**Chapter 22**

**Winter Storms**

**Queen Arianne Targaryen**

Arianne remembered a time when the journey between the capital and Storm’s End had been something to look forwards to.

It had been before the war. It had been an era where the short distance between her House’s ancestral home and the capital was thought to be a good thing. It had been moons when her mother, the maester and the men and women sang the tales of shining knights, beautiful princes and noble dragons defending the realm.

It was no longer true. The first days in the Kingswood had been the worst. Before the war, a column travelling under the royal banner would have reached the Wendwater in three days. Now that it was winter, things were different. The snow, the cold, and the various obstacles on the road had caused major delays. Five times the knights and riders of her escort had to charge to kill incoming bandits and army deserters trying to ambush them.

Arianne had been far away from the clash of swords each time, but she had seen the awful battlefields after the outlaws were dead and smelled the stench of the corpses lying on the ground. It had been a ghastly tapestry, one where no glory or honour could be found. Rusted weapons and broken spears had littered the field, and half-starved men and women were eaten by the carrion birds.

It was terrible, but the Queen in her had reasoned the Kingswood had always been a lawless land every time the realm bled. These skirmishes with bandits weren’t good, but they were hardly the first or the last ones which would be fought this century.

But as they entered the Stormlands proper and rode through the lands of House Buckler and House Errol, it had been impossible to affirm in her head the Stormlands were doing fine. Many villages showed the scars of burned houses and septs. Many mills were serving as improvised watchtowers instead of waiting for the grain to come inside. The Kingsroad, the great work of the Conciliator, was missing half of its pavement on several sections. Thank the Maiden Arianne had refused a royal carriage, because the progression with one would have been ten times harder.

Not every village and cove was showing ruins and devastation. There were lands well-organised and well-ruled between the Wendwater and Storm’s End, but for every settlement outwardly presenting an undisturbed sight, there were two or three bearing the marks of disrepair or conflict. It could be the sign of scores of graves, the collapsing walls of several inns, or the weapons abandoned in the snow or under the trees. Most of the time, however, it was the livid and hungry faces of the smallfolk.

Arianne had turned away and made sure Viserys was not able to see this. Her little son was too young to understand, but she didn’t want him to have nightmares.

Hopefully, by the time he grew old enough to understand, this year would be a half-forgotten memory. She had to believe this. The kingdom had to survive and heal. The other choices didn’t bear thinking about.

Overall, they nearly took an entire moon to make the journey. The last part of their ride had no snow anymore, but the Stormlands had plenty of unpleasant rainfalls for everyone and Arianne had refused to risk the life of her son by hastening the pace or attempting several times to outdistance a powerful storm.

Thank the Crone and the Maiden, the inns and the houses they had taken refuge into each time the weather worsened had proved comfortable and the villages crossed had no sign of the threat she and her son were fleeing.

There was no sign of people or animals suffering the first coughs of the Iron Fever for now, though a few of their guards had heard rumours and idle chatter from merchants selling the content of their chariots westwards.

The sky was a light grey when Storm’s End was revealed in all its glory. The fortress had not changed at all during the moons while she was away. The same powerful curtain wall and massive gate were still presenting an indomitable rampart against any enemy. The banner of House Baratheon was flying freely atop the great tower, the black stag on yellow defying any rival House to come and breach the walls where Gods had failed according to the first legends.

But Arianne couldn’t help but find Storm’s End vulnerable. She had seen many dragons now with her eyes, and the ruin they could make of castles. After the Conquest, no one had ever thought seriously about how to defend a citadel against the flying reptiles, but now that there were unfriendly beasts growing and becoming more dangerous on the other side of the frontier...

The massive gate was opened with the same familiar thunderous roar and a small crowd gathered outside to see the royal column arrive. The smallfolk men and women looked genuinely happy to see her, although it didn’t escape her that a great number of furious glares were given to Crown and Reach knights who formed half of her escort.

It was inside the great courtyard the reality of the war was more painfully felt. Arianne had known many, many young and old men of Storm’s End had perished on the battlefield of Bosworth Bridge, but seeing the depleted ranks of guards and a fourth of the courtyard empty was a dire remainder how much House Baratheon had paid for her father’s will.

