**Chapter 21**

**The Fever Spreads**

**Magister Lysandro Rogare**

The Palace of the Three Moons had long been a centre of power and magnificence in the heart of Lys. In fact, some loose-tongued individuals liked to pretend there had always been a Palace of the Three Moons since the city’s foundation.

This was, as far as Lysandro had been able to discover, not completely an exaggeration. When Lys had been a wealthy colony of the Freehold of Valyria, there had been a palace using this name. The location and the description of the place had been different, though.

The first Palace of the Three Moons had been built on the order of Saraero Iakaerys, dragonlord and Lord Freeholder. The Valyrian dragonrider had certainly wanted to enjoy his stay in the city in the most comfortable conditions and enjoy the sight of the fertile fruit trees and attractive waters. It was nothing worth raising an eyebrow or two, frankly. At the height of its power, it was extremely unlikely one of the Forty had not a palace-mansion at the heart of Lys for the express purpose of inviting courtesans in his bed.

But then had come the Doom, and panic had filled the city, many orator-priests had pretended this was a divine judgement come to punish their masters. The massacres of dragons and dragonriders had begun. Even considering how tumultuous and fraught with perils the era had been, Lysandro thought the Lysene of old had been fools. Dragons were the reason Valyria had been able to build a gigantic empire well-defended and wisely administered. Take the dragons away, and a lot of the prosperity and security had been removed the same day. Oh, many magisters regularly spoke that they were free of the unbearable tenets the dragonlords had imposed them...but they ‘forgot’ to mention that over three centuries ago, the Disputed Lands were one of the richest provinces in the known world, a merchant prince could sail with his ship from Qarth to Pentos without seeing a pirate and no king would have been mad enough to risk the wrath of Valyria by declaring war upon them. Lysene were now the masters of a single city and far from the greatest, where before they had been the great servants of an empire.

The original Palace of the Three Moons had not survived the first years of the Century of Blood. First, it had been ransacked by bloodthirsty crowds when the Lysene had decided it was time to push the last members of the Iakaerys line into a fiery grave. For a time, Volantis’ domination of the city had opened the eventual restoration of the ruined monument but the reconstruction efforts were just starting when the Volantene garrison was massacred and the magister-governor ruling in the name of his masters living behind the Black Walls was burned alive in a cage as drops of molten gold were poured over his head.

The new Palace of the Three Moons, whose reception hall he was currently observing the paintings and the sculptures, was the fifth construction to receive the prestigious name. Needless to say, it was not an old monument to the glory of the Freehold. In fact, it was quite recent by Lysene standards, although Lysandro was aware that for many people outside the magisters circles and wealthy trade-princes, nearly seventy-five years was not something dismissed with a disdainful sign of the hand. One of the many follies of Tarako ‘the Scourge of the Seas’ Dakar, the gardens and the long white marble stairs of the entrance had cost half a million ovalines...and that was just for the grounds. It was not impossible that three or four times that sum had been invested for the corridors, halls and chambers decoration...likely the Scourge had figured this way his ridiculous nose and his ugly mouth would be remembered by Lys for centuries after his death.

If this was Tarako Dakar’s intention, alas for him he had failed. While the fruits of his uncountable love affairs had been too busy fighting each other in duel for the inheritance of their genitor to change anything to the decoration, things had changed after the last scion had sailed to the Basilisk Isles before the assassins sent by his creditors cut his throat. A short-lived adventurer who had managed to go to Asshai and come back without losing a third of his crew had removed the paintings of the Dakar and repainted everything in blue and gold.

It was the current owner who had made the biggest changes, though. All the shark statues and tapestries had been sold to the highest bidder, with graceful and elegant swans taking the honour places. Minor artworks of the first artists had survived, but the new theme had not much in common with what it had been two decades ago. Where before the floor had been a dazzling red making you think you walked on a carpet of rubies, the elegant icons were all white and black. Lysandro had not had the opportunity to see for himself, but rumour was that several private corridors, bath and other rooms had been granted expensive mosaics. As the walls had many rare onyx, ebony and ivory-coloured paintings and sculptures, such gossip could hardly be dismissed at first glance.

