



BRAN

The ridge slanted sharply from the earth, a long fold of stone and soil shaped like a claw. Trees clung to its lower slopes, pines and hawthorn and ash, but higher up the ground was bare, the ridgeline stark against the cloudy sky.

He could feel the high stone calling him. Up he went, loping easy at first, then faster and higher, his strong legs eating up the incline. Birds burst from the branches overhead as he raced by, clawing and flapping their way into the sky. He could hear the wind sighing up amongst the leaves, the squirrels chattering to one another, even the sound a pinecone made as it tumbled to the forest floor. The smells were a song around him, a song that filled the good green world.

Gravel flew from beneath his paws as he gained the last few feet to stand upon the crest. The sun hung above the tall pines huge and red, and below him the trees and hills went on and on as far as he could see or smell. A kite was circling far above, dark against the pink sky.

Prince. The man-sound came into his head suddenly, yet he could feel the rightness of it. *Prince of the green, prince of the wolfswood.* He was strong and swift and fierce, and all that lived in the good green world went in fear of him.

Far below, at the base of the woods, something moved amongst the trees. A flash of grey, quick-glimpsed and gone again, but it was enough to make

his ears prick up. Down there beside a swift green brook, another form slipped by, running. *Wolves*, he knew. His little cousins, chasing down some prey. Now the prince could see more of them, shadows on fleet grey paws. *A pack.*

He had a pack as well, once. Five they had been, and a sixth who stood aside. Somewhere down inside him were the sounds the men had given them to tell one from the other, but it was not by their sounds he knew them. He remembered their scents, his brothers and his sisters. They all had smelled alike, had smelled of *pack*, but each was different too.

His angry brother with the hot green eyes was near, the prince felt, though he had not seen him for many hunts. Yet with every sun that set he grew more distant, and he had been the last. The others were far scattered, like leaves blown by the wild wind.

Sometimes he could sense them, though, as if they were still with him, only hidden from his sight by a boulder or a stand of trees. He could not smell them, nor hear their howls by night, yet he felt their presence at his back . . . all but the sister they had lost. His tail drooped when he remembered her. *Four now, not five. Four and one more, the white who has no voice.*

These woods belonged to them, the snowy slopes and stony hills, the great green pines and the golden leaf oaks, the rushing streams and blue lakes fringed with fingers of white frost. But his sister had left the wilds, to walk in the halls of man-rock where other hunters ruled, and once within those halls it was hard to find the path back out. The wolf prince remembered.

The wind shifted suddenly.

Deer, and fear, and blood. The scent of prey woke the hunger in him. The prince sniffed the air again, turning, and then he was off, bounding along the ridgetop with jaws half-parted. The far side of the ridge was steeper than the one he'd come up, but he flew surefoot over stones and roots and rotting leaves, down the slope and through the trees, long strides eating up the ground. The scent pulled him onward, ever faster.

The deer was down and dying when he reached her, ringed by eight of his small grey cousins. The heads of the pack had begun to feed, the male first

and then his female, taking turns tearing flesh from the red underbelly of their prey. The others waited patiently, all but the tail, who paced in a wary circle a few strides from the rest, his own tail tucked low. He would eat the last of all, whatever his brothers left him.

The prince was downwind, so they did not sense him until he leapt up upon a fallen log six strides from where they fed. The tail saw him first, gave a piteous whine, and slunk away. His pack brothers turned at the sound and bared their teeth, snarling, all but the head male and female.

The direwolf answered the snarls with a low warning growl and showed them his own teeth. He was bigger than his cousins, twice the size of the scrawny tail, half again as large as the two pack heads. He leapt down into their midst, and three of them broke, melting away into the brush. Another came at him, teeth snapping. He met the attack head on, caught the wolf's leg in his jaws when they met, and flung him aside yelping and limping.

And then there was only the head wolf to face, the great grey male with his bloody muzzle fresh from the prey's soft belly. There was white on his muzzle as well, to mark him as an old wolf, but when his mouth opened, red slaver ran from his teeth.

