**Chapter 37**

**Ambitions and Treachery**

**Lord Marq Merryweather**

The Lion Gate was famous –or infamous depending how you considered things - for three reasons, to the Reacher Lord’s knowledge.

The first was obviously the memorable gift offered over a century ago by House Lannister to the Iron Throne. Seven stone lions had been sculpted from red marble by the best artists of the Westerlands, and upon delivery bards had sung the work was so exceptional one was almost convinced the leonine shapes were going to wake up and move at any moment.

The second was far more horrifying to listen to. Once he had executed his wife Alys Harroway, Maegor ordered the executioners to cut her body in seven parts and to place them on spikes above each of the gates, and it had included this one.

The third point to know was that the entire garrison had rebelled against Rhaenyra Targaryen mere years ago. These men had been particularly important in convincing the bloodthirsty pretender that there was no salvation to be found except in the might of her dragon, which had led to her spectacular death.

Three claims to fame, and yet few save the maester he had asked to the information remembered it nowadays. Evidently, the corpses of Maegor’s wives had been removed and properly buried a long time ago, and King Jaehaerys had tried his utmost to ensure the crimes of his uncle were forgotten by the smallfolk and those the dragonlords reigned over. In the case of Lady Alys Harroway’s murder, he had been successful, contrary to other more outrageous acts of kinslaying and slaughter.

The men who had once been stationed at the Lion Gate during the Dance were long dead too. Between the desertions, the long list of people dead during the riots, the bloody destruction of any form of rebellion by Lord Borros Baratheon when the capital was taken by the loyalists, and finally the Battle of Bosworth Bridge, the majority of the original Goldcloaks sworn to the Greens or to the Black were to be found in large and barely consecrated graves.

One might think that at least the seven lions would be still there to justify the name of the Gate, but unfortunately, Rhaenyra had not liked at all that House Lannister rose its banners for her half-brother, and the day she had visited the Lion gate after her ‘coronation ceremony’, the stone statues had been one of the first thing to be melted by Syrax’s breath.

King Daeron had ordered a couple of months lion replacements, both for morale and artistic purposes; King’s Landing could hardly stay in its decrepit state and since the finances were getting a bit better, it was best to appease Westerlands’ sculptors and House Lannister.

The statues were not yet ready to be delivered though, and in their absence, the Lion Gate was really looking naked and damaged, like a part of its soul had been torn from the stones.

“I wish we could return the Gate to its previous glory,” the Hand of the King said, loud enough to be heard by the two other members of the Small Council, but not quite for the Goldcloaks to be aware of the content of their conversation.

“The Lion Gate will be in competition with six others when the time comes, my Lord Hand,” Lord Willam Stackspear said in a gloomy voice. “And honestly, I prefer to rebuild the roads first. Past the first league, the Gold Road isn’t pretty to look at.”

Marq grimaced slightly. It was hard to fault the Master of Coin for his opinion.

Merchants and knights both needed good road to travel from the Westerlands to the Crownlands, while the walls had not proven terribly useful as long as the enemy had dragons.

“I know. I have heard the same words for the Roseroad and the Kingsroad.” Marq showed a smile he didn’t feel in his heart. “Which road do you think deserves the most our attention this year?”

“If we only refer to the state of the roads, the Roseroad is the most urgent issue, my Lord Hand,” it obviously didn’t make the Westerner very happy to utter this, but the Lord of House Stackspear knew the good of the realm passed before the good of the Westerlands. “The usual spring floods have done a lot of damage to the dams near the Mander and its tributaries. The roads have suffered in consequence. And as much as I say to say it, the capital eats a lot more food from the Reach than the Westerlands.”

“Lady Tyrell has sent a lot of ravens to convince the King to approve the new road,” the new Master of Whisperers intervened before coughing in embarrassment. “His Grace didn’t reveal to me the content of their letters, but it’s obvious the Regent of Highgarden is already...displeased we are unable to duplicate the work of the Blacks on their ‘New Valyrian Roads’.

Both Marq Merryweather and Willam Stackspear nodded neutrally at Joffrey Cuy’s words. Many men and women had been sent north on the other side of the frontier to acquire the secrets of the roads ordered and built by Baela Targaryen. So far, they had had no success and plenty of empty hands returning to the loyal Crownlands.

It was galling. It was also a promise of more costly expenditures, for where the Black roads would last decades without any form of repairs, the ones of the South would require constant attention after every bad season. It had cost thousands of gold dragons to Jaehaerys the Conciliator to build these roads in the first place. It was going to cost a lot of gold and silver to rebuild them now that the Dance and the winter following it had for all intents and purposes destroyed this noteworthy project.

