**Chapter 53**

**Autumn Games**

**Lord Joffrey Cuy, Fifth Moon of 139AC, a sept some leagues south of King’s Landing**

Fortunately for everyone involved – at least that was Joffrey’s honest opinion on the subject – the King had not charged away on his dragon to challenge the Faith.

Though if the Master of Whisperers had to voice the truth, it had less to do with the efforts of the Council to restrain his Grace, and more to do with the fact no one knew where Lord Adrian had been imprisoned by the septons.

And no, ‘somewhere south of the Blackwater’ was not precise enough, even if you had a dragon.

Joffrey knew the whorehouse where the husband of Lady Maris satisfied his deplorable carnal urges, but as could be expected, both the owners of the place, the clients, and various parties were long gone by the time the first guards arrived.

As the High Septon and the Most Devout were both loudly protesting they would never dare lifting a single finger against a Lord...well, it was left to Joffrey to order his agents to collect the evidence and find both Lord Adrian and the septons who had abducted him.

Yes, they were septons. And yes, it had been done by the will of the Faith’s leaders. Joffrey Cuy was not sure of many things which happened in the realm...but his doubts on that particular matter were non-existent.

The Faith *loathed* men who fornicated with other men. Everyone knew it. And when it came down to these ‘sword-swallowers’, as many smallfolk and highborn loved to call them, it wasn’t a great secret the son of Lord Staedmon was one of them.

Joffrey had told the fool to be prudent. The King, it seemed, had genuinely been unwilling to believe the facts. Alas, His Grace had been one of the rare ones to do so, and Adrian’s lack of discretion had been very worrying many fortnights ago.

The Master of Whisperers sighed. If only the fool had sired a child in the belly of the Daughter of the Storm before...there might have been hope to salvage something from the disaster. But Lord Adrian did not, and now here they were.

“You know who I am. Let me pass.”

The two men blocking the small trail nodded, and Joffrey was allowed to ride deeper into the forest.

He had not to go very far. The sept quickly appeared out of nowhere.

If Joffrey wanted to guess, he would say it was one of those ‘Wooden Septs’ which had been built when the Durrandons were still the Kings of the Stormlands. Contrary to what the nickname proclaimed, the Septs were made of stone, not wood; otherwise they wouldn’t have lasted so long.

One might find it curious that Kings who ruled from Storm’s End would bother praying or even visiting these places, but any maester student of the old Seven Kingdoms wouldn’t. In times long gone, the Durrandon Kings had fought bitterly to rule the lands north of the Blackwater, and this had made sure they crossed the Kingswood thousands of times with their troops.

In these ‘Wooden Septs’, at least, they would enjoy some measure of peace...though not for very long.

Something, Joffrey thought glumly as he dismounted alone, could be said for him too.

There were over two scores of white-hooded figures surrounding the sept.

They were all armed with cudgeons and sticks. Thank the Gods for that...none of them had been so stupid as to show up with proper weapons. If this had been the case, a bloodbath would be unavoidable...

No one made a gesture to welcome him or to chase him away, and so the Reacher Lord entered the sept.

It was definitely dark and cold. The Kingswood in autumn was hardly pleasant, but here it felt even worse.

Still, there wasn’t a lot of wind today, and as such there were some candles to provide a tiny amount of light.

It was sufficient for Joffrey to distinguish a crude statue of the Father Above.

It looked terribly old...and this Aspect of the Seven sculpted into stone could easily be imagined as a Judge, though the scales were missing.

Lord Adrian was there too. The good news was that the Stormlander was in good health. There might have been one or two stick strikes delivered on his arms, but the greatest indignity seemed to be he had been diverted of all his clothes and forced to don a humble septon’s habit, a dirty grey-coloured piece of cloth. The innocent-looking young man next to Adrian was not known to Joffrey, but given the circumstances of the arrest and his appearance, the Master of Whisperers knew for sure why he was present there too.

“Was it really necessary?”

“The Father judges justly.” A soft voice arrived to his ears. “The Justice of Gods may seem harsh to the non-initiated, but it is just.”

“Ser Joffrey!” Adrian Baratheon blustered. “Thank the Gods-“

Whatever the Stormlander Lord had been about to say, he didn’t finish it, for a shadow behind him struck, and a cry of pain echoed.

“Don’t blasphemy!”

Joffrey cleared his throat.

“Can I have a name?”

As no one came out of the shadows to face him, it was obvious there wouldn’t be a conversation face-to-face.

“You can call me the White Chickadee,” the hooded silhouette stayed for some heartbeats behind a couple of candles before disappearing again.

Joffrey grimaced. He had heard this name before from the lips of Larys Strong...before Maegor slaughtered most of the Faith Militant, it was the title the High Septon gave to his equivalent of his Master of Whisperers.

The name itself was a little joke: there were no birds call the White Chickadee in Westeros. Blue ones, yes, black-capped, yes...but no white ones.

This wasn’t as bad as it could be, but this revelation incited to...prudence.

“His Grace the King was...very displeased by the disappearance of Lord Adrian Baratheon, as I’m sure you can understand. In his name, I must...vigorously insist for his immediate release.”

“We understand the displeasure of the King,” was the tranquil reply. “But there are things that can’t be tolerated. There is a higher Justice, and before the Father Above, Lord Adrian sinned greatly.”

“And this is the reason why you forced him to don a septon’s habit?”

“You misunderstand,” there was a chuckle, “we didn’t force him to don this habit. He did it himself for his...perverse and unholy games.”

Joffrey would have found the assertion difficult to believe, except when he stared at Lord Adrian Baratheon, the man blushed red like a crimson fruit...

Merciful Mother, no wonder the fool had angered the Faith, as the rumours of what he did undoubtedly arrived to the High Septon’s ears...

“He is a sinner.” Joffrey reluctantly agreed. “Yet it is the privilege and the duty of the King to judge him. Unless the Faith wants to judge the highborn and smallfolk of the Seven Kingdoms again?”

It was something, Joffrey didn’t bother to say, that would lead to war between the King and the Faith. And that assumed generously it would be a conflict limited to the South.

“No,” the White Chickadee replied after a moment of silence, and in an assured voice. “The privileges and the duties of delivering justice upon the sinners’ head remains with the King.”

But only an imbecile could have failed to notice the unsaid ‘for now’ at the end.

“Yet the Faithful are not willing to tolerate anymore the behaviour of Lord Adrian Baratheon. His sins are great.”

There were no threats, no grand proclamation of religious opposition...but Joffrey knew that the High Septon had given the order. Nothing could be proven...the evidence was too flimsy, and the two scores of men outside could be sacrificed to appease the wrath of the dragon for a few moons.

But there would be consequences in the end. The Faith did not command armies anymore, that much was true...but as the current situation proved, they could definitely trouble the peace of the realm.

“The King does not like deeds like this one. The peace of the realm must be maintained.”

If they had been in the late reign of King Jaehaerys, or the early years of Viserys’ rule, this small defiance could have been tolerated.

But now with the Riverlands, the North, and the Vale all part of a different realm, any loss of face could invite disastrous consequences.

