**Chapter 5**

**Summer Games**

**Tyrion Lannister 2**

The village of Oxcross was absolutely not impressive in any way. Granted it was a bit unfair, he was a dwarf born and raised within the splendour of Casterly Rock. Against the formidable thousand years-old natural citadel of the Westerlands, there were not many locations and man-made masterworks which could stand the comparison.

Once these details were said, the reality was the reality: there was not much to see at Oxcross. It was one of these minor villages on the sides of the Rock Road, the great road built and maintained by House Lannister to walk and ride from the western coast to the fortress of the Golden Tooth. Past the seat of House Lefford of course, it was no longer called the Rock Road. It became the River Road, like the Tullys and their vassals had had the idea to unite and imitate the work of the West workers. Tyrion had read the dusty archives and knew the Lord Paramount of the Riverlands of the time had only been able to begin and finish the large roads with King’s Landing support. Otherwise, the Lords of the Trident would still be there squabbling with each other and using the muddy wheel-breaking animal paths they had the audacity to call ‘roads’.

But back to Oxford, the village he was watching with a Myrish spyglass in one hand and a cup of wine in the other. It was a village of about a hundred houses like they were plenty in the Westerlands. Built on the slope of a very small hill like most of the settlements in this part of the Kingdom, it had enjoyed a moderate prosperity in these long years of peace. Oxcross was sufficiently far from the coast to be protected from the storms coming from the Sunset Sea but only five days of tranquil ride away from Casterly Rock and thus avoided the harshness of the high passes and low mountains of their eastern border. In months of long summer like this one, the harvests were particularly bountiful and the village being nearly on top of the Rock Road was a guarantee the farmers met no problem when they wanted to sell fruits, vegetables or their surplus livestock to wealthy merchants or the occasional travellers.

Oxcross like many villages of this size had no Knightly House to call master. If the records in the lower levels of the Rock could be trusted, there had been a minor tower here some two hundred years ago but House Oxfield had sided with the Blackfyres during the First Rebellion and when the time came to punish the traitors, the Lord Lannister of the time had not been in the mood for clemency and hostages. House Oxfield had disappeared like so many Knightly Houses fell, and Tyrion was not sure a single inhabitant of Oxcross remembered they had once gone to war under the banner of an ox. Like the inhabitants of Lannisport, the Oxcross shepherds and farmers were paying their taxes directly to his Lord Father and when the banners had been called for the war of the Ninepenny Kings, they had sent their young men under the gold lion of House Lannister.

As far as Tyrion had investigated, this was all there was to know about Oxcross. In the history of the Seven Kingdoms, no great battles had ever been fought near it. There were no gold or silver mines under these green pastures. The greatest resources of Oxcross were the corn of its fields and the wool of its sheep.

The most imposing structure of the village was the small sept where an elderly septon blessed the babies, preached his sermons once every seven days and did whatever religious men did in their lives. There was a small inn close to the road which was also serving as a tavern for the local smallfolk.

In short, Oxcross had all the appearance of a small and productive village, its people were loyal to Lord Tywin Lannister and thoughts of treachery and conspiracy against their liege were so foreign that the Summer Islanders were far more likely to attack and sack Lannisport before these Westerners rebelled.

It was certainly not a place where any Brave Son was searching for heretics and abominations against the Seven.

Then again, perhaps this was the whole point, Tyrion mused. While the self-proclaimed guardians of the Faith were tracking their prey in the ugly lodgings of Lannisport, northern swamps or desolate mountains, the real danger was hiding mere feet away from the road where soldiers and merchants came every day. The Rock Road was regularly patrolled, of course. But were the sworn swords of every Lord really searching for enemies when there was a tavern calling for them a hundred feet away?

Speaking from experience, Tyrion was ready to bet the answer to this question was a ‘no’. When people wanted to get drunk, have a girl in their bed and enjoy some rest before their poor rear stopped hurting when they left the saddle – not necessary in this order, mind you – they rarely thought about the enemies waiting in the shadows.

“Captain Tyrar, prepare your men.” He ordered while looking at a plain and sturdy house which looked like it had been here for a very long time. It was not completely outside the village, but it wasn’t at the centre of it, either. The grass surrounding the house was yellow and sparse, an oddity when one saw the green landscape of Oxcross and something that should have pushed someone to raise the alert. The problem was that no smallfolk had done so, or if they had done it, the greater villages and the Rock had never heard of it. He finished his cup of wine, before handing it to Pod.

“Yes, my Lord.” The aged blonde-haired officer saluted martially with eagerness. It was understandable; his Lord Father’s orders to the Captain had obviously been a form of punishment for some failure the Lord of Casterly Rock had decided but instead Tyrion had informed him they were going to make a detour to hunt heretics before riding east to see the Great Tourney given in Prince Aegon’s honour.

