**Chapter 17**

**Heavy are the Crowns**

**Queen Baela Targaryen**

As soon as Moondancer had been able to bear her weight without getting exhausted, flying had been her favourite activity of the day. And since dragons were superb fliers and created to dominate the skies, she did not often hear groans of protestation from her bonded.

Then winter had come for her and Westeros.

Suddenly, flying was not so pleasant anymore and it had been getting worse as the fortnights succeeded to another and the lands of the Riverlands disappeared under the snow.

A year ago, she could have mounted on Moondancer wearing a light cape on top of her usual riding tunic and breeches.

These days if she was mad enough to try it, her body would likely freeze in a few breaths.

The earth under her eyes was cold, white and lifeless.

The sky was grey, colder and she didn’t dare order her bonded to soar higher. There were roughly a hundred feet above the ground but the winds were violent and she had difficulties finding her marks in this winter view.

The only good point so far in her journey from Winterfell to Stone Hedge was the predominance of northern winds. Unlike her first journey into the lands governed in her name by the Starks, the wind was pushing her dragon towards her capital. It was somewhat a satisfaction, because flying from Moat Cailin to Winterfell the first time had been a nightmare with contrary winds, small blizzards and a frightening cold.

The Riverlands were far calmer, if she limited her judgement to the weather and only the weather. Five leagues south of the Twins, the Green Fork had ice on it but was almost navigable for the great barges transporting food and supplies to the villages which had their granaries and housing destroyed by the war.

The snow was there, but at worst it would reach the head of a five name days child. At Winterfell, it had reached half the height of the outer walls and workers were frequently forced to remove it least they were unable to open the gates and get out of the city-fortress.

However, as she flew over the forests and the towns of the Riverlands, the untarnished beauty of the kingdom she had just left for the South became more evident. The North was wild, it was dangerous and cold, but it had not suffered like the men, women and the children sworn to House Tully and their bannersmen. Winterfell and the forts nearby were waiting patiently the end of winter, and the only sign of the war was the absent young and old men. The Riverlanders had by contrast bled long and hard for the support they gave to the Black Dragons.

“The Old and New Gods only know where I am going to find the gold to rebuild that...” She murmured in her furs as Moondancer flew over a burned tower. Years ago, this had certainly been the household of a Landed Knight and his family, protecting by oath and sword a score of small habitations. Now it was a black dot surrounded by white. The trees nearby looked untouched so it had likely been the hands of men responsible for this deed. A dragon would have created far more ravage and ashes.

Once the Red Fork was behind her and the day grew darker, the situation was better. Despite the wrath of the winds and the waters, the lands she could observe from the sky were getting better. Many villages were small anthills, repairing collapsed bridges, houses and wells.

While she did not stop as she wanted to arrive to her bed tonight, the cheers she received as Moondancer made one two elegant moves above the head of her subjects were heart-warming.

The days were terribly short in winter. When her bonded landed in front of the gates, the welcoming party had to light scores of torches. Moondancer groaned in exhaustion when she murmured him the long flight was really over. Her dragon was becoming more resistant, but long distances in winter were still a problem.

To her surprise, the reading of several ancient memories of previous Targaryen had revealed this was true for every dragon of the previous generation. Aegon the Conqueror and his sister-wives, the generation of the Conquest, had trained their great dragons to exacting standards. Vhagar and Meraxes had travelled from Dragonstone to Oldtown and from Storm’s End to the Wall at their fastest flight speed for months before her ancestors decreed the two newborn dragons were valuable additions to the elder Balerion’s massive presence and not hindrances.

For years it had continued, and Maegor the Cruel for all his faults had been boisterous when it came to his beloved Balerion. In one of his royal edicts, the tyrant had given highly detailed plans how and where he had wanted to train the newly-hatched dragons and their riders. Maegor being Maegor and thus half-insane, it had also been a way to have the female dragonriders close to him and possibly in his bed. And naturally, King Jaehaerys had torn apart this edict like all the others.