“Tomorrow,” the White Chickadee replied, “seven Faithful will surrender themselves to the guards of his Grace before the Red Keep. They will confess their guilt. These brave and courageous souls will admit their anger led them astray, but it was their loyalty to the King and the Faith, as well as their fear that Lord Adrian’s disgusting and perverse crimes could go unpunished, which led them to take justice in their hand.”

This was...as much as Joffrey knew this was just a pile of lies, he had to acknowledge this was well-done.

Assuredly, these ‘Faithful’ would not have a septon among their ranks. In all likelihood, they would be irreproachable men who had never had embraced the outlaw’s life, or acted against the Crown in any way.

Since no one had died, but taking justice in one’s hand was hardly the kind of things the Lords of the realm would ignore, the punishment was...ah, of course.

“By their own confessions, they will have raised their hand against a Lord of the Realm. They will lose a hand, or go ten years in exile.”

Joffrey knew he would have to discover how the Faith had convinced the men involved to accept this punishment. Yes, there were true believers everywhere in the Realm, many of them inside or near King’s Landing. But it had to be said that ten years was a long, long time away from home, and many of these men didn’t have a Lord’s purse to spend on the other side of the Narrow Sea...

“The Faithful will obey the King.”

Joffrey kept his face devoid of emotions, though the urge to scowl was there. He was the Master of Whisperers, not the Hand of the King...it was his duty to warn His Grace of the threats against the realm, not act against them. He would have to warn King Daeron again. The Faith was getting more and more insolent, and this was not a situation he liked at all. Hopefully, the fate of Lord Adrian here would be sufficient for the King to take strong measures against the High Septon...

“Will they bring back Lord Adrian with them?”

“They will.” The husband of Lady Baratheon made a sound of joy...which didn’t last long. “But he and his...accomplice will stay here tonight. This will give them many turns of hourglasses to think about their actions and repent. Adultery alone is a terrible sin.”

The message was not subtle.

And the worst part was that it was true. Adultery was indeed a crime, by the code of Jaehaerys and those laws which had preceded him. It was however incredibly rare for male Lords to find their way in front of the King for it, as so many highborn failed to uphold their vows of marriage.

And if Adrian had indeed been found fornicating with a woman, there would have been scandal, but it would likely have stopped there.

Yes, Joffrey was aware it was hypocritical, for many women had been killed by their husbands for far less, but he wasn’t the Master of Laws. And by the Seven Hells, he wasn’t the King!

“The King will not send Lord Adrian to the executioner,” he warned in a resigned tone.

“While the punishment has become uncommon in recent years, there is precedent for adulterous sinners to join the Night’s Watch.”

That...that was cruel. The High Septon and his Most Devout must have waited for moons to punish the son of Lord Staedmon. But now that his adulterous ways had been proven, and in a way which would generate much anger among smallfolk and highborn alike, freezing on the Wall was indeed an adequate punishment.

Joffrey had only one last card to play.

“Lady Maris Baratheon will be very displeased by this...this breaking of her marriage vows.”

The snort he heard proved that his weak attempt was not going to work for a single heartbeat.

“Please, my Lord” the White Chickadee spoke, “the entire realm knows the Storm’s Daughter and this sinner never slept in the same bed after their marriage was celebrated. I dare say Lady Baratheon will not have too many difficulties finding happiness once her former husband will swear to take the black.”

**Lady Maris Baratheon, Fifth Moon of 139AC, Highgarden**

For the first time in a couple of years, Maris really felt satisfied when she left the bed.

Of course, it had to be mentioned it wasn’t her bed.

And she had to be careful not to trample the two young Dornish men built like the Warrior reborn to avoid waking them up.

By the time she had achieved this and decided it was a good idea to search where her clothes had ended to, Ysolde Dayne was here, presenting her a cup.

“Moon tea?” The Lady Paramount of the Stormlands didn’t take long to recognise the smell.

“You told me your husband didn’t honour you in the last year.” The Sword of the Morning told her with a perfectly typical Dornish smirk. “I think you want to avoid the questions a pregnancy would cause.”

“You’re not wrong,” Maris grimaced. “About last night...”

“You blossomed twice,” the smirk grew even wider. “And I think you liked it.”

“I did,” the Daughter of the Storm admitted hesitantly, trying her best not to blush. “But I-“

“Shush, you. You wanted it, I wanted. Now drink your moon tea.”

Maris did as she was told. As her husband the sword-swallower had not been anywhere near her in the last moons, adultery accusations were really something she wanted to avoid, for there were many men at King’s Landing who would use it against her.

“Should I consider it a sign I can return to Lady Tyrell and tell her you won’t encourage her son’s behaviour?”

Ysolde chuckled.

“You can...Maris.” Her first name spoken as it was a sweet made instantly her heart beat faster. “You can. But I wouldn’t have answered the starry-eyed expression of the Young Rose anyway. I am a proud daughter of Dorne, audacious and hot-blooded. I am not a fool. The last war between the Reach and Dorne happened recently. My Princess would have my head if I reopened it now.”

“I heard some Dornish knights pretend exactly the contrary as I was escorted to your tent,” Maris stated in a light mood.

The Sword of the Morning sniffed disdainfully.

“Many of them have not seen war. They stayed far away from the carnage and the destruction of House Wyl. They never saw what kind of destruction a dragon could unleash. No, it is far better I ignore the Young Rose...especially because I think his mother would pour poison in my jugs as soon as I have my back turned.”

“I will keep it in mind.”

“Please do so,” Ysolde smirked again, “oh, and since we’re mentioning the subject, please tell Lady Tyrell to marry her son as fast as possible, and with a woman who can control the Young Rose. As I said, I am no fool. But I can’t promise the same about several Dornish Ladies and twilight-dancers. The moment everyone hears the Lord of Highgarden has a weakness for Dornish women looking like me, there will be...how do the Braavosi call them again?”

“Courtesans, I think...though they are far more than that...” Maris added the last part thoughtfully.

“They are,” the Sword of the Morning didn’t elaborate, but her expression proved she must have verified this reputation at some point. “The courtships of Highgarden are not my problem. I am going to win this jousting tourney. Whatever oaths, marriages, betrothals, or whatever comes out this gathering of Roses and Lions...it is not my problem.”

“Some might call it arrogant. There are a lot of good jousters left.”

“I conquered a Daughter of the Storm last night,” and this time Maris blushed a lot, “I think I can triumph over a few flowers and some large cats...”

**Lord Royce Caron, Fifth Moon of 139AC, King’s Landing**

There were days where you wanted a session of the Council to last from dawn to dusk.

This was not one of these days.

“No.” The King said in an icy tone.

“Your Grace...” the royal glare was so powerful that Joffrey Cuy flinched and visibly lowered his eyes in submission, his previous words completely forgotten.

“My answer is no!” The Lord of the Iron Throne repeated. “I won’t tolerate this...this mummer’s farce! The High Septon and his ‘White Chickadee’ are going to pay for their impudence! Did they forget why no one angers the dragon?”

Royce swallowed heavily. King Daeron wasn’t often seen in an angry mood, but when he did, one was easily reminded that the blood of the Conqueror flowed in his veins.

