**Chapter 54**

**The Wisdom of Crowds**

**Keyholder Ludovico Prestayn, Ninth Moon of 139AC, the Palace of Truth, Braavos**

It was not the first time that Ludovico thought that there should be a law against boring everyone’s to death in the Sea Hall. It would disqualify immediately Keyholder Vincenzo Fregar, and that would be a very good thing.

Alas, such a law had yet to be promulgated by the Republic of Braavos.

And that meant that for the last two hours, every keyholder and ambitious man under the Titan had endured as best as they could the speech.

Honestly, it shouldn’t be possible for an oratory performance to be that boring! Not when it came to shipbuilding and other related matters!

Alas, Vincenzo Fregar achieved that improbable ‘exploit’.

“And let’s not forget,” the oldest of the keyholders continued in a near-unbearable coughing voice, “that the Arsenalotti, the Master Carpenters the entire world envy us, require the great wine fountain to flow from dawn to sunset.” A series of coughs followed, and the eighty-two years-old man shook and looked about to falter...only to regain some of his strength after a few heartbeats. “It is thanks to the wine fountain that they can perform to exacting standards.”

The problem was not so much the topic chosen for the speech, Ludovico knew. Nor was it the coughs. It was the voice. It was not supported by gestures of any kind. It was as flat as a dead fish. It was devoid of any emotions, and old age couldn’t be blamed for that; twenty years ago, listening to *that* had already been a chore.

“By all the Gods,” someone whispered, “when will he shut up?”

“Some of you may ask what my policy will be. It is simple. We must encourage the planting of trees.”

For the first time, the reactions of the men gathered in the Palace of Truth included snorts and amusement rather than annoyance. That was the idea of a man who had never left his family residence for the last decade. Had he forgotten that Braavos was built on a lagoon? Good luck planting trees in great numbers there. And as for the rest of the lands ruled by the Republic, there were so few cultivable fields between the mountains and the seas that it was out of question to waste them with trees if they didn’t give fruits for the Braavosi to eat.

“We must plant oak, which we need for the structure of our proud war galleys. We must plant fir trees in order to have an unending supply of masts. We must plan common beech trees for our oars. We must-“

The coughing interrupted this time one more the boring speech, but this time it was more violent and the limbs shook like they were in the middle of a storm.

After many heartbeats and a couple of attempts to find his voice again, with several wine jugs brought by servants, Vincenzo Fregar had to concede defeat. It took two of his younger cousins to help him walk away.

Courteous applauses escorted his departure, and it was not lying that a large sigh of relief was shared by all the men present. They had known that listening to Fregar was going to be a chore, but not to this degree of boredom.

If there was a consolation, it was that the day was almost over. Everyone was exhausted by the ‘torture’ Fregar had forced them to endure; the debates could very much wait until tomorrow.

“Is there anyone who wishes to answer the points mentioned by the Honourable Keyholder Fregar?” The First Sword asked, in the last ceremonial position he would hold in the name of the recently deceased Sealord.

“I do, Sword of the Seas.”

Ludovico didn’t bother turning his head; he knew this voice very well. In fact, all keyholders had become quite familiar with it in the last days.

“Then you have the floor, Keyholder Zalyne.”

Why did Ludovico felt he wasn’t going to like what was uttered in the next breaths?

“Our colleague Keyholder Fregar spoke at length of the needs of wood and wine this great Republic needs to thrive and expand!” The tone and the power of the voice were so different from the terrible oratory skills of Fregar that several Keyholders and Merchant Heads woke up from the lethargy they had been plunged into. “And in many ways, he is right! To ensure the security of the Serene Republic of Braavos, our Arsenal has to stock important quantities of wood every season so that when danger threatens the Republic, the Arsenalotti will be able to launch one hundred galleys in a mere fifty days!”

So far, there wasn’t anything in these words Ludovico could contest. It was rather the way these facts were presented...

“Contrary to my esteemed colleague, I don’t think we can afford to plant trees anywhere near the lagoon.” A few chuckles resonated under the green copper domes of the Palace of Truth. “We need the arable land for our farmers. And in the mountains, there are too many locations where trees will not reach suitable sizes for the construction of a war galley.”

And then a fist struck the wood of the stand, making a couple of his peers jump on their feet.

“We are forced to tolerate the intolerable, Keyholders, because the slavers enforce this intolerable situation! For hundreds of leagues to our south, the most fertile lands of Essos await! There every year grain is harvested that one million mouths can be fed with it with many granaries to spare! There forests of oak trees are regularly planted and proposed for sale, with none of the difficulties we face near our great lagoon.”

The Head of House Prestayn was alas not surprised that many keyholders nodded or showed signs of support.

“It is the First Law of this Republic that no man, woman, or child in Braavos will ever be a slave! And yet what happens every year? We are forced to swallow our pride, and buy the wood and the grain we need in exchange of our ingenuity and our precious free trade! Despite the First Law, we are year after year forced to tolerate the legacy of the dragonlords. Thousands of children are dragged into chains every year, and with it the candles of liberty dims. They are strangling us, Keyholders, and we are content to ignore the chains as long as we can enjoy the profits of this ignoble trade!”

For the second time, a fist struck wood. This time no one was startled by it; everyone present was listening with the greatest attention.

“And none of the Free Cities are foulest than the so-called ‘Princedom of Pentos’, which hides its rapacity and eagerness to enslave us behind kind smiles and benevolent faces!”

Ludovico Prestayn exchanged a disabused glance with Benvenuto Reyaan sitting to his right. They had known this was coming, but having it confirmed like this was alas not something they were going to rejoice about.

“No matter how many ships confiscated to free the slaves, no matter how much pressure is placed upon other kingdoms and cities to abolish the slave trade, Pentos is prospering and becoming richer at our expense! The Sunset Kingdoms are content to close their eyes and let themselves be seduced by the gold tainted by the Dothraki raids and tributes. The other Free Cities are cheering when Pentoshi sellsword companies march in the Disputed Lands. This must be not tolerated anymore if the Republic of Braavos is to free Essos from the chains of Ancient Valyria! For Braavos to rise, Pentos must be humbled!”

Over one third of the men present clapped their hands in firm approval, and Ludovico Prestayn sighed.

“What a way to begin the election campaign...”

**Queen Baela Targaryen, Ninth Moon of 139AC, the pass west of Wayfarer’s Rest**

Evidently, once you compared it to the Golden Tooth, it was really unimpressive.

It was only a small stone tower, after all, one where two scores of men could take refuge from enemies or the wrath of the rains and the winds too often raging at the border between the Westerlands and the Riverlands.

But it was a beginning.

“The plan is to begin digging when the next winter will end,” Lord Kermit Tully told her. “If we tried now-“

“You would likely make pools for the Riverlands ducks, yes.” Baela finished for the Lord Paramount. The autumn rains in the Riverlands were not something you ignored. Well, you could ignore them, but if you drowned, it was your fault.

“And in a few moons, you won’t even be able to do that.”

“Is it confirmed, then?”

“There’s still a quarrel between the Dogmatists and the Librarians.” The Black Queen admitted. “The former have spread the word they think the first snowfalls will arrive in the middle of the second moon next year, the latter pretend it is rather for the end of the third moon. But between them and the Freeholders, the three different orders agree at least winter is coming next year. And since our agents are telling us the Green maesters tell the same things to their Lords, the likelihood of them all being wrong is slim.”

