**Chapter 6**

**The Drums of War**

**Asha Greyjoy 3**

Fortunately, the Northerners had built baths at Bloodsteel Motte. By the black winds of the Storm God, Asha had really needed one when the grey direwolf had stopped licking her.

Of the evening and the night she spent in the ancestral fortress of House Glover, Asha knew she would not remember a lot save the essentials. Bloodsteel Motte had not been built like a Southron or an Ironborn castle. It was a fortress and a place to muster troops. Where they should have been grand tapestries on the walls, the Northern masters of the stronghold had placed weapons taken from their enemies’ dead hands. There was relatively little gold, silver or gemstones in the decoration. The hall and the gates had many bright red runes. Ancient skulls were also delivering a grim warning. The few jewels she could see men and women wearing were all shining with strange lights. The three existing towers were protected by several ballista and scores of warriors. In one word like in ten, Bloodsteel Motte was breathing war, not surprising since the citadel was devoted to the worship of the God of War and Blood.

As Victarion squadron’s sails had disappeared in the Bay of Ice, Asha had accepted the drops of blood, the bread and the salt handed by Ethan Glover and convinced Brigit and the score of Pyke armsmen sent by her Lord Father to do the same. When it came down to it, this was the sole protection the Ironborn had now in these strange and unknown lands. Asha knew she could wield an axe better than half of the reavers in the Iron Fleet, but her weapon was not going to save anyone if three hundred warriors in plate decided her skull needed to be added to their war trophies.

Asha did not sleep well that night. Her Lord Father and her uncle had decided it was fine to abandon her there and though she had known this moment would come for over a moon, it had still stung in her heart and her head. How nice of the Lord Reaper and his preferred sons to make their plans in the upper levels of Pyke and the rest of the family to endure the consequences of their will.

Drums sounded at dawn and Asha went to the dining hall, where she found Arya Stark waiting for her, masticating a large piece of bread with salted meat. The words of greeting over, the young Stark girl went straight to the point.

“We are leaving this morning,” the granddaughter of the Lord Paramount of the North declared in a manner that was more command than suggestion. “The winds are calm over the Wolfswood.”

“You speak like this is not a good thing.”

Arya Stark nodded gravely. “The Gods are rarely letting their power wane over these woods. I can’t feel it, but I think a big storm is coming to mark the end of summer. You and I need to go to Winterfell before it breaks out.”

“I have no horse to ride,” she reminded the sister of the man she was due to marry once they arrived in the seat of power built by the Starks centuries ago.

“We brought several mounts from Winterfell,” countered the Northern girl. “Just be careful, our horses bite.”

The way Arya Stark grinned confirmed that yes, the Northerners had a sense of humour...and that Asha really, really didn’t want to be bitten by her courser.

“You also need to wear a complete suit of armour,” the grey eyes were ones who had already taken lives and known bloodshed. “No Host will attack us, but the woods like the rest of our lands can be deadly to the non-initiated. If they have any sense, your escort will do the same.”

The undertone of her interlocutor was not subtle in letting her know the reavers of Pyke were not high in her esteem.

By the time she had eaten and donned the armour she had used for her raids – a simple set of black metal with a golden kraken on her chest – the Stark escort was ready to depart. When she saw them in front of the gates, the captain of the *Black Wind* recognised several of the men who had been part of the welcoming party.

It was a very diverse group: the ordinary warriors in leather and furs with swords, axes, masses and small shields were the most numerous, but there was also one man with brilliant green robes and large sceptre, half a score of tall and threatening black-armoured cavaliers in plate and radiating danger, two chariots decorated in pikes and skulls and last but not least, the big direwolf of Arya Stark. And yes, the big tongue was half-way out of the maw, ready to lick once more if given the authorisation.

“Everyone is accounted for?” asked the Stark girl after mounting her great carnivorous pet.

To Asha’s annoyance, it was not the case and it was her escort who was the cause. Brigit, being a proud daughter of Hagen’s daughter had come in her reaver armour making her an enticing vision of beauty and violence, but there were four men missing and those who had come had bloodshot eyes, half-asleep faces and smelled like they had bathed into a tankard of ale.

*By the waves and the winds of the west, what I have done to deserve these idiots?*

It took a fair amount of time to find the latecomers, one of them still being unconscious in the bed of a woman who was certainly not his wife. But once everyone was there, Asha mounted on the warhorse she had been given – a great brown steed looking at her with troubling intelligent eyes, Arya Stark gave the signal of departure and they left Bloodsteel Motte behind.

The ride was not exactly pleasant. There was a true road under the hooves of the horses and the paw of the direwolf, but Asha had not ridden a horse this year or the year before that and it showed. The Iron Islands had never been famed for their cavalry; most of the horses they had were small, famed for their resilience and endurance to cross uneven terrains without flinching. Against the famed chivalry of the green lands and their mighty coursers, the Iron Islands mounted force only chance to win would be to let the greenlanders laugh to death.

The timid sun was at its zenith when the road truly entered the Wolfswood. Beforehand, they stopped to hear Arya Stark and the warning she wanted to give them.

“The Wolfswood is no ordinary place.” Dressed on her grey direwolf and in grey-dark armour, the effect could have been funny but there was something in her stance which made even the stupidest reavers of her Lord Father stay quiet. “No Host has ever managed to claim this forest as theirs and the power of the Gods is strong under the leaves. Time can flow differently, and while the Host of Instigation launched a Purge last year, there are many beings born of sorcery and divine favour waiting for travellers to pass by.”

Arya Stark smiled, and the familiar smirk was directed at the Ironborn.

“You have the protection of House Stark until you arrive at Winterfell. Do not think this means you are safe in the Wolfswood. Stay on the Wolf Road. This paved path has been enchanted by House Stark sorcerers and is blessed by the Gods. If you leave it, you are fair game for anything and anyone wanting to test your mettle.

Stay on the Wolf Road. If you leave it, no one save Lord Stark may be able to find you again and the Lord of Winterfell has far more pressing duties than searching the Wolfswood for missing foreigners.

And in case, it is not clear, let me tell you a third time: stay on the Wolf Road, no matter what you see. You won’t like the consequences if you abandon its safety.”

And on this the direwolf rider entered first the very place she had warned them against. Her escort and the rest of the group followed.

In a few breaths, it was like they were entering into another world. On the right and the left, several ancient columns of stone were carved with red, blue, green or pink runes set the limits to the Wolf Road. The light of the sun decreased at an impressive rate and while their eyes had no difficulty see their surroundings, it was not a comforting scene. One by one the human sculptures and the pillars marking the edge of the forest disappeared and the trees were everywhere.

Neither Asha nor the Ironborn of her escort had ever seen a spectacle like this. By her own experience during her travels, anything which could be named a ‘wood’ had four or five main tree species in a given zone. According to the shipbuilders of Pyke who were always researching new locations to grab whatever materials they needed for the longships, this was dictated as much by the weather as the proximity from the sea.

The Wolfswood was not following this reality. Every time she turned her head, she was seeing a new species of tree. Under her very eyes, twice a tree fell mere feet away only for something vegetal to grow and try to take its place. It was impossible to guess what was going to be next. There were oaks and other centuries-old trees which had certainly been already old when the dragons conquered Westeros. And yet a few feet later they disappeared for a mass of shrubs and firs.

