**Chapter 24**

**Last Moons of Winter**

**Lady Johanna Lannister**

This time, the halls of Casterly Rock were giving a far nobler and prestigious appearance to her visitors. Between the guard, the servants, and her councillors she had maybe enough to fill two halls where before the war seven were not enough to hold half of the men and women sworn to House Lannister.

But brooding on the past was not something she did often these last moons. There was too much to do, and remembering the dark moments of years past never helped solving the present problems. She still missed Jason terribly, but for now the survival of what was left of the Westerlands remained at the foremost of her thoughts every day.

House Lannister had reigned for times immemorial in their impregnable castle-mountain. The Seven willing, they would stand for thousands of years more. Maybe in time, the scars of this dark era would fade away, leaving only the unpleasant anecdotes in the Lords and Ladies’ personal libraries.

But before this, they had to rebuild the West. A task far more complicated in deed than it was in saying. She could not pour thousands of gold coins in the starved villages and the abandoned forts. Half of the reason was that in too many places, they weren’t anyone to grab the gold dragons, and the other half of the reason was that if you wanted to buy something, there needed to be food sold by merchants, fishers or farmers. And too often either these people were dead, or they were refusing to adventuring more than two leagues away from their home.

The Ironborn and the Iron Fever, one after the other, had caused more ravages and destruction than anything the books of the ancients scribes serving the Kings of the Rock had written. And while the numbers were vague and imprecise, Johanna knew it was likely the Fever which had done a greater amount of suffering and deaths. The southern hills around Crakehall had lost, according to the short missives of her envoys, one out of two families living in the region. It was going to take decades for the population to return to something approaching the prosperity under the reign of King Viserys I.

Thankfully, the north and the east of the Westerlands were left mostly untouched in the mean time. In part because they had already been despoiled and ravaged by the Ironborn, of course. But also in part because with snow and ice blocking the passes, nothing, be it animals or humans, travelled far away from his home. The bannersman in front of her was testament to this.

“Yes, my Lady, the Iron Fever did not touch our lands. We weren’t spared entirely by disease...winter is an ill season favoured by the Stranger. We had plenty of our old knights and smallfolk going to bed and never waking up. The maester of my castle emptied half of his herb stores and ran the stairs ten times per day to heal common cold, coughs and winter illnesses,” Ser Rolland Lefford, Regent of the Golden Tooth spoke in a loud and deep voice.

Broad-shouldered, sprouting a massive blonde beard and often seen with a large axe by his side, the knight had the looks of someone frequenting the melees of the tourney, and had been fairly popular several years ago. By all rights, this was a man who should have marched with his brother and liege Lord Humfrey Lefford with the Army of the West, but a bad fall had broken his axe arm mere days before the call to arms was sounded, and Jason and Humfrey had named him Regent and Shield of the Golden Tooth until they returned.

As Humfrey had died at the Battle by the Lakeshore, Roland had to stand for at least five more years until his nephew Roger was in age to take the reins of rule.

“I am reassured you haven’t suffered from the Fever, Ser Roland,” she replied courteously. “Although now that winter seemed to abate this moon and the roads begin to open once more, I would be recognising if you could push your maester to take more students.”

A slight frown was visible on the visage of the blonde-haired knight of thirty name days.

“Training real maesters is a task the Order of the Masters at Oldtown has always proclaimed to be its privilege.”

“Times are changing. There is a massive shortage of healers and wise men and women everywhere. Casterly Rock can’t afford to send bright men and women hundreds of leagues southwards when bandits and disease have made the Rose Road so dangerous.”

Besides, the royal orders who had arrived on her desk the last year had all hinted one way or another that the maesters’ power had to decrease, one way or another. Johanna wholeheartedly approved. A fisher could demand ten gold dragons for a fish if there was no other fisher in the bay. If there was one fish in the entire market for Lannisport to buy, the price would be a king’s ransom. But if they were a thousand fishes, you could buy one with a silver coin, not gold.

