

BRAN

Something about the way the raven screamed sent a shiver running up Bran's spine. *I am almost a man grown*, he had to remind himself. *I have to be brave now.*

But the air was sharp and cold and full of fear. Even Summer was afraid. The fur on his neck was bristling. Shadows stretched against the hillside, black and hungry. All the trees were bowed and twisted by the weight of ice they carried. Some hardly looked like trees at all. Buried from root to crown in frozen snow, they huddled on the hill like giants, monstrous and misshapen creatures hunched against the icy wind.

"They are here." The ranger drew his longsword. "Where?" Meera's voice was hushed. "Close. I don't know. Somewhere."

The raven shrieked again. "Hodor," whispered Hodor. He had his hands tucked up beneath his armpits. Icicles hung from the brown briar of his beard, and his mustache was a lump of frozen snot, glittering redly in the light of sunset.

"Those wolves are close as well," Bran warned them. "The ones that have been following us. Summer can smell them whenever we're downwind."

"Wolves are the least of our woes," said Coldhands. "We have to climb. It will be dark soon. You would do well to be inside before night comes. Your warmth will draw them." He glanced to the west, where the light of the setting sun could be seen dimly through the trees, like the glow of a distant fire.

"Is this the only way in?" asked Meera. "The back door is three leagues north, down a sinkhole."

That was all he had to say. Not even Hodor could climb down into a sinkhole with Bran heavy on his back, and Jojen could no more walk three leagues than run a thousand.

Meera eyed the hill above. “The way looks clear.”

“*Looks,*” the ranger muttered darkly. “Can you feel the cold? There’s something here. *Where are they?*”

“Inside the cave?” suggested Meera. “The cave is warded. They cannot pass.” The ranger used his sword to point. “You can see the entrance there. Halfway up, between the weir-woods, that cleft in the rock.”

“I see it,” said Bran. Ravens were flying in and out.

Hodor shifted his weight. “Hodor.”

“A fold in the rock, that’s all I see,” said Meera. “There’s a passage there. Steep and twisty at first, a runnel through the rock. If you can reach it, you’ll be safe.”

“What about you?”

“The cave is warded.”

Meera studied the cleft in the hillside. “It can’t be more than a thousand yards from here to there.”

No, thought Bran, *but all those yards are upward*. The hill was steep and thickly wooded. The snow had stopped three days ago, but none of it had melted. Beneath the trees, the ground was blanketed in white, still pristine and unbroken. “No one’s here,” said Bran, bravely. “Look at the snow. There are no footprints.”

“The white walkers go lightly on the snow,” the ranger said. “You’ll find no prints to mark their passage.” A raven descended from above to settle on his shoulder. Only a dozen of the big black birds remained with them. The rest had vanished along the way; every dawn when they arose, there had been fewer of them. “*Come,*” the bird squawked. “*Come, come.*”

The three-eyed crow, thought Bran. *The greenseer*. “It’s not so far,” he said. “A little climb, and we’ll be safe. Maybe we can have a fire.” All of them

were cold and wet and hungry, except the ranger, and Jojen Reed was too weak to walk unaided.

“You go.” Meera Reed bent down beside her brother. He was settled in the bole of an oak, eyes closed, shivering violently. What little of his face could be seen beneath his hood and scarf was as colorless as the surrounding snow, but breath still puffed faintly from his nostrils whenever he exhaled. Meera had been carrying him all day. *Food and fire will set him right again*, Bran tried to tell himself, though he wasn’t sure it would. “I can’t fight and carry Jojen both, the climb’s too steep,” Meera was saying. “Hodor, you take Bran up to that cave.”

“Hodor.” Hodor clapped his hands together. “Jojen just needs to eat,” Bran said, miserably. It had been twelve days since the elk had collapsed for the third and final time, since Coldhands had knelt beside it in the snowbank and murmured a blessing in some strange tongue as he slit its throat. Bran wept like a little girl when the bright blood came rushing out. He had never felt more like a cripple than he did then, watching helplessly as Meera Reed and Coldhands butchered the brave beast who had carried them so far. He told himself he would not eat, that it was better to go hungry than to feast upon a friend, but in the end he’d eaten twice, once in his own skin and once in Summer’s. As gaunt and starved as the elk had been, the steaks the ranger carved from him had sustained them for seven days, until they finished the last of them huddled over a fire in the ruins of an old hillfort.

