Disclaimer: I don't own HP, GOT, or ASOIAF. Would have finished the last two properly if I had.
Edited by Bub3loka

23rd Day of the 7th Moon, 303 AC

Jon Stark

The clanging of steel carried through the trees, cutting through the quiet of the godswood.

Even in the snow, Arya's footsteps were graceful, and Needle flickered all across in a storm of steel, the tip poking at his vitals with every thrust. It was swift and sudden, though there was little strength behind the sword. Jon hefted his tourney blade, either swatting away the blows or meeting them head-on with the blunt of the sword.

Once he had seen enough, Jon reached out a hand, seizing Needle's point in his gauntlet fist, and brought the edge of his blunted sword to her throat. Arya's foot shot up for his groin, but froze when her eyes found the dark bronze codpiece guarding him.

"I yield," Arya spat, nose wrinkling up. "So… how did I fare?"

Jon let go of her blade.

"Might kill a man without armour," he said. "But one with ringmail and a shield would make short work of you in a straight fight. A spearman might just poke you from afar before you ever get close enough to wound him."

It was plain enough why they named it water dancing, for each cut and stab flowed into each other. Even the footwork was much the same. But the fight was not a dance. It was a cruel struggle with no rhythm, no beauty, and just blood and death.

"Wouldn't armour slow them?" she pressed.

"Not as much as you'd think." He pulled off his hauberk and tossed it to the side, though the soft clinking of ringmail never came. His gauntlets made no sound either. "And those who wear heavy steel scarcely feel its weight after being trained in it from boyhood. It tires a man sooner, aye, but unless you can pierce the weak spot's ringmail, or wrestle them to the ground, they are nigh impossible to kill. Against you, one well-placed stroke is all it takes, and then you're dead."

Not all armour was made equal. His own were all spell-forged, never to sunder or break. Lighter than Valyrian steel, too—hauberk, arming doublet, full set of bronze plate on top, altogether weighed less than a common round shield. If the lords of Westeros knew of it, half would grow green in the face with envy, and the other half would plot to steal it.

Arya scowled. "I only had Syrio Forel for less than three moons in King's Landing. Father never let me train under Ser Rodrik, not like you."

"You still pine for the sword?" Jon asked, aghast. "Have you not had your fill of blood and death?"

“I…” Her words choked out as she rasped. “I’m done with that. But you let Sansa do as she pleased, did you not?”

“Aye.” He studied his favourite sister. This was not another mask or practised face, but a genuine request. “Those who live by the sword die by the sword. There’s no joy in command or glory in battle, only corpses, broken houses, and grief.”

“I know,” she whispered, shrinking back into herself. “I’ve wanted this since I could remember, and… I just don’t know what else to do.”

He saw it now; the yearning for the sword, the certainty of steel, had kept her company for years, filling the void between the cracks in herself.

How many times had the cruel world broken Arya?

How often did she have to pick her pieces again and soldier onward regardless of pain and fear?

The refusal to surrender, the struggle, had become a part of her as much as breathing.

Jon’s voice softened. “You may train again if you wish. I could call some Braavosi water dancer to Winterfell. Or else you might learn under the Blackfish. But I’ll set you terms.”

Her eyes narrowed. “Terms? Did Sansa have terms put upon her?”

“There was no need,” he said bluntly. “Your sister is courteous, dutiful, and mild-tempered without her brother needling her for it.”

Arya scrunched up her nose as if she had smelled something rotten. “I can be courteous… If I must. What else?”

“You will take three subjects from Maester Wolkan,” he told her. “You can choose anything, but it must be at least three. Fill the void with something more than steel, Arya. Perhaps you will find a taste for some knowledge and joy in some other craft, and that would serve you better than a blade ever could. And try, at least, to make some friends.”

“Wait…” Arya tilted her head. “That doesn’t sound that dreadful.”

Jon snorted. “What did you expect? That I’d set you to chopping onions like some scullion?”

She had the decency to look ashamed, and he patiently repeated his earlier question. After thinking for a long moment, his sister said, “I’ll train with Uncle Brynden—I don’t want to summon anyone from Braavos.”

“So be it. But don’t shirk your other lessons, else you’ll answer to me.”

“I can be diligent,” she said, plopping onto a mossy stone cleared of snow. “I was a great cupbearer once.”

“Were you now?” Jon’s mouth curved despite himself. “And when was that?”

“After I fled King’s Landing, I found myself in Harrenhal,” Arya said, eyes growing distant. “They mistook me for a boy, and Tywin Lannister even made me his cupbearer.”

“The old lion himself?” Jon gave a low chuckle. She had not spoken of this tale, but it did not surprise him. If anyone could give the slip to Tywin Lannister, it would be Arya.

“Aye, the very same. He saw I was of nobler birth, but nothing else. He even praised my diligence.” Her voice faltered, and a shadow fell over her face. “I could have killed him, you know? I had the chance, and all it would have taken was saying his name. Perhaps… perhaps Robb and Mother might have lived.”

