Teaser War of the Beard

**Chapter 55**

**War of the Beard**

*Nobody wanted another war.*

*Nobody wanted it, save the Republic of Braavos.*

*And there were excellent reasons for that. The most important, undoubtedly, was that aside from dragons, Braavos had everything to dominate the Narrow Sea.*

*As of the year 139 after the Conquest, the Braavosi Republican Navy was strong enough to keep as many warships in active service as Tyrosh, Myr, and Lys added together. And even then, one had to count the sellsails of the defunct Triarchy to arrive to that misleading balance.*

*Braavos had only one true peer on the waves, now that the fleet of House Velaryon was a shadow of itself, and this peer was Volantis. No one else came close. The idea from several unserious individuals of the Citadel pretending that Pentos and the Black Crown decided to stop the ascendency of the Republic while they still could was laughable, and remains so to this day.*

*In metallurgy and shipbuilding, Braavos stood above all its neighbours. The Arsenal was a wonder that no other Free City had the gold and the inventiveness to copy. It is no exaggeration to say that in these years, the Braavosi shipbuilders and Arsenalotti were truly the best of the Known World. Thanks to a rigorous system of maritime inscription, over fifty thousand men could be called up to man the galleys in time of war.*

*It would already have been bad for any potential opponent, but the Republic had other strengths to call upon in case an enemy decided to challenge its might.*

*The foremost one, as could be expected from the Bastard Daughter of Valyria, was the power of the purse. Since the Uncloaking, the Braavosi had rarely fought great trade wars, but the instrument of its trade supremacy was found elsewhere, and it was called the Iron Bank. Once again, one couldn’t insist about the fact the Republic had decades of advance when it came to banking and other coin matters. For all the disgust the Braavosi ideals inspired to slaver factions, their letters of change were used from Qohor to Qarth. Insurance and chartering costs had been developed so well that their efficiency was acknowledged by Pentoshi, Myrish, and Westerosi sources, and little answer had been provided by their competitors. Braavos had also begun to extend its trade outposts across its coast, allowing it to extend its reach and convince foreign captains to use its facilities even if they weren’t willing to enter the Braavosi Lagoon.*

*While several Magisters and Lords were known to scoff, the reality was that Braavos was really emulating the Titan guarding the entrance to its city, only the Republic was a Titan of gold, silver, and wood. Several Free Cities were specialising their trade in one or two spices they had learned to cultivate and harvest; Braavos tried to trade all of them directly or by intermediaries. Braavosi hulls filled with salt and smoked fish were seen from Eastwatch-by-the-Sea to Seagard. Their coins were seen as far as Asshai.*

*That wasn’t to say the Braavosi didn’t have weaknesses, of course. As said above, the Republic didn’t have dragons. And worse from the view of a city of sea traders, they didn’t have much wood either. The Braavosi coastline had been stripped of all trees which could be used in shipbuilding, and it was never enough to feed the voracious appetite of the Arsenal. The great merchant dynasties which ruled Braavos in all but name before the War of the Beard had to purchase their wood overseas, be it from the North, Lorath, Pentos, or Qohor. In times of war, Braavos had to make sure the wood supplies came coming, otherwise the lifeblood of the Arsenal and the City was in peril.*

*The mighty naval force had also been built at the expense of a powerful army. Braavos had scores of galleys to protect its trade, but when it came to campaigning in the plains of Essos, the forces of the Bastard Daughter were nowhere to be found. The Braavosi naval infantry was renowned as the best in the world, with only the veterans of House Velaryon as close rivals, but once far from the sea, Braavosi formations were unable to fight the kind of sellsword companies every other Free City regularly hired to fight trade wars in the Disputed Lands and elsewhere.*

*Still, there was no denying that these weaknesses didn’t matter much against Pentos.*

*The City of Pepper had neglected its navy and its other military forces since the end of the Century of Blood, and now, for all its advantage in population, it was completely outmatched. The Pentoshi Magisters had only been concerned about profit, little realising that the lack of efficiency could be the sword that would kill them.*

*By all rights, Braavos, especially the Revolutionary Braavos baying for the blood of slavers, should have crushed Pentos in mere moons. By the point Queen Baela the Builder should have been in position to intervene, Pentos would have fallen, and a new titan would have risen to dominate the entire Narrow Sea.*

*But Pentos had on its side a force no Braavosi Admiral would ever be able to defeat.*

*Winter Storms.*

Extract from *Dragons and Beards*, by Historian-Librarian of the First Rank Benjen Manderly, originally written at Fairmarket, 324AC.

