**Chapter 51**

**Voyagers**

*Unlike the previous year, which would leave scars in loyalist Westerosi bodies and souls for generations, the year one hundred and thirty-nine after the Conquest was a year of peace.*

*The knights and men-at-arms who had been called by noble King Daeron to crush the treacherous ambitions of the perfidious House Reyne were now returning home, along with all their servants. Save various groups of irreducible oath-breakers, who were by now impossible to distinguish from proper bandits save the name of their leaders, there was a notable and pleasant lack of bloodshed from the northern frontier to the Dornish Marches.*

*In many ways, this was for the best of the kingdom: many sellswords and freeriders decided it was time to return to more violent lands and used their gold and silver to pay for a voyage across the Narrow Sea. The majority of these veterans, without surprise, would return to the battlefields where they had learned their bloody trade: the infamous Disputed Lands, where the feuds between Lysene, Tyroshi, and Myrish Merchant Princes were flaring up uncontrolled.*

*That was not to say everything was well for Westerosi Lords and the souls they ruled over. For once again, the kingdoms would find themselves divided.*

*But for once, this had nothing with the politics separating the loyalist South from the rebel-held North, knights squabbling separated by a pile of stones indicating where the frontier was located, or the proper amount of coin needed by traders to sell in a kingdom that wasn’t theirs.*

*No, this division for the year one hundred and thirty-nine had nothing to do with who was ruling a particular Lordship or not. The separation was done by the weather. On the western coast, the men, women and children of Lannisport, Highgarden, and many other settlements would be blessed by a summer-like weather. For every day of rain pouring fresh water upon the harvests, seven to ten would be so pleasant the granaries were able to be refilled at an incredible pace, compensating more than enough the toll the war had taken upon them, at least in the western Reach.*

*The eastern coast, unfortunately, would not be blessed the same way. In fact, many families would say this was a cursed year: the weather was way colder, and changing without warning between unending rains, foggy days, and enough warm windy days coming from the west to make sure the mud remained mud. Many lesser roads, already in bad straits, would need complete rebuilding after this year.*

*This would be the first out of the two years of the Peaceful Autumn. But as one could easily admit, that it could be called peaceful did not mean it was uneventful...*

Extract from the *End of the War of Lions and the Return of Peace*, by Maester Gaston, original written at the Citadel in 150AC.

**Lady Jeyne Arryn, 1st Moon of 139AC, the Eyrie**

Once again, the castle of the Eyrie was emptying of people and furniture. Once again, Jeyne felt sorrowful at the idea the greatest citadel of House Arryn was about to be completely devoid of any human souls for moons, possibly years.

A gust of cold wind in her face reminded her how ridiculous her emotions were. It was getting incredibly cold, and the sun was not warming long enough the rooms anymore for it to be tolerable all day.

The Eyrie and its natural defences were beautiful, but if she stayed there, the servants would bury her frozen corpse a few days later.

“Sometimes I think my ancestors should have built the same citadel of marble where Gulltown stands,” the Lady Paramount of the Vale admitted to her cousin.

“Well,” the dragonrider chuckled while tying one more blanket on the neck of Moondancer, “it would have been way cheaper...but it wouldn’t make Gulltown very defensible.”

Jeyne had long acknowledged it was the truth. What make the Eyrie impregnable was its position at the top of the Lance, not ramparts and fortified towers. The classical castle was the Gates of the Moon in that regard, not the Eyrie.

“This will be the last time we will see each other in a while.”

“Yes,” the silver-haired sovereign shook her head, “I am going to make a short process across the Vale to make sure the feathers don’t stay ruffled, but I won’t return to the Vale for the next years...unless there are bigger problems to deal with. So please, cousin, don’t give me unhappy reasons to return so soon.”

“I won’t.” Jeyne Arryn swore and she meant it. “About the ruffled feathers....”

“What is done is done,” her Queen said decisively. “I preferred to avoid a repeat of King Viserys’ disastrous succession and ruffle a few feathers, before explaining to each Lord in private why I did what I did.”

“In many ways, Viserys made the succession clear. It’s just that half of the kingdom refused to listen to his words.”

“No, he didn’t.” Her cousin was prompt to counter. “Oh, yes, he said the words. My Council made sure I could read all the proclamations *my dear royal uncle* sent year after year to his Lords. But did he really taught Rhaenyra how to rule? Did he not remarry a single year after naming her Princess of Dragonstone? And of course, his Heiress was in deliberate exile on Dragonstone when he died, leaving the Hightowers in power at court. Viserys’ edicts said something, but his actions were the complete opposite of what his royal orders proclaimed. I won’t do the same mistake.”

It did not mean, Jeyne noted, that Baela wouldn’t make others...but the Game of Thrones was an imperfect thing by its very nature.

“I suppose this is why you were so insistent that I tutored Roland personally, while the two younger brothers will work in service of the Crown outside the Vale for now.”

“I thought,” the purple eyes watched the eternal snows in the distance, “that if we place the three brothers in the succession, we make them part of my kingdom’s ruling nobility. And if we don’t involve them in the matters of rule, they will be as unprepared as I was to assume their duties when the time comes for them to succeed you. That’s why Tristan will be a Squire at Stone Hedge and Adrian will study at Fairmarket, all the while learning what they need to know to be dutiful nobles of my kingdom.”

“If your plan works, it might indeed turn Fairmarket into one of the greatest centres of learning of Westeros, one which might rival in time the Citadel.”

Baela burst into laughter.

“I am not that ambitious, cousin...and the Dogmatists of Gulltown might feel otherwise.”

“These not-maesters have had some success,” Jeyne was prompt to acknowledge with the seriousness it deserved, before smiling, “but many third sons suddenly found a desperate urge to visit Fairmarket in the last days, not Gulltown.”

