Obligatory disclaimer: I don't own ASOIAF and HP.
B. Reader: Bub3loka

While Wyman Manderly was said to be the King's right hand, the Queen would be his left. It was as rare as it was unexpected for a monarch to entrust his wife with any of the duties of ruling, let alone the fierce warrior known as the Demon of Winterfell.

Yet despite the naysayers, this daring move paid off.

Shireen Stark was just and fair like her father before. But unlike Stannis, she made many a friend and was beloved by smallfolk and nobles of the North alike. Many would speculate how the last Baratheon managed to gain so much popularity. Some would say it was her generosity; some would say that she abandoned the Seven in favour of the Old Gods. But according to Rogar Wull, it was when the Winter Queen flew to support the Northern army at the Battle of Ice and Fire and refused to flee when the tidings turned dire.

The bards sing many songs about Shireen Stark, but to this day, 'The Brave Queen Turns the Tide' and 'The Wolf and the Doe' remain the most popular.

Excerpt from 'The True Good Queen' by Mullin of the Shadowtower

---

308 AC, Winterfell

Shireen Stark

Shireen had missed her moonblood.

It was not the first time it had come late, and she might have dismissed it if not for her good sister's knowing glances. Even Jon seemed convinced, and Maester Wolkan checked her pulse and measured her last week's meals, further confirming their suspicions.

The old man cautioned that it was too early to say if the babe would quicken, yet Jon looked at her belly with certainty as though the presence of the two unclaimed direwolf pups was an ironclad guarantee. Supposedly, Shireen was carrying twin daughters. It sounded far-fetched and all too incredible, but she knew better than to dismiss her husband when it came to magic.

Gods willing, the twin daughters would come into the world with less noise and pain than Rickon had. Even so, that pregnancy had been mercifully mild. Unlike poor Cella, who had spent months retching into buckets and cursing the kitchens for cooking meats she once adored.

Still, Shireen counted herself fortunate. Jon had welcomed the idea of daughters with undisguised joy. Some lesser lords might have been disappointed at the prospect, others uncaring. But not her husband, never her husband. It warmed her heart. Jon was firm but kind to her where it mattered, and did not seek whores in some quiet brothel or anywhere else. He never raised his voice nor treated her as a broodmare to be forgotten after he had taken his pleasure. Most importantly, Jon looked at her as if she mattered. Slowly, she had begun to believe it.

All those years ago, she had thought herself in love, but it had been merely a childish infatuation. A glamorous reflection of her imagination, born out of tales of heroes and maidens.

True love took time, care, and attention to grow, Shireen now knew. It took respect and duty. The marriage had started warm, unlike the one her father and uncle had endured, but her husband had indulged her out of obligation more than love or anything else. Jon had been stiff and hesitant at the start, and she had been shy. Shireen hadn't known better, for it was better than all she had witnessed. But with time, they grew closer; her husband's eyes lingered longer, and his hands found hers more easily. Soon enough, his affection no longer came out of duty, and Shireen was a wife in truth, not only in name.

It had taken two years to truly understand what hid behind Jon Stark's calm eyes, to be allowed a glimpse behind his regal mask, for her husband always kept his thoughts close to his chest.

Some would say he was a brutal madman with a taste for blood and violence—Maegor the Cruel reborn.

Others would claim that Jon Stark was a heroic and generous king who was fair and just in equal measure.

More would complain her husband did not truly care for ruling, preferring to dabble in sword-fighting, old dusty tomes, and magic.

Most would say he was a god, descended on the earth to mingle with mortals and fight the horrors and tyrants of the world.

The truth was, it was all just a facade.

Jon Stark cared only for family. Oh, he took his little joys in swinging a sword, playing with magic, and flying with Winter, but family was what he lived for. For his family, he would turn into the cruellest of demons that would make Maegor look like a merciful septon. For his family, he would overcome his distaste for his kingly duties and fulfil them without fail. And for them, no deed was too vile—he would burn cities and kill until the rivers ran red if need be. That might have terrified Shireen had she not been one of the few he held dear.

