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Edited by Bub3loka**

4th Day of the 8th Moon, 303 AC

Jon Stark

His connection to Stormstrider had snapped, like a taut string cut clean by a sword. It was gone, but its echo lingered like the phantom feeling left after one lost a limb. He didn't even need to reach his senses out to know that Shireen had bonded with the purple drake.

Jon suspected this could happen, but to see a bloodline link just steal his dragon before him was sobering.

Judging by Stormstrider's defiant snarl when he reached out with his mind, the previous connection could not be remade. In contrast, Shireen was tense in his arms, mortified as if afraid he would bite her head off.

He would not have thought the sliver of dragonblood from Rhaelle Targaryen and the Conqueror's half-brother enough to bond with a dragon. But Stormstrider had chosen her regardless.

Perhaps... it was not the rider that chose the dragon. Perhaps the dragonblood was merely the first step of claiming a dragon, not the only one. Magic or not, dragons were beasts as clever as any man and had a strong will of their own.

Yet as fascinating as Jon found this to be, he couldn't ignore the glaring problem.

Dragons were a good chunk of his war potential, and now a third was gone. Not that Shireen was going anywhere, but as a girl of four and ten, Jon wouldn't expect her to fly into battle. She probably would if he commanded, for Stannis's daughter was no less dutiful than her father.

He reached out with a tendril of magic to check on the maiden in his hands, peering far deeper than his eyes could see. Beneath the garments, cuts and bruises dotted across her hands and legs. None were particularly dire alone, but their sheer number could prove dangerous. The cold didn't help, and Shireen needed a healer's care swiftly.

Yet his senses dove deeper still.

Shireen's blood pulsed and crackled with a power it lacked before. A consequence of the cleansing ritual, no doubt. Jon had no idea what exactly it was, but it was *there*, and it was ancient. A sliver of magic had awakened in her—not enough to cast spells, but more than she had before. Insignificant on its own, but a change that could scarcely be ignored.

His mind drifted elsewhere. Steps had to be taken to prevent others from making foolish attempts over Bloodfyre. Not that he feared that his last dragon would be spirited away, but he would rather not tempt fate. The dragons had no patience for those they disliked, which happened to be almost *everyone*. Even being a descendant of the Forty was not a guarantee, for if a dragon decided he didn't like the look of you, it would most likely roast you alive, vaunted blood of the dragon or not.

Lastly, the purple dragon would need a saddle of his own. Jon could forbid Shireen from flying and forcibly separate the two, but that wouldn't restore his lost link and would be needlessly cruel to the girl and the dragon. Perhaps it would be an apt punishment, but the one who had overstepped had been Stormstrider, and punishing a beast would bear no fruit.

No, Shireen Baratheon was a dragonrider now, and this was not necessarily a bad thing.

Jon eyed the maiden, finding her ready to burst into tears.

"Gods, Shireen, calm down," he soothed. "No harm was done."

"...But I stole your dragon?" Her quivering voice was dripping with guilt.

"It takes two to fly a dragon, and judging by the smug snout of the drakeling over there, he picked you."

Shireen averted her gaze. "What happens now?"

"Now, we return to Winterfell on my dragon, and I fetch for the maester," he said softly, and she finally eased into his arms. "With your legs like this, you are *not* to fly on Stormstrider until you're fully healed and a saddle has been made and fitted for him."

He had placed Shireen securely in front of him on his saddle, held her with one hand to his chest and wrapped her with his cloak to ward off the cold. Winter's wings struck, sending drifts of snow in each direction as he soared into the skies; Stannis's daughter felt stiff in his embrace, and he could feel her heart racing like a scared doe.

No words of consolation came to Jon's mind, so he remained silent, and his gaze drifted aimlessly. As he had merged with Winter, their feelings bled together. His dragon was torn halfway between amusement and disgruntlement. Amusement at Jon's predicament and disgruntlement at Stormstrider's posturing.

They were near enough to Winterfell for his dragon to handle the extra weight without trouble—not that the former princess was particularly heavy. Stormstrider trailed behind them, flapping his wings slowly with his head slumped piteously, his form practically dripping dejection like a child whose candy was snatched away.

Was the bloody drake mad that Shireen was riding on Winter instead of him?

Before long, Winter descended in Winterfell's courtyard. A crowd was quickly gathering, but he paid them no heed as he picked up Shireen again, who squeaked, face flushed, and rushed into the Great Keep. His captain of the guards obediently ran over with a dozen men in tow.

"Rickard, send someone to fetch Maester Wolkan with haste. I want four of our most loyal guards posted on Shireen's door at all times, men who will only take orders from me and no other. Daren, summon my councillors for an urgent meeting."