“But?”

“But House Lannister isn’t exactly too happy with us since the Tourney of Lannisport, that much Lord Caron told us after this return. Lady Johanna is...facing opposition from several of her most powerful bannersmen. There is agitation in the West, and many of her bannersmen are intensifying their efforts in the Game of Thrones. Rebuilding the Gold Road and a few gestures to tie the west and the east would do some good, I think.”

“Agitation is always concerning. Lord Willam?”

“The Tourney has created more trouble than it was supposed to remove, that much can’t be denied.” The Master of Coin hesitantly said. “I don’t think there will be much trouble in the two or three years to come. The Lords of the Westerlands need peace as much as we do. They must have smallfolk filling up the new granaries, and the builders working on their refurbished towers and castles. If they don’t have any of this, they will definitely see the bottom of their treasure chests soon enough. But yes, a few good gestures to present to House Lannister would be quite welcome.”

The problem, as Marq and the man who had just spoken very well knew, was that there was only enough money to satisfy one Regent this year, certainly not two...

**Princess Rhaena Stark**

The road’s workers had barely reached it, but there was already an ‘Inn of the Wolfswood’s Edge’ waiting for them.

Rhaena was not proud not to appreciate the irony...or the mild rebuke subtly hinted by a courageous inn owner.

“Some hardy souls anticipated our intentions, husband,” the silver-haired Princess chuckled as she observed the rather colourful colours on the wood. She thought the two animals were supposed to be a dragon and a wolf dancing together, but since the ‘artist’ had been a bit too reckless with a pencil, there was no way to know for sure.

“I do not think it was really necessary to anticipate our intentions, wife,” Rickon smirked back before placing his large hands on her shoulders. “Rumours flew for years we were doing it, but the lack of gold, the horrible weather of last year, and the preference we gave to the road to Torrhen’s Square meant that this project was...severely delayed.”

This was indeed the truth. Any Lord could understand the importance of linking Deepwood Motte and Winterfell via a real road; in late autumn and winter, the two holdfasts might have been separated by half of Essos and Westeros for all the relative ‘neighbour’ term being applied.

And even in spring, riding with a small group across the Wolfswood was far from easy. Few travellers told of having seen the great direwolves, but plenty of woodsmen and other adventurous souls often disappeared in the Wolfswood depths and were never seen again. And if the direwolves were evasive, the wolves were often heard and could attack sizeable groups of men if they were sufficiently hungry.

“Indeed. But Winterfell is at the crossroads of many new roads now.”

“Technically, I suppose it’s the upper White Knife which is the crossroads.”

Rhaena huffed for the sake of it.

“You’re enjoying destroying my arguments too much, husband,” the youngest of the elder Targaryen twins mock complained.

It wasn’t wrong, really. First the builders and Morning had created the first ‘New Valyrian Road’ on the section of the Kingsroad linking Castle Cerwyn and Winterfell. But then the better terrain and the lack of the heavy rains on the Wolfswood, along with a discreet but firm support of House Tallhart had led to the quick creation of the Winterfell-Torrhen’s Square road first.

And then, at last, the workers and her bellowed dragon had begun creating the road which would link the two populations west and east of the Wolfswood.

Even by the best estimates of the architects however, it was going to take the best part of a year...and so Rhaena had brought Theon and Aera with her, defended by over one hundred sworn swords of Houses Stark and Targaryen.

As much as she wanted to delegate this long and not very interesting task to Nettles and Sheepstealer, the human-dragon duo was needed in the Riverlands, with her sister pregnant and unable to ride should things become too...exciting with the Greens.

“It is one of my guilty pleasures,” Rickon agreed after a few heartbeats where he feigned thinking about it. “But you are going to miss them for several moons, I’m afraid.”

“Yes...” if it was a road between White Harbor and Winterfell they were building, staying together would not cause any problems: with the abundance of castles possessing messenger ravens, contacting her should there be something tragic or happy in the South wouldn’t be a problem, and ruling on the road would be very difficult, but still possible. But the Wolfswood was far from everything, and Theon and Aera were souls she didn’t want to be away from for several years. Plus she wasn’t going to risk them on Morning’s back unless it was a question of life or death. Her winged bonded was less picky than Moondancer, but no dragon felt comfortable with other souls other than his or her rider. “You think you are going to cope with the problems of coin without me?”

