads, no more than he had in displaying the headless bodies of the children before the castle. Old Nan stood with her soft toothless mouth opening and closing soundlessly, and Farlen threw himself at Theon, snarling like one of his hounds. Urzen and Cadwyl had to beat him senseless with the butts of their spears. *How did I come to this?* he remembered thinking as he stood over the fly-speckled bodies.

Only Maester Luwin had the stomach to come near. Stone-faced, the small grey man had begged leave to sew the boys' heads back onto their shoulders, so they might be laid in the crypts below with the other Stark dead.

"No," Theon had told him. "Not the crypts."

"But why, my lord? Surely they cannot harm you now. It is where they belong. All the bones of the Starks—"

"I said *no*." He needed the heads for the wall, but he had burned the headless bodies that very day, in all their finery. Afterward he had knelt amongst the bones and ashes to retrieve a slag of melted silver and cracked jet, all that remained of the wolf's-head brooch that had once been Bran's. He had it still.

"I treated Bran and Rickon generously," he told his sister. "They brought their fate on themselves."

"As do we all, little brother."

His patience was at an end. "How do you expect me to hold Winterfell if you bring me only twenty men?"

"Ten," Asha corrected. "The others return with me. You wouldn't want your own sweet sister to brave the dangers of the wood without an escort, would you? There are direwolves prowling the dark." She uncoiled from the great stone seat and rose to her feet. "Come, let us go somewhere we can speak more privily."

She was right, he knew, though it galled him that she would make that decision. *I should never have come to the hall*, he realized belatedly. *I should have summoned her to me.*

It was too late for that now, however. Theon had no choice but to lead Asha to Ned Stark's solar. There, before the ashes of a dead fire, he blurted, "Dagmer's lost the fight at Torrhen's Square—"

"The old castellan broke his shield wall, yes," Asha said calmly. "What did you expect? This Ser Rodrik knows the land intimately, as the Cleftjaw does not, and many of the northmen were mounted. The ironborn lack the discipline to stand a charge of armored horse. Dagmer lives, be grateful for that much. He's leading the survivors back toward the Stony Shore."

*She knows more than I do*, Theon realized. That only made him angrier. "The victory has given Leobald Tallhart the courage to come out from behind his walls and join Ser Rodrik. And I've had reports that Lord Manderly has sent a dozen barges upriver packed with knights, warhorses, and siege engines. The Umbers are gathering beyond the Last River as well. I'll have an *army* at my gates before the moon turns, and you bring me only *ten men*?"

"I need not have brought you any."

"I commanded you—"

"*Father* commanded me to take Deepwood Motte," she snapped. "He said nothing of me having to rescue my little brother."

"Bugger Deepwood," he said. "It's a wooden pisspot on a hill. Winterfell is the heart of the land, but how am I to hold it without a garrison?"

"You might have thought of that before you took it. Oh, it was cleverly done, I'll grant you. If only you'd had the good sense to raze the castle and carry the two little princelings back to Pyke as hostages, you might have won the war in a stroke."

"You'd like that, wouldn't you? To see my prize reduced to ruins and ashes."

"Your prize will be the doom of you. Krakens rise from the *sea*, Theon, or did you forget that during your years among the wolves? Our strength is in our longships. My wooden pisspot sits close enough to the sea for supplies and fresh men to reach me whenever they are needful. But

Winterfell is hundreds of leagues inland, ringed by woods, hills, and hostile holdfasts and castles. And every man in a thousand leagues is your enemy now, make no mistake. You made certain of that when you mounted those heads on your gatehouse.” Asha shook her head. “How could you be such a bloody fool? *Children...*”

“*They defied me!*” he shouted in her face. “And it was blood for blood besides, two sons of Eddard Stark to pay for Rodrik and Maron.” The words tumbled out heedlessly, but Theon knew at once that his father would approve. “I’ve laid my brothers’ ghosts to rest.”

“*Our* brothers,” Asha reminded him, with a half smile that suggested she took his talk of vengeance well salted. “Did you bring their ghosts from Pyke, brother? And here I thought they haunted only Father.”

“When has a maid ever understood a man’s need for revenge?” Even if his father did not appreciate the gift of Winterfell, he *must* approve of Theon avenging his brothers!

Asha snorted back a laugh. “This Ser Rodrik may well feel the same manly need, did you think of that? You are blood of my blood, Theon, whatever else you may be. For the sake of the mother who bore us both, return to Deepwood Motte with me. Put Winterfell to the torch and fall back while you still can.”

“No.” Theon adjusted his crown. “I took this castle and I mean to hold it.”

His sister looked at him a long time. “Then hold it you shall,” she said, “for the rest of your life.” She sighed. “I say it tastes like folly, but what would a shy maid know of such things?” At the door she gave him one last mocking smile. “You ought to know, that’s the ugliest crown I’ve ever laid eyes on. Did you make it yourself?”

She left him fuming, and lingered no longer than was needful to feed and water her horses. Half the men she’d brought returned with her as threatened, riding out the same Hunter’s Gate that Bran and Rickon had used for their escape.

Theon watched them go from atop the wall. As his sister vanished into the mists of the wolfswood he found himself wondering why he had not listened and gone with her.

“Gone, has she?” Reek was at his elbow.

