PROLOGUE

We should start back, Gared urged as the woods began to grow dark around them.

The wildlings are dead.

Do the dead frighten you? Ser Waymar Royce asked with just the hint of a smile.

Gared did not rise to the bait. He was an old man, past fifty, and he had seen the lordlings come andgo. Dead is dead, he said. We have no business with the dead.

Are they dead? Royce asked softly. What proof have we?

Will saw them, Gared said. If he says they are dead, thats proof enough for me.

Will had known they would drag him into the quarrel sooner or later. He wished it had been laterrather than sooner. My mother told me that dead men sing no songs, he put in.

My wet nurse said the same thing, Will, Royce replied. Never believe anything you hear at awomans tit. There are things to be learned even from the dead. His voice echoed, too loud in thetwilit forest.

We have a long ride before us, Gared pointed out. Eight days, maybe nine. And night isfalling.

Ser Waymar Royce glanced at the sky with disinterest. It does that every day about this time. Areyou unmanned by the dark, Gared?

Will could see the tightness around Gareds mouth, the barely suppressed anger in his eyes underthe thick black hood of his cloak. Gared had spent forty years in the Nights Watch, man and boy, andhe was not accustomed to being made light of. Yet it was more than that. Under the wounded pride,Will could sense something else in the older man. You could taste it; a nervous tension that cameperilous close to fear.

Will shared his unease. He had been four years on the Wall. The first time he had been sentbeyond, all the old stories had come rushing back, and his bowels had turned to water. He hadlaughed about it afterward. He was a veteran of a hundred rangings by now, and the endless darkwilderness that the southron called the haunted forest had no more terrors for him.

Until tonight. Something was different tonight. There was an edge to this darkness that made hishackles rise. Nine days they had been riding, north and northwest and then north again, farther andfarther from the Wall, hard on the track of a band of Wildling raiders. Each day had been worse thanthe day that had come before it. Today was the worst of all. A cold wind was blowing out of thenorth, and it made the trees rustle like living things. All day, Will had felt as though something werewatching him, something cold and implacable that loved him not. Gared had felt it too. Will wantednothing so much as to ride hellbent for the safety of the Wall, but that was not a feeling to share withyour commander.

Especially not a commander like this one.

Ser Waymar Royce was the youngest son of an ancient house with too many heirs. He was ahandsome youth of eighteen, grey-eyed and graceful and slender as a knife. Mounted on his hugeblack destrier, the knight towered above Will and Gared on their smaller garrons. He wore blackleather boots, black woolen pants, black moleskin gloves, and a fine supple coat of gleaming blackringmail over layers of black wool and boiled leather. Ser Waymar had been a Sworn Brother of theNights Watch for less than half a year, but no one could say he had not prepared for his vocation. Atleast insofar as his wardrobe was concerned.

His cloak was his crowning glory; sable, thick and black and soft as sin. Bet he killed them allhimself, he did, Gared told the barracks over wine, twisted their little heads off, our mightywarrior. They had all shared the laugh.

It is hard to take orders from a man you laughed at in your cups, Will reflected as he sat shiveringatop his garron. Gared must have felt the same.

Mormont said as we should track them, and we did, Gared said. Theyre dead. They shanttrouble us no more. Theres hard riding before us. I dont like this weather. If it snows, we could be afortnight getting back, and snows the best we can hope for. Ever seen an ice storm, my lord?

The lordling seemed not to hear him. He studied the deepening twilight in that half-bored, half-distracted way he had. Will had ridden with the knight long enough to understand that it was best notto interrupt him when he looked like that. Tell me again what you saw, Will. All the details. Leavenothing out.

Will had been a hunter before he joined the Nights Watch. Well, a poacher in truth. Mallisterfreeriders had caught him red-handed in the Mallisters own woods, skinning one of the Mallisters

own bucks, and it had been a choice of putting on the black or losing a hand. No one could movethrough the woods as silent as Will, and it had not taken the black brothers long to discover his talent.

The camp is two miles farther on, over that ridge, hard beside a stream, Will said. I got closeas I dared. Theres eight of them, men and women both. No children I could see. They put up a lean-to against the rock. The snows pretty well covered it now, but I could still make it out. No fireburning, but the firepit was still plain as day. No one moving. I watched a long time. No living manever lay so still.

Did you see any blood?

Well, no, Will admitted.

Did you see any weapons?

