

## BRAN

A light snow was falling. Bran could feel the flakes on his face, melting as they touched his skin like the gentlest of rains. He sat straight atop his horse, watching as the iron portcullis was winched upward. Try as he might to keep calm, his heart was fluttering in his chest.

“Are you ready?” Robb asked.

Bran nodded, trying not to let his fear show. He had not been outside Winterfell since his fall, but he was determined to ride out as proud as any knight.

“Let’s ride, then.” Robb put his heels into his big grey-and-white gelding, and the horse walked under the portcullis.

“Go,” Bran whispered to his own horse. He touched her neck lightly, and the small chestnut filly started forward. Bran had named her Dancer. She was two years old, and Joseth said she was smarter than any horse had a right to be. They had trained her special, to respond to rein and voice and touch. Up to now, Bran had only ridden her around the yard. At first Joseth or Hodor would lead her, while Bran sat strapped to her back in the oversize saddle the Imp had drawn up for him, but for the past fortnight he had been riding her on his own, trotting her round and round, and growing bolder with every circuit.

They passed beneath the gatehouse, over the drawbridge, through the outer walls. Summer and Grey Wind came loping beside them, sniffing at the wind. Close behind came Theon Greyjoy, with his longbow and a quiver of broadheads; he had a mind to take a deer, he had told them. He was followed by four guardsmen in mailed shirts and coifs, and Joseth, a stick-thin stableman whom Robb had named master of horse while Hullen was away. Maester Luwin brought up the rear, riding on a donkey. Bran would have liked it better if he and Robb had gone off alone, just the two of them, but Hal Mollen would not hear of it, and Maester Luwin backed him. If

Bran fell off his horse or injured himself, the maester was determined to be with him.

Beyond the castle lay the market square, its wooden stalls deserted now. They rode down the muddy streets of the village, past rows of small neat houses of log and undressed stone. Less than one in five were occupied, thin tendrils of woodsmoke curling up from their chimneys. The rest would fill up one by one as it grew colder. When the snow fell and the ice winds howled down out of the north, Old Nan said, farmers left their frozen fields and distant holdfasts, loaded up their wagons, and then the winter town came alive. Bran had never seen it happen, but Maester Luwin said the day was looming closer. The end of the long summer was near at hand. *Winter is coming.*

A few villagers eyed the direwolves anxiously as the riders went past, and one man dropped the wood he was carrying as he shrank away in fear, but most of the townfolk had grown used to the sight. They bent the knee when they saw the boys, and Robb greeted each of them with a lordly nod.

With his legs unable to grip, the swaying motion of the horse made Bran feel unsteady at first, but the huge saddle with its thick horn and high back cradled him comfortingly, and the straps around his chest and thighs would not allow him to fall. After a time the rhythm began to feel almost natural. His anxiety faded, and a tremulous smile crept across his face.

Two serving wenches stood beneath the sign of the Smoking Log, the local alehouse. When Theon Greyjoy called out to them, the younger girl turned red and covered her face. Theon spurred his mount to move up beside Robb. “Sweet Kyra,” he said with a laugh. “She squirms like a weasel in bed, but say a word to her on the street, and she blushes pink as a maid. Did I ever tell you about the night that she and Bessa—”

“Not where my brother can hear, Theon,” Robb warned him with a glance at Bran.

Bran looked away and pretended not to have heard, but he could feel Greyjoy’s eyes on him. No doubt he was smiling. He smiled a lot, as if the world were a secret joke that only he was clever enough to understand.

Robb seemed to admire Theon and enjoy his company, but Bran had never warmed to his father's ward.

Robb rode closer. "You are doing well, Bran."

"I want to go faster," Bran replied.

Robb smiled. "As you will." He sent his gelding into a trot. The wolves raced after him. Bran snapped the reins sharply, and Dancer picked up her pace. He heard a shout from Theon Greyjoy, and the hoofbeats of the other horses behind him.

Bran's cloak billowed out, rippling in the wind, and the snow seemed to rush at his face. Robb was well ahead, glancing back over his shoulder from time to time to make sure Bran and the others were following. He snapped the reins again. Smooth as silk, Dancer slid into a gallop. The distance closed. By the time he caught Robb on the edge of the wolfswood, two miles beyond the winter town, they had left the others well behind. "I can *ride*!" Bran shouted, grinning. It felt almost as good as flying.