Kermit Tully caressed his red beard before shrugging.

“This time the Riverlands are prepared for it, your Majesty. I would have preferred if the autumn was far milder than it was, and maybe one or two more years of summer would have been nice.”

“And next time,” Baela added sarcastically, “you may also want Essossi merchants selling you summer seeds at one-seventh of their true price.”

The Lord Paramount chuckled.

“Perish the thought, your Majesty,” then the Lord of Riverrun returned to a far more dignified expression. “I have received all the messages of my bannersmen in the last moon. All the Noble, Masterly, and Knightly Houses swear they have at least three years worth of reserves without having to tighten their belts. And this is after we sent the largest shipment of grain, paid in good silver, to White Harbor. As long as this winter doesn’t last more than three years, we won’t have to buy the Pentoshi grain again at such ridiculously high prices.”

“Good, because I don’t know if we will be able to rely on Pentoshi grain this winter,” Baela levelly replied.

Lord Kermit Tully grimaced, all the while adjusting his cloak as they both watched the long and tortuous valley leading to the Westerlands.

“Braavos?”

“Lady Sabitha is receiving more and more troubling reports about the Titan, yes. The Sealord elections are always something reeking of madness at the best of times, of course, but this time the rumble is particularly worrying.”

“That’s what happens when you are foolish enough to let your city’s rulers be decided by the wisdom of crowds,” the red-haired and red-bearded Lord didn’t bother hiding the disgust Braavosi elections provoked inside his body. “Of all the bloody things, going to war for a beard? Madness!”

Baela smiled.

“Let me remind you, my Lord, that the disastrous civil war which nearly destroyed the Seven Kingdoms began because we Targaryens couldn’t agree who would sit on the ugliest throne of the known world.” The Black Queen was certain that from the point of view of an Essossi merchant, the Dance of Dragons had been a really stupid conflict from the first skirmish to the last battle. When it came to it, all the Free Cities save Braavos had female Magisters or at the very least very influential female figures holding the reins at some point in the last century.

The silver-haired Queen sniffed disdainfully.

“Besides, when I hear the rumours about the idiots who receive coins from the last Crakehall and the Faith these days, I don’t think we would have to make a long journey to find something as stupid as this beard-cutting folly.”

“I heard more insults were screamed near the frontier at Hornvale,” Lord Kermit said slowly, “but the accusations of sorcery and more were a bit outlandish, rumours or not.”

“In that particular case, the rumours are very much confirmed.” Baela explained with a frown on her face. “Crakehall and several septons accused us of sorcery. In their opinion, we dabbled in foul heresy because the wheat and the cereals they could watch from their towers are growing faster and giving far more productive harvests than the ones their smallfolk cultivated. The conclusion is therefore divinely ordained: it must be sorcery.”

And yes, there was a lot of mockery in the last words the purple-eyed sovereign spoke.

“And...” Kermit cleared his throat in a vain attempt not to laugh. “And are they right?”

“Well, the Hornvale harvest has been pleasantly high,” the Black Queen replied while twitching her lips. “But I assure you, my Lord, it has nothing to do with sorcery.”

Baela could give her word on that; she was very much an apprentice when it came into magic, and she had never tried to improve how much food could be grown on certain lands. The books she had read insisted it was a very, very bad idea. The Valyrians of old had tried once or twice in Ghiscari lands, and the results had been awful.

“Oh? And what is the reason of this good fortune, then, your Majesty?”

“I thought it was evident.” Baela raised a royal eyebrow, presenting the dignified appearance of a dragonrider of the Old Blood. “Hornvale harvests were better because of dragon dung.”

Kermit looked at her for about five heartbeats...and then burst into an uncontrollable laughter.

“Dragon...dung?” She nodded? “HA! HA! HA! HA! HA!”

**Princess Aliandra Martell, Tenth Moon of 139AC, Sunspear**

It felt like half of Dorne had come to Sunspear in order to participate to the celebrations.

Aliandra had been a bit jealous, at first. There hadn’t been half of these men and women during her last name day.

But then it was better to be happy and cheer with everyone else.

Dornish men and women were proud, hot-blooded, and eager to find something worthy to pour their hearts into.

Yes, some had gone to the Disputed Lands and sent back to Dorne many large purses filled with gold, but these were not *Dornish* triumphs. They were done because a Free City Magister had ordered it. Many fields along the Greenblood had also been restored, the devastation of the first war against the dragons of the Conqueror erased for the first time in over a century, and it had demanded a lot of efforts so that gardens could flourish where dragon fire had scorched the earth.

But the return of the greenness combined with fruit trees was a long process that would take decades to properly heal Dorne. It was not something making sure your heart beat faster and your senses warmed up like you had taken too much spicy food in a single meal.

It was not a clear victory.

A Champion of Dorne humbling the chivalry of the Reachers, the Stormlanders, and many proud knights sworn to the Iron Throne? And the humiliation being delivered at a tourney organised in front of Highgarden, the old seat of the long-gone Gardeners?

That was a victory, and the Dornish had reacted in an entire predictable manner.

Aliandra had not needed any advice to know that her bannersmen and the smallfolk were going to open the barrels, prepare the bonfires, and whisper the words of love and fiery promises once the tales were repeated by ten thousand different throats.

Better to make it an official day of celebration, and ensure it looked like Sunspear had given her support for this entire adventure.

She had not, naturally. Aliandra had been tempted to send some knights when the first stories about the imminent tourney arrived to her ears, but in the end, she had declined to send gifted spearmen of her household. It had felt like a hellish, risky gambit to her; the young Princess simply didn’t know how King Daeron would react.

Fortunately, it seemed the Dragon King had decided the matter was neither important enough to warrant a raven message nor to rouse himself and fly to Highgarden to explain his disappointment. Audacity had carried the day.

And so as the procession advanced towards the Old Castle of House Martell, the jousters and all the young population of Sunspear were greeted by an honour guard of several hundred men, all the newly trained soldiers of House Martell in splendid armour.

Music of several scores of instruments was played, and people began to dance without waiting for anyone to give the signal.

As the sun began its descent over the horizon, the inhabitants of Sunspear committed themselves to replace its radiance with a storm of colours, ranging from the traditional orange of her banners to the light blue that was the latest dye fashionable in Lys. There were violent-passionate red dresses opened to seduce highborn young men of gold and silver attires.

This night was going to be long, and as the old proverb of one of her most ruthless ancestors said, ‘one night at Sunspear will be enough to erase all our battlefield losses of the decade’.

It was almost a surprise when the heroine of Dorne arrived. Her guards were embraced and joining the party, whether they wanted it or not – most were definitely the former, though. The musicians were dragged into the taverns and the narrow streets of the shadow city.

What little discipline the Dornish had, it was lost as the evening arrived.

“Lady Ysolde,” Aliandra managed to articulate when she saw her.

“My Princess,” the Sword of the Morning bowed.

It took many heartbeats before the young Princess could say anything else. For many years, the Lady of Sunspear had known she was attracted to men. Like many of her female predecessors, Aliandra had lost her virginity in secret, so that she could learn the secrets and the ways lust could be used, be it in her service or against her. Her tutors in the subject had given her a lot of *pleasurable* lessons about it this year and the one before that, and she had thought she had a good idea of her tastes.

