

This chapter was edited by Gladiusx.

The Wildling Princess

“Be a shame to leave this stone mountain behind,” Soren Shieldbreaker muttered. “I don't think I'll ever find a warmer home.”

Val glanced behind her, finding the massive construct of stone still peeking over the horizon. They had been traveling for a few hours and were nearly at the edge of the woods. She agreed with the sentiment but sighed inwardly as another voice replied.

“‘Stone Mountain,’ you say? It's called a castle, you oaf. And you only stayed there for three days and already called it home?” Gavin the Trader chortled, rubbing his oiled beard and showing off the rings of gold and silver adorning his fingers. “The chance of any of us settling in the Wolf Queen's castle is next to nothing. I suggest you wake up from your daydreaming.”

“Even you were incapable of claiming land in the Wolf Queen's lands, *Trader*.” Soren spat the word as if it were a curse. “Your shiny trinkets were not enough to convince the She-Wolf or even King Snow to give you land.”

“True, which is why I chose not to linger where there is no opportunity. King Snow has not led me astray so far, and wherever he goes, opportunity beckons. As many of you have found out, or else you would still be freezing in the Frostfangs and eating your own sons and daughters to survive.”

Soren scowled, and several of the Freefolk threw dirty gazes at the fancily dressed man as they began to bicker and argue.

“Look at them throwing big words around yet unwilling to come to blows.” Val glanced at the approaching speaker, her red hair tied into a messy braid and a weirwood bow slung over her shoulder.

“Looks like the proud men of the Freefolk have truly lost their balls.”

“Ygritte.” Val nodded to the waif-like huntress. “It is best for them to learn how to behave. Jon Snow has shown that he will not suffer fools or treason.”

“Look at you also using such a big word. Treason, huh? Is acting like our forefathers did for thousands of years so bad?” Ygritte clicked her tongue as she reached out for a wineskin hanging from Val’s saddle, only to flinch when she found a knife an inch from her hand.

“If we were in the True North, I would kill you for trying to steal my wine.”

“And now?” Ygritte grinned, her canines gleaming in the late afternoon sun.

“The Northmen cut off the hands of thieves or send them to the Wall. Which would you prefer?”

Ygritte burst out laughing before grabbing her wineskin and taking a deep gulp. “I’d rather lose a hand than be stuck with those boorish crows again. But I get you; new land, new laws, and all that. Want a sip?”

Val shrugged and sheathed her knife, her lips quivering as she watched the huntress rummage through her pouch; Ygritte had left her meager belongings with her for safety while she did her bidding, scouting that other group that marched alongside them. There weren’t many spearwives in their band, and Ygritte had been like a lost lamb after the destruction of Rattleshirt’s band and the Crows released her from captivity. Val needed competent trackers, and a spearwife was a good choice as her personal spy.

A spy...Val marveled at how her people had changed since crossing the Wall; it was rare now that they would rise to any reckless challenge, none of them eager to provoke the Snow King’s ire. Even she was thinking like a Kneeler, gathering an entourage of competent people, relying on the authority of being Mance’s good sister rather than her skill with a knife or a spear.

Gavin had changed the most, even if Val would admit to not knowing him too well, but she would not deny emulating him. His close friendship with Chief Leathers and their shared loyalty to King Snow would give anyone pause before they would antagonize him. Not to mention his trading acumen and his cunning in making a profit from the Kneelers with his trinkets had guaranteed him a position of authority among the Freefolk. They were divided into two separate camps: those who followed Jon Snow since he broke their army and Mance’s group, whom she led.

Gavin was one of the few among them riding a horse, a good one that the Kneelers called a palfrey, and he had a dozen men at his beck and call. Many of the Freefolk settlers joined them thanks to Gavin’s honeyed tongue and Jon Snow’s presence.

Now Val was left to drift, lost and without purpose. Dalla had given birth to a healthy boy and settled with her husband, leaving Val as a hanger-on. Especially with her Jarl dying foolishly after challenging Jon Snow's decrees. The damned fool had stolen a horse from the first homestead they came across, only for the Snow King's wolves to catch him and drag him back, mangled and shamed.

