**Chapter 19**

**Debts of the Past**

**Magister Lysandro Rogare**

The sky was covering in dark clouds and the wind was getting more powerful. A storm was coming for Lys, and it was going to be a violent one. But this was not why he was in a sour mood at noon.

“And the loan interests alone have emptied the coffers of the Munys family and their captains,” reported his eldest son Lysaro with a cruel smile. “Their defeat at Klantys cost them six thousand sellswords and the last trade rights they owned in the Disputed Lands. Now that they can’t repay the smallest loan, I am in mind to sell their children into slavery...”

“No.”

Sometimes Lysandro wondered if Lysaro was truly his son. He had raised his children the same way, with the finest things which could be bought in Lys and the best tutors. Larra and Moredo understood the power of trade, war, subtle manoeuvres and most of important of all, kindness and mercy. His eldest son, alas, was bloodthirsty and already there were whispers in the taverns and the trade meetings the Rogare Heir had lost his destiny when the call for more sellswords was made eastwards.

“But Father! We have the opportunity to crush them forever!”

Yes, Lysaro was a monumental disappointment. Thanks the Love Goddess his wife had not survived the birth of their stillborn fourth child. She would have wept to see such a lack of wits in one of her children.

“Be silent!” They were no one but two slaves for witnesses, but the Lysene Magister did not throw his glass to his son’s face. He loved that magnificent golden cup and he didn’t wish his prize to be destroyed just to give his eldest a lesson. “Destroying House Munys would be a sign to all other Houses we don’t respect the sanctity of the great offices of this city! If we remove them from the Magister Houses, the other Magisters will rally against us and the ambitious lesser merchants will help them, for they will see the empty seat to gain!”

“By not defeating them, we show we are weak!”

“By not defeating them, we allow them to regain strength and pay their loans, my son.” It was too bad that the light he awaited in Lysaro’s eyes of understanding never came. “Sell everyone as slaves, and you receive some silver and gold this evening. Spare them, and the gold you earn from this shrewd move is enough to build ten palaces. The Munys patriarch has his fingers in the spice trade and several of his best captains are bound to return from Yi-Ti before the end of this moon. House Munys will be saved, and they will be more beholden to the Rogare Bank than ever.”

Magister Lysandro Rogare made a sign of his hand and a young slave girl with dyed green hairs refilled his cup. Another gesture and the plate in front of him was removed. This entire discussion was really cutting his appetite.

“So you say, Father.”

“So I say,” Lysandro spoke, deliberately ignoring the not-subtle irony in his son’s words. “And the vast fortune I have won in our family’s name is supporting my trade policy. In the last year, the interests of our loans alone have gathered eighty thousand gold ovalines from our Dornish trade, one hundred thousand ovalines in this very city and thousands more in Pentos and elsewhere. What have you done for this House, Lysaro?”

His eldest son stiffened, and his eyes jerked to every corner of the room. Lysandro emptied another cup of wine, hiding the disgust he felt for this lapse of control.

“I...I will make sure the Westerosi pay their ransom for their Prince, Father! It is a matter of moon before...”

“No, Lysaro, not Prince.” Had he to explain everything like he would to a child? “Viserys Targaryen could be King of the Sunset Kingdoms, and you failed to realise both King and Queen have no interest to see him back for the price you asked of them!”

The tutors had not managed to give him a head for trade and plots, but it looked like Lysaro had not accepted the most basic lesson of Lys.

“What is the first lesson of our House?” He asked calmly and looking at the large tapestry he had commissioned seven years ago.

“Never demand a price the customer can’t afford to pay...”

“I’m glad you remembered this rule. In your opinion would you say two million and a half gold dragons is a small sum for a kingdom cut in half, starving and burned for several years?”

It had been a grave mistake to let Lysaro arrange the entire affair, Lysandro could see this now. Perhaps he should have given him the task to supervise the trade with the Dothraki exiles. By all accounts, there were just one or two per year and the great merchants fled at the mention of these barbarians. It would have also sent Lysaro out of the way, for the trade happened on the mainland – a necessity for the horse-riders refused to use ships.

