**Chapter 18**

**The Bracken Incident**

**Ser Harys Bracken**

Bracken’s Fort was too calm. The shiver Harys felt in his neck after that realisation was not due to the cold or snowflakes. But as he watched the new holdfast of his House in the distance, there was nothing he could do. Whatever his Lord had done, he was far too late to stop it.

He still gestured to the two Knights behind him to increase their pace. The tiny shiny orb that was the winter sun was almost at its zenith and the northern wind was as unpleasant as ever. He was not going to kill the poor horses he had taken with him to visit the villages of Black Rock and Circling Water, no. But the miserable band of deserters and outlaws he had found needed to understand he was in charge and that abandoning their duties deserved punishment.

“Faster you maggots!” barked one of his men-at-arms. “Faster or your rations will go to the horses tonight!”

They had to present a strange picture to the lone old women turning their heads to watch their slow progression on this miserable excuse of a road. Three Knights – including himself – one leading the column, one at the rear and one protecting the left flank. Three Knights in mail and steel, escorting two scores of bandit-looking men with rusted weapons and old armours which had to be ten years old or more.

The last leagues of their ride were done in a land of calm and silence. The village surrounding Bracken’s Fort was looking like it was abandoned, with only the old grey beards, ugly old hags and a few children to prove the contrary. The snow was deeper than usual; the work of several fortnights to make the passage of chariots, horses and men easier had clearly been abandoned.

The gates of Bracken’s fort should have been opened upon their arrival. Instead they were closed. Harys’ knowledge of the patrols on top of the tower allowed him to see a single man rushing down the stairs to warn of their arrival. It was not good.

Harys and his good-for-nothing deserter levies had approached slowly and not discreetly the castle. Alarm should have been raised several turn of hourglasses before this moment. Where were the rest of the Knights? Where were the men in fighting age he had been forced to threaten or buy the loyalty in the last year?

“Open, in the name of Ser Harys Bracken, Shield of Bracken’s Fort!” shouted one of his Knights, more impatient than him to take a well-deserved rest.

The wait before the gates opened was long, terribly so. If there had been sixty or seventy able men, the work should have been done rapidly...so they weren’t there. Harys Bracken gritted his teeth. So his liege Lord had decided to not wait his return before launching his first raid in the Black-held Riverlands.

It took three more orders before they were able to ride or walk into the deserted courtyard.

“Where is Lord Harrold?” Harys asked immediately to the first guard he saw as he dismounted.

“He departed five days ago to punish the servants of the Black whore,” the old idiot who had to be in his fiftieth year had the gall to smile as he delivered the information.

This was exactly what he had feared.

“How many did he have with him?” He asked and his displeasure had to be obvious for the guard’s smile disappeared and step by step he retreated in direction of the dungeon.

“Thirty Knights and sixty sworn swords,” this was worse than he had feared; his Lord had, except the patrols and the escort for the food convoys, really taken everyone for this mad endeavour. “But our Lord is a great battle-commander surely he will defeat the Northern heretics with one hand behind his back!”

*No, he will not*, thought Harys. Lord Harrold Bracken had not been of the disastrous campaign which ended at Bosworth Bridge. He had not seen the crimson river where thousands of corpses floated. He had not tasted the despair of the men who saw their allies be massacred by roaring barbarians. And as far as he knew, his liege had not commanded a small or a great army in any war.

Maybe his dark thoughts were unwarranted. The weather conditions were bad, so it was possible to make raids on the other of the unfortified frontier now cutting the Riverlands in two. Pillaging one or two villages sworn to House Tully was not difficult, and if they weren’t any survivors the Blacks’ accusations would be empty words in the winter winds.

Alas, Harys didn’t believe an instant Lord Harrold had this mind as the memories of their previous discussions played in his mind.

“I need to speak to Maester Hoster.” He said while handing his horse to a young boy who looked afraid of his own shadow. “He’s still in his library, isn’t he?”

The grey-robed man was on a normal day useless, but in this case he should accept to send a raven to King’s Landing to warn the capital of his lord’s actions. The maester had been raised at Pinkmaiden, and would not want war to resume in the Riverlands...

