**Chapter 15**

**Autumn of War**

**Captain Will Humble**

Will raised his axe and screamed in triumph when his old and slow opponent held his last breath.

“IRONBORN! THIS VILLAGE IS OURS!”

“PRAISE THE DROWNED GOD!” his men answered.

Howling like the reavers they were, they fell upon the houses of the greenlanders and it was glorious.

Blood flowed. The meat and wine supplies were taken and half of it went into the improvised victory celebrations. All the women opened their legs once properly convinced. Men were chained up and watched powerlessly as their daughters were taken as salt wives. Well, the prettier ones were going to end in their beds. They were also crones of sixty name days no one was going to sleep with. Will was a captain with standards, after all.

“I always knew the greenlanders were meek and obedient to any form of authority, but these ones are even meeker and weaker than the rest!” the captain of the longship *Blood Price* told his second and his quartermaster. Will spat contemptuously to give weigh to his words. “They were born to be thralls!”

“I don’t disagree with you, Captain,” his new second, a brown-haired Orkmont reaver who had ‘replaced’ his old companion after the storming of Seagard, approved, “but as it is, it’s causing us some problems. We are capturing so many thralls that half of our raiding force is already on its way to the longships and the markets north of the Blue Fork. And among them are plenty of our best men. I don’t trust too much the new ‘recruits’ who have joined us.”

“For good reason,” Will murmured, looking around before saying the words to be sure he wasn’t overheard. But apart from the crows feasting on the corpses and the other black birds in the surrounding trees, there was no one save the group of three Ironborn present. “They are not reavers, and a lot of them turned their cloaks when we came ashore.”

Hundreds of sellswords and freeriders had rallied to the banners of King Balon when they realised victory belonged to the Drowned God and no one else. In the old times, the reavers of the Iron Islands would have executed them along the rest of their feckless brethren, but the news times imposed some...unpleasant concessions.

The Riverlands were a huge kingdom, and if the loyal reavers of the Iron King wanted to advance as fast as possible, they needed reinforcements for the crews they were leading against the greenlanders.

“But for now,” the Humble of Oak Ridge continued louder, “they are paying the Iron Price like we do, and the lands of the Trident are opened to us. And that’s all it matters, as long as their promises to proper worship the Drowned God are respected.”

“That still doesn’t explain how we are going to solve the problem of the spoils of war, Captain,” reminded him politely the quartermaster. “We’re already down to seventy-two fighters, and between the new thralls and the loot, I don’t think we can afford to send less than a score of men northwards if we want to avoid our ‘allies’ or other squadrons’ Admirals stealing our prizes.”

Will examined the old sword the sole and only ‘knight’ of the defenders had wielded against him for a few seconds, giving him time to think.

“Can’t we do more with less?” The Humble reaver asked at last.

“Captain, we have taken more than four scores of thralls and five carts filled with food and expensive things, including the silver reliquary of the greenlanders’ sept,” his second replied with a grimace. “If we send less than a score of our men as escort, we might as well burn the loot and kill the thralls here and now. Otherwise the first column of thieves will take our due.”

Will grimly shook his head. This was the problem when you had plenty of turncloaks and ‘allies’ who weren’t proper Ironborn. They didn’t understand the rules of the Iron Price and the tenets of the Drowned God. Once they were seized the thralls and the resources could be exchanged for other things or outright sold, but stealing them from a Captain and his crew went against all traditions and heretical. Alas, there were so many parasites in the coves and the villages conquered by the Iron King that what had been unthinkable was now a fact of life, and measures had to be taken against it.

“Captain, the sorcerer is coming in our direction.”

The middle-aged Captain didn’t need the power to read the thoughts of his second to know the Orkmont reaver wanted to spit and throw some insults for good measure.

The Northerner had been useful for sure. Without him, his crew would not have been able to sneak upon five patrols of the greenlanders and slaughter them with less than five casualties in all. But the screams they often heard coming from his tent at night, the pile of horribly tortured corpses he left in his wake, and the things conjured against the villages...Will was aware war was a bloody affair in service of glory, but their ‘ally’ was not interested in glory or material possessions. Death, monsters, and using his magic to create more of the former appeared to be the only things he valued.

“Greetings in the name of **Tzeentch**, Captain Humble,” once again, the name of his false deity hurt the Ironborn ears, but there was nothing to do but grit his teeth and swallow the insult. “I congratulate you for this great victory.”