“Your Grace...” the Hand of the King himself hesitated, before deciding to say what he had to say no matter how angry the King was. “I don’t like this situation at all. But how are we supposed to arrest most of the men involved in this vulgar and treacherous act when most of them made sure to disguise their traits and hide their origins? Unless someone betrays him, we have no way to find out who is the White Chickadee. Lord Joffrey only heard his voice. We can’t exactly interrogate everyone in King’s Landing...assuming this septon is hiding here in the first place.”

“The High Septon knows!”

Royce cleared this throat...and regretted it quite quickly, as a dangerous glare was levelled in his direction.

“Yes, your Grace, the High Septon most likely does. But I certainly hope you’re not going to order the Goldcloaks or anyone else to arrest him. The Faith has many supporters inside the Red Keep and the city. They won’t be happy at all if we arrest him with such flimsy evidence.”

“He armed these ‘Faithful’! This whole scheme is far too elaborate to have been planned and executed by seven Faithful, three of them illiterate!”

“But we have no way to prove it, your Grace.” Lord Willam replied while keeping his eyes on the parchments in front of him. “And in the case the opposite was true, I could not in good conscience support it. We reimbursed the debts we owed the Faith for the Dornish War, but there are scores of merchants and highborn in the very heart of Your Grace’s kingdom who have been unable to.”

“Debts can be ignored!” King Daeron stubbornly replied.

“Your Grace...this is risking-“

“My authority has been challenged!” the dragonrider of the Blue Queen enunciated with cold fury, interrupting Owen Merryweather again. “The culprits must be punished! I won’t be a second Maegor, forced to choose between a Trial of Seven or lose the realm!”

Royce grimaced. While the situation was bad, one couldn’t say it had reached the point where burning the Great Sept was necessary...and he really hoped this sentence wouldn’t reach the High Septon’s spies.

It was better to...change tactics, shall we say?

“Your Grace,” the old Master of Laws, who felt decades older than when he had woken up this morning, tried to push forwards a face of calm and steadfastness. “Let’s say we follow the strategy you propose. We disregard the mummer’s farce, somehow find the White Chickadee and his accomplices, and judge them before sending them to the Night’s Watch. What will we do about Lord Adrian?”

“Well...” the purple eyes of the King lost most of their anger, “I thought we would send him back to Storm’s End.”

There were times when they were reminded the sovereign of the Greens had not been taught how to rule.

“Your Grace,” Lord Alan Redwyne decided to speak for them all, “Lord Staedmon’s son will never reach Storm’s End alive. If the Faith does not decide to separate his head from the rest of his body during the journey, I’m ready to heat my hat.”

“The bannersmen of the Stormlands may not be happy with him either.” Royce added darkly. “They didn’t like him much before, and I think his arrest made everything worse.”

“They swore oaths!”

“Yes, your Grace, they swore oaths...to House Baratheon and Lady Maris. The...humiliating situation Lord Adrian found himself into has already convinced many to return to Storm’s End and wait for the return of a true Baratheon.”

“And should Lord Adrian successfully find refuge there,” Joffrey Cuy whispered, “I will remind you many enemies of the Durrandon line fell from the walls while winter storms raged.”

The Master of Whisperers received one more furious glare. It was, in Royce’s opinion, completely undeserved. Joffrey Cuy had many flaws, but when it came to the problem of ‘Lord Adrian Baratheon’, the spymaster had tried his best. Only unlike Larys Strong, the Reacher didn’t eliminate the sources of trouble, he reported them and waited for further orders. And this time lack of action had resulted in a huge amount of trouble.

“If we send Lord Adrian and his...his fellow sword-swallower to the Wall, the Iron Throne may not have a lot of control over who Lady Maris will choose as her next husband.” The Green King did not seethe, but he wasn’t far from it.

“Your Grace,” Owen Merryweather said carefully, “our last choice of husband was so poor that I doubt any advice in that direction will be appreciated.”

How kind of the Hand of the King to say ‘our’ when Adrian was the King’s choice...

“If we insist,” the Lord of Longtable pursued when there was no immediate royal reaction, “we are going to regret it. I am not going to say the Lady of Storm’s End will open her legs to a Bolton and raise black banners in rebellion, but we may regret it in the next years.”

“If she proves a traitor-“

“Yes, I’ve no doubt your Grace will crush her. You have a dragon, she doesn’t. But the Reynes have already made sure the West burned, House Wyl began a Dornish War, and the realm was still recovering from the Dance when thousands more highborn and smallfolk died. At the same time, the White Chickadee told us quite plainly the High Septon is very unhappy that we let Lord Adrian sin. There are only so many fires we can dance around before the Blacks decide the moment is perfect for a new war.”

A storm raged in the eyes of the King, and for many, many heartbeats, the fury was so great you couldn’t forget the words ‘Fire and Blood’.

Then it calmed down.

“We have the seven ‘Faithful’, Lord Adrian...and his...accomplice.”

“Yes, Your Grace. What is your will?”

**Ser Richard Lydden, Fifth moon of 139AC, Highgarden**

It went without saying that half of the crowd booed when the knight of Cider Hall was dismounted, with the spear broken for good measure.

The rest cheered loudly. Whether it was because Ysolde Dayne was a beautiful woman or because they wanted a Reacher got a lesson of humility was one of these interesting questions you didn’t want an answer to.

Richard, for his part, clapped his hands in approval.

“Well, Gregor, I think my reputation is safe. I may have lost right as I entered this tournament, but I lost against the winner of the jousting.”

“It’s true,” the other Westerner conceded briefly, making Richard smile, “but you were lucky to have the Sword of Morning for opponent. If it had been someone untalented like this Felwood braggart, you would have offered a ridiculous spectacle. But since you faced the Dornish, your reputation will be preserved...until the next Tournament, that is.”

Richard rolled his eyes.

“Thank you, oh Ser Clegane. What would I do without your wisdom?”

“You would be busy emptying the barrels of Red Arbor?”

The former castellan of Deep Den took a turn of hourglass to think about it.

“Yes, you have a depressing and accurate view of a future that won’t be, Ser.”

Richard didn’t voice that the reason why it wasn’t going to happen was because he hadn’t the gold dragons for it.

Between paying some servants to ferret out secrets, ransom back his armour, and some other necessary spending, the purse he had been given was not heavy anymore.

“All hail the Sword of the Morning and all of that...” Richard spoke as the young Dornish Lady paraded, showing an incredible mastery of her horse. “I’m not sure it’s going to diminish the...attention Lord Tyrell is giving her, though.”

And what a bad surprise it had been.

Both Gregor Clegane and him had been expecting difficulties when it came to placing obstacles between a possible union of House Lannister and House Tyrell; they had not expected Lord Lyonel to give doe eyes to a Dornish woman, and especially not Ysolde Dayne!

But this was what indeed happened, and-

“We’re going to have a big problem if the winner decides to nominate a ‘King of Beauty’ instead of a Queen,” Gregor announced phlegmatically.

“She won’t do that....probably.” Richard grimaced. “Here she comes...”

But to his extreme relief, the Sword of the Morning passed next to the Lord’s seat without turning her head, and paused only to place the crown of flowers in the hand of the former Regent of the Reach, Lady Jasmine Tyrell herself.