Rickard slammed a fist to his breastplate, and soon the guardsmen scrambled to fulfil his order.

The easiest way to deal with a dragonlord was to kill or take control of the rider while he was on the ground. He had no fear of such tactics, but Shireen was far more vulnerable than he was.

His mind tugged at Ghost, and a few moments later, a white blur barrelled through the crowd. He came to a halt beside him, shaggy tail swaying eagerly. Jon trusted the household guard, but he trusted Ghost more—the direwolf’s loyalty was beyond doubt, and no trickery could get past his senses.

Shireen remained quiet, face buried in his cloak all the way to her quarters. It was an austere room, with no jewellery, scented powders, or lavish garments, as one would expect from a princess or a lady. Jon lay her down on her own bed, giving her a reassuring smile. Ghost curled down lazily near the hearth and looked as if he was asleep, but his ears twitched now and then.

Four guardsmen returned, Maester Wolkan hurrying at their heels, cheeks flushed and breath rasping loud in the stillness of the chamber.

“You sent for me, Your Grace?” the maester asked, bobbing his head, his chain clinking faintly at his throat.

“Shireen here has bruises and cuts over her arms and legs.” Jon motioned at the now pale maiden and her blood-soaked gown. “I want her treated with no expense spared.”

“As you command, Your Grace.” Wolkan bent low, then straightened, his round face hardening. His gaze fell on the guards. “Out, the lot of you. I have no need of gawkers, nor boot-mud to foul my floor.”

Jon waved the rest out of Shireen’s quarters with a chuckle, leaving Wolkan to do his work. Only Ghost remained, sprawled across the rushes like a great white rug.

The passage outside had grown crowded. Myrcella stood there, pale and trembling on the edge of panic, flanked by Ser Brynden Tully and a dozen more guardsmen in black and grey.

“Your Grace, *Princess Myrcella*,” the master-at-arms sourly chewed through the word as if it were a lemon, “claims how the purple dragon kidnapped Lady Shireen. Her two minders tell the same tale.”

“It’s no tale,” Jon said. “Shireen Baratheon, the great-granddaughter of Rhaelle Targaryen, has mastered Stormstrider.”

Surprise, doubt, and some flicker Jon could not name passed across the Blackfish’s weathered face.

Some might have claimed it would be prudent to keep the word under wraps. To deny and control it, just as rogue dragonriders ought to be controlled. But there was no need for lies when many had glimpsed the truth. His magic sang through his veins, eager to meet any challenge. The warm crown on his brow pulsed softly, as if to give him further assurance.

He set a hand on Brynden’s mailed shoulder. “No one enters Lady Shireen’s chambers save my direwolf and the maester. Choose her a handmaid you trust, and none else. She is my charge, and I’ll not see her come to harm. Triple the sentries about the Great Keep.”

The Blackfish gave him a solemn nod. “Not even a rat shall sneak in without your permission, Your Grace.”

After studying the four burly warriors now standing guard at Shireen’s door and deeming them satisfactory, Jon turned his steps toward the council chamber. Even if from the same family, a new dragonrider would inevitably send ripples through court, let alone one unattached by the bonds of kinship to the royal family.

One dragon was of little trouble for Jon when Winter would forever be larger and fiercer. With time and effort, his own magic would swell far beyond anything a fully-grown dragon could boast. But many would not see it that way. Many would see Shireen as a threat—or an opportunity.

Only one question remained. What was Jon to do with this knowledge?

Hurried footsteps echoed in his wake.

“Your Grace!” The voice was breathless, high and girlish. He turned. Princess Myrcella came running, skirts gathered in her fists. Golden curls fanned about cheeks flushed with the effort, save for the pale jagged scar from chin to ear.

She halted before him, chest heaving.

“Please,” she managed between quick, shallow breaths. “Might I be permitted to see Lady Shireen?”

Jon regarded her for a long moment. She and Shireen were the only maidens from the south here. And to his surprise, the worry in her green eyes was genuine. He would not have thought to find such softness in a child of Cersei Lannister.

“You may see her,” Jon said at last. “If Shireen herself wishes it.”

If she dared try anything, Ghost would tear her apart limb by limb.

The princess blinked, startled, as if his consent were the last answer she expected. Jon turned from her with the faintest shake of his head. Behind him, Myrcella lingered, wide-eyed in the passage, as though she could scarcely believe he had granted what she asked. Did she think him so cruel as to deny her the company of the one friend she had in all the cold North?

Jon frowned at the pitcher of ale. Torrhen should have been here to save as his cupbearer, but the boy was bone-tired and had collapsed from exhaustion soon after the morning training. Now that the king knew where his squire’s limits were, he knew how far to train him without breaking him. While not the sharpest, the boy was too stubborn to give up and obedient enough never to question his commands—the perfect student.

