**Chapter 56**

**Pact of Destruction**

*While few Magisters and important highborn would acknowledge it for years to come, the first days of the fourth moon during the year 140 after the Conquest were truly the last chance of stopping the War of the Beard from inflicting more devastation than it already had.*

*It also was, though nobody knew it at the time, the final step that would make sure that this bloodbath would be merely the first of the Narrow Sea Wars, and not just an anomaly in Essossi and Westerosi history.*

*Evidently, in order for the swords to be sheathed, the Republic of Braavos had to think this war was a titanic mistake.*

*As imperfect as the information available to the Sealord undoubtedly was, this choice doesn’t seem to have been considered.*

*Yet it was a mistake, and one many Braavosi sailors and soldiers were going to die for.*

*With the destruction of its First Fleet, the Republic had lost all the effect of surprise it did count upon to emerge victorious in mere moons.*

*Moreover, the thousands upon thousands of deaths and wounded of the first couple of moons had heavily decreased the sheer advantages Braavos enjoyed over its Pentoshi foes. Before this war, it was thought Braavos had the numbers to wage war against Myr and Pentos, and inflict deathly injuries to both when at sea.*

*After the storm struck and the First Fleet sank, it was obvious that Myr entering the war on the Pentoshi side would be a long and gruelling affair that may very well end in the Republic’s defeat.*

*For yes, Braavos could build galleys and its big ‘galleasses’ faster than anyone else in the world. Yes, it had a large fleet of armed corsairs attacking Pentoshi trade across the Narrow Sea.*

*But building a new fleet was not the same as finding the hundreds of experienced sailors to crew it.*

*And there were other problems, most of them almost impossible to observe right now, but which predicted an ugly end to this war should it last several years.*

*Did Sealord Salvatore Zalyne consider offering an acceptable peace during the fourth and fifth moon? Sadly, of the witnesses and the surviving archives available to peruse of this era, there are no indications he ever did it.*

*And the Braavosi who had loudly and proudly supported his rise were clearly in favour of attacking and attacking again until Pentoshi emissaries crawled to their knees and formally accepted the complete abolition of slavery.*

*But Pentos was not willing to bare his throat for an enemy which had been foolish enough to admit that nothing but annihilation would be concerned.*

*It was hardly an efficient system to wage war. The Pentoshi, for all their efforts to enlarge their militias, were very much at the mercy of the whims of sellsword commanders for the better part of 140AC.*

*But Pentos was going to fight.*

*And there always the secret hope now that in a single day, the Braavosi arrogance could be punished by the skies and the seas for having the temerity to begin a war in winter.*

Extract from Dragon and Beards, by Historian-Librarian of the First Rank Benjen Manderly, originally written at Fairmarket, 325AC.

“*Some narrow-minded souls may think this was an opportunity for peace, but we know better! The Sword of Justice and Liberty had been unsheathed, and it was out of the question to return it to its scabbard before we had drenched it with slaver’s blood*! *Death to the heretics and the Usurper Queen!*” Words attributed to Archmaester Morgan Hightower, 326AC.

“*Ah, yes, Archmaester Morgan Hightower. Someone should remind him one day that a maester’s oaths are to report events as truthfully as possible when writing a history book, not to waste good parchments to spread falsehoods and as many lies as his poor head can imagine? Yes, magic exists. Yes, it was undoubtedly responsible for plenty of disasters that befell this kingdom. But when writing the* Sword of Freedom*, I feel like he’s trying to compensate for something. One might think it may have to do with the reputation of his grandsire being forever associated in smallfolk’s imagination with a certain humiliating defeat during the Second Narrow Sea War...”* Words attributed to Archmaester Garth Flowers, 326AC.

**Sealord Salvatore Zalyne, Fourth Moon of 140AC, Sealord Palace, Braavos**

It had taken far too long for the message to arrive in his hands. It was alas unsurprising, since it was winter now.

But it was one more piece of carrion meat to swallow, and the roll of parchment was already filled with unpleasant things.

It was from the senior surviving squadron commander of First Fleet.

That neither Admiral Devio Bartarys nor his most senior officers had written it was opening a barrel of ill-omens that no sane Sealord wanted to watch over.

Alas, it had happened.

“I should have listened to you when you told me we courted terrible dangers by launching this war so late in the bad season, brother.”

“Mistakes were made, and I did not insist a lot about how capricious the Gods can be when it comes to the winds and the tides.”

Napoleone’s curt and sombre tone brought a tired smile to his lips. It lasted no more for the time to count to ten.

“Devio Bartarys?”

“Gone. The survivors we have all agree his flagship and the two galleasses closest to it sank with no survivors.”

This time Salvatore grimaced outwardly. He didn’t like very much the man who had been the Admiral of the First Fleet, but the losses it implied spoke of hundreds of Braavosi dead just for these three ships.

Hundreds among the thousands of dead the Braavosi fleet would take years to recover fully.

“Devio Bartarys-“

“He was unlucky. He did exactly what he was supposed to, and his sailing made a lot of sense there: there were plenty of reefs and high rocks if you stayed too close to the coast. Unfortunately, by avoiding one danger, he was hammered by another. And once caught in the storm-“

“Enrico heard some rumours this storm was unnatural, in the taverns where his friends are drinking.”

“Oh, please,” Napoleone rolled his eyes. “First of all, Enrico should not frequent these lairs of ill-repute where everyone is a friend after three pints of ale. He’s the First Sword; he should fulfil the duties of this noble office seriously. And now having said that, no, I don’t believe this storm was called by sorcery. There are storms all the time in the Narrow Sea, and there are far more of them during autumn and winter. Suddenly because one smashed apart our galleys, it means there is a cabal of warlocks against us? Please!”

There was a loud snort, and if anything it reassured somewhat Salvatore.

“The idea someone would raise a storm as powerful as this one is utterly ridiculous,” the younger of the two brothers continued. “Ten years ago, a warlock proclaiming himself to be the ‘Master of the Winds’ professed he could conjure enough wind to change the course of a battle. When called to prove it, he wasn’t able to create a breeze, and he killed twenty poor donkeys for nothing!”

“And he collapsed right after, and according to the rumours, was not able to walk for the next fortnight, yes, I’ve heard of this ‘exploit’.”

Salvatore sighed.

“I guess this was the Gods’ reminder that they alone command the fury of winter, and that we are but mortal men.” The recently-elevated Sealord breathed out. “Plan Orca failed.”

“But we have no choice but to continue it.” Napoleone stubbornly said. “Unless you want to stop this campaign here and now, brother?”

For a heartbeat it was tempting, oh so tempting to say yes. The parchment posed on his desk spoke of more casualties suffered by good Braavosi than there had been a single decade.

If they continued and a second storm wrecked the galleasses, the cogs and all the ships mustered for war, this would be an endless nightmare.

But the temptation passed.

They were at war with Pentos now, and the moment the Pentoshi discovered how many of their cousins and economic partners had been killed, they would demand excruciatingly painful terms to bleed the Republic’s coffers dry.

“No, there won’t be peace.” Salvatore Zalyne shook his head. “The Pentoshi have no reason to accept the one we desire until we have seized Sidorys and placed a dagger against their throat. And our supporters would throw me in the closest canal if I was stupid to ask for something like that now.”

“True,” the Second Sword of Braavos conceded. “War is our mistress now.”

Salvatore glared at his brother, for this was absolutely not an amusing point.

His younger brother looked away for a quick turn of hourglass, acknowledging he had gone too far.

“How is the Fleet going to proceed?” the Sealord of Braavos asked.

“We must take Argilon and Sidorys, brother. On that front, nothing has changed. But the Second Fleet is here, in this very lagoon. It was not supposed to depart for twenty more days; we will have to do everything within our power to accelerate the preparations. And I’m afraid that this means the Second Fleet and whatever we can salvage of the First won’t be able to strike Argilon until the Seventh Moon.”

“Unacceptable. Do it faster.”

This time it was Napoleone’s to stare at him in disapproval. The intelligent eyes of his brothers reminded him wordlessly what had happened the last time when they had wanted to do something ‘faster’.

“I will do what I can. The troop transports have been mostly undamaged, so it’s possible we will be able to launch the attack against Argilon sooner than I think. But there is no way we can attack the Pentoshi city before the Sixth Moon, brother. And Sidorys in turn can’t be assaulted before the Seventh or the Eighth. The Second Fleet is there, not at Palados. Our ships aren’t sailing as fast as a falcon flies.”

“I know.” Salvatore scowled. “But it means more of these cursed convoys are going to reach Pentos. The Velaryons and all the merchants of the Sunset coast are like cheap whores when you show them gold coins.”

Plenty of time it had worked to Braavos’ advantage in the past. With the Lords of the Vale and the other Andal kingdoms understanding nothing to trade, the Republic had been able to sign extremely advantageous treaties and earn immense profits on top of them.

But now Pentos was spending a river of gold and silver to rearm itself, and it wasn’t as funny anymore.

“If the Velaryons and all the merchants of Gulltown have smelled this opportunity to sell blades and war supplies to Pentos, then Myr will not be far behind.”

“Yes, brother.”

“We have to defeat Pentos before every other Free City or the Sunset Lands decide that doing something *worse* to us is in their best interest.” Like hiring a respectable number of sellsail to strike at their extended supply lines across the Narrow Sea.

Napoleone’s expression was grim.

“I still think we can beat Pentos, as long as no other Free City intervenes directly to support them. But there’s no denying it is going to cost us. We have lost a golden opportunity with the loss of First Fleet, and nothing I say or do will change that. Pentos is vulnerable now. In two or three moons, it will be a far more different beast to track and kill. And if we give it enough time, things will be very unpleasant for us.”

“Then we will have to make sure it doesn’t happen.” Salvatore spoke without hesitating. “Tacito Laskarys is here, no? He can take command of the Second Fleet, and sail for Argilon.”

“I was thinking about taking command myself,” Napoleone admitted. “There is a precedent.”

“One, and you’re too good of an administrator for that.”

At least this compliment satisfied his brother and silenced the potential objection. If only Enrico was as easy to deal with...

“Tacito Laskarys will need to be lucky.”

“It’s difficult to say, he’s not the kind of man I found cheating at dice or cards.”

The House of Laskarys were almost as ancient as the Zalyne lineage, and unlike them, they had never lost most of their fortune in a single generation.

“I suppose I will have to wait and hope he can avoid repeating the disaster of First Fleet,” his younger brother spoke. “That aside, I must mention Laskarys is an eager supporter of the fleet faction which wants to strike at the Narrow Sea trade of the Pentoshi, wherever it might be.”

“Thus a good reason to give him a fleet of galleons and galleasses,” Salvatore smoothly replied. “With the storms and the waves in the way, he’s going to stay close to the Pentoshi shore, not embark on some stupid raid against the Sunset harbours or push southwards to raid the trade of Myr and Tyrosh.”

“Yes,” Napoleone sighed. “Maybe I am just naturally...anxious after the disaster we just suffered.”

“Plenty of our supporters were far more anxious than you are.”

And it was a true statement, like saying the Narrow Sea was a bit wet in all seasons.

Someone knocked once at the door, then twice in rapid succession.

“The messenger of the Iron Bank, I take it?”

“Yes, we’re only missing some rain for this morning to be absolutely *miserable*.”

**Lord Alyn Velaryon, Fourth Moon of 140AC, the Black Fort of Axe Isle**

“I assure you, Prince-Admiral, you will never have greater friend than I!”

It was honestly a bit disconcerting that someone could smile so much.

To make it worse, Veronos Xhore was not good-looking. He was in fact positively ugly. He already missed half of his teeth – the result, he had assured him, of several beatings his brothers delivered with their fists and boots.

“I expect to find you here when we will return, Captain of the Brotherhood. Good winds, Master Xhore.”

“Fair tides, Prince-Admiral.”

And Verenos walked away with as much as dignity as a well-fed rat.

“You realise he’s going to sell you for a bag of wheat, right?”

Javantys the Black, exile from Volantis, did not waste time delivering the truth in the most offending manner possible.

“If at least it was good wheat,” Alyn shook his head. “And yes, Captain, I know very well how much we can trust Verenos. Or frankly, how he doesn’t believe in anything regarding the loyalty. I helped killing his brothers, right?”

“And with style,” Anja Do chuckled. The sound was charming, but then so was the owner of the voice. The Captain of the Primal Wind was a beauty of the Summer Isles, one that men would have killed twenty rivals to gain the favours of.

