

# THEON

Day stole upon them just as Stannis had: unseen.

Winterfell had been awake for hours, its battlements and towers crammed with men in wool and mail and leather awaiting an attack that never came. By the time the sky began to lighten the sound of drums had faded away, though warhorns were heard thrice more, each time a little closer. And still the snow fell.

“The storm will end today,” one of the surviving stableboys was insisting loudly. “Why, it isn’t even winter.” Theon would have laughed if he had dared. He remembered tales Old Nan had told them of storms that raged for forty days and forty nights, for a year, for ten years ... storms that buried castles and cities and whole kingdoms under a hundred feet of snow.

He sat in the back of the Great Hall, not far from the horses, watching Abel, Rowan, and a mousy brown-haired washerwoman called Squirrel attack slabs of stale brown bread fried in bacon grease. Theon broke his own fast with a tankard of dark ale, cloudy with yeast and thick enough to chew on. A few more tankards, and perhaps Abel’s plan might not seem quite so mad.

Roose Bolton entered, pale-eyed and yawning, accompanied by his plump and pregnant wife, Fat Walda. Several lords and captains had preceded him, amongst them Whoresbane Umber, Aenys Frey, and Roger Ryswell. Farther down the table Wyman Manderly sat wolfing down sausages and boiled eggs, whilst old Lord Locke beside him spooned gruel into his toothless mouth.

Lord Ramsay soon appeared as well, buckling on his sword belt as he made his way to the front of the hall. *His mood is foul this morning.* Theon could tell. *The drums kept him awake all night, he guessed, or someone has displeased him.* One wrong word, an ill-considered look, an ill-timed laugh, any of them could provoke his lordship’s wroth and cost a man a strip of skin. *Please, m’lord, don’t look this way.* One glance would be all it would

take for Ramsay to know everything. *He'll see it written on my face. He'll know. He always knows.*

Theon turned to Abel. "This will not work." His voice was pitched so low that even the horses could not have overheard. "We will be caught before we leave the castle. Even if we do escape, Lord Ramsay will hunt us down, him and Ben Bones and the girls."

"Lord Stannis is outside the walls, and not far by the sound of it. All we need do is reach him." Abel's fingers danced across the strings of his lute. The singer's beard was brown, though his long hair had largely gone to grey. "If the Bastard does come after us, he might live long enough to rue it."

*Think that, Theon thought. Believe that. Tell yourself it's true.* "Ramsay will use your women as his prey," he told the singer. "He'll hunt them down, rape them, and feed their corpses to his dogs. If they lead him a good chase, he may name his next litter of bitches after them. You he'll flay. Him and Skinner and Damon Dance-for-Me, they will make a game of it. You'll be begging them to kill you." He clutched the singer's arm with a maimed hand. "You swore you would not let me fall into his hands again. I have your word on that." He needed to hear it again.

"Abel's word," said Squirrel. "Strong as oak." Abel himself only shrugged. "No matter what, my prince."

Up on the dais, Ramsay was arguing with his father. They were too far away for Theon to make out any of the words, but the fear on Fat Walda's round pink face spoke volumes. He did hear Wyman Manderly calling for more sausages and Roger Ryswell's laughter at some jape from one-armed Harwood Stout.

Theon wondered if he would ever see the Drowned God's watery halls, or if his ghost would linger here at Winterfell. *Dead is dead. Better dead than Reek.* If Abel's scheme went awry, Ramsay would make their dying long and hard. *He will flay me from head to heel this time, and no amount of begging will end the anguish.* No pain Theon had ever known came close to the agony that Skinner could evoke with a little flensing blade. Abel would

learn that lesson soon enough. And for what? *Jeyne, her name is Jeyne, and her eyes are the wrong color. A mummer playing a part. Lord Bolton knows, and Ramsay, but the rest are blind, even this bloody bard with his sly smiles. The jape is on you, Abel, you and your murdering whores. You'll die for the wrong girl.*

He had come this close to telling them the truth when Rowan had delivered him to Abel in the ruins of the Burned Tower, but at the last instant he had held his tongue. The singer seemed intent on making off with the daughter of Eddard Stark. If he knew that Lord Ramsay's bride was but a steward's whelp, well ...