“I should survive,” the Heir to Winterfell smiled before kissing her deeply on the lips. “The money for the slow harbour expansion of Deepwood Motte is set aside, and so far, it looks like the Freeholders and Librarians maesters were agreeing on a correct assumption: this year of one hundred and thirty-eight is going to be a year of summer. Everything will be fine while you’re in your excursion in the Wolfswood, don’t worry.”

“May the Old and New Gods hear you.” Rhaena Stark who had once been born in House Targaryen replied. “Now tell me: how many pleas for new roads have we received in the last moon?”

“Oh, not a lot, barely five scores this time. Including personal requests from Lord Manderly, Lord Bolton, Lord Karstark, Lord Umber...”

The young woman believed it was better to see the golden sunlight to this: the Black dragons were going to stay popular for many years...

**Lord Cregan Stark**

“Just to inform you, my Lord Hand, but Lord Kermit insisted vigorously while you were away that many of your men had to be garrisoned in the western Riverlands.”

Cregan Stark huffed before smiling, amused by the morsel of news brought by Lady Sabitha Frey.

“And I suppose Lords Vance and Piper agreed with him?

Along with the Lord of Riverrun, these two were the men whose holdings were on the border with the lands of House Lannister...and the passes defended by the Golden Tooth and Deep Den.

“Yes, they did.”

Cregan poured himself a new glass of red and drank it before replying. By the Old Gods, this summer was far too hot for a proper Northerner!

“Well, I am not,” the Hand of the Queen replied with another shrug. “Unless I wasn’t informed of a dangerous call to arms from Casterly Rock, the Westerners have been very quiet these last fortnights.”

“Lord Reyne is sulking with his band of malcontents, and no one really knows who ordered his brother’s assassination. I think everyone from the Banefort to Crakehall is busy trying to evaluate how it changes things. They have no time for us...for now.”

Sabitha Frey gave him a smooth smile that he didn’t believe for a heartbeat.

“Some might say that striking against the Lannisters while they’re distracted is an opportunity that might not come again in several years.”

“What opportunity, my Lady?” Cregan asked, despite knowing the woman before him was aware of how disastrous a true conflict could lead to. “Our Queen is in her last moon of pregnancy, and unable to ride. Her twin sister is at Winterfell, and is often overseeing and participating into the new roads’ building; it would take a fortnight to contact her by raven if we’re lucky, and even more days for her to return south. Besides, Morning is the smaller dragon out of the adult three the realm can counts upon, and Princess Rhaena’s mount is far less battle-hardened than Moondancer. No, Sheepstealer is the only dragon available to counter Tessarion should war come tomorrow...and parity in dragons is not an advantage at all.”

Only an imbecile would forget that the Blacks had begun the Dance with an enormous numerical advantage in dragons, except at the end it had been two Blacks against a Green one, and the former were far too young to fight the latter head-on. Dragons crushed armies, but big dragons easily massacred smaller ones unless you were overconfident like the eldest son of Alicent Hightower.

“I know.” Sabitha told him after a satisfied smirk. “But once we are past this Tully-mandated objection, you have to admit you’re sending a lot of your men eastwards.”

“Two thousand, and they’re really needed.” The Lord Paramount of the North justified himself to the Mistress of Whisperers. “Despite overtures to the Vale Mountain clans, several have resumed their raids and other atrocities, forcing the knights of the Vale to hunt them down. I have a lot of infantry which is standing idle, best to use them where they’re needed. We might as well strike two birds with one arrow as I’ve heard certain Arryns of Gulltown aren’t happy with the line of succession we have chosen to support.”

“If they decide to turn violent, two thousand men will not be enough.”

“The Vale has tens of thousands boys who have never drawn their swords to kill,” Cregan countered. “Mine became men slaying wildlings by the score, before marching southwards and fighting the Dance. If some Arryn highborn wants to usurp Lady Arryn or try to besiege the Gates of the Moon, I wish him good fortune...before my troops have their way with him.”

The Northerner Lord and the Riverlander Lady stared at each other for a turn of hourglass before looking away.

“Anyway we’re paying these soldiers, they will go where I say as long as they are paid and their bellies are filled. Leaving them idle will not toughen them, and bored swordsmen are unpredictable and quickly become troublemakers. They can’t take the Golden Tooth on their own; it doesn’t matter if they’re two thousand or ten thousand, honestly.”

“Her Grace expressed the same opinion last moon,” the mother-in-law of the Black Queen revealed to him. “Of course, she was confident her dragon would completely change the situation.”

“I hope you and her consort will be able to convince her to rest after her pregnancy,” Cregan spoke gently. Not that he had a lot of hopes on that regard. Queen Baela Targaryen loved riding her dragon.

