**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!”

**Lord Alyn Velaryon, Twelfth Moon of 139AC, Volantis**

The Sea Snake had described the elections of Volantis as ‘joyous madness’, and now that Alyn had the spectacles and parades before his eyes, he could admit that it was indeed the truth.

From the female dancers who had donned costumes covered in flamboyant feathers to snake charmers playing their instruments in front of said venomous animals, it was as if all reason had fled Essos and everyone was only thinking about partying and enjoying things which would never be found elsewhere.

Ten days of joyous madness, and as per the traditions, the departing Triarchs had announced they would spend the equivalent of two million gold dragons for these ten days.

King Viserys the First had loved partying, it went without be said, but never to the point of emptying the chests of the Red Keep. Except Volantis wasn’t emptying its treasury halls, was it? They could afford to spend these extravagant sums year after year. And even then, it only gave a false impression of the fever burning in the heads and the hearts, for many of the Old Blood wanted to be elected, and as a result poured gold and silver into more spectacles to convince the freeborn population to support them by voice and deed.

It was joyous madness. It was the greatest city Alyn Velaryon had ever seen. And inside his head, he could admit he found it incredibly attractive, completely foreign, and somewhat threatening. From the elephants being treated both as noble steeds and objects of worship to the unfamiliar musical instruments, from the smell of the spices to the long spears of the slave-soldiers, from the golden rings piercing the noses of female highborn to their exotic clothes, Volantis couldn’t leave anyone calm and passionless.

The Lord of Driftmark didn’t know how long his guide waited with him in the streets, but at some point his face must have begun to show exhaustion or something else, for he was escorted to an inn.

Behind solid walls, the dances and the songs grew far more tolerable, and the overwhelming smells stopped hammering his poor head.

“Quite a sight, isn’t it?” Alys the Helmsman, who had once sailed with the Sea Snake himself, answered with a smirk. “This is Volantis.”

“It’s certainly something,” Alyn sipped his wine prudently, and it was a good thing, for the red liquid kicked hard, to the point it almost felt like a Dornish Red would be considered diluted wine here. “And all of that for three men to be elected?”

“Three men or women,” the exiled Westerosi told him. “Any of the Old Blood can be elected, as long as they have the votes, and have sat upon the Rajaerys before.”

“The what?”

“You don’t know? Volantis is ruled exactly as Old Valyria was. Three Triarchs,” the old Helmsman emptied his wine cup in one gulp and vigorously asked a half-naked woman for another, “and the Assembly of Forty, but the High Valyrian name is Rajaerys. There are four seats standing for election every year. The length of the term is ten years, unless you die first, of course. Then there is one more seat than usual to vote for at the end of the year.”

“I wasn’t...I wasn’t expecting that.” Alyn admitted.

His guide muttered something in High Valyrian that his knowledge of the ancient tongue didn’t allow him to understand.

“We were there before you; we will stand here and kneel to the Fourteen while you will have returned to dust.” If it wasn’t an attempt at humour-

Merciful Gods, this wasn’t humour.

“This sounds incredibly arrogant,” the Lord of Driftmark remarked.

“This is the Eldest Daughter of Valyria for you,” Alyn the Helmsman said with an indulgent smile. “They survived the Rhoynar Wars, the Doom, and the Century of Blood.”

“So did House Targaryen,” the former Master of Ships pointed out.

But his guide slowly shook his head.

“The dragonlords of Dragonstone are still here, yes. But they were not *here*. If you spend long enough in the streets, you hear the horror tales of the Doom and what came after.” Pale lilac eyes stared at him grimly. “They were here when the power of Valyria *broke*. They were here when the cities built atop the Rhoynar ruins were swallowed by the great river. They were here when many Valyrian roads disappeared under tides of water and mud. They were here when the sun disappeared for a whole year under the clouds.”

And despite the challenges, they had tried to rebuild the Freehold. They didn’t have dragons, but Essos had learned the spears and swords of Volantis remained terrifying from Tyrosh to Qohor. In the end, it had taken up most of the known world, including the Conqueror and Balerion the Black Dread, to humble Volantis.

The Tigers had lost control, and the Elephants had begun their long domination. A domination which continued to this day, more than one hundred and fifty years later.

“It is still arrogant.”

“You aren’t in awe of the majesty of the Eldest Daughter, my Lord?”

“I find the elephants impressive,” Alyn lowered his voice. “And there are things I disagree with. Though the maesters seem to have gone things blatantly wrong. The facial tattoos don’t describe accurately a slave status.”

He received hysterical laughter for his trouble. It took several cups to calm his Helmsman namesake.

“I’ve always found that ‘slave’ doesn’t mean much when you travel to Volantis.” The old sailor said when he finally stopped chuckling. “Technically, the Old Blood considers themselves ‘Slaves before the Fourteen’, you know.”

“Yes,” Alyn chuckled, “I’m sure they are willing to work from dawn to dusk in the fields before recovering elephant dung with their bare hands.”

“True,” the far better informed sailor shrugged. “This is not perfect, but it is the Castyxiax system for you. In Westeros, you, Lord Alyn would call all them slaves...but tell me, would your Lords be willing to arm, train, and keep in their service twenty thousand serf-soldiers? Because the Triarchs do.”

“The ‘tiger cloaks’,” Alyn hid a grimace. “I’ve heard of them.”

“Parents of inferior Castyxiax strive to have a child or two join their ranks,” the Helmsman said with an accented Volantene accent which betrayed the many years he had spent here. “Tiger cloaks receive excellent education as a child, and after their first ten years of service, may be offered the privilege to serve as guards and other positions within the Black Walls. And I am not sure I was able to convince you, my Lord.”

“I think slavery is slavery, no matter how much you try to hide the fish,” he tried to stay as polite as possible, “and my glorious predecessor the Sea Snake said, slavery is a curse of laziness for the slaver.”

The Helmsman laughed again.

“Yes, this is exactly what the Old Man always said!” The smile disappeared quickly. “The Castyxiax system is incredibly rigid in many ways, yet flexible in others. If you have enough Valyrian blood and wealth, you can get close to the Black Walls in a few years. If you don’t, the situation can become quite unpleasant. And as for laziness, the Elephants are really active these days. They certainly don’t spend their time waiting for the next orgy.”

“And what disturbed the noble Elephants from their naps, oh helmsman?”

“You.”

The answer was so surprising Alyn almost gaped.

“Me?”

“Well, your cousin,” the Driftmark-born sailor amended his words. “Her Grace Queen Baela, isn’t it? When she started to build her new roads, some of the Old Blood made quite a few japes about it. When their agents returned to tell them these were worthy imitations of the Valyrian roads, it really hurt their pride.”

Alyn Velaryon didn’t like the sound of that at all. Pride may be of his flaws, but he had seen it in others enough to not want to hear when an entire Free City had its own trampled by an elephant in fury.

“And what are they going to do?”

“What they already begun to do,” Alyn the Helmsman corrected. “It was over two years ago, I think. They send in urgency plenty of their captains on all known seas, and the ships returned with flowers and plants that could be used to grow them very expensive crops. Then they used their pet sorcerers, their *fakirs*, to transform the plants and everything into new things that could handle the Volantene climate. Now we’ve already seen the plantations on the Volaena and Selhoru rivers produce Gossypiax in enormous quantities.”

“Gossypiax?”

“A sort of weird plant that grows soft, fluffy white fibres,” the old sailor explains. “From all appearances, it is already said it can make incredibly soft textile, in yarn or thread. The first Qartheen merchants this year paid their weights in gold to have the privilege to acquire half of the production.”

Maybe ‘stung their pride’ was underestimating how much Volantis’ pride had been hurt by the roads.

“They also went great trouble to acquire a sort of cane which can produce sugar. They already had their sugar beets, but this one apparently is more productive, tolerates better the conditions near the jungles of the north-east, and the elephants love it when they are allowed to eat what’s left.”

“Formidable,” the successor of the Sea Snake spoke sarcastically. “Is it all?”

“For now,” the older man told him. “But they sent a lot of ships *everywhere*. And unlike their Tiger rivals, the Elephants are very good at keeping their secrets until it is too late for anyone to oppose them.”

“I thought the Elephants were all about trade, not pride...”

“A common mistake,” the old sailor who had lived in Volantis for the last decade, and grown very wealthy for it, “the Elephants’ words are ‘Conquest through Trade’. Forget it at your peril.”

Volantis had never been mentioned while he was sitting at the Council. Yet Alyn felt deep in his guts that the Eldest Daughter of Valyria was going to be one in the future. He may even have to send a messenger to Saltpans before sailing away here.

If the old helmsman was right, and Alyn saw no reason why he might not be, the kingdom of his cousin had definitely attracted some attention they could have done without. It wasn’t easy to deal with a tiger. These felines had long fangs and sharp claws. But you could expect conflict from them, and everyone knew that. The Elephants were no common foes. In fact, before Bosworth Bridge, most people had never seen an elephant – and those grey animals which survived had returned quickly to the Disputed Lands as winter came.

But an elephant was huge, patient, and from what he had seen in the streets, extremely intelligent.

“Now I think you just didn’t come here, my Lord, to hear me babble about Volantene customs and politics.”

“You are completely right,” the Lord Driftmark went on the offensive, “many people heard you had gotten your hands upon Yi-Tish star-seekers. These curious instruments with their special needles always pointing at the Constellation of the Jade Eyes in the Summer Sea.”

“One has to be careful about the rumours,” the other man replied with a smug smile. “Otherwise, one would believe you left Gulltown with strange new devices, including some astrolabes and other Myrish failed projects that no one believed into.”

“Yes, very careful. Is it enough to bargain?”

“It is,” the Helmsman who had once been sworn to House Velaryon agreed, “and I may add some piece of information about Yi Ti you may think interesting.”

“Interesting how?”

“It is entirely possible that as we speak, a conflict of succession has erupted now that the old God-Emperor left his mortal coil for the heavens...”

**Prince Fosco Doriatis, Twelfth Moon of 139AC, the Sunrise Palace, Pentos**

With each new year, it was the duty of the Prince of Pentos to deflower the Maiden of the Sea and the Maiden of the Fields.

It was in general one of the most pleasant duties of this princely function. The maidens were chosen among thousands of very willing young women, and why shouldn’t they be? For an entire year, the two Maidens were Princesses in all but name, their every whims obeyed by a small army of servants. Should the deflowering and the other coupling result in a child, the child resulting from it was considered blessed and most likely than not adopted by one of the Magisters. It was an honoured tradition and though Princes regularly protested being selected by the Council, their critics didn’t involve the seducing of the Maiden of the Sea and the Maiden of the Fields.

Fosco Doriatis, Prince of Pentos, didn’t look forwards to this moment, which would happen in exactly eleven days. It reminded him that there may not be a Pentos the year after that. And if the city survived, he likely wouldn’t live to see it.

His palanquin stopped, and Fosco had to walk the rest of the way into the great Council Room of the Sunrise Palace.

Yes, it was a way for the Magisters to remind the Prince that, for all his privileges, the title was not and never would be commanding the level of respect of the Archon of Tyrosh or the Triarchs of Volantis.

Five women and thirty-five men waited for him, and all were already seated. All were wearing the most precious cloths their trade contracts allowed them to. Disposed in a semi-circle, everything was a profusion of woven gold and silver, with silk imported from Lys and gemstones from the East. The air had been filled with perfume, and everything from the throne-seats to the floor was cleanliness incarnate.

There were few silver hair or silver beard here, and most of those who were had been dyed beforehand. There had never been many prestigious Valyrian lines residing in Pentos, and after the Century of Blood, those which remained did not seat among the Council anymore.

Pentos was ruled by the Law of Profit, and his Throne reflected it: it was a sinfully comfortable thing, with several pillows and crafted in the most precious wood parts money could buy.

There was no smile of content to be made when his backside was on the throne, however.

The skull at the centre of the room made sure of that.

“Magisters, it is with the deepest regret I must inform you that we are now at war with the Republic of Braavos.” Fosco began with a grave tone. “Violating decades of trade accords and the most elementary courtesy, they have killed the Ambassador of our noble Free City.”

“They earned the name of Bastard Daughter many times over,” one of the Magisters remarked, and there were plenty of whispers of approval.

“This is no ordinary Trade War,” Fosco continued truthfully. “The Braavosi have assassinated many of the men we were regularly trading and competing with, and the new Sealord is making sure all the bridges have been burned. In the throes of the bloodthirsty madness the crowds call ‘freedom’, the Braavosi do not listen to reason anymore. They want blood, and if they aren’t stopped as fast possible, we may very well see a second Century of Blood on our shores.”

The fact that not one of the Forty stood to tell him he was wrong showed without doubt the situation was as dire as he portrayed.

“I believe a clear and present danger to the survival of our noble Free City exists,” the Prince of Pentos spoke as majestically as he could “and I have issued a call for every sellsword and sellsail company to come to the defence of Pentos.”

It went without saying that it was going to cost a lot, but the coffers of Pentos could afford it. And even if they didn’t, it would be far cheaper than letting the Braavosi madmen sack their palaces and their manses.

“Sellswords and sellsails are not enough,” Magister Rego Grimaldus had always been one of the fiercest opponents to the Doriatis merchants, and it was with no surprise Fosco saw that he was the first Magister to intervene today. “Braavos can afford to lose three or four ships for one of ours, and still come out in better condition. We need more powerful allies.”

“Powerful allies are...distracted.” They were in an official Council, and the Prince of Pentos had to stay polite, after all. “Myr believes one more year will be enough to force Tyrosh to bare its throat. Lys is consolidating its conquests after they took Tiberias. The Lorathi emissaries are even more afraid of Braavos than we are.”

To be fair, the Lorathi had every reason to be afraid: once Pentos was dealt with, their Free City would be next.