And it wasn’t her mother who greeted her back, but her sister Maris.

“Your Grace, Storm’s End is yours,” the second oldest Baratheon spoke after kneeling like every highborn, guard and servant in the castle.

Arianne commanded immediately for the men and the women to rise. The cold was not cutting deep like in the windy streets of the capital, but it was not pleasant to endure and her son was beginning to get agitated, as he always was when one of his meals’ time drew near.

“He is a lovely boy,” Maris commented lightly when she was presented her nephew the Crown Prince, though Arianne saw in her blue eyes was indifference mixed with something else. But what alerted her was the ring on her sister’s right hand. Arianne was not the expert in jewels and gemstones Flora was, but she could recognise a diamond when she was presented one. “I hope to have children as pretty as him in a few years.”

The worry in her heart and her lungs redoubled.

“Sister, you are a bit too young to marry...” Maris had celebrated three less name days than her, and after their mother’s death in childbirth, there had been a reason Arianne and Daeron had appointed a reliable castellan in the person of a Keeper of the Coin from the Crownlands; Maris was too young and too inexperienced in matters of ruling to handle capably her duties as the Lady of Storm’s End. “And before you argue, remember it is winter and the conditions are...not good in the realm. Many suitors of high rank will be unable to come to Storm’s End and make an interesting plea for your betrothal.”

“You and your husband had no qualms selling Flora to Lord Rowan two moons ago,” Maris murmured with a voice which was between a snarl and a hiss.

If there hadn’t been half of the Storm’s End garrison watching them as they walked towards the Great Hall, the Green Queen would have grimaced. As it was, she was forced to smile and wave at the crowd.

“And I suppose you have...a knight in mind for an eventual betrothal?”

“I have, your Grace. Does the name Makaerys Belicho sound familiar to your ears?”

It was. It was the name of the Captain-General of the Volantene sellswords who had fought for the gold promised to them by the Green Crown. Arianne knew hundreds of men had been promised lands and privileges for their loyal service...but at no point it had been question to give the hand of a Lady Paramount in marriage. Sellswords, Old Blood of Volantis or not, had to know their place and it wasn’t at the top of the Westerosi nobility.

“If it is a jest, it is a poor one, sister. The man is a glorified sellsword! You are the Lady of Storm’s End. You can’t marry someone like him! He’s an exile...an Essossi exile and any lesser knight has more lands to his name. You are going to be...”

“I am going to do what? Make a mockery of our House’s name?” Maris’ lips widened into the same smirk she had given to Prince Aemond long ago. “Our father’s ‘glorious charge’ already did that, and I don’t intend to wait a decade to marry a Tyrell or a Lannister baby...find me a good hand, oh your Grace, or I will find one myself.”

And just like that, Arianne knew her ‘home visit’ at Storm’s End had become a lot more complicated than she expected.

**Archmaester Robert Turen**

When he had read the *Chronicles of Maester Perwyn* five years ago, Robert had been impressed by the Ghiscari proverb that great challenges forged great men. And yes, he had considered, like any dreamy reader, what it would be to rise as a Lord or a legendary ruler in his own right. But past the supper, reality had returned. He was a man in grey robes, a trickster pretending to be a magician.

Robert did not consider himself brave, talented with his tongue, or able to rule hundreds of men, women, and children by sheer force of will. The Divided Kingdoms of Westeros had more than ever need of people of talent to endure winter and the terrible changes brought by years of unrestrained bloodshed. And every morning as he woke up with the bells of Oldtown, the Archmaester knew he was the wrong man for this task.

Mother’s Mercy, the last sentence assumed there was a good man somewhere willing to jump in and successfully handle the task...a task which could be best described as ‘holding the realm together until spring was here’ and ‘a hundred new problems arrive before noon, solve them’.

