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

5th day of the 8th Moon, 303 AC

Jon Stark

A dark-bronze wing lashed out, and Doren backed away quickly but not quickly enough to avoid being showered in snow.

When the saddlemaker approached again, measuring tape in hand, Stormstrider growled at Jon. The king smacked his scaly snout with enough strength to snap the jaw shut.

“Bare your fangs at me again, and I’ll knock them down your gullet,” Jon warned, voice glacial. The purple drake huffed at him all the same, chest swelling like a scaly peacock, but that was all he did. Stormstrider was clever enough not to test him.

Wrangling with a dragon without any bond was far harder than expected. Jon couldn’t feel the beast’s mind anymore, and without that, any mental magic grew nigh impossible. Even finding him was a challenge. The dragon came and went as the wind pleased it, vanishing for days only to reappear at the glass gardens, where Jon had taken to waiting in ambush.

Now, he had to make the beast sit still to get measured for a saddle, since Shireen lay abed still. It was useful to see how much control Jon could exert over a dragon without the bond. To his dismay, the answer was… very little. His dragons were clever as any man, though far more wilful. Mischief seemed Stormstrider’s nature; Bloodfyre had grown lazy, preferring to spend his days and nights asleep on some rampart or a roof, while Winter preferred to vanish northward, hunting elk and bear amidst the woodland and the hills.

He still had to coax Stormstrider into easing down enough for the saddlemaker to take the measurements.

…Did he have to beat the purple drake into submission?

“If you will not be measured,” Jon said sharply, “then Shireen shall ride only with me and Winter.” To his surprise, the dragon turned his purple eyes upon him, wide and filled with betrayal. Then, grudgingly, Stormstrider stilled, though the lashing of his tail betrayed his temper.

Sighing, he pressed a hand to his temple. This was a fire-breathing child with scales and wings. Gods, he was glad for his magic—and had let loose the fortress that was his mind to keep it aware of Bloodfyre and Winter at all times to avoid a repeat of this particular mishap. It deepened his control over his dragons greatly, in a way no dragonrider of old had ever achieved. Shireen did not have the same luxury, and he pitied her for it.

“Now, Doren,” Jon called to the saddler, who was dusting the snow off his garments. “While he’s still.”

The man took about five minutes to finish taking measurements with his trembling hands. As Doren was heading back to his workshop, Stormstrider whipped his tail, lashing more snow towards the retreating saddlemaker.

Jon sighed and finally let the purple troublemaker go, earning himself a rumbling huff as the dragon slinked deeper into the snowy grove.

There was still some time until the council began, so he headed back to the Great Keep.

“Torrhen,” Jon glanced at his squire, “Summon my sisters to my solar. Then you can rest until the evening.”

The exhausted squire gave him a sleepy nod and dashed off, quite probably towards the nearest free bed.

Half an hour had passed until Sansa and Arya joined him in his solar. The void in his sister had dwindled further—she was calm and collected, and the previous sharpness had dulled. Hours of training under Blackfish’s patient but firm hand had borne fruit. Exhaustion clung to her like a cloak, and the wince as she sat on his chair spoke of bruises, but she looked happy. She had taken to it all without complaint, even the quiet, almost boring lessons with Maester Wolkan. Her words no longer rang hollow, her movements were no longer mechanical. Arya was healing.

“You sent for us, brother?”

“Aye. I’ve chosen a good-sister.” Jon took a swallow of ale from his cup and glanced at the pitcher. “Want some?”

“No, thank you,” Sansa declined as she sat at the table.

“So?” Arya leaned forward eagerly. “Which one is it? Lady Karstark or the lusty mermaids?”

Jon chuckled despite himself. “Neither.”

Sansa’s lips curved in a faint smile, though there was little mirth in it. “Daenerys… or Shireen?”

Arya pulled a face. “Shireen? I thought her flying was only some wild tale. And Daenerys—she’s your aunt, Jon.”

