

BRAN

The hunt left at dawn. The king wanted wild boar at the feast tonight. Prince Joffrey rode with his father, so Robb had been allowed to join the hunters as well. Uncle Benjen, Jory, Theon Greyjoy, Ser Rodrik, and even the queen's funny little brother had all ridden out with them. It was the last hunt, after all. On the morrow they left for the south.

Bran had been left behind with Jon and the girls and Rickon. But Rickon was only a baby and the girls were only girls and Jon and his wolf were nowhere to be found. Bran did not look for him very hard. He thought Jon was angry at him. Jon seemed to be angry at everyone these days. Bran did not know why. He was going with Uncle Ben to the Wall, to join the Night's Watch. That was almost as good as going south with the king. Robb was the one they were leaving behind, not Jon.

For days, Bran could scarcely wait to be off. He was going to ride the kingsroad on a horse of his own, not a pony but a real horse. His father would be the Hand of the King, and they were going to live in the red castle at King's Landing, the castle the Dragonlords had built. Old Nan said there were ghosts there, and dungeons where terrible things had been done, and dragon heads on the walls. It gave Bran a shiver just to think of it, but he was not afraid. How could he be afraid? His father would be with him, and the king with all his knights and sworn swords.

Bran was going to be a knight himself someday, one of the Kingsguard. Old Nan said they were the finest swords in all the realm. There were only seven of them, and they wore white armor and had no wives or children, but lived only to serve the king. Bran knew all the stories. Their names were like music to him. Serwyn of the Mirror Shield. Ser Ryam Redwyne. Prince Aemon the Dragonknight. The twins Ser Erryk and Ser Arryk, who had died on one another's swords hundreds of years ago, when brother fought sister in the war the singers called the Dance of the Dragons. The White Bull, Gerold Hightower. Ser Arthur Dayne, the Sword of the Morning. Barristan the Bold.

Two of the Kingsguard had come north with King Robert. Bran had watched them with fascination, never quite daring to speak to them. Ser Boros was a bald man with a jowly face, and Ser Meryn had droopy eyes and a beard the color of rust. Ser Jaime Lannister looked more like the knights in the stories, and he was of the Kingsguard too, but Robb said he had killed the old mad king and shouldn't count anymore. The greatest living knight was Ser Barristan Selmy, Barristan the Bold, the Lord Commander of the Kingsguard. Father had promised that they would meet Ser Barristan when they reached King's Landing, and Bran had been marking the days on his wall, eager to depart, to see a world he had only dreamed of and begin a life he could scarcely imagine.

Yet now that the last day was at hand, suddenly Bran felt lost. Winterfell had been the only home he had ever known. His father had told him that he ought to say his farewells today, and he had tried. After the hunt had ridden out, he wandered through the castle with his wolf at his side, intending to visit the ones who would be left behind, Old Nan and Gage the cook, Mikken in his smithy, Hodor the stableboy who smiled so much and took care of his pony and never said anything but "Hodor," the man in the glass gardens who gave him a blackberry when he came to visit...

But it was no good. He had gone to the stable first, and seen his pony there in its stall, except it wasn't his pony anymore, he was getting a real horse and leaving the pony behind, and all of a sudden Bran just wanted to sit down and cry. He turned and ran off before Hodor and the other stableboys could see the tears in his eyes. That was the end of his farewells. Instead Bran spent the morning alone in the godswood, trying to teach his wolf to fetch a stick, and failing. The wolfling was smarter than any of the hounds in his father's kennel and Bran would have sworn he understood every word that was said to him, but he showed very little interest in chasing sticks.

He was still trying to decide on a name. Robb was calling his Grey Wind, because he ran so fast. Sansa had named hers Lady, and Arya named hers after some old witch queen in the songs, and little Rickon called his Shaggydog, which Bran thought was a pretty stupid name for a direwolf.

Jon's wolf, the white one, was Ghost. Bran wished he had thought of that first, even though his wolf wasn't white. He had tried a hundred names in the last fortnight, but none of them sounded right.

Finally he got tired of the stick game and decided to go climbing. He hadn't been up to the broken tower for weeks with everything that had happened, and this might be his last chance.

