

REEK

They gave him a horse and a banner, a soft woolen doublet and a warm fur cloak, and set him loose. For once, he did not stink. “Come back with that castle,” said Damon Dance-for-Me as he helped Reek climb shaking into the saddle, “or keep going and see how far you get before we catch you. He’d like that, he would.” Grinning, Damon gave the horse a lick across the rump with his whip, and the old stot whinnied and lurched into motion.

Reek did not dare to look back, for fear that Damon and Yellow Dick and Grunt and the rest were coming after him, that all of this was just another of Lord Ramsay’s japes, some cruel test to see what he would do if they gave him a horse and set him free. *Do they think that I will run?* The stot they had given him was a wretched thing, knock-kneed and half-starved; he could never hope to outdistance the fine horses Lord Ramsay and his hunters would be riding. And Ramsay loved nothing more than to set his girls baying on the trail of some fresh prey.

Besides, where would he run to? Behind him were the camps, crowded with Dreadfort men and those the Ryswells had brought from the Rills, with the Barrowton host between them. South of Moat Cailin, another army was coming up the causeway, an army of Boltons and Freys marching beneath the banners of the Dreadfort. East of the road lay a bleak and barren shore and a cold salt sea, to the west the swamps and bogs of the Neck, infested with serpents, lizard lions, and bog devils with their poisoned arrows.

He would not run. He could not run.

I will deliver him the castle. I will. I must.

It was a grey day, damp and misty. The wind was from the south, moist as a kiss. The ruins of Moat Cailin were visible in the distance, threaded through with wisps of morning mist. His horse moved toward them at a walk, her hooves making faint wet squelching sounds as they pulled free of the grey-green muck.

I have come this way before. It was a dangerous thought, and he regretted it at once. “No,” he said, “no, that was some other man, that was before you knew your name.” His name was Reek. He had to remember that. *Reek, Reek, it rhymes with leek.*

When that other man had come this way, an army had followed close behind him, the great host of the north riding to war beneath the grey-and-white banners of House Stark. Reek rode alone, clutching a peace banner on a pinewood staff. When that other man had come this way, he had been mounted on a courser, swift and spirited. Reek rode a broken-down stot, all skin and bone and ribs, and he rode her slowly for fear he might fall off. The other man had been a good rider, but Reek was uneasy on horseback. It had been so long. He was no rider. He was not even a man. He was Lord Ramsay’s creature, lower than a dog, a worm in human skin. “You will pretend to be a prince,” Lord Ramsay told him last night, as Reek was soaking in a tub of scalding water, “but we know the truth. You’re Reek. You’ll always be Reek, no matter how sweet you smell. Your nose may lie to you. Remember your name. Remember who you are.”

“Reek,” he said. “Your Reek.”

“Do this little thing for me, and you can be my dog and eat meat every day,” Lord Ramsay promised. “You will be tempted to betray me. To run or fight or join our foes. No, quiet, I’ll not hear you deny it. Lie to me, and I’ll take your tongue. A man *would* turn against me in your place, but we know what you are, don’t we? Betray me if you want, it makes no matter ... but count your fingers first and know the cost.”

Reek knew the cost. *Seven*, he thought, *seven fingers. A man can make do with seven fingers. Seven is a sacred number.* He remembered how much it had hurt when Lord Ramsay had commanded Skinner to lay his ring finger bare.

The air was wet and heavy, and shallow pools of water dotted the ground. Reek picked his way between them carefully, following the remnants of the log-and-plank road that Robb Stark’s vanguard had laid down across the soft ground to speed the passage of his host. Where once a mighty curtain wall had stood, only scattered stones remained, blocks of black basalt so

large it must once have taken a hundred men to hoist them into place. Some had sunk so deep into the bog that only a corner showed; others lay strewn about like some god's abandoned toys, cracked and crumbling, spotted with lichen. Last night's rain had left the huge stones wet and glistening, and the morning sunlight made them look as if they were coated in some fine black oil.

Beyond stood the towers.

