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: Violence, death, and all sorts of unpleasant stuff in that vein.

7th Day of the 5th Moon

Robert Baratheon

This was the life he had always been missing. Ned by his side, enjoying everything the kingdoms had to offer together! Well, almost everything - his friend seemed to take his marriage vows quite seriously now; Robert would have thought him made out of stone if Eddard hadn't sired a bastard all those years ago. Ah, his Ned was lucky: Catelyn had a heart of gold to accept another woman's child under her roof; Robert still remembered how Cersei subtly threatened to do away with Mya should he bring her to court.

Alas, the Quiet Wolf seemed somehow troubled, but Robert couldn't blame him; many things had happened in the last fortnight.

At least the hunt proved quite successful. The Wolfswood was a far more primal, feral place than the Kingswood; the harshness ever present in the North had left its undeniable touch here. The beasts were a tad bigger, faster, and generally harder to catch - but that only made the hunt more meaningful.

As they made it to the top of the hill, the grey walls of Winterfell finally peaked above the tree line in the distance - it seemed that in less than half an hour of riding, they'd be back and ready to gorge themselves senseless on venison! Few things were as appetising as the meat that you had caught and killed by your own hand.

As the king, Robert was at the head of the procession, his friend and Howland Reed to his right, and the kingsguard trailed behind him, followed by everyone else.

The crannoglord was observant as usual - ever since Robert had arrived, he had scarcely seen a single word escape his mouth; it seemed that the Lord of Greywater Watch was content to simply watch impassively. If he was a tad bigger with a white cloak, Howland could easily be mistaken for a kingsguard. In fact, with his green and brown garb, he almost merged with the surrounding forest, and Robert found his eyes oft passing over the short man.

"It seems that your skills have only sharpened with time," Ned said from his right. "Clean kill; the second stag you speared is one of the biggest I've seen."

The first one he slew was nothing extraordinary. But the second… it might not have been the largest Robert had slain, but the antlers atop its head were the most majestic he had seen. Perfectly symmetrical, with no cracks, chips or any flaws. The curve, the size, the pale colour, everything was magnificent and just right; they would look even better mounted atop the Iron Throne itself. If only the damned royal chair was more comfortable, he would be more inclined to hold court…

“Nowadays, I wield the spear far more than the hammer,” Robert lamented. “You’ve not gone rusty yourself. A wild shaggy mountain horse, I haven’t seen those since our days in the Eyrie.”

“They’re a rare sight here, too,” the northern lord agreed.

“Poor old Selmy, he looked like his heart was about to burst with worry when the shadowcat leapt out of the bushes,” the king barked out in laughter, remembering the old knight’s reddened face.

“Shadowcats are no jape, Robert, you know that,” worry simmered in Ned’s grey eyes.

“Hah, twenty years might have passed, but I still remember how that crotchety old knight, what was his name Margot, Margrave?”

“Morgen Tollett,” his friend supplied gruffly.

“Aye, Morgen Tollett got raked to death through his ringmail and arming doublet in his sleep during that hunt,” Robert patted his belly with a chuckle as Eddard sighed. “You fret too much, old friend; that’s what my kingsguard are for. And your wolf made short work of the damned overgrown cat before it could do anything. Only a pity, the pelt is too savaged, or you could have gifted Cat a shadowskin cloak.”

“Some of it can still be salvaged,” Ned waved dismissively, “Enough to fit a cloak for my Arya for her next name-day.”

They finally entered the open plains between the Stark seat and the wolfswood.

The king wanted a direwolf of his own. But alas, for eight thousand years, the Starks were the only ones that had managed to tame direwolves consistently. Even if Robert managed to procure himself a cub, he was far more likely to get himself mauled or savaged sooner or later, just like all the others that had attempted before.

Robert’s only consolation was that his grandchildren would have direwolves of their own.

