



BRAN

The tower stood upon an island, its twin reflected on the still blue waters. When the wind blew, ripples moved across the surface of the lake, chasing one another like boys at play. Oak trees grew thick along the lakeshore, a dense stand of them with a litter of fallen acorns on the ground beneath. Beyond them was the village, or what remained of it.

It was the first village they had seen since leaving the foothills. Meera had scouted ahead to make certain there was no one lurking amongst the ruins. Sliding in and amongst oaks and apple trees with her net and spear in hand, she startled three red deer and sent them bounding away through the brush. Summer saw the flash of motion and was after them at once. Bran watched the direwolf lope off, and for a moment wanted nothing so much as to slip his skin and run with him, but Meera was waving for them to come ahead. Reluctantly, he turned away from Summer and urged Hodor on, into the village. Jojen walked with them.

The ground from here to the Wall was grasslands, Bran knew; fallow fields and low rolling hills, high meadows and lowland bogs. It would be much easier going than the mountains behind, but so much open space made Meera uneasy. “I feel naked,” she confessed. “There’s no place to hide.”

“Who holds this land?” Jojen asked Bran.

“The Night’s Watch,” he answered. “This is the Gift. The New Gift, and north of that Brandon’s Gift.” Maester Luwin had taught him the history. “Brandon the Builder gave all the land south of the Wall to the black brothers, to a distance of twenty-five leagues. For their . . . for their *sustenance and support*.” He was proud that he still remembered that part. “Some maesters say it was some other Brandon, not the Builder, but it’s still Brandon’s Gift. Thousands of years later, Good Queen Alysanne visited the Wall on her dragon Silverwing, and she thought the Night’s Watch was so brave that she had the Old King double the size of their lands, to fifty leagues. So that was the New Gift.” He waved a hand. “Here. All this.”

No one had lived in the village for long years, Bran could see. All the houses were falling down. Even the inn. It had never been *much* of an inn, to look at it, but now all that remained was a stone chimney and two cracked walls, set amongst a dozen apple trees. One was growing up through the common room, where a layer of wet brown leaves and rotting apples carpeted the floor. The air was thick with the smell of them, a cloying cidery scent that was almost overwhelming. Meera stabbed a few apples with her frog spear, trying to find some still good enough to eat, but they were all too brown and wormy.

It was a peaceful spot, still and tranquil and lovely to behold, but Bran thought there was something sad about an empty inn, and Hodor seemed to feel it too. “Hodor?” he said in a confused sort of way. “Hodor? Hodor?”

“This is good land.” Jojen picked up a handful of dirt, rubbing it between his fingers. “A village, an inn, a stout holdfast in the lake, all these apple trees . . . but where are the people, Bran? Why would they leave such a place?”

“They were afraid of the wildlings,” said Bran. “Wildlings come over the Wall or through the mountains, to raid and steal and carry off women. If they catch you, they make your skull into a cup to drink blood, Old Nan used to say. The Night’s Watch isn’t so strong as it was in Brandon’s day or Queen Alysanne’s, so more get through. The places nearest the Wall got raided so much the smallfolk moved south, into the mountains or onto the Umber lands east of the kingsroad. The Greatjon’s people get raided too, but not so much as the people who used to live in the Gift.”

Jojen Reed turned his head slowly, listening to music only he could hear. “We need to shelter here. There’s a storm coming. A bad one.”

Bran looked up at the sky. It had been a beautiful crisp clear autumn day, sunny and almost warm, but there were dark clouds off to the west now, that was true, and the wind seemed to be picking up. “There’s no roof on the inn and only the two walls,” he pointed out. “We should go out to the holdfast.”

“Hodor,” said Hodor. Maybe he agreed.

“We have no boat, Bran.” Meera poked through the leaves idly with her frog spear.

“There’s a causeway. A stone causeway, hidden under the water. We could walk out.” *They* could, anyway; he would have to ride on Hodor’s back, but at least he’d stay dry that way.

The Reeds exchanged a look. “How do you know that?” asked Jojen. “Have you been here before, my prince?”

“No. Old Nan told me. The holdfast has a golden crown, see?” He pointed across the lake. You could see patches of flaking gold paint up around the crenellations. “Queen Alysanne slept there, so they painted the merlons gold in her honor.”

“A causeway?” Jojen studied the lake. “You are certain?”

“Certain,” said Bran.

Meera found the foot of it easily enough, once she knew to look; a stone pathway three feet wide, leading right out into the lake. She took them out step by careful step, probing ahead with her frog spear. They could see where the path emerged again, climbing from the water onto the island and turning into a short flight of stone steps that led to the holdfast door.