The doors of the Great Hall opened with a crash.

A cold wind came swirling through, and a cloud of ice crystals sparkled blue-white in the air. Through it strode Ser Hosteen Frey, caked with snow to the waist, a body in his arms. All along the benches men put down their cups and spoons to turn and gape at the grisly spectacle. The hall grew quiet.

*Another murder.*

Snow slid from Ser Hosteen's cloaks as he stalked toward the high table, his steps ringing against the floor. A dozen Frey knights and men-at-arms entered behind him. One was a boy Theon knew—Big Walder, the little one, fox-faced and skinny as a stick. His chest and arms and cloak were spattered with blood.

The scent of it set the horses to screaming. Dogs slid out from under the tables, sniffing. Men rose from the benches. The body in Ser Hosteen's arms sparkled in the torchlight, armored in pink frost. The cold outside had frozen his blood.

“My brother Merrett's son.” Hosteen Frey lowered the body to the floor before the dais. “Butchered like a hog and shoved beneath a snowbank. A boy.”

*Little Walder*, thought Theon. *The big one*. He glanced at Rowan. *There are six of them*, he remembered. *Any of them could have done this*. But the washerwoman felt his eyes. “This was no work of ours,” she said.

“Be quiet,” Abel warned her.

Lord Ramsay descended from the dais to the dead boy. His father rose more slowly, pale-eyed, still-faced, solemn. “This was foul work.” For once Roose Bolton’s voice was loud enough to carry. “Where was the body found?”

“Under that ruined keep, my lord,” replied Big Walder. “The one with the old gargoyles.” The boy’s gloves were caked with his cousin’s blood. “I told him not to go out alone, but he said he had to find a man who owed him silver.”

“What man?” Ramsay demanded. “Give me his name. Point him out to me, boy, and I will make you a cloak of his skin.”

“He never said, my lord. Only that he won the coin at dice.” The Frey boy hesitated. “It was some White Harbor men who taught dice. I couldn’t say which ones, but it was them.”

“My lord,” boomed Hosteen Frey. “We know the man who did this. Killed this boy and all the rest. Not by his own hand, no. He is too fat and craven to do his own killing. But by his word.” He turned to Wyman Manderly. “Do you deny it?”

The Lord of White Harbor bit a sausage in half. “I confess ...” He wiped the grease from his lips with his sleeve. “... I confess that I know little of this poor boy. Lord Ramsay’s squire, was he not? How old was the lad?”

“Nine, on his last nameday.”

“So young,” said Wyman Manderly. “Though mayhaps this was a blessing. Had he lived, he would have grown up to be a Frey.”

Ser Hosteen slammed his foot into the tabletop, knocking it off its trestles, back into Lord Wyman's swollen belly. Cups and platters flew, sausages scattered everywhere, and a dozen Manderly men came cursing to their feet. Some grabbed up knives, platters, flagons, anything that might serve as a weapon.

Ser Hosteen Frey ripped his longsword from its scabbard and leapt toward Wyman Manderly. The Lord of White Harbor tried to jerk away, but the tabletop pinned him to his chair. The blade slashed through three of his four chins in a spray of bright red blood. Lady Walda gave a shriek and clutched at her lord husband's arm. "Stop," Roose Bolton shouted. "*Stop this madness.*" His own men rushed forward as the Manderlys vaulted over the benches to get at the Freys. One lunged at Ser Hosteen with a dagger, but the big knight pivoted and took his arm off at the shoulder. Lord Wyman pushed to his feet, only to collapse. Old Lord Locke was shouting for a maester as Manderly flopped on the floor like a clubbed walrus in a spreading pool of blood. Around him dogs fought over sausages.

