**Chapter 30**

**The Rowan Succession**

**Lord Commander Ramsay Bolton**

Lately, things had gone a little too well.

It was not something a Lord of Commander of the Night’s Watch admitted out loud.

In fact, Ramsay very much preferred not to think too much about it in his own thoughts.

But yes, things were getting too well. Winter’s fury had waned, the snow was melting, and the terrible blizzards were no longer something his men were constantly worrying about.

A new season of spring had decided to rule over the Wall, and for the first time in years, men by the thousands were restoring castles and cutting the wood of the Haunted Forest, ensuring the dark growth of the trees on the northern side was kept at good distance from the work of Brandon the Builder.

This was a lot of efforts, and it was going to take many, many moons of spring and summer before he could declare himself satisfied, but for the present the Haunted Forest was removed where it shouldn’t have grown in the first place, and the Night’s Watch had plenty of burn during the cold nights.

This was a Night’s Watch which was regaining some of its strength. The Black Queen’s words had held true: every year he had nine hundred swords and spears from the Noble Houses of her Grace’s realm to support the black brothers, and one hundred Targaryen men-at-arms were added to these forces. So the Order of the Black Swords stood at one thousand men, and all were true warriors.

As Ramsay had two thousand and seven hundred men serving in the Night’s Watch right now, and several hundred clansmen and sellswords regularly came to patrol and take easily a few coins to spend on whores and ale, the Wall was defended by close to four thousand men and eight castles, all with their own iron cage to raise gravel, wood and supplies to the top of the wall. Maybe half of this number had the horses to serve as cavalry, though the Dreadfort-born Northerner knew better than to make the mistake of thinking they were lancers and proper knights.

It was an imposing force.

But with the spring continuing, there was still the primary duty of defending the Wall from potential wildling raids. And the Wall, like for the last thousand years, was one hundred leagues long. In other words, he had forty men to guard a league, and given the poor visibility when there was no sun during the spring snows, it was not enough.

It wouldn’t be so bad if there was no enemy stupid enough to attack the Wall.

Unfortunately, it looked like Ramsay and the rest of the Night’s Watch were not going to have that chance.

“Four wildling tribes,” the Lord Commander repeated as Captain Eddard Cassel of the Black Swords finished his report. “I don’t like it.”

There were plenty of innocent reasons why the savage men and women of Beyond-the-Wall could be so close to the Wall. There were also plenty of very bad reasons.

“According to the rangers, they aren’t trying to hide,” the black-bearded Northerner replied. “Every night our men had no issue finding their camps. They are setting big fires and screaming so loudly you can’t miss them.”

That Ramsay was perfectly ready to believe. Wildlings were undisciplined and loud.

“I think the tribes your men saw are the Painted Skulls, the Bear’s Fangs, the Cat Pelts and the Snow Hunters,” the elected leader of the black brothers said after some moment of reflexion. “Between them, they should have between five and seven thousands wildlings.”

“Not enough to threaten the Wall, then,” the Winterfell-born Captain commented.

“That depends,” Ramsay said grimly, “if there are alone or more clans march behind them. If they’re alone, it is raiding that has drawn them southwards. If more of their tribes and hordes come, they won’t be able to evade our patrols and the castles. It will be war against them.”

“Raids were pretty common decades ago,” Eddard Cassel answered hesitantly. “But more tribes and clans of the wildlings are only united when there’s a King-Beyond-the-Wall leading them. Is it truly possible after this harsh winter to be one?”

“I don’t know,” the brother of the current Lord Bolton confessed. “There hasn’t been a King-Beyond-the-Wall since the Conqueror came to these shores, and we should have heard something from the tribes between Hardhome and the Wall if there was a new wildling army forming.”

With more men here at Castle Black, the patrols of the rangers were covering a lot more ground, and they were less and less deserters or lost crows in the Haunted Forest. But until the last couple of days, no one had seen anything or heard any rumours about enemies coming from the dark depths of the Haunted Forest.

“Should we warn Queenscrown and the other villages?”

