**Chapter 50**

**Succession Rules**

**Lady Jeyne Arryn**

When her cousin entered, Jeyne knew that the day was not going to be one where Lords and Ladies would exchange compliments and subtle threats in the same sentence.

The Lords of the Vale and the bannersmen which had received the authorisation to attend felt it too. That was why they remained silent.

There wasn’t much else they could do, not when Queen Baela Targaryen had arrived in a suit of black armour, Dark Sister sheathed by her side, and a very stern expression on her face. The lone ruby of her diadem seemed to burn in draconic fire when the rays of the sun touched the red jewel.

In the heartbeats it took her to walk in front of the throne that had been prepared for her, Baela Targaryen was indeed looking like the Dragon Queen the Greens feared.

“A trial by combat,” her cousin began immediately, and the absence of courtesies was a signal by itself, “is a very serious affair, my Lords and Ladies.”

“Your Grace, please! I was-“

One of the Kingsguards slapped Ser Yorbert, and silence returned.

“I respect the traditions of every kingdom I am the Queen of.” The legitimate ruler of the Seven Kingdoms continued as if nothing had happened. “The North, the Riverlands, and the Vale have many traditions. Some have strong similarities, others are completely different. It doesn’t matter in my eyes. But when they are part of this realm’s justice, I expect everyone to treat them with the importance and the respect they deserve. A trial by combat is a very serious affair, one which most of the time results in an accused being declared innocent or not. It is *not* to be treated as a buffoonery.”

Obviously, all the septons in the hall nodded and showed satisfied expressions. The moment the farce had begun on the tourney field, the priests had vented their fury to everyone who had ears to listen to them.

“Ser Yorbert Lipps.”

“I answer your call...your Grace...”

At least the man was sober today. A few nights in a cell had at least prevented him from emptying the bottles of wine he loved so much.

“I won’t ask what you were thinking,” her cousin began mercilessly, “because as you proved by attacking your own Champion during the trial by combat, you weren’t thinking at all. Still, I am generous. Explain your actions. Now.”

“But...your Grace...I had to give myself a bit of courage...Ser Rodrik Hunter...is one of the best swords of the Vale...I had to be confident...this wasn’t fair, I was promised a fighter I could beat!”

The more Yorbert Lipps spoke, the more angry whispers they were among her bannersmen. Yorbert already had the reputation of a drunk; he was quite clearly to add a few other flaws to it today.

“I...I am ready to join the Order of the Black Swords!”

Jeyne didn’t wince, but it was not the envy that was lacking.

“The Order of the Black Swords needs men who have excellent martial skills.” Baela was prompt to counter. “For the buffoonery you provoked by your drunken behaviour, there is only the Night’s Watch.”

There were whispers of approval, in particular from the Royce, Corbray, and Hunter factions.

And naturally, Ser Yorbert had to prove himself an idiot to the end.

“But...the black brothers serve for life!”

This time, even her cousin placed her hand on her forehead as if she was having a headache...it seemed that Baela had finally realised how much of an idiot Ser Yorbert was.

“Your Grace, I have done nothing wrong! I was just-“

“Silence.”

Dark Sister was drawn from her scabbard, and the Drunk Braggart closed his mouth.

Maybe he was realising at last how perilous his situation had become...or maybe not, given how little intelligence Yorbert Lipps had proven to possess in the last years.

“You have proven two things during the trial by combat, Ser Yorbert. The first was evidently that you were totally and completely unfit to be a knight of this realm. The second was that you were unwilling to be true to your oaths. You attacked your own Champion. You presented yourself drunk when the fight was to be held under the gaze of the Gods you swore your knighthood vows to. And sadly, it wasn’t the first time there was evidence you couldn’t be trusted.”

Dark Sister was sheathed in the scabbard again, and a few Lords grumbled in disappointment...before Baela Targaryen gave her judgement.

“You are banished from this realm, Ser Yorbert. Be they great or small, I order you to never set foot again in any Lordship or castle where my House rules.”

“This is..this is...”

“I leave to the Lords of the Vale and the septons the decision whether it is appropriate to strip you of your knighthood before you leave these shores, never to return.”

By the dark glares many were giving Yorbert, the outcome was not much in doubt.

“Guards, take him away. Ser Eldric. Come forwards.”

“I answer your call, your Grace.”

“I give you the same choice I offered Ser Yorbert,” the Black Queen didn’t waste any turn of hourglass dancing around the judgement. “You can take a black cloak, or go into exile.”

The fingers touching the hilt of Dark Sister told clearly there was a third choice.

“By the fault of this idiot, the true trial by combat didn’t even begin! Am I not to be given another chance, your Grace?”

“No,” Baela ruthlessly replied, leaving the former Knight of Forest Nest gaping, “you chose this idiot to be your Champion. His stupidity turned the trial by combat into a buffoonery, and I am not going to give you or anyone the chance to turn more traditions into farcical schemes. A trial by combat is unique and won’t be repeated.”

“This is tyranny,” Eldric seethed, “my blood and my lineage give me the right to-“

The Queen began to draw Dark Sister again, and Eldric hastily changed his tune.

“I will go into exile...your Grace.”

“Never to return,” Baela Targaryen added. The promise in her purple eyes was so limpid that Eldric departed the throne room without protest.

Of course, knowing the scoundrel, Jeyne doubted this was going to be the last time her ears would hear his name be uttered. Killing him would have settled the matter once more....but at least, this way, both he and his ‘Champion’ would be scorned and laughed at for years, maybe decades. It was one thing to be disloyal; it was quite another to mount some sort of rebellion when everyone thought you were ridiculously incompetent.

“Ser Godric Arryn.”

“I answer your call, your Grace.”

The smooth answer gave Jeyne the urge to order her guards to strike the blonde man now kneeling many feet away from her cousin.