His thoughts drifted to his future good-son, Robb Stark. Just like his father, the lad turned out to be a capable hunter; he had slain an enormous moose, albeit with the help of that direwolf of his. Those beasts were a hundred times better than hunting hounds. The young man reminded the king of his joyful youth, especially with those laughing blue eyes, the strong body, and the charming disposition. The boy did not favour the warhammer but seemed to be a far better rider than Robert had ever been.

He would have been envious if Robb Stark was not about to become his good-son in less than a moon.

Ned sure knew how to raise his children; all of them were a credit to House Stark, even that wild hellion Arya. At first glance, the young girl seemed rather subdued, yet Robert could see the defiant glint in her eyes and the restlessness bubbling underneath.

From behind, Joffrey's guffaw entered his ears, souring Robert's mood. Ah, where did he go wrong with that boy? Against all rules of the hunt, the little shit had killed a young doe and bragged about it for all to hear. And none dared to speak out because it was the crown prince, although many a man began to sport frowns when looking at Joffrey.

Truthfully, the king knew where he went wrong. His heir had a cruel streak and was arrogant and vain but no more different than some other noblemen his age. It was that shrew, his mother the queen, whispering with her poisonous tongue in the boy's ear. To this day, Robert regretted taking Jon's advice to wed the old Lion's daughter.

Sadly, it made too much sense back then to marry the gorgeous 'Light of the West' and bind her formidable father to the throne. But under the pretty face and the generous pair of teats hid the blackest of hearts.

Now, her influence in court was great, and even if Robert wanted to get rid of his wife, it would be too damn difficult even without the proud Old Lion. He could find some reason to disown his eldest son, but Cersei would raise hell and would focus on moulding the spineless Tommen to suit her own image. His youngest was sweet and kind but craved his mother's attention.

If Robert truly set his mind to it, he could do it. He could get rid of Cersei. Yet would it be worth it? No, the following fallout would leave him bereft of feasting, wenching, and drinking for a long time, the only things making rulership somewhat bearable. Maybe one day, his wife would choke on her spite.

Hah, wouldn't that be amusing?

Robert shook his head; thinking of Cersei always soured his mood. Hopefully, with Ned by his side, things in the capital would take a turn for the better.

"I've been thinking," the king hesitantly began, "Tommen and Rickon seem to be getting along very well. Why don't I leave my boy here to foster."

And get him away from the influence of his shrewish mother and the court's useless lickspittles.

"That would be too much favour for House Stark, Robert," Ned shook his head.

"Piss on that; I'm the King! If anyone has any problem with it, they can take it to me!"

"Still, it would be unfair for Robb to look after the boy when newlywed," the northern lord persisted, "How about this - I'll take Tommen as my page when we leave south, and arrangements can be made for Rickon and Tommen to foster together at a trusted lord when your son reaches ten name-days."

"Fine," Robert begrudgingly agreed. If Eddard taught the youngest prince even half as well as any of his own children, Tommen would benefit greatly.

The rest of the short way to Winterfell was spent in silence.

Inside the courtyard, they were greeted by a surprise - it seemed that Cerwyn and a good part of the northern clansmen had arrived. Wull, Burley, Norrey, Liddle, Harclay, Knott, Irondam, Redhill, and many others Robert did not remember anymore.

Knowing Ned, he probably invited the whole North to attend his heir's wedding, but the road from the furthest Northern mountains was at least ten days, and the marriage had been decided scarcely five days ago. They were here for something else, although if Robert were to wager a guess, they would definitely be staying for the wedding celebrations anyway. It didn't matter much - the more, the merrier!

And well, there was Cerwyn, who was definitely here for the latter - his seat was only a hard day's ride from Winterfell.

For some reason, Catelyn seemed somewhat uneasy, but Ned's children all looked happy.

The courtesies were quickly exchanged, and the Lady of Winterfell approached her husband with a hint of reluctance and whispered in his ear.

The long tables were laden with food and drink, and the merriment was going full force. To the side, the bards were playing *'The Bear and the Maiden Fair'* as half the younger clansmen sang along, and Robert was ravenously devouring the roast venison of his own kill. In the absence of northern lords other than Cerwyn, Reed, and the Manderly heir, most of the chieftains of the larger clans were clustered near the head of the highseat.

