**Chapter 46**

**Buffoons of Peace**

*All wars see thousands of highborn and smallfolk alike die, and the War of Lions was no exception.*

*How could it be when armies of thousands of warriors clashed with each other?*

*Unfortunately, as tragic as it sounded, the battles like the Second Butcher’s Ball, the Surprise of Lannisport, the Siege of Crakehall, or the Battle of the Lions before Cornfield had not seen that many souls died compared to the ravages the armies on the march did.*

*The Dance of the Dragons had proven not so long ago that commanders of Westeros could behave like the worst bandits upon their own vassals if they felt merchants, knights, and farmers had betrayed their cause.*

*This affirmation was verified beyond doubt as the treachery of the attainted Lord Walder Reyne of Castamere unfolded.*

*Villages which were loyal to House Lannister – or accused to be loyalists – were looted and burned by the Red armies. Discipline had never been a strong suit of the Reyne banners from the start, with hundreds of rapes confirmed before the Second Butcher’s Ball. After the death of the Grim Lord and the shameful retreat of Walder Reyne, all attempts to keep a facade of sanity failed. The Red bannersmen didn’t even care about who was on their side and who wasn’t anymore. The trail of devastation, burned homes and raped corpses, they left in their wake, would be remembered for generations.*

*While the forces to House Lannister were unquestionably better disciplined and far less prone to murder, they weren’t including saints either. Villages who had sworn their honour and their granaries to Lord Walder Reyne generally suffered heavily. The orders of Casterly Rock were to impose heavy taxes to every disloyal soul who had committed the sin to pledge himself or herself to the Red Lion, but too often a sign of hostility or defiance set the rage of the Rock’s swordsmen aflame. The Sarsfield Lordship in particular was a domain where rapes and gratuitous humiliations would be enacted for months, long after the fires of Cornfield were extinguished.*

*In these circumstances, one might be justified thinking the first steps on the path to peace would be extremely difficult, arduous to negotiate, and filled with bad faith and insults.*

*In reality, the end of the war was just a ridiculous buffoonery.*

Extract from the *War of the Lions* by Second Historian-Librarian Jonos Underhill, original written at Fairmarket, 160AC.

**King Daeron Targaryen**

Daeron breathed out in relief when the massive gates of Deep Den opened.

The youngest son of Viserys Targaryen had no desire to burn the seat of the Lydden traitors, but what a man desired and what a King had to do were two entirely different things.

This was why he had accepted drinking an absolutely awful-tasting beverage coming from the Summer Islands and suffered other foul ‘healing’ at his maester’s hands to be here today.

It wasn’t sufficient to heal his injured leg, not so soon, but it had allowed him to ride Tessarion and come here, to the camp of the Crown army he had sent to besiege the under-the-hill fortress barring the Gold Road.

The journey was short and uneventful. It was a good thing, for it had exhausted him.

Forget a dragonrider versus dragonrider fight, the Green King didn’t think he would be able to challenge and win a wooden sword duel against a ten years-old rascal.

“It seems, your Grace, that whoever Lord Lydden has left to guard his fortress has seen reason,” Lord Marq Merryweather smiled. “It is a good day for your realm.”

“Yes,” Daeron authorised himself a smile. “Yes, it is.”

Nobody had asked him the question if he would truly have incinerated Deep Den if its defenders didn’t surrender.

But Daeron knew the answer well in advance.

Yes, yes he would have done it.

Deep Den would have become a second Harrenhal.

After Walder Reyne’s betrayal, Daeron knew the last thing he could afford was a sign of weakness.

People could forgive him to not walk when his leg wasn’t fully healed. They would not be so ready to swear themselves to him if he proved unwilling to burn the oath-breakers.

Strength.

The Iron Throne was his by strength, fire, and blood.

This wasn’t something pleasing to think about.

Thankfully, it seemed he wouldn’t have to order his Blue Queen to kill thousands today so that this ugly rebellion’s last redoubt fell.

“I don’t recognise the men in the delegation...by the Father Above, what is that banner?”

“Your Grace! This is no parley banner, this is...err...it looks like a large white sheet drenched in...wine?”

From the royal seat – a very comfortable one ordered at King’s Landing – Daeron frowned and realised his Kingsguard was right.

This certainly looked...this certainly looked like a buffoonery.

If this was truly the castellan of Deep Den coming forwards, surely there should be more than three men willing to follow him right?

Normally, Daeron would have said it was a trap, but the ‘delegation’ of four had no bows, and their sword sheaths were all empty.

