

The Black River Rises



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The first thing Fran saw when he rode into the keep was not the river, or the bridge, but the dogs. There were dozens of them, thick-coated white and grey beasts that could almost be wolves if not for the way so many of them stayed matched with the men in the yard, staying in pace just behind their heels. They roamed free, too; Fran passed a cluster of them tussling on the summer snow and biting at each other's ruffs like pups. One approached him when he dismounted his horse, coming close to sniff and pace beside him.

Fran's father kept hounds for hunting, so he was familiar enough with what they wanted. He extended a hand for the dog to smell. "Already looking to lose a hand so soon?" came a voice from beside him, just as the dog began to bare its teeth. Fran pulled his hand away and took a step back. A man approached him then, tall, with a thick red beard, wearing a heavy white furred cloak. "Kljova likes to greet our guests." He made a quick, sharp noise and gestured at the dog, and it dipped its head and turned to lope away.

"But you aren't a guest. You're the Garašanin boy." "I am," Fran said.

"My name is Franjo." He offered up a small smile. "Fran." The man did not smile back.