Obligatory disclaimer: I don’t own ASOIAF; that honour goes to GRRM.

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I also want to thank everyone for their support and encouragement.

18th Day of the 8th Moon

Jon Snow

He awoke, fully rested. As usual, Val's bare form pleasantly clung to him under the thick furs. Being married… felt no different than before, but as time passed, Jon felt a sense of pressure on his shoulders, though that might have been because he had to lead over ten thousand men and women. Things were easy now, but Jon was all too well aware of how relentless and cruel the rising tide of darkness could be.

At least his sleep had been good of late - or, as soon as he had managed to tune out his connection to Ghost and the enormous pack during his dream, allowing him to wake as soon as his body had finished resting. With some effort and experimenting, wolf dreams could be muffled - his increased talent for warging gave him far greater power. Nearly three dozen direwolves now, over three hundred ordinary wolves - all under the command of his shaggy companion. The numbers would be far higher if he had not requested Ghost to stop his rabid recruitment.

The wolves drove off prey but at least could feast on wights - though Jon was unsure if having them gain a taste for human flesh was wise, he didn't have that much choice. Food was not bountiful here, and every pound of meat mattered.

Truth be told, Jon had never gone out of his way to bind the animals to himself - aside from the accident with Ramsay's four hounds, but any attempt of connecting remained effortless. He was incredibly wary despite his newfound prowess in skinchanging - and maybe even because of it. Magic was scary and dangerous, and Jon felt like a blind man wandering in the dark. The ability was too helpful and powerful to ignore, so he only had one choice - mastering it.

Even so, he was careful not to delve too deep into the minds of the wolves without thinking things through carefully.

His connection to Ghost was instinctive, like a part of Jon that had always been there. Slipping into the mind of the snowy direwolf was as natural as breathing, and even without that, he could always discern Ghost's location. His shaggy companion reacted to his feelings and thoughts immediately, as if he could read his mind, and Jon used that to great effect, even subconsciously. His companion's feelings, emotions, and senses could merge with his own almost seamlessly, but Jon couldn't help but grow wary of such things - where did the man end and the direwolf begin?

Would indulging in the depths of the connection without slipping into Ghost's mind make him more beast than man? Jon had noticed that his impulses and feelings had turned more *feral*, more primal. But

he was not the only one to change - aside from his enormous size, the white direwolf had become uncannily intelligent, even more so than the last time, despite being far younger.

Ghost's control of the pack was also ironclad, letting Jon be free of the burden of more direct connections. Not that he couldn't directly tap into their minds if he focused, but he preferred not to.

The other skinchangers couldn't truly be trusted to teach him anything either - half of them were more beast than man, but then again, so were most of the feral savages that called themselves free folk.

Reluctantly, Jon stopped his mind from wandering and gently removed himself from Val's clutches, making her grumble in her sleep. Her long, silvery locks were mesmerising, and he struggled for a few heartbeats to tear his gaze away from his wife.

Surprisingly, his marriage to a spearwife had strengthened his already growing control over the tribes and chieftains that decided to follow him, along with their respect. Even if the free folk did not understand marriage alliances, binding by blood was something they understood.

Jon quickly donned his tunic along with a ringmail, strapped Dark Sister to his belt, and left the tent, leaving Val to sleep, but not before leaving a soft kiss atop her brow. His fierce wife drove herself harshly every day, eager to prove herself - insisting on aiding him in every way possible while participating in other mundane tasks and running herself ragged in the process. There had not been a single time he had not gone out fighting where Val didn't join to watch his back. Thankfully, she was wise enough not to risk fighting close quarters and remained with the archers and hunters, always guarded by a handful of direwolves. Even now, two brown and one grey direwolves were idly napping around the tent.

Their presence was not at his behest - Jon *could* command them directly but refrained from doing so.

Just by looking at the three beasts, he felt the urge to reach out with his mind and *dominate* their very beings, but he resisted. There was no need - Ghost was in tune with his desires, and the white direwolf had also grown protective of Val. He had subconsciously formed direct links to some wolves in battle before but refrained from reaching out to the wolves directly outside of fighting. Not using the new connection made it slowly fade with time.