It was the same thing with the maesters, according to Larys Strong. With a new Order created on the other side of the frontier, the maesters of Oldtown were for the first time presented with rivals in their studies. And if by a curious coincidence Lannisport, Storm’s End and other cities followed suit...

“I...I will see what he has to say to your proposal.”

“Good. Now tell me what the Tullys have been up to.”

Because as the snow was melting near the coastal roads and the Rock, the real danger of a new war was not null anymore.

“For the last couple of moons, they have stayed largely in their castles like we did.” Roland explained. “The weather was horrible for the better part of the sixth moon of the year, and everything they did was to build more defences at Wayfarer’s Rest. The Vance castle is now a fort on its own right.”

“And?” she pressed.

“And there have been plenty of rumours from the men we sent into the Riverlands of the Tullys being to build a new fortress to block the pass on their side,” the Lefford knight admitted. “The rumours about giant trebuchets and catapults, I do not believe them. Transporting them is always hard on a flat and well-paved road, and this last winter has done plenty of damage...our smallfolk are complaining it every day from dawn to sunset. No, I don’t fear their siege engines. Our scorpions and trebuchets can destroy them an afternoon before they are in position to throw rocks at our walls.”

She couldn’t see a flaw in his ideas, having seen the Golden Tooth three times in her life. Unfortunately, that meant...

“Can Lord Tully build such a fortress?”

Roland Lefford shrugged and grunted before answering.

“The pass has several great hills where a fortress can stop an army. I don’t know if the Tullys have good castle-builders. Maybe they have. Maybe they haven’t. But there are certain locations where a good palisade, some pit filled with wood spikes and a hundred pikemen and archers can hold ten times their numbers.”

And if a small palisade could do this with two hundred men, a proper stone-walled fort would stop an army sent by House Lannister for moons and maybe years. By the time it was completed, it would take a dragon to break it quickly...and then the Blacks would bring their dragons too and burn the Golden Tooth.

“Please send me a raven the moment they begin to do more than insult our scouts and show their backsides to our men-at-arms, Ser Roland.”

“Yes, my Lady.”

Though what she would do if the Tullys were really willing to pour gold in this scheme, she didn’t know. There was a simple way to prevent this, simply order the Lefford garrison to sally and kill the workers of this new fortress, but this would mean war...and Stone Hedge was far closer to the Golden Tooth than King’s Landing.

Johanna Lannister sighed. The lands and the hills of the West had bled too many torrents of blood for her to think seriously about restarting a war because the Tullys were rumoured to build their own version of the Golden Tooth.

“Let’s forget about House Tully for the days ahead. I have remarked the taxes of the villages from your northern villages are somewhat late...”

**Lord Larys Strong**

“What is the idiot thinking, in your opinion?” Lord Marq Merryweather snarled more than asked.

Larys raised an eyebrow at seeing the usual affability of the Hand of the King totally absent. That said, in this instance, there were mitigating circumstances.

“Which one, my Lord Hand?”

“I am tempted to say ‘all of them’, but I think Lord Wyl will suffice for the purpose of this discussion.”

Had it been anyone else’s name, Larys would have felt the sinister expression on the visage of the Lord of Longtable was pessimistic and unnecessarily antagonistic. Unfortunately, this was House Wyl of Wyl they were speaking about. If there was any truth to the legend – and on this one, the Master of Whisperers was inclined to go with it – the first Wyl had poisoned his wells before somehow abducting an Andal warlord and feeding him piece after piece to his snakes. The descendants had proved they had not lost any of their fondness for atrocities when Aegon the Conqueror had begun his Dornish War.

“I think Lord Wyl figures we have been badly weakened by the recent civil war, so weakened he has a chance to surge out of the Boneway, storms several castles, give the wives of the Stormlords to his bandits and hot-blooded murderers, and loot half of the South before we lift a finger.”

“Very ambitious of him,” Marq Merryweather commented drily. “More than half of the Boneway is impassable for any animal which is not a mountain goat, and the newly trained spears and swords we kept in the Marches last year have him outnumbered two to one.”