Jon Stark's willingness to do whatever it took for those he held dear was her greatest comfort.

Shireen loved her husband dearly, so when her kingly husband vanished from the great hall on the final day of the tourney he himself had hosted, she felt only mild irritation. Jon had retreated to his workroom again, no doubt buried in some arcane quandary or folding metal and magic together, shirking the pomp and ceremony he loathed.

Kings may do as they will, and Jon did just that. At least he entrusted much of the day-to-day matters to her. She did not mind it. The queen was the one who served the desires of the king more than anyone else. This sort of duty came with power, for she could speak with the king's voice, and her presence represented the crown.

Still, she wished he were there beside her now.

The royal box felt lonelier than usual. Her good-sisters flanked her, and Wyman was already sprawled on his big chair, but Alys was about to give birth to a child, unable to leave Ironford. She had married the Harwin of House Mazin, Lord Mazin's eldest son. Myrcella was infirm, struck down by some green fever

from Essos, equally unable to make her way to Winterfell for the tourney, leaving Shireen without her close companions. She almost regretted arranging those matches.

The Lord Hand advised her to seek new ladies for her household, and perhaps he was right. But such endeavours would wait for the melee to finish.

Below, the tourney field lay ready.

The arena had been swept clean, and the ground stomped even after yesterday's games, and the bright sun painted the stands and the crowd in dull gold.

More than two hundred warriors had come to prove their valour in the final game of the tourney—the melee. Truth be told, even more had arrived, but they had failed to pass the sign-up requirement of defeating veteran guardsmen.

Without a joust, the melee was the ultimate way to display martial prowess, and the game has always boasted great prestige amongst the Northmen. The generous reward helped attract those who fought for coin instead of glory. Six thousand dragons were a sizeable enough prize that even lords would take great interest. Such a sum was more than half of what most big lords made, and only Manderly and Dustin could afford to ignore it.

Now, half of those warriors, clad in steel, boiled leather, and chainmail, looked at her with eagerness. The melee rounds were split into two for the occasion, for two hundred men would be too cramped in the field.

Shireen raised a hand. Hallen, the game master, called the melee's start.

Men rushed at each other with fervour; steel rang out, quickly merging with the crowd's cheers.

"I thought you wanted to participate in the melee, Arya?" Sansa prodded from the side.

"And fight against lugs like Torrhen and Edwyle?" the younger princess returned with a snort. "Have you seen the two of them? An Umber and a Flint, one as tall as a cave bear, the other shorter but more muscled than a bull and both ten times stronger than I. Worse, the lugs know very little of self-restraint and never hold back once the steel is drawn. One heavy blow from their blunted weapons, and I could end up a cripple."

Arya had softened, though none would dare say so aloud. In the four years since her return to Winterfell, the wild girl with the barbed tongue and boy's garb had given way to something quieter but no less sharp. Shireen still remembered that young maiden, prickly and proud like a boy with a chip on her shoulder, as she toiled at swordplay like she had something to prove. That girl had once sworn to be a knight and had taken to the yard in earnest, training first beneath her granduncle Ser Brynden. She had been the first to come to training at the crack of dawn and often the last to leave.

All of that sweat, blood, and tears in the training yard had left their mark on Arya. It was not physical, as a Princess of Winterfell, she had always worn the best armour. But the more she had sparred, the more she changed—not into a knight, but into a maiden of a different sort. Gone was the brashness, the crude boy's tongue and the eagerness to fight. Arya still rode out to hawk, loosed arrows with deadly precision and had a fondness for the forest.

It was no breastplate she wore today, but a grey riding gown that hugged her form, leaving little to the imagination. The cloth was of soft cotton, the cut elegant in the way it accented her slender chest, her

hair now clean and set in a thick braid down her back. Shireen would wager she kept daggers beneath that gown—the princess always looked restless without sharp steel at an arm's reach, a habit she shared with Jon.

