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.

2nd Day of the 6th Moon

Benjen Stark, Castle Black

Othor, Bannen, Ulmer, Ebben, and Thoren Smallwood.

Five good rangers had died under his command. It was no fault of his own but a small mercy - it did not change the facts. At least their mission was a success, for all it could have been a terrible disaster.

Eight days. It had taken the ranging party eight days to return to the Wall. As much as Benjen wanted to rush along, they were wounded, battered, and weary; it had been a miracle that they made it back even this quick, seasoned rangers or not. It was a grim, solemn journey spent mostly in quiet as the enormity of what they had found and faced was truly beginning to sink in. Dragging the body of Thoren Smallwood, which had started to stink terribly on the third day, didn't help much with their mood or the horses. The fact that the corpse could rise at any moment did not bring them comfort despite binding its limbs with thick rope.

Midnight was the only grace from the perilous expedition; the shaggy black direwolf pup uplifted his mood with its presence alone.

But they *were* finally back near the hour of the eel last night, and Mormont had only sent him to rest after taking his account of the ranging.

His small room was finally a place where Benjen could truly relax, allowing him a full night of good sleep for the first time in what felt like forever.

Now morrow had arrived and with it - the concerned Maester Aemon. Warm yet bony fingers slowly and methodically explored the Cold One's gift that ran through most of the ranger's face.

Benjen had been caught unprepared for such a perilous fight that cold night, especially after a long day and nearly a dozen days of riding prior. The Others were faster and stronger than most men, but it was not a gap that the First Ranger couldn't bridge. In fact, the icy foes were not overly skilled with their crystalline blades - they seemed to rely more on their superior power, reflexes, and arms.

Now, Benjen knew how to fight them and would not repeat his mistakes again. If his nephew at six and ten could beat the Others with such laughable ease and daring, so could he! The First Ranger only had to push himself harder in the yard.

“Is there any pain or discomfort?” Aemon’s soft voice shook him from his musings.

"Only a mild itch, yet speaking strains my skin unpleasantly."

“It is healing well, albeit slowly. Whoever attended the laceration was quite skilled,” the shrunken old maester gazed at the ranger with milky white eyes. “I rarely concern myself with hearsay, but I’ve heard the oddest thing. My dreams have been uneasy as of late, I feared that you did manage to find what you ventured out to seek.”

“That and so much more,” Benjen grimaced as he stood up from the bed.

An insistent knock on the door echoed ominously, heralding the arrival of Jeor Mormont.

After Benjen bid him enter, the door banged open, waking the snoozing Midnight, who was curled in a small cot next to Benjen’s bed, and the Lord Commander strode in, followed by Ser Thorne, both grim-faced and stern. The master-at-arms looked even more taciturn than Benjen thought possible.

“How’s our First Ranger, maester?” The Old Bear’s voice was hoarse and strained.

“The wound will scar, but Benjen Stark is as fit as a fiddle if a little tired,” the wizened old man shakily said and weakly sat on the chair near the bed. “Nothing plentiful rest and good food wouldn’t fix.”

“Good,” Mormont rubbed his brow. “If only last night were just another bad dream, but alas. I’ve already heard Rykker, Buckwell, and the others confirm your story. Now, I’d like to hear it again with my wits fresh and mind rested.”

And possibly so Maester Aemon could know the details. Benjen gathered his thoughts and slowly retold the perilous events of their ranging.

With some effort, the icy blade was removed from the frost-bound wrapping, and all of them inspected it, but it still proved untouchable for anyone bar Benjen.

“Wargs and Children, ice spiders and White Walkers,” Thorne shook his head with a thin smile. But Benjen could tell from his tone that the knight believed it all, albeit reluctantly.

“You all say the same thing, but I still struggle to believe it,” Jeor Mormont sighed, looking even more old and tired than he already was. “What’s your barely six-and-ten nephew doing North of the Wall with Children of the Forest, no less, Stark?”

