

Another voice broke in. "You know where I'd be if it was me? I'd be in Mole's Town, digging for buried treasure." Toad's shrill laughter boomed through the trees. Jon's mare snorted.

"Keep quiet, all of you," Halder said. "I thought I heard something."

"Where? I didn't hear anything." The horses stopped.

"You can't hear yourself fart."

"I can too," Grenn insisted.

"Quiet!"

They all fell silent, listening. Jon found himself holding his breath. Sam, he thought. He hadn't gone to the Old Bear, but he hadn't gone to bed either, he'd woken the other boys. Damn them all. Come dawn, if they were not in their beds, they'd be named deserters too. What did they think they were doing?

The hushed silence seemed to stretch on and on. From where Jon crouched, he could see the legs of their horses through the branches. Finally Pyp spoke up. "What did you hear?"

"I don't know," Halder admitted. "A sound, I thought it might have been a horse but..."

"There's nothing here."

Out of the corner of his eye, Jon glimpsed a pale shape moving through the trees. Leaves rustled, and Ghost came bounding out of the shadows, so suddenly that Jon's mare started and gave a whinny. "There!" Halder shouted.

"I heard it too!"

"Traitor," Jon told the direwolf as he swung up into the saddle. He turned the mare's head to slide off through the trees, but they were on him before he had gone ten feet.

"Jon!" Pyp shouted after him.

"Pull up," Grenn said. "You can't outrun us all."

Jon wheeled around to face them, drawing his sword. "Get back. I don't wish to hurt you, but I will if I have to."

"One against seven?" Halder gave a signal. The boys spread out, surrounding him.

"What do you want with me?" Jon demanded.

"We want to take you back where you belong," Pyp said.

"I belong with my brother."

"We're your brothers now," Grenn said.

"They'll cut off your head if they catch you, you know," Toad put in with a nervous laugh. "This is so stupid, it's like something the Aurochs would do."

"I would not," Grenn said. "I'm no oathbreaker. I said the words and I meant them."

"So did I." Jon told them. "Don't you understand? They murdered my father. It's war, my brother Robb is fighting in the riverlands."

"We know," said Pyp solemnly. "Sam told us everything."

"We're sorry about your father," Grenn said, "but it doesn't matter. Once you say the words, you can't leave, no matter what."

"I have to," Jon said fervently.