

BRAN

It seemed as though he had been falling for years.

Fly, a voice whispered in the darkness, but Bran did not know how to fly, so all he could do was fall.

Maester Luwin made a little boy of clay, baked him till he was hard and brittle, dressed him in Bran's clothes, and flung him off a roof. Bran remembered the way he shattered. "But I never fall," he said, falling.

The ground was so far below him he could barely make it out through the grey mists that whirled around him, but he could feel how fast he was falling, and he knew what was waiting for him down there. Even in dreams, you could not fall forever. He would wake up in the instant before he hit the ground, he knew. You always woke up in the instant before you hit the ground.

And if you don't? the voice asked.

The ground was closer now, still far far away, a thousand miles away, but closer than it had been. It was cold here in the darkness. There was no sun, no stars, only the ground below coming up to smash him, and the grey mists, and the whispering voice. He wanted to cry.

Not cry. Fly.

"I can't fly," Bran said. "I can't, I can't..."

How do you know? Have you ever tried?

The voice was high and thin. Bran looked around to see where it was coming from. A crow was spiraling down with him, just out of reach, following him as he fell. "Help me," he said.

I'm trying, the crow replied. *Say, got any corn?*

Bran reached into his pocket as the darkness spun dizzily around him. When he pulled his hand out, golden kernels slid from between his fingers into the air. They fell with him.

The crow landed on his hand and began to eat.

“Are you really a crow?” Bran asked.

Are you really falling? the crow asked back.

“It’s just a dream,” Bran said.

Is it? asked the crow.

“I’ll wake up when I hit the ground,” Bran told the bird.

You’ll die when you hit the ground, the crow said. It went back to eating corn.

Bran looked down. He could see mountains now, their peaks white with snow, and the silver thread of rivers in dark woods. He closed his eyes and began to cry.

That won’t do any good, the crow said. *I told you, the answer is flying, not crying. How hard can it be? I’m doing it.* The crow took to the air and flapped around Bran’s hand.

“You have wings,” Bran pointed out.

Maybe you do too.

Bran felt along his shoulders, groping for feathers.

There are different kinds of wings, the crow said.

Bran was staring at his arms, his legs. He was so skinny, just skin stretched taut over bones. Had he always been so thin? He tried to remember. A face swam up at him out of the grey mist, shining with light, golden. “The things I do for love,” it said.

Bran screamed.

The crow took to the air, cawing. *Not that,* it shrieked at him. *Forget that, you do not need it now, put it aside, put it away.* It landed on Bran’s shoulder, and pecked at him, and the shining golden face was gone.

Bran was falling faster than ever. The grey mists howled around him as he plunged toward the earth below. “What are you doing to me?” he asked the crow, tearful.

Teaching you how to fly.

“I can’t fly!”

You're flying tight now.

"I'm falling!"

Every flight begins with a fall, the crow said. Look down.

"I'm afraid..."

LOOK DOWN!

Bran looked down, and felt his insides turn to water. The ground was rushing up at him now. The whole world was spread out below him, a tapestry of white and brown and green. He could see everything so clearly that for a moment he forgot to be afraid. He could see the whole realm, and everyone in it.

He saw Winterfell as the eagles see it, the tall towers looking squat and stubby from above, the castle walls just lines in the dirt. He saw Maester Luwin on his balcony, studying the sky through a polished bronze tube and frowning as he made notes in a book. He saw his brother Robb, taller and stronger than he remembered him, practicing swordplay in the yard with real steel in his hand. He saw Hodor, the simple giant from the stables, carrying an anvil to Mikken's forge, hefting it onto his shoulder as easily as another man might heft a bale of hay. At the heart of the godswood, the great white weirwood brooded over its reflection in the black pool, its leaves rustling in a chill wind. When it felt Bran watching, it lifted its eyes from the still waters and stared back at him knowingly.

