**Chapter 20**

**Iron Fever**

**Lady Johanna Lannister**

The halls of Casterly Rock were cold and silent.

This was an unsolvable problem, the Head of House Lannister knew. When people spoke about the Lords of the West, what were they speaking about? The Rock of course, and its vaults filled with mountains of gold, silver, gemstones and other precious metals. And to say the truth, certain locations were exactly answering to this description: the Golden Gallery was golden from the ceiling to the floor, and here thousands of the most valuable heirlooms, relics and ornaments belonging to the dynasty which once had ruled uncontested on the Westerlands were stored. It was just the greatest exhibition of Lannister’s wealth; Johanna could count half a dozen others her Lord husband had made her visit several years ago.

Yes, the Lannisters had a lot of gold. In fact, even in their weakened state, they could still in all likelihood buy the Black Kingdom, beginning with Winterfell, the Eyrie and Riverrun before sinking their fortune in the monumental debt the Targaryens had let get out of control in a vain attempt to win the war as quickly as it was possible.

But what good did it did to her when there were no merchants to take their gold? The war might be over, but the terrible winter and the disastrous situation of Westeros – a realm divided and many provinces the feeding ground of the crows – had made sure the pre-war prosperity was years away from returning.

And in turn, this harsh reality had forced House Lannister, wealthiest of the Lords and Wardens, to acknowledge they couldn’t even warm a fourth of the rooms inside their ancestral and gigantic citadel. There wasn’t one fifth or one fourth of the wood, coal and oil available to purchase at Lannisport and the other close villages.

Johanna had made plans with her councillors to invigorate the crippled economy. Most of them had crashed in mere fortnights. First of all, the damage done by the River raiders but most of all by the Ironborn reavers had not been overestimated. In fact, according to the raven messages and more extensive reports sent by horses, the scars left by the war were worse than ever. It was like the vermin of the Red Kraken had looked at the inferno and the butchery created by the dragons and said ‘I bet I can do better!’. Secondly, and most concerning, they had an unfriendly kingdom on their other frontier and the Westerners had been disagreeably surprised by the Black Queen’s priorities. It was no great secret the West was not a kingdom which produced a lot of food; it could hardly be otherwise when a third of their lands were abrupt hills and low mountains. What could be cultivated was cultivated, but large cities like Lannisport needed a lot of food day after day. Lannister-sponsored officials had hoped the ending of hostilities would allow them to resume their profitable activities in the Riverlands. Kermit Tully, with the seal of his Queen had clearly told her this was not going to happen. Western agents acting under her orders had been forbidden to operate in Black-held lands, and the food prices were exploding as soon as a loyal Green buyer arrived in front of a granary.

Logically, she had turned to the Reach to compensate. They were part of the same kingdom, weren’t they? Alas, while the Wolves and the Black Dragon had been busy rebuilding their House, the Greens south of Silverhill had been busy...busy bickering and squabbling, that is. No one was fighting, which was definitely a progress, but the fall of the Hightowers and the rising renewal of House Tyrell had caused untold chaos. Brigands and knights were extorting ruinous tolls for every chariot passing their holdfasts and moons after moons they were becoming greedier.

This was becoming unbearable. Countless nights, she had wondered why would have happened if she had convinced her husband to stand with the Blacks. Assuredly, they would have had to stand against the fury of Vhagar, but Western keeps had been rebuilt and armed with lethal scorpions and ballista after the reign of Maegor the Cruel, for the Lannisters and the bannersmen had learned in blood and tears madmen were not barred from mounting dragons. But they had killed her husband, and in this war, their generation had to endure too much atrocities and slaughters for reconciliation to be easy and possible without the assent of the Iron Throne. Maybe, one day, when their grandchildren had forgotten the horrors of the Dance...

