**Sons and Deadmen**

Posted originally on the Archive of Our Own at [http://archiveofourown.org/works/1102873](http://archiveofourown.org/works/1102873).

**Rating:** Explicit

**Archive Warning:** Graphic Depictions Of Violence, Underage, Major Character Death, Rape/Non-Con

**Category:** M/M

**Fandom:** Game of Thrones (TV), A Song of Ice and Fire - George R. R. Martin

**Relationship:** Theon Greyjoy/Robb Stark, Theon Greyjoy/Jon Snow, Ramsay Bolton/Theon Greyjoy, Ramsay Bolton/Reek, Jon Snow/Robb Stark

**Additional Tags:** Alternate Universe - Modern Setting, Drug Use, Imprisonment, Mutilation, Amputation, Castration, Car Accidents, Trauma, Stockholm Syndrome, Miscarriage, Cutting, Self-Harm, Incest, Alcohol Abuse/Alcoholism, Alternate universe - Mafia, Rape, Non-con/dub-con, Torture, Blood and Gore, Emotional/Psychological Abuse, General graphic violence, Statutory Rape

**Stats:** Published: 2013-12-26 Completed: 2015-08-07 Chapters: 29/29 Words: 148177

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**Sons and Deadmen**

by DoubleBit

**Summary**

Theon finds himself working as a driver for the family that took him hostage. Complications arise when he learns a secret that tests his loyalty.

A/N: I've cleaned up my tags a little, doing my best to hit all the major ones, but please let me know if there's something big I've missed. I personally do not have triggers, so they can sometimes be difficult for me to spot. If you're squicked by graphic, sexualized Thramsay, you probably won't enjoy the middle third of this fic (Chapters 9 thru 17, with references to abuse continuing through the end.) Take care everyone!

**Notes**

This fic might be kind of beastly, but I hope it's entertaining!
“How many men have you seen them kill?”

Robb must’ve asked him that question once a week since they were younger, his blue eyes wide and eager, Theon’s narrow and evasive as they slid sideways.

“Oh hell, I don’t even keep count anymore.”

It was a lie, of course; his brain supplied the number unbidden, as though it were a rhyme or a song or a boy’s name that he couldn’t get out of his head. 12.

That kind of casual bravado used to be enough for Robb. “Wow,” he’d marvel, flopping back onto the bed. “I wonder if they’ll ever let me come with. Do you think they will?”

“Maybe,” said Theon, though he knew Ned Stark would never allow it.

Now that they were older, Robb insisted on details – the grislier the better – and Theon saw how his friend’s eyes dilated slightly, his cheeks flushed as Theon told him about the way a man’s face deformed around a bullet, the way little bits of skull and brains scattered everywhere, the way the hair caught fire sometimes. And Theon thought about the way he’d implored his own father to take him on these same terrible errands, back when he still lived by the sea, back when he was only small and curious. It filled him with shame to think that he’d ever wanted to see the things he’d seen.

The way he described it though, it was nothing. He’d lie on his bed with his hands behind his head and Robb cross-legged at the foot of the mattress, and through the buzz of a glass of whiskey, Theon enjoyed the feeling that someone was listening, that someone was interested in what he had to say, even if it was pretty fucking awful.

“You don’t get bored of hearing about this shit?” Theon asked once, leaned over the balcony off Robb’s bedroom and puffing away at his third cigarette in the past twenty minutes.

“Not really,” said Robb, oblivious to the implications of the question. Instead, he came outside still in his bathrobe and spit over the rail onto the brick patio three stories below. “I’m bored out of my fucking mind being kept in here under 24-hour surveillance like a goddamn prisoner.”

Theon glanced at the camera poised above them.

What would you know about being a prisoner? he wanted to ask. Instead he just nodded and smiled.

“It’s not so bad. I mean yeah, you can’t jerk off without setting off some kind of security system, but at least you can give Jory a show while you’re doing it.”

Robb tried not to grin. “Gross.”

“Sometimes I say his name when I come.”

Robb laughed and shook his head. “You do not.”

“I do. You watch, next time him and me are in the same room, and see if he ever makes eye contact with me.”
“You’re fucking ridiculous.”

Theon quirked an eyebrow and in one swift motion yanked Robb’s bathrobe open and off, leaving him naked and damp on the balcony, pounding furiously on the sliding glass door.

“You’re going to pay for this, Greyjoy!”

Theon tossed the robe onto the floor and stood with his arms folded, watching the blood rise in Robb’s chest, trying to ignore the blood rising in himself.

“Now who’s ridiculous?”

He heard Sansa’s door slide open and heard her shriek. “Oh my God, Robb! What are you doing? I have company!”

“You’re going to pay for this, Greyjoy!” But Robb was doubled-over laughing, one hand pressed against the glass, the other covering his crotch and Theon couldn’t help but notice that his bush was the same warm auburn as his hair. “Please open the door!”

Theon remembered the afternoon his brothers locked him out of the house. One of countless times, but he remembered this one because the din of the hailstones on the roof had drowned out the sound of his voice, pleading, “Come on guys, let me in! I promise to stay in my room! Please open the door!”

When Theon lifted the latch, Robb tackled him onto the floor, pinning Theon’s arms above his head, still laughing despite the chill. He was strong for sixteen – broad-shouldered and tall – but still no match for the three years Theon had on him. But Theon had learned when he first came to live with the Starks that he was not even to play at hurting Robb.

“Theon, tell me what happened.” Ned Stark knelt down to look Theon in the eye, and Theon looked at his toes, feeling the crush of Ned’s huge hand on his arm.

“We were playing ninjas,” he offered quietly.

“Did you mean to hit Robb in the face?” Ned’s voice was gentle, always gentle, but something fierce lurked there.

“No,” lied Theon, recalling the thrill he’d felt at the sight of Robb sprawled out in the grass with a line of blood trickling from his nose. “He just – he jumped when I wasn’t expecting. I didn’t mean to.”

“Theon, look at me.” Theon brought his eyes to meet Ned’s and cursed himself for feeling afraid, for wanting to cry and beg forgiveness. “You have to be careful when you play with Robb; he’s not as big as you are.”

“I know. I didn’t mean to.”

Ned moved his hand from Theon’s arm and laid it lightly on the crook of his neck. It was all Theon could do to keep himself from leaning into the touch.

“I know you didn’t mean to. I know Robb is like a little brother to you. And you know that someday Robb will be in charge, the way I am now?”

Theon sniffled and nodded. “Yeah. He always says so.”
“Well, he’s right. Someday Robb will be the one taking care of you, the same way it’s my job to take care of you now.”

Theon couldn’t imagine anything more humiliating, or more natural.

“Robb will be taking care of everything, and that’s why it’s so important that you make sure nothing happens to him, okay? Even if he makes you mad sometimes. Do you understand me?”

“Uh-huh.”

“That’s my boy.”

But he wasn’t Ned Stark’s boy, so Theon let Robb pin him to the carpet and tried to put up a convincing struggle.

“You let me win,” complained Robb.

Theon smirked and strained half-heartedly against Robb’s grip on his wrists. “I’d never.”

And he felt Robb’s breath on his face, Robb’s naked weight pressing down on him and for just a second he thought about breaking his promise and raking his nails down Robb’s chest just hard enough to break the skin…

“Theon, are you in there?” Poole knocked on the door.

“Yeah.” Theon kept his eyes locked on Robb’s, ground his hips upward. Robb bit his lip and snarled.

“We’re going for a drive. I’ll see you in the garage in ten minutes.”

Theon freed himself easily and began to sit up when Robb grabbed him by the jaw and brought their faces so close that he could’ve licked Theon’s lips.

“When I’m running the show, you won’t let me win.” Robb sucked his teeth. He trailed his index finger down Theon’s stomach and hooked in the waistband of his jeans, giving a light tug. “And you won’t act like you don’t want me.”

Theon laughed as he bucked Robb onto the floor and stood, tossing Robb’s bathrobe onto his face. “Better start hitting the gym then.”

*  

“Garage” was a modest name for the 10,000 square feet that housed Ned Stark’s entire fleet, everything from the little red Carmengia intended for Sansa’s sixteenth birthday to the barely-functional hardtop destined to end up at the bottom of a lake as soon as the need arose. The ceiling was equipped with moveable showroom lighting, but usually the warehouse was dark, save for the corner shop where Gendry could always be found, even at the strangest of hours.

He was there when Theon arrived, a pair of sneakers and frayed black jeans sticking out from beneath a blue ’99 Civic, a metallic clang followed by a storm of cursing. Theon crouched down beside him, steadying himself with the side mirror and peering under the car.

“Hey.”

Gendry’s head shot up and smacked into whatever he was working on. He screwed his eyes shut and grimaced.
“Jesusfuck! Will you fucking stop doing that to me?”

He slung his wrench at Theon, missing deliberately.

“Sorry.”

Gendry slid his creeper out from the car and shook his head at Theon.

“I was in my universe, man. I was in my zone.” He sat up and wiped his hands with a shop rag, rocking the creeper with his heels. Gendry always spoke to him with a sort of spacey familiarity that Theon found irksome – because Gendry acted like they were equals when they clearly weren’t – but also endearing because he was the only person in Ned Stark’s employ who didn’t seem to be constantly expecting Theon to fuck up.

Theon wasn’t sure how old he was; Gendry’s face was always covered with grease and flecks of oil, and his body was thick with muscle, but he slouched like a boy still and never dared to look at the girls when they came down to watch him work.

“Transmission?”

Gendry nodded and rubbed his aching forehead. “Yeah.” He glanced over his shoulder at the car and sighed. “I fucking hate working on these beaters, you know? Like, I could pour my blood into this thing, get it purring, but it’s still a fucking Civic.” He smiled at Theon. “When are you gonna let me get elbows-deep in that sweet little Zagato?”

Theon beamed and opened his mouth to answer when Gendry’s smile faded and he stood up and wiped his hands again.

“Mr. Poole. Mr. Flint.”

When Theon turned, Poole’s light eyes were already on him, as they always seemed to be. He did his best to look unaffected as he hung his thumbs through his belt-loops and lifted his chin in acknowledgement.

“Gendry.” Poole took his gaze from Theon at last. “We’re going for a drive.”

“Yes sir,” said Gendry, almost tripping over his own feet as he moved past them into the warehouse, flicking on the lights. “What, uh… What kind of drive?”

And Theon told himself that he would be good Goddamned before he said “yes sir, no sir” to Vayon Poole or anyone else – besides Ned Stark, of course.

“Doctor’s appointment,” answered Poole, which was short for snatching a man – probably from his own home – and delivering him to a certain location on the East side of town where he would most likely spend his last day on earth just wishing it was over. It made no difference to Theon; he was only the driver.

Gendry scanned the warehouse, muttering to himself. “White. White white white. You want something white.” His eyes lit up as they landed on a nondescript white sedan with a 5% tint on the back windows. “I think this one.”

Poole nodded and opened the passenger side door. Flint climbed into the backseat.

“Keys are in the cup-holder,” said Gendry. He hesitated as he always did before telling Theon, “Drive safe, man.”
Theon nodded and absently brought a hand up to feel for the 9mm he kept holstered under his T-shirt.

*

Theon never expected Ned Stark to be generous. He thought all fathers were like his own, unyielding and cold as the wind coming in over the water; he hadn’t expected a bedroom just down the hall from Robb’s, with a flat screen TV and a view of the heart-tree in the courtyard. He hadn’t expected to hold the littlest Stark children when they came home from the hospital, or for Robb to introduce him sometimes as “my brother, Theon.”

“I promise to hate them,” he told his father when Ned Stark came to Pyke personally to collect him, the penalty for Balon Greyjoy’s doomed attempt to raise arms against the most powerful family in the North.

Balon said nothing and turned away.

Theon fell asleep on the long car ride to Winterfell, and woke briefly in Ned Stark’s arms as he was lifted gently out of the car and carried into the mansion. He remembered opening his eyes for a moment and seeing the snow falling thick and soft on the oak trees.

“If you’re not careful, the boy will grow up thinking he’s a Stark,” he’d overheard Cassel saying.

“So what if he does?” replied Ned.

But Theon was a Greyjoy, and if Ned Stark wanted to let him forget it, nobody else would.

“What does it mean,” Robb asked him, “that you’re a Greyjoy?”

“I come from the Iron Islands,” he said. “My family is the most powerful family on the coast. My father controls all the shipping that comes in from Asia and South America.”

“So one day you’ll control all that? I’ll control the North and you’ll control the coast?”

“Yeah. When I go home, that’ll be mine. I’ll have a dozen ports, and over a hundred ships.” Theon recalled the sight of the freighters coming in on a steely morning as he stood on the bluff with his sister. He wondered if she still watched them.

“Can I come visit you at Pyke?”

Theon grinned. “You better come visit. Someday you’ll need me, Stark.”

He got his first tattoo on his sixteenth birthday, sweating a little as he handed his fake ID over to the artist before sitting down and splaying his fingers over the arm of the chair.

“Oh my God, let me see it!” Robb had grabbed at Theon’s hands to read the word “Ironborn” in gothic script across his knuckles. “That is so fucking cool.” He ran his thumb across the still-raised ink. “Does it hurt?”

Robb was always asking if things hurt.

They’d been playing Red Dead Redemption when Ned knocked on Robb’s door. “Robb? I need to borrow Theon for a little while.”

“Can’t we just finish this level? He’s kind of on a roll right now.”
But Theon knew the answer was no, so he handed Robb the controller and stepped into the hallway.

“Sir,” he said, hiding his hands behind his back and trying to act like his heart wasn’t beating 60mph, wondering if he was in trouble, if maybe today was the day his father decided it didn’t matter so much what happened to his only remaining son and cast aside his allegiance to the Stark Family once and for all. He knew Ned well enough to know that in that event, he’d at least get a merciful death – a bullet through the brain, clean and quick. What bothered him was wondering what would happen with his body; would it be sent back to his father intact, or just the head?

But Ned smiled warmly and put a hand on Theon’s shoulder. “Walk with me.”

They took the elevator down to the garage, Theon still concealing his hands and suddenly embarrassed by his own fear.

“What did you get the fake ID?” Ned asked without looking at him.

“Sir?”

“You had to have one to get that tattoo. Let me see your hands.”

Theon held his hands out and Ned turned to peer at them impassively.

“Well, where did you get the ID?”

“From Jaqen.”

The elevator stopped and Ned stepped out, Theon hurrying to catch up.

“You mad?” he asked, hoping that he didn’t sound like he cared.

Ned shook his head. “I’m not mad,” he admitted. “Mostly, I’m annoyed that now Robb will be begging me to get one.”

Theon looked around; he’d never been down to the garage before, and there was something surreal about it – cars as far as the eye could see.

“You remember where you came from,” continued Ned, making a beeline through the warehouse. “That’s important.”

_I don’t actually remember it that well_, Theon thought.

He looked down at his knuckles and wiggled them, so distracted that he almost slammed into Ned Stark’s back. Ned had stopped in front of a little bullet of a car, sleek and muscular and not cherry-red, but the deep luscious color of _real_ cherries.

When Ned put a hand on Theon’s shoulder, Theon wondered if his own hands could ever possibly be that massive. He glanced again at his own fingers – so slender – and at the bones of his wrists.

“And when the time comes for you to return home, I want you to remember your time here.”

Theon did his best not to assume, not to hope, but he couldn’t stop a wide, childish smile that revealed his braces. It was all he could do to keep both feet on the ground.

“Are you – are you serious?”
Robb is going to be so fucking jealous.

Ned smiled in turn. “Yes. That’s why I want you to drive for me.”

Theon wanted to touch the car – to kiss it, even – but he was afraid of leaving a mark.

“Drive? For you? In this?”

Ned laid a hand on the hood. “No, not in this. This is a gift. It’s for you to enjoy. You’ll be driving most of these.” He gestured at the warehouse.

Theon did a quick spin and then resumed staring at the Zagato coupe.

“Where will I drive?” he asked, lovestruck and only half-listening.

“Wherever I need. You’ll be with Poole most of the time.”

Theon couldn’t even be bothered with the fact that he knew Poole hated him. “Oh my God, this is so freaking cool.”

Ned laughed and held out a set of keys, which Theon took and jingled disbelievingly.

“Does that mean you’ll drive for me?”

“Hell yes.”

“You start tonight.” Ned turned Theon to face him. “You’re growing up so fast,” he said with the slightest trace of tenderness. “I know you’ll do well at this.”

And that – that felt so good.

*

Five hours later, Theon clutched the steering wheel of an old Toyota while in the beam of his headlights, Poole and Flint knocked a man’s teeth out. His hands were bound and Flint clubbed him in the back of the knees, bringing him to the ground with a scream. Poole preferred brass knuckles and Theon could still hear the sickening sound they made against the man’s jaw, however loud he turned the radio. When they’d first pulled him from the car, he’d been crying, babbling and cursing; after a few minutes, the crying stopped and his face was hardly a face. By the time Poole put a bullet straight between the man’s eyes, Theon was almost relieved. The man fell backwards into the grass as though blown over by a sudden gust of wind, and Poole shot him once more before he and Flint hurried back to the car.

“Let’s go.”

Theon thought about asking the man’s name, but in the end he was grateful not to know. After a few minutes of silence, Theon regained himself enough to ask,

“Why, um – why did we kill him?”

“We?” Poole mocked. “We~” he indicated Flint and himself – “killed him because he was warned twice to pay the debt he owed to Stark Construction.”

“There is no third warning,” added Flint.

“Was he warned that there was no third warning?” joked Theon half-heartedly.
“Just drive, Greyjoy.”

When they arrived at the garage, Poole and Flint went to clean up and as soon as they were out of site, Theon dropped to his hands and knees and vomited on the floor. The retching turned to dry heaves and once those subsided, Theon pulled himself to his feet and searched for some shop rags to wipe up the mess, wondering numbly if it was too late to say no, or if it had ever truly been a question.

But when he slid his Zagato out the gates at the end of the Starks’ parkway and a few miles later merged onto the highway, he felt his blood thicken and slow, his vision clear, his stomach settle. With his window down and the cool night air blowing up his sleeve and through his hair, the lights of the downtown district rising around him, Theon Greyjoy was fine. In fact, Theon Greyjoy had it made.

*

And tonight it was nothing that gory, at least as far as Theon was concerned. Tonight in the white four-door, Theon drove to the East end and stopped just outside a sprawling compound of storage units and waited as Poole and Flint pulled another nameless man from the trunk and dragged him towards one of the sliding doors. He heard the word “please,” and turned the radio up again.

Flint knocked five times on the door and it creaked and scraped as it opened. The light that fell across the lot was painfully bright, and Theon brought a hand up to his eyes. After a moment, he could make out the shape of a large chair in the middle of the unit, flanked by a table and a smaller chair. Poole held the man down while Flint tied him to the large chair and a silhouette appeared at the edge of the light.

He was a young man; Theon could tell by the way he stood, by the sharp angle of his elbow as he brought one hand up to drag off a cigarette, and it took him a moment to realize that the shadow was not watching the commotion inside the unit, but rather staring straight at him. And even though Theon could see nothing of the boy’s face, he felt a chill run through his bones, and something else under the chill.

Somehow his body knew the name: Ramsay Bolton. Ramsay Bolton whose father owned this storage complex. Ramsay Bolton whose name was not to be mentioned in the presence of any of the Stark children, and who must under no circumstances know their names. Poole said he was a monster, and not the monster that a man sometimes becomes but a born monster who enjoyed pain the way most men enjoy a beautiful woman.

As Poole and Flint left, the shadow turned to speak to them and when he saw Flint glance at the car and back at Ramsay, he felt something sinking in his guts. Ramsay pulled the door shut and the now the storage yard was dark again, and quiet.

Theon was trying to think of a way to ask about it casually, when Flint – with a malicious delight creeping into his tone – offered, “He asked about you.”

“Who?” Theon asked disinterestedly.

“Ramsay. He asked who you were. Must think you’re pretty.”

“Everyone thinks I’m pretty.” Theon smirked. “Even you.”

To his surprise, Poole frowned at Flint and shook his head. “You shouldn’t have told him anything. That kid is the sickest little fuck I’ve ever met in my life.”
Theon planned on going out after his drive, but when he parked the car in the warehouse, his legs suddenly felt like they were made of lead. He ambled over to the shop, where Gendry’s feet were still poking out from beneath that same blue Civic.

“Hey Gendry – you wanna go get a beer somewhere?”

The only answer was a faint snore.

Theon smiled and looked at his watch. It was almost 2am.

After he showered, Theon tiptoed down the hall to Robb’s room and knocked lightly before opening the door.

“Robb?”

But Robb was fast asleep, one pillow under his head, one in his arms and one between his knees.

Theon lay in bed, waiting to feel sleepy. His body ached but his brain was still fluttering around as it often did after a drive. When he slipped his hand beneath the waistband of his shorts, he thought of Robb, who had walked in on Theon pleasuring himself three weeks ago and lingered in the doorway for a moment before apologizing and returning to his own room. Theon thought about how desperate Robb had been acting lately, how easy it would be to walk down the hall again, open the door and crawl on top of him. He thought about the tears that would form at the corners of Robb’s eyes, the way Robb would ask him to “Please, go slower” and “Please, not so much.” And as usual, he thought of Ned Stark walking in right as his eldest son and heir moaned out Theon’s name.

Theon shook when he came and didn’t bother to clean himself.
Chapter Two

Chapter Summary

Theon enjoys torturing Robb, receives a death-threat and discovers someone new.

Chapter Notes

So I'm about to go on a tropical vacation and really anxious about losing my groove during the 3 weeks I'm gone. But here's Chapter 2!

He lost his virginity to one of the men renovating the patio during the summer after junior high. Theon was fourteen and though he never asked, he’d say that Jake was about twenty. Jake had broad, tan shoulders and shaggy brown hair and a lip ring and Theon had never wanted anything so bad. In hindsight, it was kind of embarrassing, the way he’d found any excuse to be outside – sitting fitfully in the hot-tub until his hands were grossly pruned, or lying on a lawn chair and ending up with the worst sunburn of his life. It was the sunburn that got Jake’s attention.

Theon was rubbing aloe vera lotion over his chest and neck when he heard a voice ask,

“Hey, you want me to get between your shoulders?”

His mouth went so dry that he almost didn’t answer.

“Um, sure. Thanks.”

Jake’s hands were rough and sent tingles up his spine.

“This sunburn is brutal.”

They did it in the back of Jake’s work van, surrounded by clanking masonry tools and old drop cloths. Theon tore the sleeve of Jake’s sweaty t-shirt and Jake laughed, raised an eyebrow and pushed him away for a second.

“I – I really shouldn’t do this. Your dad’ll kill me if he finds out.”

“He’s not my dad.” Though he suspected that Ned would kill him, all the same.

It was over fast, but Theon was too ecstatic to notice. He’d never known a feeling as good as that feeling of wanting something with every atom in your body, only to feel that same wanting radiated back to you from someone else. Being wanted felt like stealing, felt like getting away with something.

He mentioned it to Robb years later, when he was eighteen and Robb was fifteen. It was fall and they had just climbed out of the hot-tub. Theon looked down at his toes pressed against the brick that Jake lay, and he smiled to himself as he toweled off his hair.
“What?” Robb was smiling too, not knowing why.

“What?”

“Nothing.”

“Tell me. You got the biggest shit-eating grin right now.”

Theon hesitated. “I never told you about – about the first time I ever, you know, fucked somebody?”

Robb shook his head. “No. You didn’t.”

“Remember the summer your dad had the patio re-done?”

“Yeah. I kept asking you to come play God of War and you just wanted to lie around in the yard and get the world’s worst sunburn.”

“Yeah, well. There was this one guy working on the patio – Jake. You probably don’t remember.”

The realization crept over Robb’s face and his mouth fell open. “Wait, what?”

Theon shrugged. “Yeah. That’s what I was thinking about is all.”


“Yeah. It was my first time. With a guy… or anybody. Stop looking at me like that.”

“What did you – I mean, what did you do?”

Theon smirked and draped his towel over his shoulders. “Well, first he sucked my dick and then –”

Robb cupped his hands over his ears and grimaced. “Okay okay! Nevermind. Blech.”

“Don’t be such a pussy.”

A couple weeks passed before Robb raised the subject again. They were alone in the kitchen, waiting for a pizza to come out of the oven when Theon caught Robb giving him that look that indicated Robb had something on his mind but wanted to be asked first.

“What’s up?”

“What, um – what did it feel like?”

“What did what feel like?”

Robb bit his lip and scratched at his neck, unable to look Theon in the eyes. “Being with a dude. Like, was it – good? Did it hurt?”

Theon gave a crooked, lecherous grin. “Do you actually want to know?”

Robb nodded.

Theon took four steps and backed Robb up against the cupboards. Robb clutched the edge of the counter-top and Theon planted his own hands just beside Robb’s, their bodies so close that he could feel Robb’s rapid, shallow breathing. He brought his lips to ghost over Robb’s mouth and inhaled the tiny gasp that Robb made when he said, “It was so. fucking. good.”

Robb’s eyes had drifted closed, and when they opened, Theon was sliding the pizza out of the oven.
as if nothing had happened. Robb tugged uncomfortably at his jeans.

“Dick,” he muttered.

“You’re not ready for it,” teased Theon, and Robb blushed furiously.

So it shouldn’t have surprised him that Robb had been acting like a total madman since then. A very vocal part of him wanted to fuck Robb’s poor, hormone-addled brains out. But then Robb would do something to remind Theon that they were nearly brothers; he’d ask for help with homework, or elbow Theon in the ribs when they sat too close on the sofa – and the whole idea was enough to make Theon queasy.

*It would be weird,* he told himself. *And illegal.*

Cat settled the issue when she confronted Theon the next day in the garage.

“Theon.”

It startled him – Cat hardly ever acknowledged his existence if she could avoid it. Somehow, he didn’t take it personally and supposed that even if she didn’t like him, Ned wouldn’t have brought him to live at Winterfell without her approval. So that was something.

“Mrs. Stark.” Again, that curious dread surfaced and his mind raced through a list of all the things he might’ve done wrong recently. At least three things came to mind, but the worst was…

*Uh oh.*

Her mouth was set in a thin line that reminded Theon of the face Robb made when something was bothering him.

“Theon Greyjoy, if you ever touch any of my children like that again, I will have you killed.” There was no cruelty in her voice, just certainty. “Do you understand?”

*I didn’t touch him,* Theon wanted to snipe. *He wanted me to do more than just touch him.* Instead he nodded and said,

“Yes, ma’am. It won’t happen again.”

That was how Theon learned to mind the cameras. And despite the fact that a year had passed, Theon saw the threat renewed every time he caught Cat’s eye. He never mentioned it to Robb.

*

Of course, Cat’s warning had the unintended effect of elevating Theon’s provocations from mere amusement into an art. The fact that nothing could *ever* be allowed to happen between them meant that Theon could relax a little and enjoy making Robb Stark’s balls ache.

Jory might have eyes in almost every room in House Stark, but a few places were just out of sight; in the armory, it was the firing lane closest to the camera. Theon went there to be alone, and Robb found him unloading his pistol into the center mass of a paper target, still trying to shake the memory of Ramsay Bolton’s shadow inquiring after his name.

Theon had been a dead-eye since Robb could remember, and Robb waited at a respectful distance until the clip was empty and Theon slid his earmuffs down before saying,

“I thought you said you were gonna teach me.”
Theon turned and smiled tiredly. Robb realized he was wearing the same clothes he’d had on the day before, and he wondered sometimes if Theon wasn’t lying when he said he wouldn’t trade his job for anything.

“I thought Cassel was teaching you.” Theon began reloading.

“He is,” said Robb, picking up the gun and flicking the safety on and off. “But I’m never going to be as good as you are.” He glanced at the target where a tight cluster of holes encircled the heart marked with a black X.

_It’s not like you’ll be the one doing the red work, thought Theon. And anyway, you don’t need great aim to shoot a man tied to a chair._

“I had a head-start,” he said. “It’s the only thing my brothers taught me. And anyway, you’re like, way better at sports than I am.” He motioned to Robb for the pistol, snapped in the clip and passed it back to him, then walked down the range to change out the target.

Robb rolled his eyes. “That’ll come in real handy when I’m running the Family – I’ll just settle all our scores with a game of soccer.”

“It would be more fun that way.” Theon pulled the muffs off and lifted them over Robb’s head, then stuck his fingers in his ears and nodded down the lane. “Go for it.”

Robb held his breath, tongue tucked in the corner of his mouth as he squeezed the trigger. The target fluttered slightly, intact.

“Fuck!” Robb spat. “Fucking stupid bullshit!” His cheeks turned red like they always did when he was frustrated, and Theon tried not to laugh.

Theon bit his lip. “I have an idea. Be right back.”

He returned moments later holding a black recurve bow in one hand and a quiver of aluminum arrows in the other. Robb gaped.

“Is this a fucking joke?”

Theon smiled. “No joke. I just want you to try something. Watch me.”

He took his stance, breathing deliberately as he nocked the arrow and in the course of a single smooth exhale he drew, aimed and released it straight into the head of the target. Robb couldn’t disguise his astonishment.

“You – how come I never knew you’re an archer?”

Theon felt more pleased than he let on. “It’s just a hobby.” He held the bow out to Robb. “Give it a try.”

Robb grasped the bow with clumsy fingers and examined it, tugging at the string incredulously. “And this is going to help me shoot a gun how?”

“It’s not about the gun,” said Theon, stepping closer. “It’s about your eyes.” He held a finger a few inches from Robb’s nose. “First, look at it with both eyes. Then just the left.”

Robb pursed his lips and squinted. “It moves.”

“Right. How about the other eye?”
“Not as much.”

“So your right eye is the dominant one, which means you’re gonna hold the bow with your left hand and draw with the right.”

Robb looked at the bow doubtfully.

“Just try it.”

Robb raised the bow to mimic Theon’s stance and Theon grinned as he placed himself just behind Robb, chest pressed against Robb’s back and he could feel Robb’s breathing quicken, felt him shift his weight back onto his heels.

“A little wider stance,” said Theon, bringing his right leg up between Robb’s thighs to nudge them apart.

Robb swallowed, fingers trembling on the arrow as Theon lay one hand on his hip and ran the other down his arm to wrap his knuckles over Robb’s, steadying his grip on the bow. Theon closed his eyes and breathed in the scent of Robb’s hair, something harsh and sweet.

“Theon –”

“Keep your elbow up.”

Robb raised his draw arm slightly, and Theon felt the muscles in Robb’s shoulders beginning to shake with tension. He allowed his right hand to slip down to the front of Robb’s jeans and chuckled when Robb gulped and whispered, “Oh God…”

“And keep both eyes open.” He nipped at Robb’s ear. “If you can.”

“Theon, please…”

“Now aim and release.” Theon ground down with the heel of his palm and Robb loosed the arrow, piercing the target down and right of where he’d been aiming.

“Goddamnit!” The bow clattered across the floor and Robb whirled around to face Theon. “What the fuck are you trying to _do_ to me?”

Theon didn’t bother trying to contain his amusement. “I’m trying to help you with your marksmanship,” he said with a feigned innocence that made Robb grind his teeth audibly.

“Like hell you are!” He grabbed Theon by the front of his shirt, yanking him off balance.

“I am!” insisted Theon, jerking his head toward the target. “Now you know that you need to aim high and to the left.”

Robb huffed and glanced down the lane before turning back to Theon, his face softened slightly and there was an ache in his voice when he said again, “Theon, please just –” His blue eyes lingered on Theon’s mouth for a moment. “Please just once.”

“Okay.”

“What?”
Theon raised his hands in mock surrender. “Okay! You want me to that bad, I will!” He leaned in towards Robb, and Robb closed his eyes, opened his mouth slightly, still gripping Theon’s shirt.

“If –” Theon intercepted Robb’s lips with his fingertips and Robb’s eyes shot open.

“If?”

Theon trailed his fingers over Robb’s bottom lip, down his chin and the muscles of his throat; he pressed his own erection against Robb’s thigh. “I will fuck you until you beg me to stop if you can put an arrow through the heart of that target.”

For a second, he actually thought Robb might have a seizure.

“Fuck you!”

He watched Robb storm out of the armory and then knelt to pick up the bow, knowing that he’d gone too far but still unable to stop grinning.

“Please, just once.”

He retrieved the arrow and was gathering the quiver back together when he heard footsteps approaching. He assumed it was Robb, come back to throw a few more expletives, but when the door opened, it was Arya, standing with that slight sway she always had and uselessly pushing a few strands of tangled hair out of her eyes. Theon held the quiver in front of his crotch.

“Oh. Hey, Theon. I didn’t know you were here.”

“I’ll bet you didn’t,” he said wryly, knowing that – while not forbidden from the armory per se – Arya was not allowed to touch any of the guns in the house.

She turned to leave when her gaze caught the bow slung over Theon’s shoulder.

“What’s that?”

“It’s a recurve bow.’

She rolled her big brown eyes. “Duh. I know what it is. I meant, why do you have it?”

Theon let it slide down his arm and held it for a moment, feeling the soft leather of the hold.

“My sister got it for me. Before I came to live here.”

“Are you any good at it?”

Theon shrugged. “I think I am.” Then quieter, “My father would probably beg to differ.”

“No offense, but your dad sounds like an asshole.”

Theon laughed so abruptly that it sounded like a bark. “Yeah, I guess he probably does.”

“Can I try it?” she asked, sliding one of the arrows out of the quiver and running her fingernail over the fletching.

Theon balanced the bow on end beside her. “This thing is almost as tall as you are.” He sighed. “I guess you can try it.”
She gave him one of her goofy smiles, and Theon was glad that there was at least one person in this family whose motives were pretty straightforward.

“Chin up,” he instructed. “And keep your back straight.”

“The string is really hard to pull.”

“Maybe you should go play with dolls then,” he deadpanned.

Arya shot him a withering glare. There was a loud snap as the arrow penetrated the target about six inches below the black X. She dropped the bow and cradled her left hand to her chest, face screwed up in pain.

“Ow! That hurt!”

“Yeah, most people wear a wrist-guard for that. It won’t hurt for long. Check it out –” he pointed at the target, “You got pretty close. Good for your very first shot.”

Arya beamed, still rubbing at her wrist. “Can I try again?”

“Theon!” Ned Stark’s voice startled Theon and he dropped the quiver onto the floor, arrows scattering over Arya’s feet.

“Shit,” he muttered, bending to scoop them up as fast as he could.

Ned put his hands on Arya’s shoulders, face grim.

“Theon, you know that Arya’s not allowed to –”

“It’s okay, Dad. Theon was just teaching me to shoot a bow and arrow.”

Ned raised an eyebrow at Theon, his eyes sweeping from the quiver in his arm to the target and back to Theon.

“Pretty good for a first-timer, sir,” he said, loathing the sound of his own voice, hating Ned Stark for sending him out to watch men beaten and shot and then treating him like some fucking child.

“Arya, go get your brothers ready for dinner.”

“Can’t Sansa do it?”

The look he gave her was a scold, but it was also full of warmth. Arya rolled her eyes and stalked out of the armory.

“I’m sorry, sir,” Theon stammered. “I didn’t think I was breaking any rules.”

Ned leveled a cool gaze at Theon, as though he could ascertain the truth of the boy’s intentions if he just stared at him long enough. Theon tried not to fidget.

“I need you to go on a drive.”

Theon’s heart sank. “What kind?”

Ned looked over his shoulder at the door, then up at the security camera, and if Theon didn’t know better, he’d swear that Ned Stark was acting a little paranoid.
“It can’t see us right here,” he almost volunteered.

“It’s – it’s just an errand really.”

“Is Poole coming?”

Ned frowned. “No. Nobody is going with you. And I know that I can trust you when I say that this errand is not to be discussed with anyone. Not even Robb.”

“But Robb is my –”

“Do you tell Robb everything about your work?”

“No, sir.”

_It’s a test_, he thought, mind scrambling to think of what kind of terrible thing Ned might be asking him to do. Ned saw the gears turning in Theon’s eyes and put a reassuring hand on his shoulder.

“There’s a car in the garage. Gendry knows the one. I want you to deliver it to this address.” He handed Theon a scrap of paper with a street number and name written in Ned’s diligent penmanship.

* *

“Do you know where it’s going?” asked Gendry, leaning against the fender of the black 1967 Camaro. “I’ve been working on it for months and I hate that I don’t even know where it’s going.”

Theon shook his head. “Nah, just some random address. Must be a favor he owes somebody.”

Gendry whistled and bent to plant a kiss on the hood of the car, then immediately wiped at the spot with his shop rag. “Well, this is goodbye then.” He looked at Theon a little ruefully. “I guess I should be glad it’s not being blown up or driven into a gorge, huh?”

“You wanna go out for a drink when I’m done?”

“Yeah sure. If I’m awake. I’ve been passing out like, stupid early.”

“Do you think maybe it’s the fumes?”

Gendry smiled. “Oh God, I hadn’t even thought of that. I don’t notice them anymore.”

* *

When Theon rolled up alongside the curb, he was convinced he’d misread the address; he scrutinized Ned’s handwriting, but it only confirmed that this was the right place – a tudor house with an imposing hedge, a treehouse built into a towering cottonwood and windows glowing warmly. A painted sign at the end of the driveway read “St. Brigid’s Group Home for Boys.”

_What in the hell?_

He wondered if this was a front for some Stark Family operation, but that didn’t explain why Ned had sworn him to secrecy.

The front door was answered by a man with white hair and a stooped back whose head trembled as he looked Theon up and down before clearing his throat and asking, “How may I help you?”
“Um, hi.” Theon’s voice cracked embarrassingly. “I – I was told to deliver this car to this address and I just wanted to make sure I have the right place.”

The old man peered over Theon’s shoulder at the Camaro, then back at Theon. Theon ran his fingers through his hair and tried not to look into the house, tried to ignore the sound of boys’ laughter coming down the hallway towards him.

“Yes, this is the place,” replied the man. “Thank you.”

Theon handed him the keys and walked halfway across the street when he heard the front door open again, and when he turned around, Theon felt his heart stick in his throat.

*Oh my God.*

Although he was no older than seventeen, the boy had Ned Stark’s strong shoulders and jaw; there was none of Cat’s narrowness to him. His hair was curly like Robb’s, but it was black and hung down to his shoulders in a thick mess. His eyes were wide and serious and all his own, his full lips drawn into a sort of perpetual frown that deepened at the sight of the car. He shuffled once around it before returning to the house without giving it a second glance, leaving Theon stunned in the middle of the street.

A series of impulses ran through Theon – he wanted to run back to the house and bang on the door, demand to see the boy with the sad eyes, to know his name, his age, why he didn’t like the Camaro. Beneath that, another, baser impulse.

He waved the thought away and lit a cigarette. At the nearest bus stop, he leaned against the wall and texted Gendry with sweaty fingers.

“Drive done. Taking the bus to Midtown. Meet me at Ground Zero?”

His phone chimed as the bus rolled up.

“Yeah. U lookin 2 hook up?”

“Always. Y? U DtF? ;)” Theon smirked as he hit “send.”

“U aint got the $.”

* Theon and Gendry agreed on Ground Zero for different reasons; for Gendry, the club offered an opportunity to get wasted cheaply and in a dark corner, and for Theon, it offered plenty of guys willing to make out in a dark corner. It was a nice enough place that it felt like “going out,” but seedy enough that throwing up in a urinal wasn’t a major faux pas.

The IDs they handed the bouncer were fakes, of course, but perfectly made. Gendry headed straight for the bar while Theon scoped out the scene for a moment before joining him. Gendry ordered two shots of whiskey and downed both of them immediately. He shuddered and wiped his mouth on the back of his hand. Theon laughed and ordered a rum-and-coke.

Gendry balked. “You’re not even gonna try to keep up with me?”

“If I try to keep up with you, I won’t be able to keep it up for anybody else.”

He winked and Gendry shook his head as he gestured to the bartender for another drink.
“You are the only asshole I know who legit winks at people.”

“And you want to fuck me, don’t you?”

Gendry almost fell off his stool laughing. The bartender raised an eyebrow as she set another shot in front of him, which he took without pausing to breathe.

He turned back to Theon, trying not crack up.

“Hey, speaking of cars –”

“Don’t you?” pressed Theon, eyes wide with mock neediness.

Gendry cleared his throat. “Speaking of cars, where did you end up taking that Camaro?”

To Ned Stark’s bastard son, Theon almost said.

“Just some random house,” he answered.

“Some lucky bastard,” echoed Gendry, too busy watching the dance floor to notice the wicked grin that crept over Theon’s face.

Three drinks later, the air in the club seemed warm and almost tangibly thick with sweat. Gendry was slumped against the men’s room wall, trying to stabilize himself enough to piss, and Theon was leaned in close to a man with bright green eyes. He could smell his cologne, and the music was loud enough to drown out all but the most persistent of thoughts.

“Who did you come here with?” Theon shouted.

The man fished a cherry out of his drink.

“My boyfriend,” he shouted back, putting a hand to his cheek as though he were whispering. He glanced at a group of guys sitting together in a corner booth. “He really hates places like this,” he said, a flicker of annoyance in his tone. “I always say we don’t have to go if he doesn’t want to.”

“Does he make you happy?” asked Theon, moving close enough that their shoulders were touching.

“Oh, and you’re gonna make me happy?” He looked deliberately unimpressed.

He laughed and put a hand on the man’s thigh. “No, but I won’t make you unhappy. And I’ll fuck you like he thinks he fucks you.”

Theon was delighted when the man blushed and shook his head heavily from side to side. “Does that actually work for you?”

“I dunno – does it?”

Green-eyes looked at him, looked away and started laughing. “What did you say your name was?”
Chapter Three

Chapter Summary

Theon arranges a car accident, and one of Ned's associates takes an interest in his future.

Chapter Notes

Wow. I am back from an awesome trip to Belize - and I have a little notebook full of plot ideas!

The next morning, cars poured into the Stark driveway – long and black and low-slung things that bored Theon almost as much as the men they carried. He was curious why Ned had called them – all the important Northern families pledged to House Stark. Their presence made Theon uneasy, not least because none of these people bothered to make a secret of their dislike for him. On the rare occasion that Ned beckoned him into a meeting between the Houses, the room fell silent and their eyes practically smothered him.

“Never trust a Greyjoy.” He could almost hear it in the way they cleared their old throats and shifted in their old chairs and refused to speak of anything important until he was gone.

Theon found Gendry staring blankly at the engine block of a Beemer, obviously battling a wave of nausea.

“How you doing?”

Gendry looked up at him dolefully. “There is nothing left inside me.”

“What’s going on? Why’s everybody here this morning?”

Gendry scowled. “Fucked if I know. I don’t ask questions. I wish they’d leave though.”

“Why?” Theon moved beside Gendry to knock on the engine thoughtlessly. “None of them even know your name.”

Gendry shrugged and said in a low voice, “These people are all fucking bat-shit, and they’re all fucking strapped. Doesn’t that bother you?”

“Why do you think I’m always strapped?”

“Because you’re fucking bat-shit like the rest of them.”

Theon was flattered.

*
Theon hesitated outside Robb’s door for a moment, wondering what he was doing there. Robb was a boy in his bedroom, while the rest of the house was full of powerful men – men that Theon would sit with one day. And still, all he wanted was to retreat into Robb’s room.

He knocked on the door.

“Robb?”

“Yeah?”

“Can I come in?”

There was a pause before Robb answered:

“Yeah.”

The windows were open and the lights were off. Robb lay sprawled across the bed with the sheets tangled around him and his gaze somewhere far away. Theon shifted awkwardly.

“Sit down,” said Robb, still not looking at him.

“Are you okay?” Theon shuffled closer to the bed and looked down at Robb. It was almost eleven, but Robb was still in his boxers. One of his socks had come off during the night. Robb sighed and closed his eyes, and when he re-opened them, they focused on Theon.

“Yeah. I’m just – it’s always so weird when dad goes into business mode. He wants me to go sit with them this afternoon.”

Theon permitted himself to slouch down onto the edge of the bed. “That’s cool. I wish I could go, but everyone in there fucking hates me.”

“They do not,” said Robb dismissively. “They hate your dad, maybe, and your uncles. But nobody hates you. They don’t even know you.”

Theon found the depth of Robb’s obliviousness as endearing as it was exasperating.

“Hey Robb…” Theon bit his lip. “I’m – I’m sorry for being such a dick yesterday. In the armory. That wasn’t fair.”

Robb groaned. “Oh God, don’t apologize. That just makes it worse. Like I’m some fucking virgin –”

“You are a virgin.”

Robb glared at him. “You know what I mean.”

“You know I would, right?”

Robb’s fingers tightened on the sheets and he turned his face toward the window.

“Why won’t you then?”

Theon faltered. Suddenly aware of their proximity on the bed, he folded his hands between his knees.

*Nothing good will come from this.*
“I can’t. Your mom – Your mom told me I could never… She said she’d kill me.”

Robb lifted himself onto his elbows. “What?”

Theon nodded and smiled strangely. “Yeah. Straight up. ‘Theon, I’ll kill you.’”

“She said she’d kill you if you fucked me?” Robb’s tone was skeptical.

“And if I touch you like, you know… If I ever like, bad-touch you.” Theon smirked before adding, “Oh, or your brothers or sisters. All of you. Off limits. Forever.”

Robb sat up and crossed his legs, leaning forward to rest one cheek on his knuckles and let his fingertips run over the chain that connected Theon’s wallet to his belt-loop.

“She won’t find out.”

“I can’t.” It sounded so weak.

“When I’m in charge –”

Theon rolled his eyes and moved to get up, but Robb’s fingers curled around the chain and yanked him back down.

“No, listen – when I’m in charge, you can fuck whoever you want. And you can sit next to me at all the meetings, and if anyone says shit about it, I’ll break their fucking thumbs.”

Robb gave one of those winsome, perfect smiles that made Theon smile too, in spite of himself.

“You promise? You will personally break their thumbs?”

“Cross my fucking heart.”

*

No matter how many cigarettes he smoked, the knot in Theon’s stomach only got tighter. He’d been sitting in his Zagato for almost two hours, parked three houses down from St. Brigid’s Group Home for Boys and trying to look inconspicuous, trying not to look like –

Like a total fucking creeper.

Redbull cans and candy wrappers littered the passenger seat, and the ashtray overflowed with cigarette butts. Theon had his right foot propped up on the dashboard, a pair of aviators pushed up into his thick, dark hair. He didn’t know what he hoped for, exactly; he knew he wanted to see the bastard boy again, wanted to speak to him, to see if his frown was as unbending as it looked. But to what end, he had no idea.

Not that it matters, he thought impatiently. He saw no sign that the boy had even touched the car, and that struck Theon as unforgivably spoiled – turning down a gift from Ned Stark. A gift that was truly a gift, and not a sideways demand for submission.

He closed his eyes for a moment, and when he opened them again, the Camaro was halfway down the block. Theon shot up in his seat, fumbling with the ignition before peeling off after it.

This isn’t a damn car chase, he scolded himself as he downshifted. But his pulse continued to race as he followed at a few cars’ distance.
A couple miles later, the boy pulled into a grocery store parking lot. Theon parked a few spaces away and watched in his rearview mirror as the boy walked into the store, frowning at a small piece of paper and brushing a lock of hair behind his ear.

Theon waited. The car idled quietly and he let his hand rest lightly on the stick, trying to think of what to say.

“Hey, I’m Theon,” was as far as he got when he saw the boy exiting the store with a grocery bag on one arm and a pumpkin in the other.

*Or you could just leave him be.*

Theon backed out of his parking spot and swung his Zagato around so that it was pointed at the fender of the Camaro; the boy’s brake lights came on and his car slid slowly backwards, and Theon held his breath as he tapped on the accelerator.

The sound of metal-on-metal raised the hair on the back of Theon’s neck, and he buzzed with adrenaline as he stepped out of the car to survey the damage to his coupe. The right headlight was shattered, and when the boy got out of his car, he put a hand to his head and moaned.

“Oh shit. You gotta be fucking kidding me.”

Theon tried not to stare too hard; he was so… pretty, however hard Theon’s brain tried to find any other word.

“Hey, it’s just a headlight,” he said. “Are you okay?”

He moved around the car until they were only an arm’s length apart.

The boy’s dark eyes looked ready to cry, and Theon didn’t know how that made him feel.

“Yeah, I’m okay.” The boy blushed. “Are you okay?”

“I’m fine.”

The boy kicked angrily at the hubcap of the Camaro. “This is just so fucking stupid.”

Theon thought about touching him, maybe laying a hand on his shoulder, but decided against it.

“It’s not that big a deal. Shit happens.”

The boy glared at him and Theon didn’t know someone could be so livid and still look so breakable.

*You need to loosen up, pretty thing.*

“No, this is just fucking – just fucking dumb,” the boy insisted. “I just – I just got this stupid car. And the first fucking time I take it somewhere, I run into – into the most expensive car I’ve ever fucking seen. I didn’t even want this fucking car.” He kicked the hubcap again and winced as he jammed his toes. “Goddamnit!”

Theon smiled crookedly.

“Hey, what’s your name?”

The boy looked at him, bewildered. “Jon.”
The anger in Jon’s face abated slightly, as though he were actually seeing Theon for the first time. “I’m sorry. I thought I checked behind me. Will it – do you think it’ll be expensive to fix that?”

Theon shrugged. “I have a friend who’s good with cars.” He bit his lip and reached into his pocket for a pen. “But hey, like – just in case I actually have to take it in somewhere – can I have your phone number? You’ve got insurance, right?”

“Yeah. It came with the car, I think.” He took the pen from Theon. “Do you have something to write on?”

Theon offered over his hand. “Just write it there for now.” Jon’s fingers were almost deathly cold, and his tongue flicked out of his mouth as he scrawled a number across the back of Theon’s hand. When he was done, he held on for a second longer, reading Theon’s knuckles.

“It’s um – it’s a house phone,” said Jon, a little embarrassed. “So if you call you have to ask for Jon Snow. There’s two Jons. At the house. And um, don’t call after 9pm. If you call.”

Theon nodded. “Did you – have you – um, how old are you? Like, how long have you been driving?”

“A few months. I just turned sixteen this week.”

*Oh fuck me.*

*“Dude, what the fuck happened?”*

Gendry dropped a pair of pliers when he saw the wrecked headlight.

“Just a little love-tap,” said Theon. “You can fix it, right?”

“I’m going to have to custom order the parts. From Italy,” said Gendry matter-of-factly. He folded his arms and glanced at Theon before repeating, "What the fuck happened? You've never had an accident."

“Yeah,” replied Theon with a wink. “Accident…”

Gendry’s jaw dropped. “Are you – are you fucking serious? You crashed an $80,000 car on purpose?”

Theon flashed the number on the back of his hand. “Worth it.”

*Jory found him in the kitchen, pawing through the fridge. He cleared his throat, and Theon spun around with a half-eaten cheese stick in his mouth. Jory looked away.*

“Oh, hey Jory.”

“Greyjoy.”

“What can I do for you?”
“Mr. Stark wants to see you in his office. Now.”

*

There’s no way he could know, Theon told himself as he opened the door to Ned Stark’s study. You should just stay the fuck away from him.

“Theon, you remember Mr. Bolton.”

Theon blinked and tried to hide his relief. “Yes sir.”

Roose Bolton’s eyes cast a chill up Theon’s spine. He wasn’t an imposing man, and yet there was something dreadful in his absolute composure, in the soft, ruthlessness of his voice. Though they’d only interacted once before, Theon felt it was all Roose needed to memorize him somehow.

The Stark children told stories about all the men of the lesser houses; mostly they were silly, mean-spirited stories that ended with laughter and a sharp glance from Cat or Ned. The stories about Roose Bolton were spoken in hushed tones and always included blood – and not blood splattered across a wall after a gunfight, but blood the way it tastes.

“He drinks it,” Bran insisted. “He drinks the blood of his enemies.”

“I heard he bathes in it,” said Arya with a perverse grin. “He has it heated in a huge tub until it’s hot and thick as soup, and then he gets in and uses it to wash himself.”

“That’s stupid. How many people would you have to kill to get that much blood?”

“Will you two please shut up?” interjected Sansa.

Theon and Robb learned the truth of it from Ned: that Roose Bolton didn’t drink blood – or bathe in it – but that he regularly practiced leeching. “It’s still creepy, I guess,” said Robb disappointedly. The first time he met Bolton, Theon had been pressing Ned about it, to Ned’s clear discomfort.

“But why though?” he’d asked, not noticing that Roose had entered the room behind him. “There’s better ways to get sucked on.”

Ned looked past Theon and muttered, “God help me.”

“It cleans the blood,” said Roose, a bizarre little grin pulling at the corner of his mouth. “And clears the mind. You’d find that it diminishes many of the urges that cloud your thinking.”

Theon expected a lecture from Ned, but not the one he got.

“Roose Bolton is a dangerous man,” he said. “Probably the most dangerous man working for me.”

“I can take care of myself,” replied Theon flippantly.

Ned smiled. “I know you can. But this isn’t just about you; it’s about the Family. You’re – you’re nearly a part of the Family.”

Theon fought back a surge of elation.

“When I see you, I see a man who’s almost a son to me. Robb sees you as a brother. And Roose Bolton sees you as an opportunity to get closer to the Family.”

“Oh.” And there it was again. Nearly family, but not.
“You haven’t met his son, Ramsay, have you?” asked Ned solemnly.

Theon shook his head. “No. I’ve – we’ve made a few drops at the storage complex. But I’ve never actually seen him.”

“Good.”

“Why, is he like his dad?”

Ned thought for a moment before answering. “Yes. And no. Roose only uses cruelty when it suits his purposes, but for Ramsay, cruelty is a purpose. He enjoys it. And even though Roose doesn’t enjoy it himself, he uses that part of his son to his advantage. Do you understand what I’m saying?”

“I think so.”

"Roose will only show an interest in people he finds useful, and it's best not to interest him."

Theon hadn’t thought about Roose Bolton much since that conversation, but now – with the man’s icy eyes passing him up and down – he felt a strange mixture of unease and excitement.

“Mr. Bolton’s man had to leave early. Please give him a ride home.”

Theon nodded curtly at Ned Stark, then at Roose.

“It would be my pleasure.”

Ned glared at him, and Theon realized the nature of his words too late. As Roose stepped into the hallway, Theon moved to follow when Ned put a hand on his shoulder.

“Theon –”

“I’m sorry, sir. I just meant that of course I will. Give him a ride. I mean, I’ll drive him home.”

“Thank you, Theon. Just try to be a little less –”

“Slutty?”

Ned rolled his eyes and sighed. “Fresh. Try to be a little less fresh with him than you were last time you met.”

*

Theon hated the silence of drives like this, broken only by Roose Bolton’s quiet breathing and the sound of his boots shifting against the floor of the car. He thought about Jon Snow, with the dark eyes and dark mood and hands cold enough to give you goosebumps. He looked at his hand on the steering wheel, wondering how long he’d have to wait to call.

*He’s barely sixteen. He doesn’t care when you call.*

“How long has it been since you left Pyke?”

Roose’s soft voice startled him. He glanced in the rearview mirror and saw a pair of grey eyes staring back at him expectantly.

“Um, about eleven years.”
“And when do you plan to return?”

Theon shifted uncomfortably in his seat. Nobody asked him about Pyke besides Robb.

“I don’t know. When my father dies. Sooner. I’m not sure.”

“That’ll be strange for you, won’t it? Going back to a home you hardly remember when you’ve practically been raised a Stark.”

“I’m not a Stark,” said Theon sharply, watching in the mirror as that faint smile crept across Roose Bolton’s lips.

“Oh, of course not. Do you think you’ll cut ties with the Family once you return home?”

And that hurt somehow, and the depth of it surprised Theon. “No,” he replied. “I’m not going to make my father’s mistakes.”

“He did it for you, you know.”

Theon felt his driving grow sloppier as he grew more irritated.

“How would you know why my father does anything?” he snapped, braking abruptly for a stop light.

“All fathers do, we do for our sons,” said Roose, unfazed by Theon’s outburst.

*His other sons maybe. But not for me.*

Theon said nothing but waited for the light to turn.

When the car ground to a halt in front of the wrought-iron gates, Roose put his hand on the back of Theon’s seat. His fingers brushed against Theon’s shoulder.

“It wasn’t my intention to offend you, Master Greyjoy. I’m just curious what the future holds for you.”

“No offense taken,” said Theon coldly.

He watched Roose’s slim silhouette cross the yard and enter the house with a quick backward glance at the car.

*What the fuck was that about?*

Theon touched his phone to check the time. 8.36pm.

His fingers shook as he tapped the numbers into the screen, and he damned himself for acting like such a little girl about the whole thing. The phone rang three times before an elderly voice answered.

“Hello?”

“Hi, um – I’m calling for Jon Snow, please.”

“And who may I say is calling?”

“Theon.”
“Just a moment.”
He heard the phone set down and then picked up again.
“Hello?”
“Jon? Jon Snow?”
“Yeah?”
“It’s Theon. The guy from the, um, car accident.”
“Oh God. What?”
“Well, I, uh – my friend says he can fix the headlight.”
He heard the relief in Jon’s voice. “Oh. Good. That’s awesome.”
“That’s actually not why I’m calling though.”
“Oh God. What?”
Theon played nervously with the automatic door locks.
“Do you like sushi?”
“No.”
“Okay. Um, how about Chinese?”
“I don’t really go out to eat.”
Theon pressed the heel of his palm against his forehead, regretting this conversation more intensely by the second.
“How about coffee? Would you wanna go get coffee with me?”
A heavy silence followed and Theon was ready to hang up when Jon asked,
“How old are you?”
“I’ll tell you how old I am over coffee.”
A brief hesitation.
“How about Thursday?”
Chapter Four

Chapter Summary

Disturbing rumors from the Far North, an unexpected call from the South and one guy watching another guy drink coffee.

Chapter Notes

For everybody that’s reading this, thank you for trusting me with such a long-form narrative. Whenever I write, I tend to think of the ending early on and then struggle to maintain a consistent arc to the get that point. It’s hard for me not to rush to the part where everything goes horribly wrong. So thanks for reading and commenting!

The first time Theon smoked weed was the first time he noticed the single freckle at the corner of Robb’s right eye, and it was the first time Robb noticed that braces had done nothing for the gap between Theon’s front teeth. Surprisingly, it had been Robb who locked his bedroom door before pulling a dugout and a one-hitter from somewhere in his desk, and it was Theon who wavered.

“What if your dad finds out?”

“What if he does?” said Robb, blowing a cloud of smoke towards the ceiling. “He makes money off way worse shit than pot.”

“But he’s your dad.”

Robb’s laugh turned to a cough. “If he finds out, I’ll tell him it was my idea.” He flicked his lighter and held the flame out for Theon. “I wish you’d just fucking trust me sometimes.”

Theon only tried cocaine once, in the bathroom of a club; he was sixteen and the man cutting the lines for him must’ve been almost thirty. Five hours later, when the comedown proved too awful, he knocked on Ned’s bedroom door, desperate. He heard the click of a pistol and a voice,

“Who is it?”

“It’s Theon. I’m – oh God, I’m really sorry, Mr. Stark, but I – I need help. Please.”

When the door opened, Ned was in his robe and Theon felt so small. He wrung his hands and gazed down at his feet.

“What’s wrong?” Ned tilted Theon’s chin up with his thumb and saw that Theon’s irises were a thread of blue around his blown-out pupils. “Theon, what did you take?”

“Coke,” he answered, trying not to squirm. “I’m sorry. Please don’t be mad at me. At least not til tomorrow. I just – tried it and now I feel terrible. Like, I feel like I can’t breathe and I won’t ever be able to breathe again. Oh God, what if I just stay like this forever? Please don’t send me home like this.”
Ned pinched the bridge of his nose.

“Is everything okay, Ned?” came Cat’s thin, worried voice.

“Fine. Go back to bed, hon. I’ll be up in a little while.” Then to Theon, “Let’s go down to the kitchen and get you something.”

Theon assumed he meant a snack, but Ned pulled a mug and hot cocoa mix from the cupboard, a can of Reddi-whip from the fridge and a bottle of Irish whiskey from the liquor cabinet.

“Where did you get it?” he asked, placing the steaming cup in front of Theon and pulling up another chair beside him.

Theon took the drink with trembling hands and stared down at the shape of the whipped cream melting into the cocoa. “From a guy at the club.”

“Someone you know?”

“No.” He poked his tongue into the liquid; it was still too hot. “I didn’t know him. I didn’t mean to. He just asked if I wanted to and I said yes. I said yes. It’s easy to say yes.”

“Theon, look at me.” Ned laid a hand gently on Theon’s wrist and Theon stared at it with wide eyes before looking up at Ned’s face. “I don’t know who this guy was to you, but you have to stay away from this stuff. I know – I know it’s easy to say yes, and I know it feels good for a while, but eventually, it owns you.”

Theon looked confounded and sipped cautiously at the cocoa. He shuddered at its strength. “Yes, sir.”

“Do you want me to stay up with you?”

“Yes sir.”

As a boy, he had a recurring dream – and it wasn’t so much a dream as it was a feeling – that he was drowning; he woke up gasping and twisted in the sheets. The first time it happened, Theon stood outside his father’s bedroom for what felt like an hour before finally falling asleep on the floor in the hallway.

*

He came to feel a certain pity for the users – the bewilderment in their eyes when Poole and Flint paid a visit, the total conviction that this was all a mistake, was a dream, was a joke. That there must be some way out.

Theon was startled when Ned asked in all seriousness if he’d heard anything about White Walkers.

“It’s an urban legend,” he answered without thinking. “It’s just what parents tell their kids to keep them from trying drugs. Or hanging out with people who do drugs.”

Ned leaned forward, both his fists planted on his desk, and Theon fidgeted, sneaking a peek at his watch. He was meeting Jon Snow for coffee in two hours and he hadn’t even figured out what to wear yet.

“Why? Did Bran ask about them or something? He loves that kind of crap.”

“No.” Ned set his jaw before deciding to continue. “I’ve been hearing some disturbing rumors
from the far North.”

“Like what?”

“Just this morning, I hear a report about a man killing a complete stranger and eating his flesh, starting with the face.”

“You think it’s true?”

Ned sighed and turned to look out the window. Arya and Bran were in the courtyard.

“I’d like not to. I started hearing these stories a few months ago. At first I thought they were just junky dreams, or lies told to the police. But they keep coming, and not just from addicts now, but from law enforcement, from some of the contacts I have up there – including my brother. Last month, he shot a woman twelve times, and she kept coming at him until the last bullet.” Ned turned to look at Theon. “He says it gives him nightmares.”

Theon didn’t know what to say to that.

He was five when he found his brothers hiding out at the docks one afternoon, skipping swim team to smoke cigarettes and watch the freighters come in. He’d turned to leave, hoping they hadn’t noticed him, but Rick grabbed him by the backpack and dragged him to the edge of the water. Theon’s heels hung off the edge of the concrete, and he tried not to cough as Rick blew a stream of smoke into his face. “What the fuck are you doing out here?”

Theon looked at Maron, who folded his arms across his chest, frowning. He wondered when he would be big enough to fight back, or if it would always be like this. Rick was stronger, and he was usually content to hit Theon a few times in the stomach; Maron preferred to threaten him with much worse.

“I – I just came down to watch the boats.”

“Did you know we were here?”

Theon shook his head vigorously. “No. I didn’t. Honest.”

Rick glanced over his shoulder at Maron and Maron smiled. Of the four Greyjoy children, it was Maron whose dry smile most resembled Theon’s.

“Maybe we should give him to the White Walkers.”

Rick feigned horror. “Jesus, Ron. You think we should?”

“What’s – what’s the White Walkers?” Theon asked, clutching at his own hands.

Rick and Maron shared another look and Maron knelt to Theon’s level, held his little brother tightly by the shoulders.

“The White Walkers eat little shits like you. They look like people, but they’re so fucked up that they don’t feel pain. You could kick and scream, and it won’t matter. They’re not afraid of anything.” He pinched Theon’s round cheek. “All they want is to eat fat little kids. And they never sleep, because their hearts beat too fast. They’ve got hands like ice and they won’t even kill you before they start chewing on you, ripping pieces off to feed to their dogs.”

Theon quaked, unable to look away from his brother’s eyes. “Please just let me go home.”
Rick whistled and raised his eyebrows. ‘I don’t know if we can do that. You might tell Dad that you saw us here, smoking. You’re such a dipshit, always trying to get us in trouble like that. It might just be easier to give you to the White Walkers.’

“I hear they love places like the docks,” added Maron, looking around. “Lots of good, dark hiding places.”

“I won’t tell Dad. I swear.”

It wasn’t until he was ten that Theon realized his brothers were lying to him. When Robb asked if he wanted to play White Walker Tag, Theon had blanched.

“Do you – do you have White Walkers here?”

Robb screwed up his face. “What?”

“Do they live nearby?”

“They’re um, they’re not real. They’re just imaginary.” He seemed both pleased and confused by the fact that he knew something Theon didn’t.

Theon almost hugged Robb for rescuing him.

And now Ned Stark was telling him that there might be such a thing after all.

“That’s crazy,” he said finally. “I don’t believe it.”

Ned returned to his desk. “I hope you’re right.”

As he left the room, Theon wondered what kind of profit a man might turn on a drug that could turn men into monsters.

*  

He tried on six different shirts and two pairs of pants before settling on the white baseball tee with the black sleeves and a pair of dark blue jeans with a tear across the thigh. Looking in the mirror, he realized that his hair was getting long and kind of wild; he ran a comb through it a few times before giving up.

He’d been guiltily avoiding Robb all day, and he was almost into the elevator when he heard Robb’s voice just behind him.

“Theon!”

He turned, bracing himself as Robb’s eyes slid over him.

“Where are you going?”

“Nowhere. Just running a few errands.”

Robb bit his lip. “The shirt’s a little tight, isn’t it?”

Theon rolled his eyes. “What are you, my dad?”

“I can see your gun.”
Theon lifted his arm. *Wouldn’t want to make Jon shit his pants.* He shrugged and headed back toward his room. “Guess I better wear a jacket,” he muttered as he stepped around Robb.

“You look, um – good, though.”

Theon paused at his door. “Wanna watch a movie when I get back?” He didn’t know *why* he offered, but when Robb’s face brightened into that picture-perfect smile, he was glad he did.

“Yeah. What movie?”

“You pick.”

*

The café was small enough that everyone turned to look when the door opened, and Theon stopped there in the doorway to unzip his hoodie and push his sunglasses up into his hair. Jon Snow’s mouth split into a shy, disbelieving grin, like he hadn’t expected Theon to show. He sat beside the window with his elbows on the table, stirring at his drink, and when Theon pulled out the chair across from him, his eyes hung up on Theon’s body. Looking down, Theon realized that the tattoos on his chest and ribs showed through the thin fabric of his shirt.

“I – I thought you weren’t going to come.”

Theon looked at his watch. “I’m like, three minutes late.”

Jon laughed nervously before his lips settled into that strange little frown. “Yeah, I just, um –” He tugged at a rubber band around his wrist. “Nobody’s ever asked me for coffee or anything.”

*There’s lots more I’d like to ask you for.*

“Why not?” asked Theon bluntly, savoring the way Jon’s cheeks flared. “Is everyone you know blind or something?”

“I – uh, I –” Jon stammered, looking into his mug.

“It wasn’t a literal question.”

Jon’s face relaxed slightly and he resumed snapping the rubber band. “You said you’d tell me how old you are.” He looked up at Theon expectantly, a fleck of whipped cream clinging to the corner of his mouth. Theon’s mind sorted through the possible lies he might tell, but when he thought about all the lies he was going to have to tell – about his life and where he got his money – he felt too exhausted for anything but the truth.

“Nineteen,” he said, watching Jon’s face carefully as a tiny, self-satisfied smile appeared there and then was gone.

“Isn’t that like, illegal?”

“If you want me to leave, I will.”

“No,” replied Jon quickly. “No, I – I don’t mean I want you to leave. I just – I guess I’m just making sure you want to stay.”

“Yeah. I mean, at the moment, we’re just two guys having coffee.” Jon raised an eyebrow. “Okay, one guy watching another guy have coffee.”
“Aren’t you going to order something?”

“I don’t really drink it,” said Theon with a shrug.

“Then why’d you invite me here?”

“Because you said you didn’t like sushi.”

Jon bit that impossibly full bottom lip and glanced down. “I’d feel more comfortable if you ordered something.”

Oh my fucking God. Theon rolled his eyes as he rose and walked to the counter, staring at the overwhelming drink menu for a full three minutes before ordering a chai latte.

“There,” he said, spilling some of his drink as he placed it carelessly on the table. “Now we’re just two guys having coffee, yeah?”

Jon smiled almost apologetically. “Yeah.”

Theon wiped at the mess with the cuff of his hoodie. “So, what’s up with the whole ‘No calls after nine, ask for Jon Snow’ thing?”

“I um, live in a group home.” Jon’s voice was quiet, embarrassed. “It’s a – it’s sort of like a foster home except there’s a bunch of us and we –”

“I know what a group home is.”

Jon looked relieved. “So yeah, there’s lots of rules about like, when you can use the phone and how late you can stay out and shit.”

“Is there a rule about meeting nineteen-year-old strangers whose cars you ran into for coffee?”

“Not yet,” Jon deadpanned, and Theon felt his heart jump.

“So how long have you lived there?”

Jon paused for a moment, and Theon tried not to think about how sort of sick it was to ask a bunch of questions that he already knew the answers to, especially questions about Jon’s family. He wondered what would happen if he told Jon everything.

You have three brothers and two sisters. Your father is Ned Fucking Stark and he lives in a huge fucking mansion.

“I’ve been in the system my whole life,” said Jon. “I’ve been at St. Brigid’s – that’s the group home – I’ve been there for like, four years.”

“Is that – I mean, do you like it there?”

Jon shrugged and downed the dregs of his coffee. “It’s okay. I don’t hate it. Mr. Aemon makes sure we go to school and stay out of trouble. I like him.”

“Do you know anything about your like, birthparents or whatever?”

Jon smiled bitterly and shook his head, and Theon was struck again by how he could look pretty and so angry. “Not really. I don’t know who they are. My dad is alive somewhere. I don’t know a damn thing about my mom.”
Theon swallowed and imagined what Ned Stark’s face would look like if he came into this café and found Theon there with his foot resting against Jon’s, asking,

“How do you know your dad’s alive?”

“Mr. Aemon says so. And he always sends me Christmas and birthday presents.” Jon looked out the window at the Camaro. “That’s where I got that stupid car.”

“He must – um, he must still care about you, then. That’s a fucking mint car.”

Jon looked at Theon, and there was something unbearably familiar in those dark eyes.

“I’d rather have a family than a car.”

Theon looked away, ashamed of himself. He toyed with changing the subject, but something urged him on.

“My dad gave me away, too.”

Jon scowled. “Yeah, right.”

The disbelief in his voice hurt Theon more than he expected.

“My brothers died when I was nine. My dad – he couldn’t handle it. Couldn’t keep me. He sent me away.”

He had never said it like that before – never aloud to anyone, not just the truth like that. Not even to Robb.

“You’re from the Iron Islands, huh?”

Theon glanced at his knuckles, splayed his fingers out on the tabletop. “Yeah. That’s where my dad is.”

“You miss it?”

“Yeah,” he lied.

“Where did you grow up? I mean after that.”

“Here, in the North. With a foster family.”

Jon leaned back in his chair, his toes knocking against Theon’s. “That must be nice. I mean, not to be a dick. Just – it must be nice not to walk out of a house with a big sign in the front yard telling the whole world that you’re – that nobody wanted you.”

_I want you._

“Yeah. I guess I never thought about it.”

“I’m sorry,” said Jon, snapping the rubber band on his wrist hard enough to leave a mark. “This probably isn’t what you had in mind when you asked me out.”

Theon smiled crookedly. “Has anyone ever told you that you’re fucking beautiful?”

Jon’s face went red and the rubber band broke. “You’re fucking with me.”
“No. I’m not. Like, it’s stupid how good you look. And you’re even wearing this like, really ugly polo shirt.”

Jon laughed, and Theon felt lightheaded; making Jon Snow laugh was like…

*Like huffing paint,* he thought absurdly.

In the several seconds it took for Jon to compose himself, Theon felt two parallel desires running through his veins: he wanted to hear Jon moaning his name, but he also wanted to fall asleep with his head on Jon’s chest.

“Has anyone ever told you that you’re fucking ridiculous?” asked Jon, a remnant of that smile still hanging in the corner of his mouth.

“No for a few days.”

Jon looked at his watch and grimaced. “Shit, I’ve gotta get going. I have to be back at the house for dinner.” He eyed Theon’s mug as he reached under the table for his messenger bag. “You didn’t even drink your latte.”

Theon shrugged. “You didn’t say I had to drink it.”

As he followed Jon out of the café, Theon’s mouth went dry and his knees felt unsteady. He opened his mouth to stammer out some kind of goodbye when Jon said,

“Do you maybe want to go to a movie on Saturday?” He looked at Theon hopefully, blowing a few strands of hair out of his face.

“Yeah. Sure.”

*And then let’s run away together on Sunday.*

“I don’t know what’s like, playing but –”

“Does it really matter?” Theon put his sunglasses on and reached into his pocket for his cigarettes before thinking better of it.

“I guess not.”

“You got a pen or something? Let me give you my number.”

Jon rifled through his bag and handed Theon a red sharpie and a pad of Post-it notes. Theon scribbled his number down and stuck the paper to Jon’s chest.

“So yeah – just call me whenever and I’ll come pick you up.” He followed Jon’s gaze to his Zagato. “Is that – are you allowed?”

“You’ll have to come in and meet Mr. Aemon,” said Jon. “So like, you know, maybe just look nice or whatever.” His eyes ran Theon up and down. “You look good right now. I mean like, acceptable… maybe an undershirt.”

Theon ran a hand over his chest. “Not a big fan of tattoos?”

Jon swallowed. “No, I like them fine.”

Theon smirked. “I meant Mr. Aemon.”
“Oh. Yeah. Not so much. Um, and try not to swear when you meet him. And maybe, um – maybe try not to smell like an ashtray?”

Theon scoffed and tried not to seem offended. “How should I smell?”

“I dunno. Just like, deodorant or something.”

“You’re kind of high-maintenance aren’t you?” asked Theon, amused when Jon seemed rattled by the remark. “‘Don’t look like a skank.’ ‘Don’t smell like an ashtray.’”

“No, but you –”

Theon laughed. “I got it, okay? I’ll pick you up Saturday in a three-piece suit, smelling like Jesus Christ and roses. It’ll be a totally G-Rated evening.”

“That’s not what I meant,” Jon insisted.

“PG? We can kiss, but no tongue.”

Jon glowered at him.

_Or I’ll just fuck you blind, if that’s what you want._

“Jon,” he laid a hand on Jon’s shoulder, felt the tension there. “I’m kidding. Call me. I want you to call me. I’ll wear an undershirt and I won’t smell like cigarettes and I’ll make Mr. Aemon think that I’m an upstanding young man with no intention of corrupting your character, yeah?”

Jon bit his lip to stop another smile. “Yeah. Okay. I’ll call you.”

As Jon drove away, Theon looked down at his phone and noticed it was at half-battery. He sped home to charge it.

*

“He’s been down here three times looking for you.”

Gendry was reclined on the hood of an old Dodge with his ankles crossed and the funny pages draped over his lap.

Theon’s stomach tightened. “Who has?”

“The oldest one, with the curly hair.”

“Robb,” said Theon, annoyed. “Why do you act like you don’t know his name?”

Gendry looked up, frowned, and went back to the comics. “Because he can’t be fucked to know my name.”

“He should know your name. I talk about you to him.”

Gendry sighed. “You know, if they can’t get a hold of you, they’ll make me drive. And I really don’t want to get in that deep.”

Theon checked his phone. “Says who?”

“Says Poole.” Finished with the paper, Gendry chucked it onto the floor and slid off the hood of
“That won’t happen,” said Theon. “I mean, if he needed me so bad, he would’ve texted. Did he say what he wanted?”

“Nah.” Gendry shook his head, a knowing smile on his lips. “You know that kid is like, completely in love with you, right?”

“He is not.”

“Whatever you say.” Then, almost as an after-thought: “Ned Stark is leaving the North – for a while, I guess. He’s going to the capitol to work out some deal with Rob Baratheon.”

Theon’s jaw dropped. “Wait, what?”

Gendry shrugged, as though it didn’t matter to him one way or the other. “I guess Baratheon needs him to sort some things out.”

“What kind of things? For how long?” Theon felt as though everything had tilted on its side.

“Mob things, I guess,” replied Gendry. “But they never tell me much. I bet that’s why Robb was asking for you; he’s about to be, y’know, the Boss or whatever.” And he couldn’t hide a note of sympathy when he added, “I mean, he seemed kind of freaked out.”

*

Cat was in Robb’s room when Theon opened the door; she sat on the edge of Robb’s bed, and though there was something weary in the way her shoulders stooped, Theon didn’t miss the sharpness in her eyes when Robb rose from his desk chair and pulled him into a tight hug.

“Theon! Jesus Christ, where have you been?”

Theon held his hands out helplessly, never looking away from Cat as though she might go so far as to blow his brains out right there in Robb’s arms.

“Just out.” He pulled away and realized that Robb had been crying; the whites of his eyes were pink and his hair was matted to his temples. He glanced at Cat again, then back at Robb. “Do you wanna talk?”

Robb sniffled and wiped his nose on the back of his hands. “Yeah.” He turned to his mother. “Mom, could I – could I just hang out with Theon for a little while?”

Cat nodded. “Your father leaves at seven tomorrow morning. I’ll see you then.”

“Thanks, Mom.”

“Mrs. Stark?” ventured Theon as she brushed past.

“Theon?” The light from the hallway made Catelyn Stark look strikingly old, as though every line on her face had deepened and settled there forever.

“Um, would it be – should I also be there, when he leaves?”

Her voice softened, but not her eyes. “It would please him.”

She closed the door, and Robb slumped back into his chair, resting his elbows on his knees and
burying his face in his hands.

“Fuck,” he sighed. He looked up at Theon through his fingers. “I’m not ready for this.”

Theon cocked his head. “I still have like, no idea what’s going on. How long is he staying in the capitol?”

Robb puffed up his cheeks and exhaled. “We don’t know. It was his friend, Jon Arryn – you know, he was like family to Dad. He practically raised him and Rob, and he was working for Rob, but he, um, I guess he died a few days ago.”

“So he’s going South for the funeral?”

“No. It’s – Dad said that Rob thinks he was murdered – like, poisoned or something. He said it was an inside job, and he has to go because he’s the only person Rob can trust to get to the bottom of it. So he’s gone for as long as that takes.”

Theon nodded. He knew what Robb wasn’t saying – that the capitol was a dangerous place; Ned Stark might run the North, but in the capitol he was just another criminal; the capitol was politics, in a way that the North wasn’t. Theon sat on the floor with his back leaned against the bedframe. He nudged Robb’s foot with his own.

“You’ll be fine. You’ve still got your mom, right? She knows how things run, and she’ll take care of you.” He looked down at his sneakers. “And you’ve got me.”

Robb smiled. “I thought… I thought maybe you’d ask me to go home.”

It had crossed Theon’s mind, of course.

“Do you think you’ve got what it takes to put a bullet between my eyes if my dad ever turns against the Family?” He asked it with blithe tone, but they both knew it was a serious question.

“No,” answered Robb. “But I want you here with me.” He hesitated before asking, “Is that kind of fucked up? That I’m glad you’re here, even though –”

Theon let his head slam back against the bedframe. “I wish I could just be here because I want to be here.”

“Theon –”

“I just can’t do this forever.”

“Just for a little while then.
Chapter Five

Chapter Summary

Ned departs for the South and things are different, but not the way Theon had hoped.

It was in the first few minutes of Saturday morning that Theon woke with a jolt to the clamor of Flint’s fist banging on his bedroom door. He felt along the nightstand for his phone and squinted at the screen. “Greyjoy! Get the fuck up!”

Theon threw his arm over his eyes and groaned. “What? What the fuck do you possibly want right now?”

“We’ve got an errand. Get dressed.”

He looked at his phone again. “Seriously? Why can’t this wait until eight? It’s fucked up to kill someone before eight a.m.”

“You think I want to be awake right now? Get your shit together and be in the garage in ten.”

The light blinded him momentarily, and as he rifled through the pile of clothes at the bottom of his closet, his eyes started to burn with tears. He didn’t know why; it wasn’t as though he’d expected Ned Stark’s departure would mean the end of his duty to the Family. He pulled on a coat and paused to blink away that stinging feeling. His phone buzzed in his pocket; it was a text from Robb:

“Could Flint BE any more of a dick?”

Theon grinned.

*

The man had just purchased a ticket for the midnight express train to Dorne when he was recognized by one of Ned Stark’s associates. At first, he assumed there was a complication with his luggage, but when the station chief asked him about the sum of money still owed to a mutual acquaintance, the man understood that he would not be boarding this or any other train. The station chief ordered him detained, but with no legal reason to hold him there, it was imperative that Flint and Poole – and Theon – resolve the situation quickly.

Poole said nothing else and sipped his coffee in silence. Flint’s voice came from the seat behind Theon:

“I hope you don’t think that just because Robb Stark is running the House, that makes anything different for you.”

Theon glared into the rearview mirror.

“Are you jealous, Flint?” He wrenched around in his seat, keeping one hand on the wheel. “Does it
make you nervous knowing that he’s my best friend and he tells me everything?”

“Watch the road,” interjected Poole.

Theon sneered at Flint before turning back around. “It must really burn you up that someday I’m going to be running the fucking Iron Islands, and you’re going to die one of Robb Stark’s goons.”

Flint grabbed the back of the driver’s seat and Theon felt Flint’s breath on his neck. “I also hope that whenever your traitor father does decide to turn on the Family, I get to personally end you.”

Theon laughed and tapped the brakes just hard enough to send Flint’s face into the driver’s seat headrest. “The only person with the authority to do that wants my cock up his ass almost as much as you want me dead.”

*Probably shouldn’t’ve said that.*

Poole rubbed at his temples. “Will you two just shut the fuck up? We’re almost there; we’re about to have another person in the car, and this shit is fucking unprofessional.”

Theon snickered.

At the station, Theon stopped smoothly outside one of the utility entrances; he popped the trunk and kept the engine running in neutral, and after Flint and Poole had disappeared inside, he lit up a cigarette. The platform was silent and empty, save for a single security guard who passed in and out of the light as he walked along the tracks. Theon wondered how close the man had been to escaping; he imagined one foot inside the train and the strong arm of a conductor pulling him back, saying “You need to come with me, sir.” He wondered what kind of compensation Ned Stark’s associate would receive for his loyalty.

The door opened, and the light issuing from it was so bright that Theon couldn’t manage a good look at the figure that Poole and Flint dragged between them. He felt the car shift as they threw him in the trunk and slammed it shut.

“Where are we going?” Theon asked.

“We’re going to the house,” replied Poole. “Take the bridge.”

Although he was gagged, the man’s muffled screams filled the car for the first several miles. Theon toyed with the volume of the radio, but it was still only 1.30 in the morning and there was almost nothing on.

The bridge was off a quiet, single-lane road to the east of the city, spanning a narrow gorge along some tributary to the Mander. Theon realized he’d stopped here once before, to take a piss; that was in the middle of the day, and he remembered that the walls of the gorge were a charred black. But in the moonlight, they looked almost silver. He cut the headlights as the car rolled to a standstill alongside the rail, and he wanted to get out, to look down at the river…

Flint and Poole lifted the man out of the trunk and onto the rail. His hands and feet were bound with cord and Flint had to steady him into a seated position there. Theon couldn’t make out much of the man’s face, but when Poole removed the cloth gag, he was startled to hear a voice belonging to someone not much older than himself.

“No, no, listen! I’ve got the money, okay? I just need three more days!” The boy – and he *was* only a boy – looked frantically from Poole to Flint, and then over his shoulder at the hundred-foot drop to the bottom of the gorge. He voice cracked desperately. “Please, guys. Two more. Tell Stark I
can have the money in two days.”

He began to cry quietly as Poole and Flint raised their pistols, and Theon brought his fingers to his ears. It didn’t stop the ringing sound, and when he stepped out of the car to look over the rail, there was no sign of the boy. His stomach lurched and when he heaved, there was nothing. He spat off the bridge, closed his eyes and listened to the sound of the river crashing over the boulders at the bottom.

“Greyjoy, let’s go.”

“How much money did he owe?” Theon asked, once they were back in the warm glow of the city.

“Twenty thousand,” said Poole.

Theon wanted to ask how someone that young could possibly get in that deep, but he didn’t want to hear whatever the answer was.

*

“Dude, get up!”

Theon didn’t remember falling asleep in the car, but when Robb started banging on the windshield, he pulled on the lever and brought his seat upright.

“What time is it?” he asked with a yawn.

“It’s almost seven. You said you’d be there to say goodbye to Dad.”

“Shit.”

They found Arya standing on her tip-toes beside Gendry, holding a glass of orange juice in one hand and a filthy rag in the other, while Gendry brooded over the engine block of a Jeep. Neither of them noticed Theon and Robb standing in the door of the shop.

“Did you fix it?” she asked.

Gendry held out his hand, and she passed him the orange juice.

“I think so. We won’t know until I drive it up a hill.”

“Can I come with you?”

“I think that’s a terrible idea,” said Robb, not noticing the nasty stare Gendry gave him before looking to Theon as if to say, “See? What an asshole.”

Theon rolled his eyes. “We better get going.”

“Aw shit, Ary – you’ve got grease all over your face. Do you have something to wipe this off?” He looked expectantly at Gendry, and Gendry handed him a can of Go-Jo wipes. Robb knelt and rubbed at Arya’s cheek while she grimaced. “What are you doing down here?”

“She was helping me out,” offered Gendry. “Handing me tools.” He raised his glass and took a sip. “Bringing me OJ.”

“That’s sweet of you, sis,” said Robb. “But you shouldn’t bother people while they’re working.”
Arya folded her arms. “What else am I supposed to do around this place?”

“You could learn needle-point,” said Theon. “Or paint your nails.”

Arya stomped her foot. “Fuck you!”

“Arya!” But Robb couldn’t keep a straight face, and Theon and Gendry burst out laughing.

“Did you see them kill someone?” asked Arya as Robb shepherded her into the elevator. “What was it like?”

Theon moaned. “Not you, too.”

“Robb, can I be a hitman when I’m older?”

Robb smiled and ruffled her hair in that way he knew she hated. “No, you cannot be a hitwoman, ever.”

“How come?”

Theon felt anger creeping up his throat. “Because killing is dirty work, and Starks don’t *do* dirty work,” he said sharply and without looking at her.

The elevator opened and Arya hurried out. Robb stopped the door open for Theon with his foot and asked, “What the hell was that about?”

“I – I need to talk to you.”

Robb laid a hand on Theon’s shoulder, and Theon thought about Flint steadying the boy on the rail. Robb smiled, but there was a hint of sadness in his eyes. “After Dad leaves, yeah? First thing.”

*

The worst thing about the belt wasn’t the pain – though it did hurt bad enough to make Theon squirm in his desk at school. It wasn’t even the humiliation of having his bare ass bent over Ned Stark’s knee; it was the moment he realized that it had never been used on any of the Stark children.

And the spankings themselves were nothing compared to his father’s. Ned always waited for his anger to subside before calling Theon into his office, and he told Theon beforehand exactly how many blows he’d be receiving and why, and after it was over he’d kneel and rest his hands on Theon’s shoulders and ask,

“Why did this happen?”

And Theon would tell him whatever he wanted to hear.

At Pyke, it was nothing so formal, and Balon spared none of his children. Even Asha took a licking from time to time, though not as often as Rick and Maron, and anytime either of his brothers got beat, it was sure to trickle down to Theon. So it hadn’t bothered him at first, when Ned laid him across his knee. His eyes welled up at the sting of the leather, and after it was over he felt more relieved than anything.

It had only happened three times – once shortly after his arrival for teaching Robb to swear, once when he was eleven for smoking cigarettes, and once when he was thirteen for deliberately pissing all over a diorama Robb had made for English class.
After the second time, Robb had come to his room, knocking softly before opening the door.

“Theon?”

“What?”

Theon lay on his stomach across his bed and wiped at his eyes when Robb entered the room and sat down on the floor in front of him.

“Dad was pretty mad at you, huh?”

“Yeah. I don’t think I’m gonna be able to sit right for a day.”

Theon didn’t miss the confused squint that crossed Robb’s eyes.

“How come?”

He looked away, buried his face in the crook of his elbow. “Nevermind.”

*

The Family and the entire household lined up along the drive to bid Ned Stark goodbye. A few men waited by the train of town-cars to accompany him to the capitol, and Theon was dismayed to notice Jory among them, smoking a cigarette and studiously avoiding his gaze, as usual.

Bran and Rick were teary-eyed as they bid their father goodbye. Sansa spent the duration of an embrace begging her father to send home a dress from the capitol. Arya jumped up and hugged him around the neck.

“Can I come visit you?” she asked.

Ned smiled. “I hope I’ll be home before you miss me,” he said, cradling her cheek in his hand.

When Ned came to Robb, Theon toyed with the chain hanging from his belt loop. He felt like an intruder, but Ned hardly paid him a glance as he pulled Robb against his chest and held him firmly by the shoulders. Robb opened his mouth to say something, but Ned cut him off:

“I know you’ll do well.”

Ned looked Theon up and down. “You’ve grown so much this past year,” he observed, brushing a few strands of black out of Theon’s eyes. “And you look every bit a Greyjoy.”

Theon looked at his feet, not sure what he meant by that. But it was rude to look away for too long, and when he glanced up again, Ned was smiling at him. And it was a warm, full smile – not the dry, curled things that passed for smiles on the Iron Islands.

Ned cocked his head at Robb. “Do as he says, Theon, and keep him out of trouble.”

Theon blushed. “Yes, sir. Thank you.”

Robb snorted and Theon glared at him.

Cat had remained stoic all morning, but as soon as Ned touched her, tears began to roll down her cheeks and all the Stark children and Theon turned away.

*
Closing Robb’s bedroom door behind him, Theon barely had a chance to shuck his jacket onto the floor before Robb pinned him against the wall and kissed him desperately.

“Whoa.” Theon pushed him away, gasping. “What the fuck, dude?”

Robb’s fists were tight in Theon’s t-shirt, but his smile was shy, still unsure.

“What do you mean, ‘what’?” He bit his lip, eyes flicking hungrily to Theon’s mouth. “Now we can – now you can have me.”

He leaned forward to suck at the spot just below Theon’s left ear, and Theon fought to keep his eyes open. It felt good. It was sloppy and wet and full of teeth, but it felt good enough to make Theon forget his whole shitty morning. He let out a sharp breath when Robb rutted up against his hip, the friction of it making him half-hard.

“Robb, please –” He felt Robb smirk against his skin. “I need to talk to you.”

Robb released his grip on Theon’s shirt and brought his hands down to grapple with Theon’s belt.

“You are talking,” he said gruffly. “I’m trying to make you stop, but words are definitely coming out of your mouth.”