"-and the lad speared the beast clean through the eye!"

This was the third time Torren Liddle was retelling the tale. The Stark daughters were leaning forward, listening on with interest, and they were far from the only ones as Robb and his royal children were paying rapt attention as well. Oh, and what a tale it was; valour, bravery, and skill, a hero victorious against all odds in saving a damsel in distress!

Yet none could dispute it - the enormous pelt was pristine - not a single tear. Morgan Liddle had brought the thick skull the size of a hound - the crack at the hole where the right eye was supposed to be was unmistakable. And most important of all, the Northerners were straightforward, honest folk, and if the Liddle Chieftain said Jon Snow slew the gigantic beast and saved his daughter - it had surely happened.

The fact that Ned's bastard boy was willing to send the priceless pelt as a gift to his father spoke volumes of the respect and loyalty to House Stark and his father. And humble to boot, requesting no reward for saving a lord's daughter.

And well, Ned's face was a mask of ice, but Robert could read it well enough - there was a hint of relief in his countenance, and he had the feeling the Lord of Winterfell was bursting from pride on the inside.

Gods, the lad must be quite strong to crack one of the thickest parts of the skull with a spear, and the king idly wondered if he could take down such a beast on his lonesome. He snorted inwardly; of course, he could - there was nothing Robert Baratheon couldn't slay!

The king had half a mind to reward the boy himself - a knighthood and even a generous strip of land somewhere in the Stormlands or Crownlands, along with more honours. But Jon Snow was nowhere to be found.

"Hey Torren," the king took a generous gulp of wine from his goblet, "Where's the boy now?"

"He seemed to have his mind set on travelling," Liddle shrugged and took a swig of ale from his tankard.

"Ah, a free spirit," Robert nodded wisely. He couldn't blame the young bastard; being free like the wind to wander where his heart desired was a dream come true.

Wine and ale flowed like a river; the clansmen did not shy away from drinking at all. The king could even see a few of the younger clansmen crowded around one of the long tables below, where Morgan Liddle, Jeor Harclay, Tyrion Lannister, and Rogar Wull were competing to see who could drink the most.

Robert looked around the high table - none of the chieftains seemed too eager with their cups, and Ned was never one to indulge himself with baser pursuits like drinking. Ah, damn all those bores, where was all the celebration!?

With a loud burp, the king stood up and swaggered towards the table where the young clansmen were drinking.

Eddard Stark

Joffrey was oft charming and polite, especially in public, but now that Eddard had seen his cruel streak with the young doe for himself, he could see the mercurial nature hidden underneath the pleasant veneer. The Lord of Winterfell was glad to have declined that betrothal; the thought of the blonde boy as his good-son made his skin crawl.

And he had earned himself a young page to watch over while dealing with the mess that was going to be King's Landing.

Today was far too eventful for his liking.

He sighed; at this rate, Winterfell's stocks of wine and ale would be finished before the wedding even took place. Alas, such was the cost of hosting his bannermen and the royal court for nearly a moon. At least Ned had more than twenty days to procure more - while difficult, it was still possible. On the bright side, food would not be a problem - Winterfell's larders were filled to the brim, and harvest was around the corner. At most, a few large herds of cattle would have to be butchered, but replenishing those at the height of summer was not an issue either.

What was most important was the news about Jon - alive and well, albeit rather reckless.

His children were ecstatic to hear of the brother they thought lost, Catelyn - not as much. As usual, she said nothing, but Ned could recognise the conflicted reluctance brewing in her eyes. She had made her dislike of Jon's presence in Winterfell known to him long ago, but it seemed that his absence suited her even less.

Thankfully, the feast was finally over, with plenty of people passed out drunk. Robert, Tyrion Lannister, and Rogar Wull were the only ones on their feet after that drinking contest, though all three were swaying unsteadily. All those passed out on the benches and tables would regret it the next morn.