But she had not met Ysolde Dayne in years, and apparently, Aliandra was not the only one to have blossomed in the deserts of Dorne. You could get lost in these lilac eyes. The black hair and the tanned skin were near-perfect and-

Aliandra shook her head. She was the Princess of Dorne. As attractive as a proposal it was, letting herself be seduced by the Sword of the Morning would bring many headaches the next morning.

“It seems several rumours were in error,” the Lady of House Martell commented lightly, “I almost believed the bards when they sang you were pursued by a young boy of Highgarden whose heart ached with love.”

“It couldn’t have been further from the truth,” the daughter of House Dayne smiled. “His mother would have decapitated me before I marched away from Highgarden. But it was a shame about the song. I rather enjoyed the lyrics of my humble group being pursued from oasis to oasis by a Reacher in love.”

“Yes, it was quite a shame,” Aliandra returned the smile. Thanks the Sun and the Stars, except a few songs and loud jokes about Reacher men desiring Dornish women, it had ended there. The new Lord Tyrell thought with the tool between his legs, but sadly, he was not the first Lord of Highgarden who lusted after Dornish women; at least three Gardener Kings had perished by the poison of the scorpion in very intimate embraces.

“But for now, I find it more interesting that the chivalry of the dragons was unable to best you. Many of my advisors think it was because you are indeed the best spear of Dorne.”

And others, her uncle included, thought the quality of the Reacher, Western, and Stormlander chivalry had declined after the terrible losses of their bloody civil wars.

“My Princess, House Tyrell and House Lannister still have some talented jousters and melee fighters.” The Sword of the Morning chose to answer. “However, many of them are still young, and have lost the habit to joust against opponents practising the traditional jousting styles. It was a pleasure to dismount them and give a victory to Dorne.”

And if Aliandra had had a doubt Ysolde Dayne wanted to share her bed tonight, the way she gave attention to her cleavage and tried to plunger her lilac eyes into hers dissipated them in a heartbeat...

**Lady Maris Baratheon, Tenth Moon of 139AC, Storm’s End**

“Home, sweet home,” Maris sang as she stepped back in the room she’d been using as her personal work room for the last five years.

“Someone is very happy,” her sister commented behind her.

“I don’t want to hear anything from you, Lady ‘I didn’t stop smirking for seven days straight when my betrothal was announced’,” the Lady Paramount of the Stormlands retorted immediately.

After a heartbeat or two, Maris nonetheless huffed.

“But yes, I am happy. And yes, it has something to do with my former husband sailing on a ship with black sails.”

“Given how much we were delayed with our journey across the Reach, it is entirely possible his transport has already docked at Eastwatch, sister.” Ellyn pointed out, approaching the chimney to enjoy the warmth of the fire their servants had lit a turn of hourglass ago.

“You may be right,” the Lady of Storm’s End conceded, “though I personally don’t care. He’s gone. Good riddance, I say.”

“I think every Lord, Lady, and Knight who saw you at Highgarden is aware of that, sister.”

Maris giggled. Yes, in hindsight, she may have celebrated a bit too much.

Was she honest thinking that?

No.

Yes, she had paid a few bards to sing bawdy songs about the ‘septon affair’. Their rhymes about the septon disguises and the ‘amorous affairs’ of the sword-swallower had spread like wildfire across the Reach.

Yes, some buffoons had done charming performances in front of the Court of Roses and Flowers. Yes, mummer’s plays were invented as they spoke, with some quite amusing and explicit. Some of the best involvements included guards in Targaryen blindfolds placing blindfolds in front of their eyes so that they could be ‘surprised’ when the final act arrived.

“He deserved it.”

Ellyn stared with an expression of mild disapproval.

“What?”

“It may have cost you the support of House Staedmon.”

“Oh, please, sister. First, there is no ‘may’. The moment this sword-swallower husband of mine was sent to don a black cloak, I knew very well House Staedmon would cease its support. The old Lord of Broad Arch wanted our gold, the King’s support, and a child of Staedmon blood sitting on the Storm Throne...not necessarily in that particularly order, you know.”

The Lady Paramount wished she was lying, but that was the disgusting truth.

“If this was his goal, he should have asked his son first about his preferences,” Ellyn argued in a very reasonable tone.

“Yes.” As it was, there had been more chances of goats learning how to fly across mountains than Adrian Staedmon siring a child in her belly. “Since that means there will be no child, that left gold and the King’s support. The former he is going to give back. The latter I leave to him. It certainly didn’t do any good to the sword-swallower when the King had to choose between the Faith and him.”

“Is it...wise?” Her favourite sister – not that the competition was very hard, really – asked hesitantly. “There’s a difference between one of our bannersmen not supporting us and one outright hating us.”

“You’re right,” Maris agreed with a grimace. “Unfortunately, I am pretty sure Lord Staedmon already hates me personally. He never made any secret of it either. The bastard always considered me as a womb which would be discarded in time when there was a child of Staedmon blood ready to take her place.”

Fury boiled in her heart, and Maris forced herself to calm down. It wouldn’t do to rant out angrily now, even if the only witness was her sister.

“Broad Arch has been a thorn in my chest for several years, and I am not going to give them time to plot something bad. Tomorrow, I am going to send out a raven to the sword-swallower’s father that I want all the gold back. My former husband broke the wedding’s contract, meaning I can and I will demand all the gold dragons back in our coffers.”

“Lord Staedmon will never accept that,” Ellyn shook her head. “By the terms of the contract, he would suddenly owe you thirty thousand gold dragons!”

“Closer to thirty-five thousand, I think,” Maris corrected. “And yes, I’m very well aware he won’t pay. That’s why the moment the raven is going to leave, I am going to lead a column of two thousand soldiers to Broad Arch.”

Ellyn stayed silent for a moment.

“It’s a dangerous game, sister. On the one hand, our great bannersmen will take you seriously if you force Lord Staedmon to give back all this gold. On the other hand...”

On the other hand, King Daeron wasn’t going to like that at all, yes.

In the darkest parts of her head, Maris could freely admit one reason she was doing it was precisely because the silver-haired brother of Aemond ‘One Eye’ Targaryen was going to learn what the spite of a Baratheon Lady could do when roused in fury.

“We need the gold.” The Lady Paramount said once their tempers had calmed somewhat. “Your dowry is going to be expensive, and one of the reasons it was not as large as it should be was that Casterly Rock was more interested in this new road than in coin.”

Something that Maris understood perfectly well; now that the Reynes were all dead, House Lannister was lacking young men to work in the fields; they certainly didn’t lack golden dragons.

“One of the reasons why you are willing to push so hard against House Staedmon.”

The Lady of Storm’s End nodded darkly.

“By the rules of the Game, the King can hardly complain we are going to be involved in road creation; he certainly sent plenty of messages here recently begging us to do exactly that. But the day His Grace realises that the Great ‘Western-Stormlands’ Road doesn’t go anywhere near King’s Landing, we will need to have most of our bannersmen supporting us. And those who aren’t with us must be ruined and broken before they can be a threat.”

“You are going to need to remarry if you want to achieve that.”

