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.

Warning for the faint of heart: Gore, death, and all sorts of unpleasant stuff in that vein.

8th Day of the 5th Moon

Val, Beyond the Wall

Luck was on her side this day; with a pouch filled with berries and a dead hare in her hands, Dalla and Val would not go hungry for the next three days. Prey had never been abundant, but lately, everything was even more scarce than usual, and the forest - more unwelcoming, forcing the sisters to get by on berries, roots, and fish. Neither of them was good at catching fish, but their mother had passed her knowledge of herbs and healing to Dalla. Val had attempted to learn some, but the bow, knife, and spear suited her far better. Still, a woods witch rarely went hungry as long as people needed healing and were willing to bring gifts in return, which meant fish or sometimes skins in a village next to the lake. A few daring ones demanded that Dalla waste her precious herbs and poultices on them with nothing in return, but Val had taken care of those reckless fools.

Still, the voices in Greystone urging to join Mance Rayder and his army grew in number with every passing sennight, pride and freedom readily abandoned for fear. Dead things walking in the woods - rumours of abandoned or slaughtered villages made even Val hesitate. Yet the promises of the self-proclaimed king ran false; she remembered her mother, Valla, saying that even if all the Free Folk united under one banner and attacked the Wall and defeated the Crows, the Lord of Wolves and his kneelers would still smash them effortlessly as if they were gnats.

Val's mother would know - she was half a Southron. But then again, Mance Rayder used to be a Crow too and, by all accounts, was somewhat confident in his chances of success, and Valla's odd respect for the 'Stark' even on her death bed felt odd, misplaced. Was the Wolf Lord strong enough to protect his lands when raiders managed to climb the Wall, take what they could, and return?

Yet, did they have a choice but to try? Soon enough, one dawn, they might wake under the thrall of the Cold Shadows if they stayed here. Half a moon ago, some of the braver, more experienced hunters and raiders had gathered up, and gone into the woods, intent to fight the ominous yet elusive foe.

They never returned.

They could take their things and leave, but things were said to be even worse in other places. Truthfully, their only option was Mance Rayder; the only question was when their pride would buckle under the

dread. If there was one thing that Valla had taught her daughters, it was that survival always came first. Pride and freedom could come and go, but you'd need to survive another day to keep them.

Val shook her head and focused on the small, trodden trail leading towards Greystone as she tied the dead fox to her belt. Yet, fifteen minutes away from the village, she couldn't help but feel that something was off. Sure, the forest was more ominous these days, but her gut was telling her it was more than that. Had Crows sneaked to attack Greystone? While rare, tales of them slaughtering villages were not unheard of. Or maybe it was the Cold Shadows or even Mance Rayder's men? The Nightrunners did raid around the lake from time to time. Regardless, those who failed to listen to their gut feeling rarely lived past twenty.

With trepidation, she left the trail in favour of the trees and bushes and quickly climbed up a thick sentinel. Sure enough, she heard something and stilled on her branch, carefully watching down. Not more than two minutes later, she saw an odd man cautiously walking down the trail, not more than fifteen yards away from her. He wore no black, yet his furs were too well-made and still looked somewhat cold despite them, and his steps on the snow were cautious yet uncertain. His skin was the colour of dark, muddy clay, though Val couldn't say if it was from dirt, paint, or something else, and his face twisted into an unpleasant frown.

After a few seconds, she concluded him to be an odd southron from far away, remembering her mother's tale of the wide world that stretched further than one could imagine. Fantastical tales of lands where snow never fell and everything was lush, green, and warm. Val snorted inwardly and focused on the man. The blade on his hip was a fine make, doubtlessly steel, judging by the clinking ringmail peeking under his belt and cloak.

He was coming from the village, and the worst part was the blood on his garb. There were dark, crimson globs and splashes on his fur-lined cloak around his wrists.

Not only a stranger but a foe.

Was the village sacked, the men slain, and the women stolen? What of Dalla? After a short moment of hesitation, Val steeled herself; she would have to go and see for herself. But first, this strange new foe must be dealt with.

She never fought with Crows or Southrons but remembered old Oden's teachings on how to kill them. While impressive, their armour rarely covered their neck, knee, or elbow joints very well. And, of course, their eyes were rarely protected but were much harder targets to hit.

Val squeezed the handle of her bone knife and tensed once the man neared the trail below her. Her heart thundered like a drum, and when he was just below, she leapt down into her foe and slammed her knife into his neck above the fur-lined collar, and they tumbled onto the cold, wet slush. A pained moan escaped his throat as they rolled around the snow, and the few rocks and roots that slammed into her back and side knocked the breath out of her and made her lose her grip on the knife.

