

BRAN

In the yard below, Rickon ran with the wolves.

Bran watched from his window seat. Wherever the boy went, Grey Wind was there first, loping ahead to cut him off, until Rickon saw him, screamed in delight, and went pelting off in another direction. Shaggydog ran at his heels, spinning and snapping if the other wolves came too close. His fur had darkened until he was all black, and his eyes were green fire. Bran's Summer came last. He was silver and smoke, with eyes of yellow gold that saw all there was to see. Smaller than Grey Wind, and more wary. Bran thought he was the smartest of the litter. He could hear his brother's breathless laughter as Rickon dashed across the hard-packed earth on little baby legs.

His eyes stung. He wanted to be down there, laughing and running. Angry at the thought, Bran knuckled away the tears before they could fall. His eighth name day had come and gone. He was almost a man grown now, too old to cry.

"It was just a lie," he said bitterly, remembering the crow from his dream. "I can't fly. I can't even run."

"Crows are all liars," Old Nan agreed, from the chair where she sat doing her needlework. "I know a story about a crow."

"I don't want any more stories," Bran snapped, his voice petulant. He had liked Old Nan and her stories once. Before. But it was different now. They left her with him all day now, to watch over him and clean him and keep him from being lonely, but she just made it worse. "I hate your stupid stories."

The old woman smiled at him toothlessly. "My stories? No, my little lord, not mine. The stories *are*, before me and after me, before you too."

She was a very ugly old woman, Bran thought spitefully; shrunk and wrinkled, almost blind, too weak to climb stairs, with only a few wisps of white hair left to cover a mottled pink scalp. No one really knew how old

she was, but his father said she'd been called Old Nan even when he was a boy. She was the oldest person in Winterfell for certain, maybe the oldest person in the Seven Kingdoms. Nan had come to the castle as a wet nurse for a Brandon Stark whose mother had died birthing him. He had been an older brother of Lord Rickard, Bran's grandfather, or perhaps a younger brother, or a brother to *Lord Rickard's* father. Sometimes Old Nan told it one way and sometimes another. In all the stories the little boy died at three of a summer chill, but Old Nan stayed on at Winterfell with her own children. She had lost both her sons to the war when King Robert won the throne, and her grandson was killed on the walls of Pyke during Balon Greyjoy's rebellion. Her daughters had long ago married and moved away and died. All that was left of her own blood was Hodor, the simpleminded giant who worked in the stables, but Old Nan just lived on and on, doing her needlework and telling her stories.

"I don't care whose stories they are," Bran told her, "I hate them." He didn't want stories and he didn't want Old Nan. He wanted his mother and father. He wanted to go running with Summer loping beside him. He wanted to climb the broken tower and feed corn to the crows. He wanted to ride his pony again with his brothers. He wanted it to be the way it had been before.

"I know a story about a boy who hated stories," Old Nan said with her stupid little smile, her needles moving all the while, *click click click*, until Bran was ready to scream at her.

It would never be the way it had been, he knew. The crow had tricked him into flying, but when he woke up he was broken and the world was changed. They had all left him, his father and his mother and his sisters and even his bastard brother Jon. His father had promised he would ride a real horse to King's Landing, but they'd gone without him. Maester Luwin had sent a bird after Lord Eddard with a message, and another to Mother and a third to Jon on the Wall, but there had been no answers. "Ofttimes the birds are lost, child," the maester had told him. "There's many a mile and many a hawk between here and King's Landing, the message may not have reached them." Yet to Bran it felt as if they had all died while he had slept... or

perhaps Bran had died, and they had forgotten him. Jory and Ser Rodrik and Vayon Poole had gone too, and Hullen and Harwin and Fat Tom and a quarter of the guard.

Only Robb and baby Rickon were still here, and Robb was changed. He was Robb the Lord now, or trying to be. He wore a real sword and never smiled. His days were spent drilling the guard and practicing his swordplay, making the yard ring with the sound of steel as Bran watched forlornly from his window. At night he closeted himself with Maester Luwin, talking or going over account books. Sometimes he would ride out with Hallis Mollen and be gone for days at a time, visiting distant holdfasts. Whenever he was away more than a day, Rickon would cry and ask Bran if Robb was ever coming back. Even when he was home at Winterfell, Robb the Lord seemed to have more time for Hallis Mollen and Theon Greyjoy than he ever did for his brothers.

“I could tell you the story about Brandon the Builder,” Old Nan said. “That was always your favorite.”