“It is the understanding of the Crown you wish to be reinstated into the line of succession of House Arryn.”

“Yes, your Grace. I was denied my rights and my privileges, as everyone believed me dead. But as you can see...I am alive. And by law and tradition, I am the true Heir of the Buzzard Fort, sworn and tied by blood to the Eyrie-“

“No, you are not.”

Plenty of courtiers and knights snickered when Godric Arryn was left speechless. He recovered, though. Her distant male cousin had always been quick on his feet like that.

“Your Grace?”

“The agreements I signed with my cousin of the South,” the true Queen of the Seven Kingdoms explained, “was that every Lord and knight of the North, Riverlands, and Vale who had fought on the side of the Greens during the Dance could return to his lands, under the condition they swore strict vows to my Crown. That much is true. But it was agreed between my cousin and I that this agreement was acceptable for a length of two years. For clear reasons, each kingdom had no interest in changing who is eligible for a House’s succession every year. And these reasons still exist, Ser Godric.”

“But I was in the Free Cities, your Grace!”

“Several announcements were made where the merchants traded to buy food during the long winter: Pentos, Lys, and Myr to name the most important ones. The Crown fulfilled its duties in that regard. Where were you, pray tell, Ser Godric, that you were unable to hear these treaties in time to return to the Vale?”

That was a good question, really. Volantis? But it wasn’t that far away. Rumours always arrived to the Eldest Daughter of Valyria, and something like the end of the Dance couldn’t avoid spreading a lot of excited conversations.

“I have a claim.” Ser Godric stubbornly declared, trying to awe the Queen...and failing monumentally.

“No, you are a traitor.” Baela was quick to tell him the truth. “If you were truly repentant, or at least try to be a genuine Heir, you would have begun by apologising and swearing yourself to my Crown. You fought on the side of the Greens, Ser Godric. You bent the knee to the Kinslayer, and you were seen fighting in two battles which happened in the Reach before going missing. I don’t know what you did afterwards, but if you think I am going to re-establish you as the Knight of the Buzzard Fort, then you are truly not as clever as you think you are.”

“There are traditions in the Vale that might say otherwise.”

“And you will be escorted outside of it after this audience.” Baela commanded. “I don’t know if your true allegiance is to my southern cousin or someone in the Free Cities, but your past actions are sufficient to order you to stay far away from this realm.”

Jeyne was truly relieved. This was a troubled time in the Vale...it was best Godric Arryn was as far away from it as possible.

“Ser Eldric was certainly right about the tyranny claims...Black Queen,” and the way he sneered after saying the last words, Jeyne was more confident than ever that the man had never stopped being a Green loyalist. “I will go into exile once more...until the Dance truly ends.”

“Do you want to be stripped of your knighthood before the day is over? Guards, you can escort this man out of the castle.”

**Ser Richard Lydden**

In the Westerlands, this would not earn more than a glance of him.

Here on Great Wyk? It seemed downright...miraculous.

“They are going to find it difficult to believe at home...Ironborn...harvesting crops.”

Oh, everyone had known there were a few fields here and there while the Greyjoys were in charge...but not that many. The Ironborn spent their lives on the seas, not toiling in the fields.

And a few heartbeats later, Richard remembered he hadn’t a home anymore. Where would he go, really, when this emissary’s role was over? The answer was...where his King wished him to go.

“It took us a lot of time to remove the rocks,” the master of said fields grinned by his side. “And a lot of curses were thrown around.”

“I am sure,” Richard replied. “The walls that are separating the houses from the fields?”

“Yes,” Balon Wyk, the Ironborn who had been proclaimed Lord of Rocks and Ashes by his people, answered. “It is an excellent exercise for our youngsters, when they are far too loud and unruly.”

“I can imagine...” all Ironborn he had seen so far, men and women, had arms that were twice as large as his, “but the fields can’t be good for three good harvests a year, surely?”

“No. Half of them are left in fallow at any time. This moon, it’s the ones east of my keep, so you don’t see them from here.” Balon Wyk shrugged, his features curiously devoid of any trace of beard, something most Ironborn male living here seemed to share. “It isn’t as bad as it could be. Seagard sold us plenty of pigs and donkeys, and we need many alfalfa and other things to feed them. But yes, we are never going to have the barley harvests of the West. The soil isn’t good enough, and we need a lot of arms per field.”

This made Richard feel guilty. Every man and woman having seen the great golden wheat fields outside Lannisport was awed by them...but they did not think about the fact a kingdom near their doorstep has nothing of the like to feed its children.

Fortunately, his discomfort was not noticed by the Lord of Great Wyk, who ruled his people from the very austere castle of Spike Keep.

“I am of course going to reassure you I don’t intend to kneel before the Black Queen.” The black-haired Ironborn began.

Had he been a more naive knight, Richard would have cheered or something loud and exuberant to mark his approval.

“I assume most of your reasons for doing so are based on the...unpleasant problems that would come after joining the Blacks.”

Great Wyk staying as part of a very reduced but independent Ironborn kingdom was acceptable, both for the Blacks and the Greens.

But the moment Balon Wyk and his subjects decided to join one or the other, the balance would be shattered. The Blacks were likely the ones less likely to do anything rash, for they owned...well, he was going to call them Harlaw and Saltcliffe, Richard didn’t remember the names that they were supposed to be in use now.

But for the Greens, who already owned the useless rocks, it would be tantamount to lose all the Iron Islands altogether and risk a Black fleet taking position mere days away from Fair Isle, threatening Lannisport too quickly for the Reach squadrons to come to their help if the war resumed.

“It does.” Balon grimly replied. “I think myself an honest Lord of Wyk, so I’m not going to lie to your face, Ser Richard. My people don’t like your King and his dragon. We suffered too much when the latter burned our fleets and our first homes.”

