**Chapter 33**

**Birth of Heretics**

**Lord Larys Strong**

“We should arrest these traitors!”

Larys almost smiled at the vehemence in his chosen successor’s voice. Well, the young man who might in time rise to become his successor if the plans of Gods and men didn’t destroy his schemes.

“Suppose I advise our King to do exactly that,” the old Master of Whisperers said. “What then?”

The juvenile face of Ser Joffrey Cuy frowned as he thought about the potential consequences of his proposal.

“We are removing many traitors from our ranks,” the young Reach knight said, his small beard not furbished enough to hide the tremble of hesitation made by his lips.

“Only some, I’m afraid,” Larys replied, “at least half a score are Black merchants coming to sell at exorbitant prices how little amber and furs they are disposed to give us.”

Thank the Mother and the Father that for the present time, the maesters of the Citadel were all confirming they had a year of summer ahead and the Northern goods – save timber and salt – weren’t desperately needed in the markets. Because there were many things that promised to be very, very expensive, and the coffers of the realm did not replenish with a ‘please’.

“The King would arrest his subjects who take the silver of the Blacks, but the real culprits would be thrown on their ships or their chariots and told to never set a foot in King’s Landing again.”

“Would it not be worthwhile?”

“Some of these men and women are real merchants,” Larys pointed out, “with all the connections and resources it implies. Ban one with too little evidence, and they will spread the words how tyrannical and unfair the Green Council is to traders who serve under a Black banner.”

“I’m not sure I would say the evidence is ‘light’!” protested Joffrey, his light brown hair taking golden aspects under the sun coming to light the room where Larys taught him what he knew.

“We have only oral hearsay and no written proof of their spying,” and they wouldn’t have any parchment or other form of written message; unless he was gravely mistaken, the spies and the agents employed by Lady Frey were only writing their reports when they were several leagues away from the Iron Throne.

Sometimes, having a terrifying reputation was more a pox for your day-per-day duties than anything else.

“We would cause more damage between the commerce between the two kingdoms, which isn’t exactly up to normal levels in the first place. Having removed the previous Black spies, most of our days for the coming months would be spent on discovering who their replacements are. We would create more problems to the King in his efforts to stabilise the realm. And if we have to examine the situation with a serious eye, the agents of our enemies have not obtained much at all from them.”

“They know Prince Aemon is now a dragonrider, my Lord, and of the death of the High Septon which will be announced later tomorrow. And that the health of Lady Hightower has fallen further. And I think they may have gotten hints of the Council’s plans to build advanced siege engines.”

Larys found himself nodding, satisfied that at least Joffrey had a good head on his shoulders, though the young Reacher was often a bit too militant for his taste. But then, it was why the former Lord of Harrenhal had chosen him as a potential successor, no? Larys, for all his talents and competence, had failed badly many, many times in finding out conspiracies and treasons, age was taking its toll, and he was a stranger in the Seven Kingdoms, having never been part of the martial culture surrounding the Iron Throne.

“Indeed, indeed. But what sort of advantages the information will bring? The purple-scaled dragon of our vigorous Prince”, the Queen had taken to complain about the fact that when her second son wasn’t asleep or eating, he was reminding the entire Red Keep of his existence, “is something they would have learned sooner or later. The same is true for the death of the High Septon.”

And Larys’ money was on the ‘sooner’. Despite his best effort at compartmenting the information coming out of the Council meetings, every participant was opening his mouth to inform wife, friend, servants, and allies of the good and bad news. At King’s Landing, a secret in the morning was often shouted in the alleys of the Street of Silk before sunset.

“The health of Lady Alicent, while it will give reason to some Lords on the other side of the frontier to raise their cups in celebration, will not provoke anything else. And without the plans and the minds which made the siege engines, the Blacks will be forced to pour money in siege engineers if they want to equal us in that domain.”

“I don’t know...” the young Cuy knight answered. “They may wait before we have finished models before trying to steal the plans.”

“It is not impossible,” Larys recognised, creating a look of surprise in the eyes of his ‘apprentice’. “Oh yes, I’m sure it would be quite the coup if they achieved that. But I don’t think Lady Frey, Lord Tully or one of the Lords and Ladies who have sent us these agents have in mind something as petty as mere thievery. The Black Council is more interested in building roads, bridges and castles, and their brightest minds and maesters are entirely turned in that direction. The few siege engineers they have are kept east of the Golden Tooth.”

