

BRAN

Alebelly found him in the forge, working the bellows for Mikken. “Maester wants you in the turret, m’lord prince. There’s been a bird from the king.”

“From Robb?” Excited, Bran did not wait for Hodor, but let Alebelly carry him up the steps. He was a big man, though not so big as Hodor and nowhere near as strong. By the time they reached the maester’s turret he was red-faced and puffing. Rickon was there before them, and both Walder Freys as well.

Maester Luwin sent Alebelly away and closed his door. “My lords,” he said gravely, “we have had a message from His Grace, with both good news and ill. He has won a great victory in the west, shattering a Lannister army at a place named Oxcross, and has taken several castles as well. He writes us from Ashemark, formerly the stronghold of House Marbrand.”

Rickon tugged at the maester’s robe. “Is Robb coming home?”

“Not just yet, I fear. There are battles yet to fight.”

“Was it Lord Tywin he defeated?” asked Bran.

“No,” said the maester. “Ser Stafford Lannister commanded the enemy host. He was slain in the battle.”

Bran had never even heard of Ser Stafford Lannister. He found himself agreeing with Big Walder when he said, “Lord Tywin is the only one who matters.”

“Tell Robb I want him to come home,” said Rickon. “He can bring his wolf home too, and Mother and Father.” Though he knew Lord Eddard was dead, sometimes Rickon forgot... willfully, Bran suspected. His little brother was stubborn as only a boy of four can be.

Bran was glad for Robb’s victory, but disquieted as well. He remembered what Osha had said the day that his brother had led his army out Of Winterfell. *He’s marching the wrong way*, the wildling woman had insisted.

“Sadly, no victory is without cost.” Maester Luwin turned to the Walders. “My lords, your uncle Ser Stevron Frey was among those who lost their lives at Oxcross. He took a wound in the battle, Robb writes. It was not thought to be serious, but three days later he died in his tent, asleep.”

Big Walder shrugged. “He was very old. Five-and-sixty, I think. Too old for battles. He was always saying he was tired.”

Little Walder hooted. “Tired of waiting for our grandfather to die, you mean. Does this mean Ser Emmon’s the heir now?”

“Don’t be stupid,” his cousin said. “The sons of the first son come before the second son. Ser Ryman is next in line, and then Edwyn and Black Walder and Petyr Pimple. And then Aegon and all *his* sons.”

“Ryman is old too,” said Little Walder. “Past forty, I bet. And he has a bad belly. Do you think he’ll be lord?”

“*I’ll* be lord. I don’t care if he is.”

Maester Luwin cut in sharply. “You ought to be ashamed of such talk, my lords. Where is your grief? Your uncle is dead.”

“Yes,” said Little Walder. “We’re very sad.”

They weren’t, though. Bran got a sick feeling in his belly. *They like the taste of this dish better than I do.* He asked Maester Luwin to be excused.

“Very well.” The maester rang for help. Hodor must have been busy in the stables. It was Osha who came. She was stronger than Alebelly, though, and had no trouble lifting Bran in her arms and carrying him down the steps.

“Osha,” Bran asked as they crossed the yard. “Do you know the way north? To the Wall and... and even past?”

“The way’s easy. Look for the Ice Dragon, and chase the blue star in the rider’s eye.” She backed through a door and started up the winding steps.

“And there are still giants there, and... the rest... the Others, and the children of the forest too?”

“The giants I’ve seen, the children I’ve heard tell of, and the white walkers... why do you want to know?”

“Did you ever see a three-eyed crow?”

“No.” She laughed. “And I can’t say I’d want to.” Osha kicked open the door to his bedchamber and set him in his window seat, where he could watch the yard below.

It seemed only a few heartbeats after she took her leave that the door opened again, and Jojen Reed entered unbidden, with his sister Meera behind him. “You heard about the bird?” Bran asked. The other boy nodded. “It wasn’t a supper like you said. It was a letter from Robb, and we didn’t eat it, but—”

“The green dreams take strange shapes sometimes,” Jojen admitted. “The truth of them is not always easy to understand.”

“Tell me the bad thing you dreamed,” Bran said. “The bad thing that is coming to Winterfell.”

“Does my lord prince believe me now? Will he trust my words, no matter how queer they sound in his ears?”

Bran nodded.

“It is the sea that comes.”

“The *sea*?”