“Lord Harrold took Maester Hoster with him, Ser,” announced one of the old female cooks as he entered the hall and sat on one of the many unoccupied seats. “Nine out of ten ravens went with him in their cages.”

Seven Hells, his cousin had prepared his raid well. All the Knights who might have protested his heavy-handed and unauthorised orders were away. The force he had mustered to cross the border was devoted to him so there would be no dissent. With all the ravens of the Bracken’s Fort with him, there was no way to warn the King in time. Dragons were fast, but even they would need one day or two in winter to arrive here and certainly one more day to find the raiding party. By then, Lord Harrold and his men would already be in Black lands and arriving with a dragon would be akin to a declaration of war.

“In this case, tell Ser Lyn to prepare himself to ride tomorrow at dawn. He must ride to the capital in all haste and sound the alarm...”

In the mean time, he was going to prepare the defences of Bracken’s Fort with two scores of former deserters. For if they were forced to fight the Blacks again, this fort was going to be their first target...

**Queen Baela Targaryen**

If she had been on foot, she might never have found the assassins in the middle of these snow-covered hills.

Fortunately for her and unfortunately for them, she was riding Moondancer, and from her position in the sky the raiders were not good enough to escape her search.

They had seen her, of course. The terrible wind and the cold forced her bonded to fly low, without the clouds to hide them. At this height, a dragon could not be mistaken for a great eagle or another species of prey bird.

Three arrows flying in her direction confirmed the enemy had seen her. It was all it did, however. Maybe some elite archers of the Summer Isles and the Dornish Marches had the strength and the bows to hit a dragon at this distance, but the men fleeing below her had not the weapons or the training to accomplish this exploit. The arrows fell down without touching anything and she didn’t order Moondancer to take evasive action.

“Ah, they are trying to divide their forces and ride south as fast as they can,” the young Queen whispered.

It was not a bad strategy, admittedly. After putting the little village of Nya’s Ford to the torch and massacring its smallfolk, these Green oath-breakers had to know her forces were going to pursue them until their heads were placed on long pikes at Stone Hedge.

It was not a bad strategy...if your opponent wasn’t a dragonrider, several of your men weren’t lagging behind on foot and the snow hampered your retreat. The infantry had not a prayer to cross the frontier today. So she ignored them and went directly after the right column, which had the gall to show a banner where the decapitated head of a black dragon had been weaved.

Baela made a feint for the two archers in range to launch their arrows in what they believed to be a frontal attack before the real assault.

“Manaraxevys,” she murmured to Moondancer, before giving him a warm feeling for their bond.

Moondancer changed course and took the cavalry on their right. The enemy Knights had not the time to retaliate before the dragonfire engulfed and consumed them. Six men and six horses were dead, and she ordered her bonded to return eastwards for the other column.

By then, the retreat of the Green raiding party had turned into a rout. The foot soldiers had seen the flames killing the mounted warriors commanding them. As most of them were carrying swords and axes with the long spear here and there, they knew they had no chance and the formation broke and each man tried to run in a different direction.

Baela didn’t try to command a dragonfire pass on them. These raiders would be dealt later by her Riverlands bannersmen or by Moondancer. As it was, there were more important enemies to kill.

The second column of cavalry was killing its horses in a vain attempt to reach the frontier. Without dragon, they might have a chance. The great brown oak marking the frontier was but three hills away.

“Manaraxevys!” Baela spoke again and new flames were breathed by Moondancer. The horses, mad with terror, threw down three of their masters and tried to avoid the pyre promised for them. The half-score of knights and freeriders broke, reacting desperately in the hope one or two warriors could avoid her vigilance.

This was a forlorn hope for them. After what they had done to her people, Baela was in no mood to let them escape. As much as the roasted corpses disgusted her, she had to send a message to the Greens or soon every Knight and Lord of the Green-held Crownlands and Reach would believe it was acceptable to raid her realm.

This didn’t stop them from screaming insults and House words. Some weren’t known to her, but House Bracken battle-cries were. They must have not accepted well her royal order to make Stone Hedge the new capital.

One of the last cavaliers to remain standing planted his banner in the snow, drew his sword and screamed in a voice so loud she couldn’t help but hear his defiance.