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*It is unquestionable that the War of the Beard represents the greatest loss of opportunity to end forever the dreaded institution of slavery.*

*As of the year 139 after the Conquest, noble and pure souls of Braavos at last realised the disgusting vision of the Carps had failed: the Essossi Free Cities had not been cajoled into releasing their slaves, and if they were given the choice, they never would.*

*If the chains of tyranny had to be broken, it would be by sword and fire.*

*The first symbol of oppression to fall, of course, was to be the so-called ‘Free City of Pentos’, led by a decadent and vile slaver caste, far more interested in profit than in the salvation of souls living under them.*

*The plan of the Braavosi Admirals was perfect. Liberation was going to fly from victory to victory, and soon, all chivalrous souls on both sides of the Narrow Sea would join this new Crusade to free the blessed lands of Andalos from the abominable tyranny reigning there.*

*But the Witch-Queen, naturally, did not desire that outcome.*

*While she had so far managed to hide her vile nature to her bannersmen, the monster masquerading as a woman couldn’t this time hide when her slaver friends were threatened.*

*By abominable sorceries that will make shiver every faithful man and woman serving the legitimate King of the Seven Kingdoms, the Witch-Queen unleashed storms and countless baleful horrors upon the Braavosi fleets and anyone who stood in defiance of her heretical ambitions.*

*Fortunately, the Seven were with King Daeron I the Good and Sealord Zalyne, and what should have been a death blow was salvaged from the precipice of disaster.*

*Unfortunately, a great opportunity had still been lost, and the servants of the Witch-Queen, by refusing to rise in arms against her evil rule, allowed slavery to endure...*

Extract from *The Sword of Freedom; A True History of the War of the Beard*, by Archmaester Morgan Hightower, originally written at Oldtown, 325AC.

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“*That the Southrons persist blaming their defeats on sorcery rather than to admit they went to war in horrible weather conditions is all you need to hear to understand how they approach history.”* Historian-Librarian of the First Rank Benjen Manderly, after obtaining a copy of *The Sword of Freedom*, 326AC.

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“*I won’t waste my breathing replying to a heretic*.” Words attributed to Archmaester Morgan Hightower, upon learning of Benjen Manderly’s criticism, 326AC.

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“*That’s a lot of dead men for a beard*,” anonymous saying, thought to have originated in the city of Myr, 142AC.

**Sealord Salvatore Zalyne, Twelfth Moon of 139AC, Sealord Palace, Braavos**

Salvatore had left the Palace of Truth under thousands of cheers and with a pleasant smile on his face.

It had not been unexpected, for he had restored the ancient Arengo – far better known as the Circle of the Five Hundred or the People’s Assembly outside of Braavos – its ancient prerogatives. Since the last time the Arengo enjoyed this kind of power was when the dragonlords of Valyria ruled most of Essos, the family heads were obviously delirious with joy.

Porto Bolereon, Captain-Regent of the Arengo, had thanked him profusely for the better part of four turns of hourglasses, and his followers had been only slightly less excited.

The atmosphere in his office couldn’t have been more different.

But then Damio Ludiax was no Porto Bolereon. He was no member of the Arengo, and hadn’t dyed his hair a single day of his life.

The black-haired man was thin, dressed in purple, and did not look like any bravos of the canals or someone who had ever travelled outside of the lagoon.

But appearances were dangerous things.

Damio Ludiax was the senior Representative of the Iron Bank to the Sealord, and that made him a very dangerous player indeed.

“It seems,” given the emotionless mask of the banker, one had to admit that the institution he represented had chosen its name well, “that you have managed controlled the forces you have unleashed, Sealord.”

“I hold my promises,” Salvatore replied.

Braavos, House Zalyne, and himself. These were the three names he would see rise above all.

“You do.” Damio Ludiax conceded, with an evident lack of respect which made Enrico fume in anger. “You will have your loans, Sealord.”

Salvatore knew better than to gloat or even smile as these words were uttered. And honestly, if the Iron Bank had wanted to only deliver this message, they wouldn’t have sent someone as senior as Ludiax.

“But do not take this support of gold as unconditional, Sealord. You have disrupted considerably the trade of the Narrow Sea. You have supported the assassination of many merchants which were also Keyholders. I won’t insult your intelligence by telling you that in the halls of our noble Bank, you have made many enemies.”

“The gains justify the risks.” He didn’t apologise, for it would have been a dangerous mark of weakness.

“Two years,” Damio Ludiax bluntly declared. “In twenty-four moons, you will be in control of Pentos and contribute to repay the loans you’ve taken.”