Of course, neither he nor his cadet son had come this evening to the reception for the minor pleasure of watching the new redecoration efforts imagined by their hostess. The Palace of the Three Moons was beautiful, assuredly, but it would be a polite lie to pretend it was unique in Lys. There were at least ten magisters – including him - who could boast to have on par if not more resplendent palaces. And unlike the woman owning it, they had hundreds of merchant hulls sailing at any moment from distant Ibben to dark Asshai.

Still, for all their fortune and their accomplishments, the major players were all here tonight. Despite the numbers of men and women debating, laughing and saluting their counterparts, the patriarch of House Rogare had greeted his fellow magisters and by last count, the only two who were missing were so old their mortal shells had no more than a fortnight or two of life left in their bodies. But apart from these dying opponents and the odd one or two exceptions away from Lys at the moment, the chief power-brokers, merchant-princes, Admirals and renowned sellsails recruiters were there. And so were half of their progeny.

Brash and proud, the young scions of the great Houses were already insulting each other the moment they though their fathers weren’t able to hear.

“Ah, the fires of youth,” smiled in a melancholic manner Magister Nekare. “Always ready to draw your sword for a beautiful woman and get drunk in one of the harbour’s taverns until you no longer remember your name.”

“These were the good days,” replied Lysandro, remembering the time the two of them had duelled against each other and only their complete lack of talent with a rapier had prevented a death at each encounter in a dark street. “To be fair, Eniro, I don’t remember the name of the courtesan we fought so ferociously for.”

“You too? My, my, old age is not good for our memories, I fear...”

Both men chuckled. Three decades ago, the chance of talking like this without drawing a sword or one of the speakers erupting in a violent argument would have been so low that both Houses and their servants evaded the presence of each other unless they wanted to shed blood. But these times were over, the death of an unimportant secondary cousin paid in flesh and gold, and there had been other feuds to care for in the next decades.

“My eldest son almost dragged me from my bed to come at this reception. Do you per chance have any idea why?”

“I’m afraid I have no idea...”

Both men chuckled a second time, especially as the Nekare Heir in his bright red breeches and coat was busy trying to impress other young men with what looked to be tales of duels and pursuits in the dark – stories which undoubtedly were invented from beginning to end.

“Ah, to be so young again,” mused the Head of House Nekare. “I will have to find him a ship to learn the family trade before the year is out or he will cause me a lot of problems. He is that age they are ready to sell their family for a courtesan’s attention...”

The other magister was courteous enough not to voice ‘like your own son’, but Lysandro and the dozen lesser merchants and bankers gravitating around them heard it nonetheless. But the annoyance was nearly inexistent and easy to ignore. He had known the moment he sent Lysaro away the courts of Lys were going to bristle with rumours, gossips and whispers of scandalous explanations. Such a minor loss of face, while regrettable, was acceptable comparable to the risk of his eldest son making himself a biggest fool of himself. He had received two days ago, the message their distant cousin had been transferred from the dungeons of the Black Kingdom to a room more adequate with the status of honoured guest and he was hopeful that in a moon or two, hostilities between Lysene and Black Westerosi would be formally ended.

A soft melody began to play from a great silver harp partially masked by the dozens of young men and the talks diminished as their hostess arrived, preceded by a thin parade of young women each more lovely than the other.

And yet, none could rival their mistress, which seemed more to slide on the marble than to truly walk.

She was Johanna Swann, although people rarely pronounced her name in Lys.

No, for the thousands of young men ready to sell their souls, their families and their purses filled with silver and gold for a night in her company, she was known by a name which was beginning to be incredibly famous – or infamous if your opinion of the courtesans was low.

She was the Black Swan.

And if Lysandro, with years of careful investments, judicious assistance of sellsails, hidden daggers and punishing loans had risen to heights where his bank was effectively governing the other bankers in the city of Lys, the woman’s ascension had been ten times more prodigious. Once she had been a slave, and now she was ruling the council of magisters in all but name.

