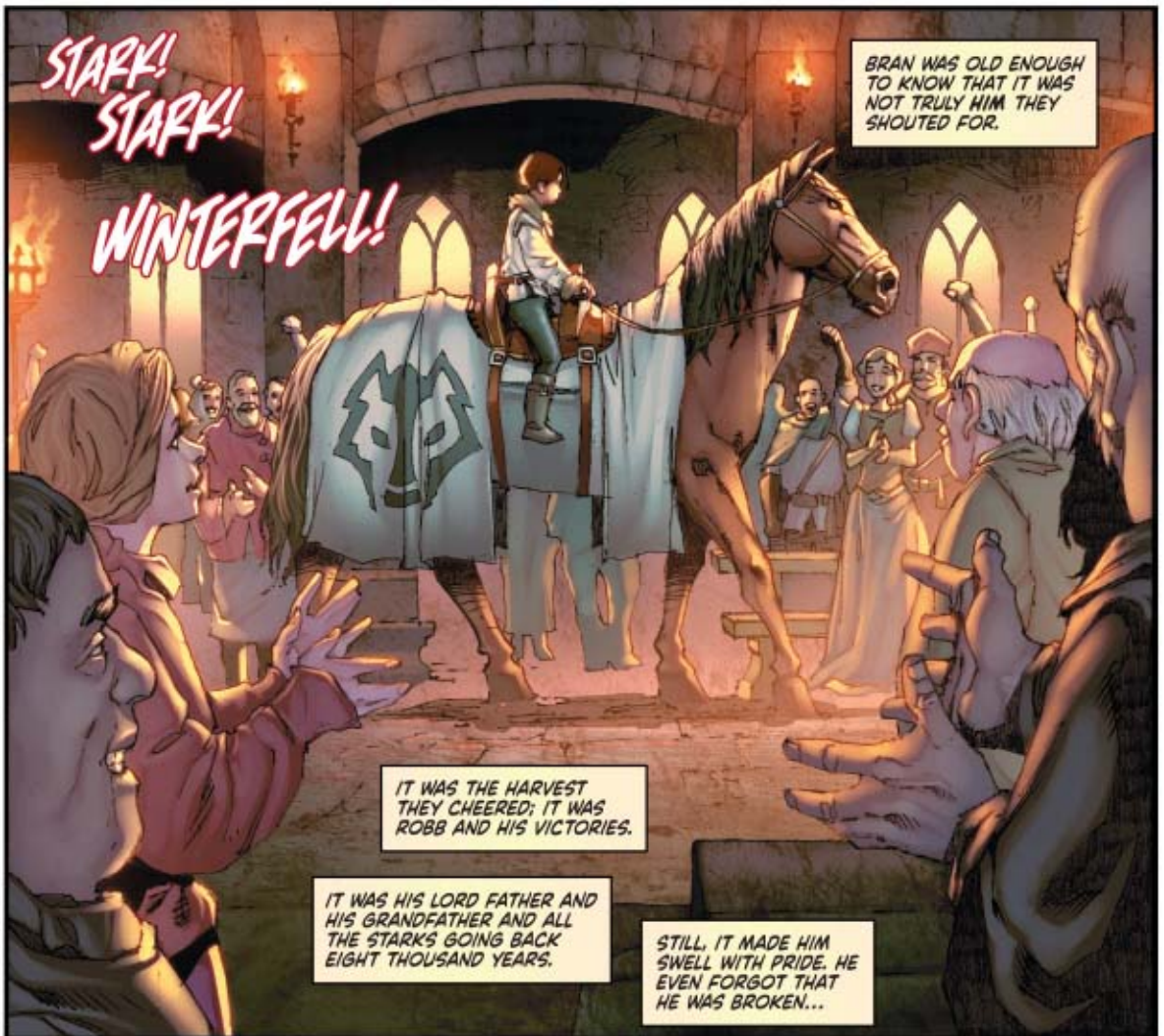


BRAN



THE NOISE SWELLED TO A STEADY RUMBLING ROAR, A GREAT HEADY STEW OF SOUND.