“And what will you do if we don’t?” Enrico growled, and Salvatore winced internally. His brother had always been the hot-headed one of the family. And of course he was one of the rare souls who believed he could disobey his command.

Fortunately, the representative of the Iron Bank didn’t feel insulted. Maybe he had gambled on obtaining exactly that sort of reaction.

“Why,” Damio Ludiax replied as bluntly as ever, “we will just have to *liquidate* this war. Mobs are such fickle things, after all.”

And in a swirl of purple robes, the Banker left his office without one more word.

For all the strength they had in them, there was a heavy silence for ten good heartbeats.

Though nothing could keep Enrico’s mouth shut for too long.

“Who does he think, this two-faced-“

“He speaks with the voice of the Iron Bank,” Napoleone interrupted with a fierce glare. “If he wanted us dead, we would not live to see another moon.”

“Indeed.”

Braavos, House Zalyne, and himself. He had to keep his mind his priorities; the successes had been tremendous, but losing sight of his goals would see him fall as spectacularly as Triarch Horonno of Volantis. And speaking of Volantene proverbs...

“Indeed. We are now riding the tiger, Enrico. The very actions we took to raise the crowds’ anger against Pentos are as dangerous as a Valyrian sword. I didn’t hide from you, brothers, that if Pentos is not ours to rule at the end of this war, I will not survive to see the ink dry on the treaties signed with the other Free Cities.”

Maybe a few other great lineages could survive, but the Zalyne name was not one of them. They had taken such risks that some would have even refused to think of, and they had only their name to back their rapiers when they were born.

“In this case, let’s strike Pentos without waiting!”

Napoleone looked at Enrico with the kind of expression he reserved for particularly stupid people. And to be fair, the new First Sword had said something shining by its lack of intelligence.

“That would be beyond foolish,” his youngest brother spoke. “Bad weather or not, we would be too far away from our bases to resupply a squadron, never mind our fleet. By the time our galleasses would enter the Bay of Pentos, the men would have drank all the water and exhausted most of the food. The most probable outcome would be a disaster the likes which would take decades to recover.”

Napoleone took a map and unfurled it upon his desk without ceremony. Unlike plenty of creations placed in the Sealord Palace, this one failed to show the western coast of the Narrow Sea.

However, it had tried to reproduce the eastern coast with extraordinary precision, reproducing every little cape, creek, and harbour from Braavos to the southern Pentoshi lands.

“Charging straight into the Bay of Pentos,” Napoleone gave only a short glance to the southern city which they were now openly at war with, “is courting disaster. We are already taking a big risk beginning this war in winter.”

“You know why we’ve been doing it,” there was no guarantee that an old man like Vincenzo Fregar would have been elected if they pushed for it. And in the meantime, their family funds would have been getting smaller and smaller, with the influence they wielded ever at the risk of collapse.

“I know,” Napoleone said grimly, reminding Salvatore that though thousands upon thousands of young men could be called bravos inside this city, his younger brother was not one of them. Cold, ambitious, arrogant, knowledgeable in the affairs of the sea and the Arsenal, charismatic; all of that had been said about Napoleone Zalyne.

But a bravos? Never.

“Then tell me the revised plan. The true plan, not the one I’m going to sell to the Arengo.”

“As you wish, brother.” Fingers designed a few chosen harbours on the Pentoshi-held coastline. “The plan is not that complicated. We need to ease our logistics, and that means capturing several harbours as our squadrons move southwards. It will allow our captains to take refuge there every time there is a winter storm or bad weather threatening our hulls, and we will have easy ways to restock water and food. We capture them, leave a company or two of Marines and fort experts to form a garrison, and sail on to the next target by moving along the coast.”

“That doesn’t sound very glorious,” Enrico protested.

“I should hope not,” Napoleone replied darkly. “Glory will see our squadrons sunk by the storms. Speaking of which-“

“No, brother,” how many times had they had this conversation? Thirty times? At least that many for sure. “I will not allow you to replace Devio Bartarys. This is an Admiral I can’t touch. And he is no coward.”

His youngest brother snorted.

“It’s not his courage I dislike, brother. It’s his ideas. If it was up to him, we would still be copying galley designs from the other Free Cities, and the Arsenal would not have been built.”

And everyone knew that the two couldn’t stand in each other’s presence without insults flying.

“I can’t touch him,” the new Sealord repeated one more time. “He’s too powerful and connected. Now tell me more about your plan.”

Napoleone glared for a few more heartbeats before admitting defeat.