“I am not going to pretend I am surprised,” Richard answered. “But while I am going to be honest and say dragonfire is a horrible manner to die, the atrocities of the Red Kraken at Lannisport and the entire Sunset coastline created a lot of hatred there too.”

“Oh, I know we weren’t innocent,” the Lord of Rocks and Ashes appeared to be genuinely sad by the entire affair...or sad his people had lost the war. It was difficult to say. “When we met at Old Wyk and tried to crown a new King, we weren’t reavers of peace. No. Many of us were ready to continue the war. All I wanted to say...there’s anger on both sides...for good reasons. But Great Wyk needs to trade with your kingdom. Otherwise all of us might live to regret it.”

“This is...an interesting choice of words, Lord Balon.”

“Bah! No, it’s just the truth, Ser Richard. The youngsters...when they aren’t working in the fields, they’re sailing on Black ships to go fishing. Or they’re going to work for Black Lords elsewhere. A few of our grey beards even tried to go and be hired by the Order of the Black Sword last year. Old reavers they were, and they wanted to die smashing a few wildling skulls.”

Richard wasn’t the smartest Lydden man to have lived...but he could understand what the Ironborn Lord was trying to say.

“You’re thinking your people will argue more and more about joining the Blacks.”

“Yes.”

“The Black Queen won’t give you back your fleets.”

Balon Pyke barked in laughter.

“By the Storm God, no, I don’t expect her too! She isn’t Maegor-with-Tits!”

Richard Lydden smiled...before Gregor, who had stayed silent so far, intervened.

“But you don’t think it is going to be enough to keep going for long.”

“I can see all too clearly the tides, Ser Clegane,” the Lord of Great Wyk shrugged again. “For now, my people only want some donkeys, some pigs, and a few more things we can’t grow here. We aren’t getting as rich as a Lannister, but we aren’t starving anymore. But if most of us on Wyk manage to survive the next winter, more youngsters will leave to go with the captains of Seagard or somewhere else. What opportunities we have with the Blacks, we need to have them with the Greens too. Otherwise my people will never trust the Greens again.”

“And what...opportunities are you after, Lord?”

“Give us the permission to sell our iron in the Lannisport markets,” Balon Wyk pressed on, “and for our boys and girls to learn fishermen and sailors’ trade aboard the ships of House Lannisters and the Westerners merchants.”

This sounded quite reasonable to Richard...but by the way Gregor immediately grimaced, it was something that was going to meet a lot of opposition.

“The Lannisport Guilds are going to...fight ferociously against it,” the giant who managed to still be bigger than any Ironborn they had met so far said simply.

“You can fight against fear.”

But one couldn’t fight against dragons, Richard was about to say...but his words didn’t cross his lips.

Now that the Lydden knight thought about it, the Ironborn here could be protected from dragons by other dragons. The Blacks had not protected Walder Reyne, but that was certainly because the self-proclaimed Red Lion was even more of a usurper and an oath-breaker as the Greens themselves. The Ironborn, however...most of those who had followed the Red Kraken were dead. And they had no King, no one reaving the Sunset coast.

“I will repeat your words to my King.” Richard promised sincerely.

“Good! Now it is time for me to give you your first taste of the authentic Wyk cooking...I hope your tongue is prepared, for you are going to remember it for years!”

**Queen Baela Targaryen**

The solar of the Eyrie had a magnificent Myrish carpet, along with a large table and several comfortable chairs. And Baela was a bit amused to discover it had almost become a tradition for the Lords and Lady Arryn to buy one.

“We think it began two hundred years ago,” Jeyne explained. “And when the carpet is getting too damaged or its style is not to our taste, we descend it back to the Gates of the Moon, and another is brought here.”

“Still,” Baela smiled, “a carpet from Myr?”

“Who do you want me to buy from, cousin? The Riverlands? Their carpets look like they’re about to be torn up the moment you walk on them with your boots.”

Ouch...Baela promised herself to avoid placing Lord Tully in the same room as her cousin to speak of carpets.

“There is the North.” The Queen of House Targaryen said instead.

“Those aren’t really proper carpets. Those are dead animals transformed into furs...that are somehow assembled into carpets. And the price to transport them is ruinous.”

“Well, Lord Melcolm likes them.”

Jeyne snorted.

“The old fool loves them, you mean, cousin. A bear carpet here, a beaver coat there. Sometimes I think he dreams of being a Northern Lord...then he thinks of the cold, and realises buying the carpets and the furred coats is way simpler than enduring a Northern winter.”

Well, her cousin was really in a fine mood today. Not that it was really a surprise, not with the latest piece of news which had arrived from their spies...

“But enough about my carpets. As you’ve no doubt heard, the banished knights ran to King’s Landing the moment they were thrown on a ship and told to never return.”

The Lady Paramount of the Vale could hold a grudge, Baela noted with amusement. Since she had judged them, Jeyne Arryn had not said ‘cousins’ or their names.

“Yes...this is what my Council hoped they would do.” Baela turned her head to watch the eternal snows of the mountains in the distance. “Quite a major mistake from them, really. With them openly asking for the support of the Greens, your own bannersmen will have no choice but to loudly denounce them, no matter how sympathetic they are to their cause...and we both know the former knights of Forrest Nest, at least, had several Lords on his side before the tourney.”

“This still could cause problems.”

“I don’t think so,” Baela placed her hands in a contemplative pose. “Yes, Daeron could choose to support one of them...but the two ‘claimants’ aren’t exactly good material. Godric Arryn was exiled by the Greens because he looted everything from the castles he waged war against, and he was quite...rapacious. And as my Mistress of Whisperers discovered, he was attacking indifferently Black and Green holdfasts.”