Snow removing his head with a single swipe of his sword was a mercy, and Jarl was not the first nor the last fool attempting to break King Snow's peace. Val did not feel anything then; Jarl was but her latest lover, one whom she stole because he was comely, just before Jon Snow broke their army at the Bridge of Skulls.

Like her previous lovers, he had proven mediocre in most things but pride and boasting. And just like her previous lovers, he had lost his life in a most foolish manner in a vain attempt at impressing her, even when she never asked him to.

Val knew her looks were unrivaled amongst the Freefolk, and many a man desired to bed her, and even here in the North, few women could hope to match her beauty. With her long, honey-blond hair that she painstakingly cared for and combed into a clean braid, her silvery-blue eyes that made people naturally hesitant to approach her, her shapely hips and full breasts, and her insistence on wearing the finest cloaks made from beasts she herself hunted, few could challenge her in both beauty and danger.

Especially after she traded some of her furs for the byrnie she now wore.

Yet, while she enjoyed the adorations thrown at her, she was well aware her position was at best shaky.

Many had tried to steal her, yet few managed to escape her clutches alive; even then, they left her a present in flesh and blood. Val never neglected her martial abilities; even if she was a woman and would never be as strong as a man, she could be far more dangerous, and she made sure everyone who looked at her wrong thought twice before provoking her.

It was not just her skill with the axe, the spear, or a dagger that had her here as Mance's eyes and ears. She knew how to understand men (and women too), their goals, their intent, how dangerous they were, and how to use that to her benefit. It was through this talent that she *knew* Jon Snow desired her, craved her like a hungry wolf would crave a piece of fresh meat. Yet when she attempted to sneak into his tent soon after he executed Jarl, she was met with a bare blade and cold eyes.

Truly, Val thought she was going to die right then and there. Perhaps she should have if she were not Mance's good sister, which gave her a good measure of authority among both the Freefolk and the Northmen.

It was the one and only time she tried to steal him. Val had not given up and tempered her passion, waiting for a better opportunity. Yet, it had been difficult. For some reason, starting around a moon ago, while she was still in the Gift, Val's emotions have burned far brighter than she ever felt. Anger came easier, her temper shortened, and it was only after many days of controlling herself that she was able to rein in all those surging urges.

Strangely, ever since then, the cold had not bothered her. At first, she thought the North was simply warmer, and while that was true, it was still cool enough to warrant wearing a fur cloak at all times. Now, Val only wore half as much fur as she used to, and even then, she felt warmer than normal. She had asked Mance and Dalla, yet they did not understand. Only Morna Whitemask, who had agreed to join her with her people, suggested it may have something to do with the Old Gods.

"I felt an unnatural chill at the same time you noticed these changes," Morna had said, but ultimately, it didn't matter. Val had focused on gathering and sorting the group that would follow her to Winterfell when Gavin had come to call for volunteers.

Nevertheless, Val might speak in his name, but Mance Rayder no longer held the same sway with the Freefolk as he did when he rallied them all beyond the Wall. Yet the Kneelers didn't seem to care as they acknowledged him as a former king and gave him the responsibility of ruling the rowdiest of the Freefolk in the lands they called the Gift. With help from the giants and the Thenns, keeping the peace among the Freefolk had proven far easier than they ever could have done beyond the Wall.

Beyond the Wall...already, Val did not consider the True North to be her home anymore. And yet she was following Jon Snow back to that hellish place regardless.

"You need to find yourself a proper man and settle down, Val." Her sister told her when she and her husband saw her off. *"Don't give up on Snow just because you failed once. This is no longer the wild lands beyond the Wall but the proper land of knee—civilized men, as Mance would call it. A land of order and rules...we don't need to fear the wilderness or raids anymore. I trust you will be able to steal any man you desire."*

Val did not know whether she should be amused or not about their optimism, but with nothing else for her to do, and Dalla not so subtly sending her away to be alone with her husband, she followed Snow to Winterfell. For some reason, many people saw that as an endorsement by the former king and flocked to her, seeing her as a leader, and Val accepted that role easily enough; it was simple to organize the men into groups where they would not kill each other and keep the women close to her as her eyes and ears. It had borne fruit in strange ways as one of the spearwives told her an interesting tidbit she heard from one of the guards wearing wolf livery: Jon Snow was now Jon Stark, which led to more inquiry about the nature of trueborn and bastards in these new lands they called home.