They had to wait...a surprisingly long time. Tessarion and himself were far out of range of the most lethal scorpion or trebuchet of the Lydden defenders, but for some reason, the man leading the delegation – who also was the one carrying the banner – was stopping to walk every ten steps as if walking straight was a divine effort.

All the men surrounding had the time to empty two cups of cold water taken in the nearby river before the wind turned.

And then the wind turned as the distance separating them from him was roughly a long spear long.

The odour...Daeron immediately recognised it. It was the smell of spilled wine by the barrel; it was something which could only come when you had emptied too many bottles to count.

“Your Gross! Your Grass! I am your dandiest servant!”

The banner-holder tried to bend the knee while holding the banner which ended in...well, the banner fell, and the posture he looked was more like he was prostrating himself.

“Don’t feed me to your dragon! Please! My wife would be too happy if I died!”

What?

This...this couldn’t be the Castellan of Deep Den.

According to the latest rumours, Lord Joffrey was dead, but surely there had to be...someone...some more competent than...this drunken knight.

“I don’t feed anyone to my dragon.” Daeron said patiently, and Tessarion huffed in approval. Obviously, the odour of wine must have disquieted his Blue Queen. “I’m afraid we were never introduced, Ser.”

“Ser Richard, Castellan of the Big Den, your Grass!” The man tried to stand, but only managed to stumble, and then land on his backside.

Hundreds of men began to snicker in their beards.

While they did so, Daeron began to wonder how the hell the ‘Red Rebellion’ had been organised without anyone noticing if it was the average skill of the conspirators.

“I presume then, Ser Richard, you are ready to surrender Deep Den.”

“Oh yes, your Gross! I surrender! I surrender! Please take my wife, the castle, the treasury! Just don’t feed me to your dragon! And send me way from Deep Horror! I don’t want to see her again!”

Next to him, Lord Marq began to laugh.

Daeron sent a betrayed look to his Hand. Lord Marq Merryweather had been a bastion of sanity in the last years, but now he was choosing this moment to laugh with the crowd?

“This is Joffrey’s fault! And my wife! And her sister! Women are terrifying creatures!” The drunken knight enumerated as more and more people succumbed to snickers, chuckles, or rolling onto the grass trying not to die in laughter. “They are guilty of grass rudeness! They are selfish! They beat tax collectors and stole plenty of gold!”

This...this had to be the weirdest surrender to ever happen. Experience had told Daeron that the traitors were trying to hide their crimes and treacheries, and when it wasn’t possible, they usually went on to find excuses. And it went without saying they did their best when the time of the verdict arrived to underestimate the size of their transgressions.

It was certainly a first to profess crimes you weren’t yet accused of...but then the man was joyously and ridiculously drunk.

It was a minor miracle of the Warrior that the Castellan could remember his own name, in all likelihood.

“Joffrey sired three bastards at King’s Pudding! And he paid his smiths with false gold! My wife is a viper! It’s all her fault I was the Castellan! I just wanted to drink good wine! Punish her! I prefer to go to the Wall! Your Grass!”

Daeron seriously contemplated sending the drunken idiot to the Night’s Watch for a good hourglass turn as more and more ridiculous things were uttered and his sworn swords didn’t stop laughing.

Regrettably, he decided it wasn’t worth the relief.

The Wall was not known for its wine or its ale, and there was a very high possibility the Black Brothers would kill Ser Richard Lydden immediately...because even among their ranks, there had to be some standards, as lamentable and low as they – undoubtedly – were.

“I am loyal! Don’t feed me to your dragon! I hate my wife!” To say things like that, the knight had not to frequent every night the marriage bed. “You have a beautiful digging...dragon! That’s a dragon! Pretty dragon!”

Tessarion took several steps back from her nesting position. Evidently, his Blue Queen wondered what sort of craziness possessed this human...

“Lord Marq!” Daeron ordered, knowing that if he didn’t stop this insanity now, nothing would be done. “Sound the trumpets and make sure the garrison of the castle come out without weapons. I have decided to agree with Ser Richard’s suggestions of not killing them for their oath-breaking!”

“At once, your Grace!” It would have been better if the Hand was not snickering before and after saying that.

“Your Gross Grass!”

Was it why Maegor the Cruel had turned out to be crazy before his thirtieth name day?

**Ser Richard Lydden**

Richard woke up, and all the weight of this unfair world struck him.

That or it was like the Seven Hells had been invited inside his head.

Everything was blurry and dancing too fast.