Though, for some reason, all the wolves and direwolves obeyed him unconditionally like trained hounds, even the rare wild one his pack hadn't adopted, not that Jon would complain. It also went in the other direction - he could instinctively understand the body language of the wolves and their moods with but a single glance. His intuition also told him they could be trusted, like a close subordinate or a family member…

The sky was still dark outside, but dawn was fast approaching, judging by the soft glow to the east. After ten minutes, Jon found Leaf by one expiring bonfire, the seething embers looking so dull as if they were about to die out any moment. Yet the Singer was not alone.

He spared the slightest glance at Melisandre, "Leave us."

The Essosi woman swiftly bowed before she fled, and he did not have to look to confirm that she was gone - the scent of incense disappeared with her. The presence of the Red Witch irked him, but even Jon would not chase away or slay a servant of the gods without cause. Inviting the ire of the divine, especially someone like R'hllor, was unwise.

“Your dislike for the red priestess continues to baffle me,” Leaf shook her head as he sat by the bonfire.

A pity, he had been so close to driving her away if not for the Singer’s interference. Yet it was within the rules he had set, so Jon begrudgingly let it go.

“I’ve met her ilk before,” he grunted, unwillingly remembering his dealings with the witch in the future that would never be. “Silver tongues promising grand gifts of fortune and success, yet each one more poisoned than the last.”

Leaf pulled in her red-leaf cloak tighter and stared into the dying embers.

"Only fools dare to challenge the whims of the divine. We, mortals, are cruel beings, and our gods are no lesser. Sorcerers, warlocks, and priests all walk the tight line between greatness and insanity. Yet sometimes even they need some sound guidance."

He shook his head with a sigh, “And what advice would a follower of the red god require from you?”

“She’s merely lost,” Leaf shrugged, but the edge of her lips quirked up as if she was laughing silently. “I’ve seen her like before - priestly orders devoted to their divine patrons with mind, body and soul. But what happens when such devotion is spurned?”

The words made his mind halt for a short moment - an ardent believer like Melisandre, scorned by R’hllor?

"As long as she pulls her weight and makes no trouble," Jon exhaled slowly, pushing down his surging fury. One single wrong step from Melisandre, and he would kick her out. Yet the Essosi woman was cunning and cautious enough and avoided her usual vexing zealotry. But that spoke of Melisandre's ability to walk the fine line of offence more than anything else - the Red Priestess knew how much to push.

However, if Leaf was truly correct - then the lack of sermons and unveiled attempts of seduction and religious conversions were because of her dwindling conviction. Not that he’d ever complain - Jon would never miss the endless, fervent praise of *Red Rahloo,* as Big Bucket loved to call it.

“As you say, Jon Snow,” Leaf inclined her head with amusement, but something he couldn’t decipher gleamed in her large, golden eyes, and then her face turned serious. “How may I be of help to the Warg Lord?”

The title irked him, but it was the least dangerous one he could claim, aside from an obscure reference to a skinchanging monarch from Seadragon Point before the Coming of the Andals. Jon had little desire to declare himself king or chieftain, which carried dangerous connotations south of the Wall and could

greatly inconvenience his kin in Winterfell. Warg Lord only implied mastery over canines… which was not something he could even begin to dispute.

“There’s no need to stand on courtesy with me, Leaf,” Jon harrumphed. “I was wondering if you possess some knowledge of the art of skinchanging?”

“Ah, I do, but not much - I have spoken to *Deer*,” she snorted with amusement at the name, “about it. And the three-eyed crow, he called himself a master of the art.”

Deer was the grey-spotted Singer with an owl companion, or at least the name Jon had given her. And Bloodraven's notorious reputation as a sorcerer was deserved after living for over a century and wielding the magicks of yore.

“Well, I have some queries.”