It confused Val; siblings were siblings, and Val never cared that Dalla was from another mother, even though Val herself had never known her own mother. All her father told her was that she was beautiful beyond measure, came to him like a dream, and left like a breeze. Nine moons later, she was placed beneath his tent, and he claimed her. It did not matter; her father and Dalla's mother had cared for her, and that's what mattered.

Yet she did not expect they would be leaving the warm castle so soon, before she could even steal the Snow King. Jon was understandably wary of her since she had last tried to steal him, yet still acknowledged her abilities and had her command the Freefolk that came from Mance's group but not his own.

To think she would return to those frozen lands so soon...

"So, any luck with stealing a man?" Ygritte's voice woke her from her stupor, the redhead walking beside her while she rode her garron; even with the small horse, the short girl's head barely reached its neck. "I found a few good ones from those salty ones the Northmen call squids."

"Oh? Already giving up on stealing Snow?"

"Hardly, but it's not a bad idea to have other options."

Ygritte had been obsessed with the man who captured her long before he began his campaign of terror on their people.

"He stole me then, so he's mine," was her reasoning. If that was the case, then Jon Snow had stolen all of the Freefolk when he forced them to surrender. Ygritte did not seem to understand how much the

Freefolk feared and respected Jon Snow, for she had not witnessed his finest hour. Instead, she thought of him as merely a comely boy with a lot of power for her to steal and play with.

Val had not asked her how her captivity was with the Crows, but she had an idea; Ygritte had a few scars from ropes around her neck, wrists, and ankles. Perhaps this was a way for the redhead to handle her inner demons.

“Perhaps so. What did you glean from those Ironborn? Any trouble or fights?”

“Surprisingly, none. From what I heard, they aren't that different from us, except they had better arms and armor, worshiped some wet god in the past, and now worship a wetter one, and sailed the seas. Yet, while there have been arguments and curses exchanged between the Freefolk and the Ironborn, it looks like they too have someone holding them on a tight leash.”

Val hummed as her mind wandered to the young warrior riding alongside Jon Snow. She had only heard about Percy Jackson, and this morning was the first time she saw him. The tales of his prowess and sorcery gave her an image of a larger-than-life figure that could rival giants.

The first thing that came to her mind when she saw him was that he was young. Probably younger than her by five years or so, yet that youthfulness did not at all reduce from the danger she could identify as she inspected him. He did not seem like an all-powerful sorcerer who could supposedly bring storms or summon lightning, but Val had never met true sorcerers before.

Nevertheless, the way he carried himself astride that large horse of his spoke of a warrior accustomed to battle. Even on a horse...there were no openings she could glean, and the one time she entertained the idea of sneaking up on him, he turned to her, his eyes gleaming with both mischief and desire.

Almost as if he could *feel* her intent.

The second thing she noticed was that he was comely. Not as comely as Jon Snow but definitely charming with those green eyes, messy hair that seemed to be constantly moving with the breeze, a lopsided grin, and, unlike everyone she had seen in her life, not pale as snow but having a healthy hue the color of pure honey. If Val had seen him before knowing him, she would have been tempted to steal him if not for the women surrounding him.

Sansa Stark was King Snow's sister, and the heavily pregnant woman gave her pause when Val first saw her. She hated to admit it, but Sansa was beautiful, more beautiful than her, and with even larger teats than her own that remained impossibly taut as if defying the pull of the earth.

Yet it was her eyes that had Val rethink approaching Percy; even more icy than her own and full of ruthless cunning, yet tempered by the clear love she held for her husband. There were two other maidens with her, both of them giving her pause for different reasons (how could hair be such a shade of blue?), and Val instinctively knew by their heated gazes towards Percy Jackson that they were likely also his women.

Val decided against such a reckless move lest she insult Jon Snow's sister. The King of Snow both terrified and lit a flame in her belly. This gaggle of soft maidens could keep their so-called sorcerer, for Val had eyes only for the one she witnessed break their army.