When his liege had asked, Larys had admitted it was likely the best usage the Blacks could get out of their gold-empty treasury. Most of the kingdoms the Blacks were reigning over had been wastes after the Dance; the North and the Vale, because of the weather conditions, the Iron Isles and the Riverlands, because of the war destruction. Repairing what had been burned and pillaged, and building important roads and goods to increase trade was going to be far more economically profitable than a few siege engines.

It was still going to cost a lot of silver to Queen Baela Targaryen, but by all evidence and rumours he had been able to gather, the successor of Rhaenyra had given her approval to a lot of projects and not given suit to plenty of war stratagems the Reach, the Stormlands and the other Southern kingdoms were working upon.

Quite clearly, dragons remained the main weapon the Blacks intended to use if war came again. For the moment, it was hardly disadvantageous for them, since they had Sheepstealer to challenge Tessarion, and the two baby dragons of Crown Prince Viserys and Prince Aemon were more than a decade away from being ready for battle.

“I’m sure Lady Lannister will be happy if we keep an eye on them,” the brown-bearded Reacher whispered.

“Yes, it wouldn’t do to find one day the Blacks are marching to storm the household of Lord Lefford.” Not seeing that coming would certainly be cause for dismissal. “But I can’t disperse too much the efforts of the agents we sent north too. It’s getting more difficult to get golden information in public or in private; not only Crownlanders and Reachers are instantly recognised when they are found in places they aren’t supposed to go to, and the old enmities of the previous conflict are still simmering everywhere.”

This was inconvenient, in a lot of ways. Larys had dearly hoped that his successor or his successor’s successor might see the grand vision of the Conqueror be forged anew and the Seven Kingdoms restored, if not under Daeron’s rule, then during his son’s reign.

Every time he heard there had been a lynching or a crime committed because the victim was rumoured to be a Black or a Green sympathiser, his heart became heavier.

The realm had been prosperous, and they, both Blacks and Greens, had put a terrible end to this prosperity. Unity was a dream, and it was going to stay that way for long, long years.

“Any news from the man we tried to send to Winterfell by White Harbor?”

“No my Lord...and I dearly hope the rumour Lord Manderly tortured him by serving him snails, garlic, parsley and mushrooms at every meal are false...”

**Queen Baela Targaryen**

The atmosphere of Winterfell in the middle of spring was a complete opposite to the castle buried in the snow she had visited last winter. Evidently, there was no white mantle covering the lands of the North, and there had been few young children born. When the blizzards were on the horizon, many families had sent their old and young mouths south of the Neck to ensure there would be a new summer.

The cycle of seasons had continued after this terrible winter, of course. And if the Gods were good, the two babies sleeping in her sister’s arms would live to see many, many springs and winters.

“Congratulations for securing the future in a single pregnancy,” Baela said in a low tone. The babies were now sleeping, it wouldn’t do at all to wake them up.

“Some people would say the duty of a woman isn’t complete until she has provided an heir and a spare,” Rhaena murmured, trying to not show her amusement and failing.

“Give me the names, I will bring them before Moondancer to show them the error of their ways,” the Queen of the Blacks smiled evilly before shaking her head. “Seriously sister, a boy and a girl is good enough for me, and I will proclaim high and loud it’s good for the realm. So...the names?”

“We agreed it would be Theon if it was a son and Aera if it was a girl,” her twin whispered.

The young sovereign of the North, Vale and Riverlands was often reminded that for all her beautiful smiles and insistence she wasn’t a warrior, her twin was as vindictive as she when she wanted it to be, and naming her son and eldest child in memory of a warrior who was arguably one of the greatest Kings of the North the Starks remembered was typical of her.

“I’m not familiar with the name of Aera,” that said, it didn’t mean a lot of things; since she wasn’t pregnant, study of names wasn’t among her priorities for the moment.

“She was a famous dragonrider of Volantis who distinguished herself in the Last Ghiscari War.”

“I like it,” Baela commented and the eldest twins present in the room smiled to each other in a dragon-like manner. They did not bear too much enmity to their cousin Daeron personally, but the Green cause as a whole had cost a terrible price to the Targaryen dynasty, and if messages had to be sent to warn certain Southerners the dragon still had fangs, so be it. “And I like the legacy you have given to our House...”

“You always like babies when they’re not shouting in your ears...not too disappointed they don’t have the perfect Targaryen looks?”