Alyn was honest enough to admit that if she had proposed sharing a couch this very evening, he would not have refused.

But Anja Do was not sleeping in the company of men. Her entire crew consisted of women. More importantly, they were all Summer Islanders women who had been chained and abused by slavers at some point. Some had been born in slavery, others weren’t, but all were united by the hatred for the other sex.

Some men had tried nonetheless to seduce them. When they were seen again, it was in many pieces, and the blood and the guts soon fed the fishes.

“The sons of Xandarro Xhore were ready to fight for the inheritance of their father. I merely give them the excuse to draw their sabres and settle it the bloody way.”

“It is always like this, with the Kings of the Basilisk Isles,” Jayantys knew, for he was an exile of Volantis. “No matter how powerful the Master, it all falls apart when he dies. The Captains here only obey the strongest.”

And the progeny Xandarro had been many things, ambitious and greedy most of all, but they weren’t the strongest.

Alyn would love to say it had been a fierce battle when his men and himself stormed the Black Fort of Axe Isle, but in reality it had been disappointingly easy.

The pirates of the Xhore Brotherhood had turned against each other, sold each other out at the first opportunity, and at the end, the combined force he had brought here, reinforced by Captains like Anja Do and Jayantys the Black had emerged triumphant.

“They obey those who offer them the greatest plunder.” Alyn smiled.

Jayantys the Black rolled his shoulders, a move that may have been unimpressive for other men, for the large man that he was, was very intimidating.

Ironically, contrary to what his name suggested, the exile of the First Daughter was copper-skinned and did have brown hair, keeping himself free of a beard. And his flamboyant clothes were blue, red, and yellow. In short, he wore no black on him.

“Your Lysene sailors and plenty of others abandoned your little adventure the moment they sniffed gold and power,” the larger man laughed at his words. “And you sent one of your ships back too, yes?”

“I have to fill up again the coffers of House Velaryon.”

And the loot and the ‘gifts’ sent with the Red Tide would go a long way paying for the costs it had taken to assemble that expedition in the first place.

The Battle of Axe Isle had not been difficult, but it had indeed created a lot of plunder. And Alyn was not sending everything home; plenty would be used for trade with Yi Ti.

“See? We will make you a proper member of the Brotherhood in time, Admiral of the Sunset Lands!”

“Or not,” Anja Do reacted grinning. As the voluptuous ebony-skinned woman was wearing clothes only made of exotic feathers, it was a struggle not to look at her with lustful eyes. “He’s taking so many risks, he might die in battle.”

“I won’t.” The Lord of Driftmark affirmed. “But it isn’t going to matter if every time there’s plunder, my men lose sight of the journey and sail in the other direction.”

“You have likely lost all the Captains that were going to turn back,” Jayantys the Black told him. “Once past Axe Isle, the distance by itself pushes a good Captain to continue, no matter the cost. Unskilled sailors may think they have a chance with empty hulls, but they will ram their ships ashore on the demon-infested shores of Valyria first. The skilled ones will sail to New Ghis.”

Plenty of Lysene crew, however, didn’t. With many Volantene and other Essossi prisoners freed from Axe Island, they would go to the Orange Shore and the City of the Triarchs.

“Is that what you advise?”

Jayantys shrugged.

“It is the safest way to reach your destination, everyone knows that. New Ghis, the lighthouse of Port Yhos, and then the Jade Gates. Once you’re past them and the Qartheen have stolen everything they can from you, you’re almost arrived in the Golden Empire.”

“I know, the Sea Snake did it.” Alyn paused, then launched himself. The two were going to come with him, and it was better to reveal the truth. “I don’t intend to follow in his footsteps.”

“Ah.” Anja Do looked at him with the eye of a prey bird, one which would have forced plenty of Greens to reconsider the terrible idea that women couldn’t rule. “You intend to try the Pearly Cape.”

“Yes. We will take new supplies on the island of Lesser Moraq, then sail for Surabahai, also known as the Isle of Elephants.”

“And once there, wait until the winds are favourable to reach Marahai Bay and ultimately, the straights of Leng.”

“Some say only fools try the Pearly Gates,” Jayantys spoke.

“It has been done before,” Anja Do was more enthusiastic than the Volantene exile to be sure. “Not many times, but we have at home the logs of three Queen-Captains who made the journey. The Valyrians did it too several times.”

“The Jade Gates are safer.”

“It is a sea that has been far more explored by sailors of Essos, I agree. There are far fewer possible hostile ships here too...as long as we let the Qartheen extort their heavy tolls.”

“The straights of Qarth are named the Jade Gates for a reason, oh Admiral of the Sunset Lands,” the copper-skinned Captain replied drily.

Alyn smiled.

“That’s true, but then there’s also the fact the Golden Empire may have a civil war right now. By passing through the Jade Gates, we must visit in turn the five great harbours, and if Anja is correct, the grand officials serving as custom harbours will force us to stop at the first major port, and we will have to turn back, our hulls filled with spices and precious goods.”

“But we will not be able to purchase anything truly exceptional.”

The clear unsaid message was obviously that it was a problem, and not like Veronos Xhore’s willingness to sell himself to anyone who could help him rise one step above his current station.

“I will follow you,” Jayantys declared. “But I warn you that we will face great dangers. The Yi-Tish don’t lack the people who break their precious imperial protocols, and the wars they fight among themselves are times they are always quick to erase from books with each new Dynasty that ascends to the Divine Throne. They will not like our presence.”

“Plenty of men and women said the same before meeting me, but they all loved me in the end,” Alyn assured them. “But before wondering of the perils of the Yi-Tish could cause to us, we must reach their Golden Empire. Do you agree Lesser Moraq and the Pearly Gates are to be the next steps of this great voyage?”

“Yes.”

“We are.”

Everything had been said.

**Prince-Consort Addam Targaryen, Fourth Moon of 130AC, Stone Hedge**

One thing Addam had never to worry about was his wife spending too little time with their daughter.

At least thrice per day, Princess Laena Targaryen had all the attention of her mother, something the purple-eyed baby appreciated a lot.

They were burning a lot of candles after supper, but they were all together, and while the white-silver dragon hatchling tried to remain as close to the chimney as was possible for a reptile, the ruling of the kingdom could wait.

Of course, as always, Laena fell asleep, and the handmaidens took her away to their bedroom.

Sometimes it led to more carnal activities starting here and then.

Often, alas, they had other things to speak of, that they didn’t had the time to speak of when the sun shone over their heads.

“What do you think about your former Master of Ships’ letter?” He asked after watching the sleeping little dragon for plenty of heartbeats.

“I think sailing and journeying far from Westeros is good for him,” Baela replied with good humour. “I’d never managed to obtain good reports from him before he left, and now he’s beginning to write assiduously!”

Ah yes, the Velaryon Lord had often ordered some of his men to write everything before he re-read it and gave it his own seal.

“I won’t deny that. But that also gives more stones to his unusually strong warning about Volantis.”

“I know.” His wife breathed out. “Though to be honest, I don’t really know what we can do.”

This was a blunt point, typical of Baela.

It didn’t mean she was wrong.

“We certainly can’t replicate the harvest of whatever crops they’re no doubt harvesting as we speak.” Addam agreed. “Our good Lord Velaryon described an air that was hot and suffocating. Something this kingdom is hardly known for.”

The only part of Westeros having some common points with it was Dorne, and it had never been part of the Seven Kingdoms of Westeros.

“I was more thinking of the minor problem that Volantis is bloody far away from here, and we have problems closer to home. But yes, there’s the problems we simply can’t try to steal some crops for ourselves. It’s not good news, isn’t there a Free City which is dreaming of calm and peace these days?”

Addam laughed.

“I’m afraid not. But they still don’t have dragons. They have these...Tiger cooks, aren’t they?”

“This sounds far less threatening than ‘Tiger Cloaks’,” his wife sniffed. “I think they had a term for it in High Valyrian. Jaknissarys, I think they were called.”

“You’re the High Valyrian expert of this House.” Addam could speak some of it, but he found this difficult, and his interests had never gone beyond understanding the merchants of the Free Cities, and this goal required simpler dialects descended from the mother tongue of Valyria.

“So I am,” Baela said with a total lack of humility and a large ironic smile. “Well, it’s not the end of the world. Volantis has dreams of glory, but they don’t have dragons. And without dragons, they can’t build new Valyrian Roads anew, something that is absolutely necessary if they want to extend their domination to the Disputed Lands or the Upper Rhoyne. Their fleet is powerful, but not powerful enough to crush everyone else.”

“That’s certainly something to remember.” Addam cleared his throat. “I hope you don’t intend to sell dragon eggs to them to pay for some important expenses?”

“We don’t have enough spare eggs anymore to think of giving away those we have,” his wife grimaced. “And I really don’t think the Volantene Triarchs have a lack of eggs. The Black Walls were an outpost of the Freehold. There must have been a hatchery here in the old days. They don’t have dragonriders anymore, but I am rather sure they have *petrified eggs*.”

This was not a young man from the Twins wanted to hear. That said, if the eggs had been petrified from more than a century, then they certainly would never hatch. One could imagine that after the defeats Aegon the Conqueror had handed them, the Volantene would have tried to hatch the eggs they had at all costs.

“Since we are on the subject of roads, my mother caught whispers of something interesting. It seems the Baratheon-Lannister alliance is scheming to build a new road.”

“Why bother scheming?” Baela wondered out loud as she went on to grab two cups and a bottle of red wine. “My dear cousin has made it clear he is only going to do a few half-efforts to rebuild the roads of the Conciliator. For the rest, the Lords are on their own. I would think the Throne of King’s Landing would be very happy the Lords of the West and the Storm will pay with the gold in their pockets.”

“Not if the road doesn’t go through King’s Landing,” Addam raised his eyebrows.

His beautiful silver-haired wife snorted.

“And how do they intend to do that, pray tell? A lot of the Northern Reach is good for sheep and goats, not for massive caravans of merchants and travellers. There’s a reason the Gold Road is where it is; it is near the rivers that mark the border with the Riverlands. South of it, there’s nothing to drink. There’s a lot of grass. Grass and more grass. I would call it a meadow, but with the grass short outside of spring and autumn, this would be an insult to meadows.”

“You put some thought on the matter,” Addam accepted the glass of wine with a smile.

“I ordered a lot of roads to be built, don’t forget,” the Black Queen spoke in a tone which had a shadow of victory hiding behind it. “Humans need to have water to build a road. And they will need it too when they use the road to go to...wherever they intend to ride to.”

“What they will do, then, in your opinion?”

Baela looked at his crude map.

“The part from Storm’s End to Felwood, they will likely keep. You only need to cut the trees in the way. But after that, they will quickly have to change their plans. Their road must go to Tumbleton, or whatever is left of it now, build a bridge, and then strike directly north. There will be many marches where there will be little water for a day or two, but it can be done. Unlike this absurdity of pushing ever westwards in the midst of some grass-covered sea where only the sheep will survive.”

Addam scratched two lines on the map.

“This new road could represent a danger for us if completed.”

“Only if the Greens build another road from Bitterbridge to Tumbleton. A lot of their big river barges can’t go much further than one day or two north of Bitterbridge.”

“I hope you’re right,” the Prince-Consort spoke.

“I’d better be, yes. Though without using his dragon, these roads will not be cheap to build, and they will have to spend a lot of gold dragons too to make sure they remain in good state. And that assumes Daeron won’t put an end to this scheming.”

“An alliance of two Paramount Lords is no small thing,” Addam could speak of experience; with three left in this kingdom, when two spoke with one voice, the Black Crown had to listen to what they had to say.

“But if Daeron can build an entirely new bridge over the Blackwater Rush in front of his capital, this new road will be a failure.”

This was one more blunt proposal, and it was indeed true.

On the other hand, this time, they were speaking of something where he, not his wife, held greater knowledge.

“I won’t deny you make an excellent point: a large bridge for King’s Landing would be a brilliant counter-proposal of the Green King. But as a son of House Frey, I can’t tell you that it isn’t that simple. The Blackwater Rush is large, treacherous, and muddy three out of four seasons we have. Many Kings tried before the Conqueror landed, the Storm Kings of the Durrandon line and plenty of others. They all failed.”

It wasn’t impossible, at least Addam didn’t think so, but it was a challenge that made the construction of the great stone bridge of the Twins look like a cheap game.

“The conditions are similar to the Red Fork, in several aspects. Except there is far more mud and current, and the distance to build the bridge is three our four times the size of the bridge that will be completed after winter to join the roads going to Fairmarket and Seagard.”