“Black Queen! I challenge you to a trial by combat! In the name of the Seven, come down and let the Warrior prove your cause is just!”

Baela snorted and by her bond, she felt Moondancer’s amusement at the japing of the soon-to-be-dead raider. Trying to remember the information gathered by Lord Cregan, she concluded this had to be the new Lord Bracken. How had her hand described him before this attack? Something about the fury of an angry stallion and the intelligence of a fish, she believed...

Moondancer made a short circle and then she gave a third time her order.

“Manaraxevys!”

The last horses and men died screaming in dragonfire. What? Did the raiders seriously hope she was going to offer them a duel when their lack of honour had been proved beyond doubt? These butchers had violated the peace and now they had to pay the price.

“Let’s go in pursuit of the infantry, bonded. I want to make sure the strength of this raiding party is not going back home.”

Some might argue letting some survivors limp back home would send a message, but if none of them came back and their heads were exposed on pikes on the frontier, it would give another message.

*If you take the next step you die*.

**Lady Alysanne Blackwood**

Despite the snow, the earth had turned charred black on an impressive expanse. It was a small act to remind them that while the dragon of their Queen was still young by the standard of the great beasts of the Conquest, it was growing and its flames were deadly.

Not that Alysanne complained. The dead were belonging to House Bracken and as far as she was concerned, these betrayers could get themselves roasted every day if they fancied it.

“We should cross the frontier and burn the new Bracken’s Fort,” said her nephew in a vibrant voice. “Burn one or two villages too, the Brackens need to learn the error of their ways.”

Alysanne didn’t nod in approval like the dozens of archers surrounded her did. Yes, she was proud of our nephew, who was now an accomplished commander at an age most squires dreamt their masters authorised to use steel during their training. But her nephew Benjicot, now nicknamed Bloody Ben from Winterfell to Sunspear, had not had the time to assimilate her lessons in politics and the tactics linking them together.

“We could,” she affirmed in a reasonable tone. “We could burn their fort, their villages and their families. And after razing them we would be in the same situation: the blue dragon would come from King’s Landing and burn us as we try to go back to our lands.”

“The Queen would protect us.”

Queen Baela probably would...and then the young woman would send them all to the Night’s Watch for having the temerity to disobey her orders.

“The risks are too great. Should the Queen decline to support us, we would suffer the fate of these Green raiders.”

Benjicot swore something rude and Alysanne feigned to not have heard it. Her nephew was young...in time he would learn ruling his lands was not a straightforward affair like a battle.

“Do we know if Lord Harrold Bracken was among these raiders?”

“The Queen thinks a man looking like him tried to challenge her to a duel,” many Blackwood sworn swords and archers laughed at the foolishness of the deed. “But dragonfire is worse than wildfire and all we have left is bones. This raid cost them heavily though, whether it was him or not. Moondancer killed over a hundred men and one score of horses.”

“Good,” Ben smiled viciously. “Very good, I wish I could be at court when the Green usurper of King’s Landing will hear the news.”

Alysanne had more peaceful wishes. Like hoping ‘King Daeron’ was not a fool war-lover like his eldest brothers. These two dragonriders had waged the first years of the Dance like they were the only persons who mattered in the entire realm and their reigns of terror had killed thousands of smallfolk.

A rider interrupted this necessary conversation.

“My Lord, My Lady, our scouts have found someone alive in the grove one league east of here.”

They left half of their mounts and men to gather what was left of the burned corpses and rode at a leisurely pace in the direction of the trees. The Manderly horses they had bought were not destined to be used in jousting, melee or battle, but they had a lot of endurance in winter conditions and every Noble House could feed them with what was left of their granaries and old fruits.

When her scouts came into view, the identity of the prisoner was not difficult to guess. A large furred grey robe covered the man from head to toe and a brilliant chain was around his neck. And twenty feet away from the circle of Blackwood warriors guarding him, there was a chariot with many raven cages.

If the man was not the maester of Bracken’s Fort, then he certainly looked like a well-dressed impostor.

“How many ravens did he sent before you captured him?” Her nephew interrogated their Captain.

“Seven or eight, but we shot down five of them before they could fly away...”

This was not good. Depending on the behaviour of the two castles receiving this destination, forces were going to be mustered again from the Crownlands or the Reach.