No, it did no good to thread on things which were not in her power. Adjusting her warm red furred robes, her red cloak of the same material with the golden lion roaring in defiance, she entered the Great Hall under the clamour of six horns and six other instruments. The musical group was small and consisted mostly of women. They were tired and many kept only brave faces because she had ordered them to do so.

This was not the only change she had been forced to command, to her deep dissatisfaction. A lot of old tapestries and furniture had been removed from the Hall, for the cold bedrooms of the Rock needed it far more than this useless monument of arrogance. The old Kings would have screamed bloody murder at the idea of some of their ancient possessions making the servants rooms and work acceptable, but Johanna had been forced to consider the fact that while she could afford putting a price of a million gold dragons for someone’s head, she had a very limited supply of trained and competent servants – the Massacre of the Western army and her Lord Husband didn’t look so bad when you knew the Tullys had also removed the heads of half of their camp followers and marched the others to their own camps where they had never come back from.

There were also a third of the Red Cloaks she had used once for her personal protection. They were too badly needed at Lannisport and elsewhere to stay here lazy and leaning against the walls.

“Let them enter,” she ordered once she was seated on her golden throne supported by four massive roaring lions – all in gold of course.

Seven men made their entrance, four of them sprouting grey breads and the three others looking like they in time would harbour them too. All of them were clothed in grey robes, had chains around their neck and generally behaved like they were doing her a favour by being there. At long last, the maesters had deigned ascending from their over-heated libraries and study rooms in the hottest sections of her fortress.

“Lady Lannister,” they all bowed at the same time. Now if only they truly respected her authority...

The evidence of this lack of respect was not long in coming when after several heartbeats one of the younger grey-robed men thought her silence was invitation to stand without permission. A Red Cloak slamming the handle of his weapon in his back was the adequate warning of her displeasure.

“Rise,” she said after fifty more heartbeats, judging they had squirmed long enough on the floor. As much as she was satisfied to let these people who barred all women from their ‘science’ receive a good reminder she was in control of the Rock, her time was precious and far better used to solve the problems of the Westerlands.

“My Lady, if we haven’t offended you in any way...”

She ignored totally the weak tirade.

“You have been summoned today, maesters, for a new threat has appeared, one which might once more endangers the very blood and heart of the Iron Islands. Unlike the pirates, this one is one your order is far more used to fight against. It arrived at Crakehall eleven days ago, and Lord Crakehall called it like the Arbor sailors the Iron Fever.”

“Yes, my Lady, a terrible illness born in the ruined islands of the Ironborn...”

“I’m glad you realise the danger, maester. As we speak, Lord Crakehall and his forces have enforced harsh quarantine measures, which is the very reason this message came from a horse-mounted squire and not a raven.”

This was not the exact truth, unfortunately. The reason why they hadn’t used ravens was the fact the trained black birds had become a previous commodity in these troubled times, and alas Crakehall had no more to send to the Rock. She wasn’t going to admit it in front of her diminished court, though.

“Fortunately, we at the Rock have seven maesters instead of our usual two. Therefore, I have already made preparations to send five members of your Order to heal as best as your talents may the lives of the highborn and the smallfolk of Crakehall.”

“My Lady...” the shock and the fear on the Citadel rats’ visages were awe-striking. And here they screamed they were specialists of healing and the like. In real life, though, maesters had spent most of the Dance playing their little games in the shadows and caring for the pregnant women had been one of the rare services had been one of the rare things she was sure they had done well, loyally, and without ulterior motive.

Now it was time to put them back to work and ensure they stayed at the station they deserved.

“The Westerlands have suffered too much in the recent war for the Iron Fever to be authorised to roam unchecked across our lands, and delivering thousands of souls to the Stranger. On my own authority, a convoy of surplus medicine from Sarsfield has been assembled and will rush to Crakehall. I’m sure you will find these stocks of the highest quality. Naturally, you will also be escorted by one hundred knights and freeriders loyal to House Lannister, Tarbeck and Prester.”

“My Lady, you confidence honours us, of course...”