“We weren’t even able to present our plea to the Green Dragon of King’s Landing. We have had far better results when it comes to Gulltown and Saltpans, but the merchants are not enough. The Black Queen is not an enemy, but she’s been reluctant to do more than support the protection of her merchant ships.”

“Braavosi merchants were found in every harbour of their eastern coast,” one of the female Magisters spoke. “The wood trade with the Braavosi was very profitable.”

The exchanges rapidly fell into petty bickering, as every Council session was infamously known for. Nine magisters favoured an open alliance with Myr. Seven favoured an accommodation of sorts to be found with Lys. No one spoke for Tyrosh; it was a sign of how far the City of Dyes had fallen in the last years. Of the three Cities which had forged the defunct Triarchy, Tyrosh was now unquestionably the lesser power, and with a weak Archon unable to impose some semblance of order, it was not likely to change.

Obviously, the Magisters who didn’t speak were as important as the ones who didn’t. His cousin Colombano was one, for appearances of impartiality had to be kept.

But the Magister of the Doriatis was the exception.

Many Magisters had grown fat and rich not from the trade with the Braavosi, but from the spice trade and the textile contracts of the Summer Sea. In the last five years, massive fortunes had been made of Volantene goods.

But no matter how profitable, none of the Magisters most involved in this trade were stupid. No one wanted to verify the hard way if the Elephants could grow claws.

It had taken the might of seven Free Cities, one Westerosi kingdom, four Dothraki khalasars, and one massive dragon to end the ambitions of the Eldest Daughter.

It was a very near thing and it may change in the future depending how bad the war unfolded. The Volantene would make them their vassals and deny them any voice in the governance of their own city; the Braavosi were just going to kill them all.

“You spoke of sellsword companies, my Prince.”

“Yes, I did.” Fosco really wished he had good news to give, but the best companies, predictably, were busy playing their employers against each other in the Disputed Lands. “The Company of the Black Bulls is already on its way, and should arrive before the end of the year.”

They wouldn’t stay at Pentos. The defences of Sidorys were so badly weakened that three thousand men could make all the difference there. And the walls of the forts guarding each side of the Bay’s entrance were even worse, in plenty of ways.

“The Black Bulls are hardly what I would call distinguished sellswords,” Rego Grimaldus snorted. “I certainly hope they are far better swords on the way!”

From the son of the man who had broken the contract of the Second Sons, this was almost worth a good laugh.

“The Gallant Men and the Iron Shields have also accepted to sign contracts with our envoys.”

“Oh, by all the Trade Gods!” the blue-dyed beard of a Magister almost hid his mouth, “are we that desperate?”

“Yes, we are.” His cousin replied for him. Which was certainly true, and made him feel relieved they had begun to speak of the sellswords first, and not of the sellsails. The latter were hardly the kind of fleet you wanted to challenge the Braavosi fleet.

“As long as it is not the Ragged Standard...these cowards always are the first to flee on the battlefield.”

“Not the Ragged Standard, no,” they hired sellswords to win, in the end, and that company of cowards seemed to relish on being defeated and then demanding gold for deeds they hadn’t done. “But the Company of the Goat has its field camp a few leagues east of Ghoyan Drohe.”

The moment Fosco spoke, several Magisters – at least four, by his best guess – looked like they were about to protest.

In the end, they didn’t. This was no normal Trade War, and though it was unpleasant to contemplate, principles alone would not save them if the bloodthirsty bravos managed to break into their city.

“How many men do they have?”

“A bit more than two thousand, all mounted.” Colombano replied.

The hesitant looks didn’t disappear, far from it.

“Make sure to include in the contract that they don’t have the right to sacrifice anyone but the Braavosi bastards, please,” Rego Grimaldus declared with a grimace.

**Ser Criston Storm, Twelfth Moon of 139AC, Broad Arch**

From the top of the ramparts of Broad Arch, it looked like a gigantic snake. The rain didn’t help. With the sun absent and everything becoming grey, the shape grew even more threatening and dark.

But it was no legendary creature. It was not one of the sea snakes which were rumoured to reign over the endless Summer Sea, the beasts said to have emerged from the waters at the dawn of time to assault the mountains where the Griffins nested.

It was merely a long column of men, followed by all the camp followers every Noble House procession always had to tolerate with moderate grumbling.

And there were stag banners. Scores of stag banners. There was enough wind to make them fly. And they were not alone.

The haystack of House Errol was here, and so was the crescent moon of House Fell. House Morrigen and Mertyns had sent their knights and men-at-arms.

It was hardly the full might of the Stormlands. It was not even a proper call of the banners for the Lordships north of Storm’s End.

But it didn’t need to be.

“I count two thousand spears and swords,” Ser Criston Storm told the men next to him. “Half of them are mounted, the rest are on foot. They may be more, but I don’t think so. We’re beginning to see all their camp followers trying to keep up with them.”

“Two thousand, eh?”

“Two thousand, yes.”

It didn’t sound like an impressive number. But then Broad Arch was not an impressive castle either.

And he knew by heart how many men were here to defend it: one hundred and six.

Many messengers had been sent westwards when the first smallfolk arrived to warn them the banners of Storm’s End had been sighted. But this had been the day before. No Noble House could muster its men in such haste...assuming they did want to in the first place.

Criston shook his head and then went on to the eastern tower. He had seen enough.

The mood as he came to cross the courtyard was miserable, and not just because of the rain. Everyone understood what the stag banners meant, and the so-called ‘friends’ of his half-brother had disappeared like leaves into a storm.

The Lord of Broad Arch was eating in the dinner hall when he was allowed to enter.

Ser Criston tried not to frown, but it was difficult.

Lord Lester Staedmon’s eating habits had always given him nausea. If you had plates and knives, surely it was good to use them, right?

Instead, there was...that. The meat disappeared in his gullet with the same dignity a pig showed when pushing its snout into the trough.

“I’m not paying you to stand idle, boy!”

Criston struggled to not snarl back. Most of the time, his sire paid him badly, or not at all.

“They are here. Two thousand men, half of them mounted, and several hundred smiths, merchants, and women to supply them if it comes to a siege.”

“And if you did have the strength of your namesake, you would have been bleeding them for several days, making the Baratheon whore regret her arrogance!”

The freshly knighted man felt pure hatred. It wasn’t bad enough for the Lord of Broad Arch to have given him one of the most reviled first names of the Stormlands, he had to pretend this was a honour too!

Among the many shames of the Stormlands, Criston Cole was certainly one of the darkest. The man had broken practically every vow he’d ever sworn, and while plenty of other Lords had shared guilt for beginning the Dance of Dragons, the Lord Commander of the Kingsguard had his hands red with the blood of tens of thousands.

Not that it mattered.

At one hundred and six men against two thousand, there was no way he could try to raid the Baratheon host with any measure of success.

Any man of House Staedmon who fell outside in the forests and the fields would be one that wouldn’t defend the castle. And it must be noted that no Knight House had answered the raven messages. For some reason, the Storm knight didn’t think the rain could be blamed for that.

“But I don’t have the strength. We have exactly one hundred and six men-“

“Each of our men is worth one hundred of the whore summoned by her side!”

This was ridiculous. Five to ten, maybe, as long as the enemy wasn’t able to take the walls. Or the gates didn’t break. But Criston didn’t believe the men of the Broad Arch were good. The best swords had accompanied Adrian to King’s Landing, and the second best swords were with Gulian...somewhere. The new Heir to Broad Arch had ridden out to participate in the Tourney of Highgarden, and so far, there had been no sign of imminent return.

The grey beards too old to joust and the children kept aside from the lists were here.

“There are so many of them that we need them to be as good as two hundred men,” he answered after hesitating. “If you let me send a herald-“

“I knew you were not the equal of Adrian or Gulian, but now I really wonder why I bothered honouring your mother with my seed,” Lester Staedmon looked at him like he was a vermin. “You are a coward. Fortunately for you, you are not bad with a sword. Bar the gates, and defend this castle until the King comes!”

He thought-

Not the equal of Adrian? The idiot had had everything! He was the husband of the Lady Storm’s End! His line was going to unite with the blood of Baratheon and Durrandon! And instead he threw everything away to satisfy his unnatural urges!

Anger filled his heart and his head. His sire this Lord might be, but at this moment he wanted to stab him and threw his corpse to the vultures of the Marches.

No. No knight was more accursed than the Kinslayer...and the sole exception was Ser Criston Cole.

No, there was-

His vows. His vows were made in the sept of Bronzegate, for true knighthood had been refused to him here.

“No.” He said.

“What did you say, *boy*?”

“I said, ‘no’,” the sight of finger dripping with meat sauce and the face as noble as a pig’s snout were stomach-churning. “I swore vows, and I am loyal to Storm’s End. I am not going to raise my sword against Lady Baratheon and her host.”

“A coward, that’s all you will ever be,” the Lord of Broad Arch spat, meat falling back from his mouth into his plate and everywhere on the table. “You always were a disappointment, boy. Fine, I will take command myself once I have finished my dinner.”

Criston tried to look everywhere but the table...and saw that there were no guards left. Only a couple of aged servants waited for orders next to the door leading to the kitchens.

“And once this matter will be settled, the gates of Broad Arch will be forever barred to you!” Lester Staedmon rambled.

Criston leashed his rage. He tried to-

Adrian and Gulian were not here.

They were not here, and the same was true of the men who would have followed them into peril...minor perils, it seemed the Watch was too far from them.

He was a bastard, yes. But since there was nothing left to gain from following his rebellious sire-

“I am loyal to the Lady of Storm’s End.” Criston Storm drew his sword.

Lester Staedmon laughed...before remembering that his greatest weapon was the knife he had used to cut up his meat.

“You wouldn’t dare,” the Lord of Broad Arch paled. “You wouldn’t...surely you wouldn’t betray your blood to this whore!”

“Funny how everyone accuses the Four Storms of selling their bodies like rutting animals, but it is always my half-brothers who were caught in the whorehouses,” the knife was thrown in his direction.

It missed so largely that Criston didn’t even bother to step aside to avoid it.

His sword, however, was soon placed next to the throat of the man who had never done more than siring him.

“You fancy yourself a Kingmaker, boy? The whore will never give you Broad Arch! You are a bastard, and the King will never agree to legitimise you!”

“Maybe not,” the young knight acknowledged. “But if Broad Arch is denied to me, at least I can advise Lady Baratheon that it would be poetic justice for you to freeze your balls off in company of Adrian on the Wall.”

The face of Lester Staedmon paled further.

“I heard,” Criston mused, “that is getting a bit cold in the North when winter is coming.”

**Princess Rhaena Targaryen, First Moon of 140AC, lands sworn to House Targaryen, the Riverlands**

Morning had just left the Red Fork behind them when suddenly, a large patch of land near a small hill was turned into a field of fire.

Since the weather was cold and the Riverlands were not known for their volcanoes, Rhaena gave a command to her dragon, and Morning obeyed diligently.

A draconic roar shook the rivers and the fields, and it went without saying her beautiful pink-scaled dragon roared back.

Rhaena didn’t know what her sister was doing so far from Stone Hedge, but this was Moondancer’s roar, assuredly.

As her flight grew closer and closer to the ground, Rhaena realised her initial assessment was a mistake: there wasn’t a single dragon; there were two. Her twin’s dragon was here, of course, standing before smouldering rocks and a place which must have been a village years ago – ruins were appropriate for what was left though – but in front of a large blacksmith’s oven, the emerald scales of Trickster shone like magnificent gemstones.

“Sister!” It only took a few heartbeats to be hugged by her twin. “You should have told me you were coming!”

“And I would have missed the look of surprise on your face,” she replied cheekily. “I wasn’t expecting to find you here.”

“I was able to find some time for myself today,” the purple eyes of Baela twinkled with amusement. “This is the place I visit when I want to practise with Moondancer. You probably can guess the most obvious reason.”

“One of the villages burned by Vhagar?” Moondancer’s flames were far hotter now, but even the dragon of her sister, the permanently scorched land which could be seen everywhere was devastation beyond its power.

“One of many,” her twin nodded. “It also had a bountiful iron mine, and some other things to build from. I don’t despair eventually convincing smallfolk to return here, but for now, it’s abandoned. So I use it to practise without setting flame to anything important.”

“And Trickster?” Rhaena asked with curiosity. Unlike Moondancer, who was placidly watching them, the emerald-scaled dragon had a big collar around its long neck, tied to a large chain of metal.

The young dragon moaned when his name was uttered. At least Rhaena assumed Trickster was male. There was no certainty for now, and there wouldn’t be for many years to come.

“Trickster is being punished for his latest crime.” The mocking glare was delivered, and the mischievous dragon turned its head away, trying to look as innocent as possible. “This reptilian thief went to extraordinary lengths to steal Moondancer’s dinner, you see. He found out which mushrooms were making my Bonded sneeze, and he rubbed his scales against them until he literally smelled like them!”

Rhaena giggled.

“Thus the punishment.”

“Thus the punishment,” her twin repeated. “He will make sure the forge is burning bright today, and as long as I am not satisfied, he will not have his dinner!”

“A good punishment,” the silver-haired Princess voiced out loud before blinking. “Sister, are you trying to forge Valyrian steel?”

Baela had not come to this ruined village alone, it appeared. There were two scores of Targaryen guards – many were men of Crackclaw Point recruited in the last years – but also several blacksmiths and metal-workers.

“I wish,” her sister grimaced. “I will admit, we still experiment, but the secrets of forging have been utterly lost to House Targaryen. There are a lot of forging and magical secrets that weren’t recorded when our ancestors left Valyria, and the books on dragon lore I bought give no hint how the Great Families crafted the priceless metal.”

“I see.”

“Oh, we are now able to forge far better steel than we did when I took the crown. Moondancer is quite close to his fourteenth sloughing. His flames purify the metal far quicker and with far better results.”