He raced across the godswood, taking the long way around to avoid the pool where the heart tree grew. The heart tree had always frightened him; trees ought not have eyes, Bran thought, or leaves that looked like hands. His wolf came sprinting at his heels. "You stay here," he told him at the base of the sentinel tree near the armory wall. "Lie down. That's right. Now *stay*—"

The wolf did as he was told. Bran scratched him behind the ears, then turned away, jumped, grabbed a low branch, and pulled himself up. He was halfway up the tree, moving easily from limb to limb, when the wolf got to his feet and began to howl.

Bran looked back down. His wolf fell silent, staring up at him through slitted yellow eyes. A strange chill went through him. He began to climb again. Once more the wolf howled. "Quiet," he yelled. "Sit down. Stay. You're worse than Mother." The howling chased him all the way up the tree, until finally he jumped off onto the armory roof and out of sight.

The rooftops of Winterfell were Bran's second home. His mother often said that Bran could climb before he could walk. Bran could not remember when he first learned to walk, but he could not remember when he started to climb either, so he supposed it must be true.

To a boy, Winterfell was a grey stone labyrinth of walls and towers and courtyards and tunnels spreading out in all directions. In the older parts of the castle, the halls slanted up and down so that you couldn't even be sure what floor you were on. The place had grown over the centuries like some monstrous stone tree, Maester Luwin told him once, and its branches were gnarled and thick and twisted, its roots sunk deep into the earth.

When he got out from under it and scrambled up near the sky, Bran could see all of Winterfell in a glance. He liked the way it looked, spread

out beneath him, only birds wheeling over his head while all the life of the castle went on below. Bran could perch for hours among the shapeless, rain-worn gargoyles that brooded over the First Keep, watching it all: the men drilling with wood and steel in the yard, the cooks tending their vegetables in the glass garden, restless dogs running back and forth in the kennels, the silence of the godswood, the girls gossiping beside the washing well. It made him feel like he was lord of the castle, in a way even Robb would never know.

It taught him Winterfell's secrets too. The builders had not even leveled the earth; there were hills and valleys behind the walls of Winterfell. There was a covered bridge that went from the fourth floor of the bell tower across to the second floor of the rookery. Bran knew about that. And he knew you could get inside the inner wall by the south gate, climb three floors and run all the way around Winterfell through a narrow tunnel in the stone, and then come out *on ground level* at the north gate, with a hundred feet of wall looming over you. Even Maester Luwin didn't know *that*, Bran was convinced.

His mother was terrified that one day Bran would slip off a wall and kill himself. He told her that he wouldn't, but she never believed him. Once she made him promise that he would stay on the ground. He had managed to keep that promise for almost a fortnight, miserable every day, until one night he had gone out the window of his bedroom when his brothers were fast asleep.

He confessed his crime the next day in a fit of guilt. Lord Eddard ordered him to the godswood to cleanse himself. Guards were posted to see that Bran remained there alone all night to reflect on his disobedience. The next morning Bran was nowhere to be seen. They finally found him fast asleep in the upper branches of the tallest sentinel in the grove.

As angry as he was, his father could not help but laugh. "You're not my son," he told Bran when they fetched him down, "you're a squirrel. So be it. If you must climb, then climb, but try not to let your mother see you."

Bran did his best, although he did not think he ever really fooled her. Since his father would not forbid it, she turned to others. Old Nan told him

a story about a bad little boy who climbed too high and was struck down by lightning, and how afterward the crows came to peck out his eyes. Bran was not impressed. There were crows' nests atop the broken tower, where no one ever went but him, and sometimes he filled his pockets with corn before he climbed up there and the crows ate it right out of his hand. None of them had ever shown the slightest bit of interest in pecking out his eyes.

Later, Maester Luwin built a little pottery boy and dressed him in Bran's clothes and flung him off the wall into the yard below, to demonstrate what would happen to Bran if he fell. That had been fun, but afterward Bran just looked at the maester and said, "I'm not made of clay. And anyhow, I never fall."

Then for a while the guards would chase him whenever they saw him on the roofs, and try to haul him down. That was the best time of all. It was like playing a game with his brothers, except that Bran always won. None of the guards could climb half so well as Bran, not even Jory. Most of the time they never saw him anyway. People never looked up. That was another thing he liked about climbing; it was almost like being invisible.