He looked east, and saw a galley racing across the waters of the Bite. He saw his mother sitting alone in a cabin, looking at a bloodstained knife on a table in front of her, as the rowers pulled at their oars and Ser Rodrik leaned across a rail, shaking and heaving. A storm was gathering ahead of them, a vast dark roaring lashed by lightning, but somehow they could not see it.

He looked south, and saw the great blue-green rush of the Trident. He saw his father pleading with the king, his face etched with grief. He saw Sansa crying herself to sleep at night, and he saw Arya watching in silence and holding her secrets hard in her heart. There were shadows all around them. One shadow was dark as ash, with the terrible face of a hound.

Another was armored like the sun, golden and beautiful. Over them both loomed a giant in armor made of stone, but when he opened his visor, there was nothing inside but darkness and thick black blood.

He lifted his eyes and saw clear across the narrow sea, to the Free Cities and the green Dothraki sea and beyond, to Vaes Dothrak under its mountain, to the fabled lands of the Jade Sea, to Asshai by the Shadow, where dragons stirred beneath the sunrise.

Finally he looked north. He saw the Wall shining like blue crystal, and his bastard brother Jon sleeping alone in a cold bed, his skin growing pale and hard as the memory of all warmth fled from him. And he looked past the Wall, past endless forests cloaked in snow, past the frozen shore and the great blue-white rivers of ice and the dead plains where nothing grew or lived. North and north and north he looked, to the curtain of light at the end of the world, and then beyond that curtain. He looked deep into the heart of winter, and then he cried out, afraid, and the heat of his tears burned on his cheeks.

Now you know, the crow whispered as it sat on his shoulder. *Now you know why you must live.*

“Why?” Bran said, not understanding, falling, falling.

Because winter is coming.

Bran looked at the crow on his shoulder, and the crow looked back. It had three eyes, and the third eye was full of a terrible knowledge. Bran looked down. There was nothing below him now but snow and cold and death, a frozen wasteland where jagged blue-white spires of ice waited to embrace him. They flew up at him like spears. He saw the bones of a thousand other dreamers impaled upon their points. He was desperately afraid.

“Can a man still be brave if he’s afraid?” he heard his own voice saying, small and far away.

And his father’s voice replied to him. “That is the only time a man can be brave.”

Now, Bran, the crow urged. *Choose. Fly or die.*

Death reached for him, screaming.

Bran spread his arms and flew.

Wings unseen drank the wind and filled and pulled him upward. The terrible needles of ice receded below him. The sky opened up above. Bran soared. It was better than climbing. It was better than anything. The world grew small beneath him.

“I’m flying!” he cried out in delight.

I’ve noticed, said the three-eyed crow. It took to the air, flapping its wings in his face, slowing him, blinding him. He faltered in the air as its pinions beat against his cheeks. Its beak stabbed at him fiercely, and Bran felt a sudden blinding pain in the middle of his forehead, between his eyes.

“What are you doing?” he shrieked.

The crow opened its beak and cawed at him, a shrill scream of fear, and the grey mists shuddered and swirled around him and ripped away like a veil, and he saw that the crow was really a woman, a serving woman with long black hair, and he knew her from somewhere, from Winterfell, yes, that was it, he remembered her now, and then he realized that he was in Winterfell, in a bed high in some chilly tower room, and the black-haired woman dropped a basin of water to shatter on the floor and ran down the steps, shouting, “He’s awake, he’s awake, he’s awake.”

Bran touched his forehead, between his eyes. The place where the crow had pecked him was still burning, but there was nothing there, no blood, no wound. He felt weak and dizzy. He tried to get out of bed, but nothing happened.

And then there was movement beside the bed, and something landed lightly on his legs. He felt nothing. A pair of yellow eyes looked into his own, shining like the sun. The window was open and it was cold in the room, but the warmth that came off the wolf enfolded him like a hot bath. His pup, Bran realized... or was it? He was so *big* now. He reached out to pet him, his hand trembling like a leaf.

When his brother Robb burst into the room, breathless from his dash up the tower steps, the direwolf was licking Bran’s face. Bran looked up

calmly. “His name is Summer,” he said.