Baela showed her a score or so of swords, several of them already in the scabbards tied to the belts of Targaryen guards, and her twin had been right: this was good steel.

“Fourteenth, eh?”

Baela snorted.

“I am not responsible for the beliefs of our ancestors, sister. And according to father, the fourteenth sloughing is significant: it is when the scales of a dragon are sufficiently hardened for him or her to be called a ‘battle-dragon’.”

“Still, you are ambitious.”

“I was more interested in building the materials for the black dragonstone which made our ancestors’ home so infamous.” Baela reluctantly admitted. “But so far, the secret for that eludes me too.”

The purple eyes of her twin looked on the right for too long, and Rhaena realised with a chuckle that some of the twisted piles nearby couldn’t be blamed on Vhagar’s flames, after all.

The chuckles increased when Moondancer left its place to go by Twister’s side...or so it seemed. Just before reaching the blacksmith’s oven, her sister’s dragon changed course and unfurled its long tongue, bathing copiously the emerald-scaled dragon with his saliva.

Trickster tried to move away, it must be said, but the draconic handlers had not given him much leeway, and collared and chained as he was, there was no escape from Moondancer’s ‘punishment’.

“So dragons can hold grudges,” Rhaena declared while caressing Morning’s snout.

“Of course they do, sister,” Baela bared her teeth, “did you never see what happened to these foolish souls who thought it was a good idea to place themselves between Sheepstealer and his favourite food?”

Yes, the brown dragon was somewhat vengeful when the meal of sheep promised failed to appear.

“Well, Sheepstealer is a male. Food and rutting are pretty much the only things which will rouse him into fury. Female dragons can be altogether more vicious and dangerous.”

“Now come on, sister, the Southron Maesters would be so disappointed in you if you listen to every rumour-“

“Xyxas is still on Dragonstone, sister. And she has not grown more peaceful with age.”

“Xy-“ Rhaena looked at her with disbelieving eyes. “That’s the name of the Cannibal?”

“I’m pretty sure it is the name that was given to her when her egg hatched.”

“You can’t be sure of that-“

“Vhagar. Meraxes. Xyxas. The three sister-Goddesses, the reason the banners of the Freehold already had three heads. I don’t spend my time searching for every piece of lore of the Fourteen, but I know their names. And Father allowed me to see the diary of the First Queen when we were young. It’s been a while, but it was mentioned a black-scaled ‘runt’ survived in the first Brood to ever survive on Dragonstone.”

Rhaena shivered.

“But that would mean the Cannibal is as old as Vhagar and Meraxes should be if they were alive today!”

“Yes. And that would also explain why nobody ever managed to tame her. While she was slow to reach her mature size, by the time new dragonriders were seeking to bond with her, she had already grown too wilful and wild.”

And when the time had come for Queen Rhaenyra to order the dragonseeds they could try their luck with the adult dragons, Xyxas the Cannibal was more than one hundred years old.

Even for full-fledged dragonlords, this was a quest which could see you killed.

“Let’s see the positive side,” Moondancer finally took mercy upon the poor Twister. Drooling time was over. Now the adult dragon was vigorously licking the smaller one. Trickster did not relish the attention, and plenty of guards were chuckling. “The Greens won’t ride this one.”

“That’s kind of true.” Baela agreed. “Not that there are many big dragons left.”

“Is there any truth to the rumours Silverwing is still nesting somewhere?”

“That’s what some rumours of the South say, but our agents have never seen Queen Alysanne’s bonded,” the name of the Bastard who had ridden her during the war was not uttered.

Baela shrugged.

“I am not exactly worried. Even if the Greens had a way to bring back Silverwing to their Dragonpit, they have no one to ride her. So far, all the sons born of Arianne Baratheon had their eggs hatch. And the first rule about dragon riding is that you are bonded to one dragon, and one dragon only.”

“So...Sheepstealer, Xyxas the Cannibal, and maybe Silverwing?”

“That’s indeed all the old dragons. The others have all had their skulls presented in public for one reason or another.”

“And what were you doing there, if not busy forging something extraordinary?”

“Training Moondancer, of course,” as always, her twin was not subtle; there was a brilliant gold-coloured gemstone on one of her fingers which hadn’t been here before.

“Moondancer is already superbly trained.”

“Flatterer,” her royal twin smiled. “There was some degree of magical training for all dragons when the Freehold ruled Essos, you know. Much like everyone here breeds the sheep to make sure they survive and thrive in their pastures, the dragonlords were breeding and helping their bonded develop new skills.”

“Hotter flames, then?”

“Longer flames,” her sister corrected. “The greatest danger when you try to confront non-draconic threats is when you dive to attack them. The further away Moondancer can strike, the fewer risks for my Bonded and myself.”

Rhaena wished she could say her sister was paranoiac, but since this was a problem which had killed Jacaerys at the Battle of the Gullet, it was difficult to argue against it.

“And are you able to have good results from this training?”

“Oh yes, it is quite productive.”

Rhaena tried to not feel anxious. To obtain results so fast, Baela must have once again dipped her fingers into a pool of sorcery.

“You should be careful, sister. You know-“

“Yes, sorcery is a sword without a hilt, Rhae. I have not forgotten. But our dragons are magic. I need to understand the lore. And we have lost so much...our flames were so close to flickering out entirely by the end of the Dance.”

“Right...but be careful, please. I don’t want to lose you.”

“You won’t.” Her twin placed her hands between hers. “I promise you, we will fly for many years together.”

**Julio of the Woods, First Moon of 140AC, edge of the Dark Wald, not far from the fisher village of Tanex, Pentoshi lands**

Julio’s hut was at the edge of the Dark Wald, and he liked it that way.

When he had left Pentos more than a decade ago, he had been tired of this cursed city, of the crowds always shouting in his ears.

But above all, he had been tired of hearing the word profit.

Profit, profit, profit.

Sometimes, he thought that was the only thing the Pentoshi understood.

Here in the Dark Wald he hadn’t to care about that anymore.

When he woke up every day, it was to the song of birds and the soft whisper of the nearby river.

The winters were hard, of course, but with the Dark Wald on his doorstep, he was never short of wood to burn.

Here on the frontier, you could be a woodcutter, a hunter, and a farmer, and no one cared. Julio exchanged the wood and the venison he didn’t need for the metal the merchants regularly brought to Tanex.

“I think it’s time to go to the village, my friend. I think I need a few more arrows now that you broke the ones I had.” The dead boar of course didn’t answer.

This really was a superb male of its species, easily arriving to his belt, and the long tusks had resisted hundreds of clashes during its life.

Honestly, if the black-furred animal hadn’t been so close to his home, Julio wouldn’t have bothered. Adult boars like this one couldn’t be transported alone; you needed four strong men for this, and preparing the meat was also a complicated affair.

But so close to his home, there hadn’t been a choice. Last time he had barricaded himself in his home, the boar had devastated everything in his hungry quest for mushrooms and edible delicacies.

“Yes, I think you are going to be incredibly popular, my friend. We’re on the eve of winter, and someone like you is enough for a feast of-“

The wind turned, and suddenly, he smelled the smoke.

Julio reacted fast, rushing to his hut, but it didn’t come from his home.

Yet the acrid smell was getting more and more pungent.

That was when the morning fog lifted, and what he had been taking for a cloud darker than the others was in reality a large plume of smoke.

“It’s Tanex,” he mumbled in stupefaction. “It has to be. This kind of fire...the entire village has to be burning.” His decision was taken in the blink of an eye. “I have to help them.”

Julio closed the door of his home and abandoned the dead boar immediately before running west. Of course, he was not so much a young man anymore, and the hill protecting his home from the worst of the winds was quite up to the task of tiring him.

Still, the former Pentoshi tradesman persevered, and he reached the top-

He was greeted by a sight he never had before.

Men, women, and children were fleeing in his direction.

There had to be-

This had to be the entire population of Tanex, or close to it that it didn’t make any difference.

And the villagers didn’t come alone.

Pigs, sheep, and shepherd dogs were running with them.

Bags of grain had been strapped on the animals’ backs, when it was not the young children.

It was a flow of humanity running, and it ran eastwards.

And as they approached, Julio could see all too clearly the terror and the despair on their faces, be they young or old.

“Tano!” For all the screams and the chaos of this mass of animals and humans, Julio quickly recognised some familiar visages. “What is happening?”

“The Braavosi are coming!”

“But...” it was completely ridiculous. What had Tanex that could interest a powerful Free City? They didn’t earn enough to be worth the tax-collectors Pentos said to the small cities of the coast. “But we’ve always lived in good peace with them.”

“They’ve gone completely crazy!” the senior fisherman of the village spat. “They were screaming ‘death to the slavers’! We had to flee!”

This didn’t make any sense.

“You do not own any slaves.” There may be one or two men born with chains around his throat, but here on the frontier, they were quickly freed. Fishermen and woodcutters couldn’t afford to spend every day guarding a prisoner, and it was all too easy for people to escape in the wilderness.

“They arrived with a dozen galleys and hundreds of men! I wasn’t about to speak with them!”

This was fair.

Frighteningly, though, the families of Tanex were continuing to run eastwards, straight towards the Dark Wald.

“My home is your home, Tano, but I have to warn you, though I killed a boar this morning, I don’t have-“

“Julio,” the robust fisherman shook his head. “We are pursued. We can’t stop at your hut. We have to take refuge in the Dark Wald.”

The wind grew stronger, and more acrid smoke assaulted his nose.

For it to be so strong, for the flames to be visible, the flames must have devoured entirely Tanex.

“Tano, winter is here! If we abandon everything-“

“I know, my friend. I know. But they are soldiers. You know what they will do to our families if we fall into their hands.”

Yes, yes he knew.

“Into the Dark Wald,” the woodsman grimaced. “If you have a donkey that can handle the weight, I have some furs and dry wood that can be loaded on its back.”

**Lord Joffrey Cuy, First Moon of 140AC, King’s Landing**

Joffrey Cuy had never hidden the discomfort the Dungeon of the Red Keep gave him.

The grisly floors were the true legacy of Maegor the Cruel, and if he had a choice, the Master of Whisperers would have stayed far away from them. And if it had been in his power, he would have closed the Dark Cells.

But as the dark mood of his King was evident this morning, Joffrey figured raising his voice would do nothing but rouse the dragon’s anger.

“Winter seems to always bring more problems.”

“Yes, your Grace,” this assertion had the merit of being always true, unfortunately. “Lord Shermer will be missed.”

And he was sincere. Despite their difference of age, his esteem for the white-bearded Reacher had been real. Alas, the Stranger had come yesterday for the Lord Commander of the City’s Watch. The old man had passed away in his sleep peacefully. More than a few times, he had heard several courtiers express their envy: passing away in your sleep painlessly surrounded by your family was not a bad way to leave this world.

“I was thinking about Lord Florent to replace him.” Joffrey struggled to hide his frown.

“The man is not well-liked in the Reach, your Grace.” And the first times he had met the long-eared Lord of Brightwater Keep, Joffrey had not been astonished by his competence. “I would advise a more competent choice. Someone with experience of maintaining the peace of the realm.”

“We will see.” The King said noncommittally. “House Staedmon?”

“It seems that some rumours about slavers were spread by Lord Lester to cover some of his own foulness.” Seriously, what had possessed the man to believe he could win a fight with Storm’s End? “He has agreed to take the black, and his second son finally reappeared to take up the Lordship.”

“Gulian Staedmon?”

“Yes, your Grace.” Joffrey had only a limited number of men around Broad Arch in the previous years, and alas this issue had caused no end of trouble. That Lord Lester Staedmon and his sons had managed to grab defeat from what should have been a splendid victory in the Game of Thrones had also to be mentioned. Adrian Baratheon born Staedmon had believed shamelessly that the entire realm would ignore his indiscretions as a sword-swallower. And unfortunately, it looked like his younger brother was as bad as he was – it would take some massive effort to be *worse*.

“The bastard of Broad Arch?”

“He chose to enter the service of Lady Baratheon, your Grace.” The spymaster answered.

“Bastards are treacherous in nature. This is true no matter the House, it seems.”

This was a way to look at it. Another was to wonder what Lord Lester hoped to achieve. If your only goal was to have your bastard close to you in order to humiliate him constantly, treachery was to be expected. Joffrey didn’t fancy himself to be the equal of Larys Strong in intelligence, but when someone was insulted, given a few copper coins for a service of gold, and constantly belittled for good deeds, the end of the tale was really predictable.

House Staedmon had been really lucky this time. Or maybe not. Replacing the Lord with the boy born on the wrong side of the sheets may have given the lands of Broad Arch some chance to rebuild. With Gulian Staedmon in charge, Joffrey knew it was going to be a long and unpleasant decade for everyone sworn to this Noble House.

“As you say, your Grace.” Joffrey didn’t approve, but there was nothing he could do to change the King’s mood. “On a totally different subject, the village of Tumbleton has been nearly entirely destroyed again. The late autumn flooding was particularly catastrophic.”

“Lord Willam will give them a tax exemption. And I suppose Lord Marq will have to transport some grain by barge.”

The dark mood of the King was *really* evident this morning. Of course, everyone knew the end of the Queen’s pregnancy was near, and it was not an easy one. And yes, Her Grace was truly a Baratheon. If before this last year, her wrath had been acknowledged as inferior to her sister ruling in the Stormlands, this was no longer the case.

“We have also the confirmation that Braavos and Pentos are at war. There was some fighting between sellsails of east of Massey’s Hook. Lord Bar Emmon swears the Braavosi sellsail was in the right, and is extremely eager to arm a few ships to fight by the Titan’s side.”

“Denied,” King Daeron replied immediately. “We already have enough problems in our realm to not involve ourselves in the quarrels of the Free Cities. The Velaryons did it, and though we gave the final push, the Triarchy brought an immense fleet to sack Driftmark.”