“Perfect! In this case, wise maesters, I leave you the rest of the day to choose between yourselves the five heroes who will help stop this dreadful fever from causing more deaths and torn-apart families...”

This time, the seven grey-robed men respected the court protocols as they retreated all haste towards the doors they had used moments ago.

“Make sure there are five of these seven men at dawn ready to depart for Crakehall,” she ordered in a low growl to one of her Captains. “You have my support to drag them from their beds – without their whores – and tie them to their donkeys if they protest too much...”

**Queen Baela Targaryen**

Political negotiations and diplomatic meetings had entered her life less than five years ago, and the more moons were spent working on them, the less Baela liked them. This was a field where dragons were useless except to threaten the man or the woman before you. The sessions were long and boring.

No, talking about politics and the affairs of the realm were not her cup of ale. There were things far more interesting in life. Flying a dragon. Having sex with her new Prince-Consort. Sparing with a sword or training with a bow. Hunting boars, stags, foxes and all sort of animals, either for Moondancer’s dinner or for the hungry mouths of the Riverlands. Also drinking, eating and resting next to a well-prepared fire away from the fury of winter. And that was just the activities which came directly from the top of her mind.

Unfortunately, advisors and Lords were getting smarter. After they had agreed that trying to feel her guilty by insinuating her parents would be so disappointed by her whims was doomed to failure, most of her court, Masters and the like had tried new tactics. Each time a proposition or a message arrived on her deck, they insisted on all the lives which depended on these accords and her final decision. To her shame, arguing with their rather unrealistic predictions wasn’t good. Riding Moondancer over the snowy lands was not telling her on the people, the trade roads and the myriad of details her kingdom needed to function.

Still, politics were slow, boring and it didn’t help the Targaryens who had preceded her had left her a mountain of troubles. It was unpleasant to recognise, but a lot of laws passed by Jaehaerys the Conciliator, her great-grandfather, had never been applied in the remote provinces of the Seven Kingdoms before the Civil War. Good Queen Alysanne had been...vocal and forceful in her effort to end the first night. Well, as a woman, Baela could certainly sympathise. The problem was, the moment the Good Queen had began her long work to abolish this custom, the Lord Stark and the Lord Manderly of the times had politely but calmly ignored certain edicts concerning the sale of their famed amber, furs and wood....before rising their prices in the last years of the reign as a Great Council was called and it was clear none of the Conciliator’s heirs would frequently visit the North for the next decade.

The documentation which had survived the fall of Queen Rhaenyra and the last campaign before the weapons were temporarily abandoned confirmed the Vale and the Riverlands like the North had sometimes adopted this strategy with varying degrees of success. As King Viserys reigned and Crown oversight was getting less exigent, many bannersmen and merchants had manipulated their figures and started to cheat the treasury off their due. It caused her plenty of headaches, and she was sure this was going to keep several future generations of dragonriders awake late for the next decades.

“I trust we are all in agreement here? No additional demand, obsolete law or Northern custom we have failed to speak about?”

It was her Hand who chose to answer for her entire Council.

“No, your Grace.”

“Splendid! In this case, Lord Stark, you can announce the entire accord as our poor scribes are preparing the official parchment and the copies which will go into the new royal archives.”

If Cregan Stark felt despair at the idea of developing the entire agreement a last time, he showed no sign of it.

“As you wish, your Grace.” The Lord of Winterfell took an instant to take a short inspiration before starting his long tirade. “This new edict is necessary for the prosperity of the realm. While no one doubts King Jaehaerys and Queen Alysanne’s good intentions, the long century of peace enjoyed by the realm has literally killed the Night’s Watch and the problem was increased by the massive deportations of Warrior’s Sons and Poor Fellows under Maegor the Cruel. At the moment we speak, neither the Night’s Watch nor the Lords of the northernmost lands have the men to block the way to a wildling invasion.”

Quite a few eyes turned towards the lone captain of the Night’s Watch present in the room, but the black-armoured simply nodded silently.