The Drunkard's Tower leaned as if it were about to collapse, just as it had for half a thousand years. The Children's Tower thrust into the sky as straight as a spear, but its shattered top was open to the wind and rain. The Gatehouse Tower, squat and wide, was the largest of the three, slimy with moss, a gnarled tree growing sideways from the stones of its north side, fragments of broken wall still standing to the east and west. *The Karstarks took the Drunkard's Tower and the Umbers the Children's Tower*, he recalled. *Robb claimed the Gatehouse Tower for his own.*

If he closed his eyes, he could see the banners in his mind's eye, snapping bravely in a brisk north wind. *All gone now, all fallen.* The wind on his cheeks was blowing from the south, and the only banners flying above the remains of Moat Cailin displayed a golden kraken on a field of black.

He was being watched. He could feel the eyes. When he looked up, he caught a glimpse of pale faces peering from behind the battlements of the Gatehouse Tower and through the broken masonry that crowned the Children's Tower, where legend said the children of the forest had once called down the hammer of the waters to break the lands of Westeros in two.

The only dry road through the Neck was the causeway, and the towers of Moat Cailin plugged its northern end like a cork in a bottle. The road was narrow, the ruins so positioned that any enemy coming up from the south must pass beneath and between them. To assault any of the three towers, an attacker must expose his back to arrows from the other two, whilst climbing damp stone walls festooned with streamers of slimy white ghostskin. The swampy ground beyond the causeway was impassable, an endless morass of suckholes, quicksands, and glistening green swards that looked solid to the

unwary eye but turned to water the instant you trod upon them, the whole of it infested with venomous serpents and poisonous flowers and monstrous lizard lions with teeth like daggers. Just as dangerous were its people, seldom seen but always lurking, the swamp-dwellers, the frog-eaters, the mud-men. Fenn and Reed, Peat and Boggs, Cray and Quagg, Greengood and Blackmyre, those were the sorts of names they gave themselves. The ironborn called them all *bog devils*.

Reek passed the rotted carcass of a horse, an arrow jutting from its neck. A long white snake slithered into its empty eye socket at his approach. Behind the horse he spied the rider, or what remained of him. The crows had stripped the flesh from the man's face, and a feral dog had burrowed beneath his mail to get at his entrails. Farther on, another corpse had sunk so deep into the muck that only his face and fingers showed.

Closer to the towers, corpses littered the ground on every side. Blood-blooms had sprouted from their gaping wounds, pale flowers with petals plump and moist as a woman's lips.

The garrison will never know me. Some might recall the boy he'd been before he learned his name, but Reek would be a stranger to them. It had been a long while since he last looked into a glass, but he knew how old he must appear. His hair had turned white; much of it had fallen out, and what was left was stiff and dry as straw. The dungeons had left him weak as an old woman and so thin a strong wind could knock him down.

And his hands ... Ramsay had given him gloves, fine gloves of black leather, soft and supple, stuffed with wool to conceal his missing fingers, but if anyone looked closely, he would see that three of his fingers did not bend.

"*No closer!*" a voice rang out. "What do you want?"

"Words." He spurred the stot onward, waving the peace banner so they could not fail to see it. "I come unarmed."

There was no reply. Inside the walls, he knew, the ironmen were discussing whether to admit him or fill his chest with arrows. *It makes no matter.* A

quick death here would be a hundred times better than returning to Lord Ramsay as a failure.

Then the gatehouse doors flung open. “*Quickly.*” Reek was turning toward the sound when the arrow struck. It came from somewhere to his right, where broken chunks of the curtain wall lay half-submerged beneath the bog. The shaft tore through the folds of his banner and hung spent, the point a bare foot from his face. It startled him so badly that he dropped the peace banner and tumbled from his saddle.

“Inside,” the voice shouted, “hurry, fool, *hurry!*”

Reek scrambled up the steps on hands and knees as another arrow fluttered over his head. Someone seized him and dragged him inside, and he heard the door crash shut behind him. He was pulled to his feet and shoved against a wall. Then a knife was at his throat, a bearded face so close to his that he could count the man’s nose hairs. “Who are you? What’s your purpose here? Quick now, or I’ll do you the same as him.” The guard jerked his head toward a body rotting on the floor beside the door, its flesh green and crawling with maggots.

“I am ironborn,” Reek answered, lying. The boy he’d been before had been ironborn, true enough, but Reek had come into this world in the dungeons of the Dreadfort. “Look at my face. I am Lord Balon’s son. Your prince.” He would have said the name, but somehow the words caught in his throat. *Reek, I’m Reek, it rhymes with squeak.* He had to forget that for a little while, though. No man would ever yield to a creature such as Reek, no matter how desperate his situation. He must pretend to be a prince again.