She was less and less sure this had been a good thing. First, because in one letter Rhaena had been able to recover, the monstrous King had publicly admitted the Dragonpit was only to be the secure haven of the dragons at King’s Landing. New hatcheries had been planned in the Vale and the North, in order to breed a formidable force of dragons and dragonriders. These plans had never seen the light of day as the Faith Militant led rebellions after rebellions and to her limited experience they looked deeply impractical. The crazy ideas like the conquest of Pentos and Braavos were not worth mentioning.

Maegor had been completely mad and impossible to restrain after his mother died. But he had tried to return House Targaryen and the dragonriders to something close to the Conquest’s strength and flight training.

It only took a glance at the portraits of her grandfather and her great-grandfather to know they had not been warriors. Seven Hells, if they rode their dragon once every seven days and at a slug’s pace, it was already a small miracle!

As a result, the battle-trained dragons before the Dance had been her Father’s Caraxes and the old Vhagar. A lot of the battles and tragedies who had taken place were forged by this lack of training and experience. House Targaryen had been complacent, bloated and weak, to the point Nettles had been a bigger force-holder with Sheepstealer than Syrax.

This was going to have to change, she reflected as her feet touched the ground and a procession of a hundred men and women formed two large columns in front of the gates to welcome her.

“Your Grace, Stone Hedge is yours,” said Lord Cregan Stark and the welcoming party bend the knee before rising once more when she gave the order to stand. Baela didn’t like the pointless ceremonies and staying in the cold for no good reason was absolutely pointless.

“Thank you, my Lord Hand,” she replied as she returned to her capital under cheers and applauses. By the noise and the number of faces, it seemed the population of her seat had gotten a minor increase. “Are they great affairs I must learn of before next morning?”

A nice ‘no’ would have been a pleasure, but in these troubled times the Gods and luck were not with her.

“Yes, a Lysene ambassador arrived shortly after your departure for Winterfell. He and his patrons of House Rogare pretend they have you half-brother Viserys in their custody and want a ransom of two millions and a half gold dragons for his release.”

“Very funny, Lord Cregan, I did not think you were ready to share humorous stories with the Tolletts...”

But as she turned to look in the grey eyes of the Lord Paramount of the North, there was no sign this was a cheap story destined to cheer her on.

Baela fought against the envy she had to sob and scream. Why had she to pay for the mistakes of her predecessors when her coffers were already so empty?

“Tell me everything.”

**Ser Harys Bracken**

After a long ride of five days in the snow, Harys was ready to sell his soul for a warm meal when he saw the fires of the village. He had always fancied himself an experienced jouster. Since he had sworn his vows and left the Great Sept as an anointed Knight, the horses he mounted for battle or for the hunts were answering him before he needed to use his spurs or harsher measures. But for all his experience with horses, he had never ridden when snow fell on the valleys, hills and fields of the Riverlands.

Harys didn’t remember when it had snowed in such quantities. There were winters, and there was *this* winter. There were feet of snow wherever you rode, and houses and septs collapsing under the weight of the ice. On his way to Bracken’s Fort, the whispers in the villages were spreading the same incredulity. Except the very old grey beards and the elderly grandmothers past seventy name days, no one remembered a winter like this one. The smallfolk who remembered having endured the glacial winds and the fury of the elements could be counted on one hand with fingers to spare for every village.

In the middle of this, his mission had become quickly to reassure those narrow-minded farmers that this dreadful winter was not a judgement of the Seven. No, the Father was not calling up the northern cruel winds to punish them for their sins.

The last steps when he dismounted from his brown horse were particularly horrible on his legs and the rest of his body. He was exhausted and the salutes he made to the sentinels at the gates and the courtyard must have betrayed his fatigue for every man and woman he met let him remove his winter cloak and protection layers before he sat to the grand table of the sole hall inside these walls. This was a painful reminder of what his family, his House and his armsmen had lost. Bracken’s Fort, formerly the ancient holdfast of House Chyttering, was no Stone Hedge. It was too small, too cramped and it could boast perhaps a fifth or a sixth of the servants they had been able to call on their ancestral lands.