He has no fear, the prince thought, *no more than me*. It would be a good fight. They went for each other.

Long they fought, rolling together over roots and stones and fallen leaves and the scattered entrails of the prey, tearing at each other with tooth and claw, breaking apart, circling each round the other, and bolting in to fight again. The prince was larger, and much the stronger, but his cousin had a pack. The female prowled around them closely, snuffing and snarling, and would interpose herself whenever her mate broke off bloodied. From time to time the other wolves would dart in as well, to snap at a leg or an ear when the prince was turned the other way. One angered him so much that he whirled in a black fury and tore out the attacker's throat. After that the others kept their distance.

And as the last red light was filtering through green boughs and golden, the old wolf lay down weary in the dirt, and rolled over to expose his throat and belly. It was submission.

The prince sniffed at him and licked the blood from fur and torn flesh. When the old wolf gave a soft whimper, the direwolf turned away. He was very hungry now, and the prey was his.

“Hodor.”

The sudden sound made him stop and snarl. The wolves regarded him with green and yellow eyes, bright with the last light of day. None of them had heard it. It was a queer wind that blew only in his ears. He buried his jaws in the deer’s belly and tore off a mouthful of flesh.

“Hodor, hodor.”

No, he thought. *No, I won’t*. It was a boy’s thought, not a direwolf’s. The woods were darkening all about him, until only the shadows of the trees remained, and the glow of his cousins’ eyes. And *through* those and behind those eyes, he saw a big man’s grinning face, and a stone vault whose walls were spotted with niter. The rich warm taste of blood faded on his tongue. *No, don’t, don’t, I want to eat, I want to, I want . . .*

“Hodor, hodor, hodor, hodor, hodor,” Hodor chanted as he shook him softly by the shoulders, back and forth and back and forth. He was trying to be gentle, he always tried, but Hodor was seven feet tall and stronger than he knew, and his huge hands rattled Bran’s teeth together. “*NO!*” he shouted angrily. “Hodor, leave off, I’m here, I’m *here*.”

Hodor stopped, looking abashed. “Hodor?”

The woods and wolves were gone. Bran was back again, down in the damp vault of some ancient watchtower that must have been abandoned thousands of years before. It wasn’t much of a tower now. Even the tumbled stones were so overgrown with moss and ivy that you could hardly see them until you were right on top of them. “Tumbledown Tower,” Bran had named the place; it was Meera who found the way down into the vault, however.

“You were gone too long.” Jojen Reed was thirteen, only four years older than Bran. Jojen wasn’t much bigger either, no more than two inches or maybe three, but he had a solemn way of talking that made him seem older and wiser than he really was. At Winterfell, Old Nan had dubbed him “little grandfather.”

Bran frowned at him. “I wanted to eat.”

“Meera will be back soon with supper.”

“I’m sick of frogs.” Meera was a frog eater from the Neck, so Bran couldn’t really *blame* her for catching so many frogs, he supposed, but even so . . . “I wanted to eat the deer.” For a moment he remembered the taste of it, the blood and the raw rich meat, and his mouth watered. *I won the fight for it. I won.*

“Did you mark the trees?”

Bran flushed. Jojen was always telling him to do things when he opened his third eye and put on Summer’s skin. To claw the bark of a tree, to catch a rabbit and bring it back in his jaws uneaten, to push some rocks in a line. *Stupid things.* “I forgot,” he said.

“You always forget.”

It was true. He *meant* to do the things that Jojen asked, but once he was a wolf they never seemed important. There were always things to see and things to smell, a whole green world to hunt. And he could *run!* There was nothing better than running, unless it was running after prey. “I was a prince, Jojen,” he told the older boy. “I was the prince of the woods.”

“You are a prince,” Jojen reminded him softly. “You remember, don’t you? Tell me who you are.”

“You *know.*” Jojen was his friend and his teacher, but sometimes Bran just wanted to hit him.

“I want you to say the words. Tell me who you are.”