“I know.” The Lady Paramount sighed. “I know. But given how many proposals I received in the time it took us to ride home, I don’t think there is going to be a lack of highborn of suitable station courting my hand.”

“And I think there would be seven times that number if they knew the ‘winner’ will have a chance of bedding a certain Dornish beauty after you ride him...”

“Ellyn!”

**Lady Victoria Blackbar, Tenth Moon of 139AC, Bandallon**

Her mother sighed before throwing the little piece of parchment into the fire.

“Lord Florent jumped on his horse and is busy riding to King’s Landing.”

“This is going to not be cheap for his finances,” Victoria remarked calmly as her mother went on to read another of the raven messages their maester had just brought into the study. “The armour of Lord Ryam at the tourney was made to impress. It must have cost him quite a sum to pay the forges which made it, and then he had to ransom it back twice.”

The Lord of House Florent fancied himself the greatest jouster to ever live and Garth Gardener reborn, but it was obvious for everyone that his pride was far greater than his martial skills. An Hedge Knight had dismounted him in his second joust, and during the melee, he had fallen to the sword of a Fossoway.

Clearly, this must have cost him a lot of golden dragons, or some silver if he tried to do the dishonourable thing. Add to that the expense of bringing so many men and women with him at Highgarden. The smallfolk owed their liege lord many days of service of year, it was true, but they had to be clothed and fed appropriately. The smith couldn’t repair the swords and the armours without good steel, proper tools, and more coins.

But at least Brightwater Keep was very close to Highgarden, a fact House Florent had never let them forget for the last one hundred and thirty-nine years or so. King’s Landing was not, and the pleasant weather they had enjoyed during the many days of the tourney was a faint memory now. Cold mist greeted them in the morning, and the smallfolk were hurrying to return everything of importance into the villages’ granaries, forges, and mills. Winter was almost here, and the sea nearby was as dark as ink.

“It is not going to make him wealthier.” Arwyn Blackbar nodded. “Servants in his household mentioned however he has a plan to change the fortune of his House around, while making sure our plans sink at the bottom of the Sunset Sea.”

Oh, this was going to be really good. House Florent had had some vainglorious Lords in the past. The one who had led the charge during the Field of Fire came to mind. And his successor had been no more intelligent, loudly proclaiming his surprise when the Conqueror chose the Tyrells to be the new Warden of the Reach.

“And what is this plan, mother? To boldly announce before the King that he was one of the most loyal supporters of Alicent Hightower though evidently, the banners of House Florent lost themselves half of the time and missed all the important battles?”

“Marriage,” the answer was spoken after a grin to suit the circumstances. “His eldest daughter is the same as our young and noble Lord of Highgarden, don’t forget.”

“How could I?” Victoria raised her eyebrows before the content of the conversation truly dominated her thoughts. “Wait. You can’t be serious. Lord Ryam still thinks his daughter has a chance?”

“The dowry he is willing to propose is...significant.”

“Half of the Ladies watching the jousts were laughing at her ears, mother. I’m pretty sure that after he stopped drooling in the direction of Ysolde Dayne, Lord Tyrell was in a hurry to stay as far away from her.”

A lot of that was undeserved. Ann Florent didn’t have the inbuilt arrogance of her father. She was a rather gentle girl, and she didn’t like much the sounds of swords clashing and knights falling from their horses.

But no matter how hard she tried to hide it under her black hair, she had the huge ears of her line. Victoria didn’t know where the trait had come from, but you couldn’t lie about it. It wasn’t as bad as the ‘snout’ some Noble Houses had replaced their noses with, but everything counted.

“And how could House Florent afford a huge dowry anyway? Lord Ryam has three daughters. Does he intend to strip every other child of his from their part of inheritance?”

“He hopes his youngest daughter will be betrothed to a Prince of the Seven Kingdoms.” Her mother told her. The Heir to the Throne is too much even for the ambition of the fox, but Prince Aemon was born in 136AC, much like Ryam’s youngest daughter.”

This was not an ambition which left you speechless, but it was nonetheless an astounding one.

“Err...yes, mother. But unless my tutors have always taught me wrongly, it is the woman who brings the dowry, not the contrary. And the King doesn’t really need the blood of the old Green Kings to flow into his veins. He largely has that by his Hightower mother.”

And the power of Oldtown, no matter how weakened it was in this day and year, was several times greater than the might of Brightwater Keep. The Florent couldn’t afford two thousand foot and two hundred horses when Highgarden called the banners to crush the Reynes! How were they supposed to be taken seriously by the Noble Houses of the Reach?

“Oh, the ambitions of House Florent are greater than the means they have at their disposal.” Her mother said gently before taking a more serious expression. “But in this case, it is likely what Lord Ryam is going to swear to the King is that he will do everything in his power to stop the expansion of our harbour here at Blackbar. He may even add to it the efforts to destroy any road which would link Highgarden and Bandallon.”

Right. That explained...some things.

“Has Lord Florent realised yet that it was exactly this kind of behaviour we anticipated coming from him? And that it is why any road to Highgarden will bypass Brightwater Keep, either following the coast or going through the Lordship of Honeyholt?”

“No, he doesn’t. Alas,” her mother’s expression turned sour, “I am certain that Lord Merryweather will be intelligent enough to point it out to him, by virtue of him being able to read a map.”

“So we better hope the Baratheon ‘septon affair’ will be distracting the King and his Council?”

“As far as our plans to steal the trade of Oldtown are concerned, yes. I’m far less worried about the money. For a daughter of House Florent to steal Lord Tyrell in front of you, you need enough gold to forget the ears in the first place, and I’m confident King’s Landing has not half of what Lord Florent wants.”

“Good.”

“Oh, and Lady Jasmine really dislikes Lord Ryam Florent. Something about him drooling before her when she was very young and not married to a Tyrell.”

Was the Game of Thrones always doomed to repeat itself? It was both amusing and tragic. Well, at least it was something to muse at for all the long evenings of winter to come.

And on this Victoria graciously took her leave.

**Lady Johanna Swann, Tenth Moon of 139AC, Lys**

“What do you think, oh Beautiful Black Swan?”

Johanna Swann had several answers ready on her lips.

*I think I am getting too old for this Game of Whispers and Little Treasons.*

*I think that in my youth, I would have jumped the bones of Alyn Velaryon and all the Admirals involved, making sure they were mad in love with me and ready to give me half of their possessions without me asking for it.*

*I think the Yi-Tish have no idea what is coming their way.*

*I think I really need to train a successor.*

*I think I want a young blonde man in my bed tonight to feel young again.*

But all of that would have been admitting weakness in some form, and the Black Swan was not weak. The Black Swan would never be weak.

The Black Swan was an ideal of beauty, terrible in her wrath, exquisite in the carnal rewards she gave.

“I think,” she answered instead, “that Admiral Alyn Velaryon is going to become a legend like his sire, or will earn a splendid watery grave for himself.” Johanna’s eyes narrowed. “And now that I think about it, there is a good chance the former may not prevent the latter.”

“The Summer Sea is known for its many dangers,” the obsequious Magister who had paid a fortune for her services for an entire day said in a servile manner. “Qartheen privateers and Basilisk pirates, to name only two.”

“And beyond, the Jade Gates and the Jade Sea await, with a myriad of danger for exhausted sailors and Captains.”