“We will have to,” the Lord Commander replied. “If we had ten thousand men to guard the Wall, I would be confident not a single raider would manage to climb the Wall without being sighted, but we have less than half of this number. I am going to prepare some messages to send by raven.”

“For the North or for the South?”

“For both,” Ramsay replied, noticing the surprise of the member of the Black Swords’ Order. “Yes, I know most of what the Greens have promised has failed to reach Eastwatch-by-the-Sea and we are more receiving rapists, smugglers and pirates these days. But I have to continue sending them. The Night’s Watch takes no side.”

Alas, seven times alas, like the septons of the White Harbor Faith continued to preach, one side made it very difficult for his brothers and he to stay impartial. The Black Kingdom had given them money, weapons, and reinforcements. He had ‘lost’ the New Gift, but the Night’s Watch had been unable to make much use of it anyway. People were coming back northwards, merchants were travelling again in the region as the risk to have your throat open at night had lessened considerably, and Queenscrown was being rebuilt.

On the other side, the Green Kingdom had done...pretty much nothing. And the few ‘Greens’ who came to swear the vows were not the men Ramsay wanted to call brothers.

The good-natured Bolton didn’t say it in his messages, but the Night’s Watch was more and more influenced by the three kingdoms of the Vale, Riverlands and the North. These were the kingdoms which helped it in its time of need. These were the kingdoms which cared.

“Who knows, maybe wildling raids will convince someone south of the Mander to send a few supplies and swordsmen...”

**Magnar Ulf**

Ulf didn’t like kneelers.

If the Gods of the Earth and the Forest had wanted true warriors to have two legs, it wasn’t to crawl on the ground or remain on their knees! It was to run, and to walk. It was to fight and to hunt. It was to be free.

Ulf didn’t like the sea.

If the Gods of the Rivers and the Seas wanted men and women to travel on the violent and dangerous waves, surely they would have granted the Free Folk some tails, gills and scales. No hunter male or female had them, so there was no reason to sail on the endless grey sea.

And why go away? This was their land. This was their forest, their rivers, their hunting grounds.

The kneelers and their crow-killers loved to call them ‘wildlings’ but what did they really know? They weren’t free. From the day he was born, Ulf was free. When there was elk and good hunt to be done, he led his warriors to claim the fresh meat. When another clan wanted to steal the meat, he removed their heads and kicked the others in the head and the belly.

He was not Magnar because his father was. He was Magnar by fist, hunt-prizes and axe.

But now he had to wait for the kneeler to arrive from the old ship. A kneeler and he came from the seas. Ulf wanted to hammer his head into the tree for the sacrilege.

He wanted to do it. But he wasn’t going to kill him.

The kneeler’s gifts were too useful. He wanted useless pretty stones. Ulf wanted the metal weapons of the crows.

But Gods damn him, the kneeler was slow! Ulf had not believed it when he had met him the first time. The man was younger than him, and had a singer’s voice. But his arms and his legs were thin. He had no scars. He had a few hairs, but no true beard.

In the True North, there were women prettier and stronger than him. In the True North, men like these died during their first moon.

The True North bred strong men and great spearwives. It had no use for the weak.

But they had good weapons. Ulf wouldn’t kill them today.

“Greetings, noble Magnar, in the name of His Royal Majesty Daeron Targaryen...” Ulf was tempted to kick one or two teeth out of this loud mouth. A lot of men chose words better once their mouth hurt.

“Yes, yes,” Ulf grumbled once it was evident the blue-dressed stranger was not going to stop his long and useless sentences. Yes, Ulf had a King too, but he didn’t babble about it every day! “I have the stones, and the amber. You have the good steel?”

“We have. The great works of the best forces of the Crownlands, the Reach and the Stormlands are given to you, in the hope you will kill many of the perfidious traitors serving the illegitimate Queen...” Ulf stopped trusting the boring words after that. The man was lying, the Magnar was sure of it.

The boxes the kneeler used to transport the weapons were cracked and old. The hilts of the weapons were too old. But the big-mouthed man had a pretty sword with flowers and pretty things on his breeches. He wasn’t giving them the best weapons.