Thousands and thousands of years ago, Brandon the Builder had raised Winterfell, and some said the Wall. Bran knew the story, but it had never been his favorite. Maybe one of the other Brandons had liked that story. Sometimes Nan would talk to him as if he were *her* Brandon, the baby she had nursed all those years ago, and sometimes she confused him with his uncle Brandon, who was killed by the Mad King before Bran was even born. She had lived so long, Mother had told him once, that all the Brandon Starks had become one person in her head.

“That’s not my favorite,” he said. “My favorites were the scary ones.” He heard some sort of commotion outside and turned back to the window. Rickon was running across the yard toward the gatehouse, the wolves following him, but the tower faced the wrong way for Bran to see what was happening. He smashed a fist on his thigh in frustration and felt nothing.

“Oh, my sweet summer child,” Old Nan said quietly, “what do *you* know of fear? Fear is for the winter, my little lord, when the snows fall a hundred feet deep and the ice wind comes howling out of the north. Fear is for the long night, when the sun hides its face for years at a time, and little

children are born and live and die all in darkness while the direwolves grow gaunt and hungry, and the white walkers move through the woods.”

“You mean the Others,” Bran said querulously.

“The Others,” Old Nan agreed. “Thousands and thousands of years ago, a winter fell that was cold and hard and endless beyond all memory of man. There came a night that lasted a generation, and kings shivered and died in their castles even as the swineherds in their hovels. Women smothered their children rather than see them starve, and cried, and felt their tears freeze on their cheeks.” Her voice and her needles fell silent, and she glanced up at Bran with pale, filmy eyes and asked, “So, child. This is the sort of story you like?”

“Well,” Bran said reluctantly, “yes, only...”

Old Nan nodded. “In that darkness, the Others came for the first time,” she said as her needles went *click click click*. “They were cold things, dead things, that hated iron and fire and the touch of the sun, and every creature with hot blood in its veins. They swept over holdfasts and cities and kingdoms, felled heroes and armies by the score, riding their pale dead horses and leading hosts of the slain. All the swords of men could not stay their advance, and even maidens and suckling babes found no pity in them. They hunted the maids through frozen forests, and fed their dead servants on the flesh of human children.”

Her voice had dropped very low, almost to a whisper, and Bran found himself leaning forward to listen.

“Now these were the days before the Andals came, and long before the women fled across the narrow sea from the cities of the Rhoynar, and the hundred kingdoms of those times were the kingdoms of the First Men, who had taken these lands from the children of the forest. Yet here and there in the fastness of the woods the children still lived in their wooden cities and hollow hills, and the faces in the trees kept watch. So as cold and death filled the earth, the last hero determined to seek out the children, in the hopes that their ancient magics could win back what the armies of men had lost. He set out into the dead lands with a sword, a horse, a dog, and a dozen companions. For years he searched, until he despaired of ever finding the

children of the forest in their secret cities. One by one his friends died, and his horse, and finally even his dog, and his sword froze so hard the blade snapped when he tried to use it. And the Others smelled the hot blood in him, and came silent on his trail, stalking him with packs of pale white spiders big as hounds—”

The door opened with a *bang*, and Bran’s heart leapt up into his mouth in sudden fear, but it was only Maester Luwin, with Hodor looming in the stairway behind him. “Hodor!” the stableboy announced, as was his custom, smiling hugely at them all.

Maester Luwin was not smiling. “We have visitors,” he announced, “and your presence is required, Bran.”

“I’m listening to a story now,” Bran complained.

“Stories wait, my little lord, and when you come back to them, why, there they are,” Old Nan said. “Visitors are not so patient, and oftentimes they bring stories of their own.”

“Who is it?” Bran asked Maester Luwin.

“Tyrion Lannister, and some men of the Night’s Watch, with word from your brother Jon. Robb is meeting with them now. Hodor, will you help Bran down to the hall?”

“Hodor!” Hodor agreed happily. He ducked to get his great shaggy head under the door. Hodor was nearly seven feet tall. It was hard to believe that he was the same blood as Old Nan. Bran wondered if he would shrivel up as small as his great-grandmother when he was old. It did not seem likely, even if Hodor lived to be a thousand.

Hodor lifted Bran as easy as if he were a bale of hay, and cradled him against his massive chest. He always smelled faintly of horses, but it was not a bad smell. His arms were thick with muscle and matted with brown hair. “Hodor,” he said again. Theon Greyjoy had once commented that Hodor did not know much, but no one could doubt that he knew his name. Old Nan had cackled like a hen when Bran told her that, and confessed that Hodor’s real name was Walder. No one knew where “Hodor” had come

from, she said, but when he started saying it, they started calling him by it. It was the only word he had.