“Dragons,” Sansa said softly, answering instead of him. “If it was the dragons he sought, why not wed the queen with three? A royal marriage was always a matter of succession and stability, and now is no different.”

Arya snorted. “Sounds like a pain in the arse. Better than Wylla Manderly, though.”

Jon’s mouth twisted wryly. “A pain in the arse, aye.”

Sansa frowned at the coarse language, but even his prim and proper little sister knew better than to gainsay a king. “Well,” she said instead, “will you keep us guessing all day?”

How dull.

“Shireen.”

At that, Sansa gave a small laugh. Then her chest shook, and the small laugh spilt over into peals, louder and stronger.

“What’s so funny?” Arya demanded, looking at her sister like she had grown a second head.

“Forgive me,” Sansa gasped between breaths of laughter. “It’s only… Robert Baratheon dreamed half his life of binding our houses together. Each time, it fell through—first by Rhaegar, and then by Cersei. And now, the son of the woman Robert most desired with the man he most despised is to wed the daughter of the brother he scarcely loved.”

Her mirth spilt over again, light and mocking, while Arya rolled her eyes skyward. Jon allowed himself a chuckle—the irony was amusing, if nothing else.

“How did Shireen manage it, though?” Arya asked, grey eyes narrowing dangerously. “You need Valyrian blood to master a dragon. Everyone knows that.”

Jon arched a brow. “Do you forget that Orys Baratheon was Aegon’s half-brother?”

“That was ages past!” Arya shot back, folding her arms.

“Not so distant as you think,” Sansa said smoothly, her voice still laced with mirth. “The Baratheons wedded those with dragonblood more than once. I can recall two Valerion marriages into the main line, and Shireen’s own great-grandmother is Princess Rhaelle Targaryen, daughter of the Unlikely. You might have forgotten your lessons, but Robert Baratheon claimed the Iron Throne by conquest *and* blood.”

Arya shrugged. “Well, at least Shireen isn’t stupid or fat. I’d have gone mad listening to Wylla Manderly simper over you every day.”

“She means no harm,” Sansa said gently. “But yes, Shireen will do well as queen. When is the wedding, Jon?”

“I don’t know.”

“What do you mean, you don’t know?” Arya’s voice was incredulous.

Jon only smiled into his cup, pouring himself more ale. “My betrothed lies abed, healing from her first dragon ride.”

“Healing from dragonriding?” Sansa mouthed, blinking at him.

“Without a saddle, the spikes and scales can… cut deep,” Jon said. “Shireen is hardly in any state to arrange a wedding feast. Why not lend her your hand, Sansa?”

All trace of indignation vanished from his elder sister’s face. Her eyes glittered like a small child who had been told his name-day was coming early. “Gladly,” she said, with no hesitation at all.

The King’s Squire

Every part of his body ached, including his head. It wasn't that someone had rung him like a bell in the yard, for Torrhen was plenty skilled with a shield—or at least hiding behind one. No, it was from those bloody lessons in the library.

This… maester had made him practice his sums and letters so much that his mind still felt like a bruise. His skull felt heavy as if his wits were swollen.

Fatigue was an old friend for those who lived up the hills, but the king had shown him dimensions to exhaustion that seeped down his very marrow. Torrhen felt parts of him ache that he didn't even know existed. Tutoring had never been so brutal. Old man Wolkan was just as demanding with the quill as the Blackfish with a sword.

Yet he couldn't complain. The king had ordered it, and any good squire had to obey. So many sons and grandsons looked at Torrhen's position with envy, and he couldn't show weakness or reluctance. The Summer Sea would freeze over before Torrhen would disappoint his father or the Demon of Winterfell.

And so, he listened to Wolkan's lessons with attention, even if his ears grew numb and words no longer made much sense.

It was a great honour to be the squire of the Stark of Winterfell and an even greater one to be the squire to the second Stark king in three hundred years, and Torrhen would not disappoint. He kneaded his sore muscles to ease the tension and massaged his temples before heading towards the smithy.