And Ulf wasn’t surprised. Once you kneeled, you were half a man. Once you kneeled, you had no freedom, and like the crows you didn’t trust your own tongue. Kneeling and crawling came first. Then they lied.

“And we hope you will use it to great effect once the armies of the mighty King-Beyond-the-Wall march against the Wall...”

Ulf smiled and nodded. The King had said nothing of the sort, but he was a ‘wildling’, eh? He was to thank the kneeler and say to him his hunters would march against the crows.

“Women are weak and must learn to stay in their place! The blood of the dragon-whore must be extinguished and their blood-claim destroyed...”

Ulf didn’t understand half of the beardless man’s noises, but the words he knew weren’t pretty. The man knew that without women, no children, right? The hunters and the raiders treating the spearwives badly never slept fine. In the True North, you treated women right, or you never lived to regret it.

Maybe this was why there was a Queen now? The King of the weak treated his women badly and the women had taken their spears and went elsewhere?

“Do not worry, man of the Southern seas, we will treat your Queen like we hunt our shadowcats.”

With a lot of prudence and skinchangers ready to fight. Spearwives bit hard when they resisted, and a Queen-spearwife had to be dangerous...

**Lady Jasmine Tyrell**

There had been a time Lady Jasmine Crane would never have used the chimney in her rooms to burn the parchments sent by her friends and the merchants in her employ.

But this girl had lived during the reign of King Viserys the Incompetent. Lady Jasmine Tyrell, widow of Lord Lucien Tyrell, Regent of the Reach until her son Lyonel came of age, was far wiser and suspicious of the world surrounding her. Thus the parchments of the messages coming back to her burned. The servants only entered this office when they had been ordered to. If this forced her to bring her candles and replacement parchments herself, it was a small price to pay for her tranquillity.

Scores of minor Masters and Knights had told her when they heard the rumours of it that she was jumping at shadows. Jasmine really disagreed. In her younger years one of her letters had somehow found its way into the hands of this bitch of Alicent Hightower, and she had sworn that never again she would rely upon friendship and the good nature of her servants and her court to protect herself.

If her letters took more turns of hourglasses to be read because they were coded, so be it. If it was difficult to read her, Larys Strong would hopefully spend his nights upon them until his eyes failed him and his health abandoned his body of Clubfoot.

Many people thought that Prince Daemon ‘the Rogue’ was behind hundreds of the corpses which had led step after step to the slaughters of the Dance. Jasmine didn’t share this opinion. The wielder of Night Sister had been a cold-hearted killer, this much was true. But when the man wanted someone dead, he often did it in person or challenged the supporters of the deceased to a trial by combat in the days after. Moreover, Daemon was a poor liar. No, many of the assassinations reeked of Alicent Hightower and Larys Strong’s stratagems. After all, who had the most to win? Was it Daemon by killing half of House Strong and his future wife’s lover? Or was it a certain cripple, who had suddenly ascended to the Lordship of Harrenhal without an eyebrow raised?

Besides, Greens and Blacks had plunged their hands into the rivers of blood until they emerged red and no amount of water and herbs could make forget the colour. After a few years, the colours of each side’s banner should be red. Jasmine considered it a small mercy that now most of the murderous loyalists of both sides were separated by a frontier if they had survived the conflict.

But for the present, it was the Greens and the lands of the Reach Jasmine had to concentrate all her attention upon.

And as if to remind her of this, Andrew Tyrell approached her just as she left her quarters.

“The situation at Goldengrove is...tense, Lady Regent.”

The mother of Lord Luthor Tyrell smiled. Ser Andrew Tyrell’s complete inability to be subtle never ceased to amuse her. Second son of a second obscure line of House Tyrell, the large knight was not unsuited to the Game of Thrones; he totally was unable to recognise there was one in the first place.

Fortunately for him, he was also loyal to the death and superb at commanding forays against bandits and deserters.

And arguably, he was an excellent man to listen to: when he was aware of something, Jasmine could trust all the Lords in Highgarden and half of the Reach had found about it.

“Yes,” she agreed, “the death of Lord Thaddeus really came at an inopportune time.”