“Bran,” he said sullenly. *Bran the Broken.* “Brandon Stark.” *The cripple boy.* “The Prince of Winterfell.” Of Winterfell burned and tumbled, its people scattered and slain. The glass gardens were smashed, and hot water gushed from the cracked walls to steam beneath the sun. *How can you be the prince of someplace you might never see again?*

“And who is Summer?” Jojen prompted.

“My direwolf.” He smiled. “Prince of the green.”

“Bran the boy and Summer the wolf. You are two, then?”

“Two,” he sighed, “and one.” He hated Jojen when he got stupid like this. *At Winterfell he wanted me to dream my wolf dreams, and now that I know*

how he's always calling me back.

“Remember that, Bran. Remember *yourself*, or the wolf will consume you. When you join, it is not enough to run and hunt and howl in Summer's skin.”

It is for me, Bran thought. He liked Summer's skin better than his own. *What good is it to be a skinchanger if you can't wear the skin you like?*

“Will you remember? And next time, mark the tree. Any tree, it doesn't matter, so long as you do it.”

“I will. I'll remember. I could go back and do it now, if you like. I won't forget this time.” *But I'll eat my deer first, and fight with those little wolves some more.*

Jojen shook his head. “No. Best stay, and eat. With your own mouth. A warg cannot live on what his beast consumes.”

How would you know? Bran thought resentfully. *You've never been a warg, you don't know what it's like.*

Hodor jerked suddenly to his feet, almost hitting his head on the barrel-vaulted ceiling. “HODOR!” he shouted, rushing to the door. Meera pushed it open just before he reached it, and stepped through into their refuge. “Hodor, hodor,” the huge stableboy said, grinning.

Meera Reed was sixteen, a woman grown, but she stood no higher than her brother. All the crannogmen were small, she told Bran once when he asked why she wasn't taller. Brown-haired, green-eyed, and flat as a boy, she walked with a supple grace that Bran could only watch and envy. Meera wore a long sharp dagger, but her favorite way to fight was with a slender three-pronged frog spear in one hand and a woven net in the other.

“Who's hungry?” she asked, holding up her catch: two small silvery trout and six fat green frogs.

“I am,” said Bran. *But not for frogs.* Back at Winterfell before all the bad things had happened, the Walders used to say that eating frogs would turn your teeth green and make moss grow under your arms. He wondered if the Walders were dead. He hadn't seen their corpses at Winterfell . . . but there had been a *lot* of corpses, and they hadn't looked inside the buildings.

“We’ll just have to feed you, then. Will you help me clean the catch, Bran?”

He nodded. It was hard to sulk with Meera. She was much more cheerful than her brother, and always seemed to know how to make him smile. Nothing ever scared her or made her angry. *Well, except Jojen, sometimes . . .* Jojen Reed could scare most anyone. He dressed all in green, his eyes were murky as moss, and he had green dreams. What Jojen dreamed came true. *Except he dreamed me dead, and I’m not.* Only he was, in a way.

Jojen sent Hodor out for wood and built them a small fire while Bran and Meera were cleaning the fish and frogs. They used Meera’s helm for a cooking pot, chopping up the catch into little cubes and tossing in some water and some wild onions Hodor had found to make a froggy stew. It wasn’t as good as deer, but it wasn’t bad either, Bran decided as he ate. “Thank you, Meera,” he said. “My lady.”

“You are most welcome, Your Grace.”

“Come the morrow,” Jojen announced, “we had best move on.”

Bran could see Meera tense. “Have you had a green dream?”

“No,” he admitted.

“Why leave, then?” his sister demanded. “Tumbledown Tower’s a good place for us. No villages near, the woods are full of game, there’s fish and frogs in the streams and lakes . . . and who is ever going to find us here?”

“This is not the place we are meant to be.”

“It is safe, though.”

“It *seems* safe, I know,” said Jojen, “but for how long? There was a battle at Winterfell, we saw the dead. Battles mean wars. If some army should take us unawares . . .”

“It might be Robb’s army,” said Bran. “Robb will come back from the south soon, I know he will. He’ll come back with all his banners and chase the ironmen away.”