This was not pessimism; there was a reason why the Volantene of the Old Blood, as arrogant as they were, rarely journeyed further away than Qarth. And still, not all the ships paid by the men and the women hiding behind the Black Walls were returning home. In fact, one in four disappeared without leaving any trace.

“But many favours were paid in the Magisters’ name.”

The man had the good grace to take a sheepish expression and apologise with his eyes and body before she took umbrage.

“Didn’t your nephew and your second cousin boast of their talents in the last two years? Here comes their chance to prove the Lysene superiority against all comers, be they Westerosi, Volantene, or Myrish.”

“Yes, but...but we may have need of young men closer to home soon. The Disputed Lands are a battlefield, by the fault of the Rogares.”

It was a really naive way to judge the situation, in the Black Swan’s opinion. There was war long before Viserys Targaryen married Larra Rogare and the two decided to scheme to take the city of Tiberius for themselves.

The only thing the two lovebirds had changed were the stakes involved. Tyrosh was now fighting for survival on the continent, and to everyone’s surprise, appeared to have overcome some of its initial setbacks. Of course, it remained to be seen if the Company of the Falcon would be able to save the day again. Assuming Myrish Magisters didn’t manage to bribe the flamboyant Captain-General to enter their service, it went without being said.

“I am more worried about what some of our most audacious Captains would do if let idle and bored.” Johanna admonished the Magister. “We quarrel with Myr and Tyrosh all the time. It is almost a tradition since the Doom, and no one is going to scream bloody murder as long as the sellswords stab and betray each other a hundred times per campaigning season. Dorne appears to have discovered the joys of that too.”

Johanna picked a dried grape graciously, always graciously, and played with it for a couple of heartbeats.

“As long as we play the game, Volantis will slumber, and the Elephants will make sure the Tigers stay toothless and declawed. It is the chief goal no Lysene can afford to forget.”

For no matter what the singers pretended, the alliance of Lys, Myr, and Tyrosh had not been enough when Volantis tried to rebuild the Valyrian Freehold over a century ago. The decisive blow had been struck by *dragons*.

And it was at a time Tyrosh and Myr were not such long-feuding foes. The days of the Triarchy, which had not been calm or united despite what everyone wanted to believe, had burned, and they wouldn’t return.

“The Rogares-“

“The Rogares can’t hide from me.” Johanna interrupted. “And for the time being, the ambitions of some are more to sire the new generation of Rogare than the conquests of new territories.”

Larra Rogare had already given birth to a son – that they had named Varys in memory of Larra’s maternal grandfather – several moons ago, and if her husband continued to pour more of his seed into her belly, there was no doubt more Rogares would be born.

“But Pentos is under threat! These abominable freedom-lovers of Braavos are conspiring as we speak to destroy Pentos, and they don’t intend to limit their appetite to a single Free City!”

“Patience, friend, patience,” Johanna used her most seductive smile and began to let her robe of black silk slowly fall of from her shoulders. “No matter what they choose to believe, the Braavosi are enslaved to their passions as strongly as any of the slaves of this city is. They will learn to embrace that truth...or they will die.”

**Keyholder Ludovico Prestayn, Tenth Moon of 139AC, the Fish market of the Long Canal, Braavos**

Braavosi elections were a complex process that even the initiated had trouble to explain to their clients and friends.

To begin by the simpler point, and contrary to what certain Volantene traders accused them of, only a short number of men had the privilege to enter the Sealord election. In order to not be immediately thrown out of the Hall of Truth, the conditions were the same as they had been since the City’s Founding. You had to be a Keyholder, or be supported by ten Keyholders of notable renown. You had to pay the entry fee, which was not an insignificant sum of gold. You had to have served the City in some aspect for three years; being an officer in the Braavosi Navy was of course the most famous choice many of the prospective candidates chose in their young years.

Naturally, this was the easy part. Once you had actually established you were among the one hundred men or so who had indeed the right to become Sealord, you had to be elected. And this was where law was telling you one thing and custom another.

As every street urchin and galley-fodder criminal knew, Braavosi men and women had the right and the duty to privilege to vote, as long as they weren’t criminals and condemned to row the proud galleys of the Republic. And if you were born in Braavos, or from a Braavosi mother and raised in the city, you were Braavosi.

But the vote of the lowborn servants was not equal to the vote of a Great Merchant. It would have been not only stupid but ridiculous to pretend so. As such-

“ZALYNE! ZALYNE FOR SEALORD! DOWN WITH THE CARPS!”

Ludovico winced as the shouts came too close to his poor ears.

“Lord Keyholder, I really think we should leave,” his chief of guards told him bluntly. “I really don’t like how some of these hot-headed fools are riling up the crowd.”

“If I leave in a hurry, I am ready to bet my entire purse that the accusations of cowardice will be in every tavern by sunset.” Why it was so easy to arrive to this conclusion? Because during the last election to choose the Sealord, no less than four candidates had withdrawn after they proved unable to calm the throats. “I realise it doesn’t sound good; I am likely going to receive several fishes on these nice clothes I love very much, and the smell is-“

“DOWN WITH THE CARPS! OUR WORD IS THE FIRST LAW!”

The crowd was getting louder and marching in their direction...which also happened to be the market’s.

It was really an impressive number of men...assuredly, Braavos had narrow streets, so it represented only something like four or five hundred men. But the fishers and the other merchants selling their goods suddenly began to pack vegetables, meat, fishes, and many other things in all haste.

“Maybe we should indeed return to a place where the electors are willing to listen. “Ludovico nodded before turning. “But what it is about carps?”

“It’s the name these fools have found for you and several of your friends, Lord Keyholder. It really began yesterday, I think. They say you do nothing but yawn and go from palace to palace in slow motion in a very predictable pattern...like carps.”

It was hard not to grit his teeth.

Really? They did nothing? It was thank to Houses like Prestayn that Braavos was as prosperous as it was? Where did these fools think the wealth of the city came from? Had they learned from their mothers’ tits that the First Law paid itself? No, it was because each Merchant House paid enormous taxes to the Sealord and the City-

“DOWN WITH THE CARPS! THE HONOUR OF BRAAVOS IS AT STAKE!”

“FOR BRAAVOS! DOWN WITH THE CARPS!”

The crowd charged.

They charged...and they drew their swords!

“By the Red Bull!” One of his guards shouted. “What are they doing?”

Ludovico stared speechless.

It was unbelievable. Yes, there were vendettas and many duels in the streets of his beloved city, but drawing swords was by custom and law always against swordsmen and other heavily armed opponents, and done in several ways that ensured the fishers and the non-armed population didn’t suffer from it.

It was never supposed to happen like...like that!

Under his very eyes, the fish market was attacked by a vociferating crowd causing as much damage as a Dothraki horde!

“HERE IS ONE! HERE IS A CARP!”

“My Lord Keyholder! You must flee!” His head of guards exclaimed. “Please! RUN! We are going to try to slow them down!”

The screams surrounded them, and blood began to spilled.

Searching for lesser streets which could provide a salutary escape, Ludovico saw that many were blocked by huge carts and large boxes used for ships.

This was no mere group of idiots suddenly turned mad by the elections, Ludovico realised.

It was an ambush, and he had walked right into it.