“She is a pleasure-slave, nothing more...” the imprecation gritted by Magister Jikaero Kereso was spiteful and hissed between his teeth. If the Rogare banker had not been so close, he wouldn’t have heard him, proof the angry whisper had been destined to him or to Eniro Nekare.

Lysandro didn’t answer. While certain foreigners’ words rang true when they said the Magisters of Lys had trade interests but no true ally, Kereso was definitely neither one nor the other. No, at the moment the man who had dyed his hairs green was very much a loud barking dog making a nuisance of himself and Lysandro was already fancying raising the interest rates of his loans by three or four percent to teach him a lesson.

Besides, if the man really hated the Black Swann that much, he should track better the travels his servants and his family made. Last time he checked, five slaves were reporting every action he entertained to the woman ruling Lys in all but name. If that wasn’t enough, his daughter had also been a bedwarmer of Johanna Swann a couple of times and Kereso’s eldest son was drinking every of her sentences like it was holy truth.

“You may be right,” answered Nekare. “But I wonder why did you choose to accept her invitation, then?”

Jikaero Kereso’s visage reddened with anger – unless it was frustration or embarrassment and Lysandro returned his attention to the actions of the Black Swan.

Tonight the woman had indeed chosen a dress which would not have been out of place for a pleasure-slave. Her black hairs were a cascade of onyx on her shoulders and her back, but no matter the length it was impossible to hide the fact her back was nearly entirely naked, with just enough lace and silk to make the robe espouse the body of its wearer.

The front of the robe was better or worse, depending whether you were one of these hot-blooded young males or one of their prideful fathers. The colour of the material was pure silver, and by some alchemical component which must have cost its weight in gold, the dress was shining and shimmering like a cloth for a goddess of moonlight. It went without saying it was also good to reveal she wore absolutely nothing underneath the dress.

“She has grasped the rules of what makes a courtesan too well,” murmured Eniro Nekare once Kereso was out of range. “Sometimes I think the captain who captured her ship should have sent her back to her barbarian family immediately, and too bad if there was no ransom.”

“It would certainly have made our lives simpler...for a time,” Lysandro agreed. “But when it comes to it, a courtesan would have climbed the marble stairs to claim the throne of beauty. There is always one, you know. Even the Braavosi, who fancy themselves rejecting our culture and our traditions, have not been able to ignore this legacy. Maybe in time our grandchildren will speak of the Black Swans like in other cities they speak of the Crimson Nightingales...”

The Nekare Magister toyed with his crystal glass for an instant as one of his servants whispered something in his ears, before meeting his eyes once more.

“Yes, I agree there would have been a new courtesan at the top...but not one making us all of her dance to her tune! Did you know one of the reasons Kereso is so furious is because she has forced him to divert more than twenty of his ships to Tyrosh? They won’t even be able to resupply here...”

Lysandro frowned. This seemed a heavy measure by any standard, and even more coming from a courtesan, who after all depending on the good will of the sellswords and her powerful admirers to exert her influence.

“I had heard rumours but not that she had been so demanding.” He gave a glance to their hostess, who by now was encircled by half a hundred young men all ready to sell their own family for the slightest chance of a kind word.“What are these ships transporting by the way? If it had been spice, silk, Myrish artisan-craft or grain, my agents would have already given me more than rumours.”

They would better, for their own sake. He paid them generously to be the first in the know, not the tenth or the thirteenth.

“If the rumours have any true in them,” both men smiled recognising the precaution for what it was, “it was slaves from the west.”

Eniro Nekare clicked his fingers with his free hand.

“Do you think our beautiful courtesan may have some reservations at long last about the slave trade?”

Lysandro allowed himself a thin smile.

“If she has, she is hiding it well. She never raised a finger to help any of the slaves coming from the Sunset Lands...”

Lysandro tried to remember the oldest reports of his agents, but no he didn’t remember the Black Swan at the start of her career helping any pleasure-slave, woman or man, from Westeros. And most of her court these days was Myrish and Lysene-born, not from her lands of birth.