“You heard Lord Tyrion! There are heretics in this house, arrest them for the glory of the Rock!”

Some two scores of swords were drawn from their scabbards and the Lannister guards, magnificent in their red cloaks, leonine helmets and mail shirts they wore over boiled weather.

“For the glory of the Rock and House Lannister!” shouted the men, the ruckus making a lot of partridges flying away from a tree they had been resting and probably killing the effect of surprise in one go.

Oh by the Seven, it was not like it was going to matter. Unless the group of heretics hiding in the house was including deaf and blind men, they must have seen the force which had just arrived on their doorstep.

It was an observation more than verified before he had the time to say ‘Castamere’.

“Crush that door!” ordered Captain Tyrar to the four of his men who were carrying an improvised ram – it was the carved remnant of a tree trunk they had found a league before Oxcross.

The retaliation came from a fissure which had been hidden behind the ivy. From his position from afar, Tyrion was only able to see what looked to be a hand and an immaterial spear of livid green. The effects, on the other hand, were far more unpleasant.

The Lannister guard who was hit by this sorcery threw down his weapon and began to scratch his own face while screaming in agony.

“Definitely heretics, Pod.” He said in a satisfied voice to his squire – the poor scion of House Payne was watching with astonished eyes and a wide-open mouth. The poor lad had been aware of his plans for some time, but it seemed the application of them under the pleasant sun of the Westerlands was giving him headaches.

“Our guards do seem to have fun killing the demon-loving scum,” he uttered out loud for the benefit of the six men having stayed behind to ensure his personal protection.

Truly, nothing could be further from the truth. The door of the heretic’s lair had finally broken, but the first man to run inside was projected outside by an unseen force, his whole body covered in green flames and a spear piercing his leg.

Fortunately, these were the red cloaks of Lord Tywin Lannister, not some band of peons and green farmers levied before a long campaign. Seeing their brother-in-arms fall, battle-cries extorting the might of House Lannister echoed and the soldiers slashed their way into the house. The loud noises arriving to his ears told him that there was a lot of animation...the steel clashing against the steel was unmistakable for anything else.

“I hope they will get some prisoners and the papers,” Tyrion Lannister spoke out loud. He wasn’t going to say it in public, but even with the information learned from the *Book of Malal*, finding this band of heretics had been a monumental chore.

The screams were really becoming loud, though.

“HEAR ME ROAR!”

“FOR THE GRANDFATHER!”

“THE SEVEN HELLS AWAIT YOU!”

“THE TRUE GODS WILL NOT RELENT OR SURRENDER!”

The big issue he had in his quest to reduce the threat posed by Chaos cults was that they weren’t stupid. The Faith, the Brave Sons in particular, were rather blind and narrow-minded, but the real heretics had taken a lot of precautions to avoid the iron fist of their trackers. Contrary to one might expect, the worshippers of the Northern abominations were paying their taxes in due time, went to the local sept at least a dozen times per moon and on average did everything to prove their loyalty to their Lord Paramount. The author of the *Book of Malal* had written lengthily on the question and concluded no heretic worth the name had ever been imprisoned for not paying his due in gold and silver.

No, to find the cults, you needed to discover quartz and other precious ingredients, stones and components they needed for their rituals. If he found the chariots and merchants transporting these unusual objects, he would find the heretics.

“My Lord...”

Podrick’s intervention forced him to turn his eyes to the roof...which had apparently begun to burn in green flames. As if that wasn’t enough, the four guards which had fallen to the enemy spells were now putrefied corpses, the noises of battle were only rising from inside, three soldiers rushed out of the habitation with panicked looks and a very pungent odour of musk was coming to his little nose.

Frowning, the young brother of Jaime Lannister saw his first raid on a Chaos base turn into a complete disaster. It was frustrating. So many searches, days passed in the archives and many gold dragons spent for so little result. He was obviously not going to get the information he needed from this raid.

It did not take long before Tyrar himself got out with his remaining men – and Tyrion noticed half a score was missing – and then the soldiers began in a hurry to torch down the building and the bodies of the fallen.

“Your sources were quite accurate my Lord, but they underestimated the danger posed by these sorcerers,” the Lannister Captain told him when the house was a pyre and the roof had collapsed, burying whatever was still alive in there in an avalanche of flames and stones. “I lost fourteen men for three sorcerers.”

Tyrion grimaced openly but inside he wasn’t really surprised. Chaos sorcerers were a plague difficult to eradicate at the best of times and all Tyrar and his men had was the good old steel of their swords and their courage.

