**Chapter 49**

**Succession Problems**

**Queen Baela Targaryen**

Not every Noble House of the Seven Kingdoms built a cemetery for its dead members. It was a strong reminder, in many ways, that for all the efforts the Conqueror had poured into forging his realm with fire and blood, the old traditions of the kingdoms that had preceded it remained.

The Tullys were famous to give their fallen to the Red Fork, on a barge they set on fire as it sailed away. Many Northern Houses, if they weren’t burying their Lords in grim crypts, were burning the dead, both as respect to the ones who had passed away, and because it was extraordinarily difficult to dig for a grave when the ground was frozen.

House Royce, however, had not shirked from providing a cemetery, no matter how difficult the prospect was. Yet the millenary-old House could not build a cemetery on the doorstep of Runestone. There were too few good fields where the grain could be harvested. A lot of food could be grown on the Vale lands, but only in certain locations.

In many ways, these fields were far more protected than many watch towers and defences of the Vale. Those the bannersmen of House Arryn could reconquer if they were lost. But the harvests and the granaries? No, they had to be protected. Given its isolated situation when the first snowfalls arrived, no help would ever come in sufficient quantities if the Vale starved.

No wonder the Knights of the Vale were held in such high esteem, for they had to be ever on the move, to protect those sworn to them from bandits and worse enemies.

And no wonder House Royce had built a garden of pillars and carved stones to remember all those who fell in their service.

It was not voicing lies for the sake of a bard’s tale. The cemetery was truly thousands of stones shaped by human sculptors’ hands. Many had received the familiar shape of the seven-pointed star, but others didn’t. In fact, several enormous white and grey-coloured stones were there for so long, that between their age and the fury of the nearby sea and the wind, one couldn’t read anymore who had been buried under them.

This was not a problem Baela had for the grave she had come to visit, quite evidently. And as she re-read the words, the Black Queen had to fight the urge not to giggle again.

LADY RHEA ROYCE

81 AC - 115AC

I WATCHED YOU LIKE A HAWK

DAEMON IF YOU READ THIS

KNOW THAT RUNESTONE WILL NEVER BE YOURS

It took a certain form of...stubbornness to order this to be carved on the stone where you were going to be buried. Baela hadn’t asked, but she was almost certain that everything – save of course the date of her death – had been carved by Lady Rhea herself.

“Did you show it to him when he came back, my Lord?”

“I did...your Majesty.”

Baela smiled.

“Good.”

When Rhea had died, her father had not been by his first wife’s side for years. In some aspects, it was thanks to that Rhaena and Baela had been conceived...when Jeyne had banished the Rogue Prince from the Vale, there had no ties to prevent him from remarrying.

“They really hated each other, did they?”

“Yes, they did, my Queen.” Lord Royce confirmed. “Permission to speak bluntly?”

“Permission granted,” Baela replied, a bit curious about what her vassal was going to say.

“Thank you,” the black-haired Lord thanked her. “My Queen, this marriage was one of the most stupid ideas of the last decades.”

This was...courageous. The Head of House Royce couldn’t ignore that it was Queen Alysanne Targaryen who had been the main force behind this marriage.

But it was also the right thing to say. Her father and Lady Rhea Royce’s union had been a disaster from the start to the beginning, and could have easily resulted in the Blacks losing all support from the Eyrie and the rest of the Vale.

“The match was prestigious.” The Black Queen said. “And while I wasn’t here to hear how it was decided, many Lords and Ladies found love or at least mutual respect in far more difficult circumstances. To begin with, I believe they were born the same year, so there was no gap when it came to name days.”

“The groom and the bride-to-be enjoying the same vigour can be a good thing,” the Lord of Runestone conceded, “but there are ways the parents of each young highborn can verify it is going to be a successful marriage. Quite clearly, my Queen, no one but the Gods can guarantee a young woman is fertile or going to survive after childbirth. But for all the whispers about the Game, clever Lords and Ladies know better than ordering their children to push them into unions where they don’t want to be. Tourneys, cupbearers, fostering, and many other ancient traditions are not just there to amaze everyone by our generosity and our titles, my Queen. They are here to make sure we won’t tie our House with another when it is obvious the wedding is going to be a succession of feuds and wrathful exchanges.”

Her Vale bannersman, given how assured his voice was, had certainly prepared his speech for a good fortnight...maybe as soon as she had asked him to visit Runestone.

But that the words weren’t spoken without a lot of forethought didn’t mean Lord Royce hadn’t a point.

Lady Rhea Royce should have been presented to her father far before their marriage, so that the King and Queen knew a prospective union was assuredly going to end in calamity. As it was, Baela didn’t know if Lady Rhea had been barren or had deliberately made sure that the few times she and Daemon Targaryen shared their bed would end with no children being sired.

“Something to keep in mind at all times, I suppose.” The silver-haired dragonrider said seriously. “And unfortunately, we were all recently reminded my father’s first marriage was far from the only one to end in a disastrous manner.”

“The...affair between Ser Eldric and Ser Joffrey’s wife, my Queen?”

“What else do you thing I am referring to, my Lord?”

Thankfully, the Lord of Runestone nodded, and didn’t tell her there was another dysfunctional marriage which was about to be brought to her attention...

“Ser Eldric and Lady Ursula,” though the Lady was a courtesy she didn’t want to give the woman, as the wife of Ser Joffrey’s transgressions went far beyond the acceptable, “did far worse than exchange love letters in secret.”

“They fornicated.” Well, thank you, Lord Royce, for this blunt and truthful judgement.

“I think the entire Vale is aware of it now, my Lord.” Baela didn’t laugh; the issue had caused her far too many headaches in the last days as it was. “The real question is, I think, if you have enough trustworthy men and women to prove it.”

“I believe so, my Queen.”

The assurance was not a boast or another thunderous proclamation, but in a way, the Royce’s words were far more reassuring than any half-empty promise given by summer knights who had no idea of what was at stake.

“I see.” In the end, most of the decisions had been taken for her, and Ser Eldric’s deeds proved he deserved whatever her cousin had in mind for him. “I will write a letter you will take with you, my Lord, before I continue my journey across the Vale.”

**Ser Eldric Arryn**

Eldric had always hated maesters.