“A small victory,” Will wanted his exploits to be sung, but given the ‘resistance’ the greenlanders had offered, this tiny skirmish was not going to impress anyone, not after the raid on Lannisport, the storming of Seagard, and the countless raids reavers were doing on this campaign. The Riverlands were aflame and conquered from the Twins to the Red Fork; that was what everyone would remember. “Why are you here, sorcerer?”

“Can’t I thank you for the desecration of the grounds where the Southerners worshipped their non-existent deities?” The blue-helmet hiding the traits of the sorcerer was more disgusting than ever in the pale light of the afternoon. It was like a vulture with livid yellow eyes was staring at you.

“Come to the point.”

“As you have probably already noticed,” the sceptre of the sorcerer moved to point at the dark clouds on the west, “a new fortnight of autumn rains will be upon us soon. And this won’t be the only problem your men will meet if they stay here. My divination trances have seen lion banners and a large column of horse coming in this direction.”

“Let them come,” Will smiled as the familiar fire of excitation ran through his veins. A worthy challenge, at last, and a true opportunity to add more kills with his axe. “An Ironborn is worth ten greenlanders.”

“Don’t be stupid, Captain,” the arrogance and the tone almost convinced him to take his weapon and remove this ugly idiot of his head. “They are more than four hundred of them, they are all mounted, and you don’t have ten horses to meet them in open battle. If they arrive tomorrow to this village and you are still there, you will all die. I will grant you may be able to hurt them a lot, but you will still be corpses at the end of day.”

“Captain, as much as I hate to say it...the sorcerer is right,” his quartermaster sighed. “Let’s take the thralls and the loots and cross back the Red Fork. If we had two hundred more men with us, we could try an ambush at a river’s ford or in the woods. But we don’t have them, and most of our archers are from the recruits.”

“Too risky.” Will disagreed. “This village doesn’t offer much protection, but if we leave it to run north, the mounted greenlanders are going to catch up when we are loading the two barges waiting on the flooding river.”

This was the issue when you invaded the Riverlands in autumn; it was impossible to cross the Red Fork on foot or by any other means than a boat or another floating transport.

“I don’t like the odds, but if they are able to charge us when our backs are against the river, we are going to be slaughtered and lose everything.”

“I have a solution to win you the time you need,” and while none of the Ironborn could see his face, there was no doubt the sorcerer was nearly gloating under his helmet. “But I need nine thralls released into my custody, with one preferably being a young woman under twenty name days.”

“You don’t want a virgin, while you’re at it?” his second said mockingly.

“Given what your men have been up to, I’m not in the mind to ask the impossible.”

“Nine thralls is a far too high price,” Will answered, hating the fact he was even considering a bargain with this...this creature.

“No, nine thralls is the very minimum for something significant,” the Northerner in his blue armour shifting unnaturally snapped back. “It would be most efficient if I had eighty-one lives...”

“No.”

“If it’s your decision, it is your decision,” the sorcerer sounded more amused than angry. “But I am afraid I need the thralls by sunset, the ritual takes a long time to be cast...”

**Ser Daven Lannister 1**

The bards paid by the Iron Throne had sung a lot about the nobility and the glory waiting for those brave knights who would answer the call to the White Crusade of the Seven.

For some unfathomable reason, Daven had never heard the first great battles and vengeful raids of the heretics would take place in the Riverlands.

More importantly, no one had ever mentioned how the men fighting to crush the traitors were supposed to oppose demon-worshippers with mere swords and spears.

“DEMONS! THEY WERE DEMONS! DEMONS I TELL YOU!”

Daven tried very hard to maintain his calm as one of his men-at-arms dragged away one of the survivors of the most recent battle against the forces of darkness.

“Report,” the Lannister knight said quietly to Ser Robert Brax.

“It was a trap,” the second son of the Lord of Hornvale was prompt to inform him as they both dismounted. “The last two Ironborn raiding parties were slaughtered without problem, so Ser Harys Swyft took upon himself to charge in the village by himself.”

Robert didn’t utter the ‘idiot’, but Daven heard it loud and clear. And as far as he was concerned, it was deserved. By all rights, Harys Swyft should never have been in a position to claim a command of the Westerlands’ cavalry or infantry. The man had no military experience to speak of, and little intelligence to learn the correct lessons in time to remedy to it.