“The New Gift can’t and won’t play the role it was supposed to fulfil. As such, by common accord between Lord Commander Bolton and Queen Baela Targaryen, the New Gift lands are returned to the guard of the legitimate sovereign of the Seven Kingdoms.”

Her, in other words. She had at first tried to involve the Green in the defence of the Wall – they ruled over three kingdoms and half and they certainly weren’t shy sending a lot of their criminals to take the black – but all she had received from King’s Landing were excuses, excuses, apologies and more rapists, murdered and vermin who had never accomplished an honest thing one day in their life. Lord Commander Bolton’s emissary had not been shy to tell her there were limits in all things, and as things currently stood they were forced to remove one in three by ‘tragic hunting accidents’ before they swore their vows...and often before they ever saw the towers of Eastwatch.

“The Crown will sell these lands back to their legitimate owners if and when they desire it. Per the ancient maps, House Umber will be returned the eastern-third of the New Gift, under the following conditions. First, Lord Umber and his descendants agree to lower the price of furs by five percent until the Crown receives the raven announcing the return of spring. Second, House Umber will pay a sum of five thousand dragons and will accept under its rule without exception all the people currently living on these lands. No property, save those sized illegally, will be confiscated. Third, House Umber will as soon as it is practically feasible, fortify the lands which have just been returned to their custody. Fourth, the fishing rights on the shores of these new lands...”

There was more and more of course. And it was repeated three times. Because while House Umber received back the eastern part of the New Gift – an increase in lands which, according to the rumours, had made her very popular with the hirsute Lord and his cousins – the New Gift had not been taken entirely from their lands. The western third of the Conciliator’s ‘gift’ had been taken from House Flint of the Mountains, which had become part of the Mountain clans. They too would return to the lands they had been deprived of, although unlike the Umbers, both she and the rest of her River Lords had made it an essential clause they would build a new harbour on the coast to provide a new naval presence on the Bay of Ice with House Mormont and House Glover’s help. Forests which had been neglected or burned under the Night Watch’s guardianship would also be replanted, though this was going to take a while for coves and wood to be tall again.

Queenscrown and the central lands would form a new minor Lordship for a new Masterly House, to be fortified by the newly created House...Queenscrown, with a son of House Karstark and a daughter of House Umber as the first Lord and Lady.

“In exchange, the Lord Paramount of the North will cede the lands in the Western Mountains known as ‘Earth Rumble’ for one thousand gold dragons...and the Order of the Black Swords will be created, to help the Night’s Watch hold back the barbaric hordes and tell the noble black brothers we stand with them in their long watch.”

Convincing Winterfell and the clans to sell this land had not been difficult. The location known as ‘Earth Rumble’ was isolated, mountainous even by Northern standards, and dangerous. For humans, it was best to avoid it if you valued your life. For dragons, it was the perfect place for a new hatchery after the Blacks had lost Dragonstone.

The Order of the Black Swords had been more difficult to sell. In principle, everyone had agreed something had to be done with the Night’s Watch, which in a few decades would approach its breaking point.

But in audiences, except the Northerners, few were convinced they had to open their purses. So Baela and her Hand had to improvise. The Order would be paid in part with the Crown and in part by nine Noble Houses, three for each of the Kingdoms she ruled. For a period of five years, each House would arm and pay one hundred of its guards to go to the Wall and serve temporarily under the authority of the Lord Commander. It would provide nine hundred soldiers and warriors to the Lord Commander...and incidentally, give her a core of trained men knowing the hardship of northern life and war against an opponent, though the wildlings were unlikely to say the least to field dragons, knights in plate and thousands of Essossi sellswords.

The Order of the Black Swords would provide military succour to the Night’s Watch, and maybe, just maybe, revalue the life of the black brothers in the eyes of the realm. Baela was not going to spend her evenings pray for this, but hopefully they would stop the decline of the ancient Wall Order.