The Knight of Forest Nest hated them. They could call themselves Dog-something or whatever funny thing they said, he would always call them maesters.

They had grey robes. They stank with righteousness like they were septons of some great God.

And for all the ‘wisdom’, they had been unable to save his fighting arm.

He was crippled, and it was their fault!

Their fault!

Eldric seethed before deciding turning to someone else he hated: Joffrey Arryn himself. Yes, it was his fault he was crippled too. Yes, he was more at fault than the maesters!

He wanted to strangle that sword-lover slowly.

And he couldn’t.

The pretentious drunk he had cuckolded had already been sent to the Wall for ten years. He would have to send someone to do the deed in his name...as soon as he had the purse that was his by right.

That, at least, had gone right. He had lost his arm, but Joffrey was out of the Game. He had Ursula and the Bloody Gate for himself right now. Soon the Eyrie would be his. The Gates of the Moon, this dark castle he was currently walking through the cold and old corridors, would be his too.

Everything would be his.

“Ser Eldric Arryn, the Knight of Forrest Nest!”

The one-armed highborn entered the main hall, and at the other side, could see the blue-robed figure of the bitch seated on her throne. At last, the weak female had made her decision. At last, she was going to name him as Heir. Why else would she summon over a score of the most important Lords of the Vale a moon after the tourney which had cost him his arm?

Victory was his.

Eldric advanced, trying to grin as little as he could. If only he could have donned a cuirass of ceremony which had belonged to the drunkard...

The Knight of Forest Nest walked forwards.

He gave a glance at Lord Templeton, the man who had supported him against the upstart merchants of Gulltown...and suddenly a cold shiver was against his skin, as the Lord of Ninestars refused to meet his eyes.

No, it had to be not to raise suspicions. The old man had promised him the hand of his daughter, after all.

Ursula would remain his beloved paramour, but a Templeton woman would be his Queen when he held his court above the clouds surrounding the Giant’s Lance.

Eldric looked at Lord Coldwater...and though there was no attempt to evade his silent question, the man’s face was of a stranger refusing to give him a single glance.

Royce, Redfort, Tollett, Belmore...they weren’t his friends, but he had spoken to them before. They knew him. They knew he had the better claim. They knew he was the greatest of the Arryns, a true falcon after his father was cowardly assassinated by the upstart merchants.

“You stand before the Lady of the Eyrie. Kneel.”

Eldric slowly knelt. Having only a single arm, he had quickly discovered, was something which made him clumsy doing a lot of deeds that were simple before.

Just for that, he would the drunkard more. The maesters too. And the bitch on the Falcon Throne. He couldn’t forget her. She could see he had only one arm. And yet she insisted upon this pomp she didn’t deserve.

The moment she named him her Heir, he would have to insist-

This was lasting too long. Why wasn’t she giving him the command to stand again?

“Ser Eldric,” the voice was one of a iron-hearted bitch, no doubt about it. “Do you know why marriage is so pleasant to the Gods?”

Oh, great, the foolish female wanted to discuss religion. How ridiculous.

“I believe, Lady Arryn,” the Knight of Forest Nest cleared his throat, “it is because the Seven-Who-Are-One love listening to the union of hearts and faithful vows being respected as per their teachings coming to us through the Holy Books.”

She wasn’t going to ask him in marriage, right? He was their cousin, and the woman would have to be mad to risk the Faith’s ire-

“A good answer, if a bit unimaginative,” the bitch answered. “I suppose you are aware of how tied to our traditions of chivalry the marriage is.”

“I am, my Lady.”

“Then I await with great pleasure your explanation why you committed adultery with the former wife of Ser Joffrey Arryn, our cousin who held the duties of the Knight of the Bloody Gate.”

Eldric gaped...before closing his mouth in a hurry and trying to imitate a stone-faced expression.

She knew. The bitch knew.

How? No, no, no. She couldn’t know. Someone must have whispered in her hears some of the rumours always spreading during the tourney, but she couldn’t know.

“I...those are ridiculous rumours, Lady Arryn, I never committed adultery and-“

“So half a score of servants of the Bloody Gate are falsely proclaiming having observed you fornicating with a woman that was married to another knight?”

Servants? Yes, as he turned his head, Eldric saw it was those unworthy lowborn scum that were introduced in the hall. Most of them were the stupid and the jealous of the Bloody Gate, those...those he hadn’t convinced to acknowledge him as their legitimate master.

“They are not highborn, my Lady.” Who would take their words against a prestigious knight of the realm like him? “Their accusations-“

“Their accusations have far more truth in them than any protestation of loyalty you might have ever uttered in my presence.”

“Cousin, I protest-“

“This is *Lady Arryn* to you, *Ser*!”

Eldric closed his mouth. He knew very much the tone the bitch had used; one which mirrored his own hatred.

“Adultery stands against all tenets of chivalry we hold for sacred in the Vale.”

“Ser Joffrey violated all tenets when he took my arm!”

“Ser Joffrey paid the price when he allowed you to play him like a fool, with his wife helping you. He has been punished. Now you will be tried for bringing shame to the House of Arryn. And I have not given you permission to stop kneeling, Ser.”

The pain in his legs and the rest of his body was beginning to be incredibly unpleasant. Why were the Lords of the Vale not saying anything? This was tyranny! This was a weak woman that had no right to-

“Your behaviour,” the Lady of the Eyrie continued to speak, and Eldric couldn’t even glare at her, as busy as he was to not kiss the carpet in front of the Falcon Seat of the Gates of the Moon, “is absolutely intolerable by the standards I hold House Arryn to. You are hereby cast out of House Arryn, Ser. Whichever name you will choose to place next to your first name, it won’t be the proud name of the Falcon.”

“NO!” Eldric screamed, knowing very well what the words meant. Depriving of the Arryn name meant a complete removal from the succession of the Eyrie. It was being disinherited of every privilege, of his birth rights, of...everything. “I have the best claim to the Eyrie now that the drunkard is gone! I am your Heir!”

“You forget yourself, Ser. And no, you are not my Heir.”

“You are not going to get rid of me so easily!” Eldric snarled.

