

## BRAN

The ashes fell like a soft grey snow.

He padded over dry needles and brown leaves, to the edge of the wood where the pines grew thin. Beyond the open fields he could see the great piles of man-rock stark against the swirling flames. The wind blew hot and rich with the smell of blood and burnt meat, so strong he began to slaver.

Yet as one smell drew them onward, others warned them back. He sniffed at the drifting smoke. *Men, many men, many horses, and fire, fire, fire.* No smell was more dangerous, not even the hard cold smell of iron, the stuff of man-claws and hardskin. The smoke and ash clouded his eyes, and in the sky he saw a great winged snake whose roar was a river of flame. He bared his teeth, but then the snake was gone. Behind the cliffs tall fires were eating up the stars.

All through the night the fires crackled, and once there was a great roar and a crash that made the earth jump under his feet. Dogs barked and whined and horses screamed in terror. Howls shuddered through the night; the howls of the man-pack, wails of fear and wild shouts, laughter and screams. No beast was as noisy as man. He pricked up his ears and listened, and his brother growled at every sound. They prowled under the trees as a piney wind blew ashes and embers through the sky. In time the flames began to dwindle, and then they were gone. The sun rose grey and smoky that morning.

Only then did he leave the trees, stalking slow across the fields. His brother ran with him, drawn to the smell of blood and death. They padded silent through the dens the men had built of wood and grass and mud. Many and more were burned and many and more were collapsed; others stood as they had before. Yet nowhere did they see or scent a living man. Crows blanketed the bodies and leapt into the air screeching when his brother and he came near. The wild dogs slunk away before them.

Beneath the great grey cliffs a horse was dying noisily, struggling to rise on a broken leg and screaming when he fell. His brother circled round him, then tore out his throat while the horse kicked feebly and rolled his eyes. When he approached the carcass his brother snapped at him and laid back his ears, and he cuffed him with a forepaw and bit his leg. They fought amidst the grass and dirt and falling ashes beside the dead horse, until his brother rolled on his back in submission, tail tucked low. One more bite at his upturned throat; then he fed, and let his brother feed, and licked the blood off his black fur.

The dark place was pulling at him by then, the house of whispers where all men were blind. He could feel its cold fingers on him. The stony smell of it was a whisper up the nose. He struggled against the pull. He did not like the darkness. He was wolf. He was hunter and stalker and slayer, and he belonged with his brothers and sisters in the deep woods, running free beneath a starry sky. He sat on his haunches, raised his head, and howled. *I will not go*, he cried. *I am wolf, I will not go*. Yet even so the darkness thickened, until it covered his eyes and filled his nose and stopped his ears, so he could not see or smell or hear or run, and the grey cliffs were gone and the dead horse was gone and his brother was gone and all was black and still and black and cold and black and dead and black...

“*Bran,*” a voice was whispering softly. “*Bran, come back. Come back now, Bran. Bran...*”

He closed his third eye and opened the other two, the old two, the blind two. In the dark place all men were blind. But someone was holding him. He could feel arms around him, the warmth of a body snuggled close. He could hear Hodor singing “Hodor, hodor, hodor,” quietly to himself.

“Bran?” It was Meera’s voice. “You were thrashing, making terrible noises. What did you see?”

“Winterfell.” His tongue felt strange and thick in his mouth. *One day when I come back I won’t know how to talk anymore.* “It was Winterfell. It was all on fire. There were horse smells, and steel, and blood. They killed everyone, Meera.”

He felt her hand on his face, stroking back his hair. "You're all sweaty," she said. "Do you need a drink?"

"A drink," he agreed. She held a skin to his lips, and Bran swallowed so fast the water ran out of the corner of his mouth. He was always weak and thirsty when he came back. And hungry too. He remembered the dying horse, the taste of blood in his mouth, the smell of burnt flesh in the morning air. "How long?"

"Three days," said Jojen. The boy had come up softfoot, or perhaps he had been there all along; in this blind black world, Bran could not have said. "We were afraid for you."

"I was with Summer," Bran said.

"Too long. You'll starve yourself. Meera dribbled a little water down your throat, and we smeared honey on your mouth, but it is not enough."

"I ate," said Bran. "We ran down an elk and had to drive off a treecat that tried to steal him." The cat had been tan-and-brown, only half the size of the direwolves, but fierce. He remembered the musky smell of him, and the way he had snarled down at them from the limb of the oak.

"The wolf ate," Jojen said. "Not you. Take care, Bran. Remember who you are."