“He needs to eat,” Meera agreed, smoothing her brother’s brow. “We all do, but there’s no food here. *Go*.”

Bran blinked back a tear and felt it freeze upon his cheek. Coldhands took Hodor by the arm. “The light is fading. If they’re not here now, they will be soon. Come.”

Wordless for once, Hodor slapped the snow off his legs, and plowed upward through the snowdrifts with Bran upon his back. Coldhands stalked beside them, his blade in a black hand. Summer came after. In some places the snow was higher than he was, and the big direwolf had to stop and shake it off after plunging through the thin crust. As they climbed, Bran turned awkwardly in his basket to watch as Meera slid an arm beneath her brother

to lift him to his feet. *He's too heavy for her. She's half-starved, she's not as strong as she was.* She clutched her frog spear in her other hand, jabbing the tines into the snow for a little more support. Meera had just begun to struggle up the hill, half-dragging and half-carrying her little brother, when Hodor passed between two trees, and Bran lost sight of them.

The hill grew steeper. Drifts of snow cracked under Hodor's boots. Once a rock moved beneath his foot and he slid backwards, and almost went tumbling back down the hill. The ranger caught him by the arm and saved him. "Hodor," said Hodor. Every gust of wind filled the air with fine white powder that shone like glass in the last light of day. Ravens flapped around them. One flew ahead and vanished inside the cave. *Only eighty yards now,* Bran thought, *that's not far at all.*

Summer stopped suddenly, at the bottom of a steep stretch of unbroken white snow. The direwolf turned his head, sniffed the air, then snarled. Fur bristling, he began to back away.

"Hodor, stop," said Bran. "Hodor. *Wait.*" Something was wrong. Summer smelled it, and so did he. *Something bad. Something close.* "Hodor, no, go back."

Coldhands was still climbing, and Hodor wanted to keep up. "Hodor, hodor, hodor," he grumbled loudly, to drown out Bran's complaints. His breathing had grown labored. Pale mist filled the air. He took a step, then another. The snow was almost waist deep and the slope was very steep. Hodor was leaning forward, grasping at rocks and trees with his hands as he climbed. Another step. Another. The snow Hodor disturbed slid downhill, starting a small avalanche behind them.

Sixty yards. Bran craned himself sideways to better see the cave. Then he saw something else. "A fire!" In the little cleft between the weirwood trees was a flickering glow, a ruddy light calling through the gathering gloom. "Look, someone—"

Hodor screamed. He twisted, stumbled, fell.

Bran felt the world slide sideways as the big stableboy spun violently around. A jarring impact drove the breath from him. His mouth was full of blood and Hodor was thrashing and rolling, crushing the crippled boy beneath him.

Something has hold of his leg. For half a heartbeat Bran thought maybe a root had gotten tangled round his ankle ... until the root moved. *A hand,* he saw, as the rest of the wight came bursting from beneath the snow.

Hodor kicked at it, slamming a snow-covered heel full into the thing's face, but the dead man did not even seem to feel it. Then the two of them were grappling, punching and clawing at each other, sliding down the hill. Snow filled Bran's mouth and nose as they rolled over, but in a half a heartbeat he was rolling up again. Something slammed against his head, a rock or a chunk of ice or a dead man's fist, he could not tell, and he found himself out of his basket, sprawled across the hillside, spitting snow, his gloved hand full of hair that he'd torn from Hodor's head.

All around him, wights were rising from beneath the snow.

Two, three, four. Bran lost count. They surged up violently amidst sudden clouds of snow. Some wore black cloaks, some ragged skins, some nothing. All of them had pale flesh and black hands. Their eyes glowed like pale blue stars.

Three of them descended on the ranger. Bran saw Coldhands slash one across the face. The thing kept right on coming, driving him back into the arms of another. Two more were going after Hodor, lumbering clumsily down the slope. Meera was going to climb right into this, Bran realized, with a sick sense of helpless terror. He smashed the snow and shouted out a warning.

Something grabbed hold of him.