It took two score Dreadfort spearmen to part the combatants and put an end to the carnage. By that time six White Harbor men and two Freys lay dead upon the floor. A dozen more were wounded and one of the Bastard's Boys, Luton, was dying noisily, crying for his mother as he tried to shove a fistful of slimy entrails back through a gaping belly wound. Lord Ramsay silenced him, yanking a spear from one of Steelshanks's men and driving it down through Luton's chest. Even then the rafters still rang with shouts and prayers and curses, the shrieks of terrified horses and the growls of Ramsay's bitches. Steelshanks Walton had to slam the butt of his spear against the floor a dozen times before the hall quieted enough for Roose Bolton to be heard.

"I see you all want blood," the Lord of the Dreadfort said. Maester Rhodry stood beside him, a raven on his arm. The bird's black plumage shone like coal oil in the torchlight. *Wet*, Theon realized. *And in his lordship's hand, a parchment. That will be wet as well. Dark wings, dark words.* "Rather than use our swords upon each other, you might try them on Lord Stannis." Lord Bolton unrolled the parchment. "His host lies not three days' ride from here, snowbound and starving, and I for one am tired of waiting on his

pleasure. Ser Hosteen, assemble your knights and men-at-arms by the main gates. As you are so eager for battle, you shall strike our first blow. Lord Wyman, gather your White Harbor men by the east gate. They shall go forth as well.”

Hosteen Frey’s sword was red almost to the hilt. Blood spatters speckled his cheeks like freckles. He lowered his blade and said, “As my lord commands. But after I deliver you the head of Stannis Baratheon, I mean to finish hacking off Lord Lard’s.”

Four White Harbor knights had formed a ring around Lord Wyman, as Maester Medrick labored over him to staunch his bleeding. “First you must needs come through us, ser,” said the eldest of them, a hard-faced greybeard whose bloodstained surcoat showed three silvery mermaids upon a violet field.

“Gladly. One at a time or all at once, it makes no matter.”

“*Enough*,” roared Lord Ramsay, brandishing his bloody spear. “Another threat, and I’ll gut you all myself. My lord father has spoken! Save your wroth for the pretender Stannis.”

Roose Bolton gave an approving nod. “As he says. There will be time enough to fight each other once we are done with Stannis.” He turned his head, his pale cold eyes searching the hall until they found the bard Abel beside Theon. “Singer,” he called, “come sing us something soothing.”

Abel bowed. “If it please your lordship.” Lute in hand, he sauntered to the dais, hopping nimbly over a corpse or two, and seated himself cross-legged on the high table. As he began to play—a sad, soft song that Theon Greyjoy did not recognize—Ser Hosteen, Ser Aenys, and their fellow Freys turned away to lead their horses from the hall.

Rowan grasped Theon’s arm. “The bath. It must be now.”

He wrenched free of her touch. “By day? We will be seen.”

“The snow will hide us. Are you deaf? Bolton is sending forth his swords. We have to reach King Stannis before they do.”

“But ... Abel ...”

“Abel can fend for himself,” murmured Squirrel.

*This is madness. Hopeless, foolish, doomed.* Theon drained the last dregs of his ale and rose reluctantly to his feet. “Find your sisters. It takes a deal of water to fill my lady’s tub.”

Squirrel slipped away, soft-footed as she always was. Rowan walked Theon from the hall. Since she and her sisters had found him in the godswood, one of them had dogged his every step, never letting him out of sight. They did not trust him. *Why should they? I was Reek before and might be Reek again. Reek, Reek, it rhymes with sneak.*

Outside the snow still fell. The snowmen the squires had built had grown into monstrous giants, ten feet tall and hideously misshapen. White walls rose to either side as he and Rowan made their way to the godswood; the paths between keep and tower and hall had turned into a maze of icy trenches, shoveled out hourly to keep them clear. It was easy to get lost in that frozen labyrinth, but Theon Greyjoy knew every twist and turning.

Even the godswood was turning white. A film of ice had formed upon the pool beneath the heart tree, and the face carved into its pale trunk had grown a mustache of little icicles. At this hour they could not hope to have the old gods to themselves. Rowan pulled Theon away from the north-men praying before the tree, to a secluded spot back by the barracks wall, beside a pool of warm mud that stank of rotten eggs. Even the mud was icing up about the edges, Theon saw. “Winter is coming ...”

