

A GHOST IN WINTERFELL

The dead man was found at the base of the inner wall, with his neck broken and only his left leg showing above the snow that had buried him during the night.

If Ramsay's bitches had not dug him up, he might have stayed buried till spring. By the time Ben Bones pulled them off, Grey Jeyne had eaten so much of the dead man's face that half the day was gone before they knew for certain who he'd been: a man-at-arms of four-and-forty years who had marched north with Roger Ryswell. "A drunk," Ryswell declared. "Pissing off the wall, I'll wager. He slipped and fell." No one disagreed. But Theon Greyjoy found himself wondering why any man would climb the snow-slick steps to the battlements in the black of night just to take a piss.

As the garrison broke its fast that morning on stale bread fried in bacon grease (the lords and knights ate the bacon), the talk along the benches was of little but the corpse.

"Stannis has friends inside the castle," Theon heard one serjeant mutter. He was an old Tallhart man, three trees sewn on his ragged surcoat. The watch had just changed. Men were coming in from the cold, stomping their feet to knock the snow off their boots and breeches as the midday meal was served—blood sausage, leeks, and brown bread still warm from the ovens.

"Stannis?" laughed one of Roose Ryswell's riders. "Stannis is snowed to death by now. Else he's run back to the Wall with his tail froze between his legs."

"He could be camped five feet from our walls with a hundred thousand men," said an archer wearing Cerwyn colors. "We'd never see a one o' them through this storm."

Endless, ceaseless, merciless, the snow had fallen day and night. Drifts climbed the walls and filled the crenels along the battlements, white blankets covered every roof, tents sagged beneath the weight. Ropes were

strung from hall to hall to help men keep from getting lost as they crossed the yards. Sentries crowded into the guard turrets to warm half-frozen hands over glowing braziers, leaving the wallwalks to the snowy sentinels the squires had thrown up, who grew larger and stranger every night as wind and weather worked their will upon them. Ragged beards of ice grew down the spears clasped in their snowy fists. No less a man than Hosteen Frey, who had been heard growling that he did not fear a little snow, lost an ear to frostbite.

The horses in the yards suffered most. The blankets thrown over them to keep them warm soaked through and froze if not changed regularly. When fires were lit to keep the cold at bay, they did more harm than good. The warhorses feared the flames and fought to get away, injuring themselves and other horses as they twisted at their lines. Only the horses in the stables were safe and warm, but the stables were already overcrowded.

“The gods have turned against us,” old Lord Locke was heard to say in the Great Hall. “This is their wroth. A wind as cold as hell itself and snows that never end. We are cursed.”

“*Stannis* is cursed,” a Dreadfort man insisted. “He is the one out there in the storm.”

“Lord Stannis might be warmer than we know,” one foolish freerider argued. “His sorceress can summon fire. Might be her red god can melt these snows.”

That was unwise, Theon knew at once. The man spoke too loudly, and in the hearing of Yellow Dick and Sour Alyn and Ben Bones. When the tale reached Lord Ramsay, he sent his Bastard’s Boys to seize the man and drag him out into the snow. “As you seem so fond of Stannis, we will send you to him,” he said. Damon Dance-for-Me gave the freerider a few lashes with his long greased whip. Then, whilst Skinner and Yellow Dick made wagers on how fast his blood would freeze, Ramsay had the man dragged up to the Battlements Gate.

Winterfell’s great main gates were closed and barred, and so choked with ice and snow that the portcullis would need to be chipped free before it

could be raised. Much the same was true of the Hunter's Gate, though there at least ice was not a problem, since the gate had seen recent use. The Kingsroad Gate had not, and ice had frozen those drawbridge chains rock hard. Which left the Battlements Gate, a small arched postern in the inner wall. Only half a gate, in truth, it had a drawbridge that spanned the frozen moat but no corresponding gateway through the outer wall, offering access to the outer ramparts but not the world beyond.

