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B. Reader: Bub3loka

The winter that began at the tail end of the Year 303 After Aegon's Conquest was the coldest in recorded history. It was said that even in Dorne, stone would crack open from the fierce chill. The cruel cold lasted two and a half years, with only three to four warm moons of respite a year. The snow in the Riverlands has been said to reach thirty feet tall, collapsing the roofs over the heads of many of the surviving smallfolk who had yet to flee further south. From Starfall to Sunspear, the world was shrouded in white, and many Dornishmen saw snow for the first time.

With House Targaryen vanished into the pages of history, it seemed that King Tommen would have no opposition in unifying the lands South of the Neck for a brief moment. But after the Second Field of Fire, new challenges arose. The Lannisters had made few friends and many foes, and when spring came, none of the High Lords had bent the knee.

Meanwhile, in the Iron Isles, Baelor Bloodsmile had continued his relentless quest to dismantle the Ironborn once and for all. Every keep was pulled down stone by stone, craftsmen sent back to the Reach, and what meagre forests grew there were cut down or burned. Those who resisted were hanged, and no quarter was given to the nobility—even women and children received no mercy. By estimates, no Ironborn or Drowned Priests survived in the Iron Islands, and those reavers who did sought to flee beyond Ibb or the Jade Gates.

From the Wall to the Arbour, the relentless cold scarcely abated for two years, even during the warm months, and the War of the Five Kings had displaced too many; famine was spreading even before the first snow had fallen south of the Neck.

It is said that during those two years, over a third of all the smallfolk perished in the cold. Some scholars claimed the numbers were greater, and fewer than half survived, but the bodies were too many to count. At the end of 306 AC, warmth finally began to return to Westeros. Despite the devastating winter, the kingdoms did not remain peaceful. The following spring was known as the 'Red Spring'...

Excerpt from 'The Red Spring' by Archmaester Perestan

Tommen Baratheon, 307 AC, Casterly Rock

"I yield," the breathless words slipped out of his mouth. Tommen heaved as he stared up at the blunted blade pointed at his neck. Mustering his sore muscles, he stood back up and picked up his sword and shield. "Again!"

“You’re getting tired, Your Grace,” said Ser Marlon Greenfield, the youngest addition to his kingsguard. “Any further training would do more harm than good.”

Tommen’s hands felt like lead, the sweat dripping from his hair stung in his eyes, and his lungs were on fire. His gaze settled on the edge of the training yard where his wife, Queen Floris Rowan, was watching from the side, and his desire for victory was set aflame again, and his exhaustion was quickly forgotten.

“One last bout. I still got some fight left in me.”

The young knight bowed in acknowledgement, stepped back, and took a fighting stance.

Tommen slowly mirrored him while trying to buy enough time to regulate his erratic breathing.

The knight would not allow him to do so, so he moved to strike first. Ser Marlon was soon upon him like a storm of steel. After years of fervent sparring, Tommen easily learned to catch the probing thrusts with his shield and weave around and skillfully deflect the heavy blows Greenfield rained upon him while waiting for an opening. Soon, his lungs were on fire again, and his legs began to buckle.

Tommen knew that the knight across him had greater endurance, and he would be the first to falter. He had to do something while he still had the strength to keep moving. It would be easy to be knocked out or disarmed, things that had happened a thousand times before. This time, however, he wanted to win. No, Tommen *needed* to win.

He feinted a lunge for Marlon's head with his blade. After practising for countless hours, his lunges were deadly and sharp, and the knight predictably tried to meet this one with his shield. It was as he expected—the knight’s vision was partially blocked. Tommen twisted his wrist and wheeled his slash towards his foe's shin at the last second, striking with full force.

Greenfield grunted with pain, faltering; the young king decisively slammed his shield into the knight’s now-opened face, knocking him to the ground. He immediately followed up while the fallen knight was still half-dazed, knocking the sword out of Ser Marlon’s grasp with ease.

Jubilation filled Tommen’s heart at his success. While he could defeat almost all the squires now, this was the first knight he was able to best.

