

BRAN

Dancer was draped in bardings of snowy white wool emblazoned with the grey direwolf of House Stark, while Bran wore grey breeches and white doublet, his sleeves and collar trimmed with vair. Over his heart was his wolf's-head brooch of silver and polished jet. He would sooner have had Summer than a silver wolf on his breast, but Ser Rodrik had been unyielding.

The low stone steps balked Dancer only for a moment. When Bran urged her on, she took them easily. Beyond the wide oak-and-iron doors, eight long rows of trestle tables filled Winterfell's Great Hall, four on each side of the center aisle. Men crowded shoulder to shoulder on the benches. "Stark!" they called as Bran trotted past, rising to their feet. "Winterfell! *Winterfell!*"

He was old enough to know that it was not truly him they shouted for—it was the harvest they cheered, it was Robb and his victories, it was his lord father and his grandfather and all the Starks going back eight thousand years. Still, it made him swell with pride. For so long as it took him to ride the length of that hall he forgot that he was broken. Yet when he reached the dais, with every eye upon him, Osha and Hodor undid his straps and buckles, lifted him off Dancer's back, and carried him to the high seat of his fathers.

Ser Rodrik was seated to Bran's left, his daughter Beth beside him. Rickon was to his right, his mop of shaggy auburn hair grown so long that it brushed his ermine mantle. He had refused to let anyone cut it since their mother had gone. The last girl to try had been bitten for her efforts. "I wanted to ride too," he said as Hodor led Dancer away. "I ride better than you."

"You don't, so hush up," he told his brother. Ser Rodrik bellowed for quiet. Bran raised his voice. He bid them welcome in the name of his brother, the King in the North, and asked them to thank the gods old and

new for Robb's victories and the bounty of the harvest. "May there be a hundred more," he finished, raising his father's silver goblet.

"A hundred more!" Pewter tankards, clay cups, and iron-banded drinking horns clashed together. Bran's wine was sweetened with honey and fragrant with cinnamon and cloves, but stronger than he was used to. He could feel its hot snaky fingers wriggling through his chest as he swallowed. By the time he set down the goblet, his head was swimming.

"You did well, Bran," Ser Rodrik told him. "Lord Eddard would have been most proud." Down the table, Maester Luwin nodded his agreement as the servers began to carry in the food.

Such food Bran had never seen; course after course after course, so much that he could not manage more than a bite or two of each dish. There were great joints of aurochs roasted with leeks, venison pies chunky with carrots, bacon, and mushrooms, mutton chops sauced in honey and cloves, savory duck, peppered boar, goose, skewers of pigeon and capon, beef-and-barley stew, cold fruit soup. Lord Wyman had brought twenty casks of fish from White Harbor packed in salt and seaweed; whitefish and winkles, crabs and mussels, clams, herring, cod, salmon, lobster and lampreys. There was black bread and honeycakes and oaten biscuits; there were turnips and pease and beets, beans and squash and huge red onions; there were baked apples and berry tarts and pears poached in strongwine. Wheels of white cheese were set at every table, above and below the salt, and flagons of hot spice wine and chilled autumn ale were passed up and down the tables.

Lord Wyman's musicians played bravely and well, but harp and fiddle and horn were soon drowned beneath a tide of talk and laughter, the clash of cup and plate, and the snarling of hounds fighting for table scraps. The singer sang good songs, "Iron Lances" and "The Burning of the Ships" and "The Bear and the Maiden Fair," but only Hodor seemed to be listening. He stood beside the piper, hopping from one foot to the other.

The noise swelled to a steady rumbling roar, a great heady stew of sound. Ser Rodrik talked with Maester Luwin above Beth's curly head, while Rickon screamed happily at the Walders. Bran had not wanted the Freys at the high table, but the maester reminded him that they would soon

be kin. Robb was to marry one of their aunts, and Arya one of their uncles. “She never will,” Bran said, “not Arya,” but Maester Luwin was unyielding, so there they were beside Rickon.

The serving men brought every dish to Bran first, that he might take the lord’s portion if he chose. By the time they reached the ducks, he could eat no more. After that he nodded approval at each course in turn, and waved it away. If the dish smelled especially choice, he would send it to one of the lords on the dais, a gesture of friendship and favor that Maester Luwin told him he must make. He sent some salmon down to poor sad Lady Hornwood, the boar to the boisterous Umbers, a dish of goose-in-berries to Cley Cerwyn, and a huge lobster to Joseth the master of horse, who was neither lord nor guest, but had seen to Dancer’s training and made it possible for Bran to ride. He sent sweets to Hodor and Old Nan as well, for no reason but he loved them. Ser Rodrik reminded him to send something to his foster brothers, so he sent Little Walder some boiled beets and Big Walder the buttered turnips.