It was twice as big as the one in Breakstone Hill, and the air inside was heavy with the clanging of the hammer and the stench of charcoal and pitch. The soot-covered man inside was hammering an orange piece of steel upon his anvil.

After a minute, Artos—Winterfell's blacksmith—finally halted, and Torrhen met his flinty gaze.

"I've fixed a fitting suit of plate for you from the armoury, lad," he rasped out as he wiped the sweat off his brow with a rag. "But first, let's put the byrnie and arming doublet on you."

Ten minutes later, he was clad in steel, iron, and cloth from head to toe like a Southron knight. And gods, wearing a full set of armour was cumbersome. The weight was well-distributed so that Torrhen could move freely, but it sapped his strength far faster. His father had him trained in a byrnie before, but that had been a breeze in comparison,

Alas, the king had ordered Torrhen to wear it all from dawn till dusk, like a second layer of skin. Even the royal cook, Beryl, had been instructed to feed Torrhen only the finest cuts from the aurochs and beef, and he could no longer sneak a bite from apple pies or other desserts. Training and tutoring until his body and mind were bruised, he was fed fine foods until he could eat no more—those were his days now.

It was hard but not as dreadful as he had imagined.

By the evening, Torrhen was dead on his feet and had a newfound respect for Southron knights. All his muscles ached, and even his sores had sores; his knees were buckling under the weight of the armour, but he managed to drag his weary body to the Great Hall.

The high table was removed, leaving only the Throne of Winter on the dais. The other trestled tables were pushed to the walls, leaving the middle wide open. Torrhen rushed to the podium and leaned on the wall just by the direwolf banner, a spot close enough to serve quickly should the king call upon him.

Soon, the Lords began to tickle slowly in the Great Hall. Most faces had shaggy beards, but some had started following the king's example and had sheared themselves clean. The Northern Lords and Chieftains ranged from some barely older than Torrhen to scar-covered greybeards, but they all had steel in their eyes. The War of the Five Kings had touched them all, one way or another. The fat merman lord stood out like a sore thumb with his sea blue velvet cloak, but his face was no less grim.

Last moon, the rumour had spread like a forest fire in the heat of summer—the two Frey squires forcefully betrothed to his granddaughters had been cut up and served as pork pies to Lord Bolton and his Frey guests at Sansa Stark's wedding feast. Wyman Manderly never spoke of the matter, but all the older chieftains seemed to believe it. Perhaps they had the right of it.

It had been decades since Lord of White Harbour had fought and killed a man with his own hands, but he was no less terrifying in his own age, if in an entirely different way.

Jon Stark entered the Great Hall with no fanfare, gave Torrhen a subtle nod on the way, and sat on the throne. He had expected that the king would request him to bear the royal arms, as was his duty as a squire.

However, no such request ever came; Jon Stark always kept his sword within arm's reach, no matter where he was. One morning, Torrhen had asked if he should carry the blade as a squire ought to, but the king had laughed.

"Well, try and lift it, then!"

Torrhen had tried but failed. Heaving and red-faced, he only managed to lift the sword so the tip of the scabbard was a mere inch from the floor before his arms and legs gave out. Carrying it was impossible for him. It shamed Torrhen, for he could not do his duty as a squire. He was the strongest boy in Breakstone Hill and could lift boulders the size of a hunting hound above his head, but this sword was simply too heavy despite looking unassumingly normal.

He had to get stronger.

Gods, the king was mighty—he could easily lift, carry, and even fight with something monstrously heavy. No wonder Roose Ryswell had been cleaved in twain with a single swing.

Even now, the sword that had cut through stone as if it were silk lay against the stone arm of the king's seat. There was something magical about it, too; the sheathed blade didn't seem to weigh the king down as he strolled through the snow.

Soon, the Lord Hand joined the king on the platform and stood on his right. It was a comical sight, like an overplump old walrus standing beside a lean wolf, and Torrhen barely stifled his chuckle.