It was not a surprise, sadly. Thaddeus Rowan had been incredibly ancient before the Dance of Dragons began, and many, beginning with Jasmine herself, had expected the terrible winter to be the source of his demise. Instead the old man had died in his bed peacefully during a spring night. Never let it be said that the Seven had not a sense of irony.

Followed by three of her ladies-in-waiting, the black-haired woman descended the stairs until they arrived to one of her flowery balconies. The scent and the view as always were sublime. Under the warm weather they had been enjoying for the last fortnight, parsed by abundant rains, the flowers were radiant and the fields and gardens of Highgarden were greenness incarnate. Blue, red, white and golden roses revealed their magnificence to every man and woman who had the eyes to see.

“I will not deny I hoped the old Lord would have lived five or six more years, Andrew,” Jasmine said as the servants withdrew and her ladies poured the herbal teas in the white teacups. This was the absolute truth: Thaddeus Rowan might have been a Black body, heart and soul, but at least the old womanizer had always supported the primacy of Highgarden over Oldtown, unlike some of the bannersmen. “But life is life, and the Father Above has called Thaddeus back to him. We can only accept its power and mercy, pray the goodness of his soul will earn his place in the Seven Heavens, and continue our lives.”

“I think he will get it, his salvation I mean,” Andrew grumbled, trying to sip some of the herbal tea but placing his teacup once again in front of him when it was evident the beverage was far too hot even for a stubborn knight. “But his sons aren’t like him. Robert in particular worries me. He...doesn’t behave like a knight.”

Coming from Andrew, the comment was surprisingly diplomatic. Jasmine thought she would have been more vicious to hint at the preferences of the soon-to-be Lord of Goldengrove – King Daeron had to give his approval to the elevation, obviously. Robert Rowan’s unmarried status had already been the origin of many rumours, given how old he was. The truth was far less acceptable than the rumours. He liked his partners young, and by ‘young’ the description was ‘freshly flowered or younger’. Many smallfolk girls had been silenced by his entourage, but one had been saved by one of the merchant-agents watching over this Lordship. Had Thaddeus been aware and refused to marry his eldest son until he apologised for his conduct? It was possible, though confirmation would never be given to her now.

“His betrayal against the knight vows I have not the power to judge,” this was between Ser Robert and the Seven, and the punishment would not be light when the time came for him to answer his actions in front of the divine judge. “His vows of bannersmen fall in my area of responsibility however. He is talking with a lot of very suspicious characters and knights.”

Many of them were known scoundrels and blades-for-hire working for Alicent Hightower and Larys Strong, but that she wasn’t going to say in front of Andrew Tyrell.

The cavalry commander didn’t disappoint.

“Why aren’t you arresting him now?”

“With what evidence and who would replace him?” Jasmine theatrically shrugged. She was not even lying for the two points: with the Master of Whisperers acting behind the scenes to restore House Hightower to its wealth and power, the accusations would never hold in front of the Royal Council, assuming they managed to pass the door.

And of course Robert’s younger brothers, Humfrey and Aladore, were no better than the eldest son of Lord Thaddeus. The best thing that could be said about them was that they liked their women older and they were accepting Lannister gold instead of Hightower coins.

“I am still formulating a strategy about what to do of the rude sons of Rowan,” a lie, her plans had been ready and she hoped whoever was now ordering the Hightower mice would choke when he or she heard of it, “but I want you to ride with three hundred men for the Northern Marches in three or four days. There have been too many bandits in the Northern Marches following the Iron Fever, and it’s time to ensure they are truly extinct.”

In three or four years she would step down from Regent to hand Lyonel the full powers of the Lord of Highgarden. And when this time came, Highgarden would rule supreme. Highgarden, not Oldtown. Alicent Hightower had played and lost; for the damages she had caused to the women across the Seven Kingdoms, the arrogant bitch might have had a little dignity and threw herself from the top of the Red Keep’s dungeon.

It didn’t matter. House Tyrell was growing strong, and House Hightower was going to stay weak. Jasmine was going to ensure it stayed that way.

**Lord Robert Rowan**

Today was the best day of his life.

