

Extract from

Wallace's Brat

by

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Prologue – 1297. The Scots have come!

Run, 'Little Rabbit'! Run! Run!

Maggie could not move quickly enough through the densely packed wood. Even the primroses seemed to grasp at her ankles; the hard frost, fortified by a biting north wind, caused her to slip and slide, pulling her endlessly to the ground. Her frustration was unbearable: she knew this wood even better than her Da, but now the wood had become her enemy.

Urkil was further ahead, a streak of silver, grey and sleek muscle, drawn by the light of the fire that she and Da had lit outside earlier that evening. Only, Da should have put it out by now; *y' were supposed t' put it...*

A dull, sickening sensation enveloped her suddenly - something was tugging against her, halting her flight. She retched, momentarily thinking that she had been arrested, that *they* had advanced this far already and she had been struck by an infamous dirk. Looking nervously down her eyes met the branch of the fallen elm tree that she would sit upon and rest, most days, from her labours - and which now, with its gnarled, weather-worn limb stretched out, seemed intent upon holding on to her. She pulled at it - *God!* It did not give easily; when it did, it ripped her tunic - the only garment she possessed - and deeply gouged a gaping wound into her flesh. *No dirk. Just the stupid branch.* She clouted the thick limb angrily, tears streaming down her face.

Something rushed through the trees ahead. Instinctively falling to the floor of the wood, she saw pale grey eyes looming towards her and relaxed. Urkil had come back for her, worried when she had disappeared from his view.

'Good lad,' she whispered, stroking him, head snuggling into the comforting warmth of his side. *It'd be good t' rest a while.*

He quietly whined, licking away her tears, sensing as well as any human could the danger that was about to be unleashed on them - once again. She placed her arms across his back and pulled herself up.

'Aye, lad. A'm comin'. Go t' Da. Go on!' She pushed against his muzzle. He was reluctant to leave her, but when his mistress told him to do something he obeyed, and off he streaked through the trees with the control of a marksman's arrow.

Her eyes feverishly scouring the wood, whose trees were now beginning to resemble the outlines of men against the advancing darkness, Maggie tore a piece of her precious tunic and wrapped it lip-bitingly around her leg, the other foot rubbing away blood that had formed delicate web-like forms in the frost. If she were to survive, it would not be a trail of blood that was going to lead them to her. She ran again, and with every step it felt as though her wound was made anew: fire-fresh tongs driven, like Parson Alfred's purgatorial sermons, into her leg, over and over again - and his tongue would be giving her a lashing if he knew she was out here.

Da was within sight now - *Thank God!* Urkil was greeting him.

'Da, man! Whist! The fire! Out! Out!' she whispered in hushed urgency, pulling at his arm. 'Howay!'

He did so, lethargically, throwing damp earth over, and stared blankly ahead.

'Stamp it down! The smoke!' *Stupid Da.* He didn't mean to be, but sometimes he just came across as being plain daft. She studied his face as she stamped, feelings of pity and love threatening to override what little calmness she felt. He looked so old, work worn and weary.

'A've hidden the cookin' pot and our stores up here,' he said, 'W'll need them if w' get through - what've y' done t' y' leg?' - his worries taken over by paternal concern for his daughter. 'Come here, lass. Let me see.'

'It's a scratch, nowt more,' she said, pushing his arm away. 'Right, Da. W'll go up the tree now. A'll take Urkil. Follow, quick.'

She moved as swiftly as her injured leg would allow, listening out for Da's footsteps following, until she reached an oak tree.

In the near distance, down in the vill of Hautwysel, fires blazed, and piercing screams littered the night sky. Occasional sounds - animals crying at Bell's dairy - gave a warning of the impending danger.

Th' a little way off, yet still too near t' relax. She issued a breath of relief. *W'll be fine. If w' just ... just get up the tree.*

Suddenly Da turned, running back, murmuring as he did so -

'A'll free the goats. Give them the chance t' survive. Aye. W' - w' lose them, w' lose them. A'll've peace o' mind the heathens didn't get th' murderin' hands on them.'

Da! The pain in her leg, the exhaustion of encouraging Urkil into the sacking, then starting the climb up the tree to pull him, meant Maggie was unable to speak, though her mind was awash with thoughts: *What if Da doesn't make it? No. No. He'll be fine.* The climb to the branch was frantic and energy draining, but once there she began pulling the rope with all the strength working the laird's land had given her, until the sack and a humiliated Urkil reached her and the makeshift cage on the hidden platform.