The problem, of course, was that more or less every knight under forty was inexperienced, courtesy of the lack of wars. As a result, the blood ties Harys Swift had formed with House Lannister and his day-per-day servility had carried out over incompetence.

“The men who fled first described it as a gigantic crow of flames and smokes rising from the desecrated sept,” Robert Brax continued, as his men around him whispered prayers of protection and mercy for the fallen. “Ser Harys was one of the first to try to get out of the village...it didn’t do him much good.”

“How many did we lose?”

“Assuming all the corpses are accounted for...this demon cost us fifty-three men and sixty horses. We have seven survivors...who are all in the state you have seen.”

The lessons learned in his childhood told him to show a confident look, but in this instance, it was practically impossible.

“You’re telling me a single demon killed fifty-three of our knights?”

“It’s getting better,” and they took a few steps forwards, Daven suddenly understood what the other knight had meant by it. Step after step, all his instincts told him there was something incredibly evil ahead. And when his eyes fell upon the village’s sept, his fists tightened in fury.

“Damn the heretics...”

In this part of the Riverlands, white stone was rarely used for religious septs and other sites of the Faith. This wasn’t the Vale with its profusion of white stone. Nevertheless, the smallfolk in general tried their best to build pretty altars to the Seven-Who-Are-One, often in light grey stone.

But the pile of stones before him was not attractive unless you were fond of nightmares. The grey stones were scarred by dark and unnatural blue fissures. It felt evil. And it was as evil as the appearances suggested. Corpses remained lying on the ground, and the familiar sight of dried blood was everywhere on the ruined stones.

“I wanted to show it to you before we put it to the torch,” Robert grimaced. “Somehow, I don’t think this is the kind of desecration we can erase with a few prayers and a purse of gold.”

“You’re right,” none of the Ironborn raiding parties had been involved in that kind of abominable deeds. “Make sure you are very thorough. It’s not like the smallfolk are going to complain, and I don’t want a demon-crow to haunt these lands after we leave them behind us.”

Daven examined the details of the vandalised houses, which contrasted neatly with the sept transformed into a lair of heresy most foul.

“I think what we are seeing here is the first evidence of collaboration between the Northern heretics and the Ironborn reavers.”

“What makes you say that?”

“The village fell by the axe and the sword,” the mutilated remains of the knight and the men-at-arms left behind by House Bracken to defend it provided a lot of evidence in this direction. “Classic Ironborn work, they are trying the same thing whenever we aren’t here to stop them. But the sept...the sept it was the deed of someone who really, really loathed the Seven. The reavers of the isles don’t hate us like that. They insult us, they think us weak, and they want us to recognise they’re the best warriors of Westeros. But they don’t loath us.”

“If it’s true, it promises quite ugly autumn days,” this was a very good point. The Northerners, according to the latest news he had been told, had managed to break through the Last Wall and ravage the Marches, with rumours going so far to tell everything north of the Red Fork was lost to the heretics. “Burning a desecrated sept is one thing...”

“Burning thousands of farms, scores of castles and several Lordships is far more difficult,” Daven completed before shaking his head. “I see that like in the other raids where we didn’t arrive in time, the attackers took all the survivors with them when they departed.”

“They must be really in a hurry to have slaves at their beck and call,” the knight of Hornvale remarked. “Maybe they want more smallfolk to harvest the lands they have managed to take temporarily in their treacherous hands?”

“Maybe,” Daven replied, not sharing much confidence this was the real reason. “Anyway, this was the last raiding party which escaped us, and judging by the tracks, they are running north. We must ride back to the Red Fork.”

“I doubt we are going to be able to catch them. They have more than half a day of advance, and most of our horses need their rest. And of course, if they really have demonic priests among them, we will need all the spears and swords we can gather.”

“We will certainly be unable to catch them,” Daven confirmed, “but we have at least to try. We owe it to these poor smallfolk they want to enslave, and to the knights this abomination has massacred.”

No doubt the reavers and their heretic allies were laughing at the trap the Westerners had bleed into. They could mock them as much as they wanted. Soon, very soon Lord Tywin was going to cross the Red Fork and bring the might of the Western chivalry against the Ironborn descending southwards.

And when the time came to fight a proper battle, Daven was going to do his utmost to gut and kill every Ironborn until their damned isles were empty for the next millennia.