“And what was this bandit doing while on the other side of the Narrow Sea?” Jeyne asked, proving that in this instance, the Crown’s eyes were better than the Vale’s. “Assuming he really went there, of course.”

“He did. He went to Volantis...and participated in one of the oldest and least respectable professions of the known world.”

“Slavery,” Jeyne muttered the word like a curse...which was well-deserved, in this case.

“Slavery,” Baela confirmed. “That’s why I think the new Master of Whisperers of the Greens decided to pay his debts and send the bandit-slaver to Gulltown. If it didn’t work, King’s Landing lost nothing but a few gold dragons. If it did, the Greens would have placed someone they could work with...someone that could give them the keys of the Vale in due time.”

“Assuming it was really the Green Court’s intention, the affair was really badly prepared.”

“I fully agree.” Baela smiled. “Of course, the unworthiness of the ‘claimant’ certainly played a large part. Many knights were exiled by the Hightower faction during the war, but most of them were told to go to the Free Cities because they criticised the way the war was fought. For someone to be cast aside because he is far busier looting your own supporters than he is fighting your enemy...err...that takes a disturbing amount of stupidity and brutality.”

“In this case, the Green King may support the other.”

“He might.” Baela replied serenely. “But he will face other obstacles. Eldric had to vow in front of seven septons that he was accepting my judgement...and we made sure everyone knew it. The Faith of the South might try to say it was done under duress and the judgement is invalid because I am a filthy heretic, but the Lords of the Vale aren’t going to like this at all.”

The silver-haired Queen had already seen the first signs of it this morning in the Gates of the Moon. Some Vale highborn could be opportunistic...but how quickly Eldric, former Knight of Forrest Nest, had broken all the oaths he had sworn, had shocked them.

There hadn’t been much trust left where he was concerned after his successful plot to remove Joffrey Arryn had been discovered, but Eldric seemed to find new ways to lose everything in a matter of days.

“And of course, between the two of them, Godric and Eldric haven’t one hundred golden dragons in their purses. We made sure of that. They have a few servants and one or two hired swords by their side. This is hardly the kind of retinue fit for a Lord of the Eyrie. So if my dear cousin sitting on the Iron Throne really wants to support one or the other, he will have to give them a lot of gold...and likely do it for years, for his kingdom is in no shape to fight another war after the carnage House Reyne unleashed across the hills of the West.”

“That sounds...reasonable.” Jeyne acknowledged before grimacing. “It’s just that I dislike letting my enemies have a weapon to wield against my House.”

“My Council is unanimously against this view, just for your ears. They think, and I agree, that letting the Greens have a figure to rally around the turncloaks and the other disgruntled souls is the best thing that can happen. If we know the identity of the claimant they intend to replace you with, it is way easier to track the coins and the promises. Especially when the chief schemers are not that clever, and they are forced to work in a city that leaks secrets like Sheepstealer devours his mutton meals.”

“Yes...and the fact the two...the two claimants hate each other is one more point in favour. I see.”

“I’m so glad we understand each other, cousin.” Baela breathed out, knowing the hard part was coming now. “But clearly, to make sure the claims of the two imbeciles I banished stay only attractive for buffoons like a certain Yorbert Lipps, you need an Heir.”

Predictably, Jeyne Arryn, Lady Paramount of the Vale, grimaced again.

“I would have preferred an Heiress.”

Baela snorted in return.

“Cousin, I like you, but I am not going to tear the succession laws of the Vale for you. I know the girl you would like to have as Heiress...and I’m telling you, it isn’t going to work. Even should the three sons of Isembard Arryn drop dead within one moon, your bannersmen wouldn’t accept it. Not to mention that in all honesty, you’re not getting any younger, and it’s likely you will die long before she is sixteen.”

“I know, but none of the sons are really perfect Heirs.”

“Cousin, the perfect Heir doesn’t exist...at least where your succession is discussed.”

“They marry merchants.”

Baela did her best not to giggle.

“You are never going to let them forgive that, are you?”

“They paint their falcon in gold, cousin. Gold!” At this moment, the haughty disdain had no rival in any House, save perhaps the Hightowers of Oldtown.

“But with the banishment of Eldric and Godric, there are your legitimate Heirs. Roland Arryn is the oldest, I believe?”

“Yes. Tristan is the cadet, Adrian is the third son.” The Lady of the Eyrie made a new grimace. “I still don’t like it.”

Baela sighed, and thanked the Gods she had not inherited too much of the legendary ‘Arryn honour’.

“What sort of conditions would make the situation more tolerable for you, cousin?”

**King Daeron Targaryen**

Daeron let his Council take their respective seats before clearing his throat.

“I wondered why the Eyrie and the Black Council agreed so quickly to banish Ser Eldric and Ser Godric Arryn. Now that I have had the opportunity to meet them, I wonder no more. One is an utter fool, and the other is the kind of turncloak that will sell his own mother if it can win him a few gold dragons.”

“His head should be removed from his shoulders, your Grace,” Lord Alan Redwyne advised. “Using that sort of viper can only lead to venom in a kingdom’s veins. Whose idea was to use this *slaver* in the first place?”

“Mine,” Joffrey Cuy immediately replied, not flinching at the glare the Lord of the Arbor gave him. “Godric Arryn had a good claim, and his face was famous enough to make sure no one would call him an impostor.”

“His claim was good...before he went to break it.” Lord Royce Caron spoke and it was clear Godric’s deeds repulsed him. “And he is not that smart. If he was a good liar, he could have caused a great deal of trouble to House Arryn of the Eyrie. As it is, he refused to break his vows to the true King...though I really don’t know why. I have met him several times, and he doesn’t strike me as a man loyal to your Grace.”

“That’s because he isn’t,” Daeron explained to his Master of Laws, “he was loyal to my brother above all else.”