“Well fought, Your Grace.” Uncle Jaime clapped from the side, a rare smile blooming on his usually stoic face. The years had not been kind to the man they called the Kingslayer—his mane of gold was streaked with grey, and his eyes were oft distant. Rumours said that his uncle suffered from nightly terrors, remembering the Second Field of Fire. “But I’ll have to remind you that we have a Small Council meeting in half an hour.”

“I’ll be there, uncle,” Tommen confirmed and headed towards his chambers, followed by Ser Lyle Crakehall of the White Cloaks.

“Brax, it seems that our newest brother is in sore need of harsher training—” Ser Jaime’s voice fizzled out as they left the yard.

Tommen remembered his uncle three years ago. He could scarcely win a bout with his left hand; some had even called him a useless cripple behind his back. Some even said it to his face.

But Jaime Lannister, undeterred by the winter chill, had religiously spent hours and hours in the training yard every day, getting beaten and bruised, until he slowly started winning. Now, none could best his uncle, no matter how hard they tried.

He returned to his chambers and had a servant draw him a hot bath to cleanse all the sweat and grime from him. The steaming water helped soothe his tired muscles. As his page was quickly helping him don his doublet, Lady Prowl quietly peddled over and mewled softly, causing the young Gerold Marbrand to jump and squeal in fright.

Crakehall pushed the door open, axe drawn, but calmed down when he saw the lioness who hissed at him with displeasure.

“Your Grace, must you insist on keeping... Lady Prowl in your quarters?” The tall kingsguard sighed as he strapped his weapon back to his belt.

“Yes, ser.” Tommen ran his fingers through the lioness’s soft underneck, and she closed her eyes and mewled in pleasure. The act itself soothed his nerves and eased the tension from his body. “There’s no need for a cage—she is harmless. Lady Prowl has never hurt anybody.”

Lyle Crakehall groaned and sagged in defeat.

All the white cloaks were worrywarts.

The Starks had no problem with their direwolves. Lady Prowl was merely a fraction of the size of the infamous Ghost. Sighing, he tore himself from his favourite kitten and headed towards the council chambers.

It seemed he was the last to arrive, as everyone else was already waiting around the table. Tommen took his seat at the head of the table and nodded to Ser Daven Lannister.

“I shall begin,” Daven declared as he ran a hand through his tangle of a beard, which looked more like a lion’s mane than anything else. “All the Highlords still refuse to bend the knee, and what we dreaded the most has become a fact. Dorne has declared itself a sovereign principality once more, and Harrold Arryn has crowned himself king of the Mountain and the Vale. Only a handful of smaller lords scattered have tentatively responded so far.”

A sigh tore out of Tommen’s mouth. He missed the simple days when ruling was just stamping all the documents with his personal seal.

“Who?” he asked.

The Hand grimaced. “A few lesser lords from Massey’s hook and the Crownlands willing to swear fealty in return for protection against pirates from the Stepstones, Your Grace.”

“Our powers don’t stretch that far,” Ser Jaime cautioned dispassionately. “As much as His Grace is the rightful King of the Seven Kingdoms, our influence and might end at the borders of the Westerlands.”

“Surely there’s someone we could help while strengthening the crown?”

The Hand stared at the parchment before him for half a minute before responding. “The only one of importance is Lord Clement Piper of Pinkmaiden. He is willing to pay homage to Casterly Rock if we protect him from Jonos Bracken.”

His uncle sneered. “I thought the newly proclaimed ‘King’ Bracken was busy warring with Mallister?”

“Not anymore. Old Bracken has agreed to wed his eldest daughter to the Red Eagle after the third indecisive battle,” Phillip Plum supplied helpfully. “With the strongest Houses of the Riverlands united, they now look to subjugate the rest that stood aside.”

The Plumm lord was a girthy, jolly man in his early fifties who took joy in baser pleasures like drinking and feasting, but had an uncanny ability to dig out secrets and gleam knowledge across the realm. He was also one of the rare lords who had survived the War of the Five Kings, the Second Field of Fire, and the cruel winter that followed.

“A pity most of our hostages died from the chill,” Lord Crane wheezed out. Half of Casterly Rock’s household had died to the cold, and while the Master of Laws survived, his health never truly recovered.