In these conditions, the road was a benediction if there ever was one. Past the first markers and the human constructions at the edge of the forest, there was nothing but the stone road to indicate they were not lost. There was so many bends she lost sense of the directions. At sea, she was an expert navigator. On land and in the North, she was unable to tell if they were marching north or south. Several times the road became a bridge as they went over small gaps in the landscape or large precipices. A long time ago Theon had asked her looking at one of the rare Northern maps kept in the library of Pyke why the Northerners had not built a castle somewhere between the lands of House Glover and House Stark. Now she knew the answer: they didn’t need to. In this forest, it was possible to lose armies without a single trace to prove they had ever existed. Building a fortress was not necessary: all the Starks had to do was using one of their damned sorcerers to hide the road on a league or two, and any invading army would be lost.

Night was not far and Arya Stark was leading them at a harsh pace, but Asha had not seen a big clearing where it was possible to see the sun. Tall like three or ten men, the multitude of trees was still blocking the sun. Asha wondered for an instant or two how many fleets could be built with all this wood. Pyke and Saltcliffe among other islands had long cut every source of timber for their hulls, but the Stark and their bannersmen had clearly not that problem.

At last signal was given to stop for the day. Asha sighed in relief and tried not to wince when her feet touched the ground. Everything was dolorous, and the pain was coming from parts of her body she had no idea existed before today.

“I am ready to sell the Iron Islands for a good bed tonight,” the daughter of Balon Greyjoy groaned.

One of the tall men in black armoured plate chuckled. Or at least Asha thought it was a chuckle. With the helmet hiding everything but the eyes, the sounders under the armour were distorted.

“Are there any villages in these woods?” asked one of the reavers.

“There are,” replied one of the warriors covered in the furs of what looked to be a lion of the mountains. “If you know where to search.”

“House Talonstark holds dominion over the southern Wolfswood,” one of the warriors mounted on chariots had decided to join the conversation. “But they are far from this road. Forrester and the rest of the wooden clans are in the north. House Glover controls the western approaches and House Stark the east.”

Asha remembered the maps of the North her uncle had let her watch in his library of Ten Towers.

“That leaves a great deal of lands unclaimed and unpatrolled.”

Sea and storm, you could hide three times the population of the Iron islands under these trees.

“Unclaimed, yes,” acknowledged the owner of the chariot with bright red barbs and a glowing skull. “Not unpatrolled. There are always youngsters trying to claim the wealth of the Kingswood and the Hosts mount regularly expeditions to purge the beasts and the esoteric results of the sorcerers.”

“In this case, why aren’t you -“ there was no time for the Ironborn to end his sentence, as a sort of wood tendril from a nearby tree wrapped itself around his arm.

“DRYADS!” The shout came from several mouths at once and everywhere Northern warriors abandoned the tasks to prepare the camp and grabbed swords and shields. “TO ARMS! TO ARMS!”

The enemies were not stupid and realised after the first shout the moment of surprise was lost. The attack came from everywhere. Around the space the group had chosen to stop, half of the trees stopped being immobile and wood branches transformed in instruments of death. A small mist fell on the improvised battlefield. The Ironborn which had his arm immobilised by the monster was unable to do more than scream in agony when in a horrible noise his arm was ripped off from his body. The strike from one of the armoured warriors cut the tendril responsible but too late.

“USE FIRE AND STEEL!” Asha did not know where the command had come from, but there was no time to wonder. Her axe was in her fighting hand and with one strike she removed a wooden blade which would have surely removed her head if allowed to continue the move. One more strike and the head of the tree-thing which had tried to attack her was separated in two neat parts.

Asha breathed loudly...and her opponent rose once more. Fortunately, before she had the time to wonder what kind of nightmare it was, one of the Northerners plunged a torch into the hole which the monster used for a mouth. The result was...impressive. In an atrocious shriek, the murderous tree was a fire pyre.

“Dryads must be cut into very tiny pieces or set aflame,” explained calmly the Northerner before going after a second monster.

“I would have been really useful to know before the battle!” She exclaimed.

“You don’t want to us to hold your hand while you’re at it?” scoffed the warrior hidden behind back plate. “The strong persevere, the weak die. This is the way of our God.”

At two against one and a torch to burn the enemy, the next ‘Dryad’ had no chance and was quickly killed. The momentum of battle accelerating, Asha felt more and more disgust at the enemy. These Dryads were looking like the ugly bastard of a tree with a human, but with none of the beauty and qualities one gave to such species. They spoke, but it was not in a tongue she understood – the garbles, shrieks and screams they made were not something for a human mouth anyway.

By reflex, she seized one of the root-tendril which was burning on the ground and used it as a secondary weapon to complement her axe-work. In a few breaths, the battle became easier. The enemy was strange, but not invincible and once burned, they did not rise again. The tide of abominable trees reinforcing their ranks had also stopped.

Victory uncertain a moment before, was now no longer in doubt. A Dryad proved that in fact, even a wooden thing could know fear when a direwolf pounced on it. There was no shield wall, no cohesion from the Northerners. They fought individually or by two in a storm of violence...and yet in the chaos each monster which emerged from the mist was opposed by a warrior who had the skill to burn or hack it with an oversized weapon.

It was chaos obviously. But the tactics employed and the facility the Dryads fell on their blades told her chance had nothing to do with this. Arya Stark and her group exploited the smallest weakness of the Wolfswood monsters against them. The last Dryad in front of her lost the large branches she had used and was set aflame by three different torches. The mist was disappearing. The last Dryads, tree-monsters or whatever sorcery animating them – realised they were beaten and hastily decided retreat was a very acceptable thing.

Asha was about to jump in pursuit, but a steel fist covered in green sap was on her right shoulders.

“Don’t,” advised the Northerner she had fought sides by sides. It was at this moment she became aware the battle had already moved her several feet away from the road. Asha shivered and this was not from the cold. She couldn’t remember leaving the camp. What in the name of the Drowned God was this damned forest? The glare she sent at the trees had fear in it. She was ashamed to admit it but it was the truth.

A man of Pyke didn’t listen to the warnings of their guides however. The traditional battle-cry of House Greyjoy and the Ironborn was shouted with all the power of a reaver’s mouth.

“WHAT IS DEAD MAY NEVER DIE!”

And the Pyke warrior disappeared in the yellow-green vegetation surrounding the battlefield. A few times she heard his shouts before silence returned.

“Idiot,” the voice of Arya Stark behind her almost nearly convinced Asha to throw her axe once more. Turning her head, she saw the Lord of Winterfell’s granddaughter had not a scratch on her. In fact, the owner of the direwolf Valkia did not look tired at all by this clash of steel and branches. “He is lost to us. We will never find his corpse.”

This was uttered like a cold prayer. There was not an ounce of doubt in these doubts.

“Are there other surprises like this?” Asha demanded testily. Counting the man who had just tried to pursue the tree abominations, three Ironborn were no longer part of her escort. If skirmishes like this happened every day...

“Well, now you mention it...it’s possible we annoyed a Skaven Seer on our outward journey...”

**Eddard Stark 1**

Eddard was not in a good mood when he entered the command tent and the sight of Lady Jonelle Cerwyn strangling Lord Fyron Amber did not make him feel better.

“ENOUGH!” He shouted and when the Lady of the Host of Slaughter failed to obey his command, she received his fist in her face. Violently. Twice. Finally, Jonelle abandoned her grip on her opponent, her nose in a sad state but already healing thank to the blessings granted by her God.