He bit down on Theon’s earlobe and Theon hummed, trying hard to remind himself that he didn’t want this. He put his hands on Robb’s chest, as lightly as he could manage.

“I don’t want to drive anymore,” he said.

Robb stiffened. He took a step back and Theon could see how flushed his face was, how his fingers trembled when he ran them through his curls.

“What?”

Theon looked down helplessly at his own body, feeling a sudden chill at the absence of Robb’s.

“Find something else for me to do. Anything else. I’ll stay here as long as I have to. I just don’t want to drive anymore.”

Robb frowned, and Theon knew that he was angry. But underneath that, Robb was hurt and Theon couldn’t imagine why.

“I can’t do that,” said Robb softly, almost apologetically. “I would but – you know how it would look to them. To my mom, to heads of the other Houses. It would look weak. It would look like I was letting my – our friendship – get in the way. Like you were playing me.”

“But I’m not playing you!” Theon swung his fists back into the wall, cursing himself for thinking this might’ve gone some other way. “I’m just asking you for something. I’ve never asked you for anything!”

Robb’s silence infuriated him. He wanted to break a window, or throw something, or punch Robb in the mouth.

“Did you ever ask my dad to stop driving?” Robb asked finally.

“No.” And Theon knew it was hopeless.

“Why not?”
“Because he would’ve said no.”

“So why are you asking. me?”

Theon rolled his eyes to stop them from watering, but he couldn’t control the way his voice quavered. “Because I thought we were friends.”

“Goddamnit, Theon. We are friends! But you have to know that doesn’t mean I can just change all the rules for you!” He reached out for Theon’s shoulder, but Theon shifted away.

“Don’t fucking touch me.”

Robb looked as though he’d been slapped. He tried again and Theon batted his arm away violently.

“I’m fucking serious. Do not. fucking. touch. me. I swear to God, Robb, if you were anyone else –” Theon felt his vision beginning to tunnel. “You’re always going on about how things are going to be different, but they’re not. Everything is still exactly the same, except instead of your dad, now it’s you who’s going to tell me what my life is.” He gave Robb a light shove. “I’ll tell you what my life is – it’s fucking bullshit, and sometimes I’d rather fucking kill myself than wait around for one of you to do it.”

“Theon, don’t be an asshole. Don’t say shit like that.”

And for half a second, Theon wanted to cave. He wanted to pull Robb into him and go on kissing and just forget the whole thing.

He would hold you. You wouldn’t even have to ask.

But instead he just stood there, shaking.

“Go to hell, Stark.”

He didn’t look behind him as he slammed the door and tore down the hall. In his own room, he flopped down onto his bed and waited for his head to stop pounding. He listened, hoping for Robb’s footsteps outside his door so he could either tell him to fuck off or let him in – he wasn’t sure. But he heard nothing.

The sky outside was overcast, and Theon had no sense of how long he lay there, listening and wishing that Ned Stark hadn’t left. He was almost asleep when his phone rang.

He’d been so overwhelmed – with the boy on the bridge, with Ned’s departure, with Robb – that he’d forgotten all about Jon and he felt a sudden relief as he remembered that there was something in his life that Robb Stark didn’t have any say in.

“We still on for this evening? World War Z is showing at 4.”

* 

“You look like shit.”

Jon’s hair was still damp when he answered the door wearing ripped black skinny jeans and an old Ministry t-shirt. Theon frowned.

“This is literally the nicest shirt I own. And I bought new pants on the way here.”

Jon grinned and shook his head. “Your clothes look um, great. I just meant that you look like
you’ve had a shitty day.”

“Yeah, I guess I have.” It flattered him, knowing that Jon was reading his face so carefully. “If you let me cop a feel out of pity, I won’t be offended.”

“Jon, is this your friend?”

Theon cleared his throat when Mr. Aemon appeared in the doorway. Mr. Aemon squinted at Theon, and if he remembered him as the boy who dropped off Jon’s Camaro, he didn’t say so.

“Theon.” He offered his hand, but instead of shaking it, examined the tattoos across his knuckles.

“What of the islands are you from?”

He replied that he was from Blacktyde, that his last name was Grey and he had moved to the mainland to study marine biology at the University. As they walked to the car, Jon gaped at him and stopped just short of the curb.

“You want me to open the door for you or something?”

“Was any of that stuff true?” Jon asked with a trace of scorn in his voice.

“Um, no.”

Jon stared at him. “I’m not going anywhere with you until you tell me your real name. And where you’re from. And why you lied. And how you can afford this car.”

Theon sighed and ran a hand through his hair. His phone vibrated.

“Text from Robb.”

He bit his lip and opened it:

“I’m sorry.”

Jon waited for an answer, arms folded across his chest and his eyebrow raised.

“Fuck.” Theon groaned. “My real name is Greyjoy. I’m from Pyke, not Blacktyde. I lied to Mr. Aemon because I figured that if he wouldn’t like me smoking, he definitely wouldn’t like the fact that my dad controls the entire West Coast drug trade. I can afford this car because it’s how my extremely rich foster family compensates for not actually loving me one fucking ounce.”

Jon seemed to consider this for a moment before opening the door and getting in the car. Theon was embarrassed to realize that he was ankle-deep in RedBull cans.

“You wanna pick some music?” he asked, handing Jon his iPod.

Jon’s eyes were a mixture of awe and apprehension. “Is your dad really like, a kingpin or whatever?”

Theon nodded and put the car into gear.

“And you’re not – you’re not a part of that? At all?”

“Nope.”
“Good.”

*

By the time they arrived at the theater, his phone had gone off three more times, each with a message from Robb:

“Where are you right now?”
“Are you with someone?”
“Please answer me.”

“Jesus, someone’s popular,” said Jon, leaned over the concessions counter to point at the specific pretzel that he wanted.

“No. It’s all the same person.” Theon handed his debit card to the cashier, over Jon’s objections.

“You know, Mr. Aemon gave me some money for snacks. You didn’t have to –”

“I wanted to,” said Theon. Then quieter, “I don’t like owing people things.”

Jon shrugged. “Whatever. If you wanna spoil me, I guess I can’t stop you.” He smiled around the straw of his soda, and Theon felt that aching in his chest again.

Going to the movies still made Theon think of Asha, even though he only really had one memory of going to the multiplex on Pyke, and even though he couldn’t count how many movies he and Robb had been to since then.

As soon as they had their tickets torn, Rick and Maron ducked into the theater showing Men In Black II. Asha was a few steps behind them when she turned and looked at Theon, standing in the center of the corridor and clutching his stub for Scooby Doo.

“Asha!” Rick had hissed. “Come on!”

Theon remembered the way she hesitated, holding the door to the theater for a moment before rolling her eyes and letting it swing shut.

“You can go,” Theon said. “I wouldn’t wanna see Scooby Doo if I was you.”

“What movie do you wanna see?”

Theon glanced at the promo poster for xXx, then at Asha. She must’ve been almost thirteen – skinny and serious, with her hair cropped short under a baseball cap.

“Um, I wanna see Triple X,” he said. “But I’m not big enough.”

Asha grabbed him by the hand – hers were always so cold – and pulled him into the darkness of the theater. He couldn’t remember much about the movie, but he remembered that she’d smuggled two cans of Dr. Pepper and a king size bag of M&Ms in her Jncos.

*

His phone went off again about ten minutes into the film, and when he pressed “Read,” he felt Jon lean into him and whisper, “Could you please just turn that off?”

The movie was trash, but Theon spent most of its two-hour length sneaking irritated glances at Jon. As soon as the previews ended, he started up with the goddamn rubber bands, and Theon thought
he was going to lose his shit. Exasperated, he reached out a hand to cover Jon’s wrist, and he felt Jon tense for a moment before twisting his hand loose just enough to twine his fingers with Theon’s.

After that, Theon didn’t much mind what was happening in the film. He turned to look at Jon, and Jon kept his eyes straight ahead while a little smile stole across his lips. Jon’s hand was still chilly, but it didn’t stop Theon’s palm from sweating and he fought the urge to wipe it across his thigh, afraid that if he broke contact Jon might pull his hand out of reach.

* 

“So what did you think?”

Theon shrugged as he started the car. The sun had set and the parking lot had faded to a cold blue.

“It was whatever.”

“Yeah, it was pretty bad.” Jon laughed, almost embarrassed.

“So why did you pick it?”

The lights started to fly by in a stream as Theon accelerated onto the freeway and Jon put a hand on the dashboard.

“I don’t know. I guess I didn’t know what kind of movies you liked and I figured that a zombie movie was the least um, like a date.” Theon raised an eyebrow. “I mean, just in case it wasn’t a date.”

Theon upshifted and then moved his hand from the stick to give a light squeeze on Jon’s thigh.

“You’re kind of difficult, you know?”

“What do you mean?”

“I mean, you’re just very – you still don’t really trust me.”

“No, not really.” Jon stared down at Theon’s hand. “But I’m in your car with your hand on my leg so I must really want to trust you.”

It was dark by the time the Zagato rolled up to St. Brigid’s Home for Boys, and they’d spent the past several minutes in silence as Theon tried to piece together a goodnight.

“Well, I’m guessing you –”

“I still don’t have to be home for another five minutes,” said Jon, looking at his watch.

Theon held Jon’s jaw between his thumb and forefinger, pulled back just enough to breathe “Relax,” before pushing Jon gently against the seat, reaching down to undo the seatbelt for him. Jon swallowed, audibly.

Theon closed his eyes. He focused on the heat of Jon’s mouth, the taste of candy and salt and the almost modest little whine he gave, the coolness of Jon’s hands slipping up under his jacket and
along his sides –

“Don’t.”

Too late, Theon tried to push Jon’s hands away, but Jon’s dark eyes were already wide with alarm and curiosity as he hooked his fingers over the strap of Theon’s holster and gave a tug.

“What the fuck…”

Theon sighed and fell back into the driver’s seat. He clutched at his gun through the fabric of his shirt, and for the first time wished it wasn’t there. Assuming he’d blown his chance, he waited for the sound of Jon’s door opening. Instead, he felt cool fingers gripping the hair at the nape of his neck.

“Are you ever gonna tell me the truth about anything?”

“Truth is that I like you enough to say almost anything.”

Without warning, Jon climbed over the center console and into his lap, hardly missing a beat as he reached down to recline the driver’s seat as far as it would go. He cast a nervous glance at the house before his lips were on Theon’s neck, one hand braced against the door while the other slipped up under Theon’s shirt, over his ribs, until it settled again on the pistol. Theon tried not to move – the pressure of Jon’s ass against his crotch was unbearable in light of Jon’s imminent curfew, and while Jon might be loudly sucking a mark onto Theon’s throat, he was a good boy, after all, and he would never make Mr. Aemon worry and Theon couldn’t understand how that somehow made the whole thing even more arousing.

“I want you to take me shooting,” said Jon. He placed a maddeningly chaste kiss at the corner of Theon’s mouth. “Next time we go out.”

“This is really not fucking fair,” choked Theon, his fingers digging into Jon’s thighs.

Jon smirked and again checked his watch. “I have to go,” he said earnestly.

Don’t go, Theon wanted to say. Please.

“Will you teach me to shoot?”

Theon nodded helplessly. “Yeah. Okay.”

Just keep touching me.

Jon grinned and kissed him one last time before he exited the car through the driver’s side door. Theon righted his seat and watched Jon stall outside the house to straighten his shirt and take a deep breath, unable to resist a final glance at Theon before he went inside.

*

The Stark mansion was strangely quiet when Theon arrived home; even Gendry’s shop was silent and dark.

He passed Robb’s bedroom on the way to the shower, the blue light of the TV flickering from beneath the door. He thought about knocking, but his blood was still running high from kissing Jon, and he didn’t want Robb thinking that everything was back to normal, whatever normal even meant between them.
Once he’d taken off his shirt, Theon stood in front of the mirror, looking at his holster and prodding at the purple mark Jon had left on his throat. The water was almost too hot when he stepped into the shower, and he groaned as the heat seeped all the way to the bone. He emptied the last of the conditioner into his palm and wrapped his fingers around his cock, leaning back against the cool tile and imagining an alternate evening in which Jon didn’t care if he was a few minutes late and wasn’t above letting Theon fuck him right there in the car in front of the group home. He imagined that soft, serious mouth around him, that wild, black hair between his thighs.

Theon brought his left hand up to drag his nails across his chest. His head fell back against the wall, his eyes just drifting closed when the shower curtain was suddenly torn open and there stood Robb Stark, regarding Theon with something bordering on wonder. He was naked, his face and chest already flushed with the heat of the steam filling the room.

“Don’t stop,” he said, eyes trailing down to Theon’s erection and then back up to his face.

“Get the fuck out of here.” Theon resisted the impulse to cover his crotch with his hands. He turned off the water and folded his arms, watching in disbelief as Robb ignored him and stepped into the shower, pulling the curtain closed behind him. “Seriously, I don’t know what the fuck you think you’re doing, but get out.”

Robb reached around Theon and turned the water back on; it was nearly scalding, but Theon forced himself to endure it, unmoving.

“You didn’t text me back,” said Robb, genuinely hurt. He pursed his lips and drew his fingertips over Theon’s tattoo – the pirate ship that covered the left half of his chest. “I was worried.” His touch moved up along Theon’s neck and lingered on the bruise there. Robb’s gaze darkened. “Who is it?” he asked.

Theon grabbed Robb’s wrist and held it. “Nobody.”

“Was it the guy who works on the cars?”

Theon snorted. “Gendry? No. It was nobody you know.”

Just your brother.

He was used to Robb being horny and desperate, but something about Robb being jealous made Theon uneasy. His brain told him to leave, just get out of the shower and lock himself in his room. He didn’t want this, whatever it was. But when the space between them disappeared, Robb’s chest was hard and slick against him, and Robb’s free hand was between his legs, the touch oddly tentative despite its brashness.

“You know I’d – I’d do anything you wanted, right?” Robb’s eyes were searching him, and Theon understood that what he meant was, “Why not me?”

“Yeah, anything except let me stop driving. Anything except let me go home.” Theon gasped when Robb sank his teeth into the flesh of his shoulder and he dropped his hold on Robb’s wrist. “You just keep on fucking texting me like a little fucking girl.” He reached out to steady himself. “Can’t take a fucking hint.”

Robb pulled back to fix him with a glare, and Theon immediately regretted his words. The hurt in Robb’s eyes turned to something hard and heavy.

“I want you to fuck me, Greyjoy, or I’ll say that you did.”
He leaned in once more to lay a line of kisses along the muscles of Theon’s neck.

“What?” Theon felt dizzy.

Robb nipped at Theon’s ear. “Fuck me, or I’ll tell my mom that you fucked me.”

“Robb –”

“Hhhmmm?” Robb hummed against Theon’s throat, held him against the wall of the shower.

“It doesn’t have to be me. You could have anyone else. Anyone you wanted.”

Robb had to stretch to press his forehead to Theon’s, and for a moment the world was eclipsed by a pair of bright blue irises, wire-thin around gaping black pupils. Robb frowned, as though it offended him that Theon thought he’d offer himself up to just anyone.

“I only want you.”

The kiss was gentle at first, and Theon was ashamed of the tiny sound he made. Robb grinned and gave a sharp tug on Theon’s hair, pushed his tongue into Theon’s mouth. Theon felt as though he was suffocating – from the heat of the water, from the crush of Robb’s lips, from the back-and-forth of his brain, reminding him of Jon, reminding him of what this really was, and yet – when Robb sank to his knees to take Theon into his mouth – praying that it didn’t stop.

And it wasn’t even that great - Robb was clearly out of his depth here - but when Theon looked down and saw those eager eyes looking back at him, there was no denying that he wanted this, had always wanted this and might as well make the most of Robb's eagerness. Theon pulled back on Robb’s curls, brought the boy roughly to his feet and ripped the shower curtain open. He didn’t bother turning off the water as he hauled Robb out of the shower and kissed him breathless before spinning him around and pinning him up against the sink, wrapping an arm around Robb’s chest to hold him by the throat, moaning softly when his cock pressed against the cleft of Robb’s ass.

Robb gazed at his reflection in the mirror; his eyelashes fluttered as Theon bit down on the back of his neck.

“Fuck.”

Theon gripped Robb’s left shoulder and bent him forward so forcefully that Robb had to fight for a hold on the marble counter-top to keep his face from smashing into the faucet. Theon spit into his palm, slicked it over the head of his cock as Robb twisted to look at him.

“Wait, aren’t you going to –”

It took all Robb’s strength not to scream – Theon could tell by the way his knuckles went white and by the way he held his breath for nearly a minute. And God, all that tension felt fucking incredible. Theon slid his right hand over Robb’s hip, held him in place as he withdrew almost completely before burying himself again, drawing a choked sob from Robb’s throat.

“Theon, please –”

He tangled his fingers in Robb’s hair and yanked back on it violently, pulling Robb’s face up to the mirror and locking eyes with his reflection. He leaned forward until his lips brushed Robb’s ear.

“Isn’t this what you wanted?” he asked through clenched teeth, punctuating the question with another deep thrust.
Robb bit his lip and nodded, despite the tears cascading down his cheeks.

It lasted less than a minute. Theon came without a sound, his mouth open and eyes shut tight as he spilled into Robb and then stayed there, frozen for a moment as Robb finally broke down, shoulders trembling as he cried and clutched at the edges of the sink to keep himself upright. Theon hesitated before pulling out, wondering if it would be wrong to kiss Robb now, or to say something. Instead, he quickly wrapped a towel around his waist and left. He stopped outside the door and listened until he heard Robb step back into the shower and close the curtain, even though the water must’ve long since gone cold.

* 

The morning after he arrived in Winterfell, Theon came down for breakfast to find a boy with auburn hair and big blue eyes gorging himself on a stack of pancakes and willfully ignoring his sister as she squealed at him from her high-chair.

Theon eyed the pancakes, suddenly ravenous but unsure of whether he was allowed to eat. The boy with blue eyes looked up at him and licked the syrup off his lips before asking, “Who are you? Are you the Iron Boy?”

Theon nodded, resolved to be cold and distant, like a true Islander. Like his father. “Yes. My name is Theon Greyjoy, son of Balon Greyjoy, heir to Pyke and –”

“I’m Robb,” said Robb, offering up a sticky hand.

Theon stared doubtfully at Robb’s little hand, then at the pile of pancakes. His stomach gurgled.

“You must be hungry!” Robb hopped off his chair to find a plate and fork for Theon. “Have some of these pancakes. Our cook makes them the best.”

He prepared to act as though the pancakes he ate at Pyke were superior, to pretend as though he was barely managing to swallow this… this greenlander filth, but when he bit down into the warm, fluffy cake, he closed his eyes and hummed at its sweetness. When he opened them again, Robb had a big, sunny grin on his face, and Theon was powerless.
Chapter Six

Chapter Summary

Theon feels lonely, Roose knows why and Jon knows lots of things.

Chapter Notes

Vinylacetat requested a mix for this fic, but truth be told it's still coming along and is surprisingly poppy. So instead, here's my go-to Reek's Mix.

I hope y'all trust me when I saw that this fic does have a very definite destination.

A part of him hoped it was a dream, but when Robb didn’t come down for breakfast and then took his lunch in the study, Theon knew that he had –

His mind recoiled from putting too fine a label on whatever it was he had done.

What he wanted you to do, he insisted weakly, shutting his eyes to blot out the image of Robb’s hands trembling as they gripped the edge of the sink.

As the day wore on, he tried to plan what he ought to say to Robb, and his thoughts bounced wildly from guilty apologies to defensive rationalizations to flip dismissals and he found himself muttering them aloud. Occasionally, he thought about Jon and the cloud of guilt grew to encompass Robb and his brother; it made Theon feel ill, for reasons he struggled to avoid. He’d done nothing to Jon, but he knew that Jon would be hurt if ever found out that Theon had –

What, cheated?

He was unused to the implications of the word.

In the afternoon, Theon glimpsed Robb walking toward the elevator with a definite, pained hitch his gait. He thought about hurrying to catch up but stopped mid-stride when a quiet voice asked,

“I don’t suppose you had anything to do with that?”

Theon spun with a start, and he couldn’t be sure if Roose Bolton actually looked entertained, or if it was only a projection of his own tasteless amusement.

“To do with what?” he asked, as though he hadn’t noticed anything amiss.

Roose raised an eyebrow. “I just met with him for an hour, and his discomfort was apparent. I don’t think he sat still for more than a minute.”

Theon looked at his feet.

“Have you met my bastard?” asked Roose. He began to walk down the hall, summoning Theon
with a glance to follow.

“Ramsay?” Theon almost said, before replying more wisely: “No, I haven’t.”

Roose pressed the downward arrow and fixed Theon with a stare that was at once critical and terribly indifferent.

“He would enjoy you. You’d do well to avoid him.”

“I heard he’s –” Theon hesitated. “I heard he’s like, very good at his job.”

The elevator chimed as it arrived, and Roose held the door open with long, steely fingers.

“That’s very tactful of you, Master Greyjoy.”

Theon stepped into the elevator, looking at Roose and then at his own burnished reflection in the steel of the wall. “Why do you call me that? Nobody else calls me that.”

“Do you dislike it?”

“No,” he admitted.

“I didn’t think so.” Roose directed the elevator to the Ground Floor, and waited until it began its descent to continue. “I told Ned Stark once that you were welcome at the Dreadfort, seeing as he already had three children to look after and I had only my son. I was disappointed when he declined, but in hindsight, it was clearly for the best – Ramsay would’ve grown too attached to let you return home.”

Theon did his best to appear unfazed by this information, though he wondered why Ned had never thought it worth mentioning, and why Bolton had decided to bring it up at all.

“The Stark boy is obviously fond of you.” Roose observed Theon’s face closely. “I mentioned your name and he blushed, even as he tried to conceal his pain.”

Theon tried to quash the heat rising in his face. It offended him to hear his friend talked about so indelicately. And underneath that, it turned him on to imagine Roose Bolton toying with Robb, causing him to shift uncomfortably in his father’s chair and go red remembering the way he’d gasped when Theon spent inside him…

“I don’t know what you mean,” he mumbled. “I would never hurt Robb.”

The elevator lurched to a stop, but Theon’s stomach seemed to keep dropping. Roose exited into the foyer with that eerie, barely-there smile on his lips.

“Of course not,” he said.

The doors glided closed between them, and Theon was left standing alone in the elevator, not quite understanding how he got there.

*

He didn’t see Robb again for a week, and although he nearly convinced himself he didn’t care – for he often went a week or two without seeing Ned – he was overpowered by how quiet his world was without Robb’s voice, how dim the days felt without a single laugh or smile from his friend.

Slowing his pace outside Robb’s office, Theon heard Cat’s voice, laden with worry:
“You’ve been avoiding me.”

“I’ve been busy,” replied Robb, plainly tired. Theon heard the sound of papers shuffling, a chair sliding against the floor.

“You’ve been avoiding everyone,” she said. “Even Theon.”

“I have not been avoiding him.” Robb must’ve sensed the anxiety in his tone, because he sighed heavily before adding, “Or you. Or anyone. I’m just really stressed out right now, okay?”

“Did you meet with Roose Bolton this week?”

“Mom, please don’t act like I can’t –”

Theon hurried away.

*

The car in the shop was old, a plain sedan that Theon didn’t remember driving. Gendry sat in the back seat with a beer in one hand and his feet up on the headrest.

“Now look for the ignition wire – it’s probably brown.”

Theon was dismayed to find Arya crouched down in the driver’s seat, so focused on the wires in the steering column that she didn’t bother looking up at him. He’d been hoping to talk with Gendry, though knowing that he couldn’t tell the truth, he had no idea what exactly he’d hoped to say.

“Hey,” said Gendry. He slid out of the car and cracked his neck. “You want a beer?”

Theon’s shoulders fell slightly. “Yeah, sure.”

“Go for it.” Gendry nodded toward a small, red cooler on his workbench and turned his attention back to Arya.

The can was barely cold but Theon opened it anyway.

“So, you’re letting Arya mess with my life and livelihood, huh?”

“This car is mine.” Gendry shrugged. “It’s just a junker that I fuck around on sometimes.”

“Gendry’s teaching me how to hotwire!” Arya exclaimed.

Theon rolled his eyes. “Robb’s gonna love that,” he said, sipping at his beer.

“Whatever,” replied Gendry, softly enough that Arya wouldn’t hear. “It’s not like he’ll notice it, probably. Besides, she’s cool.”

“I thought you thought they were all batshit.”

Gendry grinned impishly and whispered, “They are all batshit. But she brings me orange juice.”

Theon smiled and shook his head. “I was hoping to catch you alone. I’ve been wanting to tell you about all the shit that’s been happening to me lately.”

Gendry leaned closer.
“And I wanted to tell you about this dude that I’m, um –”

“What do I do now?” called Arya.

“Did you find the ignition wire?” Gendry crushed his empty can against the workbench and tossed it into an overflowing trash barrel.

“Yeah.”

“Did you strip it?”

Arya’s head popped out of the car. “Yes, I stripped it,” she said impatiently.

“Then touch it together with the red ones.” He turned back to Theon and opened his mouth to speak, but she interrupted again:

“Could you like, watch for two seconds?” she demanded. “You know, in case I fucking electrocute myself?”

“Where did you pick up this language?”

Arya rolled her eyes and sneered at Theon. “Well, if my mom asks, I’ll just say I picked it up from you.”

“Okay, we’re watching. Jesus Christ.”

Gendry ambled back to the car and leaned against the frame. Arya clasped the two wires, her face set into a focused frown as she delicately tapped them together and the car spluttered to life. The ignition sounded almost anemic, but she smiled broadly and high-fived Gendry before fixing Theon with a haughty glare.

“Bravo,” said Theon flatly.

Gendry ducked into the car and killed the engine. Turning back to Theon, he asked, “So, what was it you wanted to tell me about this guy?”

He and Arya both looked at Theon expectantly, brown and blue eyes waiting for something funny and nasty to come out of his mouth.

“Um, well, I just – it’s nothing in particular. I mean, he’s –” Theon rubbed at the back of his neck. Adorable. Awesome. Fucking gorgeous.

“Nevermind.”

Gendry looked startled. “What, aren’t you going to describe in extremely graphic detail how this guy like, blew you and got cum in his hair, or can only get off by wearing a dog collar and barking or some shit like that?”

Theon feigned a chuckle and shook his head. “Nah. It’s not that interesting, really. I don’t know why I even brought it up.”

“Lame,” scoffed Arya.

“Most lame,” agreed Gendry.
“Fine.” Arya stood and wiped her hands on her thighs. “I didn’t want to hear you talk about boys anyway.” Gendry hid his smile behind a new beer can, and she continued with a sly tone. “Hey Theon – now that my dad’s not around, will you teach me to shoot a gun?”

“Is that all we are to you?” asked Gendry, placing a hand over his heart in a maudlin gesture. “Please?”

Theon sighed; it wasn’t as though he had anything else to pass the time, and even though Robb wasn’t speaking to him, he was pretty sure Robb wouldn’t really care… And besides, it wouldn’t hurt to practice teaching someone the basics again.

“I’ll let you fuck around with the bow-and-arrow,” he conceded. “If you can land ten shots with that, I’ll teach you how to hold a pistol, yeah?”

Arya ran off toward the armory and Theon clapped Gendry on the shoulder, leaning in to say, “Be careful getting close to them.”

*

The first time Theon forgot that he was a hostage, he was ten years old. It had been raining all day, and the sky outside was black and heavy; he and Robb were building a blanket fort in the TV room when the power went out. Robb shrieked and pulled Theon into him hard enough to collapse the entire thing, and Theon was furious, but Robb laughed and held onto him, so tightly that he could feel Robb’s heart racing.

*

Jon insisted on driving.

“I mean, I’ve got this fancy car, and this, um –” He motioned at Theon.

“Hottie? Sex god? Totally bangable older gentleman?”

Jon scowled. “– This totally disgusting lech.” The corners of his mouth turned up slightly. “So I guess I should show them off, right?”

“Yeah, but like, can’t I drive? That way you can enjoy the ride.”

“But then it looks like it’s your car and I’m your –”

Theon quirked an eyebrow and watched Jon flounder for a moment. “You’re my what?”

After five more minutes of arguing, Theon capitulated and sank sulkily into the passenger’s seat of the Camaro. After a few miles, during which Jon asked him three times to please stop fidgeting with the door-locks, Theon grudgingly admitted to himself that Jon was a competent – if exasperatingly conservative – driver. The boy wore black, as usual. He had on a shitty pair of Ray-Bans, and when he rolled down the window, his hair whipped around into a wild, tangled mess.

“What?” he asked, smiling.

“What?” echoed Theon, glancing away.

“You were staring at me.”

“Sorry.”
Theon gazed out the window. Slowly, the high, irregular spines of the city skyline diminished into the neat little rows of suburbia.

*I had sex with someone,* a little voice wanted to blurt. *I didn’t mean to.*

*But I wanted to.*

“Do you?”

Theon turned back to Jon, dazed.

“Do I what?”

“But you remember very much about Pyke?” repeated Jon. He placed his hand on the black leather of the bench seat, and Theon noticed he’d painted his nails a dark, iridescent purple.

“Not really,” said Theon quietly, weaving his fingers loosely with Jon’s as he was sure it was what Jon intended. “I mean, I could tell you what it looks like – sort of – but I don’t have a ton of actual memories of it. There’s like, bits and pieces, but I couldn’t tell you what road leads to my house. Or the name of the school I went to. But I remember that I used to know all that. I remember remembering, if that makes sense.”

Jon nodded. “Do you think you’re gonna go back there ever?”

“Yeah. Someday.”

“You know, the other guys at home like to talk about their families. Or what they’re gonna do when they turn eighteen, where they’re gonna go. But I have no idea.” He paused before adding, “I’m fucking terrified.”

Theon was struck by the bluntness of the words, and he squeezed Jon’s hand. “Those guys are just fronting. I bet they’re lying awake at night, scared shitless.”

Jon sighed. “I know. It’s just – it’s kind of a fishbowl sometimes.”

“What do you wanna do when you leave?”

“I dunno.” Jon bit his lip. “I mean, I know it’s like, crazy and I’m not actually asking or anything, but maybe – you know, if nothing works out – maybe I could come stay with you?”

Theon felt a little lightheaded at the thought.

*The shooting range was busy when Jon slid into a parking space near the back of the lot, and Theon had sprinted up to the kiosk to reserve one of a couple remaining lanes. It was an outdoor range and the weather was unusually warm; Theon paused to feel the sun against his cheeks and to inhale the smell of the pines that lined the backstop behind the targets.*

“So living in a boys’ home…”

Jon looked up from the clip he was loading and raised an eyebrow. “What about it?”

“I mean, you *like* boys, yeah?”

“Yeah, I guess. So?”
Theon shrugged and struggled to keep a straight face. “So like, if I was you I’d pretty much be boning like, everyone there.”

Jon rolled his eyes. “Well, it’s a good thing you’re not me then.”

Theon laughed, then leaned forward and asked in a low, licentious voice, “Seriously though, you’ve never like, messed around with any of the other guys?”

Jon handed the clip to Theon, his face settling into a frown as he watched Theon slide it into the pistol and double-check the safety. Theon pretended not to notice and waited patiently for an answer as Jon gave a single, hard snap on the rubber band around his wrist.

“Theon, open your mouth to ask for details, Jon added, “That’s all I’m going to say about it. It didn’t – it didn’t mean anything.”

And Theon could tell that it was still a sore memory, and that Jon had to be told that it didn’t mean anything. He moved to stand shoulder-to-shoulder with Jon and held the pistol between them. It was a Glock – nothing showy – and Theon paused for a second to enjoy the familiar feel of it. It had been a birthday gift to himself, one that Ned had hesitantly approved.

“So – obviously – never point it at yourself or anyone. Even when you don’t think it’s loaded.” He ignored the disdainful look on Jon’s face and continued. “This is the safety switch. On. Off. When you’re ready to fire, you’re going to pull back on the slide, and that will chamber the first round. It’s a light gun, but the kick isn’t awful. It helps to stand with your left foot forward, and don’t lock your elbows. Your left hand should be like this.” He pointed the pistol downrange and wrapped his left-hand fingers loosely around his right, then lay the pistol down on the bench. “Any questions?”

Jon pulled his earmuffs on, pausing to disentangle them from his hair. “Yeah, aren’t you going to like, use this as an opportunity to stand uncomfortably close and put your arms around me?”

Theon was horrified by the feeling of a full-on blush suffusing his cheeks. “Um, only if you want.”

Jon smirked as he turned and walked onto the range, and Theon wondered how such a complete goddamned virgin could lay him bare like that.

The targets he’d picked up at the store were life-sized zombie illustrations, and Theon’s mouth dropped open as Jon emptied the clip straight into the head, the shots clustered so tightly that the entire face tore away.

“Jesus Christ.”

Jon smiled almost sheepishly as he ejected the clip into his hand. He blew a few strands of hair out of his face. “That was pretty good, huh?”

“That was, um – how did you –” Theon stammered. “You asked me to teach you to shoot…?”

“Yeah. And you did.”

Theon was verging on angry. He’d assumed Jon would need, well, instruction and now he felt acutely embarrassed and convinced that Jon was mocking him.

“What the fuck game are you playing with me right now?”

Jon frowned and narrowed his eyes in confusion. “What do you mean?”
Theon pointed rigidly at the target. “I mean where the fuck did you learn to do that, and why the fuck did you ask me to bring you out here, acting like you’d never fired a gun before in your life when you’ve clearly –”

“I have never fired a gun in my life,” interrupted Jon. “Just, you know, BB guns and airsoft guns and one time I got to go paintballing on my birthday.”

Theon wavered. “They let you have a BB gun at the group home?”

He’d been so nonplussed that he didn’t notice Jon had already reloaded the clip, and now held the Glock out to him and said softly, “It was a privilege I earned. That’s all. I never shot a real gun though. I thought it would be fun.”

Without a word, Theon slid his earmuffs back up and walked out onto the range to unload into the center mass of the target. The confirmation of his own slightly superior accuracy calmed him, and when he returned to the shelter, he smiled, to Jon’s obvious relief.

“I’m sorry,” they said in unison, and both began laughing.

“You’re really good,” Theon admitted, feeling on top again when he saw the way Jon flushed and looked at his toes. “I just – I really wasn’t expecting it and I just felt kind of dumb.”

“Why?” Jon looked at Theon, then at the target. “You’re really good, too.”

Theon rubbed at the back of his neck. “I just wanted to impress you, I guess.”

Jon cocked his head, amused. “I’m sure you’ll think of some other way to impress me,” he said, pushing his hair behind his ear.

Before he had time to think, Theon had grabbed Jon by the front of his shirt and pulled him into a hard kiss. Jon let out a small gasp and then closed his eyes; the pistol hung in his grip, forgotten as Theon bit and sucked at his bottom lip, one hand wrapped around the back of Jon’s neck, the other pressed against his chest. Jon’s mouth was so soft, and it made Theon ache.

He pushed Jon’s back up against one of the concrete columns of the shelter, and when Theon pulled away to catch his breath, Jon’s cheeks were a deep red.

“Can we go soon?” Jon tugged at Theon’s t-shirt, staring glassy-eyed at the Jolly Roger that peeked out on the skin beneath the collar.

Theon grasped Jon’s jaw in his left hand and tilted it up to expose the length of Jon’s pale throat, grinning at the way Jon’s eyelashes fluttered before leaning in to lick a slow stripe from his Adam’s apple to his ear. He felt Jon’s hips jerk forward, felt himself going hard from the pressure –

“You faggots need to start shooting or get off the goddamned lane.”

Theon wiped his mouth on the back of his hand and turned his head to fix the speaker with the kind of indolent smirk reserved especially for anyone who flung that particular word at him.

There were two of them – a man and a boy a little older than Jon – standing on the walkway behind the shelter, waiting for the lane to open up. The boy looked at Theon and then glanced away quickly. The man who’d spoken – clearly the boy’s father – had his arms folded across his broad chest and made no effort to disguise the repulsion on his square, sun-reddened face.
Situations like this one amused Theon, who couldn’t even recall the first time he’d been called a fag, undoubtedly by Rick or Ron. By the time he was old enough to realize what it actually meant, he’d also realized that it was actually true.

He had half a mind to just carry on kissing Jon and leave them there gaping, and he’d opened his mouth to say something about the fact that he’d paid for the lane for the next twenty minutes and if he wanted to spend that time with his tongue down Jon’s throat then they were welcome to stay and watch, but before he could begin, Jon had pulled away from him and gracefully brought the pistol up to point it surely at the man who had uttered the slur.

Theon felt dizzy all of a sudden.

“The fuck did you just say?” asked Jon, so calmly that it almost sounded like an honest question.

The boy instinctively grabbed the sleeve of his father’s shirt.

“Dad –”

It was like a spell, the way the man’s entire demeanor changed. He put an arm out to push his son behind him and held the other hand out towards Jon. About eight feet separated the man’s heart from the barrel of the gun, and Theon tried frantically to remember if it was loaded. He didn’t think so, but he wouldn’t have bet his life on it.

“What are you, fucking crazy?” he breathed.

“Jesus, son, I’m – I didn’t mean anything by it.” The man’s voice was gentle, straining to remain even.

“Well then why did you say it?”

Everything came to an abrupt stop, and Theon felt something strange happening as he looked at the Glock – so steady in Jon’s hands – and the man whose eyes were dazed by the absurdity of the escalation: in his mind’s eye, he saw the faces of the thirteen men whose executions he’d been party to, saw his own face as he watched and then looked away.

“Jon –” he managed weakly.

“I just wanted to bring my son out to the range today. I – I’m sorry. I shouldn’t have said it.”

“You had no right to say it.”

“Jon, put the gun down.” Theon’s head was pounding. “Jesus Christ, Jon, please.”

Jon remained still as a statue, until Theon’s words found their mark. He finally lowered the pistol and passed it unblinkingly to Theon, who nearly fainted with relief to find that it wasn’t loaded. He holstered it immediately and began grabbing up the remaining ammunition from the bench, fingers shaking and sending a few rounds rolling into the dirt. Theon didn’t care. He only wanted to leave.

Jon’s eyes stayed fixed on the man and his son, and still no one moved besides Theon. He took Jon’s hand in his and squeezed.

“Come on,” he pleaded softly. “Jon, let’s get out of here? You want to go – let’s go.”

Jon blinked rapidly as though emerging from a trance and looked apologetically at Theon.

“Yeah, okay.”
Theon’s hand was clammy with sweat as he pulled Jon past the man and the boy, walking as fast as he could towards the parking lot. He didn’t need to look over his shoulder to know that they were staring after him.

* 

They didn’t speak in the car and somehow ended up at a Sonic, where Theon ordered an Oreo Blast.

“Do you want something?” he asked.

“Um, yeah. Just a root-beer float.” He reached again for Theon’s hand, but when Theon pulled away he resorted to snapping at his rubber band. “Theon, I’m sorry.”

Theon rubbed at the leather of his wallet. “Is that the first time anyone’s called you a fag?”

“Theon, look at me.” When he did, Jon smiled at him hopefully. “Do you think it’s the first time?”

“You pointed a fucking gun at the guy.” He fought to stave off the tears that began to form. His hands shook as he pulled his debit card from his wallet. “You could’ve gone to fucking jail for that. You scared the fucking shit out of me.”

Jon looked ashamed. “I’m sorry,” he repeated. “I just – it still pisses me off. I wouldn’t have – you know that, right?”

Theon didn’t answer.

The car-hop arrived at Theon’s window and passed him the two cups. He ate a spoonful of ice cream, and the sweetness of it relaxed him. He glanced over at Jon, who was having some trouble trying to suck soft-serve through a straw, and Theon smiled in spite of the tightness that still gripped his stomach. This wasn’t one of Ned Stark’s men – this was only Jon Snow, who actually liked him, who seemed to care about him, who had no interest in hurting him.

“If it’s any consolation, I’m pretty sure that guy is gonna drop dead of a heart-attack when he finds out his kid is queer.”

Jon looked startled. “You know him?”

“No.” Theon shrugged and licked the back of his spoon. “I could just tell by the way he looked at me.” Then, feeling more confident by the second, he added, “If I met that kid at a party, he’d have my dick in his mouth inside thirty minutes.”

“Is that what you thought the first time you saw me?” asked Jon, his eyes flitting downward as soon as they met Theon’s.

Unsure which answer would offend Jon the least, Theon hesitated. “No,” he said after a beat. “I just wanted to know you is all.”

“So you didn’t want me to suck your dick?”

Jon didn’t bother trying to hide his delight when Theon groaned and threw up his hands.

“Jesus Christ, what do you want me to say here?”

“I dunno. I guess I want to know why me, when you could have anyone?”
Theon bit his lip, bothered by the way his thoughts kept circling back to Jon’s father. “I’ve never had anyone all to myself before… That and like, you looked like you could probably use a good, hard fuck.” He grinned and reached out to run his thumb over the curve of Jon’s mouth. “Thought maybe I could loosen this frown up a little bit.”

Jon tried not smile, but Theon saw the opportunity to push his thumb between Jon’s lips and along the edge of his teeth. “You’re such an asshole,” said Jon.

When the car-hop returned and Theon opened his wallet to replace his card, Jon snatched the whole thing away from him, slipping Theon’s ID out of its transparent cell. “This says you’re twenty-one. Is this - this is a fake!” Jon seemed unexpectedly excited by this, and he flipped the card over and back again, squinting at it and tilting it in the sunlight. “This is a really good fake.”

Theon made a grab for it. “Yeah, and it wasn’t cheap. Give it back.” Jon ignored him and bit the corner of the plastic. “Seriously, what the fuck are you even doing? Can I please have my ID now?”

“The Dungeon.”

Theon always wondered what kind of sex talk Robb got from his father; he suspected it was vastly different – though no less uncomfortable – than the one he received from Ned when he was thirteen.

Ned had called him into the office and spent about five minutes silently arranging a stack of envelopes and clearing his throat before finally folding his hands across the top of his desk and
saying, “Theon, I think it’s about time we had a discussion.”

Theon groaned; being shot in the face and sent back to Pyke on ice seemed preferable to this.

Ned took a deep breath and continued. “Would I be… hrrmm, would I be mistaken in believing that you um – that your primary interest – that is, sexually speaking – is in… other boys?”

“Excuse my language, but um – are you asking if I want to fuck guys, sir?”

The expression that crossed Ned’s face flowed seamlessly from anger into relief into amusement. Theon felt a different relief, and a gratitude that this conversation was happening here in the North with Ned Stark and not on the Iron Islands with his own father, who – if he ever suspected such a thing about any of his sons – would’ve seen a beating as the only appropriate remedy.

“Would I be wrong to ask that?”

“No,” replied Theon carefully. His hair was long, past his shoulders back then, and he was glad to hide behind it.

Ned proceeded to ask a catalogue of questions – each more horrifying than the last – about whether Theon had ever “experimented” – *What am I, a scientist?* – with other boys. Had he ever masturbated? *Duh.* Did he have a crush on anyone at school? Did he know about HIV? Did he know how to use a condom? Had anyone ever asked him to have sex, give a blow job, etc. etc.? He would’ve found Ned’s unprecedented discomfiture hilarious if he wasn’t equally put off by having to endure such a line of questioning.

When it was over, Ned asked if he had any questions and Theon thought for a moment before forcing himself to blurt, “Um, yeah: why is my dick weird?”

Ned pinched the bridge of his nose. “What? How is it weird?”

Theon turned a deep red. “I mean, it looks different than, um, everyone else’s.”

(“It’s big,” one boy had marveled during gym class change-out.

“It’s funny looking,” said another.)

“Oh. That. Here in the North, most boys are um, circumcised when they’re babies. It’s – it’s the surgical removal of the foreskin, which you still have. There’s nothing wrong with your – there’s nothing wrong with it.”

“Oh. Okay.”

It was so awful, and naturally Theon had to recount every word of it to Robb, leaving out the part about being interested in boys, of course. Even now – six years later – the fact that he’d ever discussed his cock with Ned Stark made Theon cringe. But he supposed in a way he was lucky, and wondered if anyone had ever talked to Jon Snow about these things, and specifically about how much the whole thing was going to *hurt.*

* 

“Would you, um, would you want to come up and see my room?”

St. Brigid’s was quiet; Theon heard the sound of a television coming from the living-room, but saw no sign of Mr. Aemon or any of the other boys as Jon grabbed his hand and led him upstairs and
down a narrow, carpeted hallway.

The room was small and blue, and Jon wavered when Theon closed the door behind him.

“I’m not really supposed to have the door closed when I have company.”

“Do you have a lot of guys up to your room, Jon Snow?” Theon took a step towards Jon, put his hands on Jon’s hips to push him back until his calves bumped into the bed.

“Um, no.” Jon’s knees buckled as Theon pressed him down onto the mattress, straddling his lap.

“Then if someone knocks you can just say you forgot.” He slid his hands up under Jon’s t-shirt, letting his thumbs brush over Jon’s nipples. Jon hissed.

Theon leaned in to kiss the crook of Jon’s neck. “I can’t wait to see you naked.”

Jon swallowed. “We can’t.”

Theon smirked and moved his lips up to bite the cartilage of Jon’s ear. “I know.”

Jon ran his hands up Theon’s thighs, hesitating for a second before lifting the edge of his shirt to reveal the kraken that rose from the hem of Theon’s boxer-briefs, its tentacles wrapping around his ribs to reach for the pirate ship on his breast. He let his fingers trace over the ink and Theon shivered.

“Sorry. I don’t know why my hands are always so cold.”

They stayed like that for a moment – Theon watching Jon’s eyes as they traveled over his stomach and chest and finally met Theon’s gaze again. And there it was – that unbeatable feeling of being the most wanted thing in the world. Theon kissed him again, weaving his fingers through the hair on the back Jon’s head to pull him all the way down until he lay on the bed, his legs dangling off the edge. Theon held himself up on his elbows. He could feel Jon’s hard-on against his thigh and when he rolled his hips, Jon moaned into his mouth.

Theon was surprised when Jon’s trembling fingers started undoing his belt. He caught Jon’s wrist and pinned it to the bed.

“No.”

“Don’t you want me to? I want to.”

“I don’t want to get you in trouble.”

Jon raised an eyebrow. “Don’t you?”

“No. ‘Cause then you wouldn’t get to see me anymore.” He shifted his weight to the thigh that rested between Jon’s legs and grinned when Jon’s eyes rolled up. “If we did it now, we’d have to rush,” he added, his breath hot against Jon’s ear. “And when I fuck you for the first time, I want to do it slow.” He gave another languid roll of his hips and Jon arched up into him desperately.

“What are you going to do to me?”

“Well, first I’m going to suck your cock.” Theon pulled Jon’s hand up to his lips, taking the length of the index finger into his mouth and sucking it, tasting the salt, and something sweet. He let Jon’s finger trail wetly down his chin. “I’m going to let you fuck my mouth, because I love the taste of you that much.”
Jon squirmed beneath him.

“You’ll think you might come like that, with your cock down my throat, but when I can tell you’re close, I’ll stop. I’ll put my fingers in your soft fucking mouth and then I’ll put them inside you.” He relished the mix of desire and apprehension that crossed Jon’s face and let his lips ghost over Jon’s as he continued. “And you’ll like it, more than you thought you would, and soon you’ll be begging me to just fuck you already. And I’ll want to.”

He allowed himself to grind down against Jon, setting up a rhythm as he rocked against Jon’s hips and Theon paused to enjoy the friction of it. “But I want this to last, so when I put my cock in you, it’ll be just one inch and a time until you feel so full your eyes will cross. And it’ll be so hard for me, not to just _take_ you.” Jon’s eyes drifted closed and Theon smiled. “You _want_ me to take you, don’t you?”

Jon nodded.

“I’ll be close – so close it hurts. And you’ll start to whine and push against me and probably tell me to just get on with it. But I’ll pull out, long and slow until just the head of my cock is left in you. And you’ll whimper and swear and _beg_ for it, won’t you?”

Jon hummed and slipped his hand up the back of Theon’s shirt to rake his nails down Theon’s spine before pressing against the small of Theon’s back in a bid to maximize the pressure of Theon’s thrusts.

“And when I push inside you again, I’ll probably moan your name. _Jon._” Unable to quite stop himself, Theon lifted his hips enough to unbutton Jon’s jeans and open the front of his pants up just enough to feel the shape of Jon’s erection through the fabric of his shorts. “I’ll have my hand on your cock and you’ll be fucking into my grip and just the sight might make me lose control.”

Jon’s eyes were still closed; his breathing had become rapid and shallow and Theon could tell from the way the corners of his mouth twitched that Jon was close. He continued working his palm against Jon’s prick, using his other hand to give a hard tug on Jon’s hair.

“But I want you to come first, because when you come, you get so tight that feel like I can’t breathe. So I’ll just fuck you like that, as slow as I can stand and I’ll say, ‘That’s it, come for me, Jon. _Fuck._ You feel so fucking good.’”

Jon bit down on a moan when he came, his back arching hard enough to lift Theon clear off the bed. His cheeks had turned red and now the flush clung to them as he caught his breath. The front of his boxers was soaked with cum and he lifted his head to look down at himself before letting his head drop back again, an uncontrollable smile on his lips. Theon felt his heart pounding.

“That was fucking awesome,” said Jon, after a moment.

“Man, if you thought _that_ was awesome, I’m gonna blow your fucking mind.”

Theon smirked and Jon didn’t even _try_ not to laugh.

“You should let me,” he said, reaching again for Theon’s belt, but Theon shook his head.

“I should go.”

His shoulders burned when he took his weight off them, and when he stood up, the blood rushed from his head. Jon stood too, his hair frizzy with sweat, and he started to button his pants but decided against it.
Theon looked around, taking in the room for the first time. The afternoon had rapidly passed into evening, and everything seemed gray. It was a sparse little place, a bed and a dresser and a desk with a laptop and a lamp. A Joy Division poster hung on the wall above the bed, another for *Pretty Hate Machine* on the door. A mirror beside the dresser was so covered with dust as to be unusable. Theon frowned slightly, but Jon was still too adrenalyzed to notice. He grasped Theon by the shirt, pulled him into a long, slow kiss.

“Tell me when I’ll see you again.”

“What night do you wanna go to the damn club?”

Jon grinned and kissed him again.

*

Theon was relieved not to run into anyone on his way out of the house, and once he got in the car he realized that his erection was not going away anytime soon. He ended up parked in an empty lot a few blocks from Jon’s house, finishing himself off to the image of Jon biting his lip as he came. He’d never been so grateful for the dark tint on his windows.

*

He was in the elevator when he received a text from Robb.

“Can I see you in my office please?”

*Shit.* He felt his heart sink. He’d managed to forget about the Robb Situation for a few hours, and the high he’d been feeling came to an abrupt end as he wracked his brain for what to say to the boy who was his best friend and his boss and his… whatever.

When Theon entered, Robb was sitting at his – his father’s – desk, looking sleep-deprived and Theon was startled to see what looked like an actual five-o’clock shadow on his cheek. The surface of the desk was a disaster of file folders and paperclips, but Robb still managed a shy smile.

“Hey,” said Theon.

“Hey.”

“Did you want to talk to me about –”

“Today has been a hell of a day,” interrupted Robb, standing to stretch his legs. “And I have an errand for you.” He hurried to add, “Nothing like, business-y. Just – I need you to go and pick up a couple things for me.”

Theon sighed. “Yeah?”

“Yeah. I’ve got a copy of the new *Assassin’s Creed* waiting for me at BestBuy, and I just ordered a pizza - half Hawaiian, half barbeque chicken with a two-liter of Dr. Pepper. I hope you’re free tonight.”

Theon couldn’t help but smile, and even though he knew that things weren’t back to normal, he knew that this was Robb trying to make him happy.

“Yeah, I guess I could take care of that for you.”
Chapter Seven

Chapter Summary

Things fall into place for Robb.

Dinner with the Starks was so different from eating with his own family. The dining room at Pyke was a sort of cavernous space, and the table was too big and gave rise to the feeling that there were people missing. Theon’s mother had taken her meals in her bedroom since he was four, so her chair remained empty at Balon’s left side. Asha sat beside the empty chair, and Theon to her left. Rick and Maron sat across the table, usually joking with each other and discussing family business to the degree their father deemed appropriate.

A part of him resented sitting on the women’s side of the table, farthest from his father’s attentions. Rick was to be head of the Family someday, and if he knew his brothers, he knew that Rick’s love of violence and Ron’s genius with lies would make the Greyjoys a house not to be reckoned with lightly. He had no idea what was expected from him, but it seemed to be little if anything. As much as he envied his brothers, he hated them more and was always grateful, in the end, to sit quietly beside his sister.

When he arrived in Winterfell, he resolved to carry on this way, but Ned had made it impossible and seemed determined to draw Theon out with his persistent questions. The Starks’ dining room was large, but it was filled with a warm light that made Theon feel like he was in a movie. Ned always sat at the head of the table, and Cat by his side, but there were no assigned seats among the children and Theon didn’t much care where he sat as long as it was next to Robb. Robb would kick at Theon under the table and Theon would do his best to make Robb laugh and snort water up his nose.

When he got older, Theon wondered if his father would even recognize him, always with a smile on his face and a quick remark on his tongue. Sometimes – when he was buzzed or stoned – he would look in the mirror and catch a glimpse of that quiet little boy and he would frown at his reflection and spend the rest of the day trying to shake the feeling that that was the real Theon Greyjoy. And as much as he hated the belt, or the way Ned and Cat would look at him sometimes like they wished he would go away, there was something about it that felt awfully right.

It only ever happened once, sometime around Theon’s second Christmas away from Pyke. He knew it must’ve been Christmastime, because the centerpiece was a wreath filled with candles, and Robb was wearing this dumbass reindeer sweater that Theon loved to tease him about.

“May I please have some more ravioli?”

Ned picked up the entire serving dish with one hand and passed it to Theon, who responded without thinking, “Thanks, Dad.”

The ensuing silence seemed to last an hour, though Theon knew it was probably only a couple of seconds. Cat laid her fork down and glanced quickly at her husband, while Sansa paused mid-chew to gape at him. Robb smiled, damn him. Only Arya paid no mind.

Ned had cleared his throat. “You’re welcome, Theon.”
Theon looked at his plate, full again with pasta, and found he’d lost his appetite.

* 

He was standing on the balcony outside his bedroom smoking when he heard his name called up.

“Theon! Hey!”

Looking over the rail, he saw Robb emerge from the back door wearing an old yellow jersey and holding a soccer ball under his arm. Robb held a hand to shade his eyes and squinted up at Theon’s window.

“Hey, are you doing anything right now?”

Theon took a ponderous drag, searching for something clever to say and coming up empty. “Not really.”

“You wanna come practice some shots?”

“You mean do I wanna come have you kick a soccer ball at my nuts for an hour?”

Robb grinned. “Yeah, basically.”

“Sure.”

When he joined Robb outside, he was taken aback to see the dark circles beneath his friend’s eyes, and it hadn’t been his imagination that Robb was actually starting to grow an impression of a beard.

“Are you sure you’re allowed to come out and play?” asked Theon, semi-seriously. “I’ve hardly even seen you this week.”

Robb lobbed the ball to him. “Yeah, it was Mom’s idea actually. She made me stop working and go outside.”

“What do you even do in there all day?”

Robb shook his head tiredly. “Well, let’s just say that if I were you, I wouldn’t be in any big rush to go back to Pyke. It’s pretty fucking boring, mostly – trying to understand where all the money comes and goes. Just reading over loads of accounts and invoices and looking at things on GoogleEarth.”

“Anything you want help with?” asked Theon hopefully.

“Not really. Not yet anyway. I want you at the next meeting.”

“Yeah?”

“Yeah. You wouldn’t – you wouldn’t believe the amount of product your dad moves.”

They walked out to the open space between the pool and the row of massive oaks that lined the access road on the West side of the property. The net had been taken off the goal frame last winter and never been replaced. Taking his place between the posts, Theon wondered why Robb thought this would be any fun for either of them; Theon was never any good at soccer, and he was especially terrible at playing goalie.
It had been so long since they played outside together that Theon had forgotten the way Robb’s hair looked different in the sunlight. And when he watched Robb wind up for a kick, he remembered how stupidly long and muscled Robb’s legs were.

“Ow! Fuck!”

“Oh, God, are you okay?” Robb tried not laugh. “I, um, I’m sorry! I just thought you’d, you know, move or something.”

Theon rubbed at his cheekbone as he watched the ball roll slowly away. “Well, I blocked it, didn’t I?”

Robb trotted over to scoop the ball off the ground. “Let me look at it.”

Theon turned his face away. “It’s fine. I’m not made of glass.”

Robb reached out as though to grab Theon’s chin and turn his head, but he thought better of it and jogged back out to his starting position.

Theon could remember the exact moment he’d first thought to himself that Robb Stark was going to grow up to be well, 100% fuckable. He was sixteen and Robb was edging on fourteen, and they’d been in the pool on one of the hottest days of the summer. Robb was practicing his diving, and Theon remembered watching him for a solid hour as he stood poised on the edge of the board, his back perfectly straight as he bounced on the balls of his feet. He had tried so hard to put it out of his mind – not because he was ashamed, but because it was Robb.

He managed to block a few of Robb’s shots, but the majority sailed easily past him to roll off into the trees. Theon didn’t mind – he was happy enough to see Robb enjoying himself, and for a few minutes he even forgot that less than two weeks ago he had –

You’re just as bad as your own brothers.

Worse.

No. That’s not true.

He wasn’t paying attention when a wide, powerful wind-up set the ball bouncing off the broad trunks of the oaks and sent Theon trailing back and forth out of Robb’s view, and when he returned to the field, Robb was talking to his mother.

They were out of earshot, but Theon felt his stomach drop as Robb’s arms went limp and Cat pulled him into her. He hung there in the goal, waiting for Robb to call out to him, but Robb didn’t so much as look at him. He watched Robb’s knees buckle, saw the way Cat struggled under her son’s weight as he pulled at her arms. And he knew somehow, but still he waited for someone to call to him, to tell him what was going on.

Instead, they turned and walked back into the house – Robb’s gait more of a stagger than anything – and left Theon standing in the field. He knelt down and ran his fingers through the grass – only beginning to green – and listened to the sound of a songbird somewhere behind him. Suddenly, the sun felt hot on his shoulders and he realized that his breathing had sped up. He felt like he was gliding as he moved toward the back door, like he was somehow lighter than air. When he stepped inside, he didn’t know where to go. He wanted to find Robb, but when he looked around, he suddenly felt as out of place as he had the first time he’d set foot in Ned Stark’s mansion.

*
Maron was found in a shipping container at the docks, his throat slit and his body frozen solid. Rick was found a mile away near the beach – hog-tied in knee-deep water with a weight and a short length of chain around his neck.

Theon tried to cry. Not in front of anyone, of course, but in the privacy of his room he’d pounded at his forehead with the heel of his palm, hoping to shake some tears loose. He could hear Asha’s sobs through the wall between their bedrooms. But he didn’t feel anything at all.

There were three empty chairs at the table that night, and Theon trembled under Balon’s gaze, newly turned to his youngest son – the one he’d never concerned himself with, now the heir to his empire.

“I’m sending you to Winterfell,” said Balon, as though he were talking to no one in particular.

Asha’s jaw clenched, but she said nothing.

“Me?”

“Yes, you,” Balon replied sharply. “Ned Stark and his men will be here to collect you tomorrow evening.”

Asha bit her lip before venturing, “Dad, I don’t see why he has to go.”

Theon never did see his father shed a tear – for him, or his brothers – but he remembered Balon clutching at the edge of the table as though it took all his strength to hold himself upright.

“It’s the arrangement,” he said. “Theon will go to live with the Starks, and in exchange for my only remaining son, Ned Stark will allow the Greyjoy name to continue.” A cynical grin twisted over Balon’s lips. “For as long as we serve the North.” Turning to Theon, he added, “Or else he’ll kill you – just like he killed your brothers. Do you understand that?”

Theon nodded wordlessly, though the truth was that he barely understood any of it. He didn’t know why his brothers were dead, or why Ned Stark would want a boy who was obviously of no value to anyone, and he especially didn’t understand the meaning of that “or else.” If Balon seemed upset by the bargain he’d struck, it was only his pride that ached.

Asha helped him to pack his little suitcase. She never said much to him, but somehow it was a different kind of silence from their father’s. He supposed Pyke would be a markedly quieter place from here on.

“Why does he want me?” Theon asked, throwing his favorite stuffed animal – a starfish – onto the pile of clothes he was taking.

“He wants to make you forget,” said Asha, picking up Starry and frowning. “He wants to make you love them, so that when you take over our Family, you won’t dream of turning against them.” She tossed the starfish into a box of things to be thrown out.

“Hey!” Theon snatched the toy to his chest. “I’m taking Starry with me!”

“They’ll laugh at you,” she said. “They’ll think you’re a baby. You don’t want that, do you?”

Theon hesitated, looking from the black button eyes of the starfish to his sister’s dark eyes. “No,” he said finally, replacing Starry into the box destined for the landfill.

“I promise I won’t love them,” he said, hoping to please her. Instead, her frown only deepened. She
shook her head.

“Do you know how it feels to love someone?”

“I – I don’t know.”

“Then how can you promise you won’t?”

*

Ned Stark died almost on the heels of his friend Robert Baratheon, and while both deaths were unexpected, Ned’s was at least painless. An alleged hunting accident allowed the head of the Baratheon Family to linger for a couple days before he passed, so drugged out that – by the end – he was as good as mad. Ned Stark caught a bullet between the eyes, and though no-one knew precisely who pulled the trigger, everyone knew who’d given the order. And while it was a foolish decision to murder the patriarch of the most powerful Family in the North, the choice to make his death a quick one seemed well-considered.

Theon eventually collected this information from Poole, and somehow it was the mention of Jory’s death that made Theon definitively sad. Jory Cassel must’ve been almost twenty when he accompanied Ned Stark to retrieve Theon from Pyke, and Theon remembered how blue Jory’s eyes were. He’d harbored an intense – and, in retrospect, embarrassingly obvious – crush on the Cassel boy for at least his first two years in Winterfell.

Already there was talk of unleashing all-out war on the Lannister Family, and Theon knew that whatever happened next, nothing would ever make sense of Ned’s assassination. Poole’s voice seemed muted, like all the air had left the room. When he left, the silence rang in Theon’s ears.

He took the elevator down to the garage, where Gendry was blessedly working away beneath a Jeep, impervious to the miasma of anger and confusion that seemed to be filling the rest of the house. He couldn’t hear Theon over the sound of the radio, and Theon had to kick Gendry lightly in the shin before he rolled his creeper out from beneath the undercarriage.

“How’s it going?” he asked, standing and reaching for the volume knob on the boom-box.

Theon shrugged. “Well, you know.”

Gendry placed a strong hand on Theon’s shoulder; the gesture was completely awkward, but Theon appreciated it anyway.

“Must be kind of weird for you, huh?”

“Yeah. It is.”

“Do you, um, do you wanna talk about it?”

“No.”

“Thank God,” Gendry sighed. “I’ve been hiding out down here ever since I heard.”

“That’s actually kind of why I came. Would it be cool if I just like, hung out? I won’t bother you or anything. I just want to be somewhere that I can’t hear them running up and down the halls. Sansa’s been crying for hours.”

“Yeah, sure.”
He pulled up a stool at the back of the shop and fished an old newspaper out of the trash. Gendry re-adjusted his music again and slid back under the Jeep, and Theon envied him for always being so busy.

Close to an hour had passed when Theon looked up to see Arya standing with a hand on the threshold of the shop door, that perpetual sway threatening to overtake her. Her hair was messier than usual, and she stared at him with eyes that looked cracked somehow. She hadn’t thought to find him here, clearly.

Theon rose from his seat and turned the music down long enough to say, “Gendry, you’ve got a visitor.”

Gendry slid out from the car once more, and barely had a chance to sit up before Arya threw her arms around him and began sobbing into his grease-stained t-shirt. He hesitated for a moment before wrapping his arms around her, casting a bewildered glance at Theon. As he exited the shop, he turned back to see Gendry still holding her tightly, rocking the creeper back and forth with his heels.

You know where you ought to be right now?

He was walking down the hall towards Robb’s room when his phone rang. He saw Jon’s name on the screen and almost ignored the call before stopping to lean against the wall and hit “Phone.”

“Hey, Jon.”

“Theon! What are you doing tonight?”

It hit Theon like a brick. His dad. Oh shit. Oh my God. His fucking dad.

And he lost it. He slumped down the wall until he was sitting on the carpet, his knees pulled up to his chest. Theon covered his face with his left hand, gritting his teeth as he wept silently. He felt like screaming, but when he opened his mouth, no sound came out. He slammed his head back into the wall, more forcefully than he meant to. The front of the phone was slick with tears, and he pressed it almost painfully against his ear.

“Theon? Hello?”

Fuck.

“Theon, are you there?”

He bit down hard on his thumb and took a deep, raspy breath.

“Yeah, I’m here.”

“Are you – what’s wrong? Is everything okay?”

Theon rolled his eyes up to look at the sconce above him, used the heel of his palm to wipe his cheeks dry. He faked a cough to clear his throat.

“Um. Yeah. Well, no. It’s, um, I’m just – It’s my foster family. There was an accident and I, um –”

You are scum. You are absolute fucking shit.

“Oh my God. Theon, I’m so sorry. Do you want me to come over? Tell me where you live and I’ll
be there as fast as I can.”

And *that* just about broke his fucking heart. And even though he wanted nothing more, he closed his eyes and shook his head, tugging at a fistful of hair. “No,” he managed. “No, I think I just need to be alone.”

_You are alone. You’ll always be alone._

“Okay. I understand.” Jon sounded a little deflated, almost timid when he said, “Please promise you’ll call me when you feel like it?”

“I don’t deserve you.”

“Dude, don’t be an asshole. Promise you’ll call me.”

Theon smiled faintly. “I’ll call you. But I can’t promise I won’t be an asshole.”

He heard Jon’s understated laugh. “Of course not.”

“Hey Jon?”

“Yeah?”

Theon ground his teeth until he managed to choke down all the truths that threatened to come spilling out.

“I’ll call you soon, okay?”

“Okay. Goodbye, Theon.”

“Bye.” After hanging up, he let his head fall back again. “Fuck.”

Theon rose, wiping his nose on the back of his hand and stepped into the bathroom to splash cold water across his face. His reflection gazed blearily back at him and he realized that he still needed a haircut.

His heart raced as he stopped firmly outside Robb’s bedroom. He had just raised his knuckles to wrap on the door when Robb opened it for him.

“I heard you on the phone,” he said, still gripping the doorknob.

Looking over Robb’s shoulder, Theon could see that his room was in disarray – the desk had been turned over and one of the lamps was lying broken on the floor. Seeing what Theon must be observing, Robb hung his head slightly.

“I know it’s a wreck, but do you wanna come in?”

“Sure.”

Theon closed the door behind him, stepping over a minefield of books and DVDs to sit on the edge of Robb’s bed. The sun still shone brightly, casting a long, cheery rectangle of light onto the blue bedspread. Robb remained standing. He was still wearing his jersey and shorts, looking lost, as though he wasn’t sure whose room this was or why he’d come. Theon could see where the tears had caused his curls to stick to his temples, and he noticed the bloody scrapes on the knuckles of Robb’s right hand. Glancing around the room, he spotted the hole in the wall just beside the television.
Robb spun around once, like he meant to find something, and then looked back at Theon with a sort of stunned expression. His eyelids were puffy and raw, and the tip of his nose was chapped.

“You’ve been crying,” he said finally.

Theon blinked up at him. “Yeah. A little.”

“What do you mean, why?” he asked, angrier than he felt. “Am I not allowed?”

Robb’s voice quivered. “I – It’s just that I’ve never seen you cry before.” He turned away before Theon could see the tears that had overflowed onto his cheeks, and Theon felt instantly ashamed of himself. He reached for Robb’s hand and gave a gentle tug.

“Hey, I’m sorry.”

Robb continued to look around the room helplessly, and Theon gave another, firmer pull on his friend’s hand.

“Hey, come sit with me.”

Obediently, Robb shuffled over to the bed and collapsed beside Theon, burying his face in Theon’s hair and sniffing. Theon put an arm around Robb’s shoulders to hold him upright and used his other hand to tuck a few locks of hair behind Robb’s ear. Robb was doing his best to stifle his sobs, but Theon could hear the wetness in his breathing, and he could feel the heat of tears and drool soaking through his shirt. He wanted to say something, but he couldn’t think of anything that wasn’t stupid, so he remained quiet.

They stayed like that for some time, even after Robb had stopped crying, until Theon began to lose the sensation in his hands.

“I’m sorry, but I’ve gotta move my arms.”

Robb looked at him with what seemed to Theon like the most complete longing, his eyes still brimming with tears, lips swollen. A single teardrop managed to spill over and down Robb’s cheek, and without thinking, Theon brought his thumb up to sweep it away just as it reached the corner of Robb’s mouth. The smile Robb gave was so faint that it might’ve been nothing, but to Theon it was bright as ever.

He wasn’t sure who began the kiss, but for once it didn’t matter. He still held Robb’s face with his hand, fingers applying just enough pressure to bring Robb into him, and he could taste salt and a hint of blood. It was a soft kiss, almost agony, and Theon was resolved to keep it that way until he felt Robb’s teeth against his lips. He opened his eyes to find that Robb’s were closed.

Robb’s hands were hot when they crept up under Theon’s shirt, running lightly over his ribs before grabbing the fabric and pulling it upward and inside out over Theon’s head. In the amount of time it took Theon’s conscience to finally give up the ghost, Robb had divested himself of the jersey and kicked his athletic shorts into a pile on the floor.

Theon took a moment to appreciate how much Robb had filled out over the past year – hell, the past few months – and he wondered how long it would be before Robb was taller and stronger than him. His chest was broader now and beginning to show a thin layer of fuzz to balance out that thick, auburn treasure trail. Theon grinned as he ran a finger through it to snap at the elastic of Robb’s boxers.
Robb blushed. “What?”

“You’re gonna be way hairier than I am.” He took Robb’s chin between his thumb and forefinger and leaned in to kiss him again, and kept leaning until Robb’s head hit the pillow.

“Please tell me we’re gonna fuck,” breathed Robb, nipping at Theon’s bottom lip.

Theon pulled away, sat back on his heels to fix Robb with a sardonic expression that belied his seriousness when he asked, “Do you want to?”

He could feel Robb’s erection when the boy twisted beneath him. Robb’s eyes traced over Theon’s chest and down the center line of his stomach, coming to a stop at his obvious arousal. Robb bit his lip apprehensively.

“Yeah,” he said. “Just – can we not – can we go slower this time?”

Theon undid his buckle and drew the belt from around his waist an inch at a time – a shit-eating grin on his face – until Robb growled and whipped the whole length of it out of his grasp and flung it against the opposite wall.

“You’re such an asshole.”

Theon smirked as he pulled his pants off and then lowered himself again to skim his mouth over Robb’s collar bone, along the middle of his chest and stomach, pausing to pull Robb’s shorts down just far enough to expose his length.

Robb gasped when Theon took him.

“Oh fuck.”

Theon felt Robb’s fingers thread through his hair, then tighten into a fist. A few seconds later, Robb yanked Theon’s head up, hard.

“You might want to stop.”

“I can keep going if you want.”

Robb swallowed and shook his head. “No. I want you to – you know…”

“Hand me a pillow.”

Robb chucked one of the pillows into Theon’s face and laughed. Theon smiled as he pulled Robb’s underwear completely off and watched the goosebumps rise on his friend’s thighs.

“Lift your ass up for a second.” He slid the pillow beneath Robb’s hips and lifted Robb’s legs up over his own shoulders. Reaching his right arm around Robb’s thigh, he continued to stroke Robb’s spit-slick cock and with his mouth licked his way up between Robb’s legs.

“Whoa, what – are you serious?” Robb wriggled away from him.

Theon levelled his eyes at Robb’s and raised an eyebrow. “Yes, I’m serious. I’m going to eat you out now, so stop fucking squirming.”

Robb never was very good at keeping still, and this was no exception. But he seemed to be enjoying himself plenty, judging by the little moans and gasps and the way he bent his arms back over his head to grip at the top of the headboard. When Theon spread a generous amount of lube
over all four of the fingers on his right hand, Robb froze up for a moment until Theon reassured him that he’d start with just one.

Robb’s eyebrows drew together in a grimace.

“This will go a lot better if you breathe.”

“That’s easy for you to say. You’re not the one who’s about to get a hand shoved –”

“Robb –” Theon held Robb’s right hand in his left, and kissed his bloodied knuckles. “Look at me.”

Robb slowly tore his gaze away from the other hand poised between his legs and focused on Theon’s face instead. His breath hitched for a few seconds as the first finger slid in, but he relaxed with an exhale, a small smile playing at his mouth.

“Okay. Not awful.”

Within five minutes, Robb had taken all four of Theon’s fingers and Theon was beginning to feel a little dizzy. He hadn’t touched himself at all, and his prick was starting to ache. Robb had taken a hold of his own cock, but Theon swatted his hand away and once again wrapped his lips around it, this time moving his head in rhythm with his fingers and sending Robb’s back into an arch so sharp that Theon thought for a second that he might choke.

“On your stomach.”

Robb did as he was told – for once – and Theon ran a hand down the track of Robb’s spine, loving the twin dimples at the base of it and the angles that Robb’s shoulders made as he pulled at his own hair and said,

“Jesus Christ, please just get on with it.”

Theon smirked, but his mouth fell open as he pushed into Robb, dropping forward to hold himself up on his elbows and kiss the edge of Robb’s ear. Robb let out a low groan and closed his eyes tightly.

“Okay?”

Robb bit his lip and nodded. “Mmm-hmm.”

Theon waited a moment before moving again, relaxing his hips before rolling them forward and this time there was no mistaking the wanton little whimper that Robb gave. Theon bit down gently at Robb’s shoulder, and when he looked at the light mark he’d left, he realized that Robb’s entire upper back was covered in pinprick-sized freckles.

“Tell me how long you’ve wanted this,” he said, nuzzling into the hair on the back of Robb’s neck.

“Since I can remember.”

Theon pulled out again, a little farther this time, and when Robb pushed back against him he couldn’t quite contain a desperate sort of snarl. He dug his nails into Robb’s thigh and was gratified when Robb let out a sharp hiss in response.

“I – I’m going to actually fuck you now. Like, hard.”

Again, Robb nodded.
And fuck if this wasn’t the way things were meant to be between them. Theon’s shoulders and elbows burned and his eyes stung with sweat, but it was nothing compared to the taste of Robb’s skin or the sight of Robb’s fingers clutching at the blankets or the sound of the curses coming out of Robb’s damned perfect mouth, barely more than a whisper:


“Where do you want me to come?”

Robb mumbled something into the pillow; Theon tugged on his hair.

“Where do you want me to come?” he repeated urgently.

“Finish,” said Robb, only half coherent. “Just – finish. Inside me. I want you to.”

Robb craned his neck, trying to get a good view over his shoulder, if only he could figure out how to bring his eyes into focus. Theon’s hold on Robb’s shoulder was borderline-painful, and his last few thrusts struck deep enough that Robb’s breath caught in his throat. Theon clenched his jaw when he came, absolutely determined not to make any regrettable sounds or say anything that Robb might take too much to heart. When he collapsed forward, Robb could feel the feverish beating of Theon’s heart against his back and the warm wetness already beginning to trickle down his thighs as Theon rocked forward once more, then again, and then was still. His breathing was hot and loud against Robb’s cheek.

“You’re kind of crushing me,” said Robb, when he could no longer bear Theon’s weight on his lungs.

Theon sat back, a lopsided grin hanging on his face as he pushed a handful of sweaty, tangled hair out of his eyes. Robb rolled onto his back and regarded Theon with an almost demure expression that contrasted starkly with the blood-dark hardness of his cock.

*That’s a new one.*

He’d planned to finish Robb with his mouth, but it quickly became obvious that no amount of threatening could stop the crescendo of obscenities issuing ever-louder from Robb’s lips and surely becoming audible through the wall. In the end, he drew Robb’s climax out with his right hand and swallowed the sound of it – and the smaller sounds that followed – until he was kissing Robb as softly as they’d started, tasting the last of those faint little tremors and wiping his own knuckles off on the bedspread.

“You should stay,” Robb said eventually.

“What, like, stay the night? I can’t.”

“Why not?”

Theon passed his fingers through the damp snarl of Robb’s hair.

“I don’t think the fact that your – the fact that you’re the man of the house now changes anything between your mom and me.” Seeing Robb pout, he added, “I could help you clean your room though.”

* As though the humiliation of calling him “Dad,” didn’t sting quite enough, Ned summoned Theon
to his office after dinner while the rest of the children ate their desserts.

The office always seemed so overwhelming to Theon – all the furniture slightly too large and far apart – and he never dared to touch anything there, so it was difficult not to fidget.

“Theon, please sit down,” said Ned, gesturing at the massive armchair that sat opposite his desk. Theon obeyed. His feet barely touched the ground from the height of the seat. He felt a lump forming in his throat and wondered if his error was an offense worthy of the belt.

Ned bowed his head for a moment before looking Theon in the eyes and beginning, “Theon, do you understand why you’re here – in Winterfell?”

Theon nodded. “Yes sir.”

“And why is that?”

In his mind’s eye, he saw his father’s face – always so cold with no trace of anything that might’ve been mistaken for affection.

“Because my father turned against the Family,” he said. “Because I’m his only son now, and if he ever tries to cross you again, you’ll kill me and destroy us.”

Ned nodded solemnly and rotated the signet ring on his right ring finger. “And do you understand that if that ever happens, it’s me who has to do it? Not Poole or Flint or any of my associates, but me?”

Theon blinked. He hadn’t known.

“Why?” he asked.

“Because that’s the arrangement,” Ned replied, and when Theon thought about it now, it made him shake with fury.

_You cocksucking bastard. You could’ve made other arrangements. You could’ve had it any way you wanted. You could’ve made me yours._

“So you can understand why it’s important that you – and I – must never forget that. You mustn’t allow yourself to think of me as your father, just as I can’t bear to think of you as my son.”

“Yes sir. I understand.” Theon stood up to leave. “What about Robb?”

He saw something harden in Ned’s eyes. “What do you mean?”

Theon looked down at his toes and then remembered that Cat had told him he had to look people in the eye when they asked him a question, so he fixed his gaze on Ned’s face and said, “He calls me his brother sometimes. Should I make him – should I ask him to stop?”

Ned smiled, but it was the strange, sad smile that confused Theon when he was little.

_Why would anyone smile when they’re sad?_ he wondered.

“Only if you want him to stop.”

“May I be excused?”
Ned nodded, and as soon as Theon left the office, he glanced down and realized that his hands were clenched into fists and that his cheeks were burning.
Chapter Eight

Chapter Summary

Robb takes action, Roose takes advantage and Theon takes Jon on a date.

“We should stop.” Robb’s voice was a whisper against Theon’s lips, but it seemed obscenely loud in the sanctity of House Stark’s massive conference room. Again, he pressed his open mouth against Theon’s and repeated – mostly to himself – “We really have to stop.”

Theon smirked and brushed a wrinkle out of Robb’s charcoal-gray dress shirt. His own dark-blue button-up had come completely untucked, thanks to Robb’s almost frantic groping, and as he sat on the edge of the long, mahogany table with his heels hooked around the back of Robb’s knees, he couldn’t imagine anything more gratifying than the pitiful little sounds he was eliciting from the most powerful man in the North. Theon pulled Robb in for one last kiss and tried not to linger on the fact that the man who’d raised them both was dead less than a week.

Robb took a couple steps back, watching as Theon stood and composed himself.

“You never did tell me who gave you that hickey,” he said, a wolﬁsh little grin curling up the corner of his mouth.

“What hickey?”

“That first time – in the shower – you had a big fucking hickey on your neck. You said it was no-one I’d know.”

Theon smoothed the fabric of his shirt over his chest and combed his ﬁngers through his hair.

“How do I look?”

“Fine,” replied Robb, clearly distressed by Theon’s lack of an answer, but not wanting to expose his desperation any further. “You look fine.”

“You should probably turn the cameras back on.”

Robb sighed and paced around his desk, leaning his elbows against it as he brought up the closed-circuit controls on his PC. Theon opened the doors of the conference room and took a deep breath as he double-checked the alignment of his shirt buttons. He knew that Theon Greyjoy was probably the last person on anyone’s mind this evening, but he was still nervous about his debut. He brieﬂy wished Ned were there, but then he remembered that in that case there would be no need for this meeting.

And he didn’t like Robb asking about Jon, however unwittingly or obliquely.

>You should probably stop seeing him.

It was excruciatingly rational.

_STOP seeing Jon. Before you break his heart, or get him in trouble._
Well, maybe just see him one more time, he would reason. Let him down in person. He deserves that.

Yeah, just look into those gorgeous dark eyes and watch him snap his goddamn rubber bands and say, “Sorry, but don’t ever call me again… No, of course I like you, and of course I want you, and of course I’d probably sell my soul to have you all to myself – it’s just that I have to devote the rest of my life to pretending I’m not fucking my best friend.”

Watch that frown on those perfect fucking lips of his and see how far you get with that.

He was too absorbed in thought to notice when Cat entered the room; she side-eyed him for a moment before giving Robb a quick hug and taking her seat at the table. When Theon looked up again, she was talking in subdued tones with Rick Cassel. Robb looked like a slimmer silhouette of his father, standing rigidly beside the chair at the head of the table, exchanging solemn greetings and handshakes with the men as they arrived. It was as though he’d slipped into another skin – a man’s skin – so different from the boy who’d been whimpering into Theon’s mouth a quarter of an hour earlier. For a second, he wondered what it would be like to be kissed by this Robb Stark.

Theon felt a piercing gaze upon him, and when shifted his eyes to meet it, he saw that Roose Bolton had taken the seat directly across from him and was fixing him with that thing nobody would call a smile.

Robb stood behind his father’s seat, his jaw set firmly until he said, “A moment of silence for my – for the dead.” The seat and arms of the chair were upholstered in black leather, and a deep, detailed engraving of a snarling wolf’s head surveyed the council with obsidian eyes. The men – and Cat – bowed their heads. Theon looked down dutifully, and the old words filled his head: “What is dead may never die.” But this wasn’t the place for that.

He glanced up to find Roose Bolton still staring at him.

”It’s best not to interest him.”

“Gentlemen.” Robb nodded a slight apology to his mother before taking his place at the head of the table. Theon resisted looking at him for too long. “Today’s discussion is not a question of retribution; there is no question that justice – for my father and our associates – will be brutal and swift. I’ve called you here today to decide the scope and form of our revenge.”

Besides Robb and Theon, none of the men present was younger than forty, but despite this their faces looked uniformly fierce as they nodded in grim approval. Theon felt suddenly in awe of Robb, who spoke with a hardness that sounded both dangerous and completely controlled.

“And I don’t need to remind you that – while I sincerely seek your counsel tonight – the final decision will be mine. Your loyalty and cooperation are assumed.” Taking his seat, Robb cast a quick glance at his mother and continued, “Our associates in the Capitol inform is that Joffrey Baratheon gave the order for my father’s execution, though I think we can all agree that he wouldn’t have acted without the approval of his family. The reason –” and here Robb hesitated and Theon could see him struggling for composure. “The reason for my father’s death is unclear. What is clear is that it cannot go unavenged. I wish my first real task as head of the Northern Families was any one but this. Tonight I ask you how to best protect our interests and punish those who would destroy us.”

With that, Robb bowed his head slightly and ceded the floor. Theon looked up the table; there were twelve Families represented here, not including the Greyjoys, of course. He was unsure if he was meant to be present in that capacity – he suspected that he was only here as Theon.
“I think a precise retaliation is our best course,” said Rick Cassel. “However much we may want blood, it’s best not to make too large a mess, lest things spiral out of control. Send a small number of men to take out the Baratheon boy and his mother.”

The idea was roundly supported, save by Mr. Karstark, who tugged at his beard and insisted that the consequence of anything less than a total annihilation of the entire Lannister Family would result in a bloody, prolonged war. An argument erupted. Robb wove his fingers together and rested his chin on his knuckles, listening. In that pose, he looked almost childlike.

“Whether or not Tywin Lannister had any involvement in Ned’s execution – and I wouldn’t doubt it for a second – putting a mark out on any individual members of his family will result in a kind of tit-for-tat that will leave all our Families crippled. Any truce we might reach would be broken as soon as a Northman sneezes too loudly. Whatever Joffrey’s reasons were, Tywin is in this for the long game.” He looked pointedly at Robb. “The only way to prevent him from winning is to make sure that our next move is the final one.”

Locke’s voice was reedy and unmistakable: “Still, we need to be careful not to be shortsighted here. Destroying the Lannisters has to involve the participation of all the Families, and there may be other houses who would use such a drastic action as an excuse to turn against the North.” Theon didn’t fail to notice the way Locke’s eyes turned towards him.

The debate continued for some time, and Theon grew bored with it. A quick glance at Robb revealed that he was less bored than frustrated. He was the head of House Stark now – couldn’t he just do as he damn well pleased? The conversation became circuitous, with Karstark and Cassel the main foci of the opposing sides, when – after saying nothing for over an hour – Roose Bolton interjected.

“Or –” Bolton’s voice was its usual softness, and yet the table fell instantly silent as though a gong had been struck and all eyes turned towards him. He looked only at Robb in a manner that implied that they were the only two people of consequence in the entire room. Theon noticed the way his long, thin fingers traced over a knot in the wood of the table. “Or you could make your revenge so terrible and complete – and so perfectly unexpected – that no houses – great or small, North or South – would dare to threaten your Family again.”

“What exactly are you proposing, Bolton?”

“I would be glad to discuss the details of my proposal privately with Mr. Stark.”

The almost teasing tone of it enflamed Mr. Umber’s temper. “The decision is Robb’s,” he conceded, “But any actions involving the collective fate as of the Northern Houses should involve us all.”

Roose turned and eyed Umber with the same expression one might direct at a child throwing a tantrum. “I’m asking for a private audience with Mr. Stark, which is my right to ask and his right to refuse.”

“Whaton?”

Theon nearly jumped at the sound of his name. Robb was looking at him expectantly, and he thought he saw just the faintest hint of affection there. Cat – as well as almost everyone else at the council – looked openly horrified as though they’d only now noticed his presence. Roose gazed at him intently, one eyebrow arched, his eyes inscrutable and unblinking.

What was the thing a Greyjoy ought to say? What was the thing Robb Stark most wanted to hear?
Theon considered carefully before replying, “I think you should kill them all.” He looked down the length of the table with a defiant smirk creeping across his mouth. “And I think you should hear what Mr. Bolton has to say – in private. This is your council, and it’s your decision.”

Roose seemed amused and pleased, and Theon couldn’t tell whether it was because his words had persuaded Robb to hear Bolton our, or because of something else. Robb glanced again at his mother and she assented with a subtle slide of her eyes.

“Alright,” he said heavily. “I’ll hear Mr. Bolton’s ideas this evening and we’ll reconvene for discussion in the morning. Those of you who wish to stay are welcome to our guest rooms.”

Umber muttered something under his breath.

“Something to add, Jon?” Robb had risen and leaned forward, palms against the table. Umber opened his mouth but thought better of it.

“In the morning then,” said Robb coldly.

The men began to file out of the room, once again offering their hands to Robb – even Mr. Umber initiated a perfunctory handshake. Roose Bolton lingered there, and Theon wasn’t sure if he was supposed to leave. Cat remained seated.

“Would you like to meet now, Mr. Bolton?” asked Robb. “Or would you prefer to take a short break?”

“I’d do well with a break. But – and I hope you understand – when I asked to meet with you privately, I meant that we would be… alone.” He looked emphatically at Cat, then at Theon as if he were barely an afterthought. Theon was surprised to feel slightly betrayed, and even more surprised to see his feelings mirrored in Cat’s face when Robb said, “Fine. Let’s meet in my office in fifteen minutes.”

Satisfied, Roose gave a slight bow and moved smoothly around the table and out the double doors. Cat watched him go and when he was out of sight laid a hand on her son’s shoulder.

“Robb –”

“I can handle it, Mom.” Then he placed his hand over hers and added more gently, “Please trust me.”

She nodded, and Theon and Robb watched her disappear down the hallway. Robb sighed and raked his fingers through his hair.

“You know I can handle it, right?”

Theon swallowed. He had faith in Robb – he had always had faith in Robb…

“Yeah, I know.” He bit his lip and ran a finger along the upholstery on the back of Ned’s – Robb’s chair. “But, you know, be careful. With Roose.” Then with a smile, “Watch out for leeches.”

Robb grinned. He allowed his hand to brush lightly against Theon’s.

“Come to my room tonight?”

Theon’s eyes darted to the small black sphere that contained the camera in this part of the room. He wondered who was watching him, now that Jory was gone.
“Maybe. I have to make a couple phone calls, and you’ve got a lot to take care of.”

*

*Jon, I think we need to – I think maybe we should –

Aw fuck.

And he had every intention of breaking it off. What, did he seriously think that he could just keep Jon in the dark indefinitely? Jon seemed happy enough to buy into Theon’s bullshit now, but eventually he would ask for the whole truth. And the whole truth seemed to be that Theon belonged in the company of cut-throats and criminals and merciless men. He belonged with Robb.

*Then where does Jon belong?

Theon took a deep breath and held it as he dialed the number for the group home and waited through five agonizing ring tones before Mr. Aemon answered and quickly passed the phone off to Jon.

“Jon –”

“Jon? Oh my God, I was starting to think you weren’t gonna call me.”

But he could hear the relief in Jon’s voice, almost quivering, and he could tell that Jon was smiling, probably turning to face the wall so no one around could see it.

“I’m sorry. I’ve just, um, had a lot on my mind lately.”

Theon swore he could hear the sound of rubber bands snapping and was just about the plow ahead with, “I need to talk to you about something,” when Jon interrupted:

“I miss you.”

He felt like he’d just been hit with a wave of cold water. Jon had been thinking of him. Jon had been missing him, probably jerking himself off and wishing for him. Jon had been waiting and hoping for him. As though Jon were reading his thoughts, he added – in a much quieter voice, “I want you. Like, bad. When can I see you?”

*

It was after ten p.m. when Theon killed his headlights and rolled to a slow stop in the alley behind St. Brigid’s, as per Jon’s hushed and excited instructions, and he felt a little silly when he realized his own heart was racing too. The house was dark, save for the light in Jon’s bedroom that went out as soon as Theon arrived; in the moonlight, Theon saw Jon exiting his window legs-first onto the roof and shuffling carefully down its incline until he reached the rain gutter and paused.

*Seriously?

It was a good eight feet from the roof to the ground, and Theon held his breath as he watched Jon pace along the edge for several seconds before jumping. He tucked into a forward roll as he hit the grass, springing up onto his feet again and dusting himself off. Jon glanced back at the house once more and hurried to the car.

Theon turned off the dome light just as Jon opened the door.

