

BRAN

The oldest were men grown, seventeen and eighteen years from the day of their naming. One was past twenty. Most were younger, sixteen or less.

Bran watched them from the balcony of Maester Luwin's turret, listening to them grunt and strain and curse as they swung their staves and wooden swords. The yard was alive to the *clack* of wood on wood, punctuated all too often by *thwacks* and yowls of pain when a blow struck leather or flesh. Ser Rodrik strode among the boys, face reddening beneath his white whiskers, muttering at them one and all. Bran had never seen the old knight look so fierce. "No," he kept saying. "No. No. No."

"They don't fight very well," Bran said dubiously. He scratched Summer idly behind the ears as the direwolf tore at a haunch of meat. Bones crunched between his teeth.

"For a certainty," Maester Luwin agreed with a deep sigh. The maester was peering through his big Myrish lens tube, measuring shadows and noting the position of the comet that hung low in the morning sky. "Yet given time... Ser Rodrik has the truth of it, we need men to walk the walls. Your lord father took the cream of his guard to King's Landing, and your brother took the rest, along with all the likely lads for leagues around. Many will not come back to us, and we must needs find the men to take their places."

Bran stared resentfully at the sweating boys below. "If I still had my legs, I could beat them all." He remembered the last time he'd held a sword in his hand, when the king had come to Winterfell. It was only a wooden sword, yet he'd knocked Prince Tommen down half a hundred times. "Ser Rodrik should teach me to use a poleaxe. If I had a poleaxe with a big long haft, Hodor could be my legs. We could be a knight together."

"I think that... unlikely," Maester Luwin said. "Bran, when a man fights, his arms and legs and thoughts must be as one."

Below in the yard, Ser Rodrik was yelling. “You fight like a goose. He pecks you and you peck him harder. *Parry!* Block the blow. Goose fighting will not suffice. If those were real swords, the first peck would take your arm off!” One of the other boys laughed, and the old knight rounded on him. “You laugh. You. Now that is gall. *You* fight like a hedgehog...”

“There was a knight once who couldn’t see,” Bran said stubbornly, as Ser Rodrik went on below. “Old Nan told me about him. He had a long staff with blades at both ends and he could spin it in his hands and chop two men at once.”

“Symeon Star-Eyes,” Luwin said as he marked numbers in a book. “When he lost his eyes, he put star sapphires in the empty sockets, or so the singers claim. Bran, that is only a story, like the tales of Florian the Fool. A fable from the Age of Heroes.” The maester *tsked*. “You must put these dreams aside, they will only break your heart.”

The mention of dreams reminded him. “I dreamed about the crow again last night. The one with three eyes. He flew into my bedchamber and told me to come with him, so I did. We went down to the crypts. Father was there, and we talked. He was sad.”

“And why was that?” Luwin peered through his tube.

“It was something to do about Jon, I think.” The dream had been deeply disturbing, more so than any of the other crow dreams. “Hodor won’t go down into the crypts.”

The maester had only been half listening, Bran could tell. He lifted his eye from the tube, blinking. “Hodor won’t...”

“Go down into the crypts. When I woke, I told him to take me down, to see if Father was truly there. At first he didn’t know what I was saying, but I got him to the steps by telling him to go here and go there, only then he wouldn’t go down. He just stood on the top step and said ‘Hodor,’ like he was scared of the dark, but I *had* a torch. It made me so mad I almost gave him a swat in the head, like Old Nan is always doing.” He saw the way the maester was frowning and hurriedly added, “I didn’t, though.”

“Good. Hodor is a man, not a mule to be beaten.”

“In the dream I flew down with the crow, but I can’t do that when I’m awake,” Bran explained.

“Why would you want to go down to the crypts?”

“I told you. To look for Father.”

The maester tugged at the chain around his neck, as he often did when he was uncomfortable. “Bran, sweet child, one day Lord Eddard will sit below in stone, beside his father and his father’s father and all the Starks back to the old Kings in the North... but that will not be for many years, gods be good. Your father is a prisoner of the queen in King’s Landing. You will not find him in the crypts.”

“He was there last night. I talked to him.”