The Great Hall was filled in a quarter of an hour; everyone of importance had shown up.

Every last one of the Northmen was here, from the Umbers of Last Hearth in the north to the Reeds of Greywater Watch in the south and Flints of Flint's Fingers in the west to Karstark Karhold in the east.

Lords and their heirs, chieftains and their eldest sons, Lady Mormont with her daughters, then there were the noblewomen who had come to speak for their Houses in the absence of their brothers, husbands, and fathers—Alys Karstark, Jonelle Cerwyn, and Lyessa Flint. The newly sworn Thenns, Giantsbane, and Shieldbreaker chieftains were also here, standing near the uneasy Skagosi.

A hush quickly fell over the crowd as the king stood up and rested the sheathed sword over his shoulder, much like the mountain clansmen carried their greatswords on the march. With a sign of his hand, the pair of guardsmen closed the door of the Great Hall.

“My lords,” Jon Stark’s voice echoed through the hall, edged with steel, “many of you wonder why I have called for this gathering today. I have an announcement to make. I have decided on a queen. Shireen Baratheon!”

The hall was deathly silent for a long heartbeat. A few faces hung heavy with disappointment, but Lords Umber and Mazin stood up and hollered with approval. With them, the rest quickly followed like a wave, and the jubilation almost deafened Torrhen. The squire had seen the stag’s daughter, Shireen, a maiden of kindness and duty, if with a scarred face. The king had confided to him that she had become a dragonrider, although all sorts of hearsay had spread through Winterfell.

Word was that she was so kind and pious that even the Old Gods took pity on her plight when she prayed before the heart tree and vanquished her greyscale. Perhaps they truly had. Torrhen was inclined to believe this, for no Southron maiden could survive the Northern wilderness in autumn on her lonesome. But Shireen did, and it was surely done with the gods' blessing. That Red Rahloo squire didn’t count.

The clamour finally died down, and Ondrew Locke, the ageing lord of Oldcastle, was the first to speak up. “Your Grace, does this mean the North will uphold Shireen Baratheon’s claim to the Iron Throne with your dragons?”

“Neither I, Shireen, nor House Stark shall entertain claims south of the Neck. Let the South scramble for their crowns and broken cities; the Stark of Winterfell shall rule *everything* north of the Neck.”

“Hear, hear!” Lord Umber’s bellow thundered across the hall. Others were not as loud, but Torrhen could spy tension bleed out of the faces of many. After nearly five years of war, famine, and struggle, more fighting was a bitter stew to swallow, and their minds were now settled on recovery and preparing for the looming winter.

“Stop yer hollering, Greatjon,” the scarred Ethan Flint hissed. Ehe Lord of Flint’s Finger was just as prickly as his father had told him. “The Southrons will want us kneeling before them again, Your Grace. Even if you don’t want a fight, they will claim and clamour for it sooner or later.”

Jon Stark’s smile was so sharp it could cut steel. “Let them come. Spears or swords, by ship or horse, with fire and blood, I am prepared to meet them all on the field or the sky. If they want the North, let them come and claim it if they dare.”

“What of our vengeance?” the young lord Dayn Slate muttered. “So many of us lost kith and kin to the South, and it’s our duty to avenge them.”

The king regarded Dayn with a cold look. “Take your vengeance as you wish, but I shall start no more wars. Joffrey the Illborn is dead. So are Balon Greyjoy, Tywin Lannister, Roose Bolton, Ramsay Snow, Walder Frey, and every living soul in the Twins. House Stark’s quarrel with the South has died with them.”

Torrhen had raised a similar question to the king during the privacy of their runs. *‘The Lannisters no longer matter,’* he had said. Their power was broken, their name was in the mud, and shattering them brought nothing to the North. *Ruling the broken South was more trouble than it was worth*. Instead, being the first to offer an olive branch had advantages and showed his willingness to negotiate.