“Oh my head!” the not-so-valiant knight exclaimed.

“That is what happens when you drink too much wine, I’m afraid,” a sympathetic and unfamiliar voice answered.

Richard tried to turn his head fast...and regretted it.

The world danced. It was like the only time he was on a ship.

He felt ill.

Curiously, the urge to vomit wasn’t there.

Someone handed him a glass.

The Lydden knight emptied it instantly...and coughed as it was hellishly cold...not to mention it wasn’t *wine*!

“This...this is *water*?”

“I know, I know! This isn’t your favourite choice of drink, Ser Richard. But I need your mind clear for a short conversation.”

The fog clouding his mind was lifted several heartbeats later, and the Westerner felt his eyes widen.

Richard had never felt the green-clothed highborn in front of him, but there was no mistaking the golden chains and the symbol of the Hand.

This made his interlocutor Lord Marq Merryweather, Hand of the King...and this meant the fuzzy memories playing in his head had happened.

“It is...it is not a dream? I wasn’t dreaming?”

“Dreams,” the Reacher Lord’s mouth twisted largely, “don’t empty half of Deep Den’s wine reserves. Let it not be said you were wrong when you called it ‘liquid courage’ in front of a large audience.”

Richard moaned and placed his head between his hands.

“Oh, fuck me!”

“I wouldn’t dare,” the Hand of the King of course laughed, “and you are going to have difficulties doing it with your wife. You are officially divorced, by the way. The King has decided to send the woman you called the ‘viper’ to the Silent Sisters’ convent south of Oldtown.”

“The King decided to trust everything I said when I was...err...”

“Royally drunk?” Lord Marq politely suggested. “No, of course he did not. King Daeron is a very serious young man, unlike the rest of us. He summoned your wife as the next witness soon after you passed out and began to snore in the grass.”

The cousin of the deceased Lord Joffrey Lydden winced. Knowing the...awful temper of his wife, he could already guess how the ‘exchange’ played out.

“I suppose...I suppose she tried to present me as the worst traitor of the last one hundred years?”

“Oh, not at all!” The Lord of Longtable said in a genuinely satisfied tone. “This poison-tongued menace just tried to convince His Grace you were the confident, the mastermind, and the plan-maker behind Walder Reyne’s betrayal. She also insinuated you conspired to hand out several fortresses to the Black Queen in order to escape the King’s Justice if your rebellion wasn’t successful.”

“Well,” Richard passed a hand in his hair, “since I’m not in chains and the viper is bound for a convent, I suppose the King took my version of events over hers.”

“His Grace did. Of course, the fact half of the castle seemed to be inclined to take your wife’s side was another point in your favour. And they were not very clever, I might add. The arrival of Tessarion shocked them so much they didn’t even try to burn the incriminating evidence.”

The former Castellan of Deep Den went on to seat at the edge of the camp’s couch where he had been transported. His surroundings were very expensive – if he had to guess, the Merryweather tent had opulence enough for a Lord Paramount – but this luxury was rapidly forgotten as Richard struggled against the painful headache and the mass of consequences on their way to change his life.

“What is going to happen now?” He asked, dreading the answer.

“His Grace has decided over two scores of highborn who had taken refuge inside Deep Den will be given the choice between the Wall and the gallows. The King isn’t cruel, but there are crimes we don’t condone. Several women, including your wife, will be dispersed to the convents of the Silent Sisters across the realm. A new Lord of Deep Den will be chosen, though it won’t be from the Lydden line or anyone who had familial ties with them.”

Strangely, Richard didn’t feel that disappointed.

In fact, the more he thought about it, the more he was...relieved.

No matter how many men and women were punished for siding with Walder Reyne, it would never be enough to feel safe in the dark corridors or in his own bedroom.

“May they have better success than I had taming this treacherous den,” the Western knight said after a long hesitation.

“Yes,” the Hand of the King smiled, “you were...extremely vocal about this poor fortress while you were drunk.”

Richard’s head returned in his hands with a monumental groan.

“No one is going to let me forget I did this!”

“Oh, I am sure that in twenty years, there will be some people who won’t remember it...” Marq cleared his throat. “Assuming there is something more ridiculous to speak about.”

Richard groaned again.

“My poor Ser, you arrived in front of an entire army, the King, half of the royal court, and all the important knights which were present in this part of the realm. I’m sure the news are on their way to Winterfell and Sunspear by now.”

This wasn’t a dream...this was a nightmare.

