**Chapter 34**

**The Peril of Alliances**

**Lord Cregan Stark**

“An alliance?”

His Queen, Cregan reflected, rarely spoke in a derisive tone. But when she wanted to be critical of something, the royal rider of Moondancer needed no teacher on the subject.

“I am only the messenger, your Grace,” the Lord of Winterfell raised his hands in appeasement. “I think it goes with the duty of being your Hand.”

“And I thank you for it,” the Black Queen answered in a more neutral voice. “But really, an alliance?”

“I suppose it is the logical solution to the outcome of their recent war against King Daeron and the Greens.” Cregan shrugged. “The Dornish will never like Targaryens, but we are far away from the Marches, and as the proverb says, the enemy of my enemy is my friend.”

“I have heard other variants of this saying, among my captains,” the young silver-haired ruler grinned while playing a broach representing the dead dragon of her father, Caraxes the Blood Wyrm. “They are more down-to-earth: the enemy of my enemy is my enemy’s enemy, nothing more, nothing less.”

Well, Cregan wasn’t going to say both proverbs had their good and bad points.

“The envoys of Dorne had the Envoy Seals of Princess Aliandra. I think we must at least take it as a real diplomatic effort to sign a treaty between Sunspear and your realm.”

The raven messages which had arrived from Saltpans were pushed in front of his Queen, who proceeded to read them for the next turn of hourglass.

Cregan patiently waited, noting with great attention the Black Queen should be renamed the Silver Queen today, as her robe, and her jewellery were emphasizing draconic themes in diverse silvery shades.

“You are right their envoys are really enthusiastic at the idea of an alliance and present all the guarantees they’re speaking in the name of Princess Aliandra,” Queen Baela Targaryen said once she had read everything pertaining to the presentations and what little negotiations had been done. “But I remain unconvinced. They need more this alliance than we need them. And Dorne’s past history where treaties were signed with the Iron Throne doesn’t exactly fill me with confidence an alliance with House Martell would be anything but lying in bed with scorpions and vipers and praying they don’t poison you.”

“I will never be the last to recognise the Dornish Lords and Ladies are not the most trustworthy individuals of Westeros,” Cregan agreed. “But as much as it pains me to say it, my Queen, the Masters of Dragonstone and their descendants, including the Conqueror, have hardly been chivalry of flowers and courtesy when it came to Dorne. I believe countless scars Balerion left on the plains, the deserts and the fortresses have yet to fade away.”

“Yes.” The Black Queen did not seethe, but it was a close thing. “Yes, House Targaryen was hardly a symbol of virtue in these affairs. But trust or not, an alliance must bring us something. Obviously, my Lord Hand, Dorne won’t bring more dragons to the table.”

“Obviously not,” so far, only the two feuding and divided parts of House Targaryen had dragons to use against each other. “And I understand your concerns.”

The young heiress of Valyrian blood snorted.

“My dear cousin was able, with a single adult dragon, to ravage supply columns and the armies of Dorne across the Boneway and the Prince’s Pass. If he had had two at his disposal, the war would have been over in a moon...assuming he didn’t decide to counter-invade and dictate his conditions in the ruins of Sunspear.”

“The Green King wouldn’t have pursued them in the deserts. Not as long as we are in his back, ready to assault the Crownlands at the first sign of weakness.” Still, he knew what the Mistress of Stone Hedge was going to say.

“Dorne’s value in case we want to return to the battlefield to settle our differences with the Greens will be purely defensive. It won’t open a costly second front on the Reach’s frontier. They have no dragon. They have no fleet, save those their coffers can afford to hire from the Free Cities, and they haven’t the timber to build one. Whatever trade we may offer each other will be destroyed the moment we are at war, since I don’t think Alyn or any of our captains can escape the vigilance of the galleys and other warships sailing out of Blackwater Bay, Lannisport and Oldtown. And they haven’t mountains of gold to buy a lot of things we want. I really want to find something we need from Dorne, but they certainly don’t have forty thousand spears to bury House Hightower and their bannersmen, and they don’t have anything we truly need.”

Cregan nodded thoughtfully.

“I think you underestimate a bit the importance of trade with them, your Grace, as our merchants are always eager to put their hands on lemons, oranges, Dornish wine, and spices. But yes, there’s no denying that to really cause problems to the Greens, your cousin would have to order his armies to go southwards, abandon the protection of Nightsong and Blackhaven, and pursue the horses and infantrymen of Dorne into the deserts.”