"I'd race you, but I fear you'd win." Robb's tone was light and joking, yet Bran could tell that something was troubling his brother underneath the smile.

"I don't want to race." Bran looked around for the direwolves. Both had vanished into the wood. "Did you hear Summer howling last night?"

"Grey Wind was restless too," Robb said. His auburn hair had grown shaggy and unkempt, and a reddish stubble covered his jaw, making him look older than his fifteen years. "Sometimes I think they know things... sense things..." Robb sighed. "I never know how much to tell you, Bran. I wish you were older."

"I'm eight now!" Bran said. "Eight isn't so much younger than fifteen, and I'm the heir to Winterfell, after you."

"So you are." Robb sounded sad, and even a little scared. "Bran, I need to tell you something. There was a bird last night. From King's Landing. Maester Luwin woke me."

Bran felt a sudden dread. *Dark wings, dark words*, Old Nan always said, and of late the messenger ravens had been proving the truth of the

proverb. When Robb wrote to the Lord Commander of the Night's Watch, the bird that came back brought word that Uncle Benjen was still missing. Then a message had arrived from the Eyrie, from Mother, but that had not been good news either. She did not say when she meant to return, only that she had taken the Imp as prisoner. Bran had sort of liked the little man, yet the name *Lannister* sent cold fingers creeping up his spine. There was something about the Lannisters, something he ought to remember, but when he tried to think what, he felt dizzy and his stomach clenched hard as a stone. Robb spent most of that day locked behind closed doors with Maester Luwin, Theon Greyjoy, and Hallis Mollen. Afterward, riders were sent out on fast horses, carrying Robb's commands throughout the north. Bran heard talk of Moat Cailin, the ancient stronghold the First Men had built at the top of the Neck. No one ever told him what was happening, yet he knew it was not good.

And now another raven, another message. Bran clung to hope. "Was the bird from Mother? Is she coming home?"

"The message was from Alyn in King's Landing. Jory Cassel is dead. And Wyl and Heward as well. Murdered by the Kingslayer." Robb lifted his face to the snow, and the flakes melted on his cheeks. "May the gods give them rest."

Bran did not know what to say. He felt as if he'd been punched. Jory had been captain of the household guard at Winterfell since before Bran was born. "They killed Jory?" He remembered all the times Jory had chased him over the roofs. He could picture him striding across the yard in mail and plate, or sitting at his accustomed place on the bench in the Great Hall, joking as he ate. "Why would anyone kill Jory?"

Robb shook his head numbly, the pain plain in his eyes. "I don't know, and... Bran, that's not the worst of it. Father was caught beneath a falling horse in the fight. Alyn says his leg was shattered, and... Maester Pycelle has given him the milk of the poppy, but they aren't sure when... when he..." The sound of hoofbeats made him glance down the road, to where Theon and the others were coming up. "When he will wake," Robb finished. He laid his hand on the pommel of his sword then, and went on in

the solemn voice of Robb the Lord. “Bran, I promise you, whatever might happen, I will not let this be forgotten.”

Something in his tone made Bran even more fearful. “What will you do?” he asked as Theon Greyjoy reined in beside them.

“Theon thinks I should call the banners,” Robb said.

“Blood for blood.” For once Greyjoy did not smile. His lean, dark face had a hungry look to it, and black hair fell down across his eyes.

“Only the lord can call the banners,” Bran said as the snow drifted down around them.

“If your father dies,” Theon said, “Robb will be Lord of Winterfell.”

“He *won't* die!” Bran screamed at him.

Robb took his hand. “He won’t die, not Father,” he said calmly. “Still... the honor of the north is in my hands now. When our lord father took his leave of us, he told me to be strong for you and for Rickon. I’m almost a man grown, Bran.”

Bran shivered. “I wish Mother was back,” he said miserably. He looked around for Maester Luwin; his donkey was visible in the far distance, trotting over a rise. “Does Maester Luwin say to call the banners too?”