The only hostage of worth that survived was Hoster Blackwood—and he had been ransomed back to the Blackwoods for a pittance as they had returned from their millennia-long exile back to the North. Perhaps if his mother had not fumbled things out of pettiness, leading to Edmure Tully’s suicide, they would have had a far greater hand to play in the Riverlands.

But that was Tommen’s legacy.

Son of a drunken king who cared more about whores than ruling his realm, and a mother who cared for nothing but herself. A brother to a cruel boy who plunged the Kingdoms into war. And what was left for Tommen? A shattered realm, a weak crown, and feuds and grudges had long passed the point of mere discontent.

There was no point in lamenting what could have been. *‘A king must keep looking ahead, not dwell on the past.’* His Uncle Jaime’s wise words still gave him strength every time he wavered. *‘Focus on the present and plan for the future.’*

Tommen drummed his fingers on the table as he inspected the map of the Westerlands and the neighbouring kingdoms.

“And only Piper responded? What about the Vances?”

The Plumm lord cleared his throat. “Bracken managed to keep Vance of Atranta in the fold by giving him a sizeable chunk of the former Tully lands after taking the rest for himself. The Vance of Wayfarer Rest wed one of Jonos' many daughters to his heir.”

“And, well...” The master of whispers paused, looking uncomfortable. “Lord Tywin burned over half of the Riverlands in the war. The Riverlords have not forgotten. The memory of the Red Wedding is still fresh in their minds, as is the loss of kin and kith and blame your grandfather for it.”

‘The Red Wedding has nothing to do with me,’ Tommen wanted to scream. But he knew they would look at him and see Joffrey and Tywin and everyone they hated.

Instead, he asked, “And do we know how many swords Bracken can muster under his name now?”

The master of whisper shuffled around, pulling out a pile of scrolls and parchments over the table, and busied himself inspecting them.

“By my estimate, eleven thousand at the very least and eighteen thousand at most,” he murmured at last. “The Riverlands were hit the hardest during the winter, but Bracken had managed to rally remnants of Aegon’s fleeing army to his cause. But Harrenhal seems to stay empty as the Green Scourge has taken it up as his roost and burns fools brave enough to claim it.”

“That’s all well and good, but we can only field twenty-three thousand men right now, half of whom are green.” Ser Jaime’s voice was grim. “Almost all of Jonos' forces are veterans bloodied in the last wars. Stubborn men with experience following orders who are no strangers to fighting and war. Any fight in the Riverlands will not be easy.”

Tommen looked around at the now silent table. Most of the faces were hardened, weathered, or simply weary. The War of the Five Kings had left deep scars in the minds of many; they had left deeper scars on their kin, lands, and coffers, and nobody seemed eager to speak of war again.

But as a king, Tommen could not afford to be meek or indecisive. If he were cowed by the slightest danger, he would never get anything done.

“Daven, pen a reply to Lord Piper. Should he swear fealty to Casterly Rock in perpetuity, I shall defend him against Lord Jonos. If Bracken wants to fight over Pinkmaiden, who was never his, I shall oblige him.” Tommen grinned as his councillors nodded one after another, steeling themselves. At least their loyalty outweighed their reluctance to risk battle. “Lord Plum, tell us how the other kingdoms are faring.”

“The Blackwater Bay and its coast are infested by slavers and pirates, Your Grace. The young Lord Monterys Velaryon is dead, and Driftmark has been sacked. Claw Isle has also been sacked, and all the members of House Celtigar have been sold into slavery.” The old Lord pulled on his greying moustache as the other councillors began cursing. “Baelor Hightower has finally finished his grand undertaking on the Iron Isles. The reavers are now a thing of the past.”

“Should’ve pulled them out root and stem long ago,” grunted Sebaston Farman, his master of ships, eliciting a wave of sombre agreements around the table. Sadly, the naval power of the Westerlands was a meagre score of warships and a handful of trade cogs repurposed for battle. Thankfully, those had been enough to send the promised gold to the North unmolested. “And do we know what Baelor is doing now?”