Robert had acknowledged from the very beginning he was the wrong man in the wrong spot to rebuild the Citadel in the true institution of learning, progress and science the maesters were supposed to champion. These days he feared he was the only man humble enough to realise that. There were now six other Archmaesters running around, but most of them were ambitious rats with no patience for the lesser duties and foundations of the Order like teaching the youngsters.

Truly, Robert might even insult the rats by comparing them to these golden-tongued intriguers. Sometimes he wondered how by the Father Above they had managed to forge their chains on their own. They assuredly weren’t known for their dexterity, their smith skills or their academic lore on metal.

If he was the wrong man in the wrong position, then the other Archmaesters were the wrong men taking the wrong decisions in the wrong place, listening to the wrong advices and commanding in the wrong world. Worse, they ignored they were the wrong men.

Take their latest decision on the iron stocks, for example. Before the current unpleasantness with the Red Kraken, large loads of iron had been bought by the maesters to Great Wyk or Pyke each year. Their studies in metallurgy and other metal-crafting mysteries demanded it. Yet the new Archmaester of ravenry had sent two precious birds away to Pyke before one of assistants figured that his angry messages weren’t likely to be opened, never mind read. Judging by the burned and pillaged state of the Iron Islands, one might think the man would have understood by himself House Greyjoy and the other Ironborn weren’t going to give them anything.

But a semi-official Conclave had been necessary to explain that to the idiot, losing precious time they could have used for more interesting and necessary things.

Necessary things like protecting the future of the Citadel.

“I don’t think we can make more efforts concerning the Iron Fever, Gyles,” Robert admitted to his new assistant as a litany of bad news and epidemic-stricken villages were added to the sickness toll. “We have sent five days ago every maester we could spare northwards. Our colleagues will refuse sending more and I don’t think commanding young men with no healing experience to leave the Citadel would grant us popularity and love from Three Towers to Bitterbridge.”

“I fear you are right, Master, but the Fever must be contained, one way or another.”

Robert nodded unhappily, trying not to conjure in his mind the horror of what the ‘or another’ words implied for the great plains of the Reach. Oldtown and Highgarden had enforced harsh edicts to prevent the infamous Fever from bypassing their walls, but there were plenty of villages and settlements in the Northern Marches which had been nearly wiped out.

“I heard you are writing a new treatise on the problems these...complications will give our sea trade.”

“Yes, Archmaester. I recruited four new apprentices to help me with the ship numbers arriving every fortnight in the harbours and I am regularly informed of the captains welcomed at the Arbor docks and the bays close to Oldtown.” The brown-haired young maester took a large inspiration before continuing. “It is not good, Archmaester.”

“The Fever is a big problem for trade.” The man pretending to be a warlock told his assistant. “And I suppose the destruction of the Iron Islands and the creation of two separate kingdoms has not helped things.”

“With due respect, Archmaester, I think the situation is going to become worse before it gets any better,” Gyles shrugged. “About one in four carracks were coming to this fair city because Oldtown is the Entrance Gate of the Sunset Sea. Seagard, Pyke, Ten Towers had nice coastal docks, but the key was Lannisport. Presently, with the exception of Seagard, most of the southern harbours the Essossi and the Kingslanders wanted to reach are utterly destroyed or so crippled they will need thousands of gold dragons to be repaired.”

“Lannisport will need years to regain even a shadow of its golden glory,” and for the Ironborn, it would take many more years, assuming anyone was ever interested in helping them rise from their watery graves. His eyes closed for a moment before he dared asking the question. “How bad is it going to be?”

“I think it is going to be very bad, Archmaester...err...just the timber is going to cause a lot of problems.”

“The timber?”

His assistant gave him a sheepish expression.

“Many, many merchant hulls were built under King Viserys, Archmaester. During the war, I am afraid that Lord Hightower and all our...fierce Green supporters ignored most of the overhaul and rebuilding for the hulls they didn’t use as warships. Now, a wooden hull can endure for long years the fury of the elements, stormy seas and other issues, but there are dozens of hulls which will need to be replaced in the next couple of years, and not only the captains lack the timber for more than a few quills, the best minds are also dying of illness, age or grieving their dead sons...”