“No, I don’t think she is doing anything to free slaves.” For that matter if she was so concerned with their fate, she wouldn’t send them to Tyrosh of all places. Lysandro was not going to pretend Lys was a paradise, but the love of beauty, pleasure and the importance his city placed on arts ensured a minor portion of the slaves managed to pay their debts and find their place among the merchants of their culture. Slowly but surely, the numbers of free men and women was rising these last years. It was of course a small and long process, but it had the merit of existing. Tyrosh, by comparison...well, Lysandro was not aware of any slave who had managed to be liberated in a legal manner these last five years.

The more he thought about it, the more this whole ‘Triarchy’ idea was a mistake. In the end, except trade Tyroshi and Lysene really, really, didn’t venerate the same things. Their courtesans, for one, were more akin to favourite slaves than the patron of arts, music and poetry they were in Lys.

“Where were Kereso ships sailing from anyway? I would have heard if it was from Qarth, Volantis or Slaver’s Bay...”

“Oh, some desolate islands on the western coast of the Sunset Lands. You know, some of these ugly lairs the pirates preying on our shipping are coming from...”

“The Iron Islands,” he said after a moment. Yes, he had heard of them, especially given how much money these pirates had too often cost his House when he was young...but hadn’t these islands been recently shown the error of their ways when the dragon of one of the Targaryen lords burned them alive? These rocky lairs must be pretty devastated by dragonfire and winter by now...

And suddenly he made the connection. Devastation. Winter. Undoubtedly, famine, starvation, and of course diseases were taking their sinister toll to kill more and more of the population. He estimated the travel times between the Sunset Sea and their location and winced internally.

The Black Swan wasn’t denying the entrance of Lys to Kereso’s ships for a petty reason. She was denying him supply rights and the access to the slave markets because these ships were literally plague ships and harbingers of contagion and death.

“Well, I suppose the Swan will reveal to us her intentions soon enough...” the two men gave each other nods of respect before moving away from each other...just as Admiral Wenizero, who had tried to remove several young scions from his path in a vain attempt to reach the Black Swan, was escorted to the exit by four muscled guards who looked ready to use their blades on his whimpering body.

This man wasn’t likely to command a fleet for much longer, of this was he sure. Now there were problems more urgent. If an epidemic was arriving from the Sunset Lands, maybe it would not be a bad idea to remind his captains and his allies that quarantine procedures existed for a reason...and in the mean time it would not be a bad to raise the tolls for Tyroshi captains. They were not going to use their home waters for much longer, if his suspicions were right...

**Lord Larys Strong**

“I wonder if it would not have been better to get rid of the maesters. All the ones above thirty name days at least.”

Larys maintained his calm composure in the face of royal displeasure. By now, he had had plenty of practise with three different kings, and for all of Daeron’s efforts, his wrath was easier to endure than the murderous expressions his brother had sent him at every council.

In fact by now Aegon II would have begun throwing vases and other precious objects across the room, cursed aplenty...and he would probably be on his way out of the Red Keep to go ‘pay his respects’ to the mistresses of a whorehouse.

Unfortunately, it didn’t mean the King’s anger had not some reasons to be directed that way.

“How is it possible, Lord Strong, that the Blacks have managed to contain the outbreaks of Iron Fever to Seagard and their coast when this damned epidemic is spreading across the Reach and the south of the Westerlands? Are our maesters trying to stab a poisoned dagger in the back of the kingdom? Or should I assume that when we divided the Seven Kingdoms in two, we got all the idiots and the incompetent?”

The former Lord of Harrenhal swallowed heavily before watching once more the violet eyes.

“First, your Grace, I must say that Lady Lannister and Lord Redwyne have managed to contain the Iron Fever in the northern Westerlands and the Arbor. Not to mention their warnings allowed the new Lord Hightower, Lady Tyrell and their bannersmen to enforce effective quarantine measures. None of this could have been achieved if they hadn’t several half-competent maesters at their disposal.”

The King stared at him for a moment before reluctantly nodding.

“I see,” the admission cost heavily...and the bad humour returned like a galloping horse. “This is still a disaster! From your own spies’ reports, the Iron Fever is uncontrollable and killing thousands as we speak! I wrote royal edicts forbidding contact with the Ironborn to prevent this!”