“Stubborn boy,” the maester sighed, setting his book aside. “Would you like to go see?”

“I can’t. Hodor won’t go, and the steps are too narrow and twisty for Dancer.”

“I believe I can solve that difficulty.”

In place of Hodor, the wildling woman Osha was summoned. She was tall and tough and uncomplaining, willing to go wherever she was commanded. “I lived my life beyond the Wall, a hole in the ground won’t fret me none, m’lords,” she said.

“Summer, come,” Bran called as she lifted him in wiry-strong arms. The direwolf left his bone and followed as Osha carried Bran across the yard and down the spiral steps to the cold vault under the earth. Maester Luwin went ahead with a torch. Bran did not even mind—too badly—that she carried him in her arms and not on her back. Ser Rodrik had ordered Osha’s chain struck off, since she had served faithfully and well since she had been at Winterfell. She still wore the heavy iron shackles around her ankles—a sign that she was not yet wholly trusted—but they did not hinder her sure strides down the steps.

Bran could not recall the last time he had been in the crypts. It had been *before*, for certain. When he was little, he used to play down here with Robb and Jon and his sisters.

He wished they were here now; the vault might not have seemed so dark and scary. Summer stalked out in the echoing gloom, then stopped, lifted his head, and sniffed the chill dead air. He bared his teeth and crept backward, eyes glowing golden in the light of the maester's torch. Even Osha, hard as old iron, seemed uncomfortable. "Grim folk, by the look of them," she said as she eyed the long row of granite Starks on their stone thrones.

"They were the Kings of Winter," Bran whispered. Somehow it felt wrong to talk too loudly in this place.

Osha smiled. "Winter's got no king. If you'd seen it, you'd know that, summer boy."

"They were the Kings in the North for thousands of years," Maester Luwin said, lifting the torch high so the light shone on the stone faces. Some were hairy and bearded, shaggy men fierce as the wolves that crouched by their feet. Others were shaved clean, their features gaunt and sharp-edged as the iron longswords across their laps. "Hard men for a hard time. Come." He strode briskly down the vault, past the procession of stone pillars and the endless carved figures. A tongue of flame trailed back from the upraised torch as he went.

The vault was cavernous, longer than Winterfell itself, and Jon had told him once that there were other levels underneath, vaults even deeper and darker where the older kings were buried. It would not do to lose the light. Summer refused to move from the steps, even when Osha followed the torch, Bran in her arms.

"Do you recall your history, Bran?" the maester said as they walked. "Tell Osha who they were and what they did, if you can."

He looked at the passing faces and the tales came back to him. The maester had told him the stories, and Old Nan had made them come alive. "That one is Jon Stark. When the sea raiders landed in the east, he drove them out and built the castle at White Harbor. His son was Rickard Stark, not my father's father but another Rickard, he took the Neck away from the Marsh King and married his daughter. Theon Stark's the real thin one with the long hair and the skinny beard. They called him the 'Hungry Wolf,'

because he was always at war. That's a Brandon, the tall one with the dreamy face, he was Brandon the Shipwright, because he loved the sea. His tomb is empty. He tried to sail west across the Sunset Sea and was never seen again. His son was Brandon the Burner, because he put the torch to all his father's ships in grief. There's Rodrik Stark, who won Bear Island in a wrestling match and gave it to the Mormonts. And that's Torrhen Stark, the King Who Knelt. He was the last King in the North and the first Lord of Winterfell, after he yielded to Aegon the Conqueror. Oh, there, he's Cregan Stark. He fought with Prince Aemon once, and the Dragonknight said he'd never faced a finer swordsman." They were almost at the end now, and Bran felt a sadness creeping over him. "And there's my grandfather, Lord Rickard, who was beheaded by Mad King Aerys. His daughter Lyanna and his son Brandon are in the tombs beside him. Not me, another Brandon, my father's brother. They're not supposed to have statues, that's only for the lords and the kings, but my father loved them so much he had them done."

"The maid's a fair one," Osha said.

"Robert was betrothed to marry her, but Prince Rhaegar carried her off and raped her," Bran explained. "Robert fought a war to win her back. He killed Rhaegar on the Trident with his hammer, but Lyanna died and he never got her back at all."