“Hey,” Jon whispered, still breathless and giddy from his jump.
“Hey.” Theon put the Zagato in gear and crept slowly out of the alleyway, barely touching the accelerator. Jon left his door ajar until they were far enough away for him to slam it closed.

Stopping at the mouth of the alley, Theon looked left for traffic, and when he looked right, Jon grabbed him by the collar and kissed him hard enough that Theon’s foot slid off the brake and the car jolted forward a few feet.

Jon’s lips formed into a smile against Theon’s, a breath of laughter before he bit down hard on Theon’s bottom lip. His hands left Theon’s shirt to snake up around his neck and into his hair.

“You sneak out of the group home a lot?” asked Theon before pressing forward for another kiss and reminding himself to keep his hands on the wheel.

“No,” said Jon. “But I have a lot of practice jumping off the roof.”

Theon couldn’t tell how serious Jon was, but he didn’t really care. He put the coup in neutral and pulled on the parking brake a little more forcefully than he meant to, fighting against the seatbelt to get closer, to get his tongue further into Jon’s mouth, to get his hands in Jon’s hair, still damp from a shower. The idea that he’d even considered not doing this seemed absurd.

“Are you like, set on going to The Dungeon?” he asked.

“Pretty much.” Jon pulled away, pushed his hair out of his eyes and frowned. “Why? Do you not wanna go?”

“I mean, we could just go park somewhere and make out. Or like, whatever.”

Jon bit his lip and Theon didn’t have to look down to know that he was reaching for his rubber bands. He reached out a hand to intercept Jon’s.

“Or whatever you want to do.”

“I’d like – I want to go to the club.”

Theon squeezed Jon’s hand and then let go, releasing the parking brake and putting the car into gear. Jon still seemed jittery, and Theon wondered if maybe Jon wasn’t a little afraid, now that it came right down to it.

“I – I really want to,” said Jon softly. “You know. With you. It’s just that – I kind of like this. Like, just knowing that you want to too, and knowing that we will, you know?”

“You’re fucking killing me,” said Theon. “Let’s go get an ID for you, yeah?”

Jon grinned. “Yeah. Besides, we still have like, the whole entire night.”

*  

As they merged onto the freeway, Theon noticed Jon leaned forward in his seat, the sun visor pulled down and the little mirror on it flipped open. Its tiny, yellow lights illuminated Jon’s eyes as he outlined them in black eyeliner. His mouth hung comically agape as he used his ring-fingers to blend around the edges.

“Are you seriously wearing make-up?”

“You’re wearing a hot pink shirt,” retorted Jon without looking at him. “To an industrial club.”
“Will I *embarrass* you?” Theon snarked.

“Nah, just yourself.” Jon snapped the mirror closed, shut the visor and smiled at Theon. “I don’t give a shit what you wear. And I’m pretty sure you’re just deliberately being obnoxious.”

Theon took his eyes off the road for as long as he dared. Jon wore those same ripped black jeans with a pair of black Vans and a tight-fitting, faux-vintage *Evil Dead* t-shirt. The purple polish was chipping away from his fingernails, and the number of rubber bands around his left wrist had at least doubled. His eyes seemed to smolder as he gazed back at Theon, leaning in to rest a hand on Theon’s thigh.

“You like it, don’t you?” asked Jon smugly.

“Seems dangerous to put a pointed pencil near your eye while I’m driving sixty miles per hour.”

Jon rolled his eyes. “Thanks, Dad.”

The silence that followed was painfully awkward – more so for Theon – Jon broke it as quickly as he could.

“I trust you to not get in a wreck.”

*

“Promise me you won’t tell anyone about this?”

Theon pressed a hand to Jon’s chest, stopping him a few yards short of the door to an old Air-Stream trailer that sat – seemingly abandoned – in the middle of a large, overgrown lot bordering one of the canals that ran through the outskirts of the city proper.

Jon glanced dubiously at the trailer, then back at Theon and frowned.

“This is fucking sketchy.”

“Jaqen’s a weird guy,” admitted Theon. “But he’s also like, easily weirded *out*, so just act like everything’s normal. And promise me you won’t tell.”

Jon considered, then nodded. “Yeah, okay. I promise.”

Theon grabbed Jon’s hand, threaded their fingers together and led him up to the trailer. He gave a single, solid knock on the door.

It opened a fraction, and a crack of almost blinding light fell across Theon’s face. He put his hand up, and squinting through his fingers saw a wide, green eye peering at him, then at Jon.

“Jaqen, it’s me. Um, Theon Greyjoy.”

“A man is surprised to see you again so soon,” Jaqen replied in his unnamable accent. “And who is this?”

Theon tugged on Jon’s hand and pulled him a couple steps closer. “This is Jon. He needs an ID.”

The door swung open completely, revealing an interior that was unbearably bright, though not a trace of light showed through any of the windows. They stepped inside, and the door closed behind them, leaving the Air-Stream beside the canal a picture of darkness once more.

The windows were covered inside with light-proof fabric, stapled around the edges. Jon looked around in wonder at the sides of the trailer, covered in photos and documents. The whole place
smelled of plastic and mild chemicals, and the lights themselves were UV lights, designed to simulate the sun. In one corner sat a small workstation, a little desk buried in paper. Beside it was a table with a laptop attached to a scanner, copier and printer. A small photo station took up the front end of the trailer – a Canon point-and-shoot mounted on a tripod that faced a drab blue backdrop. Looking into what used to be a bathroom, Jon saw an enlarger and ribbons of film negatives strung from the ceiling.

The most bizarre part of the operation was Jaqen himself – everything about him was indistinguishable. He looked to be anywhere from twenty to forty, depending on his posture, and his features were nothing extraordinary, yet they were somehow exotic and combined with his skin tone to suggest some Persian, or maybe Japanese, or maybe American-Indian or mestizo. Even his eyes were different colors – the right one an emerald-green, the left one a deep brown. He wore the same old beige sweater Theon had last seen him in, and he wondered if Jaqen didn’t live as well as work here.

“News has reached a man – news of Ned Stark’s death.” He looked at Theon, who tried vainly to intimate with his eyes that he didn’t wish to speak about the Starks just now. “A man is sorry to hear.”

Jon frowned. “Ned Stark? Is that your, um, your guardian?”

“No,” said Theon, not looking at him. “Someone else.”

Jaqen had picked up a manila envelope from his desk, but seeing the way Theon stiffened at the mention of Ned’s name and quickly understanding the secret between them, he cleared his throat and replaced the envelope in a stack other papers.

“So.” Jaqen moved through the cramped space to stand in front of Jon. “A boy needs an identity. What’s your name, boy?”

“Jon. Jon Snow.”

Jaqen gestured to the blue backdrop at the front of the trailer. “Stand over there, Jon Snow.”

Theon folded his arms and watched as Jaqen slouched to look at the camera screen, then up at Jon. Jaqen stepped around the tripod and before Jon could stop him, he was using his fingers to brush Jon’s hair out of his face. Jon blinked and shook his head, but Jaqen persisted.

“A boy has a pretty face,” said Jaqen, glancing at Theon as he returned to stand behind the camera. Jon blushed and Theon smirked.

“Now hold still, Jon Snow, and try not to smile.” Jaqen snapped three photos, then removed the memory card from the camera and brushed past Theon to sit at his workstation. He unfolded a pair of delicate reading glasses and began to type.

“What is your favorite number, Jon Snow?”

“Um, three, I guess.”

“And tell me your favorite fruit.”

Jon arched an eyebrow at Theon. “Peaches.”

“And your birthday.”
“March fifth, 1998.”

Jaqen entered a few swift keystrokes and the printer began to whirr.

“It will take several minutes to print and dry,” he said, spinning in his chair to face Theon, his hands folded across his stomach.

“You mind if I have a smoke outside?” asked Theon.

“A man will join you.”

Jaqen opened the door for Theon, but when Jon began to follow them out, he barred the way and said “Two men must speak privately.” Seeing the nervous flicker in Jon’s eyes, he smiled slightly and added, “A boy has no reason to worry.”

Outside, Theon handed Jaqen a cigarette and his lighter. The two of them walked around the back of the trailer and stood at the edge of the canal. The water was black and silent.

“I didn’t know you smoked,” said Theon.

Jaqen shrugged. “A man does things differently from day to day.” He took a drag and blew a chain of smoke rings up towards the crisp, clear sky. “A boy doesn’t know who he is,” he said.

“Nope,” said Theon, feeling somewhat defensive and also frightened by how easily Jaqen had surmised the truth. “And I’m not planning on telling him.”

When Jaqen handed Jon his new ID, any doubts the boy had been harboring were replaced by a broad grin as he tilted the piece of plastic to catch the light. The holographic snowflake pattern underlying the text shimmered and Jon whistled,

“Wow, this is great! Thank you!”

“Let me see it,” said Theon. And damn if Jon didn’t look good even in a shitty driver’s license photo. He held the ID up beside Jon’s face.

“So, who are you?”

“Jon Snow.”

“That’s a really nice name. Where are you from?”

“Oh, I live here in Wintertown at #3 Peach St.”

“Wow, we’re practically neighbors! I’d love to come over and suck your dick sometime, but you look a little young – what’s your birthday?”

Jon turned red and muttered, “March fifth, 1996.”

Following Jon out of the trailer, Theon winked at Jaqen. “Thanks again.”

Jaqen nodded and said nothing, but nearly slammed the door on Theon’s heels.

The grass covering the lot was thick and coarse, and in the moonlight looked almost white. The stalks were tall enough that Jon brushed them with his fingertips as he walked.

“You weren’t kidding.” He glanced over his shoulder at the little trailer. “A man is fucking weird.”
Theon hit the automatic lock button on his keychain and up ahead the lights of the Zagato flared twice. “Yeah, but he’s the best.”

Theon reached for the driver’s-side door handle, but before he could open it, Jon had spun him around and pinned his back against the cool glass of the window.

“Thank you. For doing this for me.”

Jon licked his lips as he leaned in to kiss Theon – slowly at first, then with more urgency as Theon slipped a hand up the front of Jon’s shirt. He could feel the heat in Jon’s chest, and he could feel Jon’s hard-on against his own, and when Jon moved his mouth to lick and bite his way down Theon’s throat, Theon felt ashamed at the little sound he made.

“You’re a fucking tease.”

Jon grinned and reached down to undo Theon’s belt, then his fly, and Theon gasped at the warmth of Jon’s hand – “Oh God, fucking finally” – on his cock, the thumb passing over the tip before tightening into a fist around him.

Theon closed his eyes and pushed his pants down around his thighs to give Jon a better angle. He swallowed when he heard the sound of Jon dropping to his knees in the grass and trembled when he felt Jon’s breath against him. When he opened them again, Jon was looking up at him with those big, black-lined eyes, his lips just ghosting over the head of Theon’s prick as he asked, “Do you want me to?”

Theon swallowed again and nodded.

As many times as he’d imagined it, he couldn’t believe the softness of Jon’s mouth, or the depraved, wet sounds it was making. He let his head drop back and looked up at the stars, which seemed unusually bright in this dark little corner of the city. The cool air on his skin clashed pleasantly with the heat rising inside him. He felt Jon re-situate himself, heard the sound of Jon’s zipper.

Theon knotted his fingers in Jon’s hair and with his other hand clutched at the rearview mirror to steady himself.

“You don’t stop,” he breathed.

Theon groaned when Jon pulled away with an obscene popping sound, a thread of saliva hanging from his bottom lip. Jon flashed a wicked smile, then hooked Theon around the waist and pulled him down into the grass. Theon’s elbows landed hard in the dirt, and before he could catch his breath, Jon was wrestling to get on top of him.

Their legs were a tangle of knees and pants and underwear, and when they finally came to rest, Theon was a little bewildered at how he’d ended up with his back on the ground and Jon’s thighs on either side of his ribs.

Robb would’ve taken the opportunity to gloat about this victory, but Jon only stared at Theon with an intensity that bordered on avarice, pushing his shirt halfway up to get a better view. His fingertips traced along the tentacles that covered Theon’s right side, then stilled for a moment. Jon’s muscles contracted at the touch of the air; his erection jutted up darkly against the pale skin of his stomach, and Theon felt like he was in a dream.

“Jon –”

“I changed my mind,” said Jon, pushing his hair out of his face. “I don’t think I can wait anymore.”
“Oh thank fucking Christ.”

Jon made quick work of kicking off his shoes and pants, then pulling Theon’s jean’s roughly down to his knees. Theon sat up on his elbows to watch as Jon bent down to lick a stripe along the underside of his cock, Jon smiling to himself when Theon’s hips jerked vainly upwards. Jon reached for his pants and fumbled through the pockets until he found what he was looking for.

Theon raised an eyebrow. “You want me to wear a rubber? I’m a little offended.”

“Wear it or don’t fuck me,” said Jon gruffly, tearing at the corner of the foil with his teeth.

“You’re going to want me to get you ready first.”

“I’m pretty fucking ready.”

“No, I mean like, you’ll be too tight. It’ll hurt.”

Jon rolled the condom down the length of Theon’s prick and then tore open a packet of Astroglide; he poured its contents into his palm, slicked his loosely over the condom and then reached between his own legs. Grabbing Theon’s cock and situating himself just above it, Jon smirked at the way Theon gasped as he lowered himself to take just the tip of it.

“You – you’ve done this before?”

“I’ve been practicing,” said Jon, taking Theon a little deeper. “On myself.”

Theon inhaled sharply. His fingernails dug into Jon’s thighs and his head snapped back as Jon twisted his hips slightly. He found himself actually grateful for the condom – it might prevent an embarrassingly short performance.

“Since when?” he choked.

Jon rocked back until Theon’s cock was completely inside him. “Since the first time we made out in your car.”

“And everyone thinks I’m a whore.”

“Are you?”

Theon closed his eyes and held his breath for a few seconds before replying, “Sort of. Probably. Yeah.”

Jon dropped forward onto his elbows, threading his fingers through Theon’s hair, sucking and kissing beneath his jaw, still shifting his hips slowly forward and then pushing them back. Theon had his eyes screwed shut, his teeth cutting into his bottom lip as he arched up to meet Jon’s tempo. Jon smiled and nuzzled Theon just beneath the ear.

“Tell me how this feels,” he murmured.

“So. fucking. perfect. How is it for you?”

“It’s alright,” said Jon with a husky little laugh.

Theon gave a hard thrust, enough to make Jon’s eyes cross and his breath catch in his throat.

“Don’t tease me right now,” he growled, gliding his hands up along Jon’s sides and then raking his
nails down again. He felt Jon’s knuckles grazing over his stomach, felt a drop of pre-cum against his skin. Theon reached his thumb down to wipe it up and then smeared it across Jon’s lips before kissing him hungrily. Jon moaned into Theon’s mouth.

“I think I might come soon.”

Theon took Jon’s cock in one hand and with the other grabbed the back of Jon’s neck, driving himself up and into Jon has hard as he dared. Jon’s breath was coming fast and shallow, his hands fisted in Theon’s hair, their foreheads pressed together.

“Come for me, then.” He tilted his head back, but Jon was too far gone even to kiss him. Theon sucked at Jon’s bottom lip, and he felt Jon’s whole body go taut – once, and then again and he felt the hot spurt of Jon’s seed on his stomach.

Jon collapsed against Theon’s chest and Theon gripped Jon’s hips, pushing them down as he fucked Jon desperately.

“Oh fuck.”

Jon gasped when Theon came, and in the morning when he went to piss, he discovered five small, faint bruises on either side of his hips.

After Theon’s blood began to settle, he became aware that the air was chilly and the grass was itchy and Jon’s cum was drying sticky between them. Jon rested his chin on Theon’s sternum, using his fingers to comb the tangles from Theon’s hair, an irrepressible little smile on his lips.

Theon brought a hand up to tuck a few of those manic black curls behind Jon’s ear.

“You still want to go out?”

Jon pursed his lips thoughtfully. “Kind of, yeah.”

“You’ll have to re-do your make-up.”

Jon laughed. “I knew you liked it.”

*  

The blaring of the bass system reverberated for blocks down the streets of the warehouse district, fast and heavy like the sound of a runaway freight train. Theon wondered what he was in for. He’d parked his car on the top floor of the parking garage adjacent to the club, and stepping into the elevator with Jon, he realized something.

“You were planning on that, weren’t you?” he said with a grin. “‘Take me to the club Theon.’ With a condom and a packet of lube in your pocket. You complete slut.”

“I was a virgin up until 45 minutes ago.”

“Virgins can still be sluts.”

Jon shrugged. “Maybe I was hoping.”

Theon lifted Jon’s chin and laid a kiss at the corner of his mouth.

“Was it what you wanted?”
Jon nodded almost shyly. “Yeah.”

Theon shook his head and smiled. “You’re such a fucking trip sometimes.”

The line outside The Dungeon was a dozen yards long, and Jon fidgeted with his ID.

“This is so awesome,” he said, practically shouting to be heard.

“Listen,” said Theon, putting an arm around Jon’s shoulders and bringing their faces closer together. “Put it in your wallet. The trick to this is that when they ask for your ID, you act like, really fucking put out. Like, ‘Don’t you know who I am?’ Like, you’re almost offended that they’re asking, you know? If you just shove the ID in the guy’s face, he’s gonna think that’s weird.”

By the time they came to the front of the line, Jon was so busy trying to sneak a glimpse into the club that he didn’t notice the shape of a wolf’s head on his ID, glowing bright beneath the bouncer’s blacklight.

_Goddamnit, Jaqen._

“Hands.”

Jon waited obediently while the bouncer drew a pair of thick, black X’s in Sharpie on the backs of his hands. The same sigil appeared on Theon’s ID, and he handed Theon a wristband and eyed both boys cagily as he said, “To the left.”

Following the stanchions to the left of the entryway took them through a short, darkened corridor, and when they stepped out the other side, Theon realized they had just bypassed security. At the main entrance, a pair of young men held their hands behind their heads as they were frisked, and a girl swore as she opened her purse for examination.

Jon looked questioningly at Theon, who only shrugged. “VIP, I guess.”

The place was packed, and Theon felt the heat hit him like a wave – he smelled sweat and alcohol and a noxious blend of colognes, perfumes and marijuana. The building itself was an old warehouse, cavernous with a high ceiling and metal rafters. The area near the entry – the coat-check, a set of restrooms and a modest bar – was covered with blood-red carpet, but the rest of the floor was concrete – sticky with beer and covered in graffiti. There were no windows in the black walls – only long rectangles of a cold, cobalt lighting covered with elaborate wrought-iron bars. A stage loomed at the back end of the warehouse, surrounded by a massive sound system, and above it a set of steel tracks from which colored lights flashed and pivoted, painting the crowd in blue, purple and white light.

“It’s a good thing you’re the hottest person here,” shouted Theon as they made their way further into the club.

“Yeah, why’s that?”

“Because it’s the only way I’m ever gonna be able to find you again in a whole building full of people with long black hair and black t-shirts.”

Jon laughed. “Yeah, I hate to say it, but I’m kind of glad you wore that stupid shirt.”

Glancing up, Theon realized there was a mezzanine level with an expansive bar overlooking the
main floor.

“I think I might go get a drink,” he said, pointing up the stairs.

Jon frowned.

“What? What’s wrong?”

“You’re my ride home.”

“I can have one drink.”

Jon bit his lip and snapped at his rubber bands. “I said I would trust you to not get in a wreck, so I guess I’ll just have to do that.”

*I really wish you wouldn’t.*

“Do you want me to bring you something?”

Jon displayed the backs of his hands and Theon rolled his eyes.

“Oh please. That doesn’t mean much, but I’ll take it as a no.”

“I think one first is plenty for tonight.”

Theon pulled Jon in for a kiss, hummed when Jon bit down on his tongue.

“Go dance,” he said, cocking his head towards the floor. “I promise I’ll be down in a couple minutes.”

And he did feel a little guilty when he ordered up *two* shots of tequila, but it wasn’t like Jon would notice the difference. He wiped his mouth on his knuckles and looked over the rail at the dance floor, but damned if he could spot Jon from up here. The crowd was so thick, and the thought that he might actually lose the boy hastened his steps down the metal grating that lead to the floor.

He began winding his way through the crush of bodies, stopping to glare at a girl who sloshed half her beer on him. The music was absolutely deafening – to Theon it sounded like a cross between a spaceship and a jackhammer – and his guts were starting to tighten with panic when a cool hand grabbed him by the wrist.

“T ook you long enough!” Jon was already dripping with sweat, a huge, slap-happy grin on his face.

“I was worried I wouldn’t find you.”

Jon recoiled slightly and scowled. “Jesus Christ, what did you drink?”

“Tequila.” Theon grabbed Jon by the hips and yanked him off balance so that he stumbled forward into Theon’s chest. “Sometime when you’re not being such a bitch, I’ll buy you a chocolate cake shot.”

“What’s in a chocolate cake shot?”

Theon shrugged. “Hell if I know, but you chase it with lemon and it tastes exactly like chocolate cake.”

“Sounds like kind of a girly drink.” He reached for Theon’s hand, weaving their fingers together
and gave a tug. “Come on, let’s get closer to the stage.”

Theon wasn’t exactly sure if what they were doing counted as dancing, but the throng was so dense and so unyielding that he felt he couldn’t really be blamed for having a hard-on. And Jon didn’t seem to care at all – in fact Jon was having a great time, so oblivious to everything but the sound of the music and the feeling of Theon’s body pressed against him that Theon didn’t even mind any of the blatant ogling directed their way.

The fans mounted into the ceiling high above them did nothing to lessen the suffocating, cumulative heat of kinetic energy and sweat and breath and surreptitiously-lit joints, and eventually Jon shouted, “Do you mind if I take off my shirt?”

Which Theon thought was possibly the dumbest question ever.

Jon tucked his shirt down the back of his pants, raked his soaking wet hair out of his face and threw his arms around Theon’s neck, laughing. Theon held onto Jon by the crests of his hips, though Jon’s skin was slick to the point of being slippery. He could feel Jon’s heartbeat, pounding away against his own, and he could feel Jon’s breath, sticky against his neck. It was dizzying – the contrast between this noisy, cramped club and the quietude of the field beside Jaqen’s trailer. But Jon – Jon was the overwhelming consistency between them, and with Jon’s arms around him and his face buried in Jon’s hair, Theon began to feel his vertigo give way to a sort of euphoria – an almost calm, unfamiliar sensation that things were right.

It occurred to him that for most people his age, tonight would be an epic night – sneaking your underage boyfriend out past his curfew, then having sex in a field and using fake ID’s to get into a nightclub – but to Theon it was the first time he could recall actually feeling sort of normal. The thought made him sad for a moment, but then that passed and he found himself smiling.

He felt Jon’s hand in his hair, Jon’s lips against his ear saying, “Do you want to go find someplace a little quieter?” And then Jon’s teeth on his neck, Jon’s hard prick against his thigh.

Theon put a hand on Jon’s chest and pushed him away to get a better view. Jon’s eyes were dark with want.

“What are you smiling at?” he asked.

When he thought about it later – and he did think about it often – he couldn’t say what precisely caught his eye that drew his gaze just over Jon’s right shoulder – some flare of the light, maybe – but when his eyes landed on Vayon Poole, everything seemed to stop. The music turned abruptly to silence and the crowd to empty air.

Theon blinked, but there was Poole, not ten feet away, and that meant Flint as well, somewhere at a right angle to Poole, which meant one of two possible locations. Assuming that Jon was the intended target. Jon was still standing there, smiling right up until the second that Theon shoved him hard to the ground.

He saw the glint of Poole’s pistol as he reached up under his shirt for his own. The first bullet clipped Theon in the left ear and he felt the warmth of blood, but no pain. Theon was only vaguely aware of the sudden surge of people, falling over themselves to get away. He took aim and his first shot hit Poole in the jugular, an eruption of blood that caused the man to instinctively grab at his neck with both hands. A second shot entered below Poole’s left eye and blew the back of his head open. Pool staggered forward for almost two full steps before collapsing to the ground.

In his peripheral vision, Theon registered Flint and dropped to his knees, allowing Flint’s first three rounds to pass harmlessly over his head and bury themselves in one of the PA’s, sending up a horrifying electronic squeal that only compounded the chaos. Theon emptied his clip into Flint’s
chest and watched Flint topple backwards.

All of this took less than ten seconds, and then the whole scene roared to life. The air smelled like gunpowder, filled with the screams of the dancers as they stampeded towards the front exit, security trying in vain to create order where there was only ear-shattering pandemonium. Theon looked down at Jon, who was gazing up at him with abject wonder and fear, his face ghostly with shock.

Searching, Theon spotted the emergency exit behind the stage and held a hand down to Jon.

“We have to go.”

Jon stared numbly at Theon’s hand, then back up at Theon’s face, squinting as though he didn’t understand what Theon was saying.

“Now, Jon. We have to get out of here.”

Jon clutched at Theon’s hand, but when Theon tried to pull him to his feet, his knees gave out.

“Jon, get up.”

Jon willed himself to stand, a look of determination fixed on his face as Theon took him by the hand and pulled him along, moving as quickly as he could around the stage and out the rear exit.

In the harsh lights of the parking garage elevator, Jon looked almost morbidly pale, and when Theon looked down, he saw the blood from his ear dripping steadily onto the linoleum. He brought a finger up to delicately examine the wound, feeling the ragged edge where the top of his cartilage had been.

Suddenly realizing just how close Theon had come to having his brains blown out, Jon slumped against the wall of the elevator, his arms folded across his stomach as he started to double over, his breath rasping and shallow.

“Jon, look at me.”

Jon obeyed, but his pupils were glassy and dilated.

“Do you hear me right now?” Theon reached out tentatively for Jon’s cheek, brushed his thumb over a small scratch there. Jon swallowed drily and nodded.

“Good. I need you to keep it together for just a little bit longer, okay? We need to get in my car and get the fuck out of here. We’ll get away from here and then we can both lose our shit, okay? Do you think you can keep it together long enough to get into my car? Can you do that for me?”

Jon nodded again, a little more resolutely. “Okay. Yeah. I can do that.”

Theon had to slam the brakes at the parking garage exit as a familiar town-car tore down the street. He didn’t need to look to know who was driving, and peeled out of the garage as the sound of sirens grew closer in the distance.

* 

“Do you think you’ll ever kill anybody?”

I hope not, Theon thought, though to Robb he’d only shrugged. “I dunno. Maybe.”
He thought about seeing his brothers’ bodies, about wishing in that deep, terrible part of himself that he had been the one to do it. He wondered what it felt like.
Chapter Nine

Chapter Summary

Theon tries to make sense of what happened, does the right thing and then of course does the wrong thing as well.

Chapter Notes

I've been updating this thing about every week, but I'm afraid that updates may be further in between for the next lil bit. April thru May is a crazy season at work and so I'm afraid I'll be partially redirecting that time and creative energy. But never fear! I am still going strong! Thanks to everybody who's commented/left kudos so far!

Theon had no recollection of how old he was when he learned how to lie to people. Asha was a liar and Rick was a liar and Maron loved lying, and so it only made sense that Theon was a liar too. And though the price of being caught trying to deceive his father was a thrashing, Theon intuited that the punishment had more to do with salving Balon’s pride than instilling ethics in his children.

Naturally, it began as a survival mechanism – an honest little boy stood no chance with brothers like his, and a willingness to bend the truth about things he’d seen or heard or done meant less suffering at their hands. Sometimes Asha told him mean little lies, but just as often they were kind ones. It wasn’t until he left home that Theon realized she was the best at it. Rick only lied to save his own skin, and while Maron was a savant of duplicity, he had a tell – a little smirk not unlike the one Theon often saw in the mirror. But Asha was stone-cold and straight-faced; she could tell you it was sunny out, and she would make you believe it, even if you were already soaking with rain.

The Starks were confounding with their notions of honesty. Ned Stark expected the truth at all times, despite the fact that he often withheld it himself and despite the fact that his entire empire was built on deception of one kind or another. And yet Theon never saw Ned as two-faced – either too clever or too simple to be bothered by the way his conduct as a father and husband contrasted with his willingness to commit extortion and perjury.

It wasn’t long after his arrival in Winterfell that Theon realized Robb would believe literally every word that came out of his mouth, and for a few weeks he amused himself by lying to Robb constantly. They were harmless little things, but eventually he started to feel guilty about it. Even when he was caught out – Robb repeating some fib to Ned or Cat – he knew Robb never suspected Theon of deceiving him; it must’ve been a mistake, or maybe they just did things differently on the Iron Islands. Robb trusted him, and so he gave up lying and learned to be very deft at sidestepping the truth rather than crashing painfully against it.

Jon was the exception. In a way, Theon had been more truthful with Jon than with anyone, but he’d also lied to Jon more than anyone, and he’d started lying to himself, and now they were both paying the price.

As they fled the warehouse district in the Zagato, Theon was shamefully grateful that Jon was so
focused on staving off a full-on panic attack that he hadn’t asked any questions yet. Theon’s mind began to work, and as he formulated a plausible explanation that didn’t include the name Stark, it dawned on him that he could never see Jon again. Not even for a moment, not even from a distance.

You’re such a worthless asshole.

When he pulled into the parking lot of a suburban WalMart, Theon wavered about whether to bring Jon inside – looking like he might faint any minute – or leave him in the car and risk him running off or worse.

“Why the fuck are we at WalMart?”

“I need a few things,” replied Theon, taking him by the hand and pulling him down the aisles.

In the men’s section, Theon eyeballed Jon before grabbing a white Volcom hoodie, a plain black t-shirt, a pair of Wranglers, some off-brand sneakers and a Corona baseball cap. In sporting goods, he picked up two boxes of ammunition, a pair of hunting knives and a backpack.

At the checkout counter he asked for a pack of Camels and ignored the way the cashier stared at the blood that covered the left side of his face and neck. As she rang up the clothes, Jon tossed a packet of one-hundred rubber bands onto the conveyer.

“I’m going to need these,” he said, and even though his lips were still about two shades too pale, they turned up into the slightest of smiles.

Theon stopped at the ATM on the way out the door, taking Jon’s hand again as they exited through the sliding doors.

“Stay close to me,” he instructed, glancing around the parking lot.

So Robb had found out about Jon. But had he learned the truth while going over his father’s accounts, or by having Theon shadowed? Were Poole and Flint sent to kill Ned Stark’s bastard son, or to put an end to Theon’s affair? The Family must’ve had an associate at The Dungeon – Theon could see no other possibility – but was this person put on the look-out for Jon Snow or Theon Greyjoy?

When Jon finally asked him, it was softly: “When are going to tell me what’s going on?”

“When we get where we’re going,” replied Theon, putting his car in gear.

“Where are we going?”

“Back to see Jaqen.”

* 

The coup jostled painfully as Theon drove it over the curb and straight through the empty lot towards the Air-Stream. Hearing the squealing of the brakes, Jaqen came to the door holding a shotgun at his shoulder.

“Jaqen!” Theon exited the car slowly, hands raised, while Jon waved through the passenger-side window.

Jaqen lowered the weapon, still obviously unsettled, and waited for an explanation. Theon
wondered if he ever actually slept.

“Jon needs new ID.”

“A boy lost his ID so soon?” A note of irritation colored Jaqen’s usually-placid tone.

Theon shook his head. “No, I mean a new ID. He needs a social and a passport. He needs – he needs to disappear.” Taking a few steps closer, he added in an urgent whisper, “They’re trying to kill him.”

Jaqen understood immediately and asked for no further information.

Theon beckoned Jon inside the trailer, and when they went inside, Jaqen caught sight of Theon’s ear. He reached for it, pushing Theon’s hair – brittle with blood – out of the way.

“A man can take care of this,” he offered.

Theon swatted Jaqen’s fingers away and tilted his head towards Jon. “Take care of him first.”

Jon looked lost in the middle of the tiny Air-Stream, plucking his rubber bands despondently. His skin was beginning to regain its color, but his eyes retained their stunned expression.

“Theon, please tell me what’s happening.” He sounded almost frightened.

Theon sighed and looked away, mustering the energy for this one final deception.

“That was – that was supposed to be a hit. Those two guys – they were trying to kill me.”

Jon’s mouth dropped open. “A hit? You mean, like fucking gangster shit?” His breathing sped up. “You mean that was – that wasn’t just some random – those guys were after you?”

Jaqen raised an eyebrow but continued setting up his equipment in silence.

“Yeah. They were after me.” Theon spotted a metal folding chair against one wall and opened it up in the middle of the trailer. “Take your shirt and pants off.”

“Who were they? Who sent them? Who would – who would want you dead?” He looked at Theon distrustfully. “You – you told me you didn’t have anything to do with all that shit. With your dad. You said you didn’t have anything to do with him.”

“I’m my father’s only son,” said Theon. “There are plenty of people who’d still want to see me – out of the picture, you know?”

Jon folded his arms. “Like who?”

“Like my uncles, for instance.”

“Why didn’t you ever tell me about any of that?”

He’d expected Jon to be angry, but instead the boy just seemed hurt, looking at him the way a wounded animal might to demand an explanation for why it had just been hit by a car.

Theon felt his throat constricting. “You think – you think I wanted to waste time talking about that ugly bullshit? I don’t even think about that shit when I’m with you.” He wiped his nose on the back of his hand and blinked back the sting in his eyes. “Just take off your shirt and pants.”
Jon did as he was told, pausing for a moment with his shirt still wrapped around his forearms, looking completely awkward and beautiful, and when he blew a few strands of hair out of his eyes, Theon felt like his heart might fly out of his chest. Jon stood in front of him, pants and shirt and shoes in a pile on the floor, his hands crossed modestly in front of his boxers. Theon motioned for him to sit in the metal chair.

“So what are we doing here? You fucking wasted those guys.”

Theon cringed. It sounded like something Robb would say. He crouched in front of Jon, ran a finger up the inside of Jon’s thigh over a cluster of small, raised scars he hadn’t seen before. He wanted to kiss them. “They’ll try again,” he said. “And now they’ll know that you were with me.” He noticed the eyeliner still clinging to the corners of Jon’s eyes. “Somebody at the club had to tell them I was there. They’ll find witnesses, or security footage. And they’ll start looking for you, hoping that maybe you can lead them to me. They’ll hurt you if they have to. So we have to do what we can to hide you.”

“It would be best to bleach his hair,” said Jaqen. He rolled up his sleeves and came over to examine Jon thoughtfully.

“We don’t have time for that,” said Theon.

Jaqen reached down almost gingerly, sliding one of Jon’s rubber bands off and using it to pull his own hair back into a lanky ponytail.

“Just get the clippers.”

“What?” Jon shot straight up in the chair, craning his neck to watch Jaqen rifle through a box until he produced an electric razor with a half-inch guard. “No. No no no no fucking way You are not fucking touching my hair!” He wriggled out from under Jaqen’s hands, clutching the edge of the chair and shaking his head violently.

Theon didn’t know whether to laugh or cry. “Jon, you have to, okay? Hey.” He brought a hand up to cradle Jon’s cheek and combed his fingers through a thick snarl of curls. “Hey, it’ll grow back, yeah? I know it’s not fair. You know I love your hair. But please just let him cut it.”

Jon continued pouting but stopped resisting. The drone of the clippers resonated in the Air-Stream and Theon watched the clumps of long, black hair fall to the floor. Seeing that Jon’s eyes were closed, he grabbed a few locks and tucked them into his pocket. He glanced up to find Jaqen blinking back at him.

“How does it look?” asked Jon, still clenching his eyes shut.

“Well, right now it looks like a mullet.” Theon ran his thumb over Jon’s temple where the hair was already buzzed. “Still sexy though.”

Jon laughed and Theon smiled to himself.

“What next?” Jon asked with a sigh, as Jaqen brushed the trimmings off the back of his neck and shoulders.

Theon chucked the grocery bag full of clothes at him. “Put these on.”

Jon frowned at the Wranglers. “Only because I like you.”

Theon wished himself dead.
The jeans hung low on Jon’s hips, just a size too large. Before Jon could slip the black t-shirt over his head, Theon stopped him. He pressed his palm in the center of Jon’s chest, then slid it up Jon’s neck and into his hair.

Jon closed his eyes and leaned into the touch. “That feels so good,” he admitted.

“Yeah,” said Theon softly. He kissed Jon once on the lips, then again, and then without meaning to, he was kissing Jon with his tongue, with his hands on either side of Jon’s face, and Jon swallowed the little hum that escaped Theon’s mouth.

“I’ve gotta get dressed,” he said hoarsely.

Contact lenses were Jaqen’s final touch – an eerie blue that reminded Theon of Robb. He watched as Jaqen situated Jon in front of the camera once more. Jon fidgeted. Somehow he looked even younger without all that hair to hide behind.

Theon slumped heavily down into the metal chair while Jaqen slipped his reading glasses on and began working away at his computer.

Jon walked over to straddle Theon’s legs. “Let me see it.” Theon winced as Jon pushed aside a lock of hair to get a better look at the shredded ear, those not-quite-right eyes flickering with concern. “Does it hurt?”

“Only when you touch it,” hissed Theon. “Does it look bad?”

“It looks pretty gnarly.” Jon cradled Theon’s jaw in his hand and bent to place a kiss on the bloodied skin of his cheek.

Jaqen entered a few final commands and then turned to peer at Theon over the rim of his glasses.

“A boy will never hear quite the same,” he said.

He had a light touch, as always. Jaqen wore latex gloves, pursing his thin lips as he wiped away the gore with a damp cloth, then irrigated the wound with iodine. Theon grimaced.

“Is there – ah! Fuck! – is there anything you can do to make it look normal? Like a prosthetic or something?”

Jaqen shook his head. “Not while it’s an open wound. After it heals, maybe, but for now it needs to breathe.”

* 

Jon sat in the car. The passport was warm in his hands as he flipped through its pages, squinting at the fake visas with a deep frown.

Theon stood on the threshold of the Air-Stream and turned back to Jaqen.

“Nothing hidden on that, is there?” asked Theon.

Jaqen shook his head. “No.” Seeing the next question on Theon’s lips, he added, “A man knows how to keep secrets.”

* 

Theon had lost all sense of time. The roads were empty, the stoplights blinking red and yellow, and
the night seemed to go on forever.

“What’s your name this time?” he asked.

“Black,” replied Jon, not bothering to consult the passport that was tucked into his pocket. Theon upshifted, and Jon covered Theon’s hand with his own.

“You scared?” asked Theon.

“No,” said Jon. He ran his nails through his freshly-shorn hair. “Are you?”

“Kind of.”

And you should be.

The parking lot outside the Greyhound Bus Station was nearly vacant, and Theon chose a spot well away from the entrance. He took a deep breath and closed his eyes and when he opened them, Jon was smiling at him like this was all some kind of great adventure.

“Where are we going now?” Jon asked.

Theon opened his wallet and pulled out a thick roll of hundreds. “Here’s two grand. It’s all I’ve got on me right now.”

Jon took the money and frowned, confused.

“I don’t get it.” He looked out the windshield, then back at Theon. “They’re looking for both of us. You’re going with me.”

Theon’s heart sank.

“I can’t.”

“Wait, what? What do you mean you can’t? You mean you won’t?” Jon’s voice cracked, and Theon could see the tears welling up in his strange new eyes.

“No, I mean we can’t – you’re not safe with me.”

“I am though!” Jon slammed his open hand against the dashboard. “I am safe with you! What – what do you want me to do? Where the fuck am I supposed to go? I don’t – I don’t have any family. I don’t know anyone.”

“Anywhere. Go in and buy a bus ticket to anywhere you want.” He reached up under his shirt for his 9mm, weighed it in his palm before offering it to Jon. “Take this. Take the ammo and the knives and the money and get as fucking far away from Wintertown as you can. Don’t let anyone know your name and don’t ever mention mine.

You’re so fucking smart, Jon.” He reached out of run his thumb along the curve of Jon’s lips. “You’re smart and tough and sexy, and you will fucking figure it out.”

Jon looked at the pistol, then at Theon, then buried his face in his hands. He didn’t make a sound, but Theon could tell by the way his shoulders heaved that he was crying. He wanted to touch Jon, but he knew that he needed to stop. When Jon looked up again, his face was red and wet with tears. “How can you fucking do this to me? How can you just show up out of fucking nowhere and make me – make me –” Jon faltered. “Make me fucking happy and then just fucking leave me like this?”
“I’m not leaving you. I care about you. I’m trying to take care of you.”

“Then fucking come with me, you asshole. Come with me and take care of me.”

Theon’s mouth went dry.

You could, you know.

“I can’t,” he repeated.

Jon hung his head, hands clenched into fists. A deep sigh trembled through him. Theon still held the pistol out awkwardly, and he wondered if Jon was angry enough to use it on him. That might be lovely – in its own way – he supposed.

“You have to go,” he said. “You have to trust me.”

Jon sniffled and rubbed his face. “I fucking did trust you.” He took the gun from Theon’s hand, turned it over thoughtfully. “Do you have another one?”

“I have like, four other ones.”

Jon checked the clip, then shoved the pistol into the backpack along with the bullets, the knives and his old clothes.

“I know you lie to me. Like, all the fucking time. I wish you didn’t. I could’ve found a way to help you, you know?”

Theon bristled. “I don’t need help.”

“So you’re just gonna keep on lying to me?” Jon scowled. He unbuckled his seatbelt and threw the door open. “Fucking fine then. I hope whoever you’re staying here for is fucking worth it.” He bit down hard on his lip to still its quivering, but he couldn’t stop the tears rolling down his face. “Jesus Christ. I wish you’d just fucking paid more attention to where you were driving. Then none of this would’ve happened.” He passed the sleeve of his hoodie over his cheek. “Fuck you. Seriously – just – fuck you.”

He slammed the door, and Theon watched him through the windshield, growing smaller as he crossed the parking lot, fading in and out of the patches of streetlight until he passed through the sliding glass doors to the station.

Theon killed the engine and opened his own door. He needed air. And a smoke. He ignored the way his fingers shook when he lit the cigarette, and he leaned against the side of the coup, scuffing his shoes against the asphalt. The stars looked the same as they had earlier, but colder.

He started at the sound of footsteps racing towards him, and when he looked up, there was Jon, flinging his backpack to the concrete to grab at the front of Theon’s shirt. Jon pressed Theon back against the car, kissing him fiercely, biting and sucking at Theon’s mouth until Theon couldn’t breathe.

“Find me,” said Jon darkly. “Promise me you’ll find me again.”

He pressed his lips to Theon’s – almost gently – and this was both the best and the worst kiss of his life.

“I will. I promise.” And he meant it, at least in that moment.
“You better.”

Jon left him there with swollen lips and a half-hard cock, and when Jon hurried back into the station, Theon felt as though the world had dropped away and left him stranded in space. He knew that his promise was another lie, but that didn’t stop him from spending the entire drive home fantasizing about what it might feel like to see Jon again when neither of them was expecting it.

*

The upper-story windows at Winterfell were black when Theon arrived, and the silence there felt heavy and restless. Surely news of Poole and Flint’s deaths had arrived before Theon, but he resolved to let Robb broach the subject; he saw no reason to implicate himself just now.

But he knew even before he set foot inside the mansion whose bedroom he was headed for. His feet took him there on instinct, as though he were sleepwalking, and when he knocked on the door, Robb’s voice slurred with exhaustion:

“Theon?”

“Robb, open the door.”

*What the fuck are you doing?*

And he knew he shouldn’t. He knew he should go to his own room and go to bed. But he needed this, needed to put Jon out of his mind, something – someone – to dull the memory of everything that had happened in the past few hours so it might not rush back, so crushingly vivid when the morning came.

Robb’s eyes were barely open when he came to the door, but his yawn resolved itself in a smile.

“It’s almost five a.m.,” he said. “I gave up thinking you’d come.”

Theon pushed Robb back into the darkness of the bedroom, maneuvering him to the bed and shoving him roughly to the mattress. He tore Robb’s boxers down over his knees and threw them onto the floor.

Robb laughed.

“No.” Theon leaned down suck a mark beneath Robb’s jaw. “I just want you. Tell me I can. Tell me you want to.”

Robb swallowed loudly. “Mmm-hmm.” His hips thrust up, his erection jutting into Theon’s stomach.

Theon smirked. He wet two of his fingers with his tongue and moved them down to press gently against Robb’s entrance. Robb whined and squirmed at the touch.

“You’ve been jerking off tonight, haven’t you?”

Robb nodded and whined again, pitifully.

Theon began to work his fingers inside Robb. “What did you think about?”
“This,” replied Robb, running a hand over his stomach to take his own cock in his hand. “You.”

“How many times?”

“Twice.”

Theon tried not to notice the ways that they were the same – the thick, curly hair, the full lips, the broad shoulders and soft skin. But the more he thought about it, the harder he got. He slipped another finger into Robb’s ass and grinned at the way Robb reached for him.

“Your shirt,” Robb ordered breathlessly. “Off.”

Theon complied but didn’t go further than loosening his belt and shoving his pants down just enough to free his prick. He lifted Robb’s legs forcefully over his own shoulders.

“Were you thinking about me?” asked Robb, raising his head to watch with lust-filled eyes as Theon guided his prick into place between Robb’s thighs. He let out a controlled breath as Theon entered him, not as smoothly as he’d have liked.

“Obviously.”

Robb groaned and brought one hand up to tug at his own hair. “What did you – oh, fuck – what did you think about?” He bit his lip as Theon began to move, slowly at first but quickly accelerating until Robb’s airy curses were coming at short, steady intervals:

“Fuck – oh shit – oh Jesus.”

Theon felt momentarily distressed by how much he loved Robb’s sheer need, which was nothing like Jon at all; Jon was sexually calculating and Robb was practically in heat and it was his desperation to lose control that suited Theon’s need to regain it just now.

“I thought about fucking you on the conference table,” said Theon in a low voice. And it wasn’t a total lie – he had thought about it, what seemed like years ago. “While everyone else watches and begs me to take a turn with you.”

Robb laughed and threw his hands over his head, pushed his ass up to meet Theon’s pace. “Would you let them?”

“Of course not,” said Theon, more sharply than he meant to.

“Because I’m yours?”

Theon leaned forward to kiss him, not minding the way their teeth crashed together when he sank himself as deep as he could, his hips smacking harshly against Robb’s ass. “Because you are so. fucking. tight. and I want you to stay that way for me.”

Robb came first, his spine arcing off the bed as his climax spilled over his stomach and chest in a thick burst, his eyes and mouth open as though in shock. The force of it unbalanced Theon, and he fell forward, catching himself with his elbows on either side of Robb’s neck. He slipped his tongue into Robb’s parted lips and moaned when Robb bit down, hard.

He didn’t bother to ask for permission, and Theon came with a series of deep, relentless thrusts that left Robb gasping for air, fingernails digging into Theon’s back hard enough to draw blood.

“Stay,” he said when Theon stood to clean himself with the corner of a sheet. “Just for a minute.”
Theon sighed, but he knelt to wipe up the mess between Robb’s thighs, planting a kiss on Robb’s knee before saying, “Okay. Just for a minute.”

They lay facing one another, though in the dark it was hard to see more than the glint of Robb’s eyes. But he could feel Robb’s breath rushing over his cheek, and when he put a finger to Robb’s lips, he felt a smile there. In the silence, Theon became aware of a ringing in his ears.

“I can’t believe I have to be awake for a meeting in like, three and a half hours,” groaned Robb.

“How did it go with Roose?”

More silence.

“Robb?”

“I don’t want to talk about it.” Robb’s voice had an edge to it that told Theon it was best not to push, so he said nothing and waited and after a moment, Robb’s voice added quietly, “I wish my dad was here.”

Theon fumbled for Robb’s hand and brought it up against his own chest. “I know.”

And though he didn’t mean to, he fell asleep like that, waking only briefly to feel Robb’s fingers running through his hair.

*

The sun was already high in the window when Theon woke, still in Robb’s bed, though he didn’t remember taking off his pants and shoes. He closed his eyes again and stretched, reaching for Robb but finding not even a trace of his warmth left in the blankets. Disappointed, he rolled back onto his side and had nearly drifted off again when his phone buzzed with a text.

Theon yawned.

“Text from Robb.” Looking at the corner of the screen, he saw the time.

“Shit!”

It was almost noon.

“Come to my office when you wake up. No hurry.”

His shoes and pants were in a pile at the foot of the bed, but Theon had to search for his shirt, and when he found it he realized the back was covered in grass stains and a fair amount of blood had soaked through the right shoulder. Instantly, the memory of the previous night exploded into full detail and Theon’s stomach lurched at the realization that he would never know if Jon got safely away.

You should’ve gone with him.

Why didn’t you?

Then he remembered the meeting and felt ashamed that he’d probably slept through the whole thing, and furious that Robb had just let him.

He checked the hall before sneaking into his own room, clutching his filthy t-shirt to his chest. After he had changed, Theon stopped in the bathroom to look at his ear – scabbed and raw – before
brushing his hair carefully over it.

The door to Robb’s office opened while Theon was still some distance away, and when Roose Bolton emerged, Theon braced himself for some kind of insinuating comment. But Roose only looked at him knowingly before striding wordlessly past.

“Robb!”

Robb looked up from his desk, then quickly down again. Theon stood in front of him, leaned against the wood.

“You let me sleep through the meeting! Why didn’t you come wake me up?”

“You were wiped,” said Robb, still not glancing up from the note he was writing. “I figured I shouldn’t wake you.”

“And no one asked where I was? Way to let me look like a total fuck-up in front of everybody.”

“I have an errand for you,” said Robb, as though he hadn’t even heard.

Anger flared in Theon’s chest as he wondered why Robb was acting so aloof. It wasn’t fair that Robb got to act like such a love-struck little slut at night, and in the day expect Theon to “yes sir” and “no sir” just like everyone else. Theon was surprised by how much it stung.

He stared dumbly at the note Robb handed him.

“I need you and Cassel to go pick something up for me.”

“Well, I’m glad we’re back to this again,” said Theon with an icy, feigned cheerfulness that made Robb’s jaw clench. Looking at the paper, Theon saw that the address was a familiar one; he crumpled it up and tossed it back onto Robb’s desk. “I know where that is, thanks. Unlike some people, I’ve been doing this Family’s work for quite a while now.”

He stalked out the door and took a few paces down the hall when he heard Robb’s voice, a touch softer:

“Hey, Theon?”

“Stark?” he returned coldly, not looking over his shoulder.

“Nothing. Just fucking go.”

*

Theon fully expected Rick Cassel to make some patronizing comment about how he’d missed the morning meeting, but thankfully the old man seemed to have more on his mind and their ride was pleasantly quiet. Cassel had been a large part of Theon’s life as a boy adjusting to a new home, and now he seemed like just another stranger.

“What is he having us pick up here?” asked Theon as the car rolled through the open gate of the storage complex. He’d never seen the place in the daytime, and he was startled to see that the sliding metal doors on all of the units were painted a merry shade of pink. “I’ve only ever come here for –”

The reality of the situation hit him just a millisecond before Cassel’s fist. The old man’s knuckles felt like steel, but it was the second impact – his head slamming against the window glass – that
knocked Theon out, a burst of pain and then nothing.

* 

When Theon jolted awake, his head was pounding and his vision remained black. He was terrified that he’d been blinded, but when his breathing calmed, he felt the tickle of cloth against his face. He tried to move, to push away the thing covering his eyes, but both his hands had been immobilized somewhere above his head. An almost electric pain shot down the length of his arm and Theon cried out.

“Oh, you’re up!”

The voice – unfamiliar and almost sweet – belonged to a young man. Theon heard footsteps, and when the voice came again it was much closer – too close – and he could feel the breath of it against his neck. It smelled like cigarettes and candy.

“And I had just thought of the most amusing way to wake you.”
Chapter Ten

Chapter Summary

Theon Greyjoy wakes up.

Chapter Notes

Welp, here it goes folks. My apologies for the shortness of the Ramsay chapters - not only do they work better with my crazy life right now, but it's also just really hard for me to sustain writing about torture. And with poor Theon losing himself, the memories and flashbacks that might give him a break are getting fewer and further between.

Thanks - as always - for the reads/kudos/comments!

If his body housed some other spirit, Ramsay Bolton might have been handsome. He wasn’t an imposing person – definitively shorter than Theon, and thin enough that the line of his collarbone showed through the fabric of the cheap white t-shirts he preferred for his work. The earring in his left ear looked almost elegant hanging against the corner of his jaw. Messy black hair framed his face, and when it wasn’t twisted into a grin, his mouth came to rest in a graceful bow shape. It was the eyes that lent Ramsay his inhuman aspect – cold and gray like his father’s, but sublime in that looking into them erased all knowledge or desire of anything else.

On that first day though, Theon met them. It was foolish, he thought later, to force himself to stare into Ramsay’s eyes despite the terror rising in his flesh.

“You should’ve known better,” he chided himself.

“Good morning, Theon.” Ramsay’s tone was caustic, but the sharp smile on his face expressed genuine pleasure. Glancing to the side, he asked, “Or is it night? What time is it, Skinner?”

“It’s five p.m.,” answered a voice, and Theon became aware that there was another man in the room, standing just beyond his periphery.

The space was small, maybe ten feet by twenty, and the fluorescent lighting cast a ghastly, flickering pall over what was already a grotesque scene. Theon was bound up on a massive wooden saltire which straddled a large, grimy drain in the concrete of the floor. He faced the inside of the sliding door, as well as the hinged door beside it, but not even a trace of light was visible from outside. The smell of bleach failed to conceal the stench of gore and excrement. In one corner was a recliner – leather and inappropriately luxurious – situated to view the saltire, and to Theon’s right a small, stainless-steel table littered with tools and instruments, many of them still wet with blood. Theon blinked, disbelieving.

“This isn’t real. This can’t be real.

And Ramsay completed the scene, lightly balancing a pair of pliers on his left index finger and
saying to Theon, “It’s hard to tell in here. I expect we’ll both lose track of time. For different reasons, obviously.” He cocked his head towards Skinner, “He’s here to make sure I don’t kill you. You know, get a little too into it and open an artery or whatever.” Ramsay shrugged. “Father’s orders.”

Theon said nothing, but gave another tug on his wrist, and again a bolt of pain shot down into his shoulder. He moaned, and the sincerity of Ramsay’s smile unnerved him.

“I was starting to worry we’d never meet.” Ramsay took a step back to fold his arms and examine Theon more fully. “My dad’s always going on about you to me. He’s very interested in you, for some reason.”

“That’s funny, ‘cause he’s never said fuck-all about you.” It was a lie, but Theon was pleased to see that it struck true.

Ramsay’s face darkened and a second later Theon’s head was reeling, snapped painfully back with the force of impact and he felt blood filling his mouth. His head lurch forward again, and he spat onto the floor. As Theon’s vision cleared, he saw blood running down Ramsay’s knuckles, his hand still gripping the pliers.

“You. will. not. speak to me like that again.”

Theon wanted desperately to cradle his jaw, but his hands remained fixed uselessly above his head. He couldn’t believe that someone so wiry could hit so hard. Running his tongue around his mouth, he found he’d lost one tooth and another was painfully broken.

If Ramsay’s hand hurt, he gave no indication. He tilted his head, chin resting thoughtfully on the bloodied heel of his palm while his eyes traversed Theon’s body. “Where to start?” he asked, almost to himself.

Theon strained to see his shackles, but succeeded only in refilling his mouth with blood. He began coughing, and Ramsay reached for the table of instruments.

“Let’s get a better look at you.” Ramsay wiped the red from his hands onto his shirt, then danced his fingers over the clutter until they alighted on what looked like a dull pair of scissors. “Skinner.” He held them out delicately to the other man.

Skinner’s eyes were normal, almost dull compared to Ramsay’s, and Theon found them a relief. He went rigid, though, as the scissors neared his throat. “Relax.” Ramsay sounded amused. “They’re just trauma shears.”

Theon shuddered at the cool metal edge that ran haltingly down his chest, first lengthwise and then across, and he felt his skin crawl as his shirt fell away. When he peeked through his eyelashes, Ramsay was reaching towards him.

“These are fun.” Ramsay’s fingertips hovered just above the tattoo on Theon’s chest, as though he wanted to touch the skin but thought better of it. “Are you proud of them?” Then to Skinner he added, “Find out if he’s compensating for something, will you?”

Theon slipped into full-blown panic, thrashing violently against his bonds as Skinner crouched to cut up along each of his pant legs, stopping only to remove his belt, which Ramsay took and rolled up carefully. The air of the storage unit was damp and chilly against Theon’s bare thighs, and a moment later he was completely naked.
Skinner busied himself pawing clumsily through the pockets of Theon’s shredded jeans, and Ramsay’s gaze flitted down between Theon’s legs.

“Must be something else then,” he said with a smile.

Theon began to tremble. His eyes roved around the room, looking for anything that might aid in an escape, but with no way to free himself, it was hopeless. He tried to shake the word away.

Skinner grunted. He’d pulled something out of Theon’s pockets and passed it to Ramsay.

*Oh no.*

Ramsay ran the lock of Jon’s hair between his fingers, then brought it to his nose and closed his eyes, inhaling deeply.

“He smells sweet,” observed Ramsay. He took three steps forward and suddenly Theon could feel the heat from Ramsay’s breath. Ramsay held the hair between his thumb and forefinger, ran it lightly over Theon’s cheek, down his throat, watching as Theon swallowed the bit of blood that had welled up in his mouth.

Theon’s mind flashed to the memory of Jon’s forehead pressed against his own.

“What is Jon Snow to you, exactly?” Ramsay’s voice was low, almost soft.

It took all of Theon’s strength to compose himself, to look Ramsay in the eye and say, “Who the fuck is Jon Snow?”

Ramsay rolled his eyes, snapped his fingers and Skinner handed him a glossy printout of a photo. Ramsay held it so close that Theon could barely make sense of the image. It was a still taken from the surveillance camera above the back exit of the Dungeon. There he was, and there was Jon, looking back over his shoulder as Theon pulled him along by the hand.

Theon screwed his eyes shut and turned away.

*What were you thinking?*

Ramsay looked at the picture, then gave Theon a wicked grin.

“He’s what, sixteen? Can’t blame you though.” Again, he traced the lock of Jon’s hair along the edge of Theon’s jaw, and Theon tried to ignore how pleasant it felt, almost a tickle. “He’s pretty, if that’s what you’re into. And I suppose you like being first, don’t you? I like being last, myself.” Ramsay’s voice dropped into a coarse whisper. “I bet he didn’t know what hit him – had no idea why you chose him.” He leaned in, even closer. Theon tried to wrench his head away, but Ramsay only grabbed him by the hair. “It must’ve felt good – fucking that beautiful boy, knowing who he was. Knowing whose son he was.”

Theon cringed. He struggled against the memory of Jon’s lips on his cock, Jon’s hands on his chest.

*Yes. It did.*

“If I ever get my hands on Ned Stark’s bastard, I’ll fuck him inside out.”

*Jealous?” returned Theon with a smirk.*

Skinner cleared his through as though reminding Ramsay of his presence. Ramsay released his grip
on Theon’s hair and took a step back. “I make him uncomfortable sometimes,” he said, matter-of-factly. Then with an amused look, he added “Which is funny, since he spends all day watching me pull body parts off people.”

Theon’s eyes searched frantically for something to look at besides Ramsay, but his gaze was drawn back as though by gravity. He said nothing, but waited, the tension sending up an ache in every fiber of his body. More than anything – if he couldn’t escape – he wanted to faint.

Ramsay’s mind returned to his pliers, and he weighed them in his hand. Theon felt his guts twist; he had no way to anticipate the intensity of the pain – only the certainty that it would be the worst he’d ever felt. He could hardly resist – being bound so tightly – when Ramsay finally worked the tip of the pliers under the edge of his fingernail. He closed his eyes.

“Little things like this are going to feel so fucking good to you by the time I’m done.”

Later, in the dark, Theon would feel ashamed of how hard he screamed. He writhed in his restraints, gagging at the sound the nail made as it tore loose from his finger. He kept screaming until his vision began to cloud, and as his cries grew weaker he realized that Ramsay was laughing. It was a high, strange sound made Theon furious, and he didn’t care how ridiculous it must’ve sounded to say, “When I get out of this, I swear to God I will fucking kill you. And if Robb ever finds out…”

Ramsay erupted into a fresh bout of laughter, and this time Skinner joined him. Theon thought he was going to burn up.

“You really do have a thing for the Starks, don’t you?” teased Ramsay. “How is it working – trying to fuck your way into the pack?” He held up Theon’s bloody fingernail, examining it. “I’m still not a hundred percent sure whether Robb sent you to me because he sees Jon Snow as a threat to the Family or just because he’s feeling jilted.”

“Robb wouldn’t send me to you,” shot Theon, wanting – really needing – to believe it. “He would deal with me himself.”

*It must’ve been Cat. It must’ve been Cassel. Robb would never do this to me.*

If Ramsay’s face softened almost imperceptibly, Theon was sure it was only to mock him.

“But here you are, and I think we both know that the Starks don’t do their own dirty work.”

Theon felt like he couldn’t breathe.

“I know you don’t really like the truth, but Robb Stark sent you to me so I can extract the whereabouts of a pretty little bastard named Jon Snow. And I think you’ll tell me, but I don’t really care if you do. In fact, it’s more fun if you try not to.” Again, that terrible smile, and Ramsay moved closer to squint curiously at Theon. “You do know that, don’t you? Somewhere in there, you know that he sent you here?”

Theon’s head dropped forward, his chin against his chest. “Yes.”

*Jesus Christ. But he couldn’t have known. He didn’t understand what he was doing.*

Ramsay took Theon’s jaw in his hand, almost gently. “You betrayed him, and you betrayed the Family, just like your worthless father. This – this is what you deserve.”

“Fuck. you.” Theon spit a weak spray of blood into Ramsay’s face; he expected another blow, but
Ramsay only blinked and smiled at him, tightening his grip on Theon’s jaw until his fingers pressed excruciatingly against Theon’s broken tooth. Ramsay held him like that for a moment, peering into him. Theon thought of all the men he’d delivered to this same fate and he wondered what they saw when they looked into Ramsay Bolton’s eyes.

“Here’s how this works,” said Ramsay, once more close enough to bite. “There are two ways for you to make me happy. Screaming while I carve off pieces of you is one way; telling me what I want to hear, doing what I tell you to do – that’s the other. It makes no difference to me.” His gaze rolled down Theon’s body and when it returned to his face, Theon saw the first flicker of something he might recognize, though it gave him no relief.

Ramsay pulled away and Theon thought his heart might burst, fast and hard as it pounded in his chest.

Wouldn’t that be lucky.

“Send this to Robb Stark.” Ramsay held Theon’s fingernail out to Skinner. “Find a nice little box for it and write a note thanking him for the gift.” He nodded at Theon, and if he noticed Skinner rolling his eyes, he didn’t seem to care.

Ramsay lingered until Skinner was gone, but he made no other move to hurt Theon. He only eyed his captive as he wiped his face and hands on the front of his t-shirt, then pulled on a leather jacket and gloves.

“You don’t mind if I keep this, do you?” he asked, twirling the lock of Jon’s hair between his thumb and forefinger before tucking it into his pocket. “It’s a nice little trophy.”

“I don’t know where he is.”

Ramsay raised an eyebrow. “We’ll see.” He opened the door. Theon could see the night beyond it as Ramsay hung there for a moment before looking over his shoulder. “I wish I had more time for you, but there are other… things that need my attention. And you know what they say about absence.”

How long do I have to stay here? Theon wanted to ask. How long will you be gone?

But pride forbade him to ask, so he remained resolutely silent, trying not to whimper when Ramsay turned off the lights and slipped out the door. In the darkness he listened to the sound of several locks, followed by the ignition of a motorcycle. It roared loudly enough to rattle the sliding door of the unit and then dissipated, leaving Theon in pain and silence.

*

Even as a child, Theon never feared the dark. And now he tried to remember the security of curling up underneath a pile a blankets, or the way the stars glittered over the beach at Pyke, the night sky inseparable from the blackness of the sea. He tried to remember the roar if it, constant and comforting. But this darkness was different – no sounds, no sights, not even a texture besides the rope that cut into his wrists, the wood that splintered and rubbed into his back, creaked when he shifted his weight.

And there was the pain, of course. Gingerly, he probed the gaps in his mouth, feeling with his tongue along the sharp edge of the broken bottom tooth. His finger – it was the ring-finger of his left hand – still throbbed, and at the slightest contact from the adjacent digits the feeling became unbearable. Tears welled in his eyes, but even alone and in the dark, he blinked them away.
He’ll know if you’ve been crying, he thought absurdly.

Searching for a distraction, Theon counted the number of times he’d been tied up – three, if he remembered correctly and not including present circumstances.

Rick tied him up and left him in a closet for several hours once, which was more embarrassing than frightening. At one point, Asha opened the door, but she only reached past him for her jacket and then closed it again, knowing better than to interfere with whatever punishment Theon was receiving. Finally, Balon found him there.

By that time, his vision had adjusted to the dark and the light from the hallway hurt his eyes. But he would know that severe silhouette anywhere. Theon felt ashamed, of course, and waited for his father to reprimand him, but for once Balon knelt down to him, turning him this way and that until the ropes fell away. Wordlessly, he coiled them in his leathery hands and left Theon standing there dumbly. It never happened again.

He wondered if anyone at Pyke would even miss him at this point, and for a moment he entertained a fantasy in which Balon came North in search of him. But Balon was about as likely to come to the Mainland as Ramsay was to tell Theon that this had all been some kind misunderstanding.

How long had it been since Ramsay left anyway? Ten minutes? An hour? Already time was becoming imperceptible.

He was eleven when he let Robb tie him up with a few of his mother’s scarves during a game of cops and robbers in which he had been sentenced to death-by-firing-squad. (Robb always chose himself as the heroic detective and nominated Theon to play the criminal mastermind, a casting which was in retrospect fairly ironic.)

“Make it tighter,” Theon demanded. Robb sighed and Theon reflected that on Pyke, no boy of eight could be so ignorant of how to tie a few simple knots.

“My mom is gonna be mad if we rip her scarfs,” fretted Robb.

“Make it tighter or this is just stupid.”

Robb had blind-folded him as well, too loosely to stop him from peeking out the bottom of the cloth.

The memory only made Theon angry again, and he resolved not to think about Robb anymore, which lasted for all of – well, he had no idea – but he couldn’t not think of Robb.

*How could you do this to me, you fucking asshole?*

Now all the memories that might’ve soothed his present condition were colored by this latest turn of events and he found himself trying to pin down the moment that Robb made the decision to send him here. Had Robb known what was about to happen even when he let Theon into his bedroom that night? It was an insufferable thought, that Robb would use him –

*Oh, like the way you used him?*

– That Robb would have been planning to turn him over to Ramsay Bolton even as he asked breathlessly, “Stay.”

The last time he’d been tied up – well, sort of – was less than a year ago. He’d gone home with a guy he met at Ground Zero, and though he couldn’t remember the name – if he’d ever known it –
he remembered blonde hair and green eyes and calloused hands, and he remembered holding up a pair of fuzzy handcuffs, quirking an eyebrow and saying, “Are you fucking kidding me?”

Despite Theon’s comprehensive sexual experience, the idea was novel to him – of course he’d heard that some people were into getting tied up and gagged and made to crawl on all fours, but the bedroom was supposed to be the one arena in which Theon never had to beg. When all was said and done though, it felt good – maybe better than he was comfortable admitting afterwards when he hurriedly pulled on his pants, fingers still shaking from the sheer exhilaration.

“You can stay the night if you want,” the man said hopefully.

Theon shook his head. “No, I’m okay.”

“Did I do something wrong?”

“No. I just – um, I have to get going.”

He’d gone straight back to the club, and within thirty minutes he was sweating and cursing, rutting up against some new stranger in a bathroom stall.

* 

He didn’t remember falling asleep, but when he woke the room was still pitch black and Theon was seized with the overwhelming need to relieve himself.

*I can hold it.*

What, until Ramsay comes back and gives you a potty break?

He moaned as he pissed, grateful that only a small amount of it trickled down his leg. The rest he could hear, splattering on the concrete and dripping down the drain beneath him. The smell was pungent, and the fact that he had just pissed himself was humiliating – though not as bad on either count as it would’ve been if he were still wearing his clothes. He wondered if this was Ramsay’s intention, or merely an oversight. It dawned on him that he would eventually need to shit, but he pushed the thought away.

What if he doesn’t come back?

And as much as the prospect of those cold eyes boring into him again made Theon sick to his stomach, the thought that Ramsay might never return was far worse. He realized that his only chance for escape was convincing Ramsay to undo his ties and he dared to feel a glimmer of hope, despite the despair in his guts.

* 

At some point he heard the rumble of a car engine idling outside the unit. He heard voices, though he couldn’t be sure whose, and the racket of metal doors slamming open and closed.

*You should scream.*

No. Don’t.

What if it’s him?

By the time he decided it might be best to cry out, the sound of the car had faded into nothing.
Thinking of Robb only made Theon’s whole body shake with anger, and thinking of Jon hurt like pouring alcohol into an open wound. He felt so foolish – for trusting Robb Stark, for lying to Jon Snow – that in the end the only person left for him to think about was Ramsay Bolton. He recalled the heat of Ramsay’s breath, the sharpness of his smile, the uncanny sweetness of his voice, and he made a game of counting out the seconds until his return. He often made it into the thousands before slipping into a stupor, losing count and starting over again.

He will come back, Theon thought. He has to come back.
Chapter Eleven

Chapter Notes

I put together the mix of what I've been listening to for the first part of this fic which is very poppy and can be found [here](#). I'll have to find some new tunes now that our hero's life has taken a turn for the worst.

Theon’s lips burned. How long could a person go without water?

*Three days*, his mind supplied, though he had no clue where the number came from.

*It must be longer. It's been at least five days.*

*Maybe three days is how long it takes to go crazy.*

He’d lost all faith in his ability to gauge time, to tell up from down or sleep from awake – here in the dark the only certainty was his thirst. Even pain and fear faded against the all-consuming desire for water. Occasionally his knees gave out, the entire weight of his body wrenching against the ties on his wrists. His cries reverberated against the concrete walls.

It began to rain, and Theon had never heard a sound more heart-rending than that of raindrops drumming on the steel roof of his prison, the roll of thunder close enough to rattle the doors. The smell of the storm seeped in, fresh and wet and he felt tears in the corners of his eyes.

Not long after the downpour abated, Theon again heard the clamor of engines outside; this time the door did open, allowing the scent of the rain to flood the unit. Although the sky beyond the door was darkly overcast, the light stung and he whined pitifully.

Ramsay’s hair clung damply to his forehead and he wiped at it with the cuff of his leather jacket as Skinner followed him silently through the threshold, turning on the lights and closing the door. They looked strange together, Theon thought – Ramsay looked so slight and boyish beside Skinner’s hulking frame and craggy face that if he didn’t know better, he’d assume Skinner was the dangerous one.

But Ramsay removed his jacket to reveal another white t-shirt, already drenched in half-dried blood. He took several steps toward Theon, then stopped abruptly.

“You shit yourself,” he said with a scowl. Then to Skinner, “Hose this mess down.”

Skinner disappeared, somewhere behind Theon.

“You’re fucking disgusting.”

Theon glared at him but said nothing, then yelped as he felt the freezing spray of water against the back of his neck, forceful enough to knock his head forward; he watched helplessly as rivulets of clear, drinkable water cascaded down his body, sweeping his filth and blood into the drain beneath. He twisted his neck, hoping to swallow some of what streamed over his shoulders, but succeeded only in wetting his tongue. The flow ceased as suddenly as it had started, and Theon let out a single, dry sob.
Ramsay rolled his eyes and reached around into the back pocket of his jeans. Theon expected a weapon, but was startled when it was only a steel flask, the initials “R.B.” engraved across the front. Ramsay unscrewed the cap and held it out to Theon, who eyed it warily.

*It can’t be water.*

*Maybe it’s just empty.*

*He wouldn’t give you water.*

But he was so thirsty…

“Come on, little pet. I know you want this.” Ramsay’s voice was nearly a coo, coaxing Theon to drink and he touched the cool edge of the flask to Theon’s cracked lips. As soon as Theon parted them, Ramsay tilted the flask upwards, and the liquid that filled Theon’s mouth was rich and thick and –

Theon spat, and Ramsay side-stepped the viscous spray of blood. He pulled the flask away, irritated, and waited until Theon had finished gagging before he pressed it again to Theon’s face. Theon shook his head, pursed his lips tightly.

“It’s this or nothing,” warned Ramsay.

Theon closed his eyes, trying not to think as he allowed the blood – *whose blood?* – into his mouth, unable to stop the tears streaming down his cheeks.

*He’s going to turn you into a monster,* he thought wildly.

Ramsay poured more gently this time, licking the corners of his mouth as he watched Theon swallow. “Water comes out of a tap,” he said as he screwed the flash shut and replaced it in his pocket. “But I went to a lot of trouble to get this treat for you. What do you say to me when I’m kind?”

Theon looked at him blankly. Ramsay brought a hand up to lay against Theon’s cheek, his thumb smearing a stray drop of red across Theon’s lips.

“Ramsay –”

“Yes, Skinner?” replied Ramsay, not looking away from Theon.

“You remember why we’re here?”

“Yes, and if you feel the need to remind me again, I’ll cut out your tongue and shove it up your ass.” He continued to trace his thumb over Theon’s mouth, gaze flickering up to Theon’s eyes and then down again. Theon froze. “You look like a proper whore now.” He slipped the tip of his thumb between Theon’s lips, running it over the broken tooth here. “Soon you’ll learn to say *thank you* like a proper whore.”

*He wants to fuck you.*

The insight horrified him, but it also sparked a sort of hope – it was something he knew how to use to his advantage.

But Ramsay had moved on – he snapped his fingers and Skinner produced a gray envelope. Ramsay turned it over in his hands before holding it out for Theon’s view. It was addressed to
Ramsay and in the upper-left corner bore the familiar sigil of a wolf.

“I thought I’d wait to open this in front of you.” Ramsay tore one edge open with his middle finger. “Maybe he’s already found the bastard. Or maybe he’s just decided that life’s cold and empty without your cock filling his ass and he wants you back right away.” He grinned. “Wouldn’t that be lucky?”

As he unfolded the single sheet of paper inside, something small and brown fell out onto the floor; Theon realized it was his fingernail. Ramsay’s eyes skimmed the contents of the letter, expressionless.

“What does it say?” Theon ventured meekly.

Ramsay cleared his throat. “‘Mr. Bolton –’” and here he looked very pleased. “‘Mr. Bolton – I charged you with retrieving information concerning the whereabouts of the bastard Jon Snow, not with sending me grisly trophies. Let me remind you – pre-emptively, I’m sure – that I trust you to extract this information without maiming, crippling or otherwise permanently damaging Theon. Failure to abide by these guidelines –’ blah blah blah ‘Thank you for your continued service to our Family.’ Blah blah. ‘Sincerely, Robb Stark – Head of House Stark and Warden of the Northern Families.’”

“Can I see it?”

Ramsay obliged him, and Theon’s heart sank when he saw that familiar, rigid script. He hung his head.

“Not going to get very far with a weak stomach and a tender heart.” Ramsay put his fingers lightly beneath Theon’s chin and lifted it until they were eye to eye. “But you and I – we know how this world works, don’t we, pet?” He tucked a few strands of hair behind Theon’s ruptured ear.

Theon nodded. These affectionate gestures disturbed him – they seemed to precede violent ones, as though Ramsay couldn’t quite make up his mind about how best to treat his prisoner. He said he wanted to know Jon’s location, but there was something else well – and he clearly would, whether Theon wanted it or not – but he also wanted something from Theon, and he was searching for it now in Theon’s eyes.

If I can figure out what that is, I might get out of this.

You’re never getting out of this.

“I told you – I don’t know where Jon is.”

“Have you ever taken a polygraph test?” asked Ramsay, picking idly through the pile of implements on the little table.

“No,” answered Theon.

“I bet you could pass one.” Ramsay glanced up at him. “The Greyjoys are all liars, and if you know how, you can fool a polygraph.” His fingers found their prize – a small knife in a worn leather sheath. Ramsay withdrew it – fine and curved at the end, it looked almost as delicate as a feather, out of place amongst the other pieces of crude, clumsy hardware. “I have my own lie detector,” said Ramsay. “I find it to be much more accurate.” He ran the flat of the blade against Theon’s throat and bit his lip, feeling Theon’s pulse rise in response. His eyes met Theon’s with a certain earnest look. “I want you to remember this,” he said. Then with a smile he added, “I mean, you will remember this. But I want you to remember that I will always find out when you lie to
Theon was no stranger to different types of knives, but he had never seen one like this; it looked almost antique and Ramsay held it precisely. He tried to track the glint of it with his gaze, but Ramsay had stepped to his right side. Theon strained his neck to see, and felt Ramsay’s thumb rubbing over the tattoos on his knuckles.

“My dad took me to the Iron Islands once,” recalled Ramsay. “I was excited about it, until I looked out the wind of the airplane and saw that they were just a pile of shit-stained rocks in the middle of fucking nowhere.”

Theon gasped as the edge of the blade sliced a ring around the base of his little finger. The cut was clean but deep, and he could feel the warmth of blood dribbling down the side of his hand. His eyes filled with tears and he wondered how his body found the water to supply them.

“I bet you hated it there. And I bet your dad wasn’t too fond of you either – probably disappointed when he even noticed you at all.”

The second cut circled around the first knuckle, and Theon cried out.

“Please…”

“Does he know you’re a faggot? Is that why you haven’t heard from him in – what, ten years?”

A final incision connected the first two, running lengthwise down the side of the finger. Ramsay wiped the knife clean on his shirt and returned it to its sheath on the table. Theon squirmed, hoping – for a fleeting second – that it might be over for now.

“So let’s try this again.” Ramsay jammed a fingernail beneath Theon’s skin and pulled – slowly and evenly as though he was peeling a fruit.

Theon screamed, so loud that Skinner flinched visibly. Every muscle in him twisted and writhed, his body shaking hard enough to wobble the saltire. His mind abandoned him – his past and future immolated in an instant. Theon’s entire self was distilled into this new, boundless agony and the voice that begged, “Cut it off! Jesus, please just cut it off!” – that voice belonged to someone he couldn’t recognize.

Ramsay examined his prize – a little scrap of skin inked with an “I” that fit neatly in the cup of his hand. He set it delicately on top of the stainless-steel table. Theon perceived it, but he was still too anguish to register the horror of this little fragment of himself. His vision ebbed in and out of focus.

Ramsay motioned to Skinner for a small, black pouch which unrolled on top of his mess of tools. He considered the neat row of syringes and vials, impervious to Theon’s continued – and increasingly hoarse – shrieking. He loaded one of the needles, delicately flicked the end of it as he partially depressed the plunger, his tongue tucked into one corner of a sharp grin.

“Theon –”

Theon heard him. He saw the syringe and wondered what was in it. But he could only scream.

“Theon!” Ramsay grabbed him angrily by the hair. “Scream one more fucking time and I’ll flay the whole fucking hand!”

The threat seemed to reach him, and though Theon could not silence himself completely, he
managed to confine himself to a series of distressed groans and whines.

“See this?”

His eyes followed the shimmer of the needle as Ramsay flourished it in front of him. He forced himself to nod.

“It’s morphine,” said Ramsay. “I could take this pain away from you. I could make this feel like a dream. That would feel good, wouldn’t it?”

Theon nodded again, more urgently. In the back of his mind, he knew that the syringe might contain anything, but anything was better than this.

“Yes.” He struggled to speak. “Yes. Please.”

Ramsay studied Theon’s face carefully, nodding along with him. “Yes, I can see that you want to make me happy.”

“Please…”

“So tell me: where is Jon Snow?”

Theon shook his head, sobbing. His nose was running, his eyes so flooded with tears that the whole room was a blur. He wished he had an answer, and he hated himself for wishing it. He thought to lie, but instantly recoiled at the idea.

“I will always find out when you lie to me.”

*Even if he believed you, he’ll find out fast enough. And then he’ll be angry. And he’ll hurt you even worse.*

Theon tried not to imagine what “worse” might mean.

“I don’t know,” he wailed. “I promise I don’t know.” He stared at the needle, gaze darting between its point and Ramsay’s eyes. “Please. Please believe me.”

Ramsay frowned and loosened his grip on Theon’s hair. “I do believe you, little thing. But I’m afraid that’s not what Robb Stark wants to hear.”

He fully depressed the plunger on the syringe, sending the medicine through the air in an arc. Theon let out a despairing little moan, blinking as the liquid splashed against his forehead. The pain in his hand seemed to roar back to life.

Ramsay left him that way. He folded the square of Theon’s skin up in a cloth handkerchief and tucked it carefully into the pocket of his leather jacket. Did he intend to send it to Robb? To keep it for himself? Theon craned his neck to get a look at his hand, but all he could see was blood. He erupted again into a scream that quickly diminished into a pathetic croaking sound, his throat more parched then it was when Ramsay and Skinner arrived.

“But the door had already slammed shut.

*It was only a matter of time until his classmates at Pyke Island Academy noticed Theon Greyjoy’s*
mother – or rather, noticed her absence from all school events and functions. Even when he was cast as Urron Redhand in the annual second-grade history play, the chair reserved for Alannys Greyjoy remained empty.

He hadn’t wanted to be in the play at all, and spent the weeks leading up to the production in a state of constant anxiety, staying up well past his bedtime to study his lines by the light of the tiny lamp on his nightstand. On evenings that she couldn’t sleep, Asha would tiptoe into his room to help him – she read his cues and helped him with his pronunciation, reflecting bitterly about her own casting as a nameless serving girl three years earlier.

“I don’t even want to do this!” Theon moaned, throwing his playbook onto the floor of her bedroom.

“Then why did you try out for it?”

“Mrs. Wyk made me try out. She said, ‘Everybody has to try out for the history play.’ I told her I didn’t want to, but she said it would be good for me.” He scowled. “She’s always doing stuff like this to me.”

Asha frowned. “Stuff like what?”

Theon flopped down on the foot of the bed and stared up at the ceiling. “Like, she’s always calling on me when I don’t have my hand raised, or making me go up to the board to show a problem or picking me to read out loud when she knows I hate it.”

“Maybe if you just volunteered once in a while, she’d lay off you.”

“Let’s keep reading,” he said, reaching for his book.

When the school sent out invitations to the play, Theon had dutifully handed them to his father. He couldn’t predict how Balon would react to learning that his son was actually in the performance – the old man loved history but hated theater – so Theon didn’t mention his role.

“Do you think Mom will want to come?” he asked.

He was astonished to see his father look almost forlorn for a moment before replying in his usual stony way, “No, I don’t think she’ll have any interest in this.”

Theon saw his mother only rarely – occasionally she passed through one of the corridors or sat at the large bay window that overlooked the escarpment leading down to the shore. She had long, silvery hair and faraway eyes – sometimes she didn’t even notice him there in the room with her. Other times she would smile at him faintly and pull him into her as though she were searching, trying to recover something from him.

Her portrait hung in the family room – a black-and-white photo of a young woman on the beach, balanced on one bare foot atop a rock spire, her arms outstretched and her hair flowing in the northeasterly wind that always blew on the Islands. She was smiling, and Theon wondered if his father had taken the picture. He couldn’t imagine anyone smiling at his father like that, just as he couldn’t imagine his mother leaving the house.

But he had lied to his teacher, insisting that his mom was definitely attending and so a chair was held for her.

Despite his nerves, Theon remembered all his lines, too committed to not humiliating himself to register the vacant seat in the second row. And when he came out for a final bow, he was
overwhelmed by how unexpectedly good it felt to be the center of attention – because none of the parents there would’ve guessed that the little black-haired boy barking out Urron Redhand’s lines was actually very shy, that he stumbled over his words sometimes, that he tended to blush whenever asked a question. He didn’t have to be that way, after all.

And it felt especially wonderful afterwards when one of his classmates said, “You were really good, Theon!”

“How come your mom didn’t come to see you?” asked another.

And instantly it was all washed away again, and Theon felt the burn of blood creeping into his cheeks. “I – she, um – my mom –”

“His mom’s a shut-in,” interjected another little boy, not entirely unaware of his own cruelty. “I heard she hasn’t left the house since you were born.”

“That’s not true,” said Theon, though he was sure it was.

“It is so. My sister went to school with your brother, and she told me your mom is crazy.” He twirled his index finger in a spiral around his ear. “She told me your mom went crazy when she had you.”

The other little boy looked at Theon with wide eyes. “Does that mean you’ll go crazy too?”

Theon was crying when Rick finally came to pick him up. Rick drove a black Stingray convertible, and Theon wiped his eyes as it slid up alongside the curb, hoping that his brother wouldn’t notice the tears.

“Why are you crying?” Rick asked indifferently, lighting up a cigarette and lifting his sunglasses into his hair.

“I’m not crying.”

“You’re crying like, ninety-percent of the time. So tell me what’s wrong – did you fuck up your lines or something?”

“No,” said Theon defensively. “I remembered all my lines.”

“Then what’s the fucking problem?”

“Mom – Mom didn’t come.”

Rick rolled his eyes and took a deep drag. “No shit. Mom never comes to my swim-meets, but you don’t see me getting all butt-hurt about it.”

“Some of the other kids were making fun of me for it. They said Mom is crazy that that I’m probably crazy too.”

Theon saw Rick’s jaw tighten, his eyes narrowing and searching the schoolyard behind Theon.

“Are they still here?” he asked.

Theon wiped his nose on his sleeve and looked over his shoulder. “No. I think they went home already.”

Rick reached over and opened the door of the Stingray, not waiting for Theon to buckle his seatbelt.
before peeling out down the street. He said nothing on the drive home, and Theon looked out at the ocean, wondering if he was in for a beating when they arrived, but instead Rick took him by the hand and led him straight to the back-yard and crouched down in front of him, thoughtlessly blowing a puff of smoke into Theon’s face and saying, “Show me how you make a fist.”

Theon did as he was told.

“That’s not bad,” said Rick. He took Theon’s arm, made a few gentle adjustments. “When you hit somebody, make sure your wrist is straight like this. Otherwise you’ll hurt yourself more than you’ll hurt them. If you want to really hurt somebody, you can hold something in your fist, like a roll of quarters. Or maybe dimes for you.”

“What the fuck are you guys doing?”

Maron came out of the house, tapping a pack of cigarettes on the heel of his palm.

“I’m teaching Theon how to fight.”

Maron snorted. “I can’t imagine a bigger fucking waste of time.”

Rick glared at him. “You want everyone to think our little brother’s a pussy?”

Theon waited for what he knew was coming:

“He is a pussy.”

But instead Ron only lit his smoke and asked, “Well, are you gonna fix his stance or what?”

They stayed outside until well after dusk, Rick and Maron showing Theon how to stand, how to turn, how to land a hook and an uppercut, how to protect his face and how to pin someone so they couldn’t get up.

“Dinner!” came the call from the house.

“One last thing,” said Rick, taking Theon by the shoulders and kneeling down in front of him. “I want you to hit me. As hard as you can, okay?”

Theon looked at his fist, bewildered. Was this some kind of trick? If he hit Rick, would Rick and Ron beat him up and say he started it? He looked back to his brothers’ faces.

“Go ahead,” said Maron. “Just hit him.”

The impact made a cracking sound, and when Rick brought his fingers to his nose, they came away bloody. He smiled.

“Hurts, huh?”

Theon nodded, cradling his right hand tenderly. He couldn’t believe he’d made his brother bleed.

Ron clapped Theon on the shoulder. “Not bad.”

“Guys, dinner is getting cold and I’m fucking starving!” Asha was leaned out the back door, one hand on her hip.

“Don’t get your fucking panties in a twist!” yelled Rick. “We’ll be in in just a second!” He turned to the side and blew the blood out his nostrils one at a time, then looked at Theon appraisingly.
“Listen,” he said. “If anyone ever makes fun of you again – if anyone ever talks shit about your family – you beat the fucking shit out of them, okay?”

Maron nodded, suddenly comprehending the situation.

“I – I can’t fight at school. I’ll get in trouble. Mrs. Wyk will –”

Rick shook him slightly. “You’re a fucking Greyjoy. You can do whatever the fuck you want. Mrs. Wyk knows that. And if any other little shitheads ever disrespect you again, you let them have it. If they say you’re crazy, you show them fucking crazy. And if they’re too big for you, or if it’s a grown-up, you tell us, okay?”

Theon nodded. “Can I tell Asha?”

Rick and Maron exchanged a knowing smile. “Only if you want ‘em fucking dead.”

Theon was never naïve enough to mistake his brothers’ protection for love – he was their blood, but he remained the lowest of the Greyjoys. He only ever got in one fight at school, when Tristifer caught him kissing Raif in the library. Tristifer called Theon a faggot and threatened to tell his father, and Theon sent Tristifer to the hospital on a stretcher. He remembered his vision tunneling into blackness as he straddled the other boy’s ribcage, his fists smashing the boy’s head down to the linoleum whenever he tried to get up. And after that, he remembered standing in a puddle of blood, Raif looking at him in shock, unable to answer the teacher asking him, “Raif, can you tell me what happened?”

Tristifer returned to school two weeks later in a neck-brace, and Theon waited for an expulsion that never came. Mrs. Wyk stopped calling on him so much, and after a while, he felt almost normal. But it always lingered, like his mother in the bay window – “Does that mean you’ll go crazy too?”

* 

Ramsay came alone after that. The pain in Theon’s hand was so ceaseless that he sometimes forgot about it for minutes on end, allowing his mind to wander instead to some imagined sound or to the very real thirst consuming his throat. But the pain escalated again, and by the time Ramsay returned, it had begun to radiate down the length of his arm. His skin – what was left of it – felt hot as thought held to close to a flame.

“The looks infected,” said Ramsay bluntly, not minding the way Theon winced when he tilted the flayed finger back to inspect it. Ramsay looked exhausted – dark purple rings hung beneath his pale eyes and his shoulders stooped wearily.

“Not sleeping well?” Theon ventured drily.

Ramsay blinked at him. “Better than you are,” he replied. “Sweet of you to ask though.”

Theon groaned as Ramsay wrenched his finger forward suddenly. Ramsay sighed. “This’ll have to come off.”

The prospect of being rid of it filled Theon with unspeakable joy.

Ramsay set about binding Theon’s right hand up, immobilizing it against the wood of the saltire so that only the mangled pinkie-finger remained free. The knife he used was different, not so fine as the flaying knife, but Theon found he couldn’t bear the sight of it. Ramsay untied the bandana from around his neck – pastel pink with red paisley – and rolled it up tightly.
“Bite down on this.” He held the cloth to Theon’s face. “You’ll bite your fucking tongue off with that nasty tooth of yours.”

Theon opened his mouth and tried not to panic. The bandana tasted like sweat, cigarette smoke and candy – he tried to focus on that rather than the way the pressure enflamed the pain in his tooth or the way Ramsay kept hesitating, as if he was unsure how best to make the cut. When he finally did it, Theon was glad for the cloth – it stifled his scream and soaked up some of the tears that ran down his face. It was an awful feeling – the way the knife popped into the knuckle to sever it – but the burn of the finger fell away, quickly replaced by the duller, more tolerable ache of its absence. He closed his eyes. Ramsay took the rag from Theon’s lips, and Theon flinched when Ramsay touched it to his cheeks, wiping away the tear-tracks there before tying it back around his own neck. He quickly set about bandaging the bloody stump, first with gauze and then with tape.

