**Chapter 28**

**The Art of Peace**

**Lord Royce Caron**

The more he thought about it, the more Royce found there was something deeply wrong about wars and how they ended.

Take the Dance of Dragons, where he had fought and his men bled for King Daeron, the First of his Name. The fighting had ended after Bosworth Bridge, where their army held the battlefield after the slaughter.

Yet the price of this victory had been terribly costly. It was in fact so expensive in lives and blood that the talks with the Blacks had been done not at King’s Landing, not at Riverrun or Maidenpool, but in the shadows of the ruined castle of the Antlers.

The hospitality of the last survivors of House Buckwell had been like the long winter Westeros had been about to endure: frosty, windy, and with little love for the ancient traditions. And the peace which had come out from these short talks had been as unsatisfying as the winter dark clouds and blizzards. The realm had not been reunified. The Iron Throne was now the throne ruling over three and a half kingdoms.

It had definitely not felt like a victory when the survivors had returned to King’s Landing, and the absence of any festivities had weighted heavy on the minds of his men and the Lords accompanying King Daeron.

Where had been the flowers, the cheers and the young girls the tales promised? There had only been dark answers to give. The flowers had not survived the bloody autumn. The people had little strength to smile when they were constantly struggling to avoid starvation. And too many young girls were no longer there because they had been raped and murdered, and the ones who had escaped the riots and the sacks were watching every man holding a weapon with visages which were provoking shivers on his neck.

It had been really difficult to remember what the Seven Kingdoms were truly like after the battles, the snow, the hardships, the Iron Fever and the tens of thousands of deaths.

The two or three scores of bards the Lord of Nightsong had heard during the last year were singing the time before the Dance had been an age of prosperity and justice. And Royce would be lying that he had not dreamed about going to his bed and waking up to laugh at the realisation the Dance and all these dark years had been a nightmare fuelled by alcohol and good food.

But the nightmare never ended. The years passed, and the Green Kingdom forged by King Daeron always seemed...lesser, compared to the realm once ruled by the late King Viserys when Royce was a child.

The Marcher Lord never blamed King Daeron. It was not the fault of his liege the Seven Kingdoms were broken in two, and it was not Tessarion’s rider who had provoked the largest and most terrible war ever fought under Targaryen rule.

But by the Seven, it was tempting sometimes to blame someone.

But who? Most of the men and women who had desired the Dance were long dead and their ashes carried away by the winter winds. Alicent Hightower was a broken woman and when Royce had seen her after their return to the capital, she was more a ghost than a Queen.

And now history was repeating itself. It was the second moon in the year one hundred and thirty-five after Aegon’s Conquest, and once again peace was going to be established with seals, ink and parchment.

It felt as bad as the Antlers’ talks, if for different reasons.

“I always knew the King had not the stomach for a proper war...”

And yes, one of these reasons was the man sitting to his right at the large wooden table which had been emplaced in the tower of Sam’s Mill.

The man was a Lord, naturally. Only the loyal servants of the Iron Throne from Noble and Masterly Houses had been chosen by the King to attend these talks.

Unfortunately, the ‘loyal’ quality was very much in question in Royce’s humble opinion, for the aforementioned and muttering Lord was Alan Tarly of Horn Hill, wielder of the great Valyrian Heartsbane and once a fervent supporter of Rhaenyra Targaryen.

Royce Caron didn’t like him.

“Strange, Lord Alan. I did not see you volunteer your gold when His Grace announced we had not the gold to pay for our armies for more than a year.”

He had not liked him for years, and this had been before Alan Tarly rallied the Blacks and almost emerged victorious in the Battle on the Honeywine. Fortunately, the ten-Prince Daeron had turned the tide of the battle with Tessarion, routing the Blacks, capturing Lord Alan, and preventing a siege of Oldtown which might have destroyed the Green’s cause here and there.

“We aren’t the Lannisters!” It wasn’t a roar, but it was a vigorous protestation at the very least. “If our tyrant of a King wants some money, let him take it from Westerner’s pockets!”