**Lord Elbert Arryn 3**

Defeat was not something Elbert was familiar with. Most of the clashes of arms involving a matter of life and death in the Vale had ended in victory for him, mainly against a few upstart ‘mystery knights’ and the seventh-damned barbaric clansmen. And really, he was the Heir to the Vale. His duties and his role in times of peace did not allow for anything other than compliments and victory.

The Arryn highborn had acknowledged it somewhat when the news of the Battle of the Red Tears had been won...but it was far easier to do it when it was another high commander who was vanquished and you were merely a spectator for the critics and dealing with the consequences.

Now he had been defeated...and Elbert was finding out that he really, really didn’t like the feeling. It was a pit of anger and shame in his stomach. It was contrary to everything he had believed when he swore his vows to the King. And worse of all, the Arryn knight had to recognise the battle could have turned even more badly than it did.

“Truly, I hate the heretics’ capabilities to manoeuvre their armies and their other assets like they have shown these last fortnights,” the Heir to the Vale admitted as he poured himself a new cup of Arbor red.

“What can you expect from heretics?” Robert lashed out, his beard being far shorter than before the battle. “These demon-worshippers use all sort of unnatural and monstrous things to spy on us and increase their strength.”

It said quite something that neither Lord Edmure Tully nor Elbert himself spoke out to tell the Stormlander to tell him to stop with his divagations. What would have been qualified of old women’s tales before the Crusade had revealed itself to be a short aspect of the very ugly pits of evil the Starks had revealed in the last days.

“At least we won’t be taken by surprise by that anymore,” the Lord of Riverrun remarked, his blue eyes looking far less pessimistic than Elbert’s. Of course, his Riverlanders had barely time to bloody their blades in this contest, being pushed on several secondary duties, and thus emerging relatively intact from the near-disaster. “The heretics have been forced to show their hand, and they failed to achieve their goals. I have no doubt the destruction of this army was among their chief objectives when they prepared this trap at the Twins. That they failed and we live to fight another day must be a defeat for them.”

“Looking to find victories everywhere you can, Tully, eh?” Robert asked boisterously, and it did not take a great man to see the flashes of anger into the irises of the only son of the deceased Lord Hoster.

“This was uncalled for, Robert,” Elbert spoke politely but coldly enough to force the Stormlander Heir to stop his political bumbling. “Lord Edmure is right. The heretics planned to destroy our entire army at the Twins. The forces which stormed the Twins were the anvil, and the reinforcements from the North were the hammer. If we had pushed harder into the moats and the other defences, or if Ser Lyn Corbray and his men had not valiantly died to give us the time to withdraw, the entire army would have been annihilated.”

“Our knights would have stood...”

“And they would have died,” Edmure said grimly. “Our horses went mad at the very smell of these giant wolves and bears the heretics have somehow tamed, and let’s not talk about the score of mammoths they have. We would have been able to repel them if we had shield walls ready...but most of them were already tired and with waters up to their knees.”

But like a dog watching a judicious part of meat in sight, the eldest son of the Hand of King wasn’t ready to give up.

“Well, if your only concern is shield walls, they are out of the mud holes now! We reform the ranks and we go at them again!”

“*We* reform the ranks,” Edmure insisted ironically, “nice way to push for an outrageous attack when most of this army left are Valemen and Riverlanders.”

Elbert winced. This could have been done far more diplomatically...and just like that, the Heir to the Vale knew, all chances that Robert Baratheon and Edmure Tully would speak with a single voice and be mildly tolerant to each other’s presence was an abject failure.

“Listen, shivering trout-“

“No, you listen!” hissed the red-haired Lord. “I have still twenty thousand men under my command, and more are gathering at the Trident and the Red Fork to ensure the depredations of the Ironborn raiders are as limited as humanly possible. You, however, have barely one thousand foot and horse left here.”

“The armies of Storm’s End will soon be here to reinforce me!”

“Enough!” Elbert was forced to shout before both men searched for their weapons and tried to wound each other with something far more damageable than words. “Both of you are out of line. We have lost close to five thousand men in this battle and abandoned large quantities of supplies and equipment to avoid encirclement. You will *not* dishonour the sacrifices of those who had died in the Battle of the Twins!”

The blonde-haired Valeman hated to glare at the two other commanders like they were disobedient children, but there wasn’t a choice. If the signs of disunity spread across the entire army, the entire Crusade would dissolve and *that* was a mess no one, least of all himself, wanted to be responsible for.

“As far as the retreat goes, it will have to continue, at least for three or four more days.”