“Daeron isn’t an imbecile. He will never sacrifice his armies like that. And even if he did, his victory isn’t impossible if his sons have grown old enough to ride their dragons. The Martells love to say they are unbent and unbroken, but if my ancestor had truly decided to make a pyre of Sunspear with Balerion, the Dornish chief city and fortress would have become a new Harrenhal.”

The Black Queen readjusted the silver necklace in the shape of a sleeping dragon around her neck.

“And there’s another problem. While Princess Aliandra is unmarried, there are no young men of House Targaryen to ask for her hand, and no Lord Paramount or Heir will agree to leave his lands and become a mere consort of the Princess of Dorne.”

“Lord Alyn Velaryon might.”

The ruler of the Black Kingdom giggled.

“Yes, but we’re speaking about Alyn. He’s married to the sea first.”

The description was fair and completely true, the Master of Driftmark seemed to love beautiful women...and beautiful women returned the favour, if what his spies told him was true. They might soon have to find him a wife, in order to have at least some legitimate sons otherwise an army of bastards would fight each other for his titles in three decades.

“If you aren’t opposed to it, I wish to continue the negotiations, at least to sign many trade deals between Dorne and your realm.”

“As long as it’s just trade for lemons and wine,” the young Queen agreed after a moment of hesitation. “No military alliance or help of any kind for the next couple of years. I want to know first if Princess Aliandra can control her bannersmen. I won’t begin a war if a bastard son of Lord Wyl wants to plunge the Marches into a sea of fire and blood.”

“Your orders will be obeyed. Do you want to give a trade monopoly to a particular harbour where Dornish trade is at stake?”

“No, I know from memory Gulltown and White Harbour have already two ships each visiting the Dornish harbours before or after they sail to Lys and Myr. Saltpans and Maidenpool are also trying to attract more merchants and trade. I won’t ruin the trade competition between them, and the harbour masters aren’t asking for our intervention...yet.”

“Speaking of Saltpans, they demand more walls to go with the new quarters and houses springing every moon. Must I give them the same answer I did last year?”

“That would be preferable, yes. We lack the gold and the silver to begin such an important project which won’t allow us to see thousands of coins back in the treasury...”

**Lady Jasmine Tyrell**

There were many knights and Lords Jasmine was reasonably confident that King’s Landing was very nervous about and would prefer to stay isolated and friendless for the next decades. Lord Thaddeus Rowan had been one, evidently. But Lord Alan Beesbury, Master of Honeyholt, was certainly not far behind if the Clubfoot kept a list for his dragonlord-master.

Who was she trying to keep in the shadows? Of course the Clubfoot had a list of the Black sympathisers and outright supporters who lived on the vast and sunny plains of the Reach. The last of the Strongs had lists on every potential enemy of the realm and watched everyone who might be a threat to the Hightowers’ blood.

Fortunately for his opponents, the cruelty of Aegon II and his cadet brother, the murders ordered by his entire family and the odious manipulations committed by the Green leaders at one point or another of the last decade had made sure that there were thousands of men and women with no love for the current owner of the Iron Throne. And the Clubfoot could not convince his masters to arrest everyone, otherwise their realm would be quite empty.

“I heard of Lady Iris’ ascension to the Lordship of Goldengrove,” Lord Alan Beesbury said cheerfully. “You have my heartfelt congratulations for ensuring the seat of House Rowan stays in worthy hands.”

“Thank you, Lord Beesbury,” Jasmine did not smile too widely. Even in the heart of her power and in presence of a man loathing the Greens with every part of his body, there were servants not far and spies roaming the shadows.

But the Rowan Succession had been settled to her advantage. Iris Rowan had been of her most reliable followers before leaving for Goldengrove, and now with her idiotic brothers Robert, Humfrey, and Aladore permanently removed from the Game of Thrones, Highgarden would have loyal bannersmen in the Northern Marches.

“And I can assure you your part in hiring certain assets will not be forgotten. Many masons have expressed their deep interest to restore the stone bridges of your lands after the devastation of fire and violence inflicted by drunken soldiers.”