“Not to mention Tessarion burned several forests to rid us of the Black small armies harassing the flanks of Oldtown,” it had seemed like a good idea at the time...now it was revealed as the folly it was. Robert sighed. “Let’s go to the ravenry and see if we can convince my dear colleague to send a few more urgent messages eastwards. Without half of its trade, neither Oldtown nor the Citadel are going to be pleasant places to live in the last decade...”

**Lord Marq Merryweather**

One day, the Hand of the King swore he was going to enjoy a day without a messenger running in his direction to bring him a fresh disaster. And on that magical and great day, he would open his best bottle of gold wine and empty it as the sun set over Rhaenys’ Hill.

This day had not come, and if the trend of the last days continued, it was unlikely Marq lived long enough to enjoy the best drink of his life.

“I must ask before everything else how much trust you have in your spies,” the Lord of Longtable said as he gave a last glance to the message in his hands.

“These men have worked on my pay for the last eight years,” Lord Royce Caron replied levelly. “So far, everything they gave me has been verified by more official sources in time. And unfortunately from their point of view, this affair is not easy to miss. I already gave the order for certain of my archers to take supplies and climb the mountains. If the Dornish spears are where they are, we will know before the end of the year.”

Marq played with the golden dragon, wondering when the world had ceased to be reasonable before admitting that should be given the answer, he would not like it at all. Breathing loudly, he unravelled a map of the Princedom and the Marches that he had commissioned at great price in gold and silver.

“I suppose,” the Master of House Merryweather avoided as best as he could sounding bitter, “they have not managed to explain why the Lords of Dorne think it is a good idea to prepare for a war when most of our kingdom is neck-deep in the snow.”

“No,” the Lord of Nightsong admitted, “but it’s not hard to guess. The Dornish are vultures and carrion animals. It’s in their blood, it is in their bones and it is the essence of their souls. The moment they think someone is weak, they are completely unable to stop themselves and jump into the bloodbath. To be honest, I was quite surprised the previous Prince of Dorne was strong enough to prevent the fire-spirited scorpions from attacking while we had our back turned and a knee to the ground in execution.”

“The former Prince was a wise man...and had ice in his veins instead of poison and sun. I’m told it happens sometimes.”

Alas, it was a rare case, and whatever courage and power the Lord of Sunspear had once possessed to oppose his bannersmen, it was evident his young daughter hadn’t it.

“This leaves us with a problem.” And the sands of Dorne were a bit warm in summer. By the Warrior, he had a gift for describing a bad situation. “The passes will not support more than skirmishers for the moment, but the moment snow is no longer a problem, our knights defending the border will face something like twelve thousand Dornish.”

“Maybe more,” Royce Caron amended. “My men are good, but I don’t think they had the days and the means to find all the camps and the forts where these hot-blooded scorpions are training. If they saw twelve thousand, there will be more behind.”

Twenty thousand then, maybe more. Under Viserys I, mustering a host of similar size would have been done in a fortnight...but of course Dorne would have never dared attacking the Seven Kingdoms like that. They feared the dragons too much...but the dragons right now available to the Green Crown were limited to Tessarion. Risking the Blue Queen and the life of the King when the Crown Prince had not yet celebrated his first name day was not what he could call a wise strategy. Meraxes had been bigger during the First Dornish War, and yet it had fallen all the same. Losing King Daeron would be a catastrophic blow and the Blacks would attack the moment the news arrived to their ears. One side having dragons and one having none could only have one outcome.

“In this case, I suspect I will need to be...creative to find the men, the gold and the weapons to fight a war against House Martell...unless you think Lord Wyl is going to recognise the error of his ways before this winter is over.”

As the treasury was using fumes, dust and promises to meet its obligations this last couple of months and people fled in every direction as the Iron Fever arrived from the west, Marq had no idea where the gold was going to come from...and he was sure the Master of Coin was going to share this view.

“If he does, it will be a major miracle,” the retort was dripping with black humour. “House Wyl has never been known to breed reasonable warriors...”

