

And then there was nothing to be done for it. The order had been given, and honor bound them to obey.

Will went in front, his shaggy little garron picking the way carefully through the undergrowth. A light snow had fallen the night before, and there were stones and roots and hidden sinks lying just under its crust, waiting for the careless and the unwary. Ser Waymar Royce came next, his great black destrier snorting impatiently. The warhorse was the wrong mount for ranging, but try and tell that to the lordling. Gared brought up the rear. The old man-at-arms muttered to himself as he rode.

Twilight deepened. The cloudless sky turned a deep purple, the color of an old bruise, then faded to black. The stars began to come out. A half-moon rose. Will was grateful for the light.

“We can make a better pace than this, surely,” Royce said when the moon was full risen.

“Not with this horse,” Will said. Fear had made him insolent. “Perhaps my lord would care to take the lead?”

Ser Waymar Royce did not deign to reply.

Somewhere off in the wood a wolf howled.

Will pulled his garron over beneath an ancient gnarled ironwood and dismounted.

“Why are you stopping?” Ser Waymar asked.

“Best go the rest of the way on foot, m’lord. It’s just over that ridge.”

Royce paused a moment, staring off into the distance, his face reflective. A cold wind whispered through the trees. His great sable cloak stirred behind like something half-alive.

“There’s something wrong here,” Gared muttered.

The young knight gave him a disdainful smile. “Is there?”

“Can’t you feel it?” Gared asked. “Listen to the darkness.”

Will could feel it. Four years in the Night’s Watch, and he had never been so afraid. What was it?

“Wind. Trees rustling. A wolf. Which sound is it that unmans you so, Gared?” When Gared did not answer, Royce slid gracefully from his saddle. He tied the destrier securely to a low-hanging limb, well away from the other horses, and drew his longsword from its sheath. Jewels glittered in its hilt, and the moonlight ran down the shining steel. It was a splendid weapon, castle-forged, and new-made from the look of it. Will doubted it had ever been swung in anger.

“The trees press close here,” Will warned. “That sword will tangle you up, m’lord. Better a knife.”

“If I need instruction, I will ask for it,” the young lord said. “Gared, stay here. Guard the horses.”

Gared dismounted. “We need a fire. I’ll see to it.”

“How big a fool are you, old man? If there are enemies in this wood, a fire is the last thing we want.”

“There’s some enemies a fire will keep away,” Gared said. “Bears and direwolves and . . . and other things . . . ”

Ser Waymar’s mouth became a hard line. “No fire.”

Gared’s hood shadowed his face, but Will could see the hard glitter in his eyes as he stared at the knight. For a moment he was afraid the older man would go for his sword. It was a short, ugly thing, its grip discolored by sweat, its edge nicked from hard use, but Will would not have given an iron bob for the lordling’s life if Gared pulled it from its scabbard.

Finally Gared looked down. “No fire,” he muttered, low under his breath.

Royce took it for acquiescence and turned away. “Lead on,” he said to Will.

Will threaded their way through a thicket, then started up the slope to the low ridge where he had found his vantage point under a sentinel tree. Under the thin crust of snow, the ground was damp and muddy, slick footing, with rocks and hidden roots to trip you up. Will made no sound as he climbed. Behind him, he heard the soft metallic slither of the lordling’s ringmail, the rustle of leaves, and muttered curses as reaching branches grabbed at his longsword and tugged on his splendid sable cloak.

The great sentinel was right there at the top of the ridge, where Will had known it would

be, its lowest branches a bare foot off the ground. Will slid in underneath, flat on his belly in the snow and the mud, and looked down on the empty clearing below.

His heart stopped in his chest. For a moment he dared not breathe. Moonlight shone down on the clearing, the ashes of the firepit, the snow-covered lean-to, the great rock, the little half-frozen stream. Everything was just as it had been a few hours ago.

They were gone. All the bodies were gone.

“Gods!” he heard behind him. A sword slashed at a branch as Ser Waymar Royce gained the ridge. He stood there beside the sentinel, longsword in hand, his cloak billowing behind him as the wind came up, outlined nobly against the stars for all to see.

“Get *down!*” Will whispered urgently. “Something’s wrong.”

Royce did not move. He looked down at the empty clearing and laughed. “Your dead men seem to have moved camp, Will.”

Will’s voice abandoned him. He groped for words that did not come. It was not possible. His eyes swept back and forth over the abandoned campsite, stopped on the axe. A huge double-bladed battle-axe, still lying where he had seen it last, untouched. A valuable weapon . . .