They left Old Nan in the tower room with her needles and her memories. Hodor hummed tunelessly as he carried Bran down the steps and through the gallery, with Maester Luwin following behind, hurrying to keep up with the stableboy's long strides.

Robb was seated in Father's high seat, wearing ringmail and boiled leather and the stern face of Robb the Lord. Theon Greyjoy and Hallis Mollen stood behind him. A dozen guardsmen lined the grey stone walls beneath tall narrow windows. In the center of the room the dwarf stood with his servants, and four strangers in the black of the Night's Watch. Bran could sense the anger in the hall the moment that Hodor carried him through the doors.

"Any man of the Night's Watch is welcome here at Winterfell for as long as he wishes to stay," Robb was saying with the voice of Robb the Lord. His sword was across his knees, the steel bare for all the world to see. Even Bran knew what it meant to greet a guest with an unsheathed sword.

"Any man of the Night's Watch," the dwarf repeated, "but not me, do I take your meaning, boy?"

Robb stood and pointed at the little man with his sword. "I am the lord here while my mother and father are away, Lannister. I am not your boy."

"If you are a lord, you might learn a lord's courtesy," the little man replied, ignoring the sword point in his face. "Your bastard brother has all your father's graces, it would seem."

"*Jon*," Bran gasped out from Hodor's arms.

The dwarf turned to look at him. "So it is true, the boy lives. I could scarce believe it. You Starks are hard to kill."

"You Lannisters had best remember that," Robb said, lowering his sword. "Hodor, bring my brother here."

"Hodor," Hodor said, and he trotted forward smiling and set Bran in the high seat of the Starks, where the Lords of Winterfell had sat since the days when they called themselves the Kings in the North. The seat was cold

stone, polished smooth by countless bottoms; the carved heads of direwolves snarled on the ends of its massive arms. Bran clasped them as he sat, his useless legs dangling. The great seat made him feel half a baby.

Robb put a hand on his shoulder. "You said you had business with Bran. Well, here he is, Lannister."

Bran was uncomfortably aware of Tyrion Lannister's eyes. One was black and one was green, and both were looking at him, studying him, weighing him. "I am told you were quite the climber, Bran," the little man said at last. "Tell me, how is it you happened to fall that day?"

"I *never*," Bran insisted. He never fell, never never *never*.

"The child does not remember anything of the fall, or the climb that came before it," said Maester Luwin gently.

"Curious," said Tyrion Lannister.

"My brother is not here to answer questions, Lannister," Robb said curtly. "Do your business and be on your way."

"I have a gift for you," the dwarf said to Bran. "Do you like to ride, boy?"

Maester Luwin came forward. "My lord, the child has lost the use of his legs. He cannot sit a horse."

"Nonsense," said Lannister. "With the right horse and the right saddle, even a cripple can ride."

The word was a knife through Bran's heart. He felt tears come unbidden to his eyes. "I'm *not* a cripple!"

"Then I am not a dwarf," the dwarf said with a twist of his mouth. "My father will rejoice to hear it." Greyjoy laughed.

"What sort of horse and saddle are you suggesting?" Maester Luwin asked.

"A smart horse," Lannister replied. "The boy cannot use his legs to command the animal, so you must shape the horse to the rider, teach it to respond to the reins, to the voice. I would begin with an unbroken yearling,

with no old training to be unlearned.” He drew a rolled paper from his belt. “Give this to your saddler. He will provide the rest.”

Maester Luwin took the paper from the dwarfs hand, curious as a small grey squirrel. He unrolled it, studied it. “I see. You draw nicely, my lord. Yes, this ought to work. I should have thought of this myself.”

“It came easier to me, Maester. It is not terribly unlike my own saddles.”

“Will I truly be able to ride?” Bran asked. He wanted to believe them, but he was afraid. Perhaps it was just another lie. The crow had promised him that he could fly.

“You will,” the dwarf told him. “And I swear to you, boy, on horseback you will be as tall as any of them.”

Robb Stark seemed puzzled. “Is this some trap, Lannister? What’s Bran to you? Why should you want to help him?”

“Your brother Jon asked it of me. And I have a tender spot in my heart for cripples and bastards and broken things.” Tyrion Lannister placed a hand over his heart and grinned.