“Yes, but I’m afraid, your Grace, Lord Crakehall was more interested in filling his purses with Essossi gold than obeying your decrees. The whispers I was able to collect told me the man’s ambition was to make his harbour the chief centre of Western trade now that Lannisport is more ruins than city.”

“He’s lucky to be dead,” growled the young King. “Otherwise I would have burned him alive.”

Larys Strong didn’t know if ‘lucky’ was the best word to describe what happened to House Crakehall and its Lord. He lacked a lot of information on the events of the last moons, but most witnesses his men had been able to interrogate without risk agreed the region of Crakehall was a slaughterhouse of dying humans and the ambitions of the Crakehall Lord had died at the light of hundreds of pyres.

Lord Crakehall had perished, that much was certain. So had two of his four sons, six cousins of lesser branches and maybe half of his household. And his information was late, very late, for he didn’t dare using ravens and the usual bird-messengers for these tasks.

“Your Grace, the Lords loyal to you did their best to obey their orders, but once Crakehall provided a breach in our armour, the Iron Fever struck too fast. To make things worse, the northern marshes are – or were I suppose – ravaged by the war and many Lords loathe each other. I’m afraid this...lack of trust didn’t help the situation.”

“Damn them.” King Daeron whispered. “Damn them all to the Seven Hells.”

Larys didn’t know if he was speaking of Lord Crakehall, Lord Rowan, the Ironborn or any of the slavers captains responsible for this disaster, but he judged it was not his duty to ask.

“How much of the realm is going to suffer for this?”

“Lord Merryweather has prepared the eastern Reach, your Grace. Longtable, Ashford, Cider Hall and the other castles and the villages are prepared to endure...it is possible we will be able to prevent a kingdom-sized epidemic.”

“And it is also entire possible we won’t be able to prevent the worst to pass.”

“Yes, your Grace.” After all, there was no denying the truth and in this case it was futile denying the worst couldn’t happen. Casterly Work and the Black frontier acted like a shield in the northern Westerlands, but the Gold Road and the plains south of it were all too accessible and vulnerable for a disease so dangerous like the Iron Fever. And that didn’t even count the delightful possibility of the epidemic spreading in the Free Cities and the capital being forced to watch eastwards for the arrival of the Stranger’s death scythe.

“In this case, I want Arianne and my son out of the city the moment they are able to travel.”

“Storm’s End, your Grace?”

“You said yourself the citadel had full granaries and can hold a siege for a long, long time. And it is impossible to use it in this season, so contamination by the sea has far less chance to happen than here.”

“I will make the preparations, your Grace. Queen Arianne and Prince Viserys will be safe. Though the proclamations of the previous Kings were saying all Targaryens were not vulnerable to such diseases?”

“We have said so much lies to our people and to ourselves during the last century I don’t know what the truth is in the archives,” answered his liege. “And I’m unwilling to trust the writings of the maesters after what they’ve done or failed to do. I won’t risk my family on their ramblings.”

The King breathed loudly, obviously trying to keep his anger in check.

“Now tell me what the Blacks are negotiating with the Free Cities...”

**Grand Maester Borlor**

Before he had assumed his office, Borlor had been warned to never come too close to the dragons. A distance of fifty feet had been mentioned, if he remembered correctly.

Not that it mattered. As long as he remembered, he had been terrified by big and dangerous animals. Ravens he could tolerate, as long as he trained them himself. Falcons and eagles were past the limit, as far as he was concerned. And dragons...well, they were dragons. They were big and scaly flying reptiles. They were flying reptiles which could burn you in a torrent of flames hotter than the infernos of the Seven Hells.

No, the servants could treat him of coward and grey chicken behind his back, but as far as he was concerned this was mere prudence. The dragon of the Queen was getting bigger moon after moon. While his best years were far behind him Borlor wanted a few more years of life, not finish in the maw of the royal mount because it had mistaken him for the lunch.

Maesters were trained to heal and help humans, his knowledge concerning dragons was absolutely non-existent and he hadn’t any inclination to change this. Let two of his fool apprentices try to improvise themselves dragon-veterinarians and for their own sake, he hoped they would not be elevated to the status of dragon-dinner.