That was when his shout became a scream. Bran filled a fist with snow and threw it, but the wight did not so much as blink. A black hand fumbled at his face, another at his belly. Its fingers felt like iron. *He's going to pull my guts out.*

But suddenly Summer was between them. Bran glimpsed skin tear like cheap cloth, heard the splintering of bone. He saw a hand and wrist rip loose, pale fingers wriggling, the sleeve faded black roughspun. *Black*, he thought, *he's wearing black, he was one of the Watch*. Summer flung the arm aside, twisted, and sank his teeth into the dead man's neck under the chin. When the big grey wolf wrenched free, he took most of the creature's throat out in an explosion of pale rotten meat.

The severed hand was still moving. Bran rolled away from it. On his belly, clawing at the snow, he glimpsed the trees above, pale and snow-cloaked, the orange glow between.

Fifty yards. If he could drag himself fifty yards, they could not get him. Damp seeped through his gloves as he clutched at roots and rocks, crawling toward the light. *A little farther, just a little farther. Then you can rest beside the fire.*

The last light had vanished from amongst the trees by then. Night had fallen. Coldhands was hacking and cutting at the circle of dead men that surrounded him. Summer was tearing at the one that he'd brought down, its face between his teeth. No one was paying any mind to Bran. He crawled a little higher, dragging his useless legs behind him. *If I can reach that cave ...*

"Hooooodor" came a whimper, from somewhere down below.

And suddenly he was not Bran, the broken boy crawling through the snow, suddenly he was Hodor halfway down the hill, with the wight raking at his eyes. Roaring, he came lurching to his feet, throwing the thing violently aside. It went to one knee, began to rise again. Bran ripped Hodor's longsword from his belt. Deep inside he could hear poor Hodor whimpering still, but outside he was seven feet of fury with old iron in his hand. He raised the sword and brought it down upon the dead man, grunting as the blade sheared through wet wool and rusted mail and rotted leather, biting deep into the bones and flesh beneath. "*HODOR!*" he bellowed, and slashed again. This time he took the wight's head off at the neck, and for half a moment he exulted ... until a pair of dead hands came groping blindly for his throat.

Bran backed away, bleeding, and Meera Reed was there, driving her frog spear deep into the wight's back. "Hodor," Bran roared again, waving her uphill. "*Hodor, hodor.*" Jojen was twisting feebly where she'd laid him down. Bran went to him, dropped the longsword, gathered the boy into Hodor's arm, and lurched back to his feet. "*HODOR!*" he bellowed.

Meera led the way back up the hill, jabbing at the wights when they came near. The things could not be hurt, but they were slow and clumsy. "Hodor," Hodor said with every step. "Hodor, hodor." He wondered what Meera would think if he should suddenly tell her that he loved her.

Up above them, flaming figures were dancing in the snow.

The wights, Bran realized. Someone set the wights on fire.

Summer was snarling and snapping as he danced around the closest, a great ruin of a man wreathed in swirling flame. *He shouldn't get so close, what is he doing?* Then he saw himself, sprawled facedown in the snow. Summer was trying to drive the thing away from him. *What will happen if it kills me?* the boy wondered. *Will I be Hodor for good or all? Will I go back into Summer's skin? Or will I just be dead?*

The world moved dizzily around him. White trees, black sky, red flames, everything was whirling, shifting, spinning. He felt himself stumbling. He could hear Hodor screaming, "Hodor hodor hodor hodor. Hodor hodor hodor hodor. Hodor hodor hodor hodor hodor." A cloud of ravens was pouring from the cave, and he saw a little girl with a torch in hand, darting this way and that. For a moment Bran thought it was his sister Arya ... madly, for he knew his little sister was a thousand leagues away, or dead. And yet there she was, whirling, a scrawny thing, ragged, wild, her hair atangle. Tears filled Hodor's eyes and froze there.

Everything turned inside out and upside down, and Bran found himself back inside his own skin, half-buried in the snow. The burning wight loomed over him, etched tall against the trees in their snowy shrouds. It was one of the naked ones, Bran saw, in the instant before the nearest tree shook off the snow that covered it and dropped it all down upon his head.

