

BRAN

Long before the first pale fingers of light pried apart Bran's shutters, his eyes were open.

There were guests in Winterfell, visitors come for the harvest feast. This morning they would be tilting at quintains in the yard. Once that prospect would have filled him with excitement, but that was *before*.

Not now. The Walders would break lances with the squires of Lord Manderly's escort, but Bran would have no part of it. He must play the prince in his father's solar. "Listen, and it may be that you will learn something of what lordship is all about," Maester Luwin had said.

Bran had never asked to be a prince. It was knighthood he had always dreamed of; bright armor and streaming banners, lance and sword, a warhorse between his legs. Why must he waste his days listening to old men speak of things he only half understood? *Because you're broken*, a voice inside reminded him. A lord on his cushioned chair might be crippled—the Walders said their grandfather was so feeble he had to be carried everywhere in a litter—but not a knight on his destrier. Besides, it was his duty. "You are your brother's heir and the Stark in Winterfell," Ser Rodrik said, reminding him of how Robb used to sit with their lord father when his bannermen came to see him.

Lord Wyman Manderly had arrived from White Harbor two days past, traveling by barge and litter, as he was too fat to sit a horse. With him had come a long tail of retainers: knights, squires, lesser lords and ladies, heralds, musicians, even a juggler, all aglitter with banners and surcoats in what seemed half a hundred colors. Bran had welcomed them to Winterfell from his father's high stone seat with the direwolves carved into the arms, and afterward Ser Rodrik had said he'd done well. If that had been the end of it, he would not have minded. But it was only the beginning.

"The feast makes a pleasant pretext," Ser Rodrik explained, "but a man does not cross a hundred leagues for a sliver of duck and a sip of wine.

Only those who have matters of import to set before us are like to make the journey.”

Bran gazed up at the rough stone ceiling above his head. Robb would tell him not to play the boy, he knew. He could almost hear him, and their lord father as well. *Winter is coming, and you are almost a man grown, Bran. You have a duty.*

When Hodor came bustling in, smiling and humming tunelessly, he found the boy resigned to his fate. Together they got him washed and brushed. “The white wool doublet today,” Bran commanded. “And the silver brooch. Ser Rodrik will want me to look lordly.” As much as he could, Bran preferred to dress himself, but there were some tasks—pulling on breeches, lacing his boots—that vexed him. They went quicker with Hodor’s help. Once he had been taught to do something, he did it deftly. His hands were always gentle, though his strength was astonishing. “You could have been a knight too, I bet,” Bran told him. “If the gods hadn’t taken your wits, you would have been a great knight.”

“Hodor?” Hodor blinked at him with guileless brown eyes, eyes innocent of understanding.

“Yes,” said Bran. “Hodor.” He pointed.

On the wall beside the door hung a basket, stoutly made of wicker and leather, with holes cut for Bran’s legs. Hodor slid his arms through the straps and cinched the wide belt tight around his chest, then knelt beside the bed. Bran used the bars sunk into the wall to support himself as he swung the dead weight of his legs into the basket and through the holes.

“Hodor,” Hodor said again, rising. The stableboy stood near seven feet tall all by himself; on his back Bran’s head almost brushed the ceiling. He ducked low as they passed through the door. One time Hodor smelled bread baking and *ran* to the kitchens, and Bran got such a crack that Maester Luwin had to sew up his scalp. Mikken had given him a rusty old visorless helm from the armory, but Bran seldom troubled to wear it. The Walders laughed whenever they saw it on his head.

He rested his hands on Hodor’s shoulders as they descended the winding stair. Outside, the sounds of sword and shield and horse already

rang through the yard. It made a sweet music. *I'll just have a look*, Bran thought, *a quick look, that's all*.

The White Harbor lordlings would emerge later in the morning, with their knights and men-at-arms. Until then, the yard belonged to their squires, who ranged in age from ten to forty. Bran wished he were one of them so badly that his stomach hurt with the wanting.

Two quintains had been erected in the courtyard, each a stout post supporting a spinning crossbeam with a shield at one end and a padded butt at the other. The shields had been painted red-and-gold, though the Lannister lions were lumpy and misshapen, and already well scarred by the first boys to take a tilt at them.