The bleeding freerider was carried across the bridge and up the steps, still protesting. Then Skinner and Sour Alyn seized his arms and legs and tossed him from the wall to the ground eighty feet below. The drifts had climbed so high that they swallowed the man bodily ... but bowmen on the battlements claimed they glimpsed him sometime later, dragging a broken leg through the snow. One feathered his rump with an arrow as he wriggled away. "He will be dead within the hour," Lord Ramsay promised.

"Or he'll be sucking Lord Stannis's cock before the sun goes down," Whoresbane Umber threw back.

"He best take care it don't break off," laughed Rickard Ryswell. "Any man out there in this, his cock is frozen hard."

"Lord Stannis is lost in the storm," said Lady Dustin. "He's leagues away, dead or dying. Let winter do its worst. A few more days and the snows will bury him and his army both."

And us as well, thought Theon, marveling at her folly. Lady Barbrey was of the north and should have known better. The old gods might be listening.

Supper was pease porridge and yesterday's bread, and that caused muttering amongst the common men as well; above the salt, the lords and knights were seen to be eating ham.

Theon was bent over a wooden bowl finishing the last of his own portion of pease porridge when a light touch on his shoulder made him drop his spoon. "Never touch me," he said, twisting down to snatch the fallen utensil off the floor before one of Ramsay's girls could get hold of it. "*Never* touch me."

She sat down next to him, too close, another of Abel's washerwomen. This one was young, fifteen or maybe sixteen, with shaggy blond hair in need of a good wash and a pair of pouty lips in need of a good kiss. "Some girls like to touch," she said, with a little half-smile. "If it please m'lord, I'm Holly."

Holly the whore, he thought, but she was pretty enough. Once he might have laughed and pulled her into his lap, but that day was done. "What do you want?"

"To see these crypts. Where are they, m'lord? Would you show me?" Holly toyed with a strand of her hair, coiling it around her little finger. "Deep and dark, they say. A good place for touching. All the dead kings watching."

"Did Abel send you to me?"

"Might be. Might be I sent myself. But if it's Abel you're wanting, I could bring him. He'll sing m'lord a sweet song."

Every word she said persuaded Theon that this was all some ploy. *But whose, and to what end?* What could Abel want of him? The man was just a singer, a pander with a lute and a false smile. *He wants to know how I took the castle, but not to make a song of it.* The answer came to him. *He wants to know how we got in so he can get out.* Lord Bolton had Winterfell sewn up tight as a babe's swaddling clothes. No one could come or go without his leave. *He wants to flee, him and his washerwoman.* Theon could not blame him, but even so he said, "I want no part of Abel, or you, or any of your sisters. Just leave me be."

Outside the snow was swirling, dancing. Theon groped his way to the wall, then followed it to the Battlements Gate. He might have taken the guards for a pair of Little Walder's snowmen if he had not seen the white plumes of their breath. "I want to walk the walls," he told them, his own breath frosting in the air.

"Bloody cold up there," one warned. "Bloody cold down here," the other said, "but you do as you like, turn-cloak." He waved Theon through the gate.

The steps were snow-packed and slippery, treacherous in the dark. Once he reached the wallwalk, it did not take him long to find the place where they'd thrown down the freerider. He knocked aside the wall of fresh-fallen snow filling up the crenel and leaned out between the merlons. *I could jump*, he thought. *He lived, why shouldn't I?* He could jump, and ... *And what? Break a leg and die beneath the snow? Creep away to freeze to death?*

It was madness. Ramsay would hunt him down, with the girls. Red Jeyne and Jez and Helicent would tear him to pieces if the gods were good. Or worse, he might be taken back alive. "I have to remember my *name*," he whispered.

The next morning Ser Aenys Frey's grizzled squire was found naked and dead of exposure in the old castle lychyard, his face so obscured by hoarfrost that he appeared to be wearing a mask. Ser Aenys put it forth that the man had drunk too much and gotten lost in the storm, though no one could explain why he had taken off his clothes to go outside. *Another drunkard*, Theon thought. Wine could drown a host of suspicions.