Richard had no mirror to look at his own expression, but he was sure his relief must have been evident.

And as the Sword of the Morning rode away, the exiled Western knight had a feeling thousands shared what he was feeling.

“I stand corrected,” Gregor grunted a moment later. “Lady Ysolde Dayne, it seems, did not care about anything but winning the jousting tournament.”

“Yes,” Richard agreed. “Although I have to admit, Gregor, I really don’t like how disappointed our young Lord Tyrell was when she ignored him.”

“I noticed it,” was the laconic answer, “but there’s not much he can do. A Dornish knight told me the Daynes and their servants were only here for the jousting. With what’ve I just saw, I say they can be trusted to honour their word. In all likelihood, they’re leaving tomorrow at dawn.”

It was indeed true. Unless Lord Lyonel suddenly went mad and ordered his household to kidnap a woman who was as deadly as she was beautiful...fortunately, this was the Seven Kingdoms, not the Seven Realms of Foolishness.

“Good.” Richard smiled. “Now that we have established who the Lord of Highgarden isn’t going to marry, it is our duty to discover who will be the lucky maiden.”

“It is possible none will be,” Gregor told him. “Unlike the Lannister maiden and the future Lord of Casterly Rock, Lord Lyonel has hardly proven he was ready to behave properly before his bannersmen...unless lusting for a Dornish Lady is considered proper, but I have my doubts.”

“Everything is possible,” the no longer drunken knight reported philosophically, “but I would feel far better if we had been able to bribe a few servants of the Lannister household. We really haven’t been able to hear any of the serious conversations, and I doubt our other friends were more successful than we.”

“I feel the same,” the huge Western knight nodded, “but I don’t think good silver will be enough for that.”

“No, you need gold. The Lannisters pay their debts...you forget it at your own peril.”

**Queen Baela Targaryen, Fifth moon of 139AC, Stone Hedge**

It was very rare, when her Master of Laws and her Master of Coin agreed on something without reservation and Baela didn’t.

Alas, the subject was far too important to dismiss the matter out of hand.

“I am unconvinced,” the silver-haired sovereign, “we have solved plenty of our problems lately in that direction. Why would you wish to begin...really, what would it be called?”

“I was thinking about calling it a *coinage reform*, your Majesty.” Lord Eon answered.

The female dragonrider winced.

“Is it really necessary?” she didn’t complain...she was the Queen, and Queens didn’t complain, surely. “We don’t have the gold-filled vaults of the Lannisters, but we begin to have a small but regular flow of golden dragons from the Northern mines. And we have no problem when it comes to silver.”

“Counterfeiting-“

“Please, Ser Gyles,” the young Queen huffed. “Counterfeiting and other...criminal deeds involving money have existed well before the Conqueror landed, and in all likelihood will continue when my great-great grandchildren will rule. Don’t turn around the subject, and tell me why you want this *coinage reform*.”

The two members of the Black Council exchanged silent looks she wasn’t able to interpret...and then Lord Eon Grafton spoke.

“Yes, your Majesty. To make it simple, it is about the Greens. Since recently, they have begun to decrease the silver in their stag and moon coins. Yet they have not announced it loudly, and both their coins and ours are near identical, if the marking proclaiming ‘King Daeron Targaryen’ is removed.”

“That’s...concerning, yes.” Baela conceded. “But it could be addressed by some simple counters, there’s no need to change everything.”

At least that was what she believed...evidently the two Council members disagreed.

“It is my opinion, your Majesty,” the Vale Lord affirmed, “that all sort of problems are going to persist as long as we share the coinage we have with the Greens. Some of it will be rather benign at first, I’m sure. But give it a few years, and King’s Landing will jump on the idea to hurt us. And to make sure their ambitions change, I feel there is no choice but to mint new coins. We will give them different weights than the current coins have, and as a result, your coins won’t be able to be mistaken for those of another kingdom’s.”

Baela shook her head. This was a good point, she couldn’t deny it.

“I suppose you have spoken of it with the Lord Paramount and the Noble Houses where our important metals are mined.”

“We did, your Majesty. They’re all in agreement it would be to the benefit to the realm...and the sooner we begin, the better. It will take time to melt the old coinage and to spread out the new.”

That, at least, made a lot of sense in her eyes.

“What do you want to do? Let’s begin with the silver, since you mentioned that the Greens intended to change the value of their coins.”

“The principle is rather simple, my Queen. We intend, if your approval is given, to mint three different silver coins: the Wolf, the Falcon, and the Trout.”

For the first time this Council meeting had begun, Baela chuckled.

“Yes, I’m sure House Stark, Arryn, and Tully loved the idea.”

“Long ago, House Targaryen did the same for House Baratheon,” Ser Gyles Royce pointed out. “There is a reason the Stag is the only Paramount animal to figure on the old silver coins.”

“This is true,” Baela rolled her eyes, before discarding the thought. House Baratheon had chosen its side, and thinking about Storm’s End always reminded her of Lucerys...no, better to think about something else. “Which would be the lighter coin? The Trout?”

“That was the one we intended, yes, your Majesty. We intended it to be a bit heavier than the Stag is. The Falcon as a result would be an intermediary coin, worth three Trout, and as such be lighter than the old Moon. But to compensate for this and exploit the abundance of our silver mines, we would mint a Wolf coin that is far heavier than the Moon.”

“And how many Falcon coins would it take to make a Wolf?”

“Nine.”

Baela blinked. That was going to be a big silver coin, assuredly.

“If the Wolf coin is worth so much, the current gold dragon would be inferior to the Wolf, or so close to it the merchants will only use silver for our trade.”

“Thus the need to change for the new gold coin, your Majesty.”

Of course, they had thought of it...

Her Master of Coin placed a large gold coin in front of her. Baela weighed it at first. It was heavy, indeed far heavier than a gold dragon...but as she began to examine it, the young Queen noticed that while the ‘heads’ had been minted with her face in mind, the other side had a dragon flying under a large moon.

A moon dancer.

Baela smiled.

“Well, flattery will get you everywhere.”

Baela smiled, and Ser Gyles and Lord Eon smiled back.

“We would have the...the Moon Dragon as a gold coin, and the Wolf, Falcon, and Trout for the silver,” the purple-eyed Queen summed-up. “Do you intend to change the bronze coins too?”

“Not at the moment, your Majesty...err...we were told that the smallfolk were very attached to their Star coins. It is used a lot in every market of your kingdom, the septons and the priests like it, and we...we don’t have exactly a good idea of what to replace it with.”

Yes, better to avoid troubling the religious peace they had...if the smallfolk wanted to keep their bronze coins, then by all means let them have them. Still, it would be something to keep in mind for the future...

“Then let’s speak of the matter which is going to displease me,” Baela said sarcastically. “How much is it going to cost?”

**Lord Loreon Lannister, Sixth moon of 139AC, Highgarden**

Loreon was not sure he would have enjoyed living many years in the Reach.

Oh, the castles and the gardens were beautiful. The new Warden of the West wasn’t going to say anything against them.