Where Sansa was soft and graceful, Arya was lean and quick, a shadowcat more than a doe. Her face was too long to be considered as pretty as her sister's. Yet the cool grey eyes that twinkled with mischief, her earnest smile, and the feline grace with which she moved displayed a different kind of beauty.

Shireen had once thought Sansa the likelier of the two to marry. Twice widowed and long courted, the red-haired princess had turned away every suitor, unmoved by promises of gold, titles, or rugged charm. Perhaps it was bitterness, perhaps something else, but Sansa had found no desire to wed again. Arya, of all people, had accepted a match first.

Her thoughts drifted to the fighting below.

From the royal box, she watched Torrhen Flint crush an Overton knight with a savage blow to the helm. The Flint heir, armoured in ringmail and brigandine, axe and shield in hand, fought like an angry bull, slamming and bashing his way through all foes. He had the strength for it, too. Under the harsh guidance of her husband, Torrhen had become a dangerous warrior.

"Perhaps my good-sister keeps from the melee for more reasons than pain and defeat," Shireen said, the corner of her eyes sparkling with amusement. "I see a favour tied across Torrhen's wrist—embroidered with the direwolf of House Stark, and I know it is not Sansa's hand that stitched it. Is it that you have taken a fancy to the victor's crown?"

Arya's cheeks flushed crimson, but she did not lower her head. She did not deny it, either.

"Do you have a date for the wedding, Princess?" asked Lord Wyman, chins jiggling as his face turned.

"No," Arya replied, fingers tugging nervously at her braid. "He asked for my hand, and I gave it. He plans to seek Jon's blessing after the tourney."

"Then you've nought to fear," Shireen told her, offering a smile of reassurance. "Jon will not deny you, though he'll doubtlessly test Torrhen until he proves himself worthy."

Arya eased back into her seat, the tension leaving her shoulders.

"It seems our captain of the guard has other plans," Sansa observed, her eyes on Rickard Liddle. "He means to crown his little Dornish wife if he can."

In the arena, Rickard had finally halted Torrhen's rampage, fearlessly matching the Flint heir blow for blow with his greatsword.

Arya's mouth twisted. "I still can't believe he wed Sarella. The Sand Snake could be spying for the Dornish."

Only four men remained as the herald called the round to a close. Torrhen and Rickard reluctantly stepped away from each other, but their eyes were still fierce. Men-at-arms hurried to clear the field of fallen knights.

“His Grace has ways of sniffing out spies,” the plump old Merman said, nodding toward the royal envoy, Ser Lucion Lannister, still standing among the victors. “Only those in official service remain. As for Lady Sarella... I do not believe she’s here for such things. The woman is curious by nature, inheriting the bizarre Dornish thirst for knowledge and a few oddities from her late father.”

“And Sunspear is far,” added Sansa, noting Arya’s frown. “Rella stayed because she loves Rickard, not because she serves Dorne. Her children will be of the North. What more could Sunspear offer her that she has not found here?”

Arya did not look convinced but did not pursue the topic further.

The herald began the second round's introductions. Sansa’s brow lifted as a tall, wiry knight in purple stepped forward.

“What’s a Belmore doing in Winterfell?” she asked, surprised.

“The king’s fame has spread far and wide, more than enough to attract men of renown from outside the North,” said Manderly with a jovial chuckle. “This is the first grand tourney here in living memory. If not for the distance, we'd have triple the number of knights, perhaps contestants coming all the way from Dorne and the Reach.”

“Shouldn’t the Vale knights muster at the Gates of the Moon for Arryn’s frequent feasts and tourneys instead?”

