

## BRAN

The sound was the faintest of *clinks*, a scraping of steel over stone. He lifted his head from his paws, listening, sniffing at the night.

The evening's rain had woken a hundred sleeping smells and made them ripe and strong again. Grass and thorns, blackberries broken on the ground, mud, worms, rotting leaves, a rat creeping through the bush. He caught the shaggy black scent of his brother's coat and the sharp coppery tang of blood from the squirrel he'd killed. Other squirrels moved through the branches above, smelling of wet fur and fear, their little claws scratching at the bark. The noise had sounded something like that.

And he heard it again, *clink* and scrape. It brought him to his feet. His ears pricked and his tail rose. He howled, a long deep shivery cry, a howl to wake the sleepers, but the piles of man-rock were dark and dead. A still wet night, a night to drive men into their holes. The rain had stopped, but the men still hid from the damp, huddled by the fires in their caves of piled stone.

His brother came sliding through the trees, moving almost as quiet as another brother he remembered dimly from long ago, the white one with the eyes of blood. *This* brother's eyes were pools of shadow, but the fur on the back of his neck was bristling. He had heard the sounds as well, and known they meant danger.

This time the *clink* and scrape were followed by a slithering and the soft swift patter of skinfeet on stone. The wind brought the faintest whiff of a man-smell he did not know. *Stranger. Danger. Death.*

He ran toward the sound, his brother racing beside him. The stone dens rose before them, walls slick and wet. He bared his teeth, but the man-rock took no notice. A gate loomed up, a black iron snake coiled tight about bar and post. When he crashed against it, the gate shuddered and the snake clanked and slithered and held. Through the bars he could look down the long stone burrow that ran between the walls to the stony field beyond, but

there was no way through. He could force his muzzle between the bars, but no more. Many a time his brother had tried to crack the black bones of the gate between his teeth, but they would not break. They had tried to dig under, but there were great flat stones beneath, half-covered by earth and blown leaves.

Snarling, he paced back and forth in front of the gate, then threw himself at it once more. It moved a little and slammed him back. *Locked*, something whispered. *Chained*. The voice he did not hear, the scent without a smell. The other ways were closed as well. Where doors opened in the walls of man-rock, the wood was thick and strong. There was no way out.

*There is*, the whisper came, and it seemed as if he could see the shadow of a great tree covered in needles, slanting up out of the black earth to ten times the height of a man. Yet when he looked about, it was not there. *The other side of the godswood, the sentinel, hurry, hurry...*

Through the gloom of night came a muffled shout, cut short.

Swiftly, swiftly, he whirled and bounded back into the trees, wet leaves rustling beneath his paws, branches whipping at him as he rushed past. He could hear his brother following close. They plunged under the heart tree and around the cold pool, through the blackberry bushes, under a tangle of oaks and ash and hawthorn scrub, to the far side of the wood... and there it was, the shadow he'd glimpsed without seeing, the slanting tree pointing at the rooftops. *Sentinel*, came the thought.

He remembered how it was to climb it then. The needles everywhere, scratching at his bare face and falling down the back of his neck, the sticky sap on his hands, the sharp piney smell of it. It was an easy tree for a boy to climb, leaning as it did, crooked, the branches so close together they almost made a ladder, slanting right up to the roof.

Growling, he sniffed around the base of the tree, lifted a leg and marked it with a stream of urine. A low branch brushed his face, and he snapped at it, twisting and pulling until the wood cracked and tore. His mouth was full of needles and the bitter taste of the sap. He shook his head and snarled.

His brother sat back on his haunches and lifted his voice in a ululating howl, his song black with mourning. The way was no way. They were not squirrels, nor the cubs of men, they could not wriggle up the trunks of trees, clinging with soft pink paws and clumsy feet. They were runners, hunters, prowlers.

Off across the night, beyond the stone that hemmed them close, the dogs woke and began to bark. One and then another and then all of them, a great clamor. They smelled it too; the scent of foes and fear.

A desperate fury filled him, hot as hunger. He sprang away from the wall loped off beneath the trees, the shadows of branch and leaf dappling his grey fur... and then he turned and raced back in a rush. His feet flew kicking up wet leaves and pine needles, and for a little time he was a hunter and an antlered stag was fleeing before him and he could see it, smell it, and he ran full out in pursuit. The smell of fear made his heart thunder and slaver ran from his jaws, and he reached the falling tree in stride and threw himself up the trunk, claws scrabbling at the bark for purchase. Upward he bounded, *up*, two bounds, three, hardly slowing, until he was among the lower limbs. Branches tangled his feet and whipped at his eyes, grey-green needles scattered as he shouldered through them, snapping. He had to slow. Something snagged at his foot and he wrenched it free, snarling. The trunk narrowed under him, the slope steeper, almost straight up, and wet. The bark tore like skin when he tried to claw at it. He was a third of the way up, halfway, more, the roof was almost within reach... and then he put down a foot and felt it slip off the curve of wet wood, and suddenly he was sliding, stumbling. He yowled in fear and fury, falling, *falling*, and twisted around while the ground rushed up to break him...