Then, before the day was done, a crossbowman sworn to the Flints turned up in the stables with a broken skull. Kicked by a horse, Lord Ramsay declared. *A club, more like*, Theon decided.

It all seemed so familiar, like a mummer show that he had seen before. Only the mummers had changed. Roose Bolton was playing the part that Theon had played the last time round, and the dead men were playing the parts of Aggar, Gynir Rednose, and Gelmarr the Grim. *Reek was there too*, he remembered, *but he was a different Reek, a Reek with bloody hands and lies dripping from his lips, sweet as honey. Reek, Reek, it rhymes with sneak.*

The deaths set Roose Bolton's lords to quarreling openly in the Great Hall. Some were running short of patience. "How long must we sit here waiting for this king who never comes?" Ser Hosteen Frey demanded. "We should take the fight to Stannis and make an end to him."

"Leave the castle?" croaked one-armed Harwood Stout. His tone suggested he would sooner have his remaining arm hacked off. "Would you have us

charge blindly into the snow?”

“To fight Lord Stannis we would first need to find him,” Roose Ryswell pointed out. “Our scouts go out the Hunter’s Gate, but of late, none of them return.”

Lord Wyman Manderly slapped his massive belly. “White Harbor does not fear to ride with you, Ser Hosteen. Lead us out, and my knights will ride behind you.”

Ser Hosteen turned on the fat man. “Close enough to drive a lance through my back, aye. Where are my kin, Manderly? Tell me that. Your guests, who brought your son back to you.”

“His bones, you mean.” Manderly speared a chunk of ham with his dagger. “I recall them well. Rhaegar of the round shoulders, with his glib tongue. Bold Ser Jared, so swift to draw his steel. Symond the spymaster, always clinking coins. They brought home Wendel’s bones. It was Tywin Lannister who returned Wylis to me, safe and whole, as he had promised. A man of his word, Lord Tywin, Seven save his soul.” Lord Wyman popped the meat into his mouth, chewed it noisily, smacked his lips, and said, “The road has many dangers, ser. I gave your brothers guest gifts when we took our leave of White Harbor. We swore we would meet again at the wedding. Many and more bore witness to our parting.”

“Many and more?” mocked Aenys Frey. “Or you and yours?”

“What are you suggesting, Frey?” The Lord of White Harbor wiped his mouth with his sleeve. “I do not like your tone, ser. No, not one bloody bit.”

“Step out into the yard, you sack of suet, and I’ll serve you all the bloody bits that you can stomach,” Ser Hosteen said.

Wyman Manderly laughed, but half a dozen of his knights were on their feet at once. It fell to Roger Ryswell and Barbrey Dustin to calm them with quiet words. Roose Bolton said nothing at all. But Theon Greyjoy saw a look in his pale eyes that he had never seen before—an uneasiness, even a hint of fear.

That night the new stable collapsed beneath the weight of the snow that had buried it. Twenty-six horses and two grooms died, crushed beneath the falling roof or smothered under the snows. It took the best part of the morning to dig out the bodies. Lord Bolton appeared briefly in the outer ward to inspect the scene, then ordered the remaining horses brought inside, along with the mounts still tethered in the outer ward. And no sooner had the men finished digging out the dead men and butchering the horses than another corpse was found.

This one could not be waved away as some drunken tumble or the kick of a horse. The dead man was one of Ramsay's favorites, the squat, scrofulous, ill-favored man-at-arms called Yellow Dick. Whether his dick had actually been yellow was hard to determine, as someone had sliced it off and stuffed it into his mouth so forcefully they had broken three of his teeth. When the cooks found him outside the kitchens, buried up to his neck in a snowdrift, both dick and man were blue from cold. "Burn the body," Roose Bolton ordered, "and see that you do not speak of this. I'll not have this tale spread."