“Your maester said naught of Robb when he lay dying,” Jojen reminded him. “*Ironmen on the Stony Shore*, he said, and, *east, the Bastard of Bolton*. Moat Cailin and Deepwood Motte fallen, the heir to Cerwyn dead, and the

castellan of Torrhen's Square. *War everywhere*, he said, *each man against his neighbor*."

"We have plowed this field before," his sister said. "You want to make for the Wall, and your three-eyed crow. That's well and good, but the Wall is a very long way and Bran has no legs but Hodor. If we were mounted . . ."

"If we were eagles we might fly," said Jojen sharply, "but we have no wings, no more than we have horses."

"There are horses to be had," said Meera. "Even in the deep of the wolfswood there are foresters, crofters, hunters. Some will have horses."

"And if they do, should we steal them? Are we thieves? The last thing we need is men hunting us."

"We could buy them," she said. "Trade for them."

"Look at us, Meera. A crippled boy with a direwolf, a simpleminded giant, and two crannogmen a thousand leagues from the Neck. *We will be known*. And word will spread. So long as Bran remains dead, he is safe. Alive, he becomes prey for those who want him dead for good and true." Jojen went to the fire to prod the embers with a stick. "Somewhere to the north, the three-eyed crow awaits us. Bran has need of a teacher wiser than me."

"How, Jojen?" his sister asked. "*How?*"

"Afoot," he answered. "A step at a time."

"The road from Greywater to Winterfell went on forever, and we were mounted then. You want us to travel a longer road on foot, without even knowing where it ends. Beyond the Wall, you say. I haven't been there, no more than you, but I know that Beyond the Wall's a big place, Jojen. Are there many three-eyed crows, or only one? How do we find him?"

"Perhaps he will find us."

Before Meera could find a reply to that, they heard the sound; the distant howl of a wolf, drifting through the night. "Summer?" asked Jojen, listening.

"No." Bran knew the voice of his direwolf.

“Are you certain?” said the little grandfather.

“Certain.” Summer had wandered far afield today, and would not be back till dawn. *Maybe Jojen dreams green, but he can't tell a wolf from a direwolf.* He wondered why they all listened to Jojen so much. He was not a prince like Bran, nor big and strong like Hodor, nor as good a hunter as Meera, yet somehow it was always Jojen telling them what to do. “We should steal horses like Meera wants,” Bran said, “and ride to the Umbers up at Last Hearth.” He thought a moment. “Or we could steal a boat and sail down the White Knife to White Harbor town. That fat Lord Manderly rules there, he was friendly at the harvest feast. He wanted to build ships. Maybe he built some, and we could sail to Riverrun and bring Robb home with all his army. Then it wouldn't matter who knew I was alive. Robb wouldn't let anyone hurt us.”

“Hodor!” burped Hodor. “Hodor, hodor.”

He was the only one who liked Bran's plan, though. Meera just smiled at him and Jojen frowned. They never listened to what he wanted, even though Bran was a Stark and a prince besides, and the Reeds of the Neck were Stark bannermen.

“Hooooodor,” said Hodor, swaying. “Hoooooooodor, hoooooodor, hoDOR, hoDOR, hoDOR.” Sometimes he liked to do this, just saying his name different ways, over and over and over. Other times, he would stay so quiet you forgot he was there. There was never any knowing with Hodor. “*HODOR, HODOR, HODOR!*” he shouted.

He is not going to stop, Bran realized. “Hodor,” he said, “why don't you go outside and train with your sword?”

The stableboy had forgotten about his sword, but now he remembered. “Hodor!” he burped. He went for his blade. They had three tomb swords taken from the crypts of Winterfell where Bran and his brother Rickon had hidden from Theon Greyjoy's ironmen. Bran claimed his uncle Brandon's sword, Meera the one she found upon the knees of his grandfather Lord Rickard. Hodor's blade was much older, a huge heavy piece of iron, dull from centuries of neglect and well spotted with rust. He could swing it for hours at a time. There was a rotted tree near the tumbled stones that he had hacked half to pieces.