The next he knew, he was lying on a bed of pine needles beneath a dark stone roof. *The cave. I'm in the cave.* His mouth still tasted of blood where he'd bitten his tongue, but a fire was burning to his right, the heat washing over his face, and he had never felt anything so good. Summer was there, sniffing round him, and Hodor, soaking wet. Meera cradled Jojen's head in her lap. And the Arya thing stood over them, clutching her torch.

"The snow," Bran said. "It fell on me. Buried me."

"Hid you. I pulled you out." Meera nodded at the girl. "It was her who saved us, though. The torch ... fire kills them."

"Fire *burns* them. Fire is always hungry."

That was not Arya's voice, nor any child's. It was a woman's voice, high and sweet, with a strange music in it like none that he had ever heard and a sadness that he thought might break his heart. Bran squinted, to see her better. It *was* a girl, but smaller than Arya, her skin dappled like a doe's beneath a cloak of leaves. Her eyes were queer—large and liquid, gold and green, slitted like a cat's eyes. *No one has eyes like that.* Her hair was a tangle of brown and red and gold, autumn colors, with vines and twigs and withered flowers woven through it.

"Who are you?" Meera Reed was asking.

Bran knew. "She's a child. A child of the forest." He shivered, as much from wonderment as cold. They had fallen into one of Old Nan's tales.

"The First Men named us children," the little woman said. "The giants called us *woh dak nag gran*, the squirrel people, because we were small and quick and fond of trees, but we are no squirrels, no children. Our name in the True Tongue means *those who sing the song of earth*. Before your Old Tongue was ever spoken, we had sung our songs ten thousand years."

Meera said, "You speak the Common Tongue now."

"For him. The Bran boy. I was born in the time of the dragon, and for two hundred years I walked the world of men, to watch and listen and learn. I

might be walking still, but my legs were sore and my heart was weary, so I turned my feet for home.”

“Two hundred years?” said Meera.

The child smiled. “Men, they are the children.”

“Do you have a name?” asked Bran. “When I am needing one.” She waved her torch toward the black crack in the back wall of the cave. “Our way is down. You must come with me now.”

Bran shivered again. “The ranger ...”

“He cannot come.”

“They’ll kill him.”

“No. They killed him long ago. Come now. It is warmer down deep, and no one will hurt you there. He is waiting for you.”

“The three-eyed crow?” asked Meera. “The greenseer.” And with that she was off, and they had no choice but to follow. Meera helped Bran back up onto Hodor’s back, though his basket was half-crushed and wet from melting snow. Then she slipped an arm around her brother and shouldered him back onto his feet once more. His eyes opened. “What?” he said. “Meera? Where are we?” When he saw the fire, he smiled. “I had the strangest dream.”

The way was cramped and twisty, and so low that Hodor soon was crouching. Bran hunched down as best he could, but even so, the top of his head was soon scraping and bumping against the ceiling. Loose dirt crumbled at each touch and dribbled down into his eyes and hair, and once he smacked his brow on a thick white root growing from the tunnel wall, with tendrils hanging from it and spiderwebs between its fingers.

The child went in front with the torch in hand, her cloak of leaves whispering behind her, but the passage turned so much that Bran soon lost sight of her. Then the only light was what was reflected off the passage

walls. After they had gone down a little, the cave divided, but the left branch was dark as pitch, so even Hodor knew to follow the moving torch to the right.

The way the shadows shifted made it seem as if the walls were moving too. Bran saw great white snakes slithering in and out of the earth around him, and his heart thumped in fear. He wondered if they had blundered into a nest of milk snakes or giant grave worms, soft and pale and squishy. *Grave worms have teeth.*

Hodor saw them too. “Hodor,” he whimpered, reluctant to go on. But when the girl child stopped to let them catch her, the torchlight steadied, and Bran realized that the snakes were only white roots like the one he’d hit his head on. “It’s weirwood roots,” he said. “Remember the heart tree in the godswood, Hodor? The white tree with the red leaves? A tree can’t hurt you.”