“How strange,” Baela smiled back before snorting, “Fairmarket is closer to the Vale than the Citadel, to be sure.”

Moondancer chose this moment to exhale a large cloud of smoke.

“Well, that’s the signal of my bonded to depart.”

“He still doesn’t like the cold?”

“Moondancer loves the cold...as long as they’re hot baths nearby to make sure the cold stay far away from his scales,” the Black Queen informed her gravely. “Something he seems to share with my sister...”

“Not you, your Grace?”

“Being a mature and wise Queen, I absolutely refuse to answer that question!”

The two cousins laughed, and embraced each other.

**Ser Richard Lydden, 1st Moon of 139AC, King’s Landing**

Richard waited.

It was an activity the Lydden knight had become very familiar with, in the last moons.

Most of the time, whether on a horse or aboard a ship, there was nothing to do but to enjoy as much of the journey as possible, and wait, he had learned.

And clearly, returning to the capital was not going to break this trend.

While his reports and the messages he had been keeping in his hands had been delivered fast than you could say ‘Father Above’ once he had gone through the Lion Gate, the audience he had expected had failed to come.

Richard waited, and the ‘where’ was in one of those little antechambers that King Maegor the Cruel, depraved Tyrant of old, seemed to have built everywhere so that out-of-favour nobles could be tortured. The seats and everything else, after all, were absolutely uncomfortable, and that had been before the air was unpleasantly wet.

The last Lydden knight wished he could say this was a petty vengeance from someone wishing to humiliate him for the wrongs of his House, but it was not so.

In the days he had waited for someone to remember his existence, Richard had walked in the smelly streets of King’s Landing, and to be honest, everyone had ignored him.

Things had been different westwards, but here, in the heart of the Crownlands, both highborn and smallfolk didn’t care. The Reyne Rebellion was crushed, and the Crownlanders had not exactly suffered because of it. As such, those who could recognise his colours looked at him like he was a strange animal they’d never expected to seen with their own eyes...like one of those exotic pets only the Summer Isles’ merchants could provide.

There were hundreds of thousands of men, women, and children living within the greatest city of Blackwater Bay, and Richard was just one more Hedge Knight among hundreds serving the King.

The words ‘Hedge Knights’ were out of favour these days, though. Richard didn’t know who had decided ‘hedge’ sounded too *northern* when he was speaking with the Ironborn and watching the rocks of Great Wyk, but when he returned, several men-at-arms had informed him courtiers were using ‘Landless Knights’. It was possible it was the Faith which was behind it, though it was possible it was a Great House too. Wealthy highborn loved to remind their subordinates that they had the gold and the power, and people like Richard didn’t have it anymore.

“The Lord Hand wants to speak with you.” The servant who had spoken said it like he was doing him a favour, and not like Richard had waited half a day here after answering a summon.

It didn’t help his pride that there had been many ‘Landless Knights’ with him in this tiny waiting room, and now there were none; he was the last man of the batch the Lord Hand would meet...and likely the last man of the day, given how late it was.

Still, the knight who had played envoy to the Iron Islands tried to look like a proper highborn in the mere heartbeats he had – it was easier now as he hadn’t the gold to pay himself bottles of red wine anymore – and bowed when he was introduced in the Hand’s presence.

“My Lord Hand.”

“Ser Richard,” the Lord of Longtable said with a distracted voice as he finished writing a letter. He also didn’t invite him to take a seat, meaning the Lydden man had to remain standing...thankfully he had waited for so long that he was fresh and rested. “I have read your report. It seems the Ironborn are quickly becoming supporters of the *other* kingdom.”

“I wouldn’t say exactly that, my Lord Hand,” the Westerner licked his lips before being authorised to give an answer, “I think the new Lord of Great Wyk is aware how...dangerous his situation is, as he is caught between two dragons. But the offers he sent to Seagard have been accepted, while those he sent us have not found amicable ears. I’m sure that if we offer his sailors good jobs aboard the fishing ships of Lannisport-“

“This is out of the question,” Marq Merryweather answered, not even looking at him but at the letter he had signed and was busy re-reading. “The Guilds of Lannisport would scream for hours we are forcing them to work with the reavers who stormed their beautiful city. You might have forgotten as you were part of one of the inland Houses, but many of your fellow Westerners *loathe* the Ironborn. And the allegiance of one Westerner is worth the arm of ten Ironborn pirates...not that there are many of them left.”

If he had been drunk, Richard would have undoubtedly already asked why in hell the Greens pretended they wanted to rule the Seven Kingdoms when they already couldn’t rule the one within their reach.

But he wasn’t drunk, and his purse depended on the royal favour...so he stayed silent.

“Balon of Wyk has interesting ideas, at least, my Lord Hand.”

“He does.” The right hand of King Daeron nodded. “And his ideas will cost a lot of gold and qualified workers of the Westerlands and the Reach, many of them are better suited to other and far more profitable affairs.”

Richard nodded and waited. It was obvious, given the late hour and the lack of attention he was getting, that the Council had already met, debated, and arrived to an outcome before wondering if listening to his opinion was judicious or not.

“You have done well, according to the reports of Gregor Clegane, and in the end, this mission’s primary purpose was to be sure the Ironborn weren’t rearming. They aren’t, and from time to time we will send a Landless Knight or two to be sure it doesn’t change.”

The part about Gregor didn’t surprise him; it had been painstakingly evident from the start of the ‘adventure to the Iron Islands’ Gregor was reporting to someone, and that someone wasn’t Richard.

“The King has a new mission for you. You will be accompanied again by Gregor Clegane.”

“Yes, my Lord Hand. Where must I ride to?”

“Highgarden,” the member of the Small Council revealed. “There is going to be a great tourney to celebrate the name day of Lord Tyrell.”