Rowan gave him a hard look. “You have no right to mouth Lord Eddard’s words. Not you. Not ever. After what you did—”

“You killed a boy as well.”

“That was not us. I told you.”

“Words are wind.” *They are no better than me. We’re just the same.* “You killed the others, why not him? Yellow Dick—”

“—stank as bad as you. A pig of a man.”

“And Little Walder was a piglet. Killing him brought the Freys and Manderlys to dagger points, that was cunning, you—”

“*Not us.*” Rowan grabbed him by the throat and shoved him back against the barracks wall, her face an inch from his. “Say it again and I will rip your lying tongue out, kinslayer.”

He smiled through his broken teeth. “You won’t. You need my tongue to get you past the guards. You need my lies.”

Rowan spat in his face. Then she let him go and wiped her gloved hands on her legs, as if just touching him had soiled her.

Theon knew he should not goad her. In her own way, this one was as dangerous as Skinner or Damon Dance-for-Me. But he was cold and tired, his head was pounding, he had not slept in days. “I have done terrible things ... betrayed my own, turned my cloak, ordered the death of men who trusted me ... but I am no kinslayer.”

“Stark’s boys were never brothers to you, aye. We know.”

That was true, but it was not what Theon had meant. *They were not my blood, but even so, I never harmed them. The two we killed were just some miller’s sons.* Theon did not want to think about their mother. He had known the miller’s wife for years, had even bedded her. *Big heavy breasts with wide dark nipples, a sweet mouth, a merry laugh. Joys that I will never taste again.*

But there was no use telling Rowan any of that. She would never believe his denials, any more than he believed hers. “There is blood on my hands, but not the blood of brothers,” he said wearily. “And I’ve been punished.”

“Not enough.” Rowan turned her back on him.



*Foolish woman.* He might well be a broken thing, but Theon still wore a dagger. It would have been a simple thing to slide it out and drive it down between her shoulder blades. That much he was still capable of, missing teeth and broken teeth and all. It might even be a kindness—a quicker, cleaner end than the one she and her sisters would face when Ramsay caught them.

Reek might have done it. *Would* have done it, in hopes it might please Lord Ramsay. These whores meant to steal Ramsay's bride; Reek could not allow that. But the old gods had known him, had called him Theon. *Ironborn, I was ironborn, Balon Greyjoy's son and rightful heir to Pyke.* The stumps of his fingers itched and twitched, but he kept his dagger in its sheath.

When Squirrel returned, the other four were with her: gaunt grey-haired Myrtle, Willow Witch-Eye with her long black braid, Frenya of the thick waist and enormous breasts, Holly with her knife. Clad as serving girls in layers of drab grey roughspun, they wore brown woolen cloaks lined with white rabbit fur. *No swords, Theon saw. No axes, no hammers, no weapons but knives.* Holly's cloak was fastened with a silver clasp, and Frenya had a girdle of hempen rope wound about her middle from her hips to breasts. It made her look even more massive than she was.

Myrtle had servant's garb for Rowan. "The yards are crawling with fools," she warned them. "They mean to ride out."

"Kneelers," said Willow, with a snort of contempt. "Their lordly lord spoke, they must obey."

"They're going to die," chirped Holly, happily. "Them and us," said Theon. "Even if we do get past the guards, how do you mean to get Lady Arya out?"

Holly smiled. "Six women go in, six come out. Who looks at serving girls? We'll dress the Stark girl up as Squirrel."

Theon glanced at Squirrel. *They are almost of a size. It might work.* "And how does Squirrel get out?"

Squirrel answered for herself. “Out a window, and straight down to the godswood. I was twelve the first time my brother took me raiding south o’ your Wall. That’s where I got my name. My brother said I looked like a squirrel running up a tree. I’ve done that Wall six times since, over and back again. I think I can climb down some stone tower.”