Some swords, a few bows. One man had an axe. Heavy-looking, double-bladed, a cruel piece ofiron. It was on the ground beside him, right by his hand.

Did you make note of the position of the bodies?

Will shrugged. A couple are sitting up against the rock. Most of them on the ground. Fallen, like.

Or sleeping, Royce suggested.

Fallen, Will insisted. Theres one woman up an ironwood, half-hid in the branches. A far-eyes. He smiled thinly. I took care she never saw me. When I got closer, I saw that she wasntmoving neither. Despite himself, he shivered.

You have a chill? Royce asked.

Some, Will muttered. The wind, mlord.

The young knight turned back to his grizzled man-at-arms. Frost-fallen leaves whispered past them,and Royces destrier moved restlessly. What do you think might have killed these men, Gared? SerWaymar asked casually. He adjusted the drape of his long sable cloak.

It was the cold, Gared said with iron certainty. I saw men freeze last winter, and the onebefore, when I was half a boy. Everyone talks about snows forty foot deep, and how the ice windcomes howling out of the north, but the real enemy is the cold. It steals up on you quieter than Will,and at first you shiver and your teeth chatter and you stamp your feet and dream of mulled wine andnice hot fires. It burns, it does. Nothing burns like the cold. But only for a while. Then it gets insideyou and starts to fill you up, and after a while you dont have the strength to fight it. Its easier just tosit down or go to sleep. They say you dont feel any pain toward the end. First you go weak anddrowsy, and everything starts to fade, and then its like sinking into a sea of warm milk. Peaceful,like.

Such eloquence, Gared, Ser Waymar observed. I never suspected you had it in you.

Ive had the cold in me too, lordling. Gared pulled back his hood, giving Ser Waymar a goodlong look at the stumps where his ears had been. Two ears, three toes, and the little finger off my lefthand. I got off light. We found my brother frozen at his watch, with a smile on his face.

Ser Waymar shrugged. You ought dress more warmly, Gared.

Gared glared at the lordling, the scars around his ear holes flushed red with anger where MaesterAemon had cut the ears away. Well see how warm you can dress when the winter comes. Hepulled up his hood and hunched over his garron, silent and sullen.

If Gared said it was the cold Will began.

Have you drawn any watches this past week, Will?

Yes, mlord. There never was a week when he did not draw a dozen bloody watches. What wasthe man driving at?

And how did you find the Wall?

Weeping, Will said, frowning. He saw it clear enough, now that the lordling had pointed it out.

They couldnt have froze. Not if the Wall was weeping. It wasnt cold enough.

Royce nodded. Bright lad. Weve had a few light frosts this past week, and a quick flurry of snownow 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 knights smile wascocksure. 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 toobey.

Will went in front, his shaggy little garron picking the way carefully through the undergrowth. Alight snow had fallen the night before, and there were stones and roots and hidden sinks lying justunder its crust, waiting for the careless and the unwary. Ser Waymar Royce came next, his great blackdestrier snorting impatiently. The warhorse was the wrong mount for ranging, but try and tell that tothe 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 toblack. 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 takethe 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, mlord. Its just over that ridge.

Royce paused a moment, staring off into the distance, his face reflective. A cold wind whisperedthrough the trees. His great sable cloak stirred behind like something half-alive.

Theres something wrong here, Gared muttered.

The young knight gave him a disdainful smile. Is there?

Cant you feel it? Gared asked. Listen to the darkness.

Will could feel it. Four years in the Nights 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 didnot 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-madefrom 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, mlord. Better aknife.

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. Ill see to it.

How big a fool are you, old man? If there are enemies in this wood, a fire is the last thing wewant.

Theres some enemies a fire will keep away, Gared said. Bears and direwolves and andother things

Ser Waymars mouth became a hard line. No fire.

Gareds hood shadowed his face, but Will could see the hard glitter in his eyes as he stared at theknight. For a moment he was afraid the older man would go for his sword. It was a short, ugly thing,its grip discolored by sweat, its edge nicked from hard use, but Will would not have given an iron bobfor the lordlings life if Gared pulled it from its scabbard.

Finally Gared looked down. No fire, he muttered, low under his breath.

Royce took it for acquiescence and turned away. Lead on, he said to Will.

Will threaded their way through a thicket, then started up the slope to the low ridge where he hadfound his vantage point under a sentinel tree. Under the thin crust of snow, the ground was damp andmuddy, slick footing, with rocks and hidden roots to trip you up. Will made no sound as he climbed.