The tale spread nonetheless. By midday most of Winterfell had heard, many from the lips of Ramsay Bolton, whose "boy" Yellow Dick had been. "When we find the man who did this," Lord Ramsay promised, "I will flay the skin off him, cook it crisp as crackling, and make him eat it, every bite." Word went out that the killer's name would be worth a golden dragon.

The reek within the Great Hall was palpable by eventide. With hundreds of horses, dogs, and men squeezed underneath one roof, the floors slimy with mud and melting snow, horseshit, dog turds, and even human feces, the air redolent with the smells of wet dog, wet wool, and sodden horse blankets, there was no comfort to be found amongst the crowded benches, but there was food. The cooks served up great slabs of fresh horsemeat, charred outside and bloody red within, with roast onions and neeps ... and for once, the common soldiers ate as well as the lords and knights.

The horsemeat was too tough for the ruins of Theon's teeth. His attempts to chew gave him excruciating pain. So he mashed the neeps and onions up together with the flat of his dagger and made a meal of that, then cut the horse up very small, sucked on each piece, and spat it out. That way at least

he had the taste, and some nourishment from the grease and blood. The bone was beyond him, though, so he tossed it to the dogs and watched Grey Jeyne make off with it whilst Sara and Willow snapped at her heels.

Lord Bolton commanded Abel to play for them as they ate. The bard sang “Iron Lances,” then “The Winter Maid.” When Barbreys Dustin asked for something more cheerful, he gave them “The Queen Took Off Her Sandal, the King Took Off His Crown,” and “The Bear and the Maiden Fair.” The Freys joined the singing, and even a few northmen slammed their fists on the table to the chorus, bellowing, “*A bear! A bear!*” But the noise frightened the horses, so the singers soon let off and the music died away.

The Bastard’s Boys gathered beneath a wall sconce where a torch was flaming smokily. Lutton and Skinner were throwing dice. Grunt had a woman in his lap, a breast in his hand. Damon Dance-for-Me sat greasing up his whip. “*Reek*,” he called. He tapped the whip against his calf as a man might do to summon his dog. “You are starting to stink again, *Reek*.”

Theon had no reply for that beyond a soft “Yes.”

“Lord Ramsay means to cut your lips off when all this is done,” said Damon, stroking his whip with a greasy rag.

My lips have been between his lady’s legs. That insolence cannot go unpunished. “As you say.”

Lutton guffawed. “I think he wants it.”

“Go away, *Reek*,” Skinner said. “The smell of you turns my stomach.” The others laughed.

He fled quickly, before they changed their minds. His tormentors would not follow him outside. Not so long as there was food and drink within, willing women and warm fires. As he left the hall, Abel was singing “The Maids That Bloom in Spring.”

Outside the snow was coming down so heavily that Theon could not see more than three feet ahead of him. He found himself alone in a white

wilderness, walls of snow looming up to either side of him chest high. When he raised his head, the snowflakes brushed his cheeks like cold soft kisses. He could hear the sound of music from the hall behind him. A soft song now, and sad. For a moment he felt almost at peace.

Farther on, he came upon a man striding in the opposite direction, a hooded cloak flapping behind him. When they found themselves face-to-face their eyes met briefly. The man put a hand on his dagger. "Theon Turncloak. Theon Kinslayer."

"I'm not. I never ... I was ironborn."

"False is all you were. How is it you still breathe?"

"The gods are not done with me," Theon answered, wondering if this could be the killer, the night walker who had stuffed Yellow Dick's cock into his mouth and pushed Roger Ryswell's groom off the battlements. Oddly, he was not afraid. He pulled the glove from his left hand. "Lord Ramsay is not done with me."

The man looked, and laughed. "I leave you to him, then."