On the benches below, Winterfell men mixed with smallfolk from the winter town, friends from the nearer holdfasts, and the escorts of their lordly guests. Some faces Bran had never seen before, others he knew as well as his own, yet they all seemed equally foreign to him. He watched them as from a distance, as if he still sat in the window of his bedchamber looking down on the yard below, seeing everything yet a part of nothing.

Osha moved among the tables, pouring ale. One of Leobald Tallhart’s men slid a hand up under her skirts and she broke the flagon over his head, to roars of laughter. Yet Mikken had his hand down some woman’s bodice, and she seemed not to mind. Bran watched Farlen make his red bitch beg for bones and smiled at Old Nan plucking at the crust of a hot pie with wrinkled fingers. On the dais, Lord Wyman attacked a steaming plate of lampreys as if they were an enemy host. He was so fat that Ser Rodrik had commanded that a special wide chair be built for him to sit in, but he laughed loud and often, and Bran thought he liked him. Poor wan Lady Hornwood sat beside him, her face a stony mask as she picked listlessly at her food. At the opposite end of the high table, Hother and Mors were

playing a drinking game, slamming their horns together as hard as knights meeting in joust.

It is too hot here, and too noisy, and they are all getting drunk. Bran itched under his grey and white woolens, and suddenly he wished he were anywhere but here. *It is cool in the godswood now. Steam is rising off the hot pools, and the red leaves of the weirwood are rustling. The smells are richer than here, and before long the moon will rise and my brother will sing to it.*

“Bran?” Ser Rodrik said. “You do not eat.”

The waking dream had been so vivid, for a moment Bran had not known where he was. “I’ll have more later,” he said. “My belly’s full to bursting.”

The old knight’s white mustache was pink with wine. “You have done well, Bran. Here, and at the audiences. You will be an especial fine lord one day, I think.”

I want to be a knight. Bran took another sip of the spiced honey wine from his father’s goblet, grateful for something to clutch. The lifelike head of a snarling direwolf was raised on the side of the cup. He felt the silver muzzle pressing against his palm, and remembered the last time he had seen his lord father drink from this goblet.

It had been the night of the welcoming feast, when King Robert had brought his court to Winterfell. Summer still reigned then. His parents had shared the dais with Robert and his queen, with her brothers beside her. Uncle Benjen had been there too, all in black. Bran and his brothers and sisters sat with the king’s children, Joffrey and Tommen and Princess Myrcella, who’d spent the whole meal gazing at Robb with adoring eyes. Arya made faces across the table when no one was looking; Sansa listened raptly while the king’s high harper sang songs of chivalry, and Rickon kept asking why Jon wasn’t with them. “Because he’s a bastard,” Bran finally had to whisper to him.

And now they are all gone. It was as if some cruel god had reached down with a great hand and swept them all away, the girls to captivity, Jon

to the Wall, Robb and Mother to war, King Robert and Father to their graves, and perhaps Uncle Benjen as well...

Even down on the benches, there were new men at the tables. Jory was dead, and Fat Tom, and Porthor, Alyn, Desmond, Hullen who had been master of horse, Harwin his son... all those who had gone south with his father, even Septa Mordane and Vayon Poole. The rest had ridden to war with Robb, and might soon be dead as well for all Bran knew. He liked Hayhead and Poxym and Skittrick and the other new men well enough, but he missed his old friends.

He looked up and down the benches at all the faces happy and sad, and wondered who would be missing next year and the year after. He might have cried then, but he couldn't. He was the Stark in Winterfell, his father's son and his brother's heir, and almost a man grown.

At the foot of the hall, the doors opened and a gust of cold air made the torches flame brighter for an instant. Alebelly led two new guests into the feast. "The Lady Meera of House Reed," the rotund guardsman bellowed over the clamor. "With her brother, Jojen, of Greywater Watch."

Men looked up from their cups and trenchers to eye the newcomers. Bran heard Little Walder mutter, "Frogeaters," to Big Walder beside him. Ser Rodrik climbed to his feet. "Be welcome, friends, and share this harvest with us." Serving men hurried to lengthen the table on the dais, fetching trestles and chairs.