The door slid open, then, and the wary-faced councillors slid without saying a word. Wyman Munderly lumbered into the chamber second, and Jon’s gaze settled on the stranger trailing behind him—a short, portly man with a jovial smile.

“Your Grace.” The Merman Lord bowed deeply and pulled the newcomer to his side. “This is Edwyle Locke. As promised, I brought him here with all haste.”

The man in question took the knee. “Edwyle Locke of Oldcastle at your service, Your Grace.”

Jon studied the man while the others were already taking their seats at the long oaken table. Nothing stood out in Edwyle... and perhaps that would serve the North best.

“Very well,” Jon said, voice quiet but firm. “From this day forward, you will serve the North as a spymaster. Outside these walls, you’ll be known as the royal scribe.”

“It shall be my honour, Your Grace.” Locke thumped his breast.

“Alyn,” Jon called, glancing at the boy by the door, “fetch us ale and wine. We’ll be needing both before long.” The page darted off, quick on his feet. Jon turned back to Locke. “Tell us, then. What tidings from the south?”

To his pleasant surprise, the new spymaster had not come empty-handed.

“Daenerys Targaryen has landed at Dragonstone,” Edwyle said, face cautious. “So claim merchants out of the Narrow Sea. She sails beneath a kraken’s banner, with Asha Greyjoy beside her, and brings five thousand Unsullied to her cause. And three dragons.”

“Slave soldiers?” Wyman Manderly’s face purpled, his many chins trembling with outrage. “In Westeros? In league with reavers? Has the girl gone as mad as her father? Is she here to pillage and raid like some pirate or claim what her father lost?”

“We cannot yet say, my lord,” Locke answered, his voice more careful now. He plucked nervously at the silver brooch on his breast, wrought in the shape of crossed keys. “She calls for the fealty of the Narrow Sea Houses, but their strength has thinned greatly. But there is more. From wine-traders of the Reach, I heard this—Euron Greyjoy has destroyed the Redwyne fleet. The Crow’s Eye prowls the southern seas unopposed, raiding the western shores with impunity.”

A hush settled on the chamber. Jon’s thoughts darkened at the name. *Euron*... There was something there, a shadow of a whisper at the edge of his mind, but it slipped away before he could grasp it. What mattered was that the Ironborn were raiders and pirates, no matter how they tried to dress it up. If they dared sail North, he would see them hanged with their own entrails, and the Iron Isles washed clean in fire and blood.

The true danger was not a band of ambitious pirates but elsewhere—in Dragonstone. Jon knew how dangerous dragons could be, and Daenerys boasted beasts older than his, and likely far bigger. She had made no true move yet, nor declared her cause. That was troubling in itself. It was a scheme of sorts... but what?

“Learn all you can of her,” Jon commanded.

Locke stroked his moustache, unease plain in his eyes. “All, Your Grace?”

“Every scrap of knowledge you can dig up. Her childhood, her teachers, her journey, her friends and foes. Her triumphs and her failures. Even her food and drink, her lovers—former or otherwise—her handmaids. Leave *nothing* unturned.”

Know yourself and know your enemy, and you shall win a hundred battles.

They might have claimed Daenerys could be allied with if they knew of his sire, or at least befriended, but Jon held no such delusions. The bond of kinship between him and Aerys’s daughter was thin without a childhood of familiarity, but even that scarcely stopped dragonlords from turning against one another.

Jon could see the surprise and confusion well up in Edwyle's face. He did not understand. They all did not. But councillors did not need to understand, only obey.

His lips curled when Edwyle Locke dipped his head once more. "As you command, my king." He beckoned for quill and parchment from Alyn, who had only just returned with two pitchers nestled underneath his thin arms. The man's hand almost blurred across the roll, scratching down each word with eager strokes. "Only... it will take time. The secrets of the past in Essos will not be gathered in a day—or even a moon's turn."

"I expected as much," Jon said. "Now, on the matter at hand—and the reason I summoned you here. Today, the North has faced a grave matter."

Galbart Glover cleared his throat. "A matter graver than the Mad King's daughter and her three beasts?"

"Perhaps not graver, yet no less troublesome if left unaddressed. Shireen Baratheon has mastered Stormstrider."

"Pardon?" blurted out Glover.

Jon let out a thin smile. "If your ears are failing you, perhaps you should go to Maester Wolkan for some remedy."

Galbart had the decency to blush, while the rest of his councillors were still reeling. Wyman Manderly's chins quivered as his face turned thoughtful, and Locke tugged at his beard with nervous fingers.

"I had heard," Edwyle said at last, voice tentative, "that Stannis's daughter perished in the wilds after his fall?"