“There. That wasn’t so bad, was it?”

He felt Ramsay’s finger trace the line of his lips, but when he opened his eyes he saw it was his own finger, still warm and pink and soft. He wanted to retch, but couldn’t find the strength. Ramsay grinned, amused by his little joke; he tossed the finger lightly into the air, caught it in his palm again and tucked it into his pocket. Theon watched it disappear from view.

“Don’t worry – I’m not going to keep it,” said Ramsay. “But I can’t just leave these things lying around, you know?” He wiped his own fingers against his thighs, then used them to comb Theon’s hair out of his eyes. The touch was so light, and it sent a tingle over Theon’s scalp and down his spine. He must’ve let his eyes drift closed again, because when they opened, Ramsay was smiling at him. He cursed himself for accepting that tiny moment of pleasure.

_It’s not like I have a choice how he touches me._

“Does it feel better?”

Theon nodded and looked away, ashamed. “Yes.”

Ramsay continued to stroke Theon’s hair, and Theon’s eyelashes fluttered. “What do you say when I’m kind to you?”

“Th-thank you?” stammered Theon, surprised by how readily the words came, how right they felt. Ramsay’s smile widened, almost _too_ wide, Theon thought. _Like the Cheshire Cat._

“You can be good if you try hard enough,” he purred.

And then he gave Theon _water!_ No tricks, out of a bottle – and Theon had trouble recalling a happier moment. He drank the whole twelve-ounce container, not minding that within a couple hours he’d be pissing himself again.

“Thank you!” he said, water spilling down his chin and dripping onto his chest. “Jesus Christ, thank you!”

Ramsay licked his lips as he swiped up the trickle of water, his thumb skimming over the curve of Theon’s mouth. He watched Theon’s throat tighten and twitch as he swallowed, and Theon watched the faintest flush creep into Ramsay Bolton’s snow-white cheeks.

“I should go,” Ramsay whispered, strangely unsure, so softly it was only a breath.

_“Don’t go,”_ Theon wanted to say.
Chapter Twelve

Chapter Summary

Theon makes his move and Ramsay does Ramsay.

Chapter Notes

Another short Ramsay chapter - I swear this is part plot and not just wanton Theon torture.

Ramsay flayed another finger before Theon saw his opportunity. For all his body ached, it felt like a month since he woke up strapped to the saltire; but for all he knew it had only been a week. The last time he’d asked Ramsay to tell him the day, Ramsay hit him in the mouth, chipping another of his teeth and telling Theon that time was no longer his concern.

His captor was impossible to predict – Ramsay hit Theon for talking back, he hit Theon for begging and he hit Theon for his silence. But then sometimes he would offer Theon a few drops of water, call him “pet” and “sweetheart,” or even use his fingers to gently sweep Theon’s hair out of his eyes. Theon loathed these familiarities, but a growing part of him seemed to strive for those kinder moments, making a game out of how many times in a visit he could make Ramsay happy enough to give him something other than pain. In truth, Theon began to find it increasingly difficult to think of anything but Ramsay – the cadence of his voice, the touch of his fingertips, the smoky-sweet smell of his breath that lingered even after he left.

It was the middle finger on his left hand – skinned from the base to the tip this time – and it rubbed excruciatingly against the others. Ramsay had moved him – for the moment – off the saltire and onto a hook that hung from a track on the ceiling. His wrists were bound together, feet just touching the damp concrete of the floor. They were alone, and when Ramsay had begun to untie him, Theon’s heart leaped back to life – this was his chance. But the second he came off the cross, his knees buckled, and he fell to the floor, gasping.

So much for running, he’d thought as Ramsay cinched his wrists again. You can’t even fucking crawl.

Aside from that, Ramsay was unbelievably strong, easily moving Theon’s limp body into position and hoisting him up as if staging some sort of grotesque puppet show.

Usually, Ramsay seemed lighthearted during his visits – he enjoyed taking his time, talking to Theon in that fond voice of his, asking questions that had no right answers. He pretended no further interest in the whereabouts of Jon Snow, and instead asked Theon questions about himself – about Pyke and Winterfell. On this occasion however, he’d stormed in abruptly, his jaw set and shoulders tight, as though something had prompted him to return earlier than he intended. Something had got his blood up, and Theon wracked his brain to find what he had done to stir Ramsay’s ire.

Nothing. I didn’t fucking do anything.
Once he’d secured Theon on the hook, Ramsay let out a long breath. He stood behind Theon, out of sight, and Theon twitched as he waited.

The first blow didn’t surprise him, but his body jumped and the links of the chain he hung from wrenched against each other. He felt a red-hot stripe across his shoulders, painful but almost sweet compared to the incessant burn of his skinned finger. And this was a familiar feeling – the supple leather of a man’s belt across his skin – how sick was it that the sensation made him long to be back at Winterfell?

The second strike hurt more – Theon hissed as it bit at the back of his knee. He waited for Ramsay to say something, but the silence was a relief. It was so much easier to simply take the beating rather than to endure Ramsay’s questions, his eyes, his gleeful humiliations.

It was a short-lived respite.

“Ned Stark beat you, didn’t he?” Ramsay’s voice was raspy, almost winded.

Theon nodded, head dropping down between his bound-up arms. “Yes.”

“What did he use on you? His belt?” Ramsay’s next blow landed square across Theon’s ass, and Theon cringed.

“Theon, tell me why you’re receiving this punishment?”

He closed his eyes and held his breath, waiting for the next impact, and gasped when instead he felt Ramsay’s fingers sliding up between his thighs, Ramsay’s breath against his shoulder blade.

“But did he put his hands on you?”

Ramsay’s hand was rough, and Theon tensed as it continued upward to squeeze his ass before coming to rest on the small of his back. But it felt good – it felt warm. Theon tried to concentrate on that one spot of warmth.

“I bet he didn’t hit his own children. Saved that for you?”

Theon gulped as Ramsay’s hand traced the crest of his hip. “Y-yes,” he managed.

He still couldn’t see Ramsay at all, but he swore he could feel Ramsay’s lips just above his skin, the heat of Ramsay’s breath so close to his spine, teasing him. “I bet that made you feel special,” he said. “Did it make you hard?”

And there it was, Ramsay’s hand snaking around to give a cursory tug at Theon’s half-hard prick. Theon whined and then damned himself.

He’s a fucking monster.

And you’re a fucking whore.

“I asked you a question.”

Theon nodded again, his voice almost nothing when he answered, “Once. The last time – I liked it the last time.”

He recalled how he’d hurried to his room, confused and ashamed of himself; how he’d taken his
cock in his hand and tried not to think about why.

“You wanted him to fuck you.”

“No!” Theon shook his head so vehemently that the whole length of chain quivered. “No. I – I don’t want to think about him.”

His feet had just enough purchase on the concrete that he could push back on his toes. He felt the fabric of Ramsay’s shirt against his back, Ramsay’s heartbeat racing. He willed himself not to think – it was his body, he told himself. It was an instinct. It was not a choice. He heard Ramsay’s breath hitch.

“What are you doing?” It was the first genuine question Ramsay ever asked him, and when Theon rocked himself back again on his toes, he could feel Ramsay’s prick against his ass.

“Untie me. Please. I need to touch you.”

Ramsay grabbed Theon by the hip and spun him forcefully enough to twist the chain and bring the two of them face to face. Theon winced at the way his shoulders wrenched in their sockets. Ramsay had fixed him with a voracious expression, one that made Theon shrink back as much as he was able.

“Why do I care what you need?”

“Y-you said there were two ways to make you happy. I bet I can think of a third.”

Ramsay’s eyes grew wide while that light blush rose on his cheeks and he absently worried at the collar of his t-shirt. “Can you?” he asked.

Theon nodded and licked his cracked lips. “You know I can. I promise I won’t run away.”

“You can’t run away,” Ramsay corrected with a smirk. But there was something uncertain in him, and Theon could see him weighing risk against want.

“Please. Just untie me for a few minutes?”

Ramsay extended an arm, his fingers tracing over the ink on Theon’s ribcage. When his eyes met Theon’s again, they were glazed as though in a trance. He looked at Theon’s body again, trailed his touch down to where the kraken tattoo began in the soft hollow of Theon’s hip.

“My dad –”

A shiver rippled over Theon. “He won’t know. We’re safe here.”

Ramsay let out a heavy sigh, pressed his splayed fingers over Theon’s ribs and wound them upwards over his chest and throat until he gripped the underside of Theon’s jaw. His right hand came to rest on Theon’s waist. “What the fuck is wrong with you?” He held Theon firmly, tilting his head back to squint at him while that nasty smile curled up one corner of his mouth. “Everyone says I’m a twisted fuck, but you’re the one hanging from a hook with body parts missing, and you can still get it up? You’re fucking disgusting.” His thumb teased at Theon’s bottom lip as he leaned in to say, “So tell me how you think someone so completely fucking repulsive can make me happy – Tell me what you’d let me do to you.”

“I’d let you – I’d let you f-fuck me,” Theon stammered, though the idea filled him with dread and revulsion. He swallowed that down, focusing instead on the way Ramsay’s breathing sped up, the
way his hands were beginning to sweat. “Nobody ever has. I’ll probably cry.” He felt Ramsay’s thumb slip into his mouth, and he bit down as hard as he could bear. “I’ll probably hate myself for liking it. I’ll scream for it. I’ll beg you to stop.”

Ramsay’s mouth dropped open, his eyes drifting closed as Theon sucked on his thumb as wetly as he could manage with his parched lips. Ramsay swallowed loudly, his grip on Theon’s waist tightening.

Theon felt a sudden pang of hope. He might not be able to run, but he might be able to knock Ramsay out, or use one of the implements on the table to incapacitate him long enough to get away. His legs only had to carry him as far as Ramsay’s motorcycle. He could go west and catch a ferry to Pyke. He could find his family. And then he could find Jon Snow.

*Don’t get ahead of yourself, idiot.*

“Please. Please show me how I deserve to be treated.”

Ramsay’s eyes shot open, and Theon’s heart dropped when he saw that they were once again hard and crystal-clear. He released his hold on Theon’s waist and began to constrict his grip on Theon’s throat until Theon’s breathing became a desperate wheeze. He felt like he was falling and would never stop falling.

“You’re a pathetic little whore.” Ramsay’s voice seethed through clenched teeth. “You think you can fuck your way out of anything. Anytime you start to remember how *unwanted* you are, you can just pull out your cock and pretend that you’re the one in control – pretend that you’re anything that could make anybody happy.”

Theon was ashamed of the tears that had started to spill down his cheeks. “Then what do you *want* with me? Why can’t you just let me go, or – why are you keeping me here if I’m so fucking worthless?”

He could barely make out Ramsay’s face, but he still recognized that smile, so terribly white. “Because I *want* you – not this person that you try to be or wish you were or think you’re destined to be, but the *real* you – the boy who *knows* that he will never belong at Pyke or Winterfell, or off having adventures with Jon Snow. That boy belongs to me. And this –” he clutched Theon’s cock, “is not an important part of him. I’m sure you’ll bring me just as much pleasure without it.”

*Oh my god.*

The swell of blood in Theon’s ears, the sound of the air filling and leaving his lungs seemed to drown out the rest of the world. He began to shake, hard enough that he thought he might be having a seizure.

*You can’t,* he wanted to say, though he knew better. *You can’t.*

*He can. He can do whatever he wants.*

He expected the flash of a knife, but Ramsay only stood there, head cocked to one side, considering.

“You really think this is the worst thing I could possibly do to you.”

Theon nodded, and Ramsay smirked.

“I’ll tell you what,” he said. “Let’s make this a game.”
It was a loathsome word. Theon continued to quake as Ramsay lowered his hook just enough that the soles of both Theon’s feet came to rest squarely on the slick, cool concrete. He reached up for Theon’s restraints, the white cotton of his shirt so strangely soft as his chest pressed against Theon’s. Theon inhaled the smell of fabric softener and started sobbing again. Ramsay worked at the knots, and this time Theon didn’t dare to hope. Moments earlier, he’d thought about escaping his prison – now he only wanted to keep himself intact. He felt the cord loosen and fall away from his left wrist, and he cried out when his arm dropped to his side. His shoulder burned, and a stabbing pain filled his left side as the blood returned to his arm and his hand.

He looked down and for the first time fully saw his flayed finger – the dried red and pink, the pale yellow of his tendons. He felt sick. How could so much pain come from someplace so small? If not for the letters – “B-R-N” – across the backs of the knuckles, he would’ve sworn that the appendage wasn’t his. But he willed them to move, and they did. He glanced up at Ramsay, waiting.

“Don’t you want to know the rules?”

“Y-yes please.”

Ramsay took Theon’s hand palm-up in his own, careful to avoid touching the skinless finger. “Here’s the game: if you can make yourself come, you can keep your precious prick.” He spit into Theon’s palm. “If you give up, I’ll take it from you. Understand?”

Theon nodded despairingly. He watched as Ramsay situated himself comfortably in the leather recliner that sat in the corner, extending the foot-rest and splaying one leg over the arm of the chair. He began to tinker with his watch. “I think ten minutes is generous.”

Theon looked down again at his cock – completely soft now – and he shuddered to think what he looked like from Ramsay’s vantage.

*Don’t think about him.*

Gingerly, he took himself into his hand, careful to hold his flayed finger away from his shaft. It was no real use – the slightest friction sent shockwaves of pain up the length of Theon’s arm and into his guts. He closed his eyes. He thought about Jon, thought about the way Jon had pushed him up against the car and gone down on him, like there was nothing he wanted more than Theon’s prick down his throat. But he couldn’t focus. The ache in his hand, the shame of being naked on a hook, the threat of losing his cock overwhelmed that lovely little memory as though it was only a dream. He opened his eyes to find Ramsay watching intensely, one hand up underneath his shirt, the other rubbing at his own erection through the black denim of his pants.

Theon gave another tug at himself before dropping his head. He was crying again, but this time without a sound. His tears and saliva ran off his chin and onto his chest. He brought his hand up to wipe at his eyes, but the salt stung his finger bitterly.

“You have eight minutes left,” said Ramsay, irritated.

“I can’t do it.” Theon settled for covering his face with his palm. “I just can’t.”

Ramsay sighed and rolled his eyes, lifting his hips to pull a phone from his back pocket. “What a disappointing performance,” he said as he brought it to his ear and waited.

“Who are you calling?” Theon asked, but Ramsay only brought a finger to his lips.

“Don’t be rude, pet.” Then into the phone: “Hey, it’s Ramsay… yeah, fine fine. Listen, I’m about to perform a bit of an operation and I need your help… Because I don’t want this one dead… His
dick… Yes, you heard me. You can do that without killing someone, correct?” Ramsay’s face went red. “I don’t think that part of it is any of your business… No, it’s not my father’s business either… Yes, of course I’ll fucking pay you. Just get here. You’ll see my bike outside.” He scowled as he hung up and returned the recliner to its upright position. “Fucking charlatan.” He shoved the phone back into his jeans and wordlessly unfolded his pouch of syringes and vials, running his fingers over each one, searching until he found what he was looking for.

*Please,* Theon wanted to say, but his mouth was too dry. Was this how it felt to pray? *Please don’t do this to me. Please don’t let this be real. Let it be a trick. Let it be a dream. Please let me wake up now.*

He watched mutely as Ramsay loaded the syringe, and when Ramsay approached him took one weak swipe at it. Ramsay pulled easily away, smiling at him almost fondly. His gray eyes crossed slightly as he flicked at the needle.

“One again, I’m being kinder than you deserve. I really don’t have to anesthetize you for this.” He raised an eyebrow expectantly.

“Th-thank you.” Theon was certain that the spasm he felt was his soul leaving his body.

Ramsay tore open an alcohol swab, rubbed it on the inside of Theon’s right elbow. He bit his lip as his slid the needle into place there, just the slightest little pinch and then a feeling of pressure as the fluid filled Theon’s veins.

“Although I don’t think I’d enjoy it as much, I can’t promise I won’t rape you while you’re out.”

Theon began to fade. He felt Ramsay’s hand cupping his cheek, Ramsay’s breath on his face, and then Ramsay’s lips on his, warm and sweet. And as his vision went black, he permitted himself to surrender.

“Sweet dreams, Reek.”
Chapter Thirteen

Chapter Summary

Ramsay takes what he wants and Theon gets a break.

“Robb, get up.”

Robb remained still, blue eyes and a mess of red curls peeking at Theon over the bedspread. “I can’t.”

“It’s Sunday.” Theon leaned against the doorframe, arms folded. “You said you wanted to get up early and play Call of Duty.”

Robb shook his head. “Just leave me alone. I’ll be out in a little while.”

“I’ve been up waiting for you for like, an hour already.” He moved to sit on the edge of Robb’s bed, and when the weight of his body stretched the covers a bit tighter, Theon could see the outline of Robb’s morning wood, poking up ridiculously through the Ninja Turtles pattern of his blanket.

“Don’t laugh!” Robb snapped, but Theon couldn’t help it.

“I mean, have you just been lying here staring at it this whole time?” He prodded at the bulge with his index finger and Robb turned a deep red and smacked his hand away.

*

Theon’s head snapped up. He didn’t know if he’d been asleep and dreaming or if perhaps that was a memory of a real morning, but he’d been startled to awareness by the sound of a man’s scream. At first he assumed it was his own, but as the room came into focus, he realized that there was someone new in the unit. Theon had been returned to his place – he was beginning to think of it as his place – on the saltire, and a few feet in front of him sat a man, bound in a wooden chair with his hands behind his back.

It was difficult to guess the man’s age, or whether he had ever been handsome or plain – his face was disfigured by bruises and cuts, and blood stained his cheeks, matted his beard and clothes as it gushed from the side of his head where Ramsay had just removed an ear. The air stank like piss, and Theon was glad that for once it wasn’t his.

Ramsay stood behind the man, one hand on his broad shoulders, the other holding the ear thoughtfully. Though the man’s eyes had swollen nearly shut, they stayed riveted to the spot between Theon’s legs. Theon looked down at the thick wad of bandaging there, and somewhere in the back of his mind he felt shame, but his body couldn’t muster more than a dry coughing sound.

Ramsay glanced up at him with a smile, still holding the ear in the palm of his hand.

“Good morning, sweetheart,” he said brightly. “How are you feeling?”

Theon glared at him and said nothing.
“He’s upset with me,” explained Ramsay, clapping the man firmly on the shoulder and then adding pointedly, “I’m sure it won’t last forever. You’ll get over it, won’t you?”

“What –” Theon’s voice was only a rasp. “Who is he?”

Ramsay straightened. “Oh, how rude of me. This is –” he pinched the bridge of his nose, leaving two red smudges there. “You know, I’ve completely forgotten who the fuck you are.”

“John,” replied the man through cracked teeth.

“Go on, pet – introduce yourself,” urged Ramsay.

Theon clenched his jaw defiantly, and Ramsay’s tone was several shades when he held up the man’s ear and repeated, “Tell him your name, or I’ll make you eat it.”

Theon. My name is Theon.

But the words stuck bitterly on the back of his teeth. Was that really the name of this broken, dismembered person? He looked to Ramsay for a hint.

“Have you forgotten your name, love?”

Theon shook his head, tears stinging the corners of his eyes. He’d long since given up trying to stifle them.

“Reek,” he replied, though his chest burned at the lie. “My name is Reek.”

The smile that appeared on Ramsay’s face was genuine – affectionate – as he leaned down to whisper into the man’s remaining ear, “Isn’t he perfect?”

The man nodded weakly.

“I mean, I know you’re not some – some faggot, but you’d fuck him, wouldn’t you? If you had to? If I told you it was the only way you’d get out of this alive – you could probably get it up for him, right? That would be a good game.”

Theon began to shake.

No. No no no no no. Please.

Getting fucked by Ramsay Bolton was one thing – it was something he’d steeled himself for. It was the price he was willing to pay for the opportunity to escape. He could play the whore for Ramsay, but not for – not for anyone else. Not for Ramsay’s amusement.

Perceiving the wild fear in his captive’s eyes, Ramsay’s grin only widened. “What’s wrong, pet? You don’t seem to like that idea very much.” He glanced from the man’s ruined face and back to Theon’s. “I mean, yeah, John looks a little rough right now, but I didn’t think you were picky.”

Theon shook his head, so vehemently that his neck ached, and he pleaded shrilly, “No. Please don’t make me. Please don’t let him touch me.” Locking eyes with Ramsay, he saw a subtle shift in that terrible gaze, saw the slightest tinge of color in Ramsay’s cheeks when he said, “I’m yours. I belong to you. He has no right.”

Ramsay’s lips had parted slightly, and he swallowed when he closed them, clearing his throat before shrugging and saying, “Sorry to get your hopes up, John. It seems he’s feeling coy today.”
Theon dared to breathe a sigh of relief, even as Ramsay disappeared from view for a moment. The man’s head began to droop and sway as he washed in and out of consciousness, blood still flowing from the side of his head, all the way down his side by now. Theon wanted to pity him, but as he searched within himself, he found no trace of feeling, as though they were only strangers passing on the sidewalk.

The smell of gasoline preceded the appearance of the chainsaw. It was a large model, the massive power-head flecked with gore while the chain was clean and sharp enough to catch the light in each of its teeth. Ramsay wore a pair of wrap-around glasses and corded earplugs, and he’d stripped down to his t-shirt and boxers, a pair of black athletic socks separating his feet from the grime of the unit floor.

The man trembled and the feet of the chair ground loudly against the concrete.

“I know this looks bad,” said Ramsay, lifting the saw. He cocked his head toward Theon and added, “But you should thank him. He’s made me eager to get this done faster than usual, which means it will actually be less painful than what I originally had in mind.”

The roar of the thing was ear-splitting, and it reverberated painfully off the concrete and the metal. Theon clenched his eyes closed, simultaneously afraid that he might go deaf and thankful that the sound of the engine mostly drowned out the screams of the man in the chair. He felt pinpricks of warmth as the saw spat out blood and bits and tissue over his chest and legs.

He opened his eyes again when the engine cut out, and there was Ramsay, pulling his t-shirt over his head and using it to scrub at his face and neck, as though he cared about being clean, as though the rest of his body wasn’t completely covered in shredded viscera and bone. The walls were criss-crossed with blood spray, and the thing in the chair was hardly recognizable as a human being. Theon looked at the floor.

“I suppose you’re wondering why I brought someone else into our space,” observed Ramsay, turning his attentions to Theon, wiping at his prisoner’s face with that same saturated t-shirt. Theon closed his eyes, tried to shake Ramsay away. “We’re going to be spending a lot of time together, and I wanted you to – hold still, goddamnit! – I wanted you to see me work.” He wetted the pad of his thumb with saliva and rubbed it across Theon’s cheekbone, then lifted Theon’s chin, which Theon knew meant he was expected to open his eyes. “I wanted you to see that I do treat you well, despite the fact that you’re a liar and a whore and a coward.” He pushed Theon’s head a bit further back, eyes running down the taut lines of Theon’s neck. He bit his lip, hesitated before leaning in close enough to flick his tongue into the corner of Theon’s mouth. “And don’t think for a second that I don’t know what you’re trying to do to me – like you don’t know exactly what you’re doing when you say things like that to me.”

“It’s true though,” said Theon. He felt the warmth of Ramsay’s skin, the hardness of Ramsay’s prick through the thin flannel of his shorts, pressing dangerously close to that empty space between Theon’s own legs. “I’m yours.”

Even Ramsay’s kisses hurt. His teeth ground against Theon’s broken ones, and he inhaled the whimper Theon gave as little shards of pain prickled along his jaw. His tongue filled Theon’s mouth, not seeming to mind those jagged edges, nor the way Theon struggled to breathe. Theon tasted blood, though he couldn’t be sure whose. Ramsay’s hands were rough, one squeezing beneath Theon’s jaw, the other clutching at his waist.

I wish I wanted this.

Ramsay’s lips trailed down to bite along the edge of Theon’s jaw, and Theon gasped. When
Ramsay pulled away, he was breathing hard, a light flush suffusing the smooth skin of his chest.

“Ask me to,” he ordered, voice low as his fingernails dug into Theon’s side. “Ask me nicely.”

Theon was glad that Ramsay was close enough to block his view of the dead man in the chair. He paused before proceeding carefully: “Please fuck me like I deserve.”

Ramsay smiled wickedly and passed his fingers along the column of Theon’s throat. “Such a good dog.”

Theon’s body tilted as Ramsay loosened the restraints on his wrists, first the right and then the left, and once he was free, Theon pitched forward, landing hard enough to bruise his knees, hands slipping for purchase in the puddle of blood that had backed up around the drain. He looked up at the table covered in tools, only a few feet away, but god, he was so weak that it seemed like a mile.

He could sense Ramsay standing over him, watching as he struggled forward on his hands and knees, allowing him to get nearly within arm’s reach of that table before bending down to grab him around the ankles and pull him back, back through the blood, knees and elbows raking over the grating of the drain until he was lying on the floor on the other side of the unit, out of breath and shaking too hard to move.

Worthless.

“What was your plan, exactly?” asked Ramsay, amused as he held Theon by the ankles, spreading them apart to kneel between his captive’s legs. “Do you really think you have the stomach – let alone the strength – for that? Flint told me you always threw up at executions.” He pulled Theon’s hips up and back against his own while Theon tried to push himself up off the floor, only to end by crashing down again, face-first into the cold cement.

“Please. Please wait.”

“I’ve been waiting since the first time I saw you. I’ve been waiting as long as I can fucking stand.” Ramsay pushed the elastic of his boxers down around his thighs, just low enough to release his cock, thick and dark red. Theon felt the heat of it pressed against his ass, the iron grip of Ramsay’s fingers on his sides.

So this is what it will be like.

He lost his breath when Ramsay entered him, all of a sudden, all at once. It felt like being split in half, at first, like a knife twisting up into his guts. He wondered if this was how Robb hurt that night that Theon took him against the bathroom sink.


good. I fucking hope this is what it felt like.

I hope you fucking bled.

The pace was slower than he expected – measured, restrained. “Jesus fucking Christ.” Ramsay leaned forward, his chest pressed against Theon’s back to whisper into his ear, “Do you have any idea how good this is?”

“No.”

Ramsay twined his right arm around Theon’s ribs, nipped at Theon’s wounded ear. “Does this hurt you, pet?”
“Y-yes.”

“How bad is it?”

“It hurts,” choked Theon. “It feels like I’m dying.”

Ramsay groaned and bit down on Theon’s shoulder. After a couple of minutes, Theon was finally able to brace himself on his elbows. He stared at his hands – monstrous, covered in blood – and he counted his fingers in disbelief.

Eight.

Ramsay thrust slowly and deeply into him, and Theon felt something even more terrible than pain – a strange, ghostly ache between his thighs.

You like this, then?

You like being treated like a bitch?

You really are disgusting.

“Can you –”

Ramsay leaned forward again, the sweat from his temple slick against Theon’s cheek. “You want me to stop?” he asked eagerly.

“Can you – faster – please?”

Theon could feel Ramsay’s lips form into a smirk on the nape of his neck.

“You’re a needy little slut, aren’t you?”

Theon moaned, pressed his forehead against the floor. “Yes. Please – just – faster.”

I want this to be over.

Ramsay withdrew almost completely before pushing himself in to the hilt. Theon gasped as Ramsay’s cock hit that – whatever that was that made him at once wish he still had his own prick and grateful he didn’t.

“Be patient,” Ramsay chided. “There’ll be plenty more chances for me to fuck you like that. And I will. But right now, I don’t want to tear your stitches.” He snaked a hand around to rub gently at the bandage, and Theon’s stomach jumped at the touch.

In the end, Theon was reduced to a rhythmic series of whines and gasps, mangled hands fisted in his hair while Ramsay spent inside him with a growl.

They lay there for a few minutes, Theon’s belly shivering against the cool floor, Ramsay’s chest hot against his back. Ramsay groaned when he pulled out, and Theon felt a warm, wet mess – cum tinted pink with blood – seeping down his thighs.

Ramsay rose and found his t-shirt, using it to clean himself before tossing it onto Theon, but the cloth was so soaked with fluids that Theon pushed it away and resigned himself to being perpetually covered in filth. He curled up on his side, facing away from the body in the chair, folding his hands awkwardly together and waiting for Ramsay to drag him back to the saltire.
Did you really think you’d get away?

But Ramsay only dressed himself – pulling on his leather jacket over his bare torso – before squatting down beside Theon to comb his fingers through that tangle of shaggy black hair. Theon closed his eyes; he let the pleasant tickle of Ramsay’s caress wash over him.

“You’ve been very good today,” said Ramsay softly. “Would you like to sleep on the floor?”

Theon nodded. “Yes, please. I’d like that.”

He felt so drowsy, all of his limbs too heavy to even imagine moving. And Ramsay continued to stroke his hair, almost delicately. How could such awful hands feel so gentle?

“Skinner and Damon will be here to dispose of this mess in the morning.”

Theon nodded again. “Okay.” He yawned, eyes fluttering closed. It felt so good to lie down, after all that time hung up on the cross – his body felt so right. Ramsay bent to kiss him on the mouth, and Theon hummed lightly. He could hardly recall feeling so little pain.

When he opened his eyes again, the lights were out and Ramsay was gone.

*

“Dad, when will Theon have to go home?”

Theon had fallen asleep during the movie, curled against the arm of the sofa with his stocking feet just brushing Robb’s legs. He woke up at the sound of Robb’s voice, but kept his eyes closed, breath held, waiting for an answer.

*

It was a draft that roused him – the cool caress of the night air against his back that drew him up to his knees. He swayed, bracing himself against the floor with his left hand while he rubbed at his eyes with the right.

It can’t be.

You’re seeing things.

You finally fucking lost it.

But when Theon blinked, there it was – thin as a golden thread along the bottom of the sliding door. The light was almost nothing, yet it cleaved the darkness in two. The man in the chair was gone, and the stench of bleach was the only sign that he had ever been real. Theon began to drag himself along the floor and he felt the sting of the chemical against his raw skin. His joints ached, and he couldn’t say how long it took him to crawl the short distance to the door, but as he grew nearer, he heard the sound of an engine idling outside and his heart began to swell, tearing at his chest like someone buried alive.

He stopped when he reached the light, lying down again to catch his breath, lips pressed against the crack beneath the door to drink in the air – the air he used to breathe without thinking, without really tasting its sweetness. Theon peered outside, eyes watering at the brightness of what was only a streetlight at the edge of the parking lot. When his vision came into focus, he saw a row of cars, all dark and unoccupied, and beyond them a ten-foot chain-link fence topped with razor wire. He searched, listened for the presence of other people – but he heard only the idling engine, only the
caw of a raven, only the gentle rush of traffic on the freeway.

Coming to his knees once more, Theon worked his fingers beneath the rubber that lined the bottom of the door, trying to ignore the way it scraped against the stumps that used to be his fingers. He bit back on a groan as he pulled up, his whole body straining, shaking as he lifted the door. He watched the glow of the light rise over his knees, over the bandage between his thighs, up onto his stomach, then collapsed again to the floor, sucking at the air in short, shallow gasps.

The opening was a little more than a foot – plenty of space for him to squeeze past – and after he’d rested there for a few minutes, he began to pull himself through it, elbows scraping over the asphalt until the darkness and the smell of bleach dropped away and he was on his hands and knees in the parking lot. He lifted his head, looked left and right but saw no one. The streetlight flickered. Theon turned his attention to the row of cars, listening again and looking for the one that trembled just slightly.

It was a black coupe, and Theon felt so overjoyed that he struggled not to cry.

*Fucking keep it together.*

He opened the car door from a kneeling position, clutching the parking brake and steering wheel to pull himself into the driver’s seat. Someone had been smoking in the car, and an air-freshener in the shape of a pin-up girl hung from the rearview mirror. Theon adjusted it, thought to himself that he’d do almost anything for a cigarette, and then caught a glimpse of his reflection.

*Jesus fuck.*

His eyes were sunken, red-rimmed, and when he parted his lips to probe at his teeth, he had to look away. Glancing down, he ran his hands over his ribs and realized he could feel each one of them. He swallowed the panic rising in his throat, the voice that said:

*You’re disgusting. You’ll never be able to fix this. You’re a freak.*

His fingers fumbled for seatbelt, drawing at across his lap. A cynical smirk crept over Theon’s face. He removed the parking brake and put the car into drive, feeling his stomach leap as the wheels rolled forward. He tapped the gas lightly and his smirk turned into the faintest smile.

*Like riding a fucking bicycle.*

The only exit was an electric gat, and Theon swallowed as he approached, praying that his fingers could remember the combination. He’d passed through so many times, and he knew it – somewhere in there, he knew the numbers. His fingers hovered above the keypad, twitching for a few moments before pressing “5926.”

He grinned when the gate jerked, then glided smoothly open.

“Thank fucking god.”

Theon switched on the headlights as he passed through the gate, and though he was only driving about 30 mph, he felt like he was flying. He rolled down the window, felt the air whipping his hair around his face and neck, and stuck his arm out the window for a few seconds before remembering how grotesque his hand looked. He glanced at his fingers.

*It’s not so bad, I guess.*

He imagined Jon taking his hand, kissing the places his fingers used to be, and for the first time,
Theon permitted himself to think about the future. His biggest dilemma at the moment was the fact that he was naked and had no money. He squinted at the fuel gauge and was relieved to see that his tank was nearly full.

He wanted to find Jon – he would find Jon – but as the storage unit faded away behind him, Theon felt a fire rising inside him, and without thinking too much, he merged onto the freeway towards Wintertown. He knew it was stupid – he should be heading west, to the coast. He should be trying to beg or steal a ferry ticket to Pyke. After all, there was nothing to stop Robb from sending him right back where he’d come from, but Theon wanted Robb to see him. He wanted to Robb fucking look at what he’d done.

Theon thought about the letter Robb had sent, instructing Ramsay not to permanently harm him, and he scowled. How fucking naïve was that? Didn’t anyone tell the little prick what Ramsay Bolton did for his father? Did he honestly think that once Theon had given up Jon’s location, he’d just come strolling back to Winterfell and start sucking Robb’s dick like nothing had happened? What the fuck was going on in Robb’s head?

“Oh Robb, please forgive me. I should never have even dreamed of spending my life in any way other than fucking you and doing whatever the fuck you tell me to. I see that now.”

And then he’d kiss you and take you to his bedroom.

Theon hated how the idea made him feel.

And then he’d find out.

He’d find out you can’t – find out you’re not –

Theon’s knuckles went white as his hands wrung at the steering wheel.

“Fuck him,” he whispered to himself. “Fuck. him. And fuck you for thinking it was ever – for thinking it was more than fucking business. Fuck you for falling for their bullshit.”

He was so consumed by it – thinking of what he might say to Robb Stark, imagining his fucked-up hands around Robb’s pretty fucking throat – that he didn’t notice the snarl of the motorcycle behind him until it was so close that the glare of its headlight in his rearview mirrors blinded him.

“No. Please no.

The brightness of the light obscured the face of the rider, but Theon knew he was following him. The motorcycle began to swerve as it tailgated him, weaving sharply from side to side. Theon slammed the brakes, but the bike veered deftly to the side, hanging tightly to the concrete barrier that lined the edge of the freeway. The vehicles around him began honking. Theon’s heart was in his throat, and his hands had started to sweat. He took a breath and checked over his shoulder, looking for the space to leave the right-hand lane and finding himself boxed in by an eighteen-wheeler.

“Fuck.”

He hit the gas, but was in turn brake-checked by the sedan in front of him. He laid on the horn, but the driver in front only stuck an arm out the window to flip Theon the bird.

“Fucking son of a bitch.”

He looked in the mirror, still unable to see much of anything besides the headlight. Sometimes it
would drop back for a few moments, only to come surging forward again, always avoiding the
coupe as Theon slammed the brakes again and again.

*He’s fucking playing with you.*

Neither the car in front of him nor the semi-truck seemed to have any intention of changing lanes
or speeding up. Too late, he realized that his lane turned into an Exit Only, and the car fishtailed as
he cranked the steering wheel to the right to avoid crashing head-on into the oncoming divider.

Tremors of adrenaline eddied over him, and Theon had to slam the brakes to stop from careening
into the cross-traffic at the end of the ramp. The bike rolled to a casual stop behind him, and Theon
froze, trying to decide whether to turn right or left onto this two-lane avenue.

He settled on right and floored the gas pedal, tires shrieking as he tried to get his bearings. This
was an unfamiliar neighborhood. For a moment, he hoped that he might get pulled over for
speeding. He’d probably be taken into custody – driving without a license, driving over the speed
limit, driving a stolen vehicle, driving without any damn clothes on – but then he supposed that
could go either way, depending on who happened to own that particular police officer.

He saw Ramsay’s motorcycle catching up him – still several cars back – snaking in and out of
traffic, riding right on the double-yellow lines while the drivers around him slammed their brakes,
horns blaring, tires swerving onto the shoulder. All the lights were starting to make Theon dizzy.

Seeing a break in the oncoming traffic, Theon bit his lip and took an abrupt left onto a residential
street. He was still looking in his rearview mirror when the coupe rammed through a construction
barrier and into the bulldozer behind it.

Theon’s scream was swallowed by the sound of rending metal and breaking glass. The airbag
deployed and his whole body slammed forward into it, while something cracked in the middle of
his chest and a shooting pain ran up the length of his right leg. He vision unraveled to black around
the edges, until he saw nothing, though his eyes were open. He tasted blood.

*I’ve got to get out. I have to get out of here. Before he finds me.*

Theon felt blindly for the seatbelt and managed to unbuckle it. He began to lose consciousness, the
pain in his chest taking what was left of his breath away. His fingers clutched weakly for the car
door, but it opened from the outside.
He woke briefly to the warmth of the afternoon sun, streaming in through an open window in an otherwise dreary room.

Reek. The name. His name. It cut a thin line on the lips, like a knife slicing through skin. He had heard it in his dreams. “Where are you right now, Reek? I wish you’d wake up and come back to me.”

Ramsay was asleep, sitting in a chair beside the bed with his stocking feet propped up on the edge of the mattress, arms folded across his chest, his head drooped against his shoulder.

Reek began to panic, but when he tried to move, he found that he couldn’t feel his body at all. He felt as though he was floating, but moored to the bed, or to the boy sleeping beside the bed – like a balloon tied to Ramsay’s wrist. Ramsay looked almost peaceful while he slept, soft – even – in his clean white t-shirt, black hair still wet from a shower, eyelashes fluttering while a smile twitched at the corner of his lips.

What does he dream about? Reek wondered.

He felt his own eyelids growing heavy again. The room was so warm, the air so quiet and his body felt so light. Reek supposed that there were worse things. He supposed it was good to have someone to watch over you while you slept, to make sure you didn’t float away.

* 

When he awoke in earnest, he was in the midst of pissing himself – a shameful heat that spread beneath him and stung at the place where –

Reek shook his head and groaned, his mouth too dry for words. All of the lightness had left his limbs, and now he was bound up in pain.

Ramsay had been playing a game on his phone, and when he heard Reek’s noises, he nearly dropped it onto the floor, eyes wide and ecstatic as he stood to lean out the door and shout down the hall, “Qyburn! He’s awake!”

Ramsay returned to pass his fingers through Reek’s greasy hair – tangling it even worse than before – as if he didn’t know quite what to do with his hands. “Good morning, little thing.”

Reek tried to raise his arms, to motion to his throat and ask for water, but Ramsay subdued him, pressing Reek’s hands to his sides with a gentle touch and a sharp smile. “Careful, Reek. You’re broken.”

Reek whimpered.
“And you’re thirsty. I’ll get you some water.”

As soon as Ramsay left the room, another man entered. He was tall, despite the slight stoop to his shoulders, and was finely dressed in a snow-white suit. His hair was likewise white, but the wrinkles around his eyes did not diminish their slyness. He bent down, the back of his boney hand pressing against Reek’s forehead while Reek tried vainly to escape the touch.

Another trick, he thought. Another game.

“Hold still. I’m not going to hurt you.”

But Reek continued to whine in protest, going rigid under the inevitable contact. The old man’s hands felt cool and strange against his skin.

“He doesn’t like anyone but me touching him.” Ramsay stood in the doorway, cradling a small plastic cup in one hand.

“I’m a doctor,” explained Qyburn as though speaking to a child, tilting Reek’s head back to shine a small light into his wild blue eyes, one at a time. Reek blinked and looked to his master for verification.

Ramsay grinned. “That’s technically true,” he said. “You’re probably the luckiest person he’s had his hands on in quite a while.”

Qyburn smiled thinly. He took the cup from Ramsay and held it to Reek’s lips, lifting it just enough that the water touched the rim. Reek opened his lips – so painfully chapped – but Qyburn permitted only a few drops before he moved the cup away again.

“He’s thirsty,” said Ramsay darkly.

“He hasn’t had anything in his stomach for weeks,” replied Qyburn, reaching over Reek to examine the crook of his elbow where the tape securing his IV needle was beginning to peel. He smoothed the rolled edges. “If we let him have more than a sip, he’ll start vomiting.”

“Is it true?” croaked Reek, glancing from Ramsay to Qyburn and back again.

“Is what true, sweetheart?”

If the endearment unnerved Qyburn, he didn’t show it. Reek gazed up at the old man.

“Is it true I’m lucky?”

Qyburn held the cup for him, using the other hand to support the back of Reek’s head while he drank – again only the smallest of sips. “This isn’t what Roose Bolton pays me for,” he replied simply.

“It is what I pay you for,” said Ramsay, chafed at the mention of his father’s name.

Again, Qyburn paid no mind. He stepped aside, the gold buttons on his white jacket winking in the sunlight. “I’ll be back to check on him shortly.” He turned in the doorway and added, “It will be weeks before he can walk again, and longer until he’s fully recovered. I highly suggest that you avoid doing anything that might compromise that process.” Then with a knowing smile, “No more little operations.”

Ramsay nodded. “For now.”
Reek looked down at himself. Distantly, he wanted not to cry, but the thing – it used to have a name, that thing – that used to swallow his tears back down was gone and now they came as uncontrolled as a storm.

Whose body was this – chest covered in wires, tubes coming out of its arm, out of its nose? The mattress beneath him was still wet with piss, his paper hospital gown matted to his crotch. His right leg was entirely immobilized in a cast, as was his left wrist – the name “Ramsay Bolton” signed on each with a black Sharpie in an enthusiastic script. But the worst pain sat in Reek’s chest, radiating out into his sides and his shoulders. Even crying caused the ache to build inside him until he could hardly breathe. The beeping of the heart-monitor accelerated.

“You broke your sternum,” explained Ramsay, sitting on the bed beside Reek and ignoring the way he winced as his body shifted. “And your wrist. And your fibula and your tibia. That was quite a wreck you managed to get yourself into.” He ran a hand along Reek’s left leg, up under the gown and Reek shivered and clenched his teeth. Ramsay’s fingers rubbed at the juncture of Reek’s thigh, and the sensation of it made him squirm. “The good news is that Qyburn removed your stitches. Would you like to see?”

“No.” Reek shook his head. “No thank you.”

But Ramsay only laced his left hand with Reek’s right, lightly pushing up the hem of the gown and guiding Reek’s fingertips to that place between his legs. Reek closed his eyes and turned his head away, but still he could feel it. He’d been shaved, and the skin around the scar was rough with new hair growth. The scar itself was smooth, aside from the small hole kept open so that Reek could piss. He would have to piss sitting down, he realized as Ramsay brought Reek’s hand down to cup at the softness of his testicles. Reek tried to dismiss the memory of a boy who loved to touch himself, to be touched like this, but Ramsay’s fingers continued to press just there.

“Please stop,” he whispered.

Ramsay smiled affectionately at the way Reek’s fingers clutched the sheets. “It’ll be a while before you can – before you can do much of anything, really. Or before I can do much of anything to you.”

“What – what are you going to do to me?”

“All kinds of things.”

Reek swallowed. “I meant – I ran away. What are you going to do to me?”

Ramsay’s smile faded into a thoughtful expression. “I’m glad you recognize the need for a punishment,” he said, toying with his earring. “But you – your wretched little body has been through a lot.”

Reek held his breath.

“You made me worry, Reek.”

“I’m sorry. I didn’t mean to.”

“I think another finger is a fair compromise. I’ll even let you choose. What do you think of that?”

Reek looked at his hands – bewildered, overwhelmed to be given such agency – and when Ramsay moved his fingers down to press at the spot just behind Reek’s balls, Reek wondered what he’d done right, his hips arching against Ramsay’s touch. It was awful. He wanted it to stop, but there
was no stopping anything Ramsay did. And Reek liked it. He liked Ramsay’s attention. He liked being touched this way. It was more than he deserved.

“Yes. That’s very kind of you. Please keep going.”

But Ramsay’s hand stilled, gripping painfully at Reek’s thigh.

“What does he remember?”

Roose Bolton came to stand at the foot of Reek’s bed, arms folded as he eyed Reek with that indecipherable expression, surveying Reek’s various injuries before settling his gaze on Reek’s face. Reek felt Ramsay’s fingernails digging into the flesh of his leg.

“What else do you remember?”

Ramsay nodded at Reek to continue, and Reek gave a slight shiver.

“I was in the dark. I was – I was bad. I made you – I made you angry. I’m sorry.”

Ramsay smiled at him again, and this time Reek couldn’t help but smile back – Ramsay had forgiven him. It was good to be forgiven. But Roose cringed when Reek smiled, and Reek remembered that his teeth were all broken. He brought his fingers to his lips, ashamed.

“And what about before that?” pressed Roose.

“Nothing.” Reek shook his head fervidly. “Nothing else. Nothing.” He continued his shaking as Roose turned to his son with a thin frown.

“You could’ve killed him.”

“But I didn’t,” said Ramsay. “You told me not to, and I didn’t.”

“He could’ve killed himself.”

Reek couldn’t imagine why Roose – or anybody – might care so much what happened to him. Ramsay reached to cradle Reek’s jaw in his hand, rubbing his thumb across a newly-formed scar just at the corner of Reek’s left eye. “Reek knows better than to kill himself without my permission – don’t you, pet?”

Reek nodded, hoping desperately that Roose could see how true this was. “Yes,” he said, closing his eyes as though reciting. “Reek belongs to Ramsay.”

“Where do you intend to keep him?”
Ramsay shrugged. “He can sleep with the dogs.”

“And not in your bed?”

There was no accusation in Roose’s tone, but Ramsay’s shoulders tensed and Reek saw the blush creep up the back of his master’s neck.

“He’ll sleep where I tell him to sleep. And since when do you care about –” Reek startled to hear Ramsay falter. “Since when do you care what I do?”

“I don’t,” replied Roose, and Reek found himself flinching at the words. “But you’re an idiot if you think I haven’t heard the things the servants whisper about you. If Domeric were alive –” and here Ramsay’s jaw clenched, “ – I wouldn’t spare a thought to you or the things you enjoy. But since you are currently my only son, I’ll not have you making a spectacle of the family name that I have so generously bestowed on you. Whatever you do, you’ll do it discreetly. I’ll not have him waking half the house.” Ramsay opened his mouth to speak, but Roose continued: “Do you understand?”

“Yes sir.”

Roose cocked his head and considered Reek once more, and Reek began to feel lightheaded.

“Go and fetch Qyburn,” ordered Roose, not looking at his son.

“I’m not leaving him alone with you,” said Ramsay with the faintest tremor in his voice.

“If you want to keep him under my roof, you’ll do as I say. Now go and find Qyburn.”

“Fine.” Ramsay complied icily, standing with his fists clenched at his sides. He paused to smooth out Reek’s hospital gown. “Be good, Reek,” he said, and though the words were kind, there was a sharp edge to them.

Reek nodded. “Yes. I’ll be good.”

The floor in the room creaked as Roose stepped towards the bed. Reek waited – he held his breath and looked down at his feet, while Roose listened for the sound of Ramsay’s footsteps diminishing down the hallway. Satisfied that his son was gone, Roose reached out to put his fingers beneath Reek’s chin, tilting it back until their eyes met. Roose’s fingers were chilly, his gaze impassive.

“Theon, look at me.”

Reek closed his eyes.

_No no no. That’s not me. I don’t know him. I don’t know you. We’ve never met._

“Theon!”

Roose tightened his grasp on Reek’s jaw, but still Reek kept his eyes clenched shut. It was a trick. It was a trick and he was not going to fall for it.

“Theon, if you don’t open your eyes, I’ll tell him that you begged me to take you back to Winterfell.”

Reek’s eyes shot open, pupils narrowing to pinpricks. The corner of Roose’s mouth turned up just slightly.
“That’s a good boy.” Roose relaxed his grip, but his hand stayed firmly beneath Reek’s chin. “I have a message for Theon. I know you’ll pass it along to him.” Reek went rigid as Roose bent to whisper – his lips dry against Reek’s ear: “Robb Stark sends his regards.”

Robb?

And without wishing it at all, Reek suddenly saw a boy with long legs and straight, perfect teeth and freckles on his back and hair that smelled sweet after a shower. There were hands on the boy’s skin, strong and graceful. Reek blinked and looked at his own hands – one protruding from a cast – and they looked like dead things. This boy would never let himself be touched by such hands. Nobody would like these hands touching them. How could Ramsay even bear it?

“I don’t know who –” he began, but Roose had already left the room.

*

When he was ten years old, Theon Greyjoy had a fever. He lay in bed, sweating and wishing – one of the only times he wished – that he was back at Pyke, where he could at least hear the ocean from his bedroom window.

Robb knocked on the door. “Hey Theon?”

“Robb? Are you gonna come in?”

A pause. “I – I’m not allowed. Mom says I might get sick too.”

Theon let his head drop back onto the pillow. “Then what do you want?”

“Nothing. I just – I was just making sure you’re okay.”

Once his fever reached 104 degrees, Ned Stark took him to the emergency room. He was delirious, burning up, but he remembered Ned holding him in the backseat of the Altima, telling Poole to “Drive faster, goddamnit.”

*

He didn’t see Roose Bolton again during the three weeks that passed before he was able to leave his little room. Qyburn was a more frequent visitor who showed thorough attention to Reek’s physical injuries while paying no special thought to his equally broken mind. He always wore his white suit with the polished gold buttons, and sometimes he made small talk, even though Reek was careful to never speak without Ramsay’s permission.

Ramsay came to see him most of all – sometimes he was still covered in gore from his work, and other times he looked almost like a normal boy with his jeans and t-shirts still wrinkled from the dryer. He would bring Reek his meals, and even feed him, though Reek was almost perfectly capable with his right hand, missing pinkie-finger aside. One evening, Ramsay even ordered Chinese and fed him with chopsticks, which he held in that delicate, precise way that made Reek recall a knife.

And of course there were also nights that he would hurt Reek – cut him or burn him, or move the broken parts of him too roughly. In the morning, Qyburn would tend to his wounds and change his paper gown. After a while, the pirate ship on Reek’s left breast was so criss-crossed with raised pink lines that it was no longer recognizable. Reek pulled at the collar of the gown to rub at it – he didn’t know why he had a tattoo of a pirate ship, but it seemed so stupid with all the scars running through it.
“He’ll need a bath,” said Qyburn on the afternoon that he cut off Reek’s casts. “Not too hot. But a proper bath.”

Ramsay sat in the wheelchair Qyburn had brought in, rocking himself forward and back with the balls of his feet, the floorboards groaning beneath him. “Would you like that, Reek?” he asked.

Reek considered carefully. Of course he wanted a bath. He’d been lying in his own piss for weeks. The itching beneath the casts had become constant in recent days, and the rashes and bedsores were unbearable. Qyburn had been giving him regular sponge baths, but they were cursory and rough. Still, Reek knew he wasn’t entitled to a bath, and Ramsay always hated when he acted entitled to things. So he nodded, trying not to appear too eager, and said, “Only if you’d like for me to have one.”

Ramsay had to lift him out of bed, and Reek whined at the pain that ricocheted through his chest.

“Careful, love,” admonished Ramsay, as though Reek could help being so broken. He lowered Reek into the chair and knelt to position Reek’s damaged leg on the foot-rest.

The journey from his small recovery room to the bed and bathroom down the hall marked Reek’s first foray into the Dreadfort, and he found it frightening. The house at Pyke was dreary and cavernous, and Winterfell was overwhelming in its grandiosity, but Roose Bolton’s mansion felt at once vast and confining – its hallways long and narrow, the windows dirty despite the many servants that bustled past as Ramsay wheeled Reek down the corridor.

*What do they whisper about him?* Reek wondered. Whatever it was, it mustn’t be the truth, or they wouldn’t dare to whisper it.

Ramsay opened the door to a massive bedroom, furnished with dark woods and heavy red drapery that all but blocked out the sunlight. The bed was made, a pair of reading glasses on the nightstand beside it. At a desk beneath the window, a notebook lay open. The air was cold and stale.

“Is this your room?” ventured Reek.

“No,” replied Ramsay.

He opened another door and turned on the lights to a magnificent master bathroom. The floor and countertops were a polished granite, swirls of black and flecks of pink. Ramsay pulled aside a blood-red curtain to reveal a huge, round tub of the same material. A black faucet arched forth from the wall, and beside it two crystal knobs that Ramsay began to adjust. Reek watched as he tested the temperature with his fingertips, dialing back the hot water slightly before reaching down to close the drain.

*I wonder if he’ll drown me.*

That wouldn’t be such a terrible way for this to end. Ramsay would hold him under, and there would be no blood. And maybe he would still die an Islander, in his own, pathetic way.

*But Reek is no Islander.*

When the tub was three-fourths full, Ramsay turned off the tap. He pulled his hoodie off over his head and submerged his arm in the bathwater, all the way past the elbow. Satisfied, he rose and walked behind the wheelchair, laying his hands on Reek’s shoulders and pressing forward gently.

“Let me untie your laces,” he said.
Reek leaned forward, granting Ramsay access to the flimsy strings that held his paper gown in place. Ramsay pulled the gown away, crumpled it up and threw it in the waste-bin beside the sink. The mirror above the sink was huge, stretching across one entire wall of the bathroom, but thankfully it was mounted too high for Reek to get a glimpse of himself.

Beneath the hoodie, Ramsay wore an old black beater, and when he wrapped his bare arm around Reek’s waist to help him up from the chair, Reek couldn’t help but notice the softness of Ramsay’s skin. His knees wobbled dangerously as he took the three steps to the tub, but Ramsay reassured him.

“I’ve got you.”

I know.

The water was perfect, just hot enough to reach his bones, and Reek had to stifle a sigh. It stung at his scars a bit – and between his legs – but the itch was gone from his wounded limbs. He drew his good leg up to his chest and looked at Ramsay, awaiting further instructions.

The steam from the bath drove the color up in Ramsay’s cheeks, and he smiled at Reek, combed his fingers through his pet’s hair and remarked, “Your hair’s turning white.”

“White?” Reek twirled a lock of hair before his eyes. It was black. He flinched as Ramsay plucked a few strands from his head to show him.

“At the roots. It’s coming in white, like an old man’s hair.”

Reek rested his chin on his knee, distraught. Ramsay picked up a sponge from one corner of the tub, wetted it and brought it down the track of Reek’s spine.

“It’s rare, but it happens,” he said, wringing the filthy water out.

“Does it stay that way?” Reek moped.

“It might.” Ramsay chuckled and ran the sponge along the jut of Reek’s collar bone. “You’re still such a vain thing, aren’t you?”

*What if he decides he doesn’t want you anymore?*

Reek stayed silent. Once Ramsay was finished with his back, Reek allowed himself to recline against the side of the tub. Ramsay rubbed the sponge across his chest, lifted his arms out of the water one at a time, taking care to scrub at Reek’s fingernails.

“Does this feel good, Reek?”

“Mmmhmm.”

“Answer me in *words*, pet.”

“I’m sorry. It feels very nice. Thank you.”

“You know not to get used to it.”

Reek’s eyes had drifted closed, and now they opened again. Ramsay was staring at him expectantly.

“Yes. I know.”
“Good.” Ramsay resumed his ministrations, drawing the sponge along the inside of Reek’s thigh.

Reek allowed his gaze to travel the length of Ramsay’s arms, his shoulders, the tendons of his neck—all the lines so delicate and precise. It seemed wicked of the universe to hide a monster in such perfect skin. Dimly, something inside him stirred.

“What are you staring at?”

Reek cast his eyes down quickly—he was not allowed to want things. “Nothing. I didn’t mean to stare.”

Ramsay washed every inch of Reek’s body, even taking a rough stone to the bottoms of his feet. He used a cup to wet Reek’s hair, lathering in a harsh-smelling shampoo, raking his fingernails over Reek’s scalp in a way that made Reek’s toes curl. Theon had never been treated like this. When Reek looked down again, the bathwater was cloudy.

“I have something to give you,” said Ramsay, reaching behind him for a small gray box. Then with a grin he added, “Really, it’s more of a present for me.”

He opened the box for Reek to see, and the implements inside twisted Reek’s stomach, though they were visibly less terrible than the things on the steel table. They sparkled finely—a pair of looped forceps, a long needle, a silver barb with one flat and one rounded end.

“Th-thank you?” said Reek, unable to hide his confusion.

“Qyburn said you’d be up for it.” Ramsay unfolded a pair of blue latex gloves; they snapped crisply when he put them on. “Go on, sweetheart—let me see your tongue.”

It hurt less than the other things, except for right afterwards when Ramsay kissed him and the little metal ball clanked painfully against his busted teeth. Ramsay smiled and used his ring finger to wipe Reek’s blood from the corner of his own mouth, while a few stray drops dribbled from Reek’s chin and into the filthy bathwater.

“I like it,” he said. “Don’t you?”

“Yeth,” replied Reek. “Very much.”

When the water turned chilly, Ramsay helped him out of the bath and wrapped him in a plush red towel. Reek closed his eyes and hummed as Ramsay dried his hair, allowed himself to lean back against Ramsay’s chest. It felt heavenly and strange to be so clean, to feel the soft rub of the towel and the warmth of Ramsay’s touch without a layer of dirt and blood between them. Reek let his head drop back against Ramsay’s shoulder.

He takes care of you.

But Ramsay grabbed Reek’s shattered wrist and squeezed—hard enough to make Reek cry out.

“Keep teasing me, Reek, and I’ll break you into more pieces than Qyburn will know what to do with.”

Reek’s stomach twisted at his misstep—so stupid, so disappointing—but Ramsay continued to towel him off and Reek felt hopeful that he would do better next time.
Chapter Fifteen

Chapter Summary

Reek begins to settle into a routine while changes darken the horizon for Ramsay.

Chapter Notes

SPOILERS: As usual, apologies for the fairly short chapter. Er, it feels short to me anyway. For those of you yearning for Jon's re-appearance, I hope I'm not ruining anything by telling you that it's looking like about Chapter 20 or so that we might catch up with that boy again. I hope you'll keep reading in the meantime, though! <3 y'all!

The servants – maids and cooks and groundskeepers – soon learned not to stare at Reek, and Roose Bolton made sure that his associates never caught a glimpse of the thing that used to be Balon Greyjoy’s son. And Reek was grateful that only one set of eyes bore witness to his scars, his cracked teeth, his missing parts and his freakish white hair – now down to his neck in a greasy, matted mess.

Autumn passed, and then winter, and in the spring Roose hired a landscaping crew to install an expansive flower garden on the west side of the house. Reek was forbidden from going outside while the crew was on the grounds, but Ramsay allowed him to watch the construction from his bedroom balcony on the third floor.

Who’d have guessed Roose liked flowers?

Reek leaned against the high railing and looked down over the byzantine walkway that wound through the new garden, and he tried to gauge where his body might land if he were to jump. Many of the plants were only beginning to bloom – little pinpricks of color against a deep green field, the fresh mulch a rich, raw brown. The whole thing smelled lovely. Reek tried not to notice the men who worked in the garden, pushing wheelbarrows of dirt and hauling the timber and stone and bags of concrete over their broad, bare shoulders. Occasionally, one of them might stop his work to cast a glance up towards the figure on the balcony, and Reek would shrink back from the railing and wish himself invisible.

They look so young.

They’re probably the same age as you.

He startled when two arms closed around him, one at his waist, the other across his chest.

“Did I scare you, pet?”

Reek swallowed and nodded. He knew that Ramsay liked it when he was frightened.
“Yes, you scared me.”

Ramsay held Reek tightly, pressing him forward against the rail until it dug coldly into his belly. He swept Reek’s hair off the back of his neck and bit down there just hard enough to make Reek gasp and clench at the railing with his six remaining fingers.

“See someone you like down there?” asked Ramsay, bringing one hand up under Reek’s filthy t-shirt to rub at the scars on his chest. He rested his chin on Reek’s shoulder and gazed down at the men working in the yard.

“No. I just – I just –” Reek’s tongue stud clicked against his teeth.

“You’re a shitty liar.” Ramsay’s tone was affectionate – teasing – and he nipped at Reek’s earlobe. “You used to love boys looking at you.”

Reek said nothing and Ramsay released his hold. He leaned on the rail beside his pet, tapping a pack of cigarettes on the heel of his palm before lighting one up and exhaling with a sigh. Reek hated the smell – it reminded him of something. Ramsay took another long drag and said, “My dad’s getting married.” He nodded towards the garden. “That’s why he’s having the whole yard remodeled – trying to make the Dreadfort look like something besides, you know, what it fucking is.”

“Who, um, who is she?” Reek asked.

Ramsay snorted. “Some no-name Frey bitch. Fucked if I care.”

Beneath the spiteful tone, Reek sensed something else – some kind of deep unease that he longed to soothe. Tentatively, he moved behind Ramsay to reach for his shoulders, slouched and tight beneath the fabric of his shirt. Ramsay carried all his worries just between his shoulder blades, and Reek knew the way his master moved when something was on his mind. Cursing his clumsy hands, he massaged Ramsay’s back, working at the muscles until Ramsay let out a low hum. Reek smiled.

“Have I ever told you about my mom, Reek?”

Reek thought of a woman with long white hair, sitting in a bay window. He found it hard to believe that Ramsay ever had a mother. “No,” he replied. “You never have.”

He waited for Ramsay to continue, but Ramsay said nothing else for a while, finishing his cigarette and carelessly flicking it off the balcony.

“Reek?”

“Yes sir?” Reek’s hands stilled on his master’s shoulders.

“Go down to the kitchen and fetch them something cold to drink.” Ramsay nodded at the men working below and Reek’s heart sank into his stomach. “See if you like how they look at you now.”

*

Reek saw less and less of Qyburn as his injuries healed, and though he couldn’t say why, he was relieved. Qyburn had tended to him well enough, but he had also seen how Ramsay mutilated Reek, and every time he spied the old man – often at strange hours and in strange parts of the house – Reek felt a deep unease coupled with a shame that Ramsay referred to as “ridiculous.”
On the day that Reek was finally able to limp around without crutches, Ramsay had given him a get-well present.

“Turn around and I’ll put it on you.”

Reek obeyed and lifted his hair so that Ramsay could fasten the thing snugly around his wiry neck.

The collar was pink leather with a silver buckle and small, tear-shaped garnets that sparkled audaciously against Reek’s grimy skin. Ramsay had forced Reek to stand facing a mirror for several agonizing minutes as he admired his own generosity.

“It suits him,” said Qyburn.

“What do you think, Reek?”

“Yes.” Reek ran a finger over the gemstones. “Thank you very much.”

Wearing it was terribly unpleasant for a while – the leather rubbed certain spots and left them raw and bleeding, and sometimes Ramsay would tug on it hard enough to make Reek’s vision go black.

But the leather softened and Reek grew accustomed to the feel of it, and soon the collar became a comfort – something to hold on to when he woke in a trembling fit on the cold floor of the kennels. In a panic, his hands would shoot to his throat, feeling for the collar; upon finding it, a wave of relief passed over him and his breathing would slow as he remembered his name and to whom he belonged.

_Reek. Reek. It rhymes with –_

He was thankful for it again that afternoon as he carried a tray of ice-cold lemonade out into the yard, struggling to walk steadily, his heart pounding as the liquid sloshed dangerously close to the rims of the glasses with each step he took.

“Thank you,” said the men, looking away in embarrassment.

Except for the boy who took the last glass and brought it to his lips, regarding Reek with dark brown eyes before cocking his head at the Dreadfort and asking, “Do you live here?”

The boy had a sunburn and dirty-blond hair tied up in a blue bandana. Reek wanted to look up at the balcony, but he didn’t dare, so he only touched his collar and said, “My name is Reek and I belong to Ramsay.” Then he turned and walked back into the house, his hands shaking and his heart pounding in his ears.

*  

Walda Frey looked out of place anywhere in the Dreadfort, but she looked especially odd sharing a room with Reek. She was vibrant – eager blue eyes taking in the drabness around her as though it were some kind of castle, and her dress was a cheerful pink that flattered her round figure as Roose helped her out of his town car. She was young – almost scandalously young, though Reek supposed that marrying younger women was low on the list of Roose Bolton’s questionable deeds.

She had only come for a visit, and Roose instructed Ramsay to “wear something clean and give your creature a bath.”

“Yes sir,” Ramsay had replied hotly.
“Walda – this is my bastard son, Ramsay.”

Standing behind Ramsay, Reek couldn’t quite see his master’s face, but he caught the way Ramsay’s back stiffened, the way his fingers fluttered into a fist for a fraction of a second before Ramsay instead offered a polite handshake.

“It’s a pleasure to finally meet you,” he said, probably giving his best attempt at a normal smile.

Walda blushed brightly and looked down at her feet, and Reek realized that she didn’t know – was it possible she’d never heard that Ramsay Bolton was a monster? Inverse to the Boltons, the Frey Family was large in number and small in stature, and it seemed that no one had bothered to alert the girl to the unsettling reputations of her fiancé and soon-to-be son-in-law.

“And who are you?” she asked.

Reek had been gawking at her – he’d never seen such thick, blonde hair – and now he shrank away, embarrassed, while Ramsay took a small but deliberate step between them.

“This is Reek. He’s my –”

Roose, standing just behind Walda, raised an eyebrow and Reek saw his master’s cheeks go red.

“He’s my servant.” He cast a warning glance over his shoulder at Reek. “He’s a disgusting animal, and it’s best not to speak to him. You never know what he might try to do to you if I’m not around.”

“Oh.” Walda leaned in closed to Roose and he put his arm around her shoulder, which was the most unnatural gesture Reek could imagine.

Reek looked down at the floor. Reek was bad, of course, and stupid, but had he ever really been such a beast?

“And you’ll whimper and swear and beg for it, won’t you?”

Sometimes a week would pass – a week where he was good, where he remembered his name – and then that boy would show up, vivid as though all those good weeks were nothing. That boy with wide, dark eyes and a barely-there smile would ask him –

“Do you want me to?”

Reek shook his head. He watched Roose and Walda as they headed for the elevator.

“Can I see the garden?” she asked excitedly.

“Not till it’s finished,” replied Roose.

Reek watched the smile drop from his master’s face as they disappeared from view.

“Come on, pet. I’ve got work to do.”

* Reek loved the motorcycle. It was a brand new Harley – a 1200 Custom, Ramsay told him proudly – with a gunmetal finish and leather seats, modified handlebars and an aftermarket exhaust system so loud that Reek could feel it rattling his ribs. It was frightening sometimes, the way Ramsay drove – dodging in and out of traffic at 90mph, the bike listing from one side to the other – but
whenever Reek felt afraid he would just hold Ramsay tighter, feel the race of Ramsay’s heartbeat and surrender to it. It felt like flying.

Ramsay never wore a helmet, but he bought one for Reek – red with a black stripe down the middle – and sometimes he even let Reek ride with the visor up so he could feel the breeze in his face. At stoplights, Ramsay would often let go of the handlebars to rest one hand on Reek’s knee. The bike made it too easy to pretend that things weren’t as they were – Reek pretended Ramsay was another boy, a boy that had come to rescue him.

*It would hurt him if he knew what you were thinking. It would make him angry.*

*He doesn’t have to take you out at all. Why are you always so fucking ungrateful?*

As usual, Ramsay stopped at a gas station on the way to the storage complex and picked up a pack of cigarettes and a bag of Skittles, neither of which did he ever offer to share.

It was late afternoon when they arrived, and the sunlight was harsh against the asphalt and chain-link fence surrounding the storage complex. Reek still didn’t know which unit had been his – he had never looked back to see, and from the outside they all looked the same. He imagined himself inside each one – all of them at once – though he knew now that the majority of the units housed the more mundane aspects of Roose Bolton’s enterprises.

Ramsay put the kick down and vaulted a leg over the bike so that he was sitting on it facing backwards. He popped a few Skittles into his mouth and chewed them wetly before flipping up Reek’s visor and then placing a hand firmly on each side of his helmet. Reek knew this meant Ramsay wanted to see his eyes. He tried not to blink or look away.

“If I leave you out here, will you be good?”

Reek nodded. “Yes sir.”

A couple months ago, Reek had made the mistake of wandering out of sight and Ramsay beat him unconscious.

*“You gave me a fucking heart attack!”*

After that, Ramsay made Reek accompany him inside while he did his bloody work – partially to keep an eye on him, but also to *remind* him.

Now though, it seemed that his master was willing to give him another chance to be good. Ramsay was so patient.

“I don’t need to tether you to something, do I?”

“No sir.”

Ramsay grinned as he pulled the helmet off Reek’s head and planted a chaste kiss on Reek’s mouth. “If you wait out here for me like a good dog, I’ll take you for a ride somewhere.”

Reek nodded again and gave one of his closed-lipped smiles. “Thank you. I’d like that.”

*He doesn’t want to go home.*

The screams were not entirely muffled within the storage unit, and Reek tried humming a song so that he might not hear them. He wondered if anyone had heard his own screams, and if so, what did
they sound like? He tapped his tongue stud against the roof of his mouth and wondered – for what must’ve been the millionth time – what it was about him that compelled Ramsay to show him such mercy.

Reek hesitated before allowing himself to slide up into the driver’s seat.

*It’s only a little game of pretend.*

He placed his hands lightly on the handlebars, but the height of them wrenched painfully on his shoulders. Reek sighed. The cuts and the burns and the blows all hurt, but it was the unending *ache* – that residual pain from the car crash, from hanging on the saltire for all those endless hours – that made Reek whine and moan and think about dying. He thought about putting the kickstand up and seeing if he could manage the bike on his own, but he knew better. His right leg still buckled sometimes under the weight of his body.

Reek gave up on humming. The screaming continued for some time, occasionally punctuated by Ramsay’s strange, high laugh.

*Please just kill the poor fucker already.*

The sun was low in the sky when Ramsay finally emerged, pulling on his leather jacket over a t-shirt flecked with blood.

*“The less blood, the more pain.”*

*“Who – who was that?”* asked Reek, scooting back on the bike and putting on his helmet.

*“Someone who informed on my dad.”*

*“Is he dead?”*

Ramsay snorted. *“He wishes he was.”* He leaned in to give Reek a peck on the nose. *“You’ve seen that sort of thing before, Reek. Don’t act so squeamish.”*

*“I’m sorry.”*

*

The evening air was cool against Reek’s face, and it made Ramsay’s body seem all the warmer as Reek pulled himself close to his master’s back. Ramsay drove out of the city and into the suburbs, all the way to a park that bordered the Weeping Water.

The lights lining the sidewalk began to flicker with cold light, and the greens of the grass and the trees began to shift to a deep blue as the sun dropped below the horizon. A murmur of crickets rose up and Reek began to feel nervous. He’d never been so far away from the Dreadfort.

Ramsay drove the bike up over the curb and through the grass until they came to the edge of the river. It was a secluded spot, and Ramsay lit up a cigarette before dismounting to sit beside Reek on the bank.

They sat there for what seemed like quite a while, Reek hugging his knees to his chest while Ramsay finished one cigarette and lit another. The water moved silently. It was deep. Reek knew this because another boy who knew things about water told him so. He wondered if Ramsay would jump in after him.
“Of course he would.”

“Did you know I had a half-brother?” asked Ramsay finally.

“No,” said Reek, though he’d gathered as much. He hesitated before asking, “What was his name?”

_And was he anything like you?

“Dom. I was fourteen when he died. He was twenty. I don’t think I’ve ever seen my dad that upset.” Ramsay smirked cynically and took a long drag. “I mean, I think he actually fucking _felt_ something for a few minutes there.”

Reek blinked at his master. He remembered the time that Balon whipped Theon so hard that his screams woke his mother and she came downstairs to ask him to stop. Roose’s steady indifference seemed preferable to Balon’s fierce temper, but Reek knew better than to say so.

“And you know why he’s getting married, right?” Ramsay blew a stream of smoke into Reek’s face. “Why he’s marrying _her_ and not – not someone his own fucking _age_?”

Reek shook his head wordlessly.

“She’s going to replace me.”

Reek’s heart stung at that. Carefully, he reached for the nape of Ramsay’s neck and threaded the three remaining fingers through that fine, black hair.

“He can’t replace you.”

“He _thinks_ he can.” Ramsay tilted his head back.

“Well then he’s fucking stupid.”

Reek clapped his hand over his mouth, horrified. He hadn’t meant it to come out.

But Ramsay only looked at him and laughed. “Go on, Reek.”

Reek sidled closer to Ramsay, still passing his fingers lightly through his master’s hair. “I just mean – he’ll never find anybody else that can do the things you do for him. You’re – you’re a good son to him, and if he can’t appreciate that then he – then he’s fucking blind.”

He hadn’t intended to kiss Ramsay – he never did – but Reek had leaned over and pressed his lips behind Ramsay’s ear, steadying himself with his left hand on Ramsay’s thigh. He heard Ramsay’s breath catch in his throat, felt the blood rise in his skin.

“What are you doing?” Ramsay’s voice was breathless, confused.

“It hurts me when you hurt.”

Ramsay looked startled. “You’re pathetic,” he said as he pressed his lips against Reek’s.

Reek pushed against Ramsay’s chest, just gently enough for Ramsay to think it was _his_ idea to lie back, pulling Reek down on top of him with one hand fisted in that snarled white hair, the other tugging at the front of Reek’s ratty t-shirt. Reek came down onto his elbows, his thin arms creating a perfect frame for Ramsay’s face.
Kissing was hard for Reek – it reminded him that about a third of his teeth were broken or chipped or missing, and he had to take care not to cut his master’s tongue open. So he relaxed as best he could while Ramsay nipped and sucked at his lower lip, releasing his hold on Reek’s shirt to slide his hand up beneath it and run his nails through the maze of scars there. Reek shivered.

“Do you like that, pet?”

_Do you really care if I like it?

Reek only leaned down to kiss Ramsay again, thumb playing with the earring in Ramsay’s left ear.

“Did you pierce it yourself?” asked Reek, sitting back onto his knees, feeling the hardness of Ramsay’s prick beneath him.

“What?” Ramsay blinked at him. “No.”

“Who did?”

“An old friend.”

Reek was surprised – and ashamed – to feel a twinge of envy rise up inside his chest.

_Who?_ He wanted desperately to know, but he didn’t want to hear Ramsay say any name other than his.

But the feeling must’ve been clear on his face, because Ramsay raised an eyebrow and ran his palm up the inside of Reek’s thigh. “No one for you to worry about, jealous thing,” he said with a squeeze. “But now that you’ve brought him up, you’ll have to work to make me forget about him again.”

Reek swallowed. _Theon_ had been skilled at this, but pleasing Ramsay had never called for skill as much as it called for a high pain tolerance. And Reek could tolerate more pain than Theon could imagine. Reek tried to remember – obliquely – what he ought to do.

His hands shook as he unzipped Ramsay’s leather jacket. He opened it and his fingers skimmed Ramsay’s shirt, the blood on it nearly dry already. He felt Ramsay’s hips grinding up against him, and that alien sensation building where his own manhood used to be. He looked at Ramsay questioningly.

“Can I – tell me what to do.”

“Make me happy.” Ramsay grabbed him again and yanked him forward, tugging on Reek’s collar and lifting himself up to suck a welt in the middle of Reek’s chest. Reek held himself up with one shaking arm, and with the other pulled Ramsay’s shirt up, exposing his taut stomach. He watched the goosebumps ripple over Ramsay’s skin, watched the rapid rise and fall of his chest and then leaned down to ghost his wetted lips over Ramsay’s nipple. Carefully, he began to suck, smiling to himself when Ramsay swallowed loudly. He turned his eyes up to look at his master’s face and saw Ramsay’s gray eyes gazing back at him, half-lidded.

“Is this good?” asked Reek, reaching back to slip his left hand beneath the hem of Ramsay’s boxers, closing three fingers around the warm hardness of Ramsay’s cock.

“Don’t ask me stupid questions,” growled Ramsay, putting a hand on the back of Reek’s neck to force his pet’s lips down again. Reek tasted blood when one of his broken teeth pierced the skin of Ramsay’s breast, and when Ramsay hissed, Reek froze, waiting for the blow. But Ramsay only
rasped, “Lick it up.”

Reek obeyed. The flavor was familiar and Reek’s lips left a garish red trail over Ramsay’s stomach and the crests of his hips. Reek enjoyed the way his master’s hands tore at the grass, the way his back arched and the flush from his face spread down into his chest.

Reek hated buttons – even with two hands they were difficult, and that was part of the reason that Reek wore sweatpants most of the time. In jeans, he was liable to piss himself before he could undo the fly – it amused Ramsay, of course, but after three laundry maids quit in the span of a week, Roose put a stop to it.

He hoped Ramsay would get impatient and undo his own pants, but Ramsay only watched him, smiling and rolling his hips up against Reek’s struggling hands until they finally succeeded in freeing his erection to jut up darkly against his belly.

Reek looked around. The last traces of the sun had disappeared and all the colors began to fade and blend. He listened for voices or footfalls, but heard only the flow of the river, the sound of his master’s breathing. Ramsay eyed him expectantly.

Something was off – it was unprecedented that Ramsay should wait for his pet to make the first move, and Reek was mortified, staring at dumbly at his master. Usually, Ramsay wasted no time in satisfying himself, and though it hurt sometimes – and sometimes it hurt for days – it was simple enough.

“What are you waiting for?” Ramsay asked finally.

Reek took a deep, stuttering breath. This had been easy, once – for a boy with all his teeth and fingers. He lowered himself again to his elbows and laid a cluster of kisses on the hollow of Ramsay’s hip, hoping to buy himself some time, but within seconds he felt Ramsay’s hand on his head, pushing him none-too-gently down.

“Reek, goddamnit –” And there was something desperate in Ramsay’s voice, the nearest thing to a “please” that Reek could ever hope for.

Ramsay’s initial gasp turned to a full-throated groan as Reek set to work with his tongue stud, teasing at the underside of Ramsay’s prick. Day to day, Reek disliked the little metal barb – he sometimes bit down on it by accident – but it was worth the pain to see the way his master’s head snapped back, to hear the breathless “Fuck –” that caught at the back of his throat.

It felt wonderful – the cool softness of the grass beneath Reek’s forearms, the tight grip of Ramsay’s fingers in his hair, the sweet ache between his legs as he rutted up against his master’s thigh.

He knew that Ramsay was close by the way he held his breath, and he knew to swallow every drop of it, the way Ramsay had trained him to.

“Spit it out again and I’ll break what’s left of your teeth.”

“Was that – did I –”

Reek lay down beside Ramsay, angling to press his lips against his master’s, but Ramsay turned away.

“You’re dumber than I thought if you think I’m kissing that nasty whore mouth of yours.”
“I – I’m sorry. I wasn’t thinking.” He settled for laying his head on Ramsay’s chest. He felt Ramsay’s hand move up under his shirt to rub at the small of his back. The sky was almost completely dark now, and a few stars began to shine.

“You know I love you, Reek?”

Reek’s heart leapt into his throat. Theon had always imagined what it would be like to hear those words… well, except for the name, of course, but what did that matter now?

“Do you love me back?”

“Yes. More than anything.”

They lay there silently for several minutes, before Ramsay said, “You know that you can’t tell anybody?”

“Nobody would believe me.”

Reek didn’t need to see Ramsay’s face to know that he was smiling.

“No, they wouldn’t,” said Ramsay, planting a kiss on the top of Reek’s head.
Chapter Sixteen

Chapter Summary

Roose takes a wife, Ramsay takes a toe.

Chapter Notes

It may not seem like it, but this is the chapter where things start rolling. Thanks as always for all your wonderful comments. I stumbled across this vid by INCBlackbird, and it's been a huge inspiration! (Warning for gore, torture and violence though.)

Roose Bolton’s wedding to Walda Frey was small but extravagant, and though Reek was locked in Ramsay’s bedroom for the duration of the ceremony, he was still allowed to watch from the balcony overlooking the garden. Even from this distance, Walda stood out like a butterfly among moths. Reek could see Ramsay as well, standing behind his father with his arms folded across his chest, shifting heavily on his feet and no doubt failing to conceal the scowl that had been ingrained on his face for the past week or so.

Reek had shaved his master that morning, tried to help him bathe and dress, though Reek was no good at anything and it was a wonder Ramsay gave him so many chances. He’d been waiting – as was his duty – when Ramsay stepped out of the shower, and wrapped him in a fresh towel. When he was dry, Ramsay tied it around his waist and walked into the bedroom; Reek followed, trying not to notice the stray drops of water that clung to his master’s pale skin.

“I hope this doesn’t take two fucking hours.” Ramsay examined the suit Reek had laid out on the bed. “You’re lucky you don’t have to be there.”

“Yes sir.” Reek hated being locked up sometimes, but not as much as he hated the thought of everyone looking at him. That Reek should go unseen was perhaps the only thing that Ramsay and his father could agree on.

Reek swallowed as Ramsay dropped the towel to the floor and began to dress himself, pulling on a pair of boxer-briefs and then stepping into his black dress pants. He buttoned them himself, then lifted his arms and cleared his throat expectantly, glancing at the belt draped across the bed.

Reek looked at the belt, then at Ramsay’s face. He picked it up carefully and rubbed his thumb across the leather, rolled up tightly around its silver buckle – it was Ramsay’s favorite belt, the one he sometimes used on Reek, and the thought of his master wearing it – in front of everyone – made Reek feel at once humiliated and deeply pleased. He reached his arms around Ramsay, threading the belt through the loops, fingers fumbling with the buckle while he inhaled the smell of Ramsay’s hair. He leaned forward to rest his chin on Ramsay’s shoulder, and when he was finished with the belt he let his hands linger there, the heel of his palm rubbing gently against Ramsay’s crotch.

“Not now, love.”
But Reek continued, pressing down impudently and feeling the growing shape of Ramsay’s hard-on through the thin fabric of his pants. “Please,” he mouthed against the back of Ramsay’s neck.

“Goddamnit, I said stop.”

“So punish me for disobeying you.”

Ramsay grabbed Reek’s injured wrist, twisting so hard that Reek crumbled to his knees, mouth open and eyes screwed shut, his other hand pawing at Ramsay’s grip.

_This is what you asked for._

“Did you really think you could talk back to me like that?” Ramsay sounded more amused than angry.

Reek shook his head. “No sir, I didn’t mean to –”

“You’re a liar.”

Ramsay released his hold, and Reek cradled his wrist. He was hardly surprised by the blow that came next – the back of Ramsay’s hand across his face – or the strong shove that sent him toppling back onto the carpet. Ramsay followed him down, dropped onto his knees, and pulled forcefully at Reek’s sweatpants. He paused for half a second to admire his creature – Reek’s stunned blue eyes, his cracked, trembling lips, his hand reaching down to cover the place where his prick used to be, almost shy, almost teasing.

Of course it hurt, and of course he should’ve known better than to provoke his master, but it was the kind of pain reserved for Reek and Reek alone, and it made him delirious. Ramsay came within a minute, moaning as he pulled out and spent himself on the scar between Reek’s legs, using his hand to smear the mess around while Reek panted and whined and begged.

“Jesus, you’re like a bitch in heat.”

Reek bit his lip and nodded, tears welling in the corners of his eyes and running down his temples. “I wish I could come for you.”

Ramsay frowned. He wiped his fingers clean in Reek’s hair, then rose and dressed himself again, hands shaking as he buttoned his shirt. It was a deep blue, and Reek had picked it because he knew how handsome his master looked in dark colors.

“You should let me –” began Reek, but Ramsay only laughed. “You’re a disaster,” he said affectionately and – Reek noticed – just a touch sadly. “This shirt has like, twenty buttons and I don’t have all day.”

Reek sat up, hugging his knees to his chest. He hesitated before asking, “What – what happens to me if you ever get married?”

“What do you mean, ‘happens’ to you?” Ramsay didn’t bother looking up from his cufflinks, and Reek felt his face going red.

“I mean, you – I – we – we’re, um – you know –”

_What? Lovers? You’re so ridiculous._
“Spit it out, sweetheart.”

“Your wife probably wouldn’t like the things we do.”

Ramsay scoffed as he pulled on his jacket with a snap of his shoulders. “Like I give a shit what anybody likes,” he said, kneeling beside Reek and giving a sharp tug on his pet’s hair. “You’re mine and nothing changes that.”

Reek looked into his master’s eyes – so icy and somehow full of heat. “I know,” he said.

*

When Bob Baratheon announced that he was bringing his family for a visit to Winterfell, Cat Stark sent all of the children – and Theon – to be measured by a tailor. Rickon threw a tantrum and Bran and Arya squirmed; Sansa held her breath as the yellow measuring tape slipped around her waist and Robb slouched dramatically and rolled his eyes.

Theon was eighteen at the time, and though he feigned boredom with the whole affair, he was secretly thrilled to have his very own suit, just like all the Stark children. Cat had said nothing about colors, and while the tailor made charcoal gray suits for Robb, Bran and Rickon, Theon insisted on black for himself. Afterwards, he went out and purchased a black dress shirt, a gold neck-tie and a pair of Forzieri wingtips.

Of course, he hadn’t been allowed at the main table and spent most of day seething about it, especially when he learned that Robb would be seated beside his father.

But when he entered the dining room, everyone turned to look at him – two dozen sets of wide eyes and everything went quiet. Theon combed his fingers through his hair.

“Well, that’s a Greyjoy if I ever saw one!” Bob’s thunderous voice broke the silence.

Theon smiled – though he knew it wasn’t a compliment – and offered a handshake. “Theon,” he said.

Ned gazed up at him – clearly uncomfortable – while Sansa was too busy gaping to notice her mother’s frown or her sister kicking her beneath the table. Theon tried to act cool as he took his seat, and within a few seconds, the chatter in the room picked up where it had left off.

He glanced over at Robb and caught the boy looking straight back at him with a goofy, dazzled sort of expression, as though they hadn’t seen each other every single day for the last nine years. Theon pretended not to notice, and each time he scanned the tables, he let his eyes skim right over Robb, as though it was lost on him that Robb Stark was staring, so blatantly enthralled with his father’s ward that he tried cutting his steak with a spoon.

That night he’d taken one of Baratheon’s men up to his room – tall and dark-haired and drunk, like himself – and when they stumbled into the elevator together, Theon pretended not to notice that Robb was there also, even as he deliberately turned to give the boy a good view while the other man’s hands slipped inside his jacket and under his shirt. Theon’s head dropped back against the wall of the elevator, the man sucking at the bottom of his jaw, slurring, “You swear you’re eighteen?”

“I am.” Theon shot his friend a wicked grin. “Huh, Robb?”

“Yeah,” croaked Robb, cheeks burning red. “He is.”
When the doors finally opened, Theon turned to Robb and pressed a finger against his quavering lips, brushed the other hand over the bulge in Robb’s pants and whispered, “Better not tell your dad.”

*

The kennels were freezing in the winter. Reek had curled up beside the dogs during those months, rising only to relieve himself in the corner, or to come when Ramsay called for him. There had been one night so bitter that Reek couldn’t sleep over the sound of his poor teeth chattering together – he heard the door to the kennels open and braced himself.

*Whatever he has planned for you tonight can’t be worse than this cold.*

But instead of hands yanking him roughly to his feet, he felt the weight of a heavy fur blanket descending over him. Reek sat up to thank his master, but it was the wrong man – the wrong pair of gray eyes gazing back at him. He felt a hand on his cheek, and who’d have guessed Roose Bolton’s touch could ever feel so warm?

Now that summer was near, the kennels were almost pleasantly cool, and Reek had just begun to drift off when the door swung loudly open, slamming against the wall with the force of its own weight.

“R-reek?”

Reek cringed. He always pitied whatever kitchen boy Ramsay sent down to fetch him.

“Yeah?”

“He – he wants you.”

Reek struggled to his feet, turning just in time to catch the boy’s eyes before they darted to the floor. “Where is he?”

“In his bedroom.”

As Reek shuffled behind the boy, he slowly became aware of a train of steady noise, growing louder as they walked down the corridor to Ramsay’s room. The boy cleared his throat, as though that could possibly drown out the sound of Roose and Walda’s (apparently phenomenal) lovemaking.

*He’s bound to be in a shitty mood,* Reek thought wearily.

When the door opened, the room was nearly dark. A small, bedside lamp lit the curve of Ramsay’s back as he sat at the edge of the bed with his elbows on his knees, face in his hands, fingers clutching his hair. He’d been trying to sleep – he was in his boxers, and the bed was a mess, impressions of the sheets still red against his shoulder.

“Go,” Reek mouthed to the boy, who stood dumbfounded for several seconds.

“They’ve been going at it for at least a fucking hour,” groaned Ramsay as soon as they were alone. He parted his fingers to peer at Reek between them. “Jesus fucking Christ, can you hear it all the way down in the kennels?”

Reek smiled.
“Come here, Reek. I need you.”

From then on, Reek slept in Ramsay’s bed more often than not. He enjoyed feeling needed, and—given how often Roose bedded his wife—Ramsay needed him desperately. The fucking hurt, and some nights Reek actually screamed and twisted and tried to crawl away—escaping from the bed only to be taken on the floor, leaving angry-looking carpet burns on his elbows and knees and the small of his back. But afterwards, Ramsay would kiss those places and pull Reek into him, warm enough that Reek would cast the blankets aside.

*

“Well what if I never kiss a girl?”

Theon arched an eyebrow at Robb over his copy of Catcher in the Rye. “Well then I guess you’ll just have to start kissing boys,” he taunted.

“Don’t be sick.” Robb let his head drop forward into the pages of his history textbook. “I just—what if nobody ever wants to? What if I like, never get any taller and my dick stays the same size as it is now? What if I grow up and I’m fucking ugly? Oh god, what if I have like, chronic halitosis?”

“Halitosis isn’t even a thing.”

“But what if no-one wants to?” Robb repeated.

Theon sighed and laid his book open across his thigh. “I really fucking doubt that’ll happen.”

It occurred to Theon—for just a flash—that he ought to kiss his friend.

That would shut him up for a few fucking seconds.

He remembered his first kiss—

“Why do you wanna kiss me?”

Raif only grinned at him. “Because I just do?”

They had been eight, and Raif’s breath tasted like Juicy Fruit gum. Theon was twelve when he and another boy skipped gym class to hide in the locker room and ended up jerking each other off, and he was thirteen when one of the senior boys offered to buy him cigarettes in exchange for a blow job.