“But it was King Aegon who exiled him and confiscated his ill-gotten wealth-“

“Not my brother Aegon,” Daeron corrected, “Aemond.”

It was not exactly good news to see all the members of your Council suddenly nod as if it explained everything. And the worst part was...Daeron wasn’t even surprised. It had been years the war was over, but it was still a rare moon when the gratuitous acts of cruelty Aemond had committed didn’t come back to haunt the foundations of his realm.

Last year a bard had made a song in the taverns of King’s Landing that the cement uniting the Blacks was their hatred of his brother. It had been taken as a joke, but Daeron knew it really wasn’t. Aemond had burned the Riverlands, and in many ways he had been quite lucky to die as he did. The Lords of the Trident would have made him scream for years if they’d been lucky to capture him.

“Formidable,” Lord Alan Redwyne grunted. “I suggest the executioner or confirming the banishment then, your Grace.”

“It will be the latter.” Daeron commanded. “Ser Joffrey, you will pay the last gold dragons this bandit is owed, and then make sure he is on a ship for the Free Cities before seven days have passed.”

“It will be done, your Grace,” the Master of Whisperers answered. “Though Ser Godric might insist to meet you again. He had ambitions...ambitions which might have involved being recognised as the ‘rightful Lord Paramount of the Vale in exile’.”

Really, the man’s emblem should have been a snake like the Dornish, not a falcon...

“He can insist all he wants.” Daeron bared his teeth. “You gave him a mission. It was a massive failure. He was absolutely not discreet and the Black Council was able to discover the truth of his unsavoury activities in mere days. If he refuses to sail away from King’s Landing, refresh his memory. Slavery is still something that I intend to punish as King Jaehaerys did.”

And once declared guilty, the punishment for the slavers was death. By immemorial tradition, it also was one of the few crimes where the right of trial by combat was never granted to the accused.

“Ser Eldric?” Lord Marq Merryweather asked.

“He is a fool,” Daeron mused, “but even a fool can be used, and he had some Lords of the Vale supporting him. We keep him as long as we can find a use for them.”

“He asks for a lot of gold dragons.” Joffrey Cuy mentioned cautiously.

“He will have to live on a purse of silver for now. And even that depends entirely on what sort of information he can give us. Oh, and banish this...how they do call him...the Drunken Braggart...”

“Ser Yorbert Lipps, your Grace?”

“Yes, him.” Daeron’s lips twisted in amusement at the behaviour of the last member of the ‘banished group’. “You can place him on the same ship as the slaver.”

“This will be done, your Grace.”

“Let’s return to the dance of marriages we must counter. Lord Alan? You were telling us this morning you had a name.”

“Indeed, I have one, your Grace.” The Master of Ships handed him a medallion that revealed a miniature painting of a rather attractive brown-haired maiden. “Her name is Victoria Blackbar. She just celebrated her fifteenth name day. As per your conditions, House Blackbar is largely capable of giving a dowry meeting the exacting standards of House Lannister, whether Casterly Rock insists for good or other...methods of payment. Her father is loyal, but his own father who recently died was a fence-sitter during the war. And there are no obvious ties to House Targaryen.”

“Hmm...it is...promising.” Fifteenth of age meant a marriage could be organised in the next couple of years, and while it may take some years for it to be truly consumed, the difference of age was not that important.

“Lord Redwyne fails to mention, your Grace,” Lord Marq Merryweather caressed his beard, “that while Victoria Blackbar has no ties to House Targaryen, she is tied to House Hightower by blood.”

Daeron blinked before frowning.

“I don’t remember her being mentioned at all during the family dinners at Oldtown...”

“That’s not really surprising, your Grace,” the Lord of Longtable chuckled even as Lord Redwyne gave him a dark glare, “this line was only very distant from the Lords of the High Tower’s, it has long ceased to belong to the nobility proper, instead using its skill and acumen to marry into the wealthiest merchant families of Oldtown. It brought them a significant fortune, and they also avoided all the...recent problems which plagued the city.”

“But in turn they aren’t really better than the Arryns of Gulltown we spoke about previously,” Lord Royce Caron finished.

“They aren’t that many Houses which will not close their doors when ‘Lannister’s dowry’ is uttered,” Alan Redwyne began in an annoyed tone. “If you-“

“Peace,” Daeron raised his right hand. “Peace, all of you. Lord Marq. Since you gave me that information without preparation, I assume the knowledge of House Blackbar’s ties to this merchant family is common knowledge in the Reach these days.”

“It is, my King.”

“And Lady Tyrell must be aware of both the origins of its fortune and the lineage of the potential bride.”

“Yes.” There was no hesitation from the Lord of the Longtable.

“Will Lord Blackbar be willing to risk Highgarden’s wrath for us?” Daeron asked Alan Redwyne.

Decades ago, the question would have been laughable. House Hightower was at the height of its power, and the successors to the Gardeners were powerless, their title of Lord Paramount a mere name devoid of power. Today? Highgarden had showed during the recent rebellion of the Reynes that it was very much the fist ruling the Reach.

“That’s...a good question, your Grace. One I have not the answer yet. I had only the time for a single raven exchange, which brought the medallion in addition to the letter. Though I know Lord Lyonel’s mother inquired several times if Lady Victoria could be a possible wife for her son before her gaze turned towards House Lannister.”

This implied that if the young Blackbar girl had been considered by Highgarden of all places before, there was a real prospect her father would marry her to a prestigious match, either to consolidate his line in his very castle, or tie his House with one of the greatest players of the Kingdom.

“Very well. House Blackbar of Bandallon can be a potential solution to our problem. Does anyone have another proposal?”

“I have,” Lord Shermer coughed. “It is a bit unconventional, your Grace, but it would solve undoubtedly solve some problems...aside from the dowry, of course...”