And for both sides, it had been a complete disaster. The Blacks had lost a dragon and Jacaerys Strong in the Battle of the Gullet. Spicetown had been sacked, and the losses of the Velaryon Navy had been awful. On the other hand, the blockade of Blackwater Bay had not been broken by then, and the sheer butchery on the Essossi ships had ensured the destruction of the Triarchy.

“I will write personally to Lord Bar Emmon, your Grace.”

“Yes. He is to observe, not to begin a war.” Daeron breathed out. “Now, you did tell me you had caught a spy of the Blacks?”

The gaolers opened the way and the locks, and their steps led them into the cells below the blood-coloured tower.

As always, the torches were the only source of light, and for the prisoners, it was always worse, for the feeble lights had to go through their bars.

It was not the Black Cells; there were no wooden doors to engulf those inside into an eternal night.

But it was already bad enough. The smells were foul, the atmosphere sinister and reeking of cruelty. And while there was a cat hunting in the corridors, the rats always came back.

It didn’t take long to arrive to the cell.

“Your Grace, I believe you already met Wisdom Belis. By the time the guards I sent caught him, he was busy throwing an impressive number of parchments into a fire. Unfortunately for him, I could recognise the writing of Lady Sabitha Frey on some of those he didn’t have the time to burn.”

Many men fell to their knees and implored pity when their crimes were discovered.

The Alchemist was not one of those men.

“If I am guilty, it is of the simple pursuit of knowledge!” the defiance was clear.

A guard struck him through the bars for his disrespect.

“You stand in front of the King, show some respect!”

“I’m sorry, *your Grace*.”

The Master of Whisperers sighed. He preferred the defiant tone to the pure mockery.

“Why?” the King asked. “You were one of the Wisdoms who received the news of what we think the Black Queen is trying to do. You worked upon the properties of dragon bone and dung-“

Belis cackled.

“Well, I knew everything about that for two decades, your Grace.”

“Really.”

“Really,” Joffrey had the feeling the Alchemist was rolling his eyes. “Did you think the Black Queen was the first to find it out? No, your Grace. If you had the figures for Driftmark grain harvests, you would have realised far sooner than there was more than imported Essossi practises to their good fortunes.”

“They poured dragon dung onto their fields,” the Reacher spymaster guessed coldly.

“With strong rotations between the different parts of the island,” the Wisdom confirmed. “They had Meleys, Vhagar, and Seasmoke for all these years. But they had to be careful. Dragon dung does not make really the soil more fertile. Once you use it for a harvest, it is better to let the fields rest for one season. Still, it contributed to the wealth of the Sea Snake, like many other things.”

And now that the dragons were gone from Driftmark, the prosperity of House Velaryon was gone – though the lack of dragons was only one of the reasons among many.

That said, this lack of dragon dung had been unavoidable. The bigger dragon, the more dung would exist to act as some sort of unnatural manure. And the big dragons were gone. Vhagar ending up to be ridden by Aemond Targaryen must have already a heavy blow by itself.

Joffrey Cuy grimaced internally. Yes, the anger House Velaryon had felt when the King’s brother had claimed the giant beast must have been quite genuine.

“You betrayed your rightful King because you wanted more *knowledge*?”

Joffrey knew that voice. It rarely came out, but it was a sign the King was truly furious. The Master of Whisperers prayed the Alchemist was going to be reasonable-

“You aren’t this kingdom’s rightful King. The King’s will was very clear: Queen Rhaenyra was to succeed him, and now she is dead, Queen Baela has the best claim to don the crown. You are just a Hightower trying to pass as a dragonlord, *your Grace*. Did you really think men of knowledge were going to forget your usurpation and your brothers’ kinslaying?”

The guards struck Belis again. While there were a few moans of pain, the Wisdom endured the beating with impressive courage.

“Did you arrest his apprentices and his acolytes?”

“Half of them, Joffrey admitted. “The others are missing.”

“They must be landing at Saltpans as we speak,” Belis ‘helpfully’ declared.

“What did you give Lady Frey?”

The traitor smiled.

“Our Order was once really favoured by Queen Visenya, you know? After her death, her son agreed that in exchange of our loyalty, we were to keep several precious manuscripts that had been written per her will.”

“Including, I suppose,” King Daeron Targaryen glared murderously at the Wisdom, “the secret of the Valyrian roads.”

“No,” Belis disagreed. “I wish I could take the fame for it, but the first Black Road was already in the process of being built before the exchanges became *profitable* for both sides. The Queen found out the knowledge from someone, but it wasn’t from someone of the Alchemist’s Guild.”

This, alas, didn’t decrease the anger of the King.

“I suppose I will not be allowed to take the Black?”

“You suppose correctly,” the son of Alicent Hightower snarled. “You will be executed tomorrow, and since you showed no repentance for your crimes, you will share the fate of common traitors.”

Joffrey really thought the Wisdom was going to beg or at last let fear take him.

It didn’t happen.

“As long as my body is burned afterwards,” the Alchemist shrugged like his impending demise was an unpleasant way to pass his time. “The dreams. Did they come?”

Joffrey had thought his King wanted to give the Wisdom to Tessarion before. He was wrong. Now there was no need for great imagination to see Daeron Targaryen wanted to see the Alchemist roasted and in the stomach of his dragon.

“Yes, I thought you might have them. The Pact was broken, and it has its consequences...”

The cackling resumed, and no matter how many times the guards struck him, Belis didn’t stop it for as long as they stayed in this level of the royal prison.

**Lord Roland Arryn, First Moon of 140AC, the Guild House, Saltpans**

Roland had not known the Queen’s sister would attend court today in Saltpans. Her Majesty was often sending him everywhere she felt he needed to learn something, and Tristan was now joking in his letters that he must be the adventurer of the family in the Riverlands.

Nonetheless, this was a welcome surprise.

And the smallfolk of Saltpans had rejoiced learning Morning was here.

The pink-scaled dragon was popular and didn’t require the ‘sheep offerings’ Sheepstealer wanted every time.

And it was a really pretty dragon, Roland had to admit. The winter’s sun was not bringing much light, but the radiance of the pink scales was such you would almost believe the Princess’ dragon was made of Essossi pink rubies.

This was the least boring part of the day. Once the dragons were fed, the Targaryen guards took position so that the dragons had a large amount of space for themselves at the centre of the market square, and everyone entered the Guild House.

It wasn’t a true building for the many, many Guilds of the Bay of Crabs, really.

It had been intended that way at first, certainly, but as the Queen held court increasingly frequently inside Saltpans, the merchants had donated the building to Her Majesty, and the Guilds had funded another administrative building closer to the docks.

Roland found he rather liked it.

This was a rather austere building, but it had large windows on the front, made of the crude glass the kingdom was able to create since a few years. It was not as good as Myrish glass, of course, but it made the Guild House far livelier than anything of Gulltown.

The large stairs and the brutal simplicity of some wings, however, were pure Northern. The new Heir to the Eyrie consoled himself with the knowledge there were a few falcon statues here and there.

And studying his surroundings would have to wait, for he had to make sure to not trample the feet of anyone nearby.

Yes, there were way too many people inside the Guild House.

It had a large ‘Guild Hall’, but it had been thought five hundred people would attend at any time. Between the highborn, the merchants, and the septons, there had to be far more souls inside now, and the guards had barred the way to many people once they saw the Guild House was full.

For all this massive assembly of men and women, some sort of order was enforced.

In the distance, a dragon roared – probably Moondancer – and silence came as a result.

The first audiences were short and to the point. Lucas Wode and a few other knights announced their intention to don the black and join the Night’s Watch. The Queen graciously consented to the Lord Commander of her Queensguard to knight them before their ship left for Eastwatch. The young Arryn was impressed by their sacrifice. Winter had begun now, and the Wall must be the very antechamber of a Freezing Hell now.

There were several exchanges, and then time came for the eulogies. Lord Kermit Tully was the Lord Paramount of the Riverlands, and thus prayers were said in memory of his defunct wife, too quickly taken away by the Gods from this world. This wasn’t the only death from the various diseases brought by the cold season, but it was certainly the most prominent, as it was the Lady of Riverrun herself who had been burned on the Red Fork.

The most prominent death of the Ladies of the Realm, but there were others. Their equivalent of the High Septon was dead too. Roland didn’t remember what title he had been using, but it was *their* High Septon, not the lickspittle drinking the words of the Greens inside his golden sept of King’s Landing.

Roland didn’t know much about the internal politics of the Faith, but you only had to look at the distrustful expressions of each highly-ranked septon to know the religious succession promised to be difficult.

It was the first time voices were raised in the Queen’s presence. It didn’t last long.

“Spiritual matters don’t require shouting, Arch-Septon Hubert.”

The white-robed priest immediately showed contrition and bowed.

“My apologies, your Majesty, I believe I ceased to consider the Father’s teachings for a moment. I will be more careful of my words. But I must bring forwards a point which is of paramount importance.”

“Yes?”

“The title of Arch-Septon is also used by the blasphemers of the South.” The Riverlanders septon declared with a confidence that was downright impressive. “The Holy Council of Stony Sept has gathered and voted to follow the teachings of the seven-pointed stars as was first written by the sacred scriptures. I formally beseech you, your Majesty, to abolish the title of Arch-Septon. The spiritual shepherd of Stony Sept must offer faith and guidance; let it be known an Exarch now guides the spirituals needs of the Faithful in the Riverlands.”

“The title of Exarch of the West has never been taken in millennia!” a septon of White Harbor argued back.

This was no open battle, of course, but the divisions were there. Septons of Wayfarer’s Rest and Riverrun were insinuating the Vale septons had some doctrinal problems, and of course, the Northerners of the Faith were no shy at admitting they took some liberties with the holy texts.

Roland hoped this wasn’t going to end in more debates. Fortunately, the Queen ordered the matter closed after urging the septons to find some common ground. The son of Isembard Arryn approved, but he didn’t know how much the doctrinal issues could be mended: the Most Devout were on the other side of the frontier, and not a single Black Septon listened to Oldtown these days anyway.

Boredom returned rapidly in the next turns of hourglasses. The crazy Myrish inventor was back, with one of his large ‘clocks-cloaks’. There were quite a few appeals to the Queen’s Justice: some knights sworn to House Mooton and House Darry were arguing several orchards and mills were theirs by right. Some merchants wanted to lower the taxes on the Northern wool, and were rebuffed by the silver-haired sovereign.

“But your Majesty, the coat of the Fork Sheep-“

“It is good to repel water, makes for easy shearing, and provides wool which is, plainly spoken, extremely coarse. I know. I see ten disappear in Sheepstealer’s maw every moon. Do you think there is anything I ignore about Fork Sheep?”

Roland snickered, for the expressions of several merchants were just priceless. And he wasn’t the only one to do so.

“No, the taxes stay as they are. If you desire better wool, find a way to breed Fork Sheep with the soft inner wool of the Wall Sheep.”

“Next petitioner!” The herald called.

The next affair was far less interesting: some Pentoshi merchants wanted to buy iron and steel everywhere in the Bay of Crabs. Roland didn’t see what the problem was, but apparently there was some agitation, and Maidenpool and Gulltown merchants supported the move.

There were two pleas from knights sworn to House Staunton, one Northerner who wanted to hire some Ironborn to build a harbour in a bay he didn’t even know the existence of, and more petitions that were more boring than the previous ones.

Roland yawned.

“And I can assure you, your Majesty, that piracy in the Narrow Sea is becoming a terrible danger to all your merchant ships! We humbly ask for the protection of the Royal Navy!”

“The Royal Navy is already acting to protect trade,” Queen Baela answered. Now that the two sisters were side by side, no one would mistake anymore the Black Queen for her twin. Princess Rhaena had gained some weight for her pregnancies, and was donning a lot of grey furs besides. Her Majesty, on the other hand, was as sharp as a blade, and her black winter clothes tried to imitate the shape of dragon scales.

“Of course, your Majesty. But the merchants of your realm would be more reassured if a Master of Ships was named soon, for there are-“

“I have offered the seat of Master of Ships to Lord Clement Celtigar, Lord of Claw Isle.” This had to be the second time today the Queen silenced the merchants like it took no effort. “He accepted. Naturally, his ship is still on the way, and as such I thought to wait for a few days for his arrival, but since the curiosity of some of my bannersmen has to be satisfied...”

Several excited whispers and cheers followed.

“Next petitioner!”

**Captain Rollo Lurio, First Moon of 140AC, Pentoshi village of Ragyzares**

“THE FIRST LAW! DEATH TO THE SLAVERS!”

“GO AND TAKE YOUR FIRST LAW TO THE DEMONS!”

SHTAK!

Rollo snarled as three more of his men fell.

“Damn these Myrish crossbows! I knew-“

“Who had this brilliant idea of forgo mail in the first place?”

“Shut up!”

“Bring the archers and the shields!”

Smoke and the scent of death were everywhere.

Twice, Rollo nearly fell as the ground was slippery with all the blood and corpses.

The eyes of a dead woman met his. Accusing him. Judging him.

“Our crusade of freedom is just,” the Braavosi Captain spat. “Soon, slavers will have nowhere to flee to.”

SHTAK!

This time, none of his men fell. And there were only two black-coloured arrows.

“I think they’re beginning to be a bit short on projectiles, Captain.”

“It didn’t come soon enough!” He retorted. “Come on! I want to know what a demi-company of crossbowmen is doing here when the Admiral told us it was just a tiny village of fishermen!”

“THE FIRST LAW!”

“DEATH TO THE SLAVERS!”

“THE SEA AND LIBERTY!”

The palisade was already broken in three places; breaking through was not a difficult task.

But Rollo followed his men inside, the warmth that slammed into his face was not one of a winter day.