He remembered who he was all too well; Bran the boy, Bran the broken. *Better Bran the beastling*. Was it any wonder he would sooner dream his Summer dreams, his wolf dreams? Here in the chill damp darkness of the tomb his third eye had finally opened. He could reach Summer whenever he wanted, and once he had even touched Ghost and talked to Jon. Though maybe he had only dreamed that. He could not understand why Jojen was always trying to pull him back now. Bran used the strength of his arms to squirm to a sitting position. "I have to tell Osha what I saw. Is she here? Where did she go?"

The wildling woman herself gave answer. "Nowhere, m'lord. I've had my fill o' blundering in the black." He heard the scrape of a heel on stone, turned his head toward the sound, but saw nothing. He thought he could smell her, but he wasn't sure. All of them stank alike, and he did not have

Summer's nose to tell one from the other. "Last night I pissed on a king's foot," Osha went on. "Might be it was morning, who can say? I was sleeping, but now I'm not." They all slept a lot, not only Bran. There was nothing else to do, Sleep and eat and sleep again, and sometimes talk a little... but not too much, and only in whispers, just to be safe. Osha might have liked it better if they had never talked at all, but there was no way to quiet Rickon, or to stop Hodor from muttering, "Hodor, hodor, hodor," endlessly to himself.

"Osha," Bran said, "I saw Winterfell burning." Off to his left, he could hear the soft sound of Rickon's breathing.

"A dream," said Osha.

"A wolf dream," said Bran. "I *smelled* it too. Nothing smells like fire, or blood."

"Whose blood?"

"Men, horses, dogs, everyone. We have to go *see*."

"This scrawny skin of mine's the only one I got," said Osha. "That squid prince catches hold o' me, they'll strip it off my back with a whip."

Meera's hand found Bran's in the darkness and gave his fingers a squeeze. "I'll go if you're afraid."

Bran heard fingers fumbling at leather, followed by the sound of steel on flint. Then again. A spark flew, caught. Osha blew softly. A long pale flame awoke, stretching upward like a girl on her toes. Osha's face floated above it. She touched the flame with the head of a torch. Bran had to squint as the pitch began to burn, filling the world with orange glare. The light woke Rickon, who sat up yawning.

When the shadows moved, it looked for an instant as if the dead were rising as well. Lyanna and Brandon, Lord Rickard Stark their father, Lord Edwyle his father, Lord Willam and his brother Artos the Implacable, Lord Donnor and Lord Beron and Lord Rodwell, one-eyed Lord Jonnel, Lord Barth and Lord Brandon and Lord Cregan who had fought the Dragonknight. On their stone chairs they sat with stone wolves at their feet.

This was where they came when the warmth had seeped out of their bodies; this was the dark hall of the dead, where the living feared to tread.

And in the mouth of the empty tomb that waited for Lord Eddard Stark, beneath his stately granite likeness, the six fugitives huddled round their little cache of bread and water and dried meat. “Little enough left,” Osha muttered as she blinked down on their stores. “I’d need to go up soon to steal food in any case, or we’d be down to eating Hodor.”

“Hodor,” Hodor said, grinning at her.

“Is it day or night up there?” Osha wondered. “I’ve lost all count o’ such.”

“Day,” Bran told her, “but it’s dark from all the smoke.”

“M’lord is certain?”

Never moving his broken body, he reached out all the same, and for an instant he was seeing double. There stood Osha holding the torch, and Meera and Jojen and Hodor, and the double row of tall granite pillars and long dead lords behind them stretching away into darkness... but there was Winterfell as well, grey with drifting smoke, the massive oak-and-iron gates charred and askew, the drawbridge down in a tangle of broken chains and missing planks. Bodies floated in the moat, islands for the crows.

“Certain,” he declared.

Osha chewed on that a moment. “I’ll risk a look then. I want the lot o’ you close behind. Meera, get Bran’s basket.”

“Are we going home?” Rickon asked excitedly. “I want my horse. And I want applecakes and butter and honey, and Shaggy. Are we going where Shaggydog is?”

“Yes,” Bran promised, “but you have to be quiet.”

Meera strapped the wicker basket to Hodor’s back and helped lift Bran into it, easing his useless legs through the holes. He had a queer flutter in his belly. He knew what awaited them above, but that did not make it any less fearful. As they set off, he turned to give his father one last look, and it seemed to Bran that there was a sadness in Lord Eddard’s eyes, as if he did not want them to go. *We have to*, he thought. *It’s time*.