“I am going to solve this problem, Father. This I swear, on the name of our House. I will lower the ransom price...”

Lysandro asked for the gods of his beloved city to grant him strength and toned down the rest of the proposal.

“Lysaro, we are discussing a king’s ransom, not a fish or a vegetable. Our opponents at the other end of the table are crowned heads and they rose to their thrones because they were the sole survivors of a draconic war.”

A war the mere mention of the battles was enough to scare the singers and the poets. The clashes between dragons had been mercifully rare in the past centuries. This...Dance...had just reminded how unwise it was to divide a realm with dragons on each side. When a war was fought in the Disputed Lands, one of the three Free Cities was going to benefit from the traditional martial challenges and uncountable weapon forging. When a war was fought between dragons, fortresses, harbours and lands burned. Many Lysene captains had been boastful of their deeds when they had returned, their hulls filled with the gold of Driftmark and the Westerosi Noble Houses. But for every ship which had returned, three or four did not and there had been quantities of burned sailors and officers becoming beggars in the gutters, their burns and wounds so awful their own families disowned them.

“Lowering the price of the ransom would be an admission of weakness. At the same time, we can’t delay them forever. The Blacks have your favourite cousin in their dungeons, and they have growing dragons...”

“We could send assassins. Braavosi assassins,” Lysaro’s smirk told obviously which assassin he was referring too.

Lysandro felt enough was enough. He stood slowly, asked for his sword and then with a move he had practised flawlessly in his young years against a lot of other scions, the steel was drawn and stopped an inch away from the throat of his eldest son.

“The assassins you want to use are taking gold mountains for a leper slave. I shudder at the very idea what they would ask for a dragon.”

“Father...” Lysaro had paled several shades and this was then the Magister noticed the powerful smell of cheap wine. Clearly, the poor negotiator had been in a tavern before answering his summon.

Lysandro withdrew the blade. Lysaro breathed in relief – another lapse of control. Yes, his eldest was unfit to rule the Rogare Bank. To be accurate, Lysaro was unfit to handle the responsibilities of anything more complicated than a common pirate’s life. Drinking, killing and whoring were his main strengths...

“I will negotiate for your cousin’s return and stop the chaos you have created by your actions. Should I leave you to your devices, you will destroy the trade between Lys and the Sunset Kingdoms, and it is out of the question I lose King’s Landing and Gulltown purses to the Braavosi. For your disastrous trade losses and your unrepentant drunk behaviour, your status of Heir is officially at an end. Larra will replace you until I know you have learnt the errors of your ways.”

It was something he should have done fortnights ago, but the past was the past. Thinking fast, he listed the ships which were currently waiting in the great harbour now.

“The *Sunny Whale* is leaving for a long travel to Ibben tomorrow,” he told the son who had failed him and now had an expression of horror on his face. “You will be the second. I suggest preparing warm clothes.”

**Lord Cregan Stark**

Great marriages where Lords and Lords Paramount were considered necessary were rare, whatever one thought about it. Wedding of a Princess or another member of the Royal Family was the event of the year, war or no war, and the festivities thus were long, expensive and the talk of thousands for moons. It was traditional for Noble and Knightly Houses to abstain from their own marriages for the entire fortnight when the union was proclaimed. It was also best for the grand wedding to be organised and celebrated during summer, though late spring could be considered acceptable.

In this respect Cregan thought, Queen Baela Targaryen had broken nearly all conventions. The season was winter, and not a mild one. There were several feet of snow outside and more snowflakes were awaited before the fortnight was over. The wedding was seven days after the union of Princess Rhaena to his son, a succession of marriages which would have been truly an unthinkable mistake for the royal court five years ago. The bride was not accompanied by any older parent or protector, but by her sister. There was no High Septon to bless the ceremony or give his approbation to the ceremonies which took place. About half of the protocols and the decorations had been used in the previous marriage. There were no seventy-seven meals, just seven. And since this was House Targaryen they were speaking about, the fact the dragonlady was not marrying a member of her family or a close cousin like a Velaryon was also a major noticeable issue.