“I dreamed that the sea was lapping all around Winterfell. I saw black waves crashing against the gates and towers, and then the salt water came flowing over the walls and filled the castle. Drowned men were floating in the yard. When I first dreamed the dream, back at Greywater, I didn’t know their faces, but now I do. That Alebelly is one, the guard who called our names at the feast. Your septon’s another. Your smith as well.”

“Mikken?” Bran was as confused as he was dismayed. “But the sea is hundreds and hundreds of leagues away, and Winterfell’s walls are so high the water couldn’t get in even if it did come.”

“In the dark of night the salt sea will flow over these walls,” said Jojen. “I saw the dead, bloated and drowned.”

“We have to tell them,” Bran said. “Alebelly and Mikken, and Septon Chayle. Tell them not to drown.”

“It will not save them,” replied the boy in green.

Meera came to the window seat and put a hand on his shoulder. “They will not believe, Bran. No more than you did.”

Jojen sat on Bran’s bed. “Tell me what *you* dream.”

He was scared, even then, but he had sworn to trust them, and a Stark of Winterfell keeps his sworn word. “There’s different kinds,” he said slowly. “There’s the wolf dreams, those aren’t so bad as the others. I run and hunt and kill squirrels. And there’s dreams where the crow comes and tells me to fly. Sometimes the tree is in those dreams too, calling my name. That frightens me. But the worst dreams are when I fall.” He looked down into the yard, feeling miserable. “I never used to fall before. When I climbed. I went everywhere, up on the roofs and along the walls, I used to feed the crows in the Burned Tower. Mother was afraid that I would fall but I knew I never would. Only I did, and now when I sleep I fall all the time.”

Meera gave his shoulder a squeeze. “Is that all?”

“I guess.”

“*Warg*,” said Jojen Reed.

Bran looked at him, his eyes wide. “What?”

“Warg. Shapechanger. Beastling. That is what they will call you, if they should ever hear of your wolf dreams.”

The names made him afraid again. “*Who* will call me?”

“Your own folk. In fear. Some will hate you if they know what you are. Some will even try to kill you.”

Old Nan told scary stories of beastlings and shapechangers sometimes. In the stories they were always evil. “I’m not like that,” Bran said. “I’m *not*. It’s only dreams.”

“The wolf dreams are no true dreams. You have your eye closed tight whenever you’re awake, but as you drift off it flutters open and your soul seeks out its other half. The power is strong in you.”

“I don’t want it. I want to be a *knight*.”

“A knight is what you want. A warg is what you are. You can’t change that, Bran, you can’t deny it or push it away. You are the winged wolf, but you will never fly.” Jojen got up and walked to the window. “Unless you *open your eye*.” He put two fingers together and poked Bran in the forehead, hard.

When he raised his hand to the spot, Bran felt only the smooth unbroken skin. There was no eye, not even a closed one. “How can I open it if it’s not there?”

“You will never find the eye with your fingers, Bran. You must search with your heart.” Jojen studied Bran’s face with those strange green eyes. “Or are you afraid?”

“Maester Luwin says there’s nothing in dreams that a man need fear.”

“There is,” said Jojen.

“What?”

“The past. The future. The truth.”

They left him more muddled than ever. When he was alone, Bran tried to open his third eye, but he didn’t know how. No matter how he wrinkled his forehead and poked at it, he couldn’t see any different than he’d done before. In the days that followed, he tried to warn others about what Jojen had seen, but it didn’t go as he wanted. Mikken thought it was funny. “The sea, is it? Happens I always wanted to see the sea. Never got where I could go to it, though. So now it’s coming to me, is it? The gods are good, to take such trouble for a poor smith.”

“The gods will take me when they see fit,” Septon Chayle said quietly, “though I scarcely think it likely that I’ll drown, Bran. I grew up on the banks of the White Knife, you know. I’m quite the strong swimmer.”

Alebelly was the only one who paid the warning any heed. He went to talk to Jojen himself, and afterward stopped bathing and refused to go near the well. Finally he stank so bad that six of the other guards threw him into a tub of scalding water and scrubbed him raw while he screamed that they were going to drown him like the frogboy had said. Thereafter he scowled

whenever he saw Bran or Jojen about the castle, and muttered under his breath.

It was a few days after Alebelly's bath that Ser Rodrik returned to Winterfell with his prisoner, a fleshy young man with fat moist lips and long hair who smelled like a privy, even worse than Alebelly had. "Reek, he's called," Hayhead said when Bran asked who it was. "I never heard his true name. He served the Bastard of Bolton and helped him murder Lady Hornwood, they say."