Val glanced down at Ygritte. She would need to do something about her if she were to steal Jon. Val thought back to Sansa Stark and her handmaidens; among the Freefolk, men stole as many women as they could handle. She thought it was different here, but perhaps she was mistaken. A noblewoman seemed to have a few maidens at her beck and call in these lands, so perhaps their duty was to satisfy her husband's lusts at all times?

She supposed Ygritte could fill such a position, but Val would need to make sure she understood her place.

Still, a voice niggled in her mind not to dismiss Percy Jackson. Rumor had it he had broken far worse than an army and all on his lonesome. She also was not blind to his gaze; he desired her...and she would not deny that he was also a decent catch if Jon proved reticent.

"Wait," Ygritte paused, brows knotted, "if we are to follow the laws of this land...how the fuck are we supposed to have mates if we can't steal'em and they can't steal us?"

Naturally, after thinking about it for a minute, Val had a very prudent answer.

"You steal them in secret, then threaten to geld them if they claim they were forced or didn't approve. Besides, do you really think these *Northerners* would ever have the guts to claim they were overpowered by a woman?"

Ygritte blinked before bursting out in giggles.

“You really are the smartest among us.”

Val nodded imperiously, keeping her gaze forward as a few of the other women who had been within listening distance nodded in approval. Thankfully, they could not see the sweat forming on her neck; how in the world would she convince Jon Snow to claim her if she couldn't steal him? Was that why he nearly killed her the first time? He still obviously desired her, yet he had not made a single move.

Did she truly have to play those silly courting games Mance told tales about? Perhaps she should try sneaking into Percy Jackson's tent instead after all.

It was an hour later when they entered the forest, and Val's musings were forgotten as she returned to her duties, making sure the men didn't wander off the path and the carriages didn't break down as they made their way to their first stop.

Leadership came with many duties that she had taken for granted, yet she would not have it any other way.

She could get used to this feeling of power.

The Wolfswood was expansive yet less oppressive or wild than the Haunted Forest. There were massive trees that must have stood for a thousand years, yet they were not as abundant nor as overgrown as what Val was used to seeing beyond the Wall.

Unlike what she expected, there was a path wide enough for their entire caravan to travel through unobstructed. Young sentinel trees dotted the forest, with a few oaks, birches, and other trees that she knew were quite suitable for building huts or making bows.

Strangely, many of them were cut at the base, leaving only stumps. Some of them were even cut at the top.

Later, when they stopped for the night near a spring, by a hamlet with a lumber mill, she learned the Wolfswood was half-tamed through a process known as coppicing and pollarding. Thinning the old and ungainly trees to make room for younger and healthier trees to sprout. It made the forest easy to traverse and navigate, though Val had been warned by the old clansman in charge of the mill that deeper in the Wolfswood became wilder, more primal.

"Many forget the pact, but we don't," The forest clansman said, bowing in respect to Leaf as they listened to the man; he was an older sort, well into his twilight years, with heavy bags under his eyes as if he had not been sleeping well. *"The deep woods have been left to the Old Gods. We cut what we need and a bit more to make a living. Even after thousands of years, we barely scratched the surface of these woods."*

It helped that the forest was so massive; Val doubted the Northmen would be able to cut it all down even if they wanted to. It would need far more than mere human hands and iron tools to cut deeply into the woods.

"So no one explores those deep woods? No hunters or herbalists?" Percy had asked.

"No. Especially not since the Ironborn invaded and the Prince broke them." The foreman nodded gratefully to Jon. *"But beware; things have been...queer lately."*

"How so?"

"I can't explain. Many of the folks have been having difficulty sleeping."

They had not discussed what the foreman said since they left that hamlet. Percy had insisted on visiting the closest weirwood the night before their departure. Strangely, his face seemed more grim after he returned, even as Val could have sworn to feeling a subtle weight fading from her shoulders. Even the residents of the hamlet seemed brighter and with more energy when they woke up the next morning to see them off.

It was two days later and many leagues deeper into the forest, and Val was seated around a campfire with her companions.

"Damn that overgrown dog. This was my favorite cloak!"

Val watched in bemusement as Ygritte muttered more expletives at the massive white direwolf while she tried in vain to sew the torn cloak. Sewing was a vital skill for any Freefolk, both men and women, if they ever wanted to have clothes or close wounds.