“I see.” Baela closed her eyes, visibly tried. “I see. Bah, I suppose that if the Greens decide to go ahead with it, we won’t miss it.”

“Road construction on hundreds of leagues and a bridge large enough to cross the Blackwater are not exactly the kind of thing you hide in your cellar, no.”

“Good...and I think on that good news, we better go to bed. I’m going to leave in a few days, and given how rainy the weather is, I have the feeling I will need all the rest I need beforehand.”

**Ser Daemion Velaryon, Fourth Moon of 140AC, Gulltown**

Four moons ago, the two Velaryon brothers would not have been invited to work on their affairs in this very old and busy merchant house of Gulltown.

But everything could change extremely quickly in this world, and bringing back a fortune of Pentoshi gold and silver, plus some of their very expensive pepper, was erasing a multitude of sins.

The announcement the Velaryon fleet had been the first in several decades to give the Braavosi ‘pirates’ a much needed lesson of humility had also opened more doors. Gulltown was a merchant city, and presenting yourself as a shield against the raids of the ‘pirates’ was always a good manner to be heard by the men and women who mattered.

“All in all, we obtained a benefit of seven dragons for each we invested in the venture of this ‘iron convoy’. And the next one promises to be even more profitable.”

“I know,” Daeron replied. “Why do you think I’m doing it? Because I love these cold rains washing us over and over every two days?”

Both brothers exchanged a few chuckles.

“The second ‘iron convoy’ is almost ready to sail,” his brother informed him. “As soon as the winds and the waves will allow it, I will sail again to Pentos.”

“Be careful,” Daemion advised. “While the rumours are certainly exaggerating, there’s enough captains shouting a Braavosi fleet got smashed by a storm that there must be a core of truth to the story.”

“The followers of the Sealord are taking risks, and so do we. Trade affairs of House Velaryon are on the rise once more. And this time, everybody is finding good reasons to support. The Black Crown is taxing us, so they want us to earn more gold, our sailors are getting rich once more, the men of Crackclaw take their tolls grabbing all this iron and forging some of the steel. The Pentoshi themselves are happy because they have weapons to defend themselves.”

“Everybody but the Braavosi,” Daemion corrected.

“The Braavosi can find a goat and do things I won’t say aloud here,” Daeron retorted sincerely.

“I wouldn’t have taken you for a fierce enemy of everything Braavosi and the ideals of the slavers.”

“I’m not,” his brother assured him. “I’m just disgusted these bastards want to become the Lords and Masters of everything that floats from the Shivering Sea to the Jade Gates, and before this year, nobody bothered to check their arrogance and their ambitions.”

Daemion nodded. These were words which came back more and more often in the streets of Gulltown these days. Oh, it didn’t mean the knights who lived in Gulltown, or even those visited it, had all suddenly become friends of Pentos. Many thought the ‘cheese-mongers’ had been fools to trust that the law of coin was going to prevail over the law of the sword.

But it was no truth that the opinion was quickly turning against Braavos here, and it was not slowing down.

“I understand your point of view, brother. That said, your ‘iron convoys’ must not make the Titan happy.”

“I’m sure they aren’t, but what are they going to do? Besides, we’re only the first and most important seller. When my men and I sold our wares at Pentos, there were plenty of Myrish and Lysene Captains perfectly willing to do the same thing. The big difference they had with us was that they didn’t come with large numbers of weapons or the goods in hand. But give it some time, and they will come to that. The fighting in the Disputed Lands can’t have been done without a large number of axes, swords, arrows and spears, no? So yes, the Titan is unhappy. But besides moaning and complaining, what are they going to do?””

This was indeed the interesting question, wasn’t it? The reality was, Braavos could do *nothing*.

They were already at war with Pentos, and by the looks of it, this clash of arms and warships had not started on a good note. Nobody but an insane fool would risk a war against a second enemy when the first was still able to bleed them.

“Maybe send strong-worded letters to the Queen?”

“They will have to wait for a lot of their answers, then.” Daeron grunted. “Daenera’s must have arrived to Stone Hedge by now, but it is likely her official presentation will be delayed, as Her Majesty is going to attend the marriage of the Lord of Winterfell and of Lady Blackwood.”

“Something we didn’t see coming, more the pity.” Daemion lightly commented upon. “Northern Lords are big drinkers during these festivities, I’m sure we could have made more profit.”

“There’s always next time, brother. Keep an eye on the Lord of Riverrun, eh? The pressure is strong from many of his bannersmen.”

“One might almost believe they are selling mares, not their precious daughters.”

It was one of the reasons Daemion had tried his best to avoid marrying so far.

“But the Titan isn’t the biggest problem for our activities.” Daeron explained with a grimace. “I’ve spent a few days speaking to men of Lord Redfort, and the ugly truth is that we purchased a lot of the iron and steel which were in surplus everywhere across the Riverlands and the Vale. Crackclaw and the Iron Islands are going to provide us more, but it will be moons before the production is able to catch up. I think there will be enough for a third ‘iron convoy’; I can’t promise there will be a fourth this year.”

“Bah, by then, Braavos should have learned how much of a bad idea this war was all along, and sued for peace.” Daemion answered with what he felt was the reasonable response. “There is a limit to how many fleets they can afford to send to the bottom in exchange of tiny hamlets that give them nothing but a lot of headaches, no?”

**King Daeron Targaryen, Fourth Moon of 140AC, the Red Keep, King’s Landing**

Sometimes, Daeron really wanted to know what was wrong in the heads of his bannersmen.

There were quantities of problems the Council had to make decisions about these days, but apparently, most of his Court had suddenly found it urgent to urge for a ‘clothing law’.

And alas, when your highborn supporters were backed up by the merchants, the entirety of the Royal Court, the Faith, the Maesters, and everyone who had some importance near King’s Landing, his opinion didn’t matter much.

He thought personally this was something ridiculous.

The idea of abandoning the Black colour was already not something which felt smart at all. Did they think most smallfolk and highborn in the *other* kingdom wore the black? No, only the Night’s Watch did.

But thanks to this new law, now the black would be something for foreigners and other ‘not-from-here’ souls.

Much like the grey shades would be something that indicated from the maesters.

It wouldn’t have been so bad if it had stopped there. Unfortunately, it hadn’t. His Master of Coin had been particularly forceful in pushing to keep the merchants in their places, and this meant limiting the jewellery and the ostentatious things non-highborn could wear during the day. In turn, the merchants had insisted as compensations that whores and certain disgraceful professions were imposed stringent regulations.

‘If they want to be whores, let’s make it sure that everyone knows them for what they are’ had been the most reasonable argument.

Yes, Daeron thought it was not smart at all, and this was saying it politely.

But when most of the nobility of King’s Landing thought the contrary, and they were backed by plenty of Lords across the Reach and the Westerlands, he had to consent.

Even if he knows it was going to end in mockeries and the smallfolk doing what they wanted.

You had only to look at the cloaks of the City Watch to know how well some things could be laughed at.

This entire affair had passed under the nose of the dying Lord Shermer, several merchants caring only about the idea of earning coin for new cloaks, and now thousand of mouths were finding new names to giggle every time a green cloak came into view.

“They found a name for their stupidity...Sumptuary Law.” It was based on an old High Valyrian term, and this didn’t lack salt, for generally the Faith refused to have anything to do with the language. Not this time, though.

“I wonder how the Blacks would react to a law like this one...”

The no-longer-so-young King grimaced as soon as he had finished speaking.

This wasn’t true, was it?

He knew very well how they likely would react.

Most of the Northerners would explode in raucous laughter, and tell him to stuff his ‘Sumptuary Law’ where the sun didn’t shine. The Riverlanders would likely follow in their footsteps. The only realm that was likely to see merit in that was the Vale, and only the old Noble Houses at that. The merchants of Gulltown and their friends were not going to cheer.

Daeron sighed loudly.

The worst part was not the ‘Sumptuary Law’, to be honest.

No, this ‘honour’ belonged to the fact he hadn’t the faintest idea how to enforce it.

Some things like the gold jewellery you could control, but how did you see if someone wore lace or silk under his furred coat? You ordered him to remove everything? In winter and in the middle of a street? Besides that, were the City Watch guards going to have to waste their time ‘inspecting’ the whorehouses every day?

One could already guess they wouldn’t do a lot of good keeping the peace in the rest of the capital.

What a madhouse.

Why did he accept this crown, anyway? Sometimes-

“Your Grace, Princess Jaehaera is here to see you.”

Daeron blinked. For a heartbeat, he thought he had heard wrong, but no, his Kingsguard was sincere.

“Oh? Let her enter.”

The last surviving child of his brother entered, and Daeron grimaced deep inside.

This had nothing to do with his niece per se.

It was just she had decided to wear some sort of hunting attire today.

An entirely *black* attire.

Fortunately, the ‘Sumptuary Law’ wasn’t yet active and there would be-

“Your Grace, I had Dreams.”

The face of his niece didn’t really feel...human when she said it.

And Daeron didn’t like these words at all.

However, he liked the ones which came after it even less.

Jaehaera did not speak for long. But what she said-

The King wondered if his niece had lost whatever sanity she had managed to regain in the last years. The Gods-

This was the problem, wasn’t it? The daughter of his defunct brother was utterly convinced she spoke for some Gods.

Except these Gods weren’t the Gods of his kingdom.

“This is difficult to believe, Princess.”

“Why?” Looking in these half-dead purple eyes, he really wondered if the Dreams or whatever sorcery had not destroyed Jaehaera when she was young, leaving only something unrecognisable and crippled. “The Dragons are born of magic. Everyone knows it. And magic always has a price.”

“Yes,” Daeron tried to hide his rising annoyance. “But the Valyrian Gods...the Conqueror and those who lived in exile on Dragonstone waited for decades to give them a sign. None ever came.”

“This is false,” his niece replied simply. “They still had their dragons. They were *favoured*.”

The King didn’t know how to acknowledge that. He had only been a few times to Dragonstone, and he honestly didn’t like this dreary island at all.

It was a dark place, and while you didn’t get ill there, he had always felt uncomfortable anywhere that wasn’t the Painted Table. Somehow, spending decades of his life didn’t feel exactly like a favour.

“Maybe they were, niece.” Or they believed they were, anyway. “But this was in the past. We have a kingdom now, one the Fourteen have no influence over. The Fourteen have no sway here, we rule with the support of the Faith.”

“This kingdom was conquered by the draconic flames of the Black Dread and two other dragons,” Jaehaera told him in this unnerving, devoid of emotions, cold expression. “It is by the power of the dragons House Targaryen conquered and ruled. Not the Faith. Not these Andalic Gods that aren’t part of our Valyrian inheritance.”

This wasn’t a conversation Daeron had ever thought he would need to prepare for, and not with Jaehaera of all people.

“Niece,” the day had been long, and this conversation was already giving him a headache. “Assuming what you had to endure is truly a Prophetic Dream, and not a mere feverish...dream...”

“These are true Dreams, Uncle.”

It was said with such an iron conviction that Daeron felt a bit of his heart bleed.

“Maybe there are true Dreams.” He wanted to believe they weren’t. “But the Old Dragon Gods of Valyria have been absent, and they are not worshipped here. The Faith of Seven is. I am not going to try to force my bannersmen to worship another religion. I won’t be a second Maegor.”

The Cruel rode the Black Dread, and ruled theoretically from the Wall to the Dornish Marches when he donned the crown. He had no enemy to his northern frontier, and overall, was the charismatic warrior most knights wanted to follow.

It had not saved him, and his war against the Faith had begun over the number of wives he could marry, not anything else.

Jaehaera frowned and stared like he had spoken an incomprehensible dialect.

“Who is caring about unworthy souls? The Fourteen wants House Targaryen to resume their religious duties.”

Gods-

No, may the souls of his dead brothers give him strength.

“I am the King, Niece.” His voice carried far stronger than what he wanted, but the matter was not a light one. “The religion I worship is one of the foundations of this kingdom. I am the Defender of the Faith. Many of my highborn bannersmen follow me because I have sworn to defend their beliefs and their rights on the holiest book of the Seven-Who-Are-One. I don’t know if you realise the full magnitude of what you say, but this would torn apart more than one hundred years of Targaryen rule. The people would rebel. There would be blood in the streets again.”

“The Pact of Fire and Blood is more important than the lives of a few Andals.”

At this moment, the true King of the Seven Kingdoms wondered if it wouldn’t have been better if his niece was really mad.