He, Robert Rowan, was the new Lord of Goldengrove. Something he had been afraid would never come. His father had lasted so many seasons Robert had spent the last decade worrying that he would never be able to take the great seat which was his by law and blood.

But ‘Old Bones’, as he had taken to call the old man when he wasn’t in sight, had finally been taken away by the Stranger.

The royal messenger carrying the seal of the King and the Council acknowledging him as the legitimate Lord of House Rowan had been delivered in his hands. Seven meal courses for seventy-seven of his most prestigious vassals and friends had been eaten. The only way this day would have been better was to be allowed a Princess, but he had been told in private and by raven that it wasn’t going to happen.

Too bad. It was whispered Targaryen Ladies were hotter and particularly loud in their marital bed. Yes, it was too bad. But he had been promised a Hightower.

“Is everything ready, Buford?” Robert Rowan asked to his master of the hunt as he mounted his favourite stallion.

“Yes, my Lord,” there was no problem with the man’s competence, but sometimes the new Lord of Goldengrove wished the middle-aged hunter’s face was not constantly reminding him of a scarred rabbit. “The boar has been seen. I’ve given personally the instructions to the archers. The men won’t disappoint you.”

“They’d better,” he acidly told his master of the hunt. Twice this year, promises had been made. Twice there had been problems and ridiculous things happening at the moment of triumph. Archers had lost their way in the middle of the coves. A killer had sprained his ankle and been unable to reach the agreed location in time. The only good thing every time was that no one save his friends had suspected anything. Humfrey, Aladore and the others had not seen anything coming.

Today he was going to get rid of his brothers. Assuming these were his brothers. They didn’t look like him and ‘Old Bones’ had always been fond of girls below his Lordly station. A mistake Robert was not going to repeat. When he mounted the washerwomen and the shepherdess, he always made sure they took large doses of moon tea...or disappeared.

His half-brothers had refused his generous offers to go to the Marches for adventures and lands. Robert had been happy they did. That way, his coffers would not have to pay for plate armour, swords and everything like that. Hunting accidents were maybe to raise some eyes, but nothing would be proved. And he was the Lord of Goldengrove, justice on his domains was his if the King didn’t intervene...and the Clubfoot had assured him it wasn’t going to happen.

The dogs were unleashed, and the large column of horses and servants began to move northwards, for the uninhabited hills and coves which were serving as the hunting grounds of House Rowan.

They were moving really slowly today, and Robert had to remind himself this was unavoidable. A lot of his friends were already quite drunk, and demanding the horses and the foot increase the pace was not going to do anything save accidents...accidents of the unpredictable kind.

“The boar is not far from the Yellow Hand Cove, my Lord,” one of the young servant-hunters told him. The blonde boy may be six and ten name days, but not a day older. He had not a beard’s hair on his chin, and the Lord of Goldengrove was confident he had never hunted something bigger than a fox or a badger.

“If you allow me my Lord,” Jon, one of his best friends, “the dogs are going to do all the work before we reach them.”

“Now, now,” Robert laughed. “I’m sure the dogs aren’t going to kill more than three boars and two stags before we find them!”

Someone screamed behind him and Robert turned his head, just in time to see Humfrey fall from his horse with an arrow in the back.

“What in the Seven Hells?” This wasn’t the plan! This wasn’t the plan at all!

Something horribly painful pierced him in the lungs, and the Lord of Goldengrove fixed incredulous the black feathers of the arrow imbedded in his belly for a heartbeat.

And then he fell from his horse, thinking it was maybe not such a good day for him after all.

**King Daeron Targaryen**

Most of the days, Daeron had no reasons to complain about the members of his Small Council. This was clearly why they were his advisors, political confidents and enforcers truly. If they weren’t competent fulfilling their duties and responsibilities, the Green King had long decided he would dismiss the liars, thieves and idiots, and replace them by persons who deserved being seated at the table. Even divided in two kingdoms and after the nasty epidemic of Iron Fever, there was not a shortage of candidates vying to climb on the back of the Noble Houses to take a place among the Council.