“I called the plan Orca for this is about what the bravos have taken up to call our faction.” Lips twitched in the shadow of a smile. “It is, as I said before, relatively simple. The fisher villages of Tanex, Razys, Ragyzares, and Diacros are all going to be struck by one squadron each. That way, we deny the Pentoshi the very possibility to send reinforcements north by sea. Let them keep the hinterlands and their goats; they will be unable to coordinate and will submit once victory is ours.”

“This is a ridiculous show of force,” Enrico argued. “They haven’t four galleys to defend that part of the coast-“

“Orca needs to strike fast and mercilessly,” Napoleone interrupted. “The weather is not too bad for now, but most sailors I spoke with agree this is not going to last. We need these outposts by the time the better of the Narrow Sea will be a nightmare to sail upon.”

“And then?”

“Then,” his brother pointed at three more important locations on the map, “Palados, Argilon, and Sidorys.”

Enrico exploded in mad laughter.

“And you insulted me? Brother, this plan is madness! Sidorys is the legendary fortress which once commanded the entire network of forts of the northern Bay! Even the Volantene Navy never managed to besiege it properly!”

“And today, it is a prosperous merchant city, and the walls which made its fame have been partially demolished.” The Second Sword of Braavos finished. “More importantly for this campaign, we know for sure there is a well-paved road maintained at lavish expense. If Sidorys falls, all the forts of the northern Bay of Pentos can’t be supplied. If Sidorys is ours, we can blockade the Bay with only moderate risks of being swept away by the bad weather.”

“It is going to take some time to achieve it.” Salvatore remarked.

“Yes. Three to four moons, by our best guesses. But once it is done, the only question is the scale of our victory. With a fleet anchored in Sidorys, the Pentoshi fleet will have no choice but to offer battle. Our most audacious captains will attack their sea trade all over the Narrow Sea, while the surviving cheesemonger captains will flee back to the safety of Pentos’ walls .”

“And if they don’t?” Enrico retorted. “If the slavers value so much their chains over the profits of their affairs?”

“In that case, we will enter the Bay of Pentos, capture or sink all their surviving ships, all the while the men we’ve been busy to assemble will use the road I mentioned to march to Pentos and begin a siege.” Napoleone paused. “I was given to understand we have already deployed several agents to Pentos in order to warn certain allies that we are coming?”

“It was done, yes.” The new Sealord cleared his throat. “Four or five more months, you think?”

“Closer to six, I think,” the Second Sword corrected. “But once it is done, you will celebrate in the Palace of the Prince, brother.”

“And after that, we will free to impose terms on the other slavers of Tyrosh, Lys, and-“

“No, certainly not.” It was really a good thing that Enrico was not in charge of Braavos or anything regarding the great military campaigns of the Republic. “The very goal of acting like an Orca is to finish this war before the Free Cities or anyone else can realise our true intentions and sail to save Pentos. If the Myrish Navy or someone else one day arrives to break our hold upon the Bay of Pentos, this will be a complete disaster. And the people will not support us.”

The last point was indeed completely true. Their supporters and allies of circumstances had signed for an easy conquest of Pentos. They had not made a suicide pact to hurl declaration of war after declaration of war to every power of the Narrow Sea. Once they were at war with one more Free City, the superiority in ships and quality of sailors would quickly decrease. And the Iron Bank was not joking when they said they *liquidated* the wars.

Braavos, House Zalyne, and himself. These were his priorities.

“The plan has my approval, brother. Now tell me how you are going to spread out the squadrons.”

**Admiral Devio Bartarys, Twelfth Moon of 139AC, the Arsenal, Braavos**

Devio believed in good and bad omens.

When you sailed on four of the Great Seas for most of your life, you believed in the Gods and the beliefs of every sailor.

Some might say it was superstition.

Devio was still alive, and many of those who had called him with unflattering sobriquets had long gone missing into the embrace of the Narrow Sea and beyond.

And that was why when Vysario Bombardo appeared before his eyes next to the Arsenal’s Gates, Devio groaned loudly in his red-dyed beard.

As far as omens went, this was not a good one.

“Congratulations for your command, Devio! Seventy ships and in charge of the assault against the town of Palados? I see the Sealord recognised your talents!”

The oldest Bartarys alive glared ferociously. There were many things which were discussed openly on the canals of Braavos, but his duties and the detailed orders of the Sealord were not part of it.

“You are *disturbingly* well-informed, Vysario.”

“Nah, I am just one of the drinking buddies of Enrico Zalyne,” the unrepentant man smiled with all his teeth...those he had left anyway. “For I am a man of many elements! Captain Vysario Bombardo, extraordinary inventor of complex devices, Commodore of the White-“

“They gave you the title of Commodore before expelling you from the Navy,” Devio groaned again. “They will never return you to active service.”