Even when he went outside they could hear him through the walls, bellowing “HODOR!” as he cut and slashed at his tree. Thankfully the wolfswood was huge, and there was not like to be anyone else around to hear.

“Jojen, what did you mean about a teacher?” Bran asked. “*You’re* my teacher. I know I never marked the tree, but I will the next time. My third eye is open like you wanted . . .”

“So wide open that I fear you may fall through it, and live all the rest of your days as a wolf of the woods.”

“I won’t, I promise.”

“The boy promises. Will the wolf remember? You run with Summer, you hunt with him, kill with him . . . but you bend to his will more than him to yours.”

“I just forget,” Bran complained. “I’m only nine. I’ll be better when I’m older. Even Florian the Fool and Prince Aemon the Dragonknight weren’t great knights when they were *nine*.”

“That is true,” said Jojen, “and a wise thing to say, if the days were still growing longer . . . but they aren’t. You are a summer child, I know. Tell me the words of House Stark.”

“*Winter is coming.*” Just saying it made Bran feel cold.

Jojen gave a solemn nod. “I dreamed of a winged wolf bound to earth by chains of stone, and came to Winterfell to free him. The chains are off you now, yet still you do not fly.”

“Then *you* teach me.” Bran still feared the three-eyed crow who haunted his dreams sometimes, pecking endlessly at the skin between his eyes and telling him to fly. “You’re a greenseer.”

“No,” said Jojen, “only a boy who dreams. The greenseers were more than that. They were wargs as well, as *you* are, and the greatest of them could wear the skins of *any* beast that flies or swims or crawls, and could look through the eyes of the weirwoods as well, and see the truth that lies beneath the world.

“The gods give many gifts, Bran. My sister is a hunter. It is given to her to run swiftly, and stand so still she seems to vanish. She has sharp ears,

keen eyes, a steady hand with net and spear. She can breathe mud and fly through trees. I could not do these things, no more than you could. To me the gods gave the green dreams, and to you . . . you could be more than me, Bran. You are the winged wolf, and there is no saying how far and high you might fly . . . if you had someone to teach you. How can I help you master a gift I do not understand? We remember the First Men in the Neck, and the children of the forest who were their friends . . . but so much is forgotten, and so much we never knew.”

Meera took Bran by the hand. “If we stay here, troubling no one, you’ll be safe until the war ends. You will not learn, though, except what my brother can teach you, and you’ve heard what he says. If we leave this place to seek refuge at Last Hearth or beyond the Wall, we risk being taken. You are only a boy, I know, but you are our prince as well, our lord’s son and our king’s true heir. We have sworn you our faith by earth and water, bronze and iron, ice and fire. The risk is yours, Bran, as is the gift. The choice should be yours too, I think. We are your servants to command.” She grinned. “At least in this.”

“You mean,” Bran said, “you’ll do what *I* say? Truly?”

“Truly, my prince,” the girl replied, “so consider well.”

Bran tried to think it through, the way his father might have. The Greatjon’s uncles Hother Whoresbane and Mors Crowfood were fierce men, but he thought they would be loyal. And the Karstarks, them too. Karhold was a strong castle, Father always said. *We would be safe with the Umbers or the Karstarks.*

Or they could go south to fat Lord Manderly. At Winterfell, he’d laughed a lot, and never seemed to look at Bran with so much pity as the other lords. Castle Cerwyn was closer than White Harbor, but Maester Luwin had said that Cley Cerwyn was dead. *The Umbers and the Karstarks and the Manderlys may all be dead as well*, he realized. As he would be, if he was caught by the ironmen or the Bastard of Bolton.

If they stayed here, hidden down beneath Tumbledown Tower, no one would find them. He would stay alive. *And crippled.*

Bran realized he was crying. *Stupid baby*, he thought at himself. No matter where he went, to Karhold or White Harbor or Greywater Watch,

he'd be a cripple when he got there. He balled his hands into fists. "I want to fly," he told them. "Please. Take me to the crow."