Path, steps, and door were in a straight line, which made you think the causeway ran straight, but that wasn’t so. Under the lake it zigged and zagged, going a third of a way around the island before jaggging back. The turns were treacherous, and the long path meant that anyone approaching would be exposed to arrow fire from the tower for a long time. The hidden stones were slimy and slippery too; twice Hodor almost lost his footing and shouted “*HODOR!*” in alarm before regaining his balance. The second time scared Bran badly. If Hodor fell into the lake with him in his basket, he

could well drown, especially if the huge stableboy panicked and forgot that Bran was there, the way he did sometimes. *Maybe we should have stayed at the inn, under the apple tree*, he thought, but by then it was too late.

Thankfully there was no third time, and the water never got up past Hodor's waist, though the Reeds were in it up to their chests. And before long they were on the island, climbing the steps to the holdfast. The door was still stout, though its heavy oak planks had warped over the years and it could no longer be closed completely. Meera shoved it open all the way, the rusted iron hinges screaming. The lintel was low. "Duck down, Hodor," Bran said, and he did, but not enough to keep Bran from hitting his head. "That hurt," he complained.

"Hodor," said Hodor, straightening.

They found themselves in a gloomy strongroom, barely large enough to hold the four of them. Steps built into the inner wall of the tower curved away upward to their left, downward to their right, behind iron grates. Bran looked up and saw another grate just above his head. *A murder hole*. He was glad there was no one up there now to pour boiling oil down on them.

The grates were locked, but the iron bars were red with rust. Hodor grabbed hold of the lefthand door and gave it a pull, grunting with effort. Nothing happened. He tried pushing with no more success. He shook the bars, kicked, shoved against them and rattled them and punched the hinges with a huge hand until the air was filled with flakes of rust, but the iron door would not budge. The one down to the undervault was no more accommodating. "No way in," said Meera, shrugging.

The murder hole was just above Bran's head, as he sat in his basket on Hodor's back. He reached up and grabbed the bars to give them a try. When he pulled down the grating came out of the ceiling in a cascade of rust and crumbling stone. "*HODOR!*" Hodor shouted. The heavy iron grate gave Bran another bang in the head, and crashed down near Jojen's feet when he shoved it off of him. Meera laughed. "Look at that, my prince," she said, "you're stronger than Hodor." Bran blushed.

With the grate gone, Hodor was able to boost Meera and Jojen up through the gaping murder hole. The crannogmen took Bran by the arms and drew him up after them. Getting Hodor inside was the hard part. He

was too heavy for the Reeds to lift the way they'd lifted Bran. Finally Bran told him to go look for some big rocks. The island had no lack of those, and Hodor was able to pile them high enough to grab the crumbling edges of the hole and climb through. "Hodor," he panted happily, grinning at all of them.

They found themselves in a maze of small cells, dark and empty, but Meera explored until she found the way back to the steps. The higher they climbed, the better the light; on the third story the thick outer wall was pierced by arrow slits, the fourth had actual windows, and the fifth and highest was one big round chamber with arched doors on three sides opening onto small stone balconies. On the fourth side was a privy chamber perched above a sewer chute that dropped straight down into the lake.

By the time they reached the roof the sky was completely overcast, and the clouds to the west were black. The wind was blowing so strong it lifted up Bran's cloak and made it flap and snap. "Hodor," Hodor said at the noise.

Meera spun in a circle. "I feel almost a giant, standing high above the world."

"There are trees in the Neck that stand twice as tall as this," her brother reminded her.

"Aye, but they have other trees around them just as high," said Meera. "The world presses close in the Neck, and the sky is so much smaller. Here . . . feel that wind, Brother? And look how large the world has grown."

It was true, you could see a long ways from up here. To the south the foothills rose, with the mountains grey and green beyond them. The rolling plains of the New Gift stretched away to all the other directions, as far as the eye could see. "I was hoping we could see the Wall from here," said Bran, disappointed. "That was stupid, we must still be fifty leagues away." Just speaking of it made him feel tired, and cold as well. "Jojen, what will we do when we reach the Wall? My uncle always said how big it was. Seven hundred feet high, and so thick at the base that the gates are more like tunnels through the ice. How are we going to get past to find the three-eyed crow?"

"There are abandoned castles along the Wall, I've heard," Jojen answered. "Fortresses built by the Night's Watch but now left empty. One

of them may give us our way through.”