Theon was fifteen now, but Robb was only twelve, and it felt wrong to think of it. He picked up his book again, but found his eyes scanning the same lines over and over again. Peering up at Robb, he noticed the way the boy’s tongue poked out the corner of his mouth when he read. It was hard to imagine that anyone might not want to.

*

Reek managed to avoid being alone with Walda for weeks, until one afternoon when he rounded a corner in the garden and found her there, sitting on a wooden bench with her legs crossed beneath the mint-green cotton of her skirt. She’d been in the midst of a crossword, chewing the eraser of her pencil, but when she noticed him, she politely set down her paper and tucked the pencil behind her ear.
“Hi, Reek.” She spoke softly as though not to frighten him. “How are you?”

Reek wrung his hands and looked around.

“You don’t speak to anyone without my permission.”

But Ramsay was out working for the day, and Roose was in a meeting, and she smiled at him so sweetly. Had anyone ever asked him – asked Theon – that question with such a genuine interest, without some kind of follow-up agenda?

“Where have you been?”

“Have you been drinking?”

“Have you seen Robb?”

“I’m okay, I guess.” He gave his tight-lipped smile.

“You guess?” she replied, returning his awkward grin with a cute wrinkle of her nose.

“I haven’t um, really thought about it in a while.” Again he cast his eyes around the garden.

What if one of the groundskeepers sees you?

“Aren’t the flowers beautiful? I can’t imagine what this place looked like without them.”

“It was drab,” admitted Reek. “There was an old fountain that had filled in with weeds and leaves and a big crack down the middle.”

“Sounds gothic.”

He examined her again, trying to find a clue about what kind of game she might be playing with him.

“A little,” he said, worrying at his collar. He saw her eyes fall on it, saw her smile falter.

“Roose told me you used to be handsome,” she said, seriously. She squinted at him, searching for some hint of the man Reek might’ve been.

Reek felt a flush creeping into his cheeks. He swallowed and looked down at his feet. “He said that?”

She nodded. “I asked him if you’d always looked so, um, so –”

“Disgusting?”

“Oh no. No no. I asked if you’d always looked like this. And he told me you used to have thick black hair and a quick smile and that you had boys falling all over you.” She cocked her head. “Is that true?”

Reek shifted uneasily. All the flowers were so brightly in bloom, and the sky was so blue.

“No. I mean, none of that mattered. That was before Ramsay found me.”

Walda pursed her lips and frowned slightly. “He really cares about you, doesn’t he?” she asked cautiously.
“More than anything,” said Reek, quickly covering his mouth with his hand.

*You promised not to tell.*

“I mean, he – he does take care of me.”

“Do you want to come sit down?” she asked, scooting to one side of the bench.

“No, no th-thank you.” Reek remained standing, swaying from ankle to ankle. He knew he should leave - *she probably wishes you’d leave* – but he wanted to stay.

“Are you happy here?” he blurted.

Walda considered for a moment, smoothing at the fabric of her skirt before saying, “Yeah, I think so. I mean, it was weird to just move here one day. But Roose has been so – He’s made me feel like a princess. I know that sounds dumb, but if you’d ever seen my family… There’s twelve of us.” She smiled again. “It feels like heaven to have this garden, to have whole rooms all to myself.”

Reek didn’t know what to say to that.

*A princess.*

Should he even try to put into words how Ramsay made him feel?

*Dog. Whore. Freak.*

*Sweetheart. Little thing. Love.*

Walda tilted her round face, pretty blue eyes blinking at him. “Do *you* like it here?”

Theon looked around at the flowers, the girl sitting on the bench; he listened to the birds, the breeze, the sound of the river.

“It’s nice here.”

“If you could go anywhere else, where would you go?”

*I’d go find Jon Snow,* supplied Theon.

“Nowhere else. I’m happy going wherever Ramsay takes me,” replied Reek. With a bashful half-smile, he added, “Sometimes he takes me riding on his motorcycle.”

But Walda’s gaze had moved past him, the lightness gone from her countenance. “You should go,” she said in a hush. “Don’t look, just hurry.”

Reek froze, took a deep breath and held it there in his guts.

*Go,* Walda repeated, picking up her crossword and pencil again.

Reek shook his head. “He’ll be angrier if I run.”

Ramsay hated disobedience, but Reek was so stupid that sometimes it was inevitable. Deception was more grievous, and Ramsay had taught Reek that it was better to beg for his forgiveness than it was to lie or make excuses.

*“Reek!”*
Walda flinched, and a second later, Ramsay’s hands were on him, snarled in his hair, dragging him back towards the house.

*

He lost consciousness before Ramsay could finish, and when he woke up, it was dark outside and one of his toes was missing. A bandage ran through the gap, then up around his ankle, sticky with blood as he limped into the bathroom to piss.

The door to the balcony was open and the moon shone big and bright. Reek stepped out and leaned against the rail; he felt something warm and wet dripping down his thighs, swiped at it to see if it was blood, but it wasn’t. He looked down at the garden. It was an inviting jump – high enough to do the trick, but not so high that he’d have time to regret it.

But when he glanced back at the bed, Ramsay was looking straight at him – straight into him. He extended an arm towards Reek, beckoning with a sleepy smile:

“Come back to bed, love.”
Chapter Seventeen

Chapter Summary

Reek helps Ramsay do something unforgivable, and everything changes.

Chapter Notes

Sorry it's taken so long to update! Thank you to anyone still reading, waiting patiently. I'm still chugging away at this fic - RL is just super busy and distracting at the moment. I hope you enjoy!

“Absolutely not.”

Though he looked anywhere between eighty and a hundred years old, Qyburn was taller than Ramsay when he drew himself up to his full height, arms folded across his chest and his eyes glinted down at the young man seething in front of him. Reek tried to act invisible, glancing nervously up and down the hall outside of Qyburn’s office and wishing he could slip away before his master did something terrible to the old man.

But Ramsay wanted something, so he wrestled his voice into a level tone and said:

“Look, it’s not like I’m gonna make a mess. You know that I know my way around in there. I just need a few things and I’m trying not to waste your time.”

“Since when?” Qyburn rolled his eyes. “Just tell me what you need and I’ll get it for you.”

“But I don’t –”

“Either that or walk away with nothing.”

Ramsay sighed, defeated. In the past, he’d often pilfered small amounts of drugs from Qyburn’s office while the doctor was out, and Reek had assumed that – out of fear or deference – Qyburn simply looked the other way. But things had been changing over the past several weeks, and doors that used to open freely had been fitted with sturdy new locks.

“Fine.” Ramsay turned to look at Reek. “He hasn’t been sleeping, and I thought maybe you had something for it.”

Qyburn smiled as though he believed the lie. “I may have something. How much does he weigh these days?”

Reek looked at his toes.

“About one-forty, last time I checked,” said Ramsay.

Qyburn turned and entered his office, locking the door behind him. Reek prodded at his ribcage,
ran his fingers along the pronounced bow of his collar bone. Looking at Ramsay, he observed the
telltale signs of his master’s frustration – the blush on the back of his neck, the stiffness in his
shoulders. He reached for Ramsay’s hand, but Ramsay only shook off the touch and snarled, “Can
you fucking quit it for five fucking seconds?”

Ramsay had been very on edge lately, so Reek obeyed – took a step back and folded his hands
together like two mismatched puzzle pieces.

*I wish you’d let me take care of you.*

Qyburn re-emerged a few moments later, handing Ramsay a tiny Ziploc with one boney hand as he
swiftly locked the door again with the other.

Ramsay held the bag between his thumb and middle finger, grinding at the white powder inside.

“Mix it with a glass of something,” said Qyburn, casting a glance at Reek. “Water or juice or milk
– no alcohol, unless you want him throwing up all over you. The effects will come on quickly and
last through the night.” He tucked the key to the office inside his jacket pocket. “Now if you’ll
excuse me, your *mother* hasn’t been feeling well.”

With that, the doctor turned and strode away down the hall, not waiting to see his words hit their
mark, and Ramsay was left standing there, clenching his jaw and cursing under his breath.

“Fucking worthless old fuck.”

In the bedroom, Ramsay tossed the little bag onto the nightstand beside the glass of water he kept
there and then dropped heavily onto the mattress.

“*Fuck,*” he groaned into the comforter.

Reek sighed. He wished that he knew what had put Ramsay in such a mood, but he knew better
than to pry. Instead, he moved clumsily onto the bed and knelt straddling his master’s hips –
Ramsay’s ass between his thighs – as he leaned forward to slide his hands underneath Ramsay’s
shirt, kneading at the small of his back. Not a day went by that Reek wasn’t grateful to still have
both of his thumbs, and he wondered if Ramsay hadn’t decided to leave them just so Reek could
touch him the way he liked to be touched.

Fleetingly, he imagined pressing Ramsay’s face into the bed until he stopped breathing.

“Jesus, your hands feel so good.”

Reek swallowed. He could hear his heart beating, almost drowning out his voice when said, “We
could just leave, you know?”

“And do what?” Ramsay twisted to look at him. “Get like, normal people jobs?” He laughed.

“I don’t know.” Reek rolled off his master’s hips to sit cross-legged on the mattress. “We could
just leave and find somewhere else,” he said seriously. “We could do whatever you want. Away
from here. Away from him.”

“There *is no* away from him. You should know that.” Ramsay turned onto his side to look
critically at his pet, turning the idea over in his head for a beat before shrugging it off. “You’re an
idiot,” he said, taking Reek’s right hand and pressing a wet kiss to the place where his pinkie- and
ring-fingers used to be. “Sweet and tempting, but such a stupid little thing sometimes.”
Reek blushed. “I know. I’m sorry. I don’t mean to be.”

“Things never mean to be the way they are,” replied Ramsay, reaching up to run a thumb over Reek’s crackled bottom lip.

*Kiss me?*

But Ramsay only nodded toward the glass on the nightstand and added, “Better take your medicine, pet.”

*But it’s the middle of the day and I’ve been sleeping fine.*

It was useless to say so; after all, Ramsay had gone to a lot of trouble to get this sleeping powder, and there were worse things than being unconscious. Sometimes Ramsay liked him that way, and on several occasions slipped this same powder into Reek’s food or drink – never minding the dosage – then helped his pet stumble up the stairs and onto the bed, undressing him and kissing him until everything went black.

*Reek woke to a darkened room, the window cracked open to the night air. Ramsay was gone, but the sheet sheets were still warm on his side of the bed, and though Reek let out a small whine of disappointment, he knew that his master would never leave him alone for more than a few minutes. He grabbed Ramsay’s pillow and pulled it into his chest, inhaling the smell of it before drifting back to sleep.*

*In the morning, Ramsay was breathing loudly beside him, and another little bag had appeared on the nightstand. Reek reached for it, curious, but Ramsay intercepted him, twisting his arm and pulling him into a sleepy, open-mouthed kiss.

“Not for you, pet,” he mumbled, one hand holding the crook of Reek’s waist, bringing their bodies together. Ramsay was always so warm, almost hot as though he was running a fever. Reek felt suffocated – Ramsay’s tongue filled his mouth, and Reek moaned to feel his master’s naked erection stabbing into the hollow of his hip.

“What’s it for then?” Reek asked breathlessly.

There was a glimmer in Ramsay’s eyes as they opened, a slow smile creeping up the corner of his mouth. “I’ll tell you later.” He snagged a fistful of Reek’s hair and began biting and sucking at Reek’s lips until they were swollen and cracked.

Reek felt his pulse pounding between his legs.

“Blow me.” Ramsay’s voice was a hoarse whisper. He began to yank on Reek’s hair, urging him down, but Reek shook his head. “Reek –”

“I want you on top,” Reek blurted, not quite sure what had possessed him to think he was allowed to want anything at all. Before he could come to his senses, he added, “I want you to fuck my mouth the same way you fuck my ass.”

Reek held his breath and waited to be slapped for his impertinence, but Ramsay only blinked at him, mouth open slightly, gray eyes cloudy with lust. ‘Christ, Reek. You can’t – you know you can’t fucking say things like that to me and –”
“But it’s what you want.”

And here, Ramsay did slap him hard across the cheek. He shoved Reek down to the pillow and pinned him there by the throat until he had positioned himself above Reek with his knees on either side of Reek’s ribcage. One hand gripped the top of the headboard, the other held Reek just below the jaw – and though Reek already knew the meaning of that particular touch, Ramsay added aloud, “Fucking look at me, you fucking tease.”

Reek gazed up from between his master’s legs and pushed a few strands of snow-white hair from his eyes. A rose-red mark had already started to show on his left cheek. He bit his lip as he ran his hands up Ramsay’s thighs, circling around to grab his ass and push his hips forward, then tugging down on his shorts so that his prick sprang free – already hard, close enough that Reek had only to breathe to make his master shudder.

“Say it again.”

“Say what?” Reek asked innocently, allowing his lips to just brush the leaking tip of Ramsay’s cock.

Ramsay inhaled sharply. “Say what you want.”

“I want to choke on your cum.”

“Oh god…”

Ramsay pushed into him, quickly enough that Reek didn’t have time to mind his teeth, though the sensation hardly seemed to bother Ramsay. He only groaned, breathing through pursed lips through a few measured thrusts, eyes closed in concentration. Reek might’ve smiled if he could, seeing Ramsay fighting not to come so quickly. He flicked his tongue, drew his piercing along the underside of Ramsay’s shaft, and Ramsay’s eyes shot open, jaw clenched, and Reek knew what he meant was “Please stop.”

Reek wanted to be touched. He wanted Ramsay’s hands between his legs, wanted Ramsay to spit on that scar and then rub his prick against it. At the very least, he wanted to touch himself, to reach down and play with his balls, but Ramsay hadn’t given him permission, and was now recovered enough to begin fucking his pet’s mouth, hard enough to force the thought from Reek’s mind. Reek’s hands groped for a hold on Ramsay’s hips, tears overflowing the corners of his eyes.

He tried to ignore the voice that said, He fucks like a boy. Too fast. Selfish. Shame you can’t teach him how.

He couldn’t make you come even if you –

Ramsay pulled out just in time to spend on Reek’s face and hair, eyes rolling back, mouth open just enough to whisper, “Reek –”

Reek wiped the cum off his bruised cheek and spread it carelessly on the sheets, while Ramsay collapsed beside him, chest still heaving.

“You’re trash,” he said when he finally opened his eyes, blushing even as a satisfied grin spread across his face. He brought a thumb up to worry at Reek’s swollen lips. “And your filthy cunt mouth – I should beat the shit out of you for speaking to me like that.”

Reek wavered before asking, “Why don’t you?”
But Ramsay’s smile only cut wider as he turned on his side to tuck a lock of cum-soaked hair behind Reek’s torn up ear.

“I guess I’m just too good to you,” he said, and Reek jumped when Ramsay’s hand shot down to press against his crotch. “That, and I need you to do something for me tonight.”

Reek gulped. “What?”

Ramsay’s fingers continued to rub at that spot, sometimes a light tickle, sometimes firm pressure that made Reek’s eyes cross, made his hips jerk.

“It’s something important to me, and it’ll make me very happy if you succeed. Can you do that for me?”

“Of course. Please…” Reek let his legs fall open.

But Ramsay withdrew his hand and reached over Reek’s waist to pluck the little bag of medicine from the nightstand. He dropped the bag on Reek’s stomach.

“We’re going to play a joke on Walda.”

*

Ned was away on business when Theon enlisted Robb to help him play a joke on Catelyn Stark.

“There’s something wrong with Robb!” he had yelled, careening into the living-room, hands covered in red.

Cat’s face went ashen and she nearly flew to the yard where they’d been playing, dropped to her knees beside her motionless son as though she’d been struck down by lightning.

“Don’t move,” Theon had instructed, “No matter, what, just lie totally still,” but he should’ve known that the pussy little bitch would drop the act as soon as he heard his mother crying his name. He opened his big blue eyes – already brimming with tears. “Mom, I’m okay! It’s just pretend blood! Please don’t cry – I’m okay, I promise!”

She slapped Theon three times across the face, and though it stung, Theon didn’t cry.

“I’m sorry,” Robb said later. “I didn’t mean to get you in trouble.”

*

By the time he entered the kitchen, Reek’s nerves had reached such a pitch that he felt lightheaded, like he might throw up any second. He could move through most places in the Dreadfort without garnering more than a passing, sideways glance from one of the servants, but he had been barred from the kitchen, shooed away by the imperious head chef and instructed never to enter that room again under any circumstances.

“You’re completely unsanitary,” she had said plainly.

He had only a small window of time – between dinner and dessert – and when the staff went to clear the table, Reek slunk into the kitchen, clutching the tiny plastic bag so tightly that his palm began to sweat. The kitchen was spacious and – like most things in the Dreadfort – almost as large as the one at Winterfell, and the stainless steel counters and sinks shone with a harsh light. He had to move quickly, but he’d only taken a few steps when his gaze fell upon the cutlery, hanging from
a magnetic strip that spanned one entire wall. The knives were all clean, all different shapes and sizes, and none of them resembled that knife, but they transfixed him nonetheless, and he stood there gaping at them as though they were teeth in the mouth of a beast about to swallow him whole.

The clatter of a dish being dropped in the dining room jarred him to his senses, and Reek sprang into action. There were only two dessert trays – Roose wasn’t fond of sweets and usually took a cup of tea instead. On one tray was a bowl of rocky-road ice-cream, topped with nuts and six cherries, overflowing its brim with fudge syrup – Ramsay’s, of course – and on the other a plate with a picture-perfect slice of strawberry pie à la mode – Walda’s favorite treat.

(Theon had loved cookies, Reek remembered. He loved the way the smell filled the entire second floor, and the way the melted chocolate got all over Robb’s mouth.)

Reek opened the pouch and hesitated. His stomach felt upset, and his conscience – which was usually so mute – urged him to reconsider.

*She’s kind to you. She looks at you without flinching.*

*Just wash it down the sink and say it must not have worked.*

But Ramsay would know the truth, and Ramsay would punish him. Last time he’d spoken to Walda he lost a toe, and he knew that Ramsay had something far worse in store if he refused to obey his master’s instructions. He recalled what Ramsay had told him:

*“Don’t worry, pet, it won’t hurt her. Just something to make her a little sick, so we can have a break from the goddamn fucking sounds for a night or two.”*

*He’s a liar. He’s a liar and a killer.*

*But he’s my master. And he trusted me. And I promised.*

Reek flicked the contents of the bag onto the ice-cream and into the pie filling that had started to spill out the sides of the crust. He watched the powder disappear as it settled, then tucked the empty Ziploc into his pocket and fled from the kitchen.

[*]

The screaming started a couple hours later, and then the storm of footsteps up and down the hall that lasted all through the night. Reek’s stomach heaved and he ran to the bathroom, threw his aching knees against the tile and vomited what little there was inside him, dry-retching until his throat burned. He stayed like that, weeping silently and hoping not to wake his master, while in the next room, Walda’s screams turned to a hoarse sobbing.

*I didn’t mean to. I didn’t know,* thought Reek.

*You knew, you fucking coward. You deserve everything he’s done to you,* replied Theon.

*Please forgive me.*

He didn’t hear Ramsay’s barefoot approach – he only felt a warm hand on the back of his neck, fingers combing through his snarled hair and a gentle voice that said, “Sssh. It’s okay, love. It’ll all be okay.”

Reek lifted his head to look at his master, but his vision was so blurred with tears that he could
barely see. Ramsay wiped away a thread of saliva hanging from Reek’s mouth, then a tear that rolled down his cheek. Reek took a shaky breath and tried to steady himself, but when he spoke the tears sprang forth again and his whole body crumpled in on itself.

“What have I done?”

Ramsay crouched on the floor beside him, the hand on the back of Reek’s neck pulling them close until their foreheads pressed together, his gray eyes wresting a hold on Reek’s soul.

“Breathe, love. Remember to breathe for me.”

And Reek obeyed, because obedience was his only remaining virtue.

“What have I done?” he repeated softly.

“You did as I asked, that’s all.”

“You said it wouldn’t hurt her.”

“And it won’t. She’ll feel sick for a few days, and maybe sad for a few days longer, but she’ll be fine. I promise.”

It hit Reek suddenly, and he began to heave again, cracking his head against the porcelain of the toilet seat as his stomach rolled, trying to purge itself though nothing remained to be purged.

“You’re such a weak little thing,” said Ramsay, pressing an affectionate kiss into Reek’s greasy hair. “Can’t imagine you’d have lasted a fucking week running your dad’s business.”

Reek remained face-down in the toilet, crying until he was too exhausted to continue and Ramsay had to carry him back to bed.

It was raining on the day they found his brothers’ bodies. Down at the shore, the ocean lashed the rocks and the gulls took cover while lightning lit up the ships anchored in the bay. Between the thunderclaps, he could hear his mother’s wailing, the sound of glass breaking – yet for all the noise, his own heart felt so hushed.

It didn’t rain the last time Ramsay fucked him, but the sky was a doomy gray and the air smelled like a thunderstorm. Reek kept the balcony door open until the wind started up, so strong that he felt like it might pull him right out and over the railing.

Ramsay had been out all afternoon, so Reek set about cleaning the bedroom. He’d started to think of it as “our room,” though there was nothing in it that belonged to him, and he took a certain pleasure – (he wouldn’t dare call it pride) – in making it orderly and neat every day while Ramsay was at work.

He had just finished making the bed, folding the top comforter back a few inches, when Ramsay returned, throwing his jacket and a duffle-bag busting with bloodied clothes onto the floor, not bothering to take off his shoes before vaulting onto the bed and grabbing Reek by the collar.

“I don’t know why you fucking bother,” he said with a wicked little smile.

This was Reek’s favorite sort of feeling – the lightness he felt when he knew Ramsay had been
thinking about him, wanting him, already hard for him – and as he toppled down onto the bed, he
was only dimly irritated that all his work was undone.

Ramsay stripped off Reek’s dingy old t-shirt, careless of the way Reek’s shoulders hurt whenever
he raised his arms above his head. Reek found it difficult to breathe under his master’s weight, but
he enjoyed the tingling sensation of Ramsay’s calloused fingertips tracing over his ribs, circling his
nipples until they were pink and hard, giving a sharp tug at the leather around his neck as he asked,

“Did you miss me today?”

“I always do.”

Ramsay smirked before leaning down to brush his lips over the maze of scars that covered Reek’s
left breast. “Tell me what you miss. Tell me what you think about when you touch that revolting
mess between your thighs.”

Reek gasped as Ramsay bit down on his shoulder. “I – I think about what you’ll do to me when
you get back.” He closed his eyes. Ramsay’s mouth was so wet, and he hummed as he ran his
tongue all along the skin that used to be Theon’s. Reek swallowed. “I think about whether I’ve
been bad – whether you’ll need to punish me.”

“And do I need to?”

Reek shook his head. “No, I hope not.” He wished it didn’t feel so awfully good, the way
Ramsay’s hands teased at his body, the thirsty sucking sound of his lips, the small hitch in each
breath as he rubbed himself against Reek’s thigh.

“Tell me how you think I should fuck you, then.”

Reek bit into his own lip. He kept his eyes closed, allowed one hand to wander across his chest
while the other slipped down the front of Ramsay’s black jeans. “Bend me over the edge of the
bed,” he said. “And smack my ass – hard – until it’s red and sore and I have to bite down to keep
from screaming.”

“Fuck.” Ramsay licked his lips and thrust into Reek’s grip. “What else?”

Reek undid his master’s fly, licked a wet stripe along the palm of his hand before wrapping it
around Ramsay’s exposed erection, trying not to visibly enjoy the way Ramsay started to fuck his
fist like a boy getting his first hand-job. He grabbed Ramsay’s shirt, lifted himself to suck at the
spot just beneath Ramsay’s ear. “Then you fuck me like that, but leave your clothes on. Like you
didn’t want to fuck me at all, but then you just couldn’t help it. Because I’m a whore and a bitch
and a tease, and your cock inside me is all I’ve ever wanted. It’s all I ever think of. I want to feel
your cum all over my –”

“Stop.” Ramsay clamped a hand over Reek’s mouth, and Reek understood.

* 

“Tell me you’re mine.”

Reek took one of Ramsay’s hands in his own and guided it up to the collar around his neck.

“I’m yours. No one’s but yours.”

*
He woke up alone, but that wasn’t unusual. He pulled on his sweatpants and t-shirt and shuffled around the downstairs, listless, waiting for the sound of Ramsay’s motorcycle in the garage. Sometimes Ramsay worked through the night, and then came home with dark circles under his eyes and an intense need for the company of his pet.

“You need some breakfast?”

Reek turned to find one of the kitchen girls staring at him, and he tugged at the front of his shirt.

_You look like a lost dog._

And he was acutely hungry, but Ramsay didn’t like when he ate without permission, so Reek shook his head. “No thank you. I’m not allowed yet.”

The aroma of breakfast being prepared was torturous enough that Reek returned to the bedroom and wished that Ramsay had any books he could read. He knew that Roose had an extensive library just down the hall, but he wasn’t allowed into any of the rooms belonging to Ramsay’s father, and anyway, Ramsay wouldn’t look too kindly on his pet acting smarter than he was, so Reek just went out onto the balcony to see if anything interesting was happening in the garden. It looked a little drab, somehow, and Reek wished he had a cigarette, though looking at his hands he realized that smoking would only draw attention to them.

He cleaned the bedroom again – even the windows – dusted and vacuumed and made the bed, took Ramsay’s dirty clothes down to the laundry room where he paused to enjoy the smell of warm, soapy water before retreated again to the bedroom. He flopped down on the bed and reached under the waist-band of his pants, rubbing tentatively at the space between his legs. The sensation was slow-building like a thirst. Reek closed his eyes and bit his lip and tried to think of Ramsay, but he couldn’t shake the growing unease at his master’s absence, so instead he sat up and went about taking a comprehensive tally of his scars, though he shied away from counting the things that were missing entirely. He ran his fingers through his hair. Hadn’t it been black before?

When Ramsay was away for too long, Reek started to get confused. He started to forget things. Counting his scars helped him remember, but soon he had counted them all twice and he began to feel anxious again. He remade the bed and then moved into the bathroom, scrubbing on all fours at the floor of the shower, around the basin of the sink and the toilet. He rehung the towels and even faced all the shampoo and soap bottles so their labels were visible.

The sky turned to dusk and then night. Reek finally allowed himself to fall into bed, where he lay fitfully for several more hours, crying occasionally and hugging Ramsay’s pillow to his chest.

_The sooner you fall asleep, the sooner he’ll be here_, he thought.

But when the warmth of the morning light woke him, Reek was still alone and the room was precisely as he’d left it. He sat up with a jolt, breathing quick and shallow while a film of cold sweat clung to the back of his neck. Where _was_ he? Ramsay was never gone for so long.

_Maybe it’s a game. Or a punishment._

_But what did I do?_

His vision began to narrow as he ground at his forehead with the heel of his palm.

“Oh fuck.”

_What am I going to do if he doesn’t come back?_
You could find Roose.

No. He wouldn’t like that. Maybe that’s the test.

Reek nearly shrieked when a knock came at the door, the polite rapping followed by a soft voice. “Reek – open the door.”

No. No no no no no.

Reek pulled the covers over his head.

If you stay quiet and still, he might go away.

He heard the door open a crack.

“Reek, I need you to come with me.”

Reek bit his lip. It was stifling beneath the blankets. Roose must’ve entered the room soundlessly, because Reek started when he felt the mattress shift slightly under the man’s slim weight.

“You need to stop acting like a child and get up.”

“I can’t.” Reek’s voice was a muffled whisper. “I can’t. He won’t – he doesn’t like me with you.”

“You have a visitor.”

“What?” Reek must’ve misheard. “No, that can’t be right. Reek has no friends,” he explained patiently. “No one to come visit.”

“Well, you may not have friends, but the fact remains that you have a visitor. And it’s very rude to keep a visitor waiting. You don’t mean to be rude, do you pet?”

Reek calmed slightly at the endearment. He pulled the covers down to peer at Roose, trying not to shrink under the steady gray gaze that seemed to pierce through him.

“Is it Robb?” he asked cautiously, not wishing to seem like he wanted it to be.

Roose smiled. “Come and see.” He offered a hand, thin and firm, to help Reek up, and Reek cursed himself for leaning against the man as he rose.

Leaving the room, he asked, “Won’t I frighten them? I way I – my hands and teeth are – I might frighten them.”

Roose smirked. “I doubt it.”

And Reek didn’t mind as much as he should when Roose’s arm wrapped around him, holding him steady and guiding him down the long hallway to the door of his private meeting room.

“I’m scared,” Reek admitted.

Roose brought his spidery fingers to perch on the crook of Reek’s neck, thumbing at the stones on his collar. “Don’t be.”

He opened the door, and a familiar smell hit Reek like a hurricane.

“Oh my god – Theon?”
She hadn’t cried when he left, and she hadn’t said goodbye. She had been wearing a blue dress with gray tights, and her hair was a limp tangle of black. Her face was stern, like always, so serious, like Father’s. She was the only one who came to see him off, and he’d watched her fade away into nothing but a small dot of blue, and he’d never noticed how she smelled like salt air.
Chapter Eighteen

Chapter Summary

Reek's world is turned on end.

Chapter Notes

Well, here goes. Actually had some time to write for once, so I really hope y'all like this update. Thank you to everybody who leaves comments and kudos, and even y'all just reading and enjoying! *kisses your heads*

Theon had wondered from time to time if Asha grew up to be pretty. All the Greyjoy children had shown promise in the way of looks – Rick had broad, muscular shoulders and Ron had their uncle Euron’s dark complexion. Asha had their mother’s high cheekbones and arched eyebrows, but she also had their father’s perpetual frown drawn across her mouth, and Maron liked to tease her about it, saying, “If you don’t learn to smile, Theon will probably get more dick than you.”

The woman standing in Roose Bolton’s office was beautiful and frightening – brushing her short, black hair out of her eyes to stare at him in shock. It was like looking into a mirror, only worse, and Reek began to feel faint.

“Jesus Christ.”

She didn’t cry, but he could see she wanted to.

Reek looked away. He wished Ramsay was here – Ramsay never cried to look at him. He glanced at Roose, hoping for some clue about what was happening, what was expected, but Roose only watched him – sphinx-like – as though what transpired within Reek was of far more interest than anything that Theon’s sister had to say. So Reek continued standing there – swaying a little on his feet – feeling trapped within a dream.

“Theon?” she repeated, softer this time, and offered her hand out to him. “It’s Asha.” He flinched at the gesture, and her eyes flickered with pain. “Don’t you remember me?”

Reek eyed her outstretched fingers – blue nail polish and a row of silver rings – and he longed to touch them, but Ramsay would be so angry.

Ramsay would be hurt, because hadn’t he cared more for Reek than any Greyjoy ever did?

So instead Reek rubbed at his collar, closed his eyes and shook his head. “No. No no no. That’s not me. You shouldn’t call me a name that’s not mine.” Seeing the tear that escaped before she could wipe it away on her sleeve, he tried again, adding, “It’s not… I’m Reek. Not Theon,” as though that might help her to understand.

She cast a devastating glare at Roose, her hands clenched into white-knuckled fists. “You. You expect me to believe that you had nothing to do with – with what your fucking son did to him?” Her
voice shook with rage, so strong that Reek could feel it in his guts. He wanted to leave before it burned him. “You could’ve stopped this. You could’ve fucking protected him. Give me a good fucking reason not to raze this place to the fucking ground.”

Reek pressed his palms against his ears. *Stop. You can’t talk to him like that. You don’t know.*

But Roose remained cool as ever. “I assure you that he was already in this state when my bastard brought him here. I think he’d tell you that his condition has only improved since he’s been under my roof.”

They both turned towards Reek – Asha’s eyes blazing blue and Roose’s a frozen gray – and Reek had to look at the floor as he spoke. It felt like a betrayal, but it was the truth, in a way. “Mr. Bolton has – he’s kept me safe. Makes sure the doctor sees me when I’m sick.”

“Doctor?” Asha’s gaze travelled down to his hands before he could think to hide them behind his back. “Is that some kind of fucking joke?”

“Please stop.” Reek bit his lip to stop its quivering. “Please don’t be mad at me. I never meant to make you mad.”

His knees began to wobble and he reached out to steady himself on the back of a chair.

*God, it’s too hot in here.*

Asha hesitated before laying her own hand carefully over her brother’s, and the contact seemed to ground him slightly. Reek twitched but didn’t pull away.

*She’s touching you,* he thought with disbelief.

*He’ll know that she touched you. He’ll cut off your whole hand.*

*But she’s touching you…*

“I’m sorry,” she said, drawing her thumb over the back of his wrist. “I’m not – I’m not mad at you.” His eyes darted up to meet hers, and for the first time he saw just a fraction of a smile there, searching and tentative. “I promise. Theon, I –”

“Please,” he choked. “It’s not my name.”

Why was she making it so hard to be Reek?

“Brother – I’ve come to take you home. Back to Pyke. There’s a car waiting for us outside. You don’t have to keep – you don’t have to be like this anymore.”

A ringing rose in Reek’s ears. He turned to Roose. “Is this – is it a game?” he asked. “A test?”

Roose shook his head, looking rather bored. “No, Reek, this isn’t a game. No more tricks or jokes. Asha has come to take you back to the Iron Islands… if that’s what you choose.”

Those last words sank like teeth into Reek’s brain. His head began to spin and he strained to breathe, looking anxiously at the windows – sealed shut like all the other windows in the Dreadfort. How did he keep breathing? What if he used up all the oxygen in the room?

Asha must’ve seen his eyes start to roll back, because the next thing he knew he was slumped into a chair with his sister crouched in front of him, pressing the back of her hand to his forehead.

“Are you gonna pass out on me?” And to Roose: “When was the last time he ate?”
“It’s Ramsay’s job to see that he’s fed, and as you know, Ramsay hasn’t been home for well over a day.”

“Well, shit, have someone bring him a fucking glass of milk or something!”

And Roose did rankle ever-so-slightly at being spoken to that way by a child, but he only sighed and pressed the intercom to order one of the servants to bring some milk and crackers. Asha squeezed Reek’s hand, and Reek tried not to wince at the way his intact fingers rubbed against the stumps. The food arrived within moments, and Asha waited patiently as Reek sipped at the milk and sucked the saltines until they were wet enough to chew without too much discomfort. He wasn’t very hungry, truthfully, but seeing him eat seemed to please her. After he was finished, he wiped his mouth on his wrist and asked,

“Did he send you for me?”

“He’s dead,” she said, and Reek couldn’t hear one single note of feeling in her voice. “He died last week.”

Reek’s heart skipped a beat, and for a sliver of a moment he felt an indescribable relief, the feeling of a weight slipping away from him.

*He will never know. He will never see you like this.*

*What the fuck is wrong with you? Your father is dead.*

*Coward. He always said you were.*

“How did he die?”

“He fell,” she said wearily, as though she’d already had too much practice delivering the message. “He slipped and fell off the main bridge.”

*People don’t just fall off bridges,* he thought. *Not *that* bridge anyway.*

But Reek only nodded solemnly and said, “Oh.”

“I almost didn’t try to find you,” she admitted. “I figured you always hated Pyke anyway, and maybe you’d be happier just, like, forgetting about… everything. But Mom – she’s fucking crazy, you know? She kept asking for you, asking me to see you. So I went to Winterfell, but Robb Stark turned me away at the fucking door. Little prick wouldn’t even meet with me in his office – made me wait in the foyer for almost an hour while his fucking bodyguard glowered at me.”

Reek tried to act as though Robb’s name was nothing to him, but he cleared his throat drily and worried at the stones of his collar.

“And Robb – he told you I was here?”

She frowned. “Not exactly. He told me – he said he sent you on an errand for Roose Bolton and you never came back. Said you must’ve run away up North.”

*That fucking liar,* thought Reek. *He’s a worse liar than Ramsay.*

“I asked why he hadn’t notified us when it happened. He said he had. He said he’d spoken with Dad about it.” Asha scowled. “He’s a lying sack of shit – couldn’t stand to look me in the eyes. Dad wouldn’t have – he would’ve *done* something, you know?”
“He never cared what happened to me,” said Reek. He was surprised that finally saying it aloud didn’t hurt as much as just thinking it sometimes did.

“Don’t be an asshole.”

“I’m sorry. I didn’t mean to –”

“Jesus Christ, you don’t need to fucking apologize.”

“I’m –” Reek caught himself and closed his mouth. “You know he didn’t give a shit about me though.”

Asha said nothing for a moment. She took Reek’s hands in hers and turned them over with a sad little smile. “Tattoos, little brother? You’ve changed so much, even before –”

Reek withdrew his fingers. They looked so foolish now – just clumsy empty spaces and the gibberish letters, “O-N-B-R.”

“He was quite different from the shy boy you remember,” said Roose, startling both of them. He’d remained so silent that they nearly forgot his presence. “Mouthy and promiscuous, and generally a bad influence on Ned Stark’s sons.”

_How does he know you were shy?_

“Like Maron,” she said.

“But without the taste for violence, unfortunately.”

“Yeah, well, it’s an acquired taste.” For the first time, Asha looked down. “I – I didn’t even recognize you at first. I came here looking for information, not really expecting anything, and Mr. Bolton asked if I wanted to see you.”

Reek shot a started glance at Roose while Asha continued,

“He took me into the control room – you know, where security monitors the closed-circuit. I said, ‘That’s not him. Theon’s got black hair,’ and he told me to look closer. I lost my shit. I told him to let me see you, but he said his son would never allow it.”

Softly, something clicked into place and fear flooded into Reek’s bloodstream. His hands began to shake. “You – you _have_ him. You _took_ him, didn’t you? And that’s why he hasn’t been home?” He looked desperately to Roose for confirmation, and though Roose made no expression, Reek saw it there somehow: he was right. He grabbed Asha’s sleeve so suddenly that she jerked away from him, but he didn’t care. “Oh God, give him back! You _have_ to give him back to me!” His pleading had risen to a hysterical pitch, and he turned again to Roose, still gripping at his sister’s shirt. “Please tell her not to!”

“Theon. Theon, please.” There was a slight crack in her voice. “Don’t make it harder.”

“Then don’t _hurt_ him! Jesus, can’t you please just let him go?”

_Theon._ He began to correct her, but she cut him off. “No, no. Don’t tell me ‘Reek.’” She crouched down in front of him again, laid her cool palm against his cheek; it was a tender touch, but when he raised his eyes to hers, he could see that things were set in stone. “Ramsay Bolton is dead. That was his fucking _fate_ that _he_ chose the second that he decided to hurt you.”
Reek groaned as he tried to rise from his chair, only to pitch forward into his sister, holding onto her shoulders, face buried her shirt.

“You can’t, you can’t. Please. If you care about me at all, please bring him back to me.”

He was wailing, his whole body quaking with the force of it, and his grip on her loosened and slipped until he was curled on the floor at her feet.

He must’ve looked pathetic like this – cheek pressed into the toe of his sister’s boot, clutching at her ankle like a child throwing a tantrum – but Reek was pathetic, and begging was the only thing he knew how to do. He felt a crushing weight on him, pressing the air out of his lungs until he could only bear the shallowest breathing. The floor seemed to tilt and spin, and his stomach rolled in response while his speech had slurred into a mindless string of “please – you can’t – please don’t – I need him.”

Had Ramsay been frightened? Reek imagined his master – tied up, beaten, tortured. Reek knew how terrifying it was to be treated that way, and he howled to imagine Ramsay so afraid and alone as he had been. And if he was dead, then Reek would be –

_Free._

_Not free. Alone. Forever._

And there would be no more motorcycle rides, nobody to touch his scars, nobody to call him “love.” Nobody for him to look after.

“You could k-k-kill me too?” he spluttered, still holding tight to Asha’s ankle. He felt her hand in his hair, but the touch was too gentle.

“Jesus, Theon –”

“Reek!” he sobbed. “I’m Reek! His Reek…”

“Ssshh, little brother.” She combed her fingers through his hair, and he could tell by the way her shoulders dropped that she was close to giving up.

_Go with her._

_And do what? You can’t run the Family. You can’t even tie your own shoes. You’ll only be a burden, an embarrassment. A monster._

“Come home with me,” she said.

“Pyke was n-never my home.”

“You always have a home with me.”

This triggered a fresh round of sobbing, and she added, “You’ll always be my brother. You know that? Please tell me you know that.”

Reek nodded but said nothing. The tears blended everything together.

“This isn’t how I imagined it.” She raked her fingers through her hair before standing and turning to Roose. “Tell me if he changes his mind, and I’ll be here. I’ll take him away and you’ll never hear from us again.”
“Of course,” replied Roose, as though he was being gracious. “Though I doubt that will happen. He’s known for a long time that he can never be who he was intended to be.”

“I have to go,” she said, gently extricating her leg from Theon’s grasp. “Tell me – tell me I can go.”

Reek curled in on himself, holding his sides as he wept silently. “Go,” he gasped.

She took a few steps towards the door, but his voice stopped her.

“Asha?”

And it sounded like that familiar voice, that small voice outside her door in the middle of the night after a bad dream or a lightning storm.

“Did you – did you hurt him like he hurt me?”

“No,” she replied, and then added pointedly, “The Greyjoys don’t play games.”

“Will you – if I’m your b-b-brother – will you do something for me?”

“Anything.”

“Send him back to me. Please send him back.”

“I will,” she said, and then she was gone.

*

He remained on the floor until long after she left, crying hysterically, hoping that he might wake up suddenly, in his master’s bed with his master’s arms wound around him. But the floor pressed against him, too cold and hard to be a dream.

Roose watched him soundlessly for what must’ve been the better part of an hour. Finally, Reek grew quiet – nearly catatonic – and Roose knelt beside him, placing a thin hand on the sharp angle of Reek’s shoulder.

A puddle of drool had formed beneath Reek’s face, and it smeared across his face when he spoke. “How could you let this happen?” he asked. “He’s – he’s your son. You knew – you had to know what she would do – she’s Ironborn. You knew what she would do. He only wanted to be a good son to you, and you let her take him from me.”

“Your sister has her revenge.” Roose’s voice was so quiet, so even. “And I have mine.”

Reek’s eyes widened. He wanted to look at Roose – to understand – but he didn’t dare, so he continued staring off into space, heart trembling in his chest.

“How could you let this happen?” he asked. “He’s – he’s your son. You knew – you had to know what she would do – she’s Ironborn. You knew what she would do. He only wanted to be a good son to you, and you let her take him from me.”

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“He took her brother away,” Roose continued. “And he took someone from me as well.”

“But that was me,” confessed Reek in a whisper. “It was me that did it.”

“I know.” Reek held his breath as Roose’s fingers combed through the tangles in his hair. “But I also know why. You’re a quick learner, Reek – much quicker than he ever was.”

“No,” said Reek. “That’s not true. I’m slow. Not very bright at all. He always says so.”

Roose smiled faintly. “My son is dead.” He took Reek’s jaw lightly between his thumb and
forefinger, a touch that Reek interpreted to mean “look at me.” He did, and Roose continued to hold him there even after their eyes met. “You’re alive,” said Roose. “Which means you’re at least as clever as he was crazy. I did my best to teach him, but Ramsay never learned that everything he had, he owed to me. And that means you. You belong to me, and you always have. Do you understand that?”

Reek sniffled. It was wrong – the voice and the touch both too soft – but the eyes were the right eyes, and that was close enough, wasn’t it?

“Yes sir. I understand. I just – I don’t know what to do without him.”

“Let’s not worry about that today. Are you hungry, Reek? It’s nearly time for lunch to be served.”

Reek chewed his lip. He was dreadfully hungry, but how could he be at such a moment?

_Selfish. Spoiled. He didn’t give you permission._

As if reading his thoughts, Roose offered, “I’m sure Ramsay wouldn’t want you starving yourself to death.” He held a hand out to Reek – it looked innocuous enough.

Reek shivered as he took it.

* 

“Can I have something to help me sleep? Please?”

He saw the suspicion in Qyburn’s eyes, so he hurried to add. “Just a little to help me sleep through the night. You can watch me take it if you want.”

* 

Asha kept her word, and the next morning sent a car to deliver Ramsay Bolton’s body back to the Dreadfort. Reek watched the scene from one of the second-story windows, crumpling to the carpet at the sight of the body-bag, listening to the doors opening and closing as Roose’s men brought Ramsay to one of the operating rooms off Qyburn’s office.

“I have to see him.”

Walda pursed her lips and tried to dissuade him. “It’ll make you feel worse, I think.”

Distantly, Reek knew that Theon would’ve laughed at that, but he only said, “He’ll be hurt if I don’t.”

She frowned. “Will you let me come with you?”

Reek blushed. Whatever Roose knew, he hadn’t told her. “Okay,” he said.

Qyburn unlocked the door for them, and a miasma of bleach caused the bile to rise up in Reek’s throat. He looked at Walda and saw that all the pink had drained from her cheeks. He realized that she’d likely never seen a dead body before, and that this was probably her first real taste of the kind of business that was only a matter of course for her husband. Reek felt a heartless sort of pity.

It hadn’t occurred to him that Ramsay would be naked, but he was and now he wished Walda hadn’t come at all. Because she knew – like everyone did – what kinds of things Ramsay and Reek did, and her seeing Ramsay naked like this was just as bad as if she’d seen Reek naked. But if the thought crossed her mind, she didn’t show it – only took Reek’s arm to steady him as he hobbled
towards Ramsay.

He lay on his back on top of a stainless-steel operating table, skin a wintry white beneath the unrelenting fluorescent lights.

“She lied to me,” whispered Reek.

Asha – unlike Ned Stark – wasn’t above delivering her own justice, and Reek knew that no one else would’ve bothered to carve the word – the name – “THEON” into Ramsay’s chest. The letters were large and deep, all composed of straight lines that led Reek to believe they were made with a hatchet rather than a knife. Splinters of bone poked out here and there.

“He was mutilated post-mortem,” quipped a voice, and Reek and Walda turned to see Qyburn lingering just inside the door. “He died of a single gunshot to the heart, though the entry wound is slightly obscured by the ‘E.’”

Reek swallowed down a sob and Walda shot the old man a look.

“Thank you, Qyburn. May we be alone now please?”

“Of course,” he replied, though he left the door open.

Aside from the defacement on his chest, Ramsay looked eerily clean, overall. Reek knew that Asha’s men had taken care, and not entirely for his sake. There was no dirt on Ramsay’s hands or under his fingernails, no cuts or scrapes on his knees, not even a black eye or a split lip. The only other marks on his skin were a pair of raw, red bands around his wrists where he’d been bound, and even those wounds had obviously been cleaned. Reek knew from experience that Ramsay’s back was probably a mess – blown wide open by the bullet leaving his body – and he was grateful that his sister had thought of him enough not to shoot Ramsay in the head.

Reek wished his finger weren’t quite so tremulous, letting them brush over Ramsay’s lips and then recoiling slightly. They were cold and colorless, so chaste compared to the hot, wet mouth that loved to bite him bloody. His fingertips probed between the lips, parted them to see the glint of Ramsay’s teeth – perfect teeth. He’d only ever known one other person with such perfect goddamn teeth…

He passed his hand up to the eyes, one thumb on the cheek and forefinger on the eyebrow, and Walda gasped when he pulled the eyelids open.

“I’m sorry if I’m weird,” said Reek, taking a moment to peer into Ramsay’s glassy irises. They looked more like Roose’s eyes than ever, he observed.

“Are you just making sure he’s dead?” she asked, half-jokingly.

Reek frowned. “Maybe.” He swept Ramsay’s bangs to one side and wondered how someone so lovely could’ve chosen him of all people.

“He was handsome, I guess,” said Walda, cocking her head to look at Ramsay’s face. She laid one of her dainty hands on Reek’s shoulder. “I know you care about him a whole lot, and I think that’s very sweet of you, but you – you know that you don’t need him, don’t you? That things will be okay?”

Reek felt vaguely irritated, but he was too exhausted to be angry with her.

He threaded the fingers of his right hand through Ramsay’s left. Ramsay’s hands felt so wooden, so clumsy and harmless. Reek could feel another fit of tears coming on.
“I thought I was home,” he said, squeezing his master’s palm. “I thought I finally found where I was supposed to be. He never – he never expected things from me the way other people did.”

*My brothers expected me to be invisible, my dad expected me to be my brothers, Ned Stark expected me to be my father, Robb Stark expected me to be his – I dunno, his fucking boyfriend? – and Jon Snow expected me to –*

*Stop! Stop, you can’t say those names! Don’t even think them!*

Reek cursed Theon for appearing so out of turn, then realized that Walda was looking at him and waiting for him to continue.

“Ramsay never – he never expects me to be anything besides what I am.” He looked at her despairingly. “Whatever that is.”

“I know it’s not – not the same, but you still have me and Roose.”


But she adored her husband, just like Reek adored his master, so it was hardly fair to say such a nasty thing.

“I don’t want to leave,” he admitted. “I just want to fall asleep and not wake up again.”

“You shouldn’t say that.” He saw it in her eyes, but she had the grace to say nothing besides, “I know.”

“Can you – would you mind leaving me alone with him?”

“I don’t know if I should…” Walda bit her lip.

“Please? I promise not to open a vein.” It was something Theon might’ve said with a smirk.

She left after a few moments of consideration, though he heard her instructing Qyburn to “make sure he doesn’t hurt himself.”

Reek wondered what would’ve happened to Theon if he’d ever been demonstratively suicidal during his stay with the Starks. He suspected Ned would’ve put him under 24-hour surveillance, removed him from duty for a while, taken his guns and knives and locked them away somewhere until Theon was ready to behave. He might’ve even tried to talk to him in that stilted, awkward way that Ned spoke when he was trying to muster enough empathy to really get through to Theon.

Theon had ruminated on it once, when he was high out of his mind – how funny it would be to take away the Starks’ leverage over the Greyjoys and end his father’s worthless line, all with one bullet. He’d laughed so hard that he fell off the bed.

Reek regarded Ramsay. How would they dress him? Would they put on make-up to give him a little color? He recalled waking after his car accident to see Ramsay nodding off in the chair beside him, his cheeks flushed with the heat of that little room.

The table was steel, tilted at a slight angle towards the feet, and beneath Ramsay’s heels was a drain. Reek tried to be soundless as he pulled himself up onto it, which was useless of course, but Qyburn seemed to be deliberately ignoring him, carefully out of sight and hearing in some other part of the study. The metal was chilly against Reek’s knees as he brought them to rest on either side of Ramsay’s thighs.
He leaned forward to press his ear against his master’s breast and traced his finger carefully over the wound shaped like a “T.” He lifted Ramsay’s arm and wrapped it over his waist, still listening to the cold silence of Ramsay’s chest.

He wondered what Ramsay would do if their bodies were reversed – Reek dead on a table.

*Would you still fuck me? Would you at least kiss me on the lips?*

Reek tapped his finger on Ramsay’s sternum in time with his own heartbeat.

“Don’t be afraid. I’m here with you.”

*

“I want you to accompany me to the funeral.”

The words triggered a small-scale panic attack that left Reek gripping the corner of Roose Bolton’s desk in order to remain upright. The air always seemed so thick in this damned place, but the prospect of leaving it and going – going out there without him was so much worse.

“You need to breathe or you’ll faint,” instructed Roose, hardly glancing up from his desk.

Reek nodded but continued to rasp and wheeze until Roose sighed and laid down his pen.

“Have you always had these episodes?” he asked. “And by ‘always,’ I mean did Theon threaten to pass out at the mere mention of leaving the house?”

Reek shook his head and did his best to take a deep breath. “No sir.”

“Then I suggest you channel him and get yourself dressed.”

Reek continued to teeter in place – he wanted more information, but to ask for it would seem impertinent so he merely cleared his throat.

“Is there something else, Reek?”

“Um, I – pardon me, sir, but won’t there by other, um, people from other Families there? People who shouldn’t see me?”

“That’s a very good point,” said Roose, placing a hand over Reek’s shaking fingers. “It’s good to see you thinking critically.” Reek blinked at him. “I assumed you’d prefer to stay in the car. Something came to my attention recently, and I think it’s something you’ll be quite interested in.”

Ramsay’s touches hurt, and there was no shame in bending to them, but Reek wished he wasn’t so cowed by the gentlest contact from this strange, soft-spoken man.

“That scares me,” he said after a moment.

The corner of Roose’s mouth turned up at that, and Reek’s shame deepened as he felt overwhelmed with satisfaction. He wondered what it would take to make Roose really smile.

“I understand that, but you needn’t be frightened.” He patted the back of Reek’s hand before resuming his work. “Go get dressed. I’ve had your clothes set out on Ramsay’s bed. I think you’ll find them acceptable.”

*
In the end, Roose had to help him finish clothing himself. When Reek arrived at Ramsay’s bedroom, there were two servant girls waiting to assist him, but he blushed with what little blood he had left and sent them away, trying not to feel stung by their visible relief.

The outfit was head-to-toe black, and somehow tailored to suit his emaciated six-foot frame. Reek nearly shed a tear of delight when he found that the fasteners on the dress shirt were snaps rather than buttons and that the pants closed with a zipper and a hook. He also found a pair of thin, black gloves that had been altered to account for his missing fingers, and though the mutilation was still obvious, it looked markedly less grotesque beneath a covering of fine fabric.

Just that morning Roose had asked Reek if he’d prefer to remove his collar, but Reek only looked stricken and worried at the thing. Now that he was wearing proper clothes, the collar looked almost elegant – dark stones peeking just above his neckline. He’d been allowed to bathe as well, and Walda offered to brush his hair, which somehow made him look even more like a madman, the way it stuck out at wild angles instead of clinging limply to his neck.

There was one final item, though, that he didn’t know what to make of, and he stared at it for some time before carrying it down to Roose’s office for further instruction.

When he entered, Roose looked almost startled, and instead of returning his eyes to his work as he usually did, he kept them fixed unrelentingly on Reek.

“I – I’m sorry, sir. I shouldn’t have bothered you again.”

“No. No, I was just finishing my work here.” He rose and moved swiftly around the desk, and before Reek could react, he felt Roose’s fingers in his hair, pushing it out of his face while those narrow gray eyes scrutinized him. “I hadn’t expected you’d look so much like yourself,” he said. “Put about fifty pounds back on and you’re hardly worse for the wear.”

Reek had no idea what he was supposed to say to that, so he only held out the piece of fabric he’d brought with him. “I, um, I don’t know what to do with this.”

Without thinking, Reek had wrung the cloth up into a wad, and Roose took it from him and unfolded it. It was a light gray square, frayed along the edges, and Reek guessed it was some kind of scarf.

“This is called a keffiyeh,” explained Roose. “Let me show you.” He stepped behind Reek, and Reek could smell a sort of sweetness – natural, like cloves and not like the harsh candy smell of Ramsay’s breath. Roose folded the cloth across Reek’s forehead, wrapped one side down beneath his jaw and the other side up across his face, covering his mouth and nose so that when it was tied off, all Reek could see in a mirror were a few stray bits of hair, and his eyes staring back at him, gaping and blue.

“What do you think?” asked Roose, taking a step back to look Reek up and down. “Will you be able to leave the house in this?”

“Yes sir,” said Reek, though in his head he heard Ramsay’s voice.

“Do you think wearing some extra layers makes you something other than a whore?”

“No, sir.”

“Then take it off. All of it. Right now. I want to see what’s mine.”

And he’d put his hands on you. His mouth. He’d say, “Tell me you’d die without me.”
While Roose Bolton’s wedding had been small and intimate, Ramsay Bolton’s funeral was a tastelessly well-attended affair. There must’ve been a hundred people, lines of black woven around the tombstones, and Reek supposed that many of them had probably never seen Roose Bolton’s notorious bastard son before today. The casket was a metallic gray, and Ramsay had been dressed in a scarlet shirt with his arms crossed just below his waist and the stems of a dozen long white roses tucked beneath his hands. (Reek didn’t see this for himself, but Walda described it to him with a tear in her eye. “Sounds beautiful,” he murmured.)

He’d stayed in Roose’s town-car, parked along the boulevard just behind the hearse, and too far away to hear the service. He watched the sunny scene from behind dark-tinted windows and wondered how a priest would go about composing a eulogy for a young man who had died under such blatantly nefarious circumstances and whose sole interest had been inflicting pain on anyone that crossed his path.

Reek wondered if his own uncles had crashed his father’s funeral, and thought how lucky it was that he wasn’t able to attend that miserable function – as the last surviving son, he’d’ve undoubtedly been expected to say something about Balon aside from what a cold-hearted, joyless son of a bitch he was. Not that anybody would be listening – they’d all be gaping at Reek’s hair and his fingers, and only poor Asha would hear the bitter, resentful things that Reek had to say about their father.

(His brothers’ funeral had been a traditional Iron Islands send off. His mother watched from her window, while Balon stood on the shore for some time, watching the boats that carried their bodies as they were engulfed in flames and finally sank to the bottom of the bay. He stood there for many hours afterward, until Theon had been taken in a car to the airstrip and then flown away to the mainland.)

Reek rightly assumed that Asha would not attend Ramsay’s service, but he was surprised to spot a black Lincoln with Islander plates. She’d sent a few men in her place, mainly as a reminder – “I can be there if you’re ready.”

Reek cracked the window as far as he dared. The air was warm, and the scarf around his face was stifling. He felt a pang of guilt, imagining Asha as she explained to their mother – probably more than once – that her husband was dead.

He leaned his forehead against the glass. He noted that Roose neglected to speak, no final words to say about his son, and he cursed himself for being too cowardly to stand beside his master in these last few moments. (He had kissed Ramsay farewell the previous evening, with an unseemly passion that made everyone but Roose visibly unsettled.)

There was no music as the service ended and the casket descended into the ground, and Reek watched Roose take his place by the wrought-iron gate, and his wife beside him, to exchange properly solemn handshakes with the various family members and associates as they departed. Not a single face showed signs of grief or shock, though Reek felt his own eyes burning with tears as he thought to himself that this is what Theon’s funeral would’ve been like. It might’ve happened in Winterfell or Pyke, might’ve been Ned Stark or Balon Greyjoy standing by the gate, shaking hands, saying, “Yes, such a pity.”

Reek allowed a few tears to trickle uninterrupted down his cheek, dripping on to his chest, when he suddenly heard a familiar sound that sent his head reeling.

*That laugh.*
Reek tried not to notice, tried not to hear, but he’d know that laugh until the day he died.

*Jesus Christ – how long have I been away?*

Robb had grown nearly a foot, had a handsome five-day beard that matched the red of his hair. He smiled as he took Walda’s hand, and Reek’s whole body ached in response. Reek wished so desperately that Robb Stark was dead – or better yet might drop dead right in front of him – but it felt wrong to wish that on someone so lovely, so familiar. And there was a part of him – pathetic – that wanted to fall at Robb’s feet, that wanted to beg: “Take me back. Please take me back.”

As his eyes turned to the man beside Robb, though, Reek’s heart stopped, leapt up and jammed in the back of his throat so hard he thought he might choke.

“Oh my god.”

He was shorter than Robb, broad-shouldered despite an uneasy slouch, and though he was turned away from view at the moment, Reek didn’t need to see the boy’s face to know his name.

*Jon.*

Reek’s mouth fell open, both of his hands pressed against the window to frame the scene: Robb talking amicably with Roose, while Jon shifted around anxiously, eyes downcast as he raked his fingers through his hair – still a hot mess. He bit his lip and shoved his hands in his pockets, pushing his suit-jacket aside just enough to reveal the pistol on his hip.

*Oh no. No no no no no. That was me.*

*You shouldn’t be here. You shouldn’t be anywhere near these people.*

The car was already locked, but the automatic locks clicked twice more as though to be sure, and when Reek glanced up again, he saw Roose withdrawing his hand from his pocket.

*I have to tell him though! He doesn’t – he doesn’t understand who we – who they are.*

*Yeah, you better save him,* mocked Theon. *He looks so in need of your protection. You did a great job with that last time.*

*I’m sorry. I know. I’m sorry.*

Robb and Jon bid the Boltons goodbye, then walked away toward their car, shoulders so close that there was nothing visible between them until Robb whispered something in Jon’s ear that prompted Snow to cast a backwards glance at Roose.

*Oh god. I forgot about those eyes.*

* *

Reek remained in stunned silence for most of the ride back, pushing the keffiyeh off his face and watching the trees pass by. Walda made small-talk – clearly aware that *something* had altered the mood in the car, and perhaps a little bothered that nobody intended to fill her in.

“What did you think about the service, Reek?” She twisted in her seat to look at him.

“It was fine,” replied Reek, still staring out the window.
“Robb was looking well, wasn’t he?” asked Roose

Reek squirmed. He didn’t want to think about Robb, much less discuss him. Although at first Ramsay had made a point to remind Theon who was responsible for his imprisonment, he had eventually forced Reek to forget, to understand that his relationship with Ramsay was as natural as his own heartbeat. But the sight of Robb – the sight of Robb with Jon – confused Reek terribly with the suggestion that there was no one way that things ought to happen. Perhaps if Ned Stark had never cheated on his wife, or if he had raised Jon as his own, or if Balon had never turned against the Starks, or Rick and Maron were alive, if Asha were a boy, if Theon were a girl, if Robb never wanted him or if Theon had only wanted Robb, if Dom hadn’t died, if Roose had shown Ramsay some kindness… would there be a need for Reek at all? Reek’s head began to hurt.

“Does he know?” asked Reek faintly.

“Does who know what?” Roose returned with amusement.

“Does Jon know that Robb is his brother?”

“It seems Robb’s decided it’s in his best interest to keep his father’s secrets.”

“Why?” Jon had only ever wanted a family, and it seemed cruel to keep him there, unaware that he lived in the midst of the thing he wanted most.

Roose shrugged. “Why not? Revealing Jon’s identity would only upset the family and make the boy realize that he’s entitled to things for which he currently feels lucky. As it is, Jon feels indebted to Robb, and that suits Robb just fine.”

“How did he – how did Robb find Jon? And why –” Reek faltered and wrung his hands. “And why – didn’t he ever try to f-find me?”

“Would you have liked that?” asked Roose, glancing back at him. “Would you rather belong to the Stark boy?”

There was a thin edge of mockery in Roose’s voice, and it cut just deep enough to bring tears to Reek’s eyes. “No,” he said. He felt his cheeks burning. “No no no. I belong to Ramsay. Until I’m dead, he says. Reek belongs to Ramsay and Ramsay belongs to Reek…” He curled in on himself as much as the seatbelt would allow, buried his face in his left hand and yanked almost violently at his collar with the right.

“You’ve upset him,” chastised Walda under her breath.

Reek began to weep loudly.

*He loved you. He loved you and now he’s dead and he’s never coming back.*

*Robb found what he was looking for and then left you to die. Or worse.*

*He took Jon. He took Jon and Jon took your place. That was supposed to be your place.*

*But he couldn’t know that it was my place. He couldn’t mean to. Jon cared about me.*

*Jon never let you sleep in his bed. Jon never held you close when you had nightmares. Jon never sat beside you while you were sick or hurt. He didn’t even know you.*

*Ramsay knew you. He loved you. He’s dead and he’s never coming back.*
Reek had descended into an obscene bawling, prompting Walda to knock on the partition and order the driver to pull over.

“Say something to him,” she whispered as the car rolled to a stop. Reek had pulled his knees up to his chest and bowed his head against them. Roose sighed, unbuckling his seatbelt and turning around.

“Get your feet off the leather.”

“Roose…”

“Reek, look at me. Don’t cry. You need to stop crying.”

Reek nodded, helpless against the onslaught of tears. “Sorry,” he moaned. “I’m sorry. I’m t-t-trying.”

“I know.” Roose offered a hand out to Reek; it was completely bizarre, and Reek eyed the slender fingers with some skepticism. Still, it seemed rude not to respond, so he carefully laid his own fingers in Roose’s palm and gave a squeeze. It helped him to breathe, somehow, and he kept squeezing in time with his inhalations until he was able to sniffle and say,

“I’m s-sorry I’m such a f-f-freak.”

Roose pressed his hand – still joined with Reek’s – to the side of the boy’s face. “When you’re stronger, I’ll tell you why he never came back for you.”

Reek gazed back at him, eyes wet and wide. “Will I ever see him again?”

* I want him to see me. I want to hear him count every single fucking scar. *

Roose smiled slightly. “When I think you’re ready. But I need you to be patient – can you be good and patient for me?”

Reek nodded and wiped his nose on his scarf. “Yes sir. I can.”

The road drew up alongside the Weeping Water and the silhouette of the Dreadfort emerged above the pines – its spires even darker somehow in the sunlight, like trees still standing after a fire has burned through.

*That night, Qyburn grudgingly dispensed another dose of sleeping medicine, and as Reek lay in Ramsay’s bed awaiting its effects, he slipped a hand into his pajamas to rub between his legs. He tried thinking about Ramsay, tried sucking on the places where his fingers used to be, or whispering the things he knew Ramsay liked to hear, but it was too awful to yearn for a ghost, and as the drug began to kick in, he found his thoughts floating elsewhere altogether…*

“Show me.”

“I’ll get in trouble.”

“No you won’t.”

Theon had his elbows up on the edge of the pool, pulling his goggles up into his hair to squint at Robb. “Yes I will. You’ll start crying and tell your mom and your dad will fucking kill me.”
The truth was that Theon was scared. He’d been bragging when he told Robb about the Drowned Men – those men most loyal to the Iron Islands who proved their fealty by allowing themselves to be drowned and then revived. And he’d been lying when he said that he’d undergone the ritual himself – just like Rick and Maron had lied to him, he realized with embarrassment several years later. But now here was Robb, demanding that Theon show him, trusting Theon to hold him under water until he stopped breathing and then somehow bring him back to life, like was some kind of priest and not a goddamn hostage.

“You can’t even swim,” said Theon. “You could never be Ironborn.”

He felt a twinge of guilt as Robb blushed and looked down at his toes. He was a clumsy swimmer, and he always entered the pool by the ladder rather than the diving board, and Theon hadn’t failed to notice the way Robb avoided the deep end of the pool like it was the open ocean.

“I – I don’t want to be Ironborn,” said Robb. “I just – I wanted you to see that I’m not afraid of it.”

“Why do you care what I think?”

Robb smiled. “Um, ‘cause we’re friends?”

Theon felt his heart clench. His father had warned him about this, warned him that the Starks would try to make him weak. But Theon didn’t feel weak. The way Robb looked at him – willing to do whatever it took to prove himself – it made Theon feel powerful.
Chapter Nineteen

Chapter Summary

Roose Bolton: life coach

Chapter Notes

As always, thank you so much for reading and leaving comments & kudos! Thanks to bluetilo especially for her thoughts and encouragement. October is a busy month for me, what with the Bolton Fix Xchange and all, but I promise to keep on writing!

The Dreadfort seemed even bleaker than before, which Reek had not thought possible. Without his master’s presence to send his heart racing, all the bright summer colors seemed muted and shallow, and the minutes moved at a crawl. Reek rarely left Ramsay’s bedroom and sometimes lay in bed for two or three days at a time. At night – when he slept at all – he was plagued by vivid nightmares and often woke in a fit, screaming. (Roose had instructed Qyburn that Reek receive no more sleeping medicine until further notice.) Reek hardly ate and gave up bathing altogether, though he still maintained a routine of making the bed and cleaning the room each day, half-believing that if he did it enough times, Ramsay was bound to come home sooner or later.

As for Robb and Jon – well, it was hard to tell the difference sometimes between what was asleep and what was awake, and sometimes Reek would find his hand wandering down, his mind wandering back to what must’ve been a dream –

Roose allowed him to carry on in his malaise for nearly a month before he sent a girl to fetch Reek to his study.

“He’s asked for you,” she said, and then silently led him down the hall to a set of antique double-doors that looked as old as the Dreadfort itself. She held them open for him, and stepping through the threshold, Reek’s bones tingled with the apprehension of a small boy going into a room that he knows should remain off limits. He’d expected the girl to follow him inside, but when the doors fell shut and locked behind him, he turned and realized that she was gone.

There’s no reason to be afraid, thought Reek, but Theon remained unconvinced.

The only light in the room came from an older wood-burning hearth that had been converted into a gas fireplace; the flames twisted and danced, sometimes as tall as a man, and lent their gleam to a fearsome collection of ancient-looking weapons that hung on the adjacent wall. Reek held his breath, momentarily paralyzed as his eye caught the shape of a blade that looked like a much older version of the knife Ramsay had used to – Reek looked away, trying to ignore what felt like the gaze of the object still upon him.

Above the hearth hung a portrait of a man identical in appearance to Roose Bolton, though again, the canvas must’ve been much too old for that – a grandfather, perhaps. There were no windows, though Reek could see several places where there had been – frames filled with stone and concrete
that peeked out from the edges of the many bookshelves and paintings. Reek squinted at the spines of the books, most of which bore no visible title or author, all of them bound in very old leather. He reached for one, about to run his fingernail over the stitching, when Roose’s voice interrupted:

“Still so curious, aren’t you?”

Reek froze. He hadn’t even noticed the man, sitting in a behemoth armchair facing the fire. “I’m sorry, sir,” he said, and he realized that he was sweating, suddenly overpowered by the heat from the fireplace, though the back of his neck still felt chilled somehow.

“Don’t you think you’ve gone on mourning your tormentor long enough?”

Reek took a few careful steps forward. “I don’t know what else to do,” he replied. “Come around where I can see you.”

The chair was also leather, though in the darkness its color was indistinct, and it reclined beside a small table that held a wide, shallow basin and a clean, folded towel. Reek was startled to see that Roose was naked, a sheen of sweat lighting the lines of his lean body – hard and sinuous, so unlike the muscled curves of his son. Reek lowered his eyes immediately.

“This isn’t right, he thought abstractly. He blinked away a bead of sweat.

“Do you – um, would you like me to – should I –”

“I’m not Ramsay,” said Roose, drumming his fingers on the arm of the chair. “I don’t intend to use you like he did.” He squinted at Reek. “Does that disappoint you?”

He never used me. He needed me.

“No sir.”

Roose smirked. “I think it does, on some level.” He sat up stiffly to consider the boy before him, then leaned back and inhaled sharply. “I called for you because I’d like you to administer my leechings from now on. The girls are so squeamish and I think you could be doing more useful things than cleaning a dead man’s room over and over again – don’t you agree?”

Reek nodded, though the idea revolted him, and as always, it burned that Roose spoke so callously about Ramsay’s death, feigning oblivion to Reek’s deeper feelings on the subject.

Reek took the bowl from the table, nose wrinkling at the briny smell. He was grateful for the dim light, in which the leeches looked like nothing – a soft mass of black. He looked anxiously at Roose.

“Tell me what to do,” he said.

“They won’t try to bite you – just pluck them out quickly and carefully. Put them on my skin and they’ll do the rest. Once they’re full, they’ll release their hold and you can collect and dispose of them. Just do that and refill my drink when it’s empty.” He indicated a sweet-smelling cup on the table, then smiled flickeringly. “Not much of a horror-show, I’m afraid. Think you can manage it?”

Reek nodded again and tried to mask the way his stomach clenched as he reached his fingers into the bowl, feeling the soft wetness of the creatures as they squirmed beneath his touch. They were smaller than he expected – more pliable – and when he finally pinched ahold of one he held it there for a moment, turning it in the firelight before laying it gently on the pale skin of Roose’s breast. He remembered how he and Robb had laughed when the first heard the rumor – too bizarre
Reek applied the second leech and nearly yelped when Roose grabbed his wrist, twisting his forearm to get a clearer view of the fresh cuts there. Reek winced and tried to pull away, but Roose held him there firmly. The power of his grip frightened Reek.

“You need to stop this,” said Roose, running his thumb over the raised spot where Reek had burned himself with the tip of a lighter the day before. His touch was cool as always, a relief in the heat of the room.

“I can’t. I need to – it feels – it makes me feel better.”

*It makes me feel like he’s here with me.*

Roose nodded in an imitation of sympathy and let his fingers slide up the length of Reek’s arm, feeling each scab and scar with consideration. “I know it does. But you might really hurt yourself.”

“So?” Reek slapped a hand over his mouth; he hadn’t intended to back-talk.

But Roose only smiled slightly and released his hold on Reek’s arm. “*There* he is. You know, don’t you, that Reek has limited usefulness? All these cuts and burns, every night that you wake up screaming – that’s *Theon* trying to find his way out. And it’s *Theon* that I want. That I’ve always wanted.”

Reek opened his mouth to object. The name – he didn’t want to hear that goddamn name anymore, but Roose raised his hand and continued.

“I don’t expect you to give up your name, Reek. I think it will continue to serve you well. But from now on, *I do* expected quite a few things from you.” The flames leapt and Roose sipped at his cup.

“I expect you to meet me here in my study at this same time every week. I expect you to bathe and dress yourself every morning and to present yourself in the dining room for each and every meal. I expect you to take walks with Walda, and when you’re well enough, you’ll join me on my evening run. And if you ever feel the need to hurt yourself, I want you to come and find me first.” Roose’s eyes drifted shut and he added, “I know you’ll do well. It’s a shame your father never loved you; you can be a very good boy when you put your mind to it, can’t you?”

Reek blushed. He placed the final leech on Roose’s thigh, holding his breath as he dared to let his touch linger there. His hands had been a pleasing thing, once.

* * *

Roose agreed to have Qyburn administer a prescription for sleeping pills on the condition that Reek undergo a monthly physical exam, and while the prospect of the doctor’s attentions made Reek’s skin crawl, he knew it was his only hope of sleeping through the night.

Qyburn examined him on the same table where Ramsay’s corpse had lain, and staring up at the ceiling, Reek felt a pang of empathy for his master. The steel was so cold against his back, and the lights so bright as to be uncomfortable. Clearly, Qyburn’s office was not equipped for living patients – he hadn’t even bothered giving Reek any kind of blanket or gown to cover himself. Of course, Reek hated being seen like this. Ramsay always said that his scars were perfect, but in the harsh light of the exam room it was clear they were coarse and ugly.

Reek glanced nervously at the voice recorder lying on the table beside him. He disliked the idea that there should be such a catalogue – these things were between him and Ramsay, and it saddened him to hear each mark robbed of its truth. He’d got the cut on his scalp when Ramsay slammed his face into the sink after Reek hadn’t drawn the bathwater hot enough. The scar by his eye was from a piece of glass during the car accident. The ear – that was best not mentioned at all.

The litany seemed to go on forever. Qyburn moved Reek’s body, pulling and lifting roughly.

“He cut off my fingers! Why can’t you just say he cut off my fucking fingers?”

He hadn’t even noticed how tightly he’d been clenching his thighs until Qyburn reached over to pause the recording and said, “You need to relax your legs so that I can get a better look.”

“You’ve seen it before,” countered Reek, pressing his knees together until they hurt. “You know what he did.”

“You can plug your ears if you don’t want to hear me say it.”

And it helped, a little. He couldn’t hear whatever awful name Qyburn had for that place, but he could still feel the old man’s fingers, poking and prodding at the scar there, pressing against his balls until Reek couldn’t bear it anymore and sobbed, “Please stop! That’s not yours! You have to stop now!”

That was the worst of it. After Qyburn was finished with his front, Reek had to lie face down while the doctor noted every cut and scrape and burn and bite on his back. He took an X-ray of Reek’s teeth, shined a little light in his eyes and took his blood pressure with a cuff, listened to his chest with a stethoscope and tapped on his knees with a rubber mallet and all the other things that seemed almost quaint. Reek didn’t look away when Qyburn drew a vial of blood from the crook of his elbow.

“May I get dressed now?” he asked, glancing anxiously at his clothes piled in the corner.

“That’s yours! You have to stop now!”

“Of course.” Qyburn slotted the vial into a plastic tray. “If you’ll wait a moment I can fill up that prescription that you came for.”

He’d forgotten why he came.

Reek nearly vaulted off the exam table, snatched his clothes to his chest and then put them on in such a hurry that he almost tripped and fell. He wanted to take a shower.

Qyburn smiled thinly. “I don’t know what information he expects. He already knows what parts are missing, and I don’t know what he wants with a tedious hour-long inventory of each and every deformity. Still, he’s asked me to prepare a blood report and a prognosis for your… rehabilitation.” He slid his glasses off his nose, allowing them to dangle off the thin chain around his neck, while he stared pointedly at Reek and observed, “Mr. Bolton must see something extremely valuable in you.”

“Yes sir – may I go now please?”

He had to stop to catch his breath outside the door to Roose’s office after what was nearly a sprint
out of Qyburn’s office and down the hall. He felt his blood bounding as he steadied himself to offer a more composed knock.

“Yes?”

“Mr. Bolton – it’s me – Reek. I – I’m sorry to bother you, sir, but you said if I –”

He didn’t hear a sound from within, but a second later the door opened and Roose beckoned him inside.

Roose wore black dress-pants and a perfectly-pressed white button-up, with the cuffs undone and rolled up to his elbows. His office was less dismal than the study, though it had that same sort of mustiness – the same dark woods and old furnishings, though the books were newer and more ordinary, the windows closed to the August air but permitting of the late-morning sun. Roose’s desk was large, the wood worn in places, and its surface was tidy, occupied only by a notepad and a small laptop, which Roose closed casually as he offered Reek a chair.

“No, no thank you.” Reek shook his head and rubbed at his arms, suddenly feeling foolish.

“I should’t have come. I just, um, I just finished my appointment with Qyburn – like you asked – and I really, um – you said to come find you if I was thinking about it.” He looked down at his feet – still bare, odd-numbered toes curling with embarrassment.

“I see.” Roose leaned back against the edge of his desk. “And what exactly were you thinking about doing?”

Reek shrugged and bit his lip. He tugged at the front of his t-shirt. “I don’t know. I just – he counted all our marks.” He glanced up at Roose, hoping to be spared from any more pitiful explanation.

“And you’d like to add another? One that won’t be in Qyburn’s assessment?”

“Yes sir.”

Roose smiled as though he was being indulgent. “Go on up to your room, and as soon as you’re done I want you to come back down to me.”

Reek blinked at him. “Will you – will you want to see it?”

Roose waved his hand dismissively as he circled back around his desk. “That won’t be necessarily. I trust you not to make a mess of things.” He sat down and opened his computer. “Will there be anything else?”

* *

“If you could only pick one to keep, which one would you pick?”

It was late morning, and Reek was sprawled out on the mattress, arms folded above his head, while Ramsay lay beside him, propped up on one elbow, fingernails tracing the line of his pet’s stomach and waiting expectantly for an answer.

“This one,” replied Reek, rubbing at the bite mark on his right shoulder. It was healed now, but a minor infection had left the scar rigid and red.

“That one?” Ramsay leaned over to dance his fingers around the shape of it. “Why that one?”
Reek blushed, smiled his meek closed-mouth smile. “Because it’s your teeth. It’s like a fingerprint. Makes me feel –” He stopped himself. He’d been about to say “sexy,” but Reek had no right to feel sexy. He looked at the rest of his body, so riddled with wounds, and wondered where the word had even come from. Ridiculous. “Owned,” he finished instead. “Makes me feel owned.”

Ramsay grinned, eyes glinting as he looked down, then back at Reek. It was hard to imagine a more lovely boy.

*

Theon never celebrated his birthday, at least not beyond a few drinks and a smoke, and sometimes he would take Gendry out for an expensive seafood dinner somewhere. He preferred Gendry’s quiet company to Robb’s on these occasions; the mechanic was just excited to be getting out of his shop and he never made it awkward by buying Theon a gift or singing him Happy Birthday or asking him to make a wish.

“But don’t you want a real birthday?” Robb asked, floored when Theon told him,

“Not really.”

“Are you sure? I could go downstairs and have them make you a cake – any kind you want!”

Theon shook his head. “I don’t want a fucking cake. Just leave it alone, yeah?”

Birthdays were not particularly important in the Greyjoy household; usually the kitchen staff made a special dinner, but there were no gifts or games or songs or guests. Sometimes – if she was feeling well – Alannys would come down to join the family for an hour or so. It wasn’t that Balon couldn’t have given his children cars and pets and trips abroad the way that Ned Stark did – the Greyjoys were an incredibly wealthy family by anyone’s measure – but Theon’s father saw no point in spoiling them with things they would all soon be able to buy – or steal – for themselves.

Robb’s seventh birthday party was attended by what seemed like a hundred other children, and Theon was overwhelmed – the magician, the piñata, the inflatable castle all seemed too much. (Theon felt grateful that – for whatever reason – Ned and Cat never tried to celebrate his own birthday with such festivities.)

“Didn’t you get me anything?” Robb had asked, pawing through a mountain of presents, only to find nothing from his newest friend.

“I don’t get an allowance,” mumbled Theon, shifting his eyes downward.

“You coulda made me something,” countered Robb.

Theon felt ashamed then, though what the hell was he supposed to give a boy who already had everything?

(And when Robb blew out the candles on his sixteenth birthday and Sansa asked eagerly, “What did you wish for?” Robb had only blushed and cast a glance at Theon before saying, “Nothing.”)

*

It surprised Reek when Roose Bolton handed him a small box wrapped in plain red paper.

“What’s this?”
“It’s a gift, from Walda and myself.”

Reek blinked at the package, rattled it lightly and asked, “Is it my birthday?”

“Yes.” Roose stood beside him, their shoulders touching. “I know your father was never a generous man, but I hope this doesn’t make you uncomfortable.”

Reek traced a finger over the seam of the wrapping. “How old am I?”

“Twenty-one. Are you going to open it?”

Reek tore at the paper gingerly, not quite liking the ripping sound it made, or the way it came away in strips.

Twenty-one?

That number had seemed important, once.

Reek frowned at his own, distorted reflection in the dark screen of a silver iPhone 5s. He turned the package over in his hands and asked, “What am I supposed to do with this?”

Roose arched an eyebrow. “I believe a thank you is the proper response.”

“I’m sorry, sir. Thank you. It’s a very kind gift. But I – I don’t exactly have anyone to call.”

“Not yet.” Roose smiled as he watched Reek’s mutilated hands wrestle with the packaging. “Would you let me help you with that?”

Reek handed him the box, embarrassed. “Thank you.”

Roose drew a small knife from his pocket, flicked open its blade and severed the various seals with a series of quick, almost dainty motions. He handed the phone back to Reek. “You don’t understand what this means, do you?”

Reek stared at him blankly. He wished Roose didn’t so obviously enjoy making him feel stupid. “No, I guess not.”

“It means that you’re allowed out of the house, provided you return by dinner and don’t allow yourself to be recognized. How does that suit you?”

Reek bit his lip. He didn’t want to seem ungrateful, but just the prospect of leaving the Dreadfort unattended sent his heart pounding with frightening force. “Do I have to?” he asked.

“Of course not. But I am going to ask that you join me for an outing this afternoon.”

Reek knew that Roose was never really just asking, so he slipped the phone into his pocket and went to Ramsay’s room to get dressed.

*

There was something in the way Roose Bolton looked at him that made Reek uneasy – some kind of deep, unwarranted fascination that caused Reek to slouch and thread his fingers together and wish he could disappear. It wasn’t a lustful look, exactly – too fleeting, too amused – but there was still something hungry in those placid gray eyes that made Reek suddenly and unpleasantly aware of his own body, broken and marred as it was.
Roose found Reek’s grimy sweatpants and t-shirt distasteful, and asked Walda to take him shopping for “anything that would be an improvement.” The experience was traumatic, but made slightly less so by Walda’s enthusiasm, and her aptitude for picking clothes out in the right sizes minimized the amount of time that Reek had to spend looking at himself in the changing room mirror. Of course, things fit very loosely, and he’d ended up with a cloth belt since none of the leather ones could cinch tightly enough around his hips. She’d offered to buy him a watch or a wallet, but Reek’s arms were beginning to shake under the heap of clothes she’d piled in them, and he insisted he had no use for such things.

“But it suits you so well,” she said with a frown, turning the watch to catch the light.

*It would’ve*, he thought. He recalled a time when he actually enjoyed dressing himself.

“It’s kind of you to say so,” he said.

As he headed downstairs to meet Roose in the garage, Reek couldn’t help staring at his feet – so strangely *normal* looking in a pair of black Chuck Taylors, despite the slight limp that favored his left foot. He wore the scarf, of course, and the gloves that concealed the unpleasantness of his hands, but Roose still fixed him with that unsettling look as he opened the door of a dark blue sedan and said, “After you, pet.”

The ride was quiet and smooth – nothing like the deafening rush of Ramsay’s motorcycle – and yet it followed a familiar route.

“Are you going to kill me?” he asked, eyeing the knife at Roose’s side. He doubted Roose would torture him, if only because it wasn’t practical.

“Would you like me to?” Roose smirked at him, wrapped his fingers around the well-worn hilt of the blade. “Ramsay told me that you begged for it, at one point.”

Reek considered the question seriously before answering, “No.”

“Interesting. Why not?”

Reek blushed and fiddled with the fringe on his scarf. *You’ll sound like a girl.*

“Because I’d like to see him again.”

“Robb Stark?”

Reek tilted his head, considering. “Him too, I guess. But I meant Jon Snow.”

“What did the bastard mean to you?”

“I – he –” Reek knew enough to lie. “I mean, have you *seen* him? Can you tell me you haven’t thought for just a second about how his mouth would feel on your –”

Reek trailed off. It felt wrong to speak of Jon this way – as though he were a conquest rather than a cherished secret. For a moment he imagined Jon’s face, turning away in revulsion as his eyes found the wreck between Reek’s legs.

*On your what, freak?*

Roose chuckled. “He is striking, but Robb’s growing up to be quite handsome – fair like his mother. It’s a shame you couldn’t have simply contented yourself with having the head of the most
powerful Northern Family desperate for your affections. That would’ve been a fearsome alliance, once you’d inherited the Greyjoy enterprise."

“It’s not like we’d get married.”

“No, but he’d have done anything for you.”

Reek didn’t know what to say to that.

The car turned down a side-street, confirming Reek’s suspicion that they were headed toward the storage complex. He wished Roose would let him forget that place, though he supposed his body would always remember – the smell of bleach and concrete, the sound of a metal door slamming, the darkness, the tickle of dry lips across his wounds. “Cry for me, little thing.”

The sedan passed through the automatic gate and rolled to a stop just outside one of the unit doors.

“Please don’t make me go in there.”

Roose unbuckled his seatbelt, then lay a hand on Reek’s trembling knee.

“Ramsay’s death has placed something of a burden on me,” he said. “And I must attend to some of his work. I don’t expect you to accompany me just yet, but know that eventually your assistance will be expected. Now be good and wait for me here.”

Assistance?

Reek felt as though the air had been sucked straight from his lungs. He opened the door for a taste of fresh air, but this place smelled too familiar. He swung his legs out, planted his feet on the crumbling asphalt and braced his elbows on his knees as he struggled to breathe. He closed his eyes, but that was too much like being locked in the dark, so he cradled his head in his hands, palms pressed against his ears as he tried to block out the screaming that perforated the door of the unit.

A cluster clouds began to accumulate, rolling up one on the other until the sky was an uneasy gray. The thunder began as a distant growling that grew closer by leaps and bounds until the storm broke. Reek closed the door and lay curled on the back seat, listening to the crush of hail falling on the roof of the car.

He remembered waking with a start to the clamor of a thunderclap just above the Dreadfort, only to find himself firmly in Ramsay’s arms.

“You’re such a pussy.”

But he’d been so grateful when Ramsay only pulled him closer.

*

Running was Robb’s thing. He had always been faster than Theon – at least on land – with those long, lean legs and whatever touch of madness was required to make running for no reason seem like fun.

“Come for a run with me?” Robb would ask, at least once a month, and Theon would blow a cloud of smoke into Robb’s face with a roguish grin.

Running was all heat and sweat and pounding against the earth, and Theon had never enjoyed it.
Swimming was weightlessness and silence.

And however he felt about running didn’t change the fact that the nicest pair of barefoot running shoes in the world wasn’t going to fix Reek’s limp, and the sleek, navy-blue track-suit that Roose had bought him wasn’t going to dampen the perpetual grinding sensation in his knee.

It was evening – just past sundown – and the mosquitos were out. Roose had taken him to a rubber-top track attached to a local junior high where he felt confident that Reek would not be seen or noticed by anyone important. The stadium was empty, save four of Bolton’s men stationed around the perimeter to ensure their privacy.

Reek gazed out across the field. The bleachers were empty, save for a few old pop cans that rattled noisily whenever a breeze kicked up, and a tattered spirit banner drooped from the chainlink fence. The track itself seemed interminable, looping away out of sight – Reek’s chest tightened just looking at it.

“I was never any good at this,” he mumbled.

“You don’t have to be good at it,” said Roose, pressing a hand between Reek’s shoulders. “You just have to try. And I’ll be with you.”

Did he ever speak that way to Ramsay?

Reek swiped his hair out of his face, put one foot in front of the other. The pain was definite but not unbearable. Again, with a longer stride. He let his arms bend at the elbow, tried to remember the way they were supposed to move. Faster. Straightening his back, he felt his chest open up; he couldn’t remember the last time a breath reached all the way down. Through the discomfort he began to find a rhythm – his heart roared to life.

He’d made it a few dozen yards when his knee gave out – a jab of electricity that sent him hurtling forward onto his elbows, yowling for an instant in pain before a tide of frustrated sobs overtook him.

“Fuck!” he spat, as Roose approached to kneel beside him, shooing Reek’s hands away from his leg so that he could palpitate the joint. “Fuck this! I can’t do this!”

“You can,” said Roose evenly. He pulled on Reek’s ankle until the leg was extended, then massaged either side of the knee with his fingertips. “You’ve endured far worse pain than a little jog.”

“Well maybe I’m only good at getting fucking tortured and abused!” Reek pounded a fist into the flesh of his own thigh. “Maybe I’d rather let Ramsay Bolton cut off every last fucking toe than go another fucking step!” He was furious enough not to care that his face was red, or to mind the hot tears already streaming down his face. “I hate fucking running and I always fucking have and I swear to god that whatever you’re trying to do – buying me new clothes and a phone, making me eat at the table and pretending like I don’t make you sick – none of it is going to – it’s not gonna change that I’m –”

He was shaking almost uncontrollably, hugging his uninjured knee up to his chest. When he rubbed at his eyes, he caught a glimpse of Bolton’s men turning to stare, and then his vision blurred again. He damned himself, wiped his runny nose on the back of his hand.

“It’s not going to change anything. It’s not going to get better. I don’t know what you want, but I am never going to be him again. I can’t.” He struck himself a few times in the head with the heel
of his palm. “Fuck. I miss Ramsay! You and him are exactly alike, you know? You both get off on humiliating me, but he never tries to make me go fucking jogging!”

Roose grinned ghoulishly. “You know who you sound like?”

Reek moaned and buried his face in his arms. “No! Fuck you! And fuck Theon Greyjoy. He was a whore.”

Roose didn’t touch him then, made no effort to comfort Reek as he pulled himself into a tight ball and wept until he was breathing in short, shrieking gasps.

“Robb Stark thinks you’re dead. That’s why he never came looking for you.”

Reek’s ears began to ring, and he laid a hand on the black-top to steady himself as he raised his head to fix Roose with a bleary glare. “What?”