Behind him, he heard the soft metallic slither of the lordlings ringmail, the rustle of leaves, andmuttered curses as reaching branches grabbed at his longsword and tugged on his splendid sablecloak.

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The great sentinel was right there at the top of the ridge, where Will had known it would be, itslowest branches a bare foot off the ground. Will slid in underneath, flat on his belly in the snow andthe mud, and looked down on the empty clearing below.

His heart stopped in his chest. For a moment he dared not breathe. Moonlight shone down on theclearing, the ashes of the firepit, the snow-covered lean-to, the great rock, the little half-frozen stream.

Everything was just as it had been a few hours ago.

They were gone. All the bodies were gone.

Gods! he heard behind him. A sword slashed at a branch as Ser Waymar Royce gained theridge. He stood there beside the sentinel, longsword in hand, his cloak billowing behind him as thewind came up, outlined nobly against the stars for all to see.

Get down! Will whispered urgently. Somethings wrong.

Royce did not move. He looked down at the empty clearing and laughed. Your dead men seem tohave moved camp, Will.

Wills voice abandoned him. He groped for words that did not come. It was not possible. His eyesswept back and forth over the abandoned campsite, stopped on the axe. A huge double-bladed battle-axe, still lying where he had seen it last, untouched. A valuable weapon On your feet, Will, Ser Waymar commanded. Theres no one here. I wont have you hidingunder a bush.

Reluctantly, Will obeyed.

Ser Waymar looked him over with open disapproval. I am not going back to Castle Black a failureon my first ranging. We will find these men. He glanced around. Up the tree. Be quick about it.

Look for a fire.

Will turned away, wordless. There was no use to argue. The wind was moving. It cut right throughhim. He went to the tree, a vaulting grey-green sentinel, and began to climb. Soon his hands weresticky with sap, and he was lost among the needles. Fear filled his gut like a meal he could not digest.

He whispered a prayer to the nameless gods of the wood, and slipped his dirk free of its sheath. Heput it between his teeth to keep both hands free for climbing. The taste of cold iron in his mouth gavehim comfort.

Down below, the lordling called out suddenly, Who goes there? Will heard uncertainty in thechallenge. He stopped climbing; he listened; he watched.

The woods gave answer: the rustle of leaves, the icy rush of the stream, a distant hoot of a snowowl.

The Others made no sound.

Will saw movement from the corner of his eye. Pale shapes gliding through the wood. He turnedhis head, glimpsed a white shadow in the darkness. Then it was gone. Branches stirred gently in thewind, scratching at one another with wooden fingers. Will opened his mouth to call down a warning,and the words seemed to freeze in his throat. Perhaps he was wrong. Perhaps it had only been a bird, areflection on the snow, some trick of the moonlight. What had he seen, after all?

Will, where are you? Ser Waymar called up. Can you see anything? He was turning in a slowcircle, suddenly wary, his sword in hand. He must have felt them, as Will felt them. There wasnothing to see. Answer me! Why is it so cold?

It was cold. Shivering, Will clung more tightly to his perch. His face pressed hard against the trunkof the sentinel. He could feel the sweet, sticky sap on his cheek.

A shadow emerged from the dark of the wood. It stood in front of Royce. Tall, it was, and gauntand hard as old bones, with flesh pale as milk. Its armor seemed to change color as it moved; here itwas white as new-fallen snow, there black as shadow, everywhere dappled with the deep grey-greenof the trees. The patterns ran like moonlight on water with every step it took.

Will heard the breath go out of Ser Waymar Royce in a long hiss. Come no farther, the lordlingwarned. His voice cracked like a boys. He threw the long sable cloak back over his shoulders, to free

his arms for battle, and took his sword in both hands. The wind had stopped. It was very cold.

The Other slid forward on silent feet. In its hand was a longsword like none that Will had ever seen.

No human metal had gone into the forging of that blade. It was alive with moonlight, translucent, ashard of crystal so thin that it seemed almost to vanish when seen edge-on. There was a faint blueshimmer to the thing, a ghost-light that played around its edges, and somehow Will knew it wassharper than any razor.

Ser Waymar met him bravely. Dance with me then. He lifted his sword high over his head,defiant. His hands trembled from the weight of it, or perhaps from the cold. Yet in that moment, Willthought, he was a boy no longer, but a man of the Nights Watch.