Apparently, Ygritte was not as deft with a needle as she was with a knife.

"How did you survive for so long without knowing how to mend your clothes?"

“Ryk was kind enough to help me with this kind of thing.” Ygritte cursed when she stabbed herself for the third time since she joined her by the campfire. “Too bad he preferred to stay in the Gift and settle down rather than go on another adventure. Damned Longspear, thinking with the wrong spear again.”

Val nodded absentmindedly; Longspear Ryk was also taken captive with Ygritte, and she heard he had given the Crows some grief. Enough for him to be missing a finger when he was released. She always assumed he or Ygritte would steal each other amiably, considering how close they were.

Then again, Val inspected the tiny redhead closely; Longspear would likely kill her in their first coupling. Ygritte might be kissed by fire and with a temper to match, yet she was like a waif, almost as short as one of the Earth Singers.

“You should be glad Ghost only tore your cloak.” A bold voice spoke from behind, and they turned to find the Earth Singer who followed Jon around, approaching with Varamyr’s shadowcat; no, it was no longer Varamyr’s but Crown’s. “I saw him crush a man’s head with a similar swipe. Ghost was being nice.”

Several voices cursed under their breath, and their hands reached for their weapons, only to pause when Val raised her hand. It was foolish to trust that a skinchanger would keep his animals under control. Yet the Earth Singer was a close friend to Jon, and King Snow seemed to trust him.

“Being nice, you say?” Ygritte was the first to recover and grinned. “You sure his master wasn’t just playing hard to get? A skinchanger sees through his bond animal. I bet you Snow secretly wanted me to come in after all and was just testing me!”

“Uhm, no. Jon ordered Ghost to maul anyone who dares intrude on his sleep unless it’s an emergency; he and Percy have been busy making sure that...never mind.” Crown waved his hand distractedly, even as Ygritte blanched. “Anyway, I was the one who asked Ghost to be nice. Don’t bother Jon again, any of you. If he wants a mate, he will look for one.”

It felt weird to be chastised by a being that could be mistaken for a child, yet Val also found it amusing. Especially when half the surrounding women groaned in disappointment.

“King Snow’s warning has been received, Child of the Forest.” Val smiled at the strange being; for some reason, she felt a sense of camaraderie with the Earth Singers. “Why don’t you join us? It must be dreadfully boring to be with Jon all the time. What happened to Leaf? You are usually seen together.”

Crown frowned, and for a moment, Val worried she had offended him, but then his gaze wandered around their group, as if searching for a spot to sit. Morna Whitemask subtly made room for him, but the being had its eyes set on another target. He marched boldly to Ygritte and then plopped on her lap, the girl squawking in surprise as she dropped her cloak and thread but did not dare move when the shadowcat circled them and lay behind them, allowing them to lean on her flank.

“Leaf is...busy. Jon said she found a mate, and I should leave her be for now. He also said I should look for one myself.” Crown shrugged before shifting in Ygritte’s lap and leaning back into her chest. His smile was innocent as he looked up at her with bright amber eyes, but Val was not fooled. “Will you be my mate, Iggy?”

Ygritte’s face twisted as snorts and snickers were badly hidden, but at the devious little creature’s smile and the shadowcat shifting behind her, she could only nod stiffly and hesitantly put her arms around Crown’s shoulders. The Earth Singer beamed and grabbed her torn cloak, waving his fingers over the thread and somehow fixing the cloak in seconds.

“There, a gift to my new lady friend.”

Val could barely keep her shoulders from shaking too much; so much for Ygritte stealing herself a man. Didn’t the Northmen give their women a cloak when they married them?

Sudden loud voices could be heard from another part of the camp, and Val stood at once, her brows furrowed as she found a group of men approaching. They were the contingent that had joined her from Chief Tormund’s tribe, led by his third son, Dormund; a surprise addition considering Tormund Giantsbane openly distrusted all who came from the Frozen Shore. But perhaps he felt he needed to contribute someone since members of both the Ice River clans and the Great Warlus’ clan were in their midst.