“Harrold Arryn’s court is new and lacks a backbone,” Lord Manderly murmured, stroking his heavy chin with a ring-laden hand. “He was a green boy when he donned a crown, and some say he wears it still like a borrowed cloak. As for the knight—aye, that is Ser Desmond Belmore, youngest son of Ser Loryn the Brave. Ser Loryn had spurned his lordly brother’s arrangements, earning himself an exile from Strongsong. Now, he lives in Gulltown with his wife’s kin while his sons travel around as hedge knights.”

The lengthy introductions were finally over, and the fighting officially began.

Blood came quickly in the second round. Brandon Norrey caved in a helm with his warhammer, and Jon Burley fell, never to get up again. Thoren Wells buried an axe in the throat of Torgen Waterman. Edwyle Umber swung his greatsword like a butcher’s cleaver, dropping foes like chaff. Many of which were bloodied and battered, and a few were not even moving.

“That’s why I kept out of the melee,” Arya muttered as she winced when Jorah Woods lost his helm and had his head split in two by Ser Rogar Dustin.

Shireen had seen battles and duels before, yet this felt... excessive.

“This is bloodier than the Tourney of the Hand,” said Sansa coolly, though her eyes never left the arena below. She never flinched.

“Those who live by the sword die by the sword,” Wyman replied evenly as Alyn Estermon swiftly yielded to the Belmore knight after the sword was knocked out of his hand. “And this is not like the southron tourneys.”

“How so?”

Manderly let out a long sigh. “Most Northern houses are not rich enough to afford a suit of heavy plate fashioned for tourneys alone. Certainly not for third sons or distant cousins, and smiths who could forge plate have always flocked to the south, where the coin is more abundant. A good set alone takes a skilled smith over half a year to craft. Mail, brigandine and arming doublets are easier to find but less forgiving. A single mistake might see you in an early grave, even when facing blunted weapons.”

“And the Northmen won’t hold back,” Sansa added, voice emotionless. “Victory is a matter of honour, and some no doubt mean to solve previous feuds here.”

The royal box grew quiet as the fighting below continued.

Among the din of the melee, one contestant quickly stood apart. A mystery man clad in grey brigandine and a visored barbute helm, wielding a monstrous halberd with ruthless precision. He was taller than most, but unlike his foes, he fought with restraint. Each time a challenger fell, their bodies and egos were merely battered and bruised.

More men fell, blood soaking the earth. By round’s end, only four remained: the grey mystery knight, Edwyle Umber, Ser Desmond Belmore, and Sigorn Thenn.

The field was littered quickly with bodies, some groaning, others deathly still. At least a dozen did not rise again.

The herald’s cry echoed across the field as the final eight were named.

“Who do you suppose will emerge victorious?” the red-haired princess asked, still unperturbed by the show of violence.

The men in question were already moving into position. The crowd leaned forward as the mystery knight descended upon Ser Lucion Lannister with methodical brutality. Shireen’s eyes followed the clash, her voice quiet.

“The mystery knight,” Shireen said as Ser Lucion’s shield split like kindling under the third blow.

The lion knight had spent countless hours testing his sword arm in the Winterfell yard, matching himself against every Northman with the stomach for it. It had served him well until now. A heartbeat later, his sword flew from his grasp and clattered to the earth, and Ser Lucion raised his hand in quick surrender.

“He’s good with that halberd,” Arya admitted, as Torrhen Flint dropped Rickard Liddle with a heavy blow, “but I doubt he can best Torrhen or Edwyle.”

Even as she spoke, the Giant of Last Hearth waded forward, meeting Torrhen in the dirt with a roar, while the mystery knight leaned on his halberd, waiting for the bout between Sigorn Thenn and Ser Desmond Belmore to end.

Torrhen had discarded his usual shield and short axe in favour of a heavier weapon: a great axe of grey steel. It cleaved through the air, meeting Edwyle’s greatsword blow for blow.

“I’ll wager my coin on the mystery knight myself," Lord Manderly murmured, eyes alight with interest as they did not leave the man in question.