"A sad tale," said Osha, "but those empty holes are sadder."

"Lord Eddard's tomb, for when his time comes," Maester Luwin said. "Is this where you saw your father in your dream, Bran?"

"Yes." The memory made him shiver. He looked around the vault uneasily, the hairs on the back of his neck bristling. Had he heard a noise? Was there someone here?

Maester Luwin stepped toward the open sepulchre, torch in hand. "As you see, he's not here. Nor will he be, for many a year. Dreams are only dreams, child." He thrust his arm into the blackness inside the tomb, as into the mouth of some great beast. "Do you see? It's quite empty—"

The darkness sprang at him, snarling.

Bran saw eyes like green fire, a flash of teeth, fur as black as the pit around them. Maester Luwin yelled and threw up his hands. The torch went flying from his fingers, caromed off the stone face of Brandon Stark, and tumbled to the statue's feet, the flames licking up his legs. In the drunken shifting torchlight, they saw Luwin struggling with the direwolf, beating at his muzzle with one hand while the jaws closed on the other.

"*Summer!*" Bran screamed.

And Summer came, shooting from the dimness behind them, a leaping shadow. He slammed into Shaggydog and knocked him back, and the two direwolves rolled over and over in a tangle of grey and black fur, snapping and biting at each other, while Maester Luwin struggled to his knees, his arm torn and bloody. Osha propped Bran up against Lord Rickard's stone wolf as she hurried to assist the maester. In the light of the guttering torch, shadow wolves twenty feet tall fought on the wall and roof.

"Shaggy," a small voice called. When Bran looked up, his little brother was standing in the mouth of Father's tomb. With one final snap at Summer's face, Shaggydog broke off and bounded to Rickon's side. "You let my father be," Rickon warned Luwin. "You let him be."

"Rickon," Bran said softly. "Father's not here."

"Yes he is. I saw him." Tears glistened on Rickon's face. "I saw him last night."

"In your dream...?"

Rickon nodded. "You leave him. You leave him be. He's coming home now, like he promised. He's coming home."

Bran had never seen Maester Luwin look so uncertain before. Blood dripped down his arm where Shaggydog had shredded the wool of his sleeve and the flesh beneath. "Osha, the torch," he said, biting through his pain, and she snatched it up before it went out. Soot stains blackened both legs of his uncle's likeness. "That... that *beast*," Luwin went on, "is supposed to be chained up in the kennels."

Rickon patted Shaggydog's muzzle, damp with blood. "I let him loose. He doesn't like chains." He licked at his fingers.

“Rickon,” Bran said, “would you like to come with me?”

“No. I like it here.”

“It’s dark here. And cold.”

“I’m not afraid. I have to wait for Father.”

“You can wait with me,” Bran said. “We’ll wait together, you and me and our wolves.” Both of the direwolves were licking wounds now, and would bear close watching.

“Bran,” the maester said firmly, “I know you mean well, but Shaggydog is too wild to run loose. I’m the third man he’s savaged. Give him the freedom of the castle and it’s only a question of time before he kills someone. The truth is hard, but the wolf has to be chained, or...” He hesitated.

...*or killed*, Bran thought, but what he said was, “He was not made for chains. We will wait in your tower, all of us.”

“That is quite impossible,” Maester Luwin said.

Osha grinned. “The boy’s the lordling here, as I recall.” She handed Luwin back his torch and scooped Bran up into her arms again. “The maester’s tower it is.”

“Will you come, Rickon?”

His brother nodded. “If Shaggy comes too,” he said, running after Osha and Bran, and there was nothing Maester Luwin could do but follow, keeping a wary eye on the wolves.