His captor stared at his face, squinting, his mouth twisted in suspicion. His teeth were brown, and his breath stank of ale and onion. “Lord Balon’s sons were killed.”

“My brothers. Not me. Lord Ramsay took me captive after Winterfell. He’s sent me here to treat with you. Do you command here?”

“Me?” The man lowered his knife and took a step backwards, almost stumbling over the corpse. “Not me, m’lord.” His mail was rusted, his

leathers rotting. On the back of one hand an open sore wept blood. “Ralf Kenning has the command. The captain said. I’m on the door, is all.”

“And who is this?” Reek gave the corpse a kick.

The guard stared at the dead man as if seeing him for the first time. “Him ... he drank the water. I had to cut his throat for him, to stop his screaming. Bad belly. You can’t drink the water. That’s why we got the ale.” The guard rubbed his face, his eyes red and inflamed. “We used to drag the dead down into the cellars. All the vaults are flooded down there. No one wants to take the trouble now, so we just leave them where they fall.”

“The cellar is a better place for them. Give them to the water. To the Drowned God.”

The man laughed. “No gods down there, m’lord. Only rats and water snakes. White things, thick as your leg. Sometimes they slither up the steps and bite you in your sleep.”

Reek remembered the dungeons underneath the Dreadfort, the rat squirming between his teeth, the taste of warm blood on his lips. *If I fail, Ramsay will send me back to that, but first he’ll flay the skin from another finger.* “How many of the garrison are left?”

“Some,” said the ironman. “I don’t know. Fewer than we was before. Some in the Drunkard’s Tower too, I think. Not the Children’s Tower. Dagon Codd went over there a few days back. Only two men left alive, he said, and they was eating on the dead ones. He killed them both, if you can believe that.”

Moat Cailin has fallen, Reek realized then, *only no one has seen fit to tell them.* He rubbed his mouth to hide his broken teeth, and said, “I need to speak with your commander.”

“Kenning?” The guard seemed confused. “He don’t have much to say these days. He’s dying. Might be he’s dead. I haven’t seen him since ... I don’t remember when ...”

“Where is he? Take me to him.”

“Who will keep the door, then?”

“Him.” Reek gave the corpse a kick.

That made the man laugh. “Aye. Why not? Come with me, then.” He pulled a torch down from a wall sconce and waved it till it blazed up bright and hot. “This way.” The guard led him through a door and up a spiral stair, the torchlight glimmering off black stone walls as they climbed.

The chamber at the top of the steps was dark, smoky, and oppressively hot. A ragged skin had been hung across the narrow window to keep the damp out, and a slab of peat smoldered in a brazier. The smell in the room was foul, a miasma of mold and piss and nightsoil, of smoke and sickness. Soiled rushes covered the floor, whilst a heap of straw in the corner passed for a bed.

Ralf Kenning lay shivering beneath a mountain of furs. His arms were stacked beside him—sword and axe, mail hauberk, iron warhelm. His shield bore the storm god’s cloudy hand, lightning crackling from his fingers down to a raging sea, but the paint was discolored and peeling, the wood beneath starting to rot.

Ralf was rotting too. Beneath the furs he was naked and feverish, his pale puffy flesh covered with weeping sores and scabs. His head was misshapen, one cheek grotesquely swollen, his neck so engorged with blood that it threatened to swallow his face. The arm on that same side was big as a log and crawling with white worms. No one had bathed him or shaved him for many days, from the look of him. One eye wept pus, and his beard was crusty with dried vomit. “What happened to him?” asked Reek.

“He was on the parapets and some bog devil loosed an arrow at him. It was only a graze, but ... they poison their shafts, smear the points with shit and worse things. We poured boiling wine into the wound, but it made no difference.”

I cannot treat with this thing. “Kill him,” Reek told the guard. “His wits are gone. He’s full of blood and worms.”

The man gaped at him. “The captain put him in command.”

“You’d put a dying horse down.”

“What horse? I never had no horse.”