“I will try my best,” Lady Sabitha declared drily.

“But in all frankness,” the Lord of Winterfell continued, “the more the realm we help Her Grace ruling over recovers, the more doubts I have in the pertinence of conquering the Westerlands. Assuredly, it would definitely secure our flank and put us in a dominant position against the rest of the South. Obviously, it would be just retribution for the carnage the Lannister host caused when it rampaged on its way to the God’s Eye. But the three realms have grown used to the relative scarcity of gold and the abundance of silver. And we were united in supporting Queen Rhaenyra and then her successor from the beginning. Adding another realm without removing most Lords and Ladies from their seats at the same time may cause us more headaches than grievances solved.”

“This is...yes, I can see why you believe there would be problems,” Sabitha approved. “Of course, the longer we wait before going to war with the Greens, the bigger the headaches. And there will be a war my Lord Hand, mark my words. Her Grace’s sister has already two children, Nettles has a daughter, and Baela is pregnant. The Green King has been siring a son every two or three years so far. It may be not in five or ten seasons, but one summer, there will be temptation to use these newborn dragons.”

“A good point,” Cregan hummed. “But must we use them against the Westerlands, which have gold that one can’t eat, or advance into the Reach, that the Greens can’t survive without?”

These were two very important questions, for the first was: did the Blacks have to annex the Westerlands’ Lordships now or were the Lannisters and their leonine banners those who were going to succumb without succour?

**Lysaro Rogare**

The alliance which was going to shake this unfair world met in a little cove south of an unimportant abandoned castle once sworn to the banners of the boar.

It was so insignificant in fact even the Westerners weren’t absolutely sure of the name; the pirates of the Iron Islands had plundered, killed and burned many of the plebeians, and those who had survived had been scythed down by the Iron Fever and the winter which followed.

But as such, the arrival of ten ships of sellsails, corsairs, and various warriors from the Narrow Sea and beyond was not going to attract undue attention. How could it be when there were so little men and women living a hard day of ride away?

And if things turned sour, if accusations flew to House Crakehall and other parties in time to do any good...well, watchtowers cost a lot to maintain and repair, the local knights would protest.

Not that it mattered. The plan wouldn’t fail.

And now they met to seal their alliance upon a beach of white sand.

They formed a strange alliance; Lysaro wouldn’t deny it in public.

The ones calling themselves the ‘Lords of the West’ had mustered the greatest group for this meeting. They had tried to impress them with their splendid cuirasses and equipment as well. For all their tirades about being ‘denied their Gods-given birthrights’, these men were obviously not in any danger of starving or sleeping in the stables of a tavern. They would not sleep on a wet hammock next to loud-snoring sailors.

Each man was inferior to true Lysene noblemen and noblewomen, in birth, wealth, looks, and good behaviour. No Lysene Prince-Merchant would be so tasteless as to try to add gold, red, and purple on the same armour. And though adding jewels to something made it far better, Lysaro wasn’t so inexperienced to believe having a ruby embedded in your helmet was going to improve your sword-fighting skills. At least anyone would look in your direction to loot your corpse if you fell.

Lord Walder Reyne, the Red Lion, or so he called himself, was leading this column of Sunset-born men. And he was arguably the best-looking of the crowd, although when the competition was including a green plain field, a rooster, and a peacock, the red lion was going to win ten times out of ten.

What was a surprise, however, was the new banner unfurled under their very eyes as the night grew ever closer and torches began to be lit in the braziers they had brought with them.

It was a red lion on an argent field, but the most notable feature which had stopped many people breathing was the red crown.

It was a symbol. It was a challenge to the dragonlords and those who had deprived him of his birthright, and one year ago, it might have terrified him into crawling before his insipid father for his forgiveness.

No more. He wouldn’t kneel again.

A feeling which was clearly shared by all the men who had assisted to the scene, as a few blades were drawn in salute, and contagious excitement rippled through the assembly.

This old pirate of Silverbeard was the first to advance to meet the ‘Red Lion’, Lysaro and his men following and catching up to them. They weren’t glistening like the knights of the Sunset Lands, but they had no reason to be ashamed. Born on Tyrosh, Lys, Myr, or the Disputed Lands, they had been denied their birthrights in the greatest Cities of Essos, but they had survived and thrived.

“Friends,” the man who had chosen to paint the great roaring lion on his armoured chest began, silencing the whisperers. “Are you not tired of being refused over and over what you earned through the hard work of swords and axes? Are you not tired of seeing your purses getting emptier and emptier after each summer? Are you not tired to see the men and the women weak enough to take the advice of merchants and scribes banishing you from the throne rooms you saved with your blood and your sweat?”