"She lived long enough to be found and be given succour," Jon replied, his hand drumming softly on the oaken board. "She is my ward now. And whatever else may be said, the girl has bonded with the purple drake. Her grandmother's blood runs stronger than I reckoned."

It was no surprise that Manderly was first to grasp the issue. "Does that mean Stormstrider no longer heeds you, Your Grace?"

"Indeed," Jon said. "That bond is broken. The beast answers only to her."

"The red dragon must be guarded well," the Merman Lord rumbled, pale eyes darting around. "We cannot risk some reckless fool making a claim." *Or worse, succeeding* was left unsaid, but they all heard it.

"Would you have us build a dragonpit, then?" Glover asked, his mouth twisting. "The work would beggar the North for decades, and no man alive remembers the keeping and raising dragons."

"Not with winter at our doorstep," Wyman said, shaking his great head as his jowls jostled. "But perhaps one of Winterfell's many courtyards can serve instead. It would be easily guarded, too."

“Let us not be hasty. Shireen was lucky, for Stormstrider had taken a liking to her,” Jon hummed. “She had the blood, but that alone wasn’t enough. The Red Sowing showed that blood is hardly sufficient by itself. If fools with more daring than wits attempt to claim Bloodfyre, they’re more likely to become dragon food. Still, there is wisdom in your words. Have the First Keep’s courtyard be repurposed for the dragons and put under heavy guard, Lord Hand.”

“It shall be done, Your Grace.”

He could hardly keep them all in the Godswood. Fire-breathing beasts and a woodland grove was a terrible match, no matter how much they seemed to like the ancient trees.

Alas, Lord Glover had the right of it—dragonkeepers were an essential part of rearing dragons. But with the knowledge lost, Jon had no idea where to begin. The dragons were more likely to eat any man or woman who approached without Jon’s presence to calm them. Well, everyone aside from Sansa, for the dragons had gotten used to her company as hatchlings.

“Shouldn’t Shireen Baratheon be punished?” Glover asked, his face set in a heavy frown.

Truth be told, Jon had considered it. Yet, Shireen had not done it with malicious intent. Primal, instinctive magic was at play there, and even he could halt it no more than he could stop the flow of time.

“How?” Jon asked, but his query was met with silence. “Aye, it’s a thorny matter, but she has broken no laws and is my ward. So long as Shireen Baratheon is in Winterfell, she shall remain under my protection.”

“Nobody would dare to lay a hand on her, Your Grace,” the merman lord assured. “But... she will eventually be wed, and it might be in our best interest to bind her to the North by marriage to keep the dragon here. That way, we will not lose any dragons and will have two dragonriders under Winterfell’s command.”

Glover immediately changed his tune.

“She can wed my nephew, Gawen,” he proposed quickly. Too quickly, as if he hadn’t called for Shireen to be punished moments prior. “The boy is my heir and just a few years younger than her.”

“Folly,” Wyman declared. “You speak of folly, Galbart. Or have you forgotten the Dance and what it means for dragons to be divided so swiftly?”

“Then what do you mean to suggest?” Galbart Glover’s face darkened into a shade of puce. “That Stannis’ daughter must needs wed His Grace, and rise as our Queen, for the sake of a dragon? She is landless, friendless, heir to nought but foes! If our king is to wed for dragons, better he take Daenerys Targaryen, who has thrice that number.”

The Merman’s great hand crashed upon the table, rings glinting like broken teeth. “Seven hells, have you lost your wits, Galbart? The Mad King’s spawn, queen of the North? Madness! Twice she was given to savages—first horse-lords, then a slaver. No man wants to take others’ leavings, let alone a king. Shall we open our shores to eunuchs and screamers, and invite them to the royal court, too? What does Daenerys Targaryen know of Westeros, of the North, of our ways? She is no fit bride for His Grace.”

“Her rule was nought but fire and ashes,” Ser Locke said, soft-voiced but sly. “In Slaver’s Bay, she left hunger, pestilence, and ruin in her wake. Even the men she freed rose against her, and Yunkai and

Astapor are charred husks of their former glory. Even trade from the Far East has withered. From Yi Ti, the fine silks and imperial jades that once flowed freely into the Summer Sea are scarce seen in the Narrow Sea ports.”

Galbart’s face darkened. “And if he takes Stannis’ daughter to wife, His Grace may as well call down the swords of all Westeros upon us. House Stark has not wed into the North in a hundred years. Bah...”

Jon let the clamour wash over him, councillors snapping at one another like dogs fighting over a bone. But the bone in question was a dragon and the queenship of the North. His hand strayed to the weirwood pommel, the familiar weight a steadying presence. The magic woven into the wood and steel sang beneath his fingers, as if urging him to action. It was a small comfort, but enough to bring clarity to his thoughts.