Ned shook his head; he was already feeling quite tired, but before returning to his sorely missed feathered bed, he had to deal with the belligerent mountain chieftains first, so he led them to a guarded chamber behind the great hall, where they could speak in private.

Although they seemed to be far less quarrelsome and oddly united, not that he'd complain. The last thing he wanted to do was settle petty disputes over hills, creeks, poaching, and the like now. At least no challenges of single combat were issued tonight.

"We're all scouring the mountains for obsidian and mining every deposit we find as you ordered, Lord Stark," Hugo began with a bow as soon as the door closed. "Is it true that you received a warning of dark things stirring Beyond the Wall?"

The chieftains began to murmur, but there was no sign of surprise in any of them - it seemed that they had already heard about this.

"Aye," Ned's throat felt dry, "I have, and supposedly obsidian is their weakness. Better to wait for all the Northern Lords to come before speaking further of this."

"What shall we do with all the black rock, though?" Ronard Burley grunted out.

The old chieftain had greying hair and a thick white beard and was one of the most crotchety chieftains. As his name would suggest, he was quite tall and burly, his back was beginning to hunch forward, and his neck was incredibly short and thick.

"Fashion it into spearheads, daggers, and arrowtips and begin sending it to the Watch; they will know what to do," Ned rubbed his brow. "As long as you keep doing this, you can consider a quarter of your yearly due forgiven."

The promise of reduced taxation seemed to catch their attention far better than any vague threat of legendary foe stirring. That seemed to satisfy their curiosity, so they began leaving the chamber.

Ned signalled to Liddle to stay behind; he wanted some more details about Jon's stay in Little Hall.

"Yes, Lord Stark?"

"Tell me, where did my son head to?"

A tired sigh escaped Torren Liddle's mouth, and he tiredly ran a hand through his hair.

"Beyond the Wall to see if he can see the threat with his own eyes, or at least that's what he told me," the chieftain's words made Ned's insides twist into an icy knot. "I do think he was holding a few things back, though. I sent Duncan, my firstborn, and my uncle Jarod Snow with him."

The Lord of Winterfell didn't trust his voice right now, so he nodded gratefully instead.

"What was your impression of Jon Snow?" Howland asked from the side, brow heavy with thought.

"Valiant, resolute, and sad," Torren replied without hesitation.

"Sad?" Ned found himself echoing.

"Aye, sad. The lad got on well enough with everyone but rarely smiled or laughed, and even then, it scarcely reached his eyes as if he was grieving. I know most young men are usually proud, angry, or hot-headed. Yet there was not an ounce of any of those in him, only peace." A languid yawn escaped the chieftain's mouth. "If there's nothin' else, may I be excused?"

Eddard nodded and wished him a restful sleep; Torren Liddle promptly left the chamber, leaving him alone with Howland Reed.

"What do you think Jon is aiming to do Beyond the Wall?"

His friend shook his head, "I have no idea. But it seems my earlier conjecture proved true - he's indeed grown dangerous. Fret not, Jon should have little trouble with his skills even Beyond the Wall, and he is no longer alone."

8th Day of the 5th Moon

Salladhor Saan

Salladhor's idea of trying to trade with the locals and receive aid and directions from them was met with failure as soon as chopping down weirwood was mentioned.

Screams and cries echoed through the small settlement as Denzo's men did their job. This was the second not abandoned village they found along the lake's coast, and the Lyseni sellsail grimaced as the air was filled with cries of pain and anger. The first one barely had a handful of old crones and greybeards left - nobody useful.

While savage, the locals could do little against Denzo's manhunters - bone and stone weapons could barely scratch the tyroshi slaves, who were a dab hand at fighting unprepared and unarmoured foes. Using shields, nets, staves, and clubs, they methodically subdued the fighters and hunted down the

women and the children. Out of little more than a hundred inhabitants, less than two dozen seem to be fighters, so they were easily overwhelmed.