"Do ask," Leaf gestured gracefully with her clawed hand. "I expected such questions to come far earlier."

Truth be told, he had been *cautious* about magic, especially since Jon had seen the darker aspects of it with Melisandre and a few mad skinchangers. Warging had come to him so quickly, so effortlessly, that Jon had taken it for granted and avoided taking a closer look in favour of the many challenges he had to face. He had never planned to live this long, so it hadn't mattered then.

Yet, gods laughed at the plans of men, and now, he who had sworn never to take a wife before was alive and wed. And he could no longer ignore certain things, no matter how handy.

“I’m mostly interested in the dangers and things I should avoid,” Jon said, vaguely remembering Maester Luwin’s obscure warnings about doom, danger, and glass swords.

Though, he doubted the old maester would use the metaphor of a glass sword if he could lay his eyes on the lethal crystalline blades that rivalled Valyrian Steel with laughable ease.

“A powerful skinchanger can supposedly dominate the mind of another human,” Leaf’s words were nought but a whisper, but they chilled Jon far more than the cold ever could. “Or even giants and singers. Of course, it’s considered an abomination and such things would only work on the weak of will. Failure would leave you half-mad or well - like that wildling; what was his name, Sixskins?”

The words brought him to a halt, and he tried to replay that day he entered Mance’s camp in his mind and scowled.

“You mean the pressure on my mind I felt during that fight was his attempt at possessing me?”

“Indeed,” Leaf bobbed her head, making her brown, red, and gold locks rustle like an autumn tree in the wind. “The old gods guard their champions jealously, but even without them, your mind would have easily been strong enough to repel a greedy skinchanger.”

But whether it would affect his fight was another concern altogether. Truth be told, Jon knew not what had caused Varamyr's death but didn't bother asking - he had far more urgent matters to deal with that

day. Though Sixskins had turned out to be unique in death - it looked like his eyes and brain had been boiled from the inside.

“Anything else to be wary of?” Being favoured by the gods was surprising, but after hearing Leaf say it so many times, Jon began believing there was some grain of truth in her words. And it was not exactly a bad feeling, yet it left him weary - the old gods were mercurial and could turn harsh in a heartbeat, just like the nature and weather they embodied - and any favour would be fleeting.

Leaf hummed, "Eating human flesh or mating with a beast while in an animal's skin is another, but both of those are your inability to control your companion taken to the extreme. From what little the three-eyed crow and Deer have told me, skinchanging is akin to an eternal tug of war, where losing control would turn you into a beast in human skin. You must rule the beast, or it shall rule you. Those with many a companion are at even greater risk."

It was good that he was bound only to Ghost and Ramsay's former hounds, then. He shuddered to think how much hundreds of wolves could influence him.

Yet, that brought up another question. “Why can I control canines to such a degree without even slipping into their skin?”

“I don’t know,” Leaf giggled at his surprise as if she was a young girl, not an old being who had seen nearly two centuries; the sound was like the gentle rustling of leaves and the soothing song of the wind. “Power? The gods’ favour? Luck? Maybe a mix of all three. Not even I have all the answers. Though, there’s one last thing you must be wary of - death.”

“Death?”

“Indeed, dying in the skin of another could let you experience death many a time. Yet it carries hidden dangers - the experience could twist or even break your mind, or you might get a taste for recklessness.”

Jon could only nod at her advice. Dying was not *pleasant* - he should know after doing it twice. What Leaf described was intimately familiar - the dull torment of his previous existence and his reckless disregard for his own well-being was still fresh in his mind.

Worries about skinchanging mostly assuaged, his gaze moved from the now snuffed-out embers towards the east, where the sun peeked behind the horizon, finally banishing the lingering darkness of the night.

Despite his reservations, the Singers of the Earth had proved themselves fervently leal and followed his command through thick and thin. Even now, Leaf was teaching the rest of them to speak the common tongue, although it was a slow endeavour. The assistance of the Singer before him had been more than invaluable. Jon knew of the price of fealty - true, undying loyalty was hard to nurture and even harder to find in the hearts of men.