“You will not murder each other in my presence,” the Heir of Winterfell told in his best icy tone as the Slaaneshi massaged his throat with a deranged expression on his visage. “If you try this once more, I will personally rip your souls from your screaming bodies and ensnare them into a goat.”

Slowly and reluctantly, the Khornate female warrior and the commander of the Host of Domination took their seats at the opposite corners of the tent. The distance separating them did nothing to calm the antagonism between the two, obviously. The two commanders were very much complete opposites: Jonelle Cerwyn was tall, not his height but close, she had tinged her hair in red and the red and black armour she wore let show her muscled skin tattooed by dozens of pulsing red runes. If her helmet was on, Eddard knew many would have mistaken her for a man and he wouldn’t have blamed them. By contrast, Fyron Amber had an effeminate appearance. The Lord of Amber Hall in the north-eastern Barrowlands had purple lips, long black hairs and green eyes which seemed to fix a point nobody could perceive. His armour was painted like someone had thrown over several goblets of paint randomly on it. A large golden necklace was around his neck, and his fingers were full of rings proclaiming the glory of Slaanesh.

Turning back his head to the two other Host leaders in the tent, Eddard revealed what was going to be the order of the day, no make it the order of the fortnight.

“The senile fool on the Iron Throne is dead. The Southrons and their septons are screaming we have killed him.”

While Westerosi south of the Neck always relied on the grey fools’ ravens to give them the news across the realm the North had faster ways to know of the great events shaking the Seven Kingdoms.

“Is there any truth in their outraged mumblings?” The question came in a quiet whisper from Lord Bog Boggs of the Host of Disease. Eddard would have loved describing him, but unfortunately it was not possible. Or fortunately, depending on how you saw it. The tarnished green armour was sealed by green runes and the Boggs’ own will. An aura of power and illness surrounded him, making clear the man hidden in this plate armour was terribly close to ascension.

“No,” he admitted. “All the cults which operate in or near King’s Landing have reported to tell us they didn’t order his death. The efforts to see the troubled waters of the past have not revealed an assassin or a conspiracy to end the life of Aerys. Unless someone managed to obscure magic itself, it is likely Aerys died in his sleep of old age and the Faith is just trying to use his demise for their own goals.”

“Amusing,” stated Robin Flint of the Host of Destiny. The Champion of Tzeentch on the outside looked to be unremarkable, especially with the other three on the tent...until one figured the armour he wore had merged with his skin and there was third eye on the back of his head. “The South wants to fight us while we prepare our own Black Crusade.”

“So the weaklings have still the stomach for war,” Jonelle’s disdain was evident.

“This is inconvenient,” intervened Fyron Amber. “The plan was to sow the seeds of a great civil war before we invade. United, they are more dangerous. The Southrons are weak when they fight one-on-one, but they are a lot of them.”

“True, but their lack of cohesion works in our favour.” Boggs’ voice was a murmur and everyone had to stay silent if they wanted to understand correctly his words. “The Reach and the Stormlands are far from the Riverlands and slow to muster.”

“Perhaps, but we will still have to fight them,” there was malice in Robin Flint words. “Their coffers are filled with gold and their knights will be eager to go to war. It has been so long since we went down south in Host-strength...they don’t remember the harsh lessons we gave them. They will march and they will come with tens of thousands men.”

“We will conquer the Riverlands in the name of the Gods,” retorted Jonelle with the fervour expected from the berserkers of the God of War and Blood. “Let their armies come. I don’t care if they are forty thousand or half a million. I will bathe in their blood and use their skulls to spread the worship of Lord Khorne from Casterly Rock to Tarth.”

“Funny you talk of ‘forty thousand’ and ‘half a million’,” commented in a mocking tone the Slaaneshi, making the only woman of the assembly snarl in anger. “The trout can and will muster more than forty thousand alone. For the Arryns, raising thirty thousand warriors is not a great task.”

“You don’t say anything I am not aware,” Eddard spoke before a new fist contest erupted between the martial Jonelle and the debauched Fyron. “I can even correct your numbers, if you are so fixed on them. By auguries, the cults we disseminated in their very castles, bribery and corruption, we know the Riverlands can probably gather between sixty and seventy thousand men if they are given the chance and are not invaded from every direction. The Stormlands armies are skilled but small; they will not be able to take more than forty thousand men from their hills and the Marches.”

His eyes watched the Amber Lord again, aware of the hate the Slaaneshi worshippers had for the next kingdom he was going to speak about.

“The Vale can arm over fifty thousand, though they will need to keep a few thousands at home against the pirates of the Free Cities and the clansmen.”

The next declaration was for Boggs: the followers of Grandfather Nurgle loathed the order of things in the South.

“Powerful but slow to muster, the Reach can afford to give the next best thing to one hundred and fifty thousand men if they are really dedicated to this ‘White Crusade’.”

And there were of course several kingdoms left to recruit troops in the name of the Iron Throne.

“The Lannister have the gold and the armouries to arm five and seventy thousand men. The Crownlands, having enjoyed several decades of peace, will probably provide their Targaryen masters forty or fifty thousand green boys.”

“And they think Dorne will be on their side,” added Robin Flint, his eyes changing colour each time he observed him. “That would add to thirty thousand to their gigantic Host.”

“More than four hundred thousand men,” whispered Boggs.

The number imposed the silence in the room for a few breaths...before everyone burst in laughter, cackle or grating rumble to signify their hilarity.

Yes, the Southrons could try to muster that many men in one size...but without boons for their pathetic ‘Seven’, their refusal to use the winds of magic save a few convents and their inexperienced Lords, they could not gather an army of such size in one place and stay on the defensive. They would starve first or bicker for supreme command endlessly.

“My father has decided to go himself to the Wall with the Grey Direwolves,” Eddard spoke again and all hilarity disappeared instantly. “Four Hosts will go with him and protect our northern frontier.”

“They will give us time to complete the conquests in the South,” no one disagreed with Bog Boggs. The words, as distasteful as they were, had the uncomfortable merit of being the truth.

“Which Hosts will have to bleed for the Gods?” demanded Jonelle, the bloodthirsty part almost absent.

“The Honour Host of Lord Rickard Karstark, the Starvation Host of Lord Brandon Blackmyre, the Hope Host of Lord Damon Stormer and the Perfection Host of Lady Gilia Slate,” he enumerated one by one.

Since the Grey Direwolves were Undivided in their allegiance and would be boosted by the numbers of House Blackfang near the Gift, there was one Host of each God to help the Night’s Watch defend the Wall per the ancient oaths.

“Not counting the Night’s Watch, the Free Folk and the other support troops in the Gift, roughly six hundred and ten thousand of our fiercest fighters will stop the invasions as long as it divinely possible.”

In other circumstances, tying one-sixth of the North muster away from a Southern Crusade would have been unacceptable. Against the hordes of beastmen, skavens and other nightmares coming to besiege the Wall, there was no choice at all. And the real threat was coming behind them...

“The Wolf Lord gave me the duty of waging the war against the South,” the three Lords and the Lady in front of him were suddenly far more interested by the turn taken by the conversation. “It is time for the Hosts to join the Direwolves of Ruin and remind our enemies the might of the North.”