"Who are *they*?" Rickon asked.

"Mudmen," answered Little Walder disdainfully. "They're thieves and cravens, and they have green teeth from eating frogs."

Maester Luwin crouched beside Bran's seat to whisper counsel in his ear. "You must greet these ones warmly. I had not thought to see them here, but... you know who they are?"

Bran nodded. "Crannogmen. From the Neck."

"Howland Reed was a great friend to your father," Ser Rodrik told him. "These two are his, it would seem."

As the newcomers walked the length of the hall, Bran saw that one was indeed a girl, though he would never have known it by her dress. She wore lambskin breeches soft with long use, and a sleeveless jerkin armored in bronze scales. Though near Robb's age, she was slim as a boy, with long brown hair knotted behind her head and only the barest suggestion of breasts. A woven net hung from one slim hip, a long bronze knife from the other; under her arm she carried an old iron greathelm spotted with rust; a frog spear and round leathern shield were strapped to her back.

Her brother was several years younger and bore no weapons. All his garb was green, even to the leather of his boots, and when he came closer Bran saw that his eyes were the color of moss, though his teeth looked as white as anyone else's. Both Reeds were slight of build, slender as swords and scarcely taller than Bran himself. They went to one knee before the dais.

"My lords of Stark," the girl said. "The years have passed in their hundreds and their thousands since my folk first swore their fealty to the King in the North. My lord father has sent us here to say the words again, for all our people."

She is looking at me, Bran realized. He had to make some answer. "My brother Robb is fighting in the south," he said, "but you can say your words to me, if you like."

"To Winterfell we pledge the faith of Greywater," they said together. "Hearth and heart and harvest we yield up to you, my lord. Our swords and spears and arrows are yours to command. Grant mercy to our weak, help to our helpless, and justice to all, and we shall never fail you."

"I swear it by earth and water," said the boy in green.

"I swear it by bronze and iron," his sister said.

"We swear it by ice and fire," they finished together.

Bran groped for words. Was he supposed to swear something back to them? Their oath was not one he had been taught. "May your winters be short and your summers bountiful," he said. That was usually a good thing to say. "Rise. I'm Brandon Stark."

The girl, Meera, got to her feet and helped her brother up. The boy stared at Bran all the while. “We bring you gifts of fish and frog and fowl,” he said.

“I thank you.” Bran wondered if he would have to eat a frog to be polite. “I offer you the meat and mead of Winterfell.” He tried to recall all he had been taught of the crannogmen, who dwelt amongst the bogs of the Neck and seldom left their wetlands. They were a poor folk, fishers and frog-hunters who lived in houses of thatch and woven reeds on floating islands hidden in the deeps of the swamp. It was said that they were a cowardly people who fought with poisoned weapons and preferred to hide from foes rather than face them in open battle. And yet Howland Reed had been one of Father’s staunchest companions during the war for King Robert’s crown, before Bran was born.

The boy, Jojen, looked about the hall curiously as he took his seat. “Where are the direwolves?”

“In the godswood,” Rickon answered. “Shaggy was bad.”

“My brother would like to see them,” the girl said.

Little Walder spoke up loudly. “He’d best watch they don’t see him, or they’ll take a bite out of him.”

“They won’t bite if I’m there.” Bran was pleased that they wanted to see the wolves. “Summer won’t anyway, and he’ll keep Shaggydog away.” He was curious about these mudmen. He could not recall ever seeing one before. His father had sent letters to the Lord of Greywater over the years, but none of the crannogmen had ever called at Winterfell. He would have liked to talk to them more, but the Great Hall was so noisy that it was hard to hear anyone who wasn’t right beside you.

Ser Rodrik was right beside Bran. “Do they truly eat frogs?” he asked the old knight.

“Aye,” Ser Rodrik said. “Frogs and fish and lizard-lions, and all manner of birds.”

Maybe they don’t have sheep and cattle, Bran thought. He commanded the serving men to bring them mutton chops and a slice off the aurochs and

fill their trenchers with beef-and-barley stew. They seemed to like that well enough. The girl caught him staring at her and smiled. Bran blushed and looked away.