That was not to say there weren’t surprises which had not been done in the recent union where House Stark had benefitted so much. In the distance, Moondancer roared to mark the arrival of its mistress, and over two-thirds of the assembly jumped, the echo of the dragon’s roar being a music they had absolutely no expected.

“For a moment, I thought the Black Dread was waiting for us outside,” whispered Lord Kermit Tully, his red hairs and his beard neatly trimmed for the occasion.

“I can reassure you, the dragons of the Conquest are well and truly dead,” replied in a low tone Cregan as trumpets sounded and a vast choir began to sing. “I saw the carcass of Vhagar when it was dragged out of the lake. It was a massive beast...but it was well and truly dead.”

Of course the Queen’s dragon could very well reach this size by the end of its life. If there was one thing most highborn and lowborn people knew about dragons, it was the fact the flying fire-breathing creatures never stopped growing. The majority of the Westerosi ignored it, but Cregan in his position of Hand of the King had been told the Black Dread had not particularly impressive by Freehold standards. It was just that the black mount of the Conqueror had been over one hundred years old when Aegon I burned Harrenhal and defeated Gardeners and Lannisters at the Field of Fire. All other dragons, including Meraxes or Vhagar, had been killed well before reaching the age of the formidable monster. Not that it had been a problem in the war, when sixty years-old dragons were army-destroyers in their own right.

If the Lord Paramount of the Riverlands intended to say something, it was lost in the music and the announcement of the Queen’s arrival.

“Her Most Gracious Majesty Baela Targaryen, First of Her Name, Queen of Westeros!” Plenty of titles were added after this, most truly earned like ‘Rider of Moondancer’, others which were completely obsolete now such as ‘Protector of Blackwater Bay’.

The young woman had adopted a new hairstyle and great robe today. As murmurs of approval and hundreds of applause were heard, it was to the taste’s crowd. The silver hairs were in part braided and the rest had been combed to maintain an appearance of freedom. The dress was looking like their sovereign was clothed in the scales of a black dragon. From neck to the lower edges, several scores of rubies had been weaved in it, presenting draconic symbols. A white gold crown was on her head, with a great diamond attracting the eyes of every witness just above her forehead.

Cregan had seen his fair share of weddings, but he had to admit the bride for this one was worthy to be called a Queen of Beauty. In the tales parents told their children before sleeping, fair Princesses had to share these traits.

Addam Frey, unfortunately for him, was definitely less pretty than the woman he was waiting next to the altar. The Knight of the Twins was a handsome young man with dark brown hairs and happy eyes, he was tall and muscled as befitting for a knight...but he was definitely overshadowed by the Valyrian looks of the bride.

“The future Prince Consort is nervous...”

“He is getting married with a dragon and I hear they feed you to their scaly companions if you don’t perform well in bed...”

Cregan had used several artifices and protocol manipulations to lengthen the ceremonies in Winterfell, but today most of them were absent. Children, young men and young women threw winter flowers – which had mainly been brought from the North, the Northern Riverlands and the Vale – on the luxurious carpet between the doors and the septons standing in a neat line behind the altar. Seven songs were played and seventy-seven candles in their protections of Myrish glasses lightened as a sign of good luck and blessings from the Seven.

The Kingsguards in their white armour kneeled largely as the Queen arrived to their position, and like the tides of the seas, the rest of the assembly followed suit. At the sign of their liege, everyone stood again, the music resuming, joyous and majestic. Golden harps and dozens of music instruments played their melodies in the hearts and the minds of the loyal people.

“My dear children!” exclaimed the same septon who had been chosen to celebrate the union of Princess Rhaena to his son. “We are gathered on this blessed day for a great and long-awaited event, the marriage of our Queen to a most promising great Knight! Surely the Father Above is rejoicing for this union of love and beauty...”