Urkil lay down at the entrance to the cage, head turned away from Maggie to avoid eye contact -

'Now, Urkil. In!'

So, ears drooped, tail hanging lifelessly between legs, he entered.

'A'm sorry, lad. It's f' y' own safety.' Then she flopped back against the trunk, exhausted, watching Da's movements. *When A've rested A'll go t' him...*

Da had to do what he thought was best. She knew she couldn't stop him. If Peter had been here he could've made Da see sense; but he'd volunteered to run, to warn the folk of Birlawe of the impending danger.

Glancing at her leg she saw that the blood had soaked through the cloth, not yet clotted, even in this sharp cold. *An infusion of Marigold flower may help. No. Too deep.* She reached up into the

tree, breaking off a twig, winding the cloth around it and twisting... *A don't want t' die this way. If A can just stop the flow...*

Urkil was panting hard and moving around the cage in circles. *Poor you.* He had never been caged before. She hoped he would understand that it was for his own safety. *Please understand...*

The End?

Drifting in and out of consciousness, the frontier between being awake and possible permanent sleep, Maggie experienced a different Northumberland; a Northumberland in which everyone moved peacefully throughout the land, and her own people did not steal upon her and Da during the night to plunder their resources; where all were treated, if not equally, fairly, and not by how much land they owned or how much Latin they could speak.

She took a walk to the river Tyne - she and Urkil, now fully grown into the beautiful dog she knew he would become - and dived deep down, down into her secret hideaway, where no one would find her, emerging sometimes to tease and splash water over Urkil who would growl and growl ...

Urkil? Maggie floated back through space and looked to him. Still standing, he was now motionless: front leg raised, nose pointed upwards, tasting the air. She raised herself up on her elbows, straining to see. *Somethin'...somethin' or someone must be near. Can't see... No sign of Da...*

'Ssh, man! Ssh! Please hush,' she said, as he whined and pawed at the bottom of the cage. Reaching through the bars she clasped a hand around his thick muzzle, hoping that their unique bond would mean he could sense her anxiety and keep him passive. *Come on Da. Come on!* The last time the Scots had come - whey - the people of Northumberland hadn't been prepared; and the devastation in the landscape, faces and lives of the people was immense. Da only wanted to protect his livelihood, which could be meagre at the best of times, but he was foolish. They'd survive, if he would but come.

Urkil now resigned himself to his prison and lay flat in the cage, ears pricked, eyes raising and lowering, a slow, faltering rumbling churning over in his throat, and now and again he would look towards Maggie as if to say: 'A know the danger, and A'll protect y'. A won't let anyone harm y' - if y'll but let me out.'

In her listless state she lay back again, listening to the dreadful sounds of screaming, her thoughts turning to Hugh le Forester's family and how they were faring at the laird's manor. Ma Forester had suckled Maggie when Maggie's own Ma died, and Ma Forester had just another bairn, so God alone knew what they were going to do. It was just too dreadful, too dreadful to think on. She clasped her hands to her ears, drowning out the sounds from all around; and the smell of flesh burning, whether imagined or real, a permanent memory perhaps from the previous attacks, sickened her.

Th'll soon reach us. Probably lurkin' around already, had been all this time, watchin', waitin'...someone's runnin' ... Da!

Frantically she leant forward and looked down to see him running towards her, but then he stopped, looked around, and began running aimlessly to and fro. *What's he doin'!* The goats had wandered off into the wood and, instead of making his way to the tree, he was pushing himself into a little thicket and crouching down! *It won't protect him! He'll be seen there easily!*

Her head spun now, and the surroundings loomed claustrophobically before her. She squinted. It was difficult to see easily; difficult to make out ... *must try t' stay awake*. Were the forms trees or men? Now, in answer, the trees appeared to move to one side, revealing what were now unquestionably men - men who were making loud, guttural noises. *Ten ... twenty ... more*. She returned her gaze to Da, whom she sensed was deeply afraid. *He must've seen them, that's why he ran*.

Looking to the left of him, she made out the form of a man - not very tall, but stocky, with matted hair. Even in the semi-darkness there was a look of glee in his eye at what he was about to do.

Da! Please Da!

She began sliding down, arms scratched by branches she could not see, injured leg knocking sickeningly against them. There was no thought behind this, just that she had to go to him, protect him somehow.

The dirk hovered in the air...

