



## BRAN

No roads ran through the twisted mountain valleys where they walked now. Between the grey stone peaks lay still blue lakes, long and deep and narrow, and the green gloom of endless piney woods. The russet and gold of autumn leaves grew less common when they left the wolfswood to climb amongst the old flint hills, and vanished by the time those hills had turned to mountains. Giant grey-green sentinels loomed above them now, and spruce and fir and soldier pines in endless profusion. The undergrowth was sparse beneath them, the forest floor carpeted in dark green needles.

When they lost their way, as happened once or twice, they need only wait for a clear cold night when the clouds did not intrude, and look up in the sky for the Ice Dragon. The blue star in the dragon's eye pointed the way north, as Osha told him once. Thinking of Osha made Bran wonder where she was. He pictured her safe in White Harbor with Rickon and Shaggydog, eating eels and fish and hot crab pie with fat Lord Manderly. Or maybe they were warming themselves at the Last Hearth before the Greatjon's fires. But Bran's life had turned into endless chilly days on Hodor's back, riding his basket up and down the slopes of mountains.

"Up and down," Meera would sigh sometimes as they walked, "then down and up. Then up and down again. I hate these stupid mountains of yours, Prince Bran."

"Yesterday you said you loved them."

“Oh, I do. My lord father told me about mountains, but I never saw one till now. I love them more than I can say.”

Bran made a face at her. “But you just said you hated them.”

“Why can’t it be both?” Meera reached up to pinch his nose.

“Because they’re *different*,” he insisted. “Like night and day, or ice and fire.”

“If ice can burn,” said Jojen in his solemn voice, “then love and hate can mate. Mountain or marsh, it makes no matter. The land is one.”

“One,” his sister agreed, “but over wrinkled.”

The high glens seldom did them the courtesy of running north and south, so often they found themselves going long leagues in the wrong direction, and sometimes they were forced to double back the way they’d come. “If we took the kingsroad we could be at the Wall by now,” Bran would remind the Reeds. He wanted to find the three-eyed crow, so he could learn to fly. Half a hundred times he said it if he said it once, until Meera started teasing by saying it along with him.

“If we took the kingsroad we wouldn’t be so hungry either,” he started saying then. Down in the hills they’d had no lack of food. Meera was a fine huntress, and even better at taking fish from streams with her three-pronged frog spear. Bran liked to watch her, admiring her quickness, the way she sent the spear lancing down and pulled it back with a silvery trout wriggling on the end of it. And they had Summer hunting for them as well. The direwolf vanished most every night as the sun went down, but he was always back again before dawn, most often with something in his jaws, a squirrel or a hare.

But here in the mountains, the streams were smaller and more icy, and the game scarcer. Meera still hunted and fished when she could, but it was harder, and some nights even Summer found no prey. Often they went to sleep with empty bellies.

But Jojen remained stubbornly determined to stay well away from roads. “Where you find roads you find travelers,” he said in that way he had, “and travelers have eyes to see, and mouths to spread tales of the crippled boy, his giant, and the wolf that walks beside them.” No one could get as

stubborn as Jojen, so they struggled on through the wild, and every day climbed a little higher, and moved a little farther north.

Some days it rained, some days were windy, and once they were caught in a sleet storm so fierce that even Hodor bellowed in dismay. On the clear days, it often seemed as if they were the only living things in all the world. “Does no one live up here?” Meera Reed asked once, as they made their way around a granite upthrust as large as Winterfell.

“There’s people,” Bran told her. “The Umbers are mostly east of the kingsroad, but they graze their sheep in the high meadows in summer. There are Wulls west of the mountains along the Bay of Ice, Harclays back behind us in the hills, and Knotts and Liddles and Norreys and even some Flints up here in the high places.” His father’s mother’s mother had been a Flint of the mountains. Old Nan once said that it was her blood in him that made Bran such a fool for climbing before his fall. She had died years and years and years before he was born, though, even before his father had been born.

“Wull?” said Meera. “Jojen, wasn’t there a Wull who rode with Father during the war?”

“Theo Wull.” Jojen was breathing hard from the climb. “Buckets, they used to call him.”

“That’s their sigil,” said Bran. “Three brown buckets on a blue field, with a border of white and grey checks. Lord Wull came to Winterfell once, to do his fealty and talk with Father, and he had the buckets on his shield. He’s no true lord, though. Well, he is, but they call him just *the Wull*, and there’s the Knott and the Norrey and the Liddle too. At Winterfell we called them lords, but their own folk don’t.”