“I will obey your commands, of course,” the last knight of House Lydden curtsied, “but I have to warn you my jousting is rusty, and I have neither the armour nor the horse to participate.”

And the less said about the gold or the weapons, the better.

“Armour and the rest, you will be given the gold to buy some before leaving King’s Landing,” Marq Merryweather banished this problem with the practise of someone who had never had a problem of coins in his life. “It is not the will of the King you win this tourney by jousting like the Warrior himself anyway. No, the King wants you to keep an eye on potential troublemakers...most of all House Tarly. We didn’t expect House Reyne to turn traitor; the mistake won’t be repeated. The Reach is loyal, and it will stay loyal.”

“Yes, my Lord Hand,” Richard Lydden agreed, and just like that, he was dismissed.

The former Castellan of Deep Den was used to waiting, but he really wondered if it had been necessary to make him lose so much of the day to give him an order like the one had just received...

**King Daeron Targaryen, 1st Moon of 139AC, King’s Landing**

“I’m beginning to think Lady Jasmine Tyrell doesn’t like me.” Daeron wished he could have voiced it as a small attempt to make his advisors laugh and smile.

Alas, it wasn’t the case.

“The former Regent is certainly...stubborn.” Lord Joffrey Cuy conceded, the Master of Whisperers doing his best not to grimace. “But we have nonetheless a better idea of what she’s after, your Grace.”

“Is that a surprise?” Lord Royce Caron seemed incredibly calm about the whole affair. To be fair, aside from the Dornish, nothing seemed to anger the aged Lord these days. “The Lords of Highgarden were named Warden of the South and Lord Paramount of the Reach by the Conqueror after the Field of Fire. But House Hightower’s power and wealth always made the titles something incredibly misleading at best, and an outright insult at worst. Is it really surprising now that Oldtown is no longer here to plunge them into the shadows, the roses have decided it is time to grow strong?”

“I will give it to you that it’s not surprising,” Lord Alan Redwyne grunted. “However, Jasmine Tyrell should know her place!”

Daeron did not miss the fact that his Master of Ships had forgotten the ‘Lady’ or any nobility title, something that was incredibly disrespectful given that Lord Lyonel Tyrell, her son, was now Alan’s liege.

Thus Daeron gave him a silent warning with his purple eyes, and the Lord of the Arbor had the good grace to give an expression of apology.

“She knows her place,” William Stackspear, his Master of Coin, declared to the entire Council. “That’s in fact the problem. The entire web of alliances and favours she’s been busy weaving under our noses is perfectly functional now. She can leave the duties of Lord of Highgarden to her son, all the while continuing to play the Game of Thrones. And we can’t touch her.”

“Nobody is untouchable,” Daeron reminded the man in charge of the royal coffers.

“No, your Grace, but I am afraid that if we try to accuse Lady Jasmine of great crimes without any evidence to back up the accusations, the most prosperous Reach Lordships would fight under the Rose banners...and the kingdom wouldn’t survive the struggle.” The Master of Coin continued, feigning to not notice the glare the Master of Ships gave him. “And let’s be honest, your Grace, what has the former Regent of the Reach done lately that can prove there are intentions of disloyalty behind the green-and-gold robes?”

“I have no proof of disloyalty from her or any highborn she is keeping in her service,” the dragonrider admitted. “But her ambition...it concerns me. And we all know what this tourney organised in the honour of Lord Lyonel’s name day is really about.”

Assuredly, the bards had begun to sing about great jousts and prestigious contests that would take seven days to complete. And since the merchants of the Reach reported that Highgarden had been spared the torrential rains transforming the Crownlands into plains of mud, it was entirely possible this would be indeed the triumph of Lords and Knights

This would indeed be a great tourney, one where the high chivalry of the South would meet and prove its worth.

But under the mummer’s farce...Daeron and every member of his Council knew what it was all about: Lady Jasmine wanted a maiden of high birth for her son.

House Targaryen had no one to propose – Jaehaera was the only girl which was more or less in age to marry, and his sister would likely never recover enough for Daeron to risk marry her – and that meant House Lannister was perfect from what little his Master of Whisperers had been able to hear.

“Do we know if Lady Johanna has formally accepted the invitation?” The King asked after a moment to think how lack of potential brides could ruin meticulous plans.

“No, any raven she receives would not have had time to be noticed and relayed to my agents.” Joffrey Cuy shook his head. “But she’s hardly going to refuse, your Grace. Mild this autumn might be, but it is still autumn. Casterly Rock will need the granaries of Highgarden’s bannersmen for the coming winter. The lands that weren’t despoiled by the war don’t have enough grain to make up for everything that was pillaged. And the Black smugglers using the goat passes are really expensive, no matter how good the Riverlands’ grain they provide.”

The rider of Tessarion hid the anger he felt at the last sentence. It wasn’t the Black Queen’s fault that these smugglers seemed to act everywhere his garrisons weren’t, but many of the Tully’s patrols didn’t seem in a hurry to hunt them down, or even to confiscate their illegal gains.

“I’m going to pretend I didn’t hear the last sentence.” Daeron promised himself he was going to tell Captain-General Belicho to make a priority of stopping these smugglers. Most of the Reyne men were already in a grave; moving hundreds of sentinels to watch the goat paths and other ‘smuggling passes’ should be feasible. “Back to the tourney, my Lords. I assume there hasn’t been any maiden of high birth that came out of the shadows to solve our problems?”

“None, your Grace,” Marq Merryweather replied politely. “The situation hasn’t changed since we last spoke of the great matter. Lady Jasmine quite evidently would approve if her son wished to ask for the hand of Lady Cerelle Lannister. If the only concern is the dowry, I am afraid only Lady Victoria Blackbar can be considered a credible rival for Lady Cerelle. If high birth is the preference, Lady Ellyn Baratheon, by her Durrandon blood, can match Casterly Rock’s offer.”