Osha carried her long oaken spear in one hand and the torch in the other. A naked sword hung down her back, one of the last to bear Mikken's mark. He had forged it for Lord Eddard's tomb, to keep his ghost at rest. But with Mikken slain and the ironmen guarding the armory, good steel had been hard to resist, even if it meant grave-robbing. Meera had claimed Lord Rickard's blade, though she complained that it was too heavy. Brandon took his namesake's, the sword made for the uncle he had never known. He knew he would not be much use in a fight, but even so the blade felt good in his hand.

But it was only a game, and Bran knew it.

Their footsteps echoed through the cavernous crypts. The shadows behind them swallowed his father as the shadows ahead retreated to unveil other statues; no mere lords, these, but the old Kings in the North. On their brows they wore stone crowns. Torrhen Stark, the King Who Knelt. Edwyn the Spring King. Theon Stark, the Hungry Wolf. Brandon the Burner and Brandon the Shipwright. Jorah and Jonos, Brandon the Bad, Walton the Moon King, Edderion the Bridegroom, Eyrion, Benjen the Sweet and Benjen the Bitter, King Edrick Snowbeard. Their faces were stern and strong, and some of them had done terrible things, but they were Starks every one, and Bran knew all their tales. He had never feared the crypts; they were part of his home and who he was, and he had always known that one day he would lie here too.

But now he was not so certain. *If I go up, will I ever come back down? Where will I go when I die?*

"Wait," Osha said when they reached the twisting stone stairs that led up to the surface, and down to the deeper levels where kings more ancient still sat their dark thrones. She handed Meera the torch. "I'll grope my way up." For a time they could hear the sound of her footfalls, but they grew softer and softer until they faded away entirely. "Hodor," said Hodor nervously.

Bran had told himself a hundred times how much he hated hiding down here in the dark, how much he wanted to see the sun again, to ride his horse through wind and rain. But now that the moment was upon him, he was

afraid. He'd felt safe in the darkness; when you could not even find your own hand in front of your face, it was easy to believe that no enemies could ever find you either. And the stone lords had given him courage. Even when he could not see them, he had known they were there.

It seemed a long while before they heard anything again. Bran had begun to fear that something had happened to Osha. His brother was squirming restlessly. "I want to *go home!*" he said loudly. Hodor bobbed his head and said, "Hodor." Then they heard the footsteps again, growing louder, and after a few minutes Osha emerged into the light, looking grim. "Something is blocking the door. I can't move it."

"Hodor can move anything," said Bran.

Osha gave the huge stableboy an appraising look. "Might be he can. Come on, then."

The steps were narrow, so they had to climb in single file. Osha led. Behind came Hodor, with Bran crouched low on his back so his head wouldn't hit the ceiling. Meera followed with the torch, and Jojen brought up the rear, leading Rickon by the hand. Around and around they went, and up and up. Bran thought he could smell smoke now, but perhaps that was only the torch.

The door to the crypts was made of ironwood. It was old and heavy, and lay at a slant to the ground. Only one person could approach it at a time. Osha tried once more when she reached it, but Bran could see that it was not budging. "Let Hodor try."

They had to pull Bran from his basket first, so he would not get squished. Meera squatted beside him on the steps, one arm thrown protectively across his shoulders, as Osha and Hodor traded places. "Open the door, Hodor," Bran said.

The huge stableboy put both hands flat on the door, pushed, and grunted. "Hodor?" He slammed a fist against the wood, and it did not so much as jump. "Hodor."

"Use your back," urged Bran. "And your legs."

Turning, Hodor put his back to the wood and shoved. Again. Again. “Hodor!” He put one foot on a higher step so he was bent under the slant of the door and tried to rise. This time the wood groaned and creaked. “*Hodor!*” The other foot came up a step, and Hodor spread his legs apart, braced, and straightened. His face turned red, and Bran could see cords in his neck bulging as he strained against the weight above him. “*Hodor hodor hodor hodor hodor HODOR!*” From above came a dull rumble. Then suddenly the door jerked upward and a shaft of daylight fell across Bran’s face, blinding him for a moment. Another shove brought the sound of shifting stone, and then the way was open. Osha poked her spear through and slid out after it, and Rickon squirmed through Meera’s legs to follow. Hodor shoved the door open all the way and stepped to the surface. The Reeds had to carry Bran up the last few steps.