I did. The memory came back in a rush. Smiler’s screams had sounded almost human. His mane afire, he had reared up on his hind legs, blind with pain, lashing out with his hooves. *No, no. Not mine, he was not mine, Reek never had a horse.* “I will kill him for you.” Reek snatched up Ralf Kenning’s sword where it leaned against his shield. He still had fingers enough to clasp the hilt. When he laid the edge of the blade against the swollen throat of the creature on the straw, the skin split open in a gout of black blood and yellow pus. Kenning jerked violently, then lay still. An awful stench filled the room. Reek bolted for the steps. The air was damp and cold there, but much cleaner by comparison. The ironman stumbled out after him, white-faced and struggling not to retch. Reek grasped him by the arm. “Who was second-in-command? Where are the rest of the men?”

“Up on the battlements, or in the hall. Sleeping, drinking. I’ll take you if you like.”

“Do it now.” Ramsay had only given him a day.

The hall was dark stone, high ceilinged and drafty, full of drifting smoke, its stone walls spotted by huge patches of pale lichen. A peat fire burned low in a hearth blackened by the hotter blazes of years past. A massive table of carved stone filled the chamber, as it had for centuries. *There was where I sat, the last time I was here,* he remembered. *Robb was at the head of the table, with the Greatjon to his right and Roose Bolton on his left. The Glovers sat next to Helman Tallhart. Karstark and his sons were across from them.*

Two dozen ironborn sat drinking at the table. A few looked at him with dull, flat eyes when he entered. The rest ignored him. All the men were strangers

to him. Several wore cloaks fastened by brooches in the shape of silver codfish. The Coddys were not well regarded in the Iron Islands; the men were said to be thieves and cowards, the women wantons who bedded with their own fathers and brothers. It did not surprise him that his uncle had chosen to leave these men behind when the Iron Fleet went home. *This will make my task that much easier.* “Ralf Kenning is dead,” he said. “Who commands here?”

The drinkers stared at him blankly. One laughed. Another spat. Finally one of the Coddys said, “Who asks?”

“Lord Balon’s son.” *Reek, my name is Reek, it rhymes with cheek.* “I am here at the command of Ramsay Bolton, Lord of the Hornwood and heir to the Dreadfort, who captured me at Winterfell. His host is north of you, his father’s to the south, but Lord Ramsay is prepared to be merciful if you yield Moat Cailin to him before the sun goes down.” He drew out the letter that they’d given him and tossed it on the table before the drinkers.

One of them picked it up and turned it over in his hands, picking at the pink wax that sealed it. After a moment he said, “Parchment. What good is that? It’s cheese we need, and meat.”

“Steel, you mean,” said the man beside him, a greybeard whose left arm ended in a stump. “Swords. Axes. Aye, and bows, a hundred more bows, and men to loose the arrows.”

“Ironborn do not surrender,” said a third voice. “Tell that to my father. Lord Balon bent the knee when Robert broke his wall. Elsewise he would have died. As you will if you do not yield.” He gestured at the parchment. “Break the seal. Read the words. That is a safe conduct, written in Lord Ramsay’s own hand. Give up your swords and come with me, and his lordship will feed you and give you leave to march unmolested to the Stony Shore and find a ship for home. Elsewise you die.”

“Is that a threat?” One of the Coddys pushed to his feet. A big man, but pop-eyed and wide of mouth, with dead white flesh. He looked as if his father had sired him on a fish, but he still wore a longsword. “Dagon Codd yields to no man.”

No, please, you have to listen. The thought of what Ramsay would do to him if he crept back to camp without the garrison's surrender was almost enough to make him piss his breeches. *Reek, Reek, it rhymes with leak.* "Is that your answer?" The words rang feebly in his ears. "Does this codfish speak for all of you?"

The guard who had met him at the door seemed less certain. "Victarion commanded us to hold, he did. I heard him with my own ears. *Hold here till I return,* he told Kenning."

"Aye," said the one-armed man. "That's what he said. The kingsmoot called, but he swore that he'd be back, with a driftwood crown upon his head and a thousand men behind him."

"My uncle is never coming back," Reek told them. "The kingswood crowned his brother Euron, and the Crow's Eye has other wars to fight. You think my uncle values you? He doesn't. You are the ones he left behind to die. He scraped you off the same way he scrapes mud off his boots when he wades ashore."

Those words struck home. He could see it in their eyes, in the way they looked at one another or frowned above their cups. *They all feared they'd been abandoned, but it took me to turn fear into certainty.* These were not the kin of famous captains nor the blood of the great Houses of the Iron Islands. These were the sons of thralls and salt wives.