“But none can be House Lannister’s equal both in dowry and blood,” which wasn’t that surprising, in the end: it was still House Lannister they were speaking about.

“Yes, your Grace. That’s indeed the...problem.”

“And if your Grace personally attended the tourney?” Lord Alan Redwyne proposed. “I know it was your intention to send Lord Marq to represent the Iron Throne for these important events, but perhaps it is best to change the plan?”

“I might...provided that the tourney doesn’t happen to coincide with another pleasant reason to rejoice.”

“Ah, your Grace, does it mean-“

“Yes, my Lords, it is confirmed beyond doubt since this morning: the Queen is pregnant once again.”

**Queen Baela Targaryen, 1st Moon of 139AC, Saltpans**

Laena and Moondancer had many points in common: they liked hot baths, they didn’t like the cold...and now it was proven beyond any ability to deny it that they didn’t like the rain.

“It looks like we are going to need to find a place which isn’t rainy and wet, my Lord Hand,” for her daughter didn’t like the water falling from the skies, and she wasn’t shy of informing the entire Seven Kingdoms of that. “I see the miserable weather of this first moon isn’t limited to the Vale.”

“I’m told it is much better at Riverrun and Seagard,” the Lord of Winterfell declared while donning a large hat which seemed to be made to brave the bad weather. “But even there, they have received a lot of water upon their heads. Many rivers rushing down the Mountains of the Moon and the Western Hills are already flooding.”

“Lord Alyn may have to depart earlier than he thought,” Addam declared while bringing a coat over Laena. The loud complaints of her daughter progressively ceased as she realised there was now a shield protecting her from the rains of autumn. “This autumn weather is tiring for the men and the horses, but it is nowhere as bad as the storms that can rage over the Narrow Sea in wintertime.”

“I don’t know much about sea travel,” Cregan confessed, “but I suspect you are right, Lord-Consort. And since you mentioned Lord Alyn’s voyage ambitions, I think, your Majesty, that you may want to meet someone in the days you will enjoy the hospitality of Saltpans.”

“I am already going to meet thousands of my bannersmen, in addition to all the young highborn that have followed me from the Vale,” her visits across the Vale to make sure the feathers weren’t too ruffled had resulted in a small army of lesser noble branches following her to Saltpans, to the point the boat landing was close to a small army in its own right. “Why mention one in particular?”

“Because he is not one of your bannersmen, your Majesty. The man, one Ezzelino Romano, comes from Myr. He presented himself as a...I think the proper name, once translated from his Valyrian dialect, was ‘Craftsman and Warlock’.”

Baela’s purples eyes narrowed.

“This sounds intriguing. And what does this Myrish claim?”

“He is searching for generous patrons, as he claims to have built fantastical devices to measure time itself.”

Addam cleared his throat.

“My Lord, we have devices which allow us to measure us time itself. We call them hourglasses and sundials, among other things.”

“From what I was allowed to see,” the Lord Paramount of the North said slowly, “the new devices, that the Myrish called ‘Romano Clocks’ are far better than any hourglass or sundial. They are overcomplicated, as the man is this sort of artisan that can miss a mountain as long as he’s focused on something else...but I saw the devices, and they work.”

“Since I doubt we have anything like the ateliers he could take for granted in the Free City of Myr,” Baela noted after kissing her daughter on her forehead, “I suppose he wants money to continue creating new strange devices.”

“He does.” Her Hand confirmed.

“And since you mentioned it, you think his devices have great merit.”

“Not...completely, your Majesty.” The Lord of Winterfell admitted. “It’s just that Ezzelino Romano, due to certain...eccentricities, decided to forge the instruments that would create his new ‘clocks’ himself. Therefore he learned how to create glass and work upon many metals by himself. I thought many of our own artisans could benefit from that.”

The idea had a lot of merit, Baela admitted in her mind.

“He trains apprentices in glass-blowing and some forge-secrets and in exchange we allow him to play with his ‘clocks’, that’s it?” Cregan acquiesced. “This sounds like a reasonable trade. How much?”

Cregan said a number. Baela blinked...before huffing.

“I suppose that as a Myrish, he’s used to a certain amount of Essossi luxury and decadence...try to decrease a bit the price, my Lord Hand.”

“I can do that...though to lower the price, it would be best to build him a forge-atelier here in Saltpans.”

“Saltpans? Not Stone Hedge?”

“Many of the things this eccentric Myrish needs will only be gathered practicably in a centre of trade, my Queen.” Cregan explained. “In that regard, Saltpans has many advantages Stone Hedge lack.”

“True...and for all the rain, it has become a far cleaner city, courtesy of the changes we pushed for.”

There had been many disputes between Freeholders and Maesters, but in the end, last year plans had been made for larger streets and a massive improvement of the old houses that were so common in the ‘old Saltpans’. Most of the city had now functional sewers...and the Manure Guild.

“Certain Guilds still complain the tax is too high...and that the Manure Guild shouldn’t be considered a Guild in the first place.”

Addam laughed, the traitor.

“When they are willing to remove with their own hands the dung the cows and the other animals leave on the pavement, please inform me, my Lord Hand.”

If there was one thing Baela was determined to avoid, it was the creation of a second King’s Landing, a lair of misery and nauseating smells that would bring nothing but japes and problems. Fortunately, that she had been the one to give Saltpans its City Chart helped.

“I think we all know we might both die of old age before it happens, your Majesty.” Cregan coughed. “By comparison, the initiative to plant a few trees next to the Merchant Square generates far fewer complaints.”

“Of course, it does,” the Black Queen grumbled, “they don’t have to pay taxes for that!”