“The Lord of the Hightower has returned to Oldtown and seems content to sit in his tower for now,” Lord Plumm thoughtfully responded as he fiddled with a small sealed scroll in his hand. “Willas Tyrell has succumbed to a vicious winter chill, just like his grandmother. The only Tyrell from the main line left is Garlan, who seems to be sitting back and watching his neighbours for now. Although there are rumours of a new Vulture King invading the Marches.”

“Didn’t the Dornish get hit hard by the winter?” the master of Laws rasped out.

“Not as hard as the rest of us, it seems,” Jaime muttered, taking a small sip of his wine. “What of the Citadel? Are they still trying to sell us that fat wretch of a flower for a Grand Maester?”

“Yes,” Devan confirmed with a sigh. “Supposedly, Gormon Tyrell is who the Conclave chose, and their decision is set in stone. If Maester Creylen still lived, we could have appointed him Grand Maester.”

“Why not appoint the new one instead? What was his name, Lados?” the master of ships curiously asked.

“Ladon,” his uncle corrected. “Maester Ladon. He’s too young and inexperienced, and we know not where his true loyalties lie yet.”

“Have we no contacts in the Citadel?”

“None, Your Grace.”

Tommen groaned inwardly. On days like these, he could understand why his father had preferred hunting and feasting over dealing with troublesome matters, big and small. Once you dealt with one problem, another would jump out; once you solved an issue, two more would come. There was no end to it all.

Once he had turned six and ten, his councillors weren’t eager to offer him advice on hard matters, lest they advise him wrong. It made the crown atop his head feel all the heavier.

Was he doing the right thing?

What if he followed in Joffrey's footsteps?

The silence stretched as none of the councillors dared to speak. Tommen could press them for advice, but they would give empty platitudes or profess ignorance on the matter.

"Send someone loyal to Oldtown to scout a suitable maester with no relations to House Tyrell, Lord Hand," he decided after a minute of thinking, and Daven quickly started scribbling down on his parchment. "He must be well-read and wise, with a clean background."

"Bypassing the Conclave?" Jaime asked, his green eyes shining with interest.

Tommen nodded. "If the Conclave does not want to provide us with a trusty Grand Maester, we'll recruit one ourselves. Lord Plumm, what about the Stormlands and the Vale?"

"Harry Strickland and the remnants of the Golden Company have Storm's End and Harvest Hall in an iron grip. He has taken the young Lady of Haystack Hall, Ellyne Errol, as his bride and crushed the alliance of Connington, Fell, Caron, and Morrigen at Blacktree Ridge."

"Isn't Ellyne Errol seven name-days old?!" Farman cried in outrage, and Tommen felt bile rising in his throat.

"She is," Jaime wearily confirmed. "Although it is not a surprise for an Esossi sellsword. None of those Easterners has a shred of decency. What about the other Stormlanders? Why did they not fight?"

"Strickland still holds the hostages Aegon took in Storm's End. Unlike ours, most of his lived," Plumm explained and downed a cup of wine in one go. "Of course, some of the Stormlords fought, but they were too few in numbers, unable to form up a proper resistance and were easily crushed."

"Can't we assist the Stormlords somehow?" Tommen hopefully asked. "They should easily rally to me as a Baratheon." For some reason, his uncle looked at him with a hint of sadness and quickly avoided meeting his gaze as he raised his cup of wine as if to hide behind it. "With the Stormlands on our side, pulling in the rest of the Kingdoms would be far easier."

"From Casterly Rock to Storm's End is nearly fifteen hundred miles, Your Grace," Crane wheezed. "If we send our army there, our supply lines will be easy pickings for Jonos Bracken and Garlan Tyrell. Not to mention that the Westerlands will be undefended. Worse, the Stormlords sacrificed much for Renly, Stannis, and Joffrey only to receive death and defeat for their leal service. I'm afraid there's nothing we can do for the Stormlands now, nor is it wise to make any attempt."

Tommen's shoulders sagged as he looked at the map.

"There's little hope to get Dorne back into the fold," he grimly acknowledged. "But what made Arryn declare himself King?"