**Johanna Swann**

Unlike most of the Sunset Lands or Braavos, the city of Lys wasn’t giving a great importance to the words ‘summer’ and ‘winter’. Oh, its travellers and ship captains who regularly left the beautiful island knew very well the importance of the terrible blizzards and the risk they took by departing while autumn was rising elsewhere. But from the greatest prince-merchant to the slaves, the words ‘spring’ or ‘end of a Long Summer’ had relatively little importance. Lys had a dry and a wet season, the former lasting far longer than the latter. It was no wonder, then, the Lysene believed the myriad of Goddesses they worshipped had blessed their Free City.

Eight days out of ten you could wear robes and attires which would have seen you lose some fingers or other parts of your body by frostbite in King’s Landing or Pentos. The oranges and the other fruits’ juices were dripping in your mouth and you never had the fear your food was going to be frozen if you weren’t too quick to eat it.

But if Lys had been forced to borrow the Valyrian names of the other cities save Volantis to name their seasons, this didn’t mean the City of Love had none. Lys experienced a dry season and a wet season...and now as the dark clouds covered the sky, it was evident which era was upon them.

The sun had barely risen up over the Ruby Tower, but the air was already suffocating. Not that the rays of the yellow orb bringing them light and warmth were going to last, against all these clouds. The wind was coming from the south-east, an angry rumble of warm air, promising great rains and more dangerous winds. Already she had ordered her servants and her courtesan court to bring back inside the priceless objects of her collection which could be damaged by this storm. Inversely, thirsty trees and plants which had waited the wet days were moved on the balconies and the suspended gardens. The old men and women had whispered this was merely the first rain storm of a long series, and Johanna believed them. Lys was not the land where she had been born, it did not break the storms and endured their wrath...it only took some of their rain bounty before the wrath of the sky and the sea went elsewhere.

Life was continuing in the streets, the harbour and the palaces, but the efforts were dull and exhausting. Many of the palace slaves coming from colder lands had collapsed in the last days, unused to the humidity and the hot air assaulting head and lungs.

These days, difficult as they were for slaves, common merchants and sailors, were pure hell for the courtesans like her. She was the Black Swan. She had a rank to uphold. Yet the effortless grace Johanna was supposed to show from dawn to sunset was a hard and nearly impossible task when every moment was creating drops of sweat on her forehead and her neck.

There was not a choice, though. Beauty was everything for a courtesan. Oh, the men could proclaim as many times they wanted they were interested in the finest debates on the jade trade, tapestries from the Century of Blood or the latest structure from Badiglys, you didn’t see them circling around wise sixty years-old crones every evening.

A courtesan had true power over the Lysene, but this power was fleeting and was deeply embraced with her beauty. The very moment the magisters and their entire Houses stopped finding her beautiful, she would lose her power over them.

And so despite the suffocating weather, more efforts were demanded of the young girls in her service to make her stunning and beautiful. Due to the warmth, Johanna had demanded a light hand on the perfumes, preferring to them fruit scents of her private possessions and expensive herbs from the Summer Islands. The vast pool of water she used every day was covered by fresh petals of exotic flowers. Creams from the distant East were bought and tested. From all the whispers of her doves, these efforts were successful...many lesser courtesans had taken to imitate her to salvage their looks before the young men vying for their favours abandoned them.

Yet it would not do to rest on the bed of golden flowers. Beauty was like the fluid game of alliances and betrayals at Lys, everything could change at the most inopportune times.

“The Tyroshi emissary has sent two new messengers before dawn, Black Swan,” murmured Sydonia, one of the girls which had been with her for the last two years while replacing the former fruit slices by new ones on her skin. “He humbly requests a short moment of your precious time to speak of important trade conversations.”

“I’m sure he is,” Johanna commented idly, lifting a finger to encourage her favourite musician to play with her great silver harp. A heartbeat later, a joyous melody filled her private quarters. That it prevented everyone to hear what arrived on her lips was not a coincidence. “No, he is going to wait until the rain falls over Lys today. His Archon is no more in position to dictate us his terms. By all report, this...this ‘Iron Fever’ has already killed two of his cousins and most of their fleet are in quarantine from Lorath to Volantis. I think soaking his red-purple clothes he is so proud of before I am able to greet him will give him just the final warning he needs to be more reasonable in his monetary ambitions.”

