**Chapter 47**

**Game of Lordships**

*A civil war leaves deep scars once the swords have been sheathed and the pyres have finally stopped burning.*

*The War of the Lions, unfortunately, was no exception to the rule of fratricidal bloodbaths.*

*Evidently, the previous civil war, the Dance of Dragons, had been far more damaging to Westeros as a whole.*

*The war had lasted longer, tens of thousands of men had killed each other in every kingdom south of the Neck, the dragons had incinerated dozens of villages with every fortnight, and last but not least, it had not been really resolved; after Bosworth Bridge, it was as much exhaustion as winter’s arrival which had led to the peace talks.*

*For all its atrocities, awful betrayals, and bloody methods of punishments, the civil war of the Westerlands did not unravel that badly.*

*To begin with, the rebellion of House Reyne was crushed successfully.*

*Yes, some warbands who had been part of the ‘Red Banners’ would continue to be a nuisance for years, but the next moons after the death of ‘King Walder’ would see them rapidly become unrecognisable from the common ‘hill bandit’.*

*That said bandits often stole abandoned weapons and armours from different battlefields and styled themselves ‘Lord of the Hills’ and other grandiloquent titles to give themselves some importance accelerated the trend, naturally.*

*The domains ruled by House Lannister had to face a mountain of difficult issues as the head of the chief traitor was placed on top of the Lion’s Gate.*

*But being divided into two new realms would not be one of them. Frontiers had changed, courtesy of Queen Baela’s intervention to make sure the Hornvale bloodbath ended as soon as possible, but the Kingdom of the Westerlands survived. It was scarred and weakened, the golden legend of its chivalry and unending wealth was no more as the smallfolk discovered burned granary after burned granary, but Casterly Rock and Lannisport were intact, and many large Lordships had been spared the harsh settling of accounts the self-proclaimed Red Lion wanted for the entire West.*

*This didn’t mean the changes weren’t considerable.*

*They were critical. Compared to them, the recent war against Dorne was a mere skirmish.*

*Six Noble Houses of the same Westerosi realm had turned traitor; and not content to unleash death and carnage in their shadow, they had brought to near-extinction to two more Houses. The number of Knightly Houses which had decided loyalty to House Reyne prevailed against the oaths to King Daeron and the Regency of House Lannister were between forty and fifty – due to the confusion of the fighting and the fact that in some cases there was no survivor, it was sometimes difficult to distinguish a House struck down by internal betrayal from Red-sworn supporters.*

*The Westerlands had already been broken by the Iron Fever and the Ironborn raids which had set the coasts aflame. The War of the Lions ensured there would be no return to the ages of the past.*

*There were many dead Lords and bannersmen to replace before the end of this horrible year.*

*The Game to earn new Lordships could begin.*

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

**Ser Tyland Lannister**

The Usurper was dead, and the same was true of most of the traitors which had followed him in his betrayal.

By any logic which involved food and money, House Lannister should have dispersed its armies immediately after paying the debts it owed to them.

The sad truth was that now the fighting and the killing of oath-breakers was over, the West couldn’t afford the sheer cost of keeping its forces on the field.

In his guts, Tyland found it extremely galling. Most of the war, the commander of the main Lannister army agreed, had been fought the way it was because of the massive shortages in hardy and loyal warriors. If he had had a battle-ready force of twenty thousand at the very beginning, with the appropriate companies of heavy pikemen and hundreds more plate-armoured knights, Grimm wouldn’t have had to give his life during the Second Butcher’s Ball.

But those men had not been here, Grimm died, and now that there was enough men on the battlefield, both from the West and the rest of the realm, to crush the Reyne problem effortlessly, well...most of the Usurper’s men were dead, or praying the Seven their participation in this war wouldn’t give them the fate they so richly deserved.

And the men they had needed to return to the fields.

With the ravages caused by this rebellion, House Lannister really needed every hand it could find, because, as always, there was the bitter realisation you couldn’t eat your gold.

The food shipped from the Reach would alleviate the pressure, of course. The grain House Redwyne’s hulls transported was going to replace the grain which would be distributed in war-torn lands, meaning Lady Johanna wouldn’t have to tolerate the extortion of more of their wealth by the Black Queen.

The trumpet-holders chose this moment to place their musical instruments on their lips, and a triumphant melody drowned out the usual talks made by tens of thousands of men...or at least it tried to.

The music had a lot of difficulty being thunderous when there were so many men and women cheering, applauding, and generally trying to make as much noise as their throats and hands could make.

War had jaded him, and yet even knowing how much this whole rebellion had cost, Tyland acknowledged the spectacle was impressive.