“But-“

“Unless you want to explain to me how we are going to feed it with our entire lines in disarray, Robert? Oh, and I suppose you also have a solution to the sorcerers conjuring poisonous winds when we try a counterattack?”

“You know I have not,” the black-haired Stormlander grumbled. “But every league of ground lost is a league the heretics are corrupting!”

“And what will happen in your opinion if this army is destroyed on the battlefield?” Elbert asked for what to be the tenth time today. “I need time for more priests and defenders of the Faith to arrive to fight all this sorcery, and I need to be sure there are no more Ironborn reavers ready to take us into the rear if we bring steel and retribution to the demon-worshippers.”

Three or four days should be enough to do this, by then they would be far out of reach of the heretical things which poisoned the fields and the water of the Riverlands. And no, Elbert wasn’t happy the retreat from the Twins was going to last for more than seven days. He wasn’t blind to the disastrous precedent of letting heretics gain a foothold in the northern Riverlands.

Unfortunately, there wasn’t much he could do at the moment. The cavalry had to be retrained to fight these new beasts and demonic opponents. Warriors, be they knights or young boys recruited from the farms, weren’t going to become trained veterans with a single defeat under their belt.

The army had to avoid being slaughtered. The crossroads linking the road out of the Bloody Gate and the Kingsroad had to stay in loyal hands. This wasn’t what he had imagined when the Crusade was called to arms, but with Seagard, the Twins, the Three Sisters, the Small Wall, and everything else gone in mere moons, the Vale companies had to coordinate with the Western armies and every other forces gathered by the Iron Throne.

Otherwise they were all going to become food for the crows, or worse, prisoners of the heretics.

**Lord Rodrik Harlaw 7**

“Is Theon well?”

While outwardly Rodrik hid it, the Lord of Harlaw was incredibly relieved his niece’s first question had been about her brother.

The downside to it, alas, was that the answer to it was by no means good.

“No, I’m afraid he is not well. I tried to shield him for as long as I could, but a fortnight ago he was ordered to go south with Maron.”

“Maron?” Asha cursed under her breath as the vivid green waters of the Green Fork were flowing on their right. “He despised archers and all those who don’t fight at axe’s range.”

“Something that I assure you hasn’t changed in the last moons, niece,” the Reader of the Ironborn informed her with black humour. “Both him and Rodrik love joking when they were in our siege camps how they were far better in the art of butchery than the so-called servants of the Blood God.”

His niece breathed out heavily before giving her opinion on this bravado.

“The Blood God praises strength in warriors, and enjoys when skilled fighters managed to defeat worthy enemies. Maron loves beating young boys like Theon who are smaller and weaker than him. Rodrik is a drunken fool, barely able to think about one thing per day which isn’t tits or wine. And to say our genitor favours those two...”

Rodrik shook his head approvingly. Yes, when it came down to it, it was obvious Balon Greyjoy had achieved complete success in the education of his eldest and his cadet son: they were as illiterate and arrogant as their own father.

“Let me guess: the glorious ‘Iron King’ and the Lord Captain of the Iron Fleet rushed south instead of helping you besiege the Twins.”

“This was not a very difficult guess, Asha,” Rodrik gave her a sardonic wink before returning to a more serious expression. “Two-thirds of the Greyjoy household troops and about half of our fighting strength should be crossing the Blue Fork right now.”

“They are lucky,” the young woman now having taken the Stark name declared very seriously, “if they were closer, I would have gone personally dragging my brother out of their drunk grips, no matter how many favours I would have had to use to do so.”

“I won’t say it is a bad move,” because it wasn’t, “but if you intervene in such a blatant manner, Theon won’t be respected by the captains of the Islands.”

“As long as any of our brothers, father, uncles, and other cousins are alive, Theon will never get the shadow of the respect he deserves, uncle,” Asha said in words as dark as the shade of her runic armour. “The Iron King has filled the heads of the reavers and every Ironborn with foolish tales of plunder and glory in the name of the Drowned God. He doesn’t realise war doesn’t work like that.”

“May I also assume your new family has plans to...ensure the alliance is more favourable for the North than it is for Pyke?”

“Isn’t it always this way when alliances are signed?” the young black-eyed woman answered the question with another question, which was indeed an answer by itself. “To be honest, I think the way the army of the Vale escaped the trap on the other shore forced Lord Eddard to discard a lot of his plans and to create new ones. But the Heir to Winterfell is trying to employ his elite forces sparingly, and the direwolf planned for a long war before their vanguard left the Neck. Two things I am utterly sure that our glorious Iron King utterly failed to think about.”