As if certain Gods were disagreeing with her about this injustice, the skies chose this moment to pour more rain upon their heads, and the entire royal procession hurried to find some cover from the wrath of autumn...

**Lady Ellyn Baratheon, 1st Moon of 139AC, Storm’s End**

“I guess this means I will have to send a letter of congratulations.”

Ellyn wasn’t surprised there was no joy in her sister’s voice. She didn’t scowl, at least. That had to count for something.

“Maybe it will be a girl, this time? Arianne has already three sons, I hope that for this one, we will have a niece to pamper for the next decade or so.”

“Don’t get your hopes up,” Maris grumbled. “Our dear sister so far doesn’t seem to have any intention to give birth to anything but male dragons.”

“I hope you will be wrong. It isn’t like there’s some real sorcery which allows a Lady to choose if she gives birth to a boy or a girl.”

“That’s true...otherwise all highborn Ladies would have already been on the receiving end of it once or twice. And every firstborn would be a male.”

The Lady of Storm’s End was not smiling when imagining something like that, but then Ellyn figured she had good reason to. The fact Lord Baratheon had sired only daughters had led to a lot of gossip at court and every important seat, and most of it was not the pleasant kind.

“Scowling like that isn’t going to change anything, Maris.”

“I know, Ellyn...I know...it’s just...I didn’t really want to marry this useless boar of House Staedmon, but if they had to throw a man in my bed, could they at least check it wasn’t a sword-swallower?”

The only daughter of Lord Borros Baratheon to never have been married winced.

“Are you sure you weren’t clear enough in your last letter?”

“I told Arianne that my couch is empty every night because my husband is busy sticking his second sword into men, Ellyn. How more explicit can I describe it? Must I assist to another hunt to see if the ‘greatest hunter of the day’ is ‘impaled’ by my husband?”

No, she had to concede, you couldn’t be clearer about the great matter.

“If House Staedmon hadn’t so much more influence than me at King’s Landing, I would already have tried to remove him.”

“This is dangerous talk, Maris.”

To be fair to her, her older sister calmed herself.

“I know, Ellyn. I know...but if I don’t get with child soon, our problems are going to get worse. One in three of our bannersmen are already looking at King’s Landing, not Storm’s End, when they await orders. And you can’t say the King’s agents care very much about the privileges of House Baratheon when they want something.”

This was the greatest fear Maris had, and unfortunately, Ellyn couldn’t say she was wrong. King Daeron had never had a lot of respect for the three sisters that weren’t his wife, and if he had asked for Maris or Ellyn’s opinion once, the unwed Stormlander Lady had no idea when it was.

“That much is true. And with Arianne pregnant, the chances of she taking a place at the Council are inexistent.”

“They were already inexistent in the first place, sister,” Maris didn’t even sound bitter at that, just...resigned. “I am a Daughter of the Storm, but I am not the fool our father was. No woman is part of the Royal Council, and the same is true for any position of power at the capital. With the removal of the two Regents of the Westerlands and the Reach, I am the Last Lady Paramount of the Southern kingdoms. And I can only wonder how long King Daeron will allow it.”

Once again, Ellyn wished Maris was just pessimistic. But as the only person her sister confided to, the young noblewoman was well-aware that the letters and the orders coming from King’s Landing were more something that should be used for Knights, not a Lady Paramount, and especially not the Lady Paramount of the Stormlands.

Her sister shrugged.

“And I’m sure the dragonrider wonders why we don’t like him. What a pity that...”

Even if the two of them were alone, Maris didn’t dare finishing the sentence. Saying you wished the assassin hired by House Reyne would have ended the life of the King was treason, and if someone to the King reported it – they were many in this very fortress – their heads wouldn’t be worth a silver stag.

“Respectfully, sister, I think we must thank the Seven the King survived.” Maris gave her a questioning look. “Wounded but recovering, the Northerners hesitated before deciding to only seize Hornvale. If he had died, the Black Queen in person would have led the charge once she could mount her dragon. The Tyrells could have kept their seat and privileges, but not us. Not after our ‘hospitality’ resulted in Lucerys’ death.”

They had been young and stupid, in hindsight. It wasn’t an excuse...and they had all been here. Arianne, Maris, Flora, and she. They had been present, and they had said nothing when their father threw out Lucerys to what was an execution in all but name, since his small dragon was easy prey for Vhagar.

Since they couldn’t rewrite the past, Ellyn changed immediately the subject for something far less risky.

“Let’s speaking of something a bit happier. The King has decided I must attend the tourney that will be given in honour of Lord Luthor Tyrell’s name day.”

Yes, those had been Arianne’s words, but they all knew from whose mind they had come from in the first place.

“They should make up their mind in the first place, at King’s Landing,” Marys was very grouchy, no doubt about it, “first we are ordered not to attend, then we are ordered to. Fortunately, I had yet to reply to Lady Jasmine’s letter.”

“I will need to buy a few dresses to look like the sister of a Lady Paramount.”

“You will have them,” Marys assured her. “Given how much you help me counting the golden dragons every day, this is the least I can do for my favourite sister.”

The Lady of the Storm let a powerful sigh pass through her lips a heartbeat later.

“But I don’t have enough money to make sure you find a husband worthy of your rank, sister. Your dowry would be at best four thousand dragons, and none of the Great Houses of the Reach will consider accepting that if they have any sense. I’m sorry.”

“I count golden dragons all day, remember? I am not surprised.”

The two Ladies of Storm’s End laughed together, and for a moment, it was as if the decades had not passed, they were still the young girls playing behind the walls of the impregnable citadel.

But they were only two of them now. Flora was using her widowhood to go from sept to sept these days, the death of her husband having turned her into one of those women who thought the truth was to be found with prayers and ‘holy men’.