His father had always told him to count his cups of wine...maybe he should have listened to the old bastard.

“Am I going to be a hostage at King’s Landing for the next years, then?”

This was the only thing that made sense, since his outburst with the Wall had been refused, and some of the other choices weren’t available for a knight of his age.

“Oh no, Ser Richard,” the smile of the Hand of the King grew wider. “King Daeron has found a duty suited to your...*unique talents*.”

The no-longer drunk knight didn’t like the sound of that. At all.

“My...unique talents?”

“Yes,” Lord Marq Merryweather nodded with all the pomp and dignity a Reacher highborn could show, “you are to be the new Ambassador to the Ironborn of Great Wyk.”

His mind came blank for a long time.

“Are you sure I can’t go to the Wall? Please?”

**Ser Tyland Lannister**

There were many traditions and many kingdoms in Westeros.

Some of them preached completely different customs where food, smiths, or merchants were concerned.

In the near totality of them, however, it was considered a most grievous insult to use the seat of a Lord without his permission.

In fact, even ‘insult’ may be understating the matter.

Tyland was sure at least half a dozen wars had begun that way in the Westerlands alone.

And if the smirk of Makaerys Belicho was any indication, this was something which applied to the Essossi nobles on the other side of the Narrow Sea.

Tyland didn’t really care, and he adjusted his position on the throne-chair of Cornfield like he was the rightful master of all Westeros.

He wasn’t, of course.

But the effect he hoped to gain was at least semi-successful, given how tense the seat’s owner was as he advanced through ‘his’ Hall of Roosters.

“Ah, Lord Lambert Swyft. How kind of you to join us today.”

The curtsy he received for answer was...very stiff.

“You have killed the chief traitor,” the Master of House Swyft replied with an undertone of anger, “there is no need for your victorious wrath to fall upon the shoulders of innocent bannersmen who were threatened with a thousand torments if they didn’t comply with Reyne’s ambitions.”

If Tyland had forgotten why he didn’t like Lambert, these words would have been sufficient to do it in a hurry.

The Lord of Cornfield had grown older since the last Tourney of Lannisport he jousted into, but his argument made clear he hadn’t changed at all.

Knights of House Swyft were generally known for their average jousters and melee fighters. They usually won one or two spear exchanges, and then were eliminated by a favourite. Lambert had been a bit better, but not that much. He had never been the type who reached the ten greatest and most renowned jousters of the realm.

Yet he always pretended there was something which had disadvantaged him at the last moment. His horse ate something wrong this morning. The weather was too hot. The sun had blinded him while he lowered his helm.

There were always apologies and something else to explain why the failure wasn’t his fault.

And it seemed the same was going to be true of this war.

“I see.” Tyland made the agreed sign to one of his Captains. “A thousand torments. It is an interesting way to describe the threat of the usurping fiend, my Lord.”

“Walder Reyne was a mad and brutish beast!” Lambert protested, clad in his armour of hypocritical self-righteousness. “If I had realised sooner the depths of his madness, I would have turned my spears immediately against him! House Swyft has no love for this tyrannical usurper!”

“No love,” Tyland maintained a calm and neutral expression. “So I should search from the top of your dungeons to the bottom of your cellars, I will find no supporter of the Great Traitor?”

“Absolutely none!”

Tyland nodded, and then nodded to his men. Two scores of his soldiers stopped blocking the entrance of the Hall of Roosters, and a long column of banner-holders advanced.

All of them carried the ‘Red Lion’s banners’ they had found in a secret basement next to the wine cellars.

It had been pure luck they found it so quickly; the men had been too eager to celebrate...but for once Tyland had forgiven them this guilty behaviour.

“Hmm...curious,” Makaerys Belicho played his part to his right. “It certainly sounds to me like the banners of traitors, Lord Swyft.”

“I couldn’t have said it better,” Tyland approved.

Their ‘host’, naturally, was on the verge of complete panic.

“This...this is madness, Lord Tyland!” Lambert spoke, fear burning in his eyes and mouth. “There were hundreds of these butchers’ banners taken on the fields of Cornfield! And more were taken in the carts stolen by the traitors! This doesn’t prove anything!”

For sole answer, the first banner-holder unfurled the piece of cloth at the top.

Many men and women in the audience hissed or gasped.

Lambert Swyft went livid.

Yes, the ‘Red Lion’ sigil could be explained easily, but the words ‘For Cornfield and King Walder’ were written damnation if there ever was one.

“I am innocent!”

