

BRAN

The Karstarks came in on a cold windy morning, bringing three hundred horsemen and near two thousand foot from their castle at Karhold. The steel points of their pikes winked in the pale sunlight as the column approached. A man went before them, pounding out a slow, deep-throated marching rhythm on a drum that was bigger than he was, boom, boom, boom.

Bran watched them come from a guard turret atop the outer wall, peering through Maester Luwin's bronze far-eye while perched on Hodor's shoulders. Lord Rickard himself led them, his sons Harrion and Eddard and Torrhen riding beside him beneath night-black banners emblazoned with the white sunburst of their House. Old Nan said they had Stark blood in them, going back hundreds of years, but they did not look like Starks to Bran. They were big men, and fierce, faces covered with thick beards, hair worn loose past the shoulders. Their cloaks were made of skins, the pelts of bear and sea] and wolf.

They were the last, he knew. The other lords were already here, with their hosts. Bran yearned to ride out among them, to see the winter houses full to bursting, the jostling crowds in the market square every morning, the streets rutted and torn by wheel and hoof. But Robb had forbidden him to leave the castle. "We have no men to spare to guard you," his brother had explained.

"I'll take Summer," Bran argued.

"Don't act the boy with me, Bran," Robb said. "You know better than that. Only two days ago one of Lord Bolton's men knifed one of Lord Cerwyn's at the Smoking Log. Our lady mother would skin me for a pelt if I let you put yourself at risk." He was using the voice of Robb the Lord when he said it; Bran knew that meant there was no appeal.

It was because of what had happened in the wolfwood, he knew. The memory still gave him bad dreams. He had been as helpless as a baby, no more able to defend himself than Rickon would have been. Less, even... Rickon would have kicked them, at the least. It shamed him. He was only a few years younger than Robb; if his brother was almost a man grown, so was he. He should have been able to protect himself.

A year ago, before, he would have visited the town even if it meant climbing over the walls by himself. In those days he could run down stairs, get on and off his pony by himself, and wield a wooden sword good enough to knock Prince Tommen in the dirt. Now he could only watch, peering out through Maester Luwin's lens tube. The maester had taught him all the banners: the mailed fist of the Glovers, silver on scarlet; Lady Mormont's black bear; the hideous flayed man that went before Roose Bolton of the Dreadfort; a bull moose for the Hornwoods; a battle-axe for the Cerwyns; three sentinel trees for the Tallharts; and the fearsome sigil of House Umber, a roaring giant in shattered chains.

And soon enough he learned the faces too, when the lords and their sons and knights retainer came to Winterfell to feast. Even the Great Hall was not large enough to seat all of them at once, so Robb hosted each of the principal bannermen in turn. Bran was always given the place of honor at his brother's right hand. Some of the lords bannermen gave him queer hard stares as he