“Give me a sword, Lieutenant.” The first rank of the bloodthirsty mob was stopped dead by three of his men carrying the halberds, but it was only a delay. “I think it is time we teach these murderous rascals that if they want to get rid of me, they will pay the price.”

“KILL THE CARP! DOWN WITH THE SLAVERS’ LOVERS!”

The crowd bayed for blood, and for the last time of his long life, Ludovico Prestayn wielded a sword.

Madness engulfed his entire world, and rapiers and boarding sabres took his entire attention.

There was a pain in his chest.

His arm suddenly became a terrible source of pain.

And in the end, there was blood. Red blood filled the waters as far as he could see.

**The Prince of Pentos, Eleventh Moon of 139AC, Pentos**

“They did what?”

When Fosco had seen his cousin enter with a grim face, he had known that whatever news awaited wouldn’t be a joy to listen to.

But he hadn’t expected *that*!

“I’m saying that according to one of our best agents inside Braavos, as of ten days ago,” Colombano Doriatis repeated coldly, “three Keyholders were murdered by a bloodthirsty mob, and each death happened in different parts of the city, and coincidence of all coincidences, it happened on the same day.”

Only the most stupid man of Pentos would have failed to understand it was no coincidence.

“Continue.”

“According to our agent, it was very much a very skilled assassination. Stir the young and reckless water-dancers into a frenzy until they’re willing to kill everyone before them and damn their honour, while saboteurs block the possible exits. In the chaos, the real assassins designate the targets, making sure the rapier-armed buffoons bleed the escort of the Keyholder. If they do manage to take out the man, it is all for the better.”

“And if the mob doesn’t?”

“Then the assassins were on a nearby roof with poisoned arrows and several crossbows.”

Fosco Doriatis couldn’t help but grimace.

As far as cold-blooded schemes went, he could recognise one when he heard of it.

This left only the much dreaded question to ask.

“How bad is it going to be?”

“Our agent lacked the time to investigate properly,” Colombano was not fuming with anger, but he wasn’t far from it. “But I think the answer will be something like ‘very bad’. Keyholder Ludovico and his two allies were not only wealthy merchants with respectable shares in the Iron Bank, they were the heads of the conservative faction. Ludovico was of course their most promising candidate in the coming electoral campaign, and his two allies were powerful voices and money-lenders. They represented the old merchant class of Braavos, the one which was convinced they could force us to abolish the slave trade by establishing very profitable relationships between our two Free Cities.”

The Prince of Pentos, naturally, didn’t miss the use of the past tense.

“Our merchants inside the lagoon.” The dark thought arrived in his mouth effortlessly. “Did they-“

“Yes.” No wonder his cousin was looking like he wanted to strangle the first Braavosi who was going to come close to him. “I have sufficient information to confirm at least twenty merchants who were visiting have been missing in these riots. There might be more. The canals are running red as we speak.”

“Madness,” Fosco spat out, glaring at the green parrot in the nearby cage thought the bird likely didn’t deserve it.

“Madness,” the Magister echoed, “and though I won’t repeat it in public, we were lucky. As the incidents escalated, nine out of ten of our merchants fled Braavos. This caused many breaches of contract and a lot of money was confiscated by the Braavosi scum, but better escape with your head and empty pockets than the opposite.”

“I am not going to argue with that.”

That didn’t mean there wasn’t going to be any arguing, of course. It would take a miracle to avoid that. The merchants and the rest of the Pentoshi who were tied in Braavosi activities had lost a lot of money. Many of them were either the cousins, or the client-allies of the Pentoshi Magisters. The moment they were back home, the complaints were going to be immense. Someone was going to have to take the blame for that. The Braavosi would do for a few moons, but if there wasn’t some improvement after that...

Fosco shivered. There were many reasons why being the Prince of Pentos was such a risky position.

“It is going to be war.” Colombano spoke for the first time the dreadful word. “The bloodthirsty young fools have allowed Zalyne to achieve his mad ambitions. They have literally decapitated the ‘Carps’, those who were willing to raise their voices against them. And I now fear that looking at the methods employed, the declaration of war may not be forthcoming.”

Saying something like that in the very Palace of the Prince of Pentos should have been the source of endless daughter. Of course the Braavosi were going to declare war! It was one of the rare rules every Free City abided by. It was the cornerstone every Captain-General and Lord of the Seas respected, for the alternative risked them being labelled pirates and bandits.

“The Arsenal?” He felt something unpleasant squirm inside his belly.

“Many Master Carpenters who were on half-pay are no longer to be found. And a few galleys which were not known to us are now beginning their first sea exercises.”

Fosco knew what it meant. The fifty days the Braavosi estimated necessary to launch one hundred war galleys had begun, and the message had taken ten days to reach them.

“We need all the free companies and sellsails we can buy.”

“And we need a chain to close the bay. I also have given orders before coming him to restore the old forts.”

“This isn’t going to stop them for long.”

Fosco knew that the forts in question had been almost abandoned in the last decade. It was going to take moons to rebuild them properly. Braavos wasn’t going to give them that time.

“No, but don’t forget that the enemy fleet will be far from its base, and in the middle of winter. If they have to wait a few days outside of the Bay, a winter storm will kill thousands of them without a single arrow being fired.”

Colombano was right, but it was only delaying the inevitable. Assuming Zalyne was really arrogant, they might give him a bloody nose. They wouldn’t sink many galleys, the Braavosi hulls were higher on the water than the Pentoshi ones. And thousands of sailors might get frostbite.

But once the idiots and the buffoons were out of the way, the best captains of Braavos were going to hunt anything looking like a Pentoshi carrack or any other merchant ship across the Narrow Sea. Pentos’ walls had never been breached or stormed, but the lifeblood of the city always was its trade.

The two cousins watched each other. Fosco knew it was good there wasn’t any witness, because the expressions on their faces were anything but pretty to look at.

“We need dragons on our side, and sooner than we imagined. I don’t care which colour the dragons are, but we need them.”

“We don’t have an ambassador left at King’s Landing.”

“Oh for all the sulphurous breath of-“ Fosco Doriatis breathed out, barely keeping his emotions from erupting out of control. Honestly, wasn’t there a limit to how many bad news you could receive in a single audience? “What did happen? I told him that he valued his head, he wouldn’t propose a pleasure slave to King Daeron!”

“He didn’t.” His cousin grimaced. “In fact, his behaviour was rather polite and respectful.”

“Then what was the problem?”

“The problem was that our Ambassador had a Myrish lover. A *male* Myrish lover. And the Sunset Kingdoms have a name for people who enjoy that. They call them ‘sword-swallowers’. I can assure you it is not a compliment. Worse, the religious authorities have damn made sure to hunt these ‘unnatural practises’.”

The Prince of Pentos waited for the moment when his cousin would tell him it was a bawdy joke.

The moment never came.

“And they are so eager to throw the word ‘slaver’ at us.” Fosco wasn’t blind to the flaws of his city, but if he decided to invite a man into his bedroom, the only concern of the Magisters would be that he didn’t spend half of the gold he was given on his new favourite. Pentos was hardly perfect, but you could dance horizontally with you wanted. “You better send an urgent message to Marino, then. Whatever the Black Queen needs to be convinced, I think it will be cheaper than my head and the sheer fortune Braavos want to rob us from.”