“Happy, turncloak?” Rowan asked. “Let’s be about it.”

Winterfell’s cavernous kitchen occupied a building all its own, set well apart from the castle’s main halls and keeps in case of fire. Inside, the smells changed hour by hour—an ever-changing perfume of roast meats, leeks and onions, fresh-baked bread. Roose Bolton had posted guards at the kitchen door. With so many mouths to feed, every scrap of food was precious. Even the cooks and potboys were watched constantly. But the guards knew Reek. They liked to taunt him when he came to fetch hot water for Lady Arya’s bath. None of them dared go further than that, though. Reek was known to be Lord Ramsay’s pet.

“The Prince of Stink is come for some hot water,” one guard announced when Theon and his serving girls appeared before him. He pushed the door open for them. “Quick now, before all that sweet warm air escapes.”

Within, Theon grabbed a passing potboy by the arm. “Hot water for m’lady, boy,” he commanded. “Six pails full, and see that it’s good and hot. Lord Ramsay wants her pink and clean.”

“Aye, m’lord,” the boy said. “At once, m’lord.”

“At once” took longer than Theon would have liked. None of the big kettles was clean, so the potboy had to scrub one out before filling it with water. Then it seemed to take forever to come to a rolling boil and twice forever to fill six wooden pails. All the while Abel’s women waited, their faces shadowed by their cowls. *They are doing it all wrong.* Real serving girls were always teasing the potboys, flirting with the cooks, wheedling a taste of this, a bite of that. Rowan and her scheming sisters did not want to attract notice, but their sullen silence soon had the guards giving them queer looks. “Where’s Maisie and Jez and t’other girls?” one asked Theon. “The usual ones.”

“Lady Arya was displeased with them,” he lied. “Her water was cold before it reached the tub last time.”

The hot water filled the air with clouds of steam, melting the snowflakes as they came drifting down. Back through the maze of ice-walled trenches went the procession. With every sloshing step the water cooled. The passages were clogged with troops: armored knights in woolen surcoats and fur cloaks, men-at-arms with spears across their shoulders, archers carrying unstrung bows and sheaves of arrows, freeriders, grooms leading warhorses. The Frey men wore the badge of the two towers, those from White Harbor displayed merman and trident. They shouldered through the storm in opposite directions and eyed each other warily as they passed, but no swords were drawn. Not here. *It may be different out there in the woods.*

Half a dozen seasoned Dreadfort men guarded the doors of the Great Keep. “Another bloody bath?” said their serjeant when he saw the pails of steaming water. He had his hands tucked up into his armpits against the cold. “She had a bath last night. How dirty can one woman get in her own bed?”

*Dirtier than you know, when you share that bed with Ramsay,* Theon thought, remembering the wedding night and the things that he and Jeyne had been made to do. “Lord Ramsay’s command.”

“Get in there, then, before the water freezes,” the serjeant said. Two of the guards pushed open the double doors.

The entryway was nigh as cold as the air outside. Holly kicked snow from her boots and lowered the hood of her cloak. “I thought that would be harder.” Her breath frosted the air.

“There are more guards upstairs at m’lord’s bedchamber,” Theon warned her. “Ramsay’s men.” He dare not call them the Bastard’s Boys, not here. You never knew who might be listening. “Keep your heads down and your hoods up.”

“Do as he says, Holly,” Rowan said. “There’s some will know your face. We don’t need that trouble.”

Theon led the way up the stairs. *I have climbed these steps a thousand times before.* As a boy he would run up; descending, he would take the steps three at a time, leaping. Once he leapt right into Old Nan and knocked her to the floor. That earned him the worst thrashing he ever had at Winterfell, though it was almost tender compared to the beatings his brothers used to give him back on Pyke. He and Robb had fought many a heroic battle on these steps, slashing at one another with wooden swords. Good training, that; it brought home how hard it was to fight your way up a spiral stair against determined opposition. Ser Rodrik liked to say that one good man could hold a hundred, fighting down.