Royce Caron exhaled a large sigh, and he was sure the other Lords present were thinking the same thoughts he did. Now that the Seven Kingdoms had been carved apart and Horn Hill was on the wrong side of the Black/Green frontier, Lord Tarly’s very reason to live was seemingly to spite his former foes.

King Daeron wanted to make peace with Dorne? Lord Tarly was for war.

The merchants in favour at court wanted to trade with Tyrosh and Pentos? Lord Tarly was supporting Lys and Braavos.

The food convoys of winter time were stopped now that the first harvests were filling the granaries? Alan Tarly was raising his voice and protesting there was not yet enough food for all his smallfolk.

It had come to a point that should the King come to the ancestral home and declare under a sunny and cloudless weather that the sky was blue, the wielder of Heartsbane would find a way to disagree with their liege.

But the talks were held in his lands, and so it had been impossible to not invite Lord Alan Tarly.

“We should have held these talks in my hall!” continued to mumble the large Reacher. Tarly knights and members of their household were notoriously tall and big, but Alan was larger and taller than all of them. Not enough to be qualified as a half-giant, but Royce had seen during the Dance some Umber warriors who were smaller than him. “To receive envoys, even these perfidious Dornish vipers, is a pure disgrace!”

The Master of Laws of King Daeron had to bit his tongue before he criticised Lord Tarly for his weird choices. Would House Tarly and its sworn knights open their gold chests and their vaults to pay for a sumptuous ceremony, or would they send the tax receipts to King’s Landing demanding compensation?

The Lord of Nightsong was beginning to think that perhaps, exiling Tarly northwards and confiscating all his lands would have been a destabilising but oh so satisfying move when the doors of the ancient inn set up in this old stone tower opened and the Dornish delegation.

Royce rose from his seat, followed by the rest of the delegation. Enemies and honourless they may be, but King Daeron had demanded the emissaries of the Princess were to be treated with all the respect due to the voice of a foreign sovereign. And Royce would obey, albeit with reluctance. In this he did far better than Tarly, who the moment the salutations were done sat back without a care for the offended looks of their fellow Reachers and Stormlanders.

“Lord Royce Caron, I bring great news from my liege, the Princess Aliandra Martell, Lady of Sunspear, Warden of the East, and by the line of Nymeria, Princess of Dorne. The proposals delivered by your gracious King in the latest message have been judged acceptable by the Lords and Ladies gathered at Yronwood.” Lord Sancho Ladybright had a very fox-like smile on his lips as he delivered this tirade. As well he should. The Lord of Spears and Justice – roughly the counterpart of a Master of Laws in Dorne – knew very well the demands of the Iron Throne had been considerably lessened in the last three moons. But the smartest scorpion had nothing to teach to this grey-haired emissary. Royce knew very well he would not push the Dornish into unfamiliar territory. He was far too cunning for that.

“These are pleasant tidings indeed, Lord Ladybright.” Royce answered before formally asking for each point and giving a nod to the three maesters sitting on the secondary table against the left wall to prepare the parchment of the final treaty.

“Will the Dornish Lordship of Wyl be ceded to the Green Kingdom of His Grace Daeron, First of His Name?”

“It will be, in the interest of rebuilding the friendship between our two kingdoms.”

A Stormlander Lord, perhaps Lord Errol, scoffed. Royce kept his current expression like he had not heard him, but inside his heart he agreed with the feeling. Any chance of friendship between the men and women on both side of the frontier had died a year before when Lord Wyl had begun his unprovoked attack in the Boneway.

“Will the Princess of Dorne accept her guilt in this war?”

“My Mistress, the Princess Aliandra of Dorne, do, with great regret. She was misled by evil councillors, who have now been severely punished for their wicked ways.”

One more lie, and a blatant one at that. According to every source the Greens had south of the Marches, tens of thousands Dornish had screamed for war and the chance to attack the Marches and the Reach while they were weakened by the Iron Fever and the previous war. The Princess far more likely regretted the ‘evil councillors’ had not been able to kill the Royal Dragon and storm the fortresses of Nightsong and Blackhaven by surprise.