When they stopped, the man was atop her, gurgling in his own blood and face twisted in agony as his beady black eyes stared at her in disbelief. The stench of shit and piss irritated her nose. Val ignored the weight pressing on her and wrestled to grab the wood-bound handle sticking out of her foe's neck. Her hand grasped the slippery, blood-covered hilt and pushed, twisting and pushing further, making him twitch and gurgle.

A few heartbeats later, he stopped moving. With a grunt, Val pushed his body away, stood up, and inspected herself with a wince. Her scarf, tunic, and cloak were all painted red with blood. Dull throbs littered a few parts of her torso, a result of hitting rocks and particularly gnarly roots during her roll in the snow. The kill fazed her little, as Val had slain men five times before. Three trying to steal her, and two during a scuffle with a wandering tribe. No, her main worry was for Dalla, her younger sister. The village was just a convenient place where a few smaller clans and families had gathered for protection, including them.

Still, she had to get away immediately lest the companions of the fallen man found her. After a moment of hesitation, Val quickly looked around and saw and heard nobody. The forest was eerily quiet, and the usual cries of the snow shrikes were absent. Weighting her risks, the spearwife cut the man's furs and belt, revealing a ringmail underneath.

The man's body was a tad thicker, but they were of similar build. With some struggle, Val removed the chainmail and pulled it over her tunic. It felt odd, but it did not restrict her movements too much, nor was it too loud. After a short inspection, she noted that her knife's edge had chipped in a few places and threw it away in favour of the pair of steel daggers resting on the belt. There was also an odd, curved shortsword akin to a waning moon, a wooden club, and something reminding her of a fishing net. An odd choice of arms, but Val had little time to hesitate and picked up the blade and quickly made her way into the woods, leaving the rest of the odd spoils on the corpse.

Beyond the Wall, nothing was as valuable as steel, so leaving it behind would be a great waste. Alas, burning the body would take too long, so she left it there. Hopefully, it wouldn't wake up anytime soon…

Val tried to be as stealthy as possible, stepping on stones and roots where she could, leaving next to no trace, but the ringmail clinked softly with every movement. Yet, in the eerily silent forest, it sounded like thunder in her ears. She swore quietly, pulled off the hauberk and hung it on a low branch in a way that was not visible from the trodden trail. She then marked the three with a slash from a few sides and continued.

The minutes stretched on, and Val became tenser as she approached the village through the forest while ignoring her throbbing torso, grimacing at the thought of bruises. She heard it before she saw it, yet it was wrong. A worrying mix of pained cries, moans, and odd yells in a new, unfamiliar tongue. It was not the Old Tongue nor any mixed variations that she had heard other tribes and clans speak before. The words were smooth and pleasant, akin to the flowing of a small creek, in complete contrast to the cries of pain.

And then, Val cautiously arrived at the end of the treeline and sneaked a peak from behind a nearby thick trunk. She wasn't worried about her head being spotted - the village was around thirty yards away, and the nearby shrubs and low branches provided generous cover. The following sight chilled her insides far more than ice or snow ever could - the village was swarming with those clay-skinned men. Dozens of them, all clad in well-made leathers and ringed mail and armed with steel. Never before had Val seen so much steel in one place.

A few corpses were carried onto a large pile. Val grimaced in recognition - those were Oden, the chieftain here, old Varok, and most of the remaining hunters and older folk. The rest of the villagers were in a long line, clasped in iron chains, and were led onto two enormous wooden… what did her mother call them again?

Boats.

Many a time larger and more impressive than the fishing rafts they made, both wooden monstrosities easily outsized four mammoths, if not more, reminding her of Valla's childhood tales.

Val thought most of them were made up, but…

She looked around - a few thatched huts and the hall were being ransacked, while much to her disbelief, the heart tree was being chopped down. Did those fools not fear the wrath of the gods?!

Yet, the rhythmic thumping of the axes as they methodically bit like ants into the enormous base of the weirwood spoke for itself. And worse, there was not a sign of her sister. Was she already on the boat?

Yet, if Dalla was there, could Val do anything? She was fierce and brave, but those men had slaughtered the chieftain, the raiders, and the remaining hunters and outnumbered her greatly. Worse, Val had no way of knowing if her sister was even on the ship. She could try something if there were one, two, or three. Yet there were many, as numerous as the village, if not more.

As the spearwife was hesitating, unsure what to do, a vicious, mighty howl tore through the air from the east. A lower-pitched and different one followed, then a third and a fourth. Direwolves; a chill ran down her spine.