She leapt off the final branch, jarring her leg, sprinting, then finally shinning through the air, until she leapt high on this man's back, one arm tightly wrapped around his thick neck, the other arm pummeling him, tearing at his hair.

'Leave ma Da, leave him!'

Her head spun violently now and, in this surreal state, she heard other men's voices, mocking and laughing; a different ring from the Northumbrian. Then she found herself flying through the air, stopped only by the icy leaf carpeted floor of the wood, and seized by someone ... someone who smelled of many days' travels ... someone she knew would end her life there and then.

1 Present-Day - Day 1, 1 pm

The one o'clock news has finished. It's the same depressing story that's been reported for the past few weeks; clashes between BNP supporters and anti-fascist groups; then – *Whatshisface? The leader... BNP ... He's a fool anyway* - says that black people can never be English, even if one parent is English. *How does that work then?*

The weather report is to follow. There's some sanity.

'Where do you want to meet, Zuna?' Annie asks, fingers winding nervously through the telephone wire, foot twitching restlessly.

'Something's come up,' is the solemn murmur.

A basically dry day in the northeast of England; occasional sprinkling of showers. Temperatures averaging 20 degrees with a light easterly breeze.

Annie's foot increases its motion. 'But the weather's perfect. If we don't do it now, then ... look - come on! We've got to show that we don't care what everyone thinks. I mean, they can't stop us being friends, can they?'

'No, course not - but ...'

'Twenty minutes then - library. Bye.' Annie puts the phone down before a mind is changed, untangles her fingers and turns to the window, through which the sun casts its confident beam. *Good!* At least the weather will be on her side. So ... no excuses this time - and she belly flops on to the settee, satisfied. No threats to 'run away' that are not backed up by action. *I'll show everyone how stupid they are.*

Just thinking about everything riles her. Even Mam, normally so sensible, is getting on her nerves, defending Dad and other people, just to maintain her false sense of peace. 'Urrrr!' She throws a cushion across the room - it chooses an unfortunate trajectory, knocking one of Dad's darts trophies off the mantelpiece and on to the stone hearth, chipping the marble base. *Oh knickers!* Why wasn't it one of her gymnastic trophies? But she doesn't move. *Serves Dad right, anyway. Teach him a lesson. When he comes in he'll say, 'Me trophy! Who's been messin' with me trophy!' His face'll drop, and he'll be devastated because all he cares about are things and not people - he'll only blame it on the cat, anyway.*

Actually... She gets up and places the chipped bit in position, resting it back on the mantelpiece. *He'll kick the cat otherwise.*

Running away! She throws herself onto the settee again, pulls a cushion into her stomach, legs flapping wildly, heart changing its rhythm every few seconds, charged by the fear that, at any moment, Mam and Dad will come back. Nothing will have changed, though. Dad'll be merry, hugging her, giving her a fiver to - 'Get what y' want lass'. They'll sit down to dinner and somewhere during the course of this she'll mention Zuna and he'll start on about how Northumbrians are being

infiltrated by foreigners who steal jobs, run more successful businesses, and buy all the nice houses. But how can he be like that? *Mam's dark. I'm dark. What's the difference?*

'The difference,' she hears Dad say, 'is that y' Mam hasn't got these funny religious ideas. She's normal, likes a pint and such. It doesn't matter the skin colour, only religion and queer attitudes.'

She switches off the television and goes upstairs.

Thorough in her arrangements, she compiled a list of things to take: extra knickers, thickest jumper, tooth brush and tooth paste - all ticked off. All that's left to do is put the food in - mostly baked beans, safely stored under the mattress (with the all-important tin opener). This made the mattress a bit bumpy to sleep on, but she bore the discomfort well. She removes these, along with the tent and sleeping bag, takes one last look at her room - just a suggestion of messiness so Mam and Dad think everything's normal - and bounds down the stairs. A tingling sensation rises from her stomach to her throat, catching her breath, and she smiles a rare smile.

One last thing; *Mam's letter drawer- would be the best place. Right on top so that it can be seen - no. I don't want her to see it too soon.* She places it beneath the useless, wasteful mail order mail. *Mam's money jar* She quickly considers, hand pushing into her dungaree pocket and pulling out the ten pounds she has saved, but that's to buy plasters and other boring but necessary stuff. *Money would be useful ... too young to work, can't rely on that. Right.* She unscrews the lid, takes a ten pound note, returns the jar and leaves the house, laying the rucksack in a storage alleyway at the side of the garage.