“It is certainly about to change,” he warned the Hand of the King. “Wyl may have called only one thousand men to muster, but the whispers I heard from the other side of the Narrow Sea are speaking of two thousand sellswords recruited from Tyrosh recruited to sail before the tenth moon. In addition to these reinforcements, there are columns training on the banks of the Brimstone. House Uller and House Qorgyle will march with him when the snow and the ice will no longer block the mountains. My contacts are less sure about Yronwood, but if as I fear the Princess of Dorne gives the order, they will sound the trumpets and muster their armies too.”

“Madness,” the Reacher Lord declared. “They are completely mad. We have not provoked them in any manner, but they are willing to fight us nonetheless.”

He agreed with the statement, but it didn’t change the fundamental truth. Larys coughed delicately.

“Mad or not, my Lord, I’m afraid we have to deal with them.”

“How many troops is the Princedom of Dorne able to muster, after hiring sellswords and levying all the young men they have?”

“Far less than they were at the time of the Conqueror. The dragons torched and caused terrible damage to a lot of cultivable lands.” It proved once again the Dornish weren’t sane in the first place. Judging by the terms Aegon gave before attacking and the fact that he had respected his word where the Lannisters, the Tyrells, the Tullys and the Starks among many others were concerned, the resistance of House Martell and their bannersmen had been as stubborn as it was stupid. The war – and the aftermath of Queen Rhaenys’ death – had destroyed Dorne for a generation, and according to the most recent maps he had been able to copy when King Viserys reigned, the desert was gaining more ground as years passed. The last thing Dorne should want was a war. There was nothing to win, not when their realm had an adult dragon to dominate the skies.

“They may think they will be able to forage in our lands once they storm Blackhaven and Nightsong.”

“Perhaps...” House Wyl may be mad enough to establish this as one of their battle-plan. “I am not convinced House Yronwood and House Martell would tolerate such a mad initiative. Anyway, assuming the Princess decides to support their war fully, Dorne may be able to support thirty thousand spears, and due to their ties with the Tyroshi and the rest of the Free Cities, they will have between three thousand and five thousand sellswords to attack the Reach and the Stormlands.”

As he looked at the expression of the Hand of the King, he knew his interlocutor had understood. If this host was two-thirds the size of what he estimated, they would need to call the banners across the entire kingdom. The Marcher Lords could not contest the might of Dorne alone. Together, Tarly, Caron, Dondarrion and the others could muster maybe seven or eight thousand infantry and horse, after their losses of the Dance of the Dragons.

“As for their strategy, I don’t think there will be any surprise. The ‘secret’ passes have all been found long ago, and the watchtowers guarding them are all manned and vigilant. Besides, if they attack early in spring, only the two great passes will be practicable for companies of soldiers. They will launch a double attack on the Prince’s Pass and the Boneway, thinking they can storm the walls of Nightsong and Blackhaven before reinforcements arrive to man the walls.”

“At a time our chests are still empty from the war and the winter,” the Lord of Longtable bitterly added. “But if they think they will have an easy time north of the Marches, I think they have been particularly blind and deaf these last years. Every smallfolk has learned how to use scythes to reap things which were not grass during the last autumn.”

The two men watched each other in silence, before Marq Merryweather unfolded an ancient scroll.

“I don’t want a long war against Dorne, and I know the King will refuse to consider sending armies in the heartlands of Dorne itself. Once this is said, what is our best chance to end this war?”

“I think we must remove Lord Wyl and his friends from the existing balance of power inside the Princedom. Every time after this war a Lord wants to go war with us, he must have in mind the fate we delivered on Lord Wyl and his friends’ heads. The Dornish must understand waging war against the Iron Throne may wound us, cost us more gold and men that we can afford, but that they will not be able to see it.”

The Hand of the King’s eyes slightly widened, but his lips didn’t give any protestation.

“I see the advantages,” his interlocutor answered slowly, “and this may stop others...loud-mouthed idiots on our northern frontier in their barns before they convince someone invading us is a good idea.”