The meat, the bread and the ale he swallowed in turn gave his body a new vitality, but it also relinquished the hate in his heart. Ten, a hundred or a thousand years, he would never forget the Blackwoods and the traitors of the Black Whore and the only apologies he would accept would be their broken corpses impaled on the ramparts of Stone Hedge.

“You arrived just in time, Ser Harys,” began a young armsmen with long brown hairs and a small beard. His blue eyes shone with good humour and intelligence. “The wind has grown stronger since morning, and the older guards are saying their knees are more painful than ever. A lot of snow is going to fall before the next moon.”

The Bracken Knight nodded morosely. He had not expected spring to arrive in the next fortnight, but more bad weather was not filling him with delight and the need to shout his joy outside.

The rest of the conversation was fairly normal. A food convoy had arrived while he was patrolling in his Lord’s service. As usual, while there was enough grain and other supplies for the village to last awhile, smallfolk were complaining.

“Bunch of loud bastards I know,” proclaimed an aged warrior named Roland. “They protest when they can’t live in the best quarters and use the great warehouse, they protest when they have a new Lord and they scream bloody murder if they’re asked to work to pay for their food and their clothes.”

About three scores of Knights and soldiers grumbled in approval.

“Now wonder half of the realm seceded when you have scum like this as servants...”

“Vhagar burned the wrong targets in its raids, I swear...”

As interesting as these conversations were, he was not able to stay it and enjoy the warmth atmosphere of the hall. A servant wearing the embroidered horse atop his chest came as he finished his ale to deliver him the command of his liege.

“Lord Harrold is awaiting you in his solar, Ser Harys,” the glimmer in this lowborn insolent’s eyes and his satisfied smirk told him a lot about the reception this servant expected him to receive.

The tired Knight acknowledged the order and stood up, saluted the rest of the men assembled before climbing the steps towards his cousin’s quarters.

The walk was not long, but he had to use a torch, for the stairs were treacherous and House Bracken could not afford to let candles and other sources of light at regular intervals in the castle. Winter had come too quickly and House Chyttering before them had not prepared for the coming winter. They had been too busy dying and as a result it was House Bracken which paid the price.

Truly, the King by giving them these lands had been an insult to deepen the wound. The harvests and the fields had been burned, half of the granaries were piles of useless stones, the grain had been stolen or sold to bandits pretending to be merchants and the reserves of salted food were insufficient as pigs, chicken and rabbits were disappearing when an official rider came near their farms.

The welcome he received once his Lord’s cellar was not in the nature to get rid of these dark thoughts.

“I thought I told you to come here and deliver your report first, Harys,” the scowl of Lord Harrold Bracken, Master of Bracken’s Fort and unfortunately the man who had been the highest in the succession when the bloodshed stopped. Brown-haired, brown eyes and the horse of their banners on his plastron, Harrold was very much a Bracken. Somehow, and Harys was not sure how, he had celebrated eight and twenty name days in spite of numerous murder attempts from the Blackwoods and the Tullys.

“There is nothing to report,” he said in his most respectful tone –which was not a lot. With a monumental effort of will he didn’t add ‘but you knew it very well’ or ‘stop pestering your smallfolk with unreasonable demands’. “Between all the hamlets, lone farms and villages I have patrolled, we could perhaps gather a couple of hundred smallfolk. The best among them would be the deserters, I think. They held something sharp and dangerous in their hands once before running for their lives and may remember which part you have to point at the enemy.”

“This is not good enough!” The scowl was even more pronounced. “Next morning you will go the villages of Black Rock and Circling Water and you will find the men we need!”