The two new children of her sister were indeed already far from the Valyrian ideal, as the slim duvet which was going in time to become hair was a dark brown for both of them.

“No...They are my nephew and niece, and they can be blonde or red-haired for all I care, as long as they’re yours and you love them.” Besides, Baela and Rhaena had always known this was a possibility. The dragonseeds of Dragonstone, King’s Landing and plenty of other locations had informed decades and maybe centuries ago that when a dragonlord shared the bed of a person not having a shred of Valyrian blood, the silver hair were not a trait which was always given to the children. “And they have our eyes. I’m happy to see that on this, they’ve inherited from you.”

They couldn’t be seen presently, since the noble Theon and Aera Stark were sleeping with all the grace one could expect from babies of their age, but every maid and servant in the castle was already gushing about the splendid purple eyes of the new children born in the great castle of Winterfell.

“I love them, though I wish it wasn’t so exhausting and so long to carry two babies in my belly,” Rhaena breathed out, gently touching the cheek of her son – who also happened to be the Heir of the Heir of Winterfell – before narrowing her eyes as Baela posed two objects on the bed that any Targaryen was able to recognise immediately. “You’re not wasting any time, don’t you?”

“All the writings insist the eggs have to be placed close to the newborn children as soon as possible to increase the chances. And it’s not exactly like I have a lot of babies to propose them to.”

Nettles and her daughter were, barring any catastrophe or Green’s stupid move, the last time dragonseeds would be ennobled and tied by blood and dragons to the Targaryen dynasty. There had been one loyal man and a loyal woman in the lot, but there had also been two traitors, and it was two too many. For now, Baela and Rhaena would work with what they had and reconsolidate the kingdoms they ruled over with trueborn children, not sons and daughters born on the wrong side of the sheets.

“You chose the eggs of Meleys?”

Baela shrugged.

“I think they’re the eggs of Meleys, yes,” the crimson colour and the thin bronze marks were a big clue as to the identity of the mother. “They’re nearly identical, I took them with me...just in case.”

“I’m touched,” her twin smiled before handing her Aera, the red and grey cloaking her body making the difference with her slightly older brother. “Take your niece for me, I believe Theon is about to wake up...”

A prediction more than verified a few minutes later, as the descendant of the Hungry Wolf proved beyond doubt he had healthy lungs.

**Ser Gyles Royce**

“Consider me impressed. I have rarely seen a project, never mind one of this size, respect the schedule one fixed during a Council.”

Gyles freely admitted that even after the first ‘new model’ road in the Vale was done, he had expected the Riverlands project to meet a lot of delays. The lands belonging to the Mallisters of Seagard and the Frey of the Twins were nowhere near as mountainous or hilly as the terrain the road-builders had to cross to link Gulltown and the Bloody Gate, but it had other problems: during spring, everything became a sea of mud, many bridges passing over the great and small rivers pouring into the Blue and Green Forks were ruined, and the Riverlands were known to be a kingdom where every Lord and knight had millennia-old running feuds with his neighbours.

Yet watching the dragon flames in the distance, it was painfully obvious that the road-builders and Sheepstealer had progressed exactly according to their difficult schedule, despite weather and human complications.

“The teams hired for the road-building are extremely experienced now, and we have managed to add a couple of hundred more young men to the daily duties,” Eon Grafton, Master of Coin and Treasurer of the road project, answered modestly. “Give it four or five more days, and the road section between Seagard and Fairmarket will be complete. I will, of course, use it to return to the capital with a large party of inspectors to ensure the work has been correctly done.”

Judging how the Lord of Gulltown spoke, he was not expecting a lot of trouble on that front.

“Good. I suppose the work on the Seagard-Twins section will begin immediately after?”

“As the stone and other materials we need for the project are here, I see no reason too. Time wasted is money lost, and the more time we spend near Seagard, the more men will have occasions to get royally drunk and do a lot of things I’m sure you’re very familiar with.”

The knight of Runestone saw really no reason to do more than a smirk to protest his innocence. The rumours about certain of his adventures when he had been a squire had become legends in the Vale’s taverns and beyond.

“And after that, I’m sure there are already plenty of suggestions where the road-builders must go next...”

“Stranger, yes!” The Master of Coin groaned. “Every day I have merchants and knights who want a new road to arrive in front of their tower or their village...for a third of the cost it costs the treasury and with a smile, of course.”