Cregan somewhat listened by moments the long speech. There were a lot of flowery sentences, but he had seen the speech the septon intended beforehand, which diminished the appeal the words had for him. Besides, the Seven-Who-Are-One was a God – but it was not his God – or Gods – and while he found the liturgy pleasing to hear, there were aspects of their doctrine, the taxes they could demand and the philosophy behind it he found unpleasant.

Once it ended, there was one last surprise. By all customs, the woman was asked before the man traditionally the great question, but this time it was reversed.

“Ser Addam Frey, do you swear to take Queen Baela Targaryen for wife in love and blessed union, to stand by his side until death tears you apart?”

“I do,” affirmed the young man, his voice echoing loudly in the now silent hall.

“Queen Baela Targaryen, do you swear to take Ser Addam Frey for husband and Prince-Consort in love and blessed union, to stand by his side until death tears you apart?”

“I do,” said the beautiful young Queen, who in a long practised gesture, removed her long cloak from her shoulders and placed it on those of the groom.

“You may kiss the bride,” and the bride certainly did it as soon as the holy assent was given. In fact, both the two young rulers did not show any reluctance. Cregan was ready to bet no witnesses would be demanded for the consumption after the banquet.

“Ah, to be young and happy...”

Then the acclamations came back, a dragon roared and the rest of the royal wedding was drinks, food, happiness and everyone forgot the problems created by winter.

**King Daeron Targaryen**

In a peaceful world, Daeron would have been by Arianne’s side this morning, supporting her in what was hopefully the last fortnight before she gave birth to their child.

But it was winter, his kingdom was not peaceful and there were too many affairs demanding his attention and his seal to justify staying in his royal bed until the timid sun’s zenith. And so while his wife rested and prepared her forces for the great day, the Green King was holding court, receiving diplomats, negotiated and tried to make sure Westeros wasn’t going to fall apart in one or two moons.

By the Crone and the Stranger, it was not a pleasant duty to accomplish.

The defeat of the Brackens insurgents and the absence of hostilities had convinced a lot of people, Green and Blacks alike, that the peace between the two Crowns was going to hold for this winter. No smallfolk, merchant or noble was ready to sign in his blood the promise it would continue until next autumn, but for the present most soldiers and knights weren’t busy killing each other.

It was good for the realm. It was not good for him.

Daeron didn’t know who had decided to act first. It wasn’t important, truthfully. What was critical was the fact that roughly ten days after the official punishment of House Bracken was revealed as he sat on the Iron Throne, the bankers and various creditors had begun to spread a lot of parchment sealed with the three-headed dragon of House Targaryen. These were promises of debt repayment, and now people wanted the gold and the silver sums written on them.

How such a thing was possible? Well, according to the courtiers and constables having survived the war, Rhaenyra and Aemond – his eldest brother had not ruled – had been very busy each in their own ways when they had control of King’s Landing. Like him, they had discovered empty coffers to fund their projects. Unlike him, it had not discouraged them and they had made a lot of costly promises.

When Rhaenyra had perished, the parchments and promises sealed by the Black Dragons had gone in smoke or served to do things Queen and Prince had probably never imagined. Most of the Green ‘promise-parchment’ debts had disappeared the same way.

But not all of them had been destroyed. There were thousands of dragons promised in short sentences, and several people in the streets of the capital had unfortunately heads filled of ambition and greed. In the chaos of the last days of war, it had not been difficult for some to buy this strange paper which was not worth a Stag.

The audience today was with a representative of the human which had managed with considerable skill to gather half of those parchments.

“Your Grace,” Most Devout Lester bowed largely before fixing for a few seconds the score of rubies of his gold crown. “By his Holiness’ voice, I bring you the blessings of the Seven. May the Father give your justice clarity and compassion. May the Warrior...”

The silver-clothed advisor of the High Septon continued his prayers in a long oration. There was no whisper or voice to stop him. After each day brought new witnesses of the massacres ordered by his brothers, his position with the Faith had become increasingly shaky. Dozens of the captains involved in the killings of septons and septas had not died at Bosworth Bridge, Tumbleton or King’s Landing.

“Your blessings are warming the heart of every loyal subject of the Iron Throne,” replied the last son of the Targaryen-Hightower union. “Though I must wonder what pressing revelation has alarmed His Holiness to send you this morning.”