But there was always this sense that everything tried to be as perfect as possible. The perfumes were temptation itself. The flowers were everywhere and often gave you the feeling you were in the Seven Heavens of Flowers.

The Reach and Highgarden tried to convince you to lower your guard. And then you realised the flowers had their thorns.

This, in many ways, should be the true words of House Tyrell: ‘the roses have thorns’. It would be far more truthful than ‘growing strong’.

Loreon had seen it in many occasions, but the most evident example had been the victory of the Sword of the Morning during the jousting tourney. The chivalry of the Reach had absolutely not enjoyed being defeated by a Dornish, and supreme humiliation, the jouster was a Dornish Lady, not a Lord!

Thinking back about it, it was not without reason the Sword of the Morning had rushed her departure after the tourney. Jasmine Tyrell would likely respect the ancient customs, but given the grumbling and the hostile looks, the flower of Reacher chivalry and their servants could have lacked the restraint of the former Regent.

“You look to be in deep thought, Lord Lannister.”

Loreon turned his head and realised with a lot of embarrassment his guest had arrived.

“Lady Ellyn, please forgive me...I was indeed thinking so much I failed to notice your arrival.”

“I noticed.” The youngest sister of the Lady of Storm’s End replied courteously. At least she didn’t laugh at him...it was better than he hoped for, really. “Will you guide me for a sunset walk in these gardens, Lord Lannister?”

Since refusing it would result in his little sister assassinating him afterwards for the high crime of oafishness, Loreon curtsied and presented his arm to the Stormlander highborn.

The pace of the walk, as one could expect, was really slow. With her long yellow robe and shoes that were more suited for a ball than a promenade, Ellyn Baratheon was not going to race anyone across the gardens.

“The tourney is about to end. I hope there haven’t been too many disappointments.”

“The spectacle has been everything that was promised and more.” The daughter of House Baratheon replied smoothly. “Should I return you the question, my Lord?”

“In all fairness...my House is not completely satisfied by everything which happened during these festivities, no.”

It was a lie, by the way. House Lannister had found little reason to be satisfied. Cerelle, his little sister, had found no reason to be pleased with the Lord of Highgarden’s behaviour. Some had hoped that Lady Ysolde Dayne no longer being present was going to save everything, but it hadn’t. The two were just...if they were married, it would be only a question of who would try to kill the other first.

“I think everyone with the ears to listen is aware of it, Lord Lannister. My sister found it was a pity it didn’t work, by the way. The marriage alliance of the Wardens of the South and the West could have forced the dragons to be far less arrogant than they currently are.”

Loreon had expected some careful words...the bluntness took him by surprise.

“These are...err...dangerous words...Lady Baratheon.”

“Please,” the black-haired Stormlander whispered, “call me Ellyn.”

“As you wish...” he gulped, “Ellyn. Call me Loreon, not Lord Lannister...it makes me feel old.”

The young woman chuckled, and her eyes seemed to be akin to a furious river as she did laugh.

“And yes, it is dangerous to say it when supporters of the dragon might listen...but there are words whispered under the cloaks in the Stormlands. Often we hear, ‘poor Stormlands, so far away from the Seven, so close to King’s Landing’...”

Loreon thought whoever had expressed it first had a good way to describe how the realm worked.

“I suppose many highborn of the Storm thought the same when Aegon landed...and when Maegor ruled.” Saying more than that would be...not prudent...at all.

“Yes. And many times, we thought it true. But there have been exceptions.”

“Exceptions?” Loreon asked with a frown.

“Lady Baratheon is not without friends at the capital, Loreon,” Ellyn said whimsically, “this is why this very morning, we received a raven which revealed a certain Lord Adrian was arrested for adultery.”

It wasn’t difficult to add two plus two, but when he did...

“I...that’s interesting, Ellyn, but I don’t see it resulting in-“

“Adultery with an adult man paid for the deed, caught doing something extremely sinful by outraged Faithful, and dragged back to the Red Keep in a septon’s robe.”

“Ouch,” the Warden of the West had the sheer envy of bursting into laughter. “Err...I confess this comes as a complete surprise to me.”

“Not surprising, Casterly Rock had plenty of other things, far more serious I might add, to think about. But I’m sure you can understand the implications.”

“Yes...assuming your announcement is confirmed, Storm’s End stands to regain some measure of...self-reliance.”

Loreon would have loved to say ‘independence’, but here and now, it was way too dangerous.

“You understand, Loreon.” Ellyn Baratheon gave him a dangerous smile. “And my sister believes stoking the fire when it is already burning hot. This is why House Baratheon is willing to propose a betrothal to House Lannister.”

“Err...” this had been envisaged, but there had been few indications during the jousts or the other contests that House Baratheon was even mildly interested... “I don’t know how to react.” Honesty might be the better shield, in the end.

“Oh, I wasn’t expecting poetry from you, Loreon.”

“Good, because I’m a horrible poet.” When your mother and all your sisters told you that you frightened the ducks, it might be that there was a core of truth in the words. “This is...an unexpected proposal...and one which will close many doors.”

A marriage between two of the Paramount Houses was not something the Iron Throne would compliment, but King Daeron might be willing to tolerate it for the sake of peace. The three Houses organising marriages at the same time, however? Anyone could sniff the trouble coming from that.

“Permission to speak bluntly, Loreon?”

“By all means...Ellyn.”

“House Tyrell does not have in mind an alliance, with the marriage they proposed at first. You saw the bannersmen of Highgarden. Did they behave like you were the equals of House Tyrell once the jousts were done? Were you among those who spoke with Lord Lyonel a hundred times every day? Did they mention everything about their spears gathering to help you should the Blacks cause more trouble on your part of the frontier?”

“No,” the young Lord of Casterly Rock admitted. Loreon hesitated, before deciding to speak his mind. “But the Reach is too important to ignore. Now the Riverlands are lost to the Blacks, Highgarden controls the breadbasket of this kingdom.”

“They want us to *think* they control everything,” the yellow-robed Stormlander Lady corrected in a low tone, “much like King Daeron wanted you to believe his position was unassailable before the Reyne usurper’s lust for power and blood ensured he began his mad rebellion.”

Said like that, it rang like the truth. There had for sure been plenty of worried whispers, both inside and outside the Rock, about what would have happened in the Black Queen had ordered her dragons to attack.

But thinking deeper about it, Loreon found out the other message.

“You believe you can lead some...powerful Lords to believe that the alliance of House Baratheon and House Lannister is a shield against the rising power of the Reach.”

And not an attempt to muster enough support to ignore the edicts proclaimed by the dragons of House Targaryen.

“Yes.”

It may work. There were only three Paramount Houses left to obey the Iron Throne, after all. The dragons could hardly ask Dorne to downplay the ambitions of House Tyrell, no?

“I...I’m willing to send one of the ravens we brought with us for this purpose.” Loreon said slowly. “Though I will warn you, the Rock,” it sounded better than to say ‘my mother’, “will want a dowry. One of the things which made an alliance with House Tyrell so...reasonable...was that the dowry would be in grain and many other supplies to fill the West’s granaries.”

“Lady Baratheon has thought of the matter,” a letter was placed in his hand, and Loreon hid it as discreetly as possible. “And I have my own condition should this betrothal become a marriage.”