“Yes, my Lord,” the reply came immediately from the four mouths. “What is your will?”

Eddard stood from his seat to unroll a recent map of the North, the Neck and the northern Riverlands. A lot of it was not drawn with precision: the lands ruled by the Starks were governed by winter, the Gods and the winds of magic and what was true one season often changed or disappeared from one decade to another. It was why the fortresses and sorcery towers were so important: the servants of the Gods were drawing divine protection in form of rituals and hundreds of blessed runes in order to avoid earthquakes, monumental blizzards and other disastrous events.

“My Host will depart Winterfell as soon as the Greyjoy daughter will be wed to my son.” His subordinate commanders nodded in approval.

How Balon Greyjoy had managed to stay Lord Paramount for so long of the Iron Islands defied order and chaos alike, but it had offered them a gullible ally so Eddard wasn’t able to complain.

“This will give us the time for the six remaining Hosts of Khorne and seven Hosts of Tzeentch to join me at Winterfell.”

Most of them had already left their recruiting grounds and were on their way as he spoke. Glover, Magnar, Bole and of course Umber had wasted no time forging thousands of weapons and training for what promised to be a campaign of carnage and slaughter.

“The Hosts of Grandfather Nurgle and our beloved Goddess Slaanesh will gather at Moat Cailin. Lord Sinister has been warned of my intentions and will prepare an adequate baggage train with Lord Manderly.”

Since the holy number of Nurgle was seven and Slaanesh used six respectively, this meant five Hosts of Life and Death and Four Hosts of Love and Hedonism were at his disposition – if he didn’t count the hosts gathered around this tent.

“There are exceptions, naturally.” The anticipation increased once more in the tent and divine energy surrounded the Champions. It had been a long wait, but the North was finally ready to crush the Andals once for all. “The Hosts you have here are to start their journey tonight down the Kingsroad. Howland Reed will wait for you in the Neck and provide you an escort of his personal crannogmen.”

“The old devil isn’t commanding anymore the Host of the Reaper?” For once Flint showed genuine surprise, although one had to be always prudent when it came to the followers of the Great Architect. Many were masters in the art of manipulating their interlocutors or lying to themselves.

Eddard nodded negatively. He did not show how much the situation had affected him. Howland was one of the few friends he truly had in his childhood, but his daughter had won handily the Scythe challenge to claim the leadership of the Host. Howland was still the Master of Greywater Watch, but it was not a good omen for the small crannogman’s survival.

“Meera Reed is the new Lady of the Host and will lead it to war.”

“A promising young warrior, this one,” approved Boggs. “The blessed waters of Decay have forged a redoubtable weapon in her soul.”

“Howland will provide you the disposition of the enemy forces waiting for you on the other side of the Neck,” said Eddard, returning to the war situation. “Once you have done your offerings to the Gods, you will attack the ‘Small Wall’ this pathetic Faith Militant and Daeron have built on our frontier.”

“It will be done, my Lord!” Fyron looked like he was going to masturbate at the announcement of the hostilities.

“How many siege engines can we take?” whispered Bog Boggs, the green fumes leeching his armour were becoming more corrosive and poisonous, giving the whole ‘dangerous by his simple presence’ a very good example.

“Each Host will have ten of the new Tyrant Cannons and one hundred halberd-slammers.” These were the last inventions forged by the very inventive smiths feeding the furnaces of Winterfell. Ferocious smiles were shown on the three faces he could watch. “I want no misunderstanding: if by my arrival two of these pesky fortresses have not fallen, I will crush your skulls and feed your guts to the direwolf pack myself.”

“There will be no delay, my Lord,” assured him Flint. “By the feathers of the change-birds, the Southrons will perish under my sorcery.”

“Are there any defences to be defeated first?” The question had come from the Nurgle Champion.

“House Sentinel and House Star control the best passes out of the Neck,” the Heir of Winterfell answered after a short moment of reflexion. “I would be greatly pleased if Sentinel’s Stand, Starshield and Cliff Fort are no longer there to stop us once my Host arrives. The Manderly galleys will be able to supply us by sea if House Cliffguard is no more.”

“The Greyjoys are going to attack House Mallister on the other side of the Green Fork,” noted Fyron Amber. “House Edgefaith of Edge Fort and House Strong of Mire’s Point will not dare abandoning their walls to come to the rescue of their cousins. Do we attack the Freys directly?”

This time Eddard saw no reason not to smile widely.

“No,” testing the Tyrant Cannons against the walls of the Twins would be interesting, he wasn’t going to say the contrary. But there were other plans in the wings for this House. House Reed had waited over four centuries to avenge themselves, and Eddard wasn’t going to deny them the chance to settle their old feud. “The Host of the Reaper has something *special* in mind for them.”

“Good,” Boggs gurgled. “Lord Walder Frey must pay.”

“There is one point which must be addressed before we march,” declared the Slaaneshi with the finesse and the smile expected from one serving the Goddess.

“Yes,” and for the first time of the day, Jonelle Cerwyn was agreeing with the Barrowlands Champion. “Who will command this army?”

An army on the small side – the number of fighting men and women at this muster was a bit less than five hundred and five thousand – but she had a point.

“No one in his tent,” Eddard sighed as he watched their furious expressions. “What? You seriously didn’t expect me to place one of your Hosts above the rest? I am certain that by the time you would be at Moat Cailin, my choice to lead your force would be dead and buried.”

The lack of denials told him his move was more than justified. Jonelle Cerwyn would have been a charismatic leader, but the Slaaneshi would have tried to poison her a dozen times per day and stab her in the back...and Flint would probably have helped with esoteric wards and illusions.

“You can enter,” he called in a loud voice and the tall figure waiting outside the tent entered. Like Eddard, the man was a Champion of the Undivided, a sword of the Four. “I believe you all know Jory Cassel, the Black Spear?”

Various mutterings told him they indeed were.

“My adjutant will lead you to the Riverlands and victory...you will obey his orders if you value your existences.”

**Tyrion Lannister 3**

The bells of King’s Landing were ringing. That or he had drunk too much wine. Again.

It was difficult to raise his head for some reason. When his vision became less troubled, he realised quickly why. He was stuck under a barrel. Rectification, since he could read the engraving on the barrel and smell the odour of the alcohol it had contained, it was a barrel of red wine from Longtable...year 294 after the Conquest if he had to guess.

This was a good year for sure. The Longtable grapes were a bit too soft for him, though. By tradition, the Merryweather were sending their smallfolk harvest the grapes a few days before other Houses of their Reach province, resulting in a different taste...and better profits for their purses, since they were able to sell the barrels and the bottles well before the other wineries.

Thanks to whatever divinity watching on him, the barrel was empty and he could remove it on his own. It took him five attempts to stand on his own, and by this point his ears and the rest of his senses were back. The air smelled the powerful mix of ale, wine, wasted food, piss and shit which was reigning in the city of King’s Landing for so long no one truly remembered how it had begun.

The bells rang again, proving once more this was not the pain inside his head. Seven Hells and Malal, when were they going to stop using the damn things? The septons had proclaimed the sacred bells must be heard for seven days. According to them, Aerys’ soul had to find its way to the Seven Heavens or some idiot doctrine like this. Then there had been seven new days of bells massacring his ears.

“POD! POD!”

But the time to move around a table which was half-broken, he found his squire asleep with a huge ale cup. His poor squire may not be a virgin anymore where wine, ale and liquors were concerned, but he was really collapsing too quickly.