The Bastard himself was dead, Bran learned that evening over supper. Ser Rodrik's men had caught him on Hornwood land doing something horrible (Bran wasn't quite sure what, but it seemed to be something you did without your clothes) and shot him down with arrows as he tried to ride away. They came too late for poor Lady Hornwood, though. After their wedding, the Bastard had locked her in a tower and neglected to feed her. Bran had heard men saying that when Ser Rodrik had smashed down the door he found her with her mouth all bloody and her fingers chewed off.

"The monster has tied us a thorny knot," the old knight told Maester Luwin. "Like it or no, Lady Hornwood was his wife. He made her say the vows before both septon and heart tree, and bedded her that very night before witnesses. She signed a will naming him as heir and fixed her seal to it."

"Vows made at sword point are not valid," the maester argued.

"Roose Bolton may not agree. Not with land at issue." Ser Rodrik looked unhappy. "Would that I could take this serving man's head off as well, he's as bad as his master. But I fear I must keep him alive until Robb returns from his wars. He is the only witness to the worst of the Bastard's crimes. Perhaps when Lord Bolton hears his tale, he will abandon his claim, but meantime we have Manderly knights and Dreadfort men killing one another in Hornwood forests, and I lack the strength to stop them." The old knight turned in his seat and gave Bran a stern look. "And what have you been about while I've been away, my lord prince? Commanding our guardsmen not to wash? Do you want them smelling like this Reek, is that it?"

“The sea is coming here,” Bran said. “Jojen saw it in a green dream. Alebelly is going to drown.”

Maester Luwin tugged at his chain collar. “The Reed boy believes he sees the future in his dreams, Ser Rodrik. I’ve spoken to Bran about the uncertainty of such prophecies, but if truth be told, there is trouble along the Stony Shore. Raiders in longships, plundering fishing villages. Raping and burning. Leobald Tallhart has sent his nephew Benfred to deal with them, but I expect they’ll take to their ships and flee at the first sight of armed men.”

“Aye, and strike somewhere else. The Others take all such cowards. They would never dare, no more than the Bastard of Bolton, if our main strength were not a thousand leagues south.” Ser Rodrik looked at Bran. “What else did the lad tell you?”

“He said the water would flow over our walls. He saw Alebelly drowned, and Mikken and Septon Chayle too.”

Ser Rodrik frowned. “Well, should it happen that I need to ride against these raiders myself, I shan’t take Alebelly, then. He didn’t see *me* drowned, did he? No? Good.”

It heartened Bran to hear that. *Maybe they won’t drown, then*, he thought. *If they stay away from the sea.*

Meera thought so too, later that night when she and Joien met Bran in his room to play a three-sided game of tiles, but her brother shook his head. “The things I see in green dreams can’t be changed.”

That made his sister angry. “Why would the gods send a warning if we can’t heed it and change what’s to come?”

“I don’t know,” Joien said sadly.

“If you were Alebelly, you’d probably jump into the well to have done with it! He should *fight*, and Bran should too.”

“Me?” Bran felt suddenly afraid. “What should I fight? Am I going to drown too?”

Meera looked at him guiltily. “I shouldn’t have said...”

He could tell that she was hiding something. “Did you see me in a green dream?” he asked Jojen nervously. “Was I drowned?”

“Not drowned.” Jojen spoke as if every word pained him. “I dreamed of the man who came today, the one they call Reek. You and your brother lay dead at his feet, and he was skinning off your faces with a long red blade.”

Meera rose to her feet. “If I went to the dungeon, I could drive a spear right through his heart. How could he murder Bran if he was dead?”

“The gaolers will stop you,” Jojen said. “The guards. And if you tell them why you want him dead, they’ll never believe.”

“I have guards too,” Bran reminded them. “Alebelly and Poxym Tym and Hayhead and the rest.”

Jojen’s mossy eyes were full of pity. “They won’t be able to stop him, Bran. I couldn’t see why, but I saw the end of it. I saw you and Rickon in your crypts, down in the dark with all the dead kings and their stone wolves.”

No, Bran thought. *No*. “If I went away... to Greywater, or to the crow, someplace far where they couldn’t find me...”

“It will not matter. The dream was green, Bran, and the green dreams do not lie.”