**Ser Richard Lydden, Eleventh Moon of 139AC, King’s Landing**

It was not without reason that highborn and smallfolk alike thought King’s Landing smelled bad.

No, the word ‘bad’ was not doing it justice.

If Richard had to choose between a corpse who had been left to rot for three days in a small cellar and patrolling in the streets of King’s Landing, he would take the corpse.

The capital of the Seven Kingdoms smelled *that* bad.

May the Seven forgive him, but sometimes the last Lydden knight thought the Seven Hells – where his unlamented wife would go once she departed this world, much like House Lydden – couldn’t be that much of a punishment after you regretted having a nose in the first place.

It was not the smell of animals dung and all these men and women living in tiny hovels that gave him nausea, though it was everywhere.

It was the smell of misery and despair, of columns of dirty urchins trying to steal your pockets while vendors tried to sell you fruits or vegetables which should have been fed to the pigs ten days ago.

And if you thought the smell inside the city couldn’t be equalled, the docks and Fishmarket were there to remind you it could always get worse.

The moment you passed through the Mud Gate, it was like the Stranger himself had decided to torture you. The wind came from the south today, and as such you received in your face a foul breath of poison.

No matter how long he lived, no matter how many wine bottles he emptied, Richard would never forget this disgusting odour. It reeked of rotten fishes, excrements, mud, tar, piss, and the Stranger only knew what else.

It was stinking so much that perfume and flowers stuck in your nose were unable to stop it from maiming whatever orifice you sacrificed to breathe.

“Something should really be done about that,” Richard mumbled in his small beard. “I know certain things can’t be avoided, but I have now visited Lannisport, and Highgarden, along with many sizeable settlements, and none of them are so foul-smelling.”

“I’m sure His Grace and His Hand are going to work about it,” Gregor said in a reasonable tone. “The reign of our King has just started, praise the Father Above.”

“I just wish...” Richard let out a tired breath. “Never mind. All we can do is our best. We have been given the cloak and sworn ourselves to one year in the City Watch, it is our honour and our duty to maintain the peace.”

For now, it wasn’t very difficult. All credit had to be given to Richard’s huge companion, of course.

In the very heartbeat the thieves and other petty criminals saw Gregor Clegane, their courage and arrogance fled them, replacing them in the blink of an eye by very accommodating souls.

Why, some merchants who had for days found excuse after excuse to ignore the edicts of His Grace or paying the taxes were suddenly generosity and honesty incarnate.

“In fact, let me correct my previous statement,” the last Lydden knight grumbled, as a bard sang the latest iteration of a song he had grown to hate, the *Salad Cloaks*. “I wish our gold cloaks hadn’t been replaced by these ugly things of grey-green. I know the King wanted to erase from the minds and the hearts the disloyalty of the Watch during the Dance, but these new cloaks are really making us the target of bad puns and horrible songs.”

“It couldn’t be red,” his companion commented neutrally. “That’s a Lannister colour, and Lannisport already uses it for its City Watch.”

“Fine, not red, but perhaps black-“

Gregor stared at him like he had said something idiotic...and to be fair, he had.

“True, not black,” he cleared his throat. “Maybe a...nobler shade of green? Dark green, but light enough to not be mistaken as black?”

Because honestly, the unflattering comparisons rained down on their heads from all sides. It hadn’t been a moon since the introduction of thousands of these new cloaks, and everyone had nicknames for them.

And no, no one used ‘Greencloaks’ instead of ‘Goldcloaks’.

This wouldn’t have bothered Richard too much, but he was part of the City’s Watch right now.

“Ser, I think there’s trouble on our left.”

“Let me guess. A Braavosi and a Pentoshi are about to make our lives interesting?”

“It looks rather like a Tyroshi facing a Braavosi to me,” with his height, Gregor could see so much better than him in this small maze of fishers and nauseating alleys.

“What’s the difference? A foreign slaver is a foreign slaver.”

But once again, by a strange turn of events, the arrival of Gregor and his own modest presence was long anticipated, and when they arrived in front of the Braavosi, the agitation had mysteriously disappeared. If he had been less suspicious, Richard could have *almost* believed there had been no fight or struggle.

As it was, there were ugly strains of red near a large fish, and the last Lydden knight was willing to gamble a bottle of Red Arbor he didn’t possess that it was not dirt.

But since no one was willing to open his mouth here, there was nothing to do but continuing their patrol.

“Speaking of Pentoshi, we’re not seen a lot of them anymore these days.”

“A lot of them left with their Ambassador.” Gregor answered easily. “Some already complained Captain Thomas was taking too often the side of the Braavosi, and this was the last straw.”

“Does he?”

“The merchants of the lagoon aren’t paying with iron coins, if you know what I mean.” Gregor shook his head. “I don’t like them.”

“Unlike the rest of Essos, they don’t practise slavery.” The green-cloaked knight found a quick and easy repartee this time.

“Unlike us in Westeros, they don’t have proper nobles. The mobs stuff things in large boxes and call it ‘election’. We have proper Kings! They don’t.”

Richard thought about it for a few heartbeats. Gregor may have a good point there, really.

“Well, it’s not our problem. We make sure those who come to our shores don’t have slaves in their hulls, and we keep their merchants as honest as foreigners can be.”

“Right.”

“FRESH FISH! FRESH FISH FOR THE MUD CLOAKS!”

“More like rotten fish,” Richard cursed under his breath, trying not to puke at the awful smell assaulting him from every direction.

**Lord Eon Grafton, Eleventh Moon of 139AC, Saltpans**

“My Lord, we have deep reservations about this coinage reform.”

It wouldn’t have been very noble to groan at that particular moment, and thus Eon didn’t. Deep inside, the Master of Coin was already wincing.

It had taken a lot of ingenuity and many, many days to convince his peers of the Council.

Watching this assembly of merchants, it looked like his labours had just begun.

“Name your reservations,” he said in a tone as courteous as he could manage.

“We have no issues with the name of the new coins,” the merchant who had silently been chosen by his peers to speak, a man of Seagard, “but we must insist the number equivalents are too difficult to remember for everyone not versed in numbers. Speaking for myself, I don’t happen to be very fond of the number seven. But it has the merit of simplicity. One Moon equals seven Stags. One Stag equals seven Stars. And below the Stars, the bronze coin of superior value is worth of two of the one which comes after it.”

“So your reservations are not about the reform itself, but the...what is this word which comes from Qarth? Ah yes. The mathematics behind the changes.”

“Yes, Lord. It is exactly that.”

“And I presume,” Eon’s anger left him, though resignation replaced it incredibly fast, “that many of your peers are going to say the same thing should I journey across the realm and ask the same questions I did today.”

“Yes, Lord Grafton.”

Well, that was mightily inconvenient. For him.

Thankfully, save a few coins, the minting process of the new coins had not properly begun. As such, the expense for the kingdom and the Queen’s treasury should stay well below notice and not attract too much criticism.

“I see. Now you have explained your reservations, I think, honourable men, that you explain to me how they should be resolved.”

“The big idea is to avoid the farmers transporting a set of scales with them every time they want to sell their wares in town, my Lord,” one of the wealthiest merchants of Saltpans intervened. “The coins must be something easy to count on your fingers. Plenty of our clients know numbers, they just have to remain simple. Five or ten is easy, as long as we use it for all the coins. Three then seven and you add nine...not so much.”