The ghost castles, Old Nan had called them. Maester Luwin had once made Bran learn the names of every one of the forts along the Wall. That had been hard; there were nineteen of them all told, though no more than seventeen had ever been manned at any one time. At the feast in honor of King Robert’s visit to Winterfell, Bran had recited the names for his uncle Benjen, east to west and then west to east. Benjen Stark had laughed and said, “You know them better than I do, Bran. Perhaps you should be First Ranger. I’ll stay here in your place.” That was before Bran fell, though. Before he was broken. By the time he’d woken crippled from his sleep, his uncle had gone back to Castle Black.

“My uncle said the gates were sealed with ice and stone whenever a castle had to be abandoned,” said Bran.

“Then we’ll have to open them again,” said Meera.

That made him uneasy. “We shouldn’t do that. Bad things might come through from the other side. We should just go to Castle Black and tell the Lord Commander to let us pass.”

“Your Grace,” said Jojen, “we must avoid Castle Black, just as we avoided the kingsroad. There are hundreds of men there.”

“Men of the Night’s Watch,” said Bran. “They say vows, to take no part in wars and stuff.”

“Aye,” said Jojen, “but one man willing to forswear himself would be enough to sell your secret to the ironmen or the Bastard of Bolton. And we cannot be certain that the Watch would agree to let us pass. They might decide to hold us or send us back.”

“But my father was a friend of the Night’s Watch, and my uncle is First Ranger. He might know where the three-eyed crow lives. And Jon’s at Castle Black too.” Bran had been hoping to see Jon again, and their uncle too. The last black brothers to visit Winterfell said that Benjen Stark had vanished on a ranging, but surely he would have made his way back by *now*. “I bet the Watch would even give us horses,” he went on.

“Quiet.” Jojen shaded his eyes with a hand and gazed off toward the setting sun. “Look. There’s something . . . a rider, I think. Do you see him?”

Bran shaded his eyes as well, and even so he had to squint. He saw nothing at first, till some movement made him turn. At first he thought it might be Summer, but no. *A man on a horse*. He was too far away to see much else.

“Hodor?” Hodor had put a hand over his eyes as well, only he was looking the wrong way. “Hodor?”

“He is in no haste,” said Meera, “but he’s making for this village, it seems to me.”

“We had best go inside, before we’re seen,” said Jojen.

“Summer’s near the village,” Bran objected.

“Summer will be fine,” Meera promised. “It’s only one man on a tired horse.”

A few fat wet drops began to patter against the stone as they retreated to the floor below. That was well timed; the rain began to fall in earnest a short time later. Even through the thick walls they could hear it lashing against the surface of the lake. They sat on the floor in the round empty room, amidst gathering gloom. The north-facing balcony looked out toward the abandoned village. Meera crept out on her belly to peer across the lake and see what had become of the horseman. “He’s taken shelter in the ruins of the inn,” she told them when she came back. “It looks as though he’s making a fire in the hearth.”

“I wish we could have a fire,” Bran said. “I’m cold. There’s broken furniture down the stairs, I saw it. We could have Hodor chop it up and get warm.”

Hodor liked that idea. “Hodor,” he said hopefully.

Jojen shook his head. “Fire means smoke. Smoke from this tower could be seen a long way off.”

“If there were anyone to see,” his sister argued.

“There’s a man in the village.”

“One man.”

“One man would be enough to betray Bran to his enemies, if he’s the wrong man. We still have half a duck from yesterday. We should eat and

rest. Come morning the man will go on his way, and we will do the same.”

Jojen had his way; he always did. Meera divided the duck between the four of them. She’d caught it in her net the day before, as it tried to rise from the marsh where she’d surprised it. It wasn’t as tasty cold as it had been hot and crisp from the spit, but at least they did not go hungry. Bran and Meera shared the breast while Jojen ate the thigh. Hodor devoured the wing and leg, muttering “Hodor” and licking the grease off his fingers after every bite. It was Bran’s turn to tell a story, so he told them about another Brandon Stark, the one called Brandon the Shipwright, who had sailed off beyond the Sunset Sea.

Dusk was settling by the time duck and tale were done, and the rain still fell. Bran wondered how far Summer had roamed and whether he had caught one of the deer.

Grey gloom filled the tower, and slowly changed to darkness. Hodor grew restless and walked awhile, striding round and round the walls and stopping to peer into the privy on every circuit, as if he had forgotten what was in there. Jojen stood by the north balcony, hidden by the shadows, looking out at the night and the rain. Somewhere to the north a lightning bolt crackled across the sky, brightening the inside of the tower for an instant. Hodor jumped and made a frightened noise. Bran counted to eight, waiting for the thunder. When it came, Hodor shouted, “*Hodor!*”

I hope Summer isn’t scared too, Bran thought. The dogs in Winterfell’s kennels had always been spooked by thunderstorms, just like Hodor. *I should go see, to calm him . . .*

The lightning flashed again, and this time the thunder came at six. “Hodor!” Hodor yelled again. “HODOR! HODOR!” He snatched up his sword, as if to fight the storm.

