

BRAN

Bran preferred the hard stone of the window seat to the comforts of his featherbed and blankets. Abed, the walls pressed close and the ceiling hung heavy above him; abed, the room was his cell, and Winterfell his prison. Yet outside his window, the wide world still called.

He could not walk, nor climb nor hunt nor fight with a wooden sword as once he had, but he could still *look*. He liked to watch the windows begin to glow all over Winterfell as candles and hearth fires were lit behind the diamond-shaped panes of tower and hall, and he loved to listen to the direwolves sing to the stars.

Of late, he often dreamed of wolves. *They are talking to me, brother to brother*, he told himself when the direwolves howled. He could almost understand them... not quite, not truly, but *almost*... as if they were singing in a language he had once known and somehow forgotten. The Walders might be scared of them, but the Starks had wolf blood. Old Nan told him so. "Though it is stronger in some than in others," she warned.

Summer's howls were long and sad, full of grief and longing. Shaggydog's were more savage. Their voices echoed through the yards and halls until the castle rang and it seemed as though some great pack of direwolves haunted Winterfell, instead of only two... two where there had once been six. *Do they miss their brothers and sisters too?* Bran wondered. *Are they calling to Grey Wind and Ghost, to Nymeria and Lady's Shade? Do they want them to come home and be a pack together?*

"Who can know the mind of a wolf?" Ser Rodrik Cassel said when Bran asked him why they howled. Bran's lady mother had named him castellan of Winterfell in her absence, and his duties left him little time for idle questions.

"It's freedom they're calling for," declared Farlen, who was kennelmaster and had no more love for the direwolves than his hounds did.

“They don’t like being walled up, and who’s to blame them? Wild things belong in the wild, not in a castle.”

“They want to hunt,” agreed Gage the cook as he tossed cubes of suet in a great kettle of stew. “A wolf smells better’n any man. Like as not, they’ve caught the scent o’ prey.”

Maester Luwin did not think so. “Wolves often howl at the moon. These are howling at the comet. See how bright it is, Bran? Perchance they think it *is* the moon.”

When Bran repeated that to Osha, she laughed aloud. “Your wolves have more wit than your maester,” the wildling woman said. “They know truths the grey man has forgotten.” The way she said it made him shiver, and when he asked what the comet meant, she answered, “Blood and fire, boy, and nothing sweet.”

Bran asked Septon Chayle about the comet while they were sorting through some scrolls snatched from the library fire. “It is the sword that slays the season,” he replied, and soon after the white raven came from Oldtown bringing word of autumn, so doubtless he was right.

Though Old Nan did not think so, and she’d lived longer than any of them. “Dragons,” she said, lifting her head and sniffing. She was near blind and could not see the comet, yet she claimed she could *smell* it. “It be dragons, boy,” she insisted. Bran got no *princes* from Nan, no more than he ever had.

Hodor said only, “Hodor.” That was all he ever said.

And still the direwolves howled. The guards on the walls muttered curses, hounds in the kennels barked furiously, horses kicked at their stalls, the Walders shivered by their fire, and even Maester Luwin complained of sleepless nights. Only Bran did not mind. Ser Rodrik had confined the wolves to the godswood after Shaggydog bit Little Walder, but the stones of Winterfell played queer tricks with sound, and sometimes it sounded as if they were in the yard right below Bran’s window. Other times he would have sworn they were up on the curtain walls, loping round like sentries. He wished that he could see them.

He *could* see the comet hanging above the Guards Hall and the Bell Tower, and farther back the First Keep, squat and round, its gargoyles black shapes against the bruised purple dusk. Once Bran had known every stone of those buildings, inside and out; he had climbed them all, scampering up walls as easily as other boys ran down stairs. Their rooftops had been his secret places, and the crows atop the broken tower his special friends.

And then he had fallen.

Bran did not remember falling, yet they said he had, so he supposed it must be true. He had almost died. When he saw the weatherworn gargoyles atop the First Keep where it had happened, he got a queer tight feeling in his belly. And now he could not climb, nor walk nor run nor swordfight, and the dreams he'd dreamed of knighthood had soured in his head.

Summer had howled the day Bran had fallen, and for long after as he lay broken in his bed; Robb had told him so before he went away to war. Summer had mourned for him, and Shaggydog and Grey Wind had joined in his grief. And the night the bloody raven had brought word of their father's death, the wolves had known that too. Bran had been in the maester's turret with Rickon talking of the children of the forest when Summer and Shaggydog had drowned out Luwin with their howls.