“On your feet, Will,” Ser Waymar commanded. “There’s no one here. I won’t have you hiding under a bush.”

Reluctantly, Will obeyed.

Ser Waymar looked him over with open disapproval. “I am not going back to Castle Black a failure on my first ranging. We *will* find these men.” He glanced around. “Up the tree. Be quick about it. Look for a fire.”

Will turned away, wordless. There was no use to argue. The wind was moving. It cut right through him. He went to the tree, a vaulting grey-green sentinel, and began to climb. Soon his hands were sticky with sap, and he was lost among the needles. Fear filled his gut like a meal he could not digest. He whispered a prayer to the nameless gods of the wood, and slipped his dirk free of its sheath. He put it between his teeth to keep both hands free for climbing. The taste of cold iron in his mouth gave him comfort.

Down below, the lordling called out suddenly, “Who goes there?” Will heard uncertainty in the challenge. He stopped climbing; he listened; he watched.

The woods gave answer: the rustle of leaves, the icy rush of the stream, a distant hoot of a snow owl.

The Others made no sound.

Will saw movement from the corner of his eye. Pale shapes gliding through the wood. He turned his head, glimpsed a white shadow in the darkness. Then it was gone. Branches stirred gently in the wind, scratching at one another with wooden fingers. Will opened his mouth to call down a warning, and the words seemed to freeze in his throat. Perhaps he was wrong. Perhaps it had only been a bird, a reflection on the snow, some trick of the moonlight. What had he seen, after all?

“Will, where are you?” Ser Waymar called up. “Can you see anything?” He was turning in a slow circle, suddenly wary, his sword in hand. He must have felt them, as Will felt them. There was nothing to see. “Answer me! Why is it so cold?”

It *was* cold. Shivering, Will clung more tightly to his perch. His face pressed hard against the trunk of the sentinel. He could feel the sweet, sticky sap on his cheek.

A shadow emerged from the dark of the wood. It stood in front of Royce. Tall, it was, and gaunt and hard as old bones, with flesh pale as milk. Its armor seemed to change color as it moved; here it was white as new-fallen snow, there black as shadow, everywhere dappled with the deep grey-green of the trees. The patterns ran like moonlight on water with every step it took.

Will heard the breath go out of Ser Waymar Royce in a long hiss. “Come no farther,” the lordling warned. His voice cracked like a boy’s. He threw the long sable cloak back over his shoulders, to free his arms for battle, and took his sword in both hands. The wind had stopped. It was very cold.

The Other slid forward on silent feet. In its hand was a longsword like none that Will had ever seen. No human metal had gone into the forging of that blade. It was alive with moonlight, translucent, a shard of crystal so thin that it seemed almost to vanish when seen edge-on. There was a faint blue shimmer to the thing, a ghost-light that played around its edges, and somehow Will knew it was sharper than any razor.

Ser Waymar met him bravely. “Dance with me then.” He lifted his sword high over his head, defiant. His hands trembled from the weight of it, or perhaps from the cold. Yet in that moment, Will thought, he was a boy no longer, but a man of the Night’s Watch.

The Other halted. Will saw its eyes; blue, deeper and bluer than any human eyes, a blue that burned like ice. They fixed on the longsword trembling on high, watched the

moonlight running cold along the metal. For a heartbeat he dared to hope.

They emerged silently from the shadows, twins to the first. Three of them . . . four . . . five . . . Ser Waymar may have felt the cold that came with them, but he never saw them, never heard them. Will had to call out. It was his duty. And his death, if he did. He shivered, and hugged the tree, and kept the silence.

The pale sword came shivering through the air.

Ser Waymar met it with steel. When the blades met, there was no ring of metal on metal; only a high, thin sound at the edge of hearing, like an animal screaming in pain. Royce checked a second blow, and a third, then fell back a step. Another flurry of blows, and he fell back again.

Behind him, to right, to left, all around him, the watchers stood patient, faceless, silent, the shifting patterns of their delicate armor making them all but invisible in the wood. Yet they made no move to interfere.

Again and again the swords met, until Will wanted to cover his ears against the strange anguished keening of their clash. Ser Waymar was panting from the effort now, his breath steaming in the moonlight. His blade was white with frost; the Other's danced with pale blue light.