Gyles nodded with a sympathetic expression. The office of Master of Coin was well-paid, the income was superior to his own as Master of Law, but the responsibilities and the pressure of their peers were also far greater.

“We will have to make a pause by the end of this road’s triangle anyway,” Eon revealed in a low tone. “The money entering the coffers from the road in the Vale is not enough to cover all the costs of the River road, and the gold we have is replenishing too slowly. Plus Nettles doesn’t want to stay too long in the south, and where she goes, Sheepstealer goes.”

Yes, that would stop the project in a hurry. Any group of road-builders could deliver a road with enough preparations, funds, and hands available, but without a dragon, the ‘new model’ roads were impossible to finish.

“But the Queen will return soon, and Moondancer, while far smaller than Sheepstealer, is as capable to help in road-building.”

“I won’t deny that,” Eon replied as several men-at-arms of House Mallister walked nearby their observation post on the tall walls. “But our Queen had not given her assent or the funds for more roads before her departure for Winterfell. And there’s also the issue of the great harvests coming and the summer’s weather to take into account.”

“Yes, we’re all going to be very busy the year to come.” It wasn’t an exaggeration; the entire realm was like an anthill mobilising for food gathering, except of course it wasn’t ants which were in the fields and rebuilding the Riverlands, but thousands, tens of thousands of smallfolk, and the effect was breathtaking on the hills and the plains of the Riverlands. Gyles had toured several times the region after the end of the war, and when the weapons had finally been sheathed, the knight of Runestone had believed like many that this smoking ruin would need at least a century to recover from the devastation of the Kinslayer’s raids and the ruin the army had inflicted on non-warriors and hundreds of villages.

But the Riverlands were alive again, and while they were far, far from the prosperity under King Viserys, no one was starving, hamlets were resettled and families returned to lordships they had abandoned a few years ago. “Which is why I think it’s all the more important to have a great project for the year of one hundred and thirty-six.”

“I know what you’re going to say,” the Master of the Royal Treasury passed a hand in his superb beard. “You desire that this new road link the Twins and the Bloody Gate.”

“Yes, I do,” Gyles admitted. “First, it will greatly increase the pace we can muster the armies of the Vale and protect our convoys from the bloody clans, snow or no snow. Secondly, we will have an excellent system of roads far away from the frontier that the Greens won’t be able to reach, unless they decide to use their dragons.”

The flame-breathing lords of the sky had the power to unmake plenty of war rules by their mere presence in this world.

“Thirdly, the markets and the merchants of the Vale will be for the first time really tied to the rest of the realm.”

“Saltpans’ merchants and captains may not like your plans,” his fellow member of the Black Council told him sardonically.

“Please,” Gyles rolled his eyes, “it’s not like the goods we transport by road and by sea are the same. Salt, large cargoes of metal, timbers, mostly everything which is naval furniture like masts or anchors will still require ships. The new roads are a neat improvement, but you would need hundreds of chariots to move the heaviest goods, and I’m not sure there are enough horses and donkeys to tow across the mountains half of the shipments Saltpans discharge every moon.”

“I...I won’t disagree with you on this,” the Master of Coin accepted as a servant brought them some refreshments, as the atmosphere was pleasantly warm despite the wind from the sea. “But there are other possibilities. The North also wants its own roads, since they’ve been denied one so far. And in the Riverlands, many of Lord Tully’s bannersmen are pushing to continue the road through Fairmarket until Stone Hedge.”

“And with Stone Hedge reached, they would next insist for a new road from Riverrun to Saltpans, maybe even Maidenpool,” simply knowing the terrain and the main merchant tours in the Riverlands was enough to arrive at this conclusion. “But to make the project useful, we shall need great stone bridges over the Red and Blue Forks. That’s not a minor issue.”

Gyles had no idea how much it had cost to House Frey and whoever had been sponsoring them to build a bridge over the Green Fork, but it had certainly not been cheap. And it would take a bridge of that width, if you wanted two chariots to cross from opposite shores without throwing one in the river flowing to the Trident.

“Gold,” Eon Grafton laughed. “Ask me anything but gold...”

**Lord Royce Caron**

Royce believed himself to be a very fair man. So when he said to his family or to any Lord he was in friendly terms that King Daeron was a man difficult to anger, it was not something to attract himself the attention of the courtiers plaguing the spring court or increase his not-insignificant influence. As the Master of Laws of the realm, the ageing Lord of the Marches believed himself above that kind of petty things.