If he could trust his memory, the Payne boy had fallen apart after a mere two drinks! He would have to do better if he wanted to last in his company. King or no king, war or no war, Casterly Rock or no Casterly Rock, Tyrion was not going to stop exploring the fascinating points of life.

“Too bad my Lord Father is never trying to release his nerves like this,” the dwarf chuckled, emptying what little liquid was left in a bottle he seized on the ground. The powerful taste of the Beesbury dissipated some of the tiredness in his little legs and arms.

“It’s too bad he’s not here to see this.” Tyrion smugly said as he observed his surroundings. He honestly didn’t remember all the details of the previous night, but judging by the final result it had been by the Father Above something to strike the hearts of cowards and quench his massive thirst.

The floor of the tavern he had used for this not-so-little celebration had many bottles and unconscious bodies on it. Tables were broken or overturned, there were cups everywhere and the participants had fallen asleep where they had lost their drinking contests or after a vigorous activity known as sex. Whores and servant girls had really not many clothes left to hide their non-existent virtue.

They weren’t the only one to miss clothes, obviously. Why, Tyrion just realised he was missing some breeches and undergarments, which he found near two girls he probably had...a lot of fun with last night. The two girls, one blond, one superb red-headed creature, had certainly expressions of content on their asleep faces.

He had recovered all his affairs and presented a half-respectable appearance when the door of the tavern opened in full, revealing a man which could not be anything but a sellsword. The roguish smile, the assured posture and the lack of heraldry were particularly telling. A sympathiser of the Faith would have screamed in horror at the spectacle offered by the bodies and the dozens of bottle. A heretic would have asked to organise a second round.

“Lord Tyrion Lannister?” The man asked for the form. There weren’t a lot of dwarves authorised to wear the gold lion on red of House Lannister. “I’m Bronn. Your Lord Father sent me.”

“Ah, so he is ready to return to Casterly Rock?” There was for a moment or two a lack of understanding in his interlocutor’s eyes and Tyrion felt something unpleasant in his throat. Two hundred gold dragons he was not going to like what was coming out this Bronn’s mouth.

“Lord Tyrion,” the drawl told him the sellsword was really not big on respect and kissing the shoes of the highborn, “Lord Tywin departed yesterday afternoon with your uncle and most of your family.”

Tyrion grimaced. At that moment, he had not been in a whorehouse or a tavern. He had been making some inquiries about the state of the fleet in the harbour. He had also asked some questions. It may be a newfound clarity for him, but it was somewhat strange how quickly the Faith had seized the idea of this Crusade against the Northern heretics.

“I’m sure it was an honest mistake,” inside he was sure it was anything but. “A hard ride and we can catch up with them.”

The smirk of the sellsword told him this was not going to happen.

“I’m afraid Lord Tywin has different intentions.” A large roll of parchment looking extremely pompous and official was handed to him. “Due to your extensive experience, the Westerlands have detached you to the new army the Crownlands are levying. You are now a Captain-Quartermaster, serving in the Fourth Grand Company of the King’s army.”

“If it is your idea of a joke, I can say it is not funny.” Tyrion, in case anyone from Sunspear to the Wall was unaware of it, had no military experience save burning two nests of heretics. He had some gift with the numbers, but he had never participated in a true battle. But as he unrolled the parchment, the words of Bronn were repeated, with the large red lion seal and the red three-headed dragon accompanying him.

“I am to be your second,” said Bronn, in a tone betraying his amusement. “My Lord.”

“Fantastic,” Tyrion replied. “This war is so going to suck.”

**Lord Steffon Baratheon 3**

How long did it take to see all your reforms and political efforts unravelled?

Steffon supposed that the maesters would write long treatises and debate endlessly on the question. There was no after all an obvious answer. Many laws of Jaehaerys the Conciliator were still obeyed today. Inversely, the rulings of Baelor had been rapidly forgotten the moment the King-Septon had held his last breath.

It was a sad admission his years in service of the Crown were more tending towards the latter than the former. He had forged nearly two complete decades of peace, a lack of hostilities so long Westeros had rarely seen it since the Conqueror united the Seven Kingdoms and for what? A King’s death and one fortnight later, most of his accords and advices were thrown in the gutters of King’s Landing.

Technically, he still was Hand of the King...for all the good it did. Not many Knights and Lords chose to remember it nowadays. No, the only thing everyone had in their thick skulls today was the word ‘Crusade’. The taxes have brought millions of gold dragons to our coffers these years? Let use this money to pay more soldiers and supplies for our Great Crusade! Several secondary roads and bridges in the Stormlands need rebuilding? They will wait until the Crusade is over! The pirates in the Stepstones are a problem? Our fleets will deal with this vermin once we will have crushed the Northern heretic fleet during the Crusade!

The Faith had well-prepared their announcement, he had to admit. They had spread before the tourney encouraging rumours about the King’s health, only to smash them cruelly and totally after the first day of jousting.

If someone was ready to believe Aerys had been assassinated, then Steffon was ready to sell him a fairly impressive lordship at the bottom of the Sea of Dorne. No, the man who had been his friend before his recent religious change had been old and at death’s door. The septons had just made sure he would last long enough for the Lords and Ladies of the realm to be in the single place, and then they had revealed the ‘assassination’. Pycelle and the other maesters had found no evidence of any poison or strike. But the Most Devout and their sycophants had had an answer all ready for this, hadn’t they?

Sorcery. Every demand was answered by the same word. Bypass the guard, poison the King’s soul, and become invisible to the Kingsguard had all been given the same method. Steffon personally believed the gall they had to put everything on a single word reeked of sorcery too, and maybe incompetence while they were at it.

But in the end, it was too late to stop the war from being declared. The new King was a bookworm, and had not dared challenging the Faith and four-fifths of his assembled Lords. The Crusade had been declared against the heretical kingdom of the North, and there was nothing he or the rest of the Council could do to stop it.

Varys had given him the latest reports this morning. The Crusade was right this moment the most popular event of the decade, and putting his weight against it would result in him being crushed and his House disgraced.

It was frankly sickening to see how badly he had misjudged most of his bannersmen and fellow Lords. These men had peace, prosperity, order, full granaries and people happily living their lives in growing villages and hamlets. They had enjoyed the longest summer in existence. They had the opportunity to love, eat and drink all their content.

They had renounced it the moment the Faith asked for a crusade. Steffon was not the Master of Whisperers. He had not the huge maze of informants and spies, but he had enough resources to know most of the loudest voices didn’t care about the Faith or the favour the Mother could bestow upon them.

They all wanted war. The Lannisters were eager to carve new lordships for their cadet branches in the North. The Stormlords wanted to prove their new generation could trample Northern corpses as well as the Dornish. The Tyrells wanted to convert the great kingdom which had refused to convert to the Seven. The Tullys wanted a permanent raid to the raids who had forced Hoster to give a daughter to the Northern barbarians.

Whether Aerys had been assassinated or not, this was just the point they had asked for to get the rust off their ancestral blades.

And so he watched with his old eyes the tents of the tourney – which now had become the tents of the Crown war camp - grow anew to accommodate the hundreds of retainers and warriors arriving day after day.

“Five hundred and twenty thousand, I think” the Lord Paramount of the Stormlands said, lowering his Myrish spyglass.