“Saving our sorry arses, apparently,” Benjen barked out a laugh. Midnight padded over to his right and obediently sat down, tongue lolled out. The adolescent wolf was nearing his knee in height now.

“Are you sure this beast is safe?” Thorne eyed the large dark pup with caution. “I’ve seen what grown direwolves can do - men mangled and torn apart with laughable ease in the blink of an eye.”

“Fret not, Ser; Midnight is well-behaved and will be well-trained.”

“House Stark were the only ones recorded to have tamed direwolves,” the ancient maester wheezed out, and Benjen threw a grateful nod at the old sage.

Doubtlessly, many would call for his companion to be closed in the kennels, but as long as Midnight behaved, Benjen could deflect such attempts. Still, that meant the black pup had to be strictly trained, although it wouldn't be arduous - his companion was quite obedient.

“My head hurts just trying to think about it,” the Lord Commander pulled onto his shaggy mane of hair. The First Ranger understood well enough - the myths and legends were coming back to life far too quickly for the old commander’s liking - while there were a few possible sightings of wargs and skinchangers, they were rare and never really confirmed - Children of the Forest, Others, and ice spiders were considered to be little more than old wives’ tales.

“The boy should stop cavorting around the Haunted Forest and return Dark Sister to its rightful owner,” the crotchety knight spoke with his flinty voice while looking at the shrivelled maester.

"Peace, Ser," Aemon raised his hands placatingly, though his soft voice held a tinge of sorrow. "The time of the dragon had long passed. Young Snow seems to be making far better use of the blade than I ever could. Heroes emerge from the young, not the old - if Benjen's nephew managed to find my House's lost sword where so many have failed, he is fated to wield it."

“How well would you trust this nephew of yours, Stark?” Mormont’s eyes bore into the First Ranger.

“With my life,” Benjen said.

“Damn it all, we could use men like that in the Watch,” the Old Bear grunted. “If I had fifteen like him, I’d fear no White Walkers or the such.”

“What is a Snow even doing beyond the Wall?” Alliser squinted suspiciously at Benjen.

“Following the orders of his Lord Father, of course,” Mormont waved away the biting words. “How else would the Liddle heir follow him? Stark already suspected dark things were stirring Beyond the Wall well before we did,” the old commander turned to Benjen. “Are you sure those Cold Shadows can raise the dead? Thoren Smallwood does not look like he’d get up anytime soon.”

The First Ranger snorted inwardly but did not dispute the Old Bear’s theory. Truthfully, he could see how Jon’s presence North of the Wall was suspicious, but the fact that his nephew was considered a son of Lord Stark diverted many of those troubles.

“I have not seen it for myself, but I trust Jon and Duncan Liddle, and the rest confirm my nephew’s words, and they have no reason to lie.”

“According to the legends, the Others can indeed raise the dead as their thralls,” Aemon added.

“Smallwood looks pretty dead to me,” Jeor rubbed his brow with a sigh.

“Mayhaps because we killed those who could otherwise raise him,” Benjen shrugged grimly. “If they could raise the dead from afar, we would have been long overrun by a tide of corpses.”

“I suppose. But that means a rotting carcass serves us none. I’ll order Marsh to have a pyre prepared for Smallwood. At least Lord Stark’s dragonglass weapons proved their merit.”

“The king must be notified,” Ser Thorne’s words were like a handful of spat-out nails.

“He shall be, but as far as I’m aware, His Grace is already travelling back to King’s Landing, and we do not know which route he is taking,” Mormont sighed. “It would be easier for the word to reach him when he arrives in King’s Landing.”

“Shadow Tower and Eastwatch must be contacted first,” Aemon proposed quietly.

“Yes indeed, I shall pen a letter to Commanders Mallister and Pyke with orders to halt all rangings beyond the Wall,” the Lord Commander rubbed his grey beard. “In fact, it is time for a council of the Watch to convene. Both of them shall be recalled to Castle Black; we need to figure out a proper strategy to combat the threat of the Others and begin preparing the Watch.”