The answer to *that* was unanimous.

“WE ARE!”

“WE ARE!”

“So I am,” the darkened eyes were almost looking like they burned under red banners and at the light of the fires. “So I am. We go to war under worthy lords, but when we return with most of our men crippled and the gold from our coffers spent, we hear only silence from the women and the ageing cowards who stayed home. We receive apologies and apologies again, we hear mumblings and insufficient rewards while others rise to new heights. We are abandoned, left to shiver in the cold rain while the sun is the privilege of others. So it is at Lys, Myr, or Casterly Rock, and plenty of other castles, cities, and lands. They say they give us the glory of the battlefield...and they deny us everything else, including the gold and the titles of victory.”

Lysaro bared his teeth as anger beat in his heart. Yes, this was a man who had felt the same injustices he had piled upon his head.

“It is time for that to change, my friends. It is time for warriors to throw the scabbards in the dust and show the steel to those who have decided all we are good at is to die for them, ignored and unremembered in their losing squabbles. It is time to user an Age of Warriors which will shake the world!”

More words were spoken in whisper. Plans had been made for the dragons to be unable to intervene in the coming moons. Supplies would be provided. Men who would oppose the blades of Essos would be forced to defend their lives sword in hand, as it should be.

Though at the end, all those plans, all these preparations, were only the steps to the mountain.

These were the steps before they claimed Casterly Rock, the greatest gold-filled vault in the known world.

With it, Lysaro would be able to buy tens of thousands of Unsullied and sellswords, rally the great companies and the youth of the Disputed Lands and the Free Cities to his banner. He would be able to return to Lys in triumph, and he, not these treacherous brothers and sisters, not his father, would become the new Master of House Rogare. His name would become synonym with audacity and victory. Lysaro would rise and force the prideful Lysene Magisters to submit or die.

First Magister for Life, King of the Free Cities Lysaro Rogare. Wasn’t it a pleasant music to listen to?

But first, the alliance had to be sealed in the blood of these weaklings of Lannister...

“THE RED PACT!”

“A PACT OF LYS AND WARRIORS!”

“THE SUNSET PACT!”

“THE LION PACT!”

And they had to decide upon a single name, clearly. It had not been decided before, and the voices were a bit divided on the subject...

**Queen Baela Targaryen**

Baela had been afraid about the end of her pregnancy. She had tried very hard not to show it to her Council and the rest of her bannersmen and servants, of course. Pregnant woman or not, she was the Black Queen. The silver-haired Targaryen had to pretend to be fearless.

However, for all her pretensions, the eldest twin of the union of Prince Daemon Targaryen and Lady Laena Velaryon wasn’t stupid. Eighteen years before, almost day-for-day in fact, her mother had died after giving birth to her stillborn brother after a night and a day of labor.

There had been reassurances it might not happen to her, evidently. Her mother had been able to give birth to Rhaena and she four years before, and her own twin had brought Theon and Aera relatively easily at Winterfell.

And in the last moons, gold and royal influence had been able to summon several of the most capable ‘maesters’ in the domain of healing, as well as wise women and healers of the body. Moreover, apart from the usual signs of pregnancy that were nausea, exhaustion, and mood swings, the pregnancy had been going well.

And then this morning the torture had begun, and everything was a world of pain.

Baela wasn’t able to say anymore how many turn of hourglasses she had been suffering. It felt like years, but it couldn’t be the case, surely?

The only thing she remembered was her right hand grasping Addam’s. The rest was a nightmare of pain and screams. Several times she had begged for it to stop. It had never happened to her before, but the pain...

It was unbearable. It struck everywhere at once. Even the pillows under her head weren’t enough. Her head ached. Everything hurt. And by her bond, she was trying to stop Moondancer from feeling this pain, knowing very well her dragon would go mad if this agony echoed through their bond.

Obscurity claimed her several times. She dreamed of dragons and burning cities, of past battles and a golden dragon falling to its death.

When she opened her eyes again, the pain was almost gone, though her body felt...weak. Weak and numb.

“Grand Maester?” Yes, it was the grey-robed man who was before her bed. Her voice was sounding like a series of croaking.

“Your Grace,” the man bowed. “You worried us immensely.”

“My child?” She croaked.

“Your daughter is alive and well.”

Baela felt euphoria course throughout a body. A daughter. She had a daughter. Everything, the pain, the long pregnancy, the nausea...everything had been worth it.