Normally, this should have been the duty of House Hightower to provide the funds, or failing that, the prerogative of the Iron Throne. But the latter was rarely spending gold outside of the Crownlands and the Stormlands these days, and the former had owned the armies which had caused the aforementioned devastation.

“Thank you, my Lady. If only Lord Axell could be trusted to take care of his bannersmen like you do. I fear he’s a typical Hightower of Oldtown like his predecessors before the Dance were.”

After a tumultuous winter and a more violent spring, Lord Axell Hightower had finally risen over all the bastards and the ‘distant cousins’ which had vied for the seat and restored some authority in the Lordship of Oldtown. Axell’s lineage was impeccable, being a cousin of Lady Alicent, but he had been on some travel in the Disputed Lands when the war had begun, and thus been unable to return until winter’s storms ceased. His self-interest in avoiding the ghastly fate of my Hightowers may also have played a part in these ‘delays’.

“I could be happy with a typical Hightower,” the Regent of Highgarden confessed. “But Axell is a creature of King Daeron and his spymaster Larys Strong.”

Alan Beesbury’s expression became darker and more tormented. Whatever events befell the Reach in the next decades, the Lord of Honeyholt would never forget that Lady Alicent Hightower and Lord Larys Strong had murdered his father, making the old Master of Coin the first death of the Dance of the Dragons.

And then the Green court had managed the impressive feat of making the murder worse, by spreading the lie Alan’s father had died in the Black Cells from disease after moons of captivity, when in reality his status of ‘prisoner’ had not lasted the final council of King Viserys’ reign, when Criston Cole had plunged his sword in his throat with as much regard as the slaughter of a pig.

“The Clubfoot must die.” As much as his tone was one of hatred and long-awaited vengeance, the Beesbury Lord wasn’t wrong in this instance. With himself taking a successor among House Cuy, Larys Strong was rebuilding the shattered web of alliances once wielded by House Hightower. “Ensure it is done within the year, and House Beesbury will abandon the role of bannersmen to House Hightower to swear vows to Highgarden. And the more you can destroy of this damn Strong’s legacy before he is sent to the Seven Hells, the more my House will be in your debt.”

These were all the words Lady Jasmine Tyrell wanted to hear. House Beesbury was vitally important for weakening Oldtown, not because the honey and the fields of Honeyholt represented hundreds of thousands of gold dragons – though their coffers this spring were filling with an impressive facility and would get better as stones and farms would be repaired – but because of the strategic position they occupied on the Honeywine. With Beesbury and several other Noble Houses owing her favours and renewing oaths of friendship and allegiance, it would be easy game to tax the merchants of a certain House, ‘convince’ many players to change their tune and enforce an order which was far less favourable to a certain Master of Whisperers and his agents.

“He will die,” the woman who had seen House Tyrell pass from powerless Lords Paramount to the wealthiest House of all the Reach in fewer than ten seasons promised. “But obviously, it is not going to be easy. This is why certain plans have been made before any attempt is going to unfold at the capital...”

**Lord Balon Wyk**

“I still say you should have crowned yourself King, Balon.”

The new Lord of Wyk, who had until been recently called Balon Pyke, urged himself not to strangle the former reaver in front of him.

“And my answer is still the same: this is a word I will do my best to let fall into disuse. Have you forgotten what the dragons did to the captains of the Iron Fleet and Old Wyk?”

The more Balon thought about it, the more the ‘Iron King’ or ‘Lord Reaper of the Iron Islands’ smelled like a nasty trap about to open his jaws under his feet.

“The Greens and the Blacks are making many promises in their messages to you.”

The half-brother of Dalton Greyjoy was not impolite enough to mention that the man on the other side that welcoming two maesters and their ravens – one from each kingdom – was his idea and conservatives like Gram had been vigorously opposed to it.

“The Black and the Green Dragon are each trying to convince us that they are the best choice. They want us to bend the knee, and they’re ready to close their eyes on plenty of customs and things if they can have us without a single sword drawn. But if we forge crowns and speak of kingship, they won’t send ravens and sweet words. They will return with their dragons and their knights to finish the job.”

And for all the mumblings of the man pretending to be the legitimate ‘Lord Goodbrother’, not even ‘Master’ Gram was stupid enough to say to him or anyone else that the Ironborn would manage to fend off the first wave of attackers. The middle-aged reaver had been delayed by contrary winds and thus spared the wrath of the blue dragon, but after years of tales and endless recounting, everyone had heard of the doom visited upon the kingsmoot and hundreds of experienced captains.