“Could have, would have, what is that? If Robert Baratheon had not died to a wild pig… if Cersei Lannister had not lain with her brother… if the mad king had more wits than cruelty… if the Silver Fool had not spirited away my mother… if Theon had not turned cloak… if Balon Greyjoy wasn’t a witless cretin… if Father had never gone South. They all did what they did, and we cannot change it.”

He laid a hand upon her narrow shoulder. “Do not dwell on what might have been, and forget to live. Learn from the past, if you must. But know this—that burden is not yours to bear alone.”

Tears welled up in those grey eyes. “But—”

“Enough,” Jon said, and he pulled her against him. She wept into his chest like a child. No, Arya Stark was still a child. A child who had endured more than any other. “I’m not asking you to forget, but to *forgive* yourself.”

For all of her bravery and newfound skill in masking all emotion, she was still a girl of fourteen and clutched him with her hands as a drowning man would hold onto a straw. He held her gently with patience and did not let go until at last her sobs quieted. She wiped her face on his cloak and looked up to him, eyes rimmed with red.

“I… I can trust you, can’t I?” she whispered, stepping aside.

“Always,” he promised, lifting a hand to tousle her hair. “Go, rest. And see Ser Brynden at daybreak.”

Her mouth curled with sudden mischief, and she bobbed a mocking curtsy in a shrill voice that sounded not her own. “I serve at your pleasure, Your Grace. Will you grant me the honour of riding your dragon?”

A snort of laughter slipped from his chest. For in that moment, he could almost hear Wylla Manderly simpering his way while trying to give him a generous eyeful of her chest. “Gods. You’ve no love for poor Wylla, do you?”

“What gave me away?” Arya shot back, her tone her own again. “Jests aside… might I fly with Winter, someday?”

“Perhaps, when he is larger,” Jon allowed. “And not alone. Without me, he’s more likely to see you charred to cinders than ever to let you approach.”

Arya leapt, pumping her fist and darting through the trees, leaving Jon alone in the silence of the godswood. Gods, he still couldn’t deny his sister even now. At least she had a purpose now. Soon enough, she would be too tired to let her thoughts wander.

Her words lingered in his mind. *Cupbearer*. Each ought to have one… or better, a squire. A squire would serve his master in all tasks. But being the royal squire was no small honour, and one Jon would be a fool to grant lightly.

His mind went to the Battle of Winterfell. Of those who fought by his side, the clansmen had seen the least reward. Only the Liddles bore new honours, with a captaincy of his guard. Wull had no kin of an age fit for squiring. That left the Flints. Torghen Flint had perished on the field, taking a score of foes with him. His eldest grandson, Torrhen, was near three-and-ten now. Perfect. A chieftain's heir would make a fine squire.

As of last morning, all of the North had paid homage to him. The Flints of Widow's Watch and Flint's Fingers had come, bending their knees, along with Ser Damon Dustin—now Lord Damon Dustin of Barrowton. Each lord and chieftain once again stood united under Winterfell's banner.

Yet a raven from Last Hearth had upset his plans, bringing word of a Skagosi procession coming down the kingsroad.

For the first time in living memory, the banners of Crowl, Magnar, and Stane had been seen this far south, borne by a lean company of fifty. Strange, for the Skagosi kept no maesters, no raven was trained to fly their way, nor had he sent any summons to the isle. What had stirred them awake from their rocky island, Jon could not say.

It was better this way, though. The clans of Skagos were considered a part of the North… if rather distant and usually reluctant. Jon had not once thought of them for years.

The next time he stole a moment for himself, Jon turned to explore. He could feel faded echoes of magic and sorcery in the older stones, like the First Keep. Yet echo was all it was; whatever powers had been in play had been washed away by the flow of time. There was another echo, fainter than it but far more unyielding, and it had taken Jon moons to attune his mind to the ambience to grasp a sense of it.

Now, only one place remained unexplored.

Jon's boots crunched through the snowy lichyard until he faced the dark ironwood door. With a firm push, the heavy wood slid open as if it were weightless. But the crown atop his head pressed onto his brow, as if it weighed a whole stone. The moment the door was open, he sensed something he had not felt when he had last come.

A pull.

Something deep beneath the darkness was calling for him. It was like a whisper, tugging at his heart. Calling at his very bloodline.

The more he tried to catch it, the less he could sense it.

Jon might have turned back, but he knew what it was. An older, ancient magic. A primordial force beyond spells, knowledge, and the calculation of men. A magic ever so elusive that it could never be mastered or wielded, only stumbled upon.

His crown pulsed as he descended, and its weight grew. The circlet was a plain piece of metal with no spells woven into it, yet it pressed on his mind, soul, and magic, as if searching for weakness. And here, in the darkness of the crypts, its strength had grown tenfold. The King of Winter… the millennia of authority and blood had imprinted themselves upon the world.

Jon's jaw was clenched tight. He would never yield to some paltry crown—one of his make at that—so it had not left his brow.

The burden mounted with each step down the winding staircase, but the king did not stop. Three amethyst orbs flickered around him, banishing the grasping darkness. He strode through every level, seeking out the call. The deeper he went, the more something veiled his senses, and the heavier the crown grew.