"I've no idea, Your Grace," Plumm delicately began, "but I can wager a guess. Your uncle Tyrion convinced the mountain clansmen to follow him, and they fought in the Battle of the Green Fork and at Blackwater for House Lannister. In return, your grandfather supplied them with steel armaments and armour previously denied to the savages, and they looted plenty more after the Battle on the Green Fork. Now, the wildlings are no longer a thorn in the Valemen's side but a legitimate threat. Last but not least, they have no desire to be ruled by a king sitting in Casterly Rock."

"So this is it?" Tommen tiredly ran a hand through his hair and looked at the eyes of each one of the council members. "The realm is broken, splintered back into pieces. The Conqueror's work is unravelled like some old tapestry. Nothing I can do would bring a highlord to my side. Nor can I force their knees to bend by strength of arms."

The silence was deafening. All of them were uneasily looking around, but none dared speak out; the tension was so thick you could cut it with a knife.

"You're my advisors, damn you. Advise me!"

"Your Grace," Ser Devan said, his gaze distant. "We've already done all we could in the last three years. We've tried threats, coercion, blackmail, promises of honours, alliances, gold, and marriages, but everything of significance that we could offer was already offered during the war. The lords are tired and mistrustful..."

"Perhaps it is for the best," Tommen muttered, rubbing his face. "I've no need for rebellious subjects who do not consider me king. King Tommen of the Rock has a nice ring to it."

"Your Grace—"

"Enough, I have decided, Lord Commander."

Tommen stood up, his gaze roaming over the faces of his councillors. They were all reluctant and stunned, with the exception of Lord Crane, who was looking at him with approval.

"I've no taste for senseless war. Wasn't the last one more than enough? And look where it brought us! If every highlord wants their own crown, let them! Daven, ink it down. From this day forth, I, King Tommen Baratheon, renounce my claim to the rest of the realm and name myself King of the Rock and Lord of the Westerlands."

"But, Your Grace—"

He raised his hand and stared at the audacious Lord Farman, who swallowed his words as Daven's furiously scribbling was the only thing that could be heard in the room.

"Ser Lyle."

“Yes, Your Grace?” The Strongboar came over from his post at the door.

“Did I not say I had decided not a minute earlier?”

“Aye, Your Grace, you did!”

“Escort Lord Farman out.” The Lord of Fair Isle wanted to protest, but the hulking figure of Lyle Crakehall loomed threateningly, and he quickly swallowed his words. “His services as a Master of Ships are no longer needed. I’ve no need of a councilman who cannot even listen. He will stay in the guest quarters until his heir comes to foster here, in Casterly Rock.”

As Sebaston Farman was led out of the room, Tommen waved over the cupbearer, and his goblet was filled with golden wine from the Arbour. Half a minute later, Daven finally finished his roll of parchment and handed it to him for approval. Tommen grimaced at the barely legible chicken scribbles. Perhaps it was time to get his Hand a scribe, preferably one with far better penmanship.

“To whom do you want to send it, Your Grace?”

“Send it to every Lord of the realm. Send it from Sunspear to the Arbour, from Starfall to Last Hearth.”

His councillors shared a wordless look, but Tommen did not care.

He drained the wine from his cup in one go. The sweet warmth running down his throat brought him a little comfort, but Tommen felt lighter. Gods, it was good, as if he had been carrying a set of heavy, thick armour until now, and it was suddenly gone! Yet one worry remained.

“Any news from the North?”

“Queen Shireen Stark has given birth to a healthy boy, Prince Rickon Stark, Your Grace.”

“A crown prince of Winterfell, then? Lord Crane, pick a suitable gift and send it to Winterfell in my name.” The master of laws bobbed his wisened head in agreement. “Has there been a word from my sister?”

“There seems to be a rumour that Princess Myrcella is betrothed—”

Uncle Jaime choked on his wine and started coughing violently. Tommen himself barely managed to rein in his surprise.

“Why am I only hearing about this now?!”

“Err, Your Grace, this is only a rumour, and it arrived this morning by a merchant from Barrowton. Nothing has been confirmed yet...” Plumm nervously wrung his fingers, coughed, and continued. “As I was saying, the Princess is said to be betrothed to Lord Edwyle Umber.”