Maester Luwin’s turret was so cluttered that it seemed to Bran a wonder that he ever found anything. Tottering piles of books covered tables and chairs, rows of stoppered jars lined the shelves, candle stubs and puddles of dried wax dotted the furniture, the bronze Myrish lens tube sat on a tripod by the terrace door, star charts hung from the walls, shadow maps lay scattered among the rushes, papers, quills, and pots of inks were everywhere, and all of it was spotted with droppings from the ravens in the rafters. Their strident *quorks* drifted down from above as Osha washed and cleaned and bandaged the maester’s wounds, under Luwin’s terse instruction. “This is folly,” the small grey man said while she dabbed at the

wolf bites with a stinging ointment. “I agree that it is odd that both you boys dreamed the same dream, yet when you stop to consider it, it’s only natural. You miss your lord father, and you know that he is a captive. Fear can fever a man’s mind and give him queer thoughts. Rickon is too young to comprehend—”

“I’m four now,” Rickon said. He was peeking through the lens tube at the gargoyles on the First Keep. The direwolves sat on opposite sides of the large round room, licking their wounds and gnawing on bones.

“—too young, and—*ooh*, seven hells, that burns, no, don’t stop, more. Too young, as I say, but you, Bran, you’re old enough to know that dreams are only dreams.”

“Some are, some aren’t.” Osha poured pale red firemilk into a long gash. Luwin gasped. “The children of the forest could tell you a thing or two about dreaming.”

Tears were streaming down the maester’s face, yet he shook his head doggedly. “The children... live only in dreams. Now. Dead and gone. Enough, that’s enough. Now the bandages. Pads and then wrap, and make it tight, I’ll be bleeding.”

“Old Nan says the children knew the songs of the trees, that they could fly like birds and swim like fish and talk to the animals,” Bran said. “She says that they made music so beautiful that it made you cry like a little baby just to hear it.”

“And all this they did with magic,” Maester Luwin said, distracted. “I wish they were here now. A spell would heal my arm less painfully, and they could talk to Shaggydog and tell him not to bite.” He gave the big black wolf an angry glance out of the corner of his eye. “Take a lesson, Bran. The man who trusts in spells is dueling with a glass sword. As the children did. Here, let me show you something.” He stood abruptly, crossed the room, and returned with a green jar in his good hand. “Have a look at these,” he said as he pulled the stopper and shook out a handful of shiny black arrowheads.

Bran picked one up. “It’s made of glass.” Curious, Rickon drifted closer to peer over the table.

“Dragonglass,” Osha named it as she sat down beside Luwin, bandagings in hand.

“Obsidian,” Maester Luwin insisted, holding out his wounded arm. “Forged in the fires of the gods, far below the earth. The children of the forest hunted with that, thousands of years ago. The children worked no metal. In place of mail, they wore long shirts of woven leaves and bound their legs in bark, so they seemed to melt into the wood. In place of swords, they carried blades of obsidian.”

“And still do.” Osha placed soft pads over the bites on the maester’s forearm and bound them tight with long strips of linen.

Bran held the arrowhead up close. The black glass was slick and shiny. He thought it beautiful. “Can I keep one?”

“As you wish,” the maester said.

“I want one too,” Rickon said. “I want four. *I’m* four.”

Luwin made him count them out. “Careful, they’re still sharp. Don’t cut yourself.”

“Tell me about the children,” Bran said. It was important.

“What do you wish to know?”

“Everything.”

Maester Luwin tugged at his chain collar where it chafed against his neck. “They were people of the Dawn Age, the very first, before kings and kingdoms,” he said. “In those days, there were no castles or holdfasts, no cities, not so much as a market town to be found between here and the sea of Dorne. There were no men at all. Only the children of the forest dwelt in the lands we now call the Seven Kingdoms.

“They were a people dark and beautiful, small of stature, no taller than children even when grown to manhood. They lived in the depths of the wood, in caves and crannogs and secret tree towns. Slight as they were, the children were quick and graceful. Male and female hunted together, with weirwood bows and flying snares. Their gods were the gods of the forest, stream, and stone, the old gods whose names are secret. Their wise men were called *greenseers*, and carved strange faces in the weirwoods to keep

watch on the woods. How long the children reigned here or where they came from, no man can know.