The sight of Bran in his basket drew stares from those who had not seen it before, but he had learned to ignore stares. At least he had a good view; on Hodor's back, he towered over everyone. The Walders were mounting up, he saw. They'd brought fine armor up from the Twins, shining silver plate with enameled blue chasings. Big Walder's crest was shaped like a castle, while Little Walder favored streamers of blue and grey silk. Their shields and surcoats also set them apart from each other. Little Walder quartered the twin towers of Frey with the brindled boar of his grandmother's House and the plowman of his mother's: Crakehall and Darry, respectively. Big Walder's quarterings were the tree-and-ravens of House Blackwood and the twining snakes of the Paeges. *They must be hungry for honor*, Bran thought as he watched them take up their lances. *A Stark needs only the direwolf*.

Their dappled grey coursers were swift, strong, and beautifully trained. Side by side they charged the quintains. Both hit the shields cleanly and were well past before the padded butts came spinning around. Little Walder struck the harder blow, but Bran thought Big Walder sat his horse better. He would have given both his useless legs for the chance to ride against either.

Little Walder cast his splintered lance aside, spied Bran, and reined up. "Now there's an ugly horse," he said of Hodor.

"Hodor's no horse," Bran said.

"Hodor," said Hodor.

Big Walder trotted up to join his cousin. “Well, he’s not as *smart* as a horse, that’s for certain.” A few of the White Harbor lads poked each other and laughed.

“Hodor.” Beaming genially, Hodor looked from one Frey to the other, oblivious to their taunting. “Hodor hodor?”

Little Walder’s mount whickered. “See, they’re talking to each other. Maybe *hodor* means ‘I love you’ in horse.”

“You shut up, Frey.” Bran could feel his color rising.

Little Walder spurred his horse closer, giving Hodor a bump that pushed him backward. “What will you do if I don’t?”

“He’ll set his wolf on you, cousin,” warned Big Walder.

“Let him. I always wanted a wolfskin cloak.”

“Summer would tear your fat head off,” Bran said.

Little Walder banged a mailed fist against his breastplate. “Does your wolf have steel teeth, to bite through plate and mail?”

“*Enough!*” Maester Luwin’s voice cracked through the clangor of the yard as loud as a thunderclap. How much he had overheard, Bran could not say... but it was enough to anger him, clearly. “These threats are unseemly, and I’ll hear no more of them. Is this how you behave at the Twins, Walder Frey?”

“If I want to.” Atop his courser, Little Walder gave Luwin a sullen glare, as if to say, *You are only a maester, who are you to reproach a Frey of the Crossing?*

“Well, it is not how Lady Stark’s wards ought behave at Winterfell. What’s at the root of this?” The maester looked at each boy in turn. “One of you will tell me, I swear, or—”

“We were having a jape with Hodor,” confessed Big Walder. “I am sorry if we offended Prince Bran. We only meant to be amusing.” He at least had the grace to look abashed.

Little Walder only looked peevish. “And me,” he said. “I was only being amusing too.”

The bald spot atop the maester's head had turned red, Bran could see; if anything, Luwin was more angry than before. "A good lord comforts and protects the weak and helpless," he told the Freys. "I will not have you making Hodor the butt of cruel jests, do you hear me? He's a goodhearted lad, dutiful and obedient, which is more than I can say for either of you." The maester wagged a finger at Little Walder. "And you will stay *out* of the godswood and away from those wolves, or answer for it." Sleeves flapping, he turned on his heels, stalked off a few paces, and glanced back. "Bran. Come. Lord Wyman awaits."

"Hodor, go with the maester," Bran commanded.

"Hodor," said Hodor. His long strides caught up with the maester's furiously pumping legs on the steps of the Great Keep. Maester Luwin held the door open, and Bran hugged Hodor's neck and ducked as they went through.

"The Walders—" he began.

"I'll hear no more of that, it's done." Maester Luwin looked worn-out and frayed. "You were right to defend Hodor, but you should never have been there. Ser Rodrik and Lord Wyman have broken their fast already while they waited for you. Must I come myself to fetch you, as if you were a little child?"

"No," Bran said, ashamed. "I'm sorry. I only wanted..."

"I know what you wanted," Maester Luwin said, more gently. "Would that it could be, Bran. Do you have any questions before we begin this audience?"

"Will we talk of the war?"

"*You* will talk of naught." The sharpness was back in Luwin's voice. "You are still a child of eight..."

"Almost nine!"

"Eight," the maester repeated firmly. "Speak nothing but courtesies unless Ser Rodrik or Lord Wyman puts you a question."