Neither princess took the bait—wagering against the old cunning Hand was folly. Their eyes remained fixed on the yard, where the Sigorn Thenn lay dazed in the mud. The mystery knight stepped forward to face the victorious Belmore knight, halberd in hand.

The mystery knight was like a storm, leveraging the reach of his halberd. With sharp, swift moves, it was clear that he was stronger and more skilled than Ser Desmond Belmore. In half a minute, the sword was knocked out of the Valeman's hand, and he yielded, leaving the field with his head hanging low.

The whole crowd now watched with bated breath as Edwyle and Torrhen clashed, and even the mystery knight waited patiently by the side. The young Umber lord towered above her husband's squire, his savage greatsword swooshing through the air with each forceful strike. Torrhen met him without flinching, his great axe skillfully deflecting most blows. Both were heavily armoured, and glancing strikes bounced off their lobstered plate harmlessly.

For a time, they seemed equally matched.

Then Edwyle's greatsword shattered the haft of Torrhen's axe. The crowd roared, but Torrhen was not so easily undone. With a gauntleted fist, he knocked aside the next strike and lunged forward.

Clever—at close quarters, the great sword would be of no use.

They fell, roaring as they traded blows as each tried to subdue the other. When Torrhen rose, his armour marred by dust and dirt and dented in places, but Edwyle lay unconscious at his feet, helm swatted aside, his face bloodied.

The crowd erupted, thundering with approval as Torrhen took Umber's blunted greatsword, which was almost as long as he was tall, and turned to face his final foe.

"Your betrothed scarcely looks winded, Arya," Sansa said, brows lifted in appraisal. "But the mystery knight has dealt with all his foes with ease."

"Torrhen will win," Arya said with unshakable confidence. "He survived years of Jon's training, after all."

"Perhaps," said Manderly, smiling faintly. "But the world is vast, Princess, and not every legend begins in a lord's hall. Remember Ser Duncan the Tall. If a street urchin from Fleabottom can make his tale and deeds resound from Sunspear to the Wall, everything is possible."

His words were proved prophetic. Torrhen came on strong, driving the mystery knight back with hard, fast blows, trying to overwhelm him like he did many of his previous foes. But no matter how the greatsword swept, aiming for the knight's sides and limbs, it was met by the halberd with ease.

The mystery knight was not losing. In fact, his strikes only grew fiercer, and Torrhen soon found himself on the back foot facing a flurry of steel. He was pushed back, but did not falter. Then, he roared, and his swings grew savage in an attempt to hold his ground.

It did not work.

The nameless knight was always a tad swifter, a tad fiercer.

"It seems Arya will not wear a crown today," Sansa murmured, her lips twitching.

"The fight is not yet done," Arya said sharply, leaning forward, watching the field without daring to blink. "Victory is not decided until one lies defeated."

But it was. A breath later, Torrhen's blade was batted from his grip, and he lunged again for a tackle, attempting to wrestle his foe the way Umber had been. The mystery knight stepped aside in the last moment and drove the butt of his weapon into Torrhen's helm. The young clansman crumpled to the ground like a sack of turnips.

For a moment, the arena grew silent. The victor raised his halberd in salute, and the crowd erupted, shouting and roaring with jubilation.

"Who will he crown as the queen of love and beauty, I wonder?" Sansa mused, leaning forward with anticipation.

Arya, her face clouded with worry, had already stood up, rushing out of the royal box, no doubt to check on Torrhen.

"Ah, young love," Wyman said, chuckling.

Shireen's lips twitched. Torrhen was too thick-skulled to be truly hurt by a blow to his helmet.

The master of the games approached with the crown—a circlet of winter roses, petals blue as deep frost—and offered it to the champion with due ceremony. Shouts rang out from the crowd, cries urging him to lift his helm.

"Reveal!"

"Unmask!"