“I pray this will be the case.” Because if Dorne decided to fight to the last in the Marches while the Blacks attacked from the North, it was going to be a nightmare, and with a single dragon to fight on two fronts, defeat was likely unavoidable in a few years. King Daeron simply could not be everywhere he was needed, and the realm had too much suffered from the Iron Fever to not break if the war lasted too long.

“The Blacks for the moment are expanding their harbours and building more carracks, cogs and merchant galleys,” Lord Marq forced his smile. “I don’t think they are thinking about a war for the years next couple of years, though I could be wrong. I’m however a bit more concerned about the wood they exchange against Braavosi gold...”

**Queen Baela Targaryen**

To be painfully honest, Baela had underestimated a bit in her assurances to Lady Jeyne Arryn how much blood was needed for her new road. It was an unfortunate fact of the Valyrian arts, but they needed blood to function. For the first try in an obscure valley west of Gulltown, the price had been three drops of blood from her, and a blood bowl from a goat. She didn’t know if her cousin would count it as a blood sacrifice, and she wasn’t going to ask.

But as she watched the smoothed paved black road now created on half a league, Baela felt triumph. Truth to tell, no one in the last couple of centuries had tried to equal the great monuments of the Freehold of Valyria. People like the Volantene and the Braavosi loved to say they were the inheritors of their legacy or had surpassed their achievements, but in reality they were far, far from the power and the wealth of the dragonlords.

Even her predecessors on the Iron throne and the first King of Westeros, Aegon the Conqueror, had not thought about the sheer advantages of the Valyrian roads, and unlike her, the rider of Balerion had several times journeyed to the Disputed Lands and beyond.

But this was not a mad dream pursued by a child not knowing better. As she had proved it today, they really could build lesser creations of the ancient marvels. How long they would last, neither Baela nor any of the stone-masters and architects involved in the project knew it. Assuming these roads lasted one century though, it would be a considerable saving in gold dragons. The few parchments and books her council had found from the reign of the Conciliator had showed how ruinous the upkeep of normal roads was.

And all it had taken in return was the stones to build the road, ten flame-roars from Moondancer, a small blood ritual, and some specific Valyrian inscriptions underneath to give form to the spell.

“Will we be able to begin the first great road at Gulltown next year?”

“Yes, your Grace,” her overseer-architect answered after a curt bow. The grey-haired man had expressed a lot of doubts about the success of this road-building. Unlike a lot of his workers, though, he had been wise enough to keep them on the practical side. His hesitations had dissipated once the road had cooled to its present form and chariots and horses had begun moving on it at speeds which were rarely reached on the Jaehaerys roads. “The tenth moon of 134 is two days away, and if the snow completely melts before the end of the first moon of 135, we will have the stone needed ready for the fifth moon at worse. But there are two big problems I see coming, your Grace.”

“Name them.”

“The first is in the name of the season coming after winter, your Grace. Spring is a beautiful season, but we need to refill the granaries as fast as we can. This has been a harsh winter, my Queen, and every Lord is going to need the hands of his smallfolk to work in the fields.”

The Black Queen had no problems with that. In fact, it spoke well of the Lords sworn to her that they wanted everyone to have a stomach full. Unpopular and hungry men and women were never the most loyal and disciplined souls.

“Yes, I can see why it’s going to be a problem for the road-building. But Gulltown has a lot of refugees at this moment that have literally nowhere to return to. I, on the other hand, have plenty of empty fields and farms in the Riverlands to give. I think a royal edict or two could solve the situation here.”

Moondancer devoured his third goat and sneezed, pouring some smoke they were quick to avoid.

“And the second problem?”

“To complete the real road, we need a dragon close by to properly melt the stone, and there is only one dragon with you, your Grace. I think that at the speed your Moondancer breathed fire, we can push for some three leagues per day, maybe a bit more, but the road as long as it had not been dragon-forged is vulnerable to rain, frost, and a lot of inconveniences...and the Vale spring is not known to be a rainless season or one where storms are absent.”

“I will ensure you have at Gulltown two or three maesters for the numbers, the weather and how to solve all the problems which will no doubt try to stop us on this path. As for the dragons, unfortunately for the present Moondancer is the only one who is available.”