“Will the three northernmost watchtowers of Lord Fowler be dismantled, in order to avoid further hostile actions between our two kingdoms?”

“They will be.”

On this point, it seemed the Dornish intended to respect their word. The Marchers’ messengers had reported the destructions had already begun a fortnight ago.

“Will the Dornish Treasury agree to pay fifty thousand gold dragons to repair the damage they caused in this war?”

“The sum will be delivered to the representatives of King Daeron in no less than ten days,” Lord Ladybright answered.

Originally, it should have been two hundred thousand dragons, but alas, the Dornish had stubbornly refused to even entertain half of this amount. There had been menacing insinuations from the Marcher Lords and House Targaryen, but the Dornish hadn’t buckled under the pressure. The same had been true of the salt ships. Five carracks had been at first demanded, but ultimately there would be only two per year, and it was for ten years, not fifteen. As for the sellswords, which was a military support against the Black Kingdom, the Dornish had accepted...but had made a great emphasis they would pay for Essossi sellswords and that no Dornish would serve under the banner of a green dragon.

In other words, when the time came to cross swords and spears with the Blacks, the Dornish would have the opportunity to stay neutral...or to attempt another dagger-in-the-back attack like the one they had tried at the beginning of 134 after Conquest, albeit in a far less advantageous position.

“May peace shine brightly for many years to come,” Lord Sancho Ladybright declared with a sincerity that had to involve little sincerity and plenty of lies.

“May peace shine brightly for many years to come,” Royce and the other Lords repeated, minus Lord Tarly who did not even rise his cup for a toast.

Still, despite all the bad omens...maybe this ‘Dornish War of 134AC’, or the ‘War of Lord Wyl’s Folly’ as the bards were already playing it, would be his last one. He had seen enough bloodshed in his time, and his plate armour was getting more difficult each time to don.

**Lady Johanna Lannister**

Johanna had loved surprises a decade ago. Of course, the ‘surprises’ then had been her Lord Husband organising a tourney or a feast in her order, a gift of gemstones from the markets of Lannisport, or a new dress from a Myrish or Lysene merchant.

This day the surprises were of a far less benevolent nature...and the Lady of Casterly Rock was warned at the same time her bannersmen and her servants were, which was frequently too late to do any good.

Needless to say, Johanna had begun to hate more and more these ‘surprises’. Really, these events were more and more described as ‘disasters’, and too often it was because the bannersmen who should have been her late husband’s had been caught asleep while they were supposed to accomplish their duties.

“Ser Flement, this loyal fisherman,” her left hand designated the man in the old and used clothes who was looking out of place and ill-at-ease in the cavernous hall of Casterly Rock, “is reporting there is a Black fleet at anchor in the bays of Harlaw. And said fleet was disgorging many troops and supplies when he saw them.”

The Lannister widow straightened on her stone seat and the sceptre of gold and steel she had in her right hand was slightly inclined towards the accused, a threat and a reminder of the power she wielded in one move.

“I want an explanation. Five days ago you said to me in this very hall the Blacks had not the means to launch a reconquest of the Iron Islands. From all evidence, this is not the case.”

There were over two hundred people assisting to the scene, but aside from a few murmurs, a silence of death reigned.

“I want explanations. I want to know why a loyal fisherman is revealing me this unpleasant information and not the Farman fleet I ordered to watch over the Iron Islands!” Her voice had slightly betrayed her anger, and Johanna curbed it with what she could only call her great experience of these situations. Her tone however remained imperious and cold. A fault had been committed, and many Westerners had failed to uphold the vows they had sworn. This couldn’t be forgiven. “There are only two possible choices. Either it is incompetence, or it is treason.”

Ser Flement Farman had the good sense to look shocked, and his face became livid as her words finally sunk in whatever intelligence remained in his head.