The mystery knight reached up and unfastened the visor. The barbute came free with a sweep of his arm. For a heartbeat, the world held its breath.

Purple eyes met Shireen's from across the yard, mischievous, familiar, and far too bold. Her heart skipped.

With a flourish, the knight tossed the crown of winter roses into the air, and it sailed in a slow, perfect arc, landing upon her brow with grace.

With the surprise attack on the Gates of the Moon, Shagga the Falconslayer struck a heavy blow on the upper echelons in the Vale, yet those remaining were unwilling to bend the knee to a wildling.

Half the strongest Houses were left in the hands of babes and widows who had no taste for war, and some main lines, like the Hunters, were extinguished, leaving the cadet branches to squabble for the Lordship, uncaring of the happenings outside their lands.

With Grafton and Corbray proclaiming themselves kings, the situation grew worse. Banners were called, claims were declared, and war came to the Vale, but these new kings were more eager to battle each other for dominance rather than to face the tough nut to crack that was the Gates of the Moon.

The young Robert Royce, Bronze Yohn's grandnephew, ascended as the Lord of Runestone and seemingly decided to ignore the squabbling would-be-kings and called his banners, making a blood oath to kill all the vile wildlings in the heart of the Vale. Yohn Royce and his heirs died at the Crimson Feast, and his daughters were defiled by the savage wildlings, never to be seen again.

While the Vale had conserved all of its forces by sitting out the War of the Five Kings and the Dragon's Folly, it had also failed to make any worthwhile alliances.

Michael Redfort, the new lord of the Redfort, was just as thirsty for blood and vengeance for his brothers and father, and swiftly joined forces with Robert Royce…

Excerpt from 'The Vale Divided' by Maester Yandel.

Lys

Lord Ralph Buckler

"Are you sure the boy is here?" Robin Massey asked impatiently as they walked through the sunny cobbled streets of the Perfumed City.

The roadsides were filled with palms and tangerine trees. The sweltering heat was suffocating, worming its way through garments, and even the shades of trees offered little respite. Alas, discarding his arming doublet in a dangerous place like this would not be wise.

"Yes," the Estermont knight said firmly. "My cousin was sent here with a few of Stannis' men to protect King Robert's son from the Red Witch."

"It may be so," said Ralph, looking down the sunny street, "but six years have passed. He could have moved elsewhere, and we would be wasting our time here. Unless you've kept letters with him, Ser Alyn?"

Alyn merely sighed, but his silence was damning.

The Lord of Bronzegate rubbed his face, then let his gaze wander through the crowded street.

It was a feast for the eyes, a feast of colours.

Instead of the drab grey and brown you would encounter in most corners of Westeros, everyone was eager to dress like a peacock—even the peasants. The women wore almost-thin, nearly transparent garments in this heat, sun-kissed yet pale skin on open display, and Valyrian silver-gold hair and purple eyes were commonplace. Robert Fell could not tear his gaze from the group of buxom, scantily clad women, nearly tripping several times on the cobblestones.

If Ralph had been two decades younger, he would be much the same. But those were whores, he knew.

With age came a cold detachment; his temper and lust had long since cooled.

Not all the folk of Lys wore silk. More than half bore brands on their skin, on the shoulder or breast, the arm or the hip. The tattoos of shackles and swords were for the workhands and slave soldiers, and the dancing women were for the whores and courtesans.

In just one street, Ralph had seen more slaves than in his entire life. It made his stomach churn.

There were more slaves than freedmen, and most of the city watch bore the sword brands. Ralph could not help but wonder why they had not taken arms against their masters and fought for their freedom.

The Lord of Bronze Gate knew better than to meddle, of course. Slavery was wrong, a vile and barbaric practise, but it was the way of the godless Essosi. There were gods aplenty, each city from Tyrosh to Qarth worshipping a different one, but in truth, Ralph knew the Essosi worshipped coin above all else.