Jojen Reed stopped to catch his breath. “Do you think these mountain folk know we’re here?”

“They know.” Bran had seen them watching; not with his own eyes, but with Summer’s sharper ones, that missed so little. “They won’t bother us so long as we don’t try and make off with their goats or horses.”

Nor did they. Only once did they encounter any of the mountain people, when a sudden burst of freezing rain sent them looking for shelter. Summer found it for them, sniffing out a shallow cave behind the grey-green

branches of a towering sentinel tree, but when Hodor ducked beneath the stony overhang, Bran saw the orange glow of fire farther back and realized they were not alone. “Come in and warm yourselves,” a man’s voice called out. “There’s stone enough to keep the rain off all our heads.”

He offered them oatcakes and blood sausage and a swallow of ale from a skin he carried, but never his name; nor did he ask theirs. Bran figured him for a Liddle. The clasp that fastened his squirrelskin cloak was gold and bronze and wrought in the shape of a pinecone, and the Liddles bore pinecones on the white half of their green-and-white shields.

“Is it far to the Wall?” Bran asked him as they waited for the rain to stop.

“Not so far as the raven flies,” said the Liddle, if that was who he was. “Farther, for them as lacks wings.”

Bran started, “I’d bet we’d be there if . . .”

“. . . we took the kingsroad,” Meera finished with him.

The Liddle took out a knife and whittled at a stick. “When there was a Stark in Winterfell, a maiden girl could walk the kingsroad in her name-day gown and still go unmolested, and travelers could find fire, bread, and salt at many an inn and holdfast. But the nights are colder now, and doors are closed. There’s squids in the wolfswood, and flayed men ride the kingsroad asking after strangers.”

The Reeds exchanged a look. “Flayed men?” said Jojen.

“The Bastard’s boys, aye. He was dead, but now he’s not. And paying good silver for wolfskins, a man hears, and maybe gold for word of certain other walking dead.” He looked at Bran when he said that, and at Summer stretched out beside him. “As to that Wall,” the man went on, “it’s not a place that I’d be going. The Old Bear took the Watch into the haunted woods, and all that come back was his ravens, with hardly a message between them. *Dark wings, dark words*, me mother used to say, but when the birds fly silent, seems to me that’s even darker.” He poked at the fire with his stick. “It was different when there was a Stark in Winterfell. But the old wolf’s dead and young one’s gone south to play the game of thrones, and all that’s left us is the ghosts.”

“The wolves will come again,” said Jojen solemnly.

“And how would you be knowing, boy?”

“I dreamed it.”

“Some nights I dream of me mother that I buried nine years past,” the man said, “but when I wake, she’s not come back to us.”

“There are dreams and dreams, my lord.”

“Hodor,” said Hodor.

They spent that night together, for the rain did not let up till well past dark, and only Summer seemed to want to leave the cave. When the fire had burned down to embers, Bran let him go. The direwolf did not feel the damp as people did, and the night was calling him. Moonlight painted the wet woods in shades of silver and turned the grey peaks white. Owls hooted through the dark and flew silently between the pines, while pale goats moved along the mountainsides. Bran closed his eyes and gave himself up to the wolf dream, to the smells and sounds of midnight.

When they woke the next morning, the fire had gone out and the Liddle was gone, but he’d left a sausage for them, and a dozen oatcakes folded up neatly in a green and white cloth. Some of the cakes had pinenuts baked in them and some had blackberries. Bran ate one of each, and still did not know which sort he liked the best. One day there would be Starks in Winterfell again, he told himself, and then he’d send for the Liddles and pay them back a hundredfold for every nut and berry.

The trail they followed was a little easier that day, and by noon the sun came breaking through the clouds. Bran sat in his basket up on Hodor’s back and felt almost content. He dozed off once, lulled to sleep by the smooth swing of the big stableboy’s stride and the soft humming sound he made sometimes when he walked. Meera woke him up with a light touch on his arm. “Look,” she said, pointing at the sky with her frog spear, “an eagle.”

Bran lifted his head and saw it, its grey wings spread and still as it floated on the wind. He followed it with his eyes as it circled higher, wondering what it would be like to soar about the world so effortless. *Better than climbing, even.* He tried to reach the eagle, to leave his stupid crippled body and rise into the sky to join it, the way he joined with Summer. *The greenseers could do it. I should be able to do it too.* He tried and tried, until

the eagle vanished in the golden haze of the afternoon. "It's gone," he said, disappointed.

"We'll see others," said Meera. "They live up here."

"I suppose."

"Hodor," said Hodor.