The truth of it stood plain before him now. A dragonrider for a bride was no small thing. Such a match could raise a House to heights undreamed of. Yet ambition came hand in hand with such a rise of power. Corlys Velaryon had proved as much—dragons had not sated him, nor a princess for his son. Once his blood soared through the sky, he had his gaze set on the crown and worked to achieve it by hook or crook.

Jon had no fear of dragonriders. Dragons grown were terrifying beasts, but the height of magic was twice as dangerous and far more pliant. Still, the power they wielded could not be forgotten, and with dragons came wealth, renown, pride and the worst sin of all—the arrogance of the dragonrider, for it was easy to look down on the world when it was far beneath you.

The Lord of White Harbour did not lack ambition, but his line was thin. His sole surviving son was already wed, and with merely two granddaughters to House Manderly, he dared not show interest in Shireen and her dragon, not when it meant his granddaughters had to wrangle with a dragon-riding vassal. It only meant he set his sights further. A king’s bride might be out of reach, but a royal union for her children and grandchildren—that was prize enough for a Manderly.

Though Jon expected nothing less than shrewdness in the guise of loyalty from his Hand.

What little Locke had spoken on the matter leaned in the old merman’s favour. Galbart Glover, though, surprised him with his bluntness. But he had a younger half-sister, Lyarra Glover, one of the many maidens fluttering around Jon in hopes of catching his eye. If the Lord of Deepwood could get both a queen and a dragon-riding wife for his heir, the House of Glover would rise fast and rise high.

So much for Galbart’s lack of ambition.

Lo and behold, the quarrel was growing heated. Glover’s voice grew louder and harsher, while Wyman’s jiggling face had turned into a dark shade of red.

“Seven hells, Galb—”

“Enough!” Jon’s steely voice cut through the clamour like a sword through silk. “I shall hear no more on the matter of marriages, be it mine or Lady Baratheon’s. I have heard of your mind on the matter more than I wished for. Council adjourned.”

The councillors had the decency to blush and swallow their indignity. Jon rose, stretching lazily as he left the meeting chambers, unwilling to linger there.

Some days, he hated the crown resting on his brow. Most, if not all, proposals and advice came in the guise of loyalty, but that was often a disguise for personal ambition. Loyalty to House Stark and Winterfell had not stopped lords from furthering their interests before, and it would not stop them now, either. Yet Jon had to look beyond the humble words and righteous faces, peer into the future, for the king's word and deed held weight that could be felt for decades—even centuries to come.

Yet as much as Jon disliked the wrangle, it was wed with the subtle power of authority. He cared little for those strangers living in his royal domain, but his pride demanded he give his all to the matter of rulership. The North lay in his hands now. It was for him to show the realm that a bastard might rule with more wisdom than any trueborn king, and with more justice than all the puffed-up fools who had worn crowns and failed.

While somewhat childish, Jon's desire to prove himself was still strong and alive deep in his soul—a remnant of that young bastard. It was also a matter of legacy—as a king, his deeds would echo in time even long after he was gone. The future of House Stark depended on it.

And any good king needed a worthy queen by his side.

His feet finally led him to the lacquered door on the second floor of the Great Keep, where Septa Mordane had taught his sisters embroidery and other skills required by a noble lady. The septa was gone now, but Sansa still lingered here in each free moment, doubtlessly toiling with the needle over yet another set of royal garments for him.

The King can't dress like some poor hedge knight or a vagrant, brother!

Jon pushed open the door, and only then did he mark that his sister was not alone. A ripple of laughter met him. Wynafryd and Wylla Manderly were there, along with Alys Karstark, their hands busy with strips of velvet and blue wool that spilt across Sansa's lap. Was his sister weighing which of them might suit as queen?

At his entrance, the maidens sprang to their feet, all three dipping into graceful curtsies, their smiles half-shy, half-bold.

"Your Grace," they chimed together.

"Ladies," Jon said, flatly. "I must speak with my sister. Alone."

Wynafryd and Wylla swept past with another curtsy, their hips swaying with each step. Their low-cut gowns left little to the imagination, and both sisters made sure to give him an eyeful of their ample charm. Alys Karstark, plainer and more earnest, only blushed scarlet before she followed.

When the door shut, Sansa let out a long sigh.

"They are pleasant enough company," she said, her tone edged with disdain. "Well-bred, courteous, not lacking in wit. Yet the moment you enter, their dignity falls away. You could rip their gowns where they stand and take them right away, and they would thank you for it."

Jon gave a snort as he took the seat beside her, though his breeches had grown tighter than he would want to admit. "They want a crown that badly?"