It was no exaggeration or insult. Balon’s methods were really that bad.

Setting aside the fact the former seat of House Frey had been transformed into a citadel or lethal flora with swamp and Northern fauna to defend it, Rodrik had to give it to the Northern army: Greenthorn had been quickly and adequately imagined to be an enormous depot for the tens of thousands warriors and beasts fighting under their direwolves’ banners.

The smells and the plants hinted terrible things were hidden behind the walls, but the Starks were now entrenched into the Riverlands, assuming they had done the same thing for all the towers and castles captured – and the Reader didn’t see why an intelligent warlord like Eddard Stark would commit such an elementary mistake.

The more castles and rituals the Starks and their sorcerers did, the more the land was soaked in sorcery and became ‘theirs’.

It wasn’t good for the Iron Throne, though admittedly Rodrik didn’t really care about the new silver-haired monarch or any of the Great Lords pledging their armies and treasuries to him. King’s Landing had called its armies to war first, and Meera Reed and the other Lords he had spoken with had all confirmed Aerys had not died by a northern assassin’s blade or poison.

If they were ready to declare war and not be ready for it, they were idiots and deserved to be on the receiving end of a sword strike.

If only Rodrik could be confident a Northern victory wasn’t going to be worse than everything his nightmares could conjure...

“Well, Balon, Victarion and all the Greyjoy banners can’t think about everything when they are paying the Iron Price,” Asha giggled, understanding very well that when Balon was doing this, there was *nothing* in this world or the one waiting beneath the waves to convince him to think about something else, “I think he wants to sack Riverrun. Cassel and his vanguard humiliated the Tullys on the battlefield; storming the walls of the trout would be an excellent way to topple the exploit.”

Black eyes narrowed, and for a heartbeat, the stare of his niece was those of a warlord.

“Riverrun isn’t exactly an easy fortress to besiege,” Asha said after at least a score of heartbeats of silence, “and while the River armies are near the Trident or east of the Green Fork, their homes aren’t empty. And that doesn’t count the thousands of infantrymen and knights the Lannisters are pushing eastwards now that the Iron Fleet has torched the Golden Fleet and its shipyards.”

“As far as I know, this is accurate,” Rodrik agreed. “Some sorcerers mentioned Tywin had dispersed many columns of cavalry to catch up the advance raiding parties. I don’t know what the results have been, though.”

“I can only pray the Gods Theon is going to survive the Iron King’s stupid ideas. Because if he dies...”

Rodrik sighed, choosing to not comment that she had not said ‘Drowned God’ but ‘Gods’. Given that there had been no sign of the favour of the Drowned God so far, but plenty of demons materialised by the chief deities of the North, the ageing Lord of Harlaw didn’t blame her.

“No man is more accused in the eye of the Gods than the kinslayer, nice,” it was one of the few tenets every religion of Westeros, including the Northern cults, had in common.

“That’s why I have a husband, no?” Asha smirked. “I would just have to ask after an excellent dance under the sheets...”

“I really, really didn’t need to know that,” The Reader sighed harder, only generating more hilarity in the behaviour of his niece.

**Jory Cassel 7**

The twenty-third strike of the whip bit in Meera Reed’s flesh and the punishment ended.

A murmur of approval echoed in the ranks of warriors who had been summoned to see it by Lord Stark, and Jory took two step backs before handing back the Slaaneshi whip to its owner.

This was a nasty artefact, but then using a normal whip on the skin of a Champion of the Grandfather would have been a mere inconvenience and an insult where the Gods were concerned.

Disobedience, refusal to heed his orders, and conspiracy to accomplish goals which went against the will of Winterfell had to be severely punished, otherwise every marauder with two inches of ambition in his head would soon convince himself that his ideas took priority over their liege’s strategy.

Thus the twenty-strikes, divided into three different sessions of punishments: nine strikes for Tzeentch and the nine-tailed lightning-barbed whip, eight strikes for Khorne with the blood-flayer whip, and six strikes with the Slaaneshi agony whip.

And since it had been his voice which had spoken the orders, Jory had passed the sentence, as tradition and law demanded of him.