“But some twelve thousand years ago, the First Men appeared from the east, crossing the Broken Arm of Dorne before it was broken. They came with bronze swords and great leathern shields, riding horses. No horse had ever been seen on this side of the narrow sea. No doubt the children were as frightened by the horses as the First Men were by the faces in the trees. As the First Men carved out holdfasts and farms, they cut down the faces and gave them to the fire. Horror-struck, the children went to war. The old songs say that the greenseers used dark magics to make the seas rise and sweep away the land, shattering the Arm, but it was too late to close the door. The wars went on until the earth ran red with blood of men and children both, but more children than men, for men were bigger and stronger, and wood and stone and obsidian make a poor match for bronze. Finally the wise of both races prevailed, and the chiefs and heroes of the First Men met the greenseers and wood dancers amidst the weirwood groves of a small island in the great lake called Gods Eye.

“There they forged the Pact. The First Men were given the coastlands, the high plains and bright meadows, the mountains and bogs, but the deep woods were to remain forever the children’s, and no more weirwoods were to be put to the axe anywhere in the realm. So the gods might bear witness to the signing, every tree on the island was given a face, and afterward, the sacred order of green men was formed to keep watch over the Isle of Faces.

“The Pact began four thousand years of friendship between men and children. In time, the First Men even put aside the gods they had brought with them, and took up the worship of the secret gods of the wood. The signing of the Pact ended the Dawn Age, and began the Age of Heroes.”

Bran’s fist curled around the shiny black arrowhead. “But the children of the forest are all gone now, you said.”

“Here, they are,” said Osha, as she bit off the end of the last bandage with her teeth. “North of the Wall, things are different. That’s where the children went, and the giants, and the other old races.”

Maester Luwin sighed. “Woman, by rights you ought to be dead or in chains. The Starks have treated you more gently than you deserve. It is unkind to repay them for their kindness by filling the boys’ heads with folly.”

“Tell me where they went,” Bran said. “I want to know.”

“Me too,” Rickon echoed.

“Oh, very well,” Luwin muttered. “So long as the kingdoms of the First Men held sway, the Pact endured, all through the Age of Heroes and the Long Night and the birth of the Seven Kingdoms, yet finally there came a time, many centuries later, when other peoples crossed the narrow sea.

“The Andals were the first, a race of tall, fair-haired warriors who came with steel and fire and the seven-pointed star of the new gods painted on their chests. The wars lasted hundreds of years, but in the end the six southron kingdoms all fell before them. Only here, where the King in the North threw back every army that tried to cross the Neck, did the rule of the First Men endure. The Andals burnt out the weirwood groves, hacked down the faces, slaughtered the children where they found them, and everywhere proclaimed the triumph of the Seven over the old gods. So the children fled north—”

Summer began to howl.

Maester Luwin broke off, startled. When Shaggydog bounded to his feet and added his voice to his brother’s, dread clutched at Bran’s heart. “*It’s coming*,” he whispered, with the certainty of despair. He had known it since last night, he realized, since the crow had led him down into the crypts to say farewell. He had known it, but he had not believed. He had wanted Maester Luwin to be right. *The crow*, he thought, *the three-eyed crow...*

The howling stopped as suddenly as it had begun. Summer padded across the tower floor to Shaggydog, and began to lick at a mat of bloody fur on the back of his brother’s neck. From the window came a flutter of wings.

A raven landed on the grey stone sill, opened its beak, and gave a harsh, raucous rattle of distress.

Rickon began to cry. His arrowheads fell from his hand one by one and clattered on the floor. Bran pulled him close and hugged him.

Maester Luwin stared at the black bird as if it were a scorpion with feathers. He rose, slow as a sleepwalker, and moved to the window. When he whistled, the raven hopped onto his bandaged forearm. There was dried blood on its wings. "A hawk," Luwin murmured, "perhaps an owl. Poor thing, a wonder it got through." He took the letter from its leg.

Bran found himself shivering as the maester unrolled the paper. "What is it?" he said, holding his brother all the harder.

"You know what it is, boy," Osha said, not unkindly. She put her hand on his head.

Maester Luwin looked up at them numbly, a small grey man with blood on the sleeve of his grey wool robe and tears in his bright grey eyes. "My lords," he said to the sons, in a voice gone hoarse and shrunken, "we... we shall need to find a stonecarver who knew his likeness well..."