And then Bran was back abed in his lonely tower room, tangled in his blankets, his breath coming hard. "Summer," he cried aloud. "Summer." His shoulder seemed to ache, as if he had fallen on it, but he knew it was only the ghost of what the wolf was feeling. *Jojen told it true. I am a beastling.* Outside he could hear the faint barking of dogs. *The sea has come. It's flowing over the walls, just as Jojen saw.* Bran grabbed the bar overhead and pulled himself up, shouting for help. No one came, and after a moment

he remembered that no one would. They had taken the guard off his door. Ser Rodrik had needed every man of fighting age he could lay his hands on, so Winterfell had been left with only a token garrison.

The rest had left eight days past, six hundred men from Winterfell and the nearest holdfasts. Cley Cerwyn was bringing three hundred more to join them on the march, and Maester Luwin had sent ravens before them, summoning levies from White Harbor and the barrowlands and even the deep places inside the wolfswood. Torrhen's Square was under attack by some monstrous war chief named Dagmer Cleftjaw. Old Nan said he couldn't be killed, that once a foe had cut his head in two with an axe, but Dagmer was so fierce he'd just pushed the two halves back together and held them until they healed up. *Could Dagmer have won?* Torrhen's Square was many days from Winterfell, yet still...

Bran pulled himself from the bed, moving bar to bar until he reached the windows. His fingers fumbled a little as he swung back the shutters. The yard was empty, and all the windows he could see were black. Winterfell slept. "*Hodor!*" he shouted down, as loud as he could. Hodor would be asleep above the stables, but maybe if he yelled loud enough he'd hear, or *somebody* would. "*Hodor, come fast! Osha! Meera, Jojen, anyone!*" Bran cupped his hands around his mouth. "*HOOOOODOOOOOR!*"

But when the door crashed open behind him, the man who stepped through was no one Bran knew. He wore a leather jerkin sewn with overlapping iron disks, and carried a dirk in one hand and an axe strapped to his back. "What do you want?" Bran demanded, afraid. "This is my room. You get out of here."

Theon Greyjoy followed him into the bedchamber. "We're not here to harm you, Bran."

"Theon?" Bran felt dizzy with relief. "Did Robb send you? Is he here too?"

"Robb's far away. He can't help you now."

"Help me?" He was confused. "Don't scare me, Theon."

“I’m *Prince* Theon now. We’re both princes, Bran. Who would have dreamed it? But I’ve taken your castle, my prince.”

“Winterfell?” Bran shook his head. “No, you *couldn’t*.”

“Leave us, Werlag.” The man with the dirk withdrew. Theon seated himself on the bed. “I sent four men over the walls with grappling claws and ropes, and they opened a postern gate for the rest of us. My men are dealing with yours even now. I promise you, Winterfell is mine.”

Bran did not understand. “But you’re Father’s *ward*.”

“And now you and your brother are *my* wards. As soon as the fighting’s done, my men will be bringing the rest of your people together in the Great Hall. You and I are going to speak to them. You’ll tell them how you’ve yielded Winterfell to me, and command them to serve and obey their new lord as they did the old.”

“I *won’t*,” said Bran. “We’ll fight you and throw you out. I never yielded, you can’t make me say I did.”

“This is no game, Bran, so don’t play the boy with me, I won’t stand for it. The castle is mine, but these people are still yours. If the prince would keep them safe, he’d best do as he’s told.” He rose and went to the door. “Someone will come dress you and carry you to the Great Hall. Think carefully on what you want to say.”

The waiting made Bran feel even more helpless than before. He sat in the window seat, staring out at dark towers and walls black as shadow. Once he thought he heard shouting beyond the Guards Hall, and something that might have been the clash of swords, but he did not have Summer’s ears to hear, nor his nose to smell. *Awake, I am still broken, but when I sleep, when I’m Summer, I can run and fight and hear and smell.*

He had expected that Hodor would come for him, or maybe one of the serving girls, but when the door next opened it was Maester Luwin, carrying a candle. “Bran,” he said, “you... know what has happened? You have been told?” The skin was broken above his left eye, and blood ran down that side of his face.

“Theon came. He said Winterfell was his now.”