“The maester is timid as an old woman,” said Theon.

“Father always listened to his counsel,” Bran reminded his brother. “Mother too.”

“I listen to him,” Robb insisted. “I listen to everyone.”

The joy Bran had felt at the ride was gone, melted away like the snowflakes on his face. Not so long ago, the thought of Robb calling the banners and riding off to war would have filled him with excitement, but now he felt only dread. “Can we go back now?” he asked. “I’m cold.”

Robb glanced around. “We need to find the wolves. Can you stand to go a bit longer?”

“I can go as long as you can.” Maester Luwin had warned him to keep the ride short, for fear of saddle sores, but Bran would not admit to

weakness in front of his brother. He was sick of the way everyone was always fussing over him and asking how he was.

“Let’s hunt down the hunters, then,” Robb said. Side by side, they urged their mounts off the kingsroad and struck out into the wolfwood. Theon dropped back and followed well behind them, talking and joking with the guardsmen.

It was nice under the trees. Bran kept Dancer to a walk, holding the reins lightly and looking all around him as they went. He knew this wood, but he had been so long confined to Winterfell that he felt as though he were seeing it for the first time. The smells filled his nostrils; the sharp fresh tang of pine needles, the earthy odor of wet rotting leaves, the hints of animal musk and distant cooking fires. He caught a glimpse of a black squirrel moving through the snow-covered branches of an oak, and paused to study the silvery web of an empress spider.

Theon and the others fell farther and farther behind, until Bran could no longer hear their voices. From ahead came the faint sound of rushing waters. It grew louder until they reached the stream. Tears stung his eyes.

“Bran?” Robb asked. “What’s wrong?”

Bran shook his head. “I was just remembering,” he said. “Jory brought us here once, to fish for trout. You and me and Jon. Do you remember?”

“I remember,” Robb said, his voice quiet and sad.

“I didn’t catch anything,” Bran said, “but Jon gave me his fish on the way back to Winterfell. Will we ever see Jon again?”

“We saw Uncle Benjen when the king came to visit,” Robb pointed out. “Jon will visit too, you’ll see.”

The stream was running high and fast. Robb dismounted and led his gelding across the ford. In the deepest part of the crossing, the water came up to mid thigh. He tied his horse to a tree on the far side, and waded back across for Bran and Dancer. The current foamed around rock and root, and Bran could feel the spray on his face as Robb led him over. It made him smile. For a moment he felt strong again, and whole. He looked up at the

trees and dreamed of climbing them, right up to the very top, with the whole forest spread out beneath him.

They were on the far side when they heard the howl, a long rising wail that moved through the trees like a cold wind. Bran raised his head to listen. "Summer," he said. No sooner had he spoken than a second voice joined the first.

"They've made a kill," Robb said as he remounted. "I'd best go and bring them back. Wait here, Theon and the others should be along shortly."

"I want to go with you," Bran said.

"I'll find them faster by myself." Robb spurred his gelding and vanished into the trees.

Once he was gone, the woods seemed to close in around Bran. The snow was falling more heavily now. Where it touched the ground it melted, but all about him rock and root and branch wore a thin blanket of white. As he waited, he was conscious of how uncomfortable he felt. He could not feel his legs, hanging useless in the stirrups, but the strap around his chest was tight and chafing, and the melting snow had soaked through his gloves to chill his hands. He wondered what was keeping Theon and Maester Luwin and Joseth and the rest.

When he heard the rustle of leaves, Bran used the reins to make Dancer turn, expecting to see his friends, but the ragged men who stepped out onto the bank of the stream were strangers.

"Good day to you," he said nervously. One look, and Bran knew they were neither foresters nor farmers. He was suddenly conscious of how richly he was dressed. His surcoat was new, dark grey wool with silver buttons, and a heavy silver pin fastened his fur-trimmed cloak at the shoulders. His boots and gloves were lined with fur as well.

"All alone, are you?" said the biggest of them, a bald man with a raw windburnt face. "Lost in the wolfswood, poor lad."

"I'm not lost." Bran did not like the way the strangers were looking at him. He counted four, but when he turned his head, he saw two others

behind him. “My brother rode off just a moment ago, and my guard will be here shortly.”