“Alas, there is another, far direr reason,” Jon Stark continued, voice growing grave. “The Southron kings are busy fighting against each other, aye, but we have a far closer foe to the North. A foe that we cannot ignore any longer. Ser Brynden, it’s time.”

After a curt nod, the Blackfish quickly disappeared through one of the side doors.

“Your Grace, I thought that the *wildlings,”* Lyessa Flint spat out the word with disdain as she glanced at Giantsbane and Thenn, “had sworn to you? Were you not the one to let them pass through the Wall?”

The ruling Lady of Widow’s Watch was a reedy-looking woman who bore the name Flint just like Torrhen, but her line had split away from the Flints of the Mountains about two millenia prior. They no longer considered each other kin.

“I was,” was the cool response. “I let them pass through the Wall, and what of it?”

Lynessa Flint swallowed back, squirming under the king’s gaze. They all did, lords, kings, and knights, for there was something heavy, something dangerous lurking behind those purple eyes.

A small smile crept across Jon Stark’s face as he continued, “Of course, I did not do it mindlessly. Only those who swore to keep to the King’s Peace, defend the Wall, pay tribute and give hostages to the Watch were allowed passage. Even those you call wildlings know grace and agreed to shed their blood and risk their lives for me and mine, where House Stark’s own bannermen turned a blind eye to my sister’s plea and played deaf to our call to arms.”

Lyessa Flint and a few others shrank into themselves. Some had the decency to blush, well knowing that their old loyalties had faltered. Torrhen stood prouder for it. The Flints of the Mountain had answered the call.

“If I were to judge everyone in this hall on their deeds and merits, more than one would come short,” the king added, face frozen into a stern mask, “But I have chosen to forgive past transgressions. Now, the clansmen from Beyond the Wall are no longer my foes, and those who supported me in my hour of need have been granted honours and royal boons as is proper. By my word, they are Stark men—just like any Northman—and are honour-bound to keep to the laws of my realm or suffer the consequences.”

As the silence settled, the Great Hall's doors groaned open again, and a pair of stout guardsmen brought in a rather large oaken chest wrapped tightly in chains. Breathing heavily, they dropped it before the royal dais.

As soon as it hit the ground, the chest *rattled.*

Torrhen shivered and edged closer to the nearby brazier, and many lords and chieftains shuffled, faces uneasy. The stench of rot and decay spread in the air, making him gag as bile rose in his throat.

After the king nodded, the guardsmen carefully started unlocking and removing the chains from the rattling chest. Iron clattered down the flagstones. A rusty click echoed as the guardsmen quickly fled away, as if some terrible beast was hiding inside. The lid of the chest was banged open, and the sight made Torrhen's heart leap in his throat.

It was a man with hands and feet bound in black manacles and torso wrapped in chains, who fell out and was wriggling furiously on the floor. But this could be no living man with his jaw hung loosely and teeth peering and bone peering through the rotting cheeks. The thing's eyes were burning blue, and his legs and feet were dark and swollen.

The stench of death choked him, and Torrhen heaved over to void his belly of his dinner. When he gathered his bearings, his throat felt raw, and the Hall had already grown into a chaotic mess.

Lyessa Flint and Alys Karstark had retreated to the walls, faces deathly pale, while everyone else had unsheathed their swords, axes, and bludgeons. The guttural sound of the Old Tongue carried from the corner, where the skaglords were cursing, spears hefted at the creature.

To his great shame, Torrhen realised that he was the only one who had retched, aside from the plump Jorelle Cerwyn.

"By the gods." For once, Greatjon did not bellow or roar, but approached with caution. "Is this… a wight?"

The king gave him a curt nod. "It is."

Lord Umber let out a war cry as he raised his ugly greatsword. A sharp lunge was followed by a flash of steel and a loud ting, and the struggling corpse on the floor was cleaved in twain through the waist.

An unholy shriek tore through the hall, and Torrhen's hands flew to his ears. His eyes were wide, set on the two parts of the corpse, still wiggling.

