

“What is it?” Bran asked.

Yoren wiped his fingers on his vest. “There’s hard news, m’lords, and a cruel way to pay you for your meat and mead, but the man as asks the question must bear the answer. Stark’s gone.”

One of the other men said, “The Old Bear sent him out to look for Waymar Royce, and he’s late returning, my lord.”

“Too long,” Yoren said. “Most like he’s dead.”

“My uncle is not dead,” Robb Stark said loudly, anger in his tones. He rose from the bench and laid his hand on the hilt of his sword. “Do you hear me? My uncle is not dead!” His voice rang against the stone walls, and Bran was suddenly afraid.

Old sour-smelling Yoren looked up at Robb, unimpressed. “Whatever you say, m’lord,” he said. He sucked at a piece of meat between his teeth.

The youngest of the black brothers shifted uncomfortably in his seat. “There’s not a man on the Wall knows the haunted forest better than Benjen Stark. He’ll find his way back.”

“Well,” said Yoren, “maybe he will and maybe he won’t. Good men have gone into those woods before, and never come out.”

All Bran could think of was Old Nan’s story of the Others and the last hero, hounded through the white woods by dead men and spiders big as hounds. He was afraid for a moment, until he remembered how that story ended. “The children will help him,” he blurted, “the children of the forest!”

Theon Greyjoy sniggered, and Maester Luwin said, “Bran, the children of the forest have been dead and gone for thousands of years. All that is left of them are the faces in the trees.”

“Down here, might be that’s true, Maester,” Yoren said, “but up past the Wall, who’s to say? Up there, a man can’t always tell what’s alive and what’s dead.”

That night, after the plates had been cleared, Robb carried Bran up to bed himself. Grey Wind led the way, and Summer came close behind. His brother was strong for his age, and Bran was as light as a bundle of rags, but the stairs were steep and dark, and Robb was breathing hard by the time they reached the top.

He put Bran into bed, covered him with blankets, and blew out the candle. For a time Robb sat beside him in the dark. Bran wanted to talk to him, but he did not know what to say. “We’ll find a horse for you, I promise,” Robb whispered at last.

“Are they ever coming back?” Bran asked him.

“Yes,” Robb said with such hope in his voice that Bran knew he was hearing his brother and not just Robb the Lord. “Mother will be home soon. Maybe we can ride out to meet her when she comes. Wouldn’t that surprise her, to see you ahorse?” Even in the dark room, Bran could feel his brother’s smile. “And afterward, we’ll ride north to see the Wall. We won’t even tell Jon we’re coming, we’ll just be there one day, you and me. It will be an adventure.”

“An adventure,” Bran repeated wistfully. He heard his brother sob. The room was so dark he could not see the tears on Robb’s face, so he reached out and found his hand. Their fingers twined together.