“Next he is going to say his men didn’t kill a single loyal warrior,” Makaerys Belicho said with amusement. “That his knights didn’t dare touching a single virgin, and that they prayed for the salvation of pure souls seven times per day while fasting on some small pieces of bread and water.”

“This isn’t what happened!” Lambert roared angrily, before realising the trap he had just fallen into.

“Oh?” the Lannister knight inquired, as more and more traitorous banners were thrown into a neat pile at the attainted Lord’s feet. “Then my Lord, I can only ask you tell us your version of events. I’m sure it will be incredibly fascinating.”

“This...my cousin Ser Burton died to give you time. He gave his life to win the battle and the war!”

“I know,” Tyland admitted. And he regretted it had been Burton and not Lambert who had perished that day. “That’s the reason why we’re we having this conversation. Otherwise your head would already be on a pike. Now please your tale of the last months and the real reasons you betrayed us for Walder Reyne. Tell us your illuminating story, my Lord. And remember, we have a...satisfying amount of evidence to verify your claims.”

“You were supposed to burn the banners, idiots...” the whisper could only be heard by Tyland and a few others, but it was uttered.

“Well?”

“Damn the Red Lion!” Lambert moodily exclaimed. “What do you want to know...my Lord?”

**Lord Cerion Serrett**

Fortunately, the summer evenings in the middle of the hills were rather warm, tent or not.

It was a good thing, because his tent had been abandoned near Cornfield. So were all those of his men, for that matter.

And they couldn’t light a fire right now. Not when it risked revealing their position to their pursuers.

Yes, it was definitely a good thing it was summer.

“Relay my orders, Martyn. No fire tonight.”

“Yes, my Lord. But we’re going to have to stop soon. This track has been tortuous enough, and I don’t think it is prudent to continue our progression past sunset.”

Cerion nodded. They had stopped riding long ago and were now walking by the side of their horses, but this didn’t diminish the danger at all. Not when the most recent travellers to use this track might be animals.

“I’ve seen some village when we were at the top of the last hill. We should be able to reach it before nightfall.”

The legitimate Lord of Silverhill didn’t know if that was going to be possible, really. The hill they had climbed in the morning behind them was already illuminated in a vivid red colour.

Before Cornfield, the highborn Westerner would have said it was the sun honouring the Red King and the red banners. Now it all felt like mockery.

The King was dead.

Their armies had been slaughtered, and most of their allies had turned cloak, or entirely ‘forgotten’ their promises.

Anger burned in heart again, but it rapidly faded.

Cerion felt exhausted. The more steps he took, the more his bones reminded him he wasn’t a young man anymore.

He wasn’t young, and he had no one he could trust to become the heir to his legacy. His daughter had betrayed him...and with her betrayal, Silverhill was lost.

“We were loyal, and we lost everything...” He murmured, before admonishing himself for this pathetic lamentation. What was done was done.

Bemoaning about his fate would not give him back the castle which rightfully belonged to him.

It would not convince the Seven to summon his ancestors, so that the Lannister dogs were punished before routing the massive armies of the Reach.

“We need something which will allow us to prevail,” Cerion Serrett declared as the hilly vegetation thinned to reveal the village that was their destination.

“My Lord, with due respect, we have nine knights left, and one hundred and twenty-two men in total. Forty of them do not have horses anymore to ride. I think two out of three weapons we have are in need of a smith, otherwise they’re going to be useless very soon.”

“We are few, but out courage will allow us to persevere.”

His small column entered the village.

Immediately, it became obvious why their approach had not been challenged.

There were few sounds, and absolutely no fire.

“The smallfolk fled this settlement some time ago.”

“Yes, my Lord. But this wasn’t because of us...fool, what are you doing?”

One of the few archers that had followed him, a young fool who couldn’t have seen three winters, threw a rock near one of the largest houses of the village.

Predictably, it hurt some small wooden stable and did absolutely nothing.

“Fool!” Cerion barked, unable to repress his bad mood. “We are the soldiers of the Red Lion, and you won’t dishonour his memory by-“

The sound of hens manifesting their deep discontent arrived to his ears.

Hens. Dozens of hens. And they were all clucking.

Cerion suddenly felt his stomach growl, a firm reminder they had to divide their last supplies between their horses and the men half a day ago.

There was no need to be a great Captain to see the hunger shine in his men’s eyes. There was no great wisdom required to acknowledge order and his authority could be destroyed if he said the wrong thing.

No, there was only one thing to say if he wanted to be their Lord for one more day.

