Nymeria’s War

Book 2: The Falling Star

Prologue: Crimes of the King

Joffrey

Ser Joffrey Purell and his unit of twenty soldiers had left Denfort three days ago. They had ridden after troubling rumors and bad news, word of a foreign band of outlaws harassing the lands of King Albin Manwoody. Some said they didn't carry any banners, while others reported to have seen them carrying a single white banner, depicting a black raven carrying a broken crown. If that was the sigil of a noble house, then it was one Joffrey had never heard of. However, the strangest thing about the reports was that they never claimed these foreigners to have stolen from the villages they had visited, or harmed a single man, woman or child in them. In fact, it seemed they were only targeting the soldiers of House Manwoody and its vassal houses. This was in stark contrast to the actions of House Caron’s forces, which had taken no remorse in ransacking every village and farm they came across during their campaign on the lands of House Manwoody.

Joffrey's mission was to investigate and learn more about these strangers, where had they come from and how did they operate. He had already visited a couple of villages on their way, and while the people of those villages admitted that they had indeed met these foreign outlaws, they were all suspiciously tight lipped when it came to giving information about them.

The sun was already starting to set, as Joffrey and his men rode through the narrow and meandering forest road. Joffrey knew that after these woods there would be another village, the first one that was in the lands of House Littlemill. They would spend the night there and once again try to get information out of the villagers, though Joffrey wasn't expecting to learn much.

Suddenly they had to stop, as a large tree had fallen over the road. With a sigh Joffrey turned towards his soldiers. "Alright boys, let's get that out of the way so we can continue," he commanded calmly, and so they dismounted their horses.

Just as they were about start moving the fallen tree, Joffrey heard a sudden whiz in the air, followed by a scream of pain. Turning to look back, Joffrey saw that one of his soldiers had been shot with an arrow. Quickly more arrows from both sides of the road followed, taking down more of the soldiers, and making the horses go wild. Joffrey saw few of his men

mounting their horses and trying to escape, but except for a single soldier they were all shot down. Joffrey rushed to his horse as well, attempting to escape, but almost immediately an arrow landed straight on his mount's head, and it crumbled down to its death, throwing Joffrey on his back to the dusty road in the process.

His heart beating intensely, Joffrey got back up on his feet, noticing that five of his soldiers were still standing. The arrows stopped coming, but Joffrey could still hear sounds from the woods. Laughter and chatter, and swords being unsheathed. Joffrey unsheathed his sword as well, as did the surviving five soldiers, and they backed up against each other on the middle of the road. The ambushers started walking out of the woods and onto the road, surrounding Joffrey and his men. There were dozens of them, way too many for Joffrey and his five soldiers to have any chance of taking down. Most of them were men, young and old, though there were also several women among them. Armed with spears, swords and axes, some of these outlaws looked like mere peasants, while others were clearly knights.

One of them walked closer to Joffrey, a lean and young man with short brown hair and sharp dark eyes. He was clad in chainmail and a dark leather brigandine, carrying in his hands a beautiful longsword with a heart-shaped ruby in its pommel. The young man had a confident grin on his face as he approached Joffrey, and beside him walked two young women.

The one on his left was a lean and beautiful redhead, dressed in a layered red skirt, brown boots with high heels and a red-and-white doublet that complimented her shapely bust, as well as a beret on her head in similar colors, with a raven’s feather attached to it. On her freckled face was a mischievous smirk, and on her hands a well-crafted lute.

The woman on the right of the man was also young and pretty, with long black hair, smooth fair skin and shapely lips. However, the expression on her face stern and serious. She was dressed in a simple blue tunic and brown trousers, as well as some light leather armor. On her right hand she carried a bastard sword, and on her left a white banner depicting a black raven carrying a broken crown.

"Soldiers of House Purell, I see", the young man observed calmly. "I am Ser Lucas Corbray, leader of the Free Ravens. I am here to punish King Albin Manwoody and his vassals for their crimes against their own people. If you lay down your weapons and surrender, you will each be given a trial, and a fair chance to prove your innocence to these crimes."

"Go to hell", Joffrey hissed defiantly, and Lucas Corbray chuckled at his words. "Fine then, we'll have it your way", he said coldly, raising his sword up, and lifting his gaze towards the sky. "Whichever gods may be listening, forgive these men their sins", he said with a calm and confident tone. Then he lowered his eyes to Joffrey again, an intense and deadly gaze in them. "But make haste, because they'll be coming soon." With these words Lucas Corbray charged against Joffrey and his men, and the rest of the Free Ravens followed the example of their leader, screaming and chanting as they attacked the Purell soldiers.

Two of the soldiers moved in front of Joffrey to defend him. However, Lucas parried their strikes with ease, and slit open both of their throats with a single swing of his sword. As the

two soldiers collapsed to the ground, Joffrey charged in with a roar of anger. He struck hard from above, but Lucas parried his strike with a relaxed smirk on his face. Joffrey didn't give up though, he kept striking again and again, putting all his fury and anger to every swing. *I may die today, but I will take this smirking bastard with me*.

Lucas parried yet another one of Joffrey's swings, and followed it up by tackling him to the ground. As he stumbled back on his feet, Joffrey noticed that all his soldiers were already dead, and the rest of the Free Ravens were now just spectating the duel between him and their leader.

"Die!" Joffrey screamed as he rushed for one last desperate charge. Lucas managed to deflect his reckless attack in a way that left him completely defenseless, and within a blink of an eye the Corbray's sword found its way to the unarmored spot under Joffrey's arm. The blade penetrated deep into his flesh with shocking ease, making him lose grip on his own sword and widen his eyes in shock.

Swiftly Lucas pulled the sword out, its blade now stained with Joffrey's blood. Joffrey fell on his knees, desperately trying to stop the bleeding with his hands, even if deep down he knew this was the end. Cold sweat ran down his forehead, and he tasted his own blood in his mouth. Weakly he turned his eyes to look at Lucas Corbray, who stood right in front of him, looking down at him with cold judgement in his dark eyes. "Why?" Joffrey managed to utter, his voice frail and broken.

"I told you, ser. I am here to bring punishment for the crimes of the King", Lucas answered emotionlessly, and the redheaded lady next to him started playing a sad tune with her lute. And so Lucas Corbray raised up his sword and struck without mercy, ending the life of Joffrey Purell.

End of Prologue.