The door to the yard flew open. Sunlight came streaming across the hall as Rickon burst in, breathless. The direwolves were with him. The boy stopped by the door, wide-eyed, but the wolves came on. Their eyes found Lannister, or perhaps they caught his scent. Summer began to growl first. Grey Wind picked it up. They padded toward the little man, one from the right and one from the left.

“The wolves do not like your smell, Lannister,” Theon Greyjoy commented.

“Perhaps it’s time I took my leave,” Tyrion said. He took a step backward... and Shaggydog came out of the shadows behind him, snarling. Lannister recoiled, and Summer lunged at him from the other side. He reeled away, unsteady on his feet, and Grey Wind snapped at his arm, teeth ripping at his sleeve and tearing loose a scrap of cloth.

“*No!*” Bran shouted from the high seat as Lannister’s men reached for their steel. “Summer, *here*. Summer, to me!”

The direwolf heard the voice, glanced at Bran, and again at Lannister. He crept backward, away from the little man, and settled down below Bran's dangling feet.

Robb had been holding his breath. He let it out with a sigh and called, "Grey Wind." His direwolf moved to him, swift and silent. Now there was only Shaggydog, rumbling at the small man, his eyes burning like green fire.

"Rickon, call him," Bran shouted to his baby brother, and Rickon remembered himself and screamed, "Home, Shaggy, home now." The black wolf gave Lannister one final snarl and bounded off to Rickon, who hugged him tightly around the neck.

Tyrian Lannister undid his scarf, mopped at his brow, and said in a flat voice, "How interesting."

"Are you well, my lord?" asked one of his men, his sword in hand. He glanced nervously at the direwolves as he spoke.

"My sleeve is torn and my breeches are unaccountably damp, but nothing was harmed save my dignity."

Even Robb looked shaken. "The wolves... I don't know why they did that..."

"No doubt they mistook me for dinner." Lannister bowed stiffly to Bran. "I thank you for calling them off, young ser. I promise you, they would have found me quite indigestible. And now I *will* be leaving, truly."

"A moment, my lord," Maester Luwin said. He moved to Robb and they huddled close together, whispering. Bran tried to hear what they were saying, but their voices were too low.

Robb Stark finally sheathed his sword. "I... I may have been hasty with you," he said. "You've done Bran a kindness, and, well..." Robb composed himself with an effort. "The hospitality of Winterfell is yours if you wish it, Lannister."

"Spare me your false courtesies, boy. You do not love me and you do not want me here. I saw an inn outside your walls, in the winter town. I'll find a bed there, and both of us will sleep easier. For a few coppers I may

even find a comely wench to warm the sheets for me.” He spoke to one of the black brothers, an old man with a twisted back and a tangled beard. “Yoren, we go south at daybreak. You will find me on the road, no doubt.” With that he made his exit, struggling across the hall on his short legs, past Rickon and out the door. His men followed.

The four of the Night’s Watch remained. Robb turned to them uncertainly. “I have had rooms prepared, and you’ll find no lack of hot water to wash off the dust of the road. I hope you will honor us at table tonight.” He spoke the words so awkwardly that even Bran took note; it was a speech he had learned, not words from the heart, but the black brothers thanked him all the same.

Summer followed them up the tower steps as Hodor carried Bran back to his bed. Old Nan was asleep in her chair. Hodor said “Hodor,” gathered up his great-grandmother, and carried her off, snoring softly, while Bran lay thinking. Robb had promised that he could feast with the Night’s Watch in the Great Hall. “Summer,” he called. The wolf bounded up on the bed. Bran hugged him so hard he could feel the hot breath on his cheek. “I can ride now,” he whispered to his friend. “We can go hunting in the woods soon, wait and see.” After a time he slept.

In his dream he was climbing again, pulling himself up an ancient windowless tower, his fingers forcing themselves between blackened stones, his feet scrabbling for purchase. Higher and higher he climbed, through the clouds and into the night sky, and still the tower rose before him. When he paused to look down, his head swam dizzily and he felt his fingers slipping. Bran cried out and clung for dear life. The earth was a thousand miles beneath him and he could not fly. *He could not fly.* He waited until his heart had stopped pounding, until he could breathe, and he began to climb again. There was no way to go but up. Far above him, outlined against a vast pale moon, he thought he could see the shapes of gargoyles. His arms were sore and aching, but he dared not rest. He forced himself to climb faster. The gargoyles watched him ascend. Their eyes glowed red as hot coals in a brazier. Perhaps once they had been lions, but now they were twisted and grotesque. Bran could hear them whispering to

each other in soft stone voices terrible to hear. He must not listen, he told himself, he must not hear, so long as he did not hear them he was safe. But when the gargoyles pulled themselves loose from the stone and padded down the side of the tower to where Bran clung, he knew he was not safe after all. "I didn't hear," he wept as they came closer and closer, "I didn't, I didn't."