“Edwyle Umber?” Tommen echoed, blinking. “The Giant of Last Hearth?”

“The very one,” said Plumm. “Second son of the late Jon Umber. He was fostered in Winterfell after his father fell at Westwatch. Reached his majority only last moon. From what little word reaches us, he and the Princess became... close during his time in court. And now, it seems, Queen Shireen has made the match official.”

Tommen swallowed heavily. His sister should have grown into a pretty and delicate maiden. And Umbers were... giants amongst men.

The apprehension had to be plain on his face, for Lord Crane cleared his throat. “There are worse men than Umbers,” he said quietly. “They are loyal, if nothing else.”

“And massive,” Plumm added, lips twisting. “The young lord is said to be taller than his sire. Thick as an ox and twice as strong. Little else is known of Edwyle.”

“We need more eyes in the North.” His uncle’s voice was strangled, and his face was pale.

“Spies don’t last long in the cold,” the master of whispers said. “It’s said that the Northern king’s direwolf sniffs them out on sight.”

“Forget about spies, then.” Jaime coughed. “Perhaps we can send Ser Lucion back to Winterfell, as a permanent envoy.”

Tommen gritted his teeth. They would treat his sister well, he hoped. Then, his gaze flickered to Ser Lyle, who stood like a pale shadow by his side. A giant did not mean a cruel brute.

The more he thought about it, the less he worried.

But all accounts, Myrcella was Shireen Baratheon’s close friend and confidante, so any betrothal would be suitable, perhaps even a match of love. House Umber was barely worthy of a royal princess.

“See it done,” Tommen said at last. “And find out everything about this Lord of Last Hearth. And, if my sister is to be wed, she will have a dowry worthy of her station. Let this Umber know he is marrying a Princess with the full might of Casterly Rock behind her, not some hostage. Council adjourned.”

The council murmured their assent, and one by one they bowed and withdrew. Tommen lingered a moment, feeling the dull ache of bruises beneath his doublet—tokens of all the mornings spent in the yard. His muscles were sore, and his mind felt tired.

Perhaps a nap was in order.

Ser Tytan Brax, ever dutiful, shadowed him through the gilded halls of Casterly Rock. When he reached his chambers, Tommen dismissed the guards with a nod and unfastened the gold lion clasp at his shoulder.

He pushed open the door—

And stopped.

Floris Rowan lay in the royal bed, a naked leg suggestively stretched over the silken covers as golden hair spilt across the crimson pillows. Her smile was wicked, and she made no effort to rise.

“Well, Your Grace,” she purred. “This bed feels a bit too cold without you.”

Tommen hastily closed the door behind him.

Even the wildlings beyond the Wall and at the Mountains of the Moon know and respect the ancient laws of hospitality.

The Tale of the Rat Cook and what happens to those who break Guest Right was considered an old song, a fable from times forgotten. With the passage of centuries and millennia, belief in the Old Ways had waned. Avaricious and godless men thought it a mere child’s tale.

But they have forgotten that gods never forget and never forgive slights. Even to this day, the fierce winds and storms try to shatter Godsgrief’s bastion, clinging to their grudge. The Nightfort is considered a cursed place thousands of years later. And now, House Frey and the famed Crossing are another monument to the dangers of hubris and breaking the laws of the gods.

Before the Red Wedding at 299 AC, House Frey had more than a hundred members. By 304 AC, Tywin and Willem Frey, the grandsons of Genna Lannister, were the last living Freys. It did not take long for them to meet with an accident at the Watch, perishing after a tragic fall from the Wall.

It was said that none of Walder’s Frey progeny met a peaceful end. Ever since then, the name ‘Frey’ has been synonymous with the vilest of curses and the most unworthy of men, and unlike the Rat Cook, they would never be forgotten...

Excerpt from ‘On the Importance of Guest Right’ by Lord Yohn Royce

Rogar Wull 308 AC, near Westwatch

“Come, Rodrik, let’s pay our respects to your grandfather,” Rogar urged his son.

The boy was busy gawking at the vast expanse of hewn stone ahead. And it was a resplendent sight, created under the deft hands of the finest stonemasons the North could call upon.