“Red Marchers!” The attainted Lord of Silverhill barked. “Attack this henhouse!”

**Lady Johanna Lannister**

Johanna really, really disliked the Riverlanders.

The Lady Regent doubted anyone was going to blame her for that. They had killed her husband, after all.

Still, the smallfolk and the highborn had a lot of interesting sayings they repeated every season of their lives.

Most, predictably, were about the three Fork rivers.

But some weren’t. There was one in particular which came to mind today.

Never trust a banker who comes from the east and the west.

As far as sayings went, the blonde-haired Lady was ready to acknowledge, it was rather prudent of the Tullys and their bickering bannersmen.

Neither Riverrun nor Darry had accesses to the gold mines of the Westerlands, and their great wealth came from their harvests, the bountiful grain and so many things they grew from the muddy fields near the uncountable rivers.

Before the Dance, Johanna had disdained it.

After it, her respect for it had increased by leaps and bounds, as the truth that you couldn’t eat gold when everything else had burned became evidence.

And as the Black Queen tried to play the Game of Thrones with the Golden Tooth, the vulnerability of the lands she wanted to hand to her son intact and prosperous was impossible to hide.

For all their might, House Lannister was unable to feed the Westerlands each time war ravaged the granaries and killed the smallfolk.

Changes would have to be made.

But before, she had to punish the disloyal.

“Tell me, Guildsman Silversmith...how long did you think your betrayal was going to be unnoticed?”

The white-haired elderly banker she had summoned had the good sense to look afraid immediately.

“Lady Regent?”

“Yes, Lord Swyft revealed that several granaries near Lannisport were emptied before the treachery to make sure the Usurper and his troops wouldn’t starve in mere days. Did you really think we were not going to find out?”

“The word of a traitor,” Loren Silversmith replied, regaining his calm with the dignity one might expect of one of the wealthiest non-Lannister bankers of Lannisport, “is insufficient to support such odious accusations. Lord Swyft may have stolen letters of change from several towns where my agents officiated. As for granaries, I freely admit my subordinates are selling large quantities of grain with every harvest. But we do not ask questions to our buyers as to their intentions. I am a man of money; it is not my place to calculate if it is a thousand fishermen or a thousand warriors which are going to eat what my agents sell.”

“Except,” Jaime intervened as a good advisor should, you have truly been in contact with Lord Swyft and all the conspirators. We have your writing and your signature on a series of very impressive parchments, pledging your money to the traitor’s cause.”

“Certainly not!” the Lannisport-born banker denied a heartbeat after that. “I know what I write, and pledges to attainted Lords were never made. With due respect, this is a poor gamble, my Lady. And flimsy accusations will lead you to nowhere. It might even sink the confidence many institutions of Lannisport feel towards the Rock and House Lannister.”

Johanna wanted nothing better at this moment than to summon her guards and to remove the head of this traitor.

For Loren Silversmith was a traitor, of this she had no doubt.

The City Guard had searched for many days why several of its own members had been bribed to side with the Reyne-paid sellswords in the first place. And all the clues, though most were indirect, led to the Silversmith Bank. By themselves, they would have been completely insufficient.

The confessions of Lord Lambert Swyft, on the other hand, had changed the name of the game. The head banker had been explicitly named, and his betrayal was confirmed. But the ‘man of money’ had obviously anticipated one of the letters might be intercepted, and his words were extremely prudent, to the point it would be easy for him to protest of his bloodless hands in front of a judge.

“So you want to play that game.”

“Lady Regent, there is no game. It is not my fault you failed to anticipate the attack of Walder Reyne. One must wonder though at the loss of wealth of House Lannister-“

Johanna had enough.

“Be quiet, miserable insect!” The Lioness snarled.

“Lady Regent, I protest-“

“You are a traitor, *banker*.” It was because of men imbued with that arrogance they were forced to endure war after war while the Westerlands fell apart around them. “But fortunately for you, you are right. The clues and the parchments we have are insufficient to convince your peers and Lannisport at large you have been an accomplice of the attainted Lord of Castamere.”

Then the golden-haired widow of Lord Jason Lannister smiled carnivorously.

The white-haired ‘man of money’ didn’t look so defiant anymore, proving he was certainly more intelligent than his partners in carnage and oath-breaking.

“Alas for you, Ser Cedric and Ser Jaime’s long investigation has revealed something extremely nefarious about your Bank. You have paid less than a tenth of the taxes you owed me.”