That was why he was waiting more than two hundred feet away when the Queen petted her dragon, if someone asked him the question.

At least he wasn’t alone waiting in the cold. He also had the Kingsguard to keep him company. And now, that he thought about it, they had to feel even more useless than he was. The white swords were sworn to protect the Lord of the Seven Kingdoms until their last breath, but they couldn’t follow the Queen for several turn of hourglasses per day. Their duties could be fulfilled as long as her Grace had her feet on the ground. When she was in the air, there could have been a hundred or a million Kingsguards, the members of the Order could all have been exiled to Pentos for the protection they provided.

Fortunately, the wait didn’t last long. It looked dragonlords weren’t immune to the cold, and Moondancer returned to the temporary lair he had been given while the Queen came back.

“You look like you have more bad news for me, Grand Maester,” declared bluntly Queen Baela Targaryen, First of the Name.

“Not exactly news, my Queen. More like...confirmations of what we already suspected from Seagard.”

The Black Queen nodded unhappily.

“A messenger managed to survive his quarantine, then.”

“Yes, your Grace. Lord Deddings released him as long as his maesters finished his healing inspection.”

The lips of the young woman tightened in a half-grimace.

“Tell me how many of my subjects we have condemned to death in this nightmare.”

Borlor couldn’t stand the sheer force of will in the violet eyes and rapidly turned his head away to look at the snow.

“Several thousands, your Grace. But less than the Council has feared in the last fortnight. It appears our fears were somewhat pessimistic. Order has not completely broken, and Maester Cal has managed to impose terrible but efficient measures to stop the Iron Fever before it wiped out the population of Seagard. I will read you the copy of the parchment he sent, but in simple terms he thinks one Riverlander in three may still breathe when the gates will be reopened.”

“And do you think we can believe his words, Grand Maester?

“Your Grace, I met Maester Cal twice before serving Lady Arryn,” Borlor replied in complete seriousness. “The man is stubborn, there was talk half a dozen times to strangle him with his chain and many of his most conservative ideas horrified the Archmaesters of Oldtown. But one thing he is not is a liar. If Maester Cal tells in his writings he can stop the Iron Fever from spreading, I believe him. Some of his inventions will be of great help...though like his vinegar doses, they may prove extremely onerous.”

“We may have not the choice,” the Queen spoke, a frown marring her young visage. “May I remind you our ‘Quarantine Riders’ have burned three villages on the coast of the Cape last moon? If Maester Cal’s ideas empty the treasury but prevent half of my kingdom to lie in a grave before this year is out, then I fear it will be the treasury which will take the axe. Every time.”

Borlor didn’t say anything. There were moments when there was only a single choice if you wanted not to feel like a monster in human’s skin. The problem was that the realm was so weakened, the treasury already tethering on the edge of the collapse, and that all the efforts of his Order and the men sent by the River Lords may not prove sufficient.

“Assuming Maester Cal manages to save Seagard from requiring a funeral pyre in dragonfire, will be able to stop the Fever?”

“I think so, your Grace,” he replied cautiously. “The food convoys were fortunately coming from eastwards by land, so none of them were affected by the Iron Fever and the granaries of the Vale and their guardians have not seen the trace of this disease. The same is true for Pentos from the last ravens we received from Gulltown. So on our front, I think that if we push for the harsh quarantine measures and the protection clothes of Maester Cal, we may strangle this disease before it goes rampant in the Riverlands. But we aren’t the only kingdom on this continent, your Grace...”

“The Greens,” one of the Kingsguards grumbled.

“What about the Greens, Grand Maester?” Baela Targaryen asked as servants and knights bowed right and left. “I realise there is no love between the Hightower branch and mine, but I think it is in their interest to protect smallfolk and highborn from this deadly Fever.”