“Quite the contrary,” the bitch countered. “For what you have done...and I include your adultery in addition to everything you have done to force Ser Joffrey to strike you after you recklessly provoked him during the tourney...Ser Eldric of Forest Nest, you are banished from the Vale.”

No! This was not right! This couldn’t be right!

He heard the words which followed, of course. His lands confiscated. Ursula could choose to accompany him or go to the Silent Sisters.

“Do you understand the terms of your exile, Ser Eldric?”

“I understand, and I refuse to obey them!”

This time, a lot of the Lords at last woke up and murmured behind him. Yes, bannersmen, that was how a real knight fought his battles!

“If you intend to take the word of worthless mud-crawlers against mine, then I call for a more ancient tradition, cousin. I am of the blood of Arryn! I demand a trial by combat!”

Shouts exploded and the main hall resonated for a long, long time as countless voices screamed and protested, and many were approving him.

Eldric stopped kneeling. What was the damn bitch going to do to him anymore?

Eldric raised his head...and flinched, as the blue eyes staring at him were so powerful they seemed to go deep inside his soul.

“The trial by combat is of course your right and privilege,” Eldric felt something warm burning in his heart, “the Eyrie is choosing Ser Rodrik Hunter as its Champion.”

The aforementioned knight took a step forwards, not that it was really necessary. Eldric had heard of him. The youngest son of Lord Hunter, he had been knighted at Bosworth Bridge, after slaughtering several Stormlander knights in personal combat.

There was currently no empty white cloak to give him, but many had whispered it was only a question of time before the Black Queen gave him one, as two Kingsguards were long past their prime.

Rodrik Hunter was a demon with a sword. And Eldric...suddenly the absence of his sword arm reminded him how the drunkard had crippled him.

“I...it will take...some time...for my Champion to reach the Gates of the Moon.”

He would need time to find a Champion, really, but he wasn’t going to give her the pleasure of saying it out loud...

“You have one moon, Ser.” And the female smiled! Fury burned in his guts, and he couldn’t do anything. “This is as long as we’re willing to wait before your trial by combat...unless you prefer accepting your banishment, of course.”

**Ser Richard Lydden**

To Richard’s relief, once their guide led them deeper inland, the signs of civilisation were far greater than the small village had made him think at first.

Crossing a large bridge of the same grey stones they had seen used for the pier and the houses of the coast, Gregor and Richard entered a far bigger village.

Unlike the previous one, it was breathing with life and could easily boast to have several hundred souls living there. Richard wasn’t going to say it was beautiful; everything from the houses to the well in the middle of the village’s square had been built for the sake of practicality, not beauty. The same was true of the animals. In a Western village, before Walder Reyne’s Rebellion at any rate, horses would likely have been seen, either from messengers of different Lordships, or merchants. Here? There were donkeys, of a breed Richard was not familiar with.

His curiosity tingled, the last free highborn of House Lydden asked the question which was on his tongue.

“We bought them from the Dragon Queen’s merchants,” Erik of Pincer’s Bay answered promptly. “These are formidable animals, and we needed them badly after winter.”

“Northern breed?” Gregor was more amused by the existence of the long-eared animals than him, to be sure.

Their Ironborn guide shrugged.

“I didn’t ask, but it’s likely. They’re enjoying Great Wyk’s climate, and they have what they need to protect themselves from the cold. So the Vale or the North.”

“And how did you pay for them?”

“Many of our hot-headed youngsters leave now aboard the Seagard’s fishing ships every time the weather is mild. Thanks to us, the fishers can sail to the Algae Sea.”

“The Algae what?” Richard had never heard of a sea with that name!

“Oh, the Algae is...not a true sea. It’s the nickname we gave to the part of the Sunset Sea which is...five to six days west of Cape Kraken. Before the last big war, the longships were going there by the scores every moon.”

“Why would anyone want to go that far away from the coast?” The Western knight had not liked at all their journey which had begun at Lannisport, and the continent or the big islands had never been far from their ship. The idea to sail westwards, far away from any piece of emerged rock, no matter how tiny...

“For the red tuna, of course,” Erik answered, as if the answer was incredibly obvious for him, and even it was. “The men of the Dragon Queen seem to love it, at least they sell at a good price in the fish market of Seagard.”

“Tuna,” well, at least if the young Ironborn men were fishing instead of reaving...

“Red Tuna,” their guide corrected with a majestic insistence, as if it was critically important. “Well, the red and the white breed. For the yellow tuna, you need to go past the Arbor and into the warmer seas...and Lord Wyk told us it wouldn’t be very prudent.”

“I have to agree with your Lord.” The carnage and the destruction made by the Red Kraken had not been forgotten, and the fact the Ironborn were selling their services to Black-owned ships was a possible aggravating factor, not one which would help. Western harbours would refuse to welcome those ships, storm or no storm, sea damage or no sea damage.

“I thought you might,” Erik said lightly, as they entered the village’s square after letting the small column of donkeys get past them.

The reaction...was not the one Richard had expected. There were eight or nine children playing in the square with some kind of...leather ball, or something similar, a toy they could throw to each other with forceful arm throws and powerful kicks of their young legs.

But the moment they saw Gregor and him arrive, the children shouted and ran away, racing to hide in the skirts of their mothers.

This could have been in good fun...except Richard Lydden could see the expression of the closest children and their mothers. And their eyes were filled with fear.

Damn it, he was not drunk enough for this...

“Are...is our arrival going to be greeted like this in every village of Great Wyk?” He asked seriously.

“Some. Not all,” their guide replied with a tone as serious as the one as Richard had employed. “This village has a lot of refugees from the Days of Dragon’s Wrath.”

Richard had never heard this nickname be given to any battle, but it wasn’t difficult to guess which one the Ironborn man was referring to.

“The days when the Blue Queen and our fleet burned many islands to end the war.”

“With due respect, Ser,” Erik was trying to keep sadness away, “after Old Wyk and Harlaw, the war was over. What your King and his warriors did after that...it was a slaughter.”

And the more Richard observed of the village, the more he saw fearful faces, and not just on the women and the children’s faces. The men were afraid too, though they didn’t seem that many of them, and a lot of them were very old.

“Let’s hope we can put past that era of bloodshed beyond us.”