The sky was a pale grey, and smoke eddied all around them. They stood in the shadow of the First Keep, or what remained of it. One whole side of the building had torn loose and fallen away. Stone and shattered gargoyles lay strewn across the yard. *They fell just where I did*, Bran thought when he saw them. Some of the gargoyles had broken into so many pieces it made him wonder how he was alive at all. Nearby some crows were pecking at a body crushed beneath the tumbled stone, but he lay facedown and Bran could not say who he was.

The First Keep had not been used for many hundreds of years, but now it was more of a shell than ever. The floors had burned inside it, and all the beams. Where the wall had fallen away, they could see right into the rooms, even into the privy. Yet behind, the broken tower still stood, no more burned than before. Jojen Reed was coughing from the smoke. “Take me home!” Rickon demanded. “I want to be *home!*” Hodor stomped in a circle. “Hodor,” he whimpered in a small voice. They stood huddled together with ruin and death all around them.

“We made noise enough to wake a dragon,” Osha said, “but there’s no one come. The castle’s dead and burned, just as Bran dreamed, but we had best—” She broke off suddenly at a noise behind them, and whirled with her spear at the ready.



Two lean dark shapes emerged from behind the broken tower, padding slowly through the rubble. Rickon gave a happy shout of “*Shaggy!*” and the black direwolf came bounding toward him. Summer advanced more slowly, rubbed his head up against Bran’s arm, and licked his face.

“We should go,” said Jojen. “So much death will bring other wolves besides Summer and Shaggydog, and not all on four feet.”

“Aye, soon enough,” Osha agreed, “but we need food, and there may be some survived this, Stay together. Meera, keep your shield up and guard our backs.”

It took the rest of the morning to make a slow circuit of the castle. The great granite walls remained, blackened here and there by fire but otherwise untouched. But within, all was death and destruction. The doors of the Great Hall were charred and smoldering, and inside the rafters had given way and the whole roof had crashed down onto the floor. The green and yellow panes of the glass gardens were all in shards, the trees and fruits and flowers torn up or left exposed to die. Of the stables, made of wood and thatch, nothing remained but ashes, embers, and dead horses. Bran thought of his Dancer, and wanted to weep. There was a shallow steaming lake beneath the Library Tower, and hot water gushing from a crack in its side. The bridge between the Bell Tower and the rookery had collapsed into the yard below, and Maester Luwin’s turret was gone. They saw a dull red glow shining up through the narrow cellar windows beneath the Great Keep, and a second fire still burning in one of the storehouses.

Osha called softly through the blowing smoke as they went, but no one answered. They saw one dog worrying at a corpse, but he ran when he caught the scents of the direwolves; the rest had been slain in the kennels. The maester’s ravens were paying court to some of the corpses, while the crows from the broken tower attended others. Bran recognized Poxym Tym, even though someone had taken an axe to his face. One charred corpse, outside the ashen shell of Mother’s sept, sat with his arms drawn up and his hands balled into hard black fists, as if to punch anyone who dared approach him. “If the gods are good,” Osha said in a low angry voice, “the Others will take them that did this work.”

“It was Theon,” Bran said blackly.

“No. Look.” She pointed across the yard with her spear. “That’s one of his ironmen. And there. And that’s Greyjoy’s warhorse, see? The black one with the arrows in him.” She moved among the dead, frowning. “And here’s Black Lorren.” He had been hacked and cut so badly that his beard looked a reddish-brown now. “Took a few with him, he did.” Osha turned over one of the other corpses with her foot. “There’s a badge. A little man, all red.”

“The flayed man of the Dreadfort,” said Bran.

Summer howled, and darted away.

“The godswood.” Meera Reed ran after the direwolf, her shield and frog spear to hand. The rest of them trailed after, threading their way through smoke and fallen stones. The air was sweeter under the trees. A few pines along the edge of the wood had been scorched, but deeper in the damp soil and green wood had defeated the flames. “There is a power in living wood,” said Jojen Reed, almost as if he knew what Bran was thinking, “a power strong as fire.”

On the edge of the black pool, beneath the shelter of the heart tree, Maester Luwin lay on his belly in the dirt. A trail of blood twisted back through damp leaves where he had crawled. Summer stood over him, and Bran thought he was dead at first, but when Meera touched his throat, the maester moaned. “Hodor?” Hodor said mournfully. “Hodor?”

Gently, they eased Luwin onto his back. He had grey eyes and grey hair, and once his robes had been grey as well, but they were darker now where the blood had soaked through. “Bran,” he said softly when he saw him sitting tall on Hodor’s back. “And Rickon too.” He smiled. “The gods are good. I knew...”