The location of the ‘Victory Field’ had been chosen for its proximity to the Silver River, which flowed down southwards to the former Serrett lands and their castle of Silverhill, and being mere steps away from the Gold Road.

It had been chosen for selfish reasons, one of it being the power of House Lannister.

But for all these unsaid truths, there really were more than thirty thousand household troops, freeriders, knights, sellswords, and levies gathered in a single place.

West and east of it, the harvest fields had received so much from the sun and the recent rains that they were a blinding golden hue. Above it, the Seven had decided nothing would tarnish the ceremonies and the celebrations, and the blue was truly heavenly. There would be stars tonight after sunset, that was not in question.

How long had it been since the armies loyal to the Green cause truly celebrated a true, a crushing victory?

*Too long*, his mind whispered to him.

It had been too long, but now, they were putting an end to this. Green-painted spears of Oakheart paraded between the colourful and exotic sellswords which had once turned the tide at Bosworth Field. Many of the latter had settled on Westeros permanently, but they had kept their exuberant clothes for this occasion.

The dark, black-clad footmen of House Banefort were there at the place of honour, reminding everyone and everything that in spite of the fall of their Lord, they were still alive, and would remain so to chastise any traitor raising his head.

The red cloaks and the leonine helmets of House Lannister were side by side with the recently arrived Crownlanders, while the Crag’s forces rode with the Merryweather banners.

Thousands of banners were raised in a single moment.

His cousin kneeled before the King and his immense blue dragon.

“Your Grace, the West is yours. The Red Rebellion is no more. Peace has once more returned to your realm.”

“Thank you, Lady Regent Lannister.”

The rest, as they say, was just an excuse to celebrate for...well, not seven days and seven nights, no budget would be able to afford *that*...but for most of the day and half a night, it was a sum of wine, songs, stupid gambling, and stolen kisses.

**King Daeron Targaryen**

Daeron had known the post-war division of the attainted lands was not going to be easy. Too many nobles had betrayed for it to be a matter which could be written at the end of a Small Council session with little care as to the consequences for the rest of his kingdom.

Apparently, his biggest and most pessimistic predictions had been too optimistic. The not-so-young-anymore Green King had thought the problem would begin when it would be debated who would receive the Lordships’ spoils.

While thousands of swordsmen and pikemen tried to assert what they had been drinking and doing in the last couple of days, Daeron had seen the first protests arrived before half of the vacant Knightly Houses could be replaced.

“Let’s be reasonable, please, Lady Regent.”

“I am reasonable...your Grace.”

The way the ‘your Grace’ was added at the end like an afterthought was anything but promising.

“You are not, Lady Regent.” Daeron insisted. “While some of your concerns are acceptable, others are not. I am not going to let you appoint eight new Lords and break utterly the former order of the West. Not when the rebellion which had just crushed proved there was a sizeable amount of discontent from your Regency’s edicts.”

“With due respect your Grace,” Lady Johanna replied in an icy voice, “this is sheer nonsense. The treacherous Lord Reyne and his men couldn’t bear the thought of being ruled by men for three more years. My edicts, be they about gold, knighthood traditions, or food granaries, had nothing to do with the actions of those oath-breakers. Walder Reyne would have rebelled no matter what I have done. His own words are enough to see the truth of that! The moment his red banners were raised, letters written by his hand did not push for an end of my Regency; they were about claiming the Rock and the throne of the Westerlands for himself. That the Usurper always considered a woman’s place was to cook and spread her legs for her husband was another sign of the Gods in his favour.”

The venom was so powerful that the Targaryen monarch had no doubt at all that if by some miracle there was someone with Reyne blood still alive right now, they would not live to see the end of this year.

“Perhaps,” he conceded at last, “but the number of Noble Houses which rebelled proved there were many who thought your Regency was not turning to be a model of good governance. And we must give the number of Knightly Houses which rallied at the last hour a reason to stay quiet.”

Daeron turned his head towards the blonde child who had stayed silent so far as the exchange turned sour.

“I will formally recognise you as Lord of Casterly Rock and Lord Paramount of the Westerlands, Loreon.”

Many children would have answered with a smile or something signifying their greatest dreams had been fulfilled.

The expression of the new Lord Lannister was one of unfeigned *terror*.

“But...I am too young! I am too young...your Grace!”

“You are,” it would be stupid to argue otherwise. “But the West needs a symbol, and a young new Lord taking the reins of the Rock will give the smallfolk hope, and mute the dissenters waiting in the shadows.”

“He will only celebrate his thirteenth name day in two moons,” Johanna Lannister pleaded, “your Grace it is-“

“Do you intend, yes or not, to teach him what he must know before he reaches adulthood?” Daeron regretted the stern words after they left his mouth; the former Queen of Beauty of House Westerling glared at him viciously.