“This is your opinion, and by respect for your rank, Niece, you can voice it in my presence. But I don’t happen to share it. This audience is over.”

“There will be another one, and this time, you will listen to me, Uncle.”

The sole surviving daughter of Helaena walked away.

And after the audiences of all ship captains complaining how the trade in the Narrow Sea was disrupted because of the war between Braavos and Pentos, the matter faded away. There were very important issues that required his voice and his Royal Seal.

But fourteen days precisely after that conversation, his wife came to inform him that Jaehaera had disappeared.

**Admiral Tacito Laskarys, Fourth Moon of 130AC, the Great Lagoon**

The Titan roaring with the arrival of the dawn tide was the kind of event every Braavosi treasured in his heart.

This time, there was a difference. This time, a fleet answered the roar.

For all his pragmatism, Tacito felt his body stop for a brief turn of hourglass.

You could try to keep your calm, but why bother?

There were moments to be impressed, and this time was one of them.

The Great Lagoon always had plenty of ships sailing for thousands of reasons, but at this hour, it was a legion of purple sails.

The Second Fleet of the Republic had left anchor with all its might.

Fourteen galleasses, seventy-three galleys, twelve cogs, and eleven carracks.

This was the amount of ships that had been placed under his command.

It was, without exaggeration, the most powerful naval force of the Narrow Sea, and it would get even bigger soon.

Most of the ships of First Fleet which had survived the disaster were waiting for him between Razys and Palados.

In turn, this should be enough to guarantee him a superiority of at least two-to-one against the Pentoshi, and he had the best sailors of the Narrow Sea manning the Second Fleet.

“This is not something you see with every tide,” his cousin remarked with a large smile.

“It is true, and to know it is only the visible part of the spear that is now going to war.”

More ships waited south, yes, but there were also many audacious Captains who had taken the Letter of Marque and were now hunting the merchant ships of the enemy.

“We are going to crush the squadron defending Argilon like they don’t exist.”

“Of that, I have no doubt,” the Admiral snorted. “They have what, seven ships according to the last message? The real naval battle will be fought in view of Sidorys. This is the harbour the slavers must defend, otherwise they end up blockaded in their large bay, and they hand us a large anchorage without a fight.”

“And once we do, the Republic will have the slavers where we want.”

“Yes, cousin. The *Republic* will.”

The Republic, and House Laskarys, but the bridge was a bit too crowded and filled with some curious witnesses to say it loudly.

Salvatore Zalyne was powerful and ruthless. But his power over the Sealord seat was clearly not as strong as he wanted, otherwise he would have called men far closer to his family to serve as Admiral of the Second Fleet.

He hadn’t. Tacito Laskarys was not going to refuse such a gift.

After all, in a world where Keyholders were assassinated right and left, who could say what the future would bring?

Kings and beggars could die unexpectedly; why not a Sealord too?

“Nevertheless, we have to stay humble, cousin. Devio Bartarys was not incompetent, but the storms of the Narrow Sea killed him. We will do our utmost to avoid this fate.”

Braavos couldn’t afford to lose a second fleet of this size so close after the first. There might be enough ships to form a Third Fleet before the end of the year, but Tacito had concerns how by all the courtesans of the Lagoon they would be able to crew the galleys after that.

“And Argilon?”

“The hardest part of the battle for Argilon will be on land, we both know that. The slavers of Pentos are pathetic sailors of war, but they bolstered their forces with many sellsword companies. In a fair fight, they can prove dangerous.”

“Which is the reason we have no intention to offer them a fair fight, no, Admiral?”

“Indeed, cousin,” Tacito grinned. “Indeed.”

**Lord Torrhen Manderly, Fifth Moon of 140AC, Winterfell**

Plenty of Northern Lords pretended Winter Marriages were always the best.

You had an excellent excuse to not go outside, save when the newly married couple swore their vows before the Old Gods, and you could get royally drunk without embarrassing yourself.

It was also a common belief that the greater the Lord, the bigger the number of foods arrayed before you for your palate.

Who cared if the bards were singing so wrongly your ears hurt? The banquet was so great it more than compensated their lack of talent.

The delicious smell of roasted lambs and pigs had been everywhere, supplemented by new sauces and new recipes that gave you the urge to taste everything no matter how many meals you’d had before.

Entire barrels of ale and wine had been opened; there were two of ale for each of wine, for sure. Any respectable Lord preferred the former to the latter, obviously.

His fellow Lords had already emptied plenty of cups, and the festivities were already creating a ribald ambiance where everyone from the servants to the Noble Houses had fun.

Torrhen was a bit far from Lord Cregan and his new wife at the centre of the table, but given how the direwolf and his new mate had their hands upon each other, Torrhen was not offended in the least. He only thanked the Gods the young children had been sent to bed early. Boys and girls of the North could be precocious, but not that precocious.

Besides, if he was not in a position to have conversation with his Lord Paramount, Torrhen was able to converse with the Queen. This was more than a copper coin of consolation.

“Yes, my idea to ban the butchers and all the animals they’re happy to prepare into meat from Saltpans was shamelessly stolen from the laws of your fair city, Lord Manderly,” the silver-haired beauty admitted while pecking from the lamb meat in her plate. “The pigs and the other animals that they sell must be killed and prepared in their own quarter outside the walls.”

“This is prudent,” the fat Lord of White Harbor approved. The Gods only knew how many epidemics and diseases had been prevented by this move when it came to his House’s city. “But how did you enforce it so fast? I know my own grand-grand sire fought most of his life against the Butcher’s Guild to force them to obey his commands, and he had to leave the end of the battle to his son.”

“I kept it simple,” the Black Queen smirked. “When I see a pig breaking my law, Moondancer eats the pig.”

Many of the banquet participants around them chuckled, and Torrhen proudly conceded he was among them.

“Yes, I suppose it will convince everyone to obey the law far faster than anything we did at White Harbor.”

Let the punishment fit the crime, as the old saying went. The loss of a pig for no gain was not something a butcher’s house could repeat day after day. And unlike a normal Lord’s procession in a city, the arrival of a dragon could come at any time. It was way easier to obey the law than to challenge it.

“In White Harbor, we don’t allow the livestock to be brought within the city unless it’s market day. I presume you did the same?”

“We did,” Queen Baela drank from her golden cup. “I was more successful enforcing that at Saltpans than at Fairmarket, unfortunately. This must have to do with the fact I visit more the former than the latter.”

“Bah, I would not worry too much,” Torrhen said sincerely. “Both cities are young, and you gave them strong foundations, your Majesty.”

Like many Lords, Torrhen had kept an eye on the growth of Saltpans. He had not known the pig tale, this one must be recent, but he had heard of how linen maceration was utterly forbidden in the waters close to Fairmarket and Saltpans, and punished with expensive fines of good silver. While bridges were still in construction, roads and fountains had sprung up where there was nothing before. The streets were paved, the corpses and the dung was collected and evacuated before the end of the day, and the excrements were going into newly built sewers.

“Stronger foundations than the Conqueror’s City, I hope.”

Torrhen chose carefully his next words.

“They called him the Conqueror, your Majesty.”

The purple-eyed Valyrian beauty shook her head and smiled.

“So they did. What would you do first if you were given King’s Landing, my Lord?”

This didn’t require much thinking.

“I would raze the walls,” the Lord of White Harbor shrugged. “The city is way too crowded, even with its losses of the Dance accounted for. It must be allowed to grow larger. I say the new walls would need to be pushed several leagues north and east. That way, some work could be done on new sewers, and a new way to bring fresh water into this city.”

“Interesting,” the Queen mused, “but not cheap at all.”

Well, he could hardly disagree with that.

“House Manderly has always preferred its city to smell like perfume rather than some foul pit. One must never underestimate how good it is for the dignity of the souls living inside to smell good and clean within one’s city walls.”

It was really a pity that of the many Targaryen Kings that had succeeded one another on the Iron Throne, the only one before this generation that had been interested in building for his own glory had been King Maegor.

Would the Breaker of the Faith Militant have turned his head towards the city itself once he finished his Red Keep? They would never know, unfortunately. But when his successor had ordered a blood *septon* of all people to build better things inside King’s Landing, plenty of Manderlys of the time had winced.

“On more pleasant news, your Majesty,” Torrhen grinned, “Lord Stark wished me to relay you the news that the oak forest planted on the orders of Brandon Snow in the year two after the Conquest is ready to be cut.”

This attracted, naturally, plenty of guffaws and cheers.

“The advisor to King Torrhen really thought far ahead, didn’t he?”

“I think he called it ‘my Long Revenge’, or something like that.” Torrhen placed a hand in his large blonde beard while taking a thoughtful expression.

“Did he explain to anyone how oak could resist dragon’s flames?” the Queen inquired politely.

“No, I’m sure he didn’t, your Majesty.”

“Figures,” the Targaryen Queen snorted while resuming the slow eating of her meat. “Well, I’m sure both the Crown and Winterfell will have uses for these oaks once winter will end, my Lord. I certainly don’t expect you to rush there and begin ordering your lumberjacks to cut these mighty oaks.”

“I thank your Majesty for her compassion,” Torrhen made a short bow. “If only other souls could be so patient!”

The daughter of the Rogue Prince slightly inclined her head.

“Braavos or Pentos?”

“Most are Braavosi, these days. They emptied a lot of the reserves of wood we built in summer and autumn. I was forced to close my doors to them before leaving for this wedding. We have to keep a stockpile for White Harbor and its merchants.”

“I’m going to gamble a few golden dragons, and say the Braavosi didn’t like that.”

“They didn’t,” Torrhen confirmed. “I had to expel a few loudmouths out for being ‘damn Braavosi’, I think.”

The Lord of White Harbor shrugged again.

“I’m not complaining, they bought all the wood with gold and when they didn’t, they traded glass and plenty of good tools with them.”

This time, though, he wasn’t sure the Queen had heard him. It was unsurprising, of course, for the hands of the Lord of Winterfell and Alysanne Blackwood had begun to move in ways that would have given heart attacks to a Southron.

They certainly weren’t discreet, and if they continued like that, hmm...

“They really should begin the bedding, before the bedding comes to this hall, no?”

And no, Torrhen would swear to his dying day it wasn’t him who said it before the participants of the wedding banquet.

**Princess Jaehaera Targaryen, Fifth Moon of 140AC, Dragonstone**

Leaving the Red Keep had not been difficult. The servants thought the secret passages had all been all walled up, but they couldn’t be more wrong.

The Dreams had showed her the countless tunnels under the Castle of Blood. There were so many of them, and more than a score were not known to the Whispering Master.

Finding the money had not been difficult either. There were some bags of silver abandoned in a secret vault under a miniature statue of the Black Dread.

For some reason, the sailors had given her some looks when she handed them the coin, but this was good silver, and they had accepted to bring her to the island of her ancestors.

Finding a good meal for an adult dragon, on the other hand, had been something where the Dreams were of no help.

Jaehaera knew that she had to feed *her*.

You had to feel the belly of a dragon before attempting to bond with one.

No, this didn’t mean someone who hadn’t a drop of dragon blood could truly ride one. The dragon would still kill you, hungry or not.

But for the bond to truly work properly, the dragon had to be thinking of the blood ties, not of the fire necessary to cook the dinner.

It had cost her half of her silver coins, but she had gotten four sheep for the purpose.

Climbing the first slops of the Dragonmount was exhausting.

But once she reached the Obsidian Lance, her wait was at an end.

The sheep tried to flee, but this had been in her Dreams too.

The great shadow fell upon them, and slightly burned them at first, before biting and swallowing the animals one by one.

She was huge.

She was a huge dragon, as black as the rocks of the volcano that were surrounding them.

The only colour that was not black was to be found in the eyes.

Those reptilian irises were a beautiful green, and watched her with curiosity, now that the hunger had been satisfied.

Jaehaera didn’t dare watching away.

Slowly, she drew a knife of Valyrian steel from where she had tied it to her belt, and cut her right hand.

Then she uttered the words.

Fourteen words. Fourteen words for a prayer.

Suddenly the eyes of the black dragoness were no longer green.

They were a flamboyant red.

This was not a mere dragon any longer; this was *Xyxas*, the Third Queen, sister to Meraxes and Vhagar.

The Dragon-Goddess was watching her with true eyes now.

The maw opened, burning with fires hotter than any forge.

And then the flames were pushed upwards, high in the sky.

The roar shook the entire island of Dragonstone.

Jaehaera felt the Dream and Magic becoming one.

It felt like fire. It felt good.