"Perhaps they want you." Sansa's smile was thin, her eyes unreadable. "And can you fault them? You are comely enough, and you wield strength without cruelty. You've shown kindness to your sisters, gentleness to the maidens of court. You've saved more than one damsel from peril. And the dragons... I daresay that would do little to cool their eagerness when many dream of having their children soar in the sky."

Jon shifted, uneasy. "Be that as it may, there is another dragonrider in the North now."

Sansa paled. "Has Daenerys attacked?"

"No." He cleared his throat. "Shireen. She has claimed Stormstrider."

"Oh." Sansa set aside the velvet, brows knitting together. "Because of her great-grandmother, Rhaelle?"

"Amongst other things. But the deed cannot be undone. Now, I have to deal with the woes that follow. Bloodfyre will be well-protected against those who wish to fashion themselves the next dragonrider, and yet..."

"And yet Shireen's hand is now a concern," Sansa said, the corners of her lips twitching. "I suppose many are eager to *secure* it for themselves or their heirs, even though none spared the scarred girl a second glance before."

"Got it in one." Jon took some solace that his sister, sharp as ever, saw the heart of it.

"Then you must wed her," Sansa said, her tone edging with steel. "Shireen may be loyal to you and yours, but when she has children, her blood will come first. Dragons must remain in House Stark and Winterfell."

"You gave her no thought before," said Jon as he filled a cup from the barrel in the corner, drinking deep before offering another to his sister. "She is too young."

"Four-and-ten," Sansa murmured, taking the ale. "No longer a child, not yet a woman. If you must, wait before bedding her. But the vows should be said quickly, before your bannermen grow too bold in their ambitions. No dowry, no alliance, no fortune or swords and knights could ever rival a dragon—even if said dragon was yours."

Jon's thoughts settled on Glover, and his mouth twisted.

"True enough. Yet if it were dragons I sought, I might have taken Daenerys instead."

"An outsider and a Targaryen besides." Her eyes hardened like two chips of ice. "You keep your own blood secret for that reason, lest the North turn from you. But Shireen? She was raised as heir of Dragonstone long before her father ever claimed a crown. She is not blindly devoted to the Seven, knows the ways of the Seven Kingdoms and can learn of the North easily enough. Wedding her means folding back the dragon that was already yours, instead of grasping for more."

Stability against ambition.

"You are not wrong." Jon rubbed at his jaw. "She is dutiful, with the makings of a queen. But Daenerys has three dragons, older and fiercer than mine."

Sansa snorted, lifting her cup. "Then take both for a wife, as the Conqueror did. What care have you for the Faith? The North follows the old gods, and your lords will not gainsay you."

Jon blinked at the suggestion. None of his councillors had dared voice such a thing. As he weighed it, his sister sipped her ale with a low hum, eyes on him over the rim of her cup. She was not wrong. No law, no lord, no faith bound him from taking two wives... or more.

"No," he said at last.

Sansa nearly choked, sputtering into her drink until Jon reached to pat her back. She dabbed at her lips with a scrap of cloth, eyes wide. "Why not? Many a man would leap at the chance. Daenerys Targaryen is called a Valyrian beauty of no equal, and Shireen... well, Shireen is not without her charms."

"If it were beauty I sought, I'd take a mistress," Jon murmured, closing his eyes for a moment's weariness. "Two wives sound like double the joy, but it would breed strife in my own very home. Their sons would be set at each other's throats, their mothers scheming for my favour and time. I need to look no further than the Conqueror. For his lifetime, the peace held, but the moment he was gone, the clash came swiftly. Brother was set against brother and then nephew, dragon against dragon."

Jon had not forgotten his sire, Rhaegar. He had wed Lyanna in some hidden rite, even though he had long taken a wife and had children. Either madness... or simple folly. It would not be the first time a royal choked the realm on his hubris. Perhaps his mother had been forced, perhaps not. Jon would never know, yet the thought of it all still stirred his anger.

Marriage was a vow, a bond of fidelity. It might be duty, it might be loveless, but it was not to be taken lightly, as Rhaegar had. Even if Jon took two wives who bore each other no ill will and harboured no ambition, in time one would be favoured, and envy would take root. If not in them, then in their children.

Sansa hummed, placing her needle aside. "Whichever you choose, you and your heirs must contend with the brood of the other and their dragons besides. Yet... you don't fear the dragons."

"Fear?" Jon's mouth twisted. "Dragons are dangerous beasts, aye. But even fully grown, they pale before the might of magic."

"Then the choice is simple." Sansa clapped her hands, picked up the grey vest, and threaded her needle again. "Take the one who will be the stronger wife—and the better queen."