Morning was with Rhaena at Winterfell now, but even if the bonded or her sister had been somewhere close by, Morning was far too young and his flames did not burn warmly enough for this task. Moreover, she had received one moon ago the news her sister was pregnant. Involving Morning in a tiny ritual of blood magic was...not prudent. Sheepstealer and Nettles would have been a better choice, but sending the great brown dragon in full view of everyone could provoke a war with the Greens. Improve the speed of her new road wasn’t worth these bloody consequences. However, perhaps it would give her the opportunity to begin the White Harbor-Winterfell road in the mean time? But there was still the problem of Nettles not having much of the Valyrian blood in her...

Decisions, it seemed the ruling of a kingdom always demanded more decisions from her.

“No,” she confirmed to the old architect. “The Riverlands and the Northern roads will have more dragons available, but for the Vale project Moondancer will be the only dragon present.”

And Baela knew from instinct that she was going to spend a lot of time next year in the Vale. Bah, she would bring her Consort along. It was out of the question she had a cold bed to return to at the end of the day. Perhaps the laughers had a point. She rode Moondancer during the day, and she rode her husband when the sun set...

“Continue the study of the half-league of road,” she commanded, “it is important that the flaws of this attempt are not repeated for the great work which will go from Gulltown to the Gates of the Moon.”

Dozens of workers bowed before returning to work. Baela let them go, before turning to the last man who didn’t belong to the Kingsguard staying close.

“Your opinion on the new road?” she asked.

“It will be a great boon to every kingdom where they are built, your Grace,” Maester Cal said curtly. “The current roads are in a truly lamentable state, and in many lordships and villages I saw in the Riverlands, there are no roads at all. Of course, as your architect said, the amount of road you can build is limited by the number of your dragons.”

“It will improve in the next years.” Give it five years at worse, and Nettles would be able to come south without provoking a war. After that, both Morning and Moondancer would be big enough to challenge Tessarion. Daeron had not struck her as a stupid man when she had met him, and his decisions so far in this long and terrible winter had been wise and astute. The Green King would not declare war when he had three battle-ready dragons to fight his blue-scaled bonded. “But yes, I am keenly aware the longest roads will not be built in mere moons. But the start of the Vale road will prove it can be done...and we will have proved to the Valemen they are tied to my crown by ties of blood and stone.”

“I will drink to this,” replied the grey-robed man, reminding her how...unconventional the man was. The only thanks he had received from her for his work at Seagard had been a ring of Valyrian steel to add to his chain, and he had refused to receive it in public, telling her bluntly she didn’t want to be associated with what he had done. “Delays aside, I will urge your Grace to write down the methods employed to build this road and copy it in triplicate with the royal scribes. So much knowledge has been lost in the past that it would be extremely damageable to forget once more a true achievement done on our shores.”

She found herself nodding while scratching Moondancer’s back.

“I will give the orders this evening. The scrolls will be under seal, and reserved to the Royal Family and the Council, however.”

Maybe she would add a few trusted maesters and the head-architects of the roads, but she didn’t intend it to make all too common knowledge. There were still conservative septons and many Green supporters waiting in the shadows and whispering poisonous words each time she did something they disapproved. Better not to give them oil and torches this soon in her reign.

“What do you intend to do, now that the Iron Fever is contained?”

“I will write a book, I think, your Grace...” the maester declared pensively before straightening his posture. “In a few moons, I will try to convince my colleagues to pour their knowledge together in the domain of the seas and build an Arsenal Braavosi-style.”

By Balerion, the man was certainly ambitious. But then, he had managed to stay alive where thousands had not, and escaped Seagard while most people would have preferred seeing him thrown in an unmarked grave. He might just succeed again...though the idea of maesters together under him was certainly going to be a funny thing to watch from afar.

“I will await your book and your reports. And maester...try to be a bit diplomatic, this time.”

**Lord Benjicot Blackwood**

This was not an admission the young Lord of Raventree Hall liked to think in his own thoughts, never mind tell to his own liege, but it had to be done.