“The old seafarers of my lands believe we could play against each other to buy us a few fleets.”

“And Lord Farwynd told my family they would find untold riches and a new land bigger than Westeros if they had the resources to sail deep west into the Sunset Sea.” His sarcasm must have been evident enough to tell what he thought of the idea.

“It could work.”

“The last Queen who authorised us to raid the western coast, the West and the Reach, we rewarded her by setting aflame everything, murdering thousands of her subjects, ignoring her letters after the first message, and generally doing whatever we wanted. Her successor is not going to let us have fleets, especially not since we don’t have the wood to rebuild them.”

For some strange reason, dragons coming to the Iron Islands had finished the woodcutting and shipbuilding industry of the Ironborn. Now if they wanted something bigger than a small boat to capture some crustaceans and fishes, they needed to purchase it elsewhere.

But frankly, the wood wasn’t the biggest problem. What made sure the young men and everyone sensible forgot about new wars was the reality that of all the islands, only Great Wyk was truly free. All the other rocks of the archipelago had dragon banners atop the new forts the dragon-sworn men were building, and new smallfolk were settled where Ironborn families had lived.

It wasn’t a fast process, the bards and the rare travellers who visited Great Wyk had agreed, but every fortnight saw a few more families arrive. The ships of Seagard were sailing mainly to Harlaw, and the Westerners and other Greens were landing at Pyke for now, but they were already far closer in numbers to the Ironborn, and it wasn’t a big effort.

“We could plant trees.”

“We will.” Balon said to Gram decisively, making the older man blink in surprise. “But we will plant them because we need something to avoid this Storm God-damned mud avalanches which caused so much damage when the spring floods came. This island has too few trees and too many mines and problems we dug up ourselves.”

“You are the Lord of Great Wyk,” grumbled the man who had taken the Goodbrother name. “But I think you won’t be able to sit between the two tables for long, King or no King. When they will realise we haven’t the strength of an Iron King to lead us, they will come with their dragons again to make us greenlanders.”

“I am the Lord of Great Wyk,” Balon repeated slowly and harshly, forcing the other man to lower his eyes. “And for the moment, you forget that our future is those of greenlanders, since we no longer sail the Seven Seas.”

**King Daeron Targaryen**

“So we have neatly improved our relationship with Tyrosh and the Archon is pleased with us.” Daeron recapitulated in a few words. If he had to be honest, it was not really the ally he wanted or he called with his dreams, but it was a start.

“Yes, my King. The fact the Blacks abandoned trade with Tyrosh during the heights of the Iron Fever has not been forgotten, nor has their influence in certain Myrish and Lysene circles. And since some of the smugglers and captains sailing from Gulltown and other harbours have an unpleasant tendency to target Tyroshi corsairs has not helped their cause.”

“But?”

“But judging by how little presence the Blacks have at Tyrosh and how few envoys were sent to settle these disputes, I don’t think the merchants of the Vale, the Riverlands or the North ever intended to use Tyrosh as an important trading partner.” Marq Merryweather’s smile was apologetic. “I don’t think it is insulting the Tyroshi that after the hard winter and the epidemic, they are the weakest Free City in this part of the world.”

“’Weakest’ is not insignificant.” Daeron countered easily. “Their fleet is easily surpassing the ships we have on our entire eastern coast and I think we could add the Lannister ships and still be inferior to them. And on land, they have contracts with so many armies of sellswords that it would take the muster of many, many levies and knights to equal them in numbers alone. But as you said, they are the weakest Free City of the dead alliance of the Three Daughters right now. And it is for the best. A strong Essossi partner would be tempted to betray us at the first opportunity. A weak ally can’t consider such a move with celerity and promptness.”

Tyrosh was near-perfect in that regard. Myr and Lys were too powerful, and even the Black presence at Lys had not been able to obtain an alliance. In case of war, the Archon’s fleet would be easily able to prevent the Northern, Vale and Riverlands ships from continuing their trade or their more war-like activities in the Stepstones and south of it.

And last but not least, it would likely discourage a Black-Dornish alliance, not that there appeared to be great risks about the Martells making common ground with Stone Hedge and the other rebellion Lords Paramount.

