

“Stiv, look how he’s strapped on.” The tall woman pointed with her spear. “Might be it’s the truth he’s telling.”

“Straps, is it?” Stiv said. He drew a dagger from a sheath at his belt. “There’s ways to deal with straps.”

“You some kind of cripple?” asked the short woman.

Bran flared. “I’m Brandon Stark of Winterfell, and you better let go of my horse, or I’ll see you all dead.”

The gaunt man with the grey stubbled face laughed. “The boy’s a Stark, true enough. Only a Stark would be fool enough to threaten where smarter men would beg.”

“Cut his little cock off and stuff it in his mouth,” suggested the short woman. “That should shut him up.”

“You’re as stupid as you are ugly, Hali,” said the tall woman. “The boy’s worth nothing dead, but alive... gods be damned, think what Mance would give to have Benjen Stark’s own blood to hostage!”

“Mance be damned,” the big man cursed. “You want to go back there, Osha? More fool you. Think the white walkers will care if you have a hostage?” He turned back to Bran and slashed at the strap around his thigh. The leather parted with a sigh.

The stroke had been quick and careless, biting deep. Looking down, Bran glimpsed pale flesh where the wool of his leggings had parted. Then the blood began to flow. He watched the red stain spread, feeling light-headed, curiously apart; there had been no pain, not even a hint of feeling. The big man grunted in surprise.

“Put down your steel now, and I promise you shall have a quick and painless death,” Robb called out.

Bran looked up in desperate hope, and there he was. The strength of the words were undercut by the way his voice cracked with strain. He was mounted, the bloody carcass of an elk slung across the back of his horse, his sword in a gloved hand.

“The brother,” said the man with the grey stubbly face.

“He’s a fierce one, he is,” mocked the short woman. Hali, they called her. “You mean to fight us, boy?”

“Don’t be a fool, lad. You’re one against six.” The tall woman, Osha, leveled her spear. “Off the horse, and throw down the sword. We’ll thank you kindly for the mount and for the venison, and you and your brother can be on your way.”

Robb whistled. They heard the faint sound of soft feet on wet leaves. The undergrowth parted, low-hanging branches giving up their accumulation of snow, and Grey Wind and Summer emerged from the green. Summer sniffed the air and growled.

“Wolves,” gasped Hali.

“Direwolves,” Bran said. Still half-grown, they were as large as any wolf he had ever seen, but the differences were easy to spot, if you knew what to look for. Maester Luwin and Farlen the kennelmaster had taught him. A direwolf had a bigger head and longer legs in proportion to its body, and its snout and jaw were markedly leaner and more pronounced. There was something