Bran nodded. "I'll remember."

“I will say nothing to Ser Rodrik of what passed between you and the Frey boys.”

“Thank you.”

They put Bran in his father’s oak chair with the grey velvet cushions, behind a long plank-and-trestle table. Ser Rodrik sat on his right hand and Maester Luwin to his left, armed with quills and inkpots and a sheaf of blank parchment to write down all that transpired. Bran ran a hand across the rough wood of the table and begged Lord Wyman’s pardons for being late.

“Why, no prince is ever late,” the Lord of White Harbor responded amiably. “Those who arrive before him have come early, that’s all.” Wyman Manderly had a great booming laugh. It was small wonder he could not sit a saddle; he looked as if he outweighed most horses. As windy as he was vast, he began by asking Winterfell to confirm the new customs officers he had appointed for White Harbor. The old ones had been holding back silver for King’s Landing rather than paying it over to the new King in the North. “King Robb needs his own coinage as well,” he declared, “and White Harbor is the very place to mint it.” He offered to take charge of the matter, as it please the king, and went from that to speak of how he had strengthened the port’s defenses, detailing the cost of every improvement.

In addition to a mint, Lord Manderly also proposed to build Robb a warfleet. “We have had no strength at sea for hundreds of years, since Brandon the Burner put the torch to his father’s ships. Grant me the gold and within the year I will float you sufficient galleys to take Dragonstone and King’s Landing both.”

Bran’s interest pricked up at talk of warships. No one asked him, but he thought Lord Wyman’s notion a splendid one. In his mind’s eye he could see them already. He wondered if a cripple had ever commanded a warship. But Ser Rodrik promised only to send the proposal on to Robb for his consideration, while Maester Luwin scratched at the parchment.

Midday came and went. Maester Luwin sent Poxey Tym down to the kitchens, and they dined in the solar on cheese, capons, and brown oatbread. While tearing apart a bird with fat fingers, Lord Wyman made

polite inquiry after Lady Hornwood, who was a cousin of his. “She was born a Manderly, you know. Perhaps, when her grief has run its course, she would like to be a Manderly again, eh?” He took a bite from a wing, and smiled broadly. “As it happens, I am a widower these past eight years. Past time I took another wife, don’t you agree, my lords? A man does get lonely.” Tossing the bones aside, he reached for a leg. “Or if the lady fancies a younger lad, well, my son Wendel is unwed as well. He is off south guarding Lady Catelyn, but no doubt he will wish to take a bride on his return. A valiant boy, and jolly. just the man to teach her to laugh again, eh?” He wiped a bit of grease off his chin with the sleeve of his tunic.

Bran could hear the distant clash of arms through the windows. He cared nothing about marriages. *I wish I was down in the yard.*

His lordship waited until the table had been cleared before he raised the matter of a letter he had received from Lord Tywin Lannister, who held his elder son, Ser Wylis, taken captive on the Green Fork. “He offers him back to me without ransom, provided I withdraw my levies from His Grace and vow to fight no more.”

“You will refuse him, of course,” said Ser Rodrik.

“Have no fear on that count,” the lord assured them. “King Robb has no more loyal servant than Wyman Manderly. I would be loath to see my son languish at Harrenhal any longer than he must, however. That is an ill place. Cursed, they say. Not that I am the sort to swallow such tales, but still, there it is. Look at what’s befallen this Janos Slynt. Raised up to Lord of Harrenhal by the queen, and cast down by her brother. Shipped off to the Wall, they say. I pray some equitable exchange of captives can be arranged before too very long. I know Wylis would not want to sit out the rest of the war. Gallant, that son of mine, and fierce as a mastiff.”

Bran’s shoulders were stiff from sitting in the same chair by the time the audience drew to a close. And that night, as he sat to supper, a horn sounded to herald the arrival of another guest. Lady Donella Hornwood brought no tail of knights and retainers; only herself, and six tired men-at-arms with a moosehead badge on their dusty orange livery. “We are very sorry for all you have suffered, my lady,” Bran said when she came before

him to speak her words of greetings. Lord Hornwood had been killed in the battle on the Green Fork, their only son cut down in the Whispering Wood. “Winterfell will remember.”

“That is good to know.” She was a pale husk of a woman, every line of her face etched with grief. “I am very weary, my lord. If I might have leave to rest, I should be thankful.”