Gone were the broken shore and the hills of charred bones and moans of pain coming from the hungry faces that survived. All signs of snow and battle had disappeared, replaced by greenery and stone. In

between the pathways lay a vast array of trees and bushes; Rogar could recognise apples and plums amongst the trees, and half a dozen kinds of berries crowning the well-trimmed shrubberies below. The sweet scent of fruit teased his nose as half a dozen stewards carefully harvested the garden.

It was a monument guarded by the Order of the Last Dawn, an order created by the king to defend, record the history, and maintain the final resting place of the brave souls that had perished in the Battle for the Dawn. A gesture to show that the sacrifice and valour of the fallen were not forgotten, that it was not in vain. That their brave deaths had mattered, unlike what the arrogant Southron maesters claimed.

He signalled the men-at-arms to stay with the horses as Rodrik quickly ran over, and they solemnly began to climb the stone steps leading to the monument.

"Can you tell me more about the battle, da?" his boy asked enthusiastically as his gaze roamed the surroundings.

Rogar sighed wearily and looked at his eager son.

"Oh, my sweet summer child... Battle?" His voice grew grim. "'Twas not much of a battle. The Bay froze despite the Queen's efforts—"

"Good Queen Shireen?" Rodrik interrupted.

"Yes, the Good Queen Shireen," he confirmed, grabbed his son by the ear, and twisted.

"Ow, ow, ow—"

"Hold your tongue when I speak, boy," Rogar warned, finally letting him go a few heartbeats later. "Your mother coddles you too much, methinks, and it seems I need to tan your hide more. It's time to learn some patience and listen for once. Perhaps I'll send you as a page to old Denys Mallister for a year or two to learn some proper discipline."

"Sorry, father," his son guiltily mumbled, rubbing his reddened ear.

Rogar looked at his son again and sighed. Too soft. Too cowardly and spineless.

The boy would benefit from the firm hand of the Old Eagle at the Shadow Tower.

"Where was I? Oh, right. 'Twas so cold that the Bay froze. The cold winds of winter cut through the thickest of furs, and many a man froze to death in their sleep. Ten thousand brave swords had gathered below Westwatch to fight the surging tide of dead, but we had no chance without the walls. They call it *'The battle of the Dawn'* now." He spat on the stony ground below. "There was no battle that day, my son, only slaughter. The walls facing the Gorge helped us funnel them into a killing field, but we stood no chance once they could cross the Bay and hit us in the back."

Rogar took his flask of ale from his belt, uncorked it, took a generous swig, and sighed.

“But you won?” His son hopefully looked at him.

“Nay, Roddy. We lost. There was no victory for us, only death and glory. For every breathing man, there were a hundred wights! By the gods, we did not run; we did not fold. We gave them a fight—a fierce fight for the songs, but it wasn’t enough. We were surrounded and fell little by little. No matter how valiantly we fought and how many foes we felled, there were always more. Nobody could stop the Night King and his White Walkers. They took down the Purple Dread from the sky, and great warriors were dying like flies. We lost the commanders, too, but nobody fled because there was nowhere to flee.”

He sighed and looked at the marble obelisk. They were almost there.

“Didn’t you kill a Walker, da?” Rodrik urged him on.

Rogar closed his eyes and sighed.

“I might have struck the final blow, but many perished to make it possible, including your Grandfather. All who managed to slay a Walker earned a weapon forged by the Stark himself.”

His hand instinctively found the handle of Valiance, House Wull’s new bearded axe. Crowned with a small beak on its back and a spike on its top, even the handle was made of sleek, dark bronze that would glow softly in the dark.

“Each one is hewn from a miracle bronze that was lighter than normal steel, sharper than all ordinary arms, and would never bend, break, or lose edge. But nay, we scarcely killed a dozen of the icy demons. If the Stark had arrived a little later, there wouldn’t have been anyone else left alive...”

Rogar shivered at the memory and treated himself to another swig of ale. Ominous blue eyes and the field covered in charred bones and slush would forever haunt his dreams.

“What is that?” Rodrik asked as he pointed at the statue vigilantly standing atop the marble obelisk, looking towards the Lands of Always Winter.