The eyes of Xyxas closed before reopening.

The eyes of the dragon the Andals called the Cannibal had returned to their normal green hue.

The Goddess had fulfilled part of the Pact.

Xyxas, the female dragon, not the deity, was just confused. But having had her belly full, the last dragon living on Dragonstone decided it was of no matter. The meal was done, and Jaehaera was a Targaryen.

Xyxas opened her giant black wings, and flew away to return to her lair.

Jaehaera crossed her arms and breathed out.

“Now there is only the waiting...”

Many non-Dreamers would have been tempted to ride Xyxas, but Jaehaera was not so foolish.

Xyxas had not been properly tamed, and had grown too old while not knowing the affection of a rider. It would take someone extremely powerful, with a will stronger than Valyrian Steel to ride her.

Jaehaera was not that rider.

Maybe the rider would come, maybe it wouldn’t. The Dreams had not showed it to her.

There was only waiting, and buying two more sheep, while trying to find some warm places to stay, away from the guards who searched for her.

Fortunately, there were all lazy, and afraid of Xyxas.

Most weren’t proper men of the Blood, anyway. The inheritance of the dragons had really disappeared quickly on this island.

It was on the third day she arrived.

Silver scales and silver horn, exactly as in the Dream.

Naturally, Jaehaera let her first feast on the sheep.

It was only when the last piece of meat disappeared that the young Targaryen Princess went on to caress the blue scales and scratch in places that the beautiful dragon liked very much.

“Do you want to ride with me, Silverwing? I am not she, but I promise we will be together to the end.”

The silver dragon growled lightly, and changed her position so that Jaehaera could rub her belly.

“I’m going to take it as a ‘yes’.”

The Dreamer cut her left hand this time, wincing at the pain.

“I pledge myself to you before the Fourteen, Silverwing...”

The sacred words were heavy on the tongue.

Because the Dreams had showed her what would happen after.

There would be great joys.

But there would be terrible storms too.

And one of them was going to come soon.

**Queen Baela Targaryen, Fifth Moon of 140AC, Winterfell**

Cregan Stark was in a very good this morning, Baela acknowledged.

Of course, he had someone to fulfil his carnal fantasies and warm his bed for all these winter nights.

Whereas she, unfortunately, had to wait to return to Addam’s side to enjoy the same thing.

Baela sighed.

This wasn’t that Winterfell was unwelcoming or anything like that. It was a happy castle, it was rather comfortable, given how bloody cold it was outside it, and the food was heavy on her stomach, but good.

All of that was true, but it still didn’t feel like home.

Rhaena didn’t feel the same, obviously, but then her twin had always been more of a city girl than she. And Winterfell had a city, during these cold days where the sun barely deigned showing a few rays. It was evidently no White Harbor, but it was vibrant, full of life. Artisans sold wood workings that had been made during the last years, and the results of the harvests and animal shepherding was everywhere to be seen. Bottles of honey could be purchased next to amber jewellery, scythes and axes were prepared for the next spring season. No wonder they called it the ‘Winter Town’.

But for today, they didn’t descend in these busy alleys where the smallfolk lived and bargained. The Lord of Paramount of the North led her directly to the Godswood of his home.

Immediately, what struck you when you entered it was the silence.

Winterfell was no empty castle, and these days, as befit its status of the most powerful House of the North, there were hundreds of servants, and their duties were accomplished with plenty of noise, gossiping, and gesticulations.

There was none of that in the Godswood.

And then there was the magic.

It was calm and quiet, but it was there.

“They are watching.” She told her Hand.

“Can you...communicate with them?”

“No,” the Black Queen shook immediately her head. “I am a daughter of Fire and Blood, my Lord. Assuming it is at all possible, you Starks must have had something entirely different in the old days.”

“The direwolves?”

“It might be, but it can’t have been the only ‘key’ to the gifts. I imagine there must have been more. The direwolf would have been the most obvious part of a Pact, but it must have been the leaves hiding the tree, so to speak.”

“Interesting,” the Lord of Winterfell caressed his shaven jaw. Unlike plenty of women, it seemed the new Lady Stark didn’t prefer her husband with a beard, or so the evidence suggested. “You do believe in the existence of all the Gods worshipped here and over the seas.”

“Yes, of course,” Baela shrugged. “From what I read and what I could see with my own eyes, the reason magic was accepted in the first place was that it built the bridge between the Gods and the men worshipping them. That’s why certain religions have lasted so long, and in eras before ours, the senior priesthood of a religion was always some sort of warlock or sorcerer, or whatever name was given to him.”

House Targaryen had lost an enormous amount of lore when they chose exile from Valyria ahead of the Doom, and they lost even more of what they had left in the last two centuries. But what they still held within their hands made clear that magic had existed long before them, and it would exist long after they were all dead.

“I find the explanation somewhat...difficult to believe. If the Targaryens did it, why-“

“Why didn’t others do it?” Baela smirked. “But they did, my Lord Hand. Who do you think the dragonlords of old took it from?”

There were tales of shepherds taming the dragons, of course. There was some truth to it, but it was far from the entire truth.

Lord Cregan Stark was no fool, and behind his ‘Northern ruffian’ behaviour, he knew far more history than many learned men.

“The Ghiscari,” the Northern Lord murmured. “I assume the Harpies were not just an excuse to sculpt ugly bronze things, then?”

“They are the reason the wars against Old Ghis lasted so long, yes.”

The Harpies were hardly as destructive as a battle-dragon, but they could *fly* too. Out of the myriad of enemies of the Freehold, the Ghiscari had been the only ones to contest the mastery of the skies.

And there had been many, many hundreds of Harpies in the old days.

This was why when the dragons of Valyria had fought the Last War, the destruction had been legendary. It wasn’t because Valyria wanted to enslave every man, woman, and child, no. It was because they wanted to make sure every Harpy was dead for good. And that those who could bred and raise them died with them.

“Fascinating,” the Lord of Winterfell said sincerely.

“And dangerous,” Baela added ironically. “But I doubt you invited me to the Godswood to speak of only this history, no matter how relevant it might be today.”

“You might be surprised, my Queen.” They resumed their walk between the trees. “But yes, I admit there was another reason to request the pleasure of your company. I’m sure you remember my concerns about the Wall and the Night’s Watch?”

“I do.” Baela nodded. “And I also remember telling you that there’s not much I can do on the subject. Paying Knights and other good men to stand vigilant upon the wall and train assiduously as if an enemy is going to come at any moment? I can do that. It is not cheap, but there are benefits for the kingdom. But I can’t force anyone to take the Black.”

The situation was far better than it had ever been, with plenty of Northerners living in the Riverlands these days. Their traditions were spreading, and with them the tradition of swearing vows if you thought you couldn’t be what you wanted anymore had grown.

But it was a small trickle of men, a couple of scores, and many of them were already old. The Night’s Watch needed hundreds, and it wanted them young. And it didn’t get them.

“Yes. This is why I thought of another solution to our problems.”

They arrived in sight of the Heart Tree of the Godswood, as well as the cold black pool that stood next to it.

It was a strange sight, as today it was covered in snow.

But unlike other visits, there were no squirrels.

Suddenly, the complete silence was far more understandable.

For there was a young woman in front of the Heart Tree, and on her left shoulder, there was a huge black eagle.

Baela immediately felt it. The magic. The connection between human and bird.

This was not the first time she saw something like it, when the Night’s Watch had called for help, there had been several like that on the opposite side.

Given the fear in the young woman’s eyes, evidently, the battle had not been forgotten by the wildlings.

“You are...the Dragon Queen.” The Common Tongue was recognisable, but the words were half-eaten, and the accent was incredibly different from what the men of Winterfell and other northern holdfasts spoke.

“I am.”

“The wings of fire, they embrace you, they...” the woman shivered, despite being covered entirely in white and brown furs. “You are not like us.”

“I am not a Warg, no.”

Many Northerners had shared her the rumours of what these animal-bonded warlocks could do, and even assuming a lot of exaggeration, this wasn’t like being a dragonrider at all.

“You burn and you build, you build and you burn...” the blue eyes were fearful.

“I won’t burn you, nor I will hurt your...companion.” Baela swore. “I will need a name.”

“Kala,” the woman answered and the magnificent eagle unfurled his black wings as she spoke. “Kala of the Feathers. We want to go south of the Wall, Dragon Queen.”

“Many others did,” the rider of Moondancer told her. “They did it by fighting instead of asking for permission. Why?”

“The Cannibals,” Kala of the Feathers spat, and you could feel the burning hatred in her mouth. “They hunted many Clans. Weakened by the Crows. We fled.” The Common Tongue was becoming more and more haphazard and difficult to understand. “Lost reindeers. Lost children. Lost warriors. Yet they hunted.”

It was hard not to feel the same. There had been some abhorrent behaviour during the Dance of Dragons, but mercifully enough, they had not had many acts of cannibalism, and all those found had been promptly killed.

“I see. Wait here. I must speak with Lord Cregan.”

Granted, it was certainly useless to take a few steps away, since there was an eagle with senses far keener than any mortal.

“What game are you playing at, my Lord?”

“I told you I believe it had not been tried before.” The Lord of Winterfell didn’t seem to be very sorry at being called out. “Her Clan came to take refuge in front of Eastwatch. The Black Swords gave them food and shelter. There are barely fifty of them left.”

“And?” the silver-haired dragonlady tried not to be too dismissive. “These are fifty men, women, and children we can’t trust. They will not help rebuild the Night’s Watch, in fact we would be stupid to let them live anywhere near the Wall, given how much hatred there is between the Night’s Watch and them.”

“But Kala here has magic. She is a Warg, yes?”

“Yes, she is. And how, pray tell, can we trust her? The oaths mean nothing for her people. They aren’t going to bend the knee, respect the laws of chivalry, or the-“

Baela stopped.

“Please tell me you aren’t thinking of what I think, my Lord.”

Cregan’s face had much in common with a direwolf.

“She was very willing to be ‘stolen’ by you, my Queen, if it offered her Clan and she the protection they ask for.”

The purple-eyed ruler groaned loudly.

“First the Essossi ambassador, then this. Why is everyone convinced I need a woman to warm my bed?” Sex with men was incredibly good and satisfying, why would she need something else? “And don’t you dare answer that question, my Lord.”

“I won’t, my Queen.” Cregan coughed lightly. “But returning to the matter at hand?”

“Let her Clan pass the Wall, and bring them to Winterfell. Find someone to steal her, if it is her desire. And make sure you keep a lot of eyes upon her. I don’t want to hear complaints, there are already enough of them in the South about our supposed ‘heresies’.

**Ser Richard Lydden, Fifth Moon of 140AC, King’s Landing**

“Well?”

“Well, Gregor, the Council is aware our cloaks aren’t the most popular thing to ever grace this city.”

Richard paused.

“They promised they would find a solution. Of course before that, his Grace had to decide who to appoint as the commander of the City’s Watch.”

“In other words, we’re going to be known as the Greencloaks,” his giant-sized companion said mournfully.

“If only they called us Greencloaks, Gregor...”

There were over two or three hundred nicknames hurled at them wherever they went, to the point Richard wondered if some smallfolk were really working during the day, and instead tried to find new mockeries to spread across King’s Landing.

“It is a pleasure and honour to serve.” The only Clegane to have ever served in the City’s Watch recited with resignation. “Do we have other orders?”

“Now that you mentioned it, yes,” Richard sighed. “If we see a missing Princess, we’re supposed to rush in her direction, and escort her back to the Red Keep.”

This was the talk of all the city these days, the disgraced Lydden knight knew.

“And how are we supposed to do that when the Master of Whisperers himself admitted his failure?”

“I have no idea,” Richard admitted. “But I suppose we as officers of the City’s Watch have to give the example. And it also throws more mud in the face of some proud Lords that fancied themselves influential at court.”

These Lords and Ladies, it was not a secret, had pushed hard for Princess Jaehaera Targaryen to be considered ‘simple’ and ‘broken’. They had voiced their opinion of how unworthy of her royal titles the Princess was. They had argued that she was the living proof women had to be entirely removed from the royal succession.

All of it had been a gate slammed back in their face when the ‘simple’ girl bribed some guards at the Iron Gate with coins from the reign of the Cruel, and they were still unable to explain how she had escaped the citadel in the first place.

The Princess may not be the brightest child of House Targaryen, but apparently, she had been smart enough to realise the servants and the women around her were not her friends, and act in consequence.