The master of the ravens chose this moment to intervene in the conversation.

“I told them my birds were not carrying messages of great importance...”

Several men and women snorted or smirked. Alysanne was handed a damaged roll and read it out loud.

“Bracken’s Fort under attack from considerable Black forces...” Lord Harrold Bracken, it seemed, had little love for the truth and explaining his real actions to his King. “And he has the gall to say his messages are not of great importance...”

Ben stayed on his horse with a thoughtful expression. “I wonder...how do you kill a treacherous maester? Is it the gallows or the axe?”

“You can’t do that!” The rat of the Citadel seemed genuinely shocked that they were going to kill him. “Maesters swear vows to their Lord...I had no choice but to obey...”

His eyes tried to look in the eyes of the Blackwood scouts and archers, maybe attempting to find some mercy or compassion.

He found none.

“You obeyed and your Lord massacred innocents. And by sending your ravens, you intended to start another war where thousands more would die.”

Alysanne smirked.

“But then it is no problem for all your Oldtown Order, isn’t it? Between House Hightower and the Citadel, you sided with the Greens and tore apart the Seven Kingdoms.”

“This is completely untrue!”

She didn’t waste her time answer this big lie. Instead she turned to her nephew.

“The rope or the axe?”

Ben dismounted before replying.

“We have a lot of trees ten feet away and I won’t dirty the steel of a good blade with his blood...” The Lord of Raventree Hall gave a good punch in the man’s belly when he tried to escape the vigilance of his guards. “Take his ravens and everything of value, this maester won’t need them anymore...”

**Queen Baela Targaryen**

Rhaena was beautiful in her wedding dress. The long red robe had been a special command from Myr and had cost an exorbitant price, but it espoused her sister’s body nicely. The Targaryen cloak was adding a regal touch and three rubies around her neck proved the dragon was as elegant as it was deadly.

“You should wear red and black more,” Baela said seriously, verifying by the same occasion the rings on her sister’s fingers were adjusted like in her souvenirs. Many of them had been in their mother’s collection and a grand wedding was just the first event they could walk with them in public. There were amethysts to compliment their violet eyes, onyx jewels for the black scales of the dragons, the rubies for the flames of the dynasty and white shining diamonds for the prestige and the magnificence of it.

“No, this is your queenly privilege, remember?”

Baela stuck her tongue and Rhaena laughed. Yes, she loved dressing in red and black...although she was doing it less and less since her crowning. Politics demanded every advantage she could seize and unfortunately if judging the affairs of the day in a blue robe was necessary to appease some Vale Lords, then by the Old and New Gods Baela was choosing the dress. It was less painful than to explain to hundreds of smallfolk that the ships transporting their food supplies had been delayed for several weeks due to a trade dispute.

“Well for today it is you who have the ‘privilege’, Rhae,” she remarked to her little sister – and yes Rhaena was only younger than her by several heartbeats. By a tradition which was so old and so widespread it was almost a law, the woman and the man about to be wed had to outshine the attires of the assembly gathered to see their union. Every Lord, Lady, Queen and Knight had come in her or his finest doublet, robe and tunic, but there was a fine line to not cross. It was why at the moment her dress was of a paler shade of red, her diadem was incredibly modest with a single ruby and she didn’t bear half of the Crown jewels she could afford for this wedding.

“And I will give it to you back tomorrow,” said Rhaena with a humorous expression and without a single trace of regret. It didn’t surprise her: Rhaena far preferred yellow clothes to red ones and purple to black. Unfortunately, much as it was elegant to support their violet eyes with them, purple clothes in general were hellishly costly, something to do with Tyrosh cornering the market on the dyeing. Rhaena owned a few robes plus the weaving artworks Mother had left them, but these had to be one half of said robes in Westeros. At least there were still the options to buy more; Myr and Tyrosh still traded with her kingdom, unlike Lys.

“Time to go to the altar,” and her twin breathed loudly before Baela opened the door and the handmaidens helped her put the finishing touches before helping carrying the dress.

The descent of the stairs was dignified...that was what she would pretend if asked the question, obviously. In practise, their expensive robes needed to arrive pristine and unwrinkled for the big ceremony.