"Hodor," Bran agreed.

Jojen kicked a pinecone. "Hodor likes it when you say his name, I think."

"Hodor's not his true name," Bran explained. "It's just some word he says. His real name is Walder, Old Nan told me. She was his grandmother's grandmother or something." Talking about Old Nan made him sad. "Do you think the ironmen killed her?" They hadn't seen her body at Winterfell. He didn't remember seeing any women dead, now that he thought back. "She never hurt no one, not even Theon. She just told stories. Theon wouldn't hurt someone like that. Would he?"

"Some people hurt others just because they can," said Jojen.

"And it wasn't Theon who did the killing at Winterfell," said Meera. "Too many of the dead were ironmen." She shifted her frog spear to her other hand. "Remember Old Nan's stories, Bran. Remember the way she told them, the sound of her voice. So long as you do that, part of her will always be alive in you."

"I'll remember," he promised. They climbed without speaking for a long time, following a crooked game trail over the high saddle between two stony peaks. Scrawny soldier pines clung to the slopes around them. Far ahead Bran could see the icy glitter of a stream where it tumbled down a mountainside. He found himself listening to Jojen's breathing and the crunch of pine needles under Hodor's feet. "Do you know any stories?" he asked the Reeds all of a sudden.

Meera laughed. "Oh, a few."

"A few," her brother admitted.

"Hodor," said Hodor, humming.

"You could tell one," said Bran. "While we walked. Hodor likes stories about knights. I do, too."

“There are no knights in the Neck,” said Jojen.

“Above the water,” his sister corrected. “The bogs are full of dead ones, though.”

“That’s true,” said Jojen. “Andals and ironmen, Freys and other fools, all those proud warriors who set out to conquer Greywater. Not one of them could find it. They ride into the Neck, but not back out. And sooner or later they blunder into the bogs and sink beneath the weight of all that steel and drown there in their armor.”

The thought of drowned knights under the water gave Bran the shivers. He didn’t object, though; he *liked* the shivers.

“There was one knight,” said Meera, “in the year of the false spring. The Knight of the Laughing Tree, they called him. He might have been a crannogman, that one.”

“Or not.” Jojen’s face was dappled with green shadows. “Prince Bran has heard that tale a hundred times, I’m sure.”

“No,” said Bran. “I haven’t. And if I have it doesn’t matter. Sometimes Old Nan would tell the same story she’d told before, but we never minded, if it was a good story. Old stories are like old friends, she used to say. You have to visit them from time to time.”

“That’s true.” Meera walked with her shield on her back, pushing an occasional branch out of the way with her frog spear. Just when Bran began to think that she wasn’t going to tell the story after all, she began, “Once there was a curious lad who lived in the Neck. He was small like all crannogmen, but brave and smart and strong as well. He grew up hunting and fishing and climbing trees, and learned all the magics of my people.”

Bran was almost certain he had never heard this story. “Did he have green dreams like Jojen?”

“No,” said Meera, “but he could breathe mud and run on leaves, and change earth to water and water to earth with no more than a whispered word. He could talk to trees and weave words and make castles appear and disappear.”

“I wish I could,” Bran said plaintively. “When does he meet the tree knight?”

Meera made a face at him. “Sooner if a certain prince would be quiet.”

“I was just asking.”

“The lad knew the magics of the crannogs,” she continued, “but he wanted more. Our people seldom travel far from home, you know. We’re a small folk, and our ways seem queer to some, so the big people do not always treat us kindly. But this lad was bolder than most, and one day when he had grown to manhood he decided he would leave the crannogs and visit the Isle of Faces.”

“No one visits the Isle of Faces,” objected Bran. “That’s where the green men live.”

“It was the green men he meant to find. So he donned a shirt sewn with bronze scales, like mine, took up a leathern shield and a three-pronged spear, like mine, and paddled a little skin boat down the Green Fork.”

Bran closed his eyes to try and see the man in his little skin boat. In his head, the crannogman looked like Jojen, only older and stronger and dressed like Meera.

“He passed beneath the Twins by night so the Freys would not attack him, and when he reached the Trident he climbed from the river and put his boat on his head and began to walk. It took him many a day, but finally he reached the Gods Eye, threw his boat in the lake, and paddled out to the Isle of Faces.”

“Did he meet the green men?”

“Yes,” said Meera, “but that’s another story, and not for me to tell. My prince asked for knights.”

“Green men are good too.”