Harys tried not to grit his teeth. He had gone two moons ago to these isolated villages and the only source of change was the carriages they transported from Bracken’s Fort to feed them.

“My Lord...there are no more men there. Only babes and old senile fools.”

House Chyttering and the deceased Knightly Houses under their rule had taken three out of four young men in their first muster and never came back, probably eaten by a dragon or ambushed by a rival House. The next Lord had taken the remaining men before perishing too in battle against one army or another. And the last surviving boy had died with the last guards trying to stop Vhagar from ravaging his lands.

There was simply no company to train as a base of an army anymore in this region of the Riverlands.

“Do you want to let the Blacks get away with the usurpation of our lands?” The question was uttered in a low threatening growl and Harys retreated two steps away from the small working desk.

“No I don’t,” he admitted. Stone Hedge would always remain his home. “But I don’t want to die either and this is what is going to happen if we muster some three hundred smallfolk and a hundred warriors to attack the rebels.”

“The Iron Throne will support us,” and the Knight was frightened by the expression on his cousin’s face. King Daeron had said openly the contrary during their sole and only private meeting. “The South must support us, they will have no choice.”

The second sentence was more spoken like a prayer than a fact.

**Lord Larys Strong**

Larys had been somewhat worried for the better part of the first moon of the year that the new Hand of the King would not be skilled enough in governance to provide wise counsel and help King Daeron in these difficult times.

Yes, he had some spies at Longtable but then he had a lot of agents at Storm’s End in the last decade. None of the latter had told him Lord Borros Baratheon was a narrow-minded hammer-man who could not be trusted when the time came to lead an army.

Fortunately, the reports of the men and women who had met Lord Marq Merryweather had not proved incorrect in this instance. Once the various compliments about the wine, the artisans who had worked on their clothes and the food had been expedited, the Lord of Longtable answered the first royal question with words the deceased father-in-law of Daeron Targaryen would never have used.

“Since you asked my humble opinion your Grace, my duties as a Lord of the Seven Kingdoms force me to say the civil war which had just ended was a monumental mistake.”

There was much to say about the behaviour of the Reach Lord in front of him. Larys had seen Knights stand tall and stone-faced before their liege. Marq Merryweather was not like them. Seated on his large and comfortable seat, the man looked like more a heavy Merchant Prince than a highborn of the Seven Kingdoms.

“Explain,” the tone of the King was not warm at all when he demanded his vassal to reveal the reasoning of this half-treasonous assertion.

“Gladly, your Grace,” said the new Hand of the King, the insignia of his function shining around his neck. “The problem lies in dragonfire...and the terror it has created throughout the realm.”

“I do not think I follow your mind, Lord Merryweather,” countered Lord Royce Caron. The Master of Laws had taken a far more offensive posture than Lord Marq. “From the Queen to the hermit septons on the Three Sisters, everyone I think knows of the dragonfire’s power. The Field of Fire is not a pleasant tale to tell, but it is one known to every child and adult of Westeros.”

On this Larys was perfectly ready to agree.

“Indeed and I will make the remark the grass on this dreary battlefield has not yet grown green and fertile in over one hundred and thirty years.” There was a smile on Marq’s cheeks and mouth; it did not reach his eyes. “But smallfolk and Lords alike thought that when the Conqueror was crowned at Oldtown, these times of destruction were over. There was some bloody massacres under the Cruel, but it was evident the man was insane and Jaehaerys II the Wise proved after him Targaryen monarchs could be great. As a result, the lands of Westeros thought there was an informal pact for the dragons to be the guardians of the kingdom. King Viserys’ brother helped this image, for he went to fight against the pirates and the Free Cities...”

“But then the dragons were unleashed against the granaries and the castles they were supposed to protect,” yes, Larys had already heard of these feelings, though the Reacher Lord appeared to give them more importance than him. Of course, Larys was in King’s Landing and the capital and its surroundings were already filled with enemy agents and killers. “That’s what you are trying to say, Lord Merryweather?”