The stone faces of his forebears watched him from the shadows, cold and unyielding. Kings and lords long dead, yet their eyes seemed to follow him all the same. Some were strong, others weak; some clean-shaven, others shaggy as wolves. A few had been cruel, others kind, more still foolish, feeble, or forgotten. In death, they were all the same, and each lay here now, a direwolf of stone curled at his feet.

Their stone eyes regarded him in silence, each more judgmental than the last. Jon could feel the stares on his back.

Brandon the Shipwright, who built the Northern fleet and vanished upon the Sunset Sea. His son, Brandon the Burner, who, in his grief, set torch to all his father had wrought. The Hungry Wolf, who had forged the North into one, yet found no rest from war. The Laughing Wolf, the Ice Eyes, the Snowbeard, the Sad, the Mad, the Good, and the Bad. Edwyn the Spring King, Edderion the Bridegroom, Benjen the Bitter, and then Benjen the Sweet. Walton the Moon King, and countless more, reduced now to bones and dust and statues of stone.

Jon could almost hear them whispering, *"You do not belong here."*

His stride did not falter. He had the blood of these men running through his veins. He was a Stark in all the ways that mattered. The burden was his to bear, and he would see it to the end.

Down he went, step by step, into the cold dark. With every yard, the air grew colder, the silence thicker. What power ran in his veins felt sluggish here, dulled and thin. The crown pressed down on his skull like a mountain. His steps grew heavier, as if he was carrying a hill over his shoulders.

As a boy, he had crept through these vaulted hallways without fear, a torch in hand. A moon earlier, with Sansa and Arya beside him, the crypts had seemed solemn but not hostile. Yet now he felt the old power thrumming in the stones, humming with the cold chill in the air.

At last, he came to the ninth level, the lowest of all, easily a hundred yards beneath the surface. Here, the air was frosted, the flames thinned, flickering under the pressure of the circlet. Many statues were weathered into facelessness, their features eaten away by queer white lichen and crimson moss that seemed to thrive in the cold. Rust and rot had devoured the iron swords, leaving only jagged stains upon the stone laps.

Jon's breath steamed before him. Sweat prickled beneath his crown as Jon Stark forced his legs forward.

He reached at last to where the cavernous vault had fallen, and the arched ceiling had collapsed upon itself, devouring the way forward with a heap of stone and soil. Each Lord of Winterfell had thought of seeing it restored. But it still lay a broken ruin, for to mend it would have taken a host of masons, a mountain of coin, and years besides, with no promise the repair would hold.

The levels above had not felt the collapse. Each passage wound off its own way, coiling and branching, like the limbs of a tree.

Jon studied the rocks and packed earth for a long moment. Any other man might have turned back faced with such an impassable obstacle. Yet even through the weight pressing down upon him, Jon felt the pull, faint and insistent, from somewhere beyond the stones.

Jon Stark shrugged off the runes that bound his strength, yet the crown only grew heavier with every breath. His bones ached, his joints groaned, his muscles quivered beneath the strain, yet the king did not toss aside his crown. He refused to yield. Teeth clenched together, his spine remained ramrod straight as mind and body, soul and magic rushed as one to resist.

It was an odd sense of unity where each separate part of the whole merged as one, growing stronger together.

He put his left leg forth, and then his right. It was slow, it was painful, but he could do it. The crown would not stop him here. The collapse would not halt him, either.

Redfaced and puffing with exertion, Jon leaned, dragging a heavy rock aside. Then, he turned to another one, aiming to clear some space between the granite pillar and the wall to avoid further collapse.

Time lost meaning as the northern king toiled, slowly clearing a small passage, just enough for a man to slip through.

He crawled through, his breath rasping harsher than his Lord Hand's after climbing to the solar thrice over. The crown pressed harsher upon his skull, almost buckling his weary knees. It pressed on his magic, too, turning the swift torrent of power into a slow, muddy swamp, and Jon could spare magic enough for a single flickering flame—and even that was a struggle. Each ounce of his being was focused on staying afoot.

His garments were damp with sweat, clinging to his body, and his bared skin was steaming in the air.

Panting for breath, Jon soldiered on, deeper into the now unknown. Here, there was no granite lining the walls, and the cuts in the stone were cruder, some even uneven. The vaulted ceiling was reduced to weirwood rafters, refusing to break or rot even after thousands of years.

He passed beneath faceless statues of stone without so much as a glance, deeper and deeper into blackness, until at the end he found a wall of dark stone that barred the way.

Jon touched it, running his fingers across the surface. Smooth as glass and as cold as ice. He reached out with his magic—

Power struck him back. It slammed into his mind and bones, sending him back stumbling.

“Fuck,” he gasped as he found himself sprawled on the cold floor. The crown did not slip down, as if glued to his skull.

Turning on hands and knees, he roared and forced himself upright again, though the looming weight drove his legs to breaking. A little more, and the bone would shatter. But his knees held, if barely, and he remained standing all the same, chest rising and falling like a blacksmith’s bellows.

He glared at the smooth, black wall.

His senses whispered it was unbreakable. Even his sword would not help him here if he could spare the strength to lift it.

There was no spell woven or charms placed on the black stone, yet it was magical all the same. Just like his crown. The king could cast aside his crown, and the power threatening to squash him would shatter. He could turn around and leave.