He woke gasping, lost in darkness, and saw a vast shadow looming over him. "I didn't hear," he whispered, trembling in fear, but then the shadow said "Hodor," and lit the candle by the bedside, and Bran sighed with relief.

Hodor washed the sweat from him with a warm, damp cloth and dressed him with deft and gentle hands. When it was time, he carried him down to the Great Hall, where a long trestle table had been set up near the fire. The lord's seat at the head of the table had been left empty, but Robb sat to the right of it, with Bran across from him. They ate suckling pig that night, and pigeon pie, and turnips soaking in butter, and afterward the cook had promised honeycombs. Summer snatched table scraps from Bran's hand, while Grey Wind and Shaggydog fought over a bone in the corner. Winterfell's dogs would not come near the hall now. Bran had found that strange at first, but he was growing used to it.

Yoren was senior among the black brothers, so the steward had seated him between Robb and Maester Luwin. The old man had a sour smell, as if he had not washed in a long time. He ripped at the meat with his teeth, cracked the ribs to suck out the marrow from the bones, and shrugged at the mention of Jon Snow. "Ser Alliser's bane," he grunted, and two of his companions shared a laugh that Bran did not understand. But when Robb asked for news of their uncle Benjen, the black brothers grew ominously quiet.

"What is it?" Bran asked.

Yoren wiped his fingers on his vest. "There's hard news, m'lords, and a cruel way to pay you for your meat and mead, but the man as asks the question must bear the answer. Stark's gone."

One of the other men said, “The Old Bear sent him out to look for Waymar Royce, and he’s late returning, my lord.”

“Too long,” Yoren said. “Most like he’s dead.”

“My uncle is not dead,” Robb Stark said loudly, anger in his tones. He rose from the bench and laid his hand on the hilt of his sword. “Do you hear me? *My uncle is not dead!*” His voice rang against the stone walls, and Bran was suddenly afraid.

Old sour-smelling Yoren looked up at Robb, unimpressed. “Whatever you say, m’lord,” he said. He sucked at a piece of meat between his teeth.

The youngest of the black brothers shifted uncomfortably in his seat. “There’s not a man on the Wall knows the haunted forest better than Benjen Stark. He’ll find his way back.”

“Well,” said Yoren, “maybe he will and maybe he won’t. Good men have gone into those woods before, and never come out.”

All Bran could think of was Old Nan’s story of the Others and the last hero, hounded through the white woods by dead men and spiders big as hounds. He was afraid for a moment, until he remembered how that story ended. “The children will help him,” he blurted, “the children of the forest!”

Theon Greyjoy sniggered, and Maester Luwin said, “Bran, the children of the forest have been dead and gone for thousands of years. All that is left of them are the faces in the trees.”

“Down here, might be that’s true, Maester,” Yoren said, “but up past the Wall, who’s to say? Up there, a man can’t always tell what’s alive and what’s dead.”

That night, after the plates had been cleared, Robb carried Bran up to bed himself. Grey Wind led the way, and Summer came close behind. His brother was strong for his age, and Bran was as light as a bundle of rags, but the stairs were steep and dark, and Robb was breathing hard by the time they reached the top.

He put Bran into bed, covered him with blankets, and blew out the candle. For a time Robb sat beside him in the dark. Bran wanted to talk to

him, but he did not know what to say. “We’ll find a horse for you, I promise,” Robb whispered at last.

“Are they ever coming back?” Bran asked him.

“Yes,” Robb said with such hope in his voice that Bran knew he was hearing his brother and not just Robb the Lord. “Mother will be home soon. Maybe we can ride out to meet her when she comes. Wouldn’t that surprise her, to see you a horse?” Even in the dark room, Bran could feel his brother’s smile. “And afterward, we’ll ride north to see the Wall. We won’t even tell Jon we’re coming, we’ll just be there one day, you and me. It will be an adventure.”

“An adventure,” Bran repeated wistfully. He heard his brother sob. The room was so dark he could not see the tears on Robb’s face, so he reached out and found his hand. Their fingers twined together.