“A condition?”

“Nothing out of the norms,” Lady Ellyn Baratheon spoke loudly, before approaching her lips to his right ear and her tone decreasing until it was above a murmur. “If we’re to become husband and wife, don’t you dare cheat on me, Lord Loreon Lannister. I am not my sister; if I find you fornicating with a whore, I will carve you like a pig...and I’m sure your sisters will help me hide the corpses.”

“Err...” if he shivered, Loreon swore it was only the autumn cold. Yes, really. “It...sounds fair?”

**Keyholder Ludovico Prestayn, Sixth moon of 139AC, Palace of Spice, Braavos**

When it was raining a lot, the city of Braavos truly looked miserable.

Every palace half-disappeared under the water, and you always had to be wary when using a gondola to not go overboard, for the waters could be as treacherous as the bitterest vendetta.

The smell from the sea was still there, but there was something dark and disgusting added to it.

Ludovico wasn’t betraying a trade secret when he said that he always arranged to have his duties lead him out of Braavos during that season.

But as Gelenai’s silver leaves were his witness, there was one duty which tolerated no absence. And so Ludovico was forced to stay here, amidst the rain and the bad autumn weather.

“I was told,” the Head of the Merchant House of Prestayn said quietly, abandoning his observation of the rainfall, “that it was quite an ugly death.”

“It was,” Benvenuto Reyaan acknowledged, stopping his dinner for a moment to answer. “In his place, I would have fallen upon my rapier long ago. Give me a quick and easy death when it’s time for the Many-Faced God to have his due...I don’t want to have something devour me from the inside.”

Some might have said it was cowardice, but for all his corpulent appearance, the Head of House Reyaan had in his young years captured two Lysene pirate ships, and he had also won many duels, impressing many courtesans in the process.

“I see...I see. In the end, he is dead and Braavos needs a Sealord.”

“As you no doubt have heard,” Benvenuto took a mocking expression, before taking more fish parts from his plate and swallowing them with delight, “the election campaign didn’t wait for our poor Sealord’s demise.”

“I am old, not deaf and blind, Benvenuto.” The successful merchant man replied drily. “I didn’t forget what happened eighteen years ago.”

“My apologies, it’s just...” Benvenuto stopped eating. “The vendettas are getting out of control.”

Ludovico stared emotionlessly.

“Out of control while the elections are still three moons away, my friend.” Benvenuto amended after a couple of turn of hourglasses. “You can’t deny this is unusual. And we already lost the old Torone keyholder.”

“Unusual but not unsurprising; you let the *bravos* of House Zalyne splutter utter nonsense in public.”

Ludovico managed to not turn it into an accusation, but deep inside, it wasn’t the envy which was lacking.

Many were young fools with too much hot blood to be blamed, but there had to be limits. So far since his return, the boundaries appeared to be entirely missing.

“Salvatore Zalyne has wealthy supporters, and the House’s name still carries weight.”

“Gods save us,” he groaned loudly, “the Uncloaking was long ago! And yes, I know this is one of our most important events, but we don’t have to wax his boots because his great-grandfather was the Sealord!”

“No, but there are many who hate Pentos and want to deal with it.”

The Head of House Prestayn rolled his eyes, exasperated.

“Deal with it...Benvenuto, we can sink the Pentoshi fleet in a single day! Our sailors know it, we keyholders know it, the Pentoshi know it...the damn Narrow Sea knows it! And then what? The Pentoshi will hide behind their walls, hire several sellsword companies, a few sellsails-“

“Salvatore and his younger brother believe it is possible to storm Pentos and enforce the First Law.”

Ludovico exploded in laughter...a hilarity which died when he saw Benvenuto wasn’t laughing with him.

“Please tell me you’re not serious.”

“I wish I was.”

“It is...ridiculously short-sighted, my friend. We don’t even have a quarter of the army needed to administer the Pentoshi lands, assuming we won in the first place. And the walls...I know you did sail to Pentos like I did plenty of times. The Magisters of the city are not spending a lot on their military forces, but the walls of the city are so heavily defended they could repel a horde of Dothraki with ease.”

Obviously, the Dothraki would fail and then ravage the heartlands of Pentos, forcing everyone in the city to starve...but that was something the army of Braavos couldn’t do, not in a hundred years.

Ludovico sighed.

“Assuming the new Sealord really wants a war, I suppose I could see the appeal of a short and victorious one. We crush the Pentoshi fleet, tell them to pay some reparations, inflict a few limitations on their slave trade, and then force them to lower their tariffs for those Magisters using foreign hulls. Everything more than that is just being greedy and stupid.”

And yes, Ludovico recognised the irony. When he was just a young bravos, the now very wealthy merchant had argued vociferously for a war against Lorath. But to be fair, Lorath was just not in the same league as Pentos. And it wasn’t in the Narrow Sea, where many major naval powers could intervene should they think Braavos was indeed becoming too greedy.

“Why would the Zalyne brothers believe it is a good idea in the first place?” He asked acerbically. “As far as I know, we haven’t grown far stronger than we were twenty years ago before the death of the last Sealord.”

“The Sunset kingdoms are now divided, my friend,” Benvenuto chided him as the servants brought enough large plates to satisfy the legendary appetite of a merchant of House Reyaan. “Salvatore believes that as long as the dragonlords are busy glaring at each other, they won’t turn their head in our direction, and this will allow the Braavosi keyholders to dominate the trade of the Narrow Sea, dictating which ships have the right to sail to the great harbours of the Sunset coast...and of course Pentos.”

“Benvenuto...are the Zalyne brothers aware that the descendants of the Freehold burned half of their own kingdom the last time they disagreed who was to sit on the ugliest throne of this world and the next? Telling them they must obey the orders of the Sealord sounds to me like an invitation to taste dragonfire...”

“It’s not too smart, I know,” his friend snorted, “but Salvatore is not the Sealord.”

Not yet, he didn’t add. But when Ludovico Prestayn left the Palace of Spice, he was far more preoccupied than when he had entered it...

**Ambassador Marino Doriatis, Sixth moon of 139AC, Stone Hedge**

His cousin had told him it was a great honour to be the Ambassador to the Court of the Black Queen.

Marino knew it was a lie the moment the words crossed his lips.

Oh, there was nothing incredibly bad about being sent on the other side of the Narrow Sea. The gold this position earned was good, though it had to be taken into account that this largeness was a tacit agreement to not bring any slaves on Sunset soil.

The first two Ambassadors the Council of Magisters had sent after Queen Baela I’s decoration had been willing to test her on the subject. They had quickly discovered that slavery remained utterly forbidden; their personal slaves were immediately freed before they were ordered to return to Pentos by the first ship available.

This had been the mere beginning of what was now an established tradition: the Pentoshi Ambassadors to the Black Court were not lasting long. Several moons for the longest-serving Pentoshi, three days for the one who had thought it funny to insult the Queen and her dragon when they thought she wasn’t able to listen to them.