Theon trudged through the storm until his arms and legs were caked with snow and his hands and feet had gone numb from cold, then climbed to the battlements of the inner wall again. Up here, a hundred feet high, a little wind was blowing, stirring the snow. All the crenels had filled up. Theon had to punch through a wall of snow to make a hole ... only to find that he could not see beyond the moat. Of the outer wall, nothing remained but a vague shadow and a few dim lights floating in the dark.

The world is gone. King's Landing, Riverrun, Pyke, and the Iron Islands, all the Seven Kingdoms, every place that he had ever known, every place that he had ever read about or dreamed of, all gone. Only Winterfell remained.

He was trapped here, with the ghosts. The old ghosts from the crypts and the younger ones that he had made himself, Mikken and Farlen, Gynir Rednose, Aggar, Gelmarr the Grim, the miller's wife from Acorn Water and

her two young sons, and all the rest. *My work. My ghosts. They are all here, and they are angry.* He thought of the crypts and those missing swords.

Theon returned to his own chambers. He was stripping off his wet clothes when Steelshanks Walton found him. “Come with me, turncloak. His lordship wants words with you.”

He had no clean dry clothes, so he wriggled back into the same damp rags and followed. Steelshanks led him back to the Great Keep and the solar that had once been Eddard Stark’s. Lord Bolton was not alone. Lady Dustin sat with him, pale-faced and severe; an iron horsehead brooch clasped Roger Ryswell’s cloak; Aenys Frey stood near the fire, pinched cheeks flushed with cold.

“I am told you have been wandering the castle,” Lord Bolton began. “Men have reported seeing you in the stables, in the kitchens, in the barracks, on the battlements. You have been observed near the ruins of collapsed keeps, outside Lady Catelyn’s old sept, coming and going from the godswood. Do you deny it?”

“No, m’lord.” Theon made sure to muddy up the word. He knew that pleased Lord Bolton. “I cannot sleep, m’lord. I walk.” He kept his head down, fixed upon the old stale rushes scattered on the floor. It was not wise to look his lordship in the face.

“I was a boy here before the war. A ward of Eddard Stark.”

“You were a hostage,” Bolton said. “Yes, m’lord. A hostage.” *It was my home, though. Not a true home, but the best I ever knew.*

“Someone has been killing my men.”

“Yes, m’lord.”

“Not you, I trust?” Bolton’s voice grew even softer. “You would not repay all my kindnesses with such treachery.”

“No, m’lord, not me. I wouldn’t. I ... only walk, is all.”

Lady Dustin spoke up. “Take off your gloves.”

Theon glanced up sharply. “Please, no. I ... I ...”

“Do as she says,” Ser Aenys said. “Show us your hands.”

Theon peeled his gloves off and held his hands up for them to see. *It is not as if I stand before them naked. It is not so bad as that.* His left hand had three fingers, his right four. Ramsay had taken only the pinky off the one, the ring finger and forefingers from the other.

“The Bastard did this to you,” Lady Dustin said. “If it please m’lady, I ... I asked it of him.” Ramsay always made him ask. *Ramsay always makes me beg.*

“Why would you do that?”

“I ... I did not need so many fingers.”

“Four is enough.” Ser Aenys Frey fingered the wispy brown beard that sprouted from his weak chin like a rat’s tail. “Four on his right hand. He could still hold a sword. A dagger.”

Lady Dustin laughed. “Are all Freys such fools? Look at him. Hold a dagger? He hardly has the strength to hold a spoon. Do you truly think he could have overcome the Bastard’s disgusting creature and shoved his manhood down his throat?”

“These dead were all strong men,” said Roger Ryswell, “and none of them were stabbed. The turncloak’s not our killer.”

Roose Bolton’s pale eyes were fixed on Theon, as sharp as Skinner’s flaying knife. “I am inclined to agree. Strength aside, he does not have it in him to betray my son.”

Roger Ryswell grunted. “If not him, who? Stannis has some man inside the castle, that’s plain.”

Reek is no man. Not Reek. Not me. He wondered if Lady Dustin had told them about the crypts, the missing swords.