“There have been whispers from your admirers you didn’t shout loudly ‘Dracarys’ during your latest exploits...” It was idle chat and more for the ears of their servants and the Lords who paid them to have priceless information on their lives.

“Oh I had no intention to entertain the Greens...you know given that they all died running away.”

In reality, it was nothing of the sort, of course. While the bond between dragon and master gave her great control over Moondancer, she still needed to give him vocal instruction from time to time. And in the tumult of battle, her dragon really didn’t need to hear a thousand soldiers bellowing ‘Dracarys’ and develop the idea it was nice to carbonise some humans when it was not the case.

It was her father who had told her of this problem when she was eight, and Baela had not forgotten the lesson. The moment Moondancer had been in age to understand her sentences she had invented several Valyrian-sounding words and trained her bonded to react to them. Rhaena had started recently the same training for her Morning.

Truly, ordering ‘Dracarys’ to your flame-breathing mount was awe-striking for foreigners and outsiders who had never been close to a dragon, but it was completely predictable. And being predictable had seen House Targaryen divided and a realm torn asunder. It was best to avoid it at all costs.

“Ready?” She demanded as the noise of the assembly waiting for them began to be heard and their progression stopped at the end of a corridor which had once belonged to the decimated House Bracken.

“Ready, my Queen,” replied mischievously Rhaena and they arrived in a far more crowded area of Stone Hedge and hundreds of guards, servants and knights bowed largely. The great doors opened and a herald began to recite the titles of Rhaena. For the first time of her life, her twin was announced before her...and for an instant Baela wondered if she had been the younger of the two before slightly shaking her head in amusement. What was done was done, and the past could not be altered.

The hall they advanced into was unrecognisable from its normal state. A great red carpet was covering the ground between them and the altar where seven septons waited. Great tapestries which had been stored in Vale vaults were seen renovated for this great wedding. Between the candles and the torches, the silver and the gold were shining like a thousand suns. Her court had come in their best clothes, and given that it was winter every Noble House of importance in the Black Kingdom had decided to use long and elaborated attires.

“Long live House Targaryen!”

“Long live the Queen!”

“Long live the Princess!”

“The dragon and the direwolf!”

But the voices of the assembly were rapidly overwhelmed by the songs of the septas and the children in the choirs behind the septons. Baela had to admit she hadn’t the faintest idea which song it was; study of the *Seven-Pointed Star* had not been in her tutor’s mind – but the song was majestic and enthralling. At regular interruptions, trumpets resonated.

Their procession continued until they climbed the final two steps and the two sisters dominated the gathering. On an average day, this was where Baela and her main councillors dined; today an immaculate marble altar had been installed, surrounded by hundreds of winter flowers and extensive decorations.

Trumpets sounded again, and it was the turn of the Northern procession to come in, Lord Cregan Stark leading the column with his son Rickon to his right. For this great celebration, the Starks and their bannersmen had abandoned the great heavily-furred cloaks and coats which always made them look like bears and had replaced them by fashionable grey-white tunics. Beards had been trimmed and hairs cut, and in the current atmosphere they looked more civilised than the River or Vale Lords.

Acclamations and music accompanied the North arrival, a bit more bawdy and joyous than her sister had been. Cregan Stark as always moved like a force of nature – or a direwolf stalking his prey, depending on you asked. His son by contrast looked like a young and untested warrior, though his chest was muscled and his arms had to be twice the width of Baela’s. For his wedding the Heir of Winterfell had completely shaved his face; as a consequence his dark Stark hairs and his deep grey eyes really attracted the gazes. His cloak was grey and a massive direwolf was howling to the moon on it.

When he and Rhaena arrived side by side, he kissed her hand and the entire hall cheered and shouted its joy.

“My dear children...” The smile on Septon Robar was sincerity itself. Baela congratulated herself to have chosen this man as the new chief-priest of Stone Hedge. Tolerant and popular, the old white-haired man had been a source of uninterrupted optimism in the dark fortnights and had not hesitated lending his help to distribute the grain and the meat of his office to his modest parishioners. “We are gathered here today under the gaze of the Old and New Gods for the holy and joyful union of two young noble souls. Marriage is particularly kind and blessed by the Gods, for it allows you to share your Houses strength, standing together to face the world and life hand-in-hand. We must never forget it is the union of the Father and the Mother which is the source of the stability and the prosperity of the Seven Heavens...”