“Oh, I completely agree your Grace. And no, I don’t doubt their willingness to make this horrible disease disappear from the lands of Westeros. What I and several of my Order begin to doubt is their capacity to prevent it spreading. Lady Sabitha’s spies are not everywhere, but the small reports we have received in the last three days makes me believe the Iron Fever may already have struck Crakehall and several villages down the coast. I’m afraid the local maesters were far less dedicated and ruthless than Maester Cal.”

He didn’t give any details, and to his relief, the Queen didn’t ask. It was relief, really. The short sentences of the spy – who were certainly the last message they would ever receive from the man – were not making for a good reading. Cal had acted decisively at Seagard and Lord Mallister had the intelligence not to block his orders. Crakehall, on the other hand...

He dearly hoped the rumour of ‘chariots of corpses being thrown on huge pyres’ was an exaggeration.

He truly hoped so. Divided kingdom or not, these were thousands of innocents souls it was question of.

“Crakehall...if it spreads in the Reach and the Westerlands...”

“Lord Stark will propose to double the patrols on our southern frontiers and put quarantine measures here too next Council.” For once the fact there was a frontier in the first place was going to be a good thing. Five years ago, the separation between the Reach and the Riverlands had mostly consisted in the Gold Road; today it was clearer and with the stupidity of the Brackens there were far less intact villages in the region.

“And he is right, damn it,” murmured the Black Queen. “I want to help the Green smallfolk, but we already lack the strength to help everyone in the kingdoms we control...”

**Lord Eon Grafton**

Eon had visited five times Saltpans before taking his Lordship, and the differences were impressive as he watched from the hills the Riverlands settlement a couple of leagues away.

Before the Dance, Saltpans had been...small and unimpressive. And that was if one wanted to be generous. In case a Lord or a Knight didn’t want to be ‘generous’, the words ‘miserable piece of dirt’, ‘mud hole’ and ‘sad excuse for a half-village’ had arrived to noble ears in more than one occasion.

It had not been the fault of the Lord of Saltpans or its inhabitants. To be fair, it had not been the fault of any of its smallfolk and neighbours. The lands had been ignored by the Iron Throne for a long, long time, and the greatest accomplishment nearby funded by a King had to be the Kingsroad. And the Kingsroad was leagues away westwards, ignoring the villages close to the Bay of Crabs.

As a result, Saltpans had not changed much since the days of the Conqueror until King Viserys died. It was a small fishing village, and it had never grown much past that. Every long summer saw its population rise with the arrival of several ships from the Vale and beyond. Salt and fishes were not the most valuable goods, but you never lacked buyers when the realm was at peace. But between the wars, and the truth no one in the Crownlands wanted to create a rival for the harbours of Duskendale and King’s Landing, Saltpans had been mostly ignored. It had not been the only village and hamlet to share this fate, just one of the biggest settlements.

Now things were changing. Oh, there was many, many things to do before Saltpans could be considered even the shadow of a threat by the harbours down in the south. The quays and the harbour installations were cheap and clearly built in haste. There weren’t more than a dozen ships right at this moment waiting to be loaded or unloaded. But no one could miss the new houses of stone built in neat lines and continuing the old homes which had stood for several generations. The towers of House Hawick and Cox, once upon a time lone sentinels, were now surrounded from all directions by new habitations. Considering how...imaginative the Crown had been forced to be, and how much winter had forced them to delay the great work until spring, the new Saltpans had a bright future ahead of it.

“Lord Brynden Hawick has done well,” he lightly commented. It was incredible what a modest city’s chart and some reasonable investments could do. “There must be, what? Seven thousand men, women and children living at Saltpans right now?”

“A bit more, I think my lord,” said Ser Jason Redlance after a moment of hesitation. “There are always people from the Ryger and Darry lands travelling here and some are willing to stay.”

The knight shrugged, a move which was inelegant with his missing arm. Jason had lost it at the battle of Bosworth Bridge but his valour had not gone unrewarded and he had been knighted days after once he had recovered from the ordeal. Eon had hired it a fortnight later, the young black-haired Riverlander had a good head for counting coppers and knew the eastern Riverlands like his own pocket.

“You will certainly believe there are more than seven thousand once you ride in the streets, my lord. With the ships’ crew, and the merchants, Saltpans has many, many travellers. And it will grow once the quarantine measures are no longer in effect.”