“This is my point, yes,” the Lord of Longtable answered calmly before redirecting his eyes towards the King. “It is certainly difficult to acknowledge, but the Reach and the other kingdoms before the Conquest didn’t give their swords to the Conqueror because they believed his vision of Westeros was better than theirs. Maybe there were many who thought it was a noble dream, but eight out of ten men great desire was to avoid the wrath of the dragons. After decades of peace, we believed in the dream...but the Dance killed it.”

King Daeron poured himself a cup of gold wine before resuming the conversation with his Hand.

“I assume you have an idea to...resurrect the dream.” The second part of the sentence was pronounced carefully. No one around the Council’s table was a great admirer of the Faith but you never knew when someone had a religious crisis and started to spread poisoned whispers in the dark alleys.

“We need a lasting peace,” declared decisively Lord Marq Merryweather. “And I am not speaking of these long moons of winter where military campaigns are impossible. For all the destruction the realm has suffered, I believe two long summers of peace are a necessity.”

Larys would love to cheer and clap his hands in a festive mood.

“With due respect, my Lord Hand, achieving this feat will be a hard and difficult task.” It was a massive understatement; miraculous was the right word. “There are thousands on both sides of the new frontier burning to avenge their dead and end their feuds in blood and flames.”

“But it is one which must be done,” replied without hesitation his interlocutor.

“Except the fear created by dragons fighting against dragons, there must be other reasons,” said Daeron I in a voice which implied strongly these reasons better exist.

“There are,” admitted Lord Marq. “The one I find the most pertinent is that we are likely to lose the next conflict, not win it.”

“I have Tessarion and the power of the Reach behind me,” by his expression, the Master of the Iron Throne was not appreciating at all the way this conversation was taking. “We have also the Lannisters and their sizeable fortune, the legitimacy of the capital and the martial abilities of the Stormlands.”

“But the Blacks will have two mature dragons when winter ends to defeat your noble mount, your Grace. Moondancer will be able to force a stalemate in an aerial fight, while the other dragon burns the fields of the South. In addition, the North and the Vale are incredibly difficult to invade and it will be years before we have the ships to threaten them. I’m sorry but if a fast invasion of the Riverlands doesn’t force the Blacks to demand peace, we may be forced in a long war and the realm will not survive it.”

To his surprise, it was Royce Caron who winced first.

“A long war is not a good thing. Dorne stood idle during the Dance, but they were ruled by Prince Qoren. There is a new Princess at Sunspear, and she may smell weakness at an inopportune time.”

“Let’s pray they don’t,” Daeron spoke grimly. “We have few boons to convince the Dornish to remain quiet, and I will not unite my line to these vipers...”

**Princess Aliandra Martell**

The previous Prince of Dorne, aka her Father, had not been a beloved man. The smallfolk had not enjoyed his presence. He was too cold, did not show his passions and the taxes he imposed were not cheap for their purses.

The Lords had not loved him. He had refused to go to war as long as he was alive. Prince Qoren Martell had been a schemer and cold, not someone they would invite for the marriage of their sons or their daughters.

Aliandra was young, but she was not unable to understand that her ascension to the title of Princess of Dorne was going to be plagued by difficulties. Her Father – though in her brain he deserved other and less glorious epithets – had made sure of that.

It had only taken mere days to realise she had realised how badly underestimated the problems waiting to bury her in the hungry sands.

Lord Uller, as expected, was proving one of the most vocal opponents against her rule. It was a pleasant thing Prince Qoren had not been a man willing to forget his mistakes in the pleasure of the flesh. If the Lord of Hellholt had a bastard of House Martell to side with him, she was convinced he would have already done it.

But the Ullers were just the biggest nuisance. There were hundreds more and her uncle brought more each day as ravens were exchanged. And it looked this day was not going to bring pleasant news.