“One can always hope,” Erik agreed. “Of course, it would be simpler if the Dragon King allowed us to propose our services to Lannisport and other cities. Now that we fish with the men of Seagard, relations are far better. The merchants get a lot of tuna, our iron and other metals, we help them improve their nets, sails, and ropes, and in exchange we receive grain, donkeys, and wood for our houses.”

“I had no idea trade with the islands had expanded so much in the last years,” Richard answered honestly. Of course, the Green Kingdom had been a bit busy this year tearing itself apart in a civil war, courtesy of his own Lord and the other men declaring for Walder Reyne. But it had apparently begun well before that, and no one near Deep Den had found it relevant, or if someone had, Richard had been too drunk to notice.

“It really picked up once Seagard began to recover from the Great Plague and the sailing conditions were good enough for their inexperienced sailors. It remains smaller than Lord Wyk wants, I hear. That’s why we pray for more years of summer. Building new houses and filling up the new granaries so that we don’t starve next winter is still the great priority.”

If anything, these sentences didn’t really improve Richard’s mood. It was clear that contrary to what he had feared, so far, the Ironborn had really abandoned their dreams of conquest, and began to think of a far more peaceful future.

In the meanwhile, the lands sworn to King Daeron had continued to bleed for the same red dreams, except it had been a Red Lion and not a Red Kraken doing the slaughters this time.

“Do you have any question before I invite you to our best tavern...which also happens to be the only one on our way to meet Lord Wyk?”

“Yes,” Gregor intervened. “Does the tavern happen to serve a good recipe of tuna soup? I want to check myself why the Seagard’s fishermen are so eager to sail deep into the Sunset Sea to catch them...”

“It does! One of the carracks was here yesterday and gave us a few barrels of them! Tuna Soup for everyone at dinner!” Erik saluted the words of Clegane joyously.

Richard groaned pitifully inside his mind. What was it with all this disturbing cooking? Please give him back generous meat delicacies soaked in red wine everyday...

**Prince Viserys Rogare**

If the city of Tiberius had been part of the Seven Kingdoms, it likely would have been at least the seat of one of the most powerful Noble Houses sworn to House Targaryen.

True, it was smaller than Oldtown, with a population which was rumoured to be a bit over one hundred thousand men, women, and children. In fact, it was smaller than any of the big powerhouses of the Free Cities, be it Myr, Lys, Tyrosh, Pentos, or Braavos. There was a reason why Tiberius was never mentioned in the same conversation with them.

And no, Viserys wasn’t unfair. Before being kept as an ‘honoured guest’ to Lys, the young Prince had not known a single thing about the geography of the Disputed Lands, just that they were an enormous amount of land with vague frontiers that each Free City tried to dominate, most of the time by the power of the sword.

In reality, things were far more complicated than that.

To begin with, the Disputed Lands were big. And by big, Viserys meant ‘easily bigger than the Stormlands’ big.

Moreover, this was a land of extremely varied terrain and climate. Some parts of the Disputed Lands had extremely fertile fields, others not so much. But on average, this allowed the sum of the holdings Lys, Tyrosh, and Myr fought for to boast of populations which made any region of Westeros to pale in insignificance.

As a consequence, losing ten or even a hundred villages during a single military campaign was hardly worthy of consideration. As long as you didn’t take control of a major city – and by major, the general terms of acceptance was ‘over fifty thousand and protected by stone walls’ – it was likely that your military exploits would be utterly forgotten before the year’s end. Maybe some old chroniclers would bother writing it a book about it and then selling it to the famous library of the Archon of Tyrosh, but even that was not certain.

Taking Tiberius, however? Now that was a feat worthy to be remembered.

The first settlement of Tiberius had happened approximately when the Doom destroyed the Valyrian Freehold. The tumultuous times had made sure the exact date was lost to the mists of time, but everyone was ready to concede it had been done by Lysene colonists. For a time, it had dominated the Bay of Napolias, and with its positions mere leagues west of the Tarentana Peninsula, the Free City of Lys had a sword pointed at the Stepstones. Since the Magisters were not idiots, they had exploited it mercilessly, and Tiberius’ ownership had been one of the reasons Lys was so successful in trade affairs.

Until sixty years ago when the greatest Tyroshi armada ever assembled had inflicted a humiliating defeat upon the Lysene one defending the Napolias’ coast, and Tiberius fell to the Tyroshi-paid sellswords.

This had been a heavy blow that in many ways, Lys had needed several decades to recover from.

The Tyroshi Archons, in the mean time, had worked ruthlessly to secure their conquest. The harbour had been fortified by massive defences. An enormous sea wall had been built around the harbour, both to expand the trade capacity of Tiberius, and to ensure its protection from naval threats. Said sea wall had received the latest models of ballistae and catapults, which of course could launch incendiary projectiles.

As the levels of slavery were far slower in Tiberius than they were in Tyrosh or Lys, the merchants ruling the city in the name of the Archon had kept under arms a militia of three thousand guards, with a heavy emphasis on crossbowmen and spearmen, plus a corps of siege engineers.

Last but not least, Tyrosh had three sellsword companies in permanent contracts, and while one was including a massive number of sellsails and thus rarely seen in the city itself, the two others were land-based, and added a fighting strength of roughly two thousand sellswords.

Before the might of Tyrosh began crumbling after the Triarchy failed and burned the treaties which had taken so long to sign, assaulting Tiberius would have been a dangerous madness.

As it was...

“The Archon said,” Larra said idly, watching the columns of smoke burning from the harbour where several Tyroshi captains were burning their ships in a futile endeavour if there ever was one, “that Tiberius was an impregnable citadel, I believe.”

“His official messages certainly proclaimed an extraordinary level of confidence,” Viserys replied in the same tone. “I believe he referred it to ‘our Rock’ and ‘our Jewel in the Disputed Lands’.”

While some of the message had been flowery, the Targaryen-born Prince was ready to admit the description had merits. Tiberius had been built on the abutment of what was certainly an impressive series of colossal piles of rocks.

“The Rock, I can very well believe.” His wife sniffed disdainfully like the perfect Magister’s daughter she was. “A jewel? I can smell the garlic and the alcohol from here.”

The young silver-haired man rolled his eyes.

“Now who’s exaggerating?”