However, if someone asked him whether the King was reasonable when sufficiently angered, the answer was not going to be met by a positive reply, at least if he chose to remain honest and truthful.

“WHO DOES HE BELIEVE HE IS, THIS CRYSTAL-CROWNED FOOL?”

And to say things had been quiet lately...quiet for Westeros, that is. A new dragon had hatched, the Queen’s cadet sister Lady Maris had finally consented to wed a son of Lord Staedmon, and her younger sister Flora was going to be married a second time after having been united to Lord Rowan for a very short amount of time, though this time the nuptials were less prestigious as the groom was a Tyrell of a cadet line.

There had been no skirmishes, no assassinations, and no terrifying threats against the capital or the kingdom as a whole.

It was this moment the High Septon had chosen to die.

And his replacement, at the choice of wielding understatement like a warhammer, was not to the taste of the King.

“Does this bastard know how much damage he has caused with his first speeches?” The Green monarch spat. The Lord of Nightsong was going to take the fact his sovereign was not shouting anymore as a good sign.

“Yes, your Grace,” the Master of Laws said respectfully. “I think our new High Septon knew perfectly well the effect of his speech was going to have. You don’t get the nickname of ‘Firebrand’ as a preacher and get elevated to the position of Most Devout on fanaticism alone.”

“Maybe he made a mistake...”

Or maybe the ‘Firebrand One’, the new ‘Holiness’ of the Seven-Who-Are-One, had prepared the ground well ahead of him and judged that the risks of everything coming out of his mouth were worth the gains.

“Maybe,” Royce answered with the tone of a man who didn’t believe a single word of it. “In fact, I think the High Septon should have really turned his tongue seven times in his mouth and restrained himself to the usual entrance’s platitudes, because for one thing, the Blacks are simply convinced this is one more good reason to not be sworn to the Iron Throne. The problems of the Dance convinced plenty of people that the High Septon was siding with whoever held King’s Landing, and respect for the higher echelons of the Faith had already taken a bad turn in the Riverlands and elsewhere.”

There was no need to speak about the North; the Starks and their bannersmen tolerated the New Gods at best, massacred them at worse.

“There are going to be protestations from Black envoys,” Daeron predicted with a grimace. “My cousin is many things, but according to Larys, she has a viper’s tongue when priests try to force her to do something she doesn’t like. And our new High Septon just declared over one-third of her realm heretics, with the rest ‘actively helping the corruption of the tree-lover pagans’.”

“Don’t forget the succession issue,” the Marcher Lord commented. “If really the succession is always settled in favour of men no matter the outcome, then we might as well declare Lady Arryn illegitimate...and that also weakens immensely the Regencies of Lady Lannister and Lady Tyrell.”

“You’re very courteous today, Lord Caron,” Daeron slammed his hand against the surface of the table in a fit of spite. “You haven’t said that obviously, if we take the High Septon’s words in the spirit and the letter they were uttered, no woman can claim the Seven Kingdoms as long as there’s a single male who has any blood claim to the crown.”

No need to be the most intelligent man of the world to see that Daeron was less than enthused with the prospect. Yes, he had two sons today, but who knew what the future had in store for the Green King and his family?

“We aren’t in a position to invade the Black Kingdom or even to make the preparations of an invasion at the moment.” Royce Caron didn’t even raise an eyebrow at this acknowledgement. They were outnumbered two battle-ready dragons to one, assuming that Rhaena Targaryen had just given birth at Winterfell as the rumours from merchants had informed them. “Throwing wildfire into the religious flames of discord is the last thing I want at the moment.”

“With due respect, I think we must remove the problem of this High Septon,” Royce declared firmly. “I’ve not been able to read in totality the pamphlets his subordinates spread in the streets, but for all intent and purposes he’s ready to declare everything the Blacks do to be heresy. That includes the new roads, the taxation system, the law and religious reforms of the Riverlands...I don’t know what he can do in exchange, however.”

“He will refuse to loan any money to the Iron Throne, I suspect.”

Yes, it made sense. Naturally, it was a weapon which hurt both parties; whatever they said about the sins of usury, the repayment of the loans the Faith generously ‘gifted’ to the faithful children of the Seven-Who-Are-One were helping the high-ranking septons to maintain the pomp and the prestige of the massive septs.