It was this worship of gold that made trade flourish, and exotic goods from all corners of the world could be seen at every second stall here.

Peddlers littered the streets, trying to sell many exotic fruits, more than half of which Ralph had never seen before. Ralph eyed a glistening red-orange orb with a hint of interest, but when he caught sight of a branded man shuffling past, loading wares with dead eyes, his appetite soured, and he turned away.

“We can still sail for Highgarden,” said Ser Robin Massey, sweat dripping down his face. His eyes were set on a straw hat that only peasants toiling in the fields would wear.

“And go begging before that flowery steward?” Robert’s face flushed red with outrage. “Edric Storm may be a bastard, but he has the blood of Baratheon and Florent both, old, storied lineages. And he was raised in Storm’s End, like a trueborn Baratheon!”

“Even if the boy is here and agrees to join us, we’ve not half the swords to match Strickland’s host,” the Massey knight replied gruffly. “And gods know if Edric has the strength to bend the undecided Stormlords to heel. For all we know, he’s grown soft. This city’s fit to drown a man in wine, coin, and whores. This whole journey might be folly.”

“The Tyrells may not help us either, Robin,” said Ralph. “Lord Garlan Tyrell has his own woes. Besides, the Westerlands and the Riverlands are eyeing his every move. And if chaos erupts in the Reach, the Dornish will doubtlessly start raiding along the marches again.”

Their feet brought them before a manse of modest size. It was a pretty thing, walls of varnished elm, red ceramic tiles, and a whitewashed foundation.

“Bah.” Massey’s voice was dismissive. “Yronwood has rebelled in Dorne, and the lion and the eagle are ready to rip each other to shreds. The Tyrells in Highgarden might have lessened in number, but they still command countless knights.”

“Aye, but Lord Garlan’s allies are weaker than they once were,” Ralph countered. “The Hightower sits idle in Oldtown after breaking the Ironmen. The Redwynes are a shadow of what they had been a decade ago, still unable to recover after the reavers sacked their citadel and scoured their lands. Fossoway is much the same, his might half-crippled after the Desolation of King’s Landing and the winter. And what of the Lannister? He stole two of Garlan’s strongest bannermen, and the rose sat in his garden. The fighting west of the Trident has been little more than skirmishes and raids, with neither side willing to call the banners.”

Ralph gave silent thanks to the Seven when Massey finally fell quiet. The man had always spoken of the Reach with undue fondness. Sometimes he wondered if he had picked up undue habits during his squiring in the Reach.

The oaken door before them was barred by a man half-giant in size, dark as night and broad as an ox, wearing nothing but a belt and breeches. The man lacked only a little height to compete with the Mountain, and was only half as muscled, but not less menacing for it.

“Why you here?” the man rumbled in harsh, broken Valyrian.

“We seek Gaemond Malaerys,” Ralph answered, grateful to the Crone that his father had insisted he study the tongue of the Free Cities.

“Only one enter.”

Ralph nodded and turned to his companions. “Only one is allowed to go.”

“Let me go,” Ser Alyn suddenly urged.

“Do you speak the tongue, Estermont?” Robert scoffed.

“Aye. My mother was Tyroshi. *Taught me when I was small,*” the young knight said with a grin.

“You might have mentioned that,” Ralph sighed. The smirk Alyn gave him made his teeth itch. “Very well. Go.”

He had no mind to haggle in a foreign tongue, nor coin enough to be cheated by a Lyseni merchant.

“Was it wise to send him?” Massey asked as Alyn disappeared into the manse. “He’s a stubborn lout.”

“True,” Ralph allowed, dabbing the sweat from his brow with his cloak. “But he knows how to deal with those who dabble in coin—his mother was one, after all. Let’s find some shade before we find ourselves roasted.”

They moved beneath a swaying palm at the edge of the paved lane, settling by the trunk where the shadows pooled. Robert sat upon a pale stone and stretched his legs.