They rarely attacked villages unless starving, but the scent of blood seemed to have drawn them here.

The southrons seemed unnerved, and rightfully so - a single direwolf was a dangerous foe, let alone many. A tall, burly man with a bloodied cheek began barking out harsh orders. Clad in finer clothing and wearing more steel and bigger weapons - this was undoubtedly the chieftain. A handful of men with spears, torches, and bows headed towards the eastern forest, where the howls had come.

A mistake, Val noted happily; there was no worse place to face a pack of direwolves than the forest. Sure enough, howls, cries of pain, anguish, and horror could be heard all the way here, distracting the invaders.

One of the men that had entered the eastern treeline ran out desperately, yet a moment later, a vicious white blur leapt and slammed into him, taking him down. A snow-white direwolf, bigger than any Val had seen, tore out the man's throat and gazed at the invaders. Even from here, she could see a pair of baleful crimson eyes that sent chills down her spine. Yet before the southrons could rally, the wolf disappeared into the woods with a proud swish of his shaggy white tail as if taunting them.

Silence, absolute silence, as nobody moved or said a thing; all the cries of pain and howls had stopped.

The enormous chieftain angrily brandished a thick, curved blade and snatched a spear from the hands of one of the others, and a stream of harsh words escaped his mouth.

A moment later, everything became chaotic, and Val froze, unable to do anything but watch with fascination.

As everyone was gathering towards the east, where the white direwolf had killed the man, from the west, a rain of black arrows tore through the skies like a swarm of hungry ravens.

With cries of anguish and blood, some of the men fell to the ground, while others panicked and ran around blindly. The arrows stopped as abruptly as they appeared, and Val noted that no more than a dozen had fallen; quite a few arrows had stuck into fur cloaks or tunics, yet the men did not seem much bothered by them. Another volley of arrows was now met with shields and struck down only four, but they seemed to be only wounded, judging by their pained cries and the way they rolled in the muddy slush.

Two figures dashed out of the western forest. Both clad in steel, one was tall and burly, while the other was slightly shorter and lithe. At the same time, from the eastern treeline dashed out a mixed pack of wolves, big and small.

Wargs?!

“LIDDLE!”

“WINTERFELL!”

Just as Val hesitated to join them, she stared at the sight before her and blinked. The shorter fighter, garbed in grey, was faster than she could believe and fearlessly ploughed through the sides of the clay-skinned men. Her eyes could barely track his movements, but his sword blurred, slashing through steel, bone, and flesh effortlessly, like a hungry wolf amongst sheep. The blades and cudgels of his foes couldn't catch him, nor could their nets.

But Val noticed the attackers seemed uneasy and surprised, slow and hesitant to meet the deadly foe. A few of them were slowly retreating towards the old wharf.

The fierce man was agile like a shadowcat and did not remain in more than one place for more than half a heartbeat, lunging towards the foes on the side. Blurred, sweeping strikes faster than most could counter left many men gurgling painfully from their sliced throats, if not a head shorter. The blade reminded Val of a raging river - each cut seamlessly flowed into the next, cleaving through wood, weapon, flesh or bone with savage surety.

The grey cloak twirled behind him with a deadly flourish, and the spearwife could finally make out the thing stitched onto the back - a shaggy white direwolf head.

A mighty warg? Though Val had heard many a tale about them, each one more fantastical than the rest. Yet the only one she had met could only enter the mind of a small white fox and was a big craven and a worse raider. No, mayhaps not only a warg but someone blessed by the gods?

The attackers attempted to surround him, but a few errant arrows continued hailing from the forest, forcing them to lift their shields. At that moment, the taller, burly companion arrived and ferociously protected the left flank of the wolfish man, furiously striking down any who neared with his enormous ax. The tall man might have been slower but was no less dangerous.

On the other side, scores of big and small wolves savagely encircled and attacked lone men from the sides and back. Terrifying howls melded with the screams of terror and anguish.

The enormous chieftain that towered over a head from the other invaders finally made way to stop the warg-lord from slaughtering his men. Yet, he fared no better - his cleaver was chopped in two with a sweeping slash that removed his head.

The fight - no, this wasn't even a fight, not anymore. It reminded Val more of how a few younger children tried to play-fight against the old veteran raiders, only to lose terribly every time.

Beset by two sides and with their leader slain, the invaders were quick to lose their courage and decided to turn tail and run towards the ships.

But alas, it was too late; the wolves were relentless and pounced on the backs and legs of the fleeing men with fervour, while the fighter began cutting through multiple foes with every swing.