Who are they mourning now? Had some enemy slain the King in the North, who used to be his brother Robb? Had his bastard brother Jon Snow fallen from the Wall? Had his mother died, or one of his sisters? Or was this something else, as maester and septon and Old Nan seemed to think?

If I were truly a direwolf, I would understand the song, he thought wistfully. In his wolf dreams, he could race up the sides of mountains, jagged icy mountains taller than any tower, and stand at the summit beneath the full moon with all the world below him, the way it used to be.

"Oooo," Bran cried tentatively. He cupped his hands around his mouth and lifted his head to the comet. "*Oooooooooooooooooooooo, ahoooooooooooooooooooooo,*" he howled. it sounded stupid, high and hollow and quavering, a little boy's howl, not a wolf's. Yet Summer gave answer, his deep voice drowning out Bran's thin one, and Shaggydog made it a chorus. Bran *harooood* again. They howled together, last of their pack.

The noise brought a guard to his door, Hayhead with the wen on his nose. He peered in, saw Bran howling out the window, and said, “What’s this, my prince?”

It made Bran feel queer when they called him prince, though he *was* Robb’s heir, and Robb was King in the North now. He turned his head to howl at the guard. “*Ooooooooo. Oo-oo-oooooooooooo.*”

Hayhead screwed up his face. “Now you stop that there.”

“*Ooo-ooo-Oooooo. Ooo-Ooo-Oooooooooooooooooo.*”

The guardsman retreated. When he came back, Maester Luwin was with him, all in grey, his chain tight about his neck. “Bran, those beasts make sufficient noise without your help.” He crossed the room and put his hand on the boy’s brow. “The hour grows late, you ought to be fast asleep.”

“I’m talking to the wolves.” Bran brushed the hand away.

“Shall I have Hayhead carry you to your bed?”

“I can get to bed myself.” Mikken had hammered a row of iron bars into the wall, so Bran could pull himself about the room with his arms. It was slow and hard and it made his shoulders ache, but he hated being carried. “Anyway, I don’t have to sleep if I don’t want to.”

“All men must sleep, Bran. Even princes.”

“When I sleep I turn into a wolf.” Bran turned his face away and looked back out into the night. “Do wolves dream?”

“All creatures dream, I think, yet not as men do.”

“Do dead men dream?” Bran asked, thinking of his father. In the dark crypts below Winterfell, a stonemason was chiseling out his father’s likeness in granite.

“Some say yes, some no,” the maester answered. “The dead themselves are silent on the matter.”

“Do trees dream?”

“Trees? No...”

“They do,” Bran said with sudden certainty. “They dream tree dreams. I dream of a tree sometimes. A weirwood, like the one in the godswood. It

calls to me. The wolf dreams are better. I smell things, and sometimes I can taste the blood.”

Maester Luwin tugged at his chain where it chafed his neck. “If you would only spend more time with the other children—”

“I hate the other children,” Bran said, meaning the Walders. “I commanded you to send them away.”

Luwin grew stern. “The Freys are your lady mother’s wards, sent here to be fostered at her express command. It is not for you to expel them, nor is it kind. If we turned them out, where would they go?”

“Home. It’s their fault you won’t let me have Summer.”

“The Frey boy did not ask to be attacked,” the maester said, “no more than I did.”

“That was Shaggydog.” Rickon’s big black wolf was so wild he even frightened Bran at times. “Summer never bit anyone.”

“Summer ripped out a man’s throat in this very chamber, or have you forgotten? The truth is, those sweet pups you and your brothers found in the snow have grown into dangerous beasts. The Frey boys are wise to be wary of them.”

“We should put the Walders in the godswood. They could play lord of the crossing all they want, and Summer could sleep with me again. If I’m the prince, why won’t you heed me? I wanted to ride Dancer, but Alebelly wouldn’t let me past the gate.”

“And rightly so. The wolfswood is full of danger; your last ride should have taught you that. Would you want some outlaw to take you captive and sell you to the Lannisters?”

“Summer would save me,” Bran insisted stubbornly. “Princes should be allowed to sail the sea and hunt boar in the wolfswood and joust with lances.”

“Bran, child, why do you torment yourself so? One day you may do some of these things, but now you are only a boy of eight.”