"If we yield, we walk away?" said the one-armed man. "Is that what it says on this here writing?" He nudged the roll of parchment, its wax seal still unbroken.

"Read it for yourself," he answered, though he was almost certain that none of them could read. "Lord Ramsay treats his captives honorably so long as they keep faith with him." *He has only taken toes and fingers and that other thing, when he might have had my tongue, or peeled the skin off my legs from heel to thigh.* "Yield up your swords to him, and you will live."

"Liar." Dagon Codd drew his longsword. "You're the one they call Turncloak. Why should we believe your promises?"

He is drunk, Reek realized. *The ale is speaking*. “Believe what you want. I have brought Lord Ramsay’s message. Now I must return to him. We’ll sup on wild boar and neeps, washed down with strong red wine. Those who come with me will be welcome at the feast. The rest of you will die within a day. The Lord of the Dreadfort will bring his knights up the causeway, whilst his son leads his own men down on you from the north. No quarter will be granted. The ones that die fighting will be the lucky ones. Those who live will be given to the bog devils.”

“*Enough*,” snarled Dagon Codd. “You think you can frighten ironborn with *words*? Begone. Run back to your master before I open your belly, pull your entrails out, and make you eat them.”

He might have said more, but suddenly his eyes gaped wide. A throwing axe sprouted from the center of his forehead with a solid *thunk*. Codd’s sword fell from his fingers. He jerked like a fish on a hook, then crashed face-first onto the table.

It was the one-armed man who’d flung the axe. As he rose to his feet he had another in his hand. “Who else wants to die?” he asked the other drinkers. “Speak up, I’ll see you do.” Thin red streams were spreading out across the stone from the pool of blood where Dagon Codd’s head had come to rest. “Me, I mean to live, and that don’t mean staying here to rot.”

One man took a swallow of ale. Another turned his cup over to wash away a finger of blood before it reached the place where he was seated. No one spoke. When the one-armed man slid the throwing axe back through his belt, Reek knew he had won. He almost felt a man again. *Lord Ramsay will be pleased with me*.

He pulled down the kraken banner with his own two hands, fumbling some because of his missing fingers but thankful for the fingers that Lord Ramsay had allowed him to keep. It took the better part of the afternoon before the ironborn were ready to depart. There were more of them than he would have guessed— forty-seven in the Gatehouse Tower and another eighteen in the Drunkard’s Tower. Two of those were so close to dead there was no hope for them, another five too weak to walk. That still left fifty-eight who were fit enough to fight. Weak as they were, they would have taken three

times their own number with them if Lord Ramsay had stormed the ruins. *He did well to send me*, Reek told himself as he climbed back onto his stot to lead his ragged column back across the boggy ground to where the northmen were encamped. “Leave your weapons here,” he told the prisoners. “Swords, bows, daggers. Armed men will be slain on sight.”

It took them thrice as long to cover the distance as it had taken Reek alone. Crude litters had been patched together for four of the men who could not walk; the fifth was carried by his son, upon his back. It made for slow going, and all the ironborn were well aware of how exposed they were, well within bowshot of the bog devils and their poisoned arrows. *If I die, I die*. Reek only prayed the archer knew his business, so death would be quick and clean. *A man’s death, not the end Ralf Kenning suffered*.

The one-armed man walked at the head of the procession, limping heavily. His name, he said, was Adrack Humble, and he had a rock wife and three salt wives back on Great Wyk. “Three of the four had big bellies when we sailed,” he boasted, “and Humbles run to twins. First thing I’ll need to do when I get back is count up my new sons. Might be I’ll even name one after you, m’lord.”

Aye, name him Reek, he thought, *and when he’s bad you can cut his toes off and give him rats to eat*. He turned his head and spat, and wondered if Ralf Kenning hadn’t been the lucky one.

A light rain had begun to piss down out of the slate-grey sky by the time Lord Ramsay’s camp appeared in front of them. A sentry watched them pass in silence. The air was full of drifting smoke from the cookfires drowning in the rain. A column of riders came wheeling up behind them, led by a lordling with a horsehead on his shield. *One of Lord Ryswell’s sons*, Reek knew. *Roger, or maybe Rickard*. He could not tell the two of them apart. “Is this all of them?” the rider asked from atop a chestnut stallion.

“All who weren’t dead, my lord.”

“I thought there would be more. We came at them three times, and three times they threw us back.”