The Other halted. Will saw its eyes; blue, deeper and bluer than any human eyes, a blue that burnedlike ice. They fixed on the longsword trembling on high, watched the moonlight running cold alongthe metal. For a heartbeat he dared to hope.

They emerged silently from the shadows, twins to the first. Three of them four five SerWaymar may have felt the cold that came with them, but he never saw them, never heard them. Willhad to call out. It was his duty. And his death, if he did. He shivered, and hugged the tree, and keptthe silence.

The pale sword came shivering through the air.

Ser Waymar met it with steel. When the blades met, there was no ring of metal on metal; only ahigh, thin sound at the edge of hearing, like an animal screaming in pain. Royce checked a secondblow, and a third, then fell back a step. Another flurry of blows, and he fell back again.

Behind him, to right, to left, all around him, the watchers stood patient, faceless, silent, the shiftingpatterns of their delicate armor making them all but invisible in the wood. Yet they made no move tointerfere.

Again and again the swords met, until Will wanted to cover his ears against the strange anguishedkeening of their clash. Ser Waymar was panting from the effort now, his breath steaming in themoonlight. His blade was white with frost; the Others danced with pale blue light.

Then Royces parry came a beat too late. The pale sword bit through the ringmail beneath his arm.

The young lord cried out in pain. Blood welled between the rings. It steamed in the cold, and thedroplets seemed red as fire where they touched the snow. Ser Waymars fingers brushed his side. Hismoleskin glove came away soaked with red.

The Other said something in a language that Will did not know; his voice was like the cracking ofice on a winter lake, and the words were mocking.

Ser Waymar Royce found his fury. For Robert! he shouted, and he came up snarling, lifting thefrost-covered longsword with both hands and swinging it around in a flat sidearm slash with all hisweight behind it. The Others parry was almost lazy.

When the blades touched, the steel shattered.

A scream echoed through the forest night, and the longsword shivered into a hundred brittle pieces,the shards scattering like a rain of needles. Royce went to his knees, shrieking, and covered his eyes.

Blood welled between his fingers.

The watchers moved forward together, as if some signal had been given. Swords rose and fell, allin a deathly silence. It was cold butchery. The pale blades sliced through ringmail as if it were silk.

Will closed his eyes. Far beneath him, he heard their voices and laughter sharp as icicles.

When he found the courage to look again, a long time had passed, and the ridge below was empty.

He stayed in the tree, scarce daring to breathe, while the moon crept slowly across the black sky.

Finally, his muscles cramping and his fingers numb with cold, he climbed down.

Royces body lay facedown in the snow, one arm outflung. The thick sable cloak had been slashedin a dozen places. Lying dead like that, you saw how young he was. A boy.

He found what was left of the sword a few feet away, the end splintered and twisted like a treestruck by lightning. Will knelt, looked around warily, and snatched it up. The broken sword would behis proof. Gared would know what to make of it, and if not him, then surely that old bear Mormont orMaester Aemon. Would Gared still be waiting with the horses? He had to hurry.

Will rose. Ser Waymar Royce stood over him.

His fine clothes were a tatter, his face a ruin. A shard from his sword transfixed the blind whitepupil of his left eye.

The right eye was open. The pupil burned blue. It saw.

The broken sword fell from nerveless fingers. Will closed his eyes to pray. Long, elegant handsbrushed his cheek, then tightened around his throat. They were gloved in the finest moleskin andsticky with blood, yet the touch was icy cold.

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BRAN

The morning had dawned clear and cold, with a crispness that hinted at the end of summer. They setforth at daybreak to see a man beheaded, twenty in all, and Bran rode among them, nervous withexcitement. This was the first time he had been deemed old enough to go with his lord father and hisbrothers to see the kings justice done. It was the ninth year of summer, and the seventh of Brans life.

The man had been taken outside a small holdfast in the hills. Robb thought he was a wildling, hissword sworn to Mance Rayder, the King-beyond-the-Wall. It made Brans skin prickle to think of it.

He remembered the hearth tales Old Nan told them. The wildlings were cruel men, she said, slaversand slayers and thieves. They consorted with giants and ghouls, stole girl children in the dead ofnight, and drank blood from polished horns. And their women lay with the Others in the Long Nightto sire terrible half-human children.

But the man they found bound hand and foot to the holdfast wall awaiting the kings justice wasold and scrawny, not much taller than Robb. He had lost both ears and a finger to frostbite, and hedressed all in black, the same as a brother of the Nights Watch, except that his furs were ragged andgreasy.