“The southern frontier of the Riverlands is indefensible, and I don’t see any way it can be changed.”

For sole answer, Lord Kermit Tully handed him a cup of red wine.

It was only after they emptied two cups each that the conversation resumed.

“I was afraid of that,” the Lord Paramount of the Riverlands admitted. “It’s one thing to make plans about blocking the Westerners a few leagues east of the Golden Tooth – the hills and the mountains are so vertical in the west only goats, chamois and boars are likely to bypass our defences – but our southern frontier runs on hundreds of leagues and it’s not small rivers which will stop a sizeable army.”

Lord Kermit was not gritting his teeth, but his blue eyes held little joy for the current situation. Therefore Benjicot – and how he would have preferred his mother simply called him ‘Ben’ - was careful in how he voided his second ‘revelation’.

“While I don’t enjoy admitting it...the best way to not see again the Riverlands burn...well, the proverb of a good defence being a direct offense applies. But there is little to no stomach for war in the bellies of our best warriors.”

“Wars are rarely popular,” his liege threw a glance to the view outside, where the last remnants of the snow covering the hills around Riverrun were mounting a valiant resistance against the new warmer southern wind.

“But this time, not one of our knights is in favour,” the Lord of Raventree Hall insisted. “It’s all about harvests this day, harvest here, harvests there, harvests and young boys girls being told what they will do the moment the ground isn’t frozen anymore. Besides, everyone is deadly scared of dragons this day. And the Queen is more interested in her roads and the harvests than sitting on the Iron Throne.”

This was perhaps not very complimentary, but when they had signed the peace, he had thought it was just to wait until winter was over, and then they would ride south and kill the last Brackens in existence. The confiscation of Stone Hedge had been a good beginning, but Benjicot wanted to finish them before they multiplied once more.

“The Iron Throne is an ugly chair,” the mild reproach in Lord Tully’s voice convinced him to take an apologetic look for his last sentence. “And the last war has proven it is near impossible to catch a dragon as long as his or her rider does not want it to be caught. In a way, it does not matter how defensible forts can be, because Tessarion can torch them all...and the only thing we can do is pray and send ravens to the Queen.”

Kermit shook his head.

“No. Though I hate to say it too, the risk to the Riverlands is too great to openly advocate war before the Council and her Grace. Besides, the lack of gold coins is becoming a sad reality of our time...”

“The Greens do not have this problem,” Benjicot remarked.

“No, but we would need to storm the Rock to take their money...and I am not sure it can be done, even with dragons.”

The red-haired Lord of Riverrun emptied his bottle of red and sighed.

“Do not make any provocations on the southern frontier. Stop any raider if like the Brackens they feel adventurous, but do not make any gesture which can be interpreted as a violation of the accords signed after Bosworth.”

“It will be done,” the last gulp of red wine made him grimace. The red they bought from Pentos was infect, truly. “But if we don’t act and the coming spring last two or three years, I fear this kingdom is going to be divided a long, long time.”

“It can’t be helped.” Kermit smiled. “But I’m sure there are going to be other locations where your lads will have the opportunity to draw their swords...”

**Princess Aliandra Martell**

Aliandra didn’t think she had ever been that unhappy to see a winter end. Yes, as her uncle and several of her friends had remarked to her caustically, she was not old to have lived through that many winters.

Somehow the pleasantries and the humour failed to lighten her mood.

The existence of the Princedom was at risk, but you wouldn’t know it when you rode in the labyrinth of streets below her palace. It was the twenty-second day of the twelfth moon, and between the dispersed clouds, the relative weakness of the wind, the disappearance of frost, and the announcements that the Seven Kingdoms were still collapsing after seeing tens of thousands of their smallfolk killed by the Iron Fever, the mood of Sunspear was...hungry and impatient.