The Greatjon quickly backed away, holding his greatsword raised before him.

A dark boot stepped on the upper part of the struggling wight, pinning it to the ground effortlessly. Jon Stark stood atop the corpse, holding a burning torch in one hand and his sword drawn in the other. The lower part of the corpse was still attempting to move despite the heavy manacles that chained its feet together.

"An ancient evil stirs from the Lands of Always Winter after an era of slumber." Jon Stark's words were so frosty they made Torrhen shiver. "Many think them to be nought but an old wives' tale, only good to frighten unruly children into obedience. Yet no matter how I wish it were otherwise, the White Walkers walk beyond the Wall again and raise the slain and dead as their thralls."

A hush fell on the Great Hall, and only the crackle of the roaring hearth and the trashing of those rotten limbs across the flagstones remained.

"I have seen them with my own eyes," the king went on. "I have fought them with my own hand, at Hardhome. *This*, my lords, is why I allowed the free folk to pass through the Wall. To deny them bodies,

for each wildling would rise as another soldier in their shambling army, even the women and the children and the elderly."

"It's true, and King Wolf saved our hides at Hardhome!" It was Giantsbane's voice, the greying chieftain whose belly could almost rival that of the Big Bucket. "He even slew a Walker in single combat!"

Jon Stark's mouth twitched so slightly that Torrhen might as well have imagined it.

"How do we fight these… dead fiends?" It was Lord Damon Dustin who spoke, a veteran barrowknight and the new Lord of Barrowton.

"As Lord Umber kindly demonstrated, steel does nothing to them unless you dice them into minced meat," the king said, voice patiently. "Three things that can kill a wight that I know of. *Fire*." The king stabbed the burning torch on the rattling legs. The fire burst out, enveloping the limbs in moments. Before Torrhen could blink, only ash and charred bones remained between the manacles.

"Flames make them burn out like an oiled torch. The White Walkers, however, are undeterred by fire." He then raised a small black stone dagger from his belt. "But they're not without weakness. Dragonglass and spell-forged blades slay them and their undead thralls."

He slammed the dagger into the upper back, between the shoulder blades, and the rotten limbs grew still. The burning blue eyes dulled into dark brown.

The torch prodded the carcass, and it burned as quickly as the bottom half had. Torrhen did not blink even once until the flames guttered out into wisps of smoke. The choking stench of rot and decay was replaced with charred flesh.

He finally released the breath he didn't even remember holding. The whole Great Hall was as silent as a crypt. Some lords and ladies looked as pale as freshly fallen snow, while others had grim expressions upon their hardened faces.

Then it sank in. Winter, White Walkers, and death things. The Long Night was coming.

The very thought made the blood in his veins freeze. Being a royal squire became thrice as dangerous now, as no Stark ever shied away from battle. If there were to be a grand Battle for the Dawn again, Jon Stark would doubtlessly be in the thick of the fighting, and Torrhen would have to be by his side, as was the duty of any squire.

He clenched his fist and gritted his teeth to chase the fear away. He was a Flint of the Mountains, not some craven boy. When the time came, he'd die fighting, sword in hand!

Many began to murmur quiet prayers, and Lyessa Flint clasped her shaking hands. "By the gods."

"Pray if you must," the king said, voice regal and head raised high, but the North shall prepare. Lord Glover and the mountain chieftains have been gathering obsidian to supply to the Wall. We now have the tools to fight this foe, but tools alone do not win a battle or a war."

"What are we to do, then, against these… White Walkers?" Ser Damon Dustin's sharp voice rang across the chamber. "Is the Wall not our shield? Was it not raised in olden days by Bran the Builder for this very purpose?"

Jon Stark gave a short, joyless laugh. “Any wall is only as good as the men defending it. And the Night’s Watch lacks men more than anything else. More wildlings guard the Wall than black brothers now, and even that is not enough. This is why every lord shall send a quarter of their fighting men to bolster the Watch, before the snowfall has yet to bury the roads. No oaths shall be given to the Watch, but the Wall will be protected—this is my decree.”