The Tyroshi had been a bit too arrogant for their own good, since the Kingdom of the Three Daughters had effectively broken apart. Their greed had been a bit too evident in the latest clashes in the Disputed Lands and their slaver raids everywhere had angered many important voices and crowns. Personally, Johanna couldn’t care less about what happened to the Seven Kingdoms now. Her uncle had refused to ransom her against all conventions, and this had destroyed any pleasant feelings she might have towards her former homeland. It had been a pleasure to know that her uncle, her father, her brothers and several of her cousins had died in the civil war.

“The Tyroshi must be carefully prepared, Sydonia...send him some singers and one of our most prideful boys. It will give him the time to prepare himself for his audience. Who else do we have today requesting my time?

“Half of the magisters, seven great captains, over two hundred young men of the great merchant families, emissaries from Lorath, Qohor and Astapor...”

“The Fever has reached Slaver’s Bay, then.” It was not a difficult guess to voice, given how loudly the brutes of the Red Harpy had been vocal in supporting the Tyroshi. “We will have to raise the price for the three thousands Unsullied they sold to our clients in the last five years. If they butcher their eunuchs, we aren’t going to see more of them on the market for the next three years...”

Johanna thought about the possible repercussions for a few heartbeats before deciding.

“I will meet the slave-master of Astapor tomorrow. Qohor in four days, they tried to cheat me with onyx and marble of low quality, and I have not forgotten. The magisters will be heard after my bath...”

“There is also an emissary from the Black Crown of the Sunset Lands...”

The Black Swan twitched her lips.

“I certainly am not aware of galleys or carracks from the Sunset Lands arriving to our city in the last five days...”

“According to three of our doves, they arrived on a Pentoshi-crewed carrack.”

Ah, that explained this discrepancy.

“I imagine they want to negotiate with the Rogares.” By this point, everyone at Lys powerful enough to matter was aware Lysandro Rogare had a Targaryen Prince hostage in his palace. Everyone was also aware this hostage was worse than useless, for there was no money to pay the sum Lysandro’s wastrel of a son had demanded in the first place. Several magisters or their courtiers had tried to buy the egg found with the Prince...Johanna had had to order a few assassinations before the transactions were opened with Lysaro Rogare. It was one thing to detain a potential dragonlord, quite another to play with dragon eggs. Should it hatch in foreign hands, both Black and Green dragons could turn their fiery maws against Lys and she had read the accounts of the Dance of the Dragons, as they called it.

Many, many fortresses of the Seven Kingdoms had been torched by dragons. Lys, more interested in beauty than in proper fortifications, would burn in a day if the flying beasts were authorised to unleash their wrath here.

“They have requested talks with them, yes...but one woman of her delegation requested an audience with you personally, Black Swan.”

That was intriguing. The famous courtesan made a gesture to her girls to abandon their efforts on her long black hairs.

“Has she said anything more?”

“There might have been a murmur or two about the Art, Black Swan...”

A polite way if there ever was one to tell they were interested in sorcery and other dark mysteries.

Fine, now her curiosity had been piqued and she really wanted to know why the Targaryens wanted to speak to her.

“I will grant her an audience.” She turned to the youngest girl present. “Bring me my red silk robe. We will avoid shocking the Sunsetlanders for the moment.”

Johanna received the emissary one turn of hourglass later in a discreet room with no view on the outside. The relationships between Westeros and Lys were sufficiently complicated this year there was no need for her to throw more oil and poison into the well. Or destabilise House Rogare, for that matter. Lysaro was gone, but there was no way to know how many of his siblings were willing to follow his footsteps.

The woman in front of her had definitely the black hair and the skin of someone not having enjoyed enough sun recently. The Black Swan thought she might be a Northerner, but this was a guess, not a certainty. Northern women were in general tough and not that different from their men, or at least the ones which came to the Free Cities were. Given that the most common profession the swords of House Stark were hired for was sellsword in the Disputed Lands, this was not surprising at all.