He liked how it felt too, pulling himself up a wall stone by stone, fingers and toes digging hard into the small crevices between. He always took off his boots and went barefoot when he climbed; it made him feel as if he had four hands instead of two. He liked the deep, sweet ache it left in the muscles afterward. He liked the way the air tasted way up high, sweet and cold as a winter peach. He liked the birds: the crows in the broken tower, the tiny little sparrows that nested in cracks between the stones, the ancient owl that slept in the dusty loft above the old armory. Bran knew them all.

Most of all, he liked going places that no one else could go, and seeing the grey sprawl of Winterfell in a way that no one else ever saw it. It made the whole castle Bran's secret place.

His favorite haunt was the broken tower. Once it had been a watchtower, the tallest in Winterfell. A long time ago, a hundred years before even his father had been born, a lightning strike had set it afire. The top third of the structure had collapsed inward, and the tower had never

been rebuilt. Sometimes his father sent ratters into the base of the tower, to clean out the nests they always found among the jumble of fallen stones and charred and rotten beams. But no one ever got up to the jagged top of the structure now except for Bran and the crows.

He knew two ways to get there. You could climb straight up the side of the tower itself, but the stones were loose, the mortar that held them together long gone to ash, and Bran never liked to put his full weight on them.

The *best* way was to start from the godswood, shinny up the tall sentinel, and cross over the armory and the guards hall, leaping roof to roof, barefoot so the guards wouldn't hear you overhead. That brought you up to the blind side of the First Keep, the oldest part of the castle, a squat round fortress that was taller than it looked. Only rats and spiders lived there now but the old stones still made for good climbing. You could go straight up to where the gargoyles leaned out blindly over empty space, and swing from gargoyle to gargoyle, hand over hand, around to the north side. From there, if you really stretched, you could reach out and pull yourself over to the broken tower where it leaned close. The last part was the scramble up the blackened stones to the eyrie, no more than ten feet, and then the crows would come round to see if you'd brought any corn.

Bran was moving from gargoyle to gargoyle with the ease of long practice when he heard the voices. He was so startled he almost lost his grip. The First Keep had been empty all his life.

"I do not like it," a woman was saying. There was a row of windows beneath him, and the voice was drifting out of the last window on this side. "*You* should be the Hand."

"Gods forbid," a man's voice replied lazily. "It's not an honor I'd want. There's far too much work involved."

Bran hung, listening, suddenly afraid to go on. They might glimpse his feet if he tried to swing by.

"Don't you see the danger this puts us in?" the woman said. "Robert loves the man like a brother."

“Robert can barely stomach his brothers. Not that I blame him. Stannis would be enough to give anyone indigestion.”

“Don’t play the fool. Stannis and Renly are one thing, and Eddard Stark is quite another. Robert will *listen* to Stark. Damn them both. I should have *insisted* that he name you, but I was certain Stark would refuse him.”

“We ought to count ourselves fortunate,” the man said. “The king might as easily have named one of his brothers, or even Littlefinger, gods help us. Give me honorable enemies rather than ambitious ones, and I’ll sleep more easily by night.”

They were talking about Father, Bran realized. He wanted to hear more. A few more feet... but they would see him if he swung out in front of the window.

“We will have to watch him carefully,” the woman said.

“I would sooner watch you,” the man said. He sounded bored. “Come back here.”

“Lord Eddard has never taken any interest in anything that happened south of the Neck,” the woman said. “Never. I tell you, he means to move against us. Why else would he leave the seat of his power?”

“A hundred reasons. Duty. Honor. He yearns to write his name large across the book of history, to get away from his wife, or both. Perhaps he just wants to be warm for once in his life.”

“His wife is Lady Arryn’s sister. It’s a wonder Lysa was not here to greet us with her accusations.”

Bran looked down. There was a narrow ledge beneath the window, only a few inches wide. He tried to lower himself toward it. Too far. He would never reach.

“You fret too much. Lysa Arryn is a frightened cow.”

“That frightened cow shared Jon Arryn’s bed.”

“If she knew anything, she would have gone to Robert before she fled King’s Landing.”

“When he had already agreed to foster that weakling son of hers at Casterly Rock? I think not. She knew the boy’s life would be hostage to her silence. She may grow bolder now that he’s safe atop the Eyrie.”

“Mothers.” The man made the word sound like a curse. “I think birthing does something to your minds. You are all mad.” He laughed. It was a bitter sound. “Let Lady Arryn grow as bold as she likes. Whatever she knows, whatever she thinks she knows, she has no proof.” He paused a moment. “Or does she?”