"The Watch does not have the numbers to fight alone," Thorne grunted. "We will be forced to rely on the Crown and the North for aid regardless."

"The king can wait for now. Later, I'll sail down from Eastwatch to King's Landing myself after the gathering," Jeor Mormont straightened up. "A wandering crow can be ignored, but the Lord Commander coming with proof in person should not be. If Lord Stark wants to reform the Night's Watch, I shall be the one to represent the interests of our Order."

Benjen hoped the ice blade would be enough proof for the Southerners.

“We should still send a rider or pen a letter to Winterfell informing them of our findings regardless,” he coughed, and the Jeor nodded grimly.

“Might I suggest writing to Archmaester Marwyn?” The wizened maester stirred from his chair. “Or even inviting him here. His knowledge of the arcane might prove invaluable considering the foe we face.”

“See it done, Aemon,” the Lord Commander commanded.

3d Day of the 6th Moon

Arya Stark

Things had changed two days ago. The royal retinue had finally departed, and with it, her father, many of the household, including Vayon Poole, and a hundred of the finest swords Winterfell had to offer. Jory, Alyn, Walder, Harwin, Varly, and many others were now gone.

The Imp had gone north to the Wall with a handful of Lannister men-at-arms, and her father's bannermen had left Winterfell, too, leaving the castle feeling empty. Arya had just gotten used to the bustle and commotion, and the newfound quietness unnerved her somewhat.

Uncle Edmure and his friends had remained, intent on staying for an additional sennight. She liked her uncle; his jolly and carefree demeanour was welcome in dispersing the sudden gloom that had taken hold over Winterfell.

And that was the problem - Robb looked troubled, but there was a tinge of newfound solemness, and Arya could oft see him lost in thought. He took up their father's duties well enough, but his bouts in the yard had become savage, if not desperate. Not only that, but Robb locked himself up in their father's solar for hours at a time, doing gods know what.

Her mother was also troubled, and she had become clingy as if Arya, Sansa, and Rickon would suddenly disappear.

Not only that, but to Arya's disbelief, Septa Mordane had been relieved from her teaching duties, and Catelyn had taken it upon herself to conduct the tutoring in the womanly arts instead.

Arya had finally managed to get the hang of stitching somewhat. It was no longer as crooked, but a glance at Sansa and Myrcella's work told her theirs were far more exquisite, making her sigh.

Her mother seemed to have read her thoughts as she leaned over.

"Patience, Arya," Catelyn chided. "The more you rush, the more crooked your stitches become. Don't compare yourself with someone older and more experienced."

She numbly nodded and continued with the embroidery, trying to pay attention to the painfully slow and annoying work. It was tedious and boring, but something Arya had bitterly accepted despite her reluctance, as her mother would not let her start any training with the bow unless she continued her regular lessons. She cared little for embroidery, but if that was what it took to get some training in arms, Arya would do it.

Another errant look around the room told Arya that her stitches were as good as Jeyne Poole's and even better than Beth Cassel's. She blinked in confusion as the odd feeling of satisfaction rose within her. Mayhaps her mother had a point, and embroidery wasn't that terrible in the end.

Then she glanced at Lyanna Mormont, who had remained here as a lady-in-waiting to Mother. Or maybe the princess? Arya wasn't sure. But Lyanna's stitches almost rivalled Sansa's needlework, and Arya's face curdled. Indeed, the world wasn't fair, Arya reflected bitterly. But why did she care about some stupid stitches? She'd be training with the bow soon!

Beth, Lyanna, and Jeyne started whispering to each other and giggled quietly.

That seemed to quickly attract the attention of her mother.

“Why are you three giggling about instead of working on your stitches?” Catelyn loomed over the chittering pair, making them halt.

“They were gushing after my brother,” Myrcella sighed, and Arya saw Sansa go stiff at the words.