The breath of man and horse mingled, steaming, in the cold morning air as his lord father had theman cut down from the wall and dragged before them. Robb and Jon sat tall and still on their horses,with Bran between them on his pony, trying to seem older than seven, trying to pretend that hed seenall this before. A faint wind blew through the holdfast gate. Over their heads flapped the banner of theStarks of Winterfell: a grey direwolf racing across an ice-white field.

Brans father sat solemnly on his horse, long brown hair stirring in the wind. His closely trimmedbeard was shot with white, making him look older than his thirty-five years. He had a grim cast to hisgrey eyes this day, and he seemed not at all the man who would sit before the fire in the evening andtalk softly of the age of heroes and the children of the forest. He had taken off Fathers face, Branthought, and donned the face of Lord Stark of Winterfell.

There were questions asked and answers given there in the chill of morning, but afterward Brancould not recall much of what had been said. Finally his lord father gave a command, and two of hisguardsmen dragged the ragged man to the ironwood stump in the center of the square. They forced hishead down onto the hard black wood. Lord Eddard Stark dismounted and his ward Theon Greyjoybrought forth the sword. Ice, that sword was called. It was as wide across as a mans hand, andtaller even than Robb. The blade was Valyrian steel, spell-forged and dark as smoke. Nothing held anedge like Valyrian steel.

His father peeled off his gloves and handed them to Jory Cassel, the captain of his household guard.

He took hold of Ice with both hands and said, In the name of Robert of the House Baratheon, theFirst of his Name, King of the Andals and the Rhoynar and the First Men, Lord of the SevenKingdoms and Protector of the Realm, by the word of Eddard of the House Stark, Lord of Winterfelland Warden of the North, I do sentence you to die. He lifted the greatsword high above his head.

Brans bastard brother Jon Snow moved closer. Keep the pony well in hand, he whispered. Anddont look away. Father will know if you do.

Bran kept his pony well in hand, and did not look away.

His father took off the mans head with a single sure stroke. Blood sprayed out across the snow, asred as summerwine. One of the horses reared and had to be restrained to keep from bolting. Brancould not take his eyes off the blood. The snows around the stump drank it eagerly, reddening as he

watched.

The head bounced off a thick root and rolled. It came up near Greyjoys feet. Theon was a lean,dark youth of nineteen who found everything amusing. He laughed, put his boot on the head, andkicked it away.

Ass, Jon muttered, low enough so Greyjoy did not hear. He put a hand on Brans shoulder, andBran looked over at his bastard brother. You did well, Jon told him solemnly. Jon was fourteen, anold hand at justice.

It seemed colder on the long ride back to Winterfell, though the wind had died by then and the sunwas higher in the sky. Bran rode with his brothers, well ahead of the main party, his pony strugglinghard to keep up with their horses.

The deserter died bravely, Robb said. He was big and broad and growing every day, with hismothers coloring, the fair skin, red-brown hair, and blue eyes of the Tullys of Riverrun. He hadcourage, at the least.

No, Jon Snow said quietly. It was not courage. This one was dead of fear. You could see it inhis eyes, Stark. Jons eyes were a grey so dark they seemed almost black, but there was little they didnot see. He was of an age with Robb, but they did not look alike. Jon was slender where Robb wasmuscular, dark where Robb was fair, graceful and quick where his half brother was strong and fast.

Robb was not impressed. The Others take his eyes, he swore. He died well. Race you to thebridge?

Done, Jon said, kicking his horse forward. Robb cursed and followed, and they galloped offdown the trail, Robb laughing and hooting, Jon silent and intent. The hooves of their horses kicked upshowers of snow as they went.

Bran did not try to follow. His pony could not keep up. He had seen the ragged mans eyes, and hewas thinking of them now. After a while, the sound of Robbs laughter receded, and the woods grewsilent again.

So deep in thought was he that he never heard the rest of the party until his father moved up to ridebeside him. Are you well, Bran? he asked, not unkindly.

Yes, Father, Bran told him. He looked up. Wrapped in his furs and leathers, mounted on hisgreat warhorse, his lord father loomed over him like a giant. Robb says the man died bravely, but Jonsays he was afraid.

What do you think? his father asked.

Bran thought about it. Can a man still be brave if hes afraid?

That is the only time a man can be brave, his father told him. Do you understand why I did it?

