

BRAN

Meera moved in a wary circle, her net dangling loose in her left hand, the slender three-pronged frog spear poised in her right. Summer followed her with his golden eyes, turning, his tail held stiff and tall. Watching, watching...

"Yai!" the girl shouted, the spear darting out. The wolf slid to the left and leapt before she could draw back the spear. Meera cast her net, the tangles unfolding in the air before her. Summer's leap carried him into it. He dragged it with him as he slammed into her chest and knocked her over backward. Her spear went spinning away. The damp grass cushioned her fall but the breath went out of her in an "Oof." The wolf crouched atop her.

Bran hooted. "You lose."

"She wins," her brother Jojen said. "Summer's snared."

He was right, Bran saw. Thrashing and growling at the net, trying to rip free, Summer was only ensnaring himself worse. Nor could he bite through. "Let him out."

Laughing, the Reed girl threw her arms around the tangled wolf and rolled them both. Summer gave a piteous whine, his legs kicking against the cords that bound them. Meera knelt, undid a twist, pulled at a corner, tugged deftly here and there, and suddenly the direwolf was bounding free.

"Summer, to me." Bran spread his arms. "Watch," he said, an instant before the wolf bowled into him. He clung with all his strength as the wolf dragged him bumping through the grass. They wrestled and rolled and clung to each other, one snarling and yapping, the other laughing. In the end it was Bran sprawled on top, the mud-spattered direwolf under him. "Good wolf," he panted. Summer licked him across the ear.

Meera shook her head. "Does he never grow angry?"

"Not with me." Bran grabbed the wolf by his ears and Summer snapped at him fiercely, but it was all in play. "Sometimes he tears my garb but he's never drawn blood."

“*Your* blood, you mean. If he’d gotten past my net...”

“He wouldn’t hurt you. He knows I like you.” All of the other lords and knights had departed within a day or two of the harvest feast, but the Reeds had stayed to become Bran’s constant companions. Jojen was so solemn that Old Nan called him “little grandfather,” but Meera reminded Bran of his sister Arya. She wasn’t scared to get dirty, and she could run and fight and throw as good as a boy. She was older than Arya, though; almost sixteen, a woman grown. They were both older than Bran, even though his ninth name day had finally come and gone, but they never treated him like a child.

“I wish you were our wards instead of the Walders.” He began to struggle toward the nearest tree. His dragging and wriggling was unseemly to watch, but when Meera moved to lift him he said, “No, don’t help me.” He rolled clumsily and pushed and squirmed backward, using the strength of his arms, until he was sitting with his back to the trunk of a tall ash. “See, I told you.” Summer lay down with his head in Bran’s lap. “I never knew anyone who fought with a net before,” he told Meera while he scratched the direwolf between the ears. “Did your master-at-arms teach you net-fighting?”

“My father taught me. We have no knights at Greywater. No master-at-arms, and no maester.”

“Who keeps your ravens?”

She smiled. “Ravens can’t find Greywater Watch, no more than our enemies can.”

“Why not?”

“Because it moves,” she told him.

Bran had never heard of a moving castle before. He looked at her uncertainly, but he couldn’t tell whether she was teasing him or not. “I wish I could see it. Do you think your lord father would let me come visit when the war is over?”

“You would be most welcome, my prince. Then or now.”

“Now?” Bran had spent his whole life at Winterfell. He yearned to see far places. “I could ask Ser Rodrik when he returns.” The old knight was off east, trying to set to rights the trouble there. Roose Bolton’s bastard had started it by seizing Lady Hornwood as she returned from the harvest feast, marrying her that very night even though he was young enough to be her son. Then Lord Manderly had taken her castle. To protect the Hornwood holdings from the Boltons, he had written, but Ser Rodrik had been almost as angry with him as with the bastard. “Ser Rodrik might let me go. Maester Luwin never would.”

Sitting cross-legged under the weirwood, Jojen Reed regarded him solemnly. “It would be good if you left Winterfell, Bran.”

“It would?”

“Yes. And sooner rather than later.”

“My brother has the greensight,” said Meera. “He dreams things that haven’t happened, but sometimes they do.”

“There is no *sometimes*, Meera.” A look passed between them; him sad, her defiant.