“Ramsay might’ve been an impulsive, short-sighted bastard, but he had a good idea now and then.” Roose sat back onto his haunches and dusted off his knees. “He’s not unlike Robb in that way.” He smirked. “Perhaps that’s your type.”

“Fuck you.” Reek ground at his eyes with the backs of his hands. “Why – why does he think I’m dead?”

The sky was dark now, and the whole scene had faded so that Roose was hardly more than a silhouette against the dim glow of the horizon. They were alone, Reek realized. Roose could do anything to him here.

He could do anything anywhere, Reek chided himself, though the prospect of his poor abused corpse being found in such a place – probably discovered by children – was a degradation he had not previously conceived.

“He took pictures,” explained Roose. “Before he pulled you out of that wreck. You were so covered in blood that Robb had no reason to doubt it when Ramsay told him you’d managed to escape and kill yourself in a car accident.”

Roose paused heavily. “He wept, of course. Not in front of me, but it was clear that he did as soon as I’d left the room.”

Reek chewed his lip.

That doesn’t mean anything. He was always such a pussy. It doesn’t mean anything.

“He asked me to send your body back to Pyke.”

What a dumbass.

Now Roose laid a hand on Reek’s injured knee, so gently that Reek jumped at the touch.

“I regretfully told him that your body had been destroyed, and advised him that if anyone came looking for Theon Greyjoy, the safest thing would be to tell them that you’d simply run off. It wouldn’t look too well for House Stark to kill the heir to the Greyjoy Family without the slightest notice.”

Abruptly, the lights above the field flared, drowning the scene in an impersonal white glow. Reek blinked, shielded his eyes for a moment. Suddenly he felt as though he were on a stage; he hadn’t
realized what a comfort the darkness was, a relief from the scrutiny of Roose’s relentless gray eyes, which didn’t seem to be bothered by the harsh glare at all.

“The Starks believe that you’re dead. Your sister has undoubtedly told a similar lie to your own family. You’re free from whatever it was they expected of you.” He rose, towering above Reek for a moment before offering down his slender hand. “So if you can get up and move once around this track – at whatever pace you can manage – I’ll tell you how Jon Snow came to be in Robb Stark’s employ. Can you do that for me?”

Reek took the hand, startled by its force as it lifted him onto his feet. He blinked. Everything looked so unreal in this light.

“Yes sir,” he said. He turned to begin his lap, but Roose still held his hand, fingers brushing against the place that fingers used to be.

“Speak to me like that again and I will make you wish you were back on that saltire.”
Chapter 20

Chapter Summary

Reek learns some truths.

Chapter Notes

Hey everybody - sorry about the long lapse between updates! I’ve been so busy working on my fic for the Bolton Fic X Change. I know things are moving a little slowly, but I promise that the parts you’ve been waiting for begin next chapter. Thank you so much for reading!

_Jon Snow was a whore._

The thought reverberated in Reek’s skull long after he’d retreated up to Ramsay’s bedroom and collapsed back onto the bed. Ramsay’s smell had all but faded from the sheets, and Reek buried his face in the pillow, wishing that his master would return and empty his mind once more. It felt too heavy lately, too full of things that provoked questions, plans, desires – things that Reek had no use for.

_Jon Snow was a whore._

Jon Snow was a virgin when Theon arranged their little fender-bender in the grocery store parking lot. He’d been wearing blue jeans and a plain black t-shirt. His hands were chilly as he wrote his number across the back of Theon’s hand.

And Jon wasn’t a virgin when he’d grabbed Theon by the shirt in front of the bus station, kissed him and said, “Promise me you’ll find me again.”

But Theon hadn’t kept that promise – he hadn’t been there to protect Jon, and so the boy had to find his own way up North. And he was beautiful, wasn’t he? And young, and alone, and two-thousand dollars could only get a person so far…

Reek bit into his lip to stifle a sob.

_It’s not true_, he told himself. _It might not be true._

_Why would he lie to you?_

_You just don’t want this to be your fault is all._

“I’m sorry,” he whispered, throwing his forearm over his eyes. “Fuck – I’m sorry.”

He despised the little grin that crept across Roose Bolton’s face when he told Reek that Jon Snow had been discovered working in a brothel just south of The Wall. The Northern Police Department responded to a call that a client high on some kind of designer drug – “you know, the kind that’s
become an epidemic up there” – had entered Castle Black and attacked several of the boys working there. By the time officers arrived on the scene, the man was dead, and one of the boys sat beside him in a daze, spattered in blood and holding an empty 9mm pistol in one hand.

“Oh, of course, they took him to the precinct for evidence collection.” Roose paused here to help Reek untie his running shoes. “You remember who’s the Chief of Police up there?”

“Robb’s uncle Ben.”

And of course Benjen Stark had seen the images of Jon, stills taken from the surveillance video at the club that night, along with a bulletin stating that Jon Snow was wanted for questioning in connection to the murder of Vayon Poole and Richard Flint. And though he undoubtedly guessed something more was at hand, Police Chief Stark had never been one to interfere with his family’s business. He loaded Jon into an armored van and sent him south to whatever fate his nephew had in mind for the boy.

“Why didn’t Robb kill him?” Reek asked, spellbound.

Roose shrugged. “Robb has never displayed particularly sound judgment in these matters, though I’m sure he’s done a thorough job of making the boy feel indebted to the Family for his change in circumstance.” He tilted his head to one side and asked, “Does it change your feelings for the bastard to learn that he’s been used?”

“So have I.”

Truthfully, Reek was startled to find there was still a piece of his heart left to break. The thought of Jon selling himself made Reek’s stomach upend, and it wasn’t difficult to trace the thread of the story back to himself, back to Theon. It was Theon who pursued Jon, who knowingly pulled him into a world of thieves and murders and dealers and pimps and then cut him loose without even telling him the truth about what all those men wanted.

Because you wanted him. Because you wanted to fuck him. Just like every other guy who’s paid for it since.

I think I’ve fucking paid for it.

Yeah well, so has he.

Beneath this new wave of self-loathing, Reek was also perversely proud to hear that Jon had killed the man who attacked him. He remembered that afternoon at the shooting range – how terrified Theon had been to realize that Jon absolutely had it in him to kill someone who really deserved it.

Perhaps Robb was smarter than Roose gave him credit for, deciding to keep the boy by his side.

* *

Fall came on abruptly the first weekend in September, and the cold air stirred up a soreness in Reek’s joints. On the worst days, he had to forego running and settle for a long, awkward walk around the grounds. Theon had never cared for autumn – its chill reminded him of the Iron Islands – but Reek didn’t mind it, despite the ache in his bones. Autumn meant he could comfortably wear a sweater and a coat, and his gloved hands didn’t draw quite so much attention. In the closet, he’d found a red woolen scarf that belonged to Ramsay, and he loved the way it felt, so snug around his neck.

The last of the blossoms had begun to wilt, and a small crew of men was raking up the leaves from the cluster of elms and red maple trees that grew along the river. Reek’s breath produced a fleeting
puff of vapor and he wished he’d thought to wear a hat.

“Mind if I join you?”

Walda’s cheeks glowed with a bright flush, and her blonde hair cascaded out from beneath a knit cap.

Reek shrugged. “If you want.” Then, more softly: “I like your hat.”

Walda smiled, reached up to touch the hem of it. “Thanks. I made it.”

“Really? It looks warm.”

She giggled. “It is. I could make one for you, if you want.”

Reek shook his head and resumed walking at a slower pace. “Nah. I mean, I’d like that, but it seems like a lot of trouble.”

“No, I will!” Walda fell in stride with him. “I’ve just learned, so there might be a few mistakes in it. Just – now that it’s getting cold out, I’m trying to find things to keep me busy. I only know how to make scarves and hats, so far. What colors do you like?”

Reek paused to consider. Red and pink and gray – those were the colors Ramsay wore. And before that it was gray and black and gold, but those were the colors that his family had chosen.

“Blue,” he said. “I like all kinds of blue.”

**Blue like Robb’s eyes.**

“And black,” he added.

“Blue and black it is then,” she said with a grin. “You probably don’t want a pom-pom on top, huh?”

Reek smiled his tight-lipped smile. “Wouldn’t want to compromise my dignity.”

“Do you – do you ever get bored here?” she asked.

It was a funny question, he thought. “Now that Ramsay’s gone, it’s not as exciting as it used to be but… I mean, I imagine a normal person would get super bored and weirded out here. But I’m not, you know… normal.”

She sighed, thankfully wise enough not to contend that point. “I miss my family a lot in the fall. A bunch of us have birthdays around this time; it seems like there’s always a party, or someone getting ready for a party.”

“That reminds me: I never thanked you for the birthday gift. For the phone. Thank you.”

She rolled her eyes. “That was Roose’s idea. I thought it was kind of a lame present. I wanted to get your teeth fixed.”

Reek blushed, closed his lips tightly and ran his tongue over his front teeth.

“They don’t bother me,” hurried Walda. “I just thought they probably bother you.”

“Only when I’m eating,” he said with a shrug.
The path wound out from the garden and towards the river.

“Do you ever see your family anymore?” he asked. “That’s a long trip to the Twins.”

“Tell me about it. I saw my eldest sister a few months ago, and one of my cousins when he was passing through town. But I haven’t been back. My dad is… not usually well enough for company. He’s kind of… bitter, I think.” She bit her lip before adding, “I saw your sister when she came.”

“Yeah?”

“She looks like you.”

“Thanks.”

“Do you have any other family? Anyone else you could live with?”

“You want me to leave?”

Walda stopped, laid a mitten on Reek’s arm. She looked hurt. “No. I don’t, actually. But you – I don’t think it’s good for you to stay here forever. I know Roose has been trying to help you get out more, but I actually think he’s making it harder for you. To leave, I mean. If you want.”

Reek looked at his toes. “My brothers are dead. My dad – you want to talk about bitter? – my dad threw himself off a bridge. He never tried to find me. My mom is nuts. My sister is – Asha has other things to worry about besides me. Oh, and my uncles are all also completely fucking batshit.” He smiled sadly at her. “So no, not really.”

Walda floundered. “What about – what about that guy? The one from Ramsay’s funeral? Roose said you knew him. He told me you grew up together, like you were practically brothers.”

“Did he tell you that I betrayed Robb’s trust and Robb sent me to Ramsay?”

“No,” she said with a frown. “He didn’t tell me that. What did – how did you betray his trust, exactly, that you deserved to be – that he sent you to – to Ramsay?”

Reek twitched. “I kept a secret from him.”

“Must’ve been some secret,” she said.

“It was.”

They stood quietly overlooking the river. In summer, the Weeping Water was roiling, the water rising all the way up its grassy banks, noisy and powerful. Now it had retreated to little more than a stream, wide and shallow as it wound around the smooth white rocks that had been the backbone of its summer swell. The sunlight shone bleakly off its surface. Walda rocked back onto her heels, then bounced onto the balls of her feet.

“Can I tell you a secret?” she asked finally.

“Doesn’t that seem like a shitty idea?”

“Roose knows already,” she said. “I mean, it’s not much of a secret. But I wanted to wait until it was – safe to tell, considering what happened last time. I’m pregnant.”

Reek’s heart sped up. He smiled at her, not minding his teeth for once.
“Really? That’s wonderful. I’m –” he faltered as his guilt caught up with him. “I’m glad you told me.”

Walda laughed, gave a little leap. “I’m so excited!” Again, she laid her hand on his arm. “I can’t even imagine the brightness a baby will bring to a place like this. Just think how new everything will be! I can’t wait. I mean, I suppose I have to, but I really can’t wait.”

“When?”

“January. I do hope you’ll stick around to meet him.”

“Him?”

“Just a guess,” she giggled. “Feels wrong to call it… well, it.”

_God, another Bolton boy._

_Will it have those same eyes?_

_You’re being a selfish prick again._

“I suppose I’ll still be around,” he said cautiously. Then, “I’m happy for you, Walda. I’m sorry I suck at showing it but… I think you’ll be a great mom.”

She threw her arms around him, squeezed harder than he was expecting until he laughed a wheezy little chuckle. “You’re going to break my bones,” he said.

They lingered by the river for a few more minutes, watching a flock of geese fly by.

“Wanna go inside and have a cider or something?”

“Sure.”

The path took them along the riverbank before it arced back towards the house. Reek kept his eyes on the ground as they passed by the grounds crew, listened to the rustle of dried leaves and plastic bags. When he glanced up, he saw one of the men staring straight back at him with wide, brown eyes.

Reek began to shake. He shoved his hands in his pockets and sped his pace.

Walda hurried to keep up. “Hey, don’t take it that way.”

“What the f-fuck way am I supposed to take it?” shot Reek, not slowing his stride. “I look like I belong in a fucking circus, and the most expensive fucking clothes in the whole fucking world aren’t going to change that. That’s why I can’t just leave; that’s why I have to stay here forever.”

“He thinks you’re cute.”

Reek scowled. “Don’t treat me like a fucking idiot.”

Walda tugged on the sleeve of his jacket. “Reek, I’m serious! Please slow down?”

Reek stopped, feeling suddenly ashamed when he noticed Walda breathing hard as she caught up to him. “I’m sorry. Fuck, I’m sorry.”

She looked at him plaintively. “Why won’t you believe me? I’ve seen him looking at you all week.
And not the kind of look you’re assuming, but the kind of look that says he’d like to come and talk to you. I may be a fat girl, but I do get that look sometimes myself, you know?”

Reek glanced past her to the men doing the raking, saw the same boy quickly look away and resume his work. He shivered, feeling inexplicably clumsy, afraid.

“But I – Ramsay’s the only one who – there’s nobody – he wouldn’t look at me like that if he knew what I actually l-l-looked like.”

Walda looped her hand into the crook of his elbow, gave a gentle tug that they should continue. “Ramsay adored you,” she said, adding carefully, “in his own way. Is it so hard to believe that someone else might?”

Reek chewed his lip. Walda was well-intentioned, he decided, but she didn’t know. She didn’t know the full extent of the damage – that anyone who ever saw it was bound to recoil, horrified. No matter what his face looked like. No matter whether his hair grew in black, or he got new teeth or gained back all the weight he’d lost. It would all be an illusion – he was irreparable.

“What are you?”

“I’m your Reek.”

“And what good is Reek?”

“No good. Good for nothing.”

“But you can be good if you try.” And then he kissed you. You were scared, so you let him. “Can you be good for me, pet?”

And he kissed you again, and it was gentle the way he held your face with his hands.

* 

“Walda tells me that one of the men working in the yard has his eye on you.”

Reek sighed as he replaced the empty basin on the table beside Roose’s recliner. He moved to crouch beside the fire, felt its heat traveling up his back as he watched the leeches begin their task.

“Yeah, she tells me that too.”

Roose’s nakedness had long ago ceased to unsettle Reek, though of course he still noticed it. Months had passed, and Bolton had yet to suggest anything unseemly. Once or twice, Reek felt the urge to touch him, to lay a hand between his legs and see what might happen, but some sense of self-preservation dissuaded him.

“I never took you for a particularly romantic person,” mused Roose, eyes drifting shut.

“I wasn’t.”

Reek braced himself, waiting for Roose to pursue the subject with that deliberate insensitivity of his, but the man said nothing else until the leeches were fully engorged with his blood.

“We’re going on an errand today,” he said, watching Reek’s face as he scooped up each animal, feeling its weight in his palm before discarding it back into the basin. “I’d like you to drive.”

Reek carried the basin to the fireplace, pausing for a minute before dumping the leeches into the
He couldn’t quell the trembling in his hands as he turned the key in the ignition of a brand new black Suburban that the mechanic had brought up. He strove not to think about the last time he’d been behind the wheel, but he recalled the sound of bones breaking, the half-formed wish that he might be dead.

_You were stupid for trying to run_, thought Reek, shifting into Drive once Roose and Qyburn had secured their seatbelts. _Ramsay was only trying to care for you. It was ungrateful and stupid to run._

Theon had enjoyed driving – at least, when he was on his own, aimlessly cruising the freeways of Wintertown after all the lights had come on. It felt like control. Now, even the _idea_ of control exhausted him. Crashing was so much easier.

“Reek, please keep both hands on the wheel.”

“Yes sir.”

Reek remembered the first time Ramsay had taken him out for a ride. He’d been frightened, of course, and confused when Ramsay handed him a helmet.

“I don’t, um, I shouldn’t take this from you,” said Reek, holding it at arms’ length, not allowing himself to look directly at Ramsay. “I don’t deserve to –”

Ramsay rolled his eyes and thrust the helmet back into Reek’s chest, sending a jolt of pain through his ribcage. “I don’t need one. I bought it for _you_. And now you’re acting pretty fucking ungracious about it.”

Reek swallowed, hands clutching at the front of his shirt. “No! No, no – I don’t mean to be, um, ungracious. I – I only – I – only want to – to, um –”

He’d begun to whimper, desperately searching for the _right_ words, the thing Ramsay wanted to hear.

_He wants to know that you’re worried about him._

“I just don’t want anything to happen to you.”

“That’s very thoughtful of you, pet.” Ramsay extended an arm, cradled Reek’s face in his palm. “But I need you to _trust_ me.” Before Reek could blink, Ramsay’s hand slipped down to catch him by the throat, thumb pressing just behind Reek’s jaw and lifting his chin until their eyes met. It was all Reek could do to keep them open, to remain still, to remember to breathe. Instinctively, he raised his own hands to grab at Ramsay’s forearm. A thin whine escaped his cracked lips.

“Ssshhh.” Ramsay regarded him with those icy eyes, mouth open slightly while his tongue traced the edges of his bottom teeth. “Relax, sweetheart. Relax.”

Reek allowed his hands to fall back to his sides. He swallowed again and took a deep breath. Ramsay’s grip was light on his neck, and Reek felt his pulse pounding beneath his master’s fingertips.

“There, like that. Just relax.” Ramsay leaned forward, still steadying the bike with one hand as he pressed his forehead against Reek’s. His breath was sweet and warm on his pet’s face. “Do you
trust me, Reek?” he whispered.

“Yes.”

“Well get on the bike.”

When he wrapped his arms around Ramsay’s waist, he was surprised to find that the monster felt so familiar, so finite – all that awfulness contained in a ribcage, in a body just like his own. He held Ramsay close - *he’s less likely to hurt you if you stay close* – and later on he’d sometimes let his hands stray down to press at his master’s crotch, to see if he could prompt Ramsay to pull over and take him by the side of the road.

“You trying to get us both killed?” Ramsay would ask with a grin.

“Maybe,” Reek replied breathlessly.

Which didn’t seem so bad, really. At least then there’d be someone to look after him in hell.

* 

Roose offered up a spindly hand to help him down from the cab, and Reek held it for a moment longer than necessary, adjusting the scarf around his face before asking with a stammer, “What’s – are we – who’s – is there someone – is there someone in there?” His shell-shocked blue eyes flitted from the door of the unit to Roose’s stern face.

“No, there’s nobody in there right now.”

Still, Reek shook and began to breathe too quickly, clasping Roose’s hand tightly. “Then why – then please – don’t – why do I – please don’t make me go in.”

Roose studied Reek’s eyes incisively. “Are you having a regression right now?”

Reek recovered himself enough to let go of Roose’s hand, but continued to knot his own crippled fingers together. “N-no. No sir, I’m not. Just – please tell me what’s inside.”

Roose sighed and straightened his shirt collar. “Drugs, pet. This shipmen arrived early this morning and Qyburn and I need to make sure everything is in order before it gets picked up for distribution this afternoon.” He took a few steps towards the door, pausing when Reek hung back.

“This place still scares you that much?”

“It’s the smell. The bleach. I can’t stand it.”

“Well, I’m afraid you’ll have to start readjusting yourself.” Roose clapped Reek firmly on the shoulder, pulling him along through the door. “Our work takes a strong stomach.”

The light made him flinch, the way it flickered – just like the light in his own unit. The sound of his own footsteps on the concrete echoed the way Ramsay’s did, though the tempo was different, uneven.

In the center of the floor was a pallet, stacked shoulder-high with wooden shipping crates and bound up with plastic straps.

“Is this – did my family ship this?” Reek asked, running a finger along the edge of one of the boxes.
“I don’t do business with the Ironborn,” remarked Roose, opening a pocket knife to sever the straps along one side of the pallet. “This came through White Harbor.”

“What is it?”

“MDPV,” answered Qyburn as he pulled a package free from the heap. “Colloquially known as ‘bath salts,’ though of course this particular brand has its own name, I’m sure.”

“What is it going?”

“Domeric always took an interest in the way things ran,” commented Roose as he helped the doctor to loosen the straps and pull another box from the stack. “Did Ramsay ever tell you about his older brother?”

“Not really,” lied Reek.

“Most of it’s headed North to our small-scale distributors.” Roose loaded the package into Reek’s arms, and Reek teetered under the weight of it. “However, Qyburn needs to supply his research.”

“I’m close to perfecting it,” chimed the old man.

Reek looked down at the box he held. “You know – you know what they say about this stuff? What it does to people?”

“You mean that it turns them into cannibals?” Roose closed his knife and replaced it in his pocket, then fixed Reek with an amused stare. “Of course I’ve heard those rumors.”

* * *

“Reek? Are you still awake?”

“Only if you want me to be,” Reek mumbled, not opening his eyes. He lay on his side, both arms folded up to his chest. He felt Ramsay stir, felt the heat of his master’s body pressed against his back, Ramsay’s arm hooking around his waist, lips brushing the ragged edge of his ear.

“Reek, if I ask you something, do you promise to never tell anyone?”

Reek smiled, eyes still closed. “Who would I tell?”

Ramsay shook him lightly. “I’m fucking serious. Promise.”

“Okay, I promise. Ask me something.”

Ramsay’s voice was the faintest whisper, almost childish, but it carried the heat of adrenaline behind it. “If I told you to help me kill my dad, would you do it?”

Reek felt the hair on the back of his neck bristle. He rolled onto his back, opened his eyes to regard Ramsay seriously. Ramsay was looking at him expectantly, biting his lip and holding his breath.

“You shouldn’t say things like that,” said Reek, pressing his remaining fingertips to Ramsay’s mouth. Then more softly, drawing his thumb along the bow of Ramsay’s lower lip he added, “I know – I know you want to sometimes, but you shouldn’t say so.”

“You didn’t answer the question.”

“Of course I would.”
The first snow had just fallen when Roose put a knife in Reek’s shaking hands. The air in the unit was cold enough that Reek could see his breath, and the breath of the man bound to the chair in front of him that came in weak, uneven huffs.

*The chains would be freezing,* he thought. *The blade would be freezing.*

The man in the chair had been beaten – several times, judging by the spectrum of bruising on his chest and thighs and most of all his face. One of his shoulders had dislocated; his right leg was visibly broken and his front teeth hung at odd angles.

Reek tried to get away at first, turned to flee out the door before Roose intercepted him, held Reek’s shoulders and shook him until he stopped that frantic, fearful stuttering that Roose found so grating.

“You will do as I tell you,” he said, holding Reek by the hair on the back of his head.

“Please –”

“You will do as I tell you, if you ever want to see either of Ned Stark’s pretty sons again.”

Reek nodded, his eyes welling with tears as he squirmed beneath Roose’s merciless grip. “Yes sir.”

He swallowed hard. “But –”

Roose’s fingers twisted in his hair, wrenching on his scalp hard enough to drop Reek to his knees.

“But?”

Instinctively, Reek grabbed for Roose’s forearm, fighting to free himself. Like Ramsay, Roose was remarkably strong for his size – taller than his son, yet thinner – and that strange, airy manner of his belied an almost effortless cruelty which – until now – Reek had felt more than he had seen. He ceased struggling, dropped his hands to his sides and bowed his head.

“A gun. Please.”

Roose’s fine features shifted for a moment as he considered Reek’s request. “A knife, this time,”
he said, offering the hilt of it. “If you do well, I’ll let you use a gun from now on.”

*Kill him.* The hysterical thought sparked into Reek’s brain as his fingers closed around the soft leather handle. *Stick it up into his guts and twist it, or slash the artery in his leg. Ramsay would know how. Ramsay would like that.*

But Ramsay was dead, Reek was a coward and Roose was no fool; he perceived the slide of Reek’s eyes and staid his own grip on the sheath for a beat, saying, “I trust you’re smart enough to know that killing me won’t solve even one of your countless problems.” Nodding towards the man in the chair, he added, “And at best you’ll buy him an extra few minutes of agony.”

Reek paled at having been read so plainly.

“It’s a good thought though,” said Roose, giving Reek’s hair a ruffle.

“Why are you making me do this?” The blood rushed from Reek’s head as he stood up, and his stomach felt sick. At least Ramsay got some joy out of making Reek suffer.

“Because I want to see if you can,” replied Roose. “How do you hope to take your revenge on Robb Stark if you can’t end the life of someone who means nothing to you?”

Reek hadn’t thought of that. “But Robb hurt me. This guy –”

“Look at him.”

Reek hesitated, and as he turned to face the man in the chair, he was overcome with a sense of déjà vu. His vision grew hazy around the edges, and he wasn’t startled when he felt a pair of hands on him, Roose’s voice just next to his ear, pressing him, “You remember what that was like, don’t you?”

Reek swallowed. The man raised his eyes to squint at Reek before his head lolled down again, a string of bloody saliva dropping onto his chest.

“Yes.”

“Tell me what it felt like when you realized that no one was coming to help you.”

“It felt like falling. Without ever stopping,” answered Reek, though he thought to himself, *There are no words to tell you.*

Roose’s hand slipped down the length of Reek’s arm, curled gently around Reek’s fingers, around the hilt of the knife. “You wished you were dead.”

Reek nodded.

“Then consider this your chance to be merciful.”

And perhaps it was a lie, but it was what Reek needed to believe if he was to see Jon Snow again, and perhaps mercy was in the act rather than the intention.

“Leave?” he asked, his voice a hoarse whisper. “Please leave me.”

“You have five minutes.” And Roose’s hands were gone, his footsteps sharp as he exited the unit and closed the door behind him. Reek became suddenly aware of his own flesh, the nip of the cold air at his ears, the way his hair stood on end whenever the man shifted and the legs of the chair ground against the concrete.
Reek considered the knife, turned it in his gloved hands, catching his own reflection in the steel. This was not a flaying knife; this was a heaver, more generalized weapon – it was for the kind of unskilled cutting and stabbing in which Poole and Flint had specialized and it felt like a very subtle mockery when Roose handed it to him.

“Who are you?” the man asked finally.

“My name’s Reek. I belong to Ramsay. Who are you?”

“James.”

Reek sank to his haunches in front of James, elbows resting on his thighs while he passed the knife from hand to hand. James had dark hair, olive skin, a tattoo of a sunflower on one side of his neck with a scroll that said, “Anna.”

“Did he do that?” James asked, a fresh bead of blood rolling out the corner of his mouth. “Your fingers?”

“No.”

“Who did it then?”

“Just a boy I knew.”

“How come you cover your face?”

Reek shrugged. “Because.”

“Could you – could you take it off? Let me see you?”

Reek shook his head ruefully. He supposed it didn’t really matter if James saw his face. It didn’t even matter if James knew his old name. His fingers came up to worry at the fringe of his scarf. “No,” he said. “I’d rather not.” Then after a pause: “This is bullshit, isn’t it?”

James laughed – a sort of hacking sound – and it jostled Reek to realize that he’d had a striking smile, once. "Well, get on with it, yeah?"

He did it from behind, because that was how he’d seen Flint do it. It occurred to him to apologize, but what was the point? He took off his glove, laid a bare hand on the nape of James’ neck and threaded his fingers up through his hair and pulled gently.

The sound was the worst part – the wet crunching sound, the chains rattling as James’ whole body jerked, the gush of blood onto the concrete, steaming in the cold air.

* 

“You did well,” Roose told him afterwards. “You did perfectly.” He didn’t seem to mind the wetness of Reek’s tears as he drew the boy into him. “Ssssh. It’s over. It’s done.”

“Promise me – promise me I’ll see him again.” Reek pawed at the back of Roose’s pea coat, buried his face in the crook of Roose’s shoulder.

“I promise you’ll see Jon again.”

“Tell me when.”
“Before the winter’s out. I promise.” Roose allowed himself to stroke the boy’s hair, so tangled and coarse.

“If you’re lying, I’ll k-k-kill myself. I swear to g-god.”

“Ssssh, pet. I know. You’re so good, you know that? Ramsay would be so proud of you.” Reek only whimpered. “I can tell Qyburn to give you an extra sleeping pill for tonight. Would you like that?”

“Y-yes sir,” Reek sniffled.

“Good boy.” Roose pressed a dry kiss to Reek’s temple.

* 

Domen was born at home, though two days passed before Reek was permitted to see him. He paced the hallways of the Dreadfort, listening to Walda’s screaming and trying not to think of that other time. It was early in the morning when the sounds abated and Reek lingered in the corridor, stammering at a servant girl bustling by, “H-hey, is it – um, did Walda –”

“It’s a boy,” she said, exasperated as she pushed her bangs out of her eyes.

“Is it, um – is it normal?”

“What the hell kind of question is that?” she asked, screwing up her face at him. Then, comprehendingly, “He seems normal. I mean, he’s a baby.”

“Can I hold him?” Reek asked when he was finally allowed in. Walda had been sleeping in one of the guest-rooms, and now she sat propped up against a stack of pillow, knitting.

“Oh course you can,” she said. “Have you ever held a baby before?”

Reek nodded. He’d held Bran and Rickon when they came home from the hospital. That was such a long time ago now.

“Don’t you think my – um, my hands might freak him out?”

Walda raised an eyebrow. “I doubt it. I don’t think he even knows what hands are supposed to look like.”

The baby slept in a bassinet beside the bed, wearing nothing but a green cloth diaper. Reek reached out, then recoiled, looking back imploringly at Walda. “Are you sure?”

“Yes, I’m sure. I want you to hold him.”

“Will Roose be okay with it?”

“When he pushes a baby out of his vagina, he can decide who gets to hold it,” she said, not looking up from her knitting.

“Okay, but if he asks, I’m telling him you said that.”

Domen stirred as Reek’s hands encircled him, eyes opening groggily as Reek brought him to his chest, head cradled in the crook of his elbow. The baby was bald, which Reek supposed was to be expected, but his irises were a pale gray, and they stared at Reek curiously, waiting.
“He’s got the eyes,” said Reek.

“Yeah, who’d have thought *that* was a dominant gene?”

They were the same color, and yet however much Reek scrutinized them, he couldn’t seem to find the slightest trace of Ramsay.

*What the fuck is wrong with you? He’s a baby. A brand new baby.*

“He’s got your nose though.”

Reek gingerly walked the remaining fingers of his right hand up Dom’s belly, and blushed when the baby took ahold of them with his hands. They were so warm – almost hot. It was all Reek could do not to smile and bare his teeth.

*Was I ever this small?*

*Did my mom ever hold me like this?*

*Would I have ever wanted a baby?*

Something about the sight of those ten tiny fingers wrapped around his boney, mismatched ones made Reek’s eyes start to tear up. When he turned his head away to wipe his cheeks on his sleeve, the garnet hanging from his collar gave a twinkle and Domen reached for it with a happy chirp.

“He likes you.”

“Only because he doesn’t know me,” said Reek, tucking the stone back beneath the collar of his shirt.

*

Roose kept his word and gave Reek a gun after that. Not to keep – of course – and always loaded with a single bullet, but it was faster that way, if no less bloody. Holding the pistol steady, aiming with any accuracy was impossible with his mangled hands, so Reek had to brace the tip of the barrel against the forehead. (He hated seeing their faces, but not as much as he hated the idea of shooting from the back and blowing the face apart entirely.)

The brains got everywhere, and when he returned to the Dreadfort, Reek would cut himself before stepping into a scalding shower, scrubbing his hands and arms until they were raw. He preferred an old straight-razor he’d found in Ramsay’s dresser drawer and kept beside the sink. The back of his left forearm and the outside of his right thigh bore a crosshatch of white, raised lines, which he dutifully showed to Roose.

Roose touched them sometimes, trailing his slender fingers over Reek’s skin, silent except for a light, “Hmm.”

Reek found himself thinking about Robb during what Roose called his “episodes.” (That was Roose’s word for Reek’s cutting, as well as for his night terrors and fainting spells, and the single seizure he’d had.) Reek fantasized a scenario in which Robb found him with his wrists cut open, fell to his knees and held him without minding the blood. Robb would kiss him on the mouth and whisper, “Oh god – I’m sorry. Please forgive me. I’m sorry, Theon.”

*
“What’s this?”

“What, nothing. An accident.” Reek pulled on his sleeve.

“Don’t lie to me,” warned Ramsay. “Did you do that?”

Reek looked at his feet. “Yes.”

“Have I not been paying enough attention to you?”

Reek blushed and chewed on his thumbnail. It was only a small wound, but he felt so light when Ramsay cleaned it and put a band-aid on, kissed him on the cheek and told him, “Don’t pick at it, babe, or it’ll leave a scar.”

* * *

It was soon after Valentine’s Day – just a couple weeks after Domen’s arrival – that Reek was startled to find Roose Bolton waiting fully-dressed in his study, reading a book beside the hearth and beckoning him to come in and close the door.

“Good morning, pet,” he said, eyes lingering on the page for a few seconds before looking up. He closed the volume and laid it back on the mantle.

“How are you feeling?” His tone was not cheerful by any means, but lighter somehow, as though Roose were in an approximation of a good mood.

“Fine,” replied Reek uneasily. “Are you, um - it’s Sunday, isn’t it?”

“It is, but I’ve decided to forgo my treatment for today.”

“Oh.” Reek stared at the fire, then glanced over his shoulder at the door. He wanted to leave, but without Roose’s express dismissal, he remained frozen.

“It’s your turn, Reek.” Roose spoke to him as though speaking to a skittish child – a patient, patronizing inflection to match the wiry smirk on his lips. “Take off your clothes.”

Reek wished he understood why he complied so simply. Ramsay tortured him in unimaginable ways, and yet Reek dared to disobey sometimes, dared to talk back when he thought his master might find it charming or sweet. Roose had never truly harmed him, but Reek feared him absolutely. Reek and Ramsay had a relationship; Roose didn’t relate to anyone.

He watched Reek undress, motionless save for the eyes that skimmed over the snarl of scars on Reek’s chest. Reek shivered despite the heat of the fire. He covered the worst of himself with his hands, eyes downcast as he awaited further instruction.

“Sit,” said Roose finally, and Reek shuffled over to the recliner. The leather of it felt strange against his skin – soft and more pliable than he’d expected.

“Did you ever make Ramsay do this?” he asked, shifting uncomfortably as Roose lifted Reek’s hands away from his crotch and brought them to rest on the arms of the chair.

“I never made Ramsay do anything. But he tried it a few times.” Roose reached for the basin, the firelight behind him rendering his face unreadable. “The most recent was when he still had you imprisoned in the storage yard. He came to me one night – I was surprised. Ramsay detested the leeches. But he asked me for help – he said that he hadn’t been sleeping or eating or thinking clearly. You had that effect on him.”
Reek felt a pang of affection for his master. “Did it help?” he asked, watching with fascination as Roose plucked the first leech from the bowl, rolled it gently between two fingers for a moment before laying it in the hollow of Reek’s hip.

Roose shook his head. “Ramsay’s body was far too polluted for a simple leeching to provide much relief.”

“Polluted with what?” Reek’s stomach tensed as Roose dropped a second leech just below his chest.

“His mother’s blood,” replied Roose. “It agitated him – made him impulsive and brash.”

*That’s not fair,* thought Reek. *He was yours too.*

“I’m both those things,” said Reek. “Or at least I used to be,” he added with a smirk. “I don’t suppose there’s any cure for Greyjoy blood either.”

“There’s not.” Roose placed the final leech on the inside of Reek’s elbow, set the basin aside and wiped his hands on the towel.

“So what’s the occasion?”

“I have a meeting with Robb Stark tomorrow. You’re coming with me; I think you’re ready to return to Winterfell.”

Reek’s heart skipped at the same time that his stomach dropped. But his body felt so languid – so consumed by the warmth of the room that the cool touch of Roose’s hand on his thigh was almost a relief.

“Why do you care so much what happens to me?” he asked, eyes half-lidded as he turned his face away from the brightness of the fire.

“Do you really think that I do?” Roose’s feathery touch continued up, skirting just near enough to the wound between Reek’s legs that Reek gave a faint gasp, his fingers clutching hard at the leather.

“Yes.” Reek twisted in the chair, bit his lip and closed his eyes.

* *

The snow lay thick in the trees when they arrived, the branches of the stately evergreens bowed beneath its weight while a blanket of clouds dulled the morning sunshine into a gray glow. Winterfell looked the same as ever – opulent without being ostentatious – and yet it was different somehow. He recalled the fear he’d felt the first time he saw the mansion, its wide front steps flanked on either side by a massive, marble wolf.

*I’m going to die here,* he had thought.

Now that fear seemed quaint, and though he knew that nothing within those walls presented any kind of harm he had not already endured, he still felt a kind of heaviness settling inside him, an anticipation that made him fidget with the fingers of his gloves.

*Robb. Robb is in there. He’s been there this whole time. What if he recognizes you? What if he asks you to show your face?*
He thinks you’re dead.

But what if you told him you weren’t? What if things could be the way they were supposed to be?

“Are you nervous?” asked Roose, unbuckling his seatbelt so that he could reach over to secure Reek’s scarf around his face.

“Yeah, I – what if he recognizes my voice?”

“I suggest that you refrain from speaking more than a few words at a time.” Roose pulled his gloves on and tucked the edge of his own scarf in beneath the lapels of his pea coat. “I do actually have business with Mr. Stark today, and I didn’t bring you here to interfere with that. Stay quiet, pay attention and remember your name.”

“Yes sir.”

The walk had recently been shoveled, but Reek still found himself wishing Roose would offer him an arm to hold on to. The cold made his joints throb, especially the knuckles of his missing digits, and he strove to keep up with Roose’s brisk pace. The door opened as they approached the bottom of the steps, and Reek nearly lost his footing when a familiar voice said, “Mr. Bolton – it’s good to see you again.”

Reek swallowed, steadying himself against one of the wolves before looking up to meet Jon Snow’s gaze. Jon shivered as he held open one of the formidable double-doors, barely seeming to notice as Roose brushed past him, dark eyes fixed on Reek while a light red flush rose on his cheeks.

It’s only the cold, Reek told himself.

“How are you?” Jon asked, and Reek faltered as a voice inside him shouted, Theon!

“My name is Theon!” he managed.

“Well, are you going to come inside or what?” Jon sounded irritated and Reek wilted.

“Yes, Reek, don’t be rude,” said Roose, wiping his boots on the mat in the foyer.

“Sorry.” Reek hurried inside, trying not notice how close Jon was – easily within arm’s reach.

The warmth of the house enveloped Reek the same way it had enveloped Theon twelve years earlier – new and cozy and so unlike the stale heat of the furnaces at Pyke or the stifling swelter of the hearth in the Dreadfort’s study. Roose hung his coat and scarf on one of the silver hooks lining the wall, then nodded for Reek to do the same.

He’d worn black – nothing else seemed fitting – a western-style shirt with opal buttons that Walda said made him look “really handsome.” Reek wished Jon wasn’t staring at him, though – probably noticing his clumsy hands, probably noticing the missing parts. And Reek wished he could look at Jon without staring back.

“The scarf,” said Jon, finally.

“I – I can’t, um –” Reek stammered.

“What’s that?” asked Roose.
The scarf. I can’t allow your associate to meet Mr. Stark with his face covered like that.”

Reek blinked and took a step back, terror rising as he imagined Jon snatching the scarf away, recoiling at the sight of his shattered, rotten teeth. Reek brought his hand up to his neck, felt the shape of the collar beneath the fabric of the scarf.

“Please –”

“Mr. Snow, I appreciate your sense of duty.” Roose moved to stand beside Reek, to place a reassuring hand on the small of his back. “But Reek is harmless. He’s – forgive me, Reek – he’s undergone a substantial trauma, and the scarf helps him cope with that. He tends to panic without it. But he’s very dear to me, and I hope Mr. Stark might show some compassion and allow me to vouch for him.”

Jon frowned and reached for his wrist, then seemed to catch himself and settled for combing his fingers through his curls. “Yeah, fine, I’ll ask him.” Jon cleared his throat. “Come with me. He’s waiting.”

Turning to exit the foyer into the main hallway, Jon passed through a metal detector, unruffled by its shrieking as he quickly entered the reset code. Roose had judiciously left his knives at home, and the only thing that set off the detector was Reek’s belt buckle.

“Lift up your shirt, please.” Looking utterly bored, Jon picked up a wand and passed it around Reek’s waist, while Reek held his shirt up just high enough to reveal the belt and as little of his own skin as possible.

“I think it’s the belt?” he offered.

“Yeah, it’s the belt,” said Jon, hesitating to squint at one of the red, raised scars that ran up Reek’s right hip. He replaced the wand in a holster on the wall. “Come on then.”

“That’s new,” Roose leaned in to whisper. “Robb installed it after your sister’s visit.”

“Like she’d use the door,” muttered Reek, struggling to tuck his shirt back in as they followed Jon down the corridor.

The house seemed lonelier somehow – less like a family home and more like a sparsely-occupied hotel. The servants still hurried from room to room, and the delicious, familiar smell of the Stark kitchen still wafted through the air, but the scene was oddly silent, where before there had been children’s voices, the sounds of games played in the stairwells, races down the hallways, the latest Top 40 blaring from the stereo in Sansa’s bedroom. Sansa would be seventeen by now – she might be away at college already. The idea was jarring. Arya was probably a sulky fifteen, and Bran had always been quiet. But Rickon was still only nine. Reek wondered if Gendry still worked in the garage. It must be especially lonely down there, he thought.

In the elevator, Jon pressed the button for the third floor, then leaned against the wall and tugged at the cuffs of his sleeves. Reek spotted the edge of a tattoo peeking out above the neckline of Jon’s black, cable-knit sweater, and he wondered how much else had changed. Jon’s shoulders were broader, his face a bit leaner-looking with the beginnings of a beard, and his eyes seemed sadder than Reek remembered them, and he felt a sudden ache, because even Jon’s goddamn frown still looked beautiful.

Reek looked at Roose as if to ask for help, and Roose only smirked at him.

Jon held the door to Robb’s office for Roose, but when Reek tried to follow, he found himself
stopped up against Jon’s hand, pressing firmly into the center of his chest.

“Not you. Wait here.”

He let the door fall closed, while Reek stood alone in the hallway.

_I called this home_, he thought.

“What is home?” Ramsay had asked him.

“Here. With you. I can be myself with you.”

Reek shook his head, confused. He heard Robb’s voice through the door saying, “Oh Jesus, Jon, just bring him in.”

He’d been expecting to see Catelyn there, but there was no sign of her. Or of Ned Stark for that matter – Robb had remodeled the office. Gone were the modest furniture and the shelves of old ledgers and the overflowing file cabinets, replaced with a gargantuan cherry-wood desk and an entire wall of luminous closed-circuit monitors. The fireplace had been torn out and replaced with a silent, state-of-the-art heating system, and the wolf’s-head chair had been relocated from the conference room. Robb had just taken his seat in it as Jon ushered Reek in and pointed him to the leather couch opposite Robb’s desk.

Robb Stark studied Reek for a moment, though propriety dictated he move things along more quickly than perhaps he might’ve liked. “You’ll have to forgive Mr. Snow,” he said, chewing the inside of his cheek and failing to suppress an innocent smile. “He takes his job extremely seriously.”

Jon rolled his eyes and turned away for a moment before taking his place beside the door.

Reek found his mouth had gone dry, so he nodded and uttered a raspy, “Thank you.”

He half-listened as Robb congratulated Roose on the birth of his son and asked after Walda’s health.

It didn’t seem real – how could it be that after all of that, he had ended up back here in this same room with these same men? Jon’s hand on his chest. The familiar smell of Robb’s shampoo. Robb looked a little older than his nineteen years – tired around the eyes, and a shock of gray hair had appeared just above his temple, but he was still predictably handsome, and Reek found himself wondering how boring old Ned Stark had managed to father such gorgeous sons. He wondered what Ned had intended with Jon – if perhaps keeping him away from the family was kinder than it seemed.

“And you, Mr. – um, Reek?”

“Huh?”

“Would you like something to drink?” Robb gestured to a small liquor cabinet.

Reek blushed. “Just Reek,” he said. “No thanks.”

Still, Jon wove his way around the front of the desk to pour himself a glass of bourbon, then returned to his post where he nursed the drink in one hand and chewed the fingernails on the other.

Reek turned back to find Robb looking straight back at him, head cocked slightly, biting that full
“I’m glad you were able to see me in person,” said Roose, deliberately drawing Robb’s attention to the matter at hand. “I’m excited about our new prospects, but I still dislike discussing them over the phone.”

“I understand,” replied Robb, hesitating before shifting his gaze away from Reek. “And I’m… anxious to hear about what you’ve been working on, but you should know that I’m –” He shot an apprehensive glance at Jon, who pretended not to notice as he sipped at his drink.

“Yes, I know and I completely appreciate your reservations; since the last time we spoke, though, my associate Mr. Qyburn has perfected the formula for an aerosolized version of the drug which can be administered in non-lethal doses.”

“Depends on who’s administering,” interjected Robb. “Its primary usefulness is as a weapon.”

Roose shrugged. “True – that’s its highest earning potential, though it’s no more feasible than the street distribution of smaller, recreational doses. The new formula can be administered – and contained – with much greater accuracy than previous versions. I can easily arrange a demonstration if you like.”

A profoundly uneasy expression came over Robb, and Reek noticed a redness in his face. “Mr. Bolton, I appreciate that you’ve chosen to bring your associate’s work to my attention, particularly when there are other Families that would undoubtedly be interested in your product. But I –”

“Yes,” interrupted Roose. “There are a few who’ve already expressed interest. Obviously, I came to you first, but if you decide to pass on this opportunity, I hope you won’t be startled when I start to look elsewhere for investors.” Robb opened his mouth to speak, but Roose continued, “You’re understandably cautious since the events at the capitol, but can you imagine the security that would come from exclusive ownership over this product? You could manage its distribution for a profit,” he leaned back against the couch, “Or you could simply keep it in a secure location. Either way, I’m offering you that control.”

Reek knew better, but he kept his mouth shut. He wondered what events Roose was referring to, and realized how completely out of his depth he was. Theon had often found Family affairs to be boring and sordid, and Reek was discovering that this whole thing was totally incomprehensible.

Robb folded his hands together, closed his eyes in thought for a moment before asking, “What do you think, Jon?”

Jon seemed faintly surprised that Robb had asked his opinion. He frowned and stared down through the bottom of his empty glass. “I don’t know,” he said. “I wouldn’t want to fuck around with that shit at all, if I was either of you.”

Robb grimaced. “Give me a week,” he said, drumming his fingers on the edge of his desk. “We’ll – I’ll think it over.” He smiled humorlessly. “You’ve put me in an uncomfortable position, Roose.”

“That wasn’t my intention.”

Bullshit.

Again, Robb’s eyes pivoted back to Reek. “I have another matter I’d like to discuss with Mr. Bolton – privately. Jon, would you mind escorting our friend downstairs? It shouldn’t take more than a few minutes.”
Jon shrugged, set his tumbler down on Robb’s desk and cracked his neck. “Of course.” Then to Reek, “Come with me, please.”

Reek’s heart was pounding; he looked to Roose for approval and Roose nodded his assent.

Robb rose and accompanied Reek to the door, offered a handshake, “I’d love to know more about you,” he said, dropping his voice to something just above a whisper. “I hope we’ll see each other again soon.”

Reek wavered for a beat, looking at Robb’s outstretched hand, his tentative, winsome smile. It was so like the first time – when they were boys and Theon hadn’t known how dangerous Robb Stark’s affections could be. And even now, as he clasped Robb’s strong hand with his ruined one, he was alarmed to feel a familiar weakness stirring within himself.

*It would be so easy to forgive him. Just like taking a breath after you’ve been underwater.*

“I – hope so too,” he found himself mumbling. The scarf suddenly felt so suffocating, and Reek realized that he was blushing.

He followed Jon silently down the hall, searching frantically for something to say. Jon seemed troubled by something, but it would’ve been inappropriate to ask what. He continued staring at Reek as the elevator descended to the ground floor, and when they were in the foyer again blurted, “He’s going to ask you to come work for him.” Jon folded his arms and waited for a reaction.

“Why?”

“Robb – Mr. Stark has a soft spot for broken things.” Jon clicked his tongue stud against the back of his front teeth, his gaze dipping down to Reek’s hands for a moment, curious.

“You don’t look broken.”

“Cause you can tell just by looking,” Jon snarled, snapping violently at the rubber band around his left wrist.

Belatedly, Reek remembered where Jon had been living for the better part of three years.

*You’re a fucking asshole.*

“I’m – sorry,” he said. “I just –”

“Just what?” asked Jon, reaching into his pocket for a pack of smokes.

“Just – I don’t even know. I guess I was trying – you look really, um –” Reek’s eyes darted to the floor, watering. “I’m sorry. I shouldn’t have –”

Jon frowned, and Reek tried not to notice the scent of the single cigarette that he tucked behind his ear.

“Listen, I didn’t mean –” Jon’s phone chimed, and he sighed and pushed a few strands of hair out of his face to read the text. "Called it." Shoving the phone in his back pocket, he fished in the breast pocket of his shirt for something. “He says to give you this.” He handed Reek a worn business card. “Says if you want to come work for him, give me a call and I’ll come and get you. Because I’m his fucking errand-boy, apparently.”

“What, um, what does he want me to do here?”
“Fucked if I know.”

“Do you like working here?”

“Yeah. Mr. Stark is… protective of his interests.” He looked down, gave a smile that Reek knew was not intended for him. “He’s good to me, if that’s what you mean.”

*

Unable to fall asleep that night, Reek wrapped himself in his comforter and stepped out onto the balcony. The stars were clear and sharp, and the cloud from Reek’s breath reminded him of the smoke from a cigarette, and he wondered if Jon Snow was still awake.
Reek returns.

“You’re acting like a teenager.”

Walda wove her arm around his and pressed her cheek to his shoulder.

“What does that even mean?” he asked, pulling his phone out to check the time.

“What time is it?”

“2:34.”

Walda gave Reek’s arm a squeeze. “The last time you checked, it was 2:32. And you’ve been standing at the window since breakfast, even though he’s not supposed to get here until 3.”

Reek sighed, and glanced at the small duffel he’d packed the night before. He’d chosen a few sets of clothes, the red wool scarf, the straight razor and a photo of Ramsay that Walda had been thoughtful enough to frame for him.

“Are you nervous?” she asked.

“Fucking terrified,” he said.

“You can always come back. If you change your mind. Or even just for a visit. You could come see me and Dom.” She squinted up at him. “But you won’t, will you?”

Reek shook his head. “Probably not. I hope I don’t ever come back here.”

The snow on the ground had lost its luster and turned a soft gray. Reek returned to staring out at the front gates, fighting the urge to check the time again. Walda’s body felt so warm pressed against his side, and he wondered how she could bear Roose’s chilly touch.

“You know what Roose is, right?” he asked. “Like, what he does – where he gets his money?”

“Of course,” she said. “I’m not stupid.”

But how do you – how do you not let that get to you? he wanted to know. How do you live in his world without – without becoming a part of it?

It was 2:50 when the wrought-iron gates screeched open to admit a sleek black Equus into the drive. Walda gently pulled away from Reek, handed him the duffel bag and helped him to secure the scarf around his face.

“I hope someday you’ll give up wearing this,” she said, brushing a lock of white hair out of Reek’s eyes. “You have such a handsome face.”

What good is a handsome face if your body’s a complete mess?
“You’re too good to me,” he said.

“Am not.” She smiled sadly as she handed Reek his gloves.

Jon was already inside by the time Reek arrived downstairs, wiping his boots in the entryway while Roose delivered his greetings with his usual non-smile. Reek stood, frozen – his mind abruptly went blank and the only thing he could think of was the speed of his heart as it urged him out the door. Walda stepped around him to offer a warm handshake and say, “Mr. Snow – it’s so lovely to see you again.”

“Likewise,” replied Jon as his eyes ran Reek up and down, and it was all Reek could do to restrain himself from feeling for his collar. Jon nodded at the duffel-bag. “That all the luggage you’ve got?”

Reek nodded. “Yeah.”

“Good.” Jon checked his patently expensive wrist-watch. “If we leave now, we can get back to Winterfell before the worst of rush hour.”

“Well, give us a minute to say goodbye at least,” said Walda, pulling Reek into a tight hug that made his ribs ache.

“I’m going to miss you,” she said.

Reek closed his eyes – he imagined that Roose was not there – and rested his chin atop Walda’s head of thick, soft hair.

“I’ll miss you, too.”

Roose’s handshake felt oddly perfunctory, though Reek didn’t know what else he should expect, or what else he even wanted for that matter. So he let his hand linger in Roose’s strong grip, looked into those gray eyes for a moment longer than necessary.

“Thank you for everything, sir,” he said sincerely.

Roose quirked his lips at one corner. “I hope you’ll always remember your time here. Take care of yourself.”

He stiffened when Reek threw his arms around his shoulders, but relaxed after a moment, and Reek felt Roose’s slim hand on the back of his neck, pressing against the buckle of his collar.

“Be a good boy, Reek.”

“Yes sir. I will.”

It was surreal to simply leave like this, to follow Jon out the front door of the Dreadfort, one foot in front of the other. He imagined Ramsay’s hands on him, pulling him back up the steps by his hair.

“Don’t you ever fucking leave me.”

Reek looked over his shoulder, but Ramsay wasn’t there – only Walda, waving happily while Roose wrapped his arm around her waist.

He watched the Dreadfort diminish in the rear window, then disappear from view entirely – for a moment he pretended that it had never existed at all, but when he looked down at his hands, he knew that it would always be there – in his dreams and memories and the aching of his bones.
“You glad to be leaving?” Jon kept his eyes on the road.

“Maybe.”

“I am. That place gives me the fucking wiggins.” Jon reached into his jacket pocket and pulled out a lighter. He toyed with it for a moment before asking, “Mind if I smoke?”

“No.”

Jon cracked his window, tucking his cigarette in the corner of his mouth and lighting it deftly with one hand while he steered with the other. Reek cleared his throat as Jon took a deep drag and exhaled with a sigh. “When did you start smoking?” he asked, deliberately turning to look out the passenger-side window.

“What the fuck kind of question is that?” Jon blew another stream of smoke towards the window before adding, “Since I was sixteen.” He passed the cigarette to his left hand and offered up the crumpled pack with his right. “You want one?”

Reek felt his heart give a little leap when he noticed that Jon’s nails were painted a dark, forest green.

But smoking wasn’t allowed, so he politely declined. “No thanks,” he said. “I quit.”

Jon stuffed the cigarettes back into the pocket of his down jacket and began fussing with the satellite radio settings until he landed on an acceptable station. He combed his fingers through his hair and reclined his seat slightly. “That’s good, I guess.”

It wasn’t until they passed out of suburbia and into Wintertown proper that they arrived at a stoplight, at which Jon turned to study him in earnest. Reek could see all the questions brewing, shrank back against the seat under the scrutiny of those eyes, but Jon kept his pretty mouth shut. The light changed and they sped forward again.

Reek swallowed drily, wishing to god that Jon would say something else to him, but at the same time grateful for his silence. Several more minutes passed.

“When I said you didn’t look broken, I just meant that you – I was just trying to say that you –”

Are beautiful.

Reek faltered, resisted the desire to fidget with his gloves.

“Have you seriously been thinking about that for the past two weeks?” Jon asked. His voice softened slightly, and he risked a prolonged glance at Reek as he merged into a new lane.

“I mean, not this whole time, but yeah, I’ve been thinking about it.”

“Well don’t worry about it, yeah?”

“Okay.”

Neither of them spoke for the rest of the ride. Jon smoked another cigarette, and Reek tried to keep still. He felt like he was floating, his whole body buzzing at its proximity to Jon – wanting and fearful. He felt the words filling up his mouth:

“Jon, it’s me – Theon.”
The thought of saying them was dizzying – akin to standing on a high cliff, knowing that it would be so easy to simply step over the edge, but impossible to take back.

*And what right do you have, exactly, to keep on fucking things up for him like that?*

*Or what if he doesn’t remember?*

Which was absurd, but of course the idea persisted.

*What if he’s forgotten you?*

Jon’s phone chimed just as the sedan rolled around the circular driveway in front of Winterfell and came to a smooth stop in front of the steps.

He checked the screen before answering, “Yeah, I’ve got him. We just pulled up.” And Reek noted the faint blush, the way Jon turned away slightly to say, “Jesus, it only took like, ninety minutes, okay? … Yeah, I know that… well, like I just told you, we’re here now, so you can stop worrying… yeah, I know… me too… see you soon.” He hung up, then shrugged. “He’s anxious to see you again is all.”

*

Jon carried Reek’s duffel inside, a gesture that Reek mistook for courtesy until Jon unceremoniously dumped its contents all over the floor of the foyer, then crouched down and began inspecting them. He shook out the clothes, tossed them aside, then picked up a small, paper box and opened it.

“What’s this?” he asked, pulling out one of the packets inside and sniffing at it.

Reek rang his hands feverishly, and his voice cracked. “That’s my – that’s my sleeping medicine.”

“It’s not labelled.” Jon flipped the packet over in his palm. “What is it, exactly?”

“I don’t know. I just – it knocks me out. Helps me fall asleep.”

“Where did you get it?” Jon looked up, toying with the barbell in his tongue.

“Q-qtyburn. He makes it for me. He’s Mr. Bolton’s, um –”

“I know what he is.” Reek braced himself as Jon told him, “I can’t let you bring this in here.”

“But –” Reek bit down to stop his lip from quivering. “But I – I can’t sleep without it. I have – I have dreams without it.”

Jon’s expression hardened. “If you need a new prescription, you can see Dr. Luwin about it. But I’m not letting you bring in some random white powder mixed up by that fucking maniac.”

It was hard to argue with that, though Reek wanted to. Dr. Luwin would know him, of course. Reek hated himself for not thinking to hide the medicine.

*It was going to run out sooner or later.*

He watched in resigned helplessness as Jon set the box to one side and then carried on with his inspection. Jon picked up the framed photo of Ramsay. It was a strange picture – Ramsay on his motorcycle, glancing over his shoulder with a look that aimed for exasperated by was in fact obviously affectionate. (And the thing that made it strange was the fact that Ramsay usually hated
having his picture taken – he turned downright monstrous on the day of the annual Bolton Family Portrait – but on this occasion he hadn’t seemed to mind when Reek snatched his phone away and snapped a photo.)

“Give that back, you shithead.”

“Please don’t delete it. It’s a nice picture.”

Ramsay frowned at the screen. “Yeah, I guess.”

Jon ran his thumbnail up the edge of the frame. “Did you take this?” he asked.

“Yeah.”

“It’s a nice photo.” Jon set the picture delicately aside, and Reek cringed as he picked up the straight-razor, turned it over in his hand and flicked the blade open.

“Be careful. Please.” Reek crouched down beside Jon, reached for the razor though he didn’t dare snatch it away. “It’s very sharp.”

“I can tell.”

Reek found his throat had gone dry, and he cleared it to add. “It’s – it’s his. He wanted me to have it.” Reek’s fingers flitted over the handle, still in Jon’s hand, and Jon tightened his grip. Reek saw something familiar in those wide, dark eyes. “I’m – I’m supposed to check you for weapons…” he said.

“It’s not a weapon,” Reek pleaded. “It’s just his razor. Sometimes when I was good he’d help me shave. His hands were so steady – he never cut me. Please let me keep it.”

Jon hesitated. He sighed and pushed his hair out of his eyes, then closed the blade. He offered it to Reek, but still held onto it firmly. “I’ll let you keep this because it seems important to you.”

“Thank you –”

Jon’s voice trembled faintly, but his eyes remained set on Reek’s. “Not because I trust you. Because I don’t. I think you’re fucking weird as hell and if it was up to me, you’d still be back at the Dreadfort where weird-as-hell people belong.”

Reek swallowed. Ramsay had said worse things than this in his sleep, yet Reek was ashamed to realize that his eyes were watering.

“I’m sorry. I didn’t –”

“It doesn’t matter,” Jon interrupted. “Just – keep the razor. And if you ever hurt him, I’ll fucking kill you. Do you understand?”

Reek nodded and held the razor to his chest. He could feel that the hilt of it was damp with Jon’s sweat. “Yes, sir.”

“Promise me.”

Reek glanced up, startled, and Jon stared at him expectantly. “I promise,” he said, though the words tasted familiar and bitter. “I won’t hurt Mr. Stark. Please believe me?”

Jon helped Reek to gather up his things and stuff them back into the bag, then offered his hand to
bring Reek to his feet. Reek felt light when he took it, though he still wore his gloves and couldn’t feel the particulars of Jon’s touch.

His heart pounded as Jon mumbled something about a pat-down, and Reek obediently spread his arms and feet, to allow for Jon’s awkward, cursory examination. He nearly panicked as Jon’s hands swiped inarticulately at the inside of his thighs, fearing that Jon might find what was missing there, but a second later Jon stepped back and said with a mild blush, “Looks good. Um, let me show you around.”

And just like that, Jon shifted – the hardness gone from his eyes and his voice as he slung the strap of Reek’s duffel-bag over his shoulder and passed through the metal detector, again resetting it when he arrived on the other side. “Are you coming?” he asked.

“Yes, sir,” replied Reek, shuffling through the frame.

Jon began to walk just ahead of him down the hall, raising an eyebrow to say, “You don’t have to call me sir.”

“I’m sorry.”

“Don’t be sorry. Just call me Jon.”

Reek followed, careful to stay just a step or two behind as Jon took him on a tour of a place that he still knew like it was home all along. He looked down at his feet and watched them move over the same, pristine white carpeting that he and Robb had been chided a thousand times for dirtying with their sneakers after a game of soccer or a race across the yard.

“This is the kitchen. Breakfast is served between seven and nine. Lunch is noon to one, and dinner is always at six-thirty.” Jon stepped aside to make room for a girl passing by with an armful of fresh vegetables. “Dinner – dinner is a family thing. I’m sure Mr. Stark will tell you you’re welcome.” He shrugged. “I don’t go. If you want something else, or at a different time, just let someone on staff know and they’ll fix it for you. If it’s really late at night, you can just help yourself.” Jon rolled his eyes in thought. “Anything else? Any questions about that?”

“How come you don’t go to dinner?”

Jon looked away, snapped at the rubber band around his wrist. “I just – Mrs. Stark doesn’t like me – that’s her time with her son, and she doesn’t like me there. Let’s keep moving.”

Reek listened attentively as Jon explained the elevator and the stairs and the emergency exits, paying more notice to the way Jon looked this way or that, the way he bit his lip, the way he snapped at his rubber bands or sometimes seemed embarrassed for no discernible reason. He noted the way the servants who passed them gaped, first at Jon and then at Reek.

“At least at the Dreadfort, everyone was used to me.”

“Don’t mind them,” said Jon, opening the door to the library to show Reek inside. “They just like to stare.”

Jon flipped on a switch, and an elegant iron chandelier blazed to life.

I don’t remember this.

A double-story window looked out over the tree-tops, and shelves far taller than any person lined every wall, filled with books of all sizes and ages. A well-used furniture set lay beneath the
chandelier, and though Reek suspected that the room was seldom used, it seemed clean, the air fresh.

“This is the library. It’s a good place to come if you want to be left alone. Or you, know, if you like to read.” Jon rubbed at the back of his neck.

“How long have you lived here?”

“A year. Maybe a little less than that.”

“Where did you live before that?”

You know damn well where.

Jon blanched almost imperceptibly. “Further north than this,” he said.

“How did you come to work for the Starks?”

Reek could see the irritation in Jon’s face, then saw something else. “I got into some legal trouble, and Mr. Stark’s uncle – who’s chief of police up there – he took an interest in me. He brought me here – thought maybe the Starks might have some use for me.”

Does he?

Jon faltered. “I don’t really like to talk about it. It’s not really anyone’s business.”

“I’m sorry.”

“Whatever. Now you know.”

Following Jon down the corridor on the third floor, Reek listened as Jon explained that there were five Stark children – there was Robb, obviously, who took over the Family when his father was assassininated by the Lannisters several years ago. There was Sansa, who was lovely and well-mannered but had shocked the family last year by running off with Joff Baratheon’s former bodyguard.

“I didn’t know her very well, but she seemed to know what she was doing.”

Reek smiled slightly imagining Catelyn’s horror. He wondered what she told the heads of the other Families. Jon continued; there were two younger boys – Bran and Rick – whom Robb had sent away to a private boarding school after some incident at their school in Wintertown. And then there was Arya, of whom Jon was clearly fond. “She’s crazy,” he said, shaking his head. “She’s like, fifteen but she’s fucking crazy as hell. I guess after her dad died, she just kind of stopped following any of Mrs. Stark’s rules. She’s still got a room here, and you might see her around, but yeah, nobody really knows where she is most of the time.”

It dawned on Reek how lonely Jon must be in Winterfell. Though he strode confidently enough through its hallways, that touch of sadness still hung unmistakably about him as he described a family that he still didn’t know was his. This Jon was different – colder, his wounds a little deeper – but it somehow made him feel even more familiar.

Finally, Jon stopped just outside the door to what used to be Sansa’s bedroom.

“This is your room,” he said, turning the knob to open it.

The air was cold – a window left cracked – and it smelled like cleaner. There was almost no sign
of Sansa – her peach-colored walls had been painted over in eggshell, and the curtains were an
innocuous blue. The linens too were plain – white snowflakes patterned on gray. Something about
it depressed Reek terribly.

The bathroom had been scrubbed clean, but he thought he caught the familiar scent of lavender as
Jon slid open the glass shower doors.

“We had the maintenance guys remove all the mirrors – that’s what you wanted right? Master
bathroom, locking door, no cameras, no mirrors?”

Reek nodded. “Yes. Thank you.”

“Don’t thank me.” Jon dropped Reek’s bag onto the bed. “Thank Mr. Stark.”

“Which room is yours?” Reek asked, following Jon back out into the hall.

Jon hesitated for a few seconds before pointing two doors down and answering, “That one.”

*My room.*

“But please, like, don’t bother me.” Seeing the dismay in Reek’s face, he added, “Unless you have
to. Like it’s an emergency or something.” Jon glanced at his watch. “Mr. Stark will meet with you
at five-thirty to discuss whatever arrangement he has with you. Do you think you can find his
office again?”

Reek nodded. “Yes.”

Without another word, Jon began to walk away down the hall.

*Say something.*

*Come back.*

“Jon?”

Jon stopped, turned to face him while he dug in his pocket for his cigarettes. “Yeah?”

“Um, thanks. For giving me the grand tour and everything.”

“Mr. Stark wanted to show you around, but he’s busy this afternoon.”

“Well, um, thank you anyway. For taking the time. I’ll try not to bother you anymore.”

Reek swallowed around the hard lump that had formed in his throat. He expected Jon to roll his
eyes and walk away, but instead he turned red and replied, “I didn’t mean – I just meant that I like
to be alone sometimes. I’m – I’m sure you won’t bother me.” He shrugged. “Might even be nice to
have another fuck-up around.” The statement was followed by the most fleeting of smiles, but it
was enough to make Reek’s stomach twist.

*Robb looked exhausted when he opened the door to his office, and Reek hoped that Robb might
send him away, but Robb only gave an apologetic half-smile and asked if Reek might prefer to
meet somewhere less formal.*

“Yes, sir.”
He followed Robb to the elevator, hurrying to keep up with his quick stride until they arrived at a lounge on the second floor. This had been one of Ned’s rooms – one of the places that Theon and Robb were not allowed unless they’d been summoned. Reek didn’t know what it looked like back then, but judging by the daunting plasma screen television and an entire wall lined with games and movies, he guessed that Robb had done some remodeling. The screen was dark at the moment, and Robb dialed up a dimmer-switch to bring a warm, mellow light to the room.

“Sit wherever you like,” he said, taking his own place in a plush reclining chair.

Reek swayed before sitting on one end of a matching sofa, facing Robb across a coffee table topped with black marble. “Thank you.”

Robb ran his fingers through his hair, and Reek tried to remember if they had both always done that, or if it was a habit one had acquired from the other.

“It’s good to see you again,” he said, leaning forward to rest his elbows on his knees. “Was everything like you asked?”

Reek nodded. “Yes. Thank you.”

“Good. And Jon showed you around the house?”

“Yes.”

Reek squirmed. While looking at Jon seemed to be so easy that Reek had to remind himself not to stare, he found it nearly impossible to sustain eye contact with Robb. He looked at his shoes, at the empty screen, at the sconce over Robb’s left shoulder – anywhere but those sky-blue eyes that looked so distressingly the same as they had for as long as Reek could remember.

“I’m sorry I wasn’t there. It’s important to me that you feel welcome here. And you are welcome – anywhere you aren’t meant to go will be locked, so feel free to explore otherwise.”

He’d imagined he’d find his friend somehow different, somehow tangibly wicked, but this person sitting across from him was just Robb. Robb with circles under his eyes and that strange little shock of gray in his hair, Robb taller than he used to be and with a five-o’clock shadow and a deeper voice, but still Robb with that completely disarming smile.

“It’s not fair. It’s not fair that he gets to be who he was. Who he’s supposed to be.

“And feel free to do anything you like here.” Robb cocked his head, squinting. “I only know what Roose told me about you, and I know him enough to know that it’s probably only half-true. Whatever he expected of you, you can let that go now. The scarf – you don’t have to wear it if you don’t want to.”

“But I can?”

Robb frowned and leaned back in his chair. “Yeah, you can if you want. Do you have any questions for me?”

“Why am I here?”

“I don’t know,” Robb admitted, running his fingernails along the inseam of his jeans. “You just – there’s just something about you.” He smiled, and Reek lowered his eyes. “You know?”

Reek shook his head. “No, sir.”
“Roose didn’t want to part with you at all. He seemed to think that you needed further rehabilitation for – for whatever it was, exactly. He wouldn’t tell me, and I won’t ask you to say anything you don’t want to say.” And here, Robb looked deeply uncomfortable. “And I’m sure he’s right, but I’m also pretty sure that the Dreadfort is the worst place in the world for anyone to recover from anything.”

Reek nodded silently.

“He told me that your injuries prevent you from being especially useful to him.” Robb’s eyes flitted down to Reek’s hands, and Reek folded them quickly together. “Please, don’t feel like you have to hide them here. I don’t – I don’t mind.”

“Everyone stares.”

“And you’re so sure it’s because of your hands?”

*What the fuck does that mean?*

Reek said nothing.

“I want you to drive for me. Roose told me that you have some experience.”

*No. No no no no no!*

*Back where you started. Like none of it happened. Like this is all you ever were.*

*Don’t let him do this!*

Reek opened his mouth to object, when Robb added, “You’ll be with Jon, mostly. He takes care of those things that are most important to me, and it’s stressful for him, you know? I think it would be good for him to have a little help. A little company.” Robb smiled affectionately. “He gets lonely – kind of cranky sometimes. Think you can handle it?”

“Yes. Thank you, sir.” Reek closed his mouth.

“I think I might stay here and watch an episode of something,” said Robb. “Care to join me?”

Reek glanced dubiously at flat-screen, then at Robb – he grinned at Reek, as though he genuinely wanted Reek’s company.

“I need to unpack.”

“I’m sorry. I’m forgetting what a long day this has probably been for you. Dinner is at six-thirty. You’re welcome to join us, though I bet Jon has already told you that he finds it awkward. Regardless, I’ll see you soon.”

“Yes, sir.”

Reek rose and was halfway out the door, when Robb asked, “Reek?”

“Yes?”

“Is there, um, something you’d rather be called? Just guessing that Reek’s not your real name.”

“Please call me Reek.”
So that I don’t forget.

*

He thought he was imagining it, at first. Afraid to close his eyes, Reek tossed and turned in his bed, wrapping himself in the blankets, only to cast them aside when he felt suddenly suffocated. He recalled his very first night in Winterfell – he couldn’t sleep then, either. The house was too quiet, the air too dry. He’d cursed Asha for talking him out of bringing his favorite stuffed toy.

The door to Robb’s bedroom had been opened and closed several minutes ago. Reek had listened and heard nothing else, and had slipped into a kind of stupor when he was abruptly aware of the muffled but unmistakable sound.

Oh. My. God.

“Jesus – Jon – please –”

Reek held his breath until it burned in his chest, but he couldn’t hear Jon’s response – only the continued noise of the bedframe, and Robb’s voice – louder this time:

“Oh God –” and then that sweet laugh. “Do you have to look so serious right now?”

Reek jumped when the headboard slammed forcefully against the wall in response, and Robb’s laugh morphed into a strangled “Fuck –”

Reek didn’t want to hear this, and yet he lay there listening in a state of near-paralysis for close to an hour, burning with an infuriating mixture of disgust and rage and desire. He closed his eyes, but that only made the whole scene more vivid in his mind. A cold sweat began to form on the back of his neck at the same time that the bed began to feel intolerably hot.

Robb knows. He knows.

Jon doesn’t.

Reek felt a crushing sensation descending onto his chest, making breathing difficult. His eyes welled with tears, fingers grasping for his collar as he found himself back there – back in the darkness of a storage unit somewhere on the east side of town, understanding – finally – that Robb was never coming back for him.
Chapter Twenty-Three

Chapter Summary

Reek gets advice for dealing with his panic attacks, but Jon is hardly one to give it.

Chapter Notes

Whee! Another update! You are all so lovely and I hope you like it!

Within a week, Reek’s dreams returned full-force, and he woke with a gasp in a cold sweat. When he rolled over to look at the alarm clock beside his bed, he found only forty minutes elapsed since he’d turned out the lights, which was not enough time to allow Robb and Jon to finish one another off, apparently.

Fuck.

Is it going to be like this forever?

Reek buried his head beneath the pillow to muffle the noise. He turned fitfully for some time, and when he next looked at the clock, it was nearly one in the morning and no further sound issued from the wall he shared with Robb. Reek sighed – in the Dreadfort, he often felt like time had stopped – as though he’d fallen off the planet completely, and the seasons passed in muted tones, at a distance. It was a feeling that Roose himself seemed to confirm, with his odd, ageless face that placed him anywhere from forty to in his sixties, his gait that was smooth without a swagger, his hands that were thin but strong as iron. Reek shuddered. At the time, he’d compared living in the Dreadfort to being buried alive.

Now, back in Winterfell, time moved too quickly – the tick of the seconds too acute, as the clocks jumped forward all of a sudden when Reek wasn’t looking. Reek began each day hoping to see Jon, maybe trade an awkward greeting as they both rode the elevator down to the dining room, and then before he knew it, the sun had gone down and Jon had retired to Robb’s bedroom for the night.

Reek wondered what Catelyn thought of all this. It was unthinkable that she couldn’t also hear them, and though he hadn’t actually seen her since his return, Reek had noticed the maids coming and going from her bedroom with fresh sheets each day. He’d thought to be over it by now – the feeling of being unwanted and unwelcome, but something about her seclusion left him cold and uneasy.

* 

It hurt when Ned used the belt, but more than the bite of the leather, it was the anger that left Theon burning for hours afterward. He hated it – the force of the strap landing against the bare skin of his ass – but he understood it, the same way he understood Rick’s fist in his face, or Maron twisting his arm until he cried, or the sting of his father’s open had against his cheek when he was five, telling him that he was old enough to start behaving like a man. And he understood the anger
– anger was Asha, calm on top like a fast-flowing river; it was the sound of doors slamming in their mother’s wake.

So he understood when Catelyn slapped him.

Afterwards, she ushered Robb inside and told Theon to wait in the hall while she washed the stage blood off her precious son’s face and neck, kneeling before him with a wet cloth clenched tightly in her fingers, soothing him as he sobbed pitifully that he was sorry, that he hadn’t meant it, that he and Theon were just playing a game, honest.

“Sssh, sweetie, I know. I know you’re sorry.”

Theon leaned against the wall, hands in his pockets, listening.

“You didn’t – you didn’t need to hit Theon like that. He wouldn’t let anything bad happen to me for real.”

There was a pause, in which Theon felt his heart drop.

“Robb, I know that you didn’t mean to scare me, but Theon is old enough to know better. Do you – sweetie, do you understand why Theon came to live with us?”

Robb hiccupped. “Because his father went behind Dad’s back?”

“That’s right. Your father trusted the Greyjoys, and they nearly started a war.”

“But Theon’s not – Theon’s not like them.”

Peeking around the door, Theon saw Cat cradle Robb’s cheek, wiping at a fleck of dried blood still clinging there. Her back was turned to him - and Robb’s eyes found Theon’s for a second before he looked away.

“You’re very kind to Theon,” Cat said. “So much like your father.”

“Yes, ma’am.”

Catelyn rose to her feet, and Theon quickly stepped away from the door, leaned against the wall again as though he hadn’t been listening.

“Send Theon in to clean up.”

Robb blushed – he could hardly look Theon in the eye when he said, “Mom says you can go in and wash up.”

She brushed past, her long dress creating a gust of air that caused him to blink, and when she looked at Theon he could see something sharp there – a desire to hurt him – and he understood that her words had been intended for him more than for Robb. He felt a strange, new kind of pain, different than that from a belt or a blow – and worse, because it seemed to radiate from somewhere deep inside him that no warmth or cold or soothing hand could touch.

*

Reek cracked the door to the shooting range and peered in for a few moments before stepping inside. The room was still basically the same – the lighting a bit brighter as it bounced off the polished wood floors, and a second camera had been added to eliminate that one blind-spot that Theon had taken such advantage of.
Jon didn’t notice Reek’s entrance – he wore his hair pulled back into a bun, and a pair of large, red earmuffs to dampen the cacophony of his 9-mm emptying into the black center of a paper target mounted at the far end of the range. Reek registered the loudness of the sound, but didn’t flinch as he stood at a safe distance, and once the clip was finished, Jon caught sight of him and slipped the earmuffs down around his neck to say, “You lost?” in an annoyed tone that implied Reek had interrupted something very important.

“Um, no. I was – you know, wandering.” Reek bit his lip. “Hoping maybe I’d run in to you.”

Jon slid a fresh clip into the gun. “Why – you need something?”

_This used to be so easy_, Reek thought. Talking to boys had been _easy_, and talking to Jon most of all.

He shook his head. “No. Just hoping.” Reek nudged with his toe at one of the spent casings that skittered around on the floor. “Am I bothering you?”

Jon’s shoulders drooped slightly. “Not unbearably, I guess.” He weighed the pistol in his hand, the metal of it catching the light like a mirror. “You want a turn? Bolton said you could handle a gun well enough.” He held the grip towards Reek.

Reek swallowed, then tried to laugh, but it came out a sort of bitter, caustic sound. “He said that? He said that I could handle a gun well enough to – what, to shoot someone at point blank range?”

Jon blushed, looked down at Reek’s gloved hands and then away. “I’m sorry. I just heard – he said that you did some – you know, some _work_ for him. He said you could handle a gun well enough. I wasn’t thinking about your – you know…”

Reek slumped back against the wall, pinching and squeezing at his left hand with the fingers of the right. The gloves seemed itchy, too tight. “It doesn’t matter.” Looking up at Jon, who stood there looking for some reassurance or forgiveness, Reek said quietly, “It’s nice of you to offer.” He decided that it wasn’t giving anything away and added, “I used to be good. As good as you, when I could hold it right.”

“Show me?” Again, Jon held the pistol out for him, tentatively. “Maybe I could help you?”

Reek shook his head. “Nah. Not worth your time. Honestly, I was just hoping you’d let me stay and watch.”

Jon gave a faint, lopsided grin, and plucked another pair of earmuffs off the wall. He paused before passing them to Reek and said, “Robb’s too nice to ask about your hands.”

“But you – you’re kind of an asshole, aren’t you?”

“Definitely. But I won’t – I mean, I won’t ask you right now.”

He handed Reek the earmuffs, and Reek couldn’t suppress a thin smile of his own, even as he felt a tug of apprehension. He imagined Jon backing him up against the wall, forcing his hands up beneath Reek’s shirt, feeling all the scars there even as Reek squirmed and pushed against his chest and objected, “Please – don’t. Stop –”

But of course Jon did no such thing, only watched as Reek adjusted his muffs – careful not to mess up his scarf – and then gave a thumbs-up which Reek mirrored shakily.
Each round found its mark, and by the time Jon holstered his gun, little remained of the target. He pressed a button on the wall, and a conveyer whirred overhead, reeling the paper towards them to be replaced. Reek’s eyes followed Jon as he walked to the supply locker for fresh targets and ammunition, but caught on something he hadn’t noticed before, hanging on the wall just beside the door.

Theon’s presence in Winterfell had never been especially obtrusive, and yet it was gratingly apparent somehow – the child who could never hope to pass for a Stark, if only for the mean little sparkle in his eyes. His annual school photo – hung obligingly among those of the Stark children – stood out like a single dark cloud on an otherwise sunny day, and even these small traces of him had been removed. It seemed unlike Robb to simply forget about Theon’s bow.

As he approached, though, Reek was more distressed to discover that it hadn’t been forgotten at all. He glanced over his shoulder and saw Jon busy reloading; carefully, Reek slipped the glove off his right hand, and ran a trembling finger along the graceful curve of the wood.

Far from neglected, he found that the wood had been refinished, the string replaced, the leather on the grip oiled recently enough that it felt soft and supple beneath his touch. To the side hung his quiver, many of the arrows brightened with a handsome new fletching, some of their tips replaced – Reek pressed the pad of his finger against one of them to feel its sharpness.

“That’s Robb’s.”

“Yeah?” Reek hurried to put his glove on as Jon came to stand beside him. Jon took the bow from its mount, balancing it lightly on the back of one hand.

“Yeah. He keeps saying he’s going to teach me, but…” Jon shrugged, and the bow wobbled from side to side. “He hasn’t had time.”

What an asshole. Of course he has time.

“Is he any good?” Reek asked. “It seems like a weird thing to be good at.”

“I mean, he usually comes down here to practice it when he wants to be alone. But I’ve seen him a few times, and yeah, he’s good.” And Reek didn’t miss the note of admiration when Jon said, “Hits the bull’s-eye most of the time.”

Reek reached for the bow, lifted it off Jon’s hand, hesitating before he asked, “Did he say where he got it? It looks like – you know, one-of-a-kind.”

Truthfully, he was a little bewildered to even be holding it again.

“It’s from the Iron Islands – made from some kind of tree that grows there. I just assumed his dad picked it up on a business trip or something.” Jon watched as Reek strung the bow and plucked at it, listening to its dull twang. “Speaking of which, you know we have an errand today, right?”

Reek tried to focus on the feel of the string in his fingers. “No. Nobody told me.”

Jon sighed. “Do you even have a phone?”

“Yeah.” Reek stopped playing with the bow long enough to pull the phone out of his pocket. It shone like new, protective tape still covering the screen. He had never used it – not even to call Jon to come collect him from the Dreadfort. He’d thought to throw it away – Robb would probably be happy to buy him a new phone – but it seemed wrong to discard such a generous gift, even if it made him feel more suffocated than grateful. “It’s new,” he explained, though he doubted Jon cared. “It was a – um – a birthday present from Roose.”
“That’s disappointing.” Jon held his hand out, fingers motioning. “Let me see it.”

Reek obeyed, and continued turning the bow in his hands, glancing up fleetingly to watch Jon squint as he tapped at the screen of Reek’s phone. Jon entered a final keystroke, and a second later a single, long howl emanated from his back pocket. He grinned as he returned Reek’s phone.

“There – now I’ve got your number and you’ve got mine and we don’t have to wander all over hell trying to find each other.”

“Aren’t you going to tell me a bunch of rules about when it’s okay for me to call you?”

Reek had meant it as a tease, but when Jon glared at him and began silently sweeping up his shell casings, he realized he might’ve hit a nerve.

“I’ve learned to be upfront about my boundaries,” said Jon coldly. “I’m sorry if that offends you.” Stopping to study Reek’s gloves and scarf, he added, “I figured you’d understand.”

Reek looked away, and he wrung his hands around the bow, stammering, “I – um – I”

“Just text me. Don’t call me. I don’t like being on the phone.”

“Um, okay.”

“And put that back. Robb doesn’t like anybody messing with it. As soon as I’ve cleaned up here, we’ll go.”

Where are we going? Reek wanted to ask, but instead he turned to replace the bow in its mount – dazed, sweating as he offered breathlessly, “I could teach you.”

“What?” Jon arched an eyebrow at him, and Reek’s eyes darted down to stare at a crack in the floor.

“I – I s-said I could teach you.” Reek looked up for as long as he dared. “The bow. I could teach you if you want.” He cocked his head at the shredded target. “I bet you’d be good at it.”

Jon’s face softened a bit, though his voice retained its hardness when he replied, “You can’t use a gun – how are you gonna teach me bow and arrow?”

Reek tried to ignore the way that Jon’s words felt like a slap. He was beginning to understand that Jon’s abrupt shifts in tone had less to do with him, and more to do with Jon. Hadn’t Robb called him “cranky”?

“I can show you how to stand – how to breathe.” Ten seconds ago, Reek had hardly dared to utter the suggestion, and now – seeing the eager little shine in Jon’s eyes – he wanted nothing more. “I could help you nock and draw. If you just – promise not to tell anyone.”

“What do you mean?”

“You know, just – I don’t want anyone else to know that I – that I know archery.”

“Why not?”

Reek held out his hands helplessly. “I just – don’t.”

Jon shook his head, dismayed. “I know that I just kind of bit your head off about respecting my boundaries, so I won’t say anything hypocritical about how weird I think that is. But I don’t keep secrets from Mr. Stark.”
Of course you don’t.

Reek took a long breath, hoping to hide the depth of his disappointment, and was about to offer up something conciliatory and indifferent when the door burst open with such force that the gust it caused nearly loosened Reek’s scarf.

“Jesus, Jon – I’ve been looking everywhere for you!”

No fucking way.

Reek was actually alarmed by the resemblance – the dark hair and eyes, the softer angles of the face – and honestly if he didn’t know her, he might’ve mistaken them for brothers. She was taller, but not turning into a crane like Sansa had at her age, and she wore a baseball cap, a pair of neon-green Van’s, boy’s pants hung low and a black L7 t-shirt big enough to almost conceal the small swell of her breasts.

“Ary! What’s up?”

Jon offered an open hand, and she gave it a sharp smack. “Not much – just coming home for a bit to see Mom. She said if she didn’t see me by the end of the month, she’d call the cops.”

Arya kept her hair just long enough to be messy, and when she turned to regard Reek for the first time, he wasn’t especially surprised by the ring in her lip, or the one in her eyebrow that raised up as she asked, “Who are you?”

“Reek,” he replied with a croak.

She stared at him, mouth open slightly as though she was waiting to hear the rest of it. Jon must’ve sensed Reek’s discomfort because he took a small step forward and interjected, “Reek is new – Robb just hired him on last week.” He looked at his watch. “Which, we were actually just on our way out on an errand.”

Arya continued staring at Reek, as though he were a puzzle. “I’m Arya,” she said, holding out a slender hand. “Stark. Robb is my brother.”

Reek nodded, taking a deep breath before taking her hand. “Shit,” she said, looking down at his fingers. “That’s brutal. What happened?”

“Ary –”

Reek looked at Jon. “Crazy ex,” he said, enjoying the way Jon’s mouth fell open just slightly.

“Damn. I’m not even gonna ask what’s with the scarf.” Arya gave a perverse little smile. “You seem weird as hell.”

Jon cuffed her on the back of the head, knocking her cap forward into her eyes. “Don’t be a dick.”

Arya put a hand over her heart in mock offense. “I’m not trying to be a dick.” To Reek, she said, “Welcome to the Family. If you’re going to be spending much time with Jon, you should probably start carrying a few tampons around with you.”

Playfully, Jon smacked her again. “We have to get going. Do you want to use the range?”

Arya nodded and lifted the hem of her shirt to reveal the .44 tucked into her belt. “Yeah, I thought maybe I’d get some practice.”
“Where’s Gendry?”

Gendry?

She rolled her eyes. “Probably in the garage, annoying the shit out of whatever poor bastard works on your cars these days.”

* 

He was there in the shop, leaned over the open hood of a black 1967 Camaro with his hands clasped behind his back, fingers twitching.

“You like what you see?”

Gendry turned to face them with a grin, slightly guilty as though he’d been caught where he didn’t belong. “I didn’t touch it, I swear.” He looked at his fingernails. “Gotta keep my hands clean for dinner with Mrs. Stark.”

“Such a proper little rich boy,” Jon deadpanned.

Gendry did look different, wearing a mustard-colored button-up and a pair of expensive shoes, clean-shaven and well, just plain clean in a way that he never had been when Theon knew him. He still carried himself with that over-muscled slouch, and he didn’t seem to know what to do with his hands, now that he wasn’t always holding a wrench or a pliers.

“It’s a sweet car,” said Gendry, ignoring Jon’s jab. “Yours?”

Jon nodded. “Birthday present to myself.” Stepping aside, he motioned for Reek to move closer. “This is Reek. He’s new.”

“Reek?” Gendry took Reek’s hand into a hearty handshake. “Where did Robb find you?”

“Boltons,” said Reek drily.

“Oh Christ.” Gendry lowered his eyes sympathetically. “Glad you could rejoin the living then.”

“Gendry’s head of the Baratheon Family,” explained Jon, leaning over to wipe at the headlight of his Camaro with the hem of his sleeve. “Believe it or not, he used to be the mechanic down here.”

“Rags to riches,” said Gendry with a sheepish smile.

“He’s a big, important man when Ary’s not dragging him around.”

Reek felt as though he had entered a parallel universe. The man standing before him was Gendry, and yet he knew that if he’d told Gendry three years ago that he was destined to become the most powerful man in the South, they both would’ve laughed themselves stupid.

And you?

Reek considered whether he would’ve believed three years ago that Robb would leave him for dead, or that he’d fall in love with the man who tortured him. Or if he would’ve believed even one year ago that there would in fact be a life after Ramsay Bolton, and that that life would include the boy Jon Snow. For the first time in memory, Reek allowed himself to consider – critically, of course – the possibility that maybe things were not necessarily always going to get worse. It took his breath away.
“Are you going to be joining us for dinner?” Gendry asked.

Jon scoffed. “Why, is it not going to be awkward enough for you?”

“Fair enough. See you around then?”

“Of course.” Jon danced his fingers along a row of hooks, each holding the keys to one of the cars in the garage. “Reek and I are actually on our way out, and we might be a while, but yeah, hopefully I’ll see you before you take off.”

“It was nice meeting you,” said Gendry with an unnerving sincerity that made Reek draw back slightly.

“Yeah,” he said. “You too.”

*

Jon had chosen an inconspicuous Subaru Forester and tossed Reek the keys, saying only, “Take 50 East.”

Reek drove in silence for about fifteen minutes, trying to keep his eyes on the road, trying not to look at Jon – at the way his eyelashes fluttered when he took a deep drag, or the way his fingers worried at the tear forming in the left knee of his too-tight jeans.