He was a wildling, Bran said. They carry off women and sell them to the Others.

His lord father smiled. Old Nan has been telling you stories again. In truth, the man was anoathbreaker, a deserter from the Nights Watch. No man is more dangerous. The deserter knows hislife is forfeit if he is taken, so he will not flinch from any crime, no matter how vile. But you mistakeme. The question was not why the man had to die, but why I must do it.

Bran had no answer for that. King Robert has a headsman, he said, uncertainly.

He does, his father admitted. As did the Targaryen kings before him. Yet our way is the olderway. The blood of the First Men still flows in the veins of the Starks, and we hold to the belief thatthe man who passes the sentence should swing the sword. If you would take a mans life, you owe itto him to look into his eyes and hear his final words. And if you cannot bear to do that, then perhapsthe man does not deserve to die.

One day, Bran, you will be Robbs bannerman, holding a keep of your own for your brother andyour king, and justice will fall to you. When that day comes, you must take no pleasure in the task,but neither must you look away. A ruler who hides behind paid executioners soon forgets what deathis.

That was when Jon reappeared on the crest of the hill before them. He waved and shouted down atthem. Father, Bran, come quickly, see what Robb has found! Then he was gone again.

Jory rode up beside them. Trouble, my lord?

Beyond a doubt, his lord father said. Come, let us see what mischief my sons have rooted outnow. He sent his horse into a trot. Jory and Bran and the rest came after.

They found Robb on the riverbank north of the bridge, with Jon still mounted beside him. The latesummer snows had been heavy this moonturn. Robb stood knee-deep in white, his hood pulled back

so the sun shone in his hair. He was cradling something in his arm, while the boys talked in hushed,excited voices.

The riders picked their way carefully through the drifts, groping for solid footing on the hidden,uneven ground. Jory Cassel and Theon Greyjoy were the first to reach the boys. Greyjoy waslaughing and joking as he rode. Bran heard the breath go out of him. Gods! he exclaimed,struggling to keep control of his horse as he reached for his sword.

Jorys sword was already out. Robb, get away from it! he called as his horse reared under him.

Robb grinned and looked up from the bundle in his arms. She cant hurt you, he said. Shesdead, Jory.

Bran was afire with curiosity by then. He would have spurred the pony faster, but his father madethem dismount beside the bridge and approach on foot. Bran jumped off and ran.

By then Jon, Jory, and Theon Greyjoy had all dismounted as well. What in the seven hells is it?

Greyjoy was saying.

A wolf, Robb told him.

A freak, Greyjoy said. Look at the size of it.

Brans heart was thumping in his chest as he pushed through a waist-high drift to his brothers side.

Half-buried in bloodstained snow, a huge dark shape slumped in death. Ice had formed in itsshaggy grey fur, and the faint smell of corruption clung to it like a womans perfume. Bran glimpsedblind eyes crawling with maggots, a wide mouth full of yellowed teeth. But it was the size of it thatmade him gasp. It was bigger than his pony, twice the size of the largest hound in his fathers kennel.

Its no freak, Jon said calmly. Thats a direwolf. They grow larger than the other kind.

Theon Greyjoy said, Theres not been a direwolf sighted south of the Wall in two hundred years.

I see one now, Jon replied.

Bran tore his eyes away from the monster. That was when he noticed the bundle in Robbs arms.

He gave a cry of delight and moved closer. The pup was a tiny ball of grey-black fur, its eyes stillclosed. It nuzzled blindly against Robbs chest as he cradled it, searching for milk among his leathers,making a sad little whimpery sound. Bran reached out hesitantly. Go on, Robb told him. You cantouch him.

Bran gave the pup a quick nervous stroke, then turned as Jon said, Here you go. His half brotherput a second pup into his arms. There are five of them. Bran sat down in the snow and hugged thewolf pup to his face. Its fur was soft and warm against his cheek.

Direwolves loose in the realm, after so many years, muttered Hullen, the master of horse. I likeit not.

It is a sign, Jory said.

Father frowned. This is only a dead animal, Jory, he said. Yet he seemed troubled. Snowcrunched under his boots as he moved around the body. Do we know what killed her?

Theres something in the throat, Robb told him, proud to have found the answer before hisfather even asked. There, just under the jaw.

His father knelt and groped under the beasts head with his hand. He gave a yank and held it up forall to see. A foot of shattered antler, tines snapped off, all wet with blood.