“To be sure,” Ser Rodrik said. “There is time enough for talk on the morrow.”

When the morrow came, most of the morning was given over to talk of grains and greens and salting meat. Once the maesters in their Citadel had proclaimed the first of autumn, wise men put away a portion of each harvest... though how large a portion was a matter that seemed to require much talk. Lady Hornwood was storing a fifth of her harvest. At Maester Luwin’s suggestion, she vowed to increase that to a quarter.

“Bolton’s bastard is massing men at the Dreadfort,” she warned them. “I hope he means to take them south to join his father at the Twins, but when I sent to ask his intent, he told me that no Bolton would be questioned by a woman. As if he were trueborn and had a right to that name.”

“Lord Bolton has never acknowledged the boy, so far as I know,” Ser Rodrik said. “I confess, I do not know him.”

“Few do,” she replied. “He lived with his mother until two years past, when young Domerick died and left Bolton without an heir. That was when he brought his bastard to the Dreadfort. The boy is a sly creature by all accounts, and he has a servant who is almost as cruel as he is. Reek, they call the man. It’s said he never bathes. They hunt together, the Bastard and this Reek, and not for deer. I’ve heard tales, things I can scarce believe, even of a Bolton. And now that my lord husband and my sweet son have gone to the gods, the Bastard looks at my lands hungrily.”

Bran wanted to give the lady a hundred men to defend her rights, but Ser Rodrik only said, “He may look, but should he do more I promise you there will be dire retribution. You will be safe enough, my lady... though perhaps in time, when your grief is passed, you may find it prudent to wed again.”

“I am past my childbearing years, what beauty I had long fled,” she replied with a tired half smile, “yet men come sniffing after me as they never did when I was a maid.”

“You do not look favorably on these suitors?” asked Luwin.

“I shall wed again if His Grace commands it,” Lady Hornwood replied, “but Mors Crowfood is a drunken brute, and older than my father. As for my noble cousin of Manderly, my lord’s bed is not large enough to hold one of his majesty, and I am surely too small and frail to lie beneath him.”

Bran knew that men slept on top of women when they shared a bed. Sleeping under Lord Manderly would be like sleeping under a fallen horse, he imagined. Ser Rodrik gave the widow a sympathetic nod. “You will have other suitors, my lady. We shall try and find you a prospect more to your taste.”

“Perhaps you need not look very far, ser.”

After she had taken her leave, Maester Luwin smiled. “Ser Rodrik, I do believe my lady fancies you.”

Ser Rodrik cleared his throat and looked uncomfortable.

“She was very sad,” said Bran.

Ser Rodrik nodded. “Sad and gentle, and not at all uncomely for a woman of her years, for all her modesty. Yet a danger to the peace of your brother’s realm nonetheless.”

“Her?” Bran said, astonished.

Maester Luwin answered. “With no direct heir, there are sure to be many claimants contending for the Hornwood lands. The Tallharts, Flints, and Karstarks all have ties to House Hornwood through the female line, and the Glovers are fostering Lord Harys’s bastard at Deepwood Motte. The Dreadfort has no claim that I know, but the lands adjoin, and Roose Bolton is not one to overlook such a chance.”

Ser Rodrik tugged at his whiskers. “In such cases, her liege lord must find her a suitable match.”

“Why *can’t* you marry her?” Bran asked. “You said she was comely, and Beth would have a mother.”

The old knight put a hand on Bran's arm. "A kindly thought, my prince, but I am only a knight, and besides too old. I might hold her lands for a few years, but as soon as I died Lady Hornwood would find herself back in the same mire, and Beth's prospects might be perilous as well."

"Then let Lord Hornwood's bastard be the heir," Bran said, thinking of his half brother Jon.

Ser Rodrik said, "That would please the Glovers, and perhaps Lord Hornwood's shade as well, but I do not think Lady Hornwood would love us. The boy is not of her blood."

"Still," said Maester Luwin, "it must be considered. Lady Donella is past her fertile years, as she said herself. If not the bastard, who?"

"May I be excused?" Bran could hear the squires at their swordplay in the yard below, the ring of steel on steel.

"As you will, my prince," said Ser Rodrik. "You did well." Bran flushed with pleasure. Being a lord was not so tedious as he had feared, and since Lady Hornwood had been so much briefer than Lord Manderly, he even had a few hours of daylight left to visit with Summer. He liked to spend time with his wolf every day, when Ser Rodrik and the maester allowed it.