“I will send a raven at Sarsfield to my Lord Father,” he informed the commander of his escort. “We will have other experienced men ready when we return from King’s Landing.”

*And let’s praise Malal I read this book and realised the true scale of the threat. The Book of Malal was right; the laws of Order can’t comprehend their opposites. It takes Chaos to oppose Chaos*.

**Lord Steffon Baratheon 2**

Walking around the uncountable tents which had been built specially for this momentous event, the Lord of Storm’s End could tell the Great Tourney was going to be an event remembered by tens of thousands Westerosi, smallfolk and highborn alike.

The weather was as perfect as it was possible to be: a warm sun and a great blue sky, and there were rarely more than three small white clouds seen per day. Despite the formal beginning of the tourney being four days away, already hundreds of knights from every corner of the Seven Kingdoms had arrived. Great Lords and hedge knights alike were watched by a massive crowd as their parties rode from the Kingsroad, the Gold Road or the Roseroad. The Lord Paramount of the Vale Lord Jon Arryn had made the greatest impression so far, bringing his Heir Ser Elbert and all the other branches of the Arryns residing near the Eyrie, and increasing furthermore his numbers with scores of young knights of high lineage like House Royce, House Grafton, House Melcolm, House Belmore, House Lynderly and House Redfort...

Of course, the runic armours, the falcon-shaped armours and the blue-white cloaks of the Eyrie were without doubt going to be outclassed by tomorrow. Ravens and young lads had come this morning informing the great delegation from the Westerlands was near and knowing Lord Tywin Lannister like he did, Steffon was intimately convinced the Lord of the Lions had not been cheap on the spending when he needed to exhibit the power and the might of Casterly Rock. The majority of the Westerner fighters camping near the capital were freeriders, hedge knights and warriors of little reputation, but they had nonetheless spread rumours of great and fierce men in golden armours coming to conquer the prizes agreed for the winners of the joust and the melee.

There were also day after day that the Riverlanders were coming behind young Edmure Tully, the Heir of Riverrun in formidable numbers. Steffon had read reports telling at least thirty Noble Houses, fifty Masterly and about two hundred Knightly Houses of the Trident and the Forks which were going to be participating one way or another. The Lord Paramount of the Stormlands knew hundreds of the famous Marcher archers were on their way to seize the honour and the gold the heralds had promised to the one winning the bow contest.

But it seemed that no matter what the Lords of the West and the Trident did, they were going to be forgotten by the formidable host which was coming from the South. The whispers that Lord Mace Tyrell was on his way had taken their time to arrive to the Council’s ears, but when they had he like many had had difficulty to believe them. If the men he had patrolling along the Roseroad could be trusted, the Lord of Highgarden was marching north with a sizeable army of artisans, servants jugglers and merchants, transported more food and wine that should be needed for a city the size of Volantis and he had included in his endless ranks shining knights of incomparable grace mounted on steeds the like were never heard outside the tales and legends. By all accounts, they could not be more than two or three days away...and as one of the Lords supposed to oversee the transportation details, he preferred not to imagine the time it was going to take ferry these thousands Reachers from one bank of the Blackwater to another, even if they brought barges and small galleys for the Great Tourney.

Against these efforts, the disparate delegations of the Storm Lords arriving in small columns were easily forgotten. Not that there were the only ones, far from it. The Dornish delegation had already arrived but it was consisting of less than three hundred men and women. Prince Doran Martell had sent more excuses not to attend, and declared his brother Prince Oberyn would speak with his voice. The reputation of the infamous Red Viper being what it was, Steffon was hoping the man was not going to kill anyone during the tourney. The Dornish knights and fighters were still more numerous than the Iron Islands and the North added together. These two kingdoms had never stopped their complaints that tourneys were a meek way to honour properly their own gods. There were a few men from the lands of White Harbor, Barrowton, Pyke and Harlaw in the inns, taverns and whorehouses of King’s Landing, but overall Houses Stark and Greyjoy were content to ignore it.

Apart from these two kingdoms however, the entire realm had taken pretext of this tourney to celebrate. The Long Summer was continuing; the maesters predictions that autumn could not be that far away had not been followed by colder nights, powerful winds or lasting rains and thus were generally ignored. There were some rumours of wars in the Disputed Lands and far away in the Dothraki Sea, but these conflicts did not impact the trade of the western and eastern coasts. Even the grave incidents with the wildfire fortnights ago had been mostly forgotten, the heretics being killed and dispersed without further bloodshed. The Brave Sons, the Quill Bearers and the rest of the Faithful were staying quiet, as a few of their leaders must have had the intelligence to tell them how bad for their influence ‘religious incidents’ would be in this time of feasting, popular contests and knighthood challenges.