“They are,” she agreed, but said no more about them. “All that winter the crannogman stayed on the isle, but when the spring broke he heard the wide world calling and knew the time had come to leave. His skin boat was just where he’d left it, so he said his farewells and paddled off toward shore. He rowed and rowed, and finally saw the distant towers of a castle rising beside the lake. The towers reached ever higher as he neared shore, until he realized that this must be the greatest castle in all the world.”

“Harrenhal!” Bran knew at once. “It was Harrenhal!”



Meera smiled. “Was it? Beneath its walls he saw tents of many colors, bright banners cracking in the wind, and knights in mail and plate on barded horses. He smelled roasting meats, and heard the sound of laughter and the blare of heralds’ trumpets. A great tourney was about to commence, and champions from all over the land had come to contest it. The king himself was there, with his son the dragon prince. The White Swords had come, to welcome a new brother to their ranks. The storm lord was on hand, and the rose lord as well. The great lion of the rock had quarreled with the king and stayed away, but many of his bannermen and knights attended all the same. The crannogman had never seen such pageantry, and knew he might never see the like again. Part of him wanted nothing so much as to be part of it.”

Bran knew that feeling well enough. When he’d been little, all he had ever dreamed of was being a knight. But that had been before he fell and lost his legs.

“The daughter of the great castle reigned as queen of love and beauty when the tourney opened. Five champions had sworn to defend her crown; her four brothers of Harrenhal, and her famous uncle, a white knight of the Kingsguard.”

“Was she a fair maid?”

“She was,” said Meera, hopping over a stone, “but there were others fairer still. One was the wife of the dragon prince, who’d brought a dozen lady companions to attend her. The knights all begged them for favors to tie about their lances.”

“This isn’t going to be one of those *love* stories, is it?” Bran asked suspiciously. “Hodor doesn’t like those so much.”

“Hodor,” said Hodor agreeably.

“He likes the stories where the knights fight monsters.”

“Sometimes the knights are the monsters, Bran. The little crannogman was walking across the field, enjoying the warm spring day and harming none, when he was set upon by three squires. They were none older than fifteen, yet even so they were bigger than him, all three. This was *their* world, as they saw it, and he had no right to be there. They snatched away his spear and knocked him to the ground, cursing him for a frog eater.”

“Were they Walders?” It sounded like something Little Walder Frey might have done.

“None offered a name, but he marked their faces well so he could revenge himself upon them later. They shoved him down every time he tried to rise, and kicked him when he curled up on the ground. But then they heard a roar. ‘That’s my father’s man you’re kicking,’ howled the she-wolf.”

“A wolf on four legs, or two?”

“Two,” said Meera. “The she-wolf laid into the squires with a tourney sword, scattering them all. The crannogman was bruised and bloodied, so she took him back to her lair to clean his cuts and bind them up with linen. There he met her pack brothers: the wild wolf who led them, the quiet wolf beside him, and the pup who was youngest of the four.

“That evening there was to be a feast in Harrenhal, to mark the opening of the tourney, and the she-wolf insisted that the lad attend. He was of high birth, with as much a right to a place on the bench as any other man. She was not easy to refuse, this wolf maid, so he let the young pup find him garb suitable to a king’s feast, and went up to the great castle.

“Under Harren’s roof he ate and drank with the wolves, and many of their sworn swords besides, barrowdown men and moose and bears and mermen. The dragon prince sang a song so sad it made the wolf maid snifle, but when her pup brother teased her for crying she poured wine over his head. A black brother spoke, asking the knights to join the Night’s Watch. The storm lord drank down the knight of skulls and kisses in a wine-cup war. The crannogman saw a maid with laughing purple eyes dance with a white sword, a red snake, and the lord of griffins, and lastly with the quiet wolf . . . but only after the wild wolf spoke to her on behalf of a brother too shy to leave his bench.

“Amidst all this merriment, the little crannogman spied the three squires who’d attacked him. One served a pitchfork knight, one a porcupine, while the last attended a knight with two towers on his surcoat, a sigil all crannogmen know well.”

“The Freys,” said Bran. “The Freys of the Crossing.”

“Then, as now,” she agreed. “The wolf maid saw them too, and pointed them out to her brothers. ‘I could find you a horse, and some armor that might fit,’ the pup offered. The little crannogman thanked him, but gave no answer. His heart was torn. Crannogmen are smaller than most, but just as proud. The lad was no knight, no more than any of his people. We sit a boat more often than a horse, and our hands are made for oars, not lances. Much as he wished to have his vengeance, he feared he would only make a fool of himself and shame his people. The quiet wolf had offered the little crannogman a place in his tent that night, but before he slept he knelt on the lakeshore, looking across the water to where the Isle of Faces would be, and said a prayer to the old gods of north and Neck . . .”