“Your guard, is it?” a second man said. Grey stubble covered his gaunt face. “And what would they be guarding, my little lord? Is that a silver pin I see there on your cloak?”

“Pretty,” said a woman’s voice. She scarcely looked like a woman; tall and lean, with the same hard face as the others, her hair hidden beneath a bowl-shaped halfhelmet. The spear she held was eight feet of black oak, tipped in rusted steel.

“Let’s have a look,” said the big bald man.

Bran watched him anxiously. The man’s clothes were filthy, fallen almost to pieces, patched here with brown and here with blue and there with a dark green, and faded everywhere to grey, but once that cloak might have been black. The grey stubbly man wore black rags too, he saw with a sudden start. Suddenly Bran remembered the oathbreaker his father had beheaded, the day they had found the wolf pups; that man had worn black as well, and Father said he had been a deserter from the Night’s Watch. *No man is more dangerous, he remembered Lord Eddard saying. The deserter knows his life is forfeit if he is taken, so he will not flinch from any crime, no matter how vile or cruel.*

“The pin, lad,” the big man said. He held out his hand.

“We’ll take the horse too,” said another of them, a woman shorter than Robb, with a broad flat face and lank yellow hair. “Get down, and be quick about it.” A knife slid from her sleeve into her hand, its edge jagged as a saw.

“No,” Bran blurted. “I can’t...”

The big man grabbed his reins before Bran could think to wheel Dancer around and gallop off. “You can, lordling... and will, if you know what’s good for you.”

“Stiv, look how he’s strapped on.” The tall woman pointed with her spear. “Might be it’s the truth he’s telling.”



“Straps, is it?” Stiv said. He drew a dagger from a sheath at his belt. “There’s ways to deal with straps.”

“You some kind of cripple?” asked the short woman.

Bran flared. “I’m Brandon Stark of Winterfell, and you better let go of my horse, or I’ll see you all dead.”

The gaunt man with the grey stubbled face laughed. “The boy’s a Stark, true enough. Only a Stark would be fool enough to threaten where smarter men would beg.”

“Cut his little cock off and stuff it in his mouth,” suggested the short woman. “That should shut him up.”

“You’re as stupid as you are ugly, Hali,” said the tall woman. “The boy’s worth nothing dead, but alive... gods be damned, think what Mance would give to have Benjen Stark’s own blood to hostage!”

“Mance be damned,” the big man cursed. “You want to go back there, Osha? More fool you. Think the white walkers will care if you have a hostage?” He turned back to Bran and slashed at the strap around his thigh. The leather parted with a sigh.

The stroke had been quick and careless, biting deep. Looking down, Bran glimpsed pale flesh where the wool of his leggings had parted. Then the blood began to flow. He watched the red stain spread, feeling light-headed, curiously apart; there had been no pain, not even a hint of feeling. The big man grunted in surprise.

“Put down your steel now, and I promise you shall have a quick and painless death,” Robb called out.

Bran looked up in desperate hope, and there he was. The strength of the words were undercut by the way his voice cracked with strain. He was mounted, the bloody carcass of an elk slung across the back of his horse, his sword in a gloved hand.

“The brother,” said the man with the grey stubbly face.

“He’s a fierce one, he is,” mocked the short woman. Hali, they called her. “You mean to fight us, boy?”

“Don’t be a fool, lad. You’re one against six.” The tall woman, Osha, leveled her spear. “Off the horse, and throw down the sword. We’ll thank you kindly for the mount and for the venison, and you and your brother can be on your way.”

Robb whistled. They heard the faint sound of soft feet on wet leaves. The undergrowth parted, low-hanging branches giving up their accumulation of snow, and Grey Wind and Summer emerged from the green. Summer sniffed the air and growled.

“Wolves,” gasped Hali.

“Direwolves,” Bran said. Still half-grown, they were as large as any wolf he had ever seen, but the differences were easy to spot, if you knew what to look for. Maester Luwin and Farlen the kennelmaster had taught him. A direwolf had a bigger head and longer legs in proportion to its body, and its snout and jaw were markedly leaner and more pronounced. There was something gaunt and terrible about them as they stood there amid the gently falling snow. Fresh blood spotted Grey Wind’s muzzle.