“My Lady...House Farman remains loyal...we stand ready to obey any and all commands of House Lannister...”

The Lady of Casterly Rock slammed her sceptre against the red stone where her seat and her feet were posed.

“The command was given a couple of years ago. Your House was asked the hard but necessary duty to watch over the Iron Islands and warn Casterly Rock, the Banefort, Lannisport and all other coastal fortresses as quickly as you could should anyone try to conquer the Iron Islands, be they Black knights or Tyroshi corsairs.”

The youngest brother of Lord Farman for some reason presented many common points with a ferret at that moment. Good-looking on the outside, but agitated, nervous, prone to panicking deep inside when things weren’t proceeding like he wanted.

“The Iron Islands and the seas surrounding are large, my Lady...”

Johanna stared at him like he was an idiot. And to be honest, she wasn’t ready to dismiss sheer stupidity anymore as the root of all problems in House Farman.

“The Northern ships are still immobilised by violent storms and spring snows. There is only one place these ships can come from, and it is Seagard. For a lot of reasons, it’s evident they were going to land on Harlaw first. It does not require a lot of knowledge in sea matters or to be an Admiral.”

“The situation is serious yes, but it is far from unsalvageable!” To say this confident assertion alarmed her was like saying the Iron Fever had killed some people at Crakehall. “The Blacks have broken the peace, and with two or three thousand men, we can easily throw them back into the sea and take Harlaw in the name of King Daeron!”

Well...Johanna had her answer. The Farman knight was indeed an idiot.

“The treaty His Grace signed with the Blacks say nothing of the sort, Ser,” she said slowly, articulating each word like she spoke to a child of three name days. “It acknowledged the right of vengeance was ours, since it was the Westerlands and the Reach who had suffered the most from the Red Kraken’s atrocities. It gave us the right to establish some enclaves on Old Wyk and Pyke to make sure the Ironborn were truly gone and no ‘Iron King’ was ever able to threaten our homes.”

The enclaves and outposts’ rights had not been enforced. The realm had not the men and the ability to keep hundreds of men fed in the middle of winter throughout the most violent winter in living memory. The Iron Islands had been abandoned once Tessarion and the Redwyne fleet had made a mountain of skulls from the reavers’ corpses and burned their longships.

Therefore the Blacks were not breaking the peace. It was an inimical act, to do this without a raven message or any warning and while the King and half of the kingdom’s forces were busy fighting Dorne, but it was not repudiating their oaths and their promises.

“Attacking Harlaw with the ships House Farman has, assuming you can win this battle which I doubt given your excuses of late,” Flement blushed a deep red and suddenly found the floor stones of Casterly Rock very interesting “would be a declaration of war where we would be in the wrong, at a moment most of the Reach and Stormlands armies are unable to protect our northern frontier. The Crone and the Father Above would turn their eyes in shame if I gave this order.”

Whatever plans the Blacks had in mind for these islands, House Farman was obviously the wrong House to oppose them. They had obviously failed in their duties and charges, and after the long series of defeats the Red Kraken had given them and the many stones of gold and silver she had paid for their ransoms, her patience was finally at its end.

Before the third moon of this year was over, there would be a new Admiral defending the Westerlands’ shores, and his household name wouldn’t be Farman.

“Now I want to know what exactly House Farman has done with the loan of ten thousand gold dragons of last year. Clearly, you haven’t used it to prepare your carracks and your great galleys for battle against the Seagard sailors...”

**King Daeron Targaryen**

Daeron would not admit it to his Council or anyone save his wife, but it was good to be back at King’s Landing. Yes, the city was as dirty and smelly as ever. Yes, the traces of the riots and the souvenirs of violence and lost siblings had not faded away. Like Maegor’s Citadel, the most populated city of the Seven Kingdoms – though Oldtown was trying hard to contest the title these days - was tainted by blood and the disastrous legacy of the Dance.