“The Princess is outside the city.” It was as close to a complaint Richard had ever heard Gregor utter in public. “But I suppose that if we see a silver-haired young woman, we can do our duty. Where are we wanted this fine morning?”

“The Guildhall of Alchemists?”

“Watching the pyromancers again?”

“One can never be too cautious. The Council is warier of them since they noticed treachery was allowed to spread within their ranks without anyone of the Order giving the alert.”

“As long as we aren’t going to sit in the rooms where they create their vile concoctions, I suppose we can do that. It beats separating the Braavosi and the other Essossi merchants.”

Richard grimaced. The worst part was that it was indeed the truth.

The docks these days were not a place of peace.

“Captain Thomas told me there were more of them these days than he’d seen since our King began his reign.”

“Pentos is at war with them, and closed its harbours, so they’re coming here.”

“They are closer harbours than King’s Landing.” Richard answered while ignoring the shop owners trying to sell him low-quality clothes.

“They are. But a Myrish merchant told me Gulltown and the Bay of Crabs are refusing plenty of wares from Braavos. Something about the Braavosi cutting beards and making trouble.”

“Why I am not surprised?” Richard asked rhetorically, avoiding two young children who played with a ball, all the while keeping an eye on the stalls of the merchants. It was day of market, and as was predictable, the thieves were out in force; they were other guards present, but you always had to be careful. “Did you hear what happened at Cobbler’s Square?”

“Yes, I did. Some men are really truly so desperate to sell their souls, one might advise them to begin their bodies and go employed to a whorehouse first.”

“And buy a lot of perfume before that.” It wasn’t the only thing they should do, of course. “I think-“

An enormous roar shook the city.

Smallfolk gasped. Then they shouted and screamed.

And a giant shadow began to darken King’s Landing, beginning over the Gate of the Gods.

“I wasn’t aware that the King intended to ride Tessarion today-“

“That’s because it isn’t Tessarion, Ser! It is silver, not the royal blue of the King’s mount!”

“What?”

But as it flew over the square, it was easy to acknowledge Gregor was completely right.

The dragon was no Tessarion, it was way bigger...and it was far more graceful, though he wouldn’t say it out loud.

And as it began to make circles above their heads, one could also watch the rider.

“Well, I think we can hazard a guess or two where the kingdom’s missing Princess went.”

“Yes. Though I wasn’t aware...this dragon has to be Silverwing, the dragon of the Good Queen, right?”

“It isn’t the Cannibal for sure,” that beast was still alive, everyone knew that, but it feasted upon everyone who tried to ride it, Targaryen or not.

“In that case...how did she manage to find this dragon? Even with many days of riding, the Princess shouldn’t have been able to ride further from the borders of the Crownlands or sail to Dragonstone. And Silverwing was not seen anywhere nearby.”

“I don’t know.” Richard said quietly as the silver dragon circled the sky above Rhaenys’ Hill. “I don’t know, but what I am sure of is that plenty of people are not going to be happy to see a woman ride a dragon again.”

**Master of Ships Alan Redwyne, Fifth Moon of 140AC, King’s Landing**

“This is unbearable!”

Alan glared at the incredibly arrogant Lord. Yes, there were plenty of reasons to be unhappy, but who was this insolent to speak to him like this?

“Who is the Master of Ships, Lord Bar Emmon?” For the love the Father Above, the man better show some contrition immediately!

“You are...my Lord.”

“I’m so glad you remember this fact, Lord Bar Emmon.” The Master of the Arbor spoke in a voice that wasn’t far from a tongue-lashing.

“But my Lord...placing the power of a dragon in the hands of-“

“In the hands of a Princess that happens to be the daughter of our previous King?”

Gael Bar Emmon looked very much like he had just eaten the foulest foods of the Seven Kingdoms in a single bite.

In the hands of a woman, these had been the words he would have uttered.

“It represents a grave risk for the kingdom.” The blonde-haired fool persisted in his bigotry. “I don’t want it to happen, but should the King perish tomorrow-“

“Then we would have a dragonrider and a dragon powerful enough to keep the Blacks in the North where they belonged.” Alan Redwyne didn’t like the idea of female rulers, but one had to see the world for what it was. “If the Reyne monsters had managed in their treacherous plot completely when they unleashed the War of Lions, we would have had no dragonrider to oppose them. Yes, the Black Queen was pregnant at the time. But all it would have meant that the war would have taken a few more moons to be declared, and then we would have lost incredibly badly.”

The Lord of House Redwyne had not been at Bosworth, but he had listened to every man and woman who did. And the truth was that while having a dragon was no guarantee of victory, if you hadn’t one, your army was going to burn at the end of the day.

The Gardeners would vouch for this if they hadn’t all been cooked in their armours at the Field of Fire.

“And besides,” Alan didn’t resist one more strike, “you were the one, if I remember correctly who argued that the kingdom had to its utmost to secure more dragons. ‘The need to defend the Seven Kingdoms outweigh the losses of a few’ were your own words, I think, my Lord?”

“Not like that!” Yes, it was easy to remember that Gael Bar Emmon, with his pointed nose, his two broken teeth – certainly the act of certain cousins wishing his mouth stopped uttering sheer nonsense. “I was speaking of the Cannibal!”

Alan Redwyne shook his head.

“Then I would urgently say you need to suggest something like that, my Lord. The Princess has not told the Council how exactly she tamed Silverwing, but the mount of the Good Queen had already known two riders before her. And as far I know, this silvery reptile didn’t kill any of those who tried to mount her and failed.”

The court fool and several dragonseeds had needed spare breeches and undergarments when the dragon made the refusal clear, though.

“The idea of trying to ride the Cannibal, my Lord...I would honestly prefer to try to swim in the Narrow Sea, surrounded by sharks and trying to carry a large piece of cow meat.”

There were bad ideas, and then there were *stupidly bad ideas*.

Guess which one going after a dragon that even the other dragons were afraid of was?

“I see,” the young Lord gritted his teeth in a very outrageous manner. “In that case, I reiterate my proposal to deal with the traitors and the slavers before they know what they are facing. We have the advantage, it is winter-“

“His Grace the King,” Alan spoke like he was addressing a small child, “has been very clear: the Iron Throne doesn’t want a war.”

A majority of the Lords were completely in agreement. The weather was cold and miserable at the best of times these last three moons. They had avoided snow for now in the capital, but how long it would stay that way remained to be seen. And of course, the destruction of a massive Braavosi fleet had told every highborn that yes, mustering military forces outside of the campaigning season could result in impressive disasters.

“While you dither, we miss our chance to deal with the slavers!”

And Gael Bar Emmon stormed out, fury evident on his face.

It was only when the sounds of his footsteps had faded away that the Lord of the Arbor cursed under his breath.

“I’m going to have to ask a favour to Lord Cuy. This one is dangerous, and I don’t think King Daeron will thank me if he plunges us in a war with the Blacks and the Pentoshi...”

**Podesta Alberto Meloria, Sixth Moon of 140AC, Argilon**

It was something to know the Braavosi fleet was several times the size that the greatest fleet Pentos had ever built to defend its shores.

It was quite another thing to see it by yourself.

There had to be hundreds of ships; his spotters had counted at the very least more than ninety galleys of all types.

And to think their spies had confirmed Braavos had lost another fleet beyond this one to a storm!

“So many...” a boy who couldn’t have passed his seventeenth name day swallowed nervously.

“Yes. They came with an armada. They will soon learn that it is a mistake. The Maw is way too narrow for them to deploy like a fleet.”

The gullet linking the Narrow Sea to the city of Argilon had been given this name for a reason. It was not large at all, and there were plenty of rocks in there which could sink audacious sailors.

If it was an incompetent enemy, Alberto Meloria, Podesta of Argilon – some foreigners called him ‘Lesser Magister’ – was sure plenty would have sunk. But these were the Braavosi, and no doubt a Pentoshi merchant had sold them long ago the maps indicating how to enter the Maw without ramming their ships against the high cliffs.

“They are way too many,” he repeated for his men, “but we never intended to fight a naval battle against them.”

With more than one hundred ships against six, this wouldn’t have been a battle. Besides, of his six galleys, four only were serviceable and had half-trained crews.

“Sink them.” Alberto ordered.

At first, the Braavosi laughed seeing the men he had placed aboard the galleys throw themselves overboard and swim ashore.

Their hilarity didn’t last long.

The galleys once built in the shipyards of Pentos had not been placed where they were by mistake; they were right on top of the shoals of the Maw.

Yes, the Braavosi fleet could now watch the walls of Argilon, much like the old eyes of Alberto could see the first scores of sails, if not the entirety of what they had unleashed to storm his home town.

And watch was all they could do.

For there were now six wrecks slowly sinking, and while the swords of the Sealord had clearly many talents, it didn’t include the removal of sunken galleys by shouting loud enough at them.

One Braavosi Captain was reckless or arrogant enough to believe he could go through no matter what.

Soon enough, his own galley was sinking, under the acclamations of the defenders of Argilon.

“First blood for Argilon!”

“Who cares about your First Law, your bastards?”

“Return to your Lagoon and stay there!”

The Braavosi fleet was so superior to them they would win one hundred battles out of one hundred, year after year.

Alberto knew that.

But with the Maw blocked to their ships, it was going to be a hellish task to reorganise themselves.

Many galleys would have to turn around and somehow avoid slamming into the other hulls crewed by their friends.

And a direct assault against the most vulnerable part of Argilon was impossible, as long as all the wrecks weren’t removed.

True, this had been accomplished by destroying the importance of Argilon as a trade port for the next moons, but most of the affairs of the town were more about fisheries than the great trade of spice and the goods that some fat Magisters of Pentos valued.

“They are going to try again.”

Alberto Meloria did his best to not show his discomfort.

He hadn’t liked sellswords when he was a young man, and he liked them even less now when he was forced to rely upon them.

“Captain Virtuoso,” he spoke.

“*Captain-General* Virtuoso the Red,” the arrogant killer-for-hire corrected with a smug smile, half of his red dyed hair looking like they were burning under the pale winter sun.

It was hard to not snort. The Company of the Red Shields had brought two hundred men, but you would believe they had two thousand.

“The Braavosi will come.” The sellsword commander said. “You have an undefended beach right at the entrance of the Maw, and they will land their troops there, marching them eastwards while their sailors try to create a gap so that their smaller galleys can leave your wrecks behind.”

It indeed was what Alberto would do, should he command the enemy fleet.

“That’s what a smart man will do. Of course, this smart man will soon realise that Argilon was built there because we sit at the mouth of the Argos river, and all the irrigation canals are on the southern bank, not the north where the enemy will come from. The enemy will have to bring its own water supplies with him.”

“You intend to let them try besiege you, and starve in the attempt.”

The patriarch of the Meloria household bared his old teeth to the sellsword.

“I have travelled far in my youth, Captain. And I walked onto a fair number of galley decks. They don’t have a lot of space for food and water supplies. Most of it must be on the cogs and carracks behind them. All these sailors...they eat a lot. They eat as much as all the population of Argilon does. To arrive so fast, they must have used their oars from day to dusk in the last days. This is a harsh thing to order men to do, trained or not for it.”

“You don’t have the walls of Pentos.”

“We don’t *need* the walls of Pentos.” Alberto Meloria retorted dismissively. “All we need to do is to repel the first assault. It will consume their food and water, force them to extend and consume more of their supplies. Then our reinforcements will arrive, and bite their heels, force them to always keep an eye on their backs. We don’t need to defeat them, Captain. We just need to hold them long enough for the Braavosi fleet to devour itself.”

“I see. This is a good plan.” Virtuoso the Red shook his head. “But there remains a flaw in your plans.”

“A flaw?”

His back exploded in pain, and the Podesta or Argilon barely reacted fast enough to see all the sellswords draw steel as the men of his town screamed in outraged fury.

“The flaw is that I am on the side of the winners, and this time, Braavos is going to win.”

There was pain everywhere, and then nothing.

**Captain Rollo Lurio, Sixth Moon of 140AC, the Ruin of Argilon**

The head of Virtuoso the Red did fall into a pool of mud and blood when it was removed from his shoulders.

Rollo was one of the many men who spat upon it when he was offered to.

Honestly, he had heard of the stupidity of some sellswords, but this one was sure to be a legend by himself.

“Did this maggot-infested slaver really believe we were going to allow him to take the women he wanted as slaves?” One of his men scowled.

“He was a fool,” Rollo Lurio said with so much disgust he feared it would turn into venom if more came out of his mouth. “Unfortunately, we now have to live with the consequences of his folly.”