“Dogs,” the big bald man said contemptuously. “Yet I’m told there’s nothing like a wolfskin cloak to warm a man by night.” He made a sharp gesture. “Take them.”

Robb shouted, “*Winterfell!*” and kicked his horse. The gelding plunged down the bank as the ragged men closed. A man with an axe rushed in, shouting and heedless. Robb’s sword caught him full in the face with a sickening crunch and a spray of bright blood. The man with the gaunt stubbly face made a grab for the reins, and for half a second he had them... and then Grey Wind was on him, bearing him down. He fell back into the stream with a splash and a shout, flailing wildly with his knife as his head went under. The direwolf plunged in after him, and the white water turned red where they had vanished.

Robb and Osha matched blows in midstream. Her long spear was a steel-headed serpent, flashing out at his chest, once, twice, three times, but Robb parried every thrust with his longsword, turning the point aside. On the fourth or fifth thrust, the tall woman overextended herself and lost her balance, just for a second. Robb charged, riding her down.

A few feet away, Summer darted in and snapped at Hali. The knife bit at his flank. Summer slid away, snarling, and came rushing in again. This time his jaws closed around her calf. Holding the knife with both hands, the small woman stabbed down, but the direwolf seemed to sense the blade coming. He pulled free for an instant, his mouth full of leather and cloth and bloody flesh. When Hali stumbled and fell, he came at her again, slamming her backward, teeth tearing at her belly.

The sixth man ran from the carnage... but not far. As he went scrambling up the far side of the bank, Grey Wind emerged from the stream, dripping wet. He shook the water off and bounded after the running man, hamstringing him with a single snap of his teeth, and going for the throat as the screaming man slid back down toward the water.

And then there was no one left but the big man, Stiv. He slashed at Bran's chest strap, grabbed his arm, and yanked. Suddenly Bran was falling. He sprawled on the ground, his legs tangled under him, one foot in the stream. He could not feel the cold of the water, but he felt the steel when Stiv pressed his dagger to his throat. "Back away," the man warned, "or I'll open the boy's windpipe, I swear it."

Robb reined his horse in, breathing hard. The fury went out of his eyes, and his sword arm dropped.

In that moment Bran saw everything. Summer was savaging Hali, pulling glistening blue snakes from her belly. Her eyes were wide and staring. Bran could not tell whether she was alive or dead. The grey stubbly man and the one with the axe lay unmoving, but Osha was on her knees, crawling toward her fallen spear. Grey Wind padded toward her, dripping wet. "Call him off!" the big man shouted. "Call them both off, or the cripple boy dies now!"

"Grey Wind, Summer, to me," Robb said.

The direwolves stopped, turned their heads. Grey Wind loped back to Robb. Summer stayed where he was, his eyes on Bran and the man beside him. He growled. His muzzle was wet and red, but his eyes burned.

Osha used the butt end of her spear to lever herself back to her feet. Blood leaked from a wound on the upper arm where Robb had cut her. Bran

could see sweat trickling down the big man's face. Stiv was as scared as he was, he realized. "Starks," the man muttered, "bloody Starks." He raised his voice. "Osha, kill the wolves and get his sword."

"Kill them yourself," she replied. "I'll not be getting near those monsters."

For a moment Stiv was at a loss. His hand trembled; Bran felt a trickle of blood where the knife pressed against his neck. The stench of the man filled his nose; he smelled of fear. "You," he called out to Robb. "You have a name?"

"I am Robb Stark, the heir to Winterfell."

"This is your brother?"

"Yes."

"You want him alive, you do what I say. Off the horse."

Robb hesitated a moment. Then, slowly and deliberately, he dismounted and stood with his sword in hand.

"Now kill the wolves."

Robb did not move.

"You do it. The wolves or the boy."

"*No!*" Bran screamed. If Robb did as they asked, Stiv would kill them both anyway, once the direwolves were dead.