And yet Lord Steffon Baratheon was not a happy man.

No, it had nothing to do with the Great Tourney...the reason was that he had summoned his sons to King’s Landing for today, and unless his eyes were playing tricks on him, there was only man waiting for him near the black and gold tent raised for his personal use not far from the jousting fields.

“Stannis,” he started with a voice dreading the answer to the question he was about to ask. “Where are your brothers?”

“Robert was...delayed at Felwood,” said his second son, trying evidently to not say anything bad in public where every servant and unscrupulous ear could listen to their conversation. “Renly went to Grassy Vale. Both promised they would be back in time for the Tourney, father.”

Steffon swore under his breath. His eldest and youngest sons were going to be the doom of him, unless King’s Landing and its myriads of plots, conspiracies and fetid odour did not get him first. Silently, he entered his tent, moving his fighting arm to invite his cadet son to follow him.

Without a word, the Lord of Storm’s End closed the canvas and he seated on a decorated chair created from the Rainwood forests. Stannis imitated him a moment later. Idly, he noticed his son was wearing a light blue tunic today. Delena’s influence, no doubt. Stannis’ wife was trying continuously to buy softer and happier colours for him and Steffon couldn’t say this was a bad move. If Stannis had chosen his clothes by himself, then black and morose colours would have reigned supreme.

He opened a bottle of red wine from a Merryweather winery and poured its content in two cups before resuming the conversation.

“I see your brothers have completely ignored the commands I’ve given them.” The Storm Lord remarked once the wine had refreshed his throat and somewhat smoothened the disappointment he felt in his heart.

“They tried their best, Father,” affirmed his cadet son like he had predicted. Like always, Steffon could not help but feel proud how Stannis stood in defence of his brothers when they were absent. It was a pity the objects of his loyalty did so little to deserve it. It was a damaging thought assuredly, but it was alas the truth.

“If it is their best, my son, I would hate to see what their worst is.” He remarked humorously. “The last moon we met together, I gave you and your brothers some commands. I did not ask to write a new holy book, reform entirely the tax organisation of the Seven Kingdoms or win a trade war with Braavos.”

Although if he had ordered it, he had a feeling Stannis would have started the task on the same day and pursued it with the same determination and implacable will he always did.

“To Robert, I commanded to go back to Storm’s End and stop neglecting his wife. He had also to resume the training our castellan had prepared for him. It was long time he stopped gallivanting from tourneys to brigand hunts and from melees to the whorehouses’ beds.”

Stannis openly grimaced once he had spoken the words. Good, he understood the magnitude of the problem. Robert was siring far too many bastards and had shamefully abandoned the education of his son and his daughter to others. Seven Hells, Stannis had taken more part in raising Morden and his second son had been away from Storm’s End many fortnights these last years!

“I suppose this means House Errol has complained again, Father?” The voice of Stannis looked more resigned than surprised.”

“They have.” And for good reason, he didn’t add. The union of Robert Baratheon and Erica Errol had been a political affair, of course. Storm’s End had this way improved its relationship with the Noble House which produced the greatest amount of corn in the Stormlands. House Errol was the granary of the lands he ruled. Lord Sebastion – and to be honest his deceased mother Lady Shiera – had become more and more powerful as the years of winter never came and they stored the equivalent of months of harvest reserves. Keeping the House of Haystack Hall happy was becoming more and more important as the seasons would unavoidably change once more. And Robert was siring his bastards right and left, visited Storm’s End merely once or twice per moon and ignored as best as he could Erica...

“They have,” he repeated, stopping his thoughts before his anger at the stupidity of his eldest’ actions grew out of control. “You have done an impressive work mitigating the damage, but Morden and Elenei needed their father and Lord Sebastion wanted Robert to prove he could be a good Lord Paramount when the time came.”

Well, the Lord of Haystack Hall had his answer now. As did the rest of the Stormlands, at the moment he was speaking. Robert could be charming, invincible in melee, an excellent hunter and train to be the incarnation of the Warrior himself, but he would make an awful lord Paramount. That his wife had been forced to cut him access from the gold of their vaults by the time he was twenty name days old had been the first but not the last issue.

“I don’t think Robert can stay with one woman for more than a couple of nights,” Stannis said in an emotionless voice.

“Then perhaps he should have told me this fact when I described to him the most prestigious matches of the Stormlands and the Reach!” It was almost impossible to suppress his fury after this. It was Robert who had chosen Erica Errol out of five Noble Ladies. Yes, he had outright refused some matches – mainly the ones coming from too indebted and less ranked highborn – but Erica Baratheon born Errol was still a pretty woman and hardly a terror for her household! No, Robert had only looked at a wife because it gave him exciting nights...and now that she refused to sleep in the same bed as him, he had lost all interest in her.