“Tell me what’s going to happen,” Bran said.

“I will,” said Jojen, “if you’ll tell me about your dreams.”

The godswood grew quiet. Bran could hear leaves rustling, and Hodor’s distant splashing from the hot pools. He thought of the golden man and the three-eyed crow, remembered the crunch of bones between his jaws and the coppery taste of blood. “I don’t have dreams. Maester Luwin gives me sleeping draughts.”

“Do they help?”

“Sometimes.”

Meera said, “All of Winterfell knows you wake at night shouting and sweating, Bran. The women talk of it at the well, and the guards in their hall.”

“Tell us what frightens you so much,” said Jojen.

“I don’t want to. Anyway, it’s only dreams. Maester Luwin says dreams might mean anything or nothing.”

“My brother dreams as other boys do, and those dreams might mean anything,” Meera said, “but the green dreams are different.”

Jojen’s eyes were the color of moss, and sometimes when he looked at you he seemed to be seeing something else. Like now. “I dreamed of a winged wolf bound to earth with grey stone chains,” he said. “It was a green dream, so I knew it was true. A crow was trying to peck through the chains, but the stone was too hard and his beak could only chip at them.”

“Did the crow have three eyes?”

Jojen nodded.

Summer raised his head from Bran’s lap, and gazed at the mudman with his dark golden eyes.

“When I was little I almost died of greywater fever. That was when the crow came to me.”

“He came to me after I fell,” Bran blurted. “I was asleep for a long time. He said I had to fly or die, and I woke up, only I was broken and I couldn’t fly after all.”

“You can if you want to.” Picking up her net, Meera shook out the last tangles and began arranging it in loose folds.

“*You* are the winged wolf, Bran,” said Jojen. “I wasn’t sure when we first came, but now I am. The crow sent us here to break your chains.”

“Is the crow at Greywater?”

“No. The crow is in the north.”

“At the Wall?” Bran had always wanted to see the Wall. His bastard brother Jon was there now, a man of the Night’s Watch.

“Beyond the Wall.” Meera Reed hung the net from her belt. “When Jojen told our lord father what he’d dreamed, he sent us to Winterfell.”

“How would I break the chains, Jojen?” Bran asked.

“Open your eye.”

“They *are* open Can’t you *see*?”

“Two are open.” Jojen pointed. “One, two.”

“I only *have* two.”

“You have three. The crow gave you the third, but you will not open it.” He had a slow soft way of speaking. “With two eyes you see my face. With three you could see my heart. With two you can see that oak tree there. With three you could see the acorn the oak grew from and the stump that it will one day become. With two you see no farther than your walls. With three you would gaze south to the Summer Sea and north beyond the Wall.”

Summer got to his feet. “I don’t need to see so far.” Bran made a nervous smile. “I’m tired of talking about crows. Let’s talk about wolves. Or lizard-lions. Have you ever hunted one, Meera? We don’t have them here.”

Meera plucked her frog spear out of the bushes. “They live in the water. In slow streams and deep swamps—”

Her brother interrupted. “Did you dream of a lizard-lion?”

“No,” said Bran. “I told you, I don’t want—”

“Did you dream of a wolf?”

He was making Bran angry. “I don’t have to tell you my dreams. I’m the prince. I’m the Stark in Winterfell.”

“Was it Summer?”

“You be quiet.”

“The night of the harvest feast, you dreamed you were Summer in the godswood, didn’t you?”

“*Stop it!*” Bran shouted. Summer slid toward the weirwood, his white teeth bared.

Jojen Reed took no mind. “When I touched Summer, I felt you in him. just as you are in him now.”

“You couldn’t have. I was in bed. I was sleeping.”

“You were in the godswood, all in grey.”

“It was only a bad dream...”

Jojen stood. "I felt you. I felt you fall. Is that what scares you, the falling?"

The falling, Bran thought, and the golden man, the queen's brother, he scares me too, but mostly the falling. He did not say it, though. How could he? He had not been able to tell Ser Rodrik or Maester Luwin, and he could not tell the Reeds either. If he didn't talk about it, maybe he would forget. He had never wanted to remember. It might not even be a true remembering.