“A Knight of Starfall and a Knight of High Hermitage fought each other before the gates of Blackmont,” announced her uncle in the largely silent great hall of Sunspear. Manfrey Gargalen was anything but amused. “According to Lord Blackmont, the warrior from High Hermitage accused the other Knight of using threats to rob the hamlets at the very limits of his lands.”

“I’m sure the Knight sworn to Starfall has a different story to tell,” she said. For a strange reason, there always was some ‘insignificant detail’ which was forgotten by the culprit.

“In this case, the man could not,” contradicted the Lord of Salt Shore. “He was killed in the duel.”

The Princess of Dorne hid a yawn behind before answering.

“This duel was illegal, wasn’t it?”

“Lord Blackmont swears in his raven he didn’t give his assent.”

Good, it rendered the affair easier to judge. But it was not like there were no precedents. The Sept-anointed Knights of the cadet branch of the Daynes were not fond of the soldiers serving the Swords of the Morning and many had already paid the price of treachery in the last decades.

“In this case Lord Blackmont can execute him or give him the chance to take the Black. The killer lands are forfeited and half will go the family of his victim. I won’t have my swords slaughtering each other without the consent of their liege Lords.”

“The Master of High Hermitage is not going to be pleased,” her uncle warned her.

“Then he should better control his Knights,” she replied angrily. “Because the entire affair looks like the Starfall knight was on his way to the Prince’s Pass when he was ambushed by an assassin.” She raised her head to look Manfrey directly in the eyes. “Next raven,” she ordered.

“Lord Wyl wants more men to reinforce his levies,” this time both uncle and niece grimaced.

“What is the man thinking?” This was not the tenth time she asked loudly the question. It was not even the hundredth. At first, this belligerence was amusing and a bit worthy of respect. Now it had stopped to be that and more. “The Marches are covered in snow and I don’t think anything but mountain goats can live up there when it is so cold.”

“According to his raven,” the hand of her uncle pointed at a message badly written. She might feel generous and say the application was good for a boy of five name days. “Lord Wyl thinks the winter is almost over.”

Aliandra scoffed and made a gesture towards the overture in the walls, where the grey skies were projecting a dark weather and the sparse rain was falling on the roofs of Sunspear.

“The maesters will be happy to know all their calculus and studies are wrong. And I’m sure Lord Wyl will be happy to know the Reach’s spring is happening under feet of snow.”

Every Dornish bought the warmest clothes his purse could afford and the cold winds relentlessly assaulted the shores of her Princedom. If winter was about to end next fortnight, then she was ready to swear the vows of a septa. No, once again Lord Wyl was taking his desires for the reality. Winter was there and it was going to last one or two more years in the best of cases.

“Reply him politely the time for war is not yet upon us,” if she ordered Dorne to go to war now, the Princedom armies would be buried by the avalanches a score of leagues before they reached Nightsong or Blackhaven. “And remind him politely Uncle, that House Martell will not pay his gambling debts.”

“With pleasure,” Houses Wyl and Gargalen had never been close but in the last generations they had feuded a lot and would have probably done worse if they were not separated by half of Dorne. “And this leaves us, with our last letter: Myr.”

“Myr?” She repeated incredulously. “We have not armed them or hired their sellswords...”

“Exactly,” replied the Lord of Salt Shore. “We sent a lot of bloodthirsty young men to Tyrosh and Lys in order for them to learn how to wage war. But now the Myrish worry their sellsword companies are going to be outnumbered on the battlefields of the Disputed Lands.”

“Oh by the Rhoyne...”This was a complication she had not seen coming. “I am ready to listen to your suggestions, then. It would be amusing for us to send Uller and Wyl fight against the Free Cities but I don’t think they would obey my commands...”

**Author’s Note**: As you can see the Brackens are not very happy they have been spoiled from their ancestral lands...and there are many people on both sides of the frontiers who have huge grievances. Add the Dornish, the Lysene and other factions, and you have the recipe for a resumption of hostilities the moment it is feasible to campaign...

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