Given the uncountable times he had returned from one of his ‘adventures’ with a new disease he had ‘discovered’ with another woman, Steffon didn’t blame his daughter-in-law at all. The Father and the Mother knew that if he had tried the same thing with his wife, he would not have lived that many years!

Anger swelled in his chest and he drank two cups of wine to calm himself. When had he failed to stop his Heir on the path of foolishness and drunken debauchery? Maybe he should have refused the honour of becoming the Hand of the King...but Stannis had turned well, becoming a good husband for his Florent wife, and a good father for his three sons and his two daughters.

Maybe Robert wasn’t simply suited for highborn duties. It had certainly happened more than once before...but it was hellishly inconvenient.

“What about Renly? I assume he did not travel to Tarth like we agreed.”

Steffon had suggested the Heiress of Tarth as a possible betrothed for his third son, but he saw now that it had been a fool’s endeavour. A simple look at a map of the continent could tell you Grassy Vale and the Sapphire Island of the Stormlands were separated by many leagues.

“I think he has a new lover somewhere in the Reach.” The blue eyes of Stannis were thoughtful. “This is not the first time he is riding west. Fawnton, Tumbleton, Grassy Vale, Bitterbridge...the Stormlanders in these lands have seen him a lot this year and there are many rumours spreading.”

The Lord of Storm’s End sighed. As bad as Robert...activities were, they were not as politically damaging as Renly’s. Personally, Steffon Baratheon couldn’t care less if his son wanted to invite men in his bed. But the part in him which was completely devoted to the Stormlands was angry at the lack of discretion his youngest boy showed. The Faith had led hard campaigns in the countryside against all things they considered ‘unnatural’ and if Renly was discovered at the worst moment, the consequences would be disastrous for House Baratheon and his allies.

“A marriage would silence these rumours.” Though there were other possibilities, one which had become more and more possible after Renly refused the young Ladies desirous to wed him. The Maesters, the Faith and the Wall – in his particular order of preference – did not require someone to sleep in the bed of a woman.

“I suppose...” Stannis did not appear convinced. “But he will leave as soon as the tourney ends, Father.”

“Not if I don’t pay for his armour after the jousting.”

His cadet son narrowed his eyes as he drank from his cup and Steffon felt something unpleasant in his throat.

By tradition, if a knight lost against another knight in a joust, he lost his armour and the weapons he had used in this clash of arms to his winner. A ransom was then fixed by the victorious warrior, allowing the defeated to take back his shield, his plate and his lance –amongst other things – against a sack of gold dragons. Depending on the decorations and the smith who had worked on the steel, some defeats were the end of knighthood for poor hedge knights wearing the attire of their ancestors.

Until now, he had personally ransomed back Stannis and Renly’s plates when they lost – though in Stannis’ case, it was rarely necessary as the husband of Delena often made a good showing and won enough in the first rounds to compensate for his own loss. Robert preferred the melee and the contests of pure strength, and his charisma meant he had rarely to pay for his infrequent defeats. But Renly had not the talent for jousting, entered it every time and lost every time against Lords and champions which were not known to be great lances.

Maybe it was time for his third son to learn that the cheering of thousands smallfolk did not dispense him from doing his duty.

“Lord Tarth will have to be appeased.” He whispered to himself. Evenfall Hall was not the most powerful fortress, and House Tarth was inferior to House Swann, Errol, Grandison or the Marcher Lords in status, but letting anger fester in the head of a loyal bannersman was not worth it. “Cleoden will be soon in age to marry and he has seen the Lady Brienne at Bronzegate four moons ago. If he is smitten with her...”

Stannis looked at him strangely like he could not believe he was serious or not.

“Father,” his son said prudently, “the Lady Brienne told all her pretenders at Bronzegate they would have to beat her by lance or sword if they wanted to earn her hand. The woman is a demon with the sword and the axe, and after what she did to several young Knights, I don’t think Cleoden is willing to fight for this prize...”

“Ah.” Bah, this had just been an attempt to find a quick and easy solution to his dilemma. Now he would have probably to agree to some concessions with Lord Selwyn Tarth.

Why was the Games of Thrones so complicated?

**Ser Patrek Mallister 2**

His cousin and future liege Myles had always been better at jousting than him. It was something he had recognised a lot of times in front of their friends, including Edmure, Karyl, Lymond, Jonothor, Lucas and Martin - amongst others. Oh, Patrek was not bad on a horse; he regularly dismounted scores of opponents when he visited castles from the Small Wall to the green hills south of the God’s Eye. But Myles Mallister, his cousin and brother in all but name, was jousting like he had been born on a saddle. It was not the case of course - he had asked his father just to be sure.