But it was his city, and since he was back, it the sign Westeros was finally at peace. The Seven only knew how long it was going to last, but for the moment there weren’t anywhere two armies moving towards each other anywhere near the Crownlands campaigning with the intention of massacring smallfolk and committing wholesale slaughter.

It had also been a cherished opportunity to see his two children, the second he had been unable to hold in his arms until now due to the Iron Fever and the Dornish war. Crown Prince Viserys and Prince Aemon were lively babies and were the embers of hope of House Targaryen with Jaehaera. The dragonlords had endured the worst war, plague and winter had thrown at them, and they had survived. And Daeron wasn’t the last dragonlord anymore; an egg from Sunfyre had hatched in Viserys’ hands, a new gold-orange scaled dragon which would if the Gods were good become a new sovereign of the skies.

By the Father, it had been good to spend time from his family and not think about the tedious and frustrating duty of ruling a realm for seven days. Alas, he could not evade his Council and the messages arriving from the Arbor, Storm’s End and the West for long. The Masters of the Council could handle the day-to-day duties for a few days, but it was not something he could afford for fortnights or moons, not unless he wanted to become a powerless Lord of the Iron Throne.

“My King,” Lord Merryweather bowed largely as he entered the room and already Daeron could see the first order of the day they would have to solve. For they weren’t six Masters occupying large seats around the table, but five.

“I see Lord Larys has not recovered enough to attend this Council.”

“No, your Grace,” Lord Alan Redwyne answered. “His health is...not what it once was.”

Since the ‘Clubfoot’, as most Lords called him when he was not present, had never been spared by diseases and body complications, this was not reassuring at all.

“I have been assuming Lord Larys’ duties with his benediction,” the Hand of the King said prudently, “but if this continues, a new Master of Whisperers will have to be named. The position is too important to remain unfilled.”

The debate went on for five or six turn of hourglasses about a potential replacement. They weren’t many candidates. Good informers – it would not do to call them ‘spies’ – had historically been hired from the Riverlands or the Westerlands. The former because there were quantities of feuds and quarrels between the Noble Houses of the region, the latter because of their fabulous wealth extracted from the ground. The Riverlands were now unavailable for evident reasons, and the Lannister domains had been heavily depleted by invasion and the never cursed-enough Iron Fever.

“I will search personally for a new Master of Whisperer, should Lord Larys’ health not improve further in the days to come.” It was already painful to see his mother cowered like a lady of misery in her own quarters, Daeron dearly hoped there wasn’t going to be a Councillor in a comatose state to add to the list of tragedies. “Are there any outstanding problems that are taking precedence?”

The answer he wanted to hear was ‘yes’, but since no one was showing a smile, the soon-to-come retort wasn’t going to be that one.

“No, your Grace, the Blacks have been trying to exploit the deployment of our army against Dorne, and they have achieved certain successes.”

By this point, the Green King knew the headaches were going to return at full gallop.

“What sort of successes?”

“Velaryon and his friends have landed on the Iron Islands and claimed Harlaw, Orkmont and Saltcliffe for the Blacks, according to Lady Lannister’s message.”

It took a lot of time for Daeron to analyse the curious move, but the more he thought about it, the more it made sense. It was clever. Harlaw had been the Ironborn’s granary, Saltcliffe was the heart of their salt trade and Orkmont had been where the largest forests – by Ironborn standard – had been on the archipelago.

“And no one bothered to watch over them? Seven Hells, I thought we agreed to move on Saltcliffe six moons ago!”

Most of the Council members took great care to avoid his gaze, all except Lord Willam Stackspear.

“Your Grace,” began his Master of Coin, “nine out of ten gold coins which were supposed to buy supplies and attract adventurous smallfolk for the claiming of the Iron Islands were used for the Dornish war. I had not the money to pay for both things at once, and sending settlers to claim a devastated island is not something cheap. The value of smallfolk’s work has gone through the roof in the last couple of years since they are so few of them left, and we can’t pay for two important things at once. We had the choice to pay for the war, or to create new villages in Ironman’s Bay. We couldn’t do both at the same time.”