“I will...your Grace.”

“Then do it.” The Green King ordered. “Stay as his chief advisor for the next three years, but Loreon must be seen acting as the Lord Paramount. The West must recover and looks strong. The longer this period of instability lasts, the worse our chances are that some Black Lord on the other side of the frontier will decide that, after all, beginning a war to conquer everything west of Riverrun may not be that difficult.”

“Yes, your Grace.”

There was less anger...and he was going to have to settle for that, because it wouldn’t get any better, oath or no oath.

“Good. Now let’s return to the Lordships. What did you intend to do with Castamere?”

“Divide the Lordship’s lands between the northern Lords, and give the veterans of the Banefort the right to tax the merchants travelling through the pass.” The former Regent immediately replied. “We will dismantle the fortifications, and use the underground citadel as one great inn. I also made preparations for a large statue of Lord Grimm to be erected where it can towers over the battlefield of the Second Butcher’s Ball.”

“Hmm...accepted.” Lord Marq unfurled the map of the Westerlands and placed it on the table. “it will be divided then between House Westerling, Bettley, Algood, and Marbrand...you intend to restore House Marbrand of Ashemark, yes?”

“Yes,” Lady Johanna confirmed, “Rupert Marbrand spent, I’m afraid, too long among his cousins of House Bettley, but he has the best claim, and he fought loyally against the oath-breakers.”

This was hardly a triumphal endorsement, but loyalty and the best claim trumped everything else.

“Next Lordship...Sarsfield. The castle is devastated, and most of the smallfolk are dead. My intention, given how vital the harvests in those lands are for the West as a whole, is to bring forwards many, many families of the Reach. Highgarden, to name only one Reacher holdfast, has a large surplus of families seeking new homes.”

Something dark flashed in the widow of Lord Jason’s eyes, but she didn’t protest.

“The castle is, as you said, destroyed. I intended to raise one of the Knightly Houses which was forced to flee at the onset of the rebellion to take over...House Jast of Deer Valley.”

“It can stand...but the Heir or the Lord will marry a Reach noblewoman.” Daeron examined the map, “and the five easternmost villages will be ceded to House Lefford. The defences of the Golden Tooth must stand strong.”

“Gareth Jast is already married. His Heir, however, is not.”

This was in fact better; better to not force a second unhappy second marriage...the Seven knew happy ones could result in fiery disasters.

“The Heir it is, then. Since we solved the problem of House Marbrand, what about House Brax? As I understood, there were rumours the last claimant was alive, then he was dead, then he was alive again...”

For the first time, the former Lady Regent looked extremely exasperated.

“Norman Brax is lucky to be the last of his line, for otherwise I would push to throw him into a cell until a Night Watch’s black brother comes to transport him to the Wall. He was so eager to fight that he let a man vaguely looking like him use his name and fame while he departed with thousands of other levies. If Reyne had not sent assassins against the fake claimant, it is possible we would have not noticed the problem for moons...and the Father Above only knows if Ser Norman would have survived the Red traitors and the other vagaries of battle.”

“This is...reckless,” Daeron admitted loudly, following it by a frown. “I thought all Brax loyalists had to be rewarded for their utmost loyalty to the Crown before hearing this information.”

Now evidently he was reconsidering. There was the need for vengeance, and there were actions like the one the last of the Brax did.

Johanna Lannister frowned too.

“His loud speeches against the Reynes and the other betrayers have made him extremely popular among the swordsmen and the knights of the West. Yes, it was reckless of him, but no one ignores House Brax was nearly wiped out by the Red Banners...and of course the Blacks hold the castle.”

“I heard about it too,” Lord Marq Merryweather courteously confirmed, “the young Brax has gathered around him quite a fiery band of hot-headed youths, be they of high or low birth.”

Wonderful. That meant that if Norman Brax left this ‘victory camp’ empty-handed, he was going to cause a lot of problems.

“Since he’s extremely vocal about putting all the servants of the Noble Houses allied to Reyne to the sword,” the Lord of Longtable continued, “giving him Cornfield or Silverhill may not be a move which will lead to peace.”

“The same will happen if you give him Deep Den,” Tyland Lannister said soberly. “Hornvale will be next door, and I fear this will be a temptation he won’t be able to resist, your Grace.”

Daeron nodded, grimacing in his mind. Yes, he could see a young hot-headed fool doing that...and though the Blacks would likely burn alive any raid or other attempt to attack Hornvale, it wouldn’t stop there.

And his realm was in no shape to fight several enemy dragons...not with the Westerlands devastated by the fire maniacs of Reyne.

“In this case, the only Lordship I can offer him is Crakehall...though the new Lordship won’t bear this name,” not after the castle was destroyed and the last of the Boar banners had been trampled by an elephant. “Suggestions?”