As long as the Lannisters were maintaining their loaning terms, the realm should endure the displeasure of the Faith from this direction...but if the High Septon began to vociferously call for war and the King said quite another thing, they were in very big trouble, and not just because dragonfire was a very unpleasant thing. It was the stability of the Iron Throne which was at stake.

“But...”

“But yes, you’re correct. This High Septon must be removed. We can’t let him stroke the fires of war, contest successions like the Rowan one, or preach endlessly about heresy and how our northern neighbours are horrible demons spreading corruption and vice wherever they go. We can’t win this war without a dozen miracles; but if Dorne tries some revenge war when we are assailed through the Reach-Riverlands border, the Blacks can and will win. I have no love for assassins, but I think it’s time for one to remove a thorn from this kingdom’s side.”

“Should we contact certain Braavosi agents, in that case?”

“No,” Daeron refused curtly. “Larys’ told me the price of the last time, and it was for some treacherous Archmaesters. I don’t even want to know what they would ask for a High Septon...”

**Princess Aliandra Martell**

“They died on the same day? For a coincidence...”

Aliandra drank some cold water and savoured the fresh sensation of cold flowing through her body before turning her head towards her uncle again.

“It is a coincidence, isn’t it?”

Lord Manfrey Gargalen’s expression was not exactly encouraging.

“The circumstances surrounding the first death are highly suspicious. The new High Septon, the ‘Firebrand One’ I believe he was nicknamed at King’s Landing, had nowhere near the generosity and the tolerance of his predecessor. This ‘holy man’ convinced a majority of the Most Devout to back his very militant proposals, including the removal of many old treaties signed between the Faith and the Lords living north of the Neck. Thus I have some difficulties to believe the man died of indigestion less than a fortnight after having the crystal tiara posed on his head.”

“It could be a genuine accident,” Aliandra said. “I have spoken with Lord Dayne, and he told me that four out of five old septons of the Starry Sept of Oldtown are lecherous gluttons. If these men fail to recognise gluttony is a sin, it’s not impossible the ones of King’s Landing share the same flaws.”

“Oh, I don’t doubt the ‘Firebrand One’ was at least a minor glutton,” her mentor in politics answered slowly. “It’s just that since most of the Most Devout and the High Septon are eating at the same table during the ceremonies before and after an ascension of this prestige, I think more should have died if this was a case of tainted meat, bad eggs, or rotten vegetables.”

Aliandra tried to find a flaw in this reasoning, but failed to find one.

“But if more people had died, poison could have been involved too.”

“Yes, it could,” agreed her uncle. “But I’m sure I don’t have to tell you who profits from this death?”

Aliandra shook her head. Indeed, it wasn’t necessary. The person who had the most to lose when the High Septon desired a new war was King Daeron Targaryen himself. But it made the second death all the more mysterious.

“It’s true the King on the Iron Throne had every reason to be rid of this turbulent priest, much like he rid himself of treasonous Archmaesters,” the Dornish Princess stated, “but there’s no reason why he would want to kill his own mother.”

An old servant refilled her cup with more cold water, and Aliandra drank again. Late spring was always a warm period in Dorne, but this one promised to be even warmer, according to the elders.

“Really, I don’t even know why anyone would want to kill this old crone.” A decade ago, it would not have been the same tale, of that the Princess of Dorne was certain. But a decade ago, Lady Alicent Hightower was still Queen, beautiful, and had tens of thousands of swords and a colossal fortune at her disposal. The King was her husband, the realm was – mostly – at peace, and her influence knew no bounds.

These days none of that was true anymore. The agents taking their gold in the Green court all insisted the wife of the defunct and unlamented King Viserys I looked like a broken crone and acted the part. Certain courtiers and knights were even whispering her wits were no more and the ‘broken Queen’ was crazy.

Undoubtedly, there were certainly men and women who hated the Hightower-born Queen, since not everyone had burned in the terrible war her plots had led the Seven Kingdoms to, but these days even the bitterer Blacks were voicing high and loud that her current fate after the Dance was far more terrible than anything they could have imagined.

Two sons out of three, one daughter, and many grandchildren had died, House Hightower’s influence and armies were gone, and while her last son sat on the Iron Throne, the price had been titanic and had divided the Targaryen kingdom in two parts.

None of this explained why Queen Dowager Alicent Targaryen had been found in her quarters with a dagger still embedded in her heart.