The Red Shields had been given the promise of a very large sum of gold if they turned against their Pentoshi masters.

The plan, as had been agreed between the messengers of the First Fleet’s survivors and the Tyroshi sellswords, was for Virtuoso and his men to strike hard, capture or kill the ten or so Pentoshi officials, and then open the Braavosi regiments a gate, ensuring there was no Siege of Argilon to speak of.

The problem was that the Company of the Red Shields was not among the most disciplined sellswords of Essos. The moment they had stabbed their previous employers in the back, Virtuoso had lost control of them.

A few had remembered they were to open a gate. The majority had thought only to loot, rape, and burn, and often not in that order.

“How many granaries are gone?” Proof of how much he dreaded the answer, he hadn’t trusted himself to voice it in front of the Admiral.

“Three in five,” this brought a genuine grimace to twist his face.

“May the Demons of the Doom gnaw upon their bones,” he swore.

“And there is worse. When they saw the Pentoshi militia was dying against the sellsword blades, the peasants and those who could flee took a few possessions and ran.”

“I thought something like that had happened,” Rollo admitted. “There had to be a reason why we had to stop the fires ourselves after putting down these rabid dogs. How many?”

“We have maybe two thousand out of a town of eight, ten thousand?”

“This day can’t be any better...”

The Republic of Braavos had just conquered Argilon, and what a prize it was!

Many houses were just burned husks. Stables and shops had shared this fate.

The three forges of Argilon, where the smiths worked, had been utterly destroyed, and the owners had likely been killed with their works.

But this wasn’t the worst part.

Oh, no.

No, this ‘honour’ belonged to the glances of raw hatred every smallfolk was giving them. The inhabitants of Argilon didn’t even bother hiding them.

The women, especially. Many of them had been too slow to flee, and one of the reasons the Red Shields had not been able to resist their execution was that the sellswords had been caught with their breeches down.

The men, women, and children left were spitting on the ground when they patrolled nearby.

There were few insults, but the expressions of loathing were all that was needed to reveal what they thought.

“We didn’t even free any slaves here.”

“Yeah, the Sealord promised us we would fight for liberty! Where are the slaves?”

“They were some fifty here, according to what we learned from the books of the Podesta. But they sent them east two moons ago.”

“Bastards!”

Rollo gave his subordinate an ironic glare.

“We promised high and loud we would kill any slaver who fell into our hands, or let their slaves do to them what they did in the name of cruelty and pleasure. I hate slavers, but we can’t exactly be surprised they act like they did.”

“The loss of First Fleet really hurt us hard, Captain.”

“Yes, it did.”

What difference could two or three moons make? As it happened, it could bring massive changes. There had been no massive army of Pentoshi sellswords waiting at Argilon, but then the town was hardly the sort that Pentos needed to defend no matter the circumstances. However, the moons of delay had given time for the Pentoshi to arm over five hundred for their militia, and they had given them powerful crossbows.

The walls had been refurbished, the gates repaired. The galleys had been placed to block the gullet that led out to the Narrow Sea.

It hadn’t done them any good since the enemy was already within the wall, and when in panic, many men of Argilon had rushed to protect their homes first, ignoring the needs to defend the town as a whole.

But it could have done a lot of damage.

And this was just Argilon.

An unimportant town with no important positions nearby.

“How are we going to feed everyone, Captain?”

“I don’t know.” Too many granaries had burnt. The good news was that with so many farmers and other Pentoshi dead or gone, they didn’t need to feed them anymore. But the orders of the Admiral, given to him by the Sealord in person, had been to turn Argilon into an unassailable fortress. That way, it would serve both as the Fleet’s granary and its safe harbour.

It was to be the scabbard of the sword that was going to cut Pentos’ throat soon.

Now it was clear it was going to take moons for Argilon to be rebuilt, and the Republic was going to have to bring a lot of men to do the work they could have paid other men to do.

“And...err...what do you think the Admiral is going to do?”

“I have no idea,” Rollo confessed. “But I seriously hope that it’s something good. This war is not like anything I dreamt of when I volunteered to fight the slavers...”

**Admiral Tacito Laskarys, Sixth Moon of 140AC, the ruins of Argilon**

The grand muster in front of the Titan seemed to have belonged to another life these days.

“There are times when I wish we could kill some enemies twice.” Tacito grumbled.

“Would it help solve the problems we’re facing at the moment, Admiral?”

“No, but it would make me feel better.”

His eyes didn’t leave the hundreds of Braavosi infantrymen patrolling on the shore, vigilant to make sure no attack came as a single galley was unloaded.

“Is it as bad as our first officers reported?”

“It is probably, worse, to be honest, Admiral. Argilon had some value as a granary and a logistical hub, now it has none. Men are already very unhappy about the lack of shelter, and the efforts to remove the wrecks so we could clear a single lane to the harbour were and are remaining an exhausting chore.”

It had not been an unpleasant town to look at, Argilon. It was not like these extravagant plantations of the slavers south of the Bay of Pentos, or the human pits filled with misery that were so common in Slaver’s Bay.

Four out of five houses had been single-floor affairs, nice little stone things that could keep warm their owners against the storms of the Narrow Sea and the rigours of Essossi weather.

And now most of it was gone. The fires had burned everything, and where the flames had been dealt with soon enough, this ensured everyone could listen to the silence of an empty town.

It had been three days since the banner of the Republic was raised in the middle of Argilon’s main plaza, and none of its inhabitants who had fled had returned.

The corpses had been buried, the sellswords executed and thrown into a mass grave away from the rest, but one couldn’t hide what Argilon had become: an empty town under Braavosi occupation.

“We won, but the future doesn’t look bright at all,” he whispered to himself.

“What are we going to do, Admiral?”

Tacito urged himself to not show his disgruntlement in front of his officers. He had to be confident. He was a Laskarys, and he had to prove he was in control.

And all of that was easier said than done. Damn Virtuoso the Red for transforming what would already have been a problematic success into a complete disaster.

“We have several possible courses of action,” the Admiral of Second Fleet affirmed. “Some are worse than others, obviously. First of all, we could decide to abandon the burned husk of Argilon, and sail southwards for Sidorys.”

Plenty of his men grimaced immediately.

“We will have barely enough supplies to last us to Sidorys, Admiral. If the weather forces us to take refuge beyond a promontory, if the winds turn against us-“

“Our men will starve, and scurvy will kill us faster than anything the Pentoshi will do, yes, I’m aware.”

This was a bold course of action.

Too bold, in fact.

The Braavosi fleet would leave many potential enemies in its back, and would operate at the extreme limit of its supply lines. Attacking Sidorys was the kind of do-or-die gamble that the singers wishing to seduce the courtesans repeated several times per day.

It sounded good when you heard them.

But when the time came to order it, an Admiral was forced to remember that it was the life of tens of thousands of men he was playing with.

Assuming nothing went wrong – a very dangerous idea, as the fate of First Fleet had proven – they may reach Sidorys with sailors and infantry ready to fight. But they would have to attack the Pentoshi city immediately, without studying its decaying defences.

If something went wrong, if the first storm assault was repelled, the Second Fleet was going to end up starving, bleeding, and with nothing of the food and the water to take them back home.

By then, the Pentoshi would return to Argilon, and likely order counterattacks all across their northern holdings. They had forces coming from east, sure as the sun rose from that direction.

“We need Argilon, Admiral. It is way too good to stock up supplies before sailing to attack Pentos.”

And that was the problem, wasn’t it?

They needed Argilon.

Yet in the state it had been conquered – Tacito was not going to pretend it was ‘liberation’ – Argilon could not serve its purpose.

“The second course of action is to immediately withdraw most of Second Fleet north.” The Laskarys strategist explained to his subordinates. “Argilon as it stands can’t support our operations, but Palados further north can’t. Therefore it is logical for us to order many squadrons to return to this far safer harbour. In the mean time, we leave here over a thousand of our men to re-fortify Argilon and to clear all the wrecks blocking the Maw and the harbour of the approaches.”

“Turning Argilon into an impregnable fortress is not going to happen in a single moon, Admiral.”

It wasn’t going to happen in a single year, he meant.

The Argos River that bordered Argilon was the sole element of terrain that had some defensive value.

Argilon’s harbour was barely above the water of the Maw gullet, a superb target for archers or crossbowmen. The rest of the town had been on far higher ground, but all this meant was it was on even level with the plains of Essos that bordered it to the east.

To protect their new conquest, the forces of Braavos needed tall walls, and there was no visible stone quarry nearby. No doubt most of the original construction materials had come by the sea. The grey stone had been of good quality, before the bastards of the Red Shields torched everything.

“And it is tantamount to refuse to follow the strategy of the Sealord.”

There were, understandably, plenty of grumblings at that.

There shouldn’t be.

Plan Orca had already mostly sunk on its own when First Fleet was destroyed.

They had given Pentos plenty of time to rearm, and now each minor problem caused more delays they couldn’t afford.

At the same time, they were fighting a war in winter. This resulted in unpleasant realities. The fields just east of Argilon were obviously empty, not ready to be harvested for long moons.

He couldn’t order his men to remove the wrecks like it would have been done in summer; the water was so cold it would kill hundreds in short order.

“We have a duty to our men,” Tacito cleared his throat.

And besides, it was hardly a catastrophic problem. With the failure of Orca and the removal of Argilon from the board, his friends in the Great Lagoon would push for the strategy he had supported all along: the one of unrestricted warfare against the slavers and their bountiful trade.

Winter, when it came down to it, was hardly a time for galleys and galleasses. But it was perfect time to hunt merchant ships with carracks and cogs modified to hunt the slow and cumbersome preys.

It also was far more profitable.

“There is another solution, Admiral.” One of his officers designated a black dot on the map.

“Oh?”

“Kaleos, Admiral. It’s a town as big as Argilon, about four days eastwards of our current position. It is an excellent granary, from what our spies reported. And it commands the entrance of the Black Gorges. We take it, and we can transport all the grain and the food we need on the Argos River.”

“Assuming we can take the town without burning down of it in the process,” another green dyed-bearded officer scoffed.

“Our men can follow orders, unlike these rabid sellswords...”

“Yes, but there is a paved road linking Sidorys and Kaleos. Not a very good one, but it exists. We can stop the enemy columns which will come from the east, not the south.”

“Not a single war is won by hiding behind-“

“What do you imply? That I am a coward? Is that it?”

“ENOUGH!” Tacito Laskarys shouted before the officers of the Second Fleet began to challenge each other to duels that would assuredly end with a few deaths.

“Enough,” he repeated more calmly as the commanders of the expedition showed plenty of angry expressions. “We are not going to find a solution by foul words and greater enmities. Yes, Kaleos could represent a way to supply our forces while avoiding a return to Palados. But as always, opportunities come with risks. To begin with, I sincerely doubt the slavers of Kaleos are going to let us take everything we want. It will be a foraging operation, let’s not pretend otherwise.”

Over a score of nods approved his words.

They were going to loot the grain, either by killing more Pentoshi, or forcing them to take a few coins while emptying half of their granaries. The enemy merchants were not going to like that, and it wasn’t going to improve the popularity of the Republic in these lands.

But it was tempting, really tempting.

“This means we can’t afford to send a couple of hundred men. We have to send every soldier we don’t need to fortify Argilon or unload the ships. We have to send an army, because the terrain between Kaleos and here is absolutely flat. We came with no cavalry worth mentioning. Therefore it is our pikemen and our crossbowmen who will have to protect our wagons both to get there and return loaded with everything we need.”

It was risky, needless to say.

But plenty of the bravos watching the map were looking more and more enthusiastic at the prospect. And as the day continued, undoubtedly the hot-blooded fools on the shore would voice loudly their approval. They had drunk the chalice of promises Zalyne had offered them to the last drop.

Yes, yes, it was a solution. If it worked, Tacito would be the man who had salvaged an incredibly foolish plan, and if it didn’t, well, he was an Admiral, no? Campaigns away from the sea were not what he had been trained for. Besides, he hadn’t been the one to propose this gambit.

“How many men can we commit to this campaign of foraging, Captains?”