But doing so would break whatever primal rite he had fallen into. No, it was far worse than some obscure opportunity. It would mean admitting defeat. It would mean slinking away like some craven. If he left, nobody would know. Nobody but Jon.

A wheezing chuckle tore from his chest as he spat a glob of blood to the side.

He would not bow, he would not break, he would not run away from some old, nameless power.

The weight crushed him. Muscle tore, bone splintered, joints gave way beneath the burden. Blood seeped from his nose and ears, trickled hot over his lips. Jon Stark refused to yield. He knew what to do.

Blood boiled in his veins, and with a roar, he drew his dagger across his palm, the bronze biting deep, blood welling thick and dark.

“I am Jon Stark,” he rasped, voice raw with pain, “Lord of Winterfell, King in the North… and I command you, ***open***!”

He struck his bloodied hand hard against the wall. For a heartbeat, the world went still, and the power in the air paused, as if judging him. Then, his hair stood on end, and a thousand beetles crawled down his spine as he felt a terrible wave of magic rise into the smooth stone, threatening to shatter his very being. The backlash.

The crown thrummed with power, and the weight on his skull fluttered, rising like a wave, ready to meet the rebound.

Jon staggered back. The clash echoed in his mind and through his soul and almost shattered both.

A groan shuddered through the cavern. Stone thrummed beneath him as the smooth black wall began to sink. Jon swayed, catching himself against a pillar of granite.

Ragged breaths came from his chest; his body was half a wreck that would see any other man in the grave. Yet… the circlet of copper, silver, and gold no longer weighed upon him like before.

It sat on his brow like a second skin now, and a feeling of comfort washed down his flesh. A tide of heat swept through him, banishing the cold.

The air seemed to sing with power, as if whatever had resisted him before now decided him worthy. Power that embraced him softly, gently, like a mother would hug her newborn. Strength surged into his limbs, magic raced through his flesh, and he felt more alive than ever.

He had done it.

Jon stood trembling, breath hitching between ragged laughs, half in triumph, half in disbelief at his own audacity. Blood trickled freely from his nose, ears, and mouth, even stinging his eyes—yet before he could lift a hand to wipe it away, the wounds sealed themselves. Skin knit smooth, splintered bone snapped back in place, breath grew strong. He hadn't cast a spell, hadn't even tried.

Deeper, broken joints pulled together as torn innards and muscles mended back, stronger than before. Even those old cracks on his soul knit together, mending the scars of dark magic. The last alone was worth this trip—now he could feel his soul brighter and stronger for it.

Now that he had a taste of raw, primal magic, Jon wished for more. But this was not sorcery and witchcraft to be studied, not something that could ever be mastered or seized for your own ends. It was the world's favour—though someone might call it the blessing of the gods—something to be found only once in a blue moon, when the stars aligned for the right man at the right time and place. The world, the magic itself, would guide your actions if your mind were open and willing to *listen,* just like it had happened now.

King of the North.

Words failed to describe the weight the title carried and the power it could wield. The power that had somehow found its way into his crown uninvited. The weight of ages past, the power over millions of souls. He could feel it clearly now, slumbering within the band of metal upon his skull.

Jon let out a slow, deep breath and steeled himself, pushing all his thoughts aside and braving the now-open passageway. Above, the guttering flame had swelled, bright and blazing like a small sun, even though he scarcely fed it a sliver of magic. Purple light spilt across the chamber, painting the smooth walls in strange hues.

There was a single dias with a stone throne inside, upon which sat a statue.

Each line, hair, and wrinkle across the face was wrought with great care, still sharp as if it had been carved yesterday.

Jon's breath caught.

The face was too sharp, too close to his memory to be a coincidence, even with the shaggy beard that hid a part of it. He knew that face, not from this life, but from the one before. That face was seared into his mind forever, even after all those years.

Sirius Black.

The implications, oh, the implications. Time was like water; in some places, it ran swift and fierce, and in others, sluggish.

Up close, the visage was subtly changed—brows heavier, cheeks drawn sharper. A son, perhaps. Or the difference from age itself. The shaggy beast curled by the stone throne looked more like a grim than a direwolf, its head smaller than one and muzzle not as sharp, confirming what he had already suspected.

A forgotten part of him was glad his godfather hadn't been swallowed in the void between worlds. Stranger was the irony of being Sirius's descendant, though as distant as the millenia had made him.

Finally, Jon's gaze fell on the statue's lap. Where a Stark lord's iron longsword should have rested, there lay instead a round yellow gemstone, larger than any topaz had any right to be and carved with runes that pulsed with soft light.

Elder Futhark—runic language not of this world.

This was a wardstone. An old, antiquated magic he had scarcely seen in use in his past life. But it would explain how the protections woven in Winterfell still held. Over the millenia, the curtain walls had been moved and rebuilt, and any magic woven into their foundations would have been lost. Yet the wardstone, the defences had clung to the blood and the very idea of Winterfell itself.

The price of making such a thing must have been grievous, and it would have never lasted if Winterfell hadn't been built on a nexus of magic. The wardstone was dormant now, and the protection it gave to the fortress was so small Jon could barely sense it.

