

## **BRAN**

A light snow was falling. Bran could feel the flakes on his face, melting as they touched his skin like the gentlest of rains. He sat straight atop his horse, watching as the iron portcullis was winched upward. Try as he might to keep calm, his heart was fluttering in his chest.

“Are you ready?” Robb asked.

Bran nodded, trying not to let his fear show. He had not been outside Winterfell since his fall, but he was determined to ride out as proud as any knight.

“Let’s ride, then.” Robb put his heels into his big grey-and-white gelding, and the horse walked under the portcullis.

“Go,” Bran whispered to his own horse. He touched her neck lightly, and the small chestnut filly started forward. Bran had named her Dancer. She was two years old, and Joseth said she was smarter than any horse had a right to be. They had trained her special, to respond to rein and voice and touch. Up to now, Bran had only ridden her around the yard. At first Joseth or Hodor would lead her, while Bran sat strapped to her back in the oversize saddle the Imp had drawn up for him, but for the past fortnight he had been riding her on his own, trotting her round and round, and growing bolder with every circuit.

They passed beneath the gatehouse, over the drawbridge, through the outer walls. Summer and Grey Wind came loping beside them, sniffing at the wind. Close behind came Theon Greyjoy, with his longbow and a quiver of broadheads; he had a mind to take a deer, he had told them. He was followed by four guardsmen in mailed shirts and coifs, and Joseth, a stick-thin stableman whom Robb had named master of horse while Hullen was away. Maester Luwin brought up the rear, riding on a donkey. Bran would have liked it better if he and Robb had gone off alone, just the two of them, but Hal Mollen would not hear of it, and Maester Luwin backed him. If Bran fell off his horse or injured himself, the maester was determined to be with him.

Beyond the castle lay the market square, its wooden stalls deserted now. They rode down the muddy streets of the village, past rows of small neat houses of log and undressed stone. Less than one in five were occupied, thin tendrils of woodsmoke curling up from their chimneys. The rest would fill up one by one as it grew colder. When the snow fell and the ice winds howled down out of the north, Old Nan said, farmers left their frozen fields and distant holdfasts, loaded up their wagons, and then the winter town came alive. Bran had never seen it happen, but Maester Luwin said the day was looming closer. The end of the long summer was near at hand. Winter is coming.

A few villagers eyed the direwolves anxiously as the riders went past, and one man dropped the wood he was carrying as he shrank away in fear, but most of the townfolk had grown used to the sight. They bent the knee when they saw the boys, and Robb greeted each of them with a lordly nod.

With his legs unable to grip, the swaying motion of the horse made Bran feel unsteady at first, but the huge saddle with its thick horn and high back cradled him comfortingly, and the straps