The maester set down the candle and wiped the blood off his cheek. "They swam the moat. Climbed the walls with hook and rope. Came over wet and dripping, steel in hand." He sat on the chair by the door, as fresh blood flowed. "Alebelly was on the gate, they surprised him in the turret and killed him. Hayhead's wounded as well. I had time to send off two ravens before they burst in. The bird to White Harbor got away, but they brought down the other with an arrow." The maester stared at the rushes. "Ser Rodrik took too many of our men, but I am to blame as much as he is. I never saw this danger, I never..."

*Jojen saw it*, Bran thought. "You better help me dress."

"Yes, that's so." In the heavy ironbound chest at the foot of Bran's bed the maester found smallclothes, breeches, and tunic. "You are the Stark in Winterfell, and Robb's heir. You must look princely." Together they garbed him as befit a lord.

"Theon wants me to yield the castle," Bran said as the maester was fastening the cloak with his favorite wolf's-head clasp of silver and jet.

"There is no shame in that. A lord must protect his smallfolk. Cruel places breed cruel peoples, Bran, remember that as you deal with these ironmen. Your lord father did what he could to gentle Theon, but I fear it was too little and too late."

The ironman who came for them was a squat thick-bodied man with a coal-black beard that covered half his chest. He bore the boy easily enough, though he looked none too happy with the task. Rickon's bedchamber was a half turn down the steps. The four-year-old was cranky at being woken. "I want Mother," he said. "I *want* her. And Shaggydog too."

"Your mother is far away, my prince." Maester Luwin pulled a bedrobe over the child's head. "But I'm here, and Bran." He took Rickon by the hand and led him out.

Below, they came on Meera and Jojen being herded from their room by a bald man whose spear was three feet taller than he was. When Jojen looked at Bran, his eyes were green pools full of sorrow. Other ironmen had roused the Freys. "Your brother's lost his kingdom," Little Walder told Bran. "You're no prince now, just a hostage."

“So are you,” Jojen said, “and me, and all of us.”

“No one was talking to you, frog eater.”

One of the ironmen went before them carrying a torch, but the rain had started again and soon drowned it out. As they hurried across the yard they could hear the direwolves howling in the godswood. *I hope Summer wasn't hurt falling from the tree.*

Theon Greyjoy was seated in the high seat of the Starks. He had taken off his cloak. Over a shirt of fine mail he wore a black surcoat emblazoned with the golden kraken of his House. His hands rested on the wolves' heads carved at the ends of the wide stone arms. “Theon's sitting in Robb's chair,” Rickon said.

“Hush, Rickon.” Bran could feel the menace around them, but his brother was too young. A few torches had been lit, and a fire kindled in the great hearth, but most of the hall remained in darkness. There was no place to sit with the benches stacked against the walls, so the castle folk stood in small groups, not daring to speak. He saw Old Nan, her toothless mouth opening and closing. Hayhead was carried in between two of the other guards, a bloodstained bandage wrapped about his bare chest. Poxym Tyme wept inconsolably, and Beth Cassel cried with fear.

“What have we here?” Theon asked of the Reeds and Freys.

“These are Lady Catelyle's wards, both named Walder Frey,” Maester Luwin explained. “And this is Jojen Reed and his sister Meera, son and daughter to Howland Reed of Greywater Watch, who came to renew their oaths of fealty to Winterfell.”

“Some might call that ill-timed,” said Theon, “though not for me. Here you are and here you'll stay.” He vacated the high seat. “Bring the prince here, Lorren.” The black-bearded man dumped Bran onto the stone as if he were a sack of oats.

People were still being driven into the Great Hall, prodded along with shouts and the butts of the spears. Gage and Osha arrived from the kitchens, spotted with flour from making the morning bread. Mikken they dragged in cursing. Farlen entered limping, struggling to support Palla. Her dress had

been ripped in two; she held it up with a clenched fist and walked as if every step were agony. Septon Chayle rushed to lend a hand, but one of the ironmen knocked him to the floor.

The last man marched through the doors was the prisoner Reek, whose stench preceded him, ripe and pungent. Bran felt his stomach twist at the smell of him. “We found this one locked in a tower cell,” announced his escort, a beardless youth with ginger-colored hair and sodden clothing, doubtless one of those who’d swum the moat. “He says they call him Reek.”

“Can’t think why,” Theon said, smiling. “Do you always smell so bad, or did you just finish fucking a pig?”

“Haven’t fucked no one since they took me, m’lord. Heke’s me true name. I was in service to the Bastard o’ the Dreadfort till the Starks give him an arrow in the back for a wedding gift.”

Theon found that amusing. “Who did he marry?”

“The widow o’ Hornwood, m’lord.”