It needed no clarification which brother they were gushing after, of course, the tall and pretty one, not the short and fat one. Though Sansa seemed to have lost her flame for Prince Joffrey, judging by the way she had avoided him during the wedding feast and danced with a few northern sons like Karstark, Umber, and Dustin instead. Arya grimaced at the memory of that night; she somehow managed to politely decline a handful of dancing offers without kicking people on the shins.

“We thought he was in love with Sansa and she would be Queen…” Rodrik Cassel’s daughter shuffled timidly.

“This is not Dorne. House Stark is content with a single royal marriage,” Mother coldly pointed out. “Besides, the position of a royal consort comes with many dangers, as Princess Elia Martell found out for herself.”

The brutal words chilled the room. There was truth in those words, Arya could easily acknowledge. The golden Queen oft seemed wroth with the husband. Despite her impassive face, her green eyes were almost venomous when looking at the king when he was groping wenches in front of the whole North to see.

The grisly tale of Elia Martell’s ignoble end was not a topic that was not broached in the open; only various rumours swirled around it, one darker than the rest, and the only thing they could agree on was that she and her daughter were murdered brutally.

“Wasn’t the silver prince’s wife and daughter killed under the orders of the Mad King?” Myrcella’s soft voice was curious.

The Lady of Winterfell twirled around to look at the princess.

“Where did you hear that?”

“Well, that’s what Grandmaester Pycelle said when I inquired about the topic.”

Catelyn Stark looked troubled for a heartbeat, then let out a heavy, tired sigh.

“My husband was there that day,” the words were slow and measured. “No, the deaths of Elia and Rhaenys were not the deed of Aerys. The House of the Dragon slighted a few powerful lords too many, and the Demon of the Trident would never suffer direct claimants to his rule if he could help it. Yet their clandestine deaths were the perfect way for Lord Tywin Lannister to prove his undeniable fealty to the new king. In truth, few held any remaining love for the dragons, even fewer for the Dornish, so the lords of the realm were content to close their eyes and pretend some nameless swords had done the deed or pin it on Aerys, who would have been mad enough to probably order it himself.”

The following silence was deafening; Sansa looked sick, Beth and Jeyne - ready to cry, while Myrcella looked unsettled. Suddenly, Arya was even more glad that her sister would not be Queen - Joffrey looked like the sort that would slight powerful lords for the sake of it.

After a knock on the door, Luwin entered the room, carrying a handful of books of account.

“Is there a problem, Luwin?” her mother eyed the maester with an unreadable expression.

“We should review the figures, my lady,” Luwin said. “The royal visit proved costly, and Lord Stark decreed that we should prepare our larders for winter afterwards.”

“I suppose,” Catelyn Stark exhaled slowly. “Let's get it done then. Princess Myrcella, stay with me. The rest of you go join your brothers for luncheon.”

Beth, Lyanna, and Jeyne ran out of the room, relieved, and Arya hesitantly lingered at the door. Oddly enough, Sansa stayed next to her, waiting patiently.

“Can I help you with something, Arya?”

“Well,” the girl hesitated. “Can I begin my training with the bow? I promised to behave as a lady should-”

“Yes,” her mother interrupted, to Arya’s surprise. There was none of the reluctance that she would have expected. “You’re to report to Lady Lyra and Ser Rodrik after the luncheon and follow their instructions without fail, or you will forget about any further training. And take your sister with you.”

Arya gaped, and she was far from the only surprised one. Luwin looked at Lady Stark as if he was seeing her for the first time, and even Myrcella blinked in surprise.

“Mother?” Sansa shuffled uneasily next to her. “Am I to train too?”

“Yes, Sansa. If not the bow, then the dagger.”

“But training at arms is not… ladylike.”

Catelyn’s expression hardened. “Nobody will know the difference; a dagger can be hidden under the gown.”