A sudden silence descended over the party. The men looked at the antler uneasily, and no one daredto speak. Even Bran could sense their fear, though he did not understand.

His father tossed the antler to the side and cleansed his hands in the snow. Im surprised she livedlong enough to whelp, he said. His voice broke the spell.

Maybe she didnt, Jory said. Ive heard tales maybe the bitch was already dead when thepups came.

Born with the dead, another man put in. Worse luck.

No matter, said Hullen. They be dead soon enough too.

Bran gave a wordless cry of dismay.

The sooner the better, Theon Greyjoy agreed. He drew his sword. Give the beast here, Bran.

The little thing squirmed against him, as if it heard and understood. No! Bran cried out fiercely.

Its mine.

Put away your sword, Greyjoy, Robb said. For a moment he sounded as commanding as theirfather, like the lord he would someday be. We will keep these pups.

You cannot do that, boy, said Harwin, who was Hullens son.

It be a mercy to kill them, Hullen said.

Bran looked to his lord father for rescue, but got only a frown, a furrowed brow. Hullen speakstruly, son. Better a swift death than a hard one from cold and starvation.

No! He could feel tears welling in his eyes, and he looked away. He did not want to cry in frontof his father.

Robb resisted stubbornly. Ser Rodriks red bitch whelped again last week, he said. It was asmall litter, only two live pups. Shell have milk enough.

Shell rip them apart when they try to nurse.

Lord Stark, Jon said. It was strange to hear him call Father that, so formal. Bran looked at himwith desperate hope. There are five pups, he told Father. Three male, two female.

What of it, Jon?

You have five trueborn children, Jon said. Three sons, two daughters. The direwolf is the sigilof your House. Your children were meant to have these pups, my lord.

Bran saw his fathers face change, saw the other men exchange glances. He loved Jon with all hisheart at that moment. Even at seven, Bran understood what his brother had done. The count had comeright only because Jon had omitted himself. He had included the girls, included even Rickon, thebaby, but not the bastard who bore the surname Snow, the name that custom decreed be given to allthose in the north unlucky enough to be born with no name of their own.

Their father understood as well. You want no pup for yourself, Jon? he asked softly.

The direwolf graces the banners of House Stark, Jon pointed out. I am no Stark, Father.

Their lord father regarded Jon thoughtfully. Robb rushed into the silence he left. I will nurse himmyself, Father, he promised. I will soak a towel with warm milk, and give him suck from that.

Me too! Bran echoed.

The lord weighed his sons long and carefully with his eyes. Easy to say, and harder to do. I willnot have you wasting the servants time with this. If you want these pups, you will feed themyourselves. Is that understood?

Bran nodded eagerly. The pup squirmed in his grasp, licked at his face with a warm tongue.

You must train them as well, their father said. You must train them. The kennelmaster willhave nothing to do with these monsters, I promise you that. And the gods help you if you neglectthem, or brutalize them, or train them badly. These are not dogs to beg for treats and slink off at akick. A direwolf will rip a mans arm off his shoulder as easily as a dog will kill a rat. Are you sureyou want this?

Yes, Father, Bran said.

Yes, Robb agreed.

The pups may die anyway, despite all you do.

They wont die, Robb said. We wont let them die.

Keep them, then. Jory, Desmond, gather up the other pups. Its time we were back toWinterfell.

It was not until they were mounted and on their way that Bran allowed himself to taste the sweet airof victory. By then, his pup was snuggled inside his leathers, warm against him, safe for the long ridehome. Bran was wondering what to name him.

Halfway across the bridge, Jon pulled up suddenly.

What is it, Jon? their lord father asked.

Cant you hear it?

Bran could hear the wind in the trees, the clatter of their hooves on the ironwood planks, thewhimpering of his hungry pup, but Jon was listening to something else.

There, Jon said. He swung his horse around and galloped back across the bridge. They watchedhim dismount where the direwolf lay dead in the snow, watched him kneel. A moment later he was riding back to them, smiling.

He must have crawled away from the others, Jon said.

Or been driven away, their father said, looking at the sixth pup. His fur was white, where the rest of the litter was grey. His eyes were as red as the blood of the ragged man who had died thatmorning. Bran thought it curious that this pup alone would have opened his eyes while the others

were still blind.

An albino, Theon Greyjoy said with wry amusement. This one will die even faster than theothers.

Jon Snow gave his fathers ward a long, chilling look. I think not, Greyjoy, he said. This onebelongs to me.