No, it was better to acknowledge Myles was simply more gifted at horse-riding and as they were sensibly equals when they wielded swords and spears, Patrek was winning one bout in twenty when they trained against each other for the joust. He was doing a bit better in the melee, but not enough to really believe in his chances.

The Heir of Seagard was also wearing a new armour, grey with many silver eagles and an indigo helmet. Jousts sometimes were decided by the King or whoever was of highest rank, and it would be a lie to tell appearance was not playing a role. The shield with the Mallister arms was pristine and the long purple and silver lance was shining under the sun. If this had been a tourney at Riverrun, Raventree Hall or Harrenhal, Patrek would have bet one or two silver stags that the public would be behind him.

Unfortunately, today the Great Tourney was at King’s Landing, and the uncountable number of knights present had incited the Great Lords presiding to organise as many jousts as they could before the sun set. As a result, the chances of victory on the fields hundreds of horses had trampled over and over depended on your skill...and the luck of the draw.

The latter had abandoned his cousin from the start, as he watched a young man in red and black wearing a dragon-shaped helmet at the other end of the list. Of all the possible opponents, Myles had to be chosen to tilt against Prince Aegon first and to say the smallfolk and the highborn girls on the stands were supporting the Royal family was grossly understating the situation. Moments before, the Kingslanders had watched the triumph of Ser Barristan Selmy over a Rowan knight, and now they demanded more.

“For Seagard!” He shouted but his voice was lost in a torrent of acclamations.

“AEGON! AEGON!” chanted the mass of men, women and children. Some were pushing so hard against the barriers that some Goldcloaks had to position themselves to stop this agitation.

“THE SILVER PRINCE!”

“AEGON!”

“TARGARYEN!”

It was a good thing they had to joust, because if it had been the people surrounding the fields who decided the outcome, Myles would have lost before he had the time to say ‘Above the Rest’.

The trumpet sounded and the two cavaliers charged each other, their tourney lances gleamed against the sun. Myles position on his brown horse was excellent as always, but so was the one of his adversary. And then they struck at each other. For an instant or two, Patrek believed his cousin was going to achieve a draw, but while the Mallister-coloured lance broke against the dragon shield, Prince Aegon had swiftly delivered his blow against Myles’ plate, evading the eagle protection. His cousin was ejected from his mount and received the ‘honour’ of being the third to taste the sun on this beautiful morning.

“Winner, Prince Aegon Targaryen!” announced the herald and the thousands of people surrounding the tourney grounds went wild. Clearly no advice from the Hand of the King watching the competition was necessary this time, Myles had lost fairly.

The silver-haired prince saluted lengthily his supporters, but Patrek’s eyes were fixed on Myles, who was standing again but with the help of two Mallister armsmen and a large grimace on his face once he removed his helmet.

He dearly wished to see if Myles was fine, but his own tilt was about to begin and he was already fully equipped in plate armour. By tradition and custom, only the squires and the men-at-arms entered the fields to carry back their masters and their possessions. The place of a knight on a tourney field was on his horse or it was not to be present at all.

The next joust was boring, Renly Baratheon got dismounted easily by a no-name from the Vale, Hugh, Hugor or something like this. Then it was his turn.

“Ser Patrek Mallister of Seagard against Ser Wader Frey of the Twins!”

The Warrior may have smiled for him and not Myles today, for his opponent was easy to knock down. Big-boned and with an armour which looked too big for him, Walder Frey was agitating his weapon like he was ruling over a windmill. His white horse looked deeply unhappy to bear his weight and Patrek idly demanded himself what sort of knight would consent giving the ‘Ser’ title to someone who had obviously not the qualities for it.

The trumpet sounded again and he and the Frey knight charged each other. Like he had expected, Walder Frey was a pathetic opponent and he didn’t bother feinting or trying one of his new moves. There was no need to. In fact, Patrek had to target fully in the chest his joust opponent because the idiot had badly tightened his helmet.

His purple lance struck true and Walder Frey for a small turn of hourglass seemed to fly over the field before landing in an ungracious crash. He received a fair share of applause, although the smallfolk seemed to be more eager to mock the Frey and laugh at the spectacle the weasel provided. Walder was squealing like a pig as he waited immobile on his back and the men who had come with him from the Twins were trying to extricate him from his armour.

“You got quite lucky, cousin,” told Myles, once they met at his tent. “This weasel couldn’t joust against a dwarf riding a sheep.”