Then Royce's parry came a beat too late. The pale sword bit through the ringmail beneath his arm. The young lord cried out in pain. Blood welled between the rings. It steamed in the cold, and the droplets seemed red as fire where they touched the snow. Ser Waymar's fingers brushed his side. His moleskin glove came away soaked with red.

The Other said something in a language that Will did not know; his voice was like the cracking of ice on a winter lake, and the words were mocking.

Ser Waymar Royce found his fury. "For Robert!" he shouted, and he came up snarling, lifting the frost-covered longsword with both hands and swinging it around in a flat sidearm slash with all his weight behind it. The Other's parry was almost lazy.

When the blades touched, the steel shattered.

A scream echoed through the forest night, and the longsword shattered into a hundred brittle pieces, the shards scattering like a rain of needles. Royce went to his knees, shrieking, and covered his eyes. Blood welled between his fingers.

The watchers moved forward together, as if some signal had been given. Swords rose

and fell, all in a deathly silence. It was cold butchery. The pale blades sliced through ringmail as if it were silk. Will closed his eyes. Far beneath him, he heard their voices and laughter sharp as icicles.

When he found the courage to look again, a long time had passed, and the ridge below was empty.

He stayed in the tree, scarce daring to breathe, while the moon crept slowly across the black sky. Finally, his muscles cramping and his fingers numb with cold, he climbed down.

Royce's body lay facedown in the snow, one arm outflung. The thick sable cloak had been slashed in a dozen places. Lying dead like that, you saw how young he was. A boy.

He found what was left of the sword a few feet away, the end splintered and twisted like a tree struck by lightning. Will knelt, looked around warily, and snatched it up. The broken sword would be his proof. Gared would know what to make of it, and if not him, then surely that old bear Mormont or Maester Aemon. Would Gared still be waiting with the horses? He had to hurry.

Will rose. Ser Waymar Royce stood over him.

His fine clothes were a tatter, his face a ruin. A shard from his sword transfixing the blind white pupil of his left eye.

The right eye was open. The pupil burned blue. It saw.

The broken sword fell from nerveless fingers. Will closed his eyes to pray. Long, elegant hands brushed his cheek, then tightened around his throat. They were gloved in the finest moleskin and sticky with blood, yet the touch was icy cold.

BRAN

The morning had dawned clear and cold, with a crispness that hinted at the end of summer. They set forth at daybreak to see a man beheaded, twenty in all, and Bran rode among them, nervous with excitement. This was the first time he had been deemed old enough to go with his lord father and his brothers to see the king's justice done. It was the ninth year of summer, and the seventh of Bran's life.

The man had been taken outside a small holdfast in the hills. Robb thought he was a wildling, his sword sworn to Mance Rayder, the King-beyond-the-Wall. It made Bran's skin prickle to think of it. He remembered the hearth tales Old Nan told them. The wildlings were cruel men, she said, slavers and slayers and thieves. They consorted with giants and ghouls, stole girl children in the dead of night, and drank blood from polished horns. And their women lay with the Others in the Long Night to sire terrible half-human children.

But the man they found bound hand and foot to the holdfast wall awaiting the king's justice was old and scrawny, not much taller than Robb. He had lost both ears and a finger to frostbite, and he dressed all in black, the same as a brother of the Night's Watch, except that his furs were ragged and greasy.

The breath of man and horse mingled, steaming, in the cold morning air as his lord father had the man cut down from the wall and dragged before them. Robb and Jon sat tall and still on their horses, with Bran between them on his pony, trying to seem older than seven, trying to pretend that he'd seen all this before. A faint wind blew through the holdfast gate. Over their heads flapped the banner of the Starks of Winterfell: a grey direwolf racing across an ice-white field.

Bran's father sat solemnly on his horse, long brown hair stirring in the wind. His closely trimmed beard was shot with white, making him look older than his thirty-five years. He had a grim cast to his grey eyes this day, and he seemed not at all the man who would sit before the fire in the evening and talk softly of the age of heroes and the children of the forest. He had taken off Father's face, Bran thought, and donned the face of Lord Stark of Winterfell.

There were questions asked and answers given there in the chill of morning, but afterward Bran could not recall much of what had been said. Finally his lord father gave

a command, and two of his guardsmen dragged the ragged man to the ironwood stump in the center of the square. They forced his head down onto the hard black wood. Lord Eddard Stark dismounted and his ward Theon Greyjoy brought forth the sword. “Ice,” that sword was called. It was as wide across as a man’s hand, and taller even than Robb. The blade was Valyrian steel, spell-forged and dark as smoke. Nothing held an edge like Valyrian steel.