The problem, when you were involved in treachery, was that you couldn’t exactly inform the treasury of Casterly Gold you had more gold and silver in your coffers than you were supposed to have. And thanks to Castamere’s war spending, Loren Silversmith was a very wealthy man indeed.

“Lady Regent...you were speaking one minute of treachery, and now you are going to...to...

“You will be tried, seven days from today, for an egregious and despicable attempt to avoid paying taxes, yes.” Johanna spoke with a serene expression. “The crime is smaller, but I’m told the sentence at the end of the trial is oddly similar...”

**King Daeron Targaryen**

“You know, Lord Merryweather, when I was a young and impressionable young Prince, I thought being King was supposed to be fun.”

“All children fall for it,” the Hand of the King replied seriously, “and greater men than your Grace thought the contrary before having the crown posed upon their head. Or that it wouldn’t apply to them in the end.”

“Yes. You’re definitely right on both counts.”

Sometimes Daeron was definitely tempted to study if there was some sorcery which would allow him to raise Aegon and Aemond from the grave so that he could strangle them himself.

His deceased brothers had treated the kingdom like it was a cheap present they could use when and how they wanted, before throwing it away when it bored them, leaving it broken in the mud for him to mend.

“All right. The Reyne rebellion is over.” Lord Serrett and a few other knights of note were still at large, and banditry was going to be dangerous for the next moons, but this was nothing mounted and organised columns of skilled fighters couldn’t deal with. “We hold all the rebel castles and the settlements of importance.”

“Yes.” His chief advisor confirmed. “Thankfully for us, the treacherous Lord of Castamere planned for a fast and violent decapitation of the Rock’s armies and fortified defences. When it failed and Ser Tyland Lannister refused to conform to his plans, everything fell apart rather quickly.”

“Yes, thankfully.”

The tone of the Lord of Longtable was one he had grown intimately familiar with.

Daeron sighed.

“Is it too late to order you to stop giving me the bad and unpleasant revelations?”

“Will those bad and unpleasant revelations stop existing because you don’t want to hear them, your Grace?”

The duties of a Prince were definitely far more pleasant than those of a King.

“Fine. How much is it going to cost us this time?”

“The problem, I’m afraid, is that spending too much gold is...ill-advised. We already poured thousands of golden dragons, and if we use tens of thousands more, soon our men will have their purses filled with them...something which won’t do us any good, since as a message from Lady Regent Johanna reminded me we can’t eat.”

“I know.” The Green King grimaced. “But we can’t exactly do nothing, my Lord Hand.”

“We can rebuild the granaries which were destroyed.” Lord Marq said unhappily. “And filling them is within your power, I think. But it is going to cause problems in many Lordships. The Red Army really pillages and looted like Dothraki on a mad frenzy of destruction after their defeat Castamere. The last moons’ harvests near Sarsfield, Deep Den, Ashemark, Crakehall, Silverhill, Hornvale have either too few smallfolk families on hand to handle what they did last year, or the harvest was burned during the fighting.”

“And the solution to this disaster is?” The rider of Tessarion asked.

“The first, that has my preference, is that we convince the Lady Regent of the Rock to offer new oaths and working laws to any man and woman willing to settle in these war-torn valleys and hills.”

“Wasn’t Lord Stackspear unhappy at this very idea during the last Council?” Daeron raised an eyebrow. “I think the very idea of smallfolk owning the lands they are living onto was enough to make him livid.”

“Yes. Though his reaction is nothing compared to the one the Faith fells toward the issue.” Lord Marq smiled viciously. “After all, your Grace, if a good honest man is only owing a limited number days of service to his Lord and only has to thanks his hands for the fruits of his labour, he will not have to pay when his septon desires something outrageous.”

Of course. Of course, the Faith would not stop giving him headaches. When he was a child, Daeron had thought Maegor the Cruel was a capricious and insane tyrant. Nowadays, the King sitting on the Iron Throne wondered how long the son of the Conqueror and Visenya had restrained his temper before snapping and deciding to burn the sanctimonious priests of the Father Above.

“And the other solution?”

“We bring Reacher smallfolk to the Westerlands so that the country will be repopulated before the next winter. My own Longtable, Highgarden, and several other important centres of trade have a surplus of young men willing to avoid the drawbacks of being the third son of a third son.”

“House Lannister and a majority of their Noble Houses won’t like that at all.”

And it was an understatement. When maesters and other learned men spoke of the ‘kingdoms of Westeros’, this was not a slip of the tongue.