“A bit more, Father. I would say twenty-two thousand,” corrected him his cadet son. Stannis’ face was looking dubitative. “There are a lot of young fools and green boys from the Crown farmlands there.”

“They should not be there.” These boys should be thinking about kissing a girl or two before they came back in their parent’s houses, not volunteer as foot soldiers because they wanted to impress their friends or a pretty face.

“Yes, Father,” Stannis was not greeting his teeth, but he was not far from there. “What good can this host of green boys can do? Half of this host wouldn’t recognise the pointy end of a sword even if I used one to stab them. One in three will likely die in their first charge when battle is joined.”

“This is just one of the many hosts which are mustered across the realm,” affirmed tranquilly the old Lord.

“And I’m sure the other armies are as green as this one is,” countered his son. “Father, our sworn swords of Storm’s End and the archer of the Marches have not fought more than the occasional pirate hunt or isolated bandit groups. Going against the North is going to be an entirely different affair, especially in autumn.”

Steffon nodded, hiding the grimace he wanted to make. It was not yet the gossip of the court, but summer was over, at the same time this year three hundred years after the Conquest was ending. It had not become noticeable too much for the present: the temperatures were a bit colder, the eastern winds more powerful but the autumn rains were only a question of days now.

Autumn was coming...and winter was not going to be fair either. At best, they had a couple of years to wage war before the fury of the elements rendered road impracticable.

For the thirtieth time of the day, Steffon cursed the septons and this scummy buffoon of Luceon. The Faith understood nothing when it came to war, and he knew very well the north was not going to see their banners and bend the knee peacefully while the Crusaders destroyed their culture and their kingdom.

“We have still the advantage in numbers. Mace Tyrell has promised two hundred thousand men. Tywin Lannister seventy thousand men, Edmure Tully fifty thousand...”

Stannis snorted.

“Mace Tyrell should stay at home lest we realise he can’t don his armour anymore.” This was a good point, the Master of Highgarden belly was...significant.

“Well, we should have enough to crush the fifty thousand the North can muster.” His son didn’t voice his disagreement. “I trust everything is ready for your departure to Storm’s End?”

“Yes, Father,” there was only grim acceptance in his son’s eyes. Steffon understood it, but there was little chance he could change his mind on the subject. Robert had rushed immediately to Bronzegate the moment the call for arms was heard, and Renly had run eastwards to the eastern Reach, perhaps Tumbleton or Bitterbridge.

Since he was busy preparing the Crown army for the Crusade and his two other sons could not be trusted when duty called, Stannis had the inglorious task of staying at home and training the replacements of the men who would never come back from their Crusade campaign.

“How many do you think you can spare from the Bronzegate army?” Since Stannis was the Lord of Storm’s End in all but name these last years, it was he who had the best idea of the numbers involved.

“One thousand for Storm’s End, two thousand for the other forts and defences,” His second son replied. “More would attract questions and suspicions from our friends of the Faith.”

“Suspicion I can accept,” but failure would be far more damageable. “I don’t want to go northwards and hear our lands are under attack by the Lysene or a coalition of pirates.” Not that there was much difference between the two, of course.

“Three thousand men will not stop Essossi if they land one of their big sellsword companies on our shores.”

“No, but hopefully it should give us the time to turn our cavalry around and attack them in the rear.”

Stannis didn’t protest, but he knew as well as him how unlikely this was to happen. For all the tales of proud knights and princesses saved at the fatidic moment, armies rarely arrived in time to a battlefield.

**Rodrik Harlaw 1**

The Great Hall was large. In previous circumstances, Rodrik had often marvelled how much arrogance the builders of Pyke had in their hearts to build such a monstrosity. The Lord of Harlaw was ready to acquiesce Pyke was no Harrenhal; but that left plenty of margin because Harren the Black had had an ambition sufficient for a thousand men of lesser birth.

Ten Towers was a new castle, more comfortable and larger what had been built before on the island of Harlaw. Yet its hall was only a fourth the size of the hall where the Seastone Chair happened to be placed.

It was no longer a Great Hall now. Not since the official kingsmoot which had just been celebrated at Pyke.

No, it was a throne room once more. And for the first time he had come to Pyke in all his life, Rodrik was in a crowded place. Great Captains and simple reavers had been invited. Old warriors and young men were side by side. The great tapestries of legendary reavings had like by magic reappeared on the walls. There were dozens of servants leaning on the walls, and several thousands of guards to prevent any bloody incident. It was a great number of people...but it was nothing compared to the thousands more awaiting outside due to the lack of sufficient space. Not that they represented the sum of the Ironborn population: the Bay of Lordsport was black, black of the hundreds of longships and their black sails which had sailed to obey the word of their liege.

For the Iron Islands had a king once more, and the times of peace, subservience to the Iron Throne and tolerance were over.

“Rejoice,” rumbled Victarion Greyjoy, who had never looked more massive and bulky in his black plate armour. The plastron was decorated with the golden kraken of his House and in his large fist was the grand banner of his brother. “For a new age is upon us. After three hundred years, the Ironborn are free again! Glory to King Balon Greyjoy, King of the Iron Islands, Sovereign of Salt and Rock, Son of the Sea Wind, Captain of the Great Kraken and Lord Reaper of Pyke!”

“GLORY TO KING BALON!”

Axes were raised in the air. Powerful voices screamed their joy. Acclamations were heard from every rank of the assembly. The guards hit the floor with the hamper of their spears, long axes or halberds. Men and women clapped their hands in applause as far as he could see. Upstairs, before and behind him, every Ironborn had only one word in his mouth.

“BALON! BALON!”

Step by step, the elder Greyjoy advanced to finally face the sonorous assembly. But Balon didn’t seat on the Seastone Chair. His voice boomed in his throne room.

“IRONBORN!”

One by one, the voices fell silent. This was the voice of a great leader and the man they had elevated to kingship. For all his defaults, at this moment Balon Greyjoy was the personification of the great reaver, returned from a thousand reavings with wealth and victory in tow. The blood of king-captains and conquerors flowed into his veins. He was the one who was going to lead his people to war in his black armour, the long sailor cape clapped on his shoulders and the driftwood crown posed on his head.

“For too long, we have bent the knee! For too long, we have listened to the Targaryens and their worthless laws! We have been patient! We have endured while they were ignoring us and gorging themselves of the wealth of the Seven Kingdoms! But no more!”

“NO MORE!” The acclamation was repeated with a quasi-religious fervour.

“The Iron Fleet has been rebuilt! We have now the greatest fleet of Westeros!” More shouts of approval were heard and stopped at a sign of Balon’s hand. “The greenlanders are weak and their eyes are fixed on the North. They figure that once they will have dealt with these ‘heretics’ not worshipping their precious Seven, they will beat us down and force to join our prayers to theirs.”

The expression on the new King’s visage was predatory.

“I say they are wrong. I will not wait for these useless pansies who have never wielded an axe in their life to decide the destiny of the Iron Islands! If they want a Crusade...then by the Drowned God we will give them one to remember!”

“BALON! BALON!”

“All over the coasts, thousands of greenlanders are building their galleys to begin a war of summer! I say we sink half of them and take the rest for our fleet!”

If the previous comments had the Ironborn’s approval, this one put even more blood thirst and excitation into the assembly.