His father peeled off his gloves and handed them to Jory Cassel, the captain of his household guard. He took hold of Ice with both hands and said, “In the name of Robert of the House Baratheon, the First of his Name, King of the Andals and the Rhoynar and the First Men, Lord of the Seven Kingdoms and Protector of the Realm, by the word of Eddard of the House Stark, Lord of Winterfell and Warden of the North, I do sentence you to die.” He lifted the greatsword high above his head.

Bran’s bastard brother Jon Snow moved closer. “Keep the pony well in hand,” he whispered. “And don’t look away. Father will know if you do.”

Bran kept his pony well in hand, and did not look away.

His father took off the man’s head with a single sure stroke. Blood sprayed out across the snow, as red as summerwine. One of the horses reared and had to be restrained to keep from bolting. Bran could not take his eyes off the blood. The snows around the stump drank it eagerly, reddening as he watched.

The head bounced off a thick root and rolled. It came up near Greyjoy’s feet. Theon was a lean, dark youth of nineteen who found everything amusing. He laughed, put his boot on the head, and kicked it away.

“Ass,” Jon muttered, low enough so Greyjoy did not hear. He put a hand on Bran’s shoulder, and Bran looked over at his bastard brother. “You did well,” Jon told him solemnly. Jon was fourteen, an old hand at justice.

It seemed colder on the long ride back to Winterfell, though the wind had died by then and the sun was higher in the sky. Bran rode with his brothers, well ahead of the main party, his pony struggling hard to keep up with their horses.

“The deserter died bravely,” Robb said. He was big and broad and growing every day, with his mother’s coloring, the fair skin, red-brown hair, and blue eyes of the Tullys of Riverrun. “He had courage, at the least.”

“No,” Jon Snow said quietly. “It was not courage. This one was dead of fear. You could see it in his eyes, Stark.” Jon’s eyes were a grey so dark they seemed almost black, but

there was little they did not see. He was of an age with Robb, but they did not look alike. Jon was slender where Robb was muscular, dark where Robb was fair, graceful and quick where his half brother was strong and fast.

Robb was not impressed. "The Others take his eyes," he swore. "He died well. Race you to the bridge?"

"Done," Jon said, kicking his horse forward. Robb cursed and followed, and they galloped off down the trail, Robb laughing and hooting, Jon silent and intent. The hooves of their horses kicked up showers of snow as they went.

Bran did not try to follow. His pony could not keep up. He had seen the ragged man's eyes, and he was thinking of them now. After a while, the sound of Robb's laughter receded, and the woods grew silent again.

So deep in thought was he that he never heard the rest of the party until his father moved up to ride beside him. "Are you well, Bran?" he asked, not unkindly.

"Yes, Father," Bran told him. He looked up. Wrapped in his furs and leathers, mounted on his great warhorse, his lord father loomed over him like a giant. "Robb says the man died bravely, but Jon says he was afraid."

"What do you think?" his father asked.

Bran thought about it. "Can a man still be brave if he's afraid?"

"That is the only time a man can be brave," his father told him. "Do you understand why I did it?"

"He was a wildling," Bran said. "They carry off women and sell them to the Others."

His lord father smiled. "Old Nan has been telling you stories again. In truth, the man was an oathbreaker, a deserter from the Night's Watch. No man is more dangerous. The deserter knows his life is forfeit if he is taken, so he will not flinch from any crime, no matter how vile. But you mistake me. The question was not why the man had to die, but why *I* must do it."

Bran had no answer for that. "King Robert has a headsman," he said, uncertainly.

"He does," his father admitted. "As did the Targaryen kings before him. Yet our way is the older way. The blood of the First Men still flows in the veins of the Starks, and we hold to the belief that the man who passes the sentence should swing the sword. If you

would take a man's life, you owe it to him to look into his eyes and hear his final words. And if you cannot bear to do that, then perhaps the man does not deserve to die.

"One day, Bran, you will be Robb's bannerman, holding a keep of your own for your brother and your king, and justice will fall to you. When that day comes, you must take no pleasure in the task, but neither must you look away. A ruler who hides behind paid executioners soon forgets what death is."

That was when Jon reappeared on the crest of the hill before them. He waved and shouted down at them. "*Father, Bran, come quickly, see what Robb has found!*" Then he was gone again.