Watching the crannogmen help their wounded warlord walk away, the Cassel commander wondered if Lady Reed had understood the lesson imparted on her flesh. For her sake, Jory truly hoped she did. Being a favourite of Grandfather Nurgle and the leader of a Host had saved Howland’s daughter from being executed the moment the battle was over. This was her second chance...there would be no third one.

“It is done, my Lord,” the Black Spear said as he returned by his liege’s side. “I think Lady Reed will need a fortnight to recover. The others will need two, maybe two and a half.”

All the Nurgle worshippers who had been tied to the post could have healed far faster if they were brought to sorcerers and healers, but then it wouldn’t have been a punishment.

The Heir to Winterfell nodded, having obviously anticipated this answer.

“Then they will stay here. Greenthorn and the surrounding lands need to be put into order and to play their role as one of our key supply bases.” The grey eyes grew thoughtful. “Maybe the girl will grow into a competent castellan as their injuries heal.”

“I’m afraid I have no idea about her skills in that domain, my Lord,” Jory had had very different names in mind where stewardship of the conquered Twins was concerned before this campaign.

“I don’t either,” Lord Eddard Stark admitted. “This is why many of Lord Manderly’s servants will stay here to ensure the next harvest is properly done and our supply lines function as I intend.”

It was a wise contingency, though it left an interesting question...

“Is Lord Manderly going to raise protest? War is chaotic per the Gods’ will, and he may want his men and women to return if faced with the unexpected...”

“I intend to leave Lord Wyman Manderly as the commander of my forces east of the Green Fork. He will make sure that all the gains the Southerners abandoned to us will never be recovered until winter arrives.”

The Northern warrior paused before nodding in understanding. The Lord of White Harbor and the warlord of the Host of Gluttony was not a talented attacker, but in defensive warfare, his equals could be counted on two hands in the North.

Moreover, and this his liege had stayed silent upon the issue, Lord Wyman was Slaaneshi and one of the most loyal, if not the most loyal Lord, sworn to House Stark. Meera Reed was fifty years too young to play the game with this shrewd commander.

“We are abandoning the strategy to drown our enemies into the crimson waters of the Trident.”

“Yes,” the grey-eyed warlord caressed the huge direwolf busy devouring a meal of meat and bones. “We could roll the dices and decide to challenge the Arryns and the Tullys, of course. For every aspect of the North’s armies they have seen, three or four secret weapons and great spells are waiting to be unleashed.”

Black-armoured fists tightened around the handle of the massive sword.

“Victory is certainly possible. But Elbert Arryn has proved a cautious commander, and one who won’t fall by pride and arrogance. If his army is on the brink of disaster, the Falcon will save what he can and escape to fight another day. Since the Crownlands’ muster and tens of thousands Riverlanders, Stormlanders, and Reachers are on their way to the Trident, anything but a total victory at this stage would make us fight a second massive battle in less than a fortnight. A third one is not outright impossible, for that matter.”

Jory understood. The North had a large army here, but despite the thousands of sellswords who had turned their cloaks, despite the hundreds of recently converted recruits, they were outnumbered by the manpower of the South, and the number of servants of the Gods the sorcerers would call if they reached the Trident would not be able to change the odds.

The war would turn into a battle of attrition, one the North couldn’t afford to fight. Even if they emerged triumphant, the crippling losses would make sure there wasn’t a winter campaign. There would be no offensives outside the land of the Rivers and the Trident, and no way to deal a fatal blow to the rule of Targaryen governance.

But with an eastern campaign out of the question and no real capabilities to mount an amphibious operation in the strength needed to invade the Westerlands or the Vale heartlands, it left only one real option.

“This is why we didn’t try to restrain the belligerent tempers of Balon Greyjoy and his captains, I take it?”

His liege’s lips smiled thinly.

“The core of the forces west of Stone Hedge and Raventree is answering the commands of Tywin Lannister, and the Old Lion is nothing but prideful and prompt to crush with a warhammer those who insult his leonine arrogance. Our allies will bleed, but if they can convince the Lannister hosts to leave the protection of the Red Fork and Riverrun...”

It could work. More importantly, it had to work. The Hosts had come down south in autumn to prepare for the terrible winter ready to freeze Westeros; limiting the conquests to the domains of the Sentinels, Mallisters and the Freys was far from sufficient if they wanted to avoid starvation and protect themselves from the unbelievers’ counter-offensives.

“When do we march, my Lord?”