Still, it was there, even thousands of years later.

Jon drew his dagger again, dark edge slicing through his palm and drawing blood.

He pressed it firmly against the rune of power, Uruz.

The runes drank his lifeblood, and he felt his magic pulse in sync with the air. It thrummed like a heart, as if in rhythm with the very stones around him. And suddenly, he could feel Winterfell around him as a link snapped into place.

Willas Tyrell, Highgarden

He slowly limped towards the Lord's Solar, cursing his crippled leg with every twist of pain running up his hip.

Being the Lord of Highgarden was a nightmare come true. He knew the day would come, but not so soon. Never so swift and so cruel.

In their quest to make his sister a queen, she had been wed thrice, to three kings. All he had to show for it was a word of bitter end, and not even bones to be buried in the family crypt. When you played the Game of Thrones, victory or death was all that awaited. Once the die was cast, there was no third path. House Tyrell knew the rules of the game.

His father and sister had lost, and now they were both dead—not to a better foe, but to some vile sorcery. Loras, his valiant young brother, the handsome Knight of Flowers, was gone, taken by a reckless storm of Dragonstone's black walls. He had survived long enough to see the castle fall, but perished from his wounds a fortnight later.

What use was Dragonstone now?

His bones were lost in King's Landing, too, along with his sister and father. Even now, all those who braved the poisoned fog only found a swift and painful death. King's Landing had become one giant tomb, an open grave for half a million dead.

The Reach was still mourning, for they had lost the most there. It was their fathers and brothers, their lords and ladies, their knights and men who had propped up that god-forsaken city. His mother, Alerie, had refused even bread and meat and wasted away in grief. This time, Willas had a body to bury in the crypts below, but the funeral had been no less bitter for it.

Even roses mocked him now. Their fragrance called Margaery to his mind, of how she always ran along to pluck one or two into her hair. The smiling statues and marble maidens that brightened Highgarden's courtyards seemed to leer at him with cruel stone eyes.

Willas decided to order them all removed. But that could wait until tomorrow.

The cane helped lessen the pain. Even so, the slightest weight upon the lame leg felt like a dagger twisting into his knee. If only he were whole. If only his father had not gone to war. If only there had been no war at all. Growing Strong.

Once, he thought his House's words a clever way forward, but now they were a curse on his tongue.

At last, the breathless Lord of Highgarden reached his solar.

Sunlight painted the walls, where bright tapestries showed gallant knights crowned with wreaths of roses, and shelves groaned beneath scrolls and books. His desk was cluttered with rolls of parchment, quills, and inkpots, all untouched. And there beside the hearth, small and more bitter than before, sat Olenna of House Redwyne in a black mourning robe. The Queen of Thorns, as some would call her—though never in her presence—and his grandmother.

She had lost not only a son, but a daughter with the fall of the Arbour and Willas had lost his aunt. Mina Redwyne had chosen to fling herself off the battlements once the Redwyne's hold had fallen.

The loss of his grandmother's childhood home to the Ironmen had been bitter, but it only hardened her further.

"Grandmother," Willas said, his voice ragged. Olenna gave him no more than a curt nod as he limped to the lord's chair. A hiss of breath escaped him when at last he sat, finding a place where his crippled leg ceased its torment. "Any word?"

"Your grandsire has called his banners at last," the old woman rasped, her tone like a rusted knight scraping steel. "He's mustering all the swords, spears, and crossbows he can summon."

The fall of the Arbour and Lord Paxer Redwyne to Euron Crow's Eye had set the Reach to no small panic. Along the Mander and the Sunset Sea, every garrison had swelled, and each lord scrambled to see his castle walls manned tightly. Highgarden alone had a thousand men-at-arms and twice that in crossbowmen.

"If only the Crow's Eye were so bold as to hurl himself against the Hightower," Willas muttered. "Let him break his vaunted reavers on those walls, and we might yet be rid of him."

The Ironmen preferred fishing villages and open fields, ripe for easy plunder. Every now and then, they would try their hand at storming a half-empty holdfast unaware. The Reach had an abundance of men. If Willas called his banners, he could easily call seven times more men than the reavers could boast.

But what use were a thousand knights when they couldn't gallop through the waves and storm the Ironmen's fleets? Garlan still struggled to gather enough ships to ferry men to the Four Shields, but fishing boats and wine barges were no fleet. Against longships filled with veteran reavers, they were no better than pigs for the slaughter.

"The Ironmen are mad," Olenna said, voice harsh. "And Euron Greyjoy is the maddest of them all. But madmen do not live long. Sooner or later, he will meet his end, and then the reavers will turn their axes upon one another, as they always do. But when they fall to squabbling, our fleets must be rebuilt. Once they falter, we must be ready to put this scourge to the sword for good, no matter the price. Else your sons and grandsons will be fighting this same battle long after you're gone."

"Even the women and children?"

"To the last." Olenna's voice cracked like a whip. "It is the women who breed more reavers, and the children who grow to raid and rape. Pull the weeds out by the root. Slay their drowned priests, burn their villages, salt their windswept hills and fields. Only then will the world be rid of them."