Arya’s back, hands, sides, and even fingers hurt. Her legs, too, for that matter. The training was far harder than expected, and much to her chagrin, Sansa seemed to be just as good as her despite her reluctance. And they had barely done much - it was all footwork and stance this, proper grip and form that. Endless, mindless repetition of boring basics. Arya stank of sweat and was covered in grime, and keeping her eyes open was a struggle. No longer was Septa Mordane the strict demon in her mind; no, that position was now shared by Lyra Mormont and Rodrick Cassel. Under their jolly demeanours hid a terrible beast that was unleashed on the training yard.

Even eating was cumbersome, but her stomach rumbled greedily, forcing her to continue forking at her slice of venison; a little bit more, and she could retire to her bed! It wasn't swordpractice as she wanted, but a bow and dagger were a good start. Once she proved herself skilled, they would surely allow her to train with a sword too! Next to her, Sansa was eating slowly, lost in thought. Even after the training, her sister managed to look pristine and ladylike, with her red curls bound into a training braid that Lyra Mormont had shown them, and there was no weariness in her perfect posture. Still, the sense of sluggishness in Sansa's movements gave her away.

Truthfully, Arya couldn’t help but wonder why Mother had made her sister train; Sansa was so terribly reluctant but silently agreed with Catelyn as a well-bred lady would.

Now that the royal guests were gone, the direwolves were allowed in the Great Hall. Grey Wind chased around Shaggydog while Arya slipped pieces of chicken to Nymeria and Lady, lazily curled at her and Sansa’s feet underneath the table.

Rickon was joyously sitting still in Edmure’s lap, who generously helped Arya’s brother with pieces of beef, while Robb was solemnly speaking with her uncle’s retinue about boring things about the Riverlands.

Theon was quite glum and sitting two seats from Robb, angrily poking at his food. Arya never liked the Greyjoy heir but had learned to accept him as that annoying guest who wouldn’t go away. Yet his confident smile seems to have wilted, probably since it had been months since Robb had spent much time with him. They had slowly drifted apart since Bran’s death, and two days ago, Robb’s attitude towards his friend seemed to have cooled even further.

Suddenly, the chatter quieted, and Arya glanced to see everyone looking at the bewildered Rickon, especially Robb, whose face had gone grave. Even her mother leaned over with a troubled face.

“Rickon, could you tell me more about those dreams of yours?”

“Err,” Arya’s brother squirmed uneasily into Edmure’s lap. “There were plenty of wolves like Shaggy, and Jon was fighting those icemen with a black sword of fire. But it’s all foggy, and I barely remember.”

That seemed to dampen the merry spirit of the table, and the talk slowly returned to the Riverlands, but Arya’s thoughts were swirling with her feathered bed more than anything else.

Theon, who looked like Jon when he was sulking, walked over and sat at the free seat on her left with a half-bored, half-annoyed expression.

“Hey, Arya, want some tips in archery?” The familiar cocky smirk returned as Arya squinted at the Greyjoy. “You seemed to be struggling quite a lot in the yard today.”

Those words chased away the sleepiness. Was Theon being genuine or mocking her? Arya couldn't really decide. He was indeed one of the best with a bow in Winterfell if Jon's grudging words of praise were to be believed.

“Fine.”

5th Day of the 6th Month

Val, somewhere near the Milkwater

They were nearing Mance Rayder’s army; they probably would finally find them or their scouts in a day or two. Val had seen more and more tracks in the last few days.

Her body ached from exertion, though the few bruises earned in the spars with Jon Snow didn't help. In their playfights, he never overwhelmed her with his speed or strength but instead showed just enough that she felt challenged.

Any mistakes in her footwork or overreach with her wooden staff were painfully struck down as soon they appeared. There was nothing malicious in it, for the warg lord treated his other companions no different in sparring.

In truth, the spearwife would have thought she was not getting better, but Dalla noted that her moves were faster, trickier, and flowed more smoothly. But that was not all - she had managed to win twice against Jarod and once against Duncan, whereas, at the start, they had proved unsurmountable opponents. Val also felt more vigorous and a tad stronger the last few days. That made the whole thing exhilarating; the spearwife could see why the southrons oft sparred.