“FIRE! THE SLAVER BASTARDS SET THE VILLAGE AFLAME!”

“KILL THEM! KILL THE BASTARDS!

“OFFER THEM NO MERCY! THEY WILL SOON FEED THE FISHES!”

Rollo tried to shout some orders, but it was too late.

Over seventy men had already been lost, and the men wanted their vengeance.

They wanted to bleed the enemy.

They fell like sea wolves upon the last Pentoshi and soon a storm of screams and agony rose to the skies, so powerful the carrion birds fled on their dark wings.

**Ser Daeron Velaryon, First Moon of 140AC, somewhere west of Saltpans**

From the top of the hill, Saltpans shone like a polished gemstone. Water almost surrounded it, between the Trident and the Bay of Crabs, and when there was some sun, like it was the case today, it became something fitting for paintings and songs.

It was the greatest city of the Riverlands, though admittedly, with only Fairmarket as competition, it wasn’t like it was that hard to make the claim. But one glance could tell you it was no King’s Landing. The great streets were paved and incredibly large. Plenty of trees had been planted on the sides of the roads. A canal and a small aqueduct had been built to bring fresh water to the fountains. And Saltpans smelled like salt, trade, and the sea, unlike the capital of the Conqueror that had bent the knee to the Greens.

Arguably, Saltpans had no true walls – the two feet-tall shepherd walls were more to mark the boundaries of the markets and the limit of the sheep pastures. But this would change in time, of that Daeron was certain. According to his merchant contacts, already twenty thousand souls called this city home, and it was more the will to not replicate the mistakes of the Conqueror’s city that slowed down the expansion in these lands.

All of this was naturally good for trade...and House Velaryon.

And Daeron could guess it wasn’t the reason the Queen had summoned him here. If it was, the meeting would have taken place in the Guild House, surrounded by nobles and the like.

The presence of Moondancer masticating the flesh of a goat behind her was another important clue of the message.

“Starting a war with Braavos will not solve the economic difficulties of House Velaryon.” Daeron had expected bluntness at some point. Nevertheless, the opening caught him off-guard.

“There are concerns-“

The purples eyes turned towards him, and in a couple of heartbeats, it was suddenly easy to recall Queen Baela was the daughter of the Rogue Prince.

“I am a far better candidate for the seat of Master of Ships than Lord Celtigar, your Majesty.”

“Lord Celtigar has greater experience of the coin matters needed to build and maintain a fleet,” the silver-haired Queen retorted. “And he won’t start a war without my permission.”

The audience wasn’t unfolding at all like Daeron wanted.

In the end, it was better to be honest. Queen Baela was a cousin, after all, born of Lady Laena Velaryon. Trying to influence the merchants behind the scenes had not worked, so a new approach was needed.

“Driftmark is in a perilous situation,” Daeron admitted in all honesty. “While the Sea Snake and all Lords Velaryon who came after him didn’t acknowledge it in front of the Iron Throne, House Velaryon has always relied upon dominating the trade of Blackwater Bay and siphoning the money off the Crownlands House. Now, the latest laws of the Iron Throne have raised the customs tariffs so high we effectively can’t trade anymore with King’s Landing and Duskendale. In addition to that, we have a new enemy in the person of Lord Bar Emmon. The Lord of Sharp Point and his friends have made sure we are unwelcome from the Wendwater to Massey’s Hook. Your Majesty, Blackwater Bay is lost to us now.”

“Alyn didn’t tell me it was this bad.”

“Lord Velaryon didn’t want to worry your Majesty,” and Alyn, for all his flaws, was always an optimistic soul. “And I have to admit, it got worse after his departure. Many Green Lords somewhat feared him. With him far away, fear has been replaced by contempt.”

The Black Queen didn’t answer, and her eyes turned towards Saltpans. Daeron took it as a sign to continue.

“My ships and all those flying the colours of House Velaryon have been forced to reorient our trade interests, your Majesty.”

“You have reopened plenty of mines on Westmark and Stonemont, transform the iron ore there, and then you sent it to Seagard when it is transformed into proper weapons. And after that, you ship it by canal and sea wherever greater profit awaits you.”

“Yes.” Lord Grafton must have informed the Queen of what they did. “And now Pentos is willing to buy everything we offer and more.”

And since there were moderate taxes for the Crown both at Saltpans and elsewhere, it wasn’t like the Targaryen tax-collectors were disapproving.

“If I understand well, your problem is not the Velaryon merchant fleet being useless. It is that the location of Driftmark is becoming a hindrance instead of an asset. I don’t know if the Crown can do anything to compensate that.”

“Some proper garrison would help,” Daeron tried. “Most of our fleet is now outside of Blackwater Bay at any given time. And the Greens are becoming increasingly aggressive.”

But to his disappointment, the Black Queen shook her head.

“It’s too risky. With Dragonstone in enemy hands and the Royal Fleet of King’s Landing being rebuilt, all the men I would send to Driftmark would be caught into a trap unless I send a dragon every time there is trouble. And there aren’t enough of them in the first place.”

The son of Vaemond Velaryon had been afraid of that. Sheepstealer was guarding the western border, and Morning was staying in the North. That left only Moondancer for the east.

“And yes, I am aware the loss of dragon dung represented a significant loss of harvest yield for Driftmark.” The royal dragon emitted a loud groan. “No, you won’t have more goats today. I am not going to fatten you up!”

The dragon sniffed several times, before admitting the ploy to obtain more food had been foiled. The draconic body changed its posture for a very snake-like behaviour, and went for a nap.

The Queen turned her attention towards him again.

“As I was saying, I am not going to send soldiers and highborn to Driftmark. Nor am I going to hold court here. Driftmark can’t be defended without dragons, and there are too few dragonriders of age today.”

And her voice clearly indicated Her Majesty was not going to change her mind on the subject.

“By your will, Your Majesty.” Daeron answered.

“But it must be said, family is important. And since the beginning of my reign, I have not seen my dear cousin Daenaera at court.”

“You wish to make my daughter one of your handmaidens, your Majesty?”

The Black Queen chuckled.

“I was more thinking about a companion for all her cousins and the children we are trying to raise as best as we can. She will be fourteen soon, no?”

“Thirteen in two moons, your Majesty.” Daeron thought quickly. On the one hand, it was a reminder of the Queen’s power. On the other hand, his House – minus Alyn Velaryon – had been exiled in all but name from court after the Dance. And for all his efforts, he had not managed to secure a betrothal for his daughter. “I will send the bird to Driftmark today, and her ship will arrive as fast as possible.”

“Good.” The Queen smiled, and Daeron had to concede that for all her simple black clothes and warrior style, the daughter of Laena Velaryon was a beautiful woman, even if she put far less effort into it than her twin sister.

The Captain of the *True Heart* hesitated, before pushing ahead. The stakes were too important.

“Your Majesty, do you want my humble opinion on the war between Braavos and Pentos?”

“Speak your mind, Ser.”

“Thank you, your Majesty. I believe it would be a grave mistake to let Pentos be destroyed by Braavos.”

“The Pentoshi are slavers,” the purple eyes did not seem angry, at least. “And Lord Corlys always said that slavery was synonymous with laziness, and cruelty.”

“Slavery is a disgusting institution,” Daeron rapidly agreed. “But much like the thrall system which existed in the Iron Islands before they burned, it is horribly inefficient. How many men are tied up in the southern Pentoshi lands as overseers of their pepper plantations because of slavery? How much do the merchants of the City of Profit lose every year for they don’t think they can trust their servants on their own? Pentos is a slaver city, and it is because it is one that it does not represent a threat to your kingdom, your Majesty.”

“Continue.”

“Braavos, on the other hand, does worry me,” he freely admitted. “It is not a slaver city, and it never was one. It is inhabited by ambitious and vigorous people. And now they are burning the old merchant foundations for something fiery and uncontrollable.”

“The Sealord has a far bigger fleet than ours, but he has no army worth the name.”

“The new Sealord has no army worth the name *this year*,” Daeron emphasized the last two words, “if they seize the Pentoshi heartlands, they will have a gigantic granary at their disposal. They will be able to feed their navy and to build an army. And your Majesty will have a Free City on the other side of the Narrow Sea that has no love for the descendants of Valyria.”

The argument missed, he could see it immediately.

“The Sealord has never returned the three eggs stolen during the reign of Jaehaerys the First.”

This point found a far better reception, to his satisfaction.

“The eggs must have turned to stone now, so far from the Dragonmount,” Queen Baela Targaryen murmured, though by her voice, it sounded like she was trying hard to convince herself of it.

Daeron waited patiently.

“What do you want, cousin?”

“I want to continue trading with Pentos, your Majesty. Selling them weapons and iron is extremely profitable, and in the realm’s best interest.”

“The Braavosi are going to try to stop you.”

“I expect many so-called ‘sellsails’ wait between Crackclaw Point and the Pentos,” and yes, they were likely going to be Braavosi captains with official Letters of Marque, though the Sealord would pretend they weren’t. “But our ships are well-armed. We can defend our merchants by sailing in convoys.”

“With this weather?”

“We Velaryons spend half of our life on the waves,” Daeron proudly said before shrugging. “I freely admit we won’t be able to cross the Narrow Sea as often as we do it in summer, but we have good crews and there are safe harbours between Saltpans and Driftmark. We will be able to find refuges from the bad weather far easier than the Braavosi.”

Then there was only the waiting.

“You will defend your ships and only those ships.” The Black Queen finally said. “Sail in convoys and under your true colours. Do not play the games of the Free Cities when it comes to colours, honour, and selling to one side before turning the cloak and selling to the other army.”

“Yes, your Majesty. And if the Braavosi protest?”

“If they are so arrogant as to think they can stop all foreign trade in the Narrow Sea by the Sealord’s will, I’m afraid I will have to remind them that I have a dragon, and they don’t.” The royal purple eyes stared aggressively. “But I will repeat, Ser, that I don’t want war. The Lords of the Realm aren’t eager for any bloodshed which doesn’t involve giving a beating to the Greens either. Snow falls on the Twins, and it is going to be worse in the next fortnights. Winter is not a season of war. Sail with your hulls filled with wealth, by all means, but let the kingdom enjoy its peace. Are my words easy to understand?”

“Yes, your Majesty, they are.”

**King Daeron Targaryen, First Moon of 139AC, the Red Keep, King’s Landing**

This was the fourth time, and if anything, Daeron thoughts the screams were getting worse each time it happened.

Maybe it was his imagination.

Maester Samuel had certainly refused to answer that question, which was damning by itself.

Many said that the birthing bed was the women’s battlefield, but Daeron tended to have his doubts. On a battlefield, when the men shouted, it was to give themselves courage and insult the enemy. When the men-at-arms and the knights were in pain, they were saving all their strength to survive another day. And of course there were still plenty of deserters and men who fell ill. Many men didn’t die on the field of battle. They held their last breath away from it.

It was an attempt to think about something else.

It really didn’t work.

Arianne’s screams made sure of that.

Daeron knew this was likely the last time for several seasons they would try to make a child. Viserys, Aemon and Baelor were healthy and filled with life, and a pregnancy every two year was taking its toll upon his wife.

As pleasurable as the sex was, a fourth child was enough. As long as Daeron himself lived long enough to teach them and see them grow into adulthood, the future of his line was not in doubt.

Yes, this was for the better. Four sons, or three sons and one daughter, would be enough. Besides, winter had come, and it would be at least a couple of years before summer returned. They were already busy enough to find tutors for Aemon and Baelor as it was. And it was better to not emulate the Conciliator. The Old King had enjoyed the blessings of the Seven by having superb sons surrounding him in the summer of his life, only for tragedies to arrive later and his daughters to grow selfish and uncontrollable. Rhaenyra of Dragonstone was not the first woman to abuse the power of House Targaryen, just the first one who sat a few moons on the Iron Throne.

Mercifully, the screams chose this moment to end.

Footsteps were heard.

It wasn’t coming from the seven members of his Kingsguard; three of them were right now by his side, and they all could have been statues, vigilant sentinels of white and steel.

There were more footsteps.

There was more agitation.

And at last, the door opened, and Maester Samuel of the White Chain stepped out.

“Your Grace,” the old man saluted. “The birth was...difficult. The Queen will need many days of rest.”

Daeron breathed out in relief. He really had thought for a time...no, no better to not think about it.

“It is good news, Maester.” It took a couple of heartbeats to collect himself. “And...my son?”

“You have a son,” Samuel paused. “And a daughter. The Queen gave birth to twins, your Grace.”

Twins? That was...completely unexpected.

To be fair, it wasn’t completely unexpected; had not Laena Velaryon done it before? And the twins in question were ruling the Black Realm as they spoke. Still, it was all the most surprising. They had thought this was a particular lively baby to come to this world. And-

Never mind.

These were his children, and given that Samuel had come in person to give him the news, they were clearly healthy, as all his sons who had preceded them.

“The Queen was too exhausted to name them, your Grace,” the old Maester said delicately, avoiding the screaming part. “So I wondered, the names-“

“Valerion for the boy,” that had been his choice, “and Alysanne for the girl.” This one had been Arianne’s choice, should they be blessed with a girl...and for the first time, they were.

“Fine names, your Grace. You need only to wait a few more turn of hourglasses, and I will bring them so you can carry your son and your daughter in your arms.”

**Queen Baela Targaryen, First Moon of 140AC, somewhere in the Riverlands**

With two dragons on hand, having a private conversation was as simple as flying away from some time and landing far away from any village and castle.

As for the talks themselves, well, that was why Baela was very grateful to have a competent Mistress of Whisperers.

“Were you going to tell me first that riding your husband had excellent results for your belly, or that the Lord of Winterfell, who also happens to be my Hand, has been doing some riding of his own?” she asked with humour.