“We will strike Lannisport first,” announced the Lord Reaper of Pyke. “We are going to remind the Lannisters why the Kraken must be feared. We will sack their golden city and destroy their naval power for ten generations!”

“LANNISPORT WILL BURN!”

“We will take Seagard as the Northern armies crush the trout! Like in the Hoare Conquest, the rivers will be red with the blood of the Trident men!”

“DEATH TO THE BETRAYERS OF HARREN!”

“But we will not stop after annihilating the Mallisters! The Arbor! Oldtown! Highgarden! Soon the entire Reach and its fortune will belong to us! Like in the Age of the Grey King, the sails will scream our name for all eternity!”

“THE IRON KING! THE IRON KING TRIUMPHANT!”

Turning his head to Balon’s right, the Master of Ten Towers saw his nephew Rodrik grinning. Balon’s Heir had one of his hands directly on the breasts of his future Northern wife. Saara did look pleased, though with the kind of immoral red dress she was wearing today, it was hardly surprising. The young woman was beautiful, but she inspired dread in him and not just because she was a sorceress.

“TO THE SHIPS!” This time Balon had to shout for his voice to be heard in the chaos of hundreds of voices. “THE WIND IS WITH US! THE IRON CRUSADE CAN BEGIN!”

The roar which followed made Rodrik glad the first Lords of Pyke had built solid for the ceiling shook under the formidable war cry.

“WHAT IS DEAD MAY NEVER DIE, BUT RISES AGAIN HARDER AND STRONGER!”

**Asha Greyjoy 4**

Asha was never going to admit it sober, but she was happy to leave the Wolfswood.

The journey in this endless region of trees had not been her idea of a nice ride. As amusing as it was to see the escort her ‘concerned’ Father had given her be decimated by various monsters, Asha knew she might have been one of the missing Ironborn after each skirmish. The Northern woods had never heard of the word ‘mercy’ and at several low points Asha had been almost convinced the lands were trying to challenge every fighter and non-fighter which had the temerity to walk through this road.

The first day had been without incident save the Dryad attack. The second had been worse. The Dyads had returned with reinforcements and had attacked twice, using the same methods of the previous day. Two more Ironborn had been lost as well as a single Northerner. The third and fourth day had seen the appearance of carnivorous flowers and trees. The morning after, the direwolf Valkia had warned them early on of an enormous shadowcat’s presence. Perched on the branches of a centuries-old oak, the incredibly huge feline could have decimated them in one jump and even then one of the Greyjoy warriors had succumbed to his wounds. Arya Stark had profited from the occasion to skin the black pelt of the shadowcat, saying it would make an excellent blanket for her couch. A part of Asha’s mind wanted to salute the practicality of this decision. The other part insisted these Northerners were crazy.

The depths of the Wolfswood had sheltered many horrors. Fortunately, many of them appeared to be actively against each other. Several times they had seen hordes of giant rats – the Starks and their warriors called them Skaven – and the next these aberrations were dead, blasted by sorcery or phantom armies emerging and disappearing from the shadows. The eighth day, giant spiders had been their opponents only to be attacked in the rear by ‘beastmen’ and a great pack of wolves. It had been the latter who had emerged victorious, and perhaps intimidated by their larger four-legged cousin, had left after feasting on the corpses.

So yes, seeing the runes marking the limit between forest and not-forest was a relief. She was still alive, but save Brigit, the other Ironborn had perished or were wandering somewhere in the Wolfswood without any way to exit it.

And Arya had insisted this was the Wolfswood in a calm and orderly year. Storm and waves, Asha really didn’t want to see what it looked like when the denizens of these dark foliages were at war.

“How close are we to Winterfell?” She demanded to Arya as the last trees were behind a series of dark green hills were in front of them.

“We should be there before sunset,” affirmed the Stark girl before changing her words when she looked at the sky. “If there’s a sunset, of course...our sorcerers are busy darkening the sky.”

“Lovely,” what else could she say? The cloud colours were absolutely unnatural. Dark blue, red, purple, green and other shades she didn’t have precise words to describe were shifting faster than she had the time to observe them. The survivors of the column formed a double column, and for the first time the Northern horses were able to truly prove their worth.

The air was far colder than the climate they had enjoyed near the Glover fortress. It was surely not cold enough for a snow fall, but it was close. If the fields and the air became colder, she was going to need more fur.

It didn’t take long to see Winterfell in the distance. At first, it was a blurry shadow in the distance. But after climbing one more hill and reaching a point where the stones of the road suddenly turned a deep black, she was able to watch the ancestral citadel of the Starks.

Because that what it was: a citadel. There were still at least three leagues of ride, but there was no way to miss the three great circles of black-grey walls encircling the hill unless you were blind.

Huge towers with barbicans and portcullis, sizeable curtain walls and a deep moat where a sort of red substance was flowing like water. One look at it and you could tell it was a fortress built for war. Pyke was simply not holding the comparison. Each section of the walls was covered in arrow slits and murder holes. On top of every tower and at prepared interstices in the walls, the dreaded shapes of siege engines could be imagined. To make it more impressive, runes were scintillating in unnatural lights. For them to be seen three leagues away like this, they must be thousands of them.

It was a good confirmation an invading army would not have only to take the walls from mortal defenders; sorcery and monsters would also certainly be part of the garrison. A guess supported by the formidable dungeon in the inner circle of the defences. The black tower was so elevated it was almost touching the clouds accumulated in the sky. Four lesser towers of the third circle of walls surrounded it, although one looked like a titanic tree of an unknown species.

On the vast black bridges and black roads leading to the capital of the North, there were thousands of people on the march. Some were undoubtedly civilians, but hundreds were not, the familiar spears, halberds and long swords were visible.

Asha was not an imbecile. Assuming Winterfell was lightly defended – and the forces travelling in this direction were evidence against this – the citadel would require at least fifteen or sixteen thousand soldiers with a lot of trebuchets to breach the walls. The outer curtain wall was roughly between fifty and sixty feet high. This was not an obstacle you overwhelmed with a few ladders.

“Ah, we’re awaited,” commented happily her guide. Asha turned her head but saw no one next to their column.

The illusion broke the instant after; in the blink of an eye what had been an empty terrain of green grass was replaced by a small camp where two or three scores of Northerners were indeed waiting. Arya jumped from Valkia immediately. The reason of this strange behaviour was not long in coming: swift as an arrow, a black direwolf which made the grey female look tiny and unimposing collided with her. It was not alone. The black animal was followed by an entire pack of eight or nine great beasts, one of them being an albino-white and the others grey, brown or black.

As the direwolves celebrated their reunion with friendly bites, rolls and vigorous licking of their big tongues, Arya was already hugging one of the warriors which had been the closest from her. The column stopped and most Northerners dismounted, Asha and Brigit imitating them after a moment of hesitation.

When they were a couple of feet away, Asha saw the young man the daughter of Eddard Stark was talking also presented some Stark traits. The dark hairs were there, and so were some traits in the visage, but no grey eyes.

“Asha, this is my favourite half-brother Jon Snow,” Arya made the presentations. “Jon, this is Asha Greyjoy and the red-hair is Brigit.”

“My Lady,” the bow was curt and short before the blue-violet eyes returned to Arya. “I’ve seen what you have done to your other ‘favourite half-brothers’, sister. Should I worry too about being crippled?”

No excuses came out of the lips from the Northern girl.