“Do you think the king will require proof?” the woman said. “I tell you, he loves me not.”

“And whose fault is that, sweet sister?”

Bran studied the ledge. He could drop down. It was too narrow to land on, but if he could catch hold as he fell past, pull himself up... except that might make a noise, draw them to the window. He was not sure what he was hearing, but he knew it was not meant for his ears.

“You are as blind as Robert,” the woman was saying.

“If you mean I see the same thing, yes,” the man said. “I see a man who would sooner die than betray his king.”

“He betrayed one already, or have you forgotten?” the woman said. “Oh, I don’t deny he’s loyal to Robert, that’s obvious. What happens when Robert dies and Joff takes the throne? And the sooner *that* comes to pass, the safer we’ll all be. My husband grows more restless every day. Having Stark beside him will only make him worse. He’s still in love with the sister, the insipid little dead sixteen-year-old. How long till he decides to put me aside for some new Lyanna?”

Bran was suddenly very frightened. He wanted nothing so much as to go back the way he had come, to find his brothers. Only what would he tell them? He had to get closer, Bran realized. He had to see who was talking.

The man sighed. “You should think less about the future and more about the pleasures at hand.”

“Stop that!” the woman said. Bran heard the sudden slap of flesh on flesh, then the man’s laughter.

Bran pulled himself up, climbed over the gargoyle, crawled out onto the roof. This was the easy way. He moved across the roof to the next gargoyle, right above the window of the room where they were talking.

“All this talk is getting very tiresome, sister,” the man said. “Come here and be quiet.”

Bran sat astride the gargoyle, tightened his legs around it, and swung himself around, upside down. He hung by his legs and slowly stretched his head down toward the window. The world looked strange upside down. A courtyard swam dizzily below him, its stones still wet with melted snow.

Bran looked in the window.

Inside the room, a man and a woman were wrestling. They were both naked. Bran could not tell who they were. The man’s back was to him, and his body screened the woman from view as he pushed her up against a wall.

There were soft, wet sounds. Bran realized they were kissing. He watched, wide-eyed and frightened, his breath tight in his throat. The man had a hand down between her legs, and he must have been hurting her there, because the woman started to moan, low in her throat. “Stop it,” she said, “stop it, stop it. Oh, *please...*” But her voice was low and weak, and she did not push him away. Her hands buried themselves in his hair, his tangled golden hair, and pulled his face down to her breast.

Bran saw her face. Her eyes were closed and her mouth was open, moaning. Her golden hair swung from side to side as her head moved back and forth, but still he recognized the queen.

He must have made a noise. Suddenly her eyes opened, and she was staring right at him. She screamed.

Everything happened at once then. ‘ The woman pushed the man away wildly, shouting and pointing. Bran tried to pull himself up, bending double as he reached for the gargoyle. He was in too much of a hurry. His hand scraped uselessly across smooth stone, and in his panic his legs slipped, and suddenly he was failing. There was an instant of vertigo, a sickening lurch as the window flashed past. He shot out a hand, grabbed for the ledge, lost

it, caught it again with his other hand. He swung against the building, hard. The impact took the breath out of him. Bran dangled, one-handed, panting.

Faces appeared in the window above him.

The queen. And now Bran recognized the man beside her. They looked as much alike as reflections in a mirror.

“He *saw* us,” the woman said shrilly.

“So he did,” the man said.

Bran’s fingers started to slip. He grabbed the ledge with his other hand. Fingernails dug into unyielding stone. The man reached down. “Take my hand,” he said. “Before you fall.”

Bran seized his arm and held on tight with all his strength. The man yanked him up to the ledge. “What are you doing?” the woman demanded.

The man ignored her. He was very strong. He stood Bran up on the sill. “How old are you, boy?”

“Seven,” Bran said, shaking with relief. His fingers had dug deep gouges in the man’s forearm. He let go sheepishly.

The man looked over at the woman. “The things I do for love,” he said with loathing. He gave Bran a shove.

Screaming, Bran went backward out the window into empty air. There was nothing to grab on to. The courtyard rushed up to meet him.

Somewhere off in the distance, a wolf was howling. Crows circled the broken tower, waiting for corn.