It was certainly the debt, Maiden and Mother preserve him. By the latest figures he had to owe over seventy thousand gold dragons to the institutions of the Faith, not counting the various reparations local septons demanded from Oldtown to Tarth.

“Alas, it is of heresy His Holiness is worried about in his latest prayers, your Grace,” oh, Father Above, what had the septons in Black territories invented now?

“The heretics of the North, not content to worship heretical gods, are corrupting True and Faithful Sons of the Seven-Who-Are-One. His Holiness has been granted possession of great evidence the Black Queen has promulgated two scores edicts to encourage tolerance and friendship between the True Religion and the False ‘Old Gods’. This is simply unacceptable, your Grace! His Holiness was prepared to wait for the sinners to realise the error of their ways and recant their apostasy, but now the septons in the Vale, the Northern Riverlands and the wastes north of the Neck are changing the True Order ordered by the Seven-Who-Are-One in the sacred books! His Holiness is patient, but this heresy will not be accepted any longer!”

Daeron felt really uncomfortable now, and it was not just because he was on this dangerous twisted pile of swords and metal named the Iron Throne. He really believed in the Seven – unlike Aegon and Aemond, it must be said. In fact, he was not sure his two eldest brothers had believed in anything more than their dragons and themselves. Yes, he had acknowledged there was a need for some...modifications...in the behaviour and the acts of the septons and the septas, but as most of the money was spent ensuring there was no mass starvation and pacifying the ravaged lordships, it was not like he had the moral ground and the influence to move things around. Apparently, his cousin had not that reluctance. Or perhaps she had, but with the North as one of her biggest supporters, the Black Queen felt she had no choice but beginning to make religious changes which were bordering heresy southwards.

“I hear the concerns of His Holiness,” Daeron said quietly, “alas, I do not have any influence to make the Blacks septons and nobles change their opinion.”

In other times, a King acknowledging he couldn’t say something in public and in front of a third of his court would be deeply unpopular. Here though, there were nods of approval and resignation. His authority stopped well before the Trident, and if he tried to send a raven to Baela Targaryen, at best he was going to receive a letter back to mind his own affairs.

Really, one of the deep fears Daeron and his Small Council was how much the two kingdoms were drifting apart. It had been far less than five years since the war had ended, but every witness, trader and emissary who came back from travels up North was vocal to affirm things were ‘different’. Opinions were divided whether these changes were good or not, but it didn’t change the reality. If the realm was reunified before next summer, there was a frightening possibility he and his descendants would never be able to reunify the Seven Kingdoms.

“What the Black Crown and its servants are ordering will be judged by the Seven-Who-Are-One,” the Green King continued, “but the Iron Throne must turn to heal the wounds of the realm in these difficult times. After so much violence and death, we must turn to the Crone, the Mother and the Maiden for compassion, love and mercy. “

“Admirable feelings,” declared the Most Devout, although his tone and the way he uttered them showed he had expected a far more outraged statement of Daeron. “But His Holiness has a spiritual duty and can’t allow this nest of heresy and treachery spread...I will not deceive your Grace, there are hundreds of voices raising each day to demand the excommunication of the men tolerating these heretical edicts...”

Daeron had the urge to descend from this Seven-damned uncomfortable chair and shake the Most Devout like a tree before reminding him the pre-war predecessor of His Holiness had crowned his brother Aegon II King of Westeros. As such, whatever religious commands were sent northwards – and according to Lord Larys, there had been a significant number of them – was promptly ignored when it was not trampled outright.

Excommunicating the Black Queen, her Council, her septons and her allies would not make things better. If the Gods were good, the divide between North and South was going to become wider. If fanatics gained power, there would be more people like the deceased Lord Bracken to raid the settlements on the other side, preaching their own religion of hate, rape and murder.

But as he watched the Most Devout, Daeron found none of this understanding on the visage of his interlocutor. Thank the Gods the septons were barred from the royal succession...