Much later, after all the sweets had been served and washed down with gallons of summerwine, the food was cleared and the tables shoved back against the walls to make room for the dancing. The music grew wilder, the drummers joined in, and Hother Umber brought forth a huge curved warhorn banded in silver. When the singer reached the part in “The Night That Ended” where the Night’s Watch rode forth to meet the Others in the Battle for the Dawn, he blew a blast that set all the dogs to barking.

Two Glover men began a spinning skirl on bladder and woodharp. Mors Umber was the first on his feet. He seized a passing serving girl by the arm, knocking the flagon of wine out of her hands to shatter on the floor. Amidst the rushes and bones and bits of bread that littered the stone, he whirled her and spun her and tossed her in the air. The girl squealed with laughter and turned red as her skirts swirled and lifted.

Others soon joined in. Hodor began to dance all by himself, while Lord Wyman asked little Beth Cassel to partner him. For all his size, he moved gracefully. When he tired, Cley Cerwyn danced with the child in his stead. Ser Rodrik approached Lady Hornwood, but she made her excuses and took her leave. Bran watched long enough to be polite, and then had Hodor summoned. He was hot and tired, flushed from the wine, and the dancing made him sad. It was something else he could never do. “I want to go.”

“Hodor,” Hodor shouted back, kneeling. Maester Luwin and Hayhead lifted him into his basket. The folk of Winterfell had seen this sight half a hundred times, but doubtless it looked queer to the guests, some of whom were more curious than polite. Bran felt the stares.

They went out the rear rather than walk the length of the hall, Bran ducking his head as they passed through the lord’s door. In the dim-lit gallery outside the Great Hall, they came upon Joseth the master of horse engaged in a different sort of riding. He had some woman Bran did not know shoved up against the wall, her skirts around her waist. She was

giggling until Hodor stopped to watch. Then she screamed. “Leave them be, Hodor,” Bran had to tell him. “Take me to my bedchamber.”

Hodor carried him up the winding steps to his tower and knelt beside one of the iron bars that Mikken had driven into the wall. Bran used the bars to move himself to the bed, and Hodor pulled off his boots and breeches. “You can go back to the feast now, but don’t go bothering Joseth and that woman,” Bran said.

“Hodor,” Hodor replied, bobbing his head.

When he blew out his bedside candle, darkness covered him like a soft, familiar blanket. The faint sound of music drifted through his shuttered window.

Something his father had told him once when he was little came back to him suddenly. He had asked Lord Eddard if the Kingsguard were truly the finest knights in the Seven Kingdoms. “No longer,” he answered, “but once they were a marvel, a shining lesson to the world.”

“Was there one who was best of all?”

“The finest knight I ever saw was Ser Arthur Dayne, who fought with a blade called Dawn, forged from the heart of a fallen star. They called him the Sword of the Morning, and he would have killed me but for Howland Reed.” Father had gotten sad then, and he would say no more. Bran wished he had asked him what he meant.

He went to sleep with his head full of knights in gleaming armor, fighting with swords that shone like starfire, but when the dream came he was in the godswood again. The smells from the kitchen and the Great Hall were so strong that it was almost as if he had never left the feast. He prowled beneath the trees, his brother close behind him. This night was wildly alive, full of the howling of the man-pack at their play. The sounds made him restless. He wanted to run, to hunt, he wanted to—

The rattle of iron made his ears prick up. His brother heard it too. They raced through the undergrowth toward the sound. Bounding across the still water at the foot of the old white one, he caught the scent of a stranger, the man-smell well mixed with leather and earth and iron.

The intruders had pushed a few yards into the wood when he came upon them; a female and a young male, with no taint of fear to them, even when he showed them the white of his teeth. His brother growled low in his throat, yet still they did not run.

“Here they come,” the female said. *Meera*, some part of him whispered, some wisp of the sleeping boy lost in the wolf dream. “Did you know they would be so big?”

“They will be bigger still before they are grown,” the young male said, watching them with eyes large, green, and unafraid. “The black one is full of fear and rage, but the grey is strong... stronger than he knows... can you feel him, sister?”

“No,” she said, moving a hand to the hilt of the long brown knife she wore. “Go careful, Joien.”

“He won’t hurt me. This is not the day I die.” The male walked toward them, unafraid, and reached out for his muzzle, a touch as light as a summer breeze. Yet at the brush of those fingers the wood dissolved and the very ground turned to smoke beneath his feet and swirled away laughing, and then he was spinning and falling, falling, *falling*...