Jory rode up beside them. "Trouble, my lord?"

"Beyond a doubt," his lord father said. "Come, let us see what mischief my sons have rooted out now." He sent his horse into a trot. Jory and Bran and the rest came after.

They found Robb on the riverbank north of the bridge, with Jon still mounted beside him. The late summer snows had been heavy this moonturn. Robb stood knee-deep in white, his hood pulled back so the sun shone in his hair. He was cradling something in his arm, while the boys talked in hushed, excited voices.

The riders picked their way carefully through the drifts, groping for solid footing on the hidden, uneven ground. Jory Cassel and Theon Greyjoy were the first to reach the boys. Greyjoy was laughing and joking as he rode. Bran heard the breath go out of him. "Gods!" he exclaimed, struggling to keep control of his horse as he reached for his sword.

Jory's sword was already out. "Robb, get away from it!" he called as his horse reared under him.

Robb grinned and looked up from the bundle in his arms. "She can't hurt you," he said. "She's dead, Jory."

Bran was afire with curiosity by then. He would have spurred the pony faster, but his father made them dismount beside the bridge and approach on foot. Bran jumped off and ran.

By then Jon, Jory, and Theon Greyjoy had all dismounted as well. "What in the seven hells is it?" Greyjoy was saying.

"A wolf," Robb told him.

“A freak,” Greyjoy said. “Look at the *size* of it.”

Bran’s heart was thumping in his chest as he pushed through a waist-high drift to his brothers’ side.

Half-buried in bloodstained snow, a huge dark shape slumped in death. Ice had formed in its shaggy grey fur, and the faint smell of corruption clung to it like a woman’s perfume. Bran glimpsed blind eyes crawling with maggots, a wide mouth full of yellowed teeth. But it was the size of it that made him gasp. It was bigger than his pony, twice the size of the largest hound in his father’s kennel.

“It’s no freak,” Jon said calmly. “That’s a direwolf. They grow larger than the other kind.”

Theon Greyjoy said, “There’s not been a direwolf sighted south of the Wall in two hundred years.”

“I see one now,” Jon replied.

Bran tore his eyes away from the monster. That was when he noticed the bundle in Robb’s arms. He gave a cry of delight and moved closer. The pup was a tiny ball of grey-black fur, its eyes still closed. It nuzzled blindly against Robb’s chest as he cradled it, searching for milk among his leathers, making a sad little whimpery sound. Bran reached out hesitantly. “Go on,” Robb told him. “You can touch him.”

Bran gave the pup a quick nervous stroke, then turned as Jon said, “Here you go.” His half brother put a second pup into his arms. “There are five of them.” Bran sat down in the snow and hugged the wolf pup to his face. Its fur was soft and warm against his cheek.

“Direwolves loose in the realm, after so many years,” muttered Hullen, the master of horse. “I like it not.”

“It is a sign,” Jory said.

Father frowned. “This is only a dead animal, Jory,” he said. Yet he seemed troubled. Snow crunched under his boots as he moved around the body. “Do we know what killed her?”

“There’s something in the throat,” Robb told him, proud to have found the answer before his father even asked. “There, just under the jaw.”

His father knelt and groped under the beast's head with his hand. He gave a yank and held it up for all to see. A foot of shattered antler, tines snapped off, all wet with blood.

A sudden silence descended over the party. The men looked at the antler uneasily, and no one dared to speak. Even Bran could sense their fear, though he did not understand.

His father tossed the antler to the side and cleansed his hands in the snow. "I'm surprised she lived long enough to whelp," he said. His voice broke the spell.

"Maybe she didn't," Jory said. "I've heard tales . . . maybe the bitch was already dead when the pups came."

"Born with the dead," another man put in. "Worse luck."

"No matter," said Hullen. "They be dead soon enough too."

Bran gave a wordless cry of dismay.

"The sooner the better," Theon Greyjoy agreed. He drew his sword. "Give the beast here, Bran."

The little thing squirmed against him, as if it heard and understood. "*No!*" Bran cried out fiercely. "It's mine."

"Put away your sword, Greyjoy," Robb said. For a moment he sounded as commanding as their father, like the lord he would someday be. "We will keep these pups."

"You cannot do that, boy," said Harwin, who was Hullen's son.

"It be a mercy to kill them," Hullen said.