“I’m listening.”

“Since House Targaryen does not have maidens to propose, the best status Lady Tyrell and Lady Lannister can hope for their sons is the daughter of a Paramount House. You have married yourself the eldest daughter of Lord Boros, your Grace, and Lady Maris and Lady Flora have spoken their marriage vows too. But Lady Ellyn Baratheon has yet to find a husband.”

Daeron’s answer was quick, curt, and absolutely clear.

“No, absolutely not.” On one of the rare occasions she had been present at court, Arianne’s unmarried sister had been perfectly willing to attempt to seduce him, the consequences of it be damned. Daeron had enough of Maris’ scandalous behaviour at Storm’s End. He wasn’t going to add one more Baratheon fury at Highgarden or at Casterly Rock.

“She’s eighteen, your Grace.” The poor old Lord thought good to insist.

“She also can’t be trusted to be loyal,” Joffrey Cuy answered after he gave him the permission. “The first time she met his Grace, her first question was whether her breasts were likeable or not...”

**Queen Baela Targaryen**

“And the strength of the army the Greens are keeping in the West is massively decreasing, as we expected. The Lannister host has already returned home, for the most part, with thousands of smallfolk working on the next harvest. Three thousand Stormlanders and two thousand Reachers have departed for the South, or about to do so. This leaves the Greens with only five thousand or so swords to keep the peace, and most of them are trying to hunt the remnants of Walder Reyne’s butchers.” Lady Sabitha Frey finished her report.

“They still have not been able to capture the attainted Lord of Silverhill, then?”

“Unfortunately not, my Queen. Lord Cerion proved he was not the most intelligent of men, given how completely he tied his fortune with House Reyne. But most recently, he has led several audacious raids north-west of the frontier with Hornvale, rallying several malcontents from what was the Sarsfield lordship.”

“I wouldn’t have expected that from him,” Baela said truthfully. “That said, he’s going only to delay the inevitable.”

What was left of the ‘Red Banners’ couldn’t field more than two hundred men, and likely not in the same location. Furthermore, Cerion Serrett had nothing to pay his forces in the long term. Banditry on a large scale was likely the only thing he could do now.

“Absolutely.” Lord Cregan Stark approved. “But as long as he’s raiding, the Greens won’t reinforce the one hundred men or so they’ve left to patrol the new frontier next to Hornvale.”

“I doubt they would have mustered more men here anyway,” Gyles Royce voiced his disagreement with the Lord Paramount of the North. “This...this War of the Lions didn’t bring the Greens to their knees, but it forced them to expend a lot of the reserves, in blood and gold, that they would have kept for hostilities against us. And of course the Westerlands have been devastated for the second time in less than twenty years. It hurt them, my Queen.”

“I’m inclined to think the same as you did, though we will remain prudent. The Reach, and Highgarden in particular, have proven they were forces to be reckoned with.”

House Tyrell and House Oakheart had reacted far more promptly than what her Council had thought, and though Baela could have stopped their sieges of Silverhill or Crakehall if she decided to, it was a good reminder that for all the weakness of Oldtown, the Reach had thousands of knights and men-at-arms ready to be gathered on a battlefield.

“But as you said, a new war is unlikely in the extreme for the next years. Thus let’s speak of a proposal that has nothing to do with it. Alyn.”

“Thank you...your Majesty,” her cousin and Master of Ships began. “What I have in mind is nothing less but a new Great Voyage to the distant and wealthy lands beyond the Jade Gates. The goals, as my Queen expects of me...”

The speech had to be the longest one the Lord of Driftmark had ever made, and the entire Council listened to it attentively.

“And there are great risks, but the gains of a Great Voyage could also give us significant advantages that the Greens would lack.”

“My Lords?” Baela inquired as Alyn went on to empty his cup of wine, his discourse having clearly made him quite thirsty.

“The proposal has merit,” Grand Maester Borlor was the first to answer. “Speaking as a maester, there is so much we ignore of the Jade Gates, and what little we have is in the hands of our...rivals of Oldtown. The Librarians and Freeholders will certainly be enthusiastic at the idea of sending a few adventurous minds for a Great Voyage. We could even convince several locals to teach us the local languages.”

“But this is an expense that is going to empty a lot of coffers.” Lord Eon Grafton, Master of Coin, was evidently not as enthusiastic as the Grand Maester. “I think...I will have to check the numbers, but I think we can build one or two ships at Gulltown for such a journey. Maybe one or two at White Harbor? Counting all the other ports on the eastern coast, we might arrive to something like...ten?”

“As the Master of Ships said rightly, we can’t match the number of ships the Sea Snake sailed eastwards with,” Cregan Stark smiled. “Provided Lysene assistance is provided, it could still create the profits we desire. And it could solve a problem we have no solution to. Driftmark.”

“I assure you, my Lord Hand,” Alyn tried to be as confident as her defunct grandfather...and didn’t look very successful. “I am doing my best to reverse the fortunes of-“

“You are not,” Eon Grafton countered, “though by no fault of your own. King’s Landing has started to impose extremely heavy taxes on every party that trades with Driftmark or are using a Driftmark ship to ship goods in Blackwater Bay.”

“Which is really short-sighted of them,” Alyn said. “Their ability to build ships is already at its limits. Many merchant alliances are waiting more than seven moons to have a carrack.”

“It is short-sighted, yes,” Lady Sabitha Frey agreed, “but it does not come from the merchants themselves. It comes directly from the Green Council. They consider Driftmark to be a threat pointed directly at the heart of their realm, and let’s be honest, the island is exactly that.”

“I’m sure you have discovered many flaws in this plan, my Lady,” Baela told the mother of her husband. “Continue.”