None of the savages were wasted but the wounded and the old - the former were put down instead of spending their scant medical supplies, while the latter brought no coin - so they were done away with.

A nasty business, but hopefully, Magister Sarrios would pay a hefty coin for their efforts. Salladhor shook his head and signalled his own men to bring their axes and begin processing the enormous weirwood tree in the middle of the village. Nearly thirty feet thick at the trunk, the gigantic tree that towered with its ominous red leaves above was everything they would need. On the bone-like bark, a grotesque face twisted in a fury was carved as if it were gazing at them angrily.

Salladhor snorted and made his way to the Tyroshi manhunter. He was inspecting the prisoners one by one before sending them back to the ships. It reminded the Lyseni sellsail of a man inspecting horses at the market. All clasped in chains, they were forced into a long line, and any who dared to struggle or make trouble was smacked on the shins - which quickly dissuaded the savages from resisting. The most troublesome ones were already put down at the initial fighting.

Ah, what a tragedy - to be born at the wrong place and time. But that was their lot in life, and Salladhor would finally retire in luxury with their involuntary aid.

“With this, we will have enough weirwood,” he said. “Only the ivory is left now.”

“Will still take at least half a day to chop it down. I’ve had my men looking around. There are no traces of mammoths nearby,” Denzo grunted angrily and struck down a thin greying woman with his cutlass. Blood coloured the snow as the body tumbled down helplessly. The next slave was carried in, and manhunters quickly removed the manacles and carried away the corpse to be tossed to the side.

Too old to be worth the effort to feed her all the way to Tyrosh, that one. Aside from the fighters who would do well in the fighting pits, the finest slaves were those that had not seen twenty name-days yet. Young enough to be pliable to training while not old enough to be ruined by the harshness of the northern wasteland.

“Can try asking one of these poor sods here,” the sellsail proposed and nodded towards the short, mousy woman with a weathered face and brown hair that the Tyroshi was inspecting.

“Woman, do you know where we can find mammoths?” The words were spoken in westerosi; Denzo grabbed the chains and pulled her close. Next to his hulking figure, she looked like a small, helpless child.

“Fuck you!”

Her defiance earned her a brutal smack on the face and made her tumble in the snow bonelessly.

“I think you killed her,” Salladhor observed the unmoving body.

"Worthless, that one," the manhunter snorted, stabbing his spear into her back.

There was no movement or grunts of pain; it seemed that the earlier strike had indeed finished the wildling.

“I tell ye where to find the mammoths,” a woman down the line yelled.

Denzo motioned for a pair of his men to bring her over. Pale skin, long, tangled dark hair, amber eyes, and long legs made for a tantalising sight even through her furs. Once washed and groomed, she would easily be a beauty.

“Tell us,” Denzo’s voice was menacing. Ah, the subtlety of an elephant, that one.

“Take me as yer woman, and I shall tell ye where to find the mammoths,” her mouth twisted into a crooked grin, revealing two rows of pearly white teeth.

The Tyroshi man stepped back and critically inspected the woman before him from top to bottom.

“Fine, I shall take you.” he nodded half a minute later. “Now tell us!”

At that moment, Salladhor’s men began chopping the giant weirwood.

One of the captured savages began yelling and pointing towards their sacred tree. Yet he received a smack upon the head, knocking him out. A few more tried to struggle but could do little against the manacles.

“I tell, but only you,” the woman’s face became impassive as she glanced at the weirwood.

Denzo Hartys impatiently leaned in closer. She was just about to whisper in his ear when her face suddenly twisted into a feral snarl and bit the Tyroshi’s ear.

The slaver pushed her away, and two of his men began to beat her with their clubs. Denzo’s right ear was almost completely gone, replaced by a torn, bloody stump. The tall man heaved over and moaned in pain for a moment before standing up, furious.

With a nod, the two slavers moved away from the woman. Aside from her bloody mouth, her face was untouched, but judging by how she trembled and heaved, her body had been heavily battered.