Before Val could blink, there were no more dark-skinned invaders standing, yet the man didn’t stop - he rushed the old wharf and leapt up the wooden stairs of the closer ship.

Jon Snow

He wasn’t feeling particularly merciful, so every single slaver had been slain, even those who surrendered. His brigandine had done its job splendidly - the whole fight, if it could be even called one, had earned him only a handful of bruises, courtesy of the few strikes he failed to avoid or deflect.

Getting looks of admiration, respect, caution, and fear was not a particularly new feeling, but it was odd to be again on the receiving end of such gazes. Jon shrugged it off and continued striking down the remaining chains since not all keys for the manacles were found. Thankfully, he didn't chop off any limbs, although three of the most fidgety children got a few shallow cuts.

The Singers of the Earth received no fewer looks than he did, although there seemed to be less fear and more curiosity. Understandable since none of them looked particularly imposing or threatening as they were scarcely taller than an eleven-year-old child. What seemed to unnerve the Free Folk and the slaves were the three dozen wolves with bloody-dripping snouts that roamed around the corpses. Four of the normal wolves were killed, and a handful were wounded, but there was nothing too serious.

At first, Ghost's ability to gather his own four-legged retinue had been amusing, but Jon could tap into their mind as easily, and they followed both his and Ghost's commands with no resistance whatsoever. Now, after the battle, they had proved their usefulness, it would have been a far more challenging fight without the distraction and the pack hammering the slavers from the opposite side. Jon mentally nudged them, and they retreated into the forest while Ghost paddled softly to his side.

"Can any of you speak common?" Jon turned to the freed rowers as he absentmindedly scratched behind the direwolf's ears. Fifty-two of them - all gaunt, tired, apprehensive, and freezing, courtesy of their rough, ill-fitted fur garb.

“I can, Ser,” a wiry pale-skinned man with a tangled beard and messy dark hair stepped forward while fearfully glancing at Ghost, reddened snout dripping with dark blood.

Jon noted his proficiency in the common tongue, despite the hoarse voice, and decided to ignore the misplaced title.

“Fret not; he doesn’t bite unless I tell him to,” the man gave him a sceptical grunt, making Jon chuckle. “Hailing from Westeros?”

“Nay, just a merchant from Essos, though my ma was from Gulltown,” he bowed, and then his fear was replaced with solemnity. “What will happen to us now?”

“You got a choice: stay here, or take the boats and leave.”

“You’re willing to give a bunch of slaves you never met two of the fanciest galleys I’ve ever seen?”

“Yes,” Jon said with a shrug. “They are useless to me, and most of you would probably die if you decided to stay.”

“Quite generous,” the man noted suspiciously.

“Take it or leave it. I can spare you a handful of cudgels, nets, and daggers, but any bows, weirwood and steel will remain here.”

The essosi rower turned to his fellows a slew of quick, hurried words was unleashed, spoken in some valyrian dialect Jon couldn't recognise; the rest rowers eased and began to nod.

After a short discussion, the man turned to Jon, "None wish to stay here, but we can only man one of the ships."

"Good, but first aid us clear up," Jon pointed to Duncan and the Singers, who were now stripping anything of value from the dead slavers and checking if any of the spent arrows could be reused. Arms, chainmail, and furs were all valuable and would come in use sooner or later.

The man said a few words to the freed rowers, and they enthusiastically joined in.

Leaf, who was inspecting the nearly chopped-down Heart Tree, turned around and quickly dashed his way.

"Jon, can I have a few dozen corpses?"

"What for?"

"I think I can sacrifice their blood and innards to restore the Heart Tree," Leaf replied hesitantly.

"Do it, but chop the heads off first."

"Going to do a repeat of the Hungry Wolf?" Jarod asked from the side.

"They've earned it."

Jon walked through the freed wildling, trailed by the Liddle bastard, and the direwolf wandered off. His attention turned to the young dark-haired wildling woman sitting atop a fallen trunk with blood all over her face and looking quite battered. The others might have looked scuffed, but none seemed roughed up like she was. Something in her was somewhat familiar, but Jon couldn't put his finger on it.

"What did you do to earn such a beating?" The greybeard asked directly, not mincing his words.

"They were asking after the mammoths," she groaned painfully. "Was gonna send them straight to the giants n' Mance Rayder, but I lost my temper when they started chopping the Heart Tree n' bit off their chieftain's ear instead."

"Bold!" Jarod roared in delight while Jon let out a chuckle at her daring.

"Being bold hurts," she winced. "They said you fought with the strength of ten men and speed of five. Are you a god?"

"I don't feel particularly godly," Jon snorted, but she didn't look very convinced.