Jojen said, “Be quiet, Hodor. Bran, tell him not to shout. Can you get the sword away from him, Meera?”

“I can try.”

“Hodor, *hush*,” said Bran. “Be quiet now. No more stupid hodor-ing. Sit down.”

“Hodor?” He gave the longsword to Meera meekly enough, but his face was a mask of confusion.

Jojen turned back to the darkness, and they all heard him suck in his breath. “What is it?” Meera asked.

“Men in the village.”

“The man we saw before?”

“Other men. Armed. I saw an axe, and spears as well.” Jojen had never sounded so much like the boy he was. “I saw them when the lightning flashed, moving under the trees.”

“How many?”

“Many and more. Too many to count.”

“Mounted?”

“No.”

“Hodor.” Hodor sounded frightened. “Hodor. Hodor.”

Bran felt a little scared himself, though he didn’t want to say so in front of Meera. “What if they come out here?”

“They won’t.” She sat down beside him. “Why should they?”

“For shelter.” Jojen’s voice was grim. “Unless the storm lets up. Meera, could you go down and bar the door?”

“I couldn’t even close it. The wood’s too warped. They won’t get past those iron gates, though.”

“They might. They could break the lock, or the hinges. Or climb up through the murder hole as we did.”

Lightning slashed the sky, and Hodor whimpered. Then a clap of thunder rolled across the lake. “HODOR!” he roared, clapping his hands over his ears and stumbling in a circle through the darkness. “HODOR! HODOR! HODOR!”

“*NO!*” Bran shouted back. “NO HODORING!”

It did no good. “HOOOODOR!” moaned Hodor. Meera tried to catch him and calm him, but he was too strong. He flung her aside with no more than a shrug. “HOOOOOODOOOOOOOOR!” the stableboy screamed as

lightning filled the sky again, and even Jojen was shouting now, shouting at Bran and Meera to shut him up.

“Be *quiet!*” Bran said in a shrill scared voice, reaching up uselessly for Hodor’s leg as he crashed past, reaching, *reaching*.

Hodor staggered, and closed his mouth. He shook his head slowly from side to side, sank back to the floor, and sat crosslegged. When the thunder boomed, he scarcely seemed to hear it. The four of them sat in the dark tower, scarce daring to breathe.

“Bran, what did you do?” Meera whispered.

“Nothing.” Bran shook his head. “I don’t know.” But he did. *I reached for him, the way I reach for Summer*. He had *been* Hodor for half a heartbeat. It scared him.

“Something is happening across the lake,” said Jojen. “I thought I saw a man pointing at the tower.”

I won’t be afraid. He was the Prince of Winterfell, Eddard Stark’s son, almost a man grown and a warg too, not some little baby boy like Rickon. *Summer would not be afraid*. “Most like they’re just some Umbers,” he said. “Or they could be Knotts or Norreys or Flints come down from the mountains, or even brothers from the Night’s Watch. Were they wearing black cloaks, Jojen?”

“By night all cloaks are black, Your Grace. And the flash came and went too fast for me to tell what they were wearing.”

Meera was wary. “If they were black brothers, they’d be mounted, wouldn’t they?”

Bran had thought of something else. “It doesn’t matter,” he said confidently. “They couldn’t get out to us even if they wanted. Not unless they had a boat, or knew about the causeway.”

“The causeway!” Meera mussed Bran’s hair and kissed him on the forehead. “Our sweet prince! He’s right, Jojen, they won’t know about the causeway. Even if they did they could never find the way across at night in the rain.”

“The night will end, though. If they stay till morning . . .” Jojen left the rest unsaid. After a few moments he said, “They are feeding the fire the first

man started.” Lightning crashed through the sky, and light filled the tower and etched them all in shadow. Hodor rocked back and forth, humming.

Bran could feel Summer’s fear in that bright instant. He closed two eyes and opened a third, and his boy’s skin slipped off him like a cloak as he left the tower behind . . .

. . . and found himself out in the rain, his belly full of deer, cringing in the brush as the sky broke and boomed above him. The smell of rotten apples and wet leaves almost drowned the scent of man, but it was there. He heard the clink and slither of hardskin, saw men moving under the trees. A man with a stick blundered by, a skin pulled up over his head to make him blind and deaf. The wolf went wide around him, behind a dripping thornbush and beneath the bare branches of an apple tree. He could hear them talking, and there beneath the scents of rain and leaves and horse came the sharp red stench of fear . . .