“A tribute to the fallen as per Northern tradition,” he explained, voice maudlin. “Too many died that day.”

At that moment, they finally arrived. His curious son finally stilled and, wide-eyed, looked at the imposing memorial covered to the brim with names on each of its six sides, each one carved into the granite with great care. Four silent men clad in white stood still as statues at every corner and watched like hawks. Rogar, however, stared at the red etchings at the very top.

Lord Hugo Wull

Lord Jon Umber

Lady Maege Mormont

Jorelle Mormont

Lord Jonos Norrey

Cregan Norrey

Jeor Flint

Jon Harclay

Beren Burley

Waldon Burley

Lord Harald Crowl

Lord Dorlaf Stane

Svenarr Stane

Skageir Magnar

Lord Soren Shieldbreaker

Toregg Giantsbane

Chieftain Great Walrus

Chieftainess Morna White Mask

Chieftain Gerrick Kingsblood

Chieftain Devyn Sealskinner

Chieftain Ygon Oldfather

Commander Cotter Pyke

Duncan Liddle

Iron Emmett

Artos...

Rogar sighed wearily and finally tore his eyes from the monument.

None could recognise most of the remains amidst burned bone and half-melted metal. But the Stark had said that all those who fought and fell that day deserved to be remembered, and thus, this memorial was made atop a mass grave. His father's remains would never see the Wull Crypts, but resting here was not too bad. Rogar bowed deeply and placed a small offering at the base of the white obelisk.

Too many had died that day.

"Wull!" a booming voice from the side made him jump.

"Fuckin' Umber!" he swore as he tried to get his erratic heart to calm down. The sight of the seven-and-a-half feet tall man with a heavily muscled figure practically rushing his way did not help him one bit. "Edwyle, how fare you?"

"Could be worse." Rogar coughed to hide a wince when the enormous, meaty paw his friend called a hand struck his shoulder. "That your sprog?"

The man was even more formidable than his father, the Greatjon, in both body and voice, and he was not even twenty name-days yet.

"Aye. That's my firstborn, Rodrik." His son squirmed uneasily beneath Umber's gaze, who was three full heads taller than him, and looked like he wanted to disappear into the hewn stone below. "I heard you've become a father yourself. The scarred lioness gave you a boy, didn't she?"

"My little Jon was born three moons ago!" Edwyle Umber proudly declared, making even the stoic dawn guards at the monument wince.

"Gods save us. We're going to drown in blond giants now!" Rogar groaned, and the Lord of Last Heart burst into boisterous laughter. "I hope your boy gets your looks from his ma, lest he becomes an ugly cunt like you!"

Edwyle only laughed harder and louder at his words. It took him a minute to calm down, and then he solemnly placed an offering of his own at the base of the marble obelisk.

"Have you heard, Wull?" Umber inquired carefully after he stood up.

"Heard what?"

"The Stark has announced a Tourney at Winterfell for Prince Rickon's first name-day," Edwyle said, his eyes full of fire. "And it's not like those flowery tourneys they love doing in the south."

That grabbed Rogar's attention, and he expectantly looked at his friend.

"How so?"

“There’s no joust.” Umber’s grin turned feral. “I heard there was a melee, archery, mounted archery, horse racing, boulder tossing, hand wrestling, fisticuffs, axe-throwing, and more I couldn’t remember!”

Three men were brave enough to challenge the Demon of Winterfell for Princess Sansa’s hand, though not one of them hailed from the Seven Kingdoms.

Jon Stark was unrivalled with the sword and took a cruel pleasure in chopping people’s limbs off. Lucifon of Tyrosh, the infamous swordmaster in service of the Archon, lasted scarcely two heartbeats before he lost his sword arm. The First Sword of Braavos, Gario Alerys, was defeated so quickly that he could not even swing his sword. Only Yue Tanglong from Shaolong Temple, with his Valyrian steel sabre, managed to last a meagre thirteen exchanges before he was promptly disarmed. It was said that the tyrannical sorcerer-king practised all sorts of unnatural magicks to gain his unholy powers...

Excerpt from the ‘Reign of Jon the Cruel’ by Archmaester Gormon