

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. Pany! 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."