That was long ago, though. They were all dead now. Jory, old Ser Rodrik, Lord Eddard, Harwin and Hullen, Cayn and Desmond and Fat Tom, Alyn with his dreams of knighthood, Mikken who had given him his first real sword. Even Old Nan, like as not.

And Robb. Robb who had been more a brother to Theon than any son born of Balon Greyjoy's loins. *Murdered at the Red Wedding, butchered by the Freys. I should have been with him. Where was I? I should have died with him.*

Theon stopped so suddenly that Willow almost plowed into his back. The door to Ramsay's bedchamber was before him. And guarding it were two of the Bastard's Boys, Sour Alyn and Grunt.

*The old gods must wish us well.* Grunt had no tongue and Sour Alyn had no wits, Lord Ramsay liked to say. One was brutal, the other mean, but both had spent most of their lives in service at the Dreadfort. They did as they were told.

"I have hot water for the Lady Arya," Theon told them. "Try a wash yourself, Reek," said Sour Alyn. "You smell like horse piss." Grunt grunted in agreement. Or perhaps that noise was meant to be a laugh. But Alyn unlocked the door to the bedchamber, and Theon waved the women through.

No day had dawned inside this room. Shadows covered all. One last log crackled feebly amongst the dying embers in the hearth, and a candle

flickered on the table beside a rumpled, empty bed. *The girl is gone*, Theon thought. *She has thrown herself out a window in despair*. But the windows here were shuttered against the storm, sealed up by crusts of blown snow and frost. “Where is she?” Holly asked. Her sisters emptied their pails into the big round wooden tub. Frenya shut the chamber door and put her back against it. “*Where is she?*” Holly said again. Outside a horn was blowing. *A trumpet. The Freys, assembling for battle*. Theon could feel an itching in his missing fingers.

Then he saw her. She was huddled in the darkest corner of the bed-chamber, on the floor, curled up in a ball beneath a pile of wolfskins. Theon might never have spotted her but for the way she trembled. Jeyne had pulled the furs up over herself to hide. *From us? Or was she expecting her lord husband?* The thought that Ramsay might be coming made him want to scream. “My lady.” Theon could not bring himself to call her Arya and dare not call her Jeyne. “No need to hide. These are friends.”

The furs stirred. An eye peered out, shining with tears. *Dark, too dark. A brown eye*. “Theon?”

“Lady Arya.” Rowan moved closer. “You must come with us, and quickly. We’ve come to take you to your brother.”

“Brother?” The girl’s face emerged from underneath the wolfskins. “I ... I have no brothers.”

*She has forgotten who she is. She has forgotten her name*. “That’s so,” said Theon, “but you had brothers once. Three of them. Robb and Bran and Rickon.”

“They’re dead. I have no brothers now.”

“You have a half-brother,” Rowan said. “Lord Crow, he is.”

“Jon Snow?”

“We’ll take you to him, but you must come at once.”

Jeyne pulled her wolfskins up to her chin. “No. This is some trick. It’s him, it’s my ... my lord, my sweet lord, he sent you, this is just some test to make sure that I love him. I do, I do, I love him more than anything.” A tear ran down her cheek. “Tell him, you tell him. I’ll do what he wants ... whatever he wants ... with him or ... or with the dog or ... please ... he doesn’t need to cut my feet off, I won’t try to run away, not ever, I’ll give him sons, I swear it, I swear it ...”

Rowan whistled softly. “Gods curse the man.”

“I’m a *good* girl,” Jeyne whimpered. “They *trained* me.”

Willow scowled. “Someone stop her crying. That guard was mute, not deaf. They’re going to hear.”

“Get her *up*, turncloak.” Holly had her knife in hand. “Get her up or I will. *We have to go*. Get the little cunt up on her feet and shake some courage into her.”

“And if she screams?” said Rowan.