Idly, she wondered who had arranged these rumours to spread on the shores of the Greenblood and beyond. Was it Lord Wyl himself? Was it Lord Uller or one of his friends? By this point, the question was largely for the sake of intellectual curiosity. It didn’t matter if the Archon of Tyrosh or a beggar of Starfall had whispered the first rumour. What mattered was that these last days, everyone was convinced that between the Iron Fever and the Dance of Dragons, the Green kingdom was on its knees and a last kick between the legs would kill it. Why, the Reach and the Stormlands were practically empty of knights and warriors by now, leaving only the cowards and the crippled hiding in their bedrooms.

Aliandra had been convinced nobody could be so narrow-minded to swallow these lies. Really, yes, there had been a lot of deaths north in the Black and Green kingdoms, and yes, the Westerosi had lost a lot of highborn and smallfolk to several calamities like war and disease. But judging by the word of several merchants trading with King’s Landing, the capital was still standing, and though it was less populated than before the war, it had still more souls than Sunspear, Lemonwood, and Planky Town put together. Maybe she could add Godsgrace as well and still fall short of the city where the Iron Throne waited.

It was only an educated guess, but she would not be surprised if the Stormlands were as populous as her realm. She had more troops and more men and women in age to carry a spear, thanks to not having fought a civil war recently, but this was the Stormlands alone. Against the Reach, the Stormlands and the part of the Crownlands held by the Green Dragon, the imbalance was bad. Plus there was a dragon on the other side.

“But we need a war,” the Princess of Dorne murmured.

It was laughable, but it was the truth. Too many of her generation wanted revenge for the wrongs inflicted on them by the Targaryens. The bad blood had never gone away under Maegor, Jaehaerys and Viserys; it was merely that the dragonlords were too strong, too united, and had too many armies to brutalise them on the battlefield.

The hope winter would bring some heirs and heiresses back to reason and a more prudent behaviour had not happened. The Iron Fever had struck, and now the ambitious dreamt of murderous ambushes and glorious conquests.

Aliandra was not fundamentally opposed to a war. But she wanted a war she could win. And according to the latest information she had in her hands, the blue beast answering to the name of Tessarion had grown in size and ferocity since the end of the Targaryen civil war.

As long as that monster dominated the skies, no Dornish army could gather in strength. But obviously she was one of the rare women in the Princedom to think about this. Most of her interlocutors when asked the question ‘how will you fend off the dragon’ were boasting that Dorne had killed a dragon before. It was a Dornish scorpion bolt which had killed Meraxes at the Hellholt. What they had done centuries ago, they could do it again.

Never mind that it had taken overall nearly all the main fortresses of Dorne bathed in dragonfire and that the exploit had never been done again in the years which followed.

Protesting was futile. The Dornish wanted a war, and she had not the iron determination and the years of influence her father had to stop them. If she said ‘no’ they would begin a war anyway, and probably remove her head from her shoulders first. Some of her cousins were already eyeing her throne.

They had maybe a moon and a half before the Boneway was open to columns of men-at-arms and their horse.

Thirty thousand.

This was the number of men and women who were going to be sent to the north. This was the number of Dornish warriors and Essossi sellswords which were going to fight the armies of the Green Dragon.

It was a dangerous folly. The first realistic victory solution, assassinating King Daeron before he flew to the battlefield – was purely suicidal as the Blacks had employed it before, and the protectors surrounding the Master of King’s Landing were sure to cut down anyone who was not a Faceless Man. The second realistic victory solution, inviting the Blacks to join the battlefield and let dragon fight dragon, was not possible. Dorne had not the gold to pay the services of the Black Queen and a host of fifty thousand. And the descendants of Rhaenys had no love for the descendants of Nymeria.

Thirty thousand.

This may be the greatest army Dorne would ever field for centuries if Daeron chose to burn Dorne like his ancestor did.

This was a Spring War promising ruin and fire to all. And yet there was only one order she could give.

“Call the banners. We are going to war.”

**Author’s note**: Spring is coming. And as winter flees and spring returns to Westeros, war is following in its wake. A new Targaryen-Martell war is about to begin...

It goes without saying that whatever the two sides have imagined, this conflict is not going to conform to plans once the first soldiers marches in enemy territory...

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