“What is it, Dormund?” The man was half-carrying his brother Torwynd, who was muttering unintelligibly under his breath. “What’s wrong with your brother?”

“Witchcraft and terrors of the night!” Dormund's usually boisterous attitude was gone, his deep voice a mix of fury and fear. “Something evil is in the woods, and my brother has not felt well at all since we entered.”

“Your brother was always a sickly one.” Morna tilted her head, her face hidden behind her white mask, revealing nothing. “Are you sure he did not get a bout of cold?”

“Torwynd has not had a bout since the maester of the Shadow Tower saw him and gave him medicine! He’s been fit as an auroch until he went to sleep earlier, only to wake up screaming in terror.”

“So he had a night terror. Probably drank too much on the march.” Black Maris waved him away, disdain clear on her face. “Just dunk his head into the nearby stream, and he’ll be fine.”

Dormund’s face turned the ugly color of pus, but before he could speak, Torwynd suddenly rasped, “T-They c-come in the night!”

Val frowned at the young man’s eyes; they were wide and clear, not the eyes of a drunkard. “Who is coming, Torwynd?”

“Not who. What! The eyes! It had no eyes, but it could see me!”

By now, Torwynd’s cries had attracted a lot of attention, and many of the resting folks were muttering anxiously as Dormund tried and failed to calm his brother down.

“What is going on here?” The crowd parted to make way for Jon Snow and Percy Jackson. “Val? Mind explaining the racket?”

“Demons!” Torwynd suddenly cried before collapsing to his knees. “Demons in the night. They want my memories! Ma...I can’t recall my Ma’s face!”

More whispers, and Val noted the first seeds of panic in the people’s voices. Ygritte stood beside her, worry clear in her face, while Crown was whispering something to Leaf; when the other Earth Singer arrived, Val did not know, but she hoped they might have an answer to this.

“Everyone, be calm.” The words were spoken in a casual tone, yet there was a weight in them that had everyone be silent as they turned to Percy Jackson. The young man approached the collapsed Torwynd and placed his hand on his forehead. “Don’t worry, buddy. Nothing will get you while we are here. Now, get some rest.”

Impossibly, Torwynd’s wild eyes grew hazy as his tense muscles relaxed and he started snoring in his brother’s arms.

"Alright, everyone. It's already late at night, and we have a long day of marching tomorrow." Percy said as he looked around, an easy smile on his face. "Get some sleep, and don't let the bedbugs bite you."

Some scattered snickers could be heard as the crowd dispersed, but Val could tell it wasn't enough to calm them. A few thought Torwynd had gone craven and shook their heads in disgust as they left, but a lot more were shaken, and she had a feeling not many would be able to sleep after all.

"What do you think it was, Percy?" Jon asked a few minutes later as the leaders of the caravan gathered in his tent. "Was it really just a nightmare, or was it something more malicious?"

Aside from Val, there were also an Ironborn captain, a Stark captain, one of the mountain clansmen, and the two Earth Singers.

"I wish I could tell you, but it's too early to know the truth; I know of a few monsters that can invade your dreams, but they shouldn't exist here." Percy Jackson was missing his usual grin, looking deadly serious, his words raising more questions than answers. He studied them for a moment before looking to Jon as if asking him a silent question, only for Jon to subtly shake his head. "Something has been bothering me since we entered the forest. A chill in the wind, or the feeling that we are being watched. Maybe Torwynd just had a bad nightmare, or maybe something wicked is stalking us. For what purpose, I can't tell."

He was hiding something. Both Percy and Jon, but for what reason, Val did not know and was unsure if she wanted to know.

"Tales have been sung of creatures of the night that prey on the dreams and memories of man." Leaf suddenly said, her gold and green eyes going vacant as she seemed to recall a memory from long ago. "Let us pray it is just a night terror, for there is no need to scare you; such creatures feed on fear, and we are a large group of people. Fear once started cannot be easily curbed. Once spread, it would haunt us until we find the root of the matter."

Leaf's words turned out to be true. All throughout the night, cries of terror could be heard, and people woke up screaming incoherently. Some said the same as Torwynd: demons with empty eye sockets. Others complained of whispers in the night, even while awake, just over the ears. One night's watch swore he felt a rattling breath on the back of his neck and nearly killed his companion, thinking he was making a fool of him.