One might think the relationships between Pentos and the Black Kingdom would be bad as a result, but they had remained surprisingly cordial. The Ambassadors came and left, but trade continued. Debts were paid on the correct days. The Pentoshi choosing to live west of the Narrow Sea were protected, and in the last five years, there had been no reason to complain.

And yet, Marino knew, all of it remained fragile...for there had been no test such as the one which would come before the end of this year.

All of this was known to him, but the Pentoshi showed a carefully serene expression when he was introduced into the room the Queen used for the private audiences.

As the former Ambassadors had warned him, the Targaryen dragonrider wore simple clothes of black. The materials used were more expensive than what a less-than-successful merchant could afford, of course, but there was a certain...simplicity to it. Counting the ruby of her diadem, there were only three gemstones which could be seen on the Valyrian beauty.

From the reports of the Green Court his cousin had given him, Marino knew the nobles of King’s Landing called this method of dressing ‘Northern decadence’.

It wasn’t a compliment, as one you could readily imagine.

Many Pentoshi merchants had been far warier, for this trend reminded them strongly of the clothes’ traditions of their northern neighbour.

Except the purple.

Save great occasions, the Black Kingdom didn’t use purple, whereas the Braavosi did every time they could.

“Your Majesty,” Marino bowed largely as the door closed.

“Your Excellency,” the Black Queen stood, and moving...moving the small silver dragon which had been sleeping on the table to place it into a basket quite similar to those used for cats. “Welcome to Westeros. May your service be long and profitable, and lead to prosperous ties between our two kingdoms.”

The next sentences were all known to emissaries, but they had to be said. The purple-eyed Queen inquired about the health of the Prince and several important Magisters, and Marino thanked her for the questions before inquiring whether the royal family, the Lords Paramount, and other figures of importance were as fine as they had been last year.

But it was done, and it was time to speak of the real reason of his presence here.

“Is there a reason this audience had to be done in private, your Excellency?”

“I’m afraid there is one, your Majesty. A reason that is known to every great man and woman: war. My Prince fears that before the end of this year, the peaceful Free City of Pentos will be at war with the Republic of Braavos.”

There had been only a polite expression on the Queen’s face, but now it changed to something incredibly...draconic.

“Please explain, your Excellency.”

And so Marino did. He began to recount the ‘War of the Beard’ which had brought the great matter to the Prince’s attention. The Ambassador listed the grievances their merchants had been on the receiving end of when they sailed to Braavos, and the humiliations many captains had endured. He told the Queen of the Sealord’s death, and the ugly Braavosi schemes which might motivate them to set the Narrow Sea in flames.

“I was not aware relationships between Braavos and Pentos had turned so sour. Certainly, the last Braavosi who was in presence mentioned nothing of it...but then the audience happened during my Progress in the Vale, many moons ago.”

“Ahem...forgive me, your Majesty, but there is no Braavosi Ambassador here to summon?”

“Regrettably, there is not, your Excellency. It is not something exceptional, really! We don’t have Ambassadors for Tyrosh, Lorath, Norvos, and many other Free Cities. Volantis also refused to send any diplomat to my kingdom. As far as Braavosi are concerned, the highest representatives are ‘Consuls’. They are present at Gulltown, Saltpans, and some other important harbours, and they are constantly in contact with the Lords and merchants of my kingdom. I understand there are more or less ‘Trade Ambassadors’ in their own right.”

“I am...familiar with the practise, yes, your Majesty.” And it was a weakness in Braavos’ armour that was worth exploiting. “It is very Braavosi...and not very respectful.”

Queen Baela’s expression became a smirk.

“I will remind you, your Excellency, that one of your predecessors hinted he could provide me several pillow slaves, both male and female, to entertain me before my wedding night.”

Marino winced...the Ambassador who had made the proposal was now Ambassador of nothing, for he oversaw the maintenance of Pentos’ sewers.

“I take the point, your Majesty, yet Ambassadors come and go, trade remains.”

“Trade remains,” the woman carrying the purest blood of Old Valyria in her veins agreed. “And I’m not going to deny it isn’t profitable. I have not forgotten it was Pentoshi grain which saved my kingdom from mass starvation during the last terrible winter we had to endure. And though many granaries and attics are now filled with the last years’ harvest, I have no doubt several Northern, Riverlanders and Valemen merchants will buy some from your merchants, so that my smallfolk don’t need to tighten their belts when the blizzards arrive.”

“Many things a war in the Narrow Sea would greatly hinder, if not completely shatter.”

“Yes. That said...winter is coming, as the Starks always say. And as I know from bitter experience, if this winter is as bad the one which struck us the last time, any war on land or at sea will be the stuff of nightmares. No matter how high the ambitions of the next Sealord, winter storms and high waves can drown ships in the blink of an eye.”

“This is certainly true, your Majesty.” The Pentoshi Ambassador paused. “But all our agents are sufficiently alarmed to relay their warnings. And as we’re still enjoying a mild autumn...the idea a Braavosi might gamble on a short autumn war.”

“This would be very reckless of them,” the Queen commented drily, “we Targaryens learned the hard way that when the swords are out of the scabbards and the dragons are flying to burn whole armies, it is far more difficult to let them return where they were than it was to unleash them in the first place.”

It was, assuredly, a very wise declaration...maybe if the Braavosi heard it, they wouldn’t be so quick using their rapiers for imaginary offenses.

“But it is a war against Braavos and Pentos you speak about, your Excellency. I won’t deny I would be very displeased if trade came to be disrupted. But...we trade with Braavos too. I haven’t conversed with a Manderly recently, but I know from Vale merchants their Braavosi counterparts purchase wood, furs, and amber at White Harbour. And they pay in good gold and silver.”

“Trade is important.” How could he say anything else, when the very lifeblood of Pentos was trade itself? “But should Braavosi ambitions be left unchecked...trade between them and your kingdom, your Majesty, may turn out to be a *dictate* rather than a bargain.”

This time, it was not his imagination that the purple eyes flashed in fury.

“I assure you, your Excellency, that no matter the weaknesses of my fleets, Moondancer and the other dragons bound to my crown are more than capable to resist a dictate, no matter which Free City would be arrogant enough to issue it. I can’t of course find a fleet in the Narrow Sea without swift ships guiding me to it, but with favourable winds, a mature dragon can and will fly eastwards and land on the ancient cliffs where the Andals sailed away from their ancient homes.”

Marino was no fool, and the message was loud and clear: if someone dared attack the kingdom of the Black Queen, the Free City responsible for it would be wise to prepare for the arrival of the dragons.

“I had no doubt about this, your Majesty. And this is one of the reasons among many why my Prince wishes to avoid a war.”

That, and if it came to it, Braavos was going to humiliate them in a fleet-to-fleet battle. Many renowned captains today were more known for their...prowess when it came to orgies than their seafaring abilities.

“This is good to hear, your Excellency. I suppose this means your Prince has several proposals for me?”

“Indeed, your Majesty. My Prince realise there are...out of the traditions for the kingdoms west of the Narrow Sea, but they would solve several of our respective problems...”

**King Daeron Targaryen, Seventh moon of 139AC, King’s Landing**

It was raining heavily...again.