“Most Knightly Houses followed their liege lord into rebellion,” Johanna Lannister commented, “the castle of the Knightly House of Shieldsacker is a good defensive position, but does not have the possibility of blocking enemy armies like Crakehall did. It could serve as the seat of the new Lord Brax.”

There were more amendments to the villages and the mills the future Lordship would have, and naturally Norman Brax would have to accept hundreds of new smallfolk from the Oakheart lands. The ‘vengeful loyalist’ would marry in a Reacher House too.

“This leaves us with Silverhill, Cornfield, and Deep Den. By respect for the deeds of House Lannister’s men-at-arms, I will let you choose two out of the three Houses replacing the attainted Lords.”

“House Garner for Silverhill,” the noblewoman did not even pretend she had not thought about it, “*Lord* Philip was among the first to gather his swords and besiege Castamere, and his approach is hard but just. I think he can win back the hearts of the smallfolk formerly of House Serrett.”

This would be for the best, yes...especially as his Master of Whisperers had informed him both the Lord and his ‘Red Queen’ of daughter had escaped.

“And I ask for House Hetherspoon to be granted Deep Den.”

“Then I will formally propose Captain-General Belicho to marry the eldest daughter of Lord Swyft. That way, both castle and household will change names.”

A heartbeat later, the announcement of the still beautiful Western noblewoman arrived to his ears, and there was something...problematic in what she had just said.

“Forgive me, my Lady, but...I am not familiar with any House called ‘Hetherspoon’ from the Westerlands.” It was hardly surprising, for he had only bothered to learn the name of the Noble ones, but still, it was not an important Knightly House, nor was it-

“Oh, it is a small Knightly House my husband raised above their former station.” All sort of bells tolled at the vicious smile of the former Lady Regent. “My Jason made Leo Hetherspoon a noble, for his meals are so delicious they nearly bring you to tears by the smell alone.”

Daeron had thought Johanna Lannister wanted to humiliate some of the treacherous Houses.

The Green King had been wrong. Humiliation was far too weak a word to be accurate.

“You want to...you want to raise a former *cook* to one of the most ancient and strategic Lordships of the West?”

“Yes. At least with him, I am sure no one will starve in the coming years.”

Ouch. Well, it was difficult to find a powerful retort to something like that...

“Next point. We must speak about Hornvale...”

**Queen Baela Targaryen**

Baela did not believe she was an easily worried woman, but looking at all the symbols representing thousands of knights and men-at-arms on the doorstep of Hornvale, she could feel that emotion forcing her heart to beat faster.

“I wonder,” the Black Queen mused for the benefit of her advisors, “if it was such a splendid idea to take Hornvale for ourselves.”

The young mother made sure her long silver mane was as beautiful as when her handmaidens had combed it this morning before continuing.

“It likely earned us the hatred of the new Lord of House Brax. One of our dragonriders will have to travel and stay here for the next years, to make sure the Greens understand very well the frontier has moved west. And for all the important advantages the possession of the castles gives us, it has not convinced other Lords of the Westerlands to bend the knee to me.”

“I admit that presented that way, the outcome of this bloody civil war is somewhat disappointing,” Cregan Stark conceded seriously. “But the gains you didn’t earn at Hornvale, your Majesty, are more than compensated by the gold...err...*generously exchanged* with the defenders of the Golden Tooth. Trade has already increased noticeably with the first projects to be financed from your coffers, and that means the realm has definitely avoided a gold shortage. A gold shortage, which, I don’t have to remind your Majesty, could have done a lot of damage before it was stopped.”

“True,” Baela nodded after watching the Lord of Winterfell for a short turn of hourglass. “But the problems do not erase the gains.”

“And in the end,” the Lord Paramount of the North spoke as he hadn’t heard the latest remark, “while I am a great believer in choices, we can’t give back Hornvale to the Greens. Your Majesty, it would infuriate many of your fervent supporters, who were delighted we kicked the Greens’ bannersmen where it hurts. That the Western traitors could only mildly protest because we chastised traitors out of their reach has been a large splash of mud in their face...and a source of happiness for highborn and smallfolk in your lands.”

“Worse,” Lady Sabitha murmured, “in the eyes of the Greens, we would be perceived as *weak*. And for all my spies’ assurances that their army is about to be disbanded and return home, there is no telling what the bloodthirsty loudmouths will do if we present them a chink in our armour.”

The purple-eyed royal scowled before huffing and accepting the truth of her mother-in-law’s words.

Yes, Daeron wasn’t likely to begin a new war against the Black Kingdom, not with him trying to recover from his injuries and the Westerlands devastated by battles as fierce and vicious as those of the Dance, but that didn’t mean someone couldn’t begin something extremely unwise if he – or she – felt there was an opportunity.