“We must look at Manderly,” muttered Ser Aenys Frey. “Lord Wyman loves us not.”

Ryswell was not convinced. “He loves his steaks and chops and meat pies, though. Prowling the castle by dark would require him to leave the table. The only time he does that is when he seeks the privy for one of his hourlong squats.”

“I do not claim Lord Wyman does the deeds himself. He brought three hundred men with him. A hundred knights. Any of them might have—”

“Night work is not knight’s work,” Lady Dustin said. “And Lord Wyman is not the only man who lost kin at your Red Wedding, Frey. Do you imagine Whoresbane loves you any better? If you did not hold the Greatjon, he would pull out your entrails and make you eat them, as Lady Hornwood ate her fingers. Flints, Cerwyns, Tallharts, Slates ... they all had men with the Young Wolf.”

“House Ryswell too,” said Roger Ryswell. “Even Dustins out of Barrowton.” Lady Dustin parted her lips in a thin, feral smile. “The north remembers, Frey.”

Aenys Frey’s mouth quivered with outrage. “Stark dishonored us. That is what you northmen had best remember.”

Roose Bolton rubbed at his chapped lips. “This squabbling will not serve.” He flicked his fingers at Theon. “You are free to go. Take care where you wander. Else it might be you we find upon the morrow, smiling a red smile.”

“As you say, m’lord.” Theon drew his gloves on over his maimed hands and took his leave, limping on his maimed foot.

The hour of the wolf found him still awake, wrapped in layers of heavy wool and greasy fur, walking yet another circuit of the inner walls, hoping

to exhaust himself enough to sleep. His legs were caked with snow to the knee, his head and shoulders shrouded in white. On this stretch of the wall the wind was in his face, and melting snow ran down his cheeks like icy tears.

Then he heard the horn.

A long low moan, it seemed to hang above the battlements, lingering in the black air, soaking deep into the bones of every man who heard it. All along the castle walls, sentries turned toward the sound, their hands tightening around the shafts of their spears. In the ruined halls and keeps of Winterfell, lords hushed other lords, horses nickered, and sleepers stirred in their dark corners. No sooner had the sound of the warhorn died away than a drum began to beat: *BOOM doom BOOM doom BOOM doom*. And a name passed from the lips of each man to the next, written in small white puffs of breath. *Stannis*, they whispered, *Stannis is here*, *Stannis is come*, *Stannis*, *Stannis*, *Stannis*.

Theon shivered. Baratheon or Bolton, it made no matter to him. Stannis had made common cause with Jon Snow at the Wall, and Jon would take his head off in a heartbeat. *Plucked from the clutches of one bastard to die at the hands of another, what a jape*. Theon would have laughed aloud if he'd remembered how.

The drumming seemed to be coming from the wolfswood beyond the Hunter's Gate. *They are just outside the walls*. Theon made his way along the wallwalk, one more man amongst a score doing the same. But even when they reached the towers that flanked the gate itself, there was nothing to be seen beyond the veil of white.

"Do they mean to try and *blow* our walls down?" japed a Flint when the warhorn sounded once again. "Mayhaps he thinks he's found the Horn of Joramun."

"Is Stannis fool enough to storm the castle?" a sentry asked. "He's not Robert," declared a Barrowton man. "He'll sit, see if he don't. Try and starve us out."

“He’ll freeze his balls off first,” another sentry said. “We should take the fight to him,” declared a Frey.