On the morrow, as the caravan trudged along the trails, the forest felt eerily silent, the sound of birdsong completely absent. Val had not felt anything when she slept, yet the lack of noise in the forest was disconcerting even to her, let alone the sleep-deprived men. Yet it was only one night of bad sleep, and soon the men were plodding along, enjoying the sunlight peeking from the trees. By noon, everything was almost back to normal, with people chatting or singing, sharing dried meat and water, and hoping they would make good time to the next stop.

That night, Val awoke in her tent to find Ygritte hovering over her with a finger over her mouth. She motioned for her to follow outside, and Val nodded, hurriedly putting on a cloak and grabbing her axe. Ygritte led her past sleeping guards and deeper into the woods, Val grabbing a flaming torch along the way almost by instinct before kicking a watchman in the leg for dozing off, before pausing as he merely muttered incoherently in his sleep and twitched erratically.

Val was about to wake him, but then she turned to the woods, finding Ygritte beckoning her hurriedly, her face half-hidden in the shadows, and Val moved after her.

“Where are we going?” Val finally asked after a few minutes of trekking. She glanced behind her, finding the flames of the campfires flickering. “Ygritte. This is far enough. I can barely see the camp. What did you want to talk about?”

She turned back only to freeze. There was no Ygritte. No one at all but herself in the middle of the clearing. Val cursed under her breath and gripped her axe tightly. She inspected the clearing, finding nothing of importance except for strange footprints near the bank of a stream. Val crouched, bringing the flame closer, and narrowed her eyes; the footprint was unlike anything she had seen before. Three deep punctures at the front and a bigger indent in the back. A three-clawed paw with another claw at the heel? But where was the footsole?

What manner of creature walked on its toes but had nails sharp enough to punch through hard mud?

A whisper in the wind, and Val turned, finding something just at the edge of her vision, but it vanished when she focused on it.

“Who’s there? Show yourself, craven!”

Fear filled her veins as a guttural breath came from behind her, and she swiftly turned, finding herself staring at the stuff of nightmares.

It was a pale, haggard thing—human-like, yet wrong—its bald skull and shoulders studded with bony protrusions. A wide, blood-slick maw split its face in a permanent grin, crowded with too many sharp teeth; two dark holes in its upper gums hissed with every rasping breath. Its skin was dry and brittle-looking, stretched thin over a body that seemed all bone: a waist too narrow to hold organs, flaring into an oversized ribcage. It stood on two legs warped by an extra joint between knee and ankle, balancing delicately on needle-sharp toes.

Val did not have the chance to cry out before whispers filled her mind, even though the creature did not speak, and her eyelids felt heavy, begging her to go to sleep. She nearly collapsed when a wolf's howl echoed in the night, followed by a beastly roar that quickly turned into a pained shriek. Val stood ramrod straight, awake and brandishing her torch blindly, a shriek of terror filling the night that died instantly.

There was nothing in the clearing. She turned around, panic in her heart, yet nothing. The camp could be seen in the distance, and Val wanted nothing more than to hurry back to her tent and sleep; it was just a dream, a waking nightmare. Yet something drew her eyes to where the monster had stood, and there, over the hard mud, were the same deep marks she had found earlier.

Except there was another pair beside it.

Val dashed back to the camp, unwilling to think about the grotesque creature she saw. She ran past the sleeping sentry lying down beside a tree before marching to Ygritte's shoddy tent and pulling the covers off. The sound of gentle snoring greeted her, along with a pair of green lantern-like eyes that were Crown's shadowcat glaring at her from where the Earth Singer slept in the redhead's embrace like a child would sleep with his mother.

The sight was enough to break Val from her fear; Ygritte was sound asleep. She closed the tent cover and wandered back to her tent, wondering if she was going mad, before pausing as the sound of moaning came from the other tents. Peeking through the closest one, she grimaced when she found the occupant shifting in his sleep, muttering incoherently, fear clear in his voice. Val checked a dozen other tents and sleeping cots around campfires, finding the same: people suffering in their sleep, just like the guard from earlier.