“In that case, I suppose I am going to have to confirm Nettles as the legitimate Lady of Hornvale before I leave for the Vale.”

“This would be for the best,” Cregan replied carefully. “I also think we should stop closing our eyes and arrest enough smugglers to pass the message the war is over and some...activities won’t be tolerated anymore. What we could do when the Greens were desperately trying to save their skins against the Reynes and what we can afford to do now aren’t the same things at all.”

“Not that I completely disagree,” Sabitha Frey’s smile could have been mistaken for a fox’s, “but half of the smugglers operating near the...near Lady Nettles’ new lands are Westerners...born and ‘loyal’ to the Green cause.”

“Lord Cregan is right, unfortunately.” As much as Baela wanted to continue some activities which brought a lot of gold and valuable miners, artisans, and other families on her side of the frontier, this was not worth it for the next years. “The number of innocent smallfolk and Westerners of all kind has massively decreased anyway. These days, the knights and other soldiers we sent to Hornvale are busy arresting and hanging Red deserters, not helping mothers and their children escape the atrocities of Houses Lannister and Reyne.”

There had been some talks about giving generous offers to some of the former bannersmen which had risen in rebellion against Casterly Rock, but the offers had died quickly when it became obvious that the ‘Red Queen’ was the exception to the Reyne’s barbarity and murderous behaviour.

And now with Walder Reyne dead, the Red soldiers were nothing more than particularly ugly bandits...and sometimes, they were worse than the outlaws they had been hunting before this war.

“The smuggling may not completely stop,” the warning from the Northern Lord was for once completely unnecessary. Baela was not an idiot; there were things that weren’t going to stop because a Queen said so.

“Oh, it won’t,” Sabitha smiled, “at least half of the men and women involved are living on the other side of the frontier, and as I said, they have been living...how do we say it? Exciting lives? Yes, an exciting and profitable life is appropriate. The war may have been a calamity for the local smallfolk at first, but for those who managed to survive without their homes burned, the frontier being pushed west has offered opportunities that the Lannisters had denied to them for years.”

“Formidable,” Baela snorted again, “I am sure my cousin is going to be pleased when I will tell him *that*.”

**King Daeron Targaryen**

Daeron had never believed he had been unlucky when he was born.

His father was the King. His mother was a highborn daughter of the wealthiest and most influential Noble House of the Reach.

And as he grew into adulthood, there was little reason to complain either.

He was the rider of Tessarion. He was taught everything he needed to know to be the perfect Prince by the finest maesters, knights, and wise men hired by his father, grandfather, and cousins.

And when he was crowned King, Daeron wedded Arianne, a lovely woman of House Baratheon in the ‘bargain’.

He knew all of that perfectly. But for the first time in many years, as he watched his cousin dismount from her dragon, Daeron felt a twinge of jealousy.

The youngest and sole surviving son of King Viserys had celebrated his twenty-fourth name day this year. He felt really old watching the silver-haired, purple-eyed woman who was twenty-two...and looked far younger than her age said.

Honestly, if spies and merchants alike hadn’t confirmed that his northern counterpart had truly given birth to a daughter, Daeron wouldn’t have believed it.

Aside from the growth in certain areas like breaths and hips, Baela Targaryen looked like a maiden...well, perhaps not a maiden, since the rumours about her Frey consort and she were particularly salacious, but a married woman worthy to be acclaimed as the Queen of Beauty of her realm.

The black armour and the red cloak were not hiding much of her curves, to be certain, and Daeron could hear the whispers of certain courtiers behind his Kingsguards.

“Sorcery...”

The Green King inwardly sighed. He didn’t know who had said the baseless accusation...and he wasn’t going to search for him, not when he was sure hundreds of Westerners and non-Westerners hated the Black Queen and tried at every opportunity to darken her name...no humour intended.

Because, no, a woman of twenty-two looking beautiful did not require any sorcerous deed...Targaryen women, by virtue of the dragon blood of Valyria, were known to stay desirable for decades, sometimes until their death...it had been said that if Aegon’s wife Visenya was not so terrifying, she would have received a mountain of marriage proposals after the Conqueror was no more.

Daeron stepped forward, and sat at the table which had been prepared mere steps away from the Gold Road.

Some might believe it was exactly there because he wanted to make sure his bad leg rested, and they wouldn’t be wrong...but it also was because the frontier with the lordship of Hornvale was not a good horse’s gallop away.

“Cousin.” The Black Queen, fortunately, did not try to tower over him, and took her seat as soon as she arrived, her Kingsguards staying well outside of spear’s range, exactly as his did.