Her twin sighed.

“So you know. Lady Sabitha?”

“Yes. Though in the last days, given your choice of favourite foods, I didn’t need her report save as a confirmation. You were fond of honey sweets when you were pregnant the first time. And the same is true of the other foods.”

“My big sister is growing so observant,” Rhaena teased her.

The silver-haired Queen snorted. When you were lived in the same castle as someone, or you took regularly your meals with him or her, it was child’s play to know their favourite foods and drinks.

“But yes, you’re going to be an Aunt, again, sister.”

Baela rolled her eyes.

“Try to make him or her a bit less rambunctious than Daena, please.”

“Why not both? Twins run in the family, it seems.”

Her grunt was one of despair and vexation.

“Anyway, I suppose I will have to delay any plan for being pregnant, since it is only a question of moons before you’re unable to ride Morning.”

The aforementioned dragon, hearing her name, decided to create plenty of smoke before returning to her nap.

Her twin gave her an ironic expression.

“Please, Baela. You were just asking for an excuse to not be pregnant.”

Silence, in many ways, was the best answer when you had a problematic question in front of you.

“You have duties, you know. And you won’t always have sorcery to avoid them.”

“I like riding my husband,” Baela admitted bluntly, “I love having children in my castle. But I really dislike being pregnant.”

“That’s understandable, but no matter how suitable Laena is as your Heiress, you can’t take risks with your succession. You need at least-“

“An Heiress and a spare, yes, I know.” This was annoying, and that her sister was completely right didn’t make it more tolerable. “I will probably try once this winter will be over.”

Her sister looked at her with a mock glare.

“And no, don’t look at me like that. Blood and death are everywhere on the Narrow Sea, I am not going to leave Nettles as our sole dragonrider to defend the kingdom. It would be just too dangerous.”

“Fine,” Rhaena conceded. “And you may very well be right. Let’s go back to the marriage proposal.”

“I don’t think it’s very complicated,” the Black Queen huffed. “Lord Cregan Stark has been staring lustfully like a stag at a certain Lady Blackwood, and said Lady has been making doe eyes at the proud stag...I mean, wolf. And there were several long hunts in the coves of the Riverlands last year, where not many animals were brought back, but where plenty of riding was done.”

This time they both chuckled.

“Do you think the Northerners are a bad influence on us?”

“We’re Valyrians, Rhae. We’re practically the civilisation which invented the ‘heavenly pillow houses’.”

“The Yi-Tish sailors often pretend they were the ones.”

“Screw the Yi-Tish,” she retorted. “Well? When is the marriage supposed to take place?”

“Next moon,” Rhaena informed her. “Assuming you give your approval, of course.”

“It’s really necessary to make sure the belly is not too big, I see.” Still, the Northerners generally did not care about it as long as proper vows were made before the Heart Trees. “I hope it’s not going to cause any succession problems.”

“Solutions have been found in that regard.” Her sister reassured her. “You know of Ramsgate?”

“I know the name,” the purple-eyed Valyrian beauty frowned. “It’s the derelict castle which was built where the Broken Branch River throws itself into the Shivering Sea, right?”

The castle and the lands were on a map in an excellent location, and had the potential to rival House Manderly’s holdings. Unfortunately, whereas the Lords of White Harbor had been able to build a wealthy Lordship, the guidance of House Hornwood had been...not that great.

“Yes. Lord Hornwood is willing to part with some of its lands, if Winterfell pays his debts.”

And this would create a cadet branch of House Stark where one city might arise from the earth one day. It was for sure something not worth exciting oneself about: there was no telling if Alysanne ‘Black Aly’ Blackwood’s children would grow into adulthood and play their part.

“I suppose I can approve and bless the union. Though at the wedding, you can expect me to remind my wild bannersman that there are reasons the blessings are sought for *before* the riding takes place.”

“I thought you would, sister.”

The no-longer-maiden snorted loudly. As if there was any other choice. With only three true kingdoms under her rule, the reality was that Black line needed the North. Or to be more accurate, they needed to develop and make the North prosper. Much like Northern warriors and idle hands moved southwards as winter came, the ancient domain of the former Kings of Winter was so large and so empty it attracted plenty of Valemen and Riverlanders in summer. Now that they had rebuilt the numbers of sheep from the Long Winter after the Dance, the taxes of the North were a big reason there was a surplus of gold and silver in the vaults of the Treasury.

And in a way, the outcome was far more romantic than other scenes taking place near the Trident. Cregan had waited many years to remarry. And his Northern bannersmen had not pushed hard to parade in front of him young maidens. Compare that to the death of Lord Kermit’s wife; the poor woman had just been sent on her final journey on the Red Fork that all the marriageable daughters had descended on Riverrun with indecent haste.

“Any other problems I should be aware of?”

The answer she wished to hear, obviously, was ‘no’. But when had she been that lucky?

“The Night’s Watch.”

“I was told the rebuilding of the New Gift was a success,” she grimaced.

“It is. And so is the Order of the Black Swords, to be honest. But these successes have been won at the expense of the Night’s Watch itself. Save the Royces and a few other Houses which worship the Old Gods, the Valemen and the Riverlanders join the Black Swords. And it has been a long time since no one of the South sent anything but hardened criminals.”

This sadly made sense. King’s Landing had been sending one ship per year to Eastwatch, and this was the only port city of the Greens which did so. Casterly Rock, Oldtown, and Storm’s End had all abandoned the practise...not that it was a really bad thing, in her opinion. Rapists, thieves, crooks, foreign slavers, and many more dark souls may take the oaths, but they had already broken so many of them in the first place their reliability was extremely low.

Yes, of course it was just the Northerners providing the officers to the Night’s Watch, and the rest of the black cloaks involved recruiting the scum of the kingdoms under her rule.

“What do you want me to do, sister? Oaths to the Night’s Watch are for life; this tradition and rule can’t be changed. And this is the reason the Order of the Black Swords is so attractive to my knights’ eyes; because they don’t need to serve for life.”

That and they gained some modest pay for it. As there were very few ways to entertain yourself on the Wall, many men returned with some gold dragons they spent in productive ways after.

“Lord Stark has some ideas, if you’re willing to listen to him when you will visit next moon.”

And if the Lord of Winterfell was not willing to use her sister as more than a glorious messenger, Baela felt she was not going to like these proposals. But then, many things about the Night’s Watch were grim. There was a reason the Southron Lords wanted to avoid thinking about it.

“As long as I am not forced to listen to all the bawdy comments about the ‘riding’ which took place in the bed and outside of it.”

“I wouldn’t count too much on it. Plenty of Northern Lords are going to attend this marriage, you know.”

“I can’t wait to be here,” the Black Queen lied. “Well, at least there will be the hot springs to keep the Northern Winter at bay...”

**Captain Virgo Nhabadar, Second Moon of 140AC, Braavosi corsair *Purple Hunter*, not far from the approaches of the Bay of Pentos**

“We found them, commander.”

“So we did.” Virgo smirked. “You can tell the men to prepare for battle.”

“Commander?” the voice of his second was far more hesitant suddenly. “The Pentoshi ships are trying to hide behind the convoy.”

“Yes, I can see clearly that.” He hadn’t been struck with blindness since noon, so why did his crew keep pestering him with stupid questions? “Too bad for them, this convoy is also a legitimate prize of war.”

“Commander, we have only four ships-of-war here, and the convoy is well-guarded. They fly the seahorse banner of the Sunset Lands too. Last time I checked, we weren’t at war with them.”

“And?” Virgo growled. “Our spies told us what this convoy is transporting! You heard it while the Admiralty’s envoy was telling us! A fortune in iron and steel the scum of the Sunset Lands are selling to the damn slavers!”

“Err...yes, Commander. But they also told us everyone was doing the same.”

“True, but the other bastards aren’t here. This convoy is.”

The Admiralty’s spies hadn’t been able to tell them the value of the steel and everything these ships transported, save it was great. And yes, it was now proved beyond doubt; with eight warships to defend it, the prize was assuredly magnificent.

“Victory favours the bold.” Virgo smiled. “I’m sure we are taking a few liberties with our Letter of Marque, but nobody will complain when we will sell the goods home and our benefactors will take their cut.”

“And the gold in our sailors’ purses will make them the envy of the lagoon when they will repeat the tale of the victory,” his quartermaster arrived with the same predatory expression sharks must have when one was feeding them well. “We will take the weapons they wanted to kill good Braavosi with, and increase the strength of Braavos and our own? What was it not to like?”

“Tell the men to prepare. We have many ships to board, and if the slavers’ friends resist, we will hang them like the rest.”

The wind favoured them, and the ships of his squadron rapidly gained upon their prey. It would have been easy in most circumstances, as the sailors of the Braavosi Navy were the best in the known world, but as the merchant ships were like enormous whales unable to sail faster, this was too easy.

“Looks like Roberto’s *Blue Sword* is going to be the first to bleed the seahorse ships, commander.”

“Best to not be too far behind, otherwise sailors are going to have ideas,” Virgo joked. “We are going to overtake this big cog there. It looks like-“

“By the Moonsinger!”

Virgo turned his head fast enough to see the Blue Sword be targeted by hundreds of arrows and several scorpion bolts.

Impossible. It was impossible, the warships protecting the convoy-

Then the Braavosi corsair focused on the carrack, the ‘prize’ he had thought to be just a slow ‘whale’, a heavy-laden treasure ship ready to be captured.

The carrack was now crawling with men in blue colours, and everywhere they were arrows and sizeable scorpions.

And they used them.

Volley after volley, they used them, while discarding the pieces of wood which had allowed them to masquerade as a merchant ship.

“Tell the *Blue Sword* to break off! Raise the striped yellow flag!”

“They are too close now! They aren’t going to-“

The arrows flew again, and Virgo gritted his teeth as the screams of good Braavosi men were heard.

The *Blue Sword* was taking heavy damage, and one could see men falling into the black sea.

“Commander, the galleys of the seahorse are changing course,” his second informed him. “Their strategy only makes sense if a few of these ‘big merchant carracks’ are warships. They are like shepherd dogs hidden among the sheep, and-“

“It doesn’t matter. We are going to slaughter them and take the very ships they are supposed to defend!”

It was going to be bloody. It was going to be a day of hard fighting. But these were the same sailors who had been bloodily beaten by the Triarchy, despite having dragons on their side!

No, they could deal with them. They were a bit outnumbered, but Braavosi sailors spent their time at sea. They were at home, and they were going to teach the slavers and their allies that the Republic ruled the waves.

“We will give them no quarter,” he swore, “and when dusk will come, the men of the Sunset Land will beg for our forgiveness.”

**Prince Fosco Doriatis, Second Moon of 140AC, the Doriatis Blue Manse, Pentos**

“And so the last ship, having seen what happened to its three fellows, decided it was best to live to fight other battles and fled.”

“The very first defeat suffered by Braavosi sailors in a decade.”

“The very first defeat of Braavosi *corsairs*,” Colombano corrected before sighing. “I’m not even sure of what the Braavosi privateer in command of this lot thought of when he went on to the attack. By the looks of it, he was outnumbered three-to-one, and the Velaryon ships are true seamen.”

Fosco clicked his tongue. He had known the Braavosi sailors were arrogant, but even for them, this seemed like a risky affair. Corsairs, after all, were in it for the profit. Destroying the ship you trusted to earn you a lot of coin was ill-advised.

“Whether he was thinking or not, two ships captured and one sunk is certainly a nice defensive victory.”

Fosco would have preferred that it had been a Pentoshi victory, but it was best to not be ungrateful.

“It is,” his cousin approved. “With all the weapons and the steel we now have, we will be able to arm plenty of companies and supply the sellswords we contracted. Give it two or three more moons, and one more convoy of metal, and I think we will be able to beat the Braavosi *on land*.”

The lack of smile and the insistence of ground-based war...well, it was telling enough.

“I assume the fact these *corsairs* were willing to strike against a convoy ship flying seahorse banners will not be enough to convince the Black Queen to go to war?” the Prince asked.

“Admiral Daeron Velaryon didn’t think so when I spoke with him.” Colombano winced. “I can’t say I disagree. This would have been a far more clear-cut thing if the convoy was made of Velaryon cogs and merchants ships, but the moment they heard there was some armed escort, all our trade captains on the other side of the Narrow Sea decided to try their luck with him. We can insult their memory, but the fact is that our enemies were perfectly in the right to go after certain ships. They just let their greed get out of control and went after the *Velaryon* armed ships, got slaughtered and then boarded by the Sunset sea fighters.”

“Will they try again?” Fosco grimaced at the absurdity of his question. Of course, the Braavosi were going to try again. All the steel they didn’t intercept at sea was going to end up severing the heads of the Sealord’s officers sooner or later. “No, that is the wrong question, isn’t it?”

“It is.”

“What did Marino say? He was at Saltpans when the Velaryon ships left anchor, per your words.”

“The merchants are in favour of war,” the Magister of Doriatis spoke in a disabused tone. “Both Gulltown and Saltpans know very well that the future isn’t going to be one of gold if the Braavosi are in a position to dictate grain prices across half of the Narrow Sea. But on the other side of the Narrow Sea, merchants are not in charge. It’s the Andal nobility which does, and alas, we are slavers in their eyes.”

“And the Black Queen?” After all, the Starks of the North and the Andals were one thing, but if the dragons roared, the Black Realm would go to war.

“The Black Queen remains uninterested about entering war by our side. Marino thinks we won some points because Braavos is clearly the aggressor, and that’s why Daeron Velaryon was able to gain acceptance for his convoy so easily. Unfortunately, unless the Braavosi do something as stupidly idiotic as to attack one of the Black harbours flying their own colours, their involvement is likely to stop there.”

“Not quite the bloodthirsty woman some merchants of King’s Landing are trying to convince everyone she is.”