“You fucking bitch! I’ll break you!”

Undaunted by Denzo’s roar, she spat a bloody piece of flesh at him and cackled.

“Kill me if you wish, but yer already dead.”

That stilled the furious manhunter for a moment.

“No, you shall live,” Hartys wiped off the blood from his face and slowly shook his head. His dark eyes glowed with fury, but he remained still. “You’ll be our whore, spreading your legs for my men as they desire.”

“So be it,” she showed a feral, bloody smile and twisted her head towards the weirwood tree where Salladhor’s men worked tirelessly. “The gods will strike ye down for this.”

Salladhor looked at the weirwood tree. From the carved face, red sap ominously wept as if it were blood, making him feel rather uneasy.

“Foolish savage,” Denzo guffawed and grabbed her chain, yanking her closer. “What is the tree going to do to me? Pick up a sword and fight back?”

An owl hooted somewhere in the distance.

Jarod Snow

As promised, the Earth Singers had led them to the obsidian deposit. For good or for bad, their journey here had been uneventful - travelling, sparring, and even hunting.

“That will make for a fine cloak,” Leaf said while effortlessly knapping a piece of obsidian. Under her dark claws, the black stone was quickly shaped into an arrowhead.

“Aye,” Jon agreed without stopping his own work.

The shadowcat was one of the largest Jarod had seen, nearly the size of a large pony. It would make for a fine pelt, be it as a gift, cloak, or cover, and Jon was almost done skinning it.

It seemed that their leader was indeed a master huntsman; he had tracked down and taken the beast with ease. A spear through the eye, just like the snow bear. Even now, he was quickly skinning the carcass with such ease and skill that would make one feel envious.

Jon Snow was like a cabbage - there were always more layers of surprising skills underneath.

Jarod shook his head and returned to fletching the new arrows.

Their camp was bustling with activity - three were roasting a boar over their fire - one of the leafcloak hunters had caught it. A dozen Singers were working on the obsidian just like Leaf; a few were scouting the surroundings or keeping watch. Duncan was to the side, chopping stakes for spear shafts.

At that moment, one of the Earth Singers ran in, his dappled face filled with worry and anger. Jarod recognised him as the one with the grey owl pet.

Instead of the usual soft, melodic sound akin to a summer breeze, his speech was harsh and choppy, like a blizzard amid the coldest winter. Leaf's sad face became even more forlorn. Duncan and the other singers crowded around them, and Jarod could see the faces of the leafcloaks alternate between sadness, anger, and acceptance.

Jon just finished skinning the shadowcat, cleaned his hands and dagger in the snow and patiently waited.

“What is it?” He asked as soon as the worried singer finished.

“Dark-skinned men are putting wildlings in chains in a village near the lake and are chopping down an old Heart Tree,” Leaf sighed.

“Essosi slavers,” Jarod spat. The only thing a Northman hated more than slavers were those who dared to chop down the heart trees.

“And their numbers?” Jon’s face was impassive, but his hand was on the dragonsword’s hilt.

"Less than four scores."

“We can take them!” Duncan angrily brandished his greatax.

Ah, to be young and hot-tempered. Jarod felt just as furious but knew things were not as straightforward. Less than half of the Earth Singers could fight and were more hunters than anything else. Although the slavers were not really trained fighters either, they usually fought unarmed smallfolk caught by surprise. Still, a battle could prove costly.

“And we will,” the young bastard agreed and turned to Leaf. “How far is the village?”

“Less than two leagues to the northeast,” Leaf said, her golden eyes heavy with feeling as she looked at Jon Snow as if seeing him for the first time.

“Good,” he hummed thoughtfully. From the forest, Ghost, followed by his newfound retinue of wolves, padded over. They were nearly three dozen now. “Here’s what we’ll do-”

Author's Endnote:

The hunt is finally over. Bobby B loves drinking.

Our not-so-favourite Tyroshi slavers are finally checking some of their goals but also attracting the wrong sort of attention.