“Lord Walder Frey is getting desperate if he authorises this moron to enter a tourney.” Both young Mallisters chuckled and emptied a few cups of wine. “The next tilts are not going to be so easy, I fear.”

The following events proved him right. Nevertheless, after winning against Walder Frey the long wait began. With so many knights and famous riders wishing to win the privilege of naming the Queen of Beauty, hundreds of jousts happened and this was only the beginning, the luck of draw eliminating as many aspirants before the second and third day. Mertyns, Melcolm, Bracken, Brax, Banefort, Algood, Cafferen, Connington...the number of Noble Houses which saw their Lords and Heirs beaten was huge.

Ultimately, the sun had long passed its zenith when Patrek was called back. His second opponent was...another Frey. At least this time, it was not a Walder: the name of his opponent was Hosteen. Not that this son of Lord Walder was extraordinary skilled in handling his horse, but at least this knight looked like he knew the direction he had to point his lance – a great satisfaction for the spectators and the herald, he was sure.

Patrek beat him all the same, though he feared for an instant there would be a second tilt as Hosteen Frey desperately tried to remain on his force before finally being thrown on the ground. He received some applause for it, but the cheers were really lukewarm. Many Riverlanders in the public were always happy to see one Frey put back in his place, the rapacious taxes of Lord Walder had created him plenty of enemies. But this was not in any way great jousting, and this was what the Kingslanders and the army of Reachers watching the tourney were after. Meagre silver light, the two weasels would have to buy back their plates and since the Twins coffers were filled with silver, Patrek should get a good sum.

His third adversary was decided not long before sunset and this was the moment Patrek knew his luck had ran out.

It was Ser Jaime Lannister of the Kingsguard.

“Try to break a few spears with him, the Lion is a prideful animal,” advised him Myles before entered the field for the third time.

But by the winds and waves of Ironman’s Bay, Patrek didn’t see how it was possible. In his golden and white armour, the son of Lord Tywin Lannister was riding like he was the Warrior himself and his skill with the lance and the shield was so perfect Patrek doubted Myles or any young knight of the Riverlands could equal him before a decade.

“Ser Jaime Lannister of the Kingsguard against Ser Patrek Mallister of Seagard!”

He pushed his horse to full gallop and tried his best...but Jaime Lannister was too fast, too swift. His shield was not raised in his time, and before he had the time to avoid the somersault it was already over, with his eyes watching the sky and his horse abandoning the race once he was no longer on it.

Fortunately, he could stand on his own, he didn’t think there was anything broken from his head to his feet. His wounded pride and the deception however...a lot of wine cups were drunk that night with Myles.

“These Kingsguards are demons,” he moaned a hundred times to Myles and the rest of their friends. He knew he was complaining too much but what else what he supposed to say as they emptied barrel after barrel with scores of other knights defeated in their first tilts. It was a far better atmosphere than when they had hunted the heretic near Hag’s Mire – in pure loss they hadn’t found him – but there was regret and the same of defeat in their group. Six Kingsguards had entered the field at dawn –one had to guard the old King in the Red Keep he supposed – and six had left at dusk unvanquished, their opposition routed and lying in the dust. “What are they not guarding the Royal Family and letting us earn some glory?”

There were murmurs of approval and as the night went on, there were joined by Riverlanders, Stormlanders, Reachers and Kingslanders. There were a lot of toasts raised for the King, the Princes but this was more for politeness’ sake than true royal fervour. They were all disappointed, being thrown out on the first day of the tourney was hard to swallow. About half of the knights able to speak boasted and shouted how they were going to demolish everyone in the melee, Kingsguard or no Kingsguard, Great Lord of free-rider. Girls were kissed, a bard began to song an old tale of adventure and five fair maiden. Glory and five thousand gold dragons waited for them, why were they waiting here around a bonfire?

The blackness was everywhere and soon he wasn’t able to think or see clearly...

A terrifying headache woke him up and before he had the time to utter something, a bucket of cold water was thrown to his face.

“Hey!” Patrek protested before stopping as he saw this one of the sworn swords of his Lord Father. It was hard to stay awake but somehow he managed to stumble around in a tent which wasn’t his – how he had reached this part of the camp used by the Stormlanders, he hadn’t the slightest idea.

The cold water was harsh but helped him clarify his thoughts faster, allowing him to realise it wasn’t dawn yet. The night they had started in a celebration wasn’t over. What he had taken for suns when he was half-dead were in reality torches by the hundreds lighted from the Blackwater to Stokeworth – or so it appeared to his eyes.

His ears were ringing, and for a time Patrek didn’t understand what was happening. A new dose of cold water on his face and his head was enough woken up to know the problem was not coming from him but from King’s Landing. In the distance, the great bells were ringing, a sinister sound which crawled on his skin like an unpleasant nightmare.