And Arianne was the Queen, of course.

“I hear Highgarden has far more pleasant weather than us.” Ellyn tried to pour more optimism into their conversation. “If all we’re doing is watching the tourney while we’re hosts of the Tyrell, we might tell ourselves we were away from all these storms and their humidity for several moons...”

**Ser Alyn Velaryon, 1st Moon of 139AC, Gulltown**

Alyn knew a lot of curses. Funnily, his brother had known a lot more than he did, and still highborn and smallfolk thought he was the rude one.

Addam...they had thought him the polite one of the two...he had always been a charmer that way, able to make them forget when he did something a good noble shouldn’t do. Yes, Addam had been the fox of the family, able to fool everyone, including the cunning dragon Seasmoke.

Addam had risen high, and could have climbed higher if he had survived the Dance. The Queen had turned towards her Frey Consort because there were no loyalist dragonriders left. Perhaps if Addam had lived...

“Bad news, my Lord?”

The Black Admiral abandoned his thoughts, and returned to the reason why he had muttered so many curses lately.

“More like a confirmation of what I already feared,” Alyn Velaryon told the Gulltown Captain who had been given the honour to serve as his second. “The Dogmatists have received a lot of ravens from the North: these days of rains and bad weather are not going to disappear in the next moons. The men working on the Wall are confident we should avoid winter and the cold that comes with it, but autumnal rains and winds are not going to let us in peace.”

“I see,” the hair of the Valeman were greying, but his mind was not slow to consider the implications, “this is going to limit the number of hulls we have ready....we really can’t afford to wait six moons to discover if winter is coming immediately in the footsteps of this unpleasant autumn.”

“Yes.” Alyn placed a hand in his wet hair, which of course were particularly wet and rebellious under that typical sea weather they were all forced to enjoy since the beginning of this year. “And there are more problems. While many merchants of Lys are eager to join us on this great adventure, other Targaryens have made sure there’s a considerable amount of war waged in the Stepstones and the Disputed Lands. All our ships will need experienced men aboard to repel pirates and the ambitious sellsails.”

“Targaryens? The Greens?”

“No, the...the last son of Rhaenyra, Viserys. He captured some big harbour, and that made sure the Tyroshi are seething and screaming. The Council told me the details, he’s married a Rogare girl, I think?” Alyn shrugged after a few heartbeats, as the matter was not exactly worthy of attention besides the problems it caused for him. “We may have to find them a colour to not mistake them in the next years...”

“Purple?” the Vale Captain proposed. “It’s a typical Essossi colour, there are very few Houses who can dye their banners and their clothes with it...”

“Purple dye is the pride of Tyrosh, not Lys, Captain.” Two sailors repeating it to their friends without waiting indicated his words weren’t taken into account. “Anyway. These Lysene sellswords and all their allies have caused quite a ruckus, and I don’t think the war is going to stop anytime soon, not with all the sellswords crossing back the Narrow Sea.”

“That sounds unlikely, Admiral,” his second agreed.

“Considering these problems, I have to ask the great question: how many ships can we prepare to sail away before both the weather and the Tyroshi conspire to ruin this Great Voyage before it has even begun?”

The officer of Gulltown went silent for a good turn of hourglass, his right hand caressing his long greying beard, before speaking again.

“If it is your intention to sail away so soon, Admiral...I would think seven ships. We already have the two of House Manderly, and their captains are capable. The two House Targaryen ordered built will be ready next moon, and we have the young Summer Sailors to crew what your Velaryon men won’t. And Gulltown will have three ships ready in two fortnights, with able captains and veterans of the seas.”

“Seven...” it was far less than Alyn had hoped for, he wasn’t going to lie to himself. Of course, there were likely Lysene and Volantene Captains ready to join his fleet once they were out of the Stepstones, but his authority over them would be limited in the best of cases, and so would be the profits those hulls would bring back from beyond the Jade Gates.

Unfortunately, his guts told him that if he waited for too long, the Great Voyage would not happen at all...or it would end before the Stepstones, as every sellsail and pirate of the Free Cities attacked his ships and his men.

All would be well if it was a short winter...but a long one may be the doom of his dreams, as Baela and her Council may not wish to pursue it once spring warmed again the soil of the Riverlands and the Vale.

Should he accelerate the preparations or gamble everything on the Gods, Old and News, favouring him instead of the seasons?

For the first time in his life, Alyn experienced what others called a dilemma...

**Lady Cerelle Lannister, 1st Moon of 139AC, somewhere south of Lannisport**

Cerelle was really, really glad when the crowds of Lannisport and Casterly Rock were far behind the column, and most of the agitation was limited to the five hundred mounted knights that had been given the honour to escort her brother and she.

“Thankfully, it’s all over.”

“What, dear sister? You’re no longer delighted to be cheered by your admirers? You don’t like the bards singing of your golden hair and your delightful green eyes?”

“Oh shut up, Loreon,” the young Lady of House Lannister commanded.

“It is ‘shut up my Lord’, for you, dear sister.” Loreon smirked.

Cerelle huffed.

“I knew the titles and the power were going to triple the size of your head like a puff fish.” She told her younger brother. “I swear solemnly that I will tell mother every moment when I catch you try to go against her instructions.”

“I am the Lord of Casterly Rock, you know.”

“You could have avoided Highgarden and raced to reach the Citadel, then,” the daughter of Lady Johanna sweetly suggested, “I’m sure they would be eager to give you a few lessons of history and learn the difference between the banners of House Lefford and House Farman.”

To her satisfaction, Loreon groaned.

“That was the one time, and I wasn’t paying attention!”

“I’m so reassured. Tyshara should have come too...just to use her stick to force you to pay attention.”