Consequently, Daeron could see almost nothing of Blackwater Bay this morning, and certainly not any ship sailing away from his capital. He couldn’t see black sails taking away several men, the first batch of recruits sent to the Night’s Watch in several years.

It was the end of an affair he had massively bungled in every way it was possible...and the beginning of more problems.

“I heard,” the Lord of the Iron Throne spoke as he continued the rain trying to drown the streets of King’s Landing, “that Lady Maris organised a party in the gardens of House Tyrell after receiving the raven which informed her of her widowhood.”

“In that case, I’m afraid the rumours are true, your Grace,” Owen Merryweather replied quietly. “All the agents the Council had confirmed it. It had to be the most joyous celebration in a decade where everyone chose to don the black...”

Daeron gritted his teeth, leashing his anger.

After a while, he breathed out, and let everything go.

“I suppose we deserved that.”

Maris was not Arianne. She would never be Arianne. And one of his biggest mistakes had been to ignore that fact. Maris was a Daughter of the Storm, and she could hold a grudge as fiercely as a Dornish.

When she married again – and Maris would, for she wanted her line to rule from Storm’s End – Daeron was fatalistic enough to acknowledge it would not be someone he would find acceptable. And that his opinion wouldn’t be demanded or wanted.

“Since this problem ended with a Baratheon marriage dissolved, I suppose it is fitting the one at Highgarden begins with a Baratheon union.”

“At the moment we speak, my King, it is only a betrothal between Lord Loreon and Lady Ellyn.”

Daeron groaned loudly.

“Lord Owen, I may have ignored Lord Adrian’s sinful games until the wildfire jar exploded in front of me, but I am rather certain that Lady Johanna wouldn’t have allowed her son to kiss a Baratheon Lady if the matters hadn’t progressed further than what our spies have been able to discover. Obviously, no union between a young Lord and a young Lady is certain until the septons declared them husband and wife in front of the altar. But I have met enough Lannisters to know they don’t give their oaths lightly. If the betrothal was sealed, then the marriage is only a question of moons, a couple of years in the worst case.”

“I...I’m afraid you’re right, your Grace. We tried to avoid an alliance and a union between Highgarden and Casterly Rock, and ended up witnessing the pact of Storm’s End and Casterly Rock.”

Daeron turned around. Watching the rain was too depressing anyway.

“Do we have any idea what Lady Maris must have promised to Lady Johanna?” He asked. “I think I can assume with great confidence that the lands south of the Kingswood can’t deliver half of the grain the Reach takes for granted every day.”

“I’m afraid Lord Joffrey is still searching, your Grace.” Owen told him unhappily. “There is the obvious, of course. House Baratheon is rebuilding the ranks of its host, and Lady Maris could have sworn over ten thousand swords and spears would march for Casterly Rock against any enemy of House Lannister.”

“Formidable,” Daeron sighed...and the unhappy expression of Owen Merryweather told him the bad news were far from over. “You can speak, my Hand.”

“You have turned the ruin of yesterday into a stable kingdom, my King,” the Lord of Longtable began, “but I fear for tomorrow. Your rule has restored order, but the rebellion of House Reyne proved to all that dragons weren’t immortal. It will have given ideas to other potential traitors. I fear that the only way to avoid a new War of the Lions in the next years...I fear we may soon have no choice but to invite the great powers under the dragon to sit at the Council Table.”

“We have already a Stormlander and a Westerner, my Lord.”

“Yes, your Grace...and everyone know they are yours.”

This was not a bad argument, the silver-haired King admitted.

“Ignoring the fact it wouldn’t be a Small Council anymore...who would we add seats for? One for the union of Casterly Rock and Storm’s End, yes, but who besides these Houses?”

“The Faith and House Tyrell, your Grace.”

Daeron scowled.

No wonder the Hand had been so hesitant, when he knew this wasn’t going to make him happy.

“I don’t like it.” The Green King said completely truthfully. “I was already very displeased by the fact the High Septon and his lackeys escaped my justice, the idea of giving them a voice in my Council...I don’t like the idea at all.”

“This is not ideal, your Grace...but it may be the only solution.” Lord Owen grimaced. “If they don’t have a voice here, I fear we will have other incidents like the one which happened to Lord Adrian. Lady Maris’ former husband may have been one of the greatest sinners of the realm, your Grace, but he is not by any means the only one. If the Faith is denied a voice...they will find a way for the voice of the Faith to reach you, no matter how tall and large the walls of the Red Keep.”

No wonder Maegor had succumbed to the temptation of calling for every Warrior Son’s head.

Why had he wanted to become King again?

“I understand the point you make,” Daeron replied noncommittally. “And your reasoning for House Tyrell?”

“As the recent tourney proved, House Tyrell is the most powerful House of your kingdom, my King. While there is still disunity under the Golden Rose, they have the breadbasket of the kingdom, and their might is something Storm’s End and Casterly Rock will need decades to equal, if they ever do.”

“As long as the Lord doesn’t throw everything away for the eyes of a Dornish viper.”

Owen Merryweather didn’t answer...which was probably for the best, for it was one of Daeron’s mistakes coming back to haunt them.

“I know what you are going to say. I should have let the Regency continue until the sixteenth name day.” Though it may not have prevented Lord Lyonel Tyrell behaving like a lovesick fool at the tourney, alas. “Are there any clues that Lady Jasmine is still pursuing a marriage for her son?”

“No, your Grace...but then before the last couple of years, we had no idea how high her ambitions were.”

The Green King felt he didn’t need to be reminded that, thank you very much.

“There has been one oddity, however.”

“Really? What sort of...oddity?”

“Lord Joffrey has commanded our agents in the Reach to investigate further, but it seems there has been some sort of...dispute between Lord Florent and the former Tyrell Regent. Our knights and whisperers were able to confirm that the Lord of Brightwater Keep left the tourney right after the jousting, and that not only he departed the tourney without permission, he did it in a wrathful mood.”

The first urge Daeron had was to snort. House Florent had the long ears proper for their Paramount ambitions, but little else. Every Florent the King had met so far was an overly prideful creature. Thank the Gods the animal of House Florent was a fox, and not a dragon.

But after deeper reflexion, these were previous ideas of the same impulsiveness that had led to his previous mistakes. It was better to not forget it, unless he wanted to pay a heavier price...

“Find out the reasons of such wrathful mood, please. It might be something so simple as Lady Tyrell refusing the hand of his daughter in her son’s name, but better be sure.”

Hopefully, this was just the offended pride of House Florent and not one more scheme of Lady Jasmine, hopefully.

“Anything else?”

“There have been several quarrels between Pentoshi and Braavosi sailors on the docks lately. I think we should reinforce the City’s Watch there. We really could use a Captain, a few scores of guards, and some clerks to ensure the sailors unload their cargo competently and do nothing more provocative...”

**Author’s note**: And thus this chapter ends. Both Baela and Daeron have a lot of problems coming their way...but those of Daeron won’t be solved with a sword and a dragon, unless he’s willing to go on the same path Maegor did...

I don’t own the term ‘twice-blossomed’. I read it first in A Practical Guide to Evil series of High Lord ErraticErrata, I’m just borrowing it for use in this chapter...

Next chapter...we will likely have elections...and escalation.

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