It was clearly not the act of a woman willing to take her own life, no one had seen this dagger before and no letters of farewell or forgiveness had been found. Moreover, for all her sins and problems, the woman was noted to pray a lot these last years, and if there was something the Faith had in horror, it was of its people killing themselves and thus damning their immortal souls.

“I don’t envy the Master of Laws of King Daeron on that one,” no clues about any of the two assassins, and if the King had truly given the order to kill the High Septon, searching seriously for the hired blade was an exercise fraught with peril.

“Neither do I. But the old Commander of the City’s Watch assured King Daeron his Goldcloaks wouldn’t rest until the culprits were caught.”

Aliandra chuckled.

“The Goldcloaks? Really, uncle? These pathetic band of cutthroats which show sometimes bravery when their opponent is a defenceless soldier presenting an unprotected back to them? The guards who sell their cloaks for two gold coins and will turn them again when there is a better offer? Those Goldcloaks?”

“Yes, those Goldcloaks,” Manfrey Gargalen approved. “Who knows, maybe they will find someone competent to lead the investigations...”

“And maybe if I ask every day for the rest of my life, our northern neighbours will return us all the lands they have taken and half of their treasury to boot.” Aliandra wasn’t going to waste her breath on it. “Now how goes the meetings with the Black agents in the fair city of Myr?”

**Lord Walder Reyne**

“Your plan failed, brother.”

“I know our plan failed, Tywald!”

Walder struck his desk with the strength of a Lord of Reyne, which did absolutely nothing to the black wood to the furniture. Build for his great-grandfather, the desk had seen pass many Lords Reyne, and few had left deep marks on it, physically or literally.

“Your plan,” sneered Walder’s youngest brother.

“Our plan,” corrected the Lord of Castamere. “May I remind you who gave you the silver you dilapidated in useless assassins and false Black coins which will serve to nothing?”

“May I remind you that your little idea to push for the election of this High Septon was an expensive waste of time?”

Lord Walder Reyne continued glaring at his youngest brother, wondering if sometimes, it would not be better to call the guards and throw this long-nosed sibling in the deepest and darkest cell of their ancestral home. And given how deep the mines under the hills of the region went, even the average cells were worse than the Dark Cells of the Red Keep.

Tywald had a lot of ideas...and often no idea how to move them from parchment to the Game of Thrones. It was a flaw any Lord could have forgiven, except when one plan failed, his brother conveniently ‘forgot’ immediately that it had been his idea and his suggestions which had led them to disaster in the first place.

“Yes, we lost moons and thousands of silver coins with this demise,” the High Septon had been supposed to help them remove the Lannister bitch from her position of Regent and then the last Lord Lannister would have a tragic accident. Or several tragic accidents, it was difficult to kill all the cousins and blood relations in one day after all. “What I want to know is why your ‘masterly’ agents gave us absolutely no warning of the Iron Throne’s intentions!”

“We can’t be lucky every time...”

“Tywald!” Walder barked. “You assured me your agents had infiltrated the organisation of our dear Master of Whisperers, the senile Clubfoot. You said five days ago you had everything in hand at the capital and soon we would be free to take the titles and lands who are ours by right. What. Are. Your. Agents. Doing?”

“They have...failed to contact our overseers on the Gold Road this last fortnight. But I am sure...”

“Destroy the evidence and everything which might link them to us,” the Master of the second wealthiest House of the Westerlands commanded. “Larys Strong must NOT find anything which might convince we are behind some of his latest problems.”

“You’re not serious,” Tywald protested. “Have you any idea how expensive-“

“I don’t care,” Walder confessed. “These agents are a rope for our necks, and I will not let it strangle me. Destroy all evidence, be it in parchments, silver and gold, or assassins and sellswords.”

“This will delay our plan by years!” complained his youngest brother. “The Regency of the lioness will long be over!”

“We have waited long for the chance to siege in the halls of Casterly Rock and take the title of King of the West,” the Lord of Castamere dismissed the argument with the tone it deserved. “I’m sure we can wait a few more years.”

**Author’s note**: The bad relations between Lord Tywin Lannister and some red lions did not come out of nowhere...the current Reynes would love to hear their name be recited with the addition ‘Lord Paramount of the Westerlands and Master of the Rock’. A pity for them that too often, their ambition is ten times bigger than their own skills...

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