Willas longed for the days when his grandmother's tongue had held more mockery than malice, her barbs softened with wry smiles. Yet no mirth was left in the Queen of Thorns, only cold, bubbling hatred. She drew forth a small scroll, turning it in her wrinkled hands as she stared into the flames. "This came an hour past. Jon Stark has wrestled away Winterfell from Bolton's hands and named himself King in the North."

Willas blinked. The Starks… he had forgotten about them and the North. They were far, far away, and defeat had doomed both to insignificance. Yet he was the Lord of Highgarden now, and couldn't afford the price of ignorance.

"I thought all the Starks were dead." He frowned. "A lone girl, wed to some baseborn wretch, counts for nothing. And Winterfell cannot be taken by force unless near empty."

"So we all believed," said Olenna. "But we forgot the bastard at the Wall. Eddard Stark sired four sons, not three."

"How could he quit the Night's Watch? The vows are for life. Northmen would not follow an oathbreaker."

Olenna loosed a sharp, rasping laugh that grated on his ears. “Words are wind. That bloody wedding may have slain the Young Wolf, but he had left a small gift behind. One last decree—his bastard brother made trueborn, named heir, his vows struck clean.”

“A dead boy’s word,” Willas scoffed. “With no swords to back it. Robb Stark’s strength perished with him in the Red Wedding.”

“Yet the northern lords think otherwise.” Olenna flicked the scroll into the flames as though it were nought but kindling. The parchment curled, blackened, and was gone, leaving only ash amidst the roaring hearth. From her sleeve she drew another. “The Starks are an old house, older than most. And Northerners love their wolves near as much as they love their gods.

The bastard boy seems cut from the same cloth as his trueborn brother—perhaps even stronger. The Boltons and their allies are shattered and slain, and not even their hounds were spared. Yet even the Young Wolf Reborn will have no choice but to bend his knee once dragons come calling.”

Willas sucked in a sharp breath. “So it is true then? Daenerys has dragons?”

“The gods are cruel.”

He did not press her further. He had no need. With those terrible beasts darkening the skies of Westeros, the realm would never be the same again. No castle was ever safe from dragonfire, no army could ever hope to beat those beasts, and the lords of the realm could only bend… or burn.

Before the Conquest—and after the Dance—each king had to treat his bannermen with caution and respect. They had to measure their every move and bargain, allowing lords to swell their power to resist royal tyranny and make pacts and promises that could threaten even a king, as Aerys the Mad had found out for himself. A dragon rendered all of it moot.

“Should we not bend the knee, then?” Willas asked, his mouth dry. “Better the first to offer homage than the last. Perhaps she would grant us aid against the Ironborn. Horses cannot swim, but dragons fly and ships burn quickly enough.”

“Perhaps,” Olenna allowed, “but haste is ill-advised. Daenerys is twice wed and twice widowed and barren still. She comes with eunuch slave soldiers, Dothraki screamers, and outcasts and kinslayers at her command. She could never have gathered a worse council than the dwarf kingslayer, the plotting Spider, and that old freak calling himself a mage. The girl was raised like a street rat in Essos, without an inkling of rule. The gods alone know what manner of queen she would make, but I wouldn’t bet a penny on it after the wreck she made of Slaver’s Bay.”

“She has Ser Barristan Selmy,” said Willas. “An honourable man.”

His grandmother snorted. “An honourable fool with a sword, that’s for certain. And what of it? Did he learn the arts of rule at the butts in the Red Keep? Was it when he turned his head as Aerys raped his sister, or when he stood by Robert, drunk and rutting yet another whore? Honour makes a poor tutor. He has ever chosen the worst masters, each more wretched than the last. Shall we trust that his honour will

guide this dragon queen aright? Gods help us all if Daenerys Targaryen proves to be Aerys with teats—and a dragon."

Seven above, why did every choice have to be between bad and worse?

Willas longed to shut his eyes, drift back into sleep, and wake in a gentler dream where his father still lived and Margaery's laughter echoed in the rose gardens. But such dreams were for children. He was Lord of Highgarden now, crippled leg and all, and the fate of his House rested upon his shoulders, regardless of his wants and needs.

He rubbed at his face with both hands, only to flinch as pain lanced up from his twisted limb. Turning and twisting until the pain receded, Willas let out a long, weary sigh as his hands sank into his thigh, trying to ease the knots out.

"What do we do?" he asked, his voice jagged.

"We wait," said Olenna. "The girl will parley with the Blackfyre boy, and if they make a match… then we kneel, smile, and pray the gods take pity on the realm."

Aegon. The self-styled son of Elia Martell. Half the realm whispered that he was no more than some silver-haired liar from Lys, but whispers had not stopped men from rallying. With Dorne at his back, Jon Connington at his side, and the Golden Company at his command, many flocked to his banner. He bore the Sword of Kings besides, if the tales were to be believed, and that gave his cause further strength.

But those who had wielded Blackfyre and commanded the Golden Company had all borne the name Blackfyre. Yet the last black dragons had perished four decades earlier, on a battle across the Stepstones.