“Excommunication is a religious prerogative of His Holiness and I will not dream stopping the Voice of the Seven-Who-Are-One to pass judgement on mortal affairs...”

And it was just the first ‘supplicant’ today. Daeron knew very well he was not going to leave this damn throne for a long, long time...

**Archmaester Robert Turen**

In moments like this, Archmaester Robert deeply regretted not having any magical power. Not manipulating fetid and disgusting things was very good on a normal day, but when you wanted to strangle your fellow Archmaesters, the lack of sorcery was a big problem.

Bad enough the idiots had managed to vote four new candidates after the election of Archmaester Alvin to the gold mask, rod and ring. At this rhythm, the Citadel was going to need two more years before a full Conclave was possible and the administration stopped looking like a herd of sheep with several shadows pursuing them next to a cliff.

But the real difficulties were not that there were currently only six living Archmaesters. The problem came from the fact all of them had been raised before their ambition had been tempered and their heads became wiser. And by the horns of the Black Goat of Qohor, politics had made things three or four times worse. Robert believed himself an impartial man. The five others could not say that with a straight face. Two, Alvin and Mathis, were creatures of House Tyrell, body, mind, soul or whatever. Horace was devoted to House Redwyne. Mace was a cousin or great-nephew of the Lord of Longtable and he didn’t open his mouth without consulting House Merryweather. Loren had his luxurious lifestyle paid with Lannister gold. And the last, Hugor...he had not many proof but it was entirely possible the green-eyed Riverlander was a spy for the Black Crown.

“The spending for the Astronomy department will be fifty dragons less than the previous year...”

“This is scandalous! Archmaester Alvin, you promised to increase the funds, not reduce them!”

“I can’t speak a word and conjure gold dragons from nowhere, Horace! The Lords devoted to the Blacks are making their own little academic experiments at Gulltown, Saltpan and Winterfell! As long as they don’t pay us and the realm is recovering from the Dance, we will have to work with fewer gold and silver coins than we used to! Is it so difficult to understand?”

Needless to say, the conversation didn’t become less heated after this diatribe.

“Ridiculous! We all know a third of the budget went in your pockets a new house a street away from the Hightower...”

“My department need more parchment, ink and quills...where are we going to find them without money?”

“Take your coins and put them in a place where the sun doesn’t shine...”

“I have friends who would kill you for this statement...”

“I am not afraid of your Tyrell sellswords Mathis! And I have friends too, wait and see...”

“I don’t know what good your whores will do against battle-hardened veterans of three campaigns...but we will have at least a good laugh....”

“Increase the funds of my studies or suffer my displeasure...”

“Fellow Archmaesters...”

It took a considerable amount of time and three calls before Robert was listened to. In the privacy of his thoughts, he admitted this new bunch had done something he didn’t think possible: make their predecessors look like saints. Alas, he wasn’t able to resurrect the assassinated Archmaesters – though he had not heard of any necromancy powers ever be practised in the Seven Kingdoms this millennium – and thus he had to suffer their tedious presence.

“Fellow Archmaesters, we have received a royal missive from the Iron Throne.”

The Ravenry’s duties were still ones he had to watch over, as no Archmaester of black iron had been elected yet.

“What does this arrogant youngster want this time? Besides a new Grand Maester, ten apprentices and more books we don’t have?”

Robert stiffened but finally decided against informing Loren that King Daeron had every right to be furious. Little things like conspiring to end the dragons aside, the maesters’ allegiance to the throne was laughable. There was no Grand Maester, and judging by the enthusiasm Alvin and the rest showed to organise a vote, the Iron Throne would be lucky to have one when winter ended.

“I’m afraid this is a far more...pressing...issue than sending to the capital our best students,” Archmaester Robert smiled thinly. “The Throne has been...concerned by several actions his loyal maesters have taken recently on their own. There have been...incidents he wasn’t informed of. These incidents were recognised as acts of abject betrayals and many heads were put on pikes in the end.”

“Get on with it,” grumbled Hugor.