“They are, in all likelihood, not going to be displeased if you designate a single replacement for the attainted Lord and Ladies who supported Walder Reyne.”

“Don’t remind me.”

“And there’s also the Black Queen.”

“Ah. What is the answer of my cousin to my last message? You know, the one I let you read and who demanded the restitution of Hornvale?”

“The answer,” Lord Marq Merryweather answered sarcastically, “had the merit of being short and decisive. There was a big ‘NO’ next to her seal.”

“With Hornvale,” the rider of Tessarion said gloomily, “she has a castle from which she can invade the Westerlands whenever it suits her.”

“And smuggling is on the rise all along the new border,” the Reacher Hand of the King added. “The West has lost a lot of things in the last moons, and the Riverlander merchants are happy to provide replacements under the cloak.”

Daeron groaned. Why, oh why, had he thought becoming King was a good idea?

**Queen Baela Targaryen**

It was a good day to be Queen.

Her daughter had been quiet last night, so both Addam and she had been able to spend a good night of sleep, and while Laena had shouted again in the morning to ‘request’ her milk and everything she liked, the sky was a magnificent blue, and the calamities brought by war were at last behind them.

Plus her kingdom had gained a lot of gold, and most of it could be used for important projects.

Since her Small Council unanimously agreed, it meant she was doing something right.

“Obviously,” Cregan Stark commented, “the creation of the new roads will take some time. Spending so much gold at once would be ill-advised, and we don’t have the dragons, the materials, or the men to build five or six roads within a year.”

“I think we can go ahead with the road between Riverrun and Saltpans,” Lord Eon Grafton approved. The Black Queen wasn’t going to say she saw gold shining in the eyes of her Master of Coin, but she was implying it very strongly. “It does not require the skills of excellent bridge-builders to rely upon, and it will link the recovering lands to what is without doubt our fastest growing harbour at the moment.”

“True,” her cousin Allyn Velaryon nodded. “In fact, it has grown so much this last year that some Essossi shipmasters are turning to Maidenpool if they want some peace and quiet to unload their ships.”

“As long as we avoid the problems of King’s Landing,” the silver-haired Queen mused with a smile.

“I think the efforts of this Council and the Riverlanders will be sufficient in preventing Saltpans from becoming a second King’s Landing.” Cregan paused. “Of course, once this road will be completed, Lord Manderly will be more insistent than ever having his city linked to Winterfell or Moat Cailin-“

“You mean Winterfell *and* Moat Cailin, my Lord Hand,” Ser Gyles Royce interrupted him sardonically.

“Moat Cailin and Winterfell,” the Lord Paramount of the North corrected amicably. “In my opinion, that means-“

The door of the Council opened abruptly, and the only member who had been unexplainably delayed today entered.

Grand Maester Borlor advanced after a brief apology, and his sinister expression told immediately Baela that it wasn’t because the older man wanted to assuage his reading passion that he hadn’t been able to answer when she summoned him.

“Dreadful news, your Grace,” Borlor coughed. “One of the Arryn troublemakers who had caused countless problems during the last year is dead.”

The purple-eyed dragonrider frowned in incomprehension.

“How can it be a problem? I certainly didn’t order his death...and I certainly hope the same is true of every member of this Council.”

“That is to say...” Borlor licked his lips. “Some of the guests he had invited to his home are dead too. They ate poisonous mushrooms.”

“It is...it is suspicious.” Baela was forced to admit. “But it doesn’t mean it is an assassination. Really, I think there have been two or three deaths not far from this castle where poor smallfolk thought they had found perfectly good mushrooms and ate them.”

“Indeed.” Borlor grimaced. “But none of these poor souls ‘jumped’ from the top of their tower before the poison finished its work.”

“Oh.” Lady Sabitha was not often caught surprised, but she evidently was now. “An instant if you please, Grand Master...if we’re speaking about the troublemaker who annoyed so much Lady Arryn, ‘tower’ is an impressive name for something ridiculously small. A fall from the top of it might not kill him.”

“Yes.” The bearer of bad news cleared his throat. “But the three crossbows he took in his flesh before falling certainly made it a moot point.”

“No,” Baela darkly chuckled. And to say she thought the talks with the Greens coming in a few days were going to be the most important issue of the year. “That’s absolutely not suspicious.”

**Author’s note**:

And on this absolutely not suspicious note, the chapter ends.

Next chapter will be the negotiations to end formally the War of Lions, and new crises will arrive, because the world doesn’t stop turning, Westerlands or no Westerlands...

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