Willas did not know what to believe. True or false, it did not matter to him, or to House Tyrell. They would weather the storm one way or another. They had served madmen atop a dragon before and could do it again. Only when you survived another day could you wait for the chance to grow strong again.

"And if the dragon queen and the pretender fight?" he pressed.

"Then we bow to the victor." Her voice curdled with anger. "One last thing. I have found the truth of the fire."

"What?!" Willas turned sharply, elbow knocking down the inkstand, bleeding ink across parchment and varnished wood. Pain stabbed through his leg again, and he hissed, clutching at it.

"The Archmaesters still pry at the cause," Olenna went on, unmoved. "Your grand-uncle Gormon writes that their Conclave ran the numbers and believes it would have taken tens of thousands of jars of wildfire to consume the city from wall to wall."

"That would be impossible without the royal patronage," Willas muttered, careful not to move and flare up his bad leg again. "They say the green piss is made with spells, but even the alchemists need gold to make it. The royal treasury was bare, the debts a mountain of coin. Cersei could not have paid for so many jars."

“Just so. Wildfire grows more fickle with age.” For the first time, the Queen of Thorns sounded weary, the bitterness in her voice giving way to numbness. “The Archmaesters believe the jars were Aerys’s doing—only he had the coin for it and the love for the green fire. Tens of thousands of jars of the liquid flame, buried beneath the city since the Mad King’s reign. Knowing Aerys, he meant to put it to use, but never lived long enough to see his plans through.”

‘Madness,’ Willas thought. ‘*Madness and stupidity—but they had called him the Mad King for a reason.’*

“Who?” he growled. “Who would set it off? Why now?”

“Isn’t that the question?” Olenna hunched over, looking smaller than ever. For one dreadful instant, he thought she might totter into the hearth and join the crackling fire. Instead, she fixed him with her gaze. “I found one of Cersei’s handmaids. The girl swears that a carnage had taken hold of the city streets before the fires rose. Says Lord Horn Hill himself took arms against the Faith Militant, and the streets soon filled with fighting and riots.”

Willas gaped. “Randyll Tarly? What insult could drive a godly man to draw steel on the Seven’s own servants?” Stubborn, devout, unyielding—Randyll Tarly was the last lord in the realm Willas could imagine raising sword against the Faith. “It must have been some grievous slight… an outrage he could not abide.”

Olenna Tyrell drew herself up with the help of her walking stick. She looked small, shrivelled, and as small as a child. But her blue eyes were still hard and as cold as ice. “I don't know,” she said. “But I will find out.”

24th Day of the 7th Moon, 303 AC

Aegon, somewhere in the Riverlands

The endless pittering of the rain grated on his ears. Two days of rain had seen the whole land soaked, and out in the field, there was scarcely a dry patch to sleep upon.

The kingslayer had used the same tactic at Lychester, giving battle beneath the keep's walls before retreating in good order. Aegon saw fifteen hundred of his men buried at Lychester for it. Another five hundred more perished storming the castle, and twice as many were too maimed to fight again.

The Dornish outriders had kept harassing the Lannister retreat day and night, leaving a trail of corpses behind, though it was hard to say which side saw more dead for it.

They still dogged down the Kingslayer’s host—he was just half a day’s march ahead. But Jaime Lannister’s men still managed to scour what little was left in the Riverlands, leaving not even a berry to forage for Aegon’s host. Fallow fields, scorched forests, empty larders and hollow granaries—that was the bounty of the Trident.

What little fish remained in the streams and rivers were far from enough to feed his host. Each mile west was another mile to stretch the supply train, and tens of thousands of mouths had become a shackle

upon his host. A shackle that would have forced them to turn back until spring. Jaime Lannister would have slipped away if not for the turn of the weather.

It had been that grating rain that brought Aegon a chance. Rainwater pooled and flooded down, drowning riverfords and turning the lower roads into swamps, cutting the Kingslayer's retreat.

The battle had been long and bloody—though both hosts had been tired from the chase and the rain—and Aegon bested his last foe in the field.

His heart had yearned for battle, to lead the charge. To swing his sword, feel flesh and bone and ringmail sunder beneath his strokes, and cover himself in glory from head to toe. For all its lightness, Blackfyre hung heavy on his belt, just as eager for blood, for a worthy foe. The sword was a great gift from a greater man—at least in girth—in exchange for some paltry honours from the future king. Aegon had not thought twice before accepting. Which man did not dream of wielding Valyrian steel, let alone the Sword of Kings?

But for all of his desire to fight and command, he had watched the battle from afar on a hill—high enough to see what was happening and be seen by his men in turn.

"If you die here to a stray arrow or some hedge knight's lance, all is for nought," Jon had told him. "Prince Aemon rode a dragon, yet a single bolt felled him—one heartbeat of folly, and the realm was poorer by a prince. Risk such as this we cannot afford. You've won your glory at Storm's End. Let that be enough."

As if sneaking past the walls with deception and killing men in their sleep could ever be called glorious. Yet they called him the Stormbreaker for taking an empty castle with open gates.

Aegon had agreed to watch, no matter how reluctantly, taking command of the reserve.