“Hmm...so if we tried, let’s say, five bronze Stars for a Silver Trout, and then five Trout for a Silver Falcon?”

Many heads nodded on the spot, but Eon winced again inside his head a couple of heartbeats later.

If he continued with this model, the Wolf coin would be worth five Silver Falcons, and accordingly, 25 Trout coins. As the Trout would be inferior to the Stag in value, and the Falcon inferior to the Moon, the Wolf would be a valuable coin, but not as important as he wanted.

Unless...

“And should the Silver Wolf be raised in content to be worth ten Falcons? In that case, the Treasury of Her Majesty would also ensure ten Silver Wolves would be worth a Moon Dragon.”

There were many, many conversations for the best part of two turns of hourglasses, but when the lead merchant spoke again, it was with words which warmed his heart of coin-counter.

“We have no objection to this coinage alteration.” Eon sighed in relief. “However we must insist that coinage reforms are well and good as long as our merchant activities in Her Majesty’s kingdom and beyond are protected.”

Ah, damn it.

“I presume you are referring to the...agitation between the Free Cities.”

“We do.”

“Rest assured that the Queen is doing everything in her power to resolve this *agitation* before it ends in bloodshed.”

Though what the Queen could do, Eon hadn’t the faintest idea. Pentos was all willing to listen to them, but it wasn’t Pentos the problem. Pentos hadn’t a huge navy or army; they relied on sellsails and sellswords for their defence. And half of the time, they were perfectly happy to send them to the Disputed Lands to support their ally of convenience of the year, be it Myr, Tyrosh, or Lys.

“These words reassure us, my Lord,” it wasn’t pleasant when it was one of his own Gulltown merchants who was about to hammer the nail which hurt, “and we know the Queen has many subjects demanding her attention. But we would be even more reassured if our ships received the protection of the Royal Navy.”

The sentence forced the Master of Coin to remember the old proposal of this odd duck of maester...what was his name again? Cali? Cal? The plague-killer maester had written a big manuscript to the Queen about the necessity of building a Braavosi-type Arsenal.

And to be fair to the unpopular man of knowledge, many of his ideas had been good.

But the gigantic effort it demanded was beyond the Kingdom of the North, the Rivers and the Vale.

Many specialist workers weren’t there to begin with; they would need to import them from the Free Cities in the first place. Mountains of gold and silver would be needed to pay for everything. The royal coffers didn’t contain half of what was required.

And it wouldn’t be an effort lasting one or two years. To match the shipbuilding abilities of a sea-oriented Free City like Braavos, the Arsenal policy had to be maintained every year, moon after moon.

Honestly, Eon knew half of the Lords would revolt due to the taxes strain before the first year was over.

“I am going to see what I can do.” Eon Grafton promised unhappily. Of course now that there was a high chance a naval war was going to set the northern Narrow Sea aflame, Alyn Velaryon was nowhere to be found. The Gods loved to laugh at the blindness of mortals, didn’t they?

**Keyholder Benvenuto Reyaan, Eleventh Moon of 139AC, Palace of Truth, Braavos**

Benvenuto Reyaan was afraid.

The ageing Keyholder was not afraid enough to not feel ashamed with himself.

Twenty-eight days since his old friend had been murdered less than a nautical mile away from the Palace of Truth, and Benvenuto had done nothing.

No wonder the killers pretending to be water-dancers paraded in front of his Palace and felt free to call him ‘Fat Carp’ and other injurious nicknames.

Benvenuto was a coward.

He had always been a coward. For most of his life, his mercantile interests had followed those of other prestigious Merchant Houses, and it had not bothered him.

Some part of him pushed him to change that. Some part of him wanted to draw his sword and make a stand, for the first time in decades.

The cowardly part of him, which dominated his heart and his head, refused. Many of the Keyholders who had been assassinated had been replaced by young fools. If he drew a rapier or any weapon in the Hall of Truth, it would be his turn to die.

And then the crowd outside would tear him apart, mutilating him and feeding him to the fishes of the canals, like hundreds before him had been this last moon.

It was cowardice, yes. But it was also why of all the old faction of merchants-keyholders, he was among the rare few who were left.

The rest of the most important men of the Republic had all rallied the winner. Benvenuto didn’t know if it was by fear of being murdered like Ludovico and the others were, or by simple political calculus.

What he knew was that they had sold their souls to the highest bidder and the price to be paid was going to be terrible.

The crowd was shouting and cheering outside.

It was like the sound of thunder, except it was made by twenty thousand throats.

It was a barely controllable mob, and only the promise of an easy victory against Pentos kept an appearance of order overall. How long was it going to stay that way?

Assuming they won against Pentos – and they were going to win, Benvenuto admitted most of his peers had had no idea until the last fortnight of the terrible titan’s sword to annihilate their southern neighbour – the Head of House Reyaan feared the plunder and the blood of the slave-owning Pentoshi would quench the blood thirst for fewer than five years before they searched for other victims. And once Pentos was conquered, all their neighbours were going to arm themselves, if they had a modicum of intelligence.

“Keyholders, Men of the Seas, Proud Electors of the Hall of Truth, it is my greatest pleasure and my privilege to present you your new Sealord, Salvatore Zalyne!”

Naturally, a torrent of applause engulfed the Palace.

Benvenuto clapped his hands. It wasn’t like he had the choice: many ‘water-dancers’ had invited themselves in the hall, and not showing any sign of loyalty could be met with unpleasant consequences.

All the while his eyes stayed focused on the new Sealord, the man who had made sure the ballots and the canals turned red with blood.

Salvatore was a middle-aged man, who had entered his forties one year ago. Like many of the men he led, he refused to grow a beard, instead shaving it his chin as much as he could, so that no one could miss his arrogant jaw.

No one could deny he was tall and muscled, it had to be said. Even the tallest of his guards next to him was half a head smaller. And he hadn’t chosen to wear the Sealord’s hat today to make himself look taller.

No, Salvatore Zalyne didn’t need the hat. He had come to the Palace of Truth with the traditional cape of dark purple, but underneath everything was the colour of gold. If anything, it made him look even more threatening. The presence of his two brothers and a company worth of their most dangerous guards added to this dangerous presence. Enrico and Napoleone Zalyne would have been men to be wary about on their own a year ago: when supporting their brother, they had made a mockery of the principles the Republic believed into.

Tradition and law commanded no member of your family was to be named among the Swords, the Magistrates, or the Ambassadors.

Since half of the laws and every tradition he was aware of had been trampled in these murderous parodies of elections, Benvenuto didn’t have any hope left this last principle was going to be left standing by the end of the day.

“Keyholders, Men of the Seas, Proud Electors of the Hall of Truth, I have come as your Sealord today to speak about the victorious war which will spread the First Law across Essos and beyond!”

The roars of the crowd became louder and louder. Benvenuto realised after a turn of hourglass that he was shaking from head to toe.

“Forgive me, old friend,” he whispered, thinking of Ludovico, “but the Republic is now at the mercy of the mob...”

**Author’s note**:

If you want to avoid war, it is best for the two sides to be unwilling to trigger the bloodbath...

The War of the Beard is going to begin. No one now, not Queen Baela, not the Prince of Pentos, and none of our other protagonists can stop it anymore.

Winter is coming.