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*With the benefit of hindsight, we can now say safely that the Braavosi plan to assault Kaleos in order to steal the vast quantities of grain needed for the campaigns to come was a folly.*

*The plan had not one chance in ten thousand to succeed from the very start, and not because of military facts.*

*Many survivors of Argilon had fled east, and the Podesta of Kaleos had been prompt to enact an iron-clad series of measures dictated by the urgency of the situation. Most important of all, it had been agreed that if the Braavosi came and the city was to be lost, the granaries would be set aflame to deny them to their conquerors. All methods of transportation for said grain and everything edible would be broken or moved eastwards too.*

*With all the horrors stories arriving to their ears, the inhabitants of Kaleos truly believed it was better to be dead than to fall into the hands of the Braavosi. While it would later proven to be completely false, there were rumours spreading that the Braavosi had let the sellswords of the Red Shields have their way to the most beautiful women of Argilon, so that they could adopt their babies and declare them ‘Braavosi’ and thus forge a new faction from the blood of the defeated.*

*The Magisters of Pentos, naturally, seized this priceless opportunity with both hands, committing their fortunes to fuel the hatred inspired by the Sealord and the warmongering sailors of the Republic.*

*The inhabitants of Kaleos intended to leave nothing but ashes if their town was unable to hold against the Braavosi tide, but soon they would be not the only Pentoshi to swear the same.*

*All of this was already incredibly bad for the plans of Sealord Salvatore Zalyne and the Republic of Braavos as a whole.*

*The plan had called to attack Pentos with all celerity. But sending the columns of soldiers east implied at least ten days of delay. And if success was not met, the remaining choices were very much retreat or risk everything in a last roll of the dice.*

*But many Pentoshi and Braavosi would not remember this part of the First Narrow Sea War for the logistical nightmare Braavos was facing at the time.*

*For unknown to Admiral Tacito Laskarys and all the Braavosi transported by Second Fleet, the reinforcements sent by Pentos were far closer to Argilon than their informants had thought.*

Extract from Dragon and Beards, by Historian-Librarian of the First Rank Benjen Manderly, originally written at Fairmarket, 325AC.

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**Hasturo the Unspeakable, Sixth Moon of 140AC, somewhere not far from Kaleos**

“They are coming, High Priest.”

“Do they now?” Hasturo asked lightly. “I suppose this means they are more desperate than our Pentoshi gallant allies thought.”

Braavos had a reputation for naval competency – one that was very much justified, the storm he had unleashed against them was something they couldn’t stop with their oars and their scorpions.

“How many?” even the Captain-General of the Company of the Goat could be seized with a crisis of curiosity, after all.

“Six thousand foot, give or take. My brother told me he counted four thousand pikes and two thousand crossbows.”

Hasturo whistled in appreciation.

This was a significant force by any standard, but for the Republic of the Braavos, it had to be a consequent part of its army. Braavos couldn’t field more than twenty thousand without robbing its fleet of its marine infantry.

On the other hand, it remained to be seen if they hadn’t done exactly that today to launch this eastern expedition.

“The crossbowmen.” He drank calmly his mare’s milk. “Did they bring their pavises with them?”

“No, High Priest. We didn’t see any of their big shields.”

“I love when my enemy is making a mistake...”

But fair was fair: the Braavosi hadn’t that much of a choice.

If they wanted to forage as much as they could, they couldn’t exactly burden themselves with more weight. Most of them already had to move in armour, and though it was winter, the road from Argilon to Kaleos was not paved or well-maintained.

Everything heavy in the region that had to be transported was moving on the river, but all the merchants and farmers had fled the moment they heard of the betrayal of the Red Shields and the burning of Argilon.

“Their cavalry?”

“They can’t have more than two hundred horses, half of them taken from the animals which fled out of the stables in time.”

“They may have taken the horses of the sellswords they executed too.”

Once again, hardly unsurprising, the Braavosi had no renowned cavalry formation, like plenty of other Free Cities did.

But that betrayed the weaknesses of the current Braavosi Republic: they could muster more warships on a single battlefield than anyone but Volantis, but the moment they decided to leave the seas, they were true children with no proper traditions and little idea of the consequences of their actions.

The execution of the Red Shields was proof of that.

Yes, Virtuoso and his men had gutted most of Argilon by turning against their previous masters. But as far as a sellsword honour was concerned, he had held true to his word. The Company of the Red Shields had gone over to the side which paid best.

And the Braavosi had ‘rewarded’ them with death for that.

Hasturo really wanted to see the faces of the next Braavosi officers who tried to hire other sellsword companies to fight for the Sealord and the loot.

It promised to be an extremely enjoyable situation, though likely not for the Braavosi. Sellsword prices were so unpredictable! Why, it was not out of the question any sane Captain would demand one hundred times his usual pay for his men, and insist on being paid first the entirety of the sum!

Yes, Hasturo understood why the Braavosi had killed the Red Shields.

It was still going to be ugly for them. For the rest of this war, those doing the dying for Braavos would be regular troops of the Sealord, plus their volunteers and corsairs. This was a large number. But it was a number that was in its immense majority Braavos-born.

“Orders, High Priest?”

“Since they want Kaleos so badly, it would be rude to not give them the opportunity to watch it with their own eyes, no? We are going to move to this hill nearby, and train ourselves to give them a greeting they will never forget.”

“The Pentoshi are not going to be too happy.”

“I suppose they won’t be at first,” Hasturo nodded. “But I’m sure this mild consternation won’t last. In time, they will realise it means that this will give them over four days of opportunity to hunt the Braavosi runaways across the plains of Essos.”

“The Podesta doesn’t share your confidence. He says you have two thousand, and they have six.”

“Yes,” Hasturo said with a serene smile, “this is rather unfair for them. I think that with one thousand, I would be able to slaughter them in short order.”

The Captain-General of the Company of Boat inspected the bow by his side. An old companion, and one which had shared with him many dangers.

“Two thousands? We can afford to take risks. The Braavosi can’t catch us...but we are definitely going to catch them.”

**The Black Swan, Sixth Moon of 140AC, Lys**

Overall, the first six moons of this year had been a splendid success. While other Free Cities sent the majority of their youth to the battlefields and as such achieved immortal glory by killing themselves, Lys prospered.

Lys grew ever lovelier, as gold and luxury goods were exchanged in its markets.

Lysene flowers blossomed, and its fruits had the taste of something divine.

Yes, Johanna had every reason to be satisfied. She had found three possible girls to succeed her as the Black Swan, and while the training promised to last a few years, it was nothing that she hadn’t accounted for.

She could still wait a bit longer.

After all, wasn’t it said that the song of the Swan became sublime as the moment of its death grew near?

She was the Black Swan. One day, another bird, as beautiful as she was, would replace her.

But this time had not yet come.

And this wasn’t like there was nothing to do in the mean time.

With the cascades of coins pouring in her coffers and those of the Magisters, the time had been right to establish a new gold coin.

Oh, there was nothing wrong with the ovalines, but it was a *small* coin.

Johanna Swann knew Lys could do better.

She could do better.

It had not been hard to flatter the Magisters crawling for her attentions, and that it was economically practical sold the project even faster.

There would be a new coin, and it would be called the *Cigno D’Oro* in the Lysene dialect of Valyrian everyone used inside the banks.

Assuredly, in Westeros and some other places, the coins would have minted with the face of a King or a Queen, but this was Lys.

Johanna had pushed for the animal that had become both her courtesan identity and her heraldry by default for the best part of her life.

The swan.

The swan would remain long after she was no more.

Even centuries in the future, long after everyone had forgotten her name, it was her hope the Cigno D’Oro would remain and be traded and be minted in large numbers.

It wouldn’t be bad, for a daughter of the Stormlands that had been sold as a sex slave of the pillow houses, no?

Johanna ate the grapes presented to her by a young girl one by one.

“All the supplicants but one are gone, Mistress.”

“I told you I didn’t want to have more audiences today, unless was one of Magister rank or something equal.” Johanna closed her eyes for a moment, enjoying the fresh air brought by the winds. The caress upon her skin was simply delicious.

“I know, Mistress, but he told me to give you this.”

Johanna opened her eyes. There was something in the voice of the young girl...the Black Swan took the letter in her hands.

The seal was broken immediately, revealing a small message that was certainly not written on anything as banal as parchment.

The Black Swan narrowed and her fingers twitched.

The words she had almost never seen them. But the Seal that had been hidden within...she had heard of it, though she had never been acknowledged as so important as to earn the privilege of watching it.

It was an elephant seal. No, it was the Elephant Seal.

*Triarch*.

“Bring this mysterious visitor here, dear.”

“Yes, Mistress.”

When the little girl returned, she was followed a man that looked...almost average.

Yes, he had the Valyrian looks, but that was that you could say.

The nose wasn’t remarkable. The lips were common. The eyes were not fiery or given great strength. The silver hair was not too short, but it wasn’t too long either.

“I thank you for the privilege of inviting me in your presence, Glorious Black Swan.”

“I would have admitted you earlier, if I knew who you were, Emissary.”

“I don’t doubt it,” the man spoke with no emotions at all. “But I was trying to be discreet.”

“Then stay assured that this house will respect your pledge of discretion.”

The Black Swan was powerful and influential. But there was a saying that you always found someone more powerful than you, and it was true today.

“May I ask what events made it urgent to send an Emissary in my house?”

“You may,” the Volantene man drew a small roll of the same material as the first letter from the depths of his blue cloak. “It is war, I’m afraid.”

Johanna raised both eyebrows.

“Not between our two Free Cities, of course,” the Emissary assed quickly. “But I am sure someone with your connections hasn’t missed the destruction unleashed by the upstarts ruling the Bastard Daughter of Valyria.”

“I haven’t,” the Black Swan admitted. “And I am certain I am hardly the only woman of the Free Cities to not feel...uncertainty about this bloodshed. Trade Wars are nothing new between the Cities of the Narrow Sea and beyond. But this is no Trade War.”

“It is even worse than you likely suspect,” the other man told her bluntly. “Our friends obtained this document from...other friends. Read, and you will understand why certain men and women of great influence are worried.”

The document in her hands seemed to be at first sight to be one of these official banking agreements that were signed every day at Lys and in other cities, be it for a loan or for something else involving vast sums of money. One party wanted a loan or plenty of material resources, the Bank considered it a loan, and there was the need to push forwards some assets to prove you were a serious investor or something else.

This was nothing new under the sun.

The problem was the identity of the signatories on this document. One was identified as Salvatore Zalyne, the new Sealord of Braavos, and the other party was the Iron Bank.

And it was indeed a loan of the rapacious institution of Braavos, but...yes, there was a Titan-sized ‘but’.

“This can’t be right.” For all her self-control of courtesan, even the Black Swan could be surprised.

“I assure you, it is.”

This couldn’t be right. Braavosi sailors were arrogant, but here it was getting-

Mad. This was the word she was searching. It was complete madness.

“Zalyne has promised to deliver to the Iron Bank the Grand Bazaar of Pentos, a complete monopoly on pepper production in the plantations, and disband all the institutions of money-making of the Forty Magisters’ factions *when* the Sealord will annex Pentos.”

“Yes.”

Merciful Gods, and here some thought certain rulers had big dreams. Conquering every land the Free City of Pentos ruled over, allow the Iron Bank to swallow giant sums of gold, silver, and bronze, divert the flow of certain spice trades, and ruin countless people on both sides of the Narrow Sea.

If it was true...it had to be true, unfortunately. This would explain why the Iron Bank had not moved when the canals of Braavos turned red with the blood of certain ancient keyholder families.

“This is very grave news,” there was no use to pretend the contrary. Braavos waging a Trade War against Pentos and winning would have brought serious changes to Essos and Lys; Braavos annexing Pentos would result in a mortal peril for every Free City, especially if the madmen were really serious about freeing all the slaves and destroying the established order that had been built by the Freehold.

“But why come to me, Emissary? I imagine that such a document, when placed in Myrish hands, would result in a decisive declaration of war against the Bastard Daughter and its bloody Sealord.”

“War is inevitable anyway between Myr and Braavos, oh Glorious Black Swan, and I believe you know it. The Gonfalonier of Myr hardly needs our urging to see the ravages of the Braavosi corsairs across the Narrow Sea.”

The famous courtesan gave him only a charming smile, noting the man didn’t even seem to acknowledge her beauty. Evidently, the Triarch – assuming there was only one behind this move – was not going to send someone with a weakness for seductive tactics.

“No, what we are most concerned is what will happen *after* this war. The order built at the end of the Century of Blood on the foundations of what were the ashes of the Freehold is now tethering on the point of collapse. There is need of something new. There is great need of *permanent alliances*.”

**Author’s note**: The War of the Beard and the events occurring on both sides of Narrow Sea will continue in the next update. I honestly admit I have not found a good title for it yet. After all ‘Fear the Goat’, while accurate, sounds a bit too comedic, no?