

Ser Jeremy shook his head. "Would that I knew."

Plainly Mormont was not pleased with that answer. "Two of our brothers butchered almost within sight of the Wall, yet your rangers heard nothing, saw nothing. Is this what the Night's Watch has fallen to? Do we still sweep these woods?"

"Yes, my lord, but-"

"Do we still mount watches?"

"We do, but-"

"This man wears a hunting horn." Mormont pointed at Othor. "Must I suppose that he died without sounding it? Or have your rangers all gone deaf as well as blind?"

Ser Jeremy bristled, his face taut with anger. "No horn was blown, my lord, or my rangers would have heard it. I do not have sufficient men to mount as many patrols as I should like... and since Benjen was lost, we have stayed closer to the Wall than we were wont to do before, by your own command."

The Old Bear grunted. "Yes. Well. Be that as it may." He made an impatient gesture. "Tell me how they died."

Squatting beside the dead man he had named Jafer Flowers, Ser Jeremy grasped his head by the scalp. The hair came out between his fingers, brittle as straw. The knight cursed and shoved at the face with the heel of his hand. A great gash in the side of the corpse's neck opened like a mouth, crusted with dried blood. Only a few ropes of pale tendon still attached the head to the neck. "This was done with an axe."

"Aye," muttered Dywen, the old forester. "Belike the axe that Othor carried, m'lord."

Jon could feel his breakfast churning in his belly, but he pressed his lips together and made himself look at the second body. Othor had been a big ugly man, and he made a big ugly corpse. No axe was in evidence. Jon remembered Othor; he had been the one bellowing the bawdy song as the rangers rode out. His singing days were done. His flesh was blanched white as milk, everywhere but his hands. His hands were black like Jafer's. Blossoms of hard cracked blood decorated the mortal wounds that covered him like a rash, breast and groin and throat. Yet his eyes were still open. They stared up at the sky, blue as sapphires.

Ser Jeremy stood. "The wildlings have axes too."

Mormont rounded on him. "So you believe this is Mance Rayder's work? This close to the Wall?"

"Who else, my lord?"

Jon could have told him. He knew, they all knew, yet no man of them would say the words. The Others are only a story, a tale to make children shiver. If they ever lived at all, they are gone eight thousand years. Even the thought made him feel foolish; he was a man grown now, a black brother of the Night's Watch, not the boy who'd once sat at Old Nan's feet with Bran and Robb and Arya.

Yet Lord Commander Mormont gave a snort. "If Ben Stark had come under wildling attack a half day's ride from Castle Black, he would have returned for more men, chased the killers through all seven hells and brought me back their heads."