

Royce nodded. "Bright lad. We've had a few light frosts this past week, and a quick flurry of snow now and then, but surely no cold fierce enough to kill eight grown men. Men clad in fur and leather, let me remind you, with shelter near at hand, and the means of making fire." The knight's smile was cocksure. "Will, lead us there. I would see these dead men for myself."

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."