“Let’s hope he finds the boy,” Robert said, voice rumbling as he took a rag to wipe the rivulets of sweat from his face. But the rag was already as damp as he was. “I’m tired of wandering around.”

So was Ralph, but he remained silent. They all did. They had travelled much, feasting their eyes on peace and prosperity. Most of Essos and the North were untouched by the ravages of war.

They did not wait long. A quarter-hour passed before Ser Alyn re-emerged from the manse, a wide smile on his face.

“He’s here. In Lys,” he announced.

“Edric Storm?” Ralph asked.

“Aye, come quickly.” Estermont turned, striding down a narrow street without waiting.

“What did the man tell you?” Massey asked, catching up.

“Edric commands a company of his own now,” said Alyn over his shoulder. “They call themselves the *Sons of the Storm*. They've been fighting the Myrish in the Disputed Lands. Won every battle they joined, or so the merchant claims.”

“Well then, he’s no soft lordling after all!” Robert Fell's booming laugh frightened a few of the passersby.

Massey ignored him. “How large is this company of his?”

“Twelve hundred foot, all in mail, and three hundred mounted knights and men-at-arms,” Alyn answered. “If the Lyseni was truthful, that is.”

“Impressive,” Ralph murmured, whistling. “That’s quite the host for a boy barely past his twentieth nameday.”

“Even with them, Strickland will still outnumber us,” Massey cautioned as they finally arrived at a wide square. “Three, maybe four to one.”

The crowd was thinner here, and men here wore steel and carried swords on their hips, and there was a sharpness to their gazes. Sellswords.

Estermont halted before a high wall. The oaken gate was flanked by two guards, bronze-skinned men in ringmail, both standing ramrod straight. Beyond the wall, they heard the clash of training swords and the bellowed calls of drillmasters.

“Why you come?” one of the guards asked, his Common Tongue thick and stilted.

“We’ve come to speak with Captain Edric Storm,” Ralph said.

“For contract?”

“You could say that,” Alyn answered, barely hiding his excitement.

The guards opened the gate.

Inside was a broad yard packed with men in the midst of their drills. Most of them had the look of Westerosi—quite probably exiles from the War of the Five Kings. But it was not the rows of soldiers that drew their gaze.

In the centre of the yard, a figure towered over all others. He had to be at least seven feet tall, armoured from head to toe in dark steel and a greathelm crowned with antlers upon his brow. He fought three knights at once, a hefty warhammer in hand that he swung as though it weighed nothing.

Edric Storm was said to have taken after his sire, but in truth, he had surpassed him. Taller, stronger, faster, more charismatic, and even deadlier with a warhammar than the Demon of the Trident in his prime. He had none of Robert Baratheon's penchant for excessive drinking, although he oft enjoyed carnal pursuits.

Lords Ralph Buckler and Robert Fell persuaded him to return to Westeros and lay his claim on Storm's End and the Stormlands.

Commander Harry Strickland, however, had managed to pacify the southern Stormlands and, with bolstered strength, headed north to siege Bronzegate. Plenty of the crownlords and Northern Stormlords

flocked to Edric Storm's banner, but their strength had waned greatly in previous wars and the harsh winter. Even with the Sons of the Storm, Edric's host was lacking in numbers to face Strickland openly.

The Young Storm was forced to look for allies elsewhere.

But at that moment, Lord Garlan Tyrell had finally decided to bring Houses Rowan and Crane to heel and attacked the Westerlands. King Tommen quickly made peace with King Jonos Bracken, who was said to be scared that once the Westerlands fell, he would be next.

Grudgingly, the former enemies united against the larger Reacher host. The Vale and Dorne had both descended into bloody rebellions. It briefly looked like Edric Storm stood alone, but his ability to easily make friends, even in his childhood, paid off. Aid came from the most unlikely of places…

Excerpt from 'The Rising Storm' by Archmaester Perestan