“True,” Eon raised his Myrish glass again to see better the streets and the approaches of the harbour. “I notice Ser Torrhen Manderly has been diligent in his duties. There is nothing like Fleabottom in Saltpans.”

“Ser Torrhen is a Northerner and has several strange ideas,” Jason was a son of a poor hedge knight, and even he had been taken aback by some ideas the fat and joyous knight of White Harbor had introduced. “But I won’t say he’s not useful to have around, my lord. Some of his ideas are outlandish, but he has definitely a point we don’t want another King’s Landing on our hands.”

Eon nodded before returning the Myrish spyglass in one of his bags tightened to his saddle and giving the signal to resume the travel.

Yes, they definitely needed to avoid the problems of the former capital. Sewers were already planned and would be dug the moment it was feasible. Next summer there would be a road to link Saltpans to the already existing roads. As a Lord and a loyal subject of her Majesty the Queen, Eon Grafton could only smile at the sight of the realm rebuilding itself from the ashes of the Dance. As the Master of Coin however, he shivered at the idea of finding enough gold to finance everything. The Queen and Lord Stark had been generous and patient, and they had listened to his concerns about how empty the coffers were, but they had insisted there were things the Crown had to take care of. And he agreed with them, but by the Crone and the Warrior, how difficult it was to find coin and wealth these days!

“And have you talked about Ser Torrhen about our latest problem?” This time the question had been spoken low enough for his escort several feet behind him wasn’t able to hear.

“I have, my lord. And he agrees with you there’s no easy solution coming to his mind. The gold we have is leaving our lands, and we can’t do much about it, we have to pay for food and all the other supplies...and without the Westerlands, we can’t mine gold ourselves.”

Eon narrowed his eyes but tried not to wince too heavily. He had not expected a miracle, and that was what it would take to solve the gold problem the kingdom faced. The problem, and hundreds of Lords and smallfolk knew it, was the new frontier between Greens and Blacks had cut them from the Rock and its legendary gold mines, bullion and everything shiny. Worse, the existing gold vaults were in Lannister hands but the gold mines were under their control too!

Sometimes the Lord of Gulltown thought Aegon the First and Only had been too kind with the Lannisters after the Field of Fire. But then the Conqueror had probably never thought possible something like a civil war with dragons would happen between his descendants. In the royal mind, the reasoning had –probably – been that the Westerners had the gold mines and the Riverlands had the grain, ensuring a mutual and prosperous relationship. Except now they were in different realms, people travelled far less as the fear of the Iron Fever spread and both kingdoms had lost so much they were not kind to let the other receive a tribute of money and grain at an acceptable price.

“There are always the silver mines of House Arryn and Manderly, my lord.” By the grim expression he was making, Ser Jason was perfectly aware of the political implications of such a move.

So far, the differences in the money of the Black and Green kingdom had been limited to the new coins having the visages of a King or a Queen on one side. But the idea of the ‘gold dragon’ had been so well-rooted in the mind of every lowborn and highborn heads the Council and the influential factions at Stone Hedge had –wisely – decided to delay their final decision on the matter.

There were also pragmatic and dynastical concerns. As long as the reliable gold coin was used by both sides, it was easy to clamour the two kingdoms could and would be joined again when next war was fought. But if they began to mint new coins of different metal than the Greens, the minds of the smallfolk and highborn alike were going to come with ideas the Crown may not like.

And it was an understatement he had not a clue of what replacing gold by silver as the most important coinage would do to the economy of the realm he served. Yes, he was really going to have plenty of concerns to share with the men he had charged to survey the Riverlands these last moons.

“And all of this because a King remarried a second time...”

**Author’s note**:

This winter is really going to stay in the Westerosi memories...for all the wrong reasons. The Iron Fever is ending hundreds of lives day after day and changing both realms as the Lords are forced to confront their own mortality...

Well, I think it will be all I wanted to say. I am going to work a bit on *The odds were never in my favour*, and then I will begin the preliminary work for the end of an arc in *The* *Weaver Option*...

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