It was no great tactic that had won them the day, but the direct use of superior numbers. They had more knights, men-at-arms, and archers, and the Lannister host had simply buckled first. But the same rain and mucked grounds that had slowed down the Lannister retreat made chasing down the routed foe near impossible.

Evening had seen even Aegon tired, let alone those who had fought in the mud.

After a night of uneasy sleep and a damp cot, Aegon finally awoke to a clear sky. He strolled around the camp, showing his face to the men, encouraged the wounded, and finally made it to the command tent after the dead had been counted.

Digging out heaps of corpses from the bloody mud had been the most cursed thing the young king had seen so far. There was some irony that they would put them back down once the fallen were counted.

"Four thousand dead and seven thousand more wounded," Connington said with a long sigh. "And only the gods know how many more crippled and wouldn't last the week with their wounds."

"What of the Lannisters?" Lord Thorne asked, voice growing tight. "Was the bloodbath worth it?"

The Hand gave him a stern glance. "It was. They lost eight thousand, and we have another six captured, though the Kingslayer escaped."

The king did the count in his head and smiled thinly. Tommen Waters could have no more than seven, perhaps eight thousand men at best—and that only if the shattered remnants of the Lannister host managed to crawl back together.

Aegon drank deep of the Dornish red, letting its heat chase the chill from his throat. “Did we take any men of worth?” he asked.

“Lord Garrison Prester of Feastfires, who held their foot,” Griff answered, absently rubbing his right hand again. “And Jonos Bracken of Stone Hedge—who is willing to bend his knee and pay obeisance.” The older man’s voice was flat, but his eyes betrayed nothing. “A handful of knights and some petty lords as well. None of any importance.”

That was less than he had hoped, but a Bracken would do. One strong riverlord kneeling meant others might follow, even if the man bent more from fear for his hall than fealty to Aegon’s cause.

“I’ll take his vow next morning,” Aegon decided. “Once tempers are cooled.”

“How’s the loot?” Black Balaq asked with his thick, sing-song accent. The captain of the Golden Company’s longbowmen was black as soot, and a fisherman’s son hailing from the Summer Isles. Many of the Westerosi in the tent eyed him as they might a beast on a leash. Aegon could not tell if it was his birth, his skin, or the sellsword’s greed that turned their stomach.

“Enough to make the men smile, though not enough to fatten their bellies,” Manfrey Martell answered with a half-yawn. The old Dornishman’s beard was crusted with blood and mud. “Eighty thousand golden dragons, a train of mules and draft horses, near three hundred bushels of grain.”

Lord Thorne snorted. “A pittance and a half, then. I’ve seen tourneys with bigger winners’ purses than this.”

“What do we do with those six thousand mouths we’ve captured?” a Stormlord asked.

“Kill them!”

“It’s ungodly,” Harry Strickland said, the most ungodly man in the tent. “We ought to try and get a ransom from their lords, at least.”

“We’re short on food as it is, you greedy fool—”

The argument erupted before Aegon knew it. The captains of the Golden Company shouted to put every Lannister man to the sword. The Dornish argued to blind them, or take their sword hands and send the wretches crawling back to Tommen. Few spoke of mercy, but all agreed that six thousand captives meant six thousand mouths too much…

Across the table, Jon Connington sat with lips pressed tight, and his pale blue eyes watched Aegon like a hawk. This was another test, as if he were still a green boy taking lessons from Haldon.

“Strip them of their arms and armament,” Aegon said once he had heard enough, loud enough to cut through the heated exchange. Allowing the lords a moment to settle down and look his way, he cleared his throat loudly. “They’ll swear before a septon never to bear arms against House Targaryen again. Knights and lords will remain hostage, and the rest will be set loose.”

The council broke apart soon after, each man slinking back to his tent. Aegon's limbs felt leaden, and his mind was weary, even though noon had yet to pass.

Griff lingered behind, approaching once the rest were gone.

"You'll need a squire, maybe two."

"Tomorrow," Aegon muttered, rubbing at his eyes. "I'm thinking the Staedmon boy. Gaunt's nephew, too." He stifled a yawn. "But not today, Jon. I've no strength left for talk, and once the sun dries my cot, I'll get some proper shut-eye."

Jon Connington studied him in silence, and Aegon saw the paleness creeping through the red in the man's beard.

"War allows for no idlers," Griff said, words sharp. "Least of all the king. Our raven from Dragonstone returned."

That drove the weariness from Aegon's mind. He straightened, pulse quickening. "Good tidings, I hope?"

"Perhaps." Griff's voice was flat. "They want a meeting near Harrenhal."

"Terms? Demands?"

For a long moment, Jon Connington hesitated.

"None written," he said at last. "She means to speak her price to your face."

The young king's thoughts raced. The host could not halt here for long or come to Harrenhal. They had to keep marching west, and someone had to lead them. With Griff by his side, the only choice was Ser Manfrey Martell or Harry Strickland. The lords would never stomach taking orders from a sellsword, so the old Dornish knight would lead, then.

And still the harder choice remained. Whom to bring to Harrenhal? What show of strength would please his aunt, but without coming off too strong?

Too much depended on that meeting to forego prudence. His own life, the crown, and the realm itself.