Shireen Baratheon

Her arms and legs burned, itching beneath the wraps of linen. The air hung thick with the stinging smell of poultice and mixed herbs. Wolkan had offered dreamwine and milk of the poppy, but Shireen had refused them both. Her father had taught her long ago that a man—or a maid—must always keep their wits about them.

"Dullness is sweet, but no less insidious poison, seeping into your body and mind, and makes you do things you would never even dare otherwise."

"You were fortunate, my lady," said Maester Wolkan at last, nodding from behind the white rolls of cloth. His pale hands moved deftly as he set his instruments back into their wooden box. "Two cuts deeper than the rest, but nought that a sennight of bedrest will not mend. I will return on the morrow to change the dressing."

With a shallow bow, he left her alone.

Or not alone.

From the shadows by the hearth came a stir of movement. The great white wolf uncurled, rose, and soundlessly padded forward. He stretched once, jaws parting in a soundless yawn, then came looming to her side, tail swaying like that of some oversized pup. She had not heard him enter, but then, Ghost was ever a quiet one.

Ghost settled at her bedside, lowering his great white head upon the covers. It was heavy yet warm and not uncomfortable. Shireen reached out with a shaky hand and sank her fingers into the thick fur at his neck. Soft. Softer than any cotton, as smooth as Myrish silk, and far warmer.

She had longed for this. The simple act soothed her, as if there were some secret magic in the beast's snowy coat. The itch of the poultice faded, the pain dwindled, and her thoughts strayed to Stormstrider.

Her dragon.

Once she had woken screaming from dreams of dragons devouring her, their teeth red with her blood. Yet those dreams had ceased. When? She could not recall. The last had come during her father's march upon Winterfell. Other nightmares had plagued her sleep since, some of wiggling shadows emerging from the sea, but not dragons.

Now, a dragon was bent to her will. The sky was within her reach.

The future had always been clouded, even more so now. With Stormstrider grown, new doors had opened to her. She might press her claim to the Iron Throne as her father had wished. She might... but only by turning against Jon Stark, whose hall had given her shelter, whose justice she trusted. To take the throne would be to spill blood, as Rhaenyra had done. She had sons and dragons greater than Shireen could ever hope for, and she still failed. The realm bled for her, and countless lives were lost.

Her father would have called it duty. Yet what duty did she owe him? Stannis Baratheon, who had been willing to give her to the flames. Whether the cause, it mattered little. He had betrayed her all the same, and no man was as cursed as the kinslayer. No crime was as foul as turning on your own kin. And women... women did not sit the Iron Throne easily. Or any throne for that matter, even before the Conquest—not without armies sworn to their name, not without a royal father's hand to smooth the path before them.

No. She was Jon Stark's ward, and her fate lay in his hands. The thought brought her peace. It felt right. He would be kind and just to her, as he had been before.

Her eyes grew heavy. With Ghost's warmth against her side, Shireen Baratheon drifted softly into sleep.

It felt like moments had passed when the creak of the door roused her. The expected numbness at the weight on her lap never came. Ghost lifted his head, rose, and padded to Jon Stark, who had drawn a chair close to her bedside. The absence of the direwolf's weight left a hollow ache beneath her blankets.

"How do you fare, Lady Shireen?" His words were warm and soft, easing the racing of her heart.

"A bit weary, Your Grace," she admitted, pushing herself upright with care. "The maester bade me rest in bed until the cuts mend."

He nodded, and his dark violet eyes studied her with intensity that made her stomach tighten. Still, she met his gaze and studied him in turn. She had seen his face before, but not so closely: high cheekbones, a jaw so chiselled as if some sculptor had taken a chisel to it, and the faint scar above his left eye. More handsome than most knights, rugged enough to command respect, and yet there was something sharp in that gaze that made her feel naked, as if all of her secrets and small thoughts were seen through.

Shireen squirmed, heat rising to her cheeks, and could not hide the flush. Even though she wanted to avert her eyes, she forced herself to look—and to let the king see whatever it was that he sought.

Yet the king's eyes did not move, and eventually, he gave a small, tight nod, as if he had come to a decision.

"I am no man for flowery words," he said, the voice now stripped of softness, edged with the authority of a king. "Shireen Baratheon, daughter of Stannis, rider of Stormstrider, I ask for your hand in marriage."

Her head tilted, blank, and her fingers pinched the unscarred flesh of her cheek, sharp pain reminding her that this was not a dream.

I ask for your hand in marriage.

I ask for your hand in marriage.

The words sank in slowly, but each one rang through her mind like a bell. She pinched herself again, and the jolt of pain told her this was no dream.

"Why... me?" she whispered, her voice cracking, while a thousand thoughts tangled in her mind.

The king tilted his head. "Why do you think I proposed?"

Her mind scrambled. "Because... I am a dragonrider?" she said timidly.

"Indeed, that is one reason. But not the only one."