YOU DID WELL, BRAN. LORD EDDARD WOULD HAVE BEEN MOST PROUD.

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.

SER RODRIK TALKED WITH MAESTER LUWIN ABOVE HIS DAUGHTER BETH'S CURLY HEAD, WHILE RICKON SCREAMED HAPPILY AT THE WALDERS.



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.

IT IS COOL IN THE GODSWOOD NOW.

IT IS TOO HOT HERE, HE THOUGHT, AND TOO NOISY...AND THEY ARE ALL GETTING DRUNK.





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.



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.



BRAN SUDDENLY HE WISHED HE WERE ANYWHERE BUT HERE.



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? YOU DO NOT EAT.



BRAN?

I'LL...HAVE MORE LATER. MY BELLY'S FULL TO BURSTING.

THE SERVING MEN HAD 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.



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.



THE LADY MEERA OF HOUSE REED!

WITH HER BROTHER, JOJEN, OF GREYWATER WATCH!



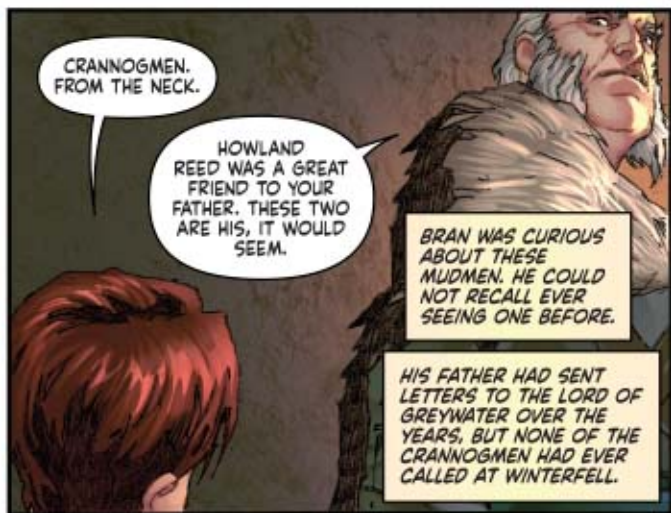
WHO ARE THEY?

MUDMEN. THEY'RE THIEVES AND CRAVENS, AND THEY HAVE GREEN TEETH FROM EATING FROGS.

BE WELCOME, FRIENDS, AND SHARE THIS HARVEST WITH US.



YOU MUST GREET THESE ONES WARMLY. I HAD NOT THOUGHT TO SEE THEM HERE, BUT... YOU KNOW WHO THEY ARE?



CRANNOGMEN. FROM THE NECK.

HOWLAND REED WAS A GREAT FRIEND TO YOUR FATHER. THESE TWO ARE HIS, IT WOULD SEEM.

BRAN 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.



MY LORDS OF STARK. 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.

MY BROTHER ROBB IS FIGHTING IN THE SOUTH, BUT YOU CAN SAY YOUR WORDS TO ME, IF YOU LIKE.

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.



TO WINTERFELL WE PLEDGE THE FAITH OF GREYWATER. 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 BRONZE AND IRON.

I SWEAR IT BY EARTH AND WATER.

WE SWEAR IT BY ICE AND FIRE.



BRAN GROPED FOR WORDS. WAS HE SUPPOSED TO SWEAR SOMETHING BACK TO THEM? THIS OATH WAS NOT ONE HE HAD BEEN TAUGHT.

MAY YOUR WINTERS BE SHORT AND YOUR SUMMERS BOUNTIFUL.

RISE. I'M BRANDON STARK.

THE CRANNOGMEN WERE A POOR FOLK. HE KNEW, 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.

WE BRING YOU GIFTS OF FISH AND FROG AND FOWL.

I THANK YOU. I OFFER YOU THE MEAT AND MEAD OF WINTERFELL.

AND YET HOWLAND REED HAD BEEN ONE OF FATHER'S STAINCHEST COMPANIONS DURING THE WAR FOR KING ROBERT'S CROWN, BEFORE BRAN WAS BORN.