“You never heard this tale from your father?” asked Jojen.

“It was Old Nan who told the stories. Meera, go on, you can’t stop there.”

Hodor must have felt the same. “Hodor,” he said, and then, “Hodor hodor hodor hodor.”

“Well,” said Meera, “if you would hear the rest . . .”

“Yes. *Tell* it.”

“Five days of jousting were planned,” she said. “There was a great seven-sided mêlée as well, and archery and axe-throwing, a horse race and tourney of singers . . .”

“Never mind about all that.” Bran squirmed impatiently in his basket on Hodor’s back. “Tell about the jousting.”

“As my prince commands. The daughter of the castle was the queen of love and beauty, with four brothers and an uncle to defend her, but all four sons of Harrenhal were defeated on the first day. Their conquerors reigned briefly as champions, until they were vanquished in turn. As it happened, the end of the first day saw the porcupine knight win a place among the champions, and on the morning of the second day the pitchfork knight and the knight of the two towers were victorious as well. But late on the afternoon of that second day, as the shadows grew long, a mystery knight appeared in the lists.”

Bran nodded sagely. Mystery knights would oft appear at tourneys, with helms concealing their faces, and shields that were either blank or bore

some strange device. Sometimes they were famous champions in disguise. The Dragonknight once won a tourney as the Knight of Tears, so he could name his sister the queen of love and beauty in place of the king's mistress. And Barristan the Bold twice donned a mystery knight's armor, the first time when he was only ten. "It was the little crannogman, I bet."

"No one knew," said Meera, "but the mystery knight was short of stature, and clad in ill-fitting armor made up of bits and pieces. The device upon his shield was a heart tree of the old gods, a white weirwood with a laughing red face."

"Maybe he came from the Isle of Faces," said Bran. "Was he green?" In Old Nan's stories, the guardians had dark green skin and leaves instead of hair. Sometimes they had antlers too, but Bran didn't see how the mystery knight could have worn a helm if he had antlers. "I bet the old gods sent him."

"Perhaps they did. The mystery knight dipped his lance before the king and rode to the end of the lists, where the five champions had their pavilions. You know the three he challenged."

"The porcupine knight, the pitchfork knight, and the knight of the twin towers." Bran had heard enough stories to know *that*. "He was the little crannogman, I told you."

"Whoever he was, the old gods gave strength to his arm. The porcupine knight fell first, then the pitchfork knight, and lastly the knight of the two towers. None were well loved, so the common folk cheered lustily for the Knight of the Laughing Tree, as the new champion soon was called. When his fallen foes sought to ransom horse and armor, the Knight of the Laughing Tree spoke in a booming voice through his helm, saying, '*Teach your squires honor, that shall be ransom enough.*' Once the defeated knights chastised their squires sharply, their horses and armor were returned. And so the little crannogman's prayer was answered . . . by the green men, or the old gods, or the children of the forest, who can say?"

It was a good story, Bran decided after thinking about it a moment or two. "Then what happened? Did the Knight of the Laughing Tree win the tourney and marry a princess?"

“No,” said Meera. “That night at the great castle, the storm lord and the knight of skulls and kisses each swore they would unmask him, and the king himself urged men to challenge him, declaring that the face behind that helm was no friend of his. But the next morning, when the heralds blew their trumpets and the king took his seat, only two champions appeared. The Knight of the Laughing Tree had vanished. The king was wroth, and even sent his son the dragon prince to seek the man, but all they ever found was his painted shield, hanging abandoned in a tree. It was the dragon prince who won that tourney in the end.”

“Oh.” Bran thought about the tale awhile. “That was a good story. But it should have been the three bad knights who hurt him, not their squires. Then the little crannogman could have killed them all. The part about the ransoms was stupid. And the mystery knight should win the tourney, defeating every challenger, and name the wolf maid the queen of love and beauty.”

“She was,” said Meera, “but that’s a sadder story.”

“Are you certain you never heard this tale before, Bran?” asked Jojen. “Your lord father never told it to you?”

Bran shook his head. The day was growing old by then, and long shadows were creeping down the mountainsides to send black fingers through the pines. *If the little crannogman could visit the Isle of Faces, maybe I could too.* All the tales agreed that the green men had strange magic powers. Maybe they could help him walk again, even turn him into a knight. *They turned the little crannogman into a knight, even if it was only for a day,* he thought. *A day would be enough.*