“Laena,” she managed to articulate as whatever strength she had been able to gather was dimming once again. “Her name is Laena. For my mother. Addam knew it, but better...”

“Yes, your Grace. She will be Laena Targaryen, like you desire. Now both the members of my Order and the others ask for you to rest. The labor exhausted you, you need to recover your strength.”

The words arrived one by one to her ears, but Baela wasn’t listening to them anymore. She had a daughter. She was a mother of a daughter, like her mother before her.

Everything was going to be fine.

Baela closed her eyes and felt sleep claim her once more.

**Ser Stafford Lantell**

“So the bitch isn’t dead. What a pity.”

Stafford frowned hearing these words. He, as a loyal man of Lady Johanna, had little love for the Blacks and those sworn to them. That was something widely spread across the West. It was ‘Maegor with tits’ who had told the Ironborn she would close her eyes on the return of the reavings as long as they raided and killed her enemies, and no man, woman, or children who had lost family to these scum of the Iron Islands would forget it as long as they lived.

On the downside, there was such a thing as decency. Rejoice when one enemy died in battle as a result of its own stupidity wasn’t the same as celebrating when a woman died in childbirth.

One was the Father Above punishing the traitors for going against the laws of the God and men. The second was the trial every woman had to endure when giving birth to a child, and Stafford had enough unpleasant memories of the hard days his mother had had with his younger siblings to wish some women an unpleasant fate during pregnancy.

“Oh, you find my words offending, Black-lover?” Stafford steeled himself. No matter how much he wanted to punch Gerion Lanny in the face from time to time, it wouldn’t do anything worthwhile. For a turn of hourglass, he would undoubtedly feel a lot of satisfaction...before being thrown out of the City Guard of Lannisport. The imbecile had somehow managed to climb the ladder until he was the commander of the Golden Gate, and Stafford was ‘merely’ the commander of the Ocean Gate, the youngest and least prestigious assignment available for the men of Captain rank.

“I am displeased by the insinuation you make about childbirth labor being an opportunity to kill a woman.” The blonde-haired knight of House Lantell answered calmly.

“The bitch isn’t a woman! She is a Kinslayer, a Kingslayer, and a Usurper!”

“She has two tits, a nice figure; it looks like a woman to me...” another Captain joked, provoking a large explosion of laughter in the officer’s quarters in the heart of Lannisport’s inner city.

“Cheers,” the commander of the Ruby Gate added his own oil on the fire destined to Gerion Lanny, “I’ve seen the girl when I went to one of the frontier talks. If she asked me to jump in the bed, I would not say no, good sir!”

More whistling and laughter followed, and Stafford wasn’t the last one to chuckle and raise his cup in salute.

“You’re forgetting she is a *heretic*.” The Captain of the Golden Gate uttered venomously.

All laughter and manifestations of amusement stopped.

“Careful now,” a grey-bearded Captain’s adjutant of the Hills’ Gate rumbled. “Nothing was ever proclaimed from King’s Landing-“

“The High Septon was ready to say so before he was assassinated! The Northerners are dabbling in heresy! They are tearing apart the tenets of the Faith of the Seven-Who-Are-One!”

“And who are you,” Stafford pointed out, “to make this claim when our King has said nothing of the sort?”

The Lantell Captain knew where the other man had certainly ‘found’ his ideas. It had not escaped him the man went to the septs every day, and it had not escaped his fellow Captains either. Something which had made him less than popular, because the main septs Gerion Lanny frequented weren’t anywhere near the Golden Gate, and many of his men complained it cut their working days short by a eighth or a ninth. And House Lannister’s paymasters didn’t give silver or bronze for work and time you didn’t do.

“Yet,” the single word was filled with hatred.

The Captain of the Ruby Gate laughed again.

“Yes, yes. And soon I will be Lord Paramount of the Vale, I’m sure.”

“I’m perfectly serious!” The dirty-shaven Captain snarled.

“So I am,” the other retorted. “Listen Lanny, the King isn’t going to declare his cousin a heretic. First off, because it’s easy to say she isn’t. Has she persecuted the Faith? Has she told the septons to kneel or die before her? No and No.”

“She allowed unbelievers to settle south of the Neck!”

“So?” Stafford intervened, taking a bored tone to convey what he thought of Gerion’s unhappiness. “As long as the Black Queen rules in the Riverlands, she can do whatever she wants, and as long as she doesn’t force the people to convert to another religion, it isn’t heresy.”

“And if she was a heretic,” continued another Captain, “what are King Daeron and the High Septon going to do? Nobody answers to them anymore in the North. The parchments of proclamations would be thrown into the pyres first chance they got. The rebels aren’t going to turn their cloaks now.”