Bran looked to his lord father for rescue, but got only a frown, a furrowed brow. "Hullen speaks truly, son. Better a swift death than a hard one from cold and starvation."

"*No!*" He could feel tears welling in his eyes, and he looked away. He did not want to cry in front of his father.

Robb resisted stubbornly. "Ser Rodrik's red bitch whelped again last week," he said. "It was a small litter, only two live pups. She'll have milk enough."

"She'll rip them apart when they try to nurse."

“Lord Stark,” Jon said. It was strange to hear him call Father that, so formal. Bran looked at him with desperate hope. “There are five pups,” he told Father. “Three male, two female.”

“What of it, Jon?”

“You have five trueborn children,” Jon said. “Three sons, two daughters. The direwolf is the sigil of your House. Your children were meant to have these pups, my lord.”

Bran saw his father’s face change, saw the other men exchange glances. He loved Jon with all his heart at that moment. Even at seven, Bran understood what his brother had done. The count had come right only because Jon had omitted himself. He had included the girls, included even Rickon, the baby, but not the bastard who bore the surname Snow, the name that custom decreed be given to all those in the north unlucky enough to be born with no name of their own.

Their father understood as well. “You want no pup for yourself, Jon?” he asked softly.

“The direwolf graces the banners of House Stark,” Jon pointed out. “I am no Stark, Father.”

Their lord father regarded Jon thoughtfully. Robb rushed into the silence he left. “I will nurse him myself, Father,” he promised. “I will soak a towel with warm milk, and give him suck from that.”

“Me too!” Bran echoed.

The lord weighed his sons long and carefully with his eyes. “Easy to say, and harder to do. I will not have you wasting the servants’ time with this. If you want these pups, you will feed them yourselves. Is that understood?”

Bran nodded eagerly. The pup squirmed in his grasp, licked at his face with a warm tongue.

“You must train them as well,” their father said. “You must train them. The kennelmaster will have nothing to do with these monsters, I promise you that. And the gods help you if you neglect them, or brutalize them, or train them badly. These are not dogs to beg for treats and slink off at a kick. A direwolf will rip a man’s arm off his shoulder as easily as a dog will kill a rat. Are you sure you want this?”

“Yes, Father,” Bran said.

“Yes,” Robb agreed.

“The pups may die anyway, despite all you do.”

“They won’t die,” Robb said. “We won’t *let* them die.”

“Keep them, then. Jory, Desmond, gather up the other pups. It’s time we were back to Winterfell.”

It was not until they were mounted and on their way that Bran allowed himself to taste the sweet air of victory. By then, his pup was snuggled inside his leathers, warm against him, safe for the long ride home. Bran was wondering what to name him.

Halfway across the bridge, Jon pulled up suddenly.

“What is it, Jon?” their lord father asked.

“Can’t you hear it?”

Bran could hear the wind in the trees, the clatter of their hooves on the ironwood planks, the whimpering of his hungry pup, but Jon was listening to something else.

“There,” Jon said. He swung his horse around and galloped back across the bridge. They watched him dismount where the direwolf lay dead in the snow, watched him kneel. A moment later he was riding back to them, smiling.

“He must have crawled away from the others,” Jon said.

“Or been driven away,” their father said, looking at the sixth pup. His fur was white, where the rest of the litter was grey. His eyes were as red as the blood of the ragged man who had died that morning. Bran thought it curious that this pup alone would have opened his eyes while the others were still blind.

“An albino,” Theon Greyjoy said with wry amusement. “This one will die even faster than the others.”

Jon Snow gave his father’s ward a long, chilling look. “I think not, Greyjoy,” he said. “This one belongs to me.”

CATELYN

Catelyn had never liked this godswood.

She had been born a Tully, at Riverrun far to the south, on the Red Fork of the Trident. The godswood there was a garden, bright and airy, where tall redwoods spread dappled shadows across tinkling streams, birds sang from hidden nests, and the air was spicy with the scent of flowers.

The gods of Winterfell kept a different sort of wood. It was a dark, primal place, three acres of old forest untouched for ten thousand years as the gloomy castle rose around it. It smelled of moist earth and decay. No redwoods grew here. This was a wood of stubborn sentinel trees armored in grey-green needles, of mighty oaks, of ironwoods as old as the realm itself. Here thick black trunks crowded close together while twisted branches wove a dense canopy overhead and misshapen roots wrestled beneath the soil. This was a place of deep silence and brooding shadows, and the gods who lived here had no names.