“I am not exaggerating,” Larra pouted.

Trust House Rogare to never let anyone forget that some of the most important goods Tiberius exported were harvested from olive trees, the vineyards...and of course there was a lot of garlic cultivated not far from the city.

In the distance, a section of the great city wall crumbled. Military trumpets tried to call their soldiers, the rally tunes thundering over the chaos of the Tyroshi retreat.

“Our good friend the Archon told everyone who had hears to listen that his Tiberius was impregnable by sea,” his wife began to eat the little bits of peach one of their servants had cut beforehand. Viserys didn’t comment; with her pregnancy well-advanced, Larra was craving for a lot of fruits and sweet things. “Well, it wasn’t impregnable when the attacker comes by land.”

“It was more difficult than you imply, Larra.”

“We had to expend a lot of gold ovalines to train the men which had to pass by the Napolirio Gorges,” the daughter of Magister Lysandro Rogare acknowledged. “But the losses in men and ships are negligible.”

That was certainly true. The surprise had been so total that the garrison of Tiberius had less than a day to prepare for a siege, and when their vanguard had already seized the main aqueduct delivering the water Tiberius needed to stop its citizens and slaves from dying of thirst, the game had already been played...and the Tyroshi defenders had lost.

“We will have to open negotiations, of course.” Larra said, as she stopped eating. “Tomorrow, I think.”

“Tomorrow?” Viserys raised an eyebrow. “I would have thought you would want to exploit our military superiority for a few moons.”

“How Westerosi of you, dear,” Viserys winced, because if it wasn’t completely an insult, it was certainly not a compliment. “Yes, we could do exactly what you propose. Exploit mercilessly our victory. Take two or three more cities, ruin Tyrosh, and make sure certain merchants push the Archon from the top of his highest tower before they prostrated themselves at our feet.”

Larra began to eat slowly another bite of fruit, this time an orange.

“But in trying to win everything, we would lose everything, in due time. Tiberius? Our opponents who stayed quiet when we organised this campaign would try to deny us our prize. Those Magisters among our allies they can’t buy, will end up poisoned or stabbed. They will sow dissension among the citizens of the city we just conquered, and make bargains with the Tyroshi. They might even negotiate with Myr or Volantis to destroy us if we prove too strong.”

“We continue to play the very long game, then.”

“Of course,” Larra smiled with an intensity a wolf or a lion would have approved. “I am not my brother, Viserys. What we will build, I intend for it to last.”

“Well, since we know how stupid your brother’s schemes were, this is something I completely support,” the Prince said truthfully. The actions of Lysaro Rogare, and his shameful demise, had been the talk of Lys for days, and the only reason House Rogare had not been severely weakened by the scandal was that the sellsword-allied ‘adventurer’ had been disinherited long before he joined Saan and the sellswords who died in Westeros. “King’s Landing may try to support its Tyroshi allies, though.”

No army or fleet would be ready to fight a war on the side of Tyrosh for moons, assuming the Greens wanted to, which, given their recent civil war, was really dubious.

A dragon, however, would be a formidable asset to stop a military campaign in its tracks.

“By then, the negotiations will be over. I think the Archon will give us hundreds of thousands of ovalines in his haste to stop the hostilities while he has only lost one walled city.”

“Hundreds of thousands of ovalines? Many of the greatest Tyroshi merchants are going to scream in outrage.”

“I’m willing to negotiate, my dear husband. I am not willing to let them keep their chests full of gold so that they can pay for armies and fleets which will retake Tiberius from us...”

Many Hightowers in the past had pretended women were too weak to ensure the Iron Throne stayed strong.

With the benefit of past wars, the dead had never truly realised how wrong they were...

**Lady Jeyne Arryn**

Jeyne waited.

Sadly, this was very common when you were a Lady Paramount, or at least it was a constant thing in her life.

She had to take a lot of decisions in a few turns of hourglasses, and then wait days, sometimes moons or years, to ascertain whether the path chosen was the most judicious one. And now that she was older, the Lady of the Eyrie knew that whether the choice was good for House Arryn or not, it would not stop the dilemmas from coming to her.

Jeyne sighed inwardly. Sometimes she was tempted to abandon everything and retire to a manor on the other side of the Narrow Sea. Even by not taking more than a third of her portable fortune with her, there would be enough to enjoy a life of hedonism and decadence that even the descendants of Valyria would approve.

But Jeyne was an Arryn. And sometimes, she figured, this meant the honour they held as the foremost virtue was its own brand of madness.

“The crowd is getting impatient, Lady Arryn.”

Jeyne nodded as if her bannersman had said something intelligent.

Of course the smallfolk and the highborn who had gathered today were getting impatient. In one moon, the rumours of the trial combat had had time to reach the Riverlands and beyond, and while Riverlanders naturally had better things to do than sail from Saltpans to Gulltown and then reach to the Gates of the Moon, thousands of Vale men, women, and children had come to watch the duel.

There were fewer spectators than there had been participants and curious eyes one moon ago, but that was not really surprising: except on the gambling and the food markets, you couldn’t make a lot of money about a trial by combat.

“Then you can summon the Champions.”

It should have been all for the admiration of the crowd...but it wasn’t.

Because, as the drums were beaten by her musicians, there was only one Champion facing the stands where her bannersmen and herself had seated themselves.

And it was her Champion, Ser Rodrik Hunter.

Of the Champion chosen by the Knight of Forest Nest, there was no sign of.

“He has a Champion, right?” Jeyne heard Lord Corbray voice the question no doubt hundreds of lesser lineage were wondering at the same moment.

“I spoke with him yesterday,” she heard the Head of House Templeton, who had been Eldric’s fiercest supporter before his nauseating deeds were revealed. “He assured me he had one. But he refused to say who-”

There was a great deal of agitation near the southern tents, and suddenly a lone knight began to force his way through the mass of men-at-arms in his way.

“Well, look at that, the Champion is...a bit late.” Lord Harlan Melcolm snickered.

“I am afraid I don’t recognise him,” Jeyne admitted with a frown. To her eyes, a knight in armour looked very much like another, and this one had his shield tied to his back. As such, Jeyne’s chances to remember if she had met this swordsman before were really-

Whatever thoughts the Lady of the Eyrie had fighting in her head, they brutally died as the knight stormed out of the crowd and went to ram head first...the man he was sworn to defend in the trial by combat, Ser Eldric himself.