A part of her wanted to wake them, but she feared it would only worsen it. Another part wanted to go seek someone's help; Jon Stark or Percy Jackson would surely know how to deal with what was clearly

some sort of sorcerous thing. Yet she was loath to show such weakness, especially when nothing truly happened; the queer footprints could be explained by someone stabbing the ground with their spear.

Nevertheless, Val had decided not to sleep that night. She donned her byrnie, grabbed her shield and helmet, and then settled on a log before a campfire, keeping watch over her people.

At least that was the plan until she was roused awake from a dreamless sleep by a shout of alarm. She hurriedly rose to her feet, swaying as a wave of exhaustion hit her. The first rays of dawn peeked from the top of the trees, yet Val focused only on the crowds of people rushing to where the shouts were coming from. She followed and soon found herself staring at the corpse of the same night's watchman she stumbled on last night. Except when she saw him earlier, he was not pale and pallid and looked as if he had lost half of his weight.

A deep puncture wound could be seen on the center of his forehead, but the most horrific thing was his eyes; they were plucked out, blood vessels and all.

"Make way!" Jon's voice brokered no argument, especially with his direwolf's presence making a path for them through the crowd. Percy followed him with Leaf in his arms, but Val noticed the so-called sorcerer had deep bags under his eyes, along with a small cut near his neck. Both Jon and Percy were armed as if for battle, and there was dirt and blood on their armor; did a fight break out? Or were they sparring? "Daryn, what happened here?"

"Del was on night's watch. I came to relieve him only to find him like this!" The guard who raised the alarm said. "This is unnatural. He was all well last night!"

"I concur," Val added. "I went on a stroll a few hours back and saw him alive, if asleep. He certainly was not missing half his body's weight."

Jon frowned before glancing at the crowd; already, people were waking up from the commotion, looking as if they had not slept at all.

He whispered urgently to Percy, who whispered back before turning to her. "What were you doing late at night? These forests are not safe."

Val hesitated before noticing Ygritte had awoken and approached with Crown. "Ygritte, did you wake me up earlier?"

The redhead looked confused. “No? I had the best sleep in a while, to be honest, at least until this racket.”

Val wanted to ask more, but with so many people around, it could easily cause a panic if she spoke her mind. Instead, she turned to Crown. “Did you notice anything while you slept, Child of the Forest?”

“Does that have anything to do with you barging in on our sleep? Shade didn’t like that.” The Earth Singer patted his shadowcat, explaining without words what she needed to hear.

Val moved closer to the two men and whispered under her breath what happened earlier: ‘Ygritte’ waking her up, Val following her into the woods, ‘Ygritte’ disappearing, and then the monster’s appearance. Leaf let out a long sigh when Val described the apparition in detail before leaning down and inspecting the puncture wound in Del’s forehead, then his empty eye sockets.

“His blood, fat, and brain were drained, and his eyes plucked.” Leaf declared after she finished her inspection. “Show me where you encountered that creature.”

Jon quickly ordered someone to bury the body and doubled the guards before gesturing for her to lead them. It didn’t take long for Val to find the way back to the stream, and she watched as Leaf inspected the footprints. Val, Percy, Jon, and a few spectators, including Ygritte and Crown, watched the ancient being as she closed her eyes and hummed a tune that was more akin to leaves rustling and streams roiling.

Finally, Leaf stood and turned to them with a grave expression. “We have an Alp infestation.”

A mystery in the woods? Who the hell asked for any of that? Let’s just go to Benny and the ice dragon!

Too bad, but the world’s horrors don’t care about plot convenience.

Alps are not canon but are monsters from German folklore; the best kind of folklore. Also, I really like the game Battle Brothers. Just saying.

Regarding Ygritte’s height: I did my calculations. She is described as half a head shorter than Jon, which is about four or five inches. Jon describes Stannis as towering over him by an entire head, so that's eight or nine inches. And Stannis is described as a few inches shorter than Robert, who is 6'6".

Hence, Stannis is between 6'2" and 6'4", Jon is between 5'4" and 5'6" (at least when he was 14 in the books, as here he is much taller), and Ygritte is a tiny-ass midget between 4'10" and a solid five feet.

Meanwhile, Leaf is around 4'10" while Crown is 4'8".