“Aren’t you going to ask me where we’re going?” said Jon after he’d flicked his cigarette butt out the window.

Reek’s wrists ached, hands sweating as he wrung at the steering wheel. “I figured you’d tell me.”

He felt Jon staring at him.

“You know, when I first showed up at Winterfell, I had about a million questions about everything. Like, I’m pretty sure I annoyed the shit out of everyone – always asking where things were, and why and how I was supposed to do things.” He scanned Reek appraisingly. “But you don’t ask very many questions. Like, I can tell you want a cigarette, but you won’t risk asking me for one. You don’t know where we’re going, and it makes you nervous a little, but you’re not going to ask me. And I can tell you’re like, a curious person.”

“Can you?”

“Yeah. I can see it in your eyes.”

Jon gestured toward his own eyes – soft but also cutting somehow – and Reek shuddered at the thought that Jon had been observing him so closely. “I learned how to not ask questions,” he said.

“Take this next exit.” Jon pointed to the right. “Was that true – what you told Ary about your fingers?”

“Yeah,” Reek replied, but it felt wrong to speak about Ramsay so glibly, so he hastened to add, “But he was good to me.”

He waited for Jon to say something callous or misunderstanding, but Jon only instructed him to follow the signs for Lonely Hill Park and then asked, “Good to you like how?”

Reek’s heartbeat quickened. “Like I don’t even know how to explain it without you thinking I’m more fucked up than you already think I am.”
Jon smiled sadly. “I had a – a friend who used to call that a ‘Dragon-and-Princess Situation’ – you’re afraid of them, and you get burned a lot, but you get so used to it that after a while everything else just seems boring.” He shrugged. “I mean, I don’t know what it was for you, obviously.”

It was apt – too apt, actually, and Reek found himself crushed by a sort of guilt that he was here – alive – and driving around in a car with a gorgeous boy, wanting something so outrageous, when the only person who had ever loved him without restraint was dead. He said nothing else, and Jon began snapping at his rubber bands until the car glided through the entrance to Lonely Hill Municipal Park, and Jon instructed Reek to turn onto an access road that disappeared from view behind a thick stand of cottonwood and elm trees.

The road hugged the western bank of the Weeping Water – here just a modest stream – until it arrived at a gate which Jon got out to unlock. It swung open with a lurch, and Jon held it open while Reek drove slowly through.

“I suppose it’s too late to ask where we’re going, huh?”

“Not much further.” Jon cracked his window. “Up ahead there’s a maintenance lot, probably empty except for one other car. That’s where we’re going.”

“I meant – you know – what are we going to do?”

Reek felt nervous suddenly, disliking the trajectory of their journey, which he had been pretending – up until this point – was a simple ride with Jon.

“There’s three-hundred-thousand dollars in the trunk.” Jon zipped the front of his jacket and pulled a pair of thin, black gloves out of the pockets. “We’re delivering that to one of Mr. Bolton’s associates, in exchange for the drugs that Bolton’s man Qyburn has in development.”

“Roose won’t – um, he won’t be here, will he?” Reek didn’t bother trying to disguise his trepidation, and Jon noted it clearly before reassuring him:

“No. He’s never around when money trades hands, or when blood’s drawn. We’re not even picking up the drugs – they’ll be left in another location.” Jon gave a shy kind of smile. “Don’t worry. I haven’t fucked one of these things up yet.”

The car coasted around a bend and into the small lot; a dilapidated out-building sat in one corner, surrounded by piles of piping, T-posts and barbed wire. The windows had been boarded up, the weathered bricks covered with graffiti. Behind the building, a black town-car sat idling, and Reek’s stomach clenched as he noticed Jon pressing a hand thoughtlessly to his side, feeling for his pistol.

“Back up behind it there, so our fender is basically up against theirs.”

Reek did as he was told, reflecting that it was fairly clever of Jon to park this way – it boxed the other car in, kept Reek out of sight and gave him a couple extra seconds to drive away if something went wrong.

“Do you want me to –”

“I want you to wait here,” said Jon.

Reek held his breath, watching in the rearview mirror as a man he’d never seen before exited the town-car and shook Jon’s hand. He hated to think what other men saw when they looked at Jon. Then Jon popped the trunk of the Subaru, and he and the other man were both obscured from view.
Reek fiddled with the side-mirrors, but saw nothing. He drummed his fingers anxiously on the rim of the steering wheel, chiding himself:

*Jon knows what he’s doing. He can take care of himself.*

He strained to hear their muted voices, felt the car shift as the weight in the back was transferred out. He heard a laugh that didn’t belong to Jon. A couple minutes later, the trunk slammed shut, and Reek watched Jon shake hands with the man once more.

“Let’s get the fuck out of here,” he said once he was back inside the car, pulling off his gloves and lighting up a smoke, grumbling, “Waste of a fuck-ton of money.”

“What do you mean?”

Jon leaned his elbow against the door and blew a stream of smoke out the window. “Mr. Stark is just going to have it incinerated,” he explained with a hint of tiredness, implying that this was part of an ongoing argument between the two of them. “He basically just flushed three-hundred grand down the toilet. And somehow, that’s what helps him sleep at night.”

Reek wanted to resist being pulled into something that sounded like none of his business, but it seemed rude to leave Jon hanging, so he asked, “Why does he buy it then?”

“I mean, don’t think for a second that Robb Stark is above making a shitload of money off of drugs, because he’s not. He’s got six times that much coming in through the Iron Islands each month, but Bolton’s stuff spooks him, so he’ll buy it up and then just destroy it.” Jon squinted at Reek. “Did Roose ever mention what happened in the capital?”

Reek looked away, uncomfortable. “No.”

“Did he tell you what happened to Robb’s dad?”

“He – got killed on Joffrey Baratheon’s orders?”

He could tell by the slightly disdainful look on Jon’s face that this was – at best – old news. “Yeah, but do you know why?”

Reek faltered. “I – I guess not.”

“Okay, so –” Jon turned to face Reek, folding one leg up onto the seat and wrapping his arm around the back of the headrest. “So Robb’s father – Ned – was a close friend of Bob Baratheon. Bob was – or like, everyone thought he was – Joff’s father. Ned Stark went south to do some work for Bob, and while he was there, he discovered that Joffrey wasn’t actually a Baratheon at all – he was a –” Jon paused to sidestep the word “bastard.” “He was the child of one of Cersei Lannister’s affairs. And so not only did he have no claim to that Family, but Mr. Stark – Robb’s dad, I mean – also discovered that Gendry – who their mutual associate Mr. Arryn had sent up North when he was still a boy – was actually Robert Baratheon’s – um, biological son and the closest thing to an heir that might reasonably be able to take over the family business. *That’s* why Joffrey’s *mother* had Ned Stark killed, but not before he could send word of his discovery out to the heads of the other Families.”

Reek imagined how bizarre the news must’ve been for Gendry, how the world could upend so abruptly. And how sort of unsettling would it be to go from being a mechanic in a basement garage to being treated almost like royalty, all because two people you didn’t know a thousand miles away couldn’t stop cheating on each other?
“Are you listening?”

“Yeah, I’m listening.”

Jon continued: “So, Robb had this big meeting to plan his revenge, and Roose Bolton offered his assistance – he said he’d been working on a weaponized form of MDPV, and that he had men on the inside of the Baratheon mansion who he could pay to deploy it within the building. He assured Mr. Stark that the attack would be precise, and without the potential for collateral damage than an old-fashioned, guns-blazing approach would have. He said it would be cleaner. So Mr. Stark gave him the go-ahead.”

It was strange, hearing Jon recite all this as though he’d learned it all from a book somewhere.

“But you know, nothing’s ever clean; things didn’t go the way Bolton said they would, and a lot of people got hurt or killed. It was pretty ugly, apparently, and that’s why Mr. Stark doesn’t want to sell anything that Bolton makes, but he also doesn’t want it going out of the North, where he can’t control it, so…”

“So why doesn’t he just tell Bolton to stop manufacturing it?”

Jon snorted. “Good fucking question. I mean, he’s asked but… I keep telling him that he should just take Bolton out, if he trusts him so little. He says it’s not that easy, and I just have to assume that he knows better than I do.”

*They’re both right,* Reek reflected.

“Can I ask you something?” said Jon.

“Okay.”

“Is it true that Bolton has his servants put leeches on him to draw his blood?”

Reek stared at him, horrified. “Why would you think that?”

“Mr. Stark told me. I said it sounded like an urban legend.” Jon smiled and shook his head. “Robb – he can be so paranoid sometimes.”

* * *

It was late when Reek went down to the kitchen, padding softly along the darkened corridor, silent except for the insistent gurgling of his stomach. He put a hand to his belly as though that might quiet it. Reek couldn’t remember the last time he actually felt like eating, and the return of this need – however slim – seemed foreboding.

The kitchen staff had retired for the night, and though the main lights were off, the room glowed with the thin blue strips of LED lighting that lined the countertops – a cold, almost magical light glaring off the stainless steel cabinets and faucets. Again, Reek found himself staring at a rack of knives – more orderly this time, and elegant, glittering things. They reminded him of Ramsay’s eyes, and Reek’s hands moved to cradle his sides as he imagined that particular, cool touch.

“You’re a cutter, aren’t you?”

Reek gasped as he spun around, fingers clutching the cotton of his long-sleeve t-shirt as he thought, *You’re not supposed to be here. You’re not allowed in the kitchen. He’ll punish you for going where you’re not allowed.*
But it was Jon, slumped up against the door of the refrigerator with a half-empty glass of whiskey and ice weighing heavy in one hand. His hair looked wild, as though he’d gone to bed some time ago, but given up on trying to sleep, and when he stared up at Reek with bleary, dark eyes, Reek could tell that he was drunk.

“You’re shitfaced, aren’t you?”

Jon smiled cynically, his cheeks flushed red. “You first,” he said, speech slurred enough that his tongue stud clicked sharply against his teeth.

You should just leave, Reek told himself, even as he took a few cautious steps forward, close enough to smell the alcohol on Jon’s breath. He watched the way Jon’s hand trembled as he brought the glass up for another swig, the way he pushed his curls out of his eyes, only to have them fall back down again as his he tried to fix his gaze on Reek. It was hopeless, Reek realized, feeling slightly weak in the knees. It was hopeless to pretend that he could ever just leave – that given the choice, he would ever be anything other than Jon Snow’s slave.

“Yes,” he said. “I am.”

Jon hooked a finger into the hem of Reek’s shirt, and the muscles in Reek’s stomach gave a twitch.

“I bet if I was to lift this up, I’d find all sorts of cuts and burns under there.”

“Please don’t.”

Jon let go of the fabric, a stricken expression playing over his face. “I’m sorry. I didn’t – I didn’t mean to scare you.” He smoothed at the front of Reek’s shirt with the tips of his fingers. “I’m sorry.”

Reek might’ve laughed, if he wasn’t so taken with the fact that Jon had touched him.

Only because he’s drunk.

“You don’t scare me,” he said. “But you are in the way of the fridge.”

“Shit. Sorry.” Jon stepped aside, tripping over his own feet. He hung on the open door, swaying as he watched Reek grab a cheese stick and then paw through the crisper for an apple. “Is that all you’re gonna have?”

Reek nodded and closed the doors, and Jon fell back into his slump with a huff. “Don’t you ever take that shit off?” He motioned at Reek’s scarf and gloves.

“How much have you had to drink?”

Jon peered into the bottom of his now-empty glass. “I dunno. Five, maybe? What time is it?”

Reek glanced at the clock above the oven. “It’s almost midnight.”

“Yeah, probably five or six then.” A thread of spit spilled out the corner of Jon’s mouth, and he swiped at it with the back of his hand, embarrassed.

“You always drink this much?”

Jon blinked at him. “Not always,” he said. “But not not-always, either.”

“Jon, I think you should try to drink some water and go to bed.”
Jon groaned, setting the glass down too hard on the counter. “You sound just like Robb.” He giggled. “Wouldn’t it be funny if you were secretly Robb, underneath that scarf?”

Reek bristled. “Well, I’m not, but maybe you should listen to me anyway and go the fuck to bed.”

“Will you take me?”

Reek’s heart seemed to sputter for a moment. “You want me to – you want me to walk you back to your room?”

“That’d be great,” agreed Jon with a limp nod. And as Reek held the kitchen door open for him, he added, “I get lost sometimes, and end up in the wrong rooms.”

Jon shrugged and then listed into the wall.

“Jesus Christ, okay.” Reek sighed as he slipped his arm around Jon’s waist, pulled their hips together and began to walk Jon slowly down the hallway.

“You should eat more,” admonished Jon. He draped his arm across Reek’s shoulders. “You’re skinnier than you look.”

Up ahead, Reek saw the dim glow of the elevator buttons – they seemed about a mile away.

Jon was heavy – his toes kept catching on the carpet, and he leaned into Reek, sending them on an unsteady, diagonal trajectory that meant Reek had to put his arm out to keep from running into the wall. And he was warm – even through both layers of clothing, Reek could feel Jon’s body heat against his side, and he could smell the mix of whiskey and hair conditioner and sweat.

Inside the elevator, Reek released his hold on Jon and allowed him to drop clumsily against the wall. Reek’s knees ached, and he cursed under his breath as he hit the button for the third floor. He thought Jon might be dozing off when his hand shot out and slammed into the “Emergency Stop” button.

“What are you doing?”

Jon fumbled for the railing, pulling himself upright and letting his head fall back against the brass of the elevator wall. He levelled Reek with a look somewhere between hungry and heartbroken, and rubbed at the tattoo beneath his collar. “I want to – can I touch your scars?”

Reek’s breath hitched in his throat. It was a trick. This had to be some awful joke – this perfect boy, gazing at him with his eyes half-lidded and his mouth parted.

*Ramsay isn’t here to trick you.*

*Robb then.*

Reek’s eyes darted up to the camera lens embedded in the ceiling of the elevator, and Jon tossed his head dismissively. “Don’t worry about that. Robb – Mr. Stark and I kiss in here all the time.”

*Robb will kill you. For sure this time.*

*And besides, you think he’d even let you touch him if he knew that you were – that you couldn’t –* “Reek?” Jon bit down hard on his lower lip, giving a needy “Please?”

“Fine.” Reek looked at his toes. “I’ll let you, if you answer a question afterwards.”
"Mmkay."

Reek wiped the sweat off his palm before wrapping it around Jon’s wrist and guiding it up under his shirt. His whole body tensed at the touch, warm and so light, as though Jon were worried about leaving a mark. Reek continued to direct Jon’s hand up, over his chest until it came to rest on the cluster of scars that covered the place where his pirate ship tattoo had been.

“Jesus Christ.”

Jon’s eyes went wide, his fingertips pulled back for a split second before they began to trace the maze of scar tissue over Reek’s left breast and shoulder. Reek shivered, and his whole body felt light. The sensation of Jon’s fingers on his skin sent a pleasant tingle sparking up the side of his neck and into his scalp, and before he could think, his eyes had drifted closed.

_This is a dream. There’s no way this is real._

_If it’s a dream then it’s harmless, and you should probably just enjoy it._

He felt Jon’s hand drop away, trailing over his chest and stomach to catch in the waist of his jeans, and when he opened his eyes, Jon had nodded off and was beginning a slow slide down the wall of the elevator.

Reek brought his own hand up to rub at his shoulder as though he needed to erase the memory of Jon’s touch. He sighed and pressed the button for the third floor, then stooped to grab Jon beneath the armpits and endeavored to pull him to his feet again.

“Jon, get up. We’re almost there.”

“I think I’m going to throw up.”

“Come on. You said you’d answer my question.”

“Oh, yeah.” Jon stumbled out of the elevator, collapsing against Reek. “What was the question again?”

“Where were you before you came here?”

Jon straightened up momentarily, managing a few steps on his own, and when he pushed his hair out of his eyes, Reek could see that they bore a wounded expression. “I’m surprised Robb didn’t tell you,” Jon replied caustically. “He never lets _me_ forget.” Despite the redness already on his cheeks, Jon managed somehow to turn an even deeper shade. “I worked in a brothel. You know, like a whorehouse?”

“I know what a brothel is.”

“Oh _do_ you?” Jon rolled his eyes. “Well, that’s where I was, before I came here. Men paid money to fuck me. Sixty bucks for a blowjob. Satisfied?”

Reek nodded, feeling unexpectedly terrible for asking, even as he noticed Jon’s tongue stud glinting in the dim light of the hallway. “Yes. Look, we’re here.”

Jon gave the door an extremely long once-over. “This is Robb’s room,” he stated.

“Yeah, well, it seems like maybe you shouldn’t sleep alone tonight.”

Jon looked at his toes. “I thought – I thought you’d try to take me to _your_ room.”
Now it was Reek’s turn to blush. “No. I wouldn’t – I mean, you wouldn’t enjoy it.” He gave a loud knock on Robb’s door before Jon could say anything else that might remind him of how completely futile it was to hope for something more than a drunken moment in an elevator.

Robb opened the door in a pair of plaid pajama pants, his shoulders dropping dejectedly as he laid eyes on Jon.

“Jesus, Jon, can we maybe not do this every other night?”

“Maybe,” replied Jon in a coy tone as he pitched forward into Robb’s arms.

Robb staggered back, holding Jon nearly upright, and Reek had taken a couple of steps down the hall, hoping to sneak away when Robb asked, “How much has he had?”

“He thinks five or six,” said Reek. “I think he needs to puke.”

Robb sighed as Jon’s weight sagged against him. “Right. Hey, thank you. For bringing him to me.”

“Yeah, sure.”

*

It was just after three a.m. that Reek woke in the midst of a scream. His right hand felt like it was on fire, but when he looked down at it, he saw that those fingers that ached had already been removed. His breaths came shallow and too fast, and his vision began to purple around the edges as he gasped, straining against the invisible weight that pressed him down into the mattress.

He thought he imagined the knock at the door, but it came again, followed by a soft, familiar voice.

“Reek? Are you okay?”

“Fine,” he managed.

“You don’t sound okay. Can I come in?”

“No.”

“Would you – would you want to come downstairs and maybe have some tea or something?”

Reek’s phone vibrated on the nightstand. It was a text from Jon:

“U should let him in – hes good at this stuff.”

“Reek?”

“Go away. Please.”

His phone sounded again.

“Breathe. Just breathe. Imagine your breath has to fill your whole body, all the way down to the toes. Like you’re a balloon. Then hold the breath and count to 5 and let it out slowly. Let out every molecule of air.”

“Reek, please tell me you’re alright, and I’ll leave and go back to bed, okay?”
Reek took a long, deep breath as Jon had instructed.

“I’m okay. I promise.”

“You know, if you ever need help, just knock on my door.”

“Okay.”

He saw Robb’s shadow linger at his door for a few moments longer, during which time his phone buzzed twice more:

“You’re doing good. It passes.

I like your scars.”
Chapter Twenty-Four

Chapter Summary

Reek gets an eyeful and does something he hadn't wanted to do.

Chapter Notes

So I guess this is kind of a fluffy chapter? Or as close as it gets? Anyway, thank you as always for all your encouraging words. I've been having trouble focusing lately, and it helps to know that some of you are actually checking to see if I've updated. :) Happy 2015 everyone!

Reek couldn’t quite recall the first time he’d been drunk. He remembered the prelude – Ron arguing persuasively with Rick that it would be a bit of harmless fun, passing Theon a pint glass of Coca-Cola with something else mixed in. And he remembered the aftermath – Balon shouting at the three of them while Theon’s head pounded like a slow drum. When he saw Maron later that afternoon, Theon cringed at the hitch in his brother’s stride, and when their eyes met, it was Maron who looked away first.

He was sixteen when he and Gendry snuck a twelve-pack from the Starks’ Fourth-of-July barbeque and downed it all in the garage. Theon’s limbs felt so light and warm, and he laughed until his face ached. Everything was funny, everything was easy, and Theon felt like he suddenly understood his brothers and he wished that they were still alive to share a drink with him.

*

Reek tried not to notice Jon’s hangovers, frequent as they were. On one occasion, he walked into the office to find Robb sitting at his desk, watching the Jon sleep over the closed-circuit camera installed in the library.

“Um – sir?” Reek cleared his throat.

Robb sighed and turned to face him. “I’m sending the two of you out today. I was hoping to take care of this earlier in the morning, but…” Again his eyes gravitated to the flat-screen mounted on the wall behind Reek. Jon lay sprawled out on a chaise lounge, still wearing his boots and a leather jacket.

“Want me to wake him, sir?”

Robb dragged his fingers through his hair, looking almost dejected. “No, let’s let him be for a little longer.”

It was just before noon when Jon nearly crashed into Reek, exiting the bathroom and clutching a towel around his waist, looking wet and miserable as he muttered an apology.
Reek swallowed, unable to wrestle his eyes away from the tattoo peeping over the edge of the towel: a pair of white roses – one on each hip – with the name “Snow” arcing low between them in a thick black font. A cluster of raised scars interrupted the smooth flat of Jon’s stomach, and Reek recognized them immediately as cigarette burns. A fading hickey on Jon’s right breast reminded Reek that he ought not be looking at all, but just above that was the tattoo that Reek often saw Jon rubbing at – a cheerfully-colored cardinal with a scroll in its beak that read –

Reek squinted at it. “What’s ‘Satin’?”

“None of your fucking business.” Jon hurried to cover it with his right hand, catching the towel with the left as it slipped further down his hips.

Reek was too preoccupied with Jon’s body to mind his tone, and when his gaze finally returned to Jon’s face, he saw a becoming mix of pride and vulnerability there; Jon blushed, but made no move to turn away. “Do you have any?” he asked more softly. “Tattoos, I mean.”

Reek considered for a moment before telling him, “I used to. It’s mostly just scars now though.”

“What were they of?”

“None of your fucking business,” returned Reek with a hidden smile.

Jon continued to rub at the cardinal on his neck for a moment before making the decision to let Reek have another look. “That’s fair, I guess.” He bit into his lower lip to stop a grin.

Reek felt sick. An awful lightness began to overtake him, a sensation of pressure building in that wasteland between his legs as he envisioned himself shoving Jon back into the bathroom, pulling the towel away and then dropping to his knees to take Jon into his mouth.

“There’s still plenty of hot water,” Jon said, which Reek thought was cute considering that they were living in Winterfell, not some shitty apartment up North with a busted water heater.

“Th-thanks,” he stammered. “But I – I just use the shower in my room.” He honestly hadn’t been intending to take a shower at all, but it suddenly seemed like an overwhelmingly good idea. He shuffled past Jon, mumbling a shy, “Sorry for staring.”

“I don’t mind.”

Reek looked over his shoulder, but Jon was already halfway down the hall, giving his damp curls a shake as he knocked on Robb’s bedroom door.

*

The water stung when it hit the freshest cut, a little smile of a thing on Reek’s left arm that he’d been picking at that morning. He rubbed at it, then wandered his hand around his ribs to feel for the rounded scars where Ramsay had extinguished his cigarettes on a semi-regular basis to form a constellation of ugly marks that dotted Reek’s left flank and shoulder-blade. He recalled the pain – worse than a simple cut, but sweet as a kiss compared to the flaying; it was a special kind of torture – degrading, yet also possessive – and he wondered who had left those same marks on Jon’s otherwise-perfect skin.

Reek passed his fingers over his own stomach – bracing himself before letting them slip lower. He closed his eyes and tried not to think about what it looked like and focused instead on the sensation of the touch. It could feel good sometimes – he knew it could because he remembered the way it felt when Ramsay would force his fingers between Reek’s wet lips, then press them just there, and
Reek’s mouth would drop open.

“Oh.”

“Does that feel good, love?”

“Mmhmm.”

Reek’s remaining fingers trembled more than Ramsay’s ever did, barely ghosting over the rigid spot where his prick had been. Still, he shivered and let his head drop back; the tile pressed coldly against his shoulders.

Jon’s fingers wouldn’t shake so much, he told himself, making a second, more confident pass with the palm of his hand. The pressure felt pleasant, and it triggered a deeper kind of tension that drew Reek’s hips forward with a jerk.

“F-fuck.”

He imagined Jon’s hips – two white roses pinning him against the wall – and Jon’s hard, red prick sliding up to rub at that place between Reek’s thighs. He imagined soft lips whispering hotly against the torn cartilage of his ear, but the voice they carried belonged to Ramsay:

“I’m surprised it doesn’t make you sick to touch yourself there.”

Reek let his hand drop away, even as the ache inside him continued to twist and build. In the stream of the shower, he didn’t have to acknowledge the tears of frustration clinging to his cheeks.

You think that just because he was – just because he’s been with lots of guys, he won’t say no to you?

I wish Ramsay was here.

Oh really? Would that make everything better?

No, but – I just wish he was here.

*

The boy in the garage looked at his wrist – a cheap sports-watch with a crack through the middle and grease caked in the sides – then at Reek.

“When did he say he’d meet you here?”

Reek shrugged. “He didn’t say a time. He’ll be ready when he’s ready.” He crossed his ankles and leaned against the driver’s-side door of a boxy, mid-eighties coupe.

The boy bustled around, trying to be accommodating though Reek was clearly in his way. He didn’t resemble Gendry in the slightest – blond and thin and scrappy-looking – and he had rearranged the shop to suit himself. Only the old CD player retained its place on the workbench, the same stack of scratched-to-death discs teetering beside it.

“Hey, did you ever know Gendry?”

The boy glanced up from the pages of a manual, taking a flathead screwdriver from between his oversized teeth to answer, “The guy who used to work here before me? Yeah, I’ve met him. He comes down here sometimes to see what I’m working on.” He wiped the screwdriver on his jeans.
“He seems cool. Way less insane than just about everybody else I’ve met here. No offense.”

Reek snorted. “None taken.”

“Did you – you know why Mr. Stark hired you to drive Mr. Snow around?” The boy tossed the manual onto the workbench and popped the trunk on the coupe.

“I just assumed it was out of the goodness of his heart.”

The boy gave him an incredulous look. “Right. He didn’t tell you that in January, Snow drove home so drunk that he rolled a car into a ditch and then passed out? Like, the car was **upside-down** and he was so hammered that he just passed out, still buckled in to the driver’s seat.”

Reek opened his mouth to say something on Jon’s behalf, when a voice from the door of the shop interrupted:

“The doctor said it was actually lucky that I was so drunk. She said that when the body tenses up, it like, absorbs impact differently and sometimes actually makes the injury **worse**.” Jon lowered his eyes, and Reek could tell that underneath the bravado, he was more than a little ashamed. “You ready?”

Reek nodded at the mechanic. “Yeah – I guess we’re taking that old El Camino.”

“Don’t suppose he told you where I’d been that day?” Jon asked sourly as he slid into the front seat beside Reek.

“No.” Reek put the car into gear and eased off the brake to let it glide out of the garage and into the afternoon sun. Jon flipped the visor down, and like clockwork cracked his window and lit a smoke. Jon snapped at his rubber bands, more forcefully than usual, and there was a definite, almost violently anxious air about him that made Reek lean away in his seat. “Well, aren’t you going to tell me?” he asked, when it became obvious that Jon was waiting to be pushed.

“It was my first hit,” he answered, looking out the window so that Reek could only see the pale reflection of his face.

“Who – who was it?” Reek felt a lump in his throat, and when he reached for it, his fingers found the shape of the collar underneath his scarf.

Jon shrugged and flicked the ash from his cigarette out the window. “Some guy – some dealer who had the bright idea to demand a larger cut than he was entitled to. Threatened to go to the police with the names of some of Mr. Stark’s associates if his terms weren’t met. I – I shot him in the back of the head.” Jon said it casually, but Reek could hear the shock, still fresh beneath a veneer of practiced indifference. It was a single off-note – one that Reek would know anywhere. He tried to remember what **Theon** might’ve needed to hear, once upon a time, when he was done throwing up and washing his clothes three times in a row because he could swear they still smelled like gunpowder and burned hair. But all that came out was:

“The brains get everywhere, don’t they?”

Jon let out a sharp, humorless laugh. “Yeah, they do.” After a beat, he added, “I – I killed a man up North. But that was different – he was – he was trying to hurt me. I still felt sick. I still threw up and everything, and I still have dreams about the – about the way it got all over me. But I don’t – I don’t feel like a **monster** about it, you know? The way I do now.”

“You’re not a monster,” Reek assured him, thinking, **I know a monster.** He gave Jon a little smile,
then remembered that Jon couldn’t see anything besides his eyes. “Or if you are, you’re like, the least monstrous monster I know.”

Jon shook his head. “You’re an asshole,” he said. His foot tapped out a fast rhythm against the door, and he gave another tug at his rubberbands, hard enough to make himself wince.

“Are you going to tell me where we’re going?”

“You’re driving me to this address,” said Jon, reaching into his pocket for a sticky-note and then pressing it onto the center of the steering wheel.

“Then what?”

“They’re sitting in the car and waiting.”

Reek’s hands began to sweat inside their gloves. “Waiting for what?”

“Just waiting, goddamnit.”

“Jon—”

“Can we just please not talk anymore right now?”

Reek shut his mouth and gripped the steering wheel until his hands hurt.

* 

It was a two-story brick house, old but not historical, and located in a neighborhood that implied its owner’s relatively recent ascent of the financial ladder. The late model Mini Coop in the driveway and the season-old saplings in the yard seemed to Reek to confirm this assessment.

The knot in his stomach had been growing since Jon put an end to their conversation, and now that the house was in sight and Reek saw the way Jon watched it as they drove slowly past – skin turning a shade whiter, as though there were some terror inside – he wanted to be somewhere else, anywhere other than this.

“Pull around into the alley.”

Reek felt as though he was gliding, as though he was watching himself at a distance and the hands on the wheel – so smooth and controlled – belonged to someone else. The alley was narrow, the back-yards on either side lined mostly by tall, wooden fences, and he parked beside one of them, understanding that they could likely not be seen from within the brick house.

“You know to keep it running?” asked Jon, and he wiped the sweat off his palms onto his jeans before reaching for his pistol. He had brought along a silencer, a black cylinder longer than the barrel itself, and he bit his lip as he assembled it with an eerie focus.

Reek’s body felt sluggish, his movements muddled with uncertainty, as his brain fired so rapidly that he hardly registered the thought before saying, “You should let me do it.”

Jon looked at him with a stunned expression, like he hadn’t quite heard correctly. “What?”

“Give me the gun and I’ll do it.” Reek extended an unsteady hand, half of him hoping that Jon would say no.

Jon stared at the pistol, then back at Reek. He narrowed his eyes. “Why… why do you want to do
“I don’t.” He could see he’d only confused the boy more, and when he saw Jon’s fingers tighten around the grip, he reached for the barrel, taking a firm hold on it, and saying, “If you don’t want to do this, then just give me the gun.” He fixed his eyes on Jon’s, wishing he had some other way to reassure him that there was no trick here, no favor to be owed. After a moment he felt Jon’s grip loosen, and Reek drew the gun carefully away and tucked it inside his jacket. “Now tell me who I’m looking for.”

“A man named Summers,” Jon replied. He cleared his throat and pulled a pack of cigarettes from his pocket. He flipped open the lid and withdrew a portion of a photograph showing a man with glasses and short, dark hair. “He’s recently divorced. Lives alone, except for the second and fourth weekend of each month, when he has the kids. There’s a – there’s a dog. A beagle, I think.”

“I’m not going to shoot his dog.”

Jon seemed relieved. “I know. I didn’t mean you had to. I just meant – there’s a dog.”

“You better get in the driver’s seat.”

Jon nodded.

“Did Mr. Stark – did he tell you the story with this one?”

“He said we’re just collecting on a debt.”

“Whose debt?”

“He didn’t say.”

The snow had mostly melted off, matting the grass with patches of dirty ice that crunched and cracked beneath the soles of Reek’s shoes as he made his way swiftly through the back-yard and around the side of the house. He figured a knock on the back door might seem suspicious or go unheard, so he waded through the bank of fallen leaves that the wind had blown up between the house and the fence, then crossed around the front of the house and up a set of steps to the front door.

He paused before ringing the doorbell, holding onto the hope that he might wake up at any second to find himself in a bed, somewhere miles away from here.

You’ve done this. You’ve done it before. You know how to do it.

Reek pressed the button. He swayed and listened to the faint chime that answered from inside, listened to the footsteps and then the turning of the doorknob…

It felt like he’d been dropped into a movie, like he was only an actor pushing forward into the house, and though it was his feet pulling him along, and his hands holding the gun and his voice saying, “On your knees!” it wasn’t him at the heart of it – not really.

The beagle was an old dog, slow and with such a pitifully hoarse bark that Reek merely gave him a firm shove with the side of his foot. The man – Summers – looked about as shocked as Reek felt, like he also wasn’t quite convinced that his life had truly taken such a drastic turn. He didn’t seem to grasp that Reek was anything more than a common burglar, and he waved his hands in front of the barrel of the gun, imploring Reek to “Take whatever you want! Take anything!”
Reek supposed it was better that way; one minute Mr. Summers was alive – albeit frightened – and the next he was not, with none of the prolonged interlude in which to feel pain or regret, or to realize that this was irrevocably the end. Even the shot itself was unreal, muffled by the silencer, and Reek took a step back as the man’s body fell forward with a heavy, awful *thunk*. The beagle whined but hung back, and for one mad second Reek thought about *taking* it, maybe giving it to Jon, but before the idea could take root, he found that he was already out the back door of the house, feet carrying him mindlessly across the patio, down the wooden steps and along a newly-poured sidewalk towards the alley.

“Did you do it?” Jon asked breathlessly as he put the car in gear, and Reek knew that this was the next-hardest part – driving away from something like that as though you were *not* in a hurry to go home and take a shower.

“Yeah,” he said. “Here’s your gun back.”

“Is the safety on?”

“Yeah.”

“Then give it to me when we get home.” Jon gripped the wheel fiercely, pulling himself forward so that his chest nearly touched the steering column. He snuck a quick glance at Reek. “How did you not get blood on you?”

“I don’t know. Luck?”

Several minutes later, Jon pulled off-route and brought the car to a jerking stop alongside the curb of a small, empty city park. “I can’t drive,” he said, shaking his head. “I’m sorry, I just – I feel kind of sick. Would you mind switching me?”

“Yeah, okay.”

Jon looked a couple shades paler when he slid into the passenger seat, raked his fingers through his hair and stared dumbly out the window, saying, “Please don’t tell Mr. Stark.”

“I thought you didn’t keep secrets from him?” Reek thought about trying to return the gun again – it weighed strangely in the inside pocket of his coat – but decided to say nothing.

Jon blinked at him and stammered. “I – I *don’t*, but I’m – I don’t want him to think that I – or that you –”

“I won’t tell him,” Reek said.

And if he didn’t know better, he’d have sworn that Jon moved closer to him, painted fingernails inching along the worn leather of the bench seat. Jon smiled at him gratefully.

“I don’t – I don’t get you,” he said, biting his lip.

“I mean, I’m pretty much a total fucking disaster. There’s not a lot to get.”

Jon laughed, and yes, he was definitely leaning in a little, and tapping his tongue stud against the back of his front teeth. “Yeah, no, I think I get that part. But there’s some part of you that’s like, *not* fucked up, and that’s the part I…” Jon took a deep breath and looked out the window again, his eyes tracking a flock of crows as it landed in the bare branches of a tall elm in the park. “Is it fucked up that I want to kiss you? Like, even though you – we just fucking *killed* someone? I know it’s fucked up.”
“What?”

Jon turned away. “Yeah, it’s pretty fucked up, I guess.”

“Mr. Stark would – he wouldn’t like you kissing me.”

Jon looked at him again and raised an eyebrow, as though Robb was a quaint consideration. “Are you afraid of him?”

Reek nodded, but Jon only smiled.

“He won’t find out.”

He will. He will. You know he will.

Reek brought his hands up to clutch at his seatbelt. “That’s two things you’re not going to tell him?”

“You’re more like just one big secret anyway.”

Jon’s hand was close enough to touch him not – not on his knee, but Jon’s fingers worried at the seam of Reek’s jeans, his face close enough that Reek could feel the heat of his breath through the scarf. He heard a click and realized that Jon had unfastened his seatbelt.

He’s only doing it because he’s scared. Because he feels like he owes you something.

I don’t care. I don’t care why he’s doing it.

“So can I?” Jon asked.

“Do you actually want to?” Reek returned, disbelieving.

“Only if you tell me you want me to.”

Reek swallowed, hard. “I want you to, but…” Jon wilted at that, until Reek added, “Promise to close your eyes and keep them closed?”

Jon let his eyes drift shut, long black lashes fluttering as he bit down on the tip of his tongue and then repeated, “Promise.”

Reek’s stomach clenched as he loosened his scarf just enough to expose his lips and chin, and he was embarrassed to remember that he hadn’t shaved in almost a week.

It might as well have been Reek’s first kiss for how nervous he was, but it was also so different – the last time they’d kissed, Jon had left his lips swollen and wet, but this was something so light that at first it hardly felt like anything at all. Jon’s lips just brushed his, parted and dry as though they were merely sharing a breath. Yet there was something electric about the delicate touch of Jon’s mouth compared with his forceful grip on the front of Reek’s jacket.

Finally, all the loathsome voices in Reek’s brain went quiet, and there was only the sound of Jon’s breathing, an airy little gasp that made Reek ache.

– Until Jon pulled away with a hiss. “Fuck! Jesus Christ!”

Reek turned away, fumbling to secure his scarf again, and when he turned back again, he saw Jon’s eyes wide with pain and surprise, fingers covering his mouth while a dark bead of blood
dropped onto the leather seat between them.

“Oh God.” Reek reached for Jon’s wrist, pulled his hand gently away to reveal his stunning, red-smeared mouth, another rivulet forming and then dropping over the swell of Jon’s bottom lip. “Oh God – I’m sorry! I forgot about – Jesus, I’m sorry.”

Jon probed one of his fingers inside his mouth, wincing and then wiping it onto his pants. He stared at Reek, opening his mouth and rubbing it on the back of his hand.

“Your teeth,” he managed before opening the door to spit out onto the asphalt. He continued to spit for some time, and when he was done pulled himself back into the car, flipped down the visor mirror and used the hem of his sleeve to clean the last traces of blood from around his pretty, swollen lips.

“I’m sorry,” repeated Reek, wishing he could will himself out of existence. “I didn’t mean to – I shouldn’t have –” He started the car again. “Let me take you home.”

“What – what happened to them?”

“They got broken.”

Jon rolled his eyes. “Yeah, but how?”

“Someone broke them.”

Jon hesitated before asking, “Was it Ramsay?”

Reek didn’t like hearing Jon say that name. He said nothing, but tilted his head in such a way as to say yes.

“You must’ve really loved him to let him break all your teeth.” Jon looked at him wistfully.

“Not as much as he loved the taste of his own blood.”

Jon gave a sheepish smile, and pulled his pack of cigarettes out of his jacket. He slid one out of the case and rolled it between his thumb and forefinger, considering before he reached over it slip it into the pocket of Reek’s coat.

“For later,” he said.
“We’re going on an errand today.”

Reek hesitated before setting aside the book he’d been reading. He’d long been accustomed to spending time alone, but only recently begun to find it at all enjoyable – and now it fell away again, his nerves jumping as he saw the text from Jon. Grabbing feverishly at the phone, Reek felt foolish for thinking of anything else.

“What errand?” he replied.

He looked at the cover of the book – old and blue, the writing on the thin spine nearly faded away: “Rikki Tikki Tavi and Other Stories.”

“It’s a surprise.”

Ramsay loved surprises – everything was always a surprise or a game or a present.

“Just tell me where we’re going.”

“Just meet me out the front doors in 15.

Nowhere bad.

I promise.”

Reek sighed and rose to dress himself, leaving the book open face-down on his bed. He chose a pair of dark blue jeans, just loose-fitting enough to be fashionable, and a slate-gray sweater that Walda had picked out for him because she liked the way it brought out his eyes. He paused to chide himself.

_Dressing up for him? You’re acting like a little boy._

_Don’t you think it’s kind of misleading to think you can just bury all that under some nice clothes?_

Reek pulled on his altered gloves and down jacket, chose a scarf to cover his face and then
wrapped Ramsay’s red woolen scarf around his neck. He glanced at himself in a mirror before he left, sweeping a shock of white hair out of his eyes, and then locking the bedroom door behind him.

He stopped on the top step outside the front doors of Winterfell, holding a hand up to block the midday sun that shone brighter than it had in weeks, reflecting off the snow and making Reek’s eyes sting. He heard the sound of melting – water dripping from the eaves, clumps of snow dropping off the branches of the pines.

“Pretty nice out, huh?”

Jon leaned against the door of his Camaro, wearing a black commando-style sweater with what Reek thought must’ve been the tightest jeans ever fabricated. Jon smiled up at him, grinding out the butt of his cigarette beneath the sole of one of his colossal Doc Martens, and Reek realized that he was smiling back like an idiot underneath his scarf.

“You – um – you look great,” he said, buckling his seatbelt as Jon started the car. He noticed that Jon’s hair was still damp from a shower, his fingernails shimmering with a fresh coat of royal-blue polish, and he found himself wondering what the occasion was.

“Thanks.” Jon leaned over him to flip down the passenger’s side visor, and Reek caught the scent of Robb’s citrus shampoo. Reclining his seat a few degrees, Jon reached out to thumb the fray of Ramsay’s red scarf. “This is nice,” he said.

*It’s not mine.*

Jon cruised a slow lap around the circular driveway, lighting another cigarette and cranking up the volume on an after-market stereo system before heading out towards Wintertown.

Noticing the way Reek eyed his cigarette, Jon said, “You know, just ask and I can put it out.”

“I don’t mind.”

“Yes you do. I can tell you have an opinion about it.”

Reek laughed – he’d only been watching Jon’s lips. “What’s my opinion?”

Jon shrugged and took a drag. “You think I smoke too much. You probably think I drink too much, too.”

“Well, I am very judgmental. What else do I think of you?”

“You like my hair.” Jon grinned, blew a stream of smoke out the left corner of his mouth. “But everyone likes my hair, so I guess that’s pretty obvious.”

The car turned south onto an overpass, and the sun came roaring in through the windshield. Jon rifled through the console for a pair of taped-together Ray-bans, unfolding them with his right hand and his teeth and then pushing them up onto the bridge of his nose. Reek wished he had his old aviators – he had to look away from the sunlight glinting off the black finish of the hood.

“I think you’re not as hard as you think you are,” he blurted.

“What?”

“You like to act all jaded and shit, but I think you’re actually just kind of sweet.”

Jon snorted and frowned. “How old are you, exactly?”
“Twenty-one.”

“Shit – I thought you were like, thirty.”

“Are you trying to insult me right now?”

Jon began dialing through the radio station, not-so-carelessly blowing a cloud of smoke in Reek’s direction. “You want to talk about an act?” he asked, extending his fingers to give the smallest pluck at the hem of Reek’s scarf. “Why don’t you lose that shit and then talk to me about my act?”

Reek recoiled, twisting in his seatbelt and pushing his back painfully against the door. “I need this!” he countered.

“Oh, like hell you do. I’d bet money you’re not even that fucked-up-looking under there. Felt normal enough when I kissed you, aside from whatever the fuck is going on inside your mouth.”

Reek blinked at him, stunned. “F-fuck you,” he stammered, and he was surprised that after everything that had happened, words could still wound him so easily. “You – you – you have no fucking idea about me, or what it’s like under here, or what I think of you or – or anything. So why can’t you just take a fucking compliment – why can’t you just let me say that I like you without turning it into some bullshit about how I don’t know you when I’m clearly fucking trying to know you?”

Reek collapsed back against the seat. “Why can’t we just go for a normal fucking car ride?”

Jon cleared his throat and looked away, rolled down his window to fling his half-spent cigarette out of the car. He turned up the radio, mumbling, “You can change the station if you want.”

Reek let it linger on some college frequency and watched the way the buildings shimmered as they passed by. The car rolled to a timid stop in front of one of a series of suites in a sprawling complex of medical businesses, and Reek squinted up at the icicle-draped lettering above the door.

“What’s a D.M.D.?”

“Doctor of Medical Dentistry.” Jon rubbed at the back of his neck. “I thought maybe – maybe I could get you some new teeth – if you wanted.” Reek stared at him. “I mean, these guys are good. Robb brought me here once when I – when one of my canines got knocked out, and I was kind of nervous, but they sedate you for most of it. Might take a couple visits to get you all fitted, but –”

“They’ll see my face.”

Jon looked discouraged. “Well, yeah, I guess. But he’s a dentist – he’ll probably only really look at your mouth. I bet he’s seen way worse teeth than yours.”

“You won’t ask to see them when they’re done?”

“I mean yeah. I want to see a lot more than just your teeth. But only when you want me to.”

“You do shit like this, and then I’m an asshole for pointing out that you’re sweet?”

Jon blushed, eyes drifting out the window. He ran a finger around the rim of the steering wheel. “I’m sorry. I just – it’s really hard to hear stuff like that when I’m, you know, trying to pretend I haven’t been thinking about kissing you this entire ride.”

Reek took a deep breath and looked down at his gloves. He imagined what it would feel like to take them off, to lose the scarf and grab a handful of those thick, black curls. He could tell by the look on Jon’s face that he’d allow it.
“You’re – you should probably tell them a name besides Reek.”

Reek swallowed and glanced apprehensively at the door to the clinic. “Like what?”

Jon shrugged. “You could pick whatever you want.”

“You pick for me.”

“Christ, I don’t know.” He looked Reek over. “Theon, maybe. You could tell them you’re a Snow, like me.”

Reek’s eyes widened. “Why Theon?” he rasped.

Jon shrugged again. “I knew this guy named Theon. You remind me of him a little.”

“How?”

“I don’t know. Just – sometimes when you’re not being a total basket-case you remind me of him. Come on – you shouldn’t be late for your appointment.”

*

Not even the cool, prodding fingers of the doctor pushing his tongue to one side as he peered into Reek’s ruined mouth muttering “Oh my” could entirely diminish the high that Reek felt at hearing that name coming out of those lips.

Reek was relieved that the dentist made no remarks about his fingers or his hair or the collar around his neck. He asked few questions, and none about how Reek’s teeth arrived at their current condition. He seemed mainly concerned with which ones caused Reek pain, and which – if any – were salvageable.

“I think we can save a couple of these.” The doctor leaned back in his chair and pulled his glasses off, letting them drop down on the cord around his neck. “Do you have an older photograph of yourself that we might use for reference?”

Reek shook his head. “No,” he said, though he knew that Robb must’ve kept some of their childhood photos stashed away somewhere.

“Do you understand that I’ll have to remove most of your remaining teeth in order to fit you with synthetic ones?”

“You can put me out for that though, right?”

“Yes, of course.”

It was the drugs that managed to smother his panic attack. Though he wasn’t restrained in any way, Reek’s arms and legs felt leaden, as though bound to the chair. The doctor maneuvered a blinding light into position above his face, and Reek swore it was Ramsay’s soft, teasing voice instructing him to count backwards from one hundred. He felt hands on his arm, and the strange bulging of his veins as they filled with anesthetic.

_The last time this happened, you woke up missing…_

_You woke up different._

Reek’s flagging mind suddenly seized on the fear that maybe this had all been one long dream –
that when he came to again, he might find himself still tied up on that saltire. He might wake to find himself staring into those bright, icy eyes, that ruthless mouth twisted into a smile and teasing him, “Time to rise and shine, sweetheart.” His vision began to blur around the edges, and he heard himself mumbling the name “Ramsay” rather than counting back as the doctor instructed.

“No,” the doctor reassured him, “but your friend Mr. Snow is just outside in the waiting room.”

Reek felt his eyes falling shut, his whole awful body dropping away.

Jon?

*

“’Fraid not, love.” The mocking tone of Ramsay’s voice couldn’t hide the jealousy lurking there, and he shook when he grabbed Reek hard by the jaw. “I do find it interesting that someone so repulsive could also be so… romantic.” He shrugged. “Though I guess it does suit how pathetic you are. Best case scenario is he escaped to the North and forgot all about you. Or he might be dead somewhere. I hate to imagine what might happen to such a beautiful boy, traveling all alone like that.”

Reek struggled to breathe, to keep still, to look Ramsay in the face with just the right degree of submission, lest his master feel disrespected on top of feeling jilted.

“Do you know what I’d do if he ever did come looking for you?” Seeing the answer in Reek’s eyes, he gave a wide, wicked smile. “Yes, you do know, don’t you? Tell me, sweetheart – what would happen to Jon Snow if he ever came to save you?”

“You’d – you’d rape him.” The words made Reek want to retch, but Ramsay covered his mouth in a thirsty kiss, as though he couldn’t wait to taste them.

“And I’d make him like it, pet. I’d make him like it the same way you do, and I’d make you watch while he cried like the pretty little whore you made him. And then what would I do?”

“You’d kill him,” Reek whispered.

Ramsay licked his lips. “If I was feeling generous, I’d kill him. So if I ever hear his name out of your mouth again, I swear to god I will do what Robb Stark can’t and I will find him. Understand me, love?”

*

Two visits later, Reek left the office with a brand new set of teeth, a prescription for painkillers and a sloppy grin on his face, thankfully still hidden by the scarf that Jon had diligently insisted the doctor replace at the end of each appointment.

And maybe he was still in the thrall of the sedatives when Jon helped him to his room and Reek backed him up against the wall, pulling Jon into him and whispering, “Close your eyes for me?”

Jon obeyed, cracking a wide smile when Reek pulled the scarf off his own face and tied it around Jon’s in a tight blindfold. “Is this how you want me?” he joked.

“No,” huffed Reek, grabbing Jon with both hands by the back of the neck and crashing their mouths together, biting down hard into the softness of Jon’s bottom lip.

Jon gasped, and then laughed. “How then?”
“Please just fucking kiss me right now and stop asking me shit.”

Jon tasted like cigarettes, and the little silver stud in his tongue pressed against the roof of Reek’s mouth, and when Reek bit down again – hard enough to make Jon moan – he slammed Reek into the wall more forcefully than he’d meant to. “I knew those teeth were a good investment,” he said, fingers trailing the length of Reek’s arm, then stopping to investigate the collar. “Unexpected,” he said, tugging the collar aside to suck at the crook of Reek’s neck.

Reek swallowed as Jon’s right hand slipped up under the front of his shirt, fingernails dragging over the jut of Reek’s hip and then dipping just below his belt. Jon’s breath was hot enough to make Reek flush when he added, “God I wish you’d let me see you.”

Reek’s knees shook, and he wondered how something could feel so familiar and also so completely unreal as Jon’s lips on his skin, Jon’s thigh between his legs, creating an agonizing, intoxicating ache there that came out Reek’s mouth as a thin whine.

“Can I?” Jon asked. “Let me take off your clothes?” His fingers caught on Reek’s belt buckle, and Reek pulled back on Jon’s hair, sharply enough that Jon let go and took a step back.

“I think you should leave.”

He didn’t need to see Jon’s eyes to register his confusion. “What? Why?”

“I just think you should.”

Jon frowned when Reek released his hold. “Did I – um – did I do something wrong?”

Reek sighed. Jon looked so wounded, even with the blindfold – his hands hung awkwardly at his sides.

_Force me_, Reek thought. _Hold me down and don’t let me stop you._

“No,” he said. “No, I – um – I really like kissing you, and I want to – I _want_ to. But it’s just – I’m just – scared of what happens when…”

“Have you never –”

“Of course I fucking have.”

Jon bit his lip before asking, “Did it hurt?”

“Yeah.”

“Can I touch you?”

Reek took Jon’s hand in his and pressed it to his cheek. He leaned into Jon’s palm, shivered as Jon used his fingers to comb through Reek’s thick, brittle hair – his touch still strangely cool.

“I promise not to be like that,” said Jon, planting a gentle kiss at the corner of Reek’s mouth. “I mean, if you ever want to, just like, say the word and I’m yours. We’ll do anything you want – nothing else. Yeah?”

“Why – I mean, you’ve got Robb. Robb’s fucking gorgeous. Why me?”

Jon smiled. “Careful with that question.”
Reek locked Jon out in the hall, still wearing the scarf over his eyes, and when Reek went into the
bathroom he found his reflection grinning irrepessibly back at him, the corner of his mouth curled
up to reveal a set of perfect white teeth.

*

Reek’s fingers trembled as he dialed Roose Bolton’s number, sweaty smears obscuring the digits
on the screen of his phone. He worried at the buckle of collar, wondering what Jon really thought
of it and hoping that Roose might not answer the call, or better yet that the number had been
disconnected altogether.

“Reek – I was beginning to wonder if you’d lost your phone.”

Reek grimaced – he could practically hear that unnerving little smile. Although he was alone in his
room, he replied in a whisper. “No. I – I’ve been busy is all.”

“I spoke with Robb several days ago, and not only is he still alive – he actually seemed fairly
cheerful. So forgive me if I say that you can’t have been particularly busy.” Roose paused to allow
the gnawing sense of shame to reawaken in the pit of Reek’s stomach. “Still, I trust you haven’t
entirely forgotten your purpose. What can I do for you?”

Reek held his breath. He thought about hanging up, or throwing the phone out the window, or
stomping it into pieces.

“Can you take off the tattoos on my knuckles?”

“You know, they have a treatment for that now.”

Reek splayed his remaining fingers against the wall. “Yeah, but I don’t like, have time for that. I
want to be able to take my gloves off, and I can’t do it with these stupid tattoos.”

A silence followed long and heavy enough that Reek had to check his phone to see that the call
hadn’t been dropped.

“It will hurt. Even if I anesthetize you, the healing process will be painful. Aesthetically, it won’t
be an improvement.”

Reek snorted. “Well, I wouldn’t want to look like a fucking walking disaster, would I? Listen, I just
want them gone. I don’t care if it hurts, and neither do you.”

“As you wish,” sighed Roose, sounding preoccupied. “I can see you Thursday evening. Expect to
spend the night – we’ll want to make sure you recover properly. Wounds like these will need some
aftercare. Of course, you know that I’ll be requiring something in return…”

“I said I would.” Reek’s voice was a dry growl. “And I will. But these things are – I can’t just –”

“Yes, I understand: you’re not particularly adept at killing people. Or rather, you aren’t as
enthusiastic about it as you are skilled. But that’s not what I meant – I meant that I’m going to
require something additional to our arrangement.”

Reek rolled his eyes – he should’ve known better than to expect a favor from Roose Bolton.

“Yeah,” he said. “What?”

“Bring me something of Robb’s.”
Hang up. Hang up right this second.

“What do you mean ‘something’? Something like what?”

“Bring me anything that belongs to the boy – it hardly matters what. For your own sake, it should probably be something that he won’t notice missing.”

Reek chewed at his thumbnail. His heart shrieked at him like a siren, but his thoughts felt muddied – he imagined how Jon’s hair might tangle between his fingers, how his body might twist and rise in response to a bare touch – the arc of Jon’s back, the swell of his chest, the flutter of his eyelashes.

“Fine,” he replied.

*  

“Have you seen Snow?” Reek cracked open the door to the entertainment room where Robb sat alone, bathed in the yellow glow of the flat-screen. He wore his pajama pants and a North College sweatshirt, bare feet propped up on an ottoman and a bottle of beer between his thighs.

“If you really care about him, you’ll know that he hates being called Snow,” Robb replied without taking his eyes off the television.

Reek felt a hot dread filling him, and suddenly the scarf covering his mouth felt suffocating. “I, um – I don’t understand.”

Robb let his head drop back against the couch and then turned to regard Reek; the light from the screen caught in his eyes, the rest of his expression obscured. “You know, it might not seem like it, but Jon… he means a lot to me. And I can tell how he feels about you. He tries to act like it’s nothing, but you should see his face whenever I tell him he’s going out for a run with you. It’s pretty fucking obvious.”

*He’s going to make you disappear – for good this time.*

You’re so stupid. You shouldn’t have come back here. You should’ve just fucking offed yourself when you had the chance.

But Robb only squinted at him. “You do like him, don’t you?”

Reek swallowed. “I – no – I – he’s your –”

“Jon isn’t *mine*. He doesn’t *belong* to me.” Robb took a sip of beer and looked down at his lap for a moment, sorting through the words before adding, “I learned a while ago that things get really fucked up if you let yourself think of somebody like that – like yours. So yeah, Jon does what he does. And I don’t always like it but… have you ever tried telling him no?” Reek shook his head mutely, bewildered, and Robb grinned. “If you can tell Jon no and he doesn’t tell you to fuck yourself, that’s how you know he likes you.”

“You love him?”

Robb raised an eyebrow before returning his gaze to the television. “He’s asleep. He’s feeling sick and went to bed early for once, but I – I wouldn’t mind some company, if you’re looking for someone to hang out with.”

Reek wavered in the doorway, eyes flicking from the screen to Robb’s hopeful smile.
“What’re you watching?”

“From Dusk Til Dawn,” Robb replied. He gestured at a mini-fridge beside the TV. “There’s more beer and some pop in there, if you want.”

“I’m okay,” said Reek, sitting rigidly at the far end of the sofa. He folded his hands between his knees and tried to ignore the weight of Robb’s gaze on him.

“I don’t bite, you know.”

But you do.

“Have you ever seen this movie?”

“Long time ago.”

Reek fixed his eyes on the screen, though he strained not to look at Robb, especially when he let out a peal of that boyish laughter that Theon had always found so disarming. The TV was bigger, and everything was so different from how Reek had imagined, but in the dark, with his feet up on the sofa, cozy in a blanket and Robb laughing like that, it almost felt like being home. Madly, it occurred to him to tell Robb everything.

How could Roose expect him to –

It wasn’t until the credits that Reek noticed Robb had fallen asleep beside him, feet buried in the comforter that Reek had wrapped himself in, lying on his side so that his face was fully illuminated. The glaring light washed out the bags under his eyes, and Reek saw with a mix of bitterness and something else how perfect his friend still looked – straight teeth shining between his parted lips, long girlish eyelashes and a rough shadow of a beard. Beneath the cover of the blanket, Reek slipped one of the gloves from his hands, glancing at Robb’s face once more before drawing his fingers lightly along the arch of Robb’s foot. Robb twitched, toes curling, eyes opening halfway for a heartbeat before falling shut again.

Reek nearly jumped when his phone buzzed in his pocket.

“I’m in bed right now – can’t stop thinking about you.”

For once, Reek didn’t reply, but let his bare hand rest on the curve of Robb’s ankle. He could feel the hair on Robb’s leg, surprisingly thick, the gentle tapping of Robb’s pulse in the top of his foot.

He draped the blanket over Robb when he left, plucked the empty glass bottle from between his friend’s thighs, and paused to run the three fingers of his right hand through Robb’s curls before turning off the television and fumbling for the door. When he opened it, he gasped, face-to-face with a pair of accusing blue eyes and a thin, expressionless mouth. He was definitely taller than Catelyn, and yet she seemed to loom over him as though he were still only ten. Now there was something harder about her, something that recalled the feeling of standing in front of all those kitchen knives in the darkness of the Dreadfort.

“Ma’am,” he croaked.

“Is Robb asleep?” she asked, looking past him and into the blackened room.

Reek nodded, eager to escape but somehow frozen in place. “Y-yes, ma’am.”

She regarded him coldly for a moment, squinting at his hands before saying, “Robb has a good
heart—he’s the kind of man who’ll tend to a wounded bird rather than breaking its neck. Kindness comes naturally to him—you shouldn’t take it personally. Goodnight.”

She made no move, only stood there like a statue by the door as Reek stepped cautiously around her and down the hall, not looking over his shoulder out of sheer terror at seeing her figure again. It wasn’t until he returned to his room that Reek realized he was still clutching the bottle so hard that his fingers ached.

* 

The Dreadfort looked bleakest in the late afternoon when the winter sun had already set behind it, but before any of the lights had come on, its appearance forlorn and hollow. He had hoped that Walda might greet him at the door, but it was only Roose who brought him in for a cursory half-embrace.

“You look healthy,” he observed.

“Well, I feel like shit all of a sudden,” replied Reek, looking around and inhaling the familiar, musty air of the central corridor. “Is Walda here?”

“She’s out with our son for the afternoon. She’ll be delighted to see you.” Roose’s hand alighted on the back of Reek’s neck as he ushered him into the house. “As am I. What did you bring me, pet?”
Chapter Twenty-Six

Chapter Summary

Recovery.

Chapter Notes

So I know it's been almost two months since I updated, and I also know that there's nothing worse than reading a Work In Progress only to find that it will never be finished. Thank you, if you are still reading, and know that chapter 27 is finished and chapter 28 is begun. I will be finishing this story, but I'll also be moving across the country and starting a new job this month, so apologies in advance for what might be a kind of long wait.

Also, if I haven't already I want to thank bluetilo for all her wonderful support.

The little room looked precisely the same as it had three years before, as though no one had entered it since. On the dusty bookshelf by the door, the spines still tilted at the same slight angle, in the same topical sequence. The air was colder but smelled the same, and instead of the bright sunbeams that used to light up the richly-stained flooring, the windows admitted only a bleak, uniform grayness that made guessing the hour impossible. In one corner sat the chair.

*Ramsay’s chair*, Reek thought, though of course the chair belonged to Roose.

He remembered the way Ramsay had looked sleeping there, his arms folded across his chest, stocking feet resting on the edge of the bed. He imagined that Ramsay had probably always felt like something of a ghost in his father’s house, and the thought saddened him.

He looked at his hands – each remaining finger wrapped separately in loose, bloody gauze, each one flickering with a dim kind of pain. Lifting the edge of the gauze on his left index finger, he saw a raw, red wound where the letter “B” had been exactingly removed. He shuddered at the realization that he’d been unconscious under Roose’s care, envisioned those thin, chilly hands moving his limp body in whatever way they pleased.

He waited in the room for what felt like an hour, but Roose was not so devoted as Ramsay, and Reek supposed that the master of the house was too busy with important matters to check in very frequently on his dead son’s broken toy.

The sky outside began to darken, and Reek’s stomach growled.

“Oh, Reek – you’re up!”

Before he could lift his head from the pillow to look at her, Walda bent down to press him into the bed with a warm, ungainly hug. He returned the embrace, careful not to touch her with his hands, face buried in the thick waves of her hair.
“Oh my god – your teeth look fantastic!”

Reek smiled helplessly. “Thanks. I – uh – I’m still getting used to them.”

“You’re not still wearing that stupid scarf over your face, are you?”


Walda’s eyes lit up. “I mean, he’s amazing. Who’d have thought that someone that shits his pants every few hours could also be just the most wonderful person in the world?”

“You know, I could do that too if I’d known it would impress you.”

She laughed her high, musical laugh. “I’ve missed you. Now that Dom is crawling, I spend all day just running around after him. Sometimes I forget that I’m actually like, a grown-up now. Roose and I baby-proofed one entire wing of the house last month, and then I spent five minutes trying to open a cabinet before I remembered that it was latched.”

Reek laughed and admitted, “It’s hard for me to imagine Roose holding a baby.” He bit his lip, considering before he said, “He asked me for something, you know – something of Robb’s.”

Walda looked at him seriously. “Asked you for what, exactly?”

“Something’ was all he said – anything. So I brought him a dumbass empty beer bottle. I thought he’d get pissed at me for bringing some of Robb’s trash, but he didn’t say anything about it – he just took it and called me – said I did a good job. You don’t – um – know what he has in mind with it, do you?”

“No,” she replied. “I don’t ask questions that I don’t want to know the answer to.” She took Reek’s hands lightly between hers. “You still care for him a little, don’t you?”


“Then you probably shouldn’t have done it.” She opened her hands to look at his bandages. “Why did you ask for this? It looks painful.”

“I wanted the tattoo gone so I could, you know, touch things without my gloves.”

Walda gave a hopeful smile. “Things like people?”

“Maybe,” Reek said, unable to stop the curve at the corner of his mouth. “Tell me about him?”

Reek blushed. “Just sweet and curious and super fucking hot.”

“I haven’t seen you smiling like that since Ramsay –” Walda frowned. “He doesn’t… treat you anything like that, does he?”

“No.” Reek lay back on the pillow. “He just – he’s hard to explain. We keep secrets from each other. He kisses me, and when I tell him to stop, he just – like I can see that he hates it and he wants to keep going, but he just stops. And he’ll kiss me once more, but it’s like, just a soft little kiss. He – I dunno – he kind of makes me feel like I’m –”

_A man._
“– Like I’m still a person.”

“You are a person though,” said Walda. “Ramsay never – you never stopped being a person.”

“You know that – that the worst of what Ramsay did to me is, like – you can’t see it, right?” Reek swallowed and willed his eyes not to stray downward. “Like, bad enough that if I ever – if Jon ever sees it, he’s going to probably freak out and never touch me again.”

“Or maybe he actually cares about you.” She smiled. “I mean, Ramsay cared about you, and he was pretty much a human-shaped monster, so I find it hard to believe that some actual human wouldn’t be able to care about you also.” Reek opened his mouth to argue, but she interrupted him. “The first time I met you, I thought you were so handsome. You were staring at me – men don’t stare at me much – and I remember I turned bright red, like, I didn’t know where to look.”

“Seriously?” Reek squeezed her hand, and his stomach gave another gurgle.

“Seriously,” she said. “Come on – let’s go downstairs and get you something to eat.”

*

He hoped – perversely – to see Roose before he left. He assumed that Bolton would have questions or instructions for him, but Walda was alone when she saw Reek off apologetically, saying that some business had called her husband to his office, and while some part of Reek felt relief, another part felt strangely cast aside.

*

The courtyard was dark, but the dim, yellow light from the porch shone enough light to cast pinprick reflections in the churning water of the hot tub, and Reek could just make out the curve of Jon’s back – defined muscles slick with water – and the hands that gripped his waist as his hips rolled in an eager, sloppy rhythm.

Reek froze. He’d stepped out onto his balcony for some fresh air, and now found that he was staring down at the two of them, their voices loud but still muddled by the humming of the hot tub motor. He urged himself to look away – this moment was not his to watch, and anyway it was wrong. He repeated the word to himself, as though it might quell the feeling between his legs and release his bandaged fingers from their tight grip on the railing.

*

“What do you want with me, exactly?”

Jon looked startled and gave a snap on his rubber bands. Reek swallowed. He’d been driving for a few minutes before working up his courage, and seeing Jon’s telling little tic made him regret the careless phrasing.

“Want with you? What does that mean? Do I have to want something with you?”

“I mean, I saw you and him in the hot tub the other night and –”

“Not this again,” sighed Jon, smacking his head lightly against the window of the sedan in a gesture of exasperation. “Listen, I don’t know what it’s going to take to get you to understand that I just want you, okay? Are you looking for some like, deep psychological explanation or something? Because I’m sure I could tell you a bunch of bullshit about being assaulted or never knowing my father, or whatever you think it would take to justify the fact that I just really want to see you
naked. Would that make it better for you – if the way I feel about you came from some bad, fucked-up place? Like, can you only get off you know that I’m using you to work out some unresolved emotional issues?”

Reek blushed, and his stomach jumped as Jon sat forward and tucked a few strands of white hair that had fallen into Reek’s eyes back beneath the edge of his scarf.

“Just because I – just because Robb and I are fucking or whatever doesn’t mean I don’t care about you, but every time I – it seems like whenever I try, you just… get scared.”

“I am scared,” Reek admitted, barely louder than a whisper. His chest felt tight as Jon leaned across the cab to press a kiss against Reek’s covered cheek.

“Why?”

“Because I’m a coward.”

_Helpless. Stupid. Pathetic._

Jon frowned. “I think you’re pretty brave,” he said, dropping his head back against the head-rest. “Do you know where we’re going right now?”

“I just go where you say to go.”

“Because you trust me?”

“Yeah.”

Jon smiled, dark eyes alight with a new idea. “So, if I said to put a blindfold on me and give me an hour, would you? Even if you’re scared, would you trust me?” The car jolted as Reek’s foot slipped off the clutch, and Jon’s smile widened as he laid a hand on Reek’s shaking knee. “I mean, I trust your driving – don’t you think you could trust me to take my clothes off for you?”

Reek swallowed hard and tried not to dwell on the fantasy of it, or to notice how his voice cracked when he answered, “Yeah, I – uh – I guess so. Um, where are we going again?”

“We’re going to make a pick-up from one of the Stark Family’s many respectable establishments.”

“Do you – how long do you think you’ll keep working for Mr. Stark?” Reek wondered what his own answer to such a question might be, and Jon shrugged with that very practiced indifference of his, seeming to imply that he hadn’t given the matter much thought.

“I dunno. I guess I just assume I’ll end up dead or in jail by the time I’m thirty.” He shrugged again and picked at the flaking nail polish on his thumb. “But I mean, that was kind of where I was headed since before I even met Robb, so…”

“Where were you, before?”

Jon raised an eyebrow. “Pretty sure I told you that.”

“I meant like, before that, even.”

“Well, before I was Jon the Whore, I was Jon the Runaway, and before that I was just Jon the Bastard.”

Reek paused to let Jon’s bitterness pass over him before asking, “It can’t all have been so shitty
though, right? Like, there must’ve been some good parts.”

“Yeah, there’s been good parts.” Jon’s lips betrayed the slightest hint of a smile. “Right now’s not so bad. God, I’m sorry I’m such an asshole.” He glanced at Reek’s uncovered hands. “I shouldn’t bitch about this stuff to you.”

Reek folded his fingers together and hid them between his knees. “Don’t be sorry,” he said. “If it hurts, it hurts.”

He directed Reek into one of the posh, old boulevards that ran through the heart of the city – brick colonial houses flanked by towering maple and evergreen trees, the streetlights casting an alluring glow over the sidewalks. Reek couldn’t help but think that this was the sort of place that made his father hate the North – wealth masquerading as simplicity.

They stopped in front of a three-story corner house, its every window illuminated. On the porch stood a cluster of figures, smoking in silence.

Reek cut the engine, then unbuckled his seatbelt and reclined his seat, prepared to wait for Jon’s return, but Jon rapped on the driver’s side window and cocked his head towards the house. Reek opened the door.

“You want me to come with?”

“Yeah.” He hesitated. “You think I should lock it?”

Jon rolled his eyes. “It’s a piece of crap. Nobody’s going to steal it. Have you ever been inside a whorehouse before?”

Reek stopped in his tracks in the middle of the boulevard, gaping at Jon and wishing he had his own rubber bands to snap. “Wait, what?”

Jon grinned, tossing his hair out of his face. “It’s just like a normal house, except with whores.” He held out a hand to Reek, and Reek took it without thinking, too disconcerted to really worry about how his missing fingers might feel freakish to Jon. It was only after Jon had pulled him up the steps and to the front door that he realized how cool Jon’s touch still felt, how pleasant against the scar tissue on his knuckles.

Jon knocked on the door. “You forget your gloves?” he asked, rubbing his thumb over the back of Reek’s hand.

“No,” Reek answered, barely audible over the sound of a series of deadbolts unlocking.

The door burst open, releasing a tide of thick, perfumed air and the pleasant din of men’s laughter and women’s voices.

“Jon Snow – so wonderful to see you!” The woman at the door clasped Jon’s hand, warm without being effusive, and gave Reek a sharp, appraising look. “And you’d brought a friend.”

Reek impulsively tried to pull his hand from Jon’s, to hide it behind his back or in a pocket, but Jon held on firmly. “Always my pleasure, Ms. Ryman. How’s business?”

“We’re in the midst of our winter boom,” she replied, her brown eyes lingering on Reek a moment more. “Husbands and wives kept indoors with one another – it drives them a little crazy, and it drives them straight to our doors. Your friend doesn’t say much, does he?”
Reek swallowed. What was there to say? One of the girls passing through the foyer cast Jon a longing gaze.

“He’s a bit overwhelmed,” said Jon, giving Reek’s hand a squeeze.

“You have such lovely eyes,” she said to Reek. “Such an unusual blue.”

“Um, thank you?”

“It speaks!” she exclaimed playfully. “You know, usually Mr. Stark sends some of his goons to make the collection. They track mud in and hassle the girls, always expecting something for nothing. We’re so pleased whenever it’s Mr. Snow instead. I keep trying to recruit him – the money is better, and the work is more fun, and it seems like an awful crime that such a perfect face should be lost to the bloodier part of Mr. Stark’s enterprise, but –” She shrugged her broad shoulders. “He insists that he’d be a bad investment.”

Jon smiled bashfully, eyes sliding sideways to meet Reek’s and affirm the secret between them. “I would like to buy something from you this evening,” he said.

Ms. Ryman raised one of her dark, perfectly-shaped eyebrows. “Oh?”

“Just a room, for an hour. You can take it out of the deposit.”

Reek could see the intense fascination in her expression, but Ms. Ryman possessed enough tact to refrain from asking for further details. Instead she only waved away the proposition of money. “Jon, please. The room is yours for as long as you like. Take number seven – it’s the finest of them.”

Reek’s heart pounded as he followed Jon up the wide, hardwood stairs – he watched Jon’s fingers gliding along the worn curvature of the banister and felt his mouth go dry in anticipation of how those hands might feel on his thighs.

The room was lovely – all the light fixtures were original, and cast a cozy, intimate glow – but Reek could hardly be bothered to take his eyes off of Jon.

Jon turned a full circle, taking in the room for a moment, drawing a deep breath as he shucked his leather jacket onto the floor. When he looked at Reek again, it was with equal parts nerves and desire, his cheeks reddened faintly as he snapped at his rubber bands, his eyes a smoldering darkness. Reek’s breath caught as Jon removed his t-shirt.

“You look nervous,” Jon observed, unbuckling the holster that held his pistol against his side, then peeling off his thin, cotton undershirt.

“You look fucking unreal,” Reek returned, taking a careful step forward, closing the space between them to only a couple feet. He could smell Jon’s cigarettes, and underneath that something sweet that might’ve been cologne.

Jon smiled – a sort of unguarded, boyish smile – and took Reek’s hand, pausing to pass his thumb over the place that used to be a pinky finger before pressing Reek’s palm against the bare skin of his chest. It was the left hand, mutilated beyond all but the most basic use, and Reek stared at its weird, contorted shape against the perfect curve of Jon’s collar bone. He slid his fingers up to press lightly at the image of the cardinal there. Reek squinted at it and bit his lip.

“So are you going to tell me about Satin, or what?”
“Are you just trying to derail me from my mission of getting you naked?”

Reek shook his head. “No. I’m just – curious. I mean, it has to be a name, right? Otherwise you wouldn’t be so uptight about it.”

“He was a boy. Just a boy I loved.” Jon cleared his throat and turned his head to allow Reek’s fingers to follow the tips of the bird’s wings up the muscles of his neck. Reek hated the knot in his stomach, the surge of jealousy he felt, in spite of the fact that Jon was here, Jon was his.

“Was he your first?”

Jon smirked. “My first what?”

“You know, your first?”

“No.”

“Who was?”

“Are we seriously using this time to talk about other guys?”

Reek swept a lock of hair behind Jon’s ear. “Please just tell me his name.” His fingers trembled as they traced the bow of Jon’s bottom lip.

“Theon,” Jon said. “And I don’t –”

Reek leaned forward, pressing his mouth to Jon’s, not minding the fabric of the scarf still between them. He flinched when Jon grabbed the front of his sweater and took three steps forward, strong enough that Reek’s knees buckled when they hit the edge of the bed. Jon laid a hand in the middle of Reek’s chest, pressing him gently back onto the mattress, crawling forward until he had Reek pinned with a knee on either side of his hips.

Reek braced himself – half afraid and half hopeful that Jon might just tear the scarf away from his face, might start undressing him in that possessive, frantic way that Ramsay always did. But Jon only sat back onto his heels to consider Reek with a thirsty stare.

“What?”

“I need to hear you tell me what you want right now.”

Reek squirmed, his crotch pressed against the firm roundness of Jon’s ass.

“Jesus, Jon – I don’t – I don’t know. I can’t think. I just want your hands on me.”

Jon grinned and reached around to pull a red bandana out of his back pocket. “Just tell me when to stop, okay?” He folded the cloth three times and took one last look at Reek before tying it securely over his eyes, then leaned forward, hand traveling up to tug gently at Reek’s scarf until it fell away. Jon passed his fingertips lightly over Reek’s mouth, dipping his thumb inside to trace the edge of Reek’s teeth.

“Okay,” said Reek, and Jon took the opportunity to press his thumb further inside, and with his other hand pulled the scarf away completely. His fingers moved down the length of Reek’s throat until they found the worn leather of his collar and began searching for the clasp. Reek froze.

“Can I?” Jon asked.
It’s not his to take off.

But who do you belong to now?

Reek nodded, then remembered that Jon couldn’t see. “Yeah,” he choked.

He felt strange for a few seconds after Jon removed the collar, like a part of him was missing, but then Jon’s mouth was on his neck and Jon’s hair was tickling his face, and Reek’s brain abruptly shut out the thought of anything else. He felt Jon’s cool touch running down the length of his arms to lift Reek’s hands and plant them on the crests of his hips.

“You can touch me too, you know.” He dropped forward onto one elbow, fingers tangling in Reek’s coarse, white hair as he licked playfully at Reek’s lips, then claimed them with a hard kiss that made Reek hum.

Reek tensed as Jon’s other hand pushed up beneath his sweater, exploring the lines of his stomach, stopping when he arrived at the first major scar. (A butterfly knife – clean, but a long cut that bled and he remembered how Ramsay had liked the taste of it.)

Reek pushed Jon away just long enough to pull his own shirt over his head. “Keep going,” he said.

He watched Jon’s fingers make their way over his ribcage, painted nails oddly innocent as they ventured into the thicket of scars that covered Reek’s left breast.

“Jesus Christ.” Jon frowned, touch lingering there as though he intended to make sense of the marks. “He did this to you?”

“Yeah.”

“He’s lucky he’s already dead.”

“It was my fault,” Reek stammered. “He never h-hurt me without a reason. If I was being good – if I was paying attention – I learned how to not be hurt as much.”

Jon’s fingers circled around the bite mark on Reek’s shoulder, and though Reek couldn’t see his eyes, he could tell that he’d upset Jon.

“I’m s-sorry. I didn’t meant to –”

“You still love him?”

“Sometimes.”

Jon rubbed at a stray cigarette burn, considering its familiarity. “What did he make you feel?”

Reek thought for a moment, trailing his fingers over the cluster of burns dotting Jon’s flat stomach. “Safe,” he answered. “Needed.”

“I can make you feel that, if you want.” Jon leaned down again to lay a dozen wet kisses over the network of scars, and Reek shivered. He grabbed a fistful of Jon’s curls, and this time it was Jon who let out a low moan as his hips ground against Reek’s thigh. Reek could feel Jon’s erection, and as much as it terrified him, it amazed him to think that Jon could be so hard – rutting shamelessly against his leg – in spite of everything, whispering into his ear that he wanted to make Reek feel better than he ever had.

“I want to feel it when you come. I want to hear the sounds you make. I want to make you forget
about him.”

Reek intercepted Jon’s hand as it wandered dangerously between his legs and pressed a kiss to Jon’s palm. “And what would that make you forget?”

Jon smiled. “You make me forget about everything else.” Sitting back, he swept a few strands of hair out of his face, then dragged his nails across Reek’s stomach just hard enough to leave a set of red streaks in their wake. “Like, everything outside of this room has just sort of fallen away.”

Reek’s spine went rigid when Jon’s hands started working at his belt buckle. “Please,” he breathed, catching a hold of Jon’s wrist. “Be careful.”

Reek felt the cool air against his stomach as Jon unzipped his fly and opened the front of his jeans. He closed his eyes and then willed them open to watch Jon’s face as his fingers slipped beneath the elastic of Reek’s boxer-briefs. Jon gave a soft gasp.

“Reek…?”

“Yeah?”

“Should I stop?”

“Only if you want to.”

He bit his lip and worked hard not to panic, felt tears forming in the corners of his eyes as Jon’s touch continued lower.

“When – um, how long ago did this –”

“Three years.”

“Does it hurt?”

“Yeah, but – oh god –” Reek’s eyes rolled back as he bucked up against the heel of Jon’s palm. “But not in the way you think.”

The truth was that it felt good enough to make Reek’s mouth hang open, eyes closed as Jon rubbed him there, and Reek feared that if it went on any longer he might start crying. He whined when he pushed Jon’s hands away.

“Did I do something wrong?”

“No. Fuck no. But we only have an hour, and I don’t – um – I don’t even think I can actually –”

“Oh.”

Reek’s heart sank as he registered the dismay on Jon’s face. “Hey,” he said gently, thumb rubbing at the white rose on Jon’s right hip. “I showed you mine, so…”

“I don’t know if I should –”

“You definitely should.”

Jon smiled, cheeks turning a deep red as he fumbled with the four buttons on his jeans, then shoved them down around his thighs. Reek took a few seconds to admire the shape of Jon’s prick through the cloth of his underwear before tugging them down to reveal an erection slightly larger than he
remembered it, arcing up from a thick, black bush to slap against the word “SNOW” just below Jon’s navel.

“Kind of a strange tattoo,” Reek mused, grazing his knuckles along the underside of Jon’s cock. “Afraid you might forget your own name?”

“Oh my God, did you know you’re super funny?” Jon retorted, giving Reek’s nipple a savage twist. “It’s just what everyone called me.”

Reek wrapped his better hand around Jon’s length and gave a few slow strokes. “You want me to call you Snow?” he teased.

Jon shook his head and bit his lip. “Hm-mm. I like when you call me Jon.”

Reek reached between Jon’s legs to grab his ass and push his hips forward so that Jon fell onto his hands and knees, and if Reek lifted his head from the mattress, his lips just brushed the leaking tip of Jon’s cock. “You want me to suck it, Jon?”

Jon gave a dry cough before answering, “Yes please.”

He sighed when Reek swallowed him, hips jerking forward while Reek braced one hand on the small of Jon’s back to hold himself up, the other fist around Jon’s prick, pumping and twisting in time with his mouth.

“Oh – god –”

Reek moaned to feel Jon’s fingers in his hair, and when he raised his eyes to Jon’s face, he saw that Jon was bracing himself with his forearms and had his head bowed against them. He wished he had the courage to tell Jon to remove the blindfold.

“Are you going to come for me, Jon?”

Jon whimpered affirmatively, and Reek felt the way his whole body quivered as he fought to maintain his balance. He gave a low him, and was rewarded with a strangled, “Oh fuck.”

“Do you have any idea how fucking good you taste?” Reek licked a sloppy line from the base of Jon’s cock to the head, then slipped a wet finger behind Jon’s balls to press against his entrance.

“Oh God – fuck me – please.”

And Reek hadn’t expected to hear that, or the way Jon rocked back onto his finger, then thrust forward into his mouth, where he spent thirty seconds later, shaking through his orgasm while Reek swallowed it. Jon collapsed beside him on the bed.

“Was that… okay?” he asked after he’d caught his breath.

Reek kissed him slowly, loving the way Jon’s mouth opened for his tongue, the cool touch of Jon’s strong hand on his waist, pulling him closer. Reek felt something tickle him, and looked down at the three neon rubber bands around Jon’s wrist.

* 

Reek took one last look at the deposit they’d come to collect before closing the trunk of the car. “Shit.”
“What?” Jon leaned on the roof, arms folded beneath his chin, watching Reek intently while his cigarette hung in the corner of an inextinguishable smile.

“I left my collar in there.” Reek reached for his throat, somehow feeling more naked than he had fifteen minutes earlier, with his shirt off and his pants undone, the taste of Jon’s orgasm still fresh in his mouth.

“I was hoping you’d forget about it.” Jon rolled his eyes. “Fine – I’ll get it. Back in a second.”

Reek watched him go, and he found himself longing violently to be back in that bedroom; he wished he hadn’t pushed Jon’s hand away. It felt good to be touched there, and Reek realized that it still felt good, just remembering.

The sky was dark, and reminded Reek of the way Pyke looked during the new moon – the blackness of the ocean that stretched out forever. Not long before he’d left, Asha had taken him out one night to a grassy hillside hidden from the lights of the port.

“Don’t let go of my hand,” she’d said, which was so unlike her.

“Where are we going?”

“To the drop.”

Theon knew the place – a sheer cliff where the hills fell away to a rocky beach fifty feet below. He squeezed Asha’s fingers with his own. A fresh breeze was blowing in from the sea that night, and they sat on the edge of the drop for almost an hour – feet dangling off into the air, listening to the sound of the surf crashing against the base of the cliff.

Reek wondered how things might be different if he had returned to the Islands with his sister. He imagined what life would be like if he had never left – how different his relationship with Robb might be if they had met as young men, Theon the heir of the largest shipping empire on the West Coast, Robb the head of the most powerful family in the North.

And where would that leave Jon?

He couldn’t help but feel that maybe things would’ve been better that way – if Jon had grown up in Wintertown, maybe gone to school there, or learned a trade, or decided to travel after he turned eighteen. Almost anything else, really.

Jon was still smiling when he returned, the collar wrapped around the knuckles of one hand. “You want me to put it back on you, or what?”

Reek opened the driver’s side door. “No. That’s okay. I just, you know – I just wanted it back.”

Jon handed it over as he buckled his seatbelt. “Looks expensive,” he remarked.

“Probably.” Reek turned the collar over in his hands. The leather was soft and dirty, but the stone still glistened dangerously.

“Who were you before this?” Jon asked with wide, dark eyes.

“Stupid,” said Reek with a huff of a laugh. “Optimistic. Too busy trying to be who I was supposed to be.”

Jon raised an eyebrow. “And who’s that?”
“Just another rich boy, I guess.” Reek shook his head and twisted the garnet between his thumb and forefinger. “Selfish. Hung up.” He started the car and accelerated down the boulevard.

“And Ramsay changed all that, huh?”

Reek shrugged.

“Robb hates him.” Jon leaned back in his seat. “He won’t tell me why, exactly, besides the fact that Ramsay was a sick fuck. He dragged me to the funeral – he said we were only going because he was obligated to make an appearance, you know, but he told me that he was sorry he hadn’t been the one to do it. He said if he’d done Ramsay, it wouldn’t have been open casket.” Jon laughed uneasily. “Robb talks big like that but… I don’t know. And then during the service, I looked over at him and he was fucking crying. That’s the only time I’ve ever seen him cry.”

Reek glanced in the rearview mirror, squinting in the glare of the headlights of the car behind them.

“Does it bother you if I ask about him?”

“Ramsay? No.”

Jon snapped his rubber bands and stayed quiet for a beat. “That was a really really good blowjob,” he said, as though he was only thinking aloud.

Reek smiled, looking again in the mirror. “Thanks.”

“You know, you’re always asking about why I like you but, like…”

“Be quiet for a second,” said Reek, reaching across Jon to check that his seatbelt was fastened.

“What’s –”

“I think we’re being followed.”

Jon twisted to look out the rear window at the pair of headlights half a block behind them. “What makes you think they’re following us?”

“The distance,” Reek replied, looking at the speedometer. “Like, right now I’m going 25.” He pressed on the brake. “But if I slow down, they keep that same space between us, even though I’m going 10 under.”

“So what do we do?” Jon asked, clearly struggling to suppress the panic in his voice.

Distantly, Reek felt his own pulse rising, his hands beginning to sweat as his mind dialed through a series of possibilities.

“You think they’re going to kill us?” Jon’s eyes widened, and he glanced again at the headlights behind them, winking brightly as the car passed over a rut in the pavement.

“Can you see what kind of car it is?” Reek asked. “Or how many people are inside?”

Jon shook his head. “No. I mean, it’s a car – not a truck or a van. But I can’t tell – the windshield’s tinted.” He looked at Reek. “I bet we can lose them if we speed up.”

“I don’t think they’re trying to catch us,” said Reek. “I think there’s something wrong with our car.”
“Shit.”

Reek’s fingers ached as his grip tightened on the wheel, trying to find a way around the conclusion he’d reached. “Right, here’s what we’re going to do: I’m going to pull into one of these alleys. They’re probably going to stop just outside of it and wait. They might kill their lights, or they might realize that we’re on to them and get out of the car. As soon as we stop, I’m going to pop the hood and take a look.”

“What do I do?”

“Keep your gun on ‘em.” Reek swallowed and laid a hand on Jon’s thigh. “I wish I could do it for you, but... I won’t be able to make the shot at that distance.”

Jon blanched. “But what if they’re not – I don’t know if –”

“Jon, I need you to do this for me.” Reek gave Jon’s leg a squeeze. “In about thirty seconds, we’re going to know for sure if these guys are trying to kill us. If they are, I’m going to need you to keep us safe. Can you do that for me, babe?”

Jon blinked at him. “Yeah. I can… I can do that.” He cleared his throat and pursed his lips resolutely, then pulled the pistol from beneath his shirt and took a deep breath as he chambered the first round.

Reek took a sharp left turn and accelerated down an alleyway shadowed by tall hedges, swerving to avoid an overturned garbage can before bringing the vehicle to an abrupt halt. He reached down to pull the pedal that disengaged the hood, then opened the door to look towards the mouth of the alley, where the other car had screeched to a stop. Reek squinted in the harsh glare of the headlights. He heard Jon’s door open, saw him turn off the safety on his pistol before exiting the car. Reek hurried to the front of the car, maimed fingers feeling through the grill for the lever that allowed him to fully open the hood. The hood blocked the light from the other car, and in the darkness Reek could barely see the engine, but he didn’t need to.

In his periphery, he heard the sound of another car door opening, a shout, the sound of a gunshot and glass shattering. He stared down at the explosive device, nested arms’ reach within the engine block, a dim display counting down the seconds.

The next shot made him jump. Peering around the hood, he saw a man lying on the gravel, lifeless.

Jon was shaking when Reek grabbed him by the arm.

“Come on, let’s go.” He pulled Jon along, away from the sedan, and he could feel the heaviness in Jon’s feet, the way his knees wobbled with each step.

Jon stopped suddenly, pulling away. “The deposit – we’ve got fifty grand in the trunk –”

“Unless you know how to defuse a bomb, we’ve got to get out of here now.”

“It’s my job, though,” said Jon, with a vacant tone. “I was supposed to –”

Reek clasped Jon’s wrist as tightly as he could, tugging almost violently until Jon took a few steps forward. “Never mind the fucking money, Jon! That car is going to blow in less than three minutes, and we need to get as far away as we fucking can, okay? In ten minutes, there are going to be a bunch of fucking cops here, and we need to be gone! Robb can deal with the police, but not if we’re still here when they arrive.”
“But he’ll be mad about the money –”

“It’s nothing. The money’s nothing. I promise I’ll tell Robb that I made you leave it. Just – please just get in the car.”

Jon stared at him, dazed, then nodded slowly. Reek held onto his wrist, leading him towards the car that had been following them. He opened the door for Jon, then scrambled around to the driver’s side, pausing to examine the face of the dead man on the ground, but finding it an unfamiliar one.

He didn’t bother buckling his seatbelt before slamming the car into reverse, then into first and speeding away down the boulevard.

*

Reek didn’t allow himself to look at Jon until they’d arrived at Winterfell. He listened to the flick of Jon’s Zippo as he lit a cigarette and tried to mask a stray, tearful sob as a cough.

“I feel like I’m fucking cursed,” he muttered.