It said quite something that despite the titanic expansion of the galleasses and galleys currently launched for the coming war, no one had thought of recalling the rascal before giving him a squadron to command.

“I know.” And the Admiral of the Braavosi knew in a click of fingers he wasn’t going to like what was going to follow. “That’s why I obtained a Letter of Marque from the Arengo! We will fight in the same war, my friend!”

“I am not your friend,” he snapped, “not since you tried to smuggle behind my back these caskets of wildfire from the Sunset Lands!”

“Oh come on, this was nine years ago! And in the end, I only managed to convince this fraud of Alchemist to sell me some green soup!”

“The soup almost burned three ships before we realised what was happening!”

And Devio had learned the hard way, that no, badly prepared substances brewed by insane Alchemists were not less dangerous than the original product.

Then his thoughts focused on words previously uttered.

“A moment, please. The Arengo has the authority to issue Letters of Marque now?”

“Oh yes, they have.” The smug smile was predictable and Devio suddenly wanted to punch someone in the face. “We are going to return to the good old times of false flags which were the norm before the Uncloaking? Isn’t life beautiful? And no, I was neither the first nor the last sailor to have this idea!”

For the good of Braavos, Devio Bartarys really hoped the Sealord knew what he was doing. Sending men like one Vysario Bombardo to scour the seas sounded like a canal worth of problems to him.

“Fine,” he wasn’t going to begin the day by returning to the Palace of Truth to tell the bloodthirsty assembly that some people should stay far, far away from galleys and other warships. “You are a sellsail in service of the Republic. I’m happy for you.”

That, obviously, was a massive lie.

“And if I catch you using wildfire or anything burning with green flames...or anything that could cause more damage to Braavosi ships than to the Pentoshi, I will feed you to the sea snakes of the Summer Sea myself.”

“Oh, I have abandoned my researches on wildfire two years ago,” with his Myrish lens over his right eye, Vysario Bombardo definitely looked like the man you condemned to ten years of hard labour. “I have something far better now. Look!”

Three men had visibly rehearsed their performance, for the drape hiding the view on his right fell at that moment, allowing to see...something.

“What the hell is this thing?” The Braavosi Admiral asked exasperated. “You tried to overcompensate and cast in bronze what you have between your legs?”

“No, though you’re not the only person to mention that,” Vysario cackled. “This, Admiral, is the Bombardo Scorpion, a fascinating weapon which is going to change forever the face of warfare!”

“It looks like a long...” it looked like a big tube of bronze, but the protuberances on both sides made the comparison with male genitalia evident. “We have scorpions, trebuchets and catapults, among other siege engines! We don’t need more!”

“Ah, but you have nothing like the Bombardo Scorpion! You see, unlike these limited and dreadfully boring weapons, my new invention uses Yi-Tish powder!”

He had been wrong. This wasn’t a bad omen; this was something altogether *worse*.

“The same powder reeking of sulphur and coal that can only explode when you use Blood Magic on top of it?”

“This very one!”

“You’re completely mad,” Devio Bartarys shook his head. From what he’d heard, even the Qartheen refused now to trade this demonic substance, and as everyone knew, Qartheen merchants were capable of selling their own mothers if there was enough profit in the bargain. “The last time someone tried to use it for warfare purposes, it incinerated several ships on the Orange Shore!”

That, as everyone knew, had put a brutal end to the experiments of the Tigers of Volantis. When the descendants of the Old Blood decided something was not worth the lives of thousands of slaves, it was better to admit it was way too dangerous.

“Science can’t advance without some small sacrifices. Now can I-“

“No.” Devio was not afraid. He was honestly terrified of what a man like Vysario Bombardo could do. “We are fighting a just war here. I am not going to damn my soul. You stay far away from my fleets, and if I catch you using this Yi-Tish substance-“

“I already have everything I need to create more Yi-Tish blast-powder, don’t worry!” The irony that he was going to be more worried-

“I just wanted to acquire the services of the Arsenal’s best metallurgists! I need more tubes of bronze, those I have-“

“Denied,” the Admiral replied without thinking.

“I didn’t even give you a number!”

“That one exists is already bad enough!” Devio spat. “Now take your men and leave the Arsenal at once! You don’t have any right to be here, and if my men catch you playing with Alchemists’ stuff once again, I will personally throw you into the Lagoon with stones tied to your ankles!”

“You were far more amusing when you were a lowly Captain!”

“And you were far more bearable when you didn’t try to sink all our ships before they even met the enemy!”