“But Tyrosh’s strength is one the wane and alone won’t give pause to the Blacks.”

“True. But no Free City owns dragons, and this is the problem we will have to find a decisive solution to in case there’s a next war.”

This wasn’t something which had happened a lot of times in history. The Valyrians of the Freehold, for their flaws and repulsive sorcery, had been united in a fist of tradition and equality – only for dragonlords and dragonladies, of course – and dragon-versus-dragon fighting had been extremely rare.

It was quite disheartening that it had taken less than two centuries of royal governance for the Targaryens to arrive at a point where this immemorial unity had been utterly broken.

“If there was some outrageous act committed by Black skirmishers or hired blades this year,” the Green King asked to his Hand having half an idea what the answer would be, “what would be the situation in the Free Cities?”

“I think neutrality would be the most common reaction, your Grace. “Braavos and Volantis would ignore us like they did in the previous civil war. The main difference is that with Caraxes and Prince Daemon gone, Myr and Lys would be more likely to detach many sellsails and sellswords to help the Blacks. I don’t think we would get full-scale wars, but they shouldn’t be on our side.”

“The dragons which killed so many noble heads of Essos were Blacks.”

“And the words and gold which pushed the Admirals to attack Driftmark and the Black strongholds were Greens’, my King. This, I assure you, has not been forgotten. At best, the influential merchant-princes of the Free Cities will be recognisant both sides have dragons, and refuse to support war on our shores.”

“At best,” Daeron wasn’t pleased by this, but if it was the good situation he could take, he wasn’t going to refuse the hand of peace. His brothers were a good example of what could happen to you when you thought war was the beginning and the end to all things.

“The settling of many of the sellswords of the last war in the Marches and other lands may help us increase our popularity overseas.”

“Assuming the magisters and the Old Blood of Volantis care in the first place about some exiles and unruly companies of sellswords. What does it means for our new war plans, if I am forced to call the banners?”

“The situation is...unsatisfactory,” the Reacher Lord licked nervously his lips. “We have no idea about the current size of Morning, but with Princess Rhaena’s pregnancy over, the risk is high the Blacks could launch a three-pronged attack southwards, each supported by a column of horse and foot.”

“Or the three female dragonriders may decide to use converging attacks on King’s Landing.”

“Whether they know you are in the capital or not, the city may resist a long time. After the actions of Rhaenyra, I doubt the old Lords of the Black cause will accept that the Conqueror’s landing field be turned into a large pyre.”

“No, they won’t devastate the city until nine men out of ten are dead,” Daeron agreed, “but if you have an army close, you don’t really need it. Dragonfire can be used to set aflame one or two Gates, and open a large breach into the ramparts. And if it is the case, the city will be lost, and the citadel of Maegor will be our only last bastion of resistance. The Goldcloaks are purged watch after watch and gate after gate, but they are no true army, and the banners of the Crownlands are too weak to relieve us.”

King’s Landing, for all its prestige as a capital, the number of smiths it possessed, and the sheer size of the population hiding behind its walls, was a colossal headache to defend when everything smiles upon you. Now that the potential attacking force had dragons at its disposal, it was a nightmare.

“Let’s see the good side, my King. With an advantage of three-against-one and the biggest dragon on her side, Rhaenyra Targaryen would have already attacked and tried to mount our heads on pikes.”

“Yes, and this is why her successor is far more than dangerous than ‘Maegor-with-tits’.”

**Lord Larys Strong**

These last fortnights, Larys’ duties imposed him to arrange a lot of meetings with the Master of Coin. Needless to say, it was an obligation which pleased neither of them. It didn’t help that, in the last Strong’s opinion, the Westerner was far too fond of defending the privileges of his fellow nobles and trampling on prerogatives which should be the private hunt of the Master of Laws. Of course, the old councillor didn’t doubt the Stackspear had other motives of dissatisfaction to create plenty of grudges.

And today was not going to see them burying their differences and declaring an undying friendship between their two Houses.

“I think Lady Tyrell’s ‘loans’ to Goldengrove must be investigated as soon as possible,” which was obviously a way to say ‘right now’, but the insinuation passed through Lord Stackspear’s head without leaving a mark.