It would have been too easy to imitate his brothers. To rage at the ‘perfidy’ of the Blacks and the Dornish, to remove Lord Stackspear from the Council and to immediately send an ultimatum to Stone Hedge as a fleet was gathered at Lannisport and troops marched northwards to ‘liberate’ the islands.

The problem was that there was no money left for this kind of adventure. The debts and the payments of the knights and the infantry were going to burden the treasury for most of this year – if they were lucky. There was no gold, no army, and not enough ships to challenge seriously the Blacks.

And most of all, the Greens couldn’t afford starting a new war against the Blacks.

“I’m sure my cousin has done more.”

“The Black Queen is creating Valyrian roads from one side of the Vale to another,” Lord Shermer declared in a gloomy voice.

“One road,” Merryweather immediately corrected, “and it will take a couple of moons to be completed. Besides, all the Pentoshi and Myrish I’ve talked about doubt this is a true Valyrian road. There have been no signs of blood sorcery, no slave-slaying and no unnatural things wherever Moondancer is sighted.”

This sentence didn’t reassure him at all. Roads. Something extremely simple, and that in the minds of the older generations was a praise to the Good King Jaehaerys. If Baela Targaryen had decided to win the hearts and the voices of the people living in the Vale with this construction, she was far more dangerous than he had thought.

The Vale was too often isolated from Westeros save by its harbour of Gulltown. But if new roads were born, even if their builders had to repair them every five years, the Eyrie and its nearby fortresses would be able to reinforce the Riverlands before a Green army reached Harrenhal. A siege of Saltpans became impossible without dragon support.

More than ever, the absence of Larys today was a massive problem. The Master of Whisperers wasn’t perfect, but Daeron was sure he would have assigned some of his best men to this Vale project.

“Our own roads are in a...less than satisfactory state?” Yes, this was an area where he was out of his depth. Riding a dragon from one fortress to another had made him the very opposite of an expert on them.

“The Kingsroad is a catastrophe, and like the Gold Road large sections of it are in enemy lands now,” Lord Royce Caron affirmed. “The Rose Road is better, especially from Oldtown to Bitterbridge where Highgarden workers have properly maintained it. But rebuilding the principal roads would require a lot of hands and money.”

Perhaps these talks of exhausted knights selling their earthly possessions and departing for the Summer Islands...

“We are going to have to answer these provocations, your Grace,” Lord Redwyne pressed him.

“Indeed,” Daeron answered. He didn’t say he hadn’t the first clue how to ‘answer’.

**Balon Pyke**

“It was a galley of two hundred oars, Balon. The greenlanders sailed into the bay of Old Wyk like they had nothing to fear.”

“They had nothing to fear, Sargon,” Balon said with the tired tone of someone who had worked from morning to dusk removing rocks and preparing the fields of Crow Spike Keep for another harvest before the heavy spring rains returned. “A galley of that size can transport over one hundred warriors, all armed with great swords, axes, crossbows and the Drowned God knows only what else. What was going to attack them in the Burned Bay? The ghosts and the skeletons of the valiant captains who perished against the dragon?”

Sargon Drumm gave him a nasty glare.

“We should have lit several fires on the cliffs to attract him on the reefs or in one of the bays of our choosing, and then take it for ourselves!”

This, the last bastard of House Greyjoy left alive mused, was certainly one of the most important reasons there weren’t that many Ironborn left alive these days.

“Then why didn’t you try it?” Balon replied in an affable tone. He knew the answer before the older man was going to open his mouth, but it was always more satisfying to hear it from the warmonger’s lips directly. “You are your own master.”

“You know exactly why! I have thirty men and two pinnaces! It is not enough! I need reinforcements to kill the greenlanders!”

“Well I’m sure the other Houses of Old Wyk are going to follow you the moment you explain your great plan.”

In fact, Balon was absolutely certain of the contrary. Because there were no Great Houses left on Old Wyk. When the dragon servants had come to finish the slaughter begun by the blue reptile, the Ironborn who had not fled...well, they had died, and let’s leave it at that.