Theon had not heard him approach, nor smelled him either. He could not think of anyone he wanted to see less. It made him uneasy to see the man walking around breathing, with what he knew. *I should have had him killed after he did the others*, he reflected, but the notion made him nervous. Unlikely as it seemed, Reek could read and write, and he was possessed of enough base cunning to have hidden an account of what they’d done.

“M’lord prince, if you’ll pardon me saying, it’s not right for her to abandon you. And ten men, that won’t be near enough.”

“I am well aware of that,” Theon said. *So was Asha*.

“Well, might be I could help you,” said Reek. “Give me a horse and bag o’ coin, and I could find you some good fellows.”

Theon narrowed his eyes. “How many?”

“A hundred, might be. Two hundred. Maybe more.” He smiled, his pale eyes glinting. “I was born up north here. I know many a man, and many a man knows Reek.”

Two hundred men were not an army, but you didn’t need thousands to hold a castle as strong as Winterfell. So long as they could learn which end of a spear did the killing, they might make all the difference. “Do as you say and you’ll not find me ungrateful. You can name your own reward.”

“Well, m’lord, I haven’t had no woman since I was with Lord Ramsay,” Reek said. “I’ve had my eye on that Palla, and I hear she’s already been had, so...”

He had gone too far with Reek to turn back now. “Two hundred men and she’s yours. But a man less and you can go back to fucking pigs.”

Reek was gone before the sun went down, carrying a bag of Stark silver and the last of Theon’s hopes. *Like as not, I’ll never see the wretch again*, he thought bitterly, but even so the chance had to be taken.



That night he dreamed of the feast Ned Stark had thrown when King Robert came to Winterfell. The hall rang with music and laughter, though the cold winds were rising outside. At first it was all wine and roast meat, and Theon was making japes and eyeing the serving girls and having himself a fine time... until he noticed that the room was growing darker. The music did not seem so jolly then; he heard discords and strange silences, and notes that hung in the air bleeding. Suddenly the wine turned bitter in his mouth, and when he looked up from his cup he saw that he was dining with the dead.

King Robert sat with his guts spilling out on the table from the great gash in his belly, and Lord Eddard was headless beside him. Corpses lined the benches below, grey-brown flesh sloughing off their bones as they raised their cups to toast, worms crawling in and out of the holes that were their eyes. He knew them, every one; Jory Cassel and Fat Tom, Porthor and Cayn and Hullen the master of horse, and all the others who had ridden south to King's Landing never to return. Mikken and Chayle sat together, one dripping blood and the other water. Benfred Tallhart and his Wild Hares filled most of a table. The miller's wife was there as well, and Farlen, even the wildling Theon had killed in the wolfswood the day he had saved Bran's life.

But there were others with faces he had never known in life, faces he had seen only in stone. The slim, sad girl who wore a crown of pale blue roses and a white gown spattered with gore could only be Lyanna. Her brother Brandon stood beside her, and their father Lord Rickard just behind. Along the walls figures half-seen moved through the shadows, pale shades with long grim faces. The sight of them sent fear shivering through Theon sharp as a knife. And then the tall doors opened with a crash, and a freezing gale blew down the hall, and Robb came walking out of the night. Grey Wind stalked beside, eyes burning, and man and wolf alike bled from half a hundred savage wounds.

Theon woke with a scream, startling Wex so badly that the boy ran naked from the room. When his guards burst in with drawn swords, he ordered them to bring him the maester. By the time Luwin arrived rumped

and sleepy, a cup of wine had steadied Theon's hands, and he was feeling ashamed of his panic. "A dream," he muttered, "that was all it was. It meant nothing."

"Nothing," Luwin agreed solemnly. He left a sleeping draught, but Theon poured it down the privy shaft the moment he was gone. Luwin was a man as well as a maester, and the man had no love for him. *He wants me to sleep, yes... to sleep and never wake. He'd like that as much as Asha would.*

He sent for Kyra, kicked shut the door, climbed on top of her, and fucked the wench with a fury he'd never known was in him. By the time he finished, she was sobbing, her neck and breasts covered with bruises and bite marks. Theon shoved her from the bed and threw her a blanket. "Get out."

Yet even then, he could not sleep.

Come dawn, he dressed and went outside, to walk along the outer walls. A brisk autumn wind was swirling through the battlements. It reddened his cheeks and stung his eyes. He watched the forest go from grey to green below him as light filtered through the silent trees. On his left he could see tower tops above the inner wall, their roofs gilded by the rising sun. The red leaves of the weirwood were a blaze of flame among the green. *Ned Stark's tree, he thought, and Stark's wood, Stark's castle, Stark's sword, Stark's gods. This is their place, not mine. I am a Greyjoy of Pyke, born to paint a kraken on my shield and sail the great salt sea. I should have gone with Asha.*

On their iron spikes atop the gatehouse, the heads waited.

Theon gazed at them silently while the wind tugged on his cloak with small ghostly hands. The miller's boys had been of an age with Bran and Rickon, alike in size and coloring, and once Reek had flayed the skin from their faces and dipped their heads in tar, it was easy to see familiar features in those misshapen lumps of rotting flesh. People were such fools. *If we'd said they were rams' heads, they would have seen horns.*