No sooner had Hodor entered the godswood than Summer emerged from under an oak, almost as if he had known they were coming. Bran glimpsed a lean black shape watching from the undergrowth as well. "Shaggy," he called. "Here, Shaggydog. To me." But Rickon's wolf vanished as swiftly as he'd appeared.

Hodor knew Bran's favorite place, so he took him to the edge of the pool beneath the great spread of the heart tree, where Lord Eddard used to kneel to pray. Ripples were running across the surface of the water when they arrived, making the reflection of the weirwood shimmer and dance. There was no wind, though. For an instant Bran was baffled.

And then Osha exploded up out of the pool with a great splash, so sudden that even Summer leapt back, snarling. Hodor jumped away, wailing

“Hodor, *Hodor*” in dismay until Bran patted his shoulder to soothe his fears. “How can you swim in there?” he asked Osha. “Isn’t it cold?”

“As a babe I suckled on icicles, boy. I like the cold.” Osha swam to the rocks and rose dripping. She was naked, her skin bumpy with gooseprickles. Summer crept close and sniffed at her. “I wanted to touch the bottom.”

“I never knew there was a bottom.”

“Might be there isn’t.” She grinned. “What are you staring at, boy? Never seen a woman before?”

“I have so.” Bran had bathed with his sisters hundreds of times and he’d seen serving women in the hot pools too. Osha looked different, though, hard and sharp instead of soft and curvy. Her legs were all sinew, her breasts flat as two empty purses. “You’ve got a lot of scars.”

“Every one hard earned.” She picked up her brown shift, shook some leaves off of it, and pulled it down over her head.

“Fighting giants?” Osha claimed there were still giants beyond the Wall. *One day maybe I’ll even see one...*

“Fighting men.” She belted herself with a length of rope. “Black crows, oft as not. Killed me one too,” she said, shaking out her hair. It had grown since she’d come to Winterfell, well down past her ears. She looked softer than the woman who had once tried to rob and kill him in the wolfswood. “Heard some yattering in the kitchen today about you and them Freys.”

“Who? What did they say?”

She gave him a sour grin. “That it’s a fool boy who mocks a giant, and a mad world when a cripple has to defend him.”

“Hodor never knew they were mocking him,” Bran said. “Anyhow he never fights.” He remembered once when he was little, going to the market square with his mother and Septa Mordane. They brought Hodor to carry for them, but he had wandered away, and when they found him some boys had him backed into an alley, poking him with sticks. “*Hodor!*” he kept shouting, cringing and covering himself, but he had never raised a hand against his tormentors. “Septon Chayle says he has a gentle spirit.”

“Aye,” she said, “and hands strong enough to twist a man’s head off his shoulders, if he takes a mind to. All the same, he better watch his back around that Walder. Him and you both. The big one they call little, it comes to me he’s well named. Big outside, little inside, and mean down to the bones.”

“He’d never dare hurt me. He’s scared of Summer, no matter what he says.”

“Then might be he’s not so stupid as he seems.” Osha was always wary around the direwolves. The day she was taken, Summer and Grey Wind between them had torn three wildlings to bloody pieces. “Or might be he is. And that tastes of trouble too.” She tied up her hair. “You have more of them wolf dreams?”

“No.” He did not like to talk about the dreams.

“A prince should lie better than that.” Osha laughed. “Well, your dreams are your business. Mine’s in the kitchens, and I’d best be getting back before Gage starts to shouting and waving that big wooden spoon of his. By your leave, my prince.”

She should never have talked about the wolf dreams, Bran thought as Hodor carried him up the steps to his bedchamber. He fought against sleep as long as he could, but in the end it took him as it always did. On this night he dreamed of the weirwood. it was looking at him with its deep red eyes, calling to him with its twisted wooden mouth, and from its pale branches the three-eyed crow came flapping, pecking at his face and crying his name in a voice as sharp as swords.

The blast of horns woke him. Bran pushed himself onto his side, grateful for the reprieve. He heard horses and boisterous shouting. *More guests have come, and half-drunk by the noise of them.* Grasping his bars he pulled himself from the bed and over to the window seat. On their banner was a giant in shattered chains that told him that these were Umber men, down from the northlands beyond the Last River.