Once the car was parked in the garage, Reek turned to him. The tears had dried on his cheeks, but his eyes were still bloodshot and glassy.

“You’re going to have to learn not to cry so much,” Reek said, instantly regretting his tone.

“Fuck you.”

“Jon –”

Jon resisted Reek’s touch for a moment before submitting to it, eyelashes fluttering closed as Reek combed a cluster of curls back behind his ear.

“Stay with me tonight?”

“I can’t,” Reek choked.

“Why not?”

“I need to find out who he was.” Reek passed his thumb over Jon’s parted lips. “And fucking kill whoever sent him.”

*

Reek found Robb in his office, rubbing at his temple with one hand while he poured over a list of accounts. The lighting in the room was unusually dim, and all the surveillance screens had been turned off. A half-empty glass of whiskey and ice dripped condensation onto the surface of the desk.

He looked up when Reek entered, tired eyes stirring to life, crinkling at the corners with that beautiful smile of his.

“Reek – you wanna sit down?”

“No.” Reek stood across the desk, leaned his thighs against its edge. His mouth felt dry.

“How did the collection go?”

“Not great.”
Robb frowned. “What happened?”

“We were followed.”

Robb stood slowly, and Reek searched his face for some hint of knowledge or deceit, but Robb sounded so sincere when he asked, “By who?”

Before he could think, he’d thrust his hands into Robb’s chest and shoved him backwards, stumbling over the legs of his chair and crashing into the wall. A second later, Reek had Robb by the front of his shirt, and he could feel Robb’s racing heartbeat, Robb’s hands warm as they wrung at Reek’s wrists. Reek swallowed.

“Don’t act like you don’t fucking know,” he hissed, face burning beneath the cloth of his scarf. “We were followed by someone who knew where find us – who knew what we were driving – and you’re going to sit there and fucking smile at me? You’re as worthless as your fucking father.”

Robb’s grip loosened, his blue eyes wide. “Theon?”

“Stop!” Reek pulled Robb forward, only to smash him back against the wall hard enough to make his eyes water. “Stop stop stop! I’m not him.” Reek could feel his whole body fighting to stay upright, his hold on Robb’s shirt tight enough to send electric pains up the length of his arms.

“Theon please –”

Reek released one hand just long enough to grab Robb just below the jaw and slam his head back. He could feel Robb gasping for air, and a voice from somewhere deep inside reminded Reek that this was what he wanted, this was what he was supposed to do. In his mind’s eye, Reek imagined crushing Robb’s throat, the way Robb would try to pry himself free, the way he would shake and the way his face and eyes would turn red with blood.

But when he actually looked at Robb, all he could see was a pair of pleading eyes, soft lips still breathing his name as though it was a prayer.

“Tell me – tell me that you didn’t. Tell me that you love him and promise me that you will never let anything happen to him, or I swear to God, Robb, I will tear your fucking throat out, and I don’t care what happens after that.”

Robb gasped for breath when Reek released his hold, coughing drily a few time before managing, “You know Jon is everything to me. I would never – I’d never do anything to hurt him. Please – please take off the scarf. Please let me see you.”

Reek faltered, recoiling from the thought even as he said, “The same way you’d never do anything to – to hurt me?”

“Theon – I didn’t –”

Here Reek shoved him again, fury rebounded at even that fraction of a denial. “Yes you did! You sent me – you sent me away. You had me – all the things he did to me, he did because you let him. You gave me away and then forgot about me!”

He trembled, paralyzed suddenly when Robb reached up to begin delicately unwrapping his scarf, heart hammering in his chest as the fabric fell away onto the floor. If Robb was shocked by what he saw, his eyes gave no indication. “I could never forget about you,” he said, tears overflowing his eyes. “I think about you every day.”
“You – you were supposed to take c-c-care of me,” Reek stuttered. A terrible pain began to blossom in his chest, as though some invisible weight had been dropped on him. “After your dad died, you were supposed to –” He stopped as Robb collapsed into him, slumping to the floor, clutching at Reek’s broken hands hard enough to hurt.

He watched bewildered as Robb buried his face in Reek’s thigh, silent, convulsive sobs coursing through his body in waves.

“Robb –” Reek made a half-hearted attempt to pull away, but Robb only clung to him tighter. “Please –”

“Theon – oh God – I’m s-s –”

“Don’t you dare fucking tell me that you’re sorry,” said Reek through clenched teeth.

Robb looked up at him, tears spilling down his cheeks, lips quivering with each breath. “Then tell me what to say.”

A part of Reek wanted to hurt Robb – maybe break that glass of whiskey across his pretty face – but another, deeper part only wanted Robb to stop crying. He couldn’t quite believe it when he found himself crouching down beside Robb, wiping his tears away, hushing him, begging him: “Jesus Christ – I don’t want you to say anything. Just – please don’t cry, Robb.”

Unthinking, he pulled Robb into him to press a dry kiss to his forehead.

“I never meant for this to happen,” Robb said, raising his eyes to meet Reek’s in supplication. “You – you know that. Please tell me you know that.”

“I know,” said Reek. He held Robb like that for some time, listening to his ragged breathing, feeling the heat that seemed to radiate off Robb’s curled body in waves. “Promise you won’t tell Jon,” he said, half-burying his face in Robb’s hair, inhaling that familiar, sweet smell that was as much home as anywhere.

“I promise,” Robb sniffled. “I – I think he thinks you’re dead.”

“He told you about me?”

Robb looked at him blearily. “Of course he told me about you. He told me how he met you in a grocery store parking-lot when he accidentally backed into your Zagato. He said you were his first, and he wonders what happened to you that you never came back for him.”

Reek frowned. “I should’ve left him alone. So should you.”

“Yeah, well. We both should’ve done lots of things.” Robb rubbed at his eye with the heel of his palm. “Dad should’ve taken better care of him.”

“Someone’s trying to kill him,” said Reek somberly. “Someone in this house wants Jon gone. So you need to do your dad’s fucking job and take care of it.”

Robb’s face settled into a grim expression. “I will.”

“You should – you should probably go to him. He – he needs you tonight.”

Robb sighed and wiped at his cheeks with the sleeves of his button-up. “I will but – could you stay? Just for a little while, with me?”
He woke to the tickle of Robb’s fingers on his forearm. “Theon?”

“Yeah?” He realized he’d nearly fallen asleep like that – sitting on the couch with Robb’s head rested on his lap, Robb’s red Chuck Taylors propped up on the sofa cushion and Theon’s arm draped over his waist while one of Ned Stark’s nameless old soul records crackled warmly through the speakers.

“Can I call you Theon now?”

Theon hesitated. A pair of cold, gray eyes peered at him through his memory. But Robb’s eyes were warm and blue.

*Like a picture of a beautiful place that you’ll never actually visit,* he thought, and said, “Only when we’re alone.”
“You don’t have to do this.” Theon cleared his throat and pretended not to notice how Jon’s hands trembled beneath the flow of the faucet.

“Well I am doing it, okay?” Jon checked that he’d locked the bathroom door, then slipped a plastic basin into the sink and watched it fill. He braced himself against the edge of the sink, regarding his reflection in the medicine-cabinet mirror with a distant expression.

Theon wondered what he saw.

“It’s just a little spatter,” he offered, picking at the flecks of gore that dotted his knuckles and the backs of his hands. “I can clean it up myself.”

Jon turned the tap off and tested the water with his fingertips. “Why are you treating me like this?”

“Like what?”

“Like I’m… I don’t know, like I’m some kind of damsel in distress or something. Like you can save me, just show up and erase everything that came before… this.”

“Before what?”

Jon rolled his eyes and lifted the basin by its edges. “Sit,” he ordered, nodding towards the toilet.

Theon obeyed, slouching with his elbows on his knees, watching as Jon knelt in front of him, slowly so as not to spill any of the water. “Before what?” he repeated, once Jon had set the basin safely on the tile.

“Before, you know, whatever this is.” Jon shrugged and threaded his five fingers with Theon’s three. “You can’t fix me any more than I can fix this, and I don’t like feeling like I owe you.” He dipped a fresh washcloth into the water, biting his lip as he spread Theon’s fingers apart to clean the spaces between them.

Theon’s hands tingled as Jon scrubbed them with the cloth – just a little too hot for comfort, and Theon was aware of an almost forgotten feeling that seemed to wrap itself about him like a blanket. “You can pay me back in winks, if you want.”

Jon looked up at him. “Winks?”

“Yeah, you know –” Theon gave a sly flicker of his left eye.

Jon bit his lip. “I’m trying to be serious.”

“Yeah, and I’m trying to make you smile.”

Jon shook his head and pinched the cloth to scrub around Theon’s nails, unable to hide his grin.
When Theon looked down at the basin between his feet, he saw that the water was dirty with blood.

* 

It was uncommon that Ramsay allowed him to bathe, but on the occasions that it did happen, Ramsay liked to wash Reek himself. His touch could be gentle – when he willed it – and Reek could not help but moan at the warmth of the water, his master’s strong hands kneading at his stooped shoulders. Ramsay remained quiet, aside from the obligatory remark about Reek’s diminishing weight, and cleaned his every scar, every angle and curve and shameful place with a focused attention that Reek understood as love.

* 

He was in the library when one of the housekeepers knocked timidly before opening the door.

“Um, excuse me, but – Mr. Stark has asked that you please join him in the armory.”

Theon arched an eyebrow, looking up from a well-worn copy of *A Separate Peace* to notice the way she avoided his gaze by staring up at the elegant chandelier overhead.

“Did he actually say please?”

“Yes.”

Theon snorted. “What was his working exactly?”

The girl squirmed, eyes downcast as she replied, “Mr. Stark said to ask his associate Mr. – Mr. Reek to please join him in the armory at his earliest convenience, and that if he asks, to tell him that it’s not a matter of business.”

“Then tell Mr. Stark that I’ll be down at my earliest convenience,” Theon replied with a smirk. “Tell him I apologize, but I don’t walk as fast as I used to.”

“Yes sir.” She hesitated for a few seconds before she left and closed the door carefully behind her.

Theon returned to his book, determined to make Robb come and find him himself, but he found he was too agitated to read, eyes skimming the same page over and over as he wondered what Robb might want with him. He stood with a heavy sigh, leaving the book open on the arm of the chaise and heading downstairs.

The shooting range was well-insulated, and reduced the report of two distinct firearms to a series of inoffensive pops that grew only slightly louder as Theon approached the door. He waited until the shots ended, followed immediately by a peal of that infectious laughter that he knew belonged to Robb.

He’d expected Jon, but when he entered, it was a different pair of wide, dark eyes that turned to greet him.

“Reek – glad you could join us.” Robb smiled as he laid aside his 9mm. “Ary’s trying to make a case for why she ought to be on the payroll.”

Arya smirked and blew a few strands of hair out of her face as she holstered her .44. “So far, I think I’ve made six valid points,” she said, gesturing toward the target at the end of the lane which bore six tightly-clustered holes around the head. Reek looked at Robb’s target, where a looser grouping
pierced the vital organs.

“And I keep telling her that she might be better than me, but she’s still too young for family work.”

Arya smacked her gum, unimpressed. “Gendry was sixteen when he started working for Dad. Theon too. And Jon was probably my age when he –”

Theon saw Robb’s shoulders go rigid. “Jon didn’t work for me until last year.”

“He worked in a brothel that you own,” she pressed. “Some of the money he made wound up in your accounts. So in a way, Jon’s probably been working for the family at least as long as you have.”

“You think you’re pretty goddamn smart, don’t you?” Robb’s steely tone ended the discussion, and Arya looked away in chagrin. “You know how Jon would feel if you said that to him? You think he wanted to work there? And Gendry – Gendry’s Bob Baratheon’s fucking son, and he grew up in our fucking garage. And Theon –” Robb locked eyes with him. “Dad was stupid to think that was a good idea. Theon fucking hated it, you know?”

Theon blinked. He wondered if Robb had always known that/

Gently, Robb reached to lay a hand on the back of Arya’s slim neck. She sighed and rested her fingers on top of his. “You have so much more to offer than just… that,” he said, nodding towards the target. “In three more years, you can do what you want, and if this is still what you want to do, I won’t stop you. Though you might have to contend with Mom, since you’re now the lady of the family, and she’ll probably want you to go to college and get married, and definitely not run off with a guy twenty years older than you,” he teased, pulling her into him. “But until then, it’s my job to keep you safe.”

Theon saw something cruel flare in her eyes, some remark she thought better of making, and in its place she only muttered, “I’m sorry I said that about Jon.”

“It’s okay.” Robb pressed a kiss to the top of her baseball cap. “You’re not wrong, exactly.”

Arya scowled. She looked at Theon, and he stared dumbly back, struck by her likeness to Jon – the pouting lips and dark hair, the serious expression.

“You guys want me to get lost?” she asked.

“Yeah. Reek and I are going somewhere in a few minutes. You can be in charge while we’re away.”

“What about Jon? Is he going with you?”

“No,” Robb replied. “I sent him on an errand.” Seeing the alarm in Theon’s gray-blue eyes, he gave Arya a light push towards the door.

“Anybody needs taking care of?” she offered jokingly.

Robb expelled an exasperated sigh. “No, but feel free to answer my emails or get started drawing up a construction contract for the Frey Brothers.”

“Ew. No thanks. I’ll see you when you get back.”

She’d barely left the room when Theon turned to Robb. “You sent him somewhere without me?”
“I just sent him to pick up a couple things for me. Legal things. You can relax.” Robb shrugged. “Jon can take care of himself.”

“But – I thought you hired me to – you know, keep him safe from his…”

Robb cast Theon a cutting look. “Well, Jon will be the first person to tell you that he hasn’t got a problem and doesn’t need a babysitter,” he said sardonically. “You should’ve heard him when I first told him I was hiring a driver: ‘Fuck you, Robb – I don’t need a fucking chaperone!’ Now it’s all ‘Is Reek coming? Will Reek be there?’”

Theon smirked. “Jealous, Stark?”

Robb’s jaw clenched. “Of course I’m fucking jealous. He talks about you all the damn time, but tries to seem like he’s not really thinking about you that much, so it’s just fucking… annoying. Plus, I hate hearing him sat that… name. I could go my whole life not hearing it again.” He rolled his eyes. “Anyway, it’s not like I sent him out alone. He’s got one of Umber’s boys with him.”

Theon scoffed. “You should’ve sent me,” he said, remembering too clearly the words that Jon Umber’s sons had used when they were out of their father’s earshot – Hostage. Prisoner. Traitor.

“Ned Stark’s gonna put a fucking bullet between your eyes, Island rat.”

“I swear to God, if something bad happens to him because I’m not there –”

Robb closed his eyes and raised a hand. “Spare me the details, please.” Then his shoulders drooped, and something the bereft way he looked at Theon made Theon feel ashamed of his theatrical half-threat. “The issue you brought to my attention has been resolved. I never did thank you,” said Robb softly. “For what you did for him.”

He just doesn’t know how to show it, Theon realized. And why would he? Like Theon, Robb didn’t understand how to manage a relationship that wasn’t built on debt and secrets, though he craved such a thing. Theon cringed to remember the way he’d treated Robb when they were younger, the way he’d enjoyed making Robb cry.

You raped him.

His mind recoiled from the word like a hand that’s touched a hot coal.

“Do you ever – um, do you tell Jon that you – you should tell him you love him.”

Robb turned red and smiled like a boy caught in a crush. “Nah. You don’t tell people that when you’re me. It’s probably the most dangerous thing I could say to him,” he added gravely. Robb stood beside the door, running his finger along the curve of Theon’s old bow where it hung on the wall. “I thought maybe I’d be able to say it to you someday, when you were running the Iron Islands and we were… I didn’t even say it to you, and look what happened.” He stopped and cleared his throat. “It’s stupid.”

“No, it’s not.” Theon resisted the desire to touch Robb. “It’s not stupid, it’s just… not the way things happened.”

Robb’s eyes glimmered, and Theon noticed that the dark circles beneath them seemed to have deepened in hue.

“Robb?”
"Yeah?"

"You look like shit."

Robb grinned, and Theon remembered that it had always been Robb’s reaction to his hurtful comments.

"Yeah, well… I was thinking maybe I could use a little break from all the man-in-charge stuff. Thought maybe you’d want to come with me, just to get out of the house of a couple hours and go somewhere not so… somewhere we can breathe. If you’re not busy." Robb looked at his toes, and Theon thought that he still blushed like a boy.

"Sure," said Theon. "But only if you drive."

* 

"Would you take off your scarf, maybe?" Robb asked, as soon as they’d passed out of the Wintertown city limits.

"I will if you tell me where we’re going."

"I was thinking maybe we could go up to Long Lake and just walk around the marina a little or something. You used to like that."

"Yeah, when I was nine."

Robb frowned. "We could go somewhere else if you want. It was just an idea."

"I mean, I guess we can go there. It’d be nice to see some water." Theon untied the scarf and then wrapped it around his left forearm. He flipped the visor down and combed his fingers through his hair a few times, sighing at his reflection in the grubby mirror.

"Do you think it’ll stay that way?" Robb asked.

"Fucked if I know."

"I like it. I mean, you’ve always been handsome but the hair makes you look…" Robb trailed off before amending, "You know you’re still you, right?"

Theon glared at him, and tasted a slew of merciless words half-formed on his tongue. He swallowed, smirked and said, "I know."

* 

The water was calm – not so much as a fish jumping to wimple its still surface – and there was no smell that Theon could detect, aside from the dim odor of fuel as they walked past a line of well-kept pleasure boats and out to the end of the pier.

Ned had brought them here as children, naively thinking that the sight of boats and the sound of gulls might alleviate the melancholy that he assumed stemmed from his ward’s homesickness. But that had never been the root of Theon’s bitterness, and anyway, the small, clean craft here were nothing like the rusted, hulking freighters of the Islands, and the sky was too clear a blue and the lake was nothing like the sea.

"Come home with me," she said.
He and Robb stood silently on the rotting planks of the pier for some time, Theon watching out of the corner of his eye while Robb rolled a loose joint. “I’m shit at these,” he said with a smile, pushing a pair of amber-tinted Oakleys back up onto the bridge of his nose.

“Didn’t know you smoked.”

Robb shrugged and took the first hit. “You can blame Jon for that. Last year I started getting these… migraines, I guess. Like, I can’t even see straight, and Jon says smoking a bit of pot from time to time might help.” He offered the joint to Theon, who took a modest drag and passed it back.

“How’s that working for you?” he coughed.

“Better than the pills the doctor gave me.” Robb blew a trio of smoke rings up towards the cloudless blue sky.

“He teach you that, too?”

“Yeah well, you never would.” Robb smiled, almost as dazzling as the sun reflecting off the water, and in the high midday light, his hair looked almost red. “Remember the first time Dad caught you smoking? I got sick at school, and he came to pick me up and it was during recess and he saw you by the fence, and he was so pissed, but I was really fucking sick, so he just drove me home.”

“I never knew how he found out,” Theon reflected.

“And then that night he made you smoke the whole fucking pack and you threw up.” Robb laughed. “And remember? You’d throw up, and the sound would make me sick and I’d throw up and then you’d start laughing and then we were both just laughing and puking, and Sansa just about lost her shit because it was Friday and she had a friend staying the night.”

Theon grinned. “Yeah, I remember.”

“I stole one of your cigarettes once,” Robb confessed. “One night when you left your pack in my room. I took one and carried it around with me for a week, waiting for a time when I knew I wouldn’t get caught. I thought you looked so fucking cool – that was after you started working for Dad and he gave up trying to stop you. I’d like, lock my bedroom door at night and put it in my mouth and look at myself in the mirror and shit.”

“So did you smoke it or what?”

Robb blushed and took another hit. “Nah. I was too afraid that Dad would smell it on my, so I just flushed it down the toilet finally. I felt so stupid, being scared of him like that.” He slipped his phone out of his pocket and glanced at the screen with a sigh.

“What?”

“Jon’s been bugging me non-stop since I sent him out today. He keeps sending me these pictures of himself looking bored.” Robb held out the phone to show Theon a photo of Jon sulking in the backseat of a car, eyes rolled back and his tongue hanging out of his mouth with the caption: “Dying.”

Theon smiled, then said delicately, “You know what you’re doing to him is… you know it’s fucked up, yeah? You have to tell him that he’s – that he’s a Stark.”

“It’s not hurting anybody,” argued Robb, flicking the roach into the lake. “And I know it’s… I know it’s wrong, you know? Like I know it, but it’s not like we grew up together. I mean, he just…
he just arrived one day in a car with Uncle Ben, looking the way he does and I…” Robb shuffled his feet against the splintering planks of the pier. “I was lonely without you. We both were. And he was the one who – it was hard to say no, you know?” He laughed humorlessly. “What’s so great about blood relatives anyway? Don’t tell me yours ever did you any favors. Remember that poem you used to say? ‘They fuck you up, your mom and dad?’”

Theon nodded. “They may not mean to, but they do.”

Robb bit his lip, wavering before he said, “It was my mom that sent that hit out on your car last week.”

“How do you know?” Theon asked, and instead of surprise he felt the breathless dread of a suspicion becoming a spoken fact.

“I asked her, and she told me.” Robb shoved his hands into his pockets, looking for something to distract him. “I kind of – it kind of clicked when you said it was somebody who knew what car you were in and all. She… I mean, she knows. How could she not? Jon looks so much like Dad’s side of the family, and she hates him for it. I think she hates him anyway, but it doesn’t help that he just looks like a Stark. She hates that he looks more like Dad than I do, and that Dad kept him a secret for so long. I don’t even know if he ever actually told her. She used to say… she said she and Dad didn’t have secrets – she said you don’t keep secrets from the ones you love, and then there’s Jon – making a fool out of her just by being. She doesn’t trust him, and she doesn’t trust me with him. I told her she’d leave him be if she loved me, but… you know how my mom is. She loves me enough to hurt just about anyone, including me.”

Theon had known how dangerous Catelyn Stark could be, long before Robb supposed it. “What are you going to do?” he asked.

“What can I do?” Robb looked at him helplessly. “She’s my mom. I’m keeping her under watch – posted two men at her door, and I’ve been monitoring all her communications myself. But I can’t – I can’t just send her away.” He shook his head. “I’m sorry for dumping all this on you. It’s just… it’s been on my mind.”

Theon said nothing, but let his weight shift onto one foot so that his shoulder pressed just slightly against Robb’s. He thought of how empty the house at Pyke had felt, with his brothers gone and his mother locked away in her room, father locked in grief. He hesitated for a moment, then wrapped an arm around his friend’s slim waist and tried not to notice the warmth of Robb’s body.

* 

Theon saw Catelyn in the evenings, moving quietly down the hall or the stairs to join Robb for what was undoubtedly a tense and largely wordless dinner, before returning to the bedroom she had shared with her husband. Theon knew that a younger version of himself would’ve gloated to see the lady of the house so diminished, but now he felt only a cold sort of pity. He supposed that he too had demonstrated a capacity for making violent choices and shouldn’t rush to judgment.

Jon was decidedly less charitable. “As long as she keeps her damn eyes off me, I don’t really care why,” he said. “I’ve never been so obviously fucking hated by someone. And I’ve said like, three words to her in my entire life.” He leaned over the rail of Theon’s balcony, flicking his lighter and watching the bustle of a flock of crows that had landed in the top branches of the oak trees.

“So you ever see your mom?” he asked.

“I haven’t seen her since I was nine,” said Theon.
“That sucks. I’m sorry.”

“It’s okay. I never knew how she felt about me.”

“Can you tell me – if you want – tell me what she was like?” Jon asked. “Do you look like her?”

“I do, yeah.” Without thinking, he added, “Me and my sister both look quite a bit like her, except she’s blonde and Dad’s got black hair.”

Jon looked startled. “So your hair is naturally black?”

Fuck.

Finding no way out of his mistake, Theon said only, “Yeah. It turned white after I was in a car accident.”

Jon opened his pretty mouth but something in the way Theon’s gaze drifted out towards the edge of the gardens made him think better of it, so he said nothing.

“Mom’s crazy,” said Theon finally, as though it was a breath he’d been holding in. “She’s kind and sweet, but she… she never really liked being a mom, I don’t think, and it just got to her. Sometimes she’d have a good day, and she’d come downstairs and play a game, or just sit in the room with me. But mostly she stayed in her bedroom. She liked to take photographs, but because she stayed inside, they were all just the same photograph – looking out of her window at the sea.”

Theon felt Jon listing into him, and he felt Jon’s hand, cool as it slipped up beneath Theon’s t-shirt to rub affectionately at the small of his back. He felt Jon’s eyes, looking at him with an agonal sort of yearning.

“I worry that I’m – I worry that’s me, too. Crazy, I mean.”

“Some people are crazy,” offered Jon, his arm snaking around Theon’s waist. “Doesn’t mean we can’t care about them. Hey –” He drew Theon’s hip against his own. “Will you take me home with you sometime? Show me the ocean? I’ve never really seen it, except out the window of a bus once.”

Theon smiled. “I don’t think you’d like the beach where I’m from. It’s gray and cold, and it makes you feel more suicidal than romantic.” He drew a sharp breath as Jon’s fingers dipped below the elastic of his underwear to rub just above the scar there.

“Are there crabs and shells and shit like that?”

Theon swallowed and nodded. “Yeah. At low tide.”

“Then I don’t mind if it’s cold.” Jon lifted Theon’s scarf aside to whisper into Theon’s ear, lips just grazing the torn cartilage as he dragged his fingers right over the spot where Theon’s prick had been. “When do I get to kiss you here?”

Theon shuddered, one hand holding fast to the railing while the other gripped Jon’s forearm, pushing Jon’s hand further between his legs. He bit his lip to stifle a moan. “Soon,” he breathed. “Soon as I can.”

“You promise?” Jon asked, his voice sweet and hungry. He gave Theon’s balls a hard squeeze, then drew his fingers up to circle around the slit he used to piss.
Theon gasped when Jon spun him around and pressed an open-mouthed kiss to his lips, wet enough that Jon’s saliva seeped through the rough cloth of the scarf, then sank slowly to his knees to lick an obscene stripe from between Theon’s legs up to the metal of his belt buckle, hands clutching at the backs of Theon’s thighs.

“Jon, you don’t have to –”

“I love you,” Jon blurted, looking up at him with dark, earnest eyes as he planted another hard kiss to the front of Theon’s jeans.

“You shouldn’t,” replied Theon. He threaded his fingers through Jon’s thick hair, heart beating so fast that it frightened him.

“Don’t tell me what to do.” Jon rose to his feet and dusted off his knees, white teeth sunk into the soft swell of his own bottom lip as he slipped a hand up beneath Theon’s scarf to trace the curve of his open mouth.

* 

Two nights later, Theon fell asleep to the roar of an early-summer rain on his balcony window. The sound was loud enough to all but drown out the urgent knocking that roused him after only a couple hours, and when Theon woke, his heartbeat leapt into a punishing pace before he remembered where he was, that the door was locked, that Ramsay never would’ve bothered knocking anyway.

“Theon, it’s Robb. Open up.”

Even muffled as it was by the door, Theon heard the agitation in Robb’s voice. “What’s up?” he asked, reaching into the laundry basket for a scarf to cover his face without thinking to put on a shirt.

“It’s Jon. I need you to –” Robb trailed off as his eyes lit on Theon’s bare skin. “Jesus Christ.”

Theon folded his arms across his chest and waited for Robb’s gaze to return to his face. “You need me to what? Where’s Jon?”

Robb sighed and dragged his fingers through his curls. Theon knew from the redness of his eyes that he and Jon had been arguing. “I don’t know, exactly. I need you to go find him.”

“Find him?” Theon leaned carelessly against the door jamb, trying to conceal a rapidly rising alarm. “Is he lost?”

“I checked the closed-circuit, and he left the house a few hours ago and took a taxi somewhere. Which is fine. I’m not his mom. But then he just started drunk-texting me.” Robb held out his phone to Theon, who took it and scrolled through an increasingly belligerent series of texts, rendered incoherent by typos and auto-correction except for the first one: “I wish I’d never met you.”

“He doesn’t mean it,” Theon tried with a shrug.

“He always means it.” Robb slipped the phone back into his pocket. “Anyway, right now I don’t care how Jon feels about me – I care where he is. I called him twice. The first time it went to voice mail, the second time it didn’t even ring. Just nothing. So I turned on the tracker on his phone and it’s at this bar he goes to called the Smoking Log.”
“So why don’t you go get him?”

Robb scoffed. “He’s pissed at me. Like, really fucking pissed.”

“Any idea why that is?” Theon asked drily.

“No fucking clue.” Noting Theon’s raised eyebrow, he added, “He brought lunch up to my office this afternoon, which like – he hates coming into my office. He said I work too much and kissed me, and I haven’t seen him since. Usually when Jon goes off I at least have some idea what I did wrong, but… I honestly haven’t the fucking slightest what’s got him so worked up right now, and I’m kind of worried that he’ll –” Robb swallowed, his supplication plain in his bright blue eyes. “I’m worried he’ll do something fucking stupid and get hurt.” Theon again felt Robb’s attention shift to the mass of scars on his shoulder, and when he thoughtlessly tried to cover them with one hand, Robb looked down at the floor, ashamed.

“The Smoking Log is near Midway,” he said. “But I don’t think he’s there anymore. His phone hasn’t moved more than a foot for the past thirty minutes.”

“Give me five minutes to get dressed and grab a car.”

Robb gave a weak, appreciative smile. “Thanks, Theon.”

“I’m not really doing it for you,” Theon returned, squinting critically at Robb. He retreated into his bedroom and began to close the door when Robb caught it with his foot and fixed Theon with a hard glare.

“Believe it or not, you actually are fucking doing this for me. Text me when you find him, and don’t come back until then.” He bit his lip. “Why do you always have to be such an asshole?” he asked, then turned and walked away before Theon could reply.

* *

He found Jon about a mile north of the Smoking Log, completely drenched from the rain and staggering along the edge of the street, sometimes ankle-deep in the dirty streams of the gutters as they rushed to empty themselves into the grated drains at each intersection.

Theon pulled the Camaro up alongside him, slowing to a crawl as he rolled down his window. Jon kept his eyes forward, and plucked the drooping cigarette from between his lips long enough to bark, “Fuck off! I’m not fucking lost, and I don’t need a fucking ride!” before folding his arms tight across his chest and lengthening his unsteady strides.

“Jon, it’s me.”

Jon stopped abruptly, wiping a few locks of wet hair across his forehead and blinking at Theon with bleary, unfocused eyes. “Reek!” He smiled at Theon, lurched forward and rested his elbows in the open window and Theon could feel the drops of rain that ran off the leather of Jon’s jacket and dripped down onto his thigh.

“Jesus Christ, Jon, it’s past midnight. Where do you think you’re walking to?”

Jon frowned and gave a small shrug. “I – I guess I’m not really thinking right now. I’m trying not to think anymore.” Theon winced at the overpowering smell of hard liquor on Jon’s breath, and Jon pressed the back of his hand to his lips in embarrassment. “I didn’t mean to make you come get me.”

“Robb sent me. He’s been trying to call you.”
“I bet he has.” Jon scowled. “I threw my phone in the fucking toilet. That fucking asshole.”

Theon smirked and slipped his hand up to cradle Jon’s cheek, thumb wiping away a stray raindrop just as it fell there. “You must be freezing,” he said softly. “Let me take you home?”

“You love me?” Jon asked in an anxious slur, his bottom lip betraying the faintest tremble.

“How could I not?”

“So say it.”

Theon smiled beneath the thin fabric of his scarf. “I love you, Jon Snow. I’m yours, Jon Snow.”

He expected Jon to laugh at him, but Jon only considered his declaration with a sudden sobriety. The cloud of intoxication seemed to lift for a moment, and when Jon spoke, his eyes were frightening and crystal clear. He spoke in such a hush that Theon almost didn’t hear.

“I’m going to kill Robb.”

Theon felt his stomach drop out – the words seemed to ring inside his head.

“Don’t say that,” he managed weakly. “You’re drunk, and you shouldn’t say shit like that.”

Jon’s laugh was cynical until he smacked his forehead hard against the edge of the window and his laughter turned to a manic giggling and he slumped against the driver’s side door, cradling his head in his hands.

“Oh Christ.” Theon opened the door gently, and when he wrapped his arms around Jon to help him into the car, he felt a series of shivers run through Jon’s body.

“I’m going to fucking kill him.” Jon’s left knee buckled and he reached out to steady himself against the hood of the Camaro. “Say it again?” He pleaded, gripping the arm that Theon had wrapped around his waist. “Like you said before.”

“I love you, Jon Snow. I’m yours, Jon Snow.”
Chapter Twenty-Eight

Chapter Notes

As always, thank you so much to everyone who reads, who comments and kudos-es. Y’all are my inspiration.

(And yes, I play a bit loose with teh science here.)

The highway was nearly vacant at that hour, and Theon had just merged to join six empty lanes as they flowed beneath an underpass when Jon grabbed his leg and asked him urgently to pull over.

“I think I’m gonna throw up.”

Before the Camaro had rolled to a complete stop, Jon opened his door and ejected himself onto the shoulder of the road, swaying with one hand clinging to a mile-marker and the other braced on his knee as he began to vomit violently. Theon watched him in the rearview mirror, illuminated at intervals by the blinking of the hazard lights, and debated whether he ought to help Jon or just wait for him in the car. Jon settled the question for him by flopping down to lie on his back on the pavement.

“Come on, Jon – please get up?” Already Theon could feel the rain soaking through his scarf.

*I’ve never seen rain like this up North,* he thought.

“Jon, you’ve got to get up.” He scanned the road for oncoming cars. “It’s dangerous for us to be right here by the road.”

Jon only laughed, his eyes closed against the rain and his arms folded across his stomach.

“Do you want to tell me what’s wrong?” Theon dropped to his haunches and took Jon’s hand in his own.

Jon rocked his head from side to side, still laughing soundlessly. “Not really. But I can’t –” He bit his lip, and suddenly his laughter transformed to a panicked breathing, chest rising and falling sharply like that of a wounded animal. “Oh God – oh fuck. He’s my –”

The rumble of a truck on the overpass drowned out the final word, but Theon didn’t need to hear – he could see its shape in Jon’s mouth – *brother.* Theon was grateful that Jon wasn’t speaking to him, so much as aloud to himself; if not for the half dark of the flashing tail-lights and the haze of his intoxication, Jon might have noticed the lack of genuine surprise on Theon’s face as Theon held his breath and a stream of possibilities coursed quickly through his mind. Deeper – beneath that – sat the immovable stone that had been placed before Theon could remember:

*This is your fault. This happened because of you.*

*It wasn’t my place,* he argued weakly. *I can’t – I can’t be what Robb is to him. I can’t offer him anything better. It wasn’t my place to come between him and Robb – just like it was nobody’s place to come between me and Ramsay.*
But that was different, because Theon had always known who and what Ramsay was, and Ramsay never lied to him.

Theon began to shiver.

“Would you have guessed that?” Jon asked, squeezing Theon’s hand and Theon dodged the question.

“Where did you – did Robb say he’s your brother?”

“No, but he knew.” Jon touched the front of his jacket, as though looking for something before his hand forgot its purpose and slid limply again to his side. “I’m going to Hell.” He looked at Theon with wild eyes. “I’m going to go to Hell.”

“I’m definitely going with you then,” said Theon, and he felt a breaking sensation when Jon smiled at him tearfully.

“It wouldn’t really be Hell then though, would it?”

It was Theon’s turn to smile. “No, I guess not.”

“I’m going to kill him,” Jon repeated, his jaw clenching as his hand clutched Theon’s tight enough to make the bones ache. “I swear to God.”

“Don’t say that.”

“You afraid of him?” Jon’s tone was mocking. “I’m not. He lied to me – he listened to me tell him about how I never knew my parents, how I had no family. Just listened and didn’t bat a fucking eyelash and asked me to work for him. He didn’t even try to stop me when I –” Jon ground the heel of his palm against his forehead, grimacing. “It’s disgusting. It’s fucking sick, but I – I didn’t know.”

“Jon, it’s not your fault, okay? I don’t – I don’t know what you heard, or what you think you know, but – you shouldn’t say things like that.” Theon rubbed his thumb over the back of Jon’s hand and gave a light tug. “Let me take you home, and we can talk about this with Robb in the morning.”

“Since when are you the reasonable one?” Jon asked.

“I only seem reasonable because you’re shitfaced.” Theon rose and offered a hand down to Jon.

Jon stood unsteadily, stumbling forward into Theon, and again Theon’s breath caught on the heavy odor of liquor and cigarettes. He guided Jon back to the car, but Jon turned and slumped against the passenger-side door before Theon could open it for him.

“You like taking care of me, don’t you?” Jon squinted at him, fingers playing in the fringe of Theon’s scarf.

Theon swallowed. He knew the words before they left Jon’s mouth.

“Let me see you.” show me

Theon took a gentle hold on Jon’s wrist, pushing his hand away. “Not now.”

“I’m not getting in that car with you until I see your face.”

“Jon –”
Tears of frustration began to roll down Jon’s flushed cheeks, and his hand found its way inside the front of Theon jacket to tangle in the front of his t-shirt. “Please? I need to know who you are.”

Theon drew a deep breath. He didn’t understand why the prospect frightened him, but still the icy sensation between his shoulder blades was real enough, something cold and heavy in his guts. And then there was Jon – dark eyes shifting in and out of focus, breathing hard while his knuckles pressed into Theon’s chest.

“You already know me,” Theon said, softly, as if the words had conjured a ghost. “I mean, you knew me before… We met when you’d just turned sixteen. You had a Camaro like this one, and I had a cherry-red –”

Jon’s mouth hung open. Before Theon could think, Jon’s hands were on him, pawing at him, pulling the scarf from around his face until it hung loosely about his neck, and in the darkness of the underpass Jon could only just see the curve of Theon’s face – his features harder now than Jon remembered, the jawline sharper, the cheeks and eyes sunken a bit, but when his fingertips brushed the mouth, it was the same – shaped like an archer’s bow.

The blow that followed that careful touch sent Theon’s head reeling. He staggered back, hand over his mouth, tasting blood. He blinked back tears for a moment, waiting for the next impact, another fist to the face or the stomach, but instead Jon grabbed him furiously by the fabric of his jacket and smashed Theon’s lips against his own.

“I’m sorry I hit you,” Jon said, breaking away to take a few frantic breaths. “I shouldn’t have.”

“I deserve it.” Theon kissed him again, and hummed at the sensation of Jon’s hands knotted in his wild white hair.

“Why did you lie to me? I thought you were dead. Why didn’t you come back for me?” Jon asked these questions between kisses, not bothering to wait for a reply before covering Theon’s mouth with the sloppiness of it, or the taste of Jon’s breath, or the thought of Jon’s tongue coated in his blood. He felt Jon’s arms around him, one hand gripping the back of his neck, the other around his waist, holding him fast.

“I did,” Theon managed finally, pressing his forehead against Jon’s. “Here you are, and here I am.”

“Yeah?”

Jon bit his lip. “Would you do something for me?”

“Anything.”

Theon’s heart pounded as though against a wall. He knew that once the words left Jon’s mouth, there was no putting them back in, and if it was what Jon wanted, it was what Theon would do. But Jon only looked him with glassy eyes and an embarrassed grin and said, “Would you take me – take me home?” Theon nodded, and Jon asked a little more boldly, “Let me spend the night with you?”

* Winterfell was dark when they returned – eerie and beautiful. The rain seemed to deepen the
shadows and saturated the air with an earthy smell that filled Theon with an edgy excitement. He imagined for a moment that the house was empty, abandoned, and he and Jon were lost travelers looking for a place to stay dry. He imagined the two of them, padding down the silent hallways in stocking feet, whispering and laughing as they explored each room, then falling asleep on Theon’s bed without knowing whose it was.

He had texted Robb some time ago: “Found Jon. He’s hammered, and super pissed off. Let it be til tomorrow.”

Jon slouched against the stone wolf at the bottom of the steps, while Theon unlocked the front door, fighting the urge to acknowledge the security camera overhead, knowing that Robb would be in his office watching their arrival.

In the darkened hallway of the second floor, a sleepy voice caught Theon off-guard.

“Is he okay?”

Arya must’ve noticed the way Jon’s feet dragged along the carpet, the way he could hardly lift his head to look at her – one hand splayed against the wall, the other clutching tightly at Theon’s jacket.

“He will be,” replied Theon in a hush.

“Jon?” she asked, as though she didn’t quite believe him.

“Ffffine,” Jon answered, a bit louder than Theon liked.

Jon gave Arya a slow, stupid grin. “Ffffine, little sister. Taken care of.”

She narrowed her eyes at them, perhaps noticing the stain on Theon’s scarf where blood had dripped from his nose and mouth, or maybe she’d spotted the small cuts on Jon’s knuckles. Whatever she saw, Arya said nothing, but rolled her eyes and withdrew into her bedroom.

*

Jon dropped his jacket onto the floor as he rushed into Theon’s bathroom, not quite managing to close the door completely before he began dry-heaving into the toilet. Something fell from inside of the jacket – a folded manila envelope that landed at Theon’s feet, where Theon considered whether to pick it up.

The envelope was just slightly damp, the corners bent, but the return address remained legible, and he stared down at it, petrified. It contained no name – no indication of being “official business” – but Theon knew its source from the tight, thin lettering.

Bolton.

His hands trembled. Through the crack in the door, he could see Jon, on his knees, still retching. Theon laid the envelope on the bed and moved to stand just outside the bathroom, forehead pressed against the hard wood of the threshold. “You okay?”

“I’m fine. I’ll be fine.”

Jon emerged a couple minutes later, having splashed cold water on his face, and his eyes looked a touch clearer than they had. His gaze flitted to the envelope, then to Theon.

“Did you open it?”

“No. Did you want me to?”
“Go for it,” Jon said with a tone too stony to be indifferent. He flopped down onto the bed beside Theon, arms spread across the sheets, staring up at the ceiling.

The pages clung together, and Theon struggled to peel them apart with his remaining fingers, laying each one carefully aside. A few photographs slid out, and Theon felt the bile rise in his throat as he examined them; his stomach lurched as he recalled the sound of breaking glass and rending metal, the pain in his leg, the breath leaving his lungs in a rush as the airbag deployed. He remembered how loud it had been, and then just a moment later, how quiet. He didn’t remember the camera flash, but there must’ve been one – the brightness of it made his blood look garish, made his skin look ghastly.

“Is that real?” Jon asked, lifting his head off the pillow. “Is that what happened?”

“I mean, it’s something that happened, yeah.” Theon shook his head and placed the photograph upside-down on the mattress.

“Was it an accident?”

“Yes and no. It was just meant to be, I guess.”

Jon scowled. “You make it sound like it was fate, instead of Robb’s fault.”

“Robb didn’t mean for that to happen,” Theon replied, sharper than he intended. “He never wanted that.”

Theon reached for the next piece of paper while Jon stared at him, speechless. His eyes scanned through a printed copy of an email – time-stamped and CC-ed to all of the Northern Families, as well as the NPD and a few names Theon didn’t recognize.

Dear Trusted Friends,

It’s with a heavy heart that I write you this afternoon to inform you of the deaths of two of our most loyal and valued associates. Vayon Poole and Samwell Flint were killed early this morning in an exchange of gunfire that took place at The Dungeon, located in the warehouse district at King and Spruce.

As you can see in the attachments, stills taken from surveillance cameras in and around the club show two individuals fleeing the scene – the first, I’m afraid, may be a familiar face to many of you: Theon Greyjoy, my father’s ward and heir to Greyjoy Shipping Enterprises, traded shots with Poole and Flint. The footage we’ve obtained suggests that Greyjoy may have sustained a minor wound during the incident.

The second individual is a minor named Jon Snow, age sixteen and a resident of St. Brigid’s Group Home for Boys. Poole and Flint were sent to retrieve Snow, as he is and has long been a person of interest to my Family. The two were last seen heading North in Greyjoy’s red 2014 Zagato coup. (see attached image)

Here Theon paused to consider the print-out of a photo taken shortly after his own sixteenth birthday – himself, still boyishly skinny, leaned proudly against the side of his Zagato, the sunlight gleaming on its red finish. “Can you take me for a ride?” Robb had asked after snapping the picture.

Theon resumed reading.

Vayon Poole and Samwell Flint served my Family and yours for thirty-two and twenty-five years,
respectively, and I ask that you show similar dedication in tracking down their killers. I am offering $25,000 for any information that leads to their capture, as well as $50,000 for the apprehension of Jon Snow, provided he is alive and unharmed. If captured, Theon Greyjoy should likewise be returned alive and well to my Family so that our retribution may be decided.

Thank you for your continued fealty and vigilance. Winter is coming.

R. Stark

Attached were the promised surveillance images, as well as a photo of Jon taken from his Group Home paperwork, and Theon’s senior-year school photo. Below each ran a description – name, age and physical descriptions of the boys and their vehicles.

Identifying marks: extensive nautical-themed tattooing on his left shoulder and right ribcage. Knuckle tattoo bearing the word “Ironborn.” Beauty mark on his left cheek.

Greyjoy is armed but unlikely to employ his weapon except as a last resort. He may be headed West towards Seagard to attempt a return to the Iron Islands to rejoin the Greyjoy Family.

Theon shook his head. The idea of returning to the Islands had never entered his mind. Checking the time-stamp again, Theon realized that the email must’ve been sent after he had already returned to Winterfell and been sent with Cassel on his fateful “errand.” This was Robb, covering his tracks, laying the foundation for Theon’s “disappearance.” It explained the lack of a reward attached to his own name.

Theon’s temples began to throb as he rifled through the rest of the papers – a few pages of Ned Stark’s finances, with certain transactions highlighted in yellow: a monthly payment to St. Brigid’s Group Home, as well as certain expensive transactions that occurred on or about March fifth of each year, including the purchase of a 1967 Camaro from a vintage car dealership that happened less than a week prior to Jon’s sixteenth birthday.

Finally, Theon found a document printed in miniscule type, bearing a letter-head from Hornwood Genetic Laboratories which compared two samples of genetic material belonging to “Subject A – Identified by client as Robb Stark”, and “Subject B – Identified by client as Jon Snow” to a “DNA sample obtained by law enforcement during the 2003 arrest of Eddard Stark on charges of racketeering and extortion (see arrest record enclosed).”

“In a Y-chromosome comparison, our technicians were able to conclude with 99.99% certainty that both samples share a common paternal lineage, and based on law enforcement data, we can verify that Eddard Stark is the father of both Subjects.”

“This doesn’t mean anything necessarily,” Theon said, even as his eyes alighted on a post-it note stuck to the cover of the analysis, where a familiar, rigid script invited Jon to “Contact me if you need further details or clarification – R. Bolton.”

“It’s true though.” Jon took the paper from Theon’s hands and held it in front of his own eyes for a few seconds before giving up and tossing it onto the floor. “He said I was a – a ‘person of interest’ to the family. His dad – my dad – making payments every month to St. Brigid’s. I looked him up – Eddard Stark, found some old news photos, even the mug-shots that go with that arrest record.” Jon’s mouth quirked up into a poignant half-smile. “I look more like him than Robb does. No wonder Mrs. Stark can’t stand the sight of me. But it’s for this –” Jon glanced at the photo from the car wreck before flinging it distastefully away from him, “that I’m going to fucking kill him.”

“Jon –”
“No no! Stop fucking defending him!” Jon looked at Theon, eyebrows drawn together and a sneer on his lips. “He – you were the first person who ever – you were the first person to make me feel safe, or wanted and he took you from me for… for what? So he could bring me here and give me a job and then – and then fuck me?” Jon’s fingers knotted into a fist. “Do you have any idea how fucking sick it makes me? To know that not only was I basically earning money for him when I was – when I was working up North, but then he also brought me here so he could look me in the eyes and act like I was fucking nothing to him but some pet project? Some fucking charity case orphan that he took pity on? And he listened to me talk about you – wonder where you went and why you never came back and he just fucking sat there! And you ended up in a car wreck, with your fingers gone and your – and more scars than I can count. He deserves to die for that.”

“Killing him won’t undo any of it.” Theon folded his hands together, the stumps rough against the pads of his fingers.

A thick silence settled between them, and Theon knew the words before they left Jon’s mouth.

“Theon?”

“Yeah?”

“Did you – did you know? That I was Robb’s brother?” Tears began to glisten in Jon’s dark, bloodshot eyes.

Theon looked away. “Yeah.”

Jon began to sob, his chest heaving as he struggled to breathe, while the tears tumbled down his cheeks. Theon had never seen anyone look so lovely and sad, and his desire to touch Jon in that moment was enough to cause him pain.

“Mr. Stark sent me to deliver your Camaro,” he said quietly, not sure if Jon was even hearing him. “I dropped it in front of the group home and then I… I saw you and I just – I don’t know. I just wanted you. And I didn’t tell you because I didn’t want you to end up – to end up here, with people like us – people like Robb and Ramsay and me.” Jon looked at him and sniffled. “And… and I just wanted you to myself. I was selfish and I’m sorry. If you had never met me –”

“Stop,” Jon sighed tremulously and wiped at his eyes with the heel of his palm. “Why – why didn’t you tell me? When you came back, why didn’t you tell me that it was you? Or that I was… that Robb was my brother?”

Looking down, Theon noticed that Jon was still wearing his shoes – a pair of big black boots that Theon began to untie. He waited for Jon to pull away, but Jon only looked at him expectantly.

“Because I didn’t – I didn’t want to take him from you. Because I can’t give you anything anymore.”

“That’s not true.” Jon lifted his head again to watch Theon’s fingers fumble with the laces. “Tell me what happened.”

“What do you mean?” Theon grunted as he pulled Jon’s foot free of the boot.

“Tell me what happened to your fingers. Tell me why you called yourself Reek.”

“He flayed them,” Theon murmured. “Peeled the skin off and left them that way until I begged him to cut them off.” He waited, but Jon said nothing. “And Reek is – Reek was his name for me.” He couldn’t bear to watch the understanding of it dawn on Jon’s face, so he only peeled off Jon’s socks and rubbed the sole of Jon’s foot.
“I’m sorry.”
Theon shrugged. “Don’t be. I’m not.”
“I love you.”
“You’re drunk.”
“Will you take a shower with me?”
Theon swallowed, disbelieving.
*
He hesitated, at first. Steam had already begun to cloud the bathroom mirror, and Jon’s face was flushed with heat; he stood there naked, watching Theon shed his t-shirt. “Is it fucked up if I say I like them?” Jon asked, reaching out to run a finger down the longest of Theon’s scars – from the base of his neck, down his chest and part way around the ribcage.
Theon couldn’t help but compare his broken body with Jon’s whole one – Jon’s muscled shoulders and long dark hair, Jon’s ten toes spread on the red bath-mat. He recalled distantly how he had looked at Jon’s age – lean and rakish and tan in the summer, which always made Robb jealous.
Jon saw the hesitation, hooked his index fingers in Theon’s belt and pulled him forward. Theon’s hands grabbed Jon’s, and he overcame the urge to push Jon away. He held his breath as Jon deftly unbuckled him, unaware that he had closed his eyes until Jon asked,
“Want me to stop?”
Theon blinked. “N-no,” he stammered.
“I used to fantasize that you’d climb in through my window one night,” said Jon. He steadied his gaze on Theon’s face while his hands worked at the fly of Theon’s jeans.
“Yeah?” Theon felt the wet heat of the air against his skin as his pants fell to the floor.
“Yeah. On nights when I couldn’t sleep – which was most nights – I imagined you’d climb up the fire-escape to the window of my shitty little studio apartment and get into bed with me. I’d be asleep, but you’d kiss me –” Jon tugged on the fabric of Theon’s briefs, sliding them down his thighs, pressing a little kiss to the center of Theon’s chest that soothed his impulse to cover himself with his hands.
“It’s not like there’s anything to cover up,” Ramsay had teased.
Theon waited for Jon to look at it – who could help but want to look? – but Jon kept his eyes fixed on Theon’s, watching for the faintest glimmer of distress as he slid his hand down the arc of Theon’s hip until it came to rest lightly over the place where his prick had been.
Theon tensed. “Don’t touch me like I’m fucking fragile,” he said.
In the shower, Jon was less gentle. He pushed Theon against the marble, and hard enough to elicit a gasp. Ramsay would’ve slammed his head back, would’ve make him see stars. This was nothing like that – Jon sucked at Theon’s neck, hard enough to leave a mark, but not hard enough to draw blood. And Ramsay had always preferred looking at Theon’s scar to touching it, and he had never touched it the way Jon did – curious, eager, asking him breathlessly, “Is this good? Tell me what
feels good.”

By the time Jon cut the tap and began to towel off, Theon’s knees were shaking, his blood coursing with desire. This seemed like the worst of Ramsay’s tortures – to leave him alive like this, burning, wanting. He was sure that if Jon tried to fuck him, there was no way he could refuse, no matter how much his conscience might try to dissuade him.

He felt almost relieved when he stepped into the bedroom and saw that Jon had already fallen asleep in his bed, mouth open, wet curls clinging to his cheek.

* 

In the darkness, Theon couldn’t move. Though he was aware of pain, the sensation felt distant – unreal – as though the body suffering didn’t quite belong to him. More acutely, he heard his own screaming, smelled the damp concrete and bleach, and a trace of cigarette smoke with something sweet mixed in.

At first, he recognized his own voice amidst the screams – cursing, lying, begging – until the words disintegrated into a mindless, animal howling, so loud that it filled the darkness. The sound began to echo there, amplifying into a roar that drowned out every thought except one:

*There is no-one coming to help you.*

* 

He jolted awake with a gasp, kicking at the blankets while a pair of strong arms held him in place. They might’ve been Ramsay’s, but the voice was different – “Theon, wake up.” He felt Jon’s hand rubbing a circle between his shoulder-blades. “It’s me. You’re with me.”

Theon twisted to look at him. Outside, a heavy rain continued to beat against the windows and somewhere to the north, sheet-lightning bloomed across the sky. Jon propped himself up on an elbow and swept a tangle of sweaty hair out of Theon’s wide eyes.

“Want to tell me what it’s like in there?” he asked, giving a gentle tap on Theon’s forehead.

Theon blinked at him, lifted a hand to brush his knuckles over Jon’s cheek. “Not really,” he said before pulling Jon down into a kiss, opening for Jon’s tongue, sinking his teeth into that pretty bottom lip while his other hand grabbed Jon by the wrist to guide his touch lower.

Jon cleared his throat. “Theon –”

“Jon.” Theon ground his hips up against Jon’s palm. “Please just – just fucking *fuck* me already. Or whatever – whatever you want. Just don’t stop.”

Jon smiled and planted an infuriating, chaste kiss to the corner of Theon’s mouth. “Fucking tease,” Theon was about to complain, but before the words could leave his lips, Jon gave a hard squeeze on his balls, thumb pressing on the slit between his legs. Theon’s back arched off the bed, and he gripped onto Jon’s upper arm, feeling the muscles flexing there as Jon applied more pressure to his touch.

“Whatsoever I want?”

Theon felt the heat of Jon’s prick, rubbing stifflly against his ass. “As long as it involves me and your cock,” he said with a grin, rolling his hips back and enjoying the way Jon surged forward to
meet them.

“I want you on top.”

Theon obeyed, shifting to his hands and knees, lifting a leg to straddle Jon. In the dark, he felt the rise and fall of Jon’s ribs beneath him, the cool, anxious touch of Jon’s hands squeezing at his thighs.

“And turn on the light.”

“Can’t we just –” Theon began, but Jon silenced him with a playful smack on the ass.

“The light, baby.”

Theon sighed as he leaned over Jon, reaching for the lamp on the night-stand and closing his eyes against the brightness of it. When he opened them again, he saw Jon gazing up at him, black eyes clearer than they had been, cheeks pink but no longer flushed red. He watched Jon’s attention wander slowly over him, fingers reaching up to tease a lock of white hair, then down Theon’s throat and over the scars on his chest, following the mutilated tentacles of the kraken along his ribcage, knuckles brushing through the dark hair that began just below his navel and fanned out thickly between his legs. Theon swallowed as Jon parted his pubic hair to get a better look.

“You can hardly see it.”

“Just what every guy wants to hear,” Theon returned sharply. “You must’ve made an amazing hooker.”

“Nobody says ‘hooker’ anymore,” Jon snapped. He glared at Theon, jaw set for a moment before he faltered. “I’m sorry. I didn’t mean – I just meant that the scar isn’t so obvious.”

“It’s not the scar that I hate.” Theon looked away.

“You ‘member that time that we were fooling around in my room at the group home?”

Theon nodded. “Yeah.”

“I remember when you pulled me onto the bed, and you started saying –” Jon bit his lip and blushed faintly. “You started talking about what you were going to do to me, and I like, couldn’t even wrap my head around it. Like, I couldn’t even process it – that someone like you wanted me.” Jon walked his fingers up over the flat of Theon’s stomach. “And I just kept wondering how it happened that I had this fucking sexy, funny, beautiful guy in my room, on top of me, kissing me.”

“I was kind of a scumbag,” Theon admitted.

Jon shrugged. “Maybe. But I’m still – you still make me feel that way.” He pulled Theon’s hand down to touch the curve of his prick.

“I wish I could get hard for you,” Theon blurted. “I wish you could know how fucking much I want you, how good everything you do to me feels.”

Jon smiled. “As much as I’d appreciate your boner in my face right now, you know what I like even more is hearing stuff like that come out of your mouth.” Jon’s hands slid around to grab Theon’s ass, and Theon let out a startled curse as Jon pushed him forward; Theon caught himself on the headboard, barely able to brace himself before he felt the wet warmth of Jon’s tongue against his hole.
“Jesus Christ.” Theon pressed his forehead against the wall and reached down between his legs to grab a fistful of Jon’s hair.

This was something Theon had never experienced; he’d gone down on many of the men he’d fucked, but none had ever returned the favor so well. Jon’s mouth moved deliberately, as though in a long kiss, tongue firm against Theon’s entrance, licking him like Jon enjoyed the taste just as much as he enjoyed the sound of Theon’s breathless “Oh fuck – oh god – Jon.”

Jon hummed and laid a firm slap across the flesh of Theon’s ass-cheek. He was panting when he nudged Theon up for a moment, his lips and chin obscenely wet with spit. “Take it back yet?”

Theon looked down at him, bewildered. “Take what back?”

“What you said. About me not being amazing.”

Theon managed to compose his expression into a smirk. “What if I don’t take it back? Will you keep on trying to prove me wrong?”

“I’m not doing anything to you until you take it back.” Jon’s expression was serious, save for the glint in his eye, the faintest tug at the corner of his mouth.

“Fine.” Theon smeared a line of saliva over Jon’s cheek. “I take it back. You’re the fucking best. I’d pay a million dollars just to suck your dick.”

Jon laughed. He pressed his fingers just behind Theon’s balls. “You know, your erection actually starts all the way back here. I can still feel it.”

Theon whimpered when Jon guided him forward again, more gently this time, and pushed his tongue upwards until Theon opened for him. Unable to resist the impulse, Theon rocked back, trying to take Jon deeper, frustrated suddenly by the desire for something more painful. He felt a cool touch – Jon’s hand against the small of his back – and when he twisted to look over his shoulder, Theon saw Jon’s other hand stroking the hard length of his cock, already leaking with arousal.

Theon lifted himself away from Jon, thighs trembling and soaking wet from Jon’s efforts. He sat back on his heels, steadied by a hand splayed across Jon’s chest. He felt Jon’s prick against his ass, and Theon swallowed drily, trying to remember that there was a time when sex didn’t hurt. He tried to focus on the beating of Jon’s heart – fast, like his own.

“Are you okay?” Jon cocked his head to one side.

Theon nodded. He felt Jon’s body shift beneath him, Jon’s hands, urging him up slightly, the tip of Jon’s cock just brushing his entrance. He took Jon’s prick in his hand, and began to lower himself onto it when Jon laid a light slap on Theon’s thigh.

“Condom?” he choked.

Theon froze. “I – I don’t have any,” he said. “Wasn’t expecting to need one.”

He expected Jon to push him away, but Jon only considered, eyes roving down over Theon’s chest and stomach, lingering on his own cock, so painfully close to Theon’s hole, before returning to Theon’s face, searching there for something.

“Jon?”
“Tell me to fuck you and I will.”

Theon swallowed. “I don’t know if –”

The rest of the sentence – *I don’t know if I’m clean* – caught in Theon’s throat as Jon’s hips gave a jerk. Theon trembled as the head of Jon’s prick pushed inside him, Jon’s eyes drifting nearly closed as he mumbled something that sounded like, “Fuck it.” He tightened his grip on Theon’s waist, guiding Theon’s hips lower an inch at a time until he’d taken Jon’s entire length.

Theon’s muscles burned as he was stretched open, and he held his breath, waiting, but Jon stayed still beneath him, buried inside him, his hand straying up the curve of Theon’s ribs to tweak at a nipple. Carefully, Theon shifted his weight back, and Jon moaned through clenched teeth. “*Fuck.*”

Theon paused there to drink in the sight – the rapid rise and fall of Jon’s chest, the twitch of his tendons as he drew his fingernails over Theon’s stomach. Jon’s mouth hung half-way open, eyes obscured by a tangle of curls. Theon swept Jon’s hair out of his face, and leaned forward to kiss him; he felt one of Jon’s hands in his hair, the other gripping his thigh as Jon gave a single upward thrust. Theon whined against Jon’s mouth, struggling to hold himself up on his elbows. Jon took Theon by the jaw. “You feel fucking good,” he whispered, biting Theon’s bottom lip.

Again, Theon froze – Ramsay liked to hold him like that, pressing on his neck. But it was Jon gazing up at him with a desire in his eyes that was more wonder than greed. “I want to be good for you,” he answered.

Jon held him close at first, pressed against Theon as he fucked into him slowly, his breath hot on Theon’s cheek. Tears clung to the corners of Theon’s eyes, but within moments, the pain of it had turned into something else, and Theon found himself rocking back on his knees to take Jon deeper.

“What am I doing?” Jon asked, urging him up with a gentle hand until Theon was once again straddling his hips, eyes half crossed every time Jon rammed into him.

“You’re doing an awful lot of work for someone who wanted to be on the bottom,” Theon managed.

Jon smiled and folded his arms above his head, and Theon smirked as he ground his hips down, and he felt Jon’s cock throb inside him in return. He pressed the fingers on his right hand to Jon’s lips, hypnotized by the sight of that perfect mouth sucking on him so eagerly.

Theon closed his eyes before he touched himself, fingers slick with saliva, cringing for a moment at the feel of it – the surgical precision of the narrow opening there, the flesh around it still sensitive. He heard Jon draw a sharp breath and go rigid beneath him, and when he opened his eyes, Jon was staring at him, dumbstruck.

“You’re fucking *killing* me,” he said finally.

Theon let his hand drop away from his crotch, but Jon caught Theon’s fingers in his own and returned them to their task.

“Don’t *stop.*”

“You like this?” Theon asked, the sensation of it not so unpleasant this time.

Jon bit his lip, nodding. His rhythm had grown more erratic, his fingernails digging into Theon’s skin.
“Why?”

Jon’s laughter came out as a huff. “Maybe, because you’re the hottest thing I’ve ever fucking seen? Because I want this to feel as good for you as it does for me?”

Jon’s back arched when Theon bent to kiss his throat, licking and biting his way up to Jon’s ear to say, “Stop worrying about me. I know you’re close – so come for me, Jon.” Jon moaned, and Theon smiled, fingers pressing harder against his scar. “It feels so good when I touch myself with your cock inside me. I want you to come for me as hard as you fucking can, and I want you to bite me when you do. Leave a mark on me, so I won’t forget how much you fucking want me.”

“Theon –” Jon’s objection died on his lips. He grabbed a fistful of Theon’s hair, his other hand moving down to rub between Theon’s legs, and Theon gasped as Jon’s prick hammered into him. Jon sank his teeth into Theon’s shoulder as he came, and he tasted Theon’s blood, heard Theon’s whispered,

“Oh – fuck – please keep going.”

Before the last tremors of his climax could subside, Jon had flipped Theon onto his back and dragged him to the edge of the mattress. He dropped to his knees on floor, roughly spreading Theon’s thighs apart to push two fingers inside him, quickly adding a third when he felt how loose Theon was, his hole slick with cum.

Theon’s head snapped back when he felt Jon’s mouth on him, tongue laving at his scar while he fingered Theon’s ass, just deep enough to hit something there that made Theon’s whole body quiver. Jon hummed against Theon’s skin, and Theon’s hips jerked at the sensation.

One by one, the voices in Theon’s brain went silent, until the only thing he knew was the way he felt in that precise moment.

He lifted his head to get a better view, and swallowed hard when Jon returned his gaze, cheeks flushed, lips glistening with spit and his own seed. Jon took a hold of Jon’s curls and gave a sharp tug, enjoying the way Jon’s eyebrows knit together in pain before he offered up a wicked grin and drew the tip of his tongue along Theon’s slit with an agonizing precision that made Theon gasp and curse at him:

“Jesus fucking Christ. Do that again.”

Jon obeyed, this time working his fingers deeper into Theon, each time touching that spot within him, until Theon was quaking, eyes closed, one hand fisted in Jon’s hair, the other in his own. He tried to muster the word stop, to warn Jon, but the thought crossed his mind too late, and Theon could only manage a strangled moan as his orgasm spilled out between his legs.

When he opened his eyes, the ceiling seemed to be spinning, and he found his fingers still wound tightly through Jon’s hair. He watched in disbelief as Jon licked him clean, then crawled up on all fours to kiss him on the lips.

“I can’t believe you fucking did that,” said Theon. “And with your mouth.”

Jon grinned and gave a shrug. “You taste fucking amazing.” He let his knuckles graze through Theon’s pubic hair, and Theon shivered. Looking down, Theon noticed that Jon was hard again, his cock already dark with blood.

Jon bit his lip when Theon’s right hand wrapped around his erection, legs still shaking as they spread for him a second time.
Jon was still sleeping when Theon woke. Finding his clothes still damp from last night’s rain, Theon pulled one of Jon’s black t-shirts out of the hamper and pulled it over his head. He dressed quietly, then stood at the balcony door for some time, watching the sky begin to pale in the east, where storm clouds still shrouded the horizon.

He thought about his first night in Winterfell – Ned Stark had shown Theon to his room, Robb in tow. He remembered Robb asking him, “Do you like it?” which to Theon seemed like a callous, imperceptive question. What was there to like? He remembered how lonely he had felt when Ned Stark shut the door behind him, how large and forlorn the room had seemed – its furnishings tailored to some imagined young boy, but not to Theon. He had stared out this same window, watching the crows, their cawing cracking through the hush of the snow.

The room had rightfully belonged to Jon.

He considered the boy, curled up on his side with one bare arm flung over the edge of the bed, his full lips parted and breathing softly against the pillow. Theon thought that Jon looked younger somehow in the pre-dawn light, despite the dark stubble on his jaw. He remembered how Jon had seemed to him three years ago, outside the café – how sweet and angry.

“I’m going to kill Robb,”
Theon’s guts twisted. Jon had been emotional and drunk, and probably only half-aware, but the clarity of the words nagged at Theon – the way they left Jon’s pretty mouth with such precision amidst the slur of epithets, the way Jon’s eyes had flickered with intention.

He’s not wrong for wanting it, Theon thought. If he allowed himself to think back far enough, he could remember the first time he wished his own brothers were dead. He couldn’t recall the events leading up to the incident, but he remembered lying at the bottom of the stairs, the pain in his body, the tears stinging his eyes while Maron laughed. It hadn’t been the pain, hadn’t even been the act of it that made Theon hate his brothers enough to hurt them – it was Maron’s goddamned laugh.

Before he’d been taken from Pyke, Theon pretended sometimes that he was adopted – that he wasn’t Balon Greyjoy’s son, that Rick and Ron were only mean to him because he wasn’t really their blood. Asha was the only wrinkle in that fantasy – her finer features, set into a serious expression that Theon learned to mirror without meaning to.

Theon’s brothers were cruel – but they had never abused him the way Robb abused Jon. Once Theon learned not to trust them, their ability to wound him diminished significantly, and he found the bruises and split lips easier to bear than the humiliation of having trusted carelessly. But Jon – who had always been guarded and suspicious – had opened up to Robb, only to find himself used and deceived.

And you. He trusted you, and you lied to him. You’re as much to blame for this as Robb.

He carded his fingers through Jon’s hair, watching Jon’s eyelids twitch at the tickle of it.

“Come back to bed,” Jon murmured.

Theon swallowed. His palms were sweaty, and his heart pounding inexplicably. Or maybe he knew why.

“You know I’m in love with you?” he asked hoarsely.
Jon’s eyes drifted part way open, a sleepy half-grin gracing his full lips. “I knew that before you did.”

Theon opened his mouth to ask for something else, to hear the words one more time, but Jon had slipped back to sleep. Theon thought to kiss him, but instead he only ran a light touch along Jon’s brow.

He sat on the edge of the bed to tie his shoes, fingers trembling more than usual. He grabbed Jon’s still-damp leather jacket from the pile of clothes on the floor, and shrugged into it, comforted by its weight, then gathered his phone and wallet off the nightstand. He considered his scarf for a beat, but left it draped over the corner of Jon’s desk.

The door closed silently behind him, and in the hall one of the maids carried a rumple of linens away, never turning to see the strange man with white hair and dazed blue eyes who made his way after her, then stopped outside Mr. Stark’s bedroom door.

Theon felt dizzy as he tested the knob, half-hoping he’d find the door locked, heart sinking when it opened easily, as though Robb had been waiting for him.

Robb slept on his back, sprawled on top of his covers in a pair of black sweat-pants, his phone still cradled loosely in one hand. Theon swayed on the balls of his feet, watching and willing Robb to wake, but Robb remained still aside from the gentle rise and fall of his chest, his cheeks flushed with the warmth of the room.

Theon moved swiftly, climbing onto the bed to straddle Robb, knees bracketing Robb’s ribcage, and he could feel the heat radiating from Robb’s body, the lean, elegant lines of his muscles giving a startled jump while his eyelashes fluttered open.

“Theon?” Robb smiled his winning smile, and the world seemed to grind to a halt.

Theon’s hand moved almost of its own accord, through the red hair of Robb’s chest, up onto the arc of Robb’s throat, where he could feel the thrum of Robb’s heartbeat as it grew faster and harder beneath his touch. He felt Robb’s right hand on his knee, misunderstanding, the left hand pulling him downward by the front of Jon’s jacket.

“Robb –” was all he managed before their lips met, and the worst part was the sweetness of it – a chaste, childish kiss that took Theon’s breath away.

I thought you’d keep me safe.

Theon shook the thought away. He closed his eyes and tightened his grip on Robb’s neck, feeling the buzz of Robb’s alarmed gasp against his mouth.

Robb began to struggle beneath him, hips bucking frantically as he tried to twist himself free, nearly lifting Theon off the mattress. Theon clenched his thighs around Robb’s torso and locked his elbows to bear down on Robb’s throat with both hands. He felt Robb’s knees in his back, Robb’s fists pounding uselessly at his sides, then fingernails clawing at the leather of the jacket, searching for a hold on Theon’s neck, tearing at fabric of his t-shirt.

Robb’s convulsions intensified, fear surging through his body, and Theon imagined their positions reversed, Robb’s fingers closing around his throat while he writhed beneath. He remembered the terror he’d felt when Ramsay choked him, and even then, he’d half-known that Ramsay didn’t intend to kill him. His stomach churned as Robb’s windpipe seemed to cave in, and Robb’s breathing turned to a grotesque rasp. Robb pried at Theon’s hands, palms wringing painfully at the
skin on Theon’s wrists. His thrashing turned suddenly to a kind of seizure, his grip clamping down onto Theon’s wrists hard enough to send a jolting, electric sensation shooting up Theon’s arms.

Theon didn’t open his eyes for what felt like minutes after Robb’s body had gone still beneath him. His hands throbbed when he released his hold on Robb’s neck, and his legs cramped. Robb’s head listed to one side, his cheeks still almost purple, while an ugly welt rose around his throat. The whites of Robb’s pretty blue eyes were red with blood, and his mouth hung open, its corners wet with spit. Theon touched Robb’s lips with his fingertips, and swore he could still feel their softness on his own.

His right knee gave out when he tried to stand, and he caught himself on the edge of the bed, watery eyes locking with Robb’s vacant gaze.

*I’m sorry,* Theon thought, but he didn’t dare speak the words, weak as they were.

He cast a final look at his friend before stepping into the hall, checking this time to see that he was alone there. He locked the door behind him. His head burned, but his body felt light, footsteps almost gliding, moving him quickly and effortlessly towards the elevator, while a shaking hand that didn’t seem to belong to him pushed the button for the basement level.

The garage was blissfully dark – only a dim blue light emanated from the shop, and the boy who worked there was nowhere to be seen. Theon plucked a set of keys off the board – a dark blue, late model Mustang, nothing flashy.

The house was still quiet when he pulled away, the sun just peeking through the branches of the oak trees. In the pocket of Jon’s coat, Theon found a crumpled pack of cigarettes and a lighter. He cracked the window of the Mustang, smoke filling his lungs as he took a right and watched Winterfell disappear abruptly around the corner.
Chapter Twenty-Nine/Epilogue

Thank you thank you thank you so much to everyone who has left comments and kudos over the past two years (!) You have made me feel so privileged and lucky. Please never stop being amazing.

I've gifted this fic to Neliore and bluetilo, without whose effusive encouragement, friendship and support I'd likely not have finished.

As for me, I'll have something coming out later this month for the Bolton Fic Xchange, but I've got no other long-term projects in mind. I may post an updated FicMix on 8tracks, if I am ever satisfied with the song sequencing. Frankly, I'm excited just sit back and catch up on my AO3 reading for a change.

Much love!

He’d intended to stay Northbound – ditch the car a few towns over and buy a train ticket to… to wherever. It didn’t matter much, he thought numbly. They’d be looking for him to the West, probably sending another email with his name and photo to every port and marina on the coast, thinking he’d be headed to Pyke. He’d nearly reached the city limits of Wintertown proper when his phone buzzed with an incoming text.

He didn’t want to look. He wanted to forget about it, not imagine Jon’s horror when he saw Robb’s lifeless body sprawled across the bed they’d shared. He remembered how cold Ramsay’s corpse felt, lying on the table in Qyburn’s office, how soft his face looked. The phone buzzed a second time, and Theon felt the itch to answer it, if only to read Jon’s recriminations. He held the phone with one hand, the steering wheel with the other and held his breath.

“Go where I’ll find you.
Please don’t leave me again.”

Theon felt tears burning at the corners of his eyes as he replied, “Don’t be stupid. Stop texting me.”

The morning light cast a fresh gleam on the still-wet leaves of the trees that lined the road.

“Don’t tell me what to do.”

The sickening guilt Theon felt wasn’t quite heavy enough to suppress a small smile. “So you tell *me* what to do.”

“Go where Reek would go and wait for me there.
I love you, Theon.”

Theon swallowed. He entered a terse, “Delete these messages,” followed by, “Please.”

“Tell me you love me back, you asshole.”
“Don’t you know that by now?” He’d intended it to be playful, but Jon’s answer made him frown.

“I’m fucking freaking out right now. There’s police everywhere.

Mrs. Stark’s just lost her fucking mind, and I can’t find Arya anywhere.

And Robb is fucking dead.

I’m scared.”

“I know. I’m scared too.

I love you, Jon Snow. I’ll wait for you there.”

The phone went silent, though Theon glanced at it frequently, the darkened screen glinting up at him from the passenger seat as he exited the freeway and turned eastward. He fiddled with the radio dials, then turned them off again – the sounds of the world seemed unbearable, the way they carried on as though this was just another day, as though he hadn’t strangled Robb Stark in his bed, as though there was no reason for the aching in Theon’s hands.

He stopped at a gas station in between suburbs. He snatched a pair of silver-chrome aviators off a rack and filled a Styrofoam cup with sludgy black coffee, then set them down while he hurried to the bathroom to throw up. He paid in cash and lit one of Jon’s cigarettes on his way out to the car. Again he checked his phone, half relieved and half afraid when he saw no further communications.

* 

The cemetery was empty, aside from a single groundskeeper hoisting the flag – the morning still too new and too pleasant to be visiting the dead just yet. The dew from last night’s rain clung to the fresh-cut grass, sending up a sunlit sparkle and a sweet smell that stirred some distant memory in Theon’s brain.

He found the grave easily enough. The Bolton family marker was not ornate or extravagant, but it was monolithic, black granite rising formidably amongst the relatively cheerier aspects of stone angels and saints.

The three fingers of Theon’s right hand passed over the most recent engraving – Ramsay Bolton – b. 1993 d. 2016. There was nothing else; where another family might’ve added “Beloved son,” only smooth stone. Theon wondered what else it ought to say. He remembered the Greyjoy family plot – a few rough-cut stones on a wind-swept hilltop on Pyke where his mother had taken him once as a child, and his father had taken him again when his brothers’ ashes were laid to rest. He remembered the texture of the kraken carved into the stone – gnawed by the salty air, its graceful lines diminished into little more than a suggestion. But his brothers’ names were cut so fresh – Rodrick Greyjoy, Maron Greyjoy – and beside them the monument already bore their father’s name, and their mother’s. Theon had wondered how long before he’d find his own name on that stone. It seemed a morbid relief to imagine it – Theon Greyjoy, no different from all the other Greyjoys, no way for his father to mark him as a disappointment from beyond the grave.

“You know what this means?” Asha had asked him seriously.

Theon shook his head.

“It means that one day you’ll be in charge. Pyke, and all the ships and everything will be yours.”

Theon looked at her uncertainly. “But I… Dad doesn’t think I’m smart like Ron, or strong like
Rick... He hates me.”

“He doesn’t hate you. He’s just an asshole.”

“But I don’t want to die here,” he hadn’t said.

“He’s going to replace me,” Ramsay had said.

And here he was – just a name on a piece of rock, with no words to tell how fierce he was, how loyal. Nothing to tell you how he looked in the morning when his hair stuck up at funny angles, or how fearlessly he rode his motorcycle, or how warm his hands were.

_Or that he was a total fucking psycho_, Theon concluded with a bitter little smile.

He hadn’t seen her approach, hadn’t heard her bare footsteps padding softly through the lush grass – he only stood there, fingers pressed against the cool stone. She shot him in the stomach, and Theon slumped forward, one hand clinging to the Bolton family monument, the other pressed to his side. He touched the front of his shirt, and his fingertips came away red.

“You’re a fucking asshole,” she said, and though her hand was deathly steady as she trained the gun on him, her voice sounded choked and broken. Theon could see that she’d been crying. “You could’ve just stayed away from us. You didn’t have to –” Arya faltered, moved to hold her pistol with two hands. “You didn’t have to.”

Theon looked for a vehicle – _How did I not hear her?_ – but saw the Mustang he'd arrived in. His eyes flickered from the round barrel of the silencer to her face, a lovely face. “Did Jon send you?” he asked, feeling the soft earth beneath his knees.

She squinted at him, head cocked to one side. “Jon send me?” she echoed. The pain mounted in Theon’s body, like something inside had come alive and determined to claw its way out. He groaned, and pressed against the wound as hard as he could bear. The world seemed to list to one side. “He’s your brother, you know,” he said, and he saw that he’d unnerved her. “Takes after your dad. Promise me you’ll take care of him.”

“No,” she said, though her eyes looked doubtful. "No more fucking tricks, Theon."

Theon's grimace twisted into a smirk. "You were on the money with 'asshole,' but I never thought of myself as tricky," he said. "Jon can prove it, if you ask him. So promise to look after him. Please."

Theon let out groan as he pitched forward onto his hands and knees, and Arya moved as though to take hold of him, but then thought better of it. She began to cry, tears rolling down her round cheeks, lips pursed together tight as she nodded an affirmation. She moved closer as though to place a second, more merciful shot somewhere in Theon’s skull, but he shook his head.

“No hurry.”

“It hurts a lot to die that way.”

“No shit,” he managed.

“I – I have to g-go,” she stammered, as though asking for permission.

“Go on then. Get the fuck out of here.”
She left just as quietly, and Theon dropped down to lay on his side. He felt a surge of anger, and the creep of the blood as it soaked through his shirt, and then just as quickly, the anger passed. He tried to recall the way Jon had kissed him beneath the underpass the night before – that felt so wonderful, he reflected, remembering the way his heart had beat. The sky was blue overhead, and he could hear the birds singing around him. He felt the dew on his arms, the warmth of the sun for some time after his eyesight went black.

*

Asha paused at the bottom of the steps to meet the stony gaze of one of the wolves that crouched there. They were larger than life – taller than Theon had been when he’d arrived here, she guessed, tracing the snout with her finger. She’d learned to live with the guilt – she was only a girl, after all, when Ned Stark came for her brother, and what could she have done? But the idea of living entirely without him filled her with a numb dread for which she’d found no remedy.

She’d been alone since he left – an only child, the focus of all her father’s attention and ambition, and though she often felt Theon’s absence with a startling, bitter acuity, she had always reassured herself that he was not truly gone, that somewhere far away her little brother’s Greyjoy heart was pumping Greyjoy blood through his Greyjoy veins. (She’d long since abandoned the fantasy that he might someday return to Pyke to relieve her of the burden that was his by right.)

The night she learned of his death, she took a long walk beside the cliffs, listening to the roar of the surf, ceaseless and deep as ever. The stars, dampened by clouds, looked the same as ever, and she felt ashamed that she had not known, had not felt that Theon was gone. Did that make her a terrible sister? she wondered. Did it mean she hadn’t loved him enough?

It was a man who’d called to inform her, his voice full of pain in the way that it endeavored to sound otherwise, and he had not allowed much conversation.

“Who – who is this?” she’d asked, not really caring, but still needing to know.

“Jon Snow,” he said, and then hung up.

She’d already made her plans to travel to Winterfell and personally open Robb Stark’s throat when she learned of his death. According to the official communication she’d received – a terse, emotionless email signed by the same Jon Snow – Robb had died in his bed of an aneurysm, but Asha knew better than to believe in such a freak coincidence. No official statement had yet been issued regarding Theon’s death – that duty fell to his family, and Asha wanted to hold her brother close for as long as possible.

“Let me go with you,” Qarl had said, as close to insisting as anyone dared. “I can help make the arrangements.”

But she’d come alone, unannounced and unsure of her intentions. She needed to bring Theon’s body home, of course, but she’d also made no pretense of hiding the pistol on her hip or the hatchet that had become the trademark of her bloodier work. Standing on the front steps, she tried to imagine whether seeing Winterfell reduced to a pile of ash would provide any relief from the suffocating sense of helplessness she felt.

She hadn’t expected a little girl to answer the door – no older than sixteen, wearing a .44 on her
side and a look both ferocious and heartsick. The girl seemed equally startled by Asha’s arrival, eyes darting from her face to her pistol, then lingering on her axe.

“You’re Asha Greyjoy,” she said, one hand alighting on the grip of her gun.

Asha nodded. “I am.” They regarded one another for a long moment. The girl seemed to sway lightly on the balls of her feet, expectantly, until Asha cleared her throat and asked, “Is Mrs. Stark available?”

Arya’s brown eyes dropped down to look at the ground. “No,” she replied. “My – Mrs. Stark has taken a trip to visit her family down South.”

_Not a lie, exactly,_ Asha knew, since it was the sort of lie she was fluent in telling about her own mother. (That had been the hardest part of all – listening to her mother wail. Theon had always been nine years old in Alannys’ eyes, and she grieved accordingly. “My baby,” she sobbed. “My boy.”)

Asha swallowed. “I’m sorry to hear about Robb.”

“Are you?” Arya narrowed her eyes.

“Honestly, no. But I know how it is to lose a brother.”

“It hurts,” Arya said, matter-of-factly.

“Yeah.”

Arya nodded at Asha’s weapons. “I can’t let you in with those.”

“Well, I’m not taking them off. The axe really holds the whole outfit together.”

Arya _almost_ smiled. “I’ll tell my brother you’re here.”

The door opened again a few minutes later to reveal a young man with a somber face, his cold expression tempered by the sadness in his wide, dark eyes. He wore his black hair tied back, and on one wrist an expensive watch glittered amidst a half-dozen rubber-bands.

She looked like her brother – Theon had said so, hadn’t he? – and it was so obvious now, right down to the little smirk tugging at her lips that Jon doubted she even knew was there anymore. It explained why he’d been unable to stop staring at her the first time he’d seen her. He was so new then, and she’d frightened him a little with her hard-set mouth and the axe she wore that looked every bit as sharp as it did ancient. Now, he wished he’d found the courage to speak to her sooner. A tightness seized Jon's chest, but his face remained impassive.

“Ms. Greyjoy.”

“Asha,” she returned, offering a bone-crushing handshake. “And you must be Jon Snow.” She looked him over with gray-blue eyes. “Not quite the Stark I was expecting. Last time I came, you were just the babysitter.”

Jon heard her implication – that recent events had proved fortunate for him – but he ignored it, arms folded across his chest. “Mrs. Stark took her sons South after the funeral to spend some time with family. Arya and I look after Robb’s affairs, so whatever reason you have for visiting, I’m sure we can –”
“My brother’s dead,” she cut in. “I’m sure you can guess why I’m here.”

Jon frowned, his shoulders drooping slightly as he fingered the rubber bands around his wrist. Asha could tell that he found formality exhausting. “I – I’ve already had him cremated.” He did his best to sound regretful, but Jon felt relieved by the truth of it; he would not part with Theon for a third time. He saw the fury rising in her eyes, color in her high cheeks.

“What the fuck do you mean, ‘already had him cremated?’ Who the fuck do you think you are?”

Jon stiffened. “I think I’m the acting head of the Stark family and I think you’re the one standing on my fucking doorstep and more importantly, I think I was Theon’s –” He caught his tongue just in time, “friend, and I’m sure you’ll forgive me for thinking that nobody on the Iron Islands gave a damn about him.”

Asha hoped he couldn’t see how deep the remark had cut, just as Jon hoped she hadn’t noticed the faint tremor in his voice. “You should’ve informed me about the service,” she said guardedly.

“There wasn’t one,” he offered, reflecting that he’d been too drunk to arrange it. “He hated those sorts of things anyway.” Perceiving the desperate look in her eyes, he added, “His ashes are in the yard, if you’d like.”

“Your security says I’m not allowed in with these.” Asha gestured to her weapons.

Jon smiled faintly. “We can walk around the outside.” He stepped out beside her, allowing the heavy door to fall shut behind him. He wore a handsome black button-up with the sleeves rolled up to his elbows, and drew a pair of silver-chrome aviators from the breast pocket to push them onto the bridge of his nose.

He almost looked the part, Asha thought, when you couldn’t see his eyes.

“You think I wouldn’t kill you right here?” she asked.

Jon heard Theon’s bravado in her voice, and he shrugged. “I mean, I guess you could. I don’t think it would make either of us feel any better though.” He pulled a cigarette case from his back pocket. “You mind if I smoke?”

She shook her head.

The two of them passed beneath a line of old oaks.

“I’d forgotten how much taller the trees grow up here,” she observed aloud, before asking abruptly, “How did Robb die?”

“I sent out an email.”

She scoffed at him. “We both know that nobody either of our families just dies of an aneurysm.”

“Yeah, I suppose we both do.”

“Tell me about Theon at least.”

Jon stopped walking, and Asha saw her own reflection in the lens of his sunglasses as he considered her.

“‘Never trust a Greyjoy,’” he said. “Isn’t that a thing people say?”
“Not if they want to keep all their parts.”

Jon smiled, and Asha noted how pretty it made him. They continued walking. “Sorry,” said Jon. “I’m new to all this bullshit. But – if I tell you how Theon died, you have to promise me that you’ll – that you’ll be satisfied with the answer, and you won’t go trying to make it... even, or 'right' or whatever the fuck you call it.”

“Why would I promise that?”

“Because if you don’t, this just keeps happening. Someone close to me dies, and someone close to you dies. We might as well just get it over with and blow each other’s brains out right here, while the person who... who really hurt Theon keeps on breathing as though he deserves it.”

“Ramsay Bolton is dead,” she said, remembering the way his head had lurched forward when she’d put a bullet into his chest, the way he’d grinned at her.

“I wasn’t talking about Ramsay.”

Jon came to a halt beside a patch of freshly-turned earth where a carpeting of green leaves had recently been planted.

Strawberries, she realized. She crouched beside the garden, parting the leaves to reveal a small flat stone that read only “THEON.”

“What was he to you?” she asked.

"How much do you know about him?"

"I guess I'm asking if you were in love with him."

“Yeah,” Jon answered, so quietly that she almost asked him to repeat it. Jon dropped to his haunches beside her, their knees just touching, and carded his fingers through the tangle of stems. He remembered the way Theon’s body had looked on the autopsy table – the wound that killed him seemed like nothing amidst the scars and burns and missing parts. And there was the bite mark on his shoulder, of course, still red and fresh and Jon had touched it when the examiner turned his back. “I mixed his ashes with the soil,” he told Asha.

“I wanted to bring him back to Pyke,” she replied half-heartedly. “My – our father would’ve wanted him back at Pyke.”

And if the old man had died sooner, Theon might’ve come home.

“He didn’t belong there,” Jon said, and she knew he was right.

“And he belonged in Winterfell with the Starks?”

“I'm not a Stark,” Jon snapped. He pretended not to notice when Asha hurried to swipe at a runaway tear, and added more gently, "He belongs with me."

Jon wished for something else to say, but all could think of was Theon’s cold body, Theon’s things in a labelled plastic bag, Theon’s blood still damp in the fabric of his old t-shirt. Jon had wept already – smashed up every breakable thing in his bedroom and then spent two days drunk out of his mind, waiting for it to stop, waiting for Theon to help him to bed so he could wake up already and find that it was all only a dream.
It had been Arya who finally called the paramedics, who rode with Jon in the back of the ambulance while the EMTs shined a light into his eyes, and waited outside the room while the doctors pumped his stomach. She’d been on the phone, nearly hysterical, and when Gendry arrived to take them home the next morning, she’d fallen asleep in the back seat of his Q50.

“You can’t go doing stuff like that anymore,” Gendry said. “You scared the shit out of her.”

Jon glanced over his shoulder at Arya, her mouth open, head slumped against the window.

“I know,” he said, ashamed.

“Next time… next time it gets bad like that, just call me, okay? She's got enough...” Problems, Gendry didn't say, opting instead for, "She's got enough on her mind."

Jon lifted his sunglasses to look at Asha. “I can have one put in a pot for you,” he offered.

Asha crumbled, burying her face in her hands and hoping foolishly that they might somehow cover the fact that she was crying. “This is bullshit,” she said with a sob. “I loved him too. I should’ve brought him home. And not in a – not in a fucking pot. Fuck this. Fuck the Starks and fuck the Boltons and fuck Theon and fuck you and your fucking garden. There's not even any fucking strawberries in it yet.” She sat back and folded her knees up to her chest.

Something in the timbre of her voice struck a nerve within Jon, and before he knew it, he’d laid an arm around her shaking shoulders.

“Tell anyone you saw me cry and I’ll fucking kill you,” she said as she leaned back into his touch.

Jon smiled.

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