“Would a quarter of our men be enough?” Greatjon asked, far more subdued than before.

“It will have to make do,” the king said calmly. “The Gift shall struggle to feed any more. Food has always been a luxury in the far North, more so in winter. And winter is almost upon us.”

Torrhen swallowed, but the lump at the back of his throat would not go away. Winter was almost here, yet who had prepared for it? They had all sent men and fought against the Lannisters and Ironmen and Boltons, and half a decade of war had scarcely allowed the Northmen time to farm and fill their grannaries and stores.

With half an ear, he listened as even the Skags started levying questions at the king, asking details. Who would lead? Where will they muster? Where would the host stay?

Jon Stark answered it all with a calm yet firm voice, and Torrhen saw it, then. Fear and apprehension slowly drained from the faces of the bannermen, replaced by resolve. There was no need for alarm—the Stark of Winterfell had led them to victory, and he would do so again, whether it was against some great warlord with a grand host or ice fiends crawling out of the dark cold.

6th Day of the 8th Moon, 303 AC

Genna Lannister, Riverrun

She stabbed her fork into the breast of the roasted mallard with a squelch. The sight before her was enough to water her mouth: crisped herbs, dripping fat, cloves and honey, but she tore her eyes away, fixed her gaze upon the fool seated across from her.

“I must have misheard,” she said with a forced calm. “Would you be so kind as to repeat yourself, Emmon?”

Emmon Frey, balding and blotchy, fumbled for his goblet and nearly knocked it over. His jowls quivered like jelly as he sank lower in his chair, eyes flitting from the roasted bird to her face and back again. For a long moment, he said nothing, an unfitting cowardice for one who claimed the title of the Lord of Riverrun.

At last, her husband found what passed for courage in his meagre frame

“I—I mean to ride for the Crossing,” he declared, fingers nervously tugging at his collar. “Stevron’s line is ended. His sons and grandsons, all of them dead and buried. By rights, the Twins should pass to me now, and you will be its Lady.”

He puffed up as he said it, as if the words alone could make him a lord. Genna nearly laughed. He was a man knighted, but there was nothing knightly in Emmon’s hands, still as thin as a reed, and his shoulders were narrow and small. Even in her maiden days, she had stood a full hand taller than him and

outweighed him by stone, and she had been slender and pretty back then. And now here he was, a greedy little weasel with none of his sire's cunning and twice his ambition.

He had not shed a tear for his dead kin, treacherous and unpleasant as they had all been.

"Is Marianne Vance not yet living?" she asked coolly, reaching for her wine. "Stevron's granddaughter—you recall her, I trust? A Frey by birth, if not by name."

"She's no Frey," Emmon snapped, but cowered away by a quirk of her eyebrow. "Not truly."

Genna sipped on her wine, watching over him. The gods had given her a craven for a husband and a fool besides. Marriages were not for love, but for alliances, her brother always said, but hers had brought her neither.

"My lord husband," she said, her voice low but firm. "By all laws of the land, Marianne Vance's claim precedes your own. Or has your reading of the lineages and law grown as feeble as your spine?"

"The Crossing is mine by right," Emmon reminded, more to convince himself rather than anything else.

Genne cocked her head. "So you claim. But do you truly mean to ride to that damned bridge, twice cursed by the Stranger's Feast?"

That's what the servants and the smallfolk had taken to calling it, in hushed whispers. A fitting name for the night when each soul—man, woman, and child perished between the walls of the Crossing to poison. It was an ugly way to go, by all accounts, but no less terrible than the butchery that had been the Red Wedding. Many swore the gods had been angered over the breaking of Guest Right so vile that the Stranger himself had climbed out of the Seven Hells to drag down the sinners to his domain.