The next day two of them came together to audience; the Greatjon’s uncles, blustery men in the winter of their days with beards as white as the bearskin cloaks they wore. A crow had once taken Mors for dead and

pecked out his eye, so he wore a chunk of dragonglass in its stead. As Old Nan told the tale, he'd grabbed the crow in his fist and bitten its head off, so they named him Crowfood. She would never tell Bran why his gaunt brother Hother was called Whoresbane.

No sooner had they been seated than Mors asked for leave to wed Lady Hornwood. "The Greatjon's the Young Wolf's strong right hand, all know that to be true. Who better to protect the widow's lands than an Umber, and what Umber better than me?"

"Lady Donella is still grieving," Maester Luwin said.

"I have a cure for grief under my furs." Mors laughed. Ser Rodrik thanked him courteously and promised to bring the matter before the lady and the king.

Hother wanted ships. "There's wildlings stealing down from the north, more than I've ever seen before. They cross the Bay of Seals in little boats and wash up on our shores. The crows in Eastwatch are too few to stop them, and they go to ground quick as weasels. It's longships we need, aye, and strong men to sail them. The Greatjon took too many. Half our harvest is gone to seed for want of arms to swing the scythes."

Ser Rodrik pulled at his whiskers. "You have forests of tall pine and old oak. Lord Manderly has shipwrights and sailors in plenty. Together you ought to be able to float enough longships to guard both your coasts."

"Manderly?" Mors Umber snorted. "That great waddling sack of suet? His own people mock him as Lord Lamprey, I've heard. The man can scarce walk. If you stuck a sword in his belly, ten thousand eels would wriggle out."

"He is fat," Ser Rodrik admitted, "but he is not stupid. You will work with him, or the king will know the reason why." And to Bran's astonishment, the truculent Umbers agreed to do as he commanded, though not without grumbling.

While they were sitting at audience, the Glover men arrived from Deepwood Motte, and a large party of Tallharts from Torrhen's Square. Galbart and Robett Glover had left Deepwood in the hands of Robett's wife,

but it was their steward who came to Winterfell. “My lady begs that you excuse her absence. Her babes are still too young for such a journey, and she was loath to leave them.” Bran soon realized that it was the steward, not Lady Glover, who truly ruled at Deepwood Motte. The man allowed that he was at present setting aside only a tenth of his harvest. A hedge wizard had told him there would be a bountiful spirit summer before the cold set in, he claimed. Maester Luwin had a number of choice things to say about hedge wizards. Ser Rodrik commanded the man to set aside a fifth, and questioned the steward closely about Lord Hornwood’s bastard, the boy Larence Snow. In the north, all highborn bastards took the surname *Snow*. This lad was near twelve, and the steward praised his wits and courage.

“Your notion about the bastard may have merit, Bran,” Maester Luwin said after. “One day you will be a good lord for Winterfell, I think.”

“No I won’t.” Bran knew he would never be a lord, no more than he could be a knight. “Robb’s to marry some Frey girl, you told me so yourself, and the Walders say the same. He’ll have sons, and they’ll be the lords of Winterfell after him, not me.”

“It may be so, Bran,” Ser Rodrik said, “but I was wed three times and my wives gave me daughters. Now only Beth remains to me. My brother Martyn fathered four strong sons, yet only Jory lived to be a man. When he was slain, Martyn’s line died with him. When we speak of the morrow nothing is ever certain.”

Leobald Tallhart had his turn the following day. He spoke of weather portents and the slack wits of smallfolk, and told how his nephew itched for battle. “Benfred has raised his own company of lances. Boys, none older than nineteen years, but every one thinks he’s another young wolf. When I told them they were only young rabbits, they laughed at me. Now they call themselves the Wild Hares and gallop about the country with rabbitskins tied to the ends of their lances, singing songs of chivalry.”

Bran thought that sounded grand. He remembered Benfred Tallhart, a big bluff loud boy who had often visited Winterfell with his father, Ser Helman, and had been friendly with Robb and with Theon Greyjoy. But Ser Rodrik was clearly displeased by what he heard. “If the king were in need

of more men, he would send for them,” he said. “Instruct your nephew that he is to remain at Torrhen’s Square, as his lord father commanded.”