Daeron had thought this year the Council would need no replacements. And if he needed one, it was more likely Lord Royce Caron would be the one to demand to be released from his functions at the capital. The Dornish Marches remained a dangerous frontier, and it was not rare the knights and the guards mounting guards had to kill the remnants of Dornish raiding parties and deserters of many armies.

But lately, his Master of Whispers’ performance was less and less satisfying. Daeron had believed the stroke and the long days under the maesters had been the first warning signs, but in hindsight there had been more problems and he had closed his eyes when they came in sight. Really, the Council and he should have been more prudent. A group of sorcerers from the legendary Age of the Freehold would have faced difficulties watching over the incredible number of plots running from the western Reach to the northern Crownlands. And Larys Strong was many things, but he had no powers fuelled by sorcery or another devilry.

This could have served as an excuse. But when someone failed in his duties, he had to punish the bannersman who had compromised the laws or the influence of the Iron Throne. And in this disaster, a lot of eggs had been pulverised in front of him and the consequences promised to be indigestible.

“Lord Larys Strong. Please explain to me why I have just received half a score of messages telling me the Lord of Goldengrove, his two younger brothers and twenty-two men and women have been killed...*in a hunting party*.”

Daeron wasn’t a saint, and he couldn’t help but let his anger show with these last four words. In his favour, the spymaster had the wits to bow quickly and look truly repentant.

“Your Grace...it was supposed to be a trap for the many Black agents Lord Thaddeus Rowan hosted at Goldengrove.”

“These Black agents have been there for more than a decade!” Daeron retorted immediately. In fact, the spies and friends who had sworn their fortunes to Rhaenyra Targaryen and her descendants had probably been there for far longer than ten years. House Rowan had never liked House Hightower or any of their Reach partisans. “They were not going to go anywhere!”

Larys Strong swallowed heavily.

“They were not going to flee as long as they had a Black Lord to protect them, your Grace,” the last loyal Lord of Harrenhal protested weakly. “But since Robert Rowan had given us many guarantees he was going to be our man, I judged the time was right to...cripple the Black networks of Lady Frey in the Northern Marches.”

“You could have waited,” Daeron replied without a trace of approval. “You know how fragile my power is in the north of the Reach after the Iron Fever deaths. You know we need every part of the realm to rebuild itself. You know we need to look strong.”

By all reports and the witnesses of the merchants travelling through the two realms, his kingdom was rebuilding itself faster than the Riverlands, as he had a lot more idle smallfolk hands than them now that the Dornish War was over.

“What went wrong at Goldengrove?”

The evidence the aged Lord took a lot of time to answer told him he was going to hate the revealed information.

“For reasons I was unable to be warned in time, some of my agents decided it was a good idea to support Lord Robert’s plans aiming to eliminate his younger brothers. They...they really didn’t like each other.”

“Kinslaying? Really?” The spymaster nodded, with a wary expression.

“The cadet, Humfrey, was a courtier of Lady Lannister. I think Aladore Rowan was a friend of Tarly, but I have not the paper evidence to prove it. But in the end, they knew their eldest brother wanted to remove them from the succession, especially since he wasn’t married and had no children of his own. So they organised their own assassinations...”

“Crone’s Light save us from our sins...” the prayer gave the sovereign of the Iron Throne little comfort.

“Aladore was poisoned and then gored by a boar,” continued Larys, struggling against the considerable embarrassment. “Lord Robert and Humfrey were pierced with arrows several times. Many of the servants and their friends had horse accidents, were butchered by swords and spears...

“Is there anything good to come out of this disaster?” The brother of Aegon II wondered with great sarcasm.

“The Black spies are dead...though I also lost half of my agents in the ‘hunting party’.”

Daeron stayed silent a long time, weighing, trying to find a way to turn this catastrophe into a disaster. He didn’t find one.

“Who is responsible for this massacre?” Because as much as he wanted to accuse Robert or one of his youngest brothers for the killings, this had all the marks of someone else having created a way to get rid of the descendants of the deceased Lord Rowan.

“I have no proof, your Grace,” Larys began, “but I think this was the work of Lady Jasmine Tyrell, Regent of Highgarden.”

The Green monarch instinctively narrowed his eyes.