At last the parchments were ready and the countless political agreements she had to barter were all announced without a murmur of protest.

The seals were given and then it was done.

“In common unity and for the good of the realm, the New Gift is officially no more. Let it be known that, I Queen Baela Targaryen, will stand with my dragon and the Order of the Black Swords should any threat attack the Wall from the Haunted Forest.”

Gods be good, may it be the only Targaryen legacy she was forced during her reign. The Conqueror and the Conciliator had often done things for a reason – though sometimes said reason escaped her experience – and since she had absolutely no intention to resurrect the Faith Militant internal revolts should only happen if she had badly misjudged something.

This was alas an exhausted maester chose to barge in the council room and depose a letter in front of her with the recognisable seal of House Mallister.

“It comes from Seagard, your Grace. The rumours about an epidemic from the Iron Islands were maybe not rumours of fisher wives...”

**Ser William Erenford**

William couldn’t remember being so afraid for his life.

He couldn’t.

It shouldn’t have been like this. He was not going to say he knew every tavern, street corner and fisherman of Seagard, but he had been one of the many Riverlands knights called to arms in the last war to defend the fortified home of the Mallisters. With the Ironborn ravaging the coasts and the reavers trying to pillage the coasts, all the Noble Houses had decided it was best to defend the Cape of Eagles and the neighbouring regions before the dreaded Red Kraken tried the same kind of conquests his Hoare predecessors achieved long ago.

But this time of peril, long wait and war had been thought ended. The Red Kraken had been devoured by the fishes or whatever after losing some battle somewhere, the Iron Fleet had burned under the flames of a Green dragon, and the Ironborn were starving and dying on their damned islands, forsaken by their fucking Drowned God.

But the enemy which had come while he escorted a food convoy was not the one which came with swords, and spears, war battle-cries and longships. No, this enemy left no trace like that. From the outside, there were not a lot of signs the city was different. Maybe it was a bit darker, but then it was winter and with the furious storms coming regularly from the Bay, the dark snow and the lack of sun, there was no way the weather could be bright, right?

The big difference lied in the fires and the deserted streets. Where they should have been lighted to help the smallfolk warm as they tried to continue their work and transport the fishes from the ships to the markets, everything had changed in the last days.

Everything had changed, for the Iron Fever had come to Seagard.

William didn’t know from where the name had come from, he wasn’t sure he cared, but he had to agree the name was stuck. Some doomsayers at first had tried to launch riots and the like against House Mallister, shouting this was the judgement of the Stranger coming at last to punish the sinners. The unblinking obedience to a ‘Black whore’, ‘incest-spawned lizards’ and ‘monsters with violet eyes’ may also have been mentioned.

Those had been rapidly sent to the darkest cells of Seagard. Unfortunately, the Iron Fever had not been easily defeated. Despite the sailors and the guards taking as many quarantine precautions as they possibly could, one ship had managed to break the blockade and rush its ill crew ashore. They had all been slain in a matter of days, but by then it was too late as two or three had managed to enter Seagard.

Now it was a fortnight later, and the souls sworn to House Mallister were paying a dreadful price. Trade was non-existent, as by the orders of the Booming Tower, the contagion could and would not spread to the neighbouring villages. This edict had been enforced by blades and axes. The streets were empty, as everyone had barred doors and every opening in the hope the epidemic would ignore their refuge and strike elsewhere. And the fires were not light illuminations to demand to the Father Above he released them from the embrace of the cold winter, but pyres to burn the dozens of corpses each day brought.

Precautions had been taken and instructions spread by the few maesters present. But there were too few and they lacked the gold to be really effective. Oh, cats had been purchased in great numbers to eat the rats and the rest of the vermin, but since everybody who travelled to Seagard could not come out until the Fever had disappeared, there were not a lot of incoming merchants these days. And while certain spices and substances seemed to have purifying effects, most of them were coming from Essos and after long years of war and trouble, the stocks had been rather slim in the first place.