Horselaugh laughter erupted everywhere.

“Are you the one I must kill today?” the knight roared, to the delight of the crowd, while Ser Eldric tried desperately to catch his breath. “Did you try to ambush me before the duel began? Ah, perfidious beast! Vile scoundrel!”

“This man is drunk!” Lord Eon Tollett exclaimed, and fortunately Lady Jeyne was not far from him, because even a shout was lost in the cheers of the men and women who looked at the ridiculous performance playing before their very eyes.

“I am going to disarm you like I disarmed the Mammoth of Beyond-the-Wall! I will break you like I broken ten armies!” Jeyne had no idea what was the perfect stance to wield a sword, but the ridiculous gesticulations the new knight did as Ser Eldric tried to move out of the way to not be impaled by his own ‘Champion’ were absolutely not it.

“My Lady, I think Ser Eldric chose Ser Yorbert Lipps as his Champion.”

“Oh...*him*.”

Jeyne knew the name.

It would be difficult not to.

Of the thousands of Vale warriors who had fought with her cousin the Queen at Bosworth Bridge, many Lords, knights, and humble warriors had covered themselves in glory. Ser Rodrik Hunter was one, but there were many others.

Ser Yorbert Lipps was not among them. The second son of Lord Lipps had not done anything to prove himself a loyal or disloyal bannersman before this critical battle, but his infamy after it had been solidly established.

This was because Yorbert, who had been recently knighted, had been so happy about gaining his spurs that the night before, he had emptied a barrel of wine by himself. Naturally, after such an ‘exploit’, when the son of Lord Lipps had woken up, the bloodshed was nearly over.

Yorbert had insisted, both to his Lord Father and many of the Great Lords of the Vale, that it was ‘just to strengthen his courage’. Few had been willing to give him the benefit of the doubt, and for good reason.

“Well, once a drunkard, always a drunkard, I suppose,” Even the stoic Lord Royce had tears of joy forming on his eyes. The poor Eldric trying to retreat as his ‘Champion’ tried to skewer him, all the while shouting for his ‘enemy’ to stand up and fight, was absolutely hilarious. “Her Majesty the Queen is going to be very disappointed to have missed this...this buffoonery.”

“Assuredly,” Her cousin, Queen Baela Targaryen, had let her deal with this matter on her own...which Jeyne knew she deserved, since this mess was her fault.

And really, the younger woman deserved to visit the Vale with her husband and her daughter without Jeyne coming to her with a mountain of problems to resolve.

“What does the law says about a Champion fighting the very man he is supposed to defend?” Lord Melcolm asked as a Corbray knight had pity for Ser Eldric and threw him a sword...that of course with only one arm, the disgraced Knight of Forest Nest failed to catch, and had to roll below the blade of Yorbert to seize.

The smallfolk, at the risk of her repeating herself, loved it and screamed louder.

“I don’t know,” Jeyne couldn’t help but laughing as Eldric was once more saved by Ser Yorbert collapsing, as the wine the drunkard had gorged himself with left him unable to go three steps forwards without stumbling on his own. “This is something I doubt the laws of King Jaehaerys ever thought to codify...”

“Maybe the North will be of help in that regard?”

“Please,” Lord Corbray scoffed. “I saw Lord Umber and many Northerners get drunk after a battle; they wouldn’t have made a mistake like that...”

Eldric’s sword clashed with the weapon of Ser Yorbert, and the unexpected duel resumed...

**King Daeron Targaryen**

The outcome of this unpleasant situation was not pleasant at all. And the worst part was that his Master of Whisperers had, in this instance, predicted correctly two moons ago what was going to happen.

“So Tiberius has been conquered by Lys.” And with it, House Rogare and Lys were on the ascendant.

“Yes, your Grace. Larra Rogare and her husband must have held court for a fortnight by now. One in three of the merchants of the city have promptly renounced all the oaths they swore to the Archon of Tyrosh. The others have fled, or are waiting to see if the Archon can organise a major counterattack to liberate the city.”

Daeron glared at the Reacher Lord. It was not his fault Tiberius had fallen, but the Green King was not in a good mood.

“A counterattack with what, my Lord?” The rider of Tessarion asked bitterly. “Most of the Tyroshi military strength, be it sellswords or sellsails, is badly needed to make sure the Myrish don’t take their other holdings in the Disputed Lands while the Tyroshi captains have their backs turned. Their main military reserve in the south was concentrated at Tiberius. And from your report, half of it turned its cloak at the first opportunity.”

Westeros and House Targaryen had endured many betrayals in the last decades, so sadly the Iron Throne could not profess any great superiority compared to the Tyroshi. But it was still galling that a city Tyrosh had ruled for most than sixty years had surrendered after a couple of days of fighting and minor soldier losses.

Daeron wanted to pretend such a thing wouldn’t happen to the dynasty he was the King of. Unfortunately, the youngest son of King Viserys was not so stupid to voice it in public. Not when barely a few moons ago, Lord Walder Reyne had rebelled with many powerful and influential Western Noble Houses.

“What we can do to help Tyrosh? Promise them a delivery of gold to pay a new army?”

Joffrey Cuy grimaced, and Daeron knew the time of bad news wasn’t over.

“I doubt the Tyroshi will refuse gold if you offer it for free, your Grace. But in my humble opinion, what they need at the moment is men. Tyrosh has suffered badly in the southern Disputed Lands and its Stepstones’ possessions. What the Archon really needs right now, is ten thousand veterans ready to butcher the Myrish and Lysene-paid sellswords.”

“Surely the situation isn’t that desperate,” Lord Marq Merryweather intervened.

“Desperate, my Lord Hand?” Joffrey Cuy shook his head. “No, it isn’t. But make no mistake, between the Iron Fever, many military and economic reverses, and now being deprived of Tiberius, Tyrosh has been weakened. And Lys and Myr appear content to inflict scores of little defeats every year to make sure their losses are permanent. I fear that, if we do nothing, within twenty years Tyrosh will be the puppet of the two other Free Cities. And of course their Magisters will be all too happy to rescind the treaty we signed with Tyrosh.”