"Do you fall every night, Bran?" Jojen asked quietly.

A low rumbling growl rose from Summer's throat, and there was no play in it. He stalked forward, all teeth and hot eyes. Meera stepped between the wolf and her brother, spear in hand. "Keep him back, Bran."

"Jojen is making him angry."

Meera shook out her net.

"It's your anger, Bran," her brother said. "Your fear."

"It isn't. I'm not a wolf." Yet he'd howled with them in the night, and tasted blood in his wolf dreams.

"Part of you is Summer, and part of Summer is you. You know that, Bran."

Summer rushed forward, but Meera blocked him, jabbing with the three-pronged spear. The wolf twisted aside, circling, stalking. Meera turned to face him. "Call him back, Bran."

"Summer!" Bran shouted. "To me, Summer!" He slapped an open palm down on the meat of his thigh. His hand tingled, though his dead leg felt nothing.

The direwolf lunged again, and again Meera's spear darted out. Summer dodged, circled back. The bushes rustled, and a lean black shape came padding from behind the weirwood, teeth bared. The scent was strong; his brother had smelled his rage. Bran felt hairs rise on the back of his neck. Meera stood beside her brother, with wolves to either side. "Bran, call them off."

"I *can* 't!"

“Jojen, up the tree.”

“There’s no need. Today is not the day I die.”

“*Do it!*” she screamed, and her brother scrambled up the trunk of the weirwood, using the face for his handholds. The direwolves closed. Meera abandoned spear and net, jumped up, and grabbed the branch above her head. Shaggy’s jaws snapped shut beneath her ankle as she swung up and over the limb. Summer sat back on his haunches and howled, while Shaggydog worried the net, shaking it in his teeth.

Only then did Bran remember that they were not alone. He cupped hands around his mouth. “Hodor!” he shouted. “*Hodor! Hodor!*” He was badly frightened and somehow ashamed. “They won’t hurt Hodor,” he assured his treed friends.

A few moments passed before they heard a tuneless humming. Hodor arrived half-dressed and mud-spattered from his visit to the hot pools, but Bran had never been so glad to see him. “Hodor, help me. Chase off the wolves. Chase them off.”

Hodor went to it gleefully, waving his arms and stamping his huge feet, shouting “Hodor, Hodor,” running first at one wolf and then the other. Shaggydog was the first to flee, slinking back into the foliage with a final snarl. When Summer had enough, he came back to Bran and lay down beside him.

No sooner did Meera touch ground than she snatched up her spear and net again. Jojen never took his eyes off Summer. “We will talk again,” he promised Bran.

It was the wolves, it wasn’t me. He did not understand why they’d gotten so wild. *Maybe Maester Luwin was right to lock them in the godswood.* “Hodor,” he said, “bring me to Maester Luwin.”

The maester’s turret below the rookery was one of Bran’s favorite places. Luwin was hopelessly untidy, but his clutter of books and scrolls and bottles was as familiar and comforting to Bran as his bald spot and the flapping sleeves of his loose grey robes. He liked the ravens too.

He found Luwin perched on a high stool, writing. With Ser Rodrik gone, all of the governance of the castle had fallen on his shoulders. “My prince,” he said when Hodor entered, “you’re early for lessons today.” The maester spent several hours every afternoon tutoring Bran, Rickon, and the Walder Freys.

“Hodor, stand still.” Bran grasped a wall sconce with both hands and used it to pull himself up and out of the basket. He hung for a moment by his arms until Hodor carried him to a chair. “Meera says her brother has the greensight.”

Maester Luwin scratched at the side of his nose with his writing quill. “Does she now?”

He nodded. “You told me that the children of the forest had the greensight. I remember.”

“Some claimed to have that power. Their wise men were called *greenseers*.”

“Was it magic?”

“Call it that for want of a better word, if you must. At heart it was only a different sort of knowledge.”

“What was it?”

Luwin set down his quill. “No one truly knows, Bran. The children are gone from the world, and their wisdom with them. It had to do with the faces in the trees, we think. The First Men believed that the greenseers could see through the eyes of the weirwoods. That was why they cut down the trees whenever they warred upon the children. Supposedly the greenseers also had power over the beasts of the wood and the birds in the trees. Even fish. Does the Reed boy claim such powers?”