Yet, he had unknowingly earned it from beings straight out of legend.

Any caution about the Singers had long vanished; they had proven more than true despite their inhuman form.

“What about you?” Jon found himself asking. “Is there something I can aid you with?”

No matter what, Lord Stark's lessons always stuck by him - loyalty and fealty were cloaks to be shared. Big or small, any liege, lord, or knight had obligations to those under their command in return for their allegiance. One could not keep taking endlessly without giving something in return.

Leaf stilled like a statue for what felt like forever before finally speaking, “Those who sing the song of the earth have made their peace with life and death long ago, Jon.”

“Surely there is something-”

“Following you has been more than enough,” there was sadness in her voice, but it was mixed with steel. “Meeting you has been our greatest gift, Jon Snow. I had once feared that we would dwindle into oblivion, long forgotten and without a purpose. But now, even as our twilight approaches, we will not go quietly into the night.”

Pride and acceptance warred in her golden gaze; at this moment, Jon Snow felt the weight on his shoulders more than ever. His very survival had never been more in question deep into the territory of the Cold Shadows, but his desire to win, succeed, and live raged like an angry firestorm within.

He had been wrong, oh, so *wrong*, about the Singers being defeated and walking straight to their death.

“I shall prove worthy of your loyalty,” he promised solemnly as his hand found the hilt of Dark Sister and gripped it with all his strength. Leaf nodded wordlessly and went towards the grove, leaving him alone by the ashes of the cold campfire.

Mind wandering, Jon stood up and began walking in no direction whatsoever. Almost everything he had done before had been with a purpose in mind, but letting himself wander was strangely refreshing. His gaze roamed just as much as his feet did - as dawn had already broken, the camp had begun to come to life.

Many had already busied themselves with their task, and Jon idly nodded in greeting as he walked by over the packed dirt.

Although Warg's Keep almost looked like a proper town - his quest for order had finally begun to bear fruit after many difficulties. The wall had been completed half a moon prior, a double line of hammered logs twenty feet high above the ground, filled with rock and earth in between, forming a solid wall and a rampart to walk on. It had been a challenging endeavour, only possible because of the generous aid of giants and mammoths.

The great hall atop the hill was also nearing construction; only the roofing was yet to be done. As much as he wanted to avoid the trappings of power, one could never do without them. While wildlings did not respect things like sceptres, gold, or crowns, they did not lack the primal understanding of strength. Jon

did not shy away from fighting and leading by the front, but aside from being symbolic, the hall atop the hill was also a prudent defensive measure. And an attempt to corral the savageness out of the mostly nomadic raiders, rapers, and hunters.

It had not escaped his mind that all here had chosen to follow him willingly - and such obligations were fleeting like the wind. This is why Jon had done everything he could to prove himself and had openly welcomed any challenges - although any such fools after the first day, he crushed swiftly, brutally, and with no mercy.

Because of the abundance of wood and after seeing Jon's idea, many had taken to making their own humble houses out of logs, and such buildings were beginning to sprout all over the place like mushrooms after a rain, albeit quite motley in appearance.

A fur tent was a meagre protection against the northern harshness compared to wooden walls and a solid roof over their heads.

Discipline and order were not without a price here, Beyond the Wall - while over two thousand had joined in the last two moons, *more* had left in a stubborn refusal to become southron kneelers and the such.

Just as he walked between a handful of half-finished shacks, motley houses, and tents, he felt Ghost. His arrival was heralded by the wary exclaims of quite a few while a few younger children were fearfully pointing at something behind him.

Jon did not have to turn - he could feel the presence of his faithful companion like an additional limb. Regardless, he turned around and reached up; the enormous snowy direwolf had to lower his head for Jon to scratch his ears. Ghost had yet to stop growing - he was already half a head taller than Jon, noticeably larger than any other of his kind.

Regardless of the stares, Jon idly continued his walk over the walkways, this time with a companion in tow. Let them all see the Warg Lord and his beasts - a leader had to be seen and respected, whether out of fear or love.