However, Jon Snow always seemed slightly better and remained unbeatable no matter what she tried.

After a few bouts of training, the group retreated to the campfires and tents. The Singers were scuttling around and about, eating their bloody mushroom stew or tending to the horses. A few were knapping at

pieces of obsidian with their dark claws, shaping them into speartips and arrowheads. Val knew a few kept watch on the surrounding trees while most wolves prowled around the camp. As for most evenings, Jon Snow was carving arrow shafts, Duncan Liddle was either gathering firewood or practising with his ax, and Jarod Snow was methodically fletching the newly formed arrow shafts.

Val went through her usual routine - into the forest to place a few traps far away from the wolves, hoping to catch some prey by the morrow. Though it was hard, the presence of the wolf pack deterred a lot of smaller animals even from afar, yet she managed to catch something more often than not. And, of course, gather whatever berries and herbs she managed to spot.

Yet, the gods seemed to smile upon Val as one of the traps had caught something before she could return to the camp. Tonight, they wouldn't rely on the Singer's stew, roots, berries, and dried rations.

The herbs were handed to her sister, who got busy with her pouches and concoctions while the spearwife focused on the fire.

“Do you think there will be trouble with Mance’s army?” Dalla asked from behind her.

"Undoubtedly," Val snorted without tearing her gaze from the skinned hare skewered on a stick, slowly churning atop the fire. "If word of Rayder's death had reached them, half would flee, and the other half would be tryin' to kill each other."

“And what if they don’t know?”

“We follow the warg lord and his lead,” the spearwife shrugged. It had taken some time, but the idea of relying on Jon Snow as their leader and chieftain had slowly sunk in. And it was both calming and freeing - he seemed to deal with whatever situation with confidence and ease. It was so easy, so simple to put your faith in the warg chieftain and simply follow.

That realisation had made Val lose any lingering uncertainty and hesitation; her mind was now set.

"Are you going to find your daring anytime soon?" Dalla's voice was genuinely curious. "The warg lord won't lack for spearwives trying to steal him in Mance's army."

“I’ll try tonight,” she turned over the stick so the bottom side of the hare wouldn’t get burnt.

“Just like you tried the last five nights?” Her sister snorted in amusement.

The allure of sleep had been irresistible the last few days by the time the evenings came.

“Well, no, I will really try tonight,” Val said, more to herself than anything else. They descended into a calm silence as the crackling flame made the meat churn pleasantly. Soon enough, the succulent smell of roast meat tingled pleasantly in her nose. A little more and it would be ready; she spun the stick with the hare again. “What about Duncan?”

“What about the big lunk?” Dalla stopped grinding her nettles with the pestle.

"When are you going to steal him?" Her sister stilled, face blinking in surprise. "Don't deny it - I see you stealing glances at Dunk. If you keep waiting, some spearwife in Mance's army might steal him under your nose."

Dalla sputtered and refused to say anything else, so Val smirked and stopped pushing. Soon enough, the hare was roasted, and they started devouring it with gusto. One leg was placed aside for Helicent, whom Val saw lying by the chieftain’s fancy tent.

The sunset and the bustle inside their camp slowly died out; the Singers huddled together around the roots of the trees or hit into some burrows while the rest retreated to their tents.

Val fought off the weighting eyelid with enormous effort and stared at the tent's ceiling, trying to stay awake. A myriad of thoughts swirled into her uneasy mind. She knew that sleep would take her when she closed her eyes. Forcing herself to remain awake turned out to be a struggle, and soon enough, Dalla's breath evened - her sister was finally asleep. The spearwife waited a few minutes more for good measure and discarded her clothes, leaving only her cloak to cover herself with.

With the saved roast hare leg in hand, she quietly went out and snuck by the glowing embers left by the campfires. She froze when a pair of large golden-green slitted eyes gazed at her from one of the surrounding trees. A silhouette stirred in the dark, making Val’s heart thunder like a drum.