There had been local communities which had travelled back to the holy island once the greenlanders had decided there was nothing left worth destroying. But Old Wyk had not been a very pleasant location to endure the wrath of the western and northern winds before the kingsmoot, and afterwards it had become worse. Grain and meat had burned. Wine bottles and ale barrels had been broken and poured their contents into the corpse-filled waters surrounding Old Wyk.

The Master of Crow Spike Keep – though Balon’s great and pompous title was ‘Master of the Iron Islands, Lord of Rock and Ashes’ – didn’t know how many had died of starvation and disease during these dark years, but it must have been thousands. When the softest and most pleasant food you had was the white turnip, times were dire.

Sargon Drumm was today the most powerful man of Old Wyk, and Balon would be astonished if he had more than a thousand people living under his authority. He had thought this would encourage the cousin’s cousin of the previous Lord Drumm to show some caution and calm, but evidently he had been wrong.

In his case, the proverb ‘one day a reaver, always a reaver’ was really, really true.

“You are mocking me.”

“I am.”

There were rumours that before winter made sea travel a death sentence, Sargon Drumm had tried to fight against some copper-skinned slavers with the help of some veteran reavers. It had gone as well as one might expect. Their last longship had been destroyed by fire arrows, and half of the Ironborn involved had joined their ancestors in the halls of the Drowned God.

“This is your fight too!”

“No, my fight is to toil the fields with the families of Crow Spike Keep and to ensure the next harvest is bountiful. My battles are waged with the plough and the bad herbs.”

The Ironborn had lost too much to do anything else. ‘His’ lands were worthy of a Lordship, but there were far too empty. Before the Red Kraken went to war, the domain of three valleys he ruled over would have gathered thirty or forty thousand men and women for the fields and the fisher boats. Now? He counted himself lucky if there were seven thousand answering his calls...and that was including ten name days children and old men two generations past their prime. The women, the young, the crippled, the men a few moons away from the grave. These were the Ironborn who had survived the dragon flames and the death they brought with dark wings.

“The crows have feasted enough. Leave this valley and never come back.”

“The galley had a green dragon’s flag! Do you know what it means?”

If Sargon had hoped to shock him, he was sorely disappointed.

“Of course it had a green dragon on its banners. Greenlanders’ flags are green or black, you know...”

The self-proclaimed Drumm tried to spit in his face, but the projectile narrowly missed his feet.

“We will see if you sing the same tale when the dragons burn your forts and your fields...”

Balon barked a joyless laugh at that.

“Return to Old Wyk, Sargon. No man can fight dragons on his own. We Ironborn of Old Wyk have understood the harsh lesson. If they come as conquerors, we will fight them. If they don’t come, we will ignore the greenlanders. It’s simple.”

One would hope the Drumm had learned it on the shores of Old Wyk like them. The Drowned God knew Sargon must have fled like everyone, since he was still alive today. But no, this was ‘Old Way’ and ‘reaving’, when there wasn’t a single longship seaworthy...madness. And it was dangerous madness to boot.

“THE DRAGONS WILL COME! IRONBORN! RALLY TO ME!”

Two old women turned their heads from their tasks for a brief instant, and this was it. The Old Wyk ‘reaver’ swore a torrent of curses and marched away.

“Fool...”

**Queen Baela Targaryen**

The young Queen lowered her letter with a small grimace. Since a crown had been posed on her head, Baela was not used to reading messages of people ill-disposed towards her. On the contrary, Lords, maesters, merchants and every man or woman able to write more than his own name on a parchment was very, very complimentary.

She wasn’t stupid enough to believe all of her subjects thought so highly of her in their heads, but in public she met more smiles than angry expressions. The return of peace, the recovery of trade and the last two bountiful spring harvests may have something to do with it, of course.

So no, the Lords and the rest of the men not happy at seeing her on the throne had the good sense to keep their protestations under a large veneer of civility. It wasn’t good to have the Queen opposing you at every turn, clearly.