"But... it is your dragon, Your Grace!" She waved her hands awkwardly. But it was as if a dam had burst open, and her words started spilling like a flood from her tongue. "I would follow you for life without marriage—I will swear on it. There is no need to wed me. I am not... not as fair as the other ladies. Even without greyscale, my face is marred. I have nothing—no lands, no men, no swords or banners sworn to my name. When my father died, what few remained didn't spare me a single glance."

Jon Stark laughed so hard that his chest shook, and the sound rang through the room, deep and unrestrained. Shireen's heart sank, as if a thousand swords had pierced it at once. She wanted nothing more than to vanish beneath the blankets.

"Forgive me," Jon said, patting his chest. "I am not laughing at you, Shireen. On the contrary... it seems my choice may be wiser than I had hoped."

"What...?" she whispered, rubbing at her eyes, still dazed.

Jon shook his head, eyes growing soft. "I care not for scars—I bear far more than you do. If it were beauty I sought, I'd have wed Cersei Lannister, or some Lyseni courtesan. But you... you are far from ugly. Your blue eyes are like a summer sky, and your black hair flows like silk. I like them both."

Shireen felt no falsehood in his words. He met her gaze without flinching, and all she saw was earnestness that could not be feigned. He did not speak of her square jaw, her ungainly ears, or her scars. The King in the North had no reason to lie to a girl under his protection.

Her hair and eyes, gifts of her father, had always seemed ordinary to her. Yet in his gaze, they were beautiful. It... stirred something warm in her chest. Jon Stark had always been honest. And she wanted, more than anything, to say yes. She wanted it so badly that it made her insides twist into a knot.

But his honesty had to be repaid in kind.

"I serve at your pleasure, Your Grace," she said, bowing low, careful to hide the tears pooling in her eyes. "The dragon is yours. You need not wed me for it. I will bear no children, take no husband, and when I die, Stormstrider shall return to your command."

"You are kind, dutiful, and honest," the king said, and when she rose her eyes to steal a glance, she saw his mouth curving in a faint smile. "Why, then, would I refuse such a wife?"

"My father left me foes, Your Grace," she whispered, sniffing. "Enemies enough to fill the Seven Kingdoms. To wed me would invite their wrath. Many would believe you wed me to claim the realm for your own."

The king laughed then. It was an easy, pleasant sound that made her heart beat faster. "Let fools think what they will. As for your enemies in the South... let them come, if they dare."

The words were so simple, so plain, and spoken with steely confidence that even her father had never displayed.

Yet the air in the room thickened, and Shireen finally realised why they called him the Demon of Winterfell. He radiated danger, so palpable that her hair prickled and each breath had her lungs scream for air. There was no doubt in her mind—the South would break beneath sword and fire if they dared cross him. And that he would fight them until they were all laid low.

And then the weight was gone. Shireen felt as if she was enveloped in a warm summer breeze as Jon Stark gave her an encouraging smile.

It made her melt.

“You need not answer me now,” the king said gently, patting her wrist before rising. “Such matters are not to be rushed. Take your time to think it over.”

Why...? Jon could have taken her without question. She was not yet of age, and such had not stopped kings and lords who had done far worse before, especially to a maiden flowered. Her very presence in Winterfell placed her at his mercy. Others might have dragged her before a sept or a heart tree, yet Jon Stark had offered her choice. And she knew in her heart, if she declined, he would not press the matter.

He had been more than fair, more than just, more than generous to an orphaned maid like her. He had sheltered her, protected her, and even the greyscale that had dominated her life had been vanquished by his hand, and still he had asked nothing in return.

In the quiet corners of her heart, Shireen had allowed herself to dream of being his bride. She had longed for someone brave, gentle, strong—a great knight of the songs, a gallant protector astride a white steed. Jon Stark was no knight, nor was Winter a white horse, but they were far better than anything she had dared imagine. Yet she had buried those thoughts, convinced he would never choose her when so many Northern maidens were fairer and nobler.

Now she knew why. Yes, he desired the dragon that was his by all rights, but that alone did not explain it. His intent was stated plain and clear. This was not a grand gesture of romance, nor a declaration of love she might doubt. Jon Stark had never lied to her.

This was not some feverish dream, and everything she had ever wished for lay within reach. She only had to reach out and take it.

“Wait, Your Grace!” she called, before the door had fully closed.

The king halted his stride, then turned back to the room.

“Yes, Lady Shireen?” His voice was gentle, and she would never tire of hearing it. “Is there something more?”

Her voice trembled, but she gathered her courage. “Jon Stark, Lord of Winterfell and King of the North,” she said slowly, tasting each word. “I, Shireen Baratheon, willingly offer you my hand in marriage!”