“Oh, I am sure if the attacks had come from *Green* corsairs, the response would have been far more violent.” Colombano shrugged. “But one must not forget that for all the so-called fires of the Freehold, the dragonlords’ wars were separated by long generations of peace. The dragons sleep soundly, unless they are taken by surprise and roused in anger.”

There was a small temptation to ask if they couldn’t arrange the ‘rousing’ themselves, but the Prince of Pentos immediately abandoned the idea. If it was discovered Pentos was behind it, the City would become nothing more than a gigantic Harrenhal.

No. There was nothing to do but hope the Braavosi would do the unthinkable, and Fosco didn’t think anyone was arrogant enough for that. The Sealord was a murderer and preaching a bloody creed to the mobs, but he wasn’t *that* arrogant.

And all the Faceless Men in the world would do the Braavosi no good if a large dragon descended upon Braavos.

“How fares the war?” he asked the question he had decided to avoid for the better part of the morning.

“Badly,” Colombano admitted. “You’re likely to be informed Palados has been sacked and burned tomorrow.”

This was disastrous, all right.

“We had a militia of five hundred men here.”

“They were completely outmatched.” His cousin had his mask of grimness. “I was sent a hawk before the end. Apparently, it was the entire First Fleet of Admiral Devio Bartarys. Over a dozen big galleasses, three scores of small galleys, and plenty of carracks and other cogs to transport troops and the supplies he needed. The garrison did its best, but I think they killed just enough of them to make them very, very angry.”

This made a fitting epitaph for the prelude of what must have been a nightmarish sack. Braavosi sailors had never been gentle with the slaver ships they captured, but the new Zalyne regime had whipped the mobs into frenzy. Thousands of bravos were marching to war, and they were ready to kill all the Pentoshi who stood in their way.

“Razys, Ragyzares, Diacros, and Palados had almost no slaves to speak of,” the northern fishermen villages and towns had nothing which required shipping slaves to them save one or two exceptions, “if they were willing to visit such bloodshed on settlements which have no slaves, what do they intend to do once they enter the Bay?”

“I don’t know,” Colombano replied, “but I think the last war the Ghiscari lost against the Freehold may be a very unwelcome precedent.” And this war has been the end of the Ghiscari civilisation, no matter what their successors in the Bay of Ghis pretended.

Since the Braavosi didn’t enslave their captives, every Magister and their families would be lucky if they cut their own throats before being captured.

Fosco’s hands shook. Madness. It was just madness.

“Two or three moons, you said?” It was better to latch to a hope, any hope, no matter how unlikely it was.

His cousin nodded.

“In two moons, we will have enough sellswords and freemen under arms to protect the entire Bay against any Braavosi assault. We will have also armed or bought the next best thing to seventy galleys. They will all be lighter than the Braavosi galleys, never mind their galleasses, but we have plenty of crossbows copied from the Myrish models, and more will be built to compensate the losses. One more moon will give us ten more sellsword companies and a few more ships, enough to garrison properly Sidorys and the forts. The other cities up to the coast are also making efforts to improve their defences and restore their walls. By this time, Myr will have its convoys run up, and we will have the income from the pepper sales to pay for more weapons.”

This sounded very impressive, and to be fair, it really was. But it also betrayed how much everyone in Pentos had been content to cede to sellswords and sellsails the defence of Pentoshi interests since the Century of Blood.

“I don’t think it is going to be enough to win,” the Magister of House Doriatis confessed. “Braavos has its never-damned-enough Arsenal, and they can replace their naval losses far more easily than we do. But the weather is rapidly getting worse. And unlike the Sealord, we were just able to formally cancel all our debts to the Iron Bank. In addition to that, we didn’t spend millions on building warships. Now that all Magisters know this is going to be a fight to the death, we have now a truly comfortable amount of resources and gold to defend Pentos.”

“Not a victory, but if we last three more moons, we will be able to drag Braavos into a costly and ruinous war?”

“Yes. And as you imagine-“

“They intend to strangle our entire sea trade before that.” Fosco grimaced. “Yes, I can read a map. Right now they have secured their first bases. Now they’re going to move for the kill. If Sidorys falls-“

“Then we will be half-way into the grave. And unless we get a miracle, I don’t think they will wait three moons before attacking it.”

**No One, Second Moon of 140AC, somewhere on the Valyrian road between Ghoyan Drohe and Pentos**

“Wake up, dreamer.”

The man woke up.

He didn’t remember falling asleep. And-

Ah.

“You should be dead.”

“Yes.”

His target was smiling.

His target almost looked like a kind, old man.

But this was a lie.

“I failed,” the assassin admitted. “But others will come. Valar Morghulis.”

“Yes.” The look of kindness didn’t falter. The man almost could believe it was genuine. Almost. “I know very well how your Order functions. But since I managed to capture you alive, I wanted to speak with you.”

“There is nothing I want to speak of with someone like you.” He replies with iron-clad certainty.

“Then I will do the speaking.” His target’s smile didn’t waver. “I want to speak of *sacrifice*.”

He shuddered. No man should articulate the word like that.

“You see, this is where the imperfection of the High Valyrian tongue was particularly damning. Long ago, it was a renouncement, a voluntary deprivation. But then it became something else. It began to be associated with the ritualistic offerings to the Gods and Goddesses, and it involved the true destruction of what was offered.”

“I know what sacrifice means, Hasturo the Unspeakable.”

“Do you?” His target countered. “I *sacrificed* my family name when I was twelve. But you? Tell me, do you remember anything about the boy you were?”

“I am No One. I am the sword of the Many-Faced God. I am-“

“You are hollow.” And at last the smile disappeared. But he had not expected the emotion which replaced it on his captor’s face: pity. “You let them empty you out inside and outside. And you did it for nothing. True sacrifice is done because the mortal soul wants to obtain *something* in exchange. You took the masks of your Order, and became something with no face.”

“They call us the Faceless Men.” Why did the target bother wasting both of their time?

“No, not Faceless,” the kindly-looking sellsword commander corrects. “You are *nameless*. And it is fitting, for you are a hollowed-out puppet of the Nameless Circle.”

No One shivered. There had been something-

“You felt it, didn’t you? The demons are waiting.”

“Strange words for a man who has committed countless atrocities for a demon.”

“You’re mistaken.” Is the target mad? “I serve the All-Mother, the Black Goat of the Woods, She of a Thousand Young. Therefore my service is not to a demon, but to a *demoness*.”

No One was right. The kind face was just a veil to hide the madness.

“You spoke easily of sacrifices, but when the Dothraki came for you, where was your infernal patron?”

The smile returned.

“Oh, nameless one, one shouldn’t show so easily his ignorance.” The monster chuckled before sobering up. “Yes, let’s speak of the battle of the Three Thousand, as fools love to recall it.”

The sellsword-priest cleared his throat.

“More than two centuries ago, the khalasars were at last united under the line of Khal Mengo Temmuko, Grand Khal under Heaven. By great cunning and alliances, he rode west, ever victorious. He strangled the petty Sarnori nobles in sublime carpets as they had stupidly committed the great crime of slaying his emissaries. The Sarnori Queens became his wives, and all bowed to him in the Dothraki Sea and beyond. Cities diminished in size, and new pastures were opened to the Lords of the Steppes. And when Khal Mengo died, his son Moro continued his work. The Great Khalate expanded east and west, ever victorious. Moro died, but the victories continued. And Great Khal Temmo took the reins of the most formidable khalasar the world had ever seen. This was a time which saw the Dothraki became one of the wealthiest societies of Essos, for at last they controlled all the land trade routes of the known world, while at the same time the daughters of Valyria killed each other.”

This was a twisted version of the truth. The Dothraki were not-

“And so, Khal Temmo rode west, down the Quoyne, and crossed the great forest which separated us from Essaria. It was the greatest force of horse archers in the known world; that much everyone should agree upon. It was a mounted civilisation riding to forge anew the world. It was men, women, children, horses and sheep, united under a single banner. And when the servants of the All-Mother saw it, they knew they would never be able to triumph.”

The admission was surprising. Qohor had tall walls-

“Khal Temmo had bribed the siege engineers of old Essaria to help him,” Hasturo explained as if he was reading his thoughts. “They had even bribed some of our artificers into selling them Valyrian steel. Staying behind the walls and enduring a siege was not going to work. We had only one thing that they didn’t have: the All-Mother. But the sacrifice...”

The Unspeakable seemed suddenly ashamed.

No One snorts.

“Ah yes, the Unsullied. What a sacrifice.”

“You understand nothing, Hollowed One,” Hasturo answered. “The sacrifice wasn’t the Unsullied. The sacrifice was the entire Qohorik army.”

“What?”

“A sacrifice is no true sacrifice if it has no meaning to you.” The sellsword-priest enounced with terrible clarity. “And if the deed you want your deity to perform is near-miraculous, then it is logical the sacrifice must be of the appropriate size. Tens of thousands of fathers, brothers, sisters, and sons went to their deaths, the greatest blood sacrifice our priesthood ever did. And it almost wasn’t enough.”

Hasturo the Unspeakable sighed.

“We cursed the Dothraki. We instilled in their hearts an unnatural hatred of sheep and all animals which weren’t protected by their horse deity. But in exchange, we sacrificed our ability to defend ourselves. Unsullied had been called as an afterthought, and this would be the only force we would ever be able to raise if we wanted the sacrifice to endure.”

“Madness,” the assassin commented.

“Yes,” the Qohorik surprisingly agreed. “At first, it seemed the sacrifice had worked as intended. The next morning, the Dothraki behaved like they all had suddenly lost their skills and legendary aptitude for warfare. They charged again and again into the ranks of the Unsullied, and took losses that they should have never recovered from.”

The kindly-looking monster sighed again.

“But my predecessors forgot to their sorrow that a sacrifice is exactly what you ask for, nothing more, nothing less. We had asked for the All-Mother to pour her savagery, her disdain for armour not made of animal skin, her bloodlust, and more into the Dothraki’s hearts. And She did. But to do that, She had to imbue them with her fertility blessings. The Dothraki would soon be able to make their losses good. And many Qohorik panicked.”

No. No. If he said truly the truth-

“You created the screamers and the ungodly savages every Free City has to deal with today,” No One accused him. “You never released your sorcery, in fear a Great Khal would unite the khalasars again.”

“Fear will push intelligent men to do very stupid things,” Hasturo commented with a thin smile. “And yes, you are absolutely correct.”

“Why not convince your fellow priests to stop this butchery?”

“Do you really think I didn’t try, Nameless One?” The sellsword-priest shook his head. “My peers have grown extremely fond of the sacrifices, forgetting that shedding the blood of slaves and people you have no value for is no true sacrifice. Oh, it keeps the Dothraki disunited and filled with savagery. But they forget that it is not sustainable in the long term. In time, the khalasars will get too huge, and since they are slaughtering in their madness too many sheep, they will invade again and again the lands outside the Dothraki Sea. This madness, as you call it justly, must stop. Otherwise only the fear of salted water shared by the servants of the All-Mother will be the world’s last shield.”

The assassin hoped it was a lie. It had to be a lie! Because if it wasn’t-

“The situation isn’t irreversible. There are still plenty of Dothraki who struggle against the Curse, and who are willing to do their utmost to save their traditions. Some of them ride with the Company of the Goat.”

“And what are you going to do? Kill one million men on one thousand different battlefields?”

“If it was that simple, don’t you think I wouldn’t have already tried?” and these words were enough to remember Hasturo the Unspeakable was a true monster. “No. As long as the Qohorik population is willing to sacrifice itself, no matter how imperfectly and selfishly the sacrifices are made, blood by itself is insufficient. Hope has to come from elsewhere. Fortunately, the Black Goat is not just willing to bless its priests with her bountiful fertility. She is a *messenger*.”

No One didn’t like that.

“Of course, it is easy to say, but the execution is difficult. The All-Mother rules over the Tenth Circle. I have thus to contact a Circle higher than that. That doesn’t leave me with a lot of choices.”

No One felt all his limbs shake and twist.

And then something spoke through his mouth.

“**You**,” it sounded like a beast was growling, “**will not open the way to the Fourteenth Circle**.”

The priest of the Goat laughed.

“You do not give me orders, spawn of the Nameless Circle. And by the way, which one are you? You can’t be the Supreme Overlord, this one was killed by the Black Dread.”

“**We have unmade the Valyrians. We have destroyed their stone-anchors. We have shut the gates of the Circle of Fire and Blood. If you stand against us, you will perish**.”

A dagger was drawn. There was a large gemstone enshrined into the glassy hilt.

It shone like blood.

“**Annataryx Stone**,” the creature which used his mouth hissed.

“The slaves of Valyria, ironically, called them Titan Stones.” The priest of the Black Goat of Qohor chuckled. “Well, this was a truly satisfying conversation. But now I am afraid I need some energy, and your puppet has volunteered itself.”

“**What are you going to do**?”

“If things continue as they are, this war is going to end too soon. Braavos will be victorious. And waiting for another chance is not reasonable at my age. So I am going to raise the storm.”

“**We will send them all to kill you. We will end you and every worshipper of the Fourteen who dares to stand by your side**!”

“Yes, I certainly think you will.” The dagger rose over his head. “But you, Nameless One? You won’t become a new demon of many faces and no name. Forget the Nameless Circle, it is the void which is awaiting you.”

The dagger struck. And No One and the demon inside him roared in agony.

**Admiral Devio Bartarys, second moon of 140AC, Braavosi galleass *Titan’s Sword*, along the Essossi western coast, Narrow Sea**

“I don’t like this, Marco.”

“I know, Admiral.”

“I don’t like this,” Devio Bartarys repeated, feigning to not have heard his loyal aide. “I know we’re still on track to follow the Sealord’s strategy, but I don’t like how we’ve done it.”