“I’d sooner be a wolf. Then I could live in the wood and sleep when I wanted, and I could find Arya and Sansa. I’d *smell* where they were and go

save them, and when Robb went to battle I'd fight beside him like Grey Wind. I'd tear out the Kingslayer's throat with my teeth, rip, and then the war would be over and everyone would come back to Winterfell. If I was a wolf..." He howled. "Ooo-ooo-ooooooooooooo."

Luwin raised his voice. "A true prince would welcome—"

"AAHOOOOOOO," Bran howled, louder. "AAHOOOOOOOOOOOOOOO."

The maester surrendered. "As you will, child." With a look that was part grief and part disgust, he left the bedchamber.

Howling lost its savor once Bran was alone. After a time he quieted. *I did welcome them*, he told himself, resentful. *I was the lord in Winterfell, a true lord, he can't say I wasn't*. When the Walders had arrived from the Twins, it had been Rickon who wanted them gone. A baby of four, he had screamed that he wanted Mother and Father and Robb, not these strangers. It had been up to Bran to soothe him and bid the Freys welcome. He had offered them meat and mead and a seat by the fire, and even Maester Luwin had said afterward that he'd done well.

Only that was before the game.

The game was played with a log, a staff, a body of water, and a great deal of shouting. The water was the most important, Walder and Walder assured Bran. You could use a plank or even a series of stones, and a branch could be your staff. You didn't *have* to shout. But without water, there was no game. As Maester Luwin and Ser Rodrik were not about to let the children go wandering off into the wolfswood in search of a stream, they made do with one of the murky pools in the godswood. Walder and Walder had never seen hot water bubbling from the ground before, but they both allowed how it would make the game even better.

Both of them were called Walder Frey. Big Walder said there were bunches of Walders at the Twins, all named after the boys' grandfather, Lord Walder Frey. "We have our *own* names at Winterfell," Rickon told them haughtily when he heard that.

The way their game was played, you laid the log across the water, and one player stood in the middle with the stick. He was the lord of the

crossing, and when one of the other players came up, he had to say, “I am the lord of the crossing, who goes there?” And the other player had to make up a speech about who they were and why they should be allowed to cross. The lord could make them swear oaths and answer questions. They didn’t have to tell the truth, but the oaths were binding unless they said “Maybaps,” so the trick was to say “Mayhaps” so the lord of the crossing didn’t notice. Then you could try and knock the lord into the water and *you* got to be lord of the crossing, but only if you’d said “Mayhaps.” Otherwise you were out of the game. The lord got to knock anyone in the water anytime he pleased, and he was the only one who got to use a stick.

In practice, the game seemed to come down to mostly shoving, hitting, and falling into the water, along with a lot of loud arguments about whether or not someone had said “Mayhaps.” Little Walder was lord of the crossing more often than not.

He was Little Walder even though he was tall and stout, with a red face and a big round belly. Big Walder was sharp-faced and skinny and half a foot shorter. “He’s fifty-two days older than me,” Little Walder explained, “so he was bigger at first, but I grew faster.”

“We’re cousins, not brothers,” added Big Walder, the little one. “I’m Walder son of Jammos. My father was Lord Walder’s son by his fourth wife. He’s Walder son of Merrett. His grandmother was Lord Walder’s third wife, the Crakehall. He’s ahead of me in the line of succession even though I’m older.”

“Only by fifty-two days,” Little Walder objected. “And neither of us will ever hold the Twins, stupid.”

“I will,” Big Walder declared. “We’re not the only Walders either. Ser Stevron has a grandson, Black Walder, he’s fourth in line of succession, and there’s Red Walder, Ser Emmon’s son, and Bastard Walder, who isn’t in the line at all. He’s called Walder Rivers not Walder Frey. Plus there’s girls named Walda.”

“And Tyr. You always forget Tyr.”

“He’s *Waltyr*, not Walder,” Big Walder said airily. “And he’s after us, so he doesn’t matter. Anyhow, I never liked him.”

Ser Rodrik decreed that they would share Jon Snow's old bedchamber, since Jon was in the Night's Watch and never coming back. Bran hated that; it made him feel as if the Freys were trying to steal Jon's place.

He had watched wistfully while the Walders contested with Turnip the cook's boy and Joseth's girls Bandy and Shyra. The Walders had decreed that Bran should be the judge and decide whether or not people had said "Mayhaps," but as soon as they started playing they forgot all about him.