But she knew she would find her husband here tonight. Whenever he took a man's life, afterward he would seek the quiet of the godswood.

Catelyn had been anointed with the seven oils and named in the rainbow of light that filled the sept of Riverrun. She was of the Faith, like her father and grandfather and his father before him. Her gods had names, and their faces were as familiar as the faces of her parents. Worship was a septon with a censer, the smell of incense, a seven-sided crystal alive with light, voices raised in song. The Tullys kept a godswood, as all the great houses did, but it was only a place to walk or read or lie in the sun. Worship was for the sept.

For her sake, Ned had built a small sept where she might sing to the seven faces of god, but the blood of the First Men still flowed in the veins of the Starks, and his own gods were the old ones, the nameless, faceless gods of the greenwood they shared with the vanished children of the forest.

At the center of the grove an ancient weirwood brooded over a small pool where the waters were black and cold. "The heart tree," Ned called it. The weirwood's bark was white as bone, its leaves dark red, like a thousand bloodstained hands. A face had been

carved in the trunk of the great tree, its features long and melancholy, the deep-cut eyes red with dried sap and strangely watchful. They were old, those eyes; older than Winterfell itself. They had seen Brandon the Builder set the first stone, if the tales were true; they had watched the castle's granite walls rise around them. It was said that the children of the forest had carved the faces in the trees during the dawn centuries before the coming of the First Men across the narrow sea.

In the south the last weirwoods had been cut down or burned out a thousand years ago, except on the Isle of Faces where the green men kept their silent watch. Up here it was different. Here every castle had its godswood, and every godswood had its heart tree, and every heart tree its face.

Catelyn found her husband beneath the weirwood, seated on a moss-covered stone. The greatsword Ice was across his lap, and he was cleaning the blade in those waters black as night. A thousand years of humus lay thick upon the godswood floor, swallowing the sound of her feet, but the red eyes of the weirwood seemed to follow her as she came. "Ned," she called softly.

He lifted his head to look at her. "Catelyn," he said. His voice was distant and formal. "Where are the children?"

He would always ask her that. "In the kitchen, arguing about names for the wolf pups." She spread her cloak on the forest floor and sat beside the pool, her back to the weirwood. She could feel the eyes watching her, but she did her best to ignore them. "Arya is already in love, and Sansa is charmed and gracious, but Rickon is not quite sure."

"Is he afraid?" Ned asked.

"A little," she admitted. "He is only three."

Ned frowned. "He must learn to face his fears. He will not be three forever. And winter is coming."

"Yes," Catelyn agreed. The words gave her a chill, as they always did. The Stark words. Every noble house had its words. Family mottoes, touchstones, prayers of sorts, they boasted of honor and glory, promised loyalty and truth, swore faith and courage. All but the Starks. *Winter is coming*, said the Stark words. Not for the first time, she reflected on what a strange people these northerners were.

"The man died well, I'll give him that," Ned said. He had a swatch of oiled leather in one hand. He ran it lightly up the greatsword as he spoke, polishing the metal to a dark glow.

“I was glad for Bran’s sake. You would have been proud of Bran.”

“I am always proud of Bran,” Catelyn replied, watching the sword as he stroked it. She could see the rippling deep within the steel, where the metal had been folded back on itself a hundred times in the forging. Catelyn had no love for swords, but she could not deny that Ice had its own beauty. It had been forged in Valyria, before the Doom had come to the old Freehold, when the ironsmiths had worked their metal with spells as well as hammers. Four hundred years old it was, and as sharp as the day it was forged. The name it bore was older still, a legacy from the age of heroes, when the Starks were Kings in the North.

“He was the fourth this year,” Ned said grimly. “The poor man was half-mad. Something had put a fear in him so deep that my words could not reach him.” He sighed. “Ben writes that the strength of the Night’s Watch is down below a thousand. It’s not only desertions. They are losing men on rangings as well.”

“Is it the wildlings?” she asked.

“Who else?” Ned lifted Ice, looked down the cool steel length of it. “And it will only grow worse. The day may come when I will have no choice but to call the banners and ride north to deal with this King-beyond-the-Wall for good and all.”

“Beyond the Wall?” The thought made Catelyn shudder.

Ned saw the dread on her face. “Mance Rayder is nothing for us to fear.”

“There are darker things beyond the Wall.” She glanced behind her at the heart tree, the pale bark and red eyes, watching, listening, thinking its long slow thoughts.