This was the big problem old men who had stayed at home with Lord Reyne and his friends failed to answer when one asked them during the tourney. Yes, yes, the Northerners and their vile Black allies were treacherous, monstrous, and defiled the order established by the Conqueror with their breath and deeds.

But what to do once words were spoken? The Black Queen was still alive, and would ride her dragon again. Maybe not this moon, the second of the year one hundred and thirty-eight, but soon. And if the rumours coming from merchants and maesters’ ravens were true, the Blacks had three dragons in age to be called for war, while their King has one. The latter was of course far bigger than two of the three, but one of the Blacks’ was equally as formidable. Plus the Black-sworn Lords would not bend the knee until there was a chance to preserve their privileges. For them, Lannisport and the South were the traitors, the few Black men and women Stafford had met all voiced that.

“Yes,” Stafford agreed. “I will answer Lady Johanna’s call if she orders it, but as long as the Northerners have dragons, I admit I’m feeling a bit anxious about taking the field.”

In fact, Stafford Lantell was utterly terrified at the prospect of fighting a battle where dragons fought over your head. He was a mediocre archer and was sufficiently aware how difficult it was to touch accurately something when you tried to fire a scorpion or a trebuchet. Against a dragon, there was little you could do save praying you weren’t going to burn.

Sword, spear, or axe; no matter how talented the opponent, being trained and reasonably lucky could let you hold your own against anyone, Kingsguard or battle-hardened sworn sword. But how did you fight a dragon when most of your weapons couldn’t pierce the scales? What could you do when unless the rider was drunk and arrogant, your bolts wouldn’t reach the vital parts?

Apart from dying, evidently.

“The Warrior Himself is asking for new armours to the Smith at the sight of these beasts, Captain.”

“Yes, let’s stay at home and have peace! If the rebels want the North, let them have it! I’m told it’s always cold and snowy, who wants some place called ‘Winterfell’ anyway?”

**King Daeron Targaryen**

To be clear, Daeron hated riding a horse in King’s Landing streets. This had to do as much as the decrepit looks of the streets of ‘his’ capital as it had with riding a horse, honestly.

The young Green King had poured thousands of golden dragons in renovation efforts from the Mud Gate to the Iron Gate, but there always seemed to be something which was malfunctioning or that the original builders had done completely wrong, to the point Daeron was more and more cursing Jaehaerys ‘the Wise’ for having the ‘splendid idea’ to delegate to his good friend Septon Barth the plans and the building of King’s Landing.

It wasn’t entirely the fault of the long-dead Hand of the King, Rhaenyra had caused a lot of destruction and killed scores of people responsible for the maintenance of the towers, the water supply, and many other things, but there was no denying the capital had not been a flawed city by the time his father took the throne. Several decades later, evidently, the situation was far, far worse.

It had gotten to the point where Daeron was really, really thinking about razing this incredible mess and building a new capital. Unfortunately, he had neither the popular support nor the gold to do that.

One might have sworn the issue of horses was fairly minor, but it wasn’t. For all the praises and compliments his courtiers gave him, there wasn’t anything gracious in his method of riding, and his hairy mounts had to be carefully trained, for the odour of Tessarion on him panicked three of four stallions, most of them refusing to let him approach them. It had been so bad Daeron had ordered Larys a couple of years ago to spy upon the Blacks and see how the Black Queen and her twin sister were dealing with this problem.

The answer was...they didn’t.

Baela Targaryen had solved the problem by accepting no mount other than Moondancer, and her twin had visibly imitated her when Morning was in age to tolerate the weight of a young woman. If some horses refused you, then the horses would be discarded. And it had some merit, given that Stone Hedge wasn’t a great city, and Winterfell and White Harbor had many potential landing sites for the most formidable instruments of power of House Targaryen.

Daeron had been forced to chart his own path and buy the younger horses he could to acclimate them to Tessarion. Despite years of effort and a training which was getting better and better, the mounts weren’t reacting acceptably as often as he desired.

“It is confirmed, then,” the Green sovereign told Alan Redwyne, his Master of Ships.

“Yes, it is, your Grace,” the ageing Admiral nodded quickly. “I have a couple of men in Saltpans who have successfully evaded the Black Whisperers, and all agree both daughter and mother are alive. We have even the name for the first: Laena Targaryen.”

“And the rumours?”

The Reacher Admiral grunted, though whether it was because of the question or whether it was that a child had been almost pushed before his horse was a guess in itself. Or maybe it was the horse. Lord Alan was built to fight sea battles, not riding animals.