“Cousin,” he replied.

“A nice view you chose here,” the Black Queen had come into a black armour of ceremony, but the gloves she removed were not made for war; rather they had been ordered for hunting...or dragon-riding. Interestingly, save her wedding ring, his cousin did not wear any rings around her fingers. Indeed, the only other piece of jewellery visible was the diadem around her head.

Daeron was quite aware there could be no greater contrast with his own appearance: not being able to settle this war except at Deep Den, his ‘victorious garments’ had gold, silver, and gemstones everywhere. The large green royal robe was embroidered with gold, and several sapphires, emeralds, and diamonds of House Targaryen had been embedded into his dynasty’s crown.

And yes, he could hear the whispered mockeries of some of his courtiers. Really, some highborn fools weren’t as discreet as they thought they were. Did they think it was his ears which had been hurt?

“I’m glad you think so.” As much as they could have spent scores of turns of hourglass on the most boring or common topics imaginable – like the cloudless sky over their heads – Daeron preferred to stop that and directly go to the subject at hand. “Your messages indicated you were favourable to a negotiated treaty where the issue of the Lordship of Hornvale was concerned.”

“Yes, cousin,” the Black Queen gave him a polite smile, “after a long debate with my advisors, I have decided upon the following: until the end of the year one hundred and thirty-eight, ten merchant ships of your realm will be allowed to dock at Saltharvest and purchase enough salt to fill their hulls...the prices will be fixed at eight out of ten golden dragons of what it would have cost them last year. And exceptionably, I will let them pay half of the total payment in silver, if they so desire.”

“That’s...” Daeron cleared his throat, “very generous.”

And it was, he was absolutely sincere.

His realm had too much gold and too little salt; and yes, the traitor Walder Reyne had made everything worse, for ships which should have contributed to the salt transport were now forced to transport grain and a lot of food to the lands burned and ravaged by the Red fire-lovers.

“In exchange, your kingdom will renounce any and all claims upon Hornvale and its borders, such as they were before this year’s unpleasantness.” The rider of Moondancer thinly smiled. “To sweeten the deal, Lady Rohanne Reyne nee Serrett will take back her maiden’s name and renounce forever her family claims to Silverhill.”

That was even better news. Given that House Garner’s claims – the successors of House Serrett – had a weak claim and no wedding union to support it, having the Red Queen out of the Game of Thrones was a significant concession.

“No monetary concession, I take it?”

“We wouldn’t say no to more gold payments from House Lefford, of course,” the younger woman replied cheekily.

Daeron raised his eyes to the sky. Obviously, he had intended for him to be the receiving party of such golden dragons’ payments. It was his mistake to let the Blacks break through this diplomatic weakness.

There were more issues to settle. The markers for the new frontier and how the Blacks weren’t authorised to place any fortified point near the Gold Road was one of those key matters.

There was much haggling, but at last, all the points he had covered with Lord Marq Merryweather were negotiated to his satisfaction.

“Very well, I think we are-“

“NO! NO YOU GRACE, YOU CAN’T LET THE TRAITORS GET AWAY WITH THIS!”

**Queen Baela Targaryen**

“NO! NO YOU GRACE, YOU CAN’T LET THE TRAITORS GET AWAY WITH THIS!”

Baela’s first reaction in the privacy of her mind was that the day had been going a bit too well.

Obviously there had to be some venom-tongued fool to complicate the treaty.

This was part of the reason why she had come with few knights and members of her own party, to be honest.

With only her Kingsguards and a few of her bannersmen she would gamble her life upon – the Vale, the North, and the Riverlands were equally represented – Baela had felt reasonably certain there would be no unpleasant surprise from her side...especially not since she had explained why she was trying to negotiate for in the last several days.

Daeron, alas, had not felt reasonable to take the same precautions. She wasn’t going to say his followers were the size of a small army, but beyond his own Kingsguard, there were several hundreds of them.

And one of them, a young man with red hair that she had never seen before, had opened his mouth at exactly the wrong moment.

The Targaryen Queen had never had the dubious honour of observing him with her own eyes, but she could guess correctly who he was based on the splendid unicorn-shaped helmet he kept under his arm.

This was Norman Brax, and Baela once again felt it had been a mistake to seize Hornvale, for this man, barely a few years younger than herself, was going to be a fierce enemy of everything the Black Realm tried to build.

“Be silent.”

“My King!”

“I didn’t give you, the authorisation to speak, Lord Brax! Who are you to tell the dragon what he can or can’t do? Are your oaths you uttered less than seven days ago worth so little?”

But it was too late. Baela felt it in the air. Her cousin had chastised the ungrateful youngster who had been reported as dead no less than five times by several spies, but it had broken the good progress of the talks, and now other virulent naysayers felt free to open their mouths and voice their disapproval.