*We are all dead*, Theon thought. *I told them this was folly, but none of them would listen*. Abel had doomed them. All singers were half-mad. In songs, the hero always saved the maiden from the monster’s castle, but life was not a song, no more than Jeyne was Arya Stark. *Her eyes are the wrong color. And there are no heroes here, only whores*. Even so, he knelt beside her, pulled down the furs, touched her cheek. “You know me. I’m Theon, you remember. I know you too. I know your name.”

“My name?” She shook her head. “My name ... it’s ...”

He put a finger to her lips. “We can talk about that later. You need to be quiet now. Come with us. With me. We will take you away from here. Away from him.”

Her eyes widened. “Please,” she whispered. “Oh, please.”

Theon slipped his hand through hers. The stumps of his lost fingers tingled as he drew the girl to her feet. The wolfskins fell away from her.

Underneath them she was naked, her small pale breasts covered with teeth marks. He heard one of the women suck in her breath. Rowan thrust a bundle of clothes into his hands. "Get her dressed. It's cold outside."

Squirrel had stripped down to her smallclothes, and was rooting through a carved cedar chest in search of something warmer. In the end she settled for one of Lord Ramsay's quilted doublets and a well-worn pair of breeches that flapped about her legs like a ship's sails in a storm.

With Rowan's help, Theon got Jeyne Poole into Squirrel's clothes. *If the gods are good and the guards are blind, she may pass.* "Now we are going out and down the steps," Theon told the girl. "Keep your head down and your hood up. Follow Holly. Don't run, don't cry, don't speak, don't look anyone in the eye."

"Stay close to me," Jeyne said. "Don't leave me."

"I will be right beside you," Theon promised as Squirrel slipped into Lady Arya's bed and pulled the blanket up.

Frenya opened the bedchamber door. "You give her a good wash, Reek?" asked Sour Alyn as they emerged. Grunt gave Willow's breast a squeeze as she went by. They were fortunate in his choice. If the man had touched Jeyne, she might have screamed. Then Holly would have opened his throat for him with the knife hidden up her sleeve. Willow simply twisted away and past him.

For a moment Theon felt almost giddy. *They never looked. They never saw. We walked the girl right by them!*

But on the steps the fear returned. What if they met Skinner or Damon Dance-for-Me or Steelshanks Walton? Or Ramsay himself? *Gods save me, not Ramsay, anyone but him.* What use was it to smuggle the girl out of her bedchamber? They were still inside the castle, with every gate closed and barred and the battlements thick with sentries. Like as not, the guards outside the keep would stop them. Holly and her knife would be of small use against six men in mail with swords and spears.

But the guards outside were huddled by the doors, backs turned against the icy wind and blown snow. Even the serjeant did not spare them more than a quick glance. Theon felt a stab of pity for him and his men. Ramsay would flay them all when he learned his bride was gone, and what he would do to Grunt and Sour Alyn did not bear thinking about.

Not ten yards from the door, Rowan dropped her empty pail, and her sisters did likewise. The Great Keep was already lost to sight behind them. The yard was a white wilderness, full of half-heard sounds that echoed strangely amidst the storm. The icy trenches rose around them, knee high, then waist high, then higher than their heads. They were in the heart of Winterfell with the castle all around them, but no sign of it could be seen. They might have easily been lost amidst the Land of Always Winter, a thousand leagues beyond the Wall. "It's cold," Jeyne Poole whimpered as she stumbled along at Theon's side.

*And soon to be colder.* Beyond the castle walls, winter was waiting with its icy teeth. *If we get that far.* "This way," he said when they came to a junction where three trenches crossed.

"Frenya, Holly, go with them," Rowan said. "We will be along with Abel. Do not wait for us." And with that, she whirled and plunged into the snow, toward the Great Hall. Willow and Myrtle hurried after her, cloaks snapping in the wind.

*Madder and madder,* thought Theon Greyjoy. Escape had seemed unlikely with all six of Abel's women; with only two, it seemed impossible. But they had gone too far to return the girl to her bedchamber and pretend none of this had ever happened. Instead he took Jeyne by the arm and drew her down the pathway to the Battlements Gate. *Only a half-gate,* he reminded himself. *Even if the guards let us pass, there is no way through the outer wall.* On other nights, the guards had allowed Theon through, but all those times he'd come alone. He would not pass so easily with three serving girls in tow, and if the guards looked beneath Jeyne's hood and recognized Lord Ramsay's bride ...