The septon had promised a short discourse and for a royal marriage he held his word: as fast as he had started, the great question arrived for Rhaena.

“Princess Rhaena Targaryen, do you swear to take Lord Rickon Stark for husband in love and blessed union, to stand by his side until death tears you apart?”

“I do.”

**King Daeron Targaryen**

Daeron had known when he had elevated some Lords to their current titles he had made several mistakes. Most of it he had attributed it to the fact he didn’t like said bannersmen and was forced to play the game of thrones which had almost brought the Seven Kingdoms to the edge of complete destruction. The rider of Tessarion had known and in private he had not hidden his unhappiness.

Now it appeared that one of these mistakes had been greater than he thought...and he had more headaches and unhappiness to feel.

The Green King had not liked Lord Harrold Bracken at all, but he had thought the man would be intelligent enough to rebuild his House, play dead in order to decrease the vigilance of the Black spies and wait until the snow melted and the roads became practicable.

It was not difficult to understand but he had been sure to write it in big and simple words when he sent his orders to the Noble Houses of the Riverlands frontier. Do not wage war in winter. Do not start any raids. Do your best to rebuild the fortunes of your new lands and let the population grow to numbers approaching those of 125 after Conquest.

Either someone had modified his messages, or Lord Harrold Bracken had decided to completely ignore his royal commands. As much as Daeron wanted to believe it was the former, there was no indication it wasn’t the latter.

The Lord of Bracken’s fort had tried to fulfil his thirst of vengeance at all costs, including the resumption of hostilities and the start of a new war Blacks and Greens couldn’t afford.

Lord Bracken had gambled and he had lost. To be honest, every illiterate thief of King’s Landing would have been able to predict his failure. The Brackens had no dragons; therefore the only question had been if his cousin the Black Queen was going to massacre his party on a snowy plain or she was going to torch Bracken’s Fort while he was in it.

“Lord Harrold Bracken, may the Father judge him harshly, chose treachery over the loyalty oaths he swore to House Targaryen,” he announced to the crowd waiting for his decisions in the throne room. Despite the end of the dark atmosphere with dragon skulls and bloody tapestries, it was hard to watch the expressions of his subjects at this distance. Aegon the Conqueror’s work was evidently not practical at all for many things.

“Let it be known that Lord Harrold Bracken actions betrayed the word and the treaties agreed by the Iron Throne. For the ignoble murders he committed or ordered, it is the decision of the Crown that Lord Harrold Bracken is denied all his titles, honours, privileged and inheritances he was entitled by our laws.”

Daeron would have loved to do more, perhaps beheading the man himself, but alas according all the spies of his Master of Whisperers, the fool had perished in dragonfire and even showing his head on a pike was no longer possible. The advisors, sellswords and weapon-sellers who by greed or spite had plunged their hands in this river of hate had shared Lord Bracken’s fate or had already met the axe of Royal Justice.

“Ser Harys Bracken,” the last surviving member of the Riverlands Noble House advanced. If he had to be honest, Daeron would love to banish him on the other side of the Narrow Sea or to the Wall. But there were politics and the Bracken knight had by Larys Strong’s reports the man had genuinely try to warn him. Too late, but he had tried, unlike certain Lords. “Your loyalty to the Crown has been noted and you will be the new Lord of Bracken’s Fort and its lands.”

Said lands were going to be reduced by a mill and three hamlets, but there was no reason to tell it in front of the court.

“Your Grace is generous. House Bracken’s loyalty will not be in doubt ever again.”

“A pleasant vow for the Kingdoms,” Daeron replied, appreciating the newly-elevated Lord Bracken had understood there would be no second chances. This entire affair had cost a lot to the treasury: many Black harbours had raised unexplainably their taxes for several days, a few merchants had seen their hulls ‘borrowed’ for a fortnight or two and he had been forced to reinforce some garrisons when the last batch of levies was not ready to guard anything more dangerous than sheep.

“This sad events settled, we must speak of several problems plaguing Oldtown...”