“The new Lady Rowan spent half of her life in the service of the Regent of Highgarden,” Willam reminded him like he was a simpleton and unaware of this reality. “With the household of Goldengrove still reeling from the ‘Hunting Party’ and the short rule of this oaf of Robert Rowan, I find it all natural Lady Iris is turning towards her liege.”

“Lord Lyonel is her Lord Paramount, and will soon reach his sixteenth name day.” Larys pointed out.

“And if you believe he is going to throw out his mother of the Rose councils and tell her she is not welcome in Tyrell lands, I think you’re in for a rude disappointment. Lyonel is not that bad for a Tyrell, but like a lot of males of his age, he’s more concerned about learning jousting, impressing pretty maidens, and riding along the Mander to meet his spring knights and smallfolk.”

“Lady Jasmine Tyrell will need to be removed. The woman is too clever and not enough loyal to the royal cause.”

“In this case, wouldn’t it have been better to give her a seat among us?” asked the Master of Coin.

“You’re not serious.”

The look the younger Lord sent him convinced him that in fact, Lord Stackspear was deadly serious.

“If you’re convinced she is scheming something bad inside the Reach, the best result would have been to move her hundreds of leagues away from the castle where she is Lady and Mistress.”

“And give her the opportunity to scheme on our door?”

“It would also have given some pause to the rumours and the whispers we intend to strip every woman of their place in the Noble Houses’ succession.” Willam Stackspear continued like his last sentence had not been uttered.

“I was there when the King gave assurances it wouldn’t happen,” Larys declared flatly. “And with the death of this troublesome High Septon, this idea will fade into obscurity soon enough.”

“I’m sorry, but it isn’t fading,” the other member of the Small Council was prompt to disavow him. “The High Septon was assassinated, not punished by His Grace the King. Therefore plenty of Lords like the Reynes and their friends are murmuring the rule of certain women is illegitimate and Regency and Lordship should only be given to men.” A twisted smile arrived on the lips of the Master of Coin. “Lady Johanna Lannister is not amused.”

“Reassure the Lady of Casterly Rock the Crown supports her Regency,” they had to, unlike the Tyrells, the Regency of the West would not end during the imminent summer.

“That’s not enough. Casterly Rock wants a commitment to act against the Reynes. The Red Lions are getting more provocative every day.”

“Without evidence, the King can’t punish them at his leisure.” And yes, Larys was aware the hands of Lord Walder Reyne were hardly innocent in many crimes and murders for which no culprits had been found these last years. But every time his agents found something, the trail ended a few days later with plenty of corpses to show for it. Someone at the other end of the line of orders was very good at covering his nefarious deeds.

“Then at least convince the King to give a seat to a woman on the Small Council. There are some competent Ladies which we could use the popularity of, and the Lords and Houses associated with them would thank us for the immense favour it would represent for them.”

“No. The moods in the capital’s streets and among the Faith’s councils are against it. It isn’t worth the political problems it would cause.”

Larys expected more arguments and debate, but Willam Stackspear shrugged and changed the subject...which was not for the better.

“The new Lord of Hightower is not very careful where he spends his purse. I have already noticed that over three thousand gold dragons which should have gone to bridges’ reparations never arrived to the correct hands. The Guilds of Oldtown are very happy, but outside of the city there has been a great deal of anger. Many Knights are protesting, fearing a resurgence of House Hightower.”

“With Lord Axell Hightower in control of these lands, the Reach will be rebuilt and placed in control of loyal hands.”

“Lord Larys, I will remind you House Hightower gave us the Dance, and that the young Lyonel Tyrell of Highgarden is the Lord Paramount, not the Lord of Oldtown.”

Nothing important was done on this meeting that day, and they didn’t meet anymore that fortnight.

**Queen Baela Targaryen**

“The more I learn about the Reynes, the more I am glad they’re not part of this kingdom.”

This was perhaps not the kind of remark a Queen should make in public, but with only her Small Council to hear her words, Baela supposed there were few enough witnesses to be offended by them...and besides the councillors had read at the same time as she the spies’ reports.

“This could be nonetheless an opportunity, my Queen,” Grand Maester Borlor intervened. “If the Reynes truly offer us an opportunity to break the united front of the Westerlands-“

“Walder Reyne will betray us the moment it is convenient for him, and he will do it still pretending to be our truest and most loyal ally,” the young voice of Benjicot Blackwood interrupted him. “You can’t trust a snake like that. The man makes the worst criminals we have appear like kind souls in comparisons. He may even make the Dornish trustworthy!”