“And why would one of the most powerful Ladies in my realm dare instigate the near-extinction of one of my Noble Houses?”

“She is a paranoid old bat, your Grace,” Larys answered smoothly. “As Lord Robert’s loyalty went to you first and Highgarden second, she certainly wanted to place one of the gullible Rowan girls she keeps around her on the seat of Goldengrove.”

There were many moments when Daeron had accepted the wisdom of the older and more knowledgeable Council member in the last years. This time was not going to be one of them.

The Master of Whisperers was lying, and his motivations were sufficiently treasonous that he didn’t dare revealing his real motives to his liege with no witnesses around.

The rider of Tessarion had known he was going to have to find a new spymaster soon, for the choices proposed by the Strong were frankly not ones he felt comfortable with.

But it appeared he had even less time than he had thought.

“Withdraw your surviving agents from the lands of House Rowan. My couriers and knights will investigate the deaths of this *hunting party*.”

“Summon Lord Merryweather,” he commanded to his Kingsguard once the Clubfoot had once more vanished in the shadows. “Inform him I need his solving skills to deal with an unexpected problem.”

**Queen Baela Targaryen**

In her darkest thoughts, Baela wondered if a second war against the Greens would be so bad. After all, once the traitors were put in their rightful place – and for hundreds of them it was six feet in a very large grave – none of them would be threats and large annoyances anymore.

Then she remembered Bosworth Bridge and the battlefields of the Dance, and her conviction to avoid a new war unless the Greens started it returned. A second Dance with fewer dragons was not going to be less cruel or cause fewer deaths. The two kingdoms had been separated for several years. She had not visited a Green city or castle this spring, but for the Black villages and hamlets, this was a very big change. Valemen and Northerners-born smallfolk were common sight in the Riverlands. Different words, different traditions were slowly becoming all the young boys and girls had ever known. Did the Greens’ Lords want things like this on their lands? Baela was not going to bet ten gold dragons they did.

“Too bad the Clubfoot didn’t die. When he was nearly visited by the Stranger, the frontier was calm.”

“We don’t know for sure the Green Master of Whisperers is behind this,” reminded her politely Cregan Stark.

Baela smiled.

“I admit it’s...somewhat out of character given his previous actions. During winter, the man was more like a spider, weaving his webs and preparing his daggers in the darkness.”

At that time, all they had on him and his goals were rumours and vague murmurs to act upon.

“But whether it’s him or another of the Green Council acting under his guidance, the Greens are moving overtly against us,” the young Black Queen stated. “In the last three moons, more than thirty of our agents in the South have been found with their throats sliced or assassinated by other means. One of our carracks travelling between our new settlements west and Seagard has been burned at anchor by Green privateers. They organised a massacre of our supporters at Goldengrove. Several Stormlords’ ships were sighted selling steel weapons to the wildlings!”

Each on their own, the moves would have been mild provocations. Together, they were far more worrying. And neither her Hand nor the other men and women in her service rose to protest that the Greens’ demonstrations of friendship had been misunderstood.

“Maybe it is the Clubfoot who has slipped his leash. Maybe it is my dear cousin who is behind all of this, rising tensions to extend his royal influence back to its previous levels. Maybe it is something else. But someone important has given orders under royal seal for this to happen. And I want it to stop. I am going to go to Winterfell sooner than I wanted, and Sheepstealer is going to return to the Riverlands to build the roads. We are going to arm a few new galleys at Seagard to protect our forts on the Iron Islands and any Green spy we find on our side of the frontier will meet the same end our agents did.”

“I have no objections for the latter proposals,” her Master of Coin was the first to answer. “But Winterfell is a bit far from the Wall to deter the wildlings from trying to launch raids upon our coasts or, Seven forbid, a true assault against the Night’s Watch.”

“If the wildlings assault the Wall with an army, I will go there myself,” Baela promised. “And the ice folk will be reminded they are nothing against a dragon.”

**Author’s note**: Poor Larys. When he was believed dead, a lot of the men and women who were in his service began to take...liberties with his instructions and orders. And now time is lacking for him to correct the situation before he’s removed from the Council and his duties of Master of Whisperers.

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