“There are not that many flaws,” the Mistress of Whisperers reassured her...or at least tried to do so. “Obviously, if Lord Alyn intends to lead the...the Great Expedition himself, your Majesty will need to find a new Master of Ships, as well as someone capable to handle the duties of the Driftmark Lordship in Lord Alyn’s absence.”

“But even if the scheme succeeds,” Gyles Royce began in a pessimistic tone, “will the fortune gained be really able to return Driftmark to the heights it enjoyed before the Dance?”

“Almost certainly not,” the Lord of Winterfell said after a moment of silence. “The high taxes King’s Landing imposes on everything that comes out of Driftmark are here to stay, I’m afraid.”

“Driftmark can still play a major role!”

“As a fortress constantly reminding the Southerners we can wreck havoc in Blackwater Bay the moment hostilities begin, most certainly,” Sabitha played the role of appeaser.

“But as a trade harbour, Driftmark’s days are going to be increasingly difficult,” Baela added in the same tone her mother-in-law did. “The Sea Snake was as successful as he was because he could sell everything he wanted in the markets of King’s Landing, and from there, the entire South. If you can’t, the only other choices in Westeros are Gulltown, Maidenpool, Saltpans, and White Harbor...none of them are that wealthy, and you can’t rely exclusively on the Free Cities. Pentoshi Magisters have ambitions of their own too...and as we said before, you can’t make a Great Voyage every year.”

“I will...I will have a solution before I depart. If, that is,” the roguish smile returned, “I am allowed to sail beyond the Jade Gates?”

“Ten ships and not a single more,” Eon Grafton warned. And with the seal of approval of her Master of Coin, the ‘ayes’ of the rest of the Council followed in short order.

“And he will have to leave before the bad weather returns.” Cregan Stark added after saying his ‘aye’.

“We still have a year of summer, my Lord Stark,” Grand Maester Borlor protested.

“Winter is coming. Winter is *always* coming.”

“That’s funny, the Summer Islanders think the exact opposite,” Alyn chuckled, “you know for them, it’s Summer who is always reigning, may you should exchange-“

The cold eyes of the Lord Paramount of the North convinced her Master of Ships to not finish what he had been about to say...

**Amalia Romano**

“Truly this is my greatest work! I have achieved the miraculous! With this, I have turned the sundials and the hourglasses into nothing more than old and useless relics! Truly...wife, what are you doing?”

“Ah, he finally notices,” Amalia remarked acidly. “I am packing my possessions, husband. And so should you.”

“But...but this is our home!”

“No, this is the home my beloved father let us use for a decade of marriage.” The Myrish noblewoman corrected. “The same can be said of the slaves and everything else. And guess what, husband? My father’s patience is exhausted.”

“What? But I’m about to present an invention which will change Essos forever!”

“You said the same thing to him two years ago. And in the mean time, every time you presented to him those...those things of metal doing a horrible noise, they all fell apart before sunset...sometimes injuring a Magister or two.”

“This was then, this is now! I found out where I erred! The Romano clock is ready! Look, wife!”

Amalia looked. There were indeed...some needle-shaped objects moving at a moderate speed, behind a large glass protection. The result was...incredibly chaotic and agitated, much like her husband. There were so many needles and other things moving that Amalia was almost impressed...before realising there was no way to know what was important and what was not.

“I’m really happy for you, Ezzelino.” The third daughter of Magister Guido told her husband. She found herself to be sincere; the first time she met him, Amalia had understood how important it was for him to measure time. “But it is over. My father won’t fund your expensive attempts to replace hourglasses anymore. They aren’t worth irritating the Glass Guild, for one.”

“I’m using glass for my clock!”

Amalia glanced at the...the large thing her husband had called a ‘clock’. Aside from the glass protecting the needles, the rest was metal and wood.

“Not enough to make the Glass Guild happy. And this isn’t me you have to convince anyway. Pack your...everything you worked upon these last years, and quickly. You have two days to leave this house and the atelier. Past that date, my father’s guards will confiscate everything.”

“But...but...” finally Ezzelino Romano, his hirsute hair looking like he had escaped a horde of Dothraki, realised that all the unfulfilled promises of the last ten years had some consequences, and they weren’t going to be pleasant for him. “But how are we going to be able to continue the creation of my Romano clocks without an atelier?”

“There is no ‘we’,” Amalia brutally informed him. “My father gave me a choice yesterday: I could return home, or I could accompany you to...to whatever hovel you will find this moon. I chose the former.”

“But we are husband and wife!”

“How kind of you to remember that after you ignored me for moons!” Amalia didn’t hide her anger. “I spent my best years convincing my father and my friends that you had a future, that your creations combining metal, wood, and sorcery were going to change everything and make the names of Guido and Romano famous from Braavos to Qarth! Instead you broke things up, you crippled valuable slaves, and you angered pretty much everyone you spoke with! I’m done.”

“But...I love you...”

“You have shown a very derange way to show it, then.” Amalia retorted. “I loved you, Ezzelino. But not only your so-called ‘clocks’ aren’t working, and you spent most of your time ignoring my advices.”

“But...what if I could make them work...our marriage...and my inventions?”

At least he had said the marriage first...

“With my father washing his hands and abandoning you, the only way I could see our marriage working anymore requires someone to become your new protector.” Amalia declared, not bothering hiding her doubts about this prospect. “No Magister will take that risk, not when they know my father obtained nothing for a decade of support. The Pentoshi are lazy and indolent, they will not support something so...foreign. The Tyroshi hates our guts, and the Archon has a tight purse these days. And of course on the other side of the Narrow Sea, the Faith hates the Art...you tell your devices they need a drop of blood to come to life, you will be led to the executioner in quick order.”

“Give me a last chance.” Ezzelino pleaded.

Amalia sighed. No matter what he had done...she had been in love with him. And she may still be.