“Hornvale belongs to the true and the loyal!”

“No renouncement! The Blacks are traitors, we can’t abandon a single Lordship to them!”

“House Brax has always stood with House Lannister! Will we abandon their lands in times of hardship? I say no!”

Interestingly, as Baela watched the irate crowd like Lady Sabitha had taught her, the purple-eyed woman noticed that aside from Lord Brax, most of the Western highborn had remained silent...the harsh critics were coming in large part from Reachers, Stormlanders, and Crownlanders.

The colourful-armoured sellsword who had to be the Volantene Captain-General stayed silent and a vigilant sentinel, glaring at the screaming idiots. And most of the Lannister delegation went to ‘inform’ plenty of stupid Lords with fists and the hilts of their swords against insubordinate backs that their intervention was neither confirmed nor desired.

It didn’t matter. Not when Lord Norman Brax managed to step forwards and give a solid kick to the superb table which had been chosen to carry ink pots and parchments aplenty.

“I WILL NEVER RENOUNCE MY CLAIMS TO HORNVALE!” The hot-headed fool spluttered so violently Baela had to step back and place a hand in front of her face to not get wet from his spitting. “YOU HEAR ME BLACK QUEEN? WE WILL RECONQUER HORNVALE!”

“No,” Baela gave him an unimpressed expression. “If you are so foolish as to attempt it, you will die.”

“EVEN DRAGONS CAN DIE!”

This time, after a couple of heartbeats, even the idiots realised he had gone too far...and a Kingsguard immediately slammed his shield against his head, making sure the new Lord Brax was not going to say any new treacherous words today.

It didn’t return a semblance of peace.

“DON’T NEGOTIATE WITH A HERETIC!”

“THE SEVEN WILL GIVE US VICTORY!”

“NO WOMAN CAN BE ALLOWED TO SIT UPON THE IRON THRONE! IT IS A SACRILEGE!”

Scores of septons and religious madmen went to add their numbers, and by the way Daeron scowled, their presence had not been part of his plans.

“WE TOLERATED MAEGOR WITH TITS ONCE, WE WILL ENVER DO IT AGAIN!”

Oh, they had tolerated Queen Rhaenyra, did they?

And here she thought lying was a sin.

From the very beginning, the Faith of Seven had supported the idea Aegon II was the legitimate King. House Hightower and the Starry Sept had worked in perfect harmony to dethrone the Blacks and everything House Targaryen had stood for.

Lady Sabitha had been right; if there was ever a second Dance, the upper leadership of the Faith of Seven would be her mortal enemies. Expecting anything else to happen would be demanding many miracles from both the Old and New Gods.

“My apologies,” her cousin said curtly.

“It is not you I want to apologise,” Baela snorted before lowering her tone, not that it was strictly necessary as chaos reigned among the Green bannersmen. “I hope you realise, cousin, this is just the beginning of the problems. You should have given the Crakehall Lordship to a woman of high birth, and kept Lady Johanna as Regent.”

“The Lords won’t follow them anymore,” the mild protest was uttered with no conviction whatsoever.

“That’s what happens when you allow arrogant fools to usurp the legacy of women of high birth. My Hand often repeats the same thing: you have to consider the claim, the laws, and the ruling skills of each claimant.”

Norman Brax, based on her first impression, shouldn’t have been granted a Lordship, ever.

But he was, and now...

“It will get better. I promise you. Will you sign the treaty?”

Yes, the question was almost imploring...

“Yes. In the name of peace, I will sign. Just make sure this fool does not go anywhere near Hornvale. Nettles... I mean, Lady Nettles, has an even shorter well of patience than I before giving Sheepstealer the command to roast hot-headed fools.”

**Ser Richard Lydden**

Lannisport was truly impossible to forget when the red sunset illuminated it.

Richard knew there were a lot of poor souls there; he had seen hundreds in the last days. The Lydden Knight knew far better than any outsider how many refugees had fled behind those walls as the Red Lion’s armies burned their way through the Westerlands, and many of them were staying because there was nothing to return to.

He knew all of this.

Lannisport still shone like the most magnificent of rubies, and the golden monuments erected by House Lannister increased by several orders the sight.

Ser Richard was glad to have seen it one more time before his ship departed next dawn. Somehow, he didn’t think Great Wyk would be a match for the greatest city of the West – not that there was a lot of competition, mind you.

Steps were heard behind him, but the former Castellan of Deep Den didn’t turn his head. The position near the cliffs he had chosen could be only reasonably visited by two type of souls: the watchtower guards – who were all busy preparing a large rabbit before it cooked over their bonfire – or the spy he had been assigned for his mission.