Daeron had feared that much.

“We can’t at the moment deploy ten thousand men on the other side of the Narrow Sea.” At the best of time, it would have been a very risky proposal, but now with the need to maintain a lot of swords and spears near the Westerlands to make sure the latest rebellion was truly over, the idea was not worth exploring. “And though my healing is nearly complete, I can’t take the risk of taking the field myself on Tessarion.”

The near-successful assassination attempt had reminded him brutally that when he was unable to go to war, there were no dragons or dragonriders who could lead in his name.

Some courtiers had whispered it had ended well, in the end. Daeron disagreed, and he wasn’t going to verify how strong the foundations of his rule were by dying in the Disputed Lands.

“In that case, your Grace, I’m afraid a few companies of young summer knights eager to search fortune and some gold chests are the best I can propose.”

Daeron looked at his Hand, and Marq Merryweather nodded slowly. Being powerless was something he wasn’t fond of, especially as they were still speaking of a secondary branch of their Black cousins, but if a direct solution was worse than the problem at hand, then they would have to tolerate it...for now.

“We will speak of the fall of Tiberius and its consequences for the Free Cities at the next Council,” the Green King commanded. “You said you had a subject of even greater importance to speak of?”

“Yes, your Grace,” Joffrey bowed. “I’m afraid Lady Tyrell is making...cunning moves. There have been a lot of letters exchanged between Casterly Rock and Highgarden.”

“What sort of moves?” Daeron asked warily.

“In exchange of certain opportunities for Casterly Rock to obtain large quantities of grain and meat at low prices, Lady Jasmine Tyrell is heavily encouraging the union of her son Lyonel to a daughter of Lady Johanna.”

“What?” Marq Merryweather’s outburst proved this came as a big surprise for the Lord of Longtable as it was for Daeron himself. “But that would...that would...”

“Create an alliance that could dictate terms to King’s Landing, if they so wished?” The Master of Whisperers finished. “Yes, it would.”

“You said a daughter of House Lannister. Which one?”

“Most likely the second daughter, Cerelle, your Grace,” Joffrey Cuy answered. “Tyshara is rumoured to be a beauty, but she is already in age to be married, and Lyonel Tyrell is still a young boy.”

The worst part was that it made perfect sense for the woman to search for the best maiden for her son to marry.

Yet for a union of such importance, courtesy and tradition alone should have dictated Highgarden asked for the permission of King’s Landing first.

“House Tyrell won’t be allowed to forge a marriage alliance with House Lannister.” Daeron didn’t explain why, and his Hand and his Master of Whisperers didn’t ask. It was incredibly evident that if Highgarden and Casterly Rock entered in alliance, they would control between themselves the granary of his kingdom and the gold treasury, and more than two-thirds of his armies. House Targaryen would still have Tessarion, but the last time such an alliance had happened, Aegon the Conqueror had needed *three* dragons, one of them the Black Dread, to vanquish the Gardener-Lannister alliance.

“There have also been...overtures in the other direction.”

Just when you thought it couldn’t get worse, it did.

“The other direction...Lady Johanna’s son would marry a Reacher Lady of high birth?” House Tyrell had no young women unmarried who could wed Lord Loreon Lannister without raising many eyebrows and beards.

“That’s the...creative overtures that are discussed, your Grace.”

“It must definitely be stopped,” Marq Merryweather muttered. “The consequences of something so...mountain-shaking do not bear thinking about, your Grace.”

“I completely agree, my Lord Hand.” Daeron replied. “We are going to need to make sure all the other Masters of the Council return from their missions earlier than planned. This is a serious issue, my Lords. It will need to be resolved...with great subtlety, before it can cause considerable damage.”

The easier way to disarm the crisis would have been to offer a bride for a more prestigious marriage, but Daeron had no daughters to offer, and even if he had, they would have been far too young for the proposal to be considered. And while Jaehaera had made some progresses recently – like adopting a black cat that spent its day purring instead of hunting mice – sending her away to be married would likely cause her great distress and destroy the fragile recovery.

“As you say, your Grace,” the Master of Whisperers approved. “This is all I have for the important matters for the last seven days.”

“And the not-too important matters?”

“Err...I’m afraid that Lady Baratheon, beloved sister of Her Grace, has not stopped causing scandals just because she is married...”

Daeron groaned. As much as it would cause trouble to Arianne and himself, giving the Stormlands to his second son looked more and more like a marvellous idea...

**Queen Baela Targaryen**

The moment Baela had known Alyn was here to speak to her, interrupting his sea patrols between Gulltown and Driftmark to rush here and see her, the silver-haired sovereign had known she was going to hear some wild ideas.

The daughter of the Rogue Prince had been perfectly right.

Though even with her experience, she had not expected how ‘wild’ the main proposal was.

“If I understand you well,” the Black Queen said while watching the great number of merchant ships loading and removing quantities of goods in the harbour of Gulltown, “your idea to solve all our problems is to imitate the Sea Snake and go on a great voyage to Yi Ti and beyond.”

“Well, it is...” the roguish smile didn’t disappear when she gave him an amused expression. “Err...yes, that’s the idea in a few words.”

“It’s extremely dangerous.”

“Our grandfather did sail beyond the Jade Gates several times, and brought back a fortune.”

“I seem to remember he lost six out of his twenty ships during his last ‘Great Voyage,’” Baela countered.

The less said about the fact Lord Corlys Velaryon had bought elephants – which had all died during the journey back – as that was a good sign the Sea Snake had a lot of Targaryen blood in his veins...

“And what he earned bringing the other fourteen back to Driftmark was enough to make every surviving sailor a Lord in its own right. For a time, he was wealthier than the Hightowers and the Lannisters!”

“Yes,” Baela agreed before sarcastically adding, “for a time.”

Let’s be no mistake: even today, House Velaryon remained one of the wealthiest Houses of the Seven Kingdoms, and yes, the Black Queen counted both Green and Black Houses.

Alyn could be reckless, but he wasn’t stupid. And his next words proved it.

“You don’t think it is a good idea.”

Baela winced and decided to...creatively answer the question, as she continued to watch the sails of all the ships present in the harbour.