“There are so many rumours you will need to ask the pretty boy stepping in the Clubfoot’s shoes to tell the truth from the wrongs. I think...” the clamours of the crowds drowned everything for a few heartbeats. “I think the pregnancy’s end was particularly difficult for the Black Queen. Too many concerns and rumours for that to be wrong. But one moon later, and she held court again. I don’t think it was as bad as some of the few loyalists we have behind their lines made it to be. And now she has secured her line.”

There was nothing to say save agreeing to that. Contrary to his own family where any eldest child who was not a son would have been catastrophic, his Black cousin could name her firstborn son her heir, and no one would raise an eyebrow. Laena Targaryen, assuming their sources were correct, was indeed the new Heiress, as the rumours and hearsay had repeated everywhere for the last days. Why, the rumours had certainly reached Sunspear by now.

“As for the other rumours, I am the Master of Ships, not the Master of Rumours,” Alan bluntly declared.

“But aren’t your sailors inveterate rumour-masters and the dutiful ears and mouths in the taverns?” Daeron said in good humour.

“Aye,” the Lord of House Redwyne, “but they have some difficulty telling what they’ve said after the first barrel of wine or ale.”

Yes, that was a problem of reliability all right.

“I don’t give any credibility to the accusations of black magic and heretical worship,” the Admiral continued. “And I certainly don’t think that the baby was so ‘accursed’ by the Seven her first breath was able to hatch an abomination from a dragon’s egg!”

Always the problem with rumours; they were really limited. And when they were about dragons, you knew from the start the people spreading the rumours were really lacking in draconic knowledge.

“Anyway you have now three sons to one daughter,” Alan Redwyne said in a satisfied tone, “and I think the Black Queen will wait for several years before trying once again to solidify her line.”

In this regard, Alan’s duties on the sea proved he would make a terrible Hand: he forgot a bit too easily of the second twin on the side of the other side of the frontier. The one who had given birth to twins, solidifying further the direwolf’s ties to the dragon, and was giving the Blacks a salvation should the descendants of Baela Targaryen suffer misfortune by plague or arms.

Assuming the pregnancies had been both difficult – and Daeron didn’t believe he was that lucky, Viserys, Aemon, and Baelor would have to contend with Laena and two other cousins when they grew of age.

Since he couldn’t take another wife to sire more children – well, he could, but then Daeron would likely begin another civil war before the next dawn – most of his plans to have more dragons than the Blacks were crashing down. Yes, his sons had all had an egg hatch in their hands, but they remained outnumbered in dragons.

At least it would make Dorne irrelevant the moment Viserys came of age. His gold-orange dragon was riding nicely, nearly as fast as Tessarion had in her time.

“Not that I feel very happy about the Regent of Highgarden’s insistence, but what do you think about her ‘Royal Progress through the Reach’ idea, your Grace?”

“I think-“

Daeron would not have the leisure to finish this sentence as a crossbow arrow slammed in his chest. Fortunately, he had already had assassination attempts upon his life, and therefore wore armour under his blue and green tunic today, no matter how uncomfortable it was under this suffocating heat.

Several turn of hourglasses later, Alan and Lord Shermer would tell him there had been six crossbowmen in total – none of them who were taken alive. Two had narrowly missed and their arrows went to hit his guards by his side. The first men-at-arms died, the second survived, as the projectile hit his shield. Two of the other assassins missed more widely, killing two smallfolk in the smallfolk of King’s Landing – thus making sure the assassins were not taken alive as the pursuers were grieving and rather enraged. The last one, though, hit his horse in the head, and Daeron was not so fast or gifted in equitation that he realised in time what was about to happen and to abandon saddle and stirrups. His mount collapsed, and a great deal of pain exploded in his body as suddenly, his right leg was blocked under his dying mount.

Fortunately for him, his Kingsguard didn’t lose its mind and managed to lift the horse and protect him from the chaos created by this assassination attempt. Daeron would live, though his leg was broken and would need moons of healing, immobilised on order of maesters and all healers paid by House Targaryen.

He couldn’t ride a horse in such a state, and mounting Tessarion was obviously out of the question.

A fortnight later, a raven arrived, revealing who had the arrogance and the treacherous heart to order an assassination on his person.

For in the Westerlands, the War of the Lions had begun.

**Author’s note**: How do you fight dragons? You don’t, if you’re smart. And someone had evidently thought that getting rid of the dragonlord is a whole lot easier than killing the huge flame-breathing reptiles...

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