The passage twisted to the left. There before them, behind a veil of falling snow, yawned the Battlements Gate, flanked by a pair of guards. In their



wool and fur and leather, they looked as big as bears. The spears they held were eight feet tall. “Who goes there?” one called out. Theon did not recognize the voice. Most of the man’s features were covered by the scarf about his face. Only his eyes could be seen. “Reek, is that you?”

Yes, he meant to say. Instead he heard himself reply, “Theon Greyjoy. I ... I have brought some women for you.”

“You poor boys must be freezing,” said Holly. “Here, let me warm you up.” She slipped past the guard’s spearpoint and reached up to his face, pulling loose the half-frozen scarf to plant a kiss upon his mouth. And as their lips touched, her blade slid through the meat of his neck, just below the ear. Theon saw the man’s eyes widen. There was blood on Holly’s lips as she stepped back, and blood dribbling from his mouth as he fell.

The second guard was still gaping in confusion when Frenya grabbed the shaft of his spear. They struggled for a moment, tugging, till the woman wrenched the weapon from his fingers and clouted him across the temple with its butt. As he stumbled backwards, she spun the spear around and drove its point through his belly with a grunt.

Jeyne Poole let out a shrill, high scream. “Oh, bloody shit,” said Holly. “That will bring the kneelers down on us, and no mistake. *Run!*”

Theon clapped one hand around Jeyne’s mouth, grabbed her about the waist with the other, and pulled her past the dead and dying guards, through the gate, and over the frozen moat. And perhaps the old gods were still watching over them; the drawbridge had been left down, to allow Winterfell’s defenders to cross to and from the outer battlements more quickly. From behind them came alarums and the sounds of running feet, then the blast of a trumpet from the ramparts of the inner wall.

On the drawbridge, Frenya stopped and turned. “Go on. I will hold the kneelers here.” The bloody spear was still clutched in her big hands.

Theon was staggering by the time he reached the foot of the stair. He slung the girl over his shoulder and began to climb. Jeyne had ceased to struggle by then, and she was such a little thing besides ... but the steps were slick

with ice beneath soft powdery snow, and halfway up he lost his footing and went down hard on one knee. The pain was so bad he almost lost the girl, and for half a heartbeat he feared this was as far as he would go. But Holly pulled him back onto his feet, and between the two of them they finally got Jeyne up to the battlements.

As he leaned up against a merlon, breathing hard, Theon could hear the shouting from below, where Frenya was fighting half a dozen guards-men in the snow. “Which way?” he shouted at Holly. “Where do we go now? *How do we get out?*”

The fury on Holly’s face turned to horror. “Oh, fuck me bloody. The rope.” She gave a hysterical laugh. “*Frenya has the rope.*” Then she grunted and grabbed her stomach. A quarrel had sprouted from her gut. When she wrapped a hand around it, blood leaked through her fingers. “Kneelers on the inner wall ...” she gasped, before a second shaft appeared between her breasts. Holly grabbed for the nearest merlon and fell. The snow that she’d knocked loose buried her with a soft *thump*.

Shouts rang out from their left. Jeyne Poole was staring down at Holly as the snowy blanket over her turned from white to red. On the inner wall the crossbowman would be reloading, Theon knew. He started right, but there were men coming from that direction too, racing toward them with swords in hand. Far off to the north he heard a warhorn sound. *Stannis*, he thought wildly. *Stannis is our only hope, if we can reach him.* The wind was howling, and he and the girl were trapped.

The crossbow snapped. A bolt passed within a foot of him, shattering the crust of frozen snow that had plugged the closest crenel. Of Abel, Rowan, Squirrel, and the others there was no sign. He and the girl were alone. *If they take us alive, they will deliver us to Ramsay.*

Theon grabbed Jeyne about the waist and jumped.