The bald man took hold of his hair with his free hand and twisted it cruelly, till Bran sobbed in pain. "You shut your mouth, cripple, you hear me?" He twisted harder. "*You hear me?*"

A low *thrum* came from the woods behind them. Stiv gave a choked gasp as a half foot of razor-tipped broadhead suddenly exploded out of his chest. The arrow was bright red, as if it had been painted in blood.

The dagger fell away from Bran's throat. The big man swayed and collapsed, facedown in the stream. The arrow broke beneath him. Bran watched his life go swirling off in the water.

Osha glanced around as Father's guardsmen appeared from beneath the trees, steel in hand. She threw down her spear. "Mercy, m'lord," she called

to Robb.

The guardsmen had a strange, pale look to their faces as they took in the scene of slaughter. They eyed the wolves uncertainly, and when Summer returned to Hali's corpse to feed, Joseth dropped his knife and scrambled for the bush, heaving. Even Maester Luwin seemed shocked as he stepped from behind a tree, but only for an instant. Then he shook his head and waded across the stream to Bran's side. "Are you hurt?"

"He cut my leg," Bran said, "but I couldn't feel it."

As the maester knelt to examine the wound, Bran turned his head. Theon Greyjoy stood beside a sentinel tree, his bow in hand. He was smiling. Ever smiling. A half-dozen arrows were thrust into the soft ground at his feet, but it had taken only one. "A dead enemy is a thing of beauty," he announced.

"Jon always said you were an ass, Greyjoy," Robb said loudly. "I ought to chain you up in the yard and let Bran take a few practice shots at *you*."

"You should be thanking me for saving your brother's life."

"What if you had missed the shot?" Robb said. "What if you'd only wounded him? What if you had made his hand jump, or hit Bran instead? For all you knew, the man might have been wearing a breastplate, all you could see was the back of his cloak. What would have happened to my brother then? Did you ever think of *that*, Greyjoy?"

Theon's smile was gone. He gave a sullen shrug and began to pull his arrows from the ground, one by one.

Robb glared at his guardsmen. "Where were you?" he demanded of them. "I was sure you were close behind us."

The men traded unhappy glances. "We were following, m'lord," said Quent, the youngest of them, his beard a soft brown fuzz. "Only first we waited for Maester Luwin and his ass, begging your pardons, and then, well, as it were..." He glanced over at Theon and quickly looked away, abashed.

"I spied a turkey," Theon said, annoyed by the question. "How was I to know that you'd leave the boy alone?"

Robb turned his head to look at Theon once more. Bran had never seen him so angry, yet he said nothing. Finally he knelt beside Maester Luwin. “How badly is my brother wounded?”

“No more than a scratch,” the maester said. He wet a cloth in the stream to clean the cut. “Two of them wear the black,” he told Robb as he worked.

Robb glanced over at where Stiv lay sprawled in the stream, his ragged black cloak moving fitfully as the rushing waters tugged at it. “Deserters from the Night’s Watch,” he said grimly. “They must have been fools, to come so close to Winterfell.”

“Folly and desperation are oftentimes hard to tell apart,” said Maester Luwin.

“Shall we bury them, m’lord?” asked Quent.

“They would not have buried us,” Robb said. “Hack off their heads, we’ll send them back to the Wall. Leave the rest for the carrion crows.”

“And this one?” Quent jerked a thumb toward Osha.

Robb walked over to her. She was a head taller than he was, but she dropped to her knees at his approach. “Give me my life, m’lord of Stark, and I am yours.”

“Mine? What would I do with an oathbreaker?”

“I broke no oaths. Stiv and Wallen flew down off the Wall, not me. The black crows got no place for women.”

Theon Greyjoy sauntered closer. “Give her to the wolves,” he urged Robb. The woman’s eyes went to what was left of Hali, and just as quickly away. She shuddered. Even the guardsmen looked queasy.

“She’s a woman,” Robb said.

“A wildling,” Bran told him. “She said they should keep me alive so they could take me to Mance Rayder.”

“Do you have a name?” Robb asked her.

“Osha, as it please the lord,” she muttered sourly.

Maester Luwin stood. “We might do well to question her.”

Bran could see the relief on his brother's face. "As you say, Maester. Wayn, bind her hands. She'll come back to Winterfell with us... and live or die by the truths she gives us."