Yes, because the King, for some reason, had decided he would get the title of King’s envoy – or whatever thing he would eventually get called by the Ironborn – but a much younger and loyal boy would get the real job. The one which demanded to answer the question: was this ‘Lord Balon Pyke’ a threat to the Green realm or not?

“You do not intend to return to the city before the gates close, Ser?”

“No,” Richard chuckled, “I do not. Setting aside the fact a Lannisport inn is extraordinarily expensive and I do not want to spend the King’s gold...I’ve always wondered how it would feel to sleep under the stars. No tents. No roof. Nothing but the wind flowing in my hair and the stars to provide comfort and light.”

It was sunset and his eyes couldn’t yet see them, but given how blue the sky was all day, Richard did not doubt a single instant the spectacle would offer itself to his senses tonight.

The spy sat on the rock about a spear’s away, something that always seemed unnatural, because for all his young age, the lowborn Westerner had reached the height where people often wondered if you had giant’s blood flowing in your veins.

“I understand. It’s something to do a few times in your life, Noble House or not...and peace has returned, so it is not so risky to be alone...as long as one stays close to Casterly Rock.”

“Yes,” if you went deeper southwards or eastwards, it was an entirely different tale, as they said. There was a reason most of the journey on the Gold Road had been done protected by a formidable escort of knights and infantry, and it wasn’t because King Daeron was worried about his possible desertion. “What an ugly peace...assuming it is peace, that is.”

The spy grimaced.

“You noticed too, Ser?”

“My dear companion, courtesy of not having any wine bottles in my possession, I am *royally* sober,” Richard chuckled at his poor joke. “And I heard what happened when the Black Queen and Green King met.”

The last member of House Lydden to have been spared chains and lifelong punishment raised an imaginary cup in the direction of the sea.

“The idiots which survived the bloodbath had two choices: they could blame themselves for their lack of vigilance and not keeping their two eyes on Walder Reyne...or they could blame the Black Queen. It was way easier to do the latter than the former.”

After all, the silver-haired beauty and her ivory-green dragon were not living on their side of the frontier.

Baela Targaryen was the enemy well before Castamere and countless highborn men and women turned traitor.

“It is easier to spread rumours and blame her for the next moons,” the black-haired spy agreed, taking in his arms the adorable puppy he never went anywhere without. “But in the next several years, it will stop.”

“Are you certain of that?”

His fears must have been all too evident in his voice, for the tall and muscled man raised his hands in appeasement.

“Norman Brax and all the idiots who followed him were one foot away from being sent to the executioner,” the spy commented slowly, “and for all his arrogance, the Lordship he was given has been devastated. Oh, and the daughters of Lord Oakheart have suddenly become incredibly reluctant to be betrothed. His coffers are empty, Crakehall can’t be used as a Lordship seat, and for all their religious sermons, the fanatics who supported him won’t stay eternally by his side if he can’t give them food, shelter, and protection.”

“Yes...but what happens if he grows in wisdom and learns the value of patience? What if all the young knights of summer we saw at the Victory Field and near Deep Den decide to wait?”

“I find it...unlikely.” Enormous shoulder rolled. “Don’t forget, the King is wise, and though the Red Usurper might have wounded him, he failed to kill him...and as long as His Grace rides Tessarion, I believe any attempt to rebel and unleash a war will be crushed in blood and severely punished.”

“True,” Richard conceded. “Maybe it’s nothing but the lack of wine and good ale...”

“There is good ale in Lannisport!” His companion retorted outraged.

“No, there is not,” he wasn’t going to call that ‘good ale’, not even if his life was at stake!

Richard waited as the sunset faded and night came for the Westerlands.

“Like I said, I want to say it is all over. That we will have an eternal summer and all of that.”

Richard hesitated.

“But this is not the kind of world we live into. Life isn’t a song. And the Dance of Dragons...it is not over.”

It was not peace, that what was he feared.

“A pause, to give the two sides to prepare...” He whispered for himself, and as obscurity surrounded them, it seemed the winds whispered him the truth. “A pause of two decades...and there will be a war. The greatest war of our era.”

The muscular Westerner by his side snorted.

“You’re in a fine mood this evening, Ser.”

“Sorry.” The ex-drunken knight apologised. “Why don’t you tell me some amusing histories of your time as ‘lord of puppies’, Gregor Clegane?”

**Author’s note**:

This was the last chapter where the War of Lions took the centre stage, I promise. Next chapter will see the focus on the Arryn succession crisis and a whole lot of Vale shenanigans.

More links on the Dance is not Over:

P a treon: www. p a treon Antony444

Alternate History: www .alternatehistory forum /threads /asoiaf-the-dance-is-not-over.391415