We are ironborn, he thought, with a sudden flash of pride, and for half a heartbeat he was a prince again, Lord Balon's son, the blood of Pyke. Even thinking was dangerous, though. He had to remember his name. *Reek, my name is Reek, it rhymes with weak.*

They were just outside the camp when the baying of a pack of hounds told of Lord Ramsay's approach. Whoresbane was with him, along with half a dozen of his favorites, Skinner and Sour Alyn and Damon Dance-for-Me, and the Walders Big and Little too. The dogs swarmed around them, snapping and snarling at the strangers. *The Bastard's girls*, Reek thought, before he remembered that one must never, never, *never* use that word in Ramsay's presence.

Reek swung down from his saddle and took a knee. "My lord, Moat Cailin is yours. Here are its last defenders."

"So few. I had hoped for more. They were such stubborn foes." Lord Ramsay's pale eyes shone. "You must be starved. Damon, Alyn, see to them. Wine and ale, and all the food that they can eat. Skinner, show their wounded to our maesters."

"Aye, my lord."

A few of the ironborn muttered thanks before they shambled off toward the cookfires in the center of the camp. One of the Cods even tried to kiss Lord Ramsay's ring, but the hounds drove him back before he could get close, and Alison took a chunk of his ear. Even as the blood streamed down his neck, the man bobbed and bowed and praised his lordship's mercy.

When the last of them were gone, Ramsay Bolton turned his smile on Reek. He clasped him by the back of the head, pulled his face close, kissed him on his cheek, and whispered, "My old friend Reek. Did they really take you for their prince? What bloody fools, these ironmen. The gods are laughing."

"All they want is to go home, my lord."

"And what do *you* want, my sweet Reek?" Ramsay murmured, as softly as a lover. His breath smelled of mulled wine and cloves, so sweet. "Such

valiant service deserves a reward. I cannot give you back your fingers or your toes, but surely there is something you would have of me. Shall I free you instead? Release you from my service? Do you want to go with them, return to your bleak isles in the cold grey sea, be a prince again? Or would you sooner stay my leal serving man?"

A cold knife scraped along his spine. *Be careful*, he told himself, *be very, very careful*. He did not like his lordship's smile, the way his eyes were shining, the spittle glistening at the corner of his mouth. He had seen such signs before. *You are no prince. You're Reek, just Reek, it rhymes with freak. Give him the answer that he wants.*

"My lord," he said, "my place is here, with you. I'm your Reek. I only want to serve you. All I ask ... a skin of wine, that would be reward enough for me ... red wine, the strongest that you have, all the wine a man can drink ..."

Lord Ramsay laughed. "You're not a man, Reek. You're just my creature. You'll have your wine, though. Walder, see to it. And fear not, I won't return you to the dungeons, you have my word as a Bolton. We'll make a dog of you instead. Meat every day, and I'll even leave you teeth enough to eat it. You can sleep beside my girls. Ben, do you have a collar for him?"

"I'll have one made, m'lord," said old Ben Bones.

The old man did better than that. That night, besides the collar, there was a ragged blanket too, and half a chicken. Reek had to fight the dogs for the meat, but it was the best meal he'd had since Winterfell.

And the wine ... the wine was dark and sour, but *strong*. Squatting amongst the hounds, Reek drank until his head swam, retched, wiped his mouth, and drank some more. Afterward he lay back and closed his eyes. When he woke a dog was licking vomit from his beard, and dark clouds were scuttling across the face of a sickle moon. Somewhere in the night, men were screaming. He shoved the dog aside, rolled over, and went back to sleep.

The next morning Lord Ramsay dispatched three riders down the causeway to take word to his lord father that the way was clear. The flayed man of House Bolton was hoisted above the Gatehouse Tower, where Reek had hauled down the golden kraken of Pyke. Along the rotting-plank road, wooden stakes were driven deep into the boggy ground; there the corpses festered, red and dripping. *Sixty-three*, he knew, *there are sixty-three of them*. One was short half an arm. Another had a parchment shoved between its teeth, its wax seal still unbroken.