“Blessed by the gods, that’s what he is,” Jarod murmured to the side, and the woman nodded along, face filled with understanding.

He wanted to retort, but it died in his throat. They weren’t exactly… wrong. Blessings, curses, was there any difference in the end?

"Regardless, I'm grateful for the aid," she tilted her head to the surrounding Free Folk that listened on with interest. "We all are. Those mud-skin fucks came when we least expected them from the lake, slaughtered most like pigs, and captured the rest. They looked southron but came from the North."

“Probably sailed up the river. Essosi slavers can only attack those weaker and less prepared,” Jarod spat on the ground, then looked at the battered woman and froze. “Where’d you get that pin?”

“This?” She pointed towards the worn oaken pinecone that clasped the fur cloak atop her shoulders. “Was from my ma.”

At that moment, Jon felt Ghost tug at his mind and smiled inwardly at the fleeting image.

“Forget it,” the greybeard sighed and tiredly waved. “What’s your name?”

"Dalla," Jon Snow hid his surprise well enough and scrutinised the woman. Sure enough, there was some resemblance, but the abundance of blood on her face and the lack of swollen belly made her look quite different. It took him a few moments to rattle his memory, but he did remember that Mance Rayder mentioned he met his wife on his way back from Winterfell.

Jon stilled - he had completely forgotten to mention Mance Rayder's visit to Winterfell in the letter to his father. A sigh tore from his mouth; there was not much to be done about it now; Jon wasn't even sure he wanted to do anything. He could have attempted to warg into Bran's direwolf, but that connection had waned once he travelled a few hundred miles. And the Wall was also another obstacle that would bar his attempts, even if the connection was still present.

“I’m Jarod Snow,” the old clansman hesitantly spoke up, breaking Jon out of his musing. “The young man securing our spoils over there is my nephew, Duncan Liddle. And our fearsome chieftain is called Jon Snow.”

“Aren’t you two related with the same name as well?”

“Nay, Snow’s the name given to those born to unwed parents,” Jon explained with a shrug.

“Sounds stupid,” Dalla coughed, then gazed at him curiously. “What brings southrons like you so far north? I thought only Crows could pass the Wall, and there were no Children in the south.”

“Don’t let them hear ya call them that,” Jarod snorted, “the little leafcloaks prefer being called Singers of the Earth and got the voice for it to boot.”

“As for our purpose here - we’re hunting,” Jon explained.

“Hunting?”

“Aye, for the Others.”

His words were met with gasps, suspicious glances and disbelief.

“Don’t think the Cold Shadows can even die,” Dalla spoke sombrely, “our best hunters and raiders went to fight them a fortnight ago and never returned.”

“Everything can be killed,” he shrugged, “the Others might be dangerous foes, but we’ve slain four before.”

"Blessed by the gods," the woman hummed quietly with a shake of her head, then nodded, "Aye, if it's someone like you, I can believe it."

“What’ll happen to us now?” A chestnut-haired boy looking around twelve, maybe thirteen, spoke up fearfully.

“That’s up to you,” Jon shrugged.

“Up to us?” Dalla echoed with a pained grimace.

“Aren’t you going to take us with you?” The boy persisted.

“You can follow if you wish,” he shrugged, “But don’t expect to be coddled. You’ll have to pull your own weight, and if you can’t keep up, you’ll be left behind.”

Jon knew leaving the Free Folk here would probably get most of them killed. Yet taking them would result in a similar fate, as he had no way to protect them, especially while fighting the Others. Nor did he desire to play a wet nurse to a few snot-nosed brats.

“When are you goin’ to leave?” The battered woman asked quietly.

“Five, maybe ten days.”

Dalla then looked around as if searching for someone, and he had quite a good idea who. “Have you seen a pretty spearwife, long honey-coloured hair and blue eyes, perchance?”

“Aye, there,” Jon pointed to Val, who walked out of the tree line under the watchful eyes of Ghost and two other direwolves, who slowly circled her from afar. She looked to be bloodied but otherwise unharmed.

A relieved sigh escaped the battered woman's lips, and she looked at him oddly, "Didn't think southrons could become skinchangers. My ma used to say magic was gone in the south."

"Dalla!" Val finally rushed over and stopped just in front of her sister.

Author's Endnote:

Val finally shows her face. Jon might be reckless, but he has the skills to back it, and he did learn tactics at Ned's knee, just like Robb did.

Salladhor Saan was killed by one of the arrows and didn't even have the chance to surrender, not that it would have done him any good.

Was Valla the missing daughter of old Lena from Little Hall? Yes.