“What is happening in the name of the Seven?” He demanded to his Riverlander guide once they tried to march back to their tents.

At such a late hour – or an early one, the Hour of the Wolf was long past certainly – there should have been only a few servants and smallfolk working the fires, preparing the next meals, some smiths and squires repairing in haste the damaged armours and lances of their masters. Instead hundreds of knights were swiftly forced out of their beds as their rest came to an end. Many were donning their armours. There were large columns of Goldcloaks and Baratheons men-at-arms running in every direction, giving imperious orders and pushing out of their ways drunken tourney participants. The large town built around the capital was woken in tumult and agitation...and nobody seemed to know why.

“The King is dead,” the news left Patrek stare open-mouthed and it was only after a long silence he managed to say something, the only thing he could say in this circumstance.

“Long live the King.”

**Lady Lyanna Stark 2**

The altar room was silent and dark. Given the agitation in the streets, the Red Keep and the hundreds of tents around the capital, Lyanna had not summoned anyone to join her this time. It would have been reckless. The more people moved to a place they shouldn’t be, the more questions the imbeciles and hypocrites of the Faith asked.

And they asked a lot in the first place, despite having no right to. The laws of King Maegor were supposed to have ended the presence of the septons and septas in the Game, but one could see the edicts were mere inches away from being ignored these days. It was frustrating, but not surprising. The Kings and their Councils ruling over the Seven Kingdoms were extremely skilled imagining laws that the majority of the highborn and the smallfolk ignored.

Lyanna removed the black cloak and the rest of the disguise she wore while climbing the last stairs and closing the large door behind her. The place was deep underground and no one absent her Slaaneshi subordinates was supposed to know it existed, but being the head of a secret and forbidden organisation meant you had to take precautions the rest of the world would characterise at the limit of paranoia. Yes, Miria was guarding one of the two accesses upstairs and no, none of her agents had been arrested today but with so many enemies circling around the Iron Throne but all it took was a word in the end.

The daughter of Rickard Stark removed her court robe to replace it by a long violet robe and lighted the candles on the altar by hand. She was largely able to do it with a simple gesture, weak winds of power or not, but for the communication she was about to establish it was best not to save her forces.

Her boots were removed and it was with her naked feet experiencing the cold of the stone ground she dragged a drugged Goldcloak to the altar. The man was one of three bodies they kept in magically-induced coma for cases like this. It was not difficult to grab them – the thieves and smugglers of Fleabottom were more than happy to get rid of these corrupt nuisances – and their unpopularity made sure there were not many investigations in the aftermath. Rapidly, she dissipated the sorcery surrounding the fat and stupid guard, waited until his eyes opened...and then plunger her dagger in his throat, savouring his terrified expression as blood started to pour from the lethal wound.

Some additional stabs were struck. The sacrifice’s blood was now soaking the altar’s eight-pointed star. Ancient words of power were said, lowering the temperature of the room and devouring the soul of the Goldcloak. A lot of blood rose magically to form a vaguely humanoid figure. The last incantation was spit more than spoken, but she made no mistake and no chaotic disruption was observed.

“Lyanna,” for the first time in moons, she heard the voice of her brother. “You were not supposed to make contact before three days.”

Deep inside, Lyanna felt shame and anger. She had been sent south to sow the seeds of discord between the Kingdoms and while it could be argued she had done exactly that, the last part of her plans was now in ruins. Just because Aerys has chosen this moment to drop dead of old age.

Now the Brave Sons were screaming heretics were behind the death, the assassination attempts she had prepared on Mace Tyrell and the Hand of the King were now nearly impossible to pull off and every septon nearby was calling for a crusade. If she didn’t know any better she would have suspected them to have killed the old fool, but in all likelihood they had just known of his failing health and prepared their ‘faithful’ for this moment.

There was going to be a crusade against the North but it was going to be a far more united one than they had planned for. Her sorcerers and the invasion hosts were going to have to strike hard and fast if they wanted the Black Crusade to be successful.

“I have bad news for you, brother. War has begun.” Lyanna grimaced. “Everything is not going as planned.”

**Author’s note**: And at long last, peace is over for Westeros. The machinations of Chaos and the Faith have finally ended the long period of peace known as the Long Summer. Now, it is going to be the time of swords, great battles, magic and massacres.

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

Little message for Paul: while I’m flattered you comment a lot on my stories, please try not to swarm me under the reviews, especially when many are one sentence-long and were sometimes written in other reviews. If you want more answers, I suggest you take an account and send me a few PM, I answer the questions of my readers if it does not spoil too much the plot and the outcome of future chapters.