“There is a new Crown Lord on his way to Oldtown,” he announced without showing the slightest sign of triumph. “He is accompanied by a full detachment of the Master of Whisperers agents and several copper-counters of the Master of Coin.”

“WHAT? But he has not the right! The Citadel is an independent institution of science and learning!”

“I suggest you voice directly your arguments to the agents when they arrive...and pray they have not the orders to use their weapons to enforce their orders...”

**Lord Alan Redwyne**

The ship may have been a pretty sight when it had been built five or six years ago by the shipbuilders of Tyrosh. A sculpture of a woman holding flowers had become the prow, and the carrack had been built with the best dry wood the Free Cities merchants could afford.

Alan didn’t know when it had been captured by the pirates and began a campaign of plunder and crime. Maybe one year or two after that, though he would never know for sure. Outlaws were not used to count coppers and stars and writing how much money they had stolen was not considered a priority when any good regular navy would hang you for your attacks and raids.

Now the former carrack was a wreck on the shore, with wood splinters everywhere and the pirates forced to their knees by the presence of hundreds of bows and crossbows. Any other day, the Admiral of the Arbor Fleet would have rejoiced at the scene of these scums getting the justice they deserved.

Today he did not. For the cargo transported by the *Pursuer*, once belonging to a Tyroshi merchant but used in the last years by Basilisk Pirates, was not consisting of gold but humans.

Sick humans.

Alan placed a new tissue of vinegar on his face while observing the situation. He had known the Iron Islands had fallen apart after the massive beating the King and his forces had given them, and yes he had known pirates and corsairs were plaguing the Sunset Sea. His warships and the new small Lannister fleet were extremely busy hunting them down. After getting rid of the Ironborn naval threat, the last thing they wanted was to let the pirates build new bases on the western archipelago.

But he had not thought the pirates would be stupid enough to transport in their hulls contagious prisoners. Nor that they would try breaking the quarantine procedures when it became clear disease was spreading among the *Pursuer*’s crew.

“Kill them all,” he snarled to his captains, who had their own vinegar-soaked tissues on their faces. “Then burn everything from prow to stern. I want to see a gigantic pyre before sunset.”

There were Ironborn women and children among that lot, but with the coughing and the blood so many of them had, it was naive and dangerous to take any risks. Heartbeats after he had given the word, crossbows soared and struck flesh. The sick pirates tried to run or hide under the corpses of their own crewmates, in vain. Soon fire arrows were added to the rain of wood and metal, and the carcass of the Pursuer and the hundreds of corpses it contained were given to the flame.

“We need to establish proper quarantine procedures for all your men, my Lord,” told the elderly maester by his side. “Many didn’t know the pirates were sick when they arrested them. I fear this...fever...is particularly contagious and deadly. We need to stop it before it is out of control...”

“We will also need to burn every corpse which comes ashore,” grunted a young blonde-haired Knight. “They certainly tried to throw the first corpses in the sea, and the Seven only knows where these diseased-ridden things were dispersed.”

“Do it, and do it quickly,” Lord Alan Redwyne declared. “We can’t afford this disease to spread all over Westeros.”

In summer, it would be already bad enough. But in winter after a war? When most people were already coughing and feeling ill because they were not eating to fill their stomachs, fevers and plagues could reap a terrible toll. One of his captains cleared his throat as the pirates agonised on the beach.

“We will do what we can, my Lord, but I fear several corsairs and pirates have tried to rob the damned Ironborn of their last possessions. They promise to get them to safety, but instead they chain them at the bottom of the ship to sell them as slaves. If several of these scum adopted the same methods, we could have this...Iron Fever...spread all over the Sunset coast and further.”

“Burn everything,” repeated Alan of the Noble House of Redwyne. “Begin the quarantine procedures and send your fastest ravens to Oldtown, Lannisport and Highgarden, maester. We need to react before this disease ravages our lands.”

Something in Alan’s guts told him it was probably already too late. But they were loyal subjects of the Iron Throne, and they had a duty to try. Even if it cost him the totality of his surplus gold and decreased trade for several moon.

“It is better to be ruined than to get sick from this fever...”