Of course, the superstitious fools would prattle on, but Genna knew House Frey did not lack for foes. The Red Wedding had been a terrible cruelty and a slight to many besides. Pinning the blame on the dead Starks was merely a matter of expediency.

In truth, it mattered little who had plied the poison into the water and the wine; the name of House Frey was now forever tarnished, and every member of the House would have to look behind their back for daggers in the dark. And without Old Walder to keep them on a leash, what had survived from his foolish get had started slaughtering each other over the Crossing like rabid dogs over a meaty bone.

"This is why I must go," Emmon said, puffing up. "The other claimants are dead, as I told you. I only need to reach the Crossing, and my grandson Willem will easily be the next lord after I pass!"

'And you find your bloody courage now,' she thought bitterly. '*When it serves nothing and costs everything.'*

Jaime had just been routed at some muddy hill by Lychester, and the Riverlands and now stood alone against Aegon. The last of her boys, her poor sons, were gone.

Brave, blustering Lyonel and sweet Walder were slain, lost to some nameless field and nameless death. There were no bones to bury, and only ghosts remained to haunt her nights. Four sons she had at the start of the war, and now there were none. Genna had grieved a week, alone with the thick stone walls of Riverrun and her cup, her craven of a husband offering no comfort.

Even with Aegon and his army looming closer, Genna had chosen to remain here in Riverrun, instead of braving the roads to Casterly Rock, no doubt swarming with scouts and deserters, all grown desperate and cruel from the war. That and she had no desire to deal with her niece, who had grown drunk on power in the Westerlands, responding with cruelty to every slight, real or imagined.

Some days, Genna cursed the whims of the gods and the ambition of men.

“Emmon, cease this foolishness,” she implored.

What was it with the damned Twins that made each Frey lose their minds?

“I must, Genna,” he said, brow scrunched into a stubborn line. “I must have the Crossing.”

“The Frey name is the most reviled thing from Sunspear to the Wall,” she reminded quietly. “How many Riverlords and Northmen lost kin in the Red Wedding? Do you think they have forgotten? Or that they have forgiven?”

“It matters not.” Emmon’s voice unyielding. “The rabble will fall and bow to the might of House Frey as it did once before.”

“That was back then, and this is now.” Genna hid her irritation with another swig of the goblet of wine. It tasted bitter upon her tongue. “Your House had the numbers before, but that strength had been wasted in the squabble for inheritance. How many sons and brothers and cousins are sharpening their swords and hoisting their axes, eager to get a taste of Frey blood?”

“Pah, when I sit at the Twins, I will command over two thousand swords. Two thousand men, Genna, a fifth of those knights or just as good,” her husband said, brown eyes burning with desire. “I just need the men to escort me to the Crossing, and it will be mine.”

For all his bluster, Genna was in command of the red cloaks garrisoning Riverrun. Her grip on the men was shaky, for she was no warrior or commander and Tywin long since died, while her husband was an anointed knight, no matter how inept. But Captain Joshen still obeyed her.

Genna’s eyes narrowed down at her husband. “You would empty the garrison and see Riverrun undefended with the dragon’s men almost upon us?”

“I’ll take only half,” Emmon insisted, once again emboldened by the sound of his own foolishness. “A hundred and fifty men are more than enough to hold this castle. It’s a strong keep, defended by the rapids of the Red Fork and the Tumblestone on both sides. Let Aegon freeze in the snow, while I gather the Frey banners and sweep his tired men from behind.”

Genna almost snorted. He styled himself the Young Wolf reborn, no doubt.

At least… Emmon had an inkling of a plan. It was folly, she suspected, but it was more thought that he had shown in weeks.

“Go if you must,” she said, smiling thinly. “But our grandchildren shall remain here.”

Her husband nodded and scurried out of the room, giddy with excitement.

Genna was left alone in the hall, which was her own yet so foreign, with the mallard gone cold. With a sigh, she refilled her goblet with the fruity wine of the Arbour and stabbed the fork into the meat, but failed to find her appetite.