“The situation has changed a lot since our adventurous grandfather made his ninth and final Great Voyage. I’m doing my best to keep Lys as an ally for now-“

“But the Lysene captains do not sail much beyond Volantis these days,” Alyn protested, before realising there was limits to the rudeness she was willing to tolerate these days, “your Grace.”

“You may have a point,” and though Alyn may not be right, this could be solved by offering the Black Swan and other important players of Lys a role into the expedition.”Though Lys is the lesser problem, honestly. Braavos. Volantis and its Elephant faction. Tyrosh. And of course the last time, our grandfather did not need to fear a dragon attack as he left the Stepstones behind him.”

“They would not dare. It would be a declaration of war.”

“Maybe they would. Maybe they wouldn’t.” Baela was of the opinion right now that Daeron himself would let such a fleet sail to Gulltown safely. Unfortunately, as the last events had proven, Daeron was the King of the Greens, he wasn’t the entire kingdom. One of his bannersmen may have other ideas if a fleet loaded with jade and other priceless treasures sailed near them. “And that leaves in my opinion the biggest problem: The Sea Snake’s Great Voyages gave nothing lasting to the realm.”

This time Alyn truly erupted.

“No, your Grace! The jade! The spice! The silk! The perfumes! The porcelain dinner services!”

“A lot of them were sold out to the Free Cities’ Magisters before, during, and after the war to pay off our debts,” and because it was better for the realm not to starve than having a Yi Ti service to warm up your soup. “The perfumes must have all been used by now. The silk robes are gone, and I am forced to buy from Myr or Lys if I really want a beautiful robe. The spice was all eaten too.”

Alyn grimaced, but didn’t abandon the idea. Truly unlike some previous proposals, this one he was taking to heart.

“Such a journey can still earn House Targaryen a massive fortune.”

The purple-eyed Queen gave her cousin the same expression she did give him before: amused but telling him quite clearly he could do better than that.

That said, Alyn wasn’t really wrong. A lot of the gold and silver House Targaryen and she personally held in their chests was used for the good of the realm, be it in road building or something else. Baela was far from poor, as certain taxes went directly to her vault, but there was no denying the days of King Viserys’ reign were far behind them.

But as Baela had explained before, a Great Voyage, was only a single expedition when all the bards’ tales and the myths of what laid beyond the Jade Gates were mentioned. House Targaryen had likely the gold, the men, and the ships to organise a Great Voyage. But it certainly couldn’t renew the efforts if they lost the ships involved in this adventure that would make their grandfather proud.

It was right then a new idea came in her head.

“If,” the Black Queen said cautiously, “speaking hypothetically, I gave you the gold and the means to make a Great Voyage of your own. How confident would you be to come back with some secrets the men and women of Yi Ti keep for themselves? The ways they create silk and porcelain, for example.”

For the first time of this moon, Alyn stayed speechless. Baela savoured the moment, it wasn’t every day she managed to surprise her cousin so much he lost his voice after one of her ideas.

“Err...that is to say...it’s a very audacious...err...idea.” Her cousin cleared his throat. “May I ask...your Grace...why?”

“Unless you can promise me twenty ships can sail beyond the Jade Gates every three or four years, the Great Voyage will be only a small mountain of gold we will have expended long before a second Great Voyage can return. But if we can trade with our neighbours exactly what makes the countries of Yi Ti, Leng, and Qarth so special, then we won’t need to send merchants to them. The traders will come to us, and the wealth of the Free Cities will flow into our coffers.”

“Ah...I understand.” Alyn stayed silent for many heartbeats before smiling again. “I unfortunately can’t promise you to succeed, your Grace. I read several times our grandfather’s captain logs, and he never tried what you thought of. Trading with the Golden Empire’s merchants, yes. Buying or trying to steal their secrets...no.” The roguish expression went to illuminate his sailor’s face again. “All I can say...I would try my best to obey your orders.”

At least her cousin had been honest. If he had promised her success immediately, Baela wouldn’t have believed him, and abandoned the idea immediately.

“You will give me the permission to begin this Great Voyage?”

“I think,” Baela answered in her best queenly voice, “that you have given me enough for the subject to be discussed during the next Council. Beyond that, I won’t promise anything. After that, we will see.”

Alyn, obviously, looked disappointed...thank the Gods Old and New he was only her Master of Ships, not her Master of Whisperers.

“Your Majesty! Your Majesty!”

A messenger rushed in her direction, and Baela knew immediately something must have gone wrong.

After her Kingsguards verified the messenger was truly who he was pretending to be and the raven’s message, the Black Queen alas knew her bad feelings were more than justified.

“Ser Yorbert Lipps, while acting as the Champion of Ser Eldric Arryn, cut one of Eldric’s ears in an act of pure buffoonery.”

“What?” Alyn exclaimed. “There must be a mistake!”

“No mistake,” Baela grimly replied. “Ser Yorbert was drunk. But it is not the worst problem Lady Arryn has now in her hands. A new claimant with the Arryn name has come back from the dead.”

“One more or one less, what is the problem?” Her Master of Ships scoffed.

“It matters,” the silver-haired sovereign answered patiently, “because the very reason we thought this claimant was dead...was because he had left to fight for the Greens in the South when the Dance’s armies mustered. Since we didn’t hear anything about him, we all presumed he was dead.”

“Oh...” yes, oh...” isn’t it a bit too...convenient, your Grace? I mean, yes, the Dance was a bloody affair, and we had many exiles who returned home after winter...but it’s been years now. And this Arryn claimant returns now?”

For a sailor clearly uninterested in the game of politics, Alyn had described perfectly the shadows shrouding the problem...

“That’s a good description of the situation.” Baela finished reading the message and grimaced. “My visit of Gulltown needs to end today, it seems. I need to return to the Gates of the Moon immediately.”

At least Moondancer was going to be happy...it had been a while since they hadn’t try to fly as fast as her bonded enjoyed.

“This succession is nothing but trouble!” Alyn grumbled.

**Author’s note**: The shenanigans of the Arryn succession and many other issues will continue in the next chapter, which I will probably call *Succession Laws*.

More links on the Dance is not Over:

P a treon: www. p a treon Antony444

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