“Knew?” said Bran uncertainly.

“The legs, I could tell... the clothes fit, but the muscles in his legs... poor lad...” He coughed, and blood came up from inside him. “You vanished... in the woods... how, though?”

“We never went,” said Bran. “Well, only to the edge, and then doubled back. I sent the wolves on to make a trail, but we hid in Father’s tomb.”

“The crypts.” Luwin chuckled, a froth of blood on his lips. When the maester tried to move, he gave a sharp gasp of pain.

Tears filled Bran’s eyes. When a man was hurt you took him to the maester, but what could you do when your maester was hurt?

“We’ll need to make a litter to carry him,” said Osha.

“No use,” said Luwin. “I’m dying, woman.”

“You *can*’t,” said Rickon angrily. “No you can’t.” Beside him, Shaggydog bared his teeth and growled.

The maester smiled. “Hush now, child, I’m much older than you. I can... die as I please.”

“Hodor, down,” said Bran. Hodor went to his knees beside the maester.

“Listen,” Luwin said to Osha, “the princes... Robb’s heirs. Not... not together... do you hear?”

The wildling woman leaned on her spear. “Aye. Safer apart. But where to take them? I’d thought, might be these Cerwyns...”

Maester Luwin shook his head, though it was plain to see what the effort cost him. “Cerwyn boy’s dead. Ser Rodrik, Leobald Tallhart, Lady Hornwood... all slain. Deepwood fallen, Moat Cailin, soon Torrhen’s Square. Ironmen on the Stony Shore. And east, the Bastard of Bolton.”

“Then where?” asked Osha.

“White Harbor... the Umbers... I do not know... war everywhere... each man against his neighbor, and winter coming... such folly, such black mad folly...” Maester Luwin reached up and grasped Bran’s forearm, his fingers closing with a desperate strength. “You must be strong now. *Strong.*”

“I will be,” Bran said, though it was hard. *Ser Rodrik killed and Maester Luwin, everyone, everyone...*

“Good,” the maester said. “A good boy. Your... your father’s son, Bran. Now go.”

Osha gazed up at the weirwood, at the red face carved in the pale trunk. “And leave you for the gods?”

“I beg...” The maester swallowed. “A... a drink of water, and... another boon. If you would...”

“Aye.” She turned to Meera. “Take the boys.”

Jojen and Meera led Rickon out between them. Hodor followed. Low branches whipped at Bran’s face as they pushed between the trees, and the leaves brushed away his tears. Osha joined them in the yard a few moments later. She said no word of Maester Luwin. “Hodor must stay with Bran, to be his legs,” the wildling woman said briskly. “I will take Rickon with me.”

“We’ll go with Bran,” said Jojen Reed.

“Aye, I thought you might,” said Osha. “Believe I’ll try the East Gate, and follow the kingsroad a ways.”

“We’ll take the Hunter’s Gate,” said Meera.

“Hodor,” said Hodor.

They stopped at the kitchens first. Osha found some loaves of burned bread that were still edible, and even a cold roast fowl that she ripped in half. Meera unearthed a crock of honey and a big sack of apples. Outside, they made their farewells. Rickon sobbed and clung to Hodor’s leg until Osha gave him a smack with the butt end of her spear. Then he followed her quick enough. Shaggydog stalked after them. The last Bran saw of them was the direwolf’s tail as it vanished behind the broken tower.

The iron portcullis that closed the Hunter’s Gate had been warped so badly by heat it could not be raised more than a foot. They had to squeeze beneath its spikes, one by one.

“Will we go to your lord father?” Bran asked as they crossed the drawbridge between the walls. “To Greywater Watch?”

Meera looked to her brother for the answer. “Our road is north,” Jojen announced.

At the edge of the wolfswood, Bran turned in his basket for one last glimpse of the castle that had been his life. Wisps of smoke still rose into the grey sky, but no more than might have risen from Winterfell’s chimneys on a cold autumn afternoon. Soot stains marked some of the arrow loops, and here and there a crack or a missing merlon could be seen in the curtain

wall, but it seemed little enough from this distance. Beyond, the tops of the keeps and towers still stood as they had for hundreds of years, and it was hard to tell that the castle had been sacked and burned at all. *The stone is strong*, Bran told himself, *the roots of the trees go deep, and under the ground the Kings of Winter sit their thrones*. So long as those remained, Winterfell remained. It was not dead, just broken. *Like me*, he thought. *I'm not dead either*.