Her cousin had not the same reluctance, alas.

“The Green King didn’t call me a truce-breaker,” the rider of Moondancer told Lord Cregan Stark while handing him back the letter which had arrived from King’s Landing via Gulltown. “I suppose this is a progress.”

The Lord of Winterfell shrugged like if the subject was a simple quarrel and had no great consequences between two realms.

“I find the veiled accusations worthy of a Hightower,” the Stark patriarch said after a moment spent watching the new road in the distance. “The huge hypocrisy is there. He knows we know his forces would have moved against the Iron Islands if Dorne hadn’t attacked his realm at the beginning of spring. He knows the accords signed haven’t been breached, so this entire message is posturing.”

Baela wasn’t inclined to disagree with the Lord Paramount of the North. There was still one point that could cause problems among the scene of Black politics however.

“And his intention to ‘claim Pyke, Great Wyk, Old Wyk, Blacktyde and the Lonely Light as legitimate and indivisible parts of the Kingdom of the Westerlands’?”

There was no doubt in Cregan Stark when he replied.

“The Green King is bluffing. He’s not his brothers, but he is bluffing. Too many of his troops are tied in the Marches and the southern Reach at the moment, and too many of his smallfolk have died by the Iron Fever. Besides, what does holding these islands give him? It was the salt-farm and the granary he wanted, and we claimed them before his men-at-arms could.”

“The Lannisters still could send a few hundred spearmen on every island we didn’t claim.”

They can certainly try,” Cregan agreed, “but once again, my Queen, what good will it provides them? There will be little opposition on the Lonely Light, Old Wyk or Blacktyde, but these islands have nothing to offer save fishing harbours for Green sailors. Great Wyk and Pyke can provide some harvests and a few iron mines, but those need smallfolk to work, and your cousin has already a shortage of them. Besides, I heavily suspect he can afford one or the other when these big islands are at stake. The populations of the islands we took were in the low hundreds and these men and women truly hate the Greens for what they have done during the sack of the Iron Islands. Lord Velaryon was forced to hang a few former reavers before they completely submitted...and we weren’t the targets of this hate in the first place. If the Greens land again, my advice to them would be bring Tessarion again. They surely will need a flame-breathing helper to crush the Ironborn resistance a last time.”

This was not the answer she wanted to hear...but in this situation, there weren’t a lot of happy endings. Baela wasn’t going to begin a war for some lousy Ironborn who would have killed or raped her if they had the chance. And evacuating the islands in their fist would be an admission of weakness plus a sword pointed at Seagard and all the naval trade in the Sunset Sea.

“You are against this conference the Southerners propose, then?”

“Oh no, I am completely in favour,” Lord Cregan smiled in a manner that would have made a direwolf proud. “The reality they asked, not us, is the proof that for all the arrogance of Oldtown and Highgarden, this Green kingdom is an ugly situation after burning the spear columns of Sunspear. They know many of our Lords will scream for war the moment Tessarion falls. They know the Dornish are sharpening their spears. And a lot of Essossi aren’t exactly their friends after the way they handled their debts...no, my Queen, I suggest we let them talk.”

“We talk but we continue building roads and forging new swords while we’re meeting their envoys?”

The grey eyes of the Master of Winterfell were expressive enough to let her guess the conversations would go where her personal messengers would ensure these exchanges went nowhere for moons, perhaps years. It was not an honest method of diplomacy. But no one would die from it, and as spring continued, her kingdom would become stronger and unwilling to bow to any Green dragonlord.

“Speaking of roads...what do you think of the name my engineers and smallfolk have chosen...”

“Well, they have correctly assimilated the basic principle; this ‘Black Road’ is indeed black-coloured...”

**Author’s note**: Once again, the Iron Islands become the centre of Westerosi attention...to their sorrow. This time, the survivors of the terrible winter are caught between the big bad green dragon and the implacable black reptile...bad, bad times.

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