His mind couldn't help but drift. As a young boy, war and battles were the field of glory, where heroes were made and villains were felled. But alas, reality proved different as he grew; the line between good and evil was quick to blur, especially for a bastard - there were only shades of grey. Life was not a thing of wondrous tales, but Jon discovered that even the childish tales were not all *wrong*. Were not the winners heroes - and the losers always villains? After all, who would dare throw glory onto those who lost the match of cunning and mettle?

If you won - your cause was righteous.

Even such concepts were not bereft of the many shades of grey - the manner of victory did matter in the end.

But, what rarely reached the songs or the worn pages of history was the waiting.

War, battle, command - it was nine parts waiting and one part fighting. Of course, depending on the specifics, that waiting could be marching or simply preparing, but it did not change the facts - the tediousness of waiting was inescapable.

At least it did allow him more time to plan and do other… activities.

Unknowingly, his feet had carried him to the top of the hill, at the clearing just before the nearly finished Great Hall. It was a silly name - the building was scarcely a third the size of Winterfell's Hall and far cruder. The facade was built out of undressed logs, with a wide door flanked by two tall windows draped with pelts to ward off the cold. It wasn't much, but it was… *his*.

“Lord Snow,” Jarod Snow’s respectful voice interrupted his musings. The old greybeard came from the side, accompanied by Styr Thenn and Tormund. “I have completed a tally of our forces.”

Jon was pleasantly surprised at the news, “Already?”

“It wasn’t easy,” the greybeard admitted grudgingly. “And the numbers are rough. Two hundred and thirty-three giants. Got about nine hundred spearwives and nearly five thousand raiders and hunters. The other six thousand are women and children.” Unsaid went that any boy over the age of fourteen was considered either a hunter or a raider and remained such until they died.

Not that most of the younger children had not been put to use - they either foraged, served as errand boys, or aided everyone else.

The losses ever since they had arrived here had not been small despite his efforts - over a thousand had perished in total against the tide of death and ice. Fighting the Others and their minions left no room for cowardice and ineptitude; a defeated warband meant a dead warband. Still, while the losses were not light, Jon estimated they had slain nearly a hundred Cold Ones and easily over ten thousand of their dead thralls, and morale was high.

About two moons and a half now, and Jon had fought side by side with almost every chieftain and leader, big or small. Yet, as much as he wanted to fight every day, Val could not keep up - nor could his forces or their dragonglass supplies, and plenty of things around the camp demanded his attention. So Jon rotated the warbands and sent each out once every four or five days to keep everyone sharp. Now, he had plenty of time to rest… or drill in simple formations, mediate disputes, organise matters big or small.

“Morna, Soren, Blind Doss, and the rest returned just now,” Styr said in a hoarse voice while throwing an idle glance at Ghost. “No attacks last night again.”

The last five nights had been the same - none of the wandering warbands had met foes in the dark. Jon would hope the Others were defeated, but the icy fucks were not without cunning - it was far more likely that they had turned their focus to easier foes - the many divided tribes and warbands that had scattered away after Mance’s army fell apart.

Jon turned to Tormund, “Got anything on the rest of the Free Folk?”

“Most scattered far and wide now, and me men can hardly know what’s happenin’. Two o’ the smaller clans nearby have perished,” Giantsbane said, no trace of his usual cheer. “Most have begun to group up under Gerrick, Harle, Isryn, Lerna the Red, or anyone who managed to win some fights against the Cold Shadows.”

Plenty had joined Jon’s forces for protection, but not all could stomach his *southron* ways.

"Lerna?" The name didn't even sound familiar. Even Isryn sounded vaguely familiar - probably some of the many war chieftains that had perished in the first battle beneath the Wall.

“Daughter of Leron, the chieftain of the biggest Ice River clans,” Styr rumbled. “A cruel bitch if I ever saw one.”