Alas, her big sister, far from being a talisman like it usually was in Loreon’s presence, revealed itself to be a flaw here.

“Ha! You are still angry she isn’t with you?”

“Silence,” she ordered, trying to imitate her mother’s voice...but alas, no matter how she did it, she hadn’t the effect that always made sure Loreon lowered his eyes in short order.

“Sorry to inform you of this, sister...but you’re not that scary.”

Cerelle huffed again and looked away.

There was a lot to watch, so it wasn’t exactly a chore. The coast of the Westerlands was offering itself to her green eyes, and it was truly a beautiful tapestry of green, gold, and blue.

Looking at it made it difficult to believe there had been a devastating civil war last year...of course, all the big battlefields had been far from here. It would take them several days before they even approached the ruins of Crakehall.

Everything looked beautiful...and it was a lie. Her mother had made it clear all her daughters knew it. That was why Cerelle was going to be betrothed before the end of the year, and likely married before this summer-like autumn ended.

The Westerlands seemed to have recovered, but they hadn’t. It had too much gold, and not enough people. Their allies were few, and the ranks of their bannersmen had been decimated. They needed allies, powerful allies, before a dragon decided the Lannister lions were weak and easy to devour.

“No reaction? No ‘I will tell it to Tyshara’?”

“She will decide your punishment, I hope you’re not prideful enough to think you can escape it.”

“Bah, she will forgive me.” Cerelle gave him an amused expression. Tyshara? Forgiving Loreon when he did something obtuse and foolish? “Err...as long as I am not participating in the tourney as a mystery knight?”

“If you happen to do something so idiotic, Tyshara will be the least of your problems, brother dear.”

Loreon was way too young to joust. Jousting was always dangerous even in the smallest tourneys, but against renowned knights who competed ferociously for the gold and the honours that went with winning a great tourney? It could be downright murderous...and she wasn’t going to speak of the melees. The ghost of a Reyne traitor could swear those were *lethal*.

“Why isn’t our sister with us, really? I know mother stays because someone has to rule the Rock in my absence, with all the problems the Usurper created, but no one said why Tyshara didn’t come with us. It isn’t because she is behind in her lessons!”

“Speaking of experience here, brother?”

“No!”

Cerelle smiled...but she didn’t feel anything happy inside. Loreon, without being aware of it, had raised a good question. One she had the answer to.

Tyshara wasn’t coming because her mother had decided that if there was a Lannister Lady to be wed to the Lord Tyrell for their generation, it would be Cerelle, not her older sister.

It wasn’t a question of beauty or intelligence, of who was the favourite or not, her mother had explained it in extremely blunt terms two days ago. It was about giving them the best chance when it came to a potential union of House Tyrell and House Lannister, and Cerelle was the one who was the closest to Luthor Tyrell’s age.

“Do you think Cousin Tyland will participate?”

“I don’t know,” Cerelle answered honestly, relieved her brother was returning to safer grounds where she didn’t feel as uncomfortable. “He’s not known to love jousting, but he’s a superb rider, and maybe mother told him to give a good showing for House Lannister...”

**Captain Godric Arryn, 1st Moon of 139AC, Disputed Lands**

Godric Arryn almost felt melancholic looking at the war camp and everything around it.

This was not what he had felt a year ago when he took a boring escort duty to Pentos. At the time, he had been lucky to survive the battle that had destroyed most of the Company of the Giraffe, and that was after he had been recruited from the Company of the Elephant.

The Stranger had come very close from collecting its due, and Godric had desired nothing but enjoying his pay and what delights the Free Cities could offer to officers with large purses.

But the purses were not bottomless, and soon enough Godric had needed to work again, and it was *awfully boring* to be the bodyguard of a Pentoshi Magister.

And then a man with the eyes of a coward had come to propose him a plan that could make him very rich and very powerful.

Godric had shrugged and said ‘why not’?

The Eyrie were dreadfully boring, but commanding the armies of the Vale could change that.

But no, just landing on the shores where he had been born had been a series of disappointments.

And it had grown worse once they had learned he had been involved in the slave trade...never mind that it had lasted a couple of moons! By all the Hells, they had been so busy seething that he had sold slaves to the highest bidder that they had missed he owned several slaves when he was fighting for Tyrosh!

To be sure, Godric had not owned any while he was in Pentos, but that was because the rout that had led to the destruction of the Company of the Giraffe had been so disastrous it had been difficult to save something of his belongings besides his purse, his horse, and his sword. And the Pentoshi Magisters had paid to his expenses at first, so there was no reason to pay for the slaves he used day after day.

“Why are they so much against slavery anyway?” He wondered out loud.

“Captain?”

“The Westerosi,” the exiled Arryn said out loud for the benefit of his second, “why are they so united in their hatred of slavery? Smallfolk and highborn truly love bending the knee and swearing vows to dragonlords of Valyrian blood. I’ve seen many Houses treating their servants with the right of life and death over their ugly heads. Half of King’s Landing families live in hovels that the slaves of Tyrosh and Pentos would rather break their chains first rather than to live into. Why?”

“Jealousy?” the other sellsword tried. “Our Magister masters of the Free Cities are rich; they aren’t.”

“That...makes sense.”

Most of Westeros was dirt poor, but at least they were going to swear they were *honourable* and didn’t do any trade where slaves were involved. It was wrong, of course, with the South no longer sending anyone to the Night’s Watch, many poachers and smugglers often found themselves dragged in chains at the bottom of a slaver’s hull.

“They value honour, and they fight and die poor...but honourable. But we, my friend, value profit above else, and if we live through the battles, we will be rich by the time sunset adds more crimson lights to this plain!”

While he had been furious the day it happened, Godric hadn’t take long to realise the Black Queen had done him a mighty service; he would have been mightily bored and poor in short order if he was forced to listen to the old crone of the Eyrie.