This woman, however, wasn’t bulky at all, though her common clothes did not reveal a lot. But if Johanna had to give a description, it would be...yes, common. Common clothes, of a brown-black. Common hairs, common eyes and a behaviour which had no good or bad points. The woman was common...and the Black Swan could see why she had been chosen to play the role of emissary. Assuming there were enemies in Lys, this emissary could disappear in a crowd and even one of the Braavosi Faceless Men would find difficult to locate her.

The Northern origin was more than confirmed as the introductions were done in record time.

“Lady Swann,” the envoy of the Black Queen bowed. A letter was handed to her protectors, who verified there was no poison or dangerous substance before one of her personal messengers approached it. The seal of the black dragon, symbol of House Targaryen was indeed authentic. The content of the message above it was much more interesting.

“Your mistress is ambitious,” Johanna noted without raising an eyebrow. A bottle of Summer wine was opened and in good hostess she drank first her cup to show there was no risk for her interlocutor. Yet the foreign woman didn’t touch it.

In the distance, the wind was gaining in strength. Rain should not be long in coming.

“My Queen needs strong foundations. A strong realm is at this price.”

“Well said,” The Black Swan replied, letting the Westerosi have a direct view on her breasts. Sadly, it left the other woman indifferent. “But I could remark she has not much to negotiate with me. I am quite aware of the...shattered state of the Seven Kingdoms. I am also aware, as are the magisters and the great merchant factions of this city, that the gold of Casterly Rock is on the wrong side of the frontier from your perspective.”

“Frontiers can change,” replied calmly the Northerner.

“But not while winter prevents you from campaigning,” Johanna fixed the brown eyes, wondering what sort of ice could forge a behaviour so cold. “I mean no disrespect, I know the Black Queen is brave and her armies fought valiantly against great armies, including hosts of sellswords from the Disputed Lands...but for all your abundance of steel, Lys has no need of it. Trade is a harsh mistress, and it is in gold, secret and valuable goods that expensive favours are paid.”

Johanna gave the black-haired foreigner a thin smile.

“I will admit you are wiser than the last Green emissary. He tried to convince me by a false promise of returning Stonehelm and the lands nearby if I made secret pacts with him.”

The man was still there at Lys...maybe. Since he had been insulting and loud-mouthed, Johanna had sold him to a pleasure-house before he had time to set a foot outside her hall. When you accused a courtesan to open her legs for everyone, you had to be careful you weren’t going to spend your time doing this for the next years.

“Her Grace unfortunately has not the power to give you back Stonehelm, it would be a lie to pretend the contrary. And for all our...limited supply of gold, the kingdom of Queen Baela has many resources the lands south of the Trident can’t give to you.”

“It may be so,” the Black Swan agreed. “The North has timber which would be welcomed with open arms, much more than the Braavosi who have other great woods in Essos to build their fleets with. The Vale has iron, silver, and fertile valleys. The Riverlands, once your days of winter will be gone, will probably have more grain and salt to sell. But how we can be sure your Queen will not cancel this trade or intervene in our affairs the moment she takes back King’s Landing? Lysene remember Caraxes, and for good or bad, your Queen is his daughter...”

“And our stance on slavery does not make us popular in the streets of Lys.”

“And your stance on slavery does not make you popular,” there was no use to deny it...most of the Essossi thought the Lords of the Sunset Lands were hypocrites when it came to their serfs and slavery. “If your Queen truly wants my help on some...artful...pursuits, I will need guarantees. I will need guarantees from Black Queen to Black Swan.”

The rest was a trade of knowledge and favours. She might have started as a lowly slave at Lys, but it would not be said she had no ambition. And if the Targaryen Queen wanted to infuriate the Stormlords, Johanna wasn’t going to say no...

**Author’s note**: from Winterfell to Sunspear, the Game of Thrones continue and Westeros tries to fight the internal threats like the Iron Fever, the conspiracies, the legacy of the Dance of the Dragons and plenty of external problems...

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