“No. I don’t think. But he has dreams that come true sometimes, Meera says.”

“All of us have dreams that come true sometimes. You dreamed of your lord father in the crypts before we knew he was dead, remember?”

“Rickon did too. We dreamed the same dream.”

“Call it greensight, if you wish... but remember as well all those tens of thousands of dreams that you and Rickon have dreamed that did *not* come true. Do you perchance recall what I taught you about the chain collar that every maester wears?”

Bran thought for a moment, trying to remember. “A maester forges his chain in the Citadel of Oldtown. It’s a chain because you swear to serve, and it’s made of different metals because you serve the realm and the realm has different sorts of people. Every time you learn something you get another link. Black iron is for ravenry, silver for healing, gold for sums and numbers. I don’t remember them all.”

Luwin slid a finger up under his collar and began to turn it, inch by inch. He had a thick neck for a small man, and the chain was tight, but a few pulls had it all the way around. “This is Valyrian steel,” he said when the link of dark grey metal lay against the apple of his throat. “Only one maester in a hundred wears such a link. This signifies that I have studied what the Citadel calls *the higher mysteries*—magic, for want of a better word. A fascinating pursuit, but of small use, which is why so few maesters trouble themselves with it.

“All those who study the higher mysteries try their own hand at spells, soon or late. I yielded to the temptation too, I must confess it. Well, I was a boy, and what boy does not secretly wish to find hidden powers in himself? I got no more for my efforts than a thousand boys before me, and a thousand since. Sad to say, magic does not work.”

“Sometimes it does,” Bran protested. “I had that dream, and Rickon did too. And there are mages and warlocks in the east...”

“There are men who *call* themselves mages and warlocks,” Maester Luwin said. “I had a friend at the Citadel who could pull a rose out of your ear, but he was no more magical than I was. Oh, to be sure, there is much we do not understand. The years pass in their hundreds and their thousands, and what does any man see of life but a few summers, a few winters? We look at mountains and call them eternal, and so they seem... but in the course of time, mountains rise and fall, rivers change their courses, stars fall

from the sky, and great cities sink beneath the sea. Even gods die, we think. Everything changes.

“Perhaps magic was once a mighty force in the world, but no longer. What little remains is no more than the wisp of smoke that lingers in the air after a great fire has burned out, and even that is fading. Valyria was the last ember, and Valyria is gone. The dragons are no more, the giants are dead, the children of the forest forgotten with all their lore.

“No, my prince. Jojen Reed may have had a dream or two that he believes came true, but he does not have the greensight. No living man has that power.”

Bran said as much to Meera Reed when she came to him at dusk as he sat in his window seat watching the lights flicker to life. “I’m sorry for what happened with the wolves. Summer shouldn’t have tried to hurt Jojen, but Jojen shouldn’t have said all that about my dreams. The crow lied when he said I could fly, and your brother lied too.”

“Or perhaps your maester is wrong.”

“He isn’t. Even my father relied on his counsel.”

“Your father listened, I have no doubt. But in the end, he decided for himself. Bran, will you let me tell you about a dream Jojen dreamed of you and your fosterling brothers?”

“The Walders aren’t my brothers.”

She paid that no heed. “You were sitting at supper, but instead of a servant, Maester Luwin brought you your food. He served you the king’s cut off the roast, the meat rare and bloody, but with a savory smell that made everyone’s mouth water. The meat he served the Freys was old and grey and dead. Yet they liked their supper better than you liked yours.”

“I don’t understand.”

“You will, my brother says. When you do, we’ll talk again.”

Bran was almost afraid to sit to supper that night, but when he did, it was pigeon pie they set before him. Everyone else was served the same, and he couldn’t see that anything was wrong with the food they served the Walders. *Maester Luwin has the truth of it*, he told himself. Nothing bad

was coming to Winterfell, no matter what Jojen said. Bran was relieved... but disappointed too. So long as there was magic, anything could happen. Ghosts could walk, trees could talk, and broken boys could grow up to be knights. "But there isn't," he said aloud in the darkness of his bed. "There's no magic, and the stories are just stories."

And he would never walk, nor fly, nor be a knight.