“Aye, her father died in some spat, or so me men say,” Tormund patted his bulging gut. “That one has a taste ‘o human flesh, probably ate her old man, har! Feisty one took three men as husbands, along with their clans.”

The old Snow almost choked on his cough from the side, and Jon absentmindedly patted the greybeard on the back. While Giantsbane wasn’t what anyone would call a competent spymaster or the such, the bastard of Winterfell could not afford to remain blind to the movements of the rest of the wildings. Should he or his forces show weakness, they might easily find themselves attacked.

"Any success with the search for tin?" Jon turned to the Thenn. They had found a small copper deposit about two leagues to the west, but the metal was too soft and useless on its own, turning the handful of primitive Thenn smiths nearly useless.

Styr grunted, “Still lookin’. Tin was rare even in our own valley.”

The day quickly dwindled by the time he tore himself away from the woes of leading the free folk. When there was no law, resolving petty disputes had become a headache, and some days, training the stubborn raiders and hunters felt like he was herding cats. Jon had shortly considered introducing laws and such but quickly discarded it - It was not worth the risk or the effort.

Instead, he focused his energy on the more civilised of the group - the Thenns, who could pass as unruly Northern clansmen… if you squinted hard enough, and the scant few tribes with strong chieftains who could enforce some sort of tentative discipline.

Necessity and desperation had brought so many here, but it was far from enough to bind them together. Many were too set in their savage ways, and even the slightest attempt to change a lifetime of habits was an uphill battle. Even before, in the life that would never be, very few of the wildlings had cooperated, and only after the crushing defeat Stannis generously served them. The hostages and tributes Jon had extracted had always played a significant role.

Regardless of his distaste for the situation, Jon's goal was being fulfilled quite handily - while many wildlings died to the Others, far more were fighting back.

A wry smile appeared on his face; even corralling them into digging latrines felt like a victory - he had no desire to invite disease or poison his source of fish and water.

Despite everything, it had been quite a productive day - among the small clans that joined his forces had been Borroq and his giant boar.

The evening saw Jon plenty exhausted - truth be told, he preferred to journey and fight the Others instead of dealing with the woes of unruly fools. But leaving the place for too long was not an option for him, lest he wanted to invite mayhem and infighting. What had Mance been thinking by leaving nearly so many clans and tribes together on their own for moons, Jon would never know.

Finally, he arrived at the outskirts of the godswood grove, where his tent stood.

“You look quite… frustrated,” his wife noted from a wooden bench as her gaze roamed over his figure.

The bench was just two raw planks fastened over two rocks hastily cobbled together by him, but Val loved it.

Jon exhaled slowly, “Aye.”

“What ails you?” She patted the wood right next to her, and he sat there.

"Managing everything is far harder than I thought," Jon admitted as he rubbed his brow. Even ruling the exhausted North had not been as challenging.

"Hard?" Val snorted as she slung her arm over his shoulder. "You have most of them eating out of the palm of your hand. In no time, you had so many doing things I thought none would ever agree to! Even half of what you did here would be impossible if you asked me a year ago."

The words uplifted his mood immediately, and he pulled his wife into his lap, earning himself a squeak and an elbow to the ribs.

Yet, a moment later, Val leaned in his embrace and craned her neck to look at him with silvery eyes. "Wanna spar?"

“I’d love to.”

Some fighting would be just what he needed to get his mind off his woes. Val stole a quick kiss from him, and nimbly leapt to her feet, grabbing her white weirwood staff and pointing it at him challengingly. With a smile on his face, Jon grabbed his crude ironwood training sword and suppressed his rising lust as he greedily feasted his eyes upon Val’s svelte body hidden beneath the white furs and got himself into a fighting stance.

A good fight was always welcome to put his mind off things, and with Val, it usually ended in a steamy, naked *battle* in the cave spring.

Author's Endnote: Jon's PoV stretched too much; I suppose we'll see Winterfell next week. Isryn and Lerna are original characters I made.

Also, I did warn you that nothing particularly important is happening Beyond the Wall - though we get a load of 'smaller' matters instead.