“That crone? Was he blind? She has teats like empty wineskins, dry and withered.”

“It wasn’t her teats he wed her for, m’lord.”

The ironmen slammed shut the tall doors at the foot of the hall. From the high seat, Bran could see about twenty of them. *He probably left some guards on the gates and the armory.* Even so, there couldn’t be more than thirty.

Theon raised his hands for quiet. “You all know me—”

“Aye, we know you for a sack of steaming dung!” shouted Mikken, before the bald man drove the butt of his spear into his gut, then smashed him across the face with the shaft. The smith stumbled to his knees and spat out a tooth.

“Mikken, you be silent.” Bran tried to sound stern and lordly, the way Robb did when he made a command, but his voice betrayed him and the words came out in a shrill squeak.



“Listen to your little lordling, Mikken,” said Theon. “He has more sense than you do.”

*A good lord protects his people*, he reminded himself. “I’ve yielded Winterfell to Theon.”

“Louder, Bran. And call me prince.”

He raised his voice. “I have yielded Winterfell to Prince Theon. All of you should do as he commands you.”

“Damned if I will!” bellowed Mikken.

Theon ignored the outburst. “My father has donned the ancient crown of salt and rock, and declared himself King of the Iron Islands. He claims the north as well, by right of conquest. You are all his subjects.”

“*Bugger that.*” Mikken wiped the blood from his mouth. “I serve the Starks, not some treasonous squid of—*aah.*” The butt of the spear smashed him face first into the stone floor.

“Smiths have strong arms and weak heads,” observed Theon. “But if the rest of you serve me as loyally as you served Ned Stark, you’ll find me as generous a lord as you could want.” on his hands and knees, Mikken spat blood. *Please don’t*, Bran wished at him, but the blacksmith shouted, “If you think you can hold the north with this sorry lot o’—”

The bald man drove the point of his spear into the back of Mikken’s neck. Steel slid through flesh and came out his throat in a welter of blood. A woman screamed, and Meera wrapped her arms around Rickon. *It’s blood he drowned on*, Bran thought numbly. *His own blood.*

“Who else has something to say?” asked Theon Greyjoy.

“*Hodor hodor hodor hodor*,” shouted Hodor, eyes wide.

“Someone kindly shut that halfwit up.”

Two ironmen began to beat Hodor with the butts of their spears. The stableboy dropped to the floor, trying to shield himself with his hands.

“I will be as good a lord to you as Eddard Stark ever was.” Theon raised his voice to be heard above the smack of wood on flesh. “Betray me, though, and you’ll wish you hadn’t. And don’t think the men you see here

are the whole of my power. Torrhen's Square and Deepwood Motte will soon be ours as well, and my uncle is sailing up the Saltspear to seize Moat Cailin. If Robb Stark can stave off the Lannisters, he may reign as King of the Trident hereafter, but House Greyjoy holds the north now."

"Stark's lords will fight you," the man Reek called out. "That bloated pig at White Harbor for one, and them Umbers and Karstarks too. You'll need men. Free me and I'm yours."

Theon weighed him a moment. "You're cleverer than you smell, but I could not suffer that stench."

"Well," said Reek, "I could wash some. If I was free."

"A man of rare good sense." Theon smiled. "Bend the knee." one of the ironmen handed Reek a sword, and he laid it at Theon's feet and swore obedience to House Greyjoy and King Balon. Bran could not look. The green dream was coming true.

"M'lord Greyjoy!" Osha stepped past Mikken's body. "I was brought here captive too. You were there the day I was taken."

*I thought you were a friend,* Bran thought, hurt.

"I need fighters," Theon declared, "not kitchen sluts."

"It was Robb Stark put me in the kitchens. For the best part of a year, I've been left to scour kettles, scrape grease, and warm the straw for this one." She threw a look at Gage. "I've had a bellyful of it. Put a spear in my hand again."

"I got a spear for you right here," said the bald man who'd killed Mikken. He grabbed his crotch, grinning.

Osha drove her bony knee up between his legs. "You keep that soft pink thing." She wrested the spear from him and used the butt to knock him off his feet. "I'll have me the wood and iron." The bald man writhed on the floor while the other reavers sent up gales of laughter.

Theon laughed with the rest. "You'll do," he said. "Keep the spear; Stygg can find another. Now bend the knee and swear."

When no one else rushed forward to pledge service, they were dismissed with a warning to do their work and make no trouble. Hodor was

given the task of bearing Bran back to his bed. His face was all ugly from the beating, his nose swollen and one eye closed. “Hodor,” he sobbed between cracked lips as he lifted Bran in huge strong arms and bloody hands and carried him back out into the rain.