“Hodor.” Hodor plunged ahead, hurrying after the child and her torch, deeper into the earth. They passed another branching, and another, then came into an echoing cavern as large as the great hall of Winterfell, with stone teeth hanging from its ceiling and more poking up through its floor. The child in the leafy cloak wove a path through them. From time to time she stopped and waved her torch at them impatiently. *This way, it seemed to say, this way, this way, faster.*

There were more side passages after that, more chambers, and Bran heard dripping water somewhere to his right. When he looked off that way, he saw eyes looking back at them, slitted eyes that glowed bright, reflecting back the torchlight. *More children, he told himself, the girl is not the only one,* but Old Nan’s tale of Gendel’s children came back to him as well.

The roots were everywhere, twisting through earth and stone, closing off some passages and holding up the roofs of others. *All the color is gone,* Bran realized suddenly. The world was black soil and white wood. The heart tree at Winterfell had roots as thick around as a giant’s legs, but these were even thicker. And Bran had never seen so many of them. *There must be a whole grove of weirwoods growing up above us.*

The light dwindled again. Small as she was, the child-who-was-not-a-child moved quickly when she wanted. As Hodor thumped after her, something crunched beneath his feet. His halt was so sudden that Meera and Jojen almost slammed into his back.

“Bones,” said Bran. “It’s bones.” The floor of the passage was littered with the bones of birds and beasts. But there were other bones as well, big ones that must have come from giants and small ones that could have been from children. On either side of them, in niches carved from the stone, skulls looked down on them. Bran saw a bear skull and a wolf skull, half a dozen human skulls and near as many giants. All the rest were small, queerly formed. *Children of the forest*. The roots had grown in and around and through them, every one. A few had ravens perched atop them, watching them pass with bright black eyes.

The last part of their dark journey was the steepest. Hodor made the final descent on his arse, bumping and sliding downward in a clatter of broken bones, loose dirt, and pebbles. The girl child was waiting for them, standing on one end of a natural bridge above a yawning chasm. Down below in the darkness, Bran heard the sound of rushing water. *An underground river*.

“Do we have to cross?” Bran asked, as the Reeds came sliding down behind him. The prospect frightened him. If Hodor slipped on that narrow bridge, they would fall and fall.

“No, boy,” the child said. “Behind you.” She lifted her torch higher, and the light seemed to shift and change. One moment the flames burned orange and yellow, filling the cavern with a ruddy glow; then all the colors faded, leaving only black and white. Behind them Meera gasped. Hodor turned.

Before them a pale lord in ebon finery sat dreaming in a tangled nest of roots, a woven weirwood throne that embraced his withered limbs as a mother does a child.

His body was so skeletal and his clothes so rotted that at first Bran took him for another corpse, a dead man propped up so long that the roots had grown over him, under him, and through him. What skin the corpse lord showed was white, save for a bloody blotch that crept up his neck onto his cheek.

His white hair was fine and thin as root hair and long enough to brush against the earthen floor. Roots coiled around his legs like wooden serpents. One burrowed through his breeches into the desiccated flesh of his thigh, to emerge again from his shoulder. A spray of dark red leaves sprouted from his skull, and grey mushrooms spotted his brow. A little skin remained, stretched across his face, tight and hard as white leather, but even that was fraying, and here and there the brown and yellow bone beneath was poking through.

“Are you the three-eyed crow?” Bran heard himself say. *A three-eyed crow should have three eyes. He has only one, and that one red.* Bran could feel the eye staring at him, shining like a pool of blood in the torchlight. Where his other eye should have been, a thin white root grew from an empty socket, down his cheek, and into his neck.

“A ... crow?” The pale lord’s voice was dry. His lips moved slowly, as if they had forgotten how to form words. “Once, aye. Black of garb and black of blood.” The clothes he wore were rotten and faded, spotted with moss and eaten through with worms, but once they had been black. “I have been many things, Bran. Now I am as you see me, and now you will understand why I could not come to you ... except in dreams. I have watched you for a long time, watched you with a thousand eyes and one. I saw your birth, and that of your lord father before you. I saw your first step, heard your first word, was part of your first dream. I was watching when you fell. And now you are come to me at last, Brandon Stark, though the hour is late.”

“I’m here,” Bran said, “only I’m broken. Will you ... will you fix me ... my legs, I mean?”

“No,” said the pale lord. “That is beyond my powers.”

Bran’s eyes filled with tears. *We came such a long way.* The chamber echoed to the sound of the black river.

“You will never walk again, Bran,” the pale lips promised, “but you will fly.”