“You have four moons...” she conceded at last. “Past that date, if you fail, you will have to find another wife to tolerate your eccentricities.”

**Lady Jasmine Tyrell**

“Ellyn Baratheon? You didn’t mention her three days ago when you told me all the offers you had received, mother.”

Jasmine smiled at her son, but did not lower her guard when he decided to pout. As his mother, she was very well aware his eyes and his expressions of fake supplication were able to charm all the smallfolk and plenty of highborn he met.

“That’s because I gave you the list of all the lovely young women coming from Houses which could afford a dowry worthy of House Tyrell, my son.”

“Really?” Lyonel stopped immediately pouting and became a lot more serious. “I would have thought...House Baratheon has Storm’s End and can tax a lot of the Stormlands. And Lady Ellyn’s eldest sister married the King.”

“Yes, she did,” Jasmine nodded, satisfied her sons remembered his lessons. “And the dowry for Lady Arianne, now Queen Arianne, was significant. What does that tell you, my son?”

“That the biggest dowry has already been given away...and from there, they are getting smaller and smaller?”

“Exactly,” the Lady who no longer held the title of Regent of the Reach approved. “Obviously, Lady Maris is the Lady of Storm’s End, so it was Lord Staedmon who had to pay to unite his son with her. But after this sad affair at Goldengrove, Lady Flora could not marry Lord Thaddeus or one of his Heirs, since they were all dead. As a result, a large amount of gold and other metals was spent so that her days-long widowhood was forgotten, and Lady Flora Baratheon became Lady Flora Cordwayner.”

Which was frankly an error, in Jasmine’s opinion. In fact, it was so clearly against the interests of Storm’s End that the move had certainly been thought of in the Council room of King’s Landing. The Baratheons would have been far better served by marrying Flora to a Fell or an Errol.

“From what my friends are telling me,” Jasmine concluded, “there is not much wealth left to serve as a dowry right now. In ten years, maybe it would be different. But for now, Lady Ellyn brings her name and nothing else as a bride.”

“But House Targaryen pushed Storm’s End to propose.”

“In this case, my son, I don’t think so.” Lyonel looked at her, visibly surprised. “Oh, there must have been some support in the corridors of the Red Keep for that idea. But I think it is far more likely that Lady Maris wishes her sister to find a husband as soon as possible. Her eighteenth name day is only a couple of moons away, after all.”

“Err...ah, the painting she sent...she’s really pretty.”

Ah, so it had not been her imagination the first time.

“She is.” Jasmine didn’t try to hide it; while she did hid some things from her son, such an important affair deserved all the honesty in the world. “All the sisters that are sometimes called the Four Storms are great beauties, something they inherited from their mother...the Seven blessed them in that regard, they would have looked like bears if they had received the looks of their father.”

The former Regent of the Reach took her time to breathe and let her son properly think about the information.

“However, like her sisters, Lady Ellyn had not been trained to assume the duties of a Lady of noble birth. Her father made sure of that. The lout believed only a son could succeed him, and in the end, he wasn’t able to sire one.”

Men often spoke of the justice of the Father Above, but sometimes, the Mother had hers too.

“I don’t doubt you would have a young beauty incredibly eager to jump in your bed, my son.” Lyonel’s blush was absolutely adorable. “But you are the Lord of Highgarden and the Warden of the South. Ellyn Baratheon will bring nothing you already have when it comes to alliances.”

“Yes...House Baratheon is already tied to House Targaryen. Lady Maris has to obey King’s Landing first before listening to any...suggestion I could give her.”

“You understand the heart of the stag.” Jasmine was pleased her son had deduced things so fast.

Yes, in appearance, there were scandals, and Lady Maris Baratheon was trying very hard to be her own Lady. Jasmine was a bit impressed by her strength of will...but not by the methods used. With her sister giving birth to an impressive number of baby dragons, Maris Baratheon should have used an approach including a great deal of cunning. She didn’t.

“Speaking as your mother, my son, I think the two best potential matches for you are Lady Cerelle Lannister and Lady Victoria Blackbar, in that very order. The daughter of Lady Johanna can bring the greatest dowry of all, is quite a beauty, and most importantly at all, will for the first time tie House Tyrell with a House which once ruled the Westerlands as Kings of their own before the Targaryens came.”

Something that on this side of the frontier, was a true rarity these days. And no, Jasmine didn’t consider the Baratheons the true inheritors of the Durrandon Kings and Queens.

“Err...I met Lady Victoria, mother. I never met Lady Cerelle.” Oh yes, her son was incredibly adorable when he blushed.

And yes, it meant she had been right. Waiting one more year was not acceptable, not when her son was beginning to notice the charms of maidens and not-maidens.

“That can be arranged, my son. A few tourneys can be organised for you two to get acquainted.” Jasmine didn’t think there would be any problems in that regard, as Cerelle was whispered to have inherited her mother’s beauty and intelligence, but it was better to make sure. The Targaryens had chosen to ignore that, and look where it had led them to. “Lady Victoria Blackbar will be there too, of course. As will be many very beautiful maidens.”

“Mother!”

“My son,” Jasmine smirked and didn’t bother to glance at Lyonel, she knew his blush must be extraordinarily possible. “You will have to make a choice.”

“Is...is that really necessary?”

“Unless you want to kill the High Septon from the sheer audacity of the proposal, I can’t encourage you to marry seven Ladies of high birth in a single ceremony, my son...”

“Mother!”

**Author’s note**: And with this fiftieth chapter, the year one hundred and thirty-eight after the Conquest is officially over. The next update will present events happening in the year one hundred and thirty-nine.

It will include the end of the Vale succession affair – at least temporarily – and the Game of Thrones getting more complicated, both for the Blacks and the Greens. And of course Alyn Velaryon is preparing to sail away from Westeros...

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