For guards and knights like him, this meant their duties in the cold, deadly alleys of Seagard had become ugly moments. There still were looters and criminals trying to profit from human misery, but now you never knew which gang of thieves was ill and those who weren’t. A simple cough could be more deadly than ten thousand swords. Two days ago, one of the small barracks had been put to the torch after its occupants had fought a score of outlaws. The death of these bottom-feeders had not saved the guards from dying from the Iron Fever.

It was dreadful, but orders were orders and they had already been warned failure to comply with them would mean the city would burn – no one had dared question if wildfire or dragonfire would be called to begin the destruction of Seagard, but they didn’t need to.

In the end, their salvation was in the hands of the maesters. The surviving maesters, for three had already joined the corpses of their patients burning on the numerous pyres. Those who had perished had been the reasonable ones, alas. Now the mad and the eccentric were left.

“We will have to intensify our efforts to root this ‘Iron Fever’,” declared Maester Cal, who by default had become the leader of the anti-disease effort in Seagard. William would like to describe what the Maester looked like, but it was impossible. From the moment the disease had been announced, the maester had taken to wear what he called his ‘Stranger-shield’ attire. Heavy and black long robes hid his body, a large crow-like mask hid his head, and large ungracious gloves were at the place where hands should be. He exhaled in permanence an acid odour mixed with cheap alcohol.

He was also raving mad and was far too much in love with his wits for anyone to be around him.

“These houses,” a vague cross was made upon a basic plan of Seagard, “are now secondary sources of the epidemic. We will have to burn them, and the sooner, the batter.”

“You’re not serious! There are dozens of people alive in there!”

“Five score of people, according to my latest estimations,” replied Maester Cal. “Half of them are already ill and the few who aren’t today will soon to be.”

“We will not do this without a direct order from Lord Mallister,” shouted one of the captains.

“Cease your ridiculous japing,” declared the dark-robed maester. “Lord Mallister has hundreds of problems like preventing the epidemic from spreading all over the entire province and the Riverlands beyond. He has better things to do than hearing your complaints.”

One of the guards constantly attached to Maester Cal’s escort – recognisable in the fact they wore frightening attires imitating those of their masters and smelled strangely – hit the rebellious captain with his large cudgel in a place no man’s loved to receive a blow.

“Victory over this disease demands great sacrifices and anyway the sick people in these houses will know the Stranger’s embrace in a few hours. Six out of ten were already dead and the Fever is not likely to show them mercy. Purge this disease and Seagard may have a chance to see a spring’s dawn.”

They weren’t told what would happen in the event of failure. Everyone present at the gathering could hazard very unpleasant guesses, however.

“May the Mother, the Crone and the Maiden have mercy on our souls...” whispered a young recruit. Like many guards and knights, he looked far too young for these duties...and William wondered when he the boy had become ‘too young’, for he himself was maybe three or four years older than him.

Maester Cal, alas, heard him somehow under its ‘crow-Stranger-funeral mask’ and chuckled darkly.

“Pray the Gods all you want, but for myself I trust far more the protections of my anti-fever clothes, mask and gloves over your so-called ‘Seven blessings’! If all of you have any sense, you will burn your clothes if they are touched by ill people, cover your body and your head when we go in the streets and don’t hesitate to boil plenty of water before pouring it all on your body with essences of acid spice from Myr!”

The sinister beak and the lenses of the costume watched them one by one.

“Plagues, fevers and great epidemics are like enemies on a battlefield, Sers!” the Citadel madman cackled. “You will protect yourself and you will fight with all your heart against this enemy, or by my chain, the Fever will strangle you and your next helped will be the Stranger Himself! Were my words heard by everyone? Good! Now then let’s go burn the ill and save those who have escaped the Fever!”

The long column lighted its torches and began the walk in the condemned city, each man showing grim faces and wondering how many of them would return this time...