Three days later, the vanguard of Roose Bolton's host threaded its way through the ruins and past the row of grisly sentinels—four hundred mounted Freys clad in blue and grey, their spearpoints glittering whenever the sun broke through the clouds. Two of old Lord Walder's sons led the van. One was brawny, with a massive jut of jaw and arms thick with muscle. The other had hungry eyes close-set above a pointed nose, a thin brown beard that did not quite conceal the weak chin beneath it, a bald head. *Hosteen and Aenys*. He remembered them from before he knew his name. Hosteen was a bull, slow to anger but implacable once roused, and by repute the fiercest fighter of Lord Walder's get. Aenys was older, crueller, and more clever—a commander, not a swordsman. Both were seasoned soldiers.

The northmen followed hard behind the van, their tattered banners streaming in the wind. Reek watched them pass. Most were afoot, and there were so few of them. He remembered the great host that marched south with Young Wolf, beneath the direwolf of Winterfell. Twenty thousand swords and spears had gone off to war with Robb, or near enough to make no matter, but only two in ten were coming back, and most of those were Dreadfort men.

Back where the press was thickest at the center of the column rode a man armored in dark grey plate over a quilted tunic of blood-red leather. His rondels were wrought in the shape of human heads, with open mouths that shrieked in agony. From his shoulders streamed a pink woolen cloak embroidered with droplets of blood. Long streamers of red silk fluttered from the top of his closed helm. *No crannogman will slay Roose Bolton with a poisoned arrow*, Reek thought when he first saw him. An enclosed

wagon groaned along behind him, drawn by six heavy draft horses and defended by crossbowmen, front and rear. Curtains of dark blue velvet concealed the wagon's occupants from watching eyes.

Farther back came the baggage train—lumbering wayns laden with provisions and loot taken in the war, and carts crowded with wounded men and cripples. And at the rear, more Freys. At least a thousand, maybe more: bowmen, spearmen, peasants armed with scythes and sharpened sticks, freeriders and mounted archers, and another hundred knights to stiffen them.

Collared and chained and back in rags again, Reek followed with the other dogs at Lord Ramsay's heels when his lordship strode forth to greet his father. When the rider in the dark armor removed his helm, however, the face beneath was not one that Reek knew. Ramsay's smile curdled at the sight, and anger flashed across his face. "What is this, some mockery?"

"Just caution," whispered Roose Bolton, as he emerged from behind the curtains of the enclosed wagon.

The Lord of the Dreadfort did not have a strong likeness to his bastard son. His face was clean-shaved, smooth-skinned, ordinary, not handsome but not quite plain. Though Roose had been in battles, he bore no scars. Though well past forty, he was as yet unwrinkled, with scarce a line to tell of the passage of time. His lips were so thin that when he pressed them together they seemed to vanish altogether. There was an agelessness about him, a stillness; on Roose Bolton's face, rage and joy looked much the same. All he and Ramsay had in common were their eyes. *His eyes are ice.* Reek wondered if Roose Bolton ever cried. *If so, do the tears feel cold upon his cheeks?*

Once, a boy called Theon Greyjoy had enjoyed tweaking Bolton as they sat at council with Robb Stark, mocking his soft voice and making japes about leeches. *He must have been mad. This is no man to jape with.* You had only to look at Bolton to know that he had more cruelty in his pinky toe than all the Freys combined.

"Father." Lord Ramsay knelt before his sire.

Lord Roose studied him for a moment. “You may rise.” He turned to help two young women down from inside the wagon.

The first was short and very fat, with a round red face and three chins wobbling beneath a sable hood. “My new wife,” Roose Bolton said. “Lady Walda, this is my natural son. Kiss your stepmother’s hand, Ramsay.” He did. “And I am sure you will recall the Lady Arya. Your betrothed.”

The girl was slim, and taller than he remembered, but that was only to be expected. *Girls grow fast at that age.* Her dress was grey wool bordered with white satin; over it she wore an ermine cloak clasped with a silver wolf’s head. Dark brown hair fell halfway down her back. And her eyes ...

That is not Lord Eddard’s daughter.

Arya had her father’s eyes, the grey eyes of the Starks. A girl her age might let her hair grow long, add inches to her height, see her chest fill out, but she could not change the color of her eyes. *That’s Sansa’s little friend, the steward’s girl. Jeyne, that was her name. Jeyne Poole.*

“Lord Ramsay.” The girl dipped down before him. That was wrong as well. *The real Arya Stark would have spat into his face.* “I pray that I will make you a good wife and give you strong sons to follow after you.”

“That you will,” promised Ramsay, “and soon.”