“If they can’t last a spar against me, why do they insist to go to war?”

Jon Snow rolled his eyes to the sky, showing what he thought of this declaration. In blue-black armour he looked rather handsome, but he was more built like a fencer of the green lands rather than an axe-wielder reaver, and he had two one-handed swords strapped on his backs.

“Please tell me you didn’t challenge Lord Glover in his own Motte.”

“You know me, brother.”

“Yes. This is why I am asking the question, Arya.”

The voice was similar to Jon Snow but louder, more powerful and confident. There was power in these words and Asha felt the air change, becoming more oppressive and violent. There had been times in the Wolfswood where the trees felt more alive and dark, and this was giving her the same felling. Whispers resonated in the distance, but she ignored them.

A new warrior was next to Arya Stark. His armour was a bland black plate whose only decoration was a red direwolf encircled by an eight-pointed star. He was half a head taller than Jon Snow, had dark hairs and grey eyes...and there were sort of sparkles of pure darkness all over him.

Until that moment, Asha had believed the most dangerous man she’d ever met, was her own uncle Euron Greyjoy, more commonly known as the Crow’s Eye. But this young man...as she looked into his eyes and he looked back, she knew in her heart and her mind no warrior of the Iron Islands would have the slightest chance against him.

“Lord Torrhen Stark, I suppose?”

Her interlocutor nodded calmly before bowing slightly.

“Lady Asha,” the son of Eddard Stark and her future husband replied. “Welcome to Winterfell.”

**Ser Stevron Frey 1**

Being Heir of a Noble House in the Seven Kingdoms of Westeros was obviously one of the greatest titles which could be bestowed at birth. Only belonging to a Lord Paramount family or the Royal House of King’s Landing was granting you a greater position in the complex hierarchy of the highborn Houses. You had the money to arm yourself, train with an acceptable master-at-arms and fight in tourneys or melee. Money to eat or drink was not a problem. Provided you didn’t fail at the most basic things, you were always welcome in the neighbouring castles. If your skill at arms was impressive, you could earn quite a bit of fame before retiring when the Lord of your House left this earthly world.

There was a small flaw in the Heir’s position, unfortunately. The Lord or the Lady of your House had to die at one point of your life. And on this small but crucial issue, the fact he was the Heir of the Twins was a mockery of fate.

Stevron was old. Born in the year of two hundred and thirty-four after the Conquest, he had recently celebrated his sixty-sixth name day. In a peaceful realm, he could tell of several scores of men he had rode with who were already dead and buried in the fertile soil of the Riverlands.

He was old and he was still waiting for his father, Lord Walder Frey, to die and finally claim the Lordship. After forty years of waiting and his forces abandoning him morning after morning, Stevron had sadly acknowledged becoming a Lord was now not going to do him any good. Even if his father died tomorrow – and given the vigour of the robust patriarch, he would never bet on this – his best years were long past him and he was not confident he had five more years in his tired body. His hairs had lost long ago every colour but the grey. A third of his teeth were missing. His eyes saw half the distance they could watch a decade before.

There were some advantages to be the longest living Heir of the Twins nonetheless. He married three times, had plenty of children, grandchildren and even a couple of great-grandchildren with more on the way. If he gave the order, he could command an escort of one hundred horses and knights to follow him to whatever destination he had in mind.

This happened less and less often these days. He was quickly exhausted past morning and had to rest twice as long as he was fifty. Preserving his meagre forces was now the goal of his afternoons, and it had become a chore in itself.

As such, standing like he was at the moment on the rampart of Sentinel’s Stand had cost him a lot of his vigour and he knew he was going to pay for it heavily in the next fortnight. But for the moment, his attention was elsewhere.

His old eyes were watching the dark green clouds massing over the Neck. In winter, such a growing storm would not have been out of the norm save the colour. In these last days of summer, it was easy to recognise it as the unnatural phenomenon it was.

It was an ugly thing, no matter the number of leagues separating him from these twisted clouds. Sometimes it was like contemplating a wall of darkness and miasma. At other times it was clearer but you could almost see atrocious heads, fangs and other awful things emerging from the storm.

“When did it begin?” He asked to his host, trying to keep the dread he felt out of his voice.

“Last evening,” replied Lord Benedict Sentinel. Two years younger than Stevron himself, the Master of the greatest fortress of the Small Wall was built like a bull and no fat or sign of a life of indulgence could be seen on his hard visage. His white hairs were short and the frosty wind carried from the North had no effect. Benedict was tall and defiant. “Cliff Fort has also reported new storms in the Bite. The Sistermen have sent all their ravens. Blue and purple lightning are illuminating the seas. Several of their fishermen have not returned from their daily duties.”

“They know of the incoming Crusade.” Northern spies had not the time to send ravens to their masters, so the only option to be aware of the southern recent events was sorcery. Stevron did not find it very reassuring. He was hardly a good leader of men and had fought two melees in all his youth, but he could recognise the advantage in information the heretical practises offered the men from the Neck and beyond. “How long do you think?”

“Less than a fortnight for the first skirmishers,” the words were determined and not hesitant. “There will be raiding parties of humans and non-humans heretics from the Edge Fort to the Cliff Fort testing our defences in depth. Light infantry, monsters from the Neck and a few mounted scouts, all armed with poisoned weapons.”

Stevron shivered. The reputation of the crannogmen when it came to poisons was not an amusing thing. All the veteran stories and old folk tales were in agreement on one thing: a scratch from an arrow of the Neck was a guarantee of long suffering and endless agony. Many men of the Riverlands and Westeros had been taught on the battlefield that it was indeed quite possible for a grown man to beg for death at the hands of his own comrades rather to endure the torture of the monstrous poisons.

“You must convince your Father to accelerate his muster Stevron,” Benedict pressed him. “The storm is coming and I fear the banners of Riverrun will not arrive in time to help us.”

“I will try,” his attempt to smile must have looked very unconvincing he was sure. “But my Father was more interested in the preparations of his marriage than ordering us to march to war.”

Oh, they had very large armouries, a great number of siege engines and thousands of young men eager to prove themselves in the name of ambition and gaining the capricious favours of Lord Walder. But House Frey had not participated in a real campaign in his entire life.

“What is it, his ninth one this time?”

“It is,” the Heir of the Twins confirmed. “The eighth died in childbirth four moons ago, so he found an ugly Reacher of House Florent no one wanted to marry and demanded a dowry of silver and a caravan of the South to trade with our household.”

As much as a lot of his fellow Riverlords didn’t like his Father, there was no denying the elderly Lord had kept all his wits and abilities to exchange mud against silver.

“Well, tell him to stop fornicating.” Benedict didn’t snarl, but he wasn’t far from it. “If Sentinel’s Stand falls to the heretics, the Twins will be the next fortress to be besieged.”

“I know,” he sighed before giving a last glance to the darkness moving southwards. “This is going to be a war we’ve never seen the like...”

**Author’s note**: three Crusades have been declared, the time of war and bloodshed is upon Westeros. The Ironborn are ready to return to their nasty reaving habits. The South musters its armies, numerous but inexperienced to the rigours of carnage and winter. And the North is ready to destroy their old opponents of the Faith...but not everything is going according to the plan.

Next chapter will see the first clashes of the war...and the first tragedies too.

As usual, if you want to support this story on P a treon: ww w. p a treon Antony444