

“Unless he was slain as well,” Ser Jaremy insisted.

The words hurt, even now. It had been so long, it seemed folly to cling to the hope that Ben Stark was still alive, but Jon Snow was nothing if not stubborn.

“It has been close on half a year since Benjen left us, my lord,” Ser Jaremy went on. “The forest is vast. The wildlings might have fallen on him anywhere. I’d wager these two were the last survivors of his party, on their way back to us... but the enemy caught them before they could reach the safety of the Wall. The corpses are still fresh, these men cannot have been dead more than a day

“No,” Samwell Tarly squeaked.

Jon was startled. Sam’s nervous, high-pitched voice was the last he would have expected to hear. The fat boy was frightened of the officers, and Ser Jaremy was not known for his patience.

“I did not ask for your views, boy,” Rykker said coldly.

“Let him speak, ser,” Jon blurted.

Mormont’s eyes flicked from Sam to Jon and back again. “If the lad has something to say, I’ll hear him out. Come closer, boy. We can’t see you behind those horses.”

Sam edged past Jon and the garrons, sweating profusely. “My lord, it... it can’t be a day or... look... the blood...”

“Yes?” Mormont growled impatiently. “Blood, what of it?”

“He soils his smallclothes at the sight of it,” Chett shouted out, and the rangers laughed.

Sam mopped at the sweat on his brow. “You... you can see where Ghost... Jon’s direwolf... you can see where he tore off that man’s hand, and yet... the stump hasn’t bled, look...” He waved a hand. “My father... L-lord Randyll, he, he made me watch him dress animals sometimes, when... after...” Sam shook his head from side to side, his chins quivering. Now that he had looked at the bodies, he could not seem to look away. “A fresh kill... the blood would still flow, my lords. Later... later it would be clotted, like a... a jelly, thick and... and...” He looked as though he was going to be sick. “This man... look at the wrist, it’s all... crusty... dry... like...”

Jon saw at once what Sam meant. He could see the torn veins in the dead man’s wrist, iron worms in the pale flesh. His blood was a black dust. Yet Jaremy Rykker was unconvinced. “If they’d been dead much longer than a day, they’d be ripe by now, boy. They don’t even smell.”

Dywen, the gnarled old forester who liked to boast that he could smell snow coming on, sidled closer to the corpses and took a whiff. “Well, they’re no pansy flowers, but... m’lord has the truth of it. There’s no corpse stink.”

“They... they aren’t rotting.” Sam pointed, his fat finger shaking only a little. “Look, there’s... there’s no maggots or... or... worms or anything... they’ve been lying here in the woods, but they... they haven’t been chewed or eaten by animals... only Ghost... otherwise they’re... they’re...”

“Untouched,” Jon said softly. “And Ghost is different. The dogs and the horses won’t go near them.”

The rangers exchanged glances; they could see it was true, every man of them. Mormont frowned, glancing from the corpses to the dogs. “Chett, bring the hounds closer.”