His smile was gentle. “You listen to too many of Old Nan’s stories. The Others are as dead as the children of the forest, gone eight thousand years. Maester Luwin will tell you they never lived at all. No living man has ever seen one.”

“Until this morning, no living man had ever seen a direwolf either,” Catelyn reminded him.

“I ought to know better than to argue with a Tully,” he said with a rueful smile. He slid Ice back into its sheath. “You did not come here to tell me crib tales. I know how little you like this place. What is it, my lady?”

Catelyn took her husband’s hand. “There was grievous news today, my lord. I did not wish to trouble you until you had cleansed yourself.” There was no way to soften the

blow, so she told him straight. "I am so sorry, my love. Jon Arryn is dead."

His eyes found hers, and she could see how hard it took him, as she had known it would. In his youth, Ned had fostered at the Eyrie, and the childless Lord Arryn had become a second father to him and his fellow ward, Robert Baratheon. When the Mad King Aerys II Targaryen had demanded their heads, the Lord of the Eyrie had raised his moon-and-falcon banners in revolt rather than give up those he had pledged to protect.

And one day fifteen years ago, this second father had become a brother as well, as he and Ned stood together in the sept at Riverrun to wed two sisters, the daughters of Lord Hoster Tully.

"Jon . . ." he said. "Is this news certain?"

"It was the king's seal, and the letter is in Robert's own hand. I saved it for you. He said Lord Arryn was taken quickly. Even Maester Pycelle was helpless, but he brought the milk of the poppy, so Jon did not linger long in pain."

"That is some small mercy, I suppose," he said. She could see the grief on his face, but even then he thought first of her. "Your sister," he said. "And Jon's boy. What word of them?"

"The message said only that they were well, and had returned to the Eyrie," Catelyn said. "I wish they had gone to Riverrun instead. The Eyrie is high and lonely, and it was ever her husband's place, not hers. Lord Jon's memory will haunt each stone. I know my sister. She needs the comfort of family and friends around her."

"Your uncle waits in the Vale, does he not? Jon named him Knight of the Gate, I'd heard."

Catelyn nodded. "Brynden will do what he can for her, and for the boy. That is some comfort, but still . . ."

"Go to her," Ned urged. "Take the children. Fill her halls with noise and shouts and laughter. That boy of hers needs other children about him, and Lysa should not be alone in her grief."

"Would that I could," Catelyn said. "The letter had other tidings. The king is riding to Winterfell to seek you out."

It took Ned a moment to comprehend her words, but when the understanding came, the darkness left his eyes. "Robert is coming here?" When she nodded, a smile broke across

his face.

Catelyn wished she could share his joy. But she had heard the talk in the yards; a direwolf dead in the snow, a broken antler in its throat. Dread coiled within her like a snake, but she forced herself to smile at this man she loved, this man who put no faith in signs. “I knew that would please you,” she said. “We should send word to your brother on the Wall.”

“Yes, of course,” he agreed. “Ben will want to be here. I shall tell Maester Luwin to send his swiftest bird.” Ned rose and pulled her to her feet. “Damnation, how many years has it been? And he gives us no more notice than this? How many in his party, did the message say?”

“I should think a hundred knights, at the least, with all their retainers, and half again as many freeriders. Cersei and the children travel with them.”

“Robert will keep an easy pace for their sakes,” he said. “It is just as well. That will give us more time to prepare.”

“The queen’s brothers are also in the party,” she told him.

Ned grimaced at that. There was small love between him and the queen’s family, Catelyn knew. The Lannisters of Casterly Rock had come late to Robert’s cause, when victory was all but certain, and he had never forgiven them. “Well, if the price for Robert’s company is an infestation of Lannisters, so be it. It sounds as though Robert is bringing half his court.”

“Where the king goes, the realm follows,” she said.

“It will be good to see the children. The youngest was still sucking at the Lannister woman’s teat the last time I saw him. He must be, what, five by now?”

“Prince Tommen is seven,” she told him. “The same age as Bran. Please, Ned, guard your tongue. The Lannister woman is our queen, and her pride is said to grow with every passing year.”

Ned squeezed her hand. “There must be a feast, of course, with singers, and Robert will want to hunt. I shall send Jory south with an honor guard to meet them on the kingsroad and escort them back. Gods, how are we going to feed them all? On his way already, you said? Damn the man. Damn his royal hide.”