“I don’t know if I would go that far,” Lord Eon Grafton said after a few nervous chuckles had been made. “But I agree with everything else. As Lady Sabitha has informed us with her reports,” the Master of Coin inclined his head towards her mother-in-law, “the Reynes have engaged in smuggling of goods on both sides of the frontier, money counterfeiting, assassinations, thievery on other Lords’ lands, arming bandits and sellswords against the edicts of their own liege, and that’s just the crimes we have found the tiniest evidence to link them to. There may be more waiting to be dug up.” The Vale Lord shook violently his head. “You don’t ally with someone responsible for these crimes. You send him to the Wall or you eliminate him the moment you are in position to do so.”

Baela was convinced by the argument of the Grafton. Alyn to her left was not.

“We could buy him for a couple of years, and then jump on him the moment he has offered us the keys of the Golden Tooth or something important.”

Cregan Stark made a silent ‘no’ before being invited to speak.

“First, Lord Alyn, the Lannisters have not reigned for countless generations by being stupid. The Regent of the Rock and her main banners may not be aware of everything the forces of Castamere have been up to, but they know enough, I am sure, to not let this band of mad dogs be in charge of the security of what is right now the key fortress preventing us from invading.”

The Lord of Winterfell drank some wine from his cup before continuing, under the approving nods of most of the Council.

“Then there is the question of what they would ask for a great and mighty reward before the task’s preparation would even be considered. And I think everyone around this table know what they want.”

“Casterly Rock,” Grand Maester Borlor muttered.

“And it is of course unacceptable,” Lady Sabitha Frey added. “I would rather trust King’s Landing Council before my scaffold than the Reynes with the gold treasury of Casterly Rock.”

“The Rock still needs to fall quickly in our hands if a war starts,” her silver-haired cousin playing the Master of Ships insisted.

“Maybe, but I prefer to have the Lannisters on our side,” Lord Eon Grafton grimly affirmed. “They have the legitimacy, the gold, the loyalty of the main Noble Houses, and while they don’t have the love of the smallfolk and the kind of support House Stark and House Arryn take for granted, they are still looked at with high regards, especially after the Long Winter and the Iron Fever.”

“But we killed Lady Johanna’s husband and the future Lord of the Rock’s father,” retorted Benjicot Blackwood.

“That is a problem,” Gyles Royce acknowledged. “On the other hand, should the West rally to us, their gold and the mines making their wealth would instantly reintegrate them into our realm, and ease their granary issues.”

“We have not fought this war to make the Lions the dominant kingdom again,” grumbled the young Lord of Raventree Hall.

This was a comment which was beyond seditious and Baela had to intervene.

“While the former Lords of Lannister have hardly been friends to my House, Lord Benjicot, the previous war was fought in the first place because the so-called Aegon II and all the children of Alicent Hightower refused to acknowledge Queen Rhaenyra as their legitimate Queen. It was not to decide which realm of the Riverlands and the Westerlands is the more important.”

“And in the end, it’s better to have a lot of food on the table than bags of gold,” Cregan Stark calmed the tempers. “I’m told a few men tried to eat gold coins during the war, and they didn’t find it very digestible.”

“How surprising,” Baela rolled her eyes. “I have made my decision. We won’t ally with these oath-breaking Reynes, and if there’s an opportunity to use them to gain favour with the Lannisters and thus set apart the Greens and the West, we will take it. Are there any other points to be mentioned?”

“No, my Queen, I think all the important subjects have been talked about,” the Grand Maester answered for the entire Council.

“In this case, I have a last announcement for you,” Baela stood from her throne, watching her Lords one by one before giving them a draconic smile.

“I am pregnant.”

**Author’s note**: In the case of the Reynes, the enemy’s enemy answer is simply that they are a worse enemy...how surprising (or not).

The Greens may be relieved by the latest news, since it will mean the Blacks won’t invade this year and likely the year after that. But obviously, in the long-term, it means one more potential dragonrider to be added to the ranks of the Black cause...

More links on the Dance is not Over:

P a treon: www. p a treon Antony444

Alternate History: www .alternatehistory forum /threads /asoiaf-the-dance-is-not-over.391415