

He liked how it felt too, pulling himself up a wall stone by stone, fingers and toes digging hard into the small crevices between. He always took off his boots and went barefoot when he climbed; it made him feel as if he had four hands instead of two. He liked the deep, sweet ache it left in the muscles afterward. He liked the way the air tasted way up high, sweet and cold as a winter peach. He liked the birds: the crows in the broken tower, the tiny little sparrows that nested in cracks between the stones, the ancient owl that slept in the dusty loft above the old armory. Bran knew them all.

Most of all, he liked going places that no one else could go, and seeing the grey sprawl of Winterfell in a way that no one else ever saw it. It made the whole castle Bran's secret place. His favorite haunt was the broken tower. Once it had been a watchtower, the tallest in Winterfell. A long time ago, a hundred years before even his father had been born, a lightning strike had set it afire. The top third of the structure had collapsed inward, and the tower had never been rebuilt. Sometimes his father sent ratters into the base of the tower, to clean out the nests they always found among the jumble of fallen stones and charred and rotten beams. But no one ever got up to the jagged top of the structure now except for Bran and the crows.

He knew two ways to get there. You could climb straight up the side of the tower itself, but the stones were loose, the mortar that held them together long gone to ash, and Bran never liked to put his full weight on them.

The best way was to start from the godswood, shinny up the tall sentinel, and cross over the armory and the guards hall, leaping roof to roof, barefoot so the guards wouldn't hear you overhead. That brought you up to the blind side of the First Keep, the oldest part of the castle, a squat round fortress that was taller than it looked. Only rats and spiders lived there now but the old stones still made for good climbing. You could go straight up to where the gargoyles leaned out blindly over empty space, and swing from gargoyle to gargoyle, hand over hand, around to the north side. From there, if you really stretched, you could reach out and pull yourself over to the broken tower where it leaned close. The last part was the scramble up the blackened stones to the eyrie, no more than ten feet, and then the crows would come round to see if you'd brought any corn.

Bran was moving from gargoyle to gargoyle with the ease of long practice when he heard the voices. He was so startled he almost lost his grip. The First Keep had been empty all his life.

"I do not like it," a woman was saying. There was a row of windows beneath him, and the voice was drifting out of the last window on this side. "You should be the Hand."

"Gods forbid," a man's voice replied lazily. "It's not an honor I'd want. There's far too much work involved."

Bran hung, listening, suddenly afraid to go on. They might glimpse his feet if he tried to swing by.

"Don't you see the danger this puts us in?" the woman said. "Robert loves the man like a brother."

"Robert can barely stomach his brothers. Not that I blame him. Stannis would be enough to give anyone indigestion."