Two heartbeats later, the figure gracefully approached, and the spearwife saw Leaf emerge from the shadows and throw her an amused nod before seamlessly melding back into the darkness.

A shuddering breath escaped Val's lips as she shook her head and slowly approached the large fancy tent where the chieftain rested.

Her palms felt sweaty now, and her pulse was racing like a scared doe in the forest; for a moment, Val considered turning around and returning to her tent to sleep.

But it seemed that her presence had been noticed again, this time by Ghost.

Like a pale, shaggy shadow, the enormous direwolf was beside her; the spearwife had not seen or heard him approach. This was the first time she had seen him up close - larger than any other of his kind Val had seen before, Ghost reached just above her nose. Any more, and he’d be already taller than her.

Trying to suppress the chilling images of the wolf tearing enormous spiders with laughable ease, she stood still.

With a gulp, Val hesitantly offered her empty hand forward, and the direwolf inspected it with his wet muzzle. It seemed he found her satisfactory because he lowered his enormous head, and she hesitantly ran her fingers through the snowy fur, scratching behind his left ear.

That got the enormous, shaggy white tail wagging furiously and earned her a wet lick upon her face, and in the blink of an eye, the white direwolf was gone just as fast as he had appeared.

The spearwife was less than ten yards from the tent's entrance, but her legs felt as heavy as if made of bronze, and every step was a struggle.

A low growl halted her once again - a grey figure stirred from just by the entrance - Helicent was staring at her with bared teeth. From the side, Red Jeyne raised her shaggy red head for a heartbeat before slumping down to sleep.

The hare leg seemed to placate the grey hound, and with a drumming heart and heavy legs, Val finally entered the tent.

It was big, warm, cosy, and fancy from what Val little could gleam in the darkness - the ground was covered by rugs.

She discarded the cloak, revealing her bare body to the cool night air and cautiously approached the cot where Jon was sleeping.

The spearwife shivered and, for a painfully long moment, wondered what the hells she was doing. She never had a man before.

Something cold and icy was upon her neck, making Val still in her steps.

Even in the darkness, she could make out the dark, smoky ripples of the blade that now rested by her neck, ready to cut into her skin.

"What are you doing, Val?" The voice was little more than a growl.

A pair of dark eyes hungrily roamed over her body. They were fascinating, and she could swear there were flecks of deep silver in them, making her skin tingle pleasantly.

"Stealing you?" The words sounded weak even to her, and Val realised that she hadn't even brought a weapon, and her limbs were stiff, whether from the cold, the tension, or the long, tiring day.

She could never fight off the warg lord, weapon or not.

"Are you sure?" His words were raw, heavy with lust and desire, making her shiver for a completely different reason.

The sword was placed aside, and his furs were pulled away, revealing his lean but powerful torso, stirring something inside her.

"Yes-"

Before she could finish, Val was pulled into Jon Snow’s fierce embrace, and any words were quickly forgotten.

Author's Endnote:

We see more of our favourite uncle.

Wow, 23 chapters later, the royal party finally left Winterfell - we see Catelyn's reactions to the revelations. One thing that is good about Catelyn is her willingness to do things for her children and husband, even if they are illogical or hasty. Supposedly, she's quite smart and capable in politics - but obviously, anything Catelyn says or does is subjected to an unreliable narrator.

As for Pycelle and the Elia Martell blindsiding - I obviously took that from the OG narration that was supposedly recorded by the maesters in canon, along with the rumours that went around.

Jon and co approach their destination while Val finally finds her courage. Also, it seems that faced with a naked beauty in the middle of the night, Jon’s control is thrown out. I finally got to write this scene; it was one of the things that I actually did plan from the very beginning.

Now, I got more of the pieces set on the board I want them to be, so you can expect the plot to start moving forward quicker.

Also, I *strongly* claim unreliable narrator. None of the characters are objective, and they all have their own biases.