“Yes, Captain. And here we will never run out of contacts and clients!”

“Truer words have never been spoken,” Godric grinned. “Being a sellsword is the second oldest profession in the worlds, and it gives us plenty of gold to enjoy the first!”

And afterwards, no one would raise an eyebrow if you wanted to buy you a pleasure slave.

Around them, the tumult of war grew. The battle wasn’t imminent, but it was coming. Oh yes, the moment to decide a victor and a vanquished was coming.

“COMPANY OF THE FALCON!” Godric freely admitted he had chosen the name as an insult to House Arryn at first, but the men seemed to have taken a liking to it. And the banner of a white falcon on a black field was far more impressive than a twisted giraffe or a ridiculous elephant, in the end. “TO WAR!”

More than five hundred swords, spears, axes, and warhammers were raised in salute, and the soldiers of the Company of the Falcon roared back.

“TO WAR!”

**Lady Victoria Blackbar, 1st Moon of 139AC, Bandallon**

The two Ladies of House Blackbar watched each other in silence while sipping their fruit juice as the Lord of the House left.

Nothing seemed out of the ordinary, and there was little tension in the little garden that had been built over seventeen years ago as a wedding present. The flowers were superb, and the birds sang.

But Victoria was not surprised when her mother dismissed the servants and soon they found themselves alone.

“From the books left to me by the Ladies who came before me,” Arwyn Blackbar nee Hightower began while admiring touching and scenting a beautiful blue rose, “King Daeron has a lot of common points with King Jaehaerys the First.”

That was...not something Victoria had expected to hear. Neither as a subject to be spoken of, nor the comparison itself.

“I have no doubt our King has a lot of qualities, but being a conciliator doesn’t look to be one of them, mother,” King’s Landing’s efforts to try to keep House Tyrell and House Lannister apart, all the while offering little in return, did not look to her like a mastery of conciliation.

“Don’t let the maesters’ ramblings fool you, Victoria,” her mother gently admonished her, “King Jaehaerys wasn’t a Conciliator; he was all about control and giving lessons that he refused to apply to the disaster-in-making he called his family. If he had any good sense, he would never have decided King Viserys to be his Heir. But he craved...he *thirsted* for control. That’s why he ordered this masquerade of Great Council to be assembled, and why he made sure to push for Viserys behind the throne. He wanted control. King Viserys was to be malleable, and obedient; he would listen to him in all things for as long as he lived. Rhaenys Targaryen, the Queen-that-never-was, would have not hesitated to tell him when he was wrong.”

Victoria drank from her glass before contemplating what her next words should be.

“But Viserys was chosen in the end. And Daeron is not his father.”

“Let us be thankful none of the two dragons we have on each other throne are like Viserys,” her mother said with a serenity that felt completely natural. “The kingdom may survive another Maegor; I pray the Cruel will have no heir to his bloody legacy, but it is not impossible one dragon will arrive to the conclusion it is better to be feared than to be loved. But the thing is, Kings like Maegor never sleep easily, and sooner or later everyone abandons them. Fear works as long as the tyrant is truly fearsome. A bad King who wants to be loved will find far more support than the cruel one. And unfortunately, before he loses his crown, he will do more damage to the kingdom.”

“But as long as the King is alive and well, he is the King...and his orders are the law.”

“It is completely true...but you surely have noticed how it is a daughter of House Blackbar who is supposed to remove the threat of a Lannister Lady marrying the Lord of House Tyrell. I spoke again of control before. Control does sound very secure, doesn’t it? And it is safe indeed...because the man who controls does not take any risks.”

“True...but save his sister, who is half-mad, House Targaryen has no one to propose.”

“Victoria,” Arwyn Blackbar looked at her with amusement, “it would have been so simple for the dragonlord on his Iron Throne to promise a magnificent dowry with a Crownlands’ name and a beautiful face. Yes, a Targaryen can’t marry a Tyrell right now. But given how fast our beloved Queen is giving birth to a new draconic family, the union could easily be arranged for the next generation. It isn’t like there will be a shortage of candidates.”

“The Art of Conciliation,” the young Reacher Lady murmured, “as you take with one hand, you must give with the other.”

“Exactly,” her mother began to admire another flower...one which was red and gold. “It is a pity our King never learned it before they placed a crown upon his head. His cousin is a far better ruler in that regard.”

“I presume,” Victoria let a part of her emotions shine on her visage, “that you refer to the Valyrian roads the Black Queen is busy building at a frenetic pace.”

“The roads, the cities of Saltpans and Fairmarket, the mines and the projects she invested in the far North,” the correction came promptly, “I haven’t alas been able to meet the Black Queen, and as a result I don’t know if it is a desire to be reminded as the ‘Builder’ who drives her so, but she will be remembered for these efforts, Victoria.”

Yes, if a new war didn’t burn all those things like the Dance had burned most of Jaehaerys and Viserys’ creations.

But since her mother didn’t say one more word than she intended to voice, the message was clear: the moment she arrived at Highgarden, Victoria would have to play the riskiest game of all: the Game of Thrones.

And she was sure now it would have little to do with the plans her father had just explained to her, which included among other things opening her legs for the new Lord Tyrell.

“Charming dragons and roses is not a dance where we can stay in control for long.”

“No,” Arwyn Blackbar acknowledged, “but I think you find out, much like I did when I was young, that sometimes never being in control when doing the charming can give you great rewards...”

**Author’s name**:

I don’t think it is much of a spoiler if I say the next chapter may figure some Highgarden scenes...

A detail that likely won’t have missed by the readers: I have decided to add some dates and the locations of the Point of Views in this chapter, much like I did for other stories before. Depending on the returns, I will continue it or not. Wait and see, like the proverb says...

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