The shouts and splashes soon drew others: Palla the kennel girl, Cayn's boy Calon, Tom Too whose father Fat Tom had died with Bran's father at King's Landing. Before very long, every one of them was soaked and muddy. Palla was brown from head to heel, with moss in her hair, breathless from laughter. Bran had not heard so much laughing since the night the bloody raven came. *If I had my legs, I'd knock all of them into the water*, he thought bitterly. *No one would ever be lord of the crossing but me.*

Finally Rickon came running into the godswood, Shaggydog at his heels. He watched Turnip and Little Walder struggle for the stick until Turnip lost his footing and went in with a huge splash, arms waving. Rickon yelled, "Me! Me now! I want to play!" Little Walder beckoned him on, and Shaggydog started to follow. "No, Shaggy," his brother commanded. "Wolves can't play. You stay with Bran." And he did...

...until Little Walder had smacked Rickon with the stick, square across his belly. Before Bran could blink, the black wolf was flying over the plank, there was blood in the water, the Walders were shrieking red murder, Rickon sat in the mud laughing, and Hodor came lumbering in shouting "Hodor! Hodor! Hodor!"

After that, oddly, Rickon decided he *liked* the Walders. They never played lord of the crossing again, but they played other games—monsters and maidens, rats and cats, come-into-my-castle, all sorts of things. With Rickon by their side, the Walders plundered the kitchens for pies and honeycombs, raced round the walls, tossed bones to the pups in the kennels, and trained with wooden swords under Ser Rodrik's sharp eye. Rickon even showed them the deep vaults under the earth where the stonemason was carving father's tomb. "You had no right!" Bran screamed at his brother

when he heard. “That was our place, a *Stark* place!” But Rickon never cared.

The door to his bedchamber opened. Maester Luwin was carrying a green jar, and this time Osha and Hayhead came with him. “I’ve made you a sleeping draught, Bran.”

Osha scooped him up in her bony arms. She was very tall for a woman, and wiry strong. She bore him effortlessly to his bed.

“This will give you dreamless sleep,” Maester Luwin said as he pulled the stopper from the jar. “Sweet, dreamless sleep.”

“It will?” Bran said, wanting to believe.

“Yes. Drink.”

Bran drank. The potion was thick and chalky, but there was honey in it so it went down easy.

“Come the morn, you’ll feel better.” Luwin gave Bran a smile and a pat as he took his leave.

Osha lingered behind. “Is it the wolf dreams again?”

Bran nodded.

“You should not fight so hard, boy. I see you talking to the heart tree. Might be the gods are trying to talk back.”

“The gods?” he murmured, drowsy already. Osha’s face grew blurry and grey. *Sweet, dreamless sleep*, Bran thought.

Yet when the darkness closed over him, he found himself in the godswood, moving silently beneath green-grey sentinels and gnarled oaks as old as time. *I am walking*, he thought, exulting. Part of him knew that it was only a dream, but even the dream of walking was better than the truth of his bedchamber, walls and ceiling and door.

It was dark amongst the trees, but the comet lit his way, and his feet were sure. He was moving on four good legs, strong and swift, and he could feel the ground underfoot, the soft crackling of fallen leaves, thick roots and hard stones, the deep layers of humus. It was a good feeling.

The smells filled his head, alive and intoxicating; the green muddy stink of the hot pools, the perfume of rich rotting earth beneath his paws, the squirrels in the oaks. The scent of squirrel made him remember the taste of hot blood and the way the bones would crack between his teeth. Slaver filled his mouth. He had eaten no more than half a day past, but there was no joy in dead meat, even deer. He could hear the squirrels chittering and rustling above him, safe among their leaves, but they knew better than to come down to where his brother and he were prowling.

He could smell his brother too, a familiar scent, strong and earthy, his scent as black as his coat. His brother was loping around the walls, full of fury. Round and round he went, night after day after night, tireless, searching... for prey, for a way out, for his mother, his littermates, his pack... searching, searching, and never finding.

Behind the trees the walls rose, piles of dead man-rock that loomed all about this speck of living wood. Speckled grey they rose, and moss-spotted, yet thick and strong and higher than any wolf could hope to leap. Cold iron and splintery wood closed off the only holes through the piled stones that hemmed them in. His brother would stop at every hole and bare his fangs in rage, but the ways stayed closed.

He had done the same the first night, and learned that it was no good. Snarls would open no paths here. Circling the walls would not push them back. Lifting a leg and marking the trees would keep no men away. The world had tightened around them, but beyond the walled wood still stood the great grey caves of man-rock. *Winterfell*, he remembered, the sound coming to him suddenly. Beyond its sky-tall man-cliffs the true world was calling, and he knew he must answer or die.