

"I'll find them faster by myself." Robb spurred his gelding and vanished into the trees.

Once he was gone, the woods seemed to close in around Bran. The snow was falling more heavily now. Where it touched the ground it melted, but all about him rock and root and branch wore a thin blanket of white. As he waited, he was conscious of how uncomfortable he felt. He could not feel his legs, hanging useless in the stirrups, but the strap around his chest was tight and chafing, and the melting snow had soaked through his gloves to chill his hands. He wondered what was keeping Theon and Maester Luwin and Joseth and the rest.

When he heard the rustle of leaves, Bran used the reins to make Dancer turn, expecting to see his friends, but the ragged men who stepped out onto the bank of the stream were strangers.

"Good day to you," he said nervously. One look, and Bran knew they were neither foresters nor farmers. He was suddenly conscious of how richly he was dressed. His surcoat was new, dark grey wool with silver buttons, and a heavy silver pin fastened his fur-trimmed cloak at the shoulders. His boots and gloves were lined with fur as well.

"All alone, are you?" said the biggest of them, a bald man with a raw windburnt face. "Lost in the wolfswood, poor lad."

"I'm not lost." Bran did not like the way the strangers were looking at him. He counted four, but when he turned his head, he saw two others behind him. "My brother rode off just a moment ago, and my guard will be here shortly."

"Your guard, is it?" a second man said. Grey stubble covered his gaunt face. "And what would they be guarding, my little lord? Is that a silver pin I see there on your cloak?"

"Pretty," said a woman's voice. She scarcely looked like a woman; tall and lean, with the same hard face as the others, her hair hidden beneath a bowl-shaped halfhelmet. The spear she held was eight feet of black oak, tipped in rusted steel.

"Let's have a look," said the big bald man.

Bran watched him anxiously. The man's clothes were filthy, fallen almost to pieces, patched here with brown and here with blue and there with a dark green, and faded everywhere to grey, but once that cloak might have been black. The grey stubbly man wore black rags too, he saw with a sudden start. Suddenly Bran remembered the oathbreaker his father had beheaded, the day they had found the wolf pups; that man had worn black as well, and Father said he had been a deserter from the Night's Watch. No man is more dangerous, he remembered Lord Eddard saying. The deserter knows his life is forfeit if he is taken, so he will not flinch from any crime, no matter how vile or cruel.

"The pin, lad," the big man said. He held out his hand.

"We'll take the horse too," said another of them, a woman shorter than Robb, with a broad flat face and lank yellow hair. "Get down, and be quick about it." A knife slid from her sleeve into her hand, its edge jagged as a saw.

"No," Bran blurted. "I can't."

The big man grabbed his reins before Bran could think to wheel Dancer around and gallop off. "You can, lordling... and will, if you know what's good for you."