“We knew we were going to deal with significant problems due to our lack of infantry.”

“Yes. But there was a reason why I was unhappy at the idea of filling our transports with hot-blooded bravos!” Truth to tell, Devio had not really protested that much. He had been busier making sure the other possible challengers for the title of Admiral of First Fleet were forced to close their mouths and listen to his arguments. “I hoped their officers would be able to teach them that the battles were not going to be a bridge duel for the favour of a courtesan. Palados showed it was a vain hope.”

“Their discipline wasn’t too bad, Admiral.” Devio glared at his aide. “At least until they began to be on the receiving end of the volleys from these damned Myrish crossbows.”

“Pentoshi-made Myrish crossbows,” the old sailor grimaced. “Our spies are good, but they appeared to have missed several things. For Palados and every village to have access to some, it is clear Pentos copied the design and build thousands of them, and they started years ago.”

So far, it had not changed anything to sea battles, because the enemy had only lone galleys to oppose to his squadron. But on land, it had resulted in bloodbaths when the eager bravos stormed the palisades.

“Yes,” the Admiral urged himself to calm down. It would not do anything good for his heart to rage. “It was almost fine until they were on the receiving end of the arrows. Then they learned the hard way that helmets, proper mail and shields exist for one reason. They died by the scores, Marco! What do you think would have happened if we didn’t outnumber the enemy ten-to-one?”

“Nothing good, Admiral,” his aide answered firmly but respectfully. “But you didn’t have the choice. The Marine Infantry of the Republic has to be preserved for the assault on Sidorys.”

Tanex, Razys, Diacros, Palados...the list sounded impressive, but they were just the prelude for the real fight. The northern territories of the Pentoshi were lightly populated. Even Argilon, the next harbour which had to be seized on their way south, boasted fewer than ten thousand souls.

Young and foolish Braavosi often forgot it, but the waves of the colonisation of the Valyrian Freehold had come from southwards. There was an entire chain of mountains between the Flatlands and the Rhoyne valley, and before the dragonlords blasted their way through them at Ghoyan Drohe and built a Valyrian road there, caravans couldn’t from Norvos and the east.

The richest lands of the enemy were all around the Bay of Pentos or further south. The majority of their slaves were there too.

This was why all the wars between Pentos and the Republic had been trade wars until this one; there was not much to fight about.

Sure, there were little farms here and there, along with thousands of goats and sheep, but you had to walk for fortnights inland, and the Pentoshi freeholders were generally well-armed to deter bandits and worse.

No, the real war would begin at Sidorys. And the previous skirmishes had raised a lot of doubts in his head.

“If only we had had more time,” he mused. “What I wouldn’t give for a square of seven to eight thousand pikemen with some light horse to guard our flanks.”

The musing didn’t last long. And Devio Bartarys felt almost ashamed. You went to war with the forces your Free City had, and Bravos had built a mighty navy to begin a new era of liberty and slavery abolition. The First Fleet was more powerful than the fleet the Triarchy had sent to the Battle of the Gullet, and there were more ships being readied in the Arsenal as they sailed southwards.

“Forgive me, Marco. I think the bloodshed put me in an ugly mood.”

“That’s what aides are for, Admiral.”

Devio chuckled lightly, but he didn’t think it warmed his old heart.

“In the end, I think-“

Someone knocked at the door.

“Yes?”

“The Captain begs for your forgiveness, Admiral, but he thinks you should come. The weather is getting worse-“

Of course the weather was getting worse! Devio grumbled, and tried not to frighten the Ensign which had brought him the message. The boy was just a boy and a messenger. Had he ever been so young?

It didn’t take long to get out of his cabin, after donning again his superb cloak he had purchased four moons ago. It was purple, of course, an extravagancy only Braavosi and Tyroshi could afford these days.

It was-

His thoughts were interrupted by the black sky and the violent winds which almost threw him against several sailors. By all the Sea Gods of the Seven Seas, this was not ‘bad’ weather, this was far worse than that!

“We have more rain coming from behind us, Admiral. And I don’t like these winds at all,” the Captain of the *Titan’s Sword* reported after saluting. “We already got one galley losing its mast, and I fear it is going to be worse.”

“We have left Seagull Island behind us this morning. Is there any creek or bay where our galleys could hide until this storm abates?”

“None, Admiral. We have the Grey Reefs on our port side.”

And with the wind coming in powerful squalls from the north, they couldn’t even try to return to Palados and wait there.

“We have to continue then,” the Admiral grimly declared. “I know it is far from a good solution, but there’s the Bay of the Black Hook.”

“We’re still most of a day away, Admiral, and-“

The wind, which had already been far from calm, decided to strike like the weapon of a God. In the distance, Devio Bartarys saw a galley mast fall, broken in two.

The elements unleashed their rage, and one forceful wave of rain soaked them to the bone.

The sky turned even darker, and for his poor old eyes, it was as if the night had come.

“Gods help us,” the Braavosi Admiral croaked. “Forget the Grey Reefs! We have to-“

A wave came over the Titan’s Sword, and his words lost themselves in water and salt.

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*Though it certainly was no ‘unholy act of sorcery’ as certain Green and Braavosi authors accused the Pentoshi of in the years after the end of the War of the Beard, there is no denying that the storm which struck the Pentoshi coast on the second moon of 140AC was of extraordinary violence.*

*Many fisher villages between Palados and Sidorys were near destroyed, and dozens of merchant ships disappeared forever into this black maw, never to be seen again. Plenty of fishers on both sides of the Narrow Sea were caught by surprise and would never return home to their families. The castle of Stonedance suffered significant damage. The town of Argilon, despite the protection offered by the small bay of the same name, endured many deaths and wounded, and of the latter, scores wouldn’t survive another moon.*

*But when it came to the two sides which were then fighting the War of the Beard, that is, Braavos and Pentos, it is obvious the former fared extraordinarily worse than the latter. The Pentoshi squadrons, desperately trying to train their inexperienced crews, took refuge in their home bay in time.*

*The First Fleet of Braavos didn’t have that opportunity. The winter storm caught it while it was more than two days away from Argilon, and the sailors lacked the time to reach the Bay of Black Hook.*

*The result was the greatest naval disaster ever suffered in a single year by the Republic of the Braavos.*

*Sixteen galleys and two galleasses, which had never been made to withstand this kind of storm, sunk with all hands. One cog and three merchant ships also capsized before meeting their end.*

*This list of losses would have been terrible enough, but none of the galleys which survived the storm were in battle-condition anymore. Three of the hulls which would manage to sail back to Palados four days later were abandoned on a beach, the damage proving too much for any shipbuilding facility which wasn’t the Arsenal. Two other galleys would be disassembled for parts at Diacros so lighter-damaged ships could return to service faster. All ships took scores of crippling casualties.*

*As the dawn of the third moon of 140AC arrived, the First Fleet of Braavos was effectively destroyed. Admiral Devio Bartarys and several other senior naval commanders were no more.*

*Matters could have been more catastrophic for the Braavosi: the carracks and the cogs transporting the troops assigned to the Argilon and Sidorys assault survived, albeit damaged. And the storm didn’t hit the other squadrons mustering in or near the Braavosi lagoon, meaning the Republic could replenish its losses.*

*But it was going to take time.*

*And time was no longer on Braavos’ side now.*

*With the First Fleet unable to press on, the Pentoshi fleet was granted a reprieve they didn’t think they would get. Preparations which at the beginning of the year were said to have started too late may be ready just in time now. Every day saw sellsails and sellswords coming in greater numbers to fight beneath the walls of Pentos.*

*Sealord Zalyne had promised his bravos a short and easy war.*

*He was not going to have one or the other.*

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

**The Dreamer, somewhere in the Dreamlands**

“Wake up, Dreamer.”

She doesn’t want to wake up.

It is far better to stay dreaming.

Here in the dreams, no one can hurt her.

It is soft. It is comfortable. She can listen to the music. She doesn’t have to pretend.

It is safe. It is safe away from the pain and the darkness.

“Open your eyes, Dreamer.”

Her eyes open.

There is surprise. Something-

The light makes her blink.

Why is it so sunny?

This is not the Keep of Blood. This is...different.

There is the sun. There is the sea and a large cliff not far away. There are a lot of stones.

Oh.

There are many towers everywhere. But all of them have fallen into ruin.

“I was beginning to think you would never listen.”

There is a girl seated on a pile of stones.

The girl is like her, with beautiful silver hair and purple eyes and-

“You aren’t a girl.”

The girl-who-is-not-a-girl groans.

“I was, but this is not important. You-“

“Lie! I never saw you, and I remember all of them, be they black or green of scales.”

“One can’t lie in the Dreamlands,” the other girl sticks her tongue out to provoke her. “And I was before your time. While I lived, they called me Aerea Targaryen.”

The name should mean nothing.

But as it is uttered, something flashes, and a shadow for a second clouds the sun.

She sees. She sees an enormous black dragon as big as a mountain.

“You are the last rider of the Black Dread.” And she doesn’t know how she learned that.

The other girl nods.

“I bonded with Balerion, and together, we answered the Call of the Fourteen. We flew to the Last Gate. And at the price of our lives, we slew the God-Demon of the Nameless Circle.”

For a few heartbeats, the dream turns into nightmare.

They are flying anew.

They are flying, and the skies are hellish.

The young Dreamer sees the Gate tear apart. The gigantic demon, a beast as tall as the Keep of Blood, screams its victory. It is a thing of tentacles and fangs. It is death and damnation.

And something roars.

The black dragon descends from the skies, and when he opens his maw, the world *burns*.

There is no more hesitation or show of force. These are the two most dangerous predators has ever seen, and likely will ever see in its millennia.

They charge each other, and the nightmare-

She closes her eyes again.

“It is over. I didn’t know you could summon my past so easily. For it is worth, my cousin, I am sorry.”

She doesn’t want to...but she opens her eyes again.

The ruins are here once more. And now that she has seen them before, this presents a strange resemblance to the nightmare. It is-

“Yes. We are in the ruins of Valyria.”

“It is a just dream.”

“It is, and it isn’t.”

“You are dead.”

The dream of her cousin nods and smiles sadly.

“The victory left me broken. The curses of a God-Demon are far beyond anything a dragonlady can survive. But the Fourteen saved my soul. I was reborn in the Fourteenth Circle. And I can fly there!”

She stares, and the appearance of a girl doesn’t hold. Where there should be hands, there are black scales. Where-

“Sorry. The Fourteen wanted me to talk to you, since we are so alike.”

“I lost my twin!” the scream escaped her lips before she could control it.

“So did I,” the other girl-who-is-not-a-girl-anymore answers. “But I have to admit your loss was far worse. My twin sister was sent to the Faith, and I never saw her again.”

The pain-

This is why the Dream is a refuge.

This is why-

“Morghul!”

“Yes. She waits for you.”

“I want just to continue dreaming.”

“If it was just you, cousin, the Fourteen would likely leave you alone. But it is not only about you.”

Flames burn in the palms of Aerea Targaryen.

Memories that aren’t hers are in her.

“The Pact.”

“Yes. The Pact of Fire and Blood.” The purple eyes are akin to something not of this world. “The Fourteen were not happy at all when Aegon broke it in his grief after the loss of his sister-wife. And when Jaehaerys broke it again, their roars were quite formidable. If I hadn’t answered the Call with my Bonded, I think they would have turned all the dragons against House Targaryen and the Iron Throne. As it was, my sacrifice only bought you one century. And in its imbecility, House Targaryen’s heads killed each other.”

“But the dragons still fly.”

Fingers transform into black claws.

“The Dragon Gods were incredibly close to end everything,” Aerea says, “no matter how much of a victory it would be for the enemies of life. As it was, once again, our line got lucky. Maybe it is our greatest power? Sheer dumb luck?”

She doesn’t know how to answer that. She isn’t sure there is something to answer.

The girl is almost gone. Her body is growing. There are ivory thorns pushing out of the head. Her body is being covered in black scales. A tail is pushing out of her spine.

“The first Pact was broken, and the Fourteen aren’t in the habit of giving second chances. Since the two lines have been torn asunder by treachery and stupidity, two new Pacts will be proposed very soon.”

Draconic eyes look at her, and the smile warms her skin.

“If they want to continue to fly as dragonlords, they will accept. And you cousin, you will warn them.”

“What? But no one ever listens to me! I warned them! I swear it to you, Aerea, I warned them, and-“

“I know. The Fourteen know.” By now, there is almost nothing of left of the girl’s appearance; what stands in front of her is a strange combination of human and dragon. Aerea Targaryen stands on two legs, but she is entirely covered in black scales, and her feet have been replaced by powerful talons. “And while they can’t give back you Morghul, two wounded souls can find healing together.”

She doesn’t understand.

“They will not listen to a Dreamer, but they always listen to a dragon. They better, I think, or there is no point forging a Pact again.”

The dragon-woman is running away and flies, avoiding the crumbing towers and the other obstacles, straight towards the sun.

“Now wake up, Dreamer. You have to wake up, Jaehaera Targaryen.”

**Author’s note**: I have always been disappointed GRRM never gave us an answer to the question: what kind of creature could be possibly strong enough to hurt the Black Dread?

This chapter is (in part) an attempt to answer that.

And now the War of the Beard can truly begin. It isn’t going to cause the devastation of the Dance (which is admittedly a high bard to beat) but it is going to cause massive changes in both Essos and Westeros.

As for the size of this chapter, I blame the Black Goat.

Hope you enjoyed the chapter!

More links on the Dance is not Over:

P a treon: www. p a treon Antony444

Alternate History: www .alternatehistory forum /threads /asoiaf-the-dance-is-not-over.391415

The Dance is not Over can also be read on Archive of Our Own now!

Link is: archiveofourown works / 52798378 / chapters / 133541518