“I will, ser,” said Leobald, and only then raised the matter of Lady Hornwood. Poor thing, with no husband to defend her lands nor son to inherit. His own lady wife was a Hornwood, sister to the late Lord Halys, doubtless they recalled. “An empty hall is a sad one. I had a thought to send my younger son to Lady Donella to foster as her own. Beren is near ten, a likely lad, and her own nephew. He would cheer her, I am certain, and perhaps he would even take the name Hornwood...”

“If he were named heir?” suggested Maester Luwin.

“...so the House might continue,” finished Leobald.

Bran knew what to say. “Thank you for the notion, my lord,” he blurted out before Ser Rodrik could speak. “We will bring the matter to my brother Robb. Oh, and Lady Hornwood.”

Leobald seemed surprised that he had spoken. “I’m grateful, my prince,” he said, but Bran saw pity in his pale blue eyes, mingled perhaps with a little gladness that the cripple was, after all, not *his* son. For a moment he hated the man.

Maester Luwin liked him better, though. “Beren Tallhart may well be our best answer,” he told them when Leobald had gone. “By blood he is half Hornwood. If he takes his uncle’s name...”

“...he will still be a boy,” said Ser Rodrik, “and hard-pressed to hold his lands against the likes of Mors UMBER or this bastard of Roose Bolton’s. We must think on this carefully. Robb should have our best counsel before he makes his decision.”

“It may come down to practicalities,” said Maester Luwin. “Which lord he most needs to court. The riverlands are part of his realm, he may wish to cement the alliance by wedding Lady Hornwood to one of the lords of the Trident. A Blackwood, perhaps, or a Frey—”

“Lady Hornwood can have one of our Freys,” said Bran. “She can have both of them if she likes.”

“You are not kind, my prince,” Ser Rodrik chided gently.

Neither are the Walders. Scowling, Bran stared down at the table and said nothing.

In the days that followed, ravens arrived from other lordly houses, bearing regrets. The bastard of the Dreadfort would not be joining them, the Mormonts and Karstarks had all gone south with Robb, Lord Locke was too old to dare the journey, Lady Flint was heavy with child, there was sickness at Widow's Watch. Finally all of the principal vassals of House Stark had been heard from save for Howland Reed the crannogman, who had not set foot outside his swamps for many a year, and the Cerwyns whose castle lay a half day's ride from Winterfell. Lord Cerwyn was a captive of the Lannisters, but his son, a lad of fourteen, arrived one bright, blustery morning at the head of two dozen lances. Bran was riding Dancer around the yard when they came through the gate. He trotted over to greet them. Cley Cerwyn had always been a friend to Bran and his brothers.

"Good morrow, Bran," Cley called out cheerfully. "Or must I call you Prince Bran now?"

"Only if you want."

Cley laughed. "Why not? Everyone else is a king or prince these days. Did Stannis write Winterfell as well?"

"Stannis? I don't know."

"He's a king now too," Cley confided. "He says Queen Cersei bedded her brother, so Joffrey is a bastard."

"Joffrey the Illborn," one of the Cerwyn knights growled. "Small wonder he's faithless, with the Kingslayer for a father."

"Aye," said another, "the gods hate incest. Look how they brought down the Targaryens."

For a moment Bran felt as though he could not breathe. A giant hand was crushing his chest. He felt as though he was falling, and clutched desperately at Dancer's reins.

His terror must have shown on his face. "Bran?" Cley Cerwyn said. "Are you unwell? It's only another king."

“Robb will beat him too.” He turned Dancer’s head toward the stables, oblivious to the puzzled stares the Cerwyns gave him. His blood was roaring in his ears, and had he not been strapped onto his saddle he might well have fallen.

That night Bran prayed to his father’s gods for dreamless sleep. If the gods heard, they mocked his hopes, for the nightmare they sent was worse than any wolf dream.

“*Fly or die!*” cried the three-eyed crow as it pecked at him. He wept and pleaded but the crow had no pity. It put out his left eye and then his right, and when he was blind in the dark it pecked at his brow, driving its terrible sharp beak deep into his skull. He screamed until he was certain his lungs must burst. The pain was an axe splitting his head apart, but when the crow wrenched out its beak all slimy with bits of bone and brain, Bran could see again. What he saw made him gasp in fear. He was clinging to a tower miles high, and his fingers were slipping, nails scrabbling at the stone, his legs dragging him down, stupid useless dead legs. “*Help me!*” he cried. A golden man appeared in the sky above him and pulled him up. “The things I do for love,” he murmured softly as he tossed him out kicking into empty air.