Do that, Theon thought. Ride out into the snow and die. Leave Winterfell to me and the ghosts. Roose Bolton would welcome such a fight, he sensed. *He needs an end to this.* The castle was too crowded to withstand a long siege, and too many of the lords here were of uncertain loyalty. Fat Wyman Manderly, Whoresbane Umber, the men of House Hornwood and House Tallhart, the Lockes and Flints and Ryswells, all of them were *northmen*, sworn to House Stark for generations beyond count. It was the girl who held them here, Lord Eddard’s blood, but the girl was just a mummer’s ploy, a lamb in a direwolf’s skin. So why not send the north-men forth to battle Stannis before the farce unraveled? *Slaughter in the snow. And every man who falls is one less foe for the Dreadfort.*

Theon wondered if he might be allowed to fight. Then at least he might die a man’s death, sword in hand. That was a gift Ramsay would never give him, but Lord Roose might. *If I beg him. I did all he asked of me, I played my part, I gave the girl away.*

Death was the sweetest deliverance he could hope for.

In the godswood the snow was still dissolving as it touched the earth. Steam rose off the hot pools, fragrant with the smell of moss and mud and decay. A warm fog hung in the air, turning the trees into sentinels, tall soldiers shrouded in cloaks of gloom. During daylight hours, the steamy wood was often full of northmen come to pray to the old gods, but at this hour Theon Greyjoy found he had it all to himself.

And in the heart of the wood the weirwood waited with its knowing red eyes. Theon stopped by the edge of the pool and bowed his head before its carved red face. Even here he could hear the drumming, *boom DOOM boom DOOM boom DOOM*. Like distant thunder, the sound seemed to come from everywhere at once.

The night was windless, the snow drifting straight down out of a cold black sky, yet the leaves of the heart tree were rustling his name. “Theon,” they seemed to whisper, “Theon.”

The old gods, he thought. They know me. They know my name. I was Theon of House Greyjoy. I was a ward of Eddard Stark, a friend and brother to his children. “Please.” He fell to his knees. “A sword, that’s all I ask. Let me die as Theon, not as Reek.” Tears trickled down his cheeks, impossibly warm. “I was ironborn. A son ... a son of Pyke, of the islands.”

A leaf drifted down from above, brushed his brow, and landed in the pool. It floated on the water, red, five-fingered, like a bloody hand. “... Bran,” the tree murmured.

They know. The gods know. They saw what I did. And for one strange moment it seemed as if it were Bran’s face carved into the pale trunk of the weirwood, staring down at him with eyes red and wise and sad. *Bran’s ghost*, he thought, but that was madness. Why should Bran want to haunt him? He had been fond of the boy, had never done him any harm. *It was not Bran we killed. It was not Rickon. They were only miller’s sons, from the mill by the Acorn Water.* “I had to have two heads, else they would have mocked me ... laughed at me ... they ...”

A voice said, “Who are you talking to?”

Theon spun, terrified that Ramsay had found him, but it was just the washerwomen—Holly, Rowan, and one whose name he did not know. “The ghosts,” he blurted. “They whisper to me. They ... they know my name.”

“Theon Turncloak.” Rowan grabbed his ear, twisting. “You had to have two heads, did you?”

“Elsewise men would have *laughed* at him,” said Holly.

They do not understand. Theon wrenched free. “What do you want?” he asked.

“You,” said the third washerwoman, an older woman, deep-voiced, with grey streaks in her hair.

“I told you. I want to touch you, turncloak.” Holly smiled. In her hand a blade appeared.

I could scream, Theon thought. Someone will hear. The castle is full of armed men. He would be dead before help reached him, to be sure, his blood soaking into the ground to feed the heart tree. *And what would be so wrong with that?* “Touch me,” he said. “Kill me.” There was more despair than defiance in his voice. “Go on. Do me, the way you did the others. Yellow Dick and the rest. It was you.”

Holly laughed. “How could it be us? We’re women. Teats and cunnies. Here to be fucked, not feared.”

“Did the Bastard hurt you?” Rowan asked. “Chopped off your fingers, did he? Skinned your widdle toes? Knocked your teeth out? Poor lad.” She patted his cheek. “There will be no more o’ that, I promise. You prayed, and the gods sent us. You want to die as Theon? We’ll give you that. A nice quick death, ’twill hardly hurt at all.” She smiled. “But not till you’ve sung for Abel. He’s waiting for you.”