**Ser Gerion Lannister 3**

Gerion had thought thousands of times how his return to Westeros would happen in the last years. Most had involved him being cheered and carried in triumph across the streets of Lannisport, being presented with the keys of the city, and basking into the attention of countless beautiful women while Tywin was forced to congratulate him for his exploits.

It had been nonsensical dreams, of course. Life never happened like that.

But despite the warning signs, the ageing Lannister knight had still been caught flat-footed by how bad were the news when he and his ‘companions’ had set foot on the docks of Oldtown.

It appeared that in his absence, the whole continent had gone crazy. The King, the old Aerys II, was finally dead. That much had been clear. The circumstances were a bit hazy though; the bards were unable to agree if the Master of the Seven Kingdoms had been assassinated by a tide of Northern demons, a kraken, the blades of the Iron Throne, or his own Kingsguard. What was not a rumour, unfortunately, was the fact the Faith had proclaimed a true Crusade against the heretics.

And as the longest summer in living memory ended, the Ironborn had allied with the Northern heretics, and burned the Lannister fleet at anchor. Gerion would have paid to see the reaction of his eldest brother to that.

The reliable information ended there. Everything else was a bunch of rumours and speculations heard from the mouth of boisterous merchants and soldiers proclaiming the victory of the forces of Light would be won before winter. Gerion was pretty sure the last part was a lie, actually, since there were also massive rumours of granaries being emptied to compensate for shortfalls in the Riverlands. He was not Tywin or a gifted commander, but he could read between the lines. The Iron Throne had declared war too soon, and the war wasn’t fought in the swamps of the Neck or the icy plains surrounding Winterfell.

And so his Essossi and Valyrian adventures ended here, at a shabby table of the *Grey Mule*, miserable inn of the poorest quarter of Oldtown, waiting for his ‘companion’ to return.

With the hostilities raging between the Houses loyal to House Targaryen against the Ironborn, announcing his return along one of the most infamous Ironborn to sail the Jade and Sunset Sea was just asking for a quick trial and an execution. As a consequence of the war, Gerion had thus landed far from the city with a small boat and then walked like a poor vagabond to the gates of Oldtown.

To be honest, the son of Gerold Lannister hadn’t the slightest idea what he was going to do now.

Gerion could return to Casterly Rock. Assuming he could sell a good story how he had managed to return without a ship and hide the true identity of his ‘saviour’ in the jungles of Sothoryos, there was a high chance House Lannister would accept his return.

Except naturally, with every knight and swordsmen of high birth expected to join the Crusade, Gerion feared he would exchange one monster for another. And it might be worse. Tywin might try to get rid of him as a final point to stop embarrassing the legacy of House Lannister.

And yet at least, it would allow him to see again his daughter. That had to count for more than gold, no?

One of the other choices to escape this madness was to take refuge in one of the numerous religious hermitages existing in the Reach. It was as far removed from a life of gold, privileges, and power one could get, but it would get him away from the abominations and all the monsters he had seen in the last moons...assuming the armies of the Iron Throne kept the Enemy north of the Golden Road, naturally.

“Something on your mind, my friend?”

Gerion flinched as like a demon puppet out a mummer’s show, Euron Greyjoy had materialised on the seat on the other side of the old wooden table.

“Plenty of things,” he grumbled, wondering how by the Stranger the man was managing to stroll so easily in the alleys of Oldtown when the entire city had increased several times patrols on land and sea to prevent Ironborn raids and infiltration. If the man had changed clothes and looks...but no, the Crow’s Eye very much looked like the one-eyed pirate of their first meeting. “How life isn’t a song, how unfair is the world, and how many wars it’s going to take for everyone to realise peace and summer are greater than autumn and war.”

“I doubt my poor brother thought a tenth of what you have,” there was no sarcasm or irony; Euron seemed to genuinely believe what he was saying, though one could never be sure with him. His whisper grew more vicious after this acknowledgement. “He had the opportunity of a lifetime to prove to the world the Ironborn could be more than a fleet of bloodthirsty pirates, and he let it slip away for the pleasure of being the meat-shield of the Starks.”

“Well, he is an idiot.”

“The priests drowned him ten times too many,” the one-eyed man smirked. “And he wasn’t very gifted in wits and cleverness at the beginning.”

“Poor Iron Islands.”

“Oh they deserve their fate,” the captain of House Greyjoy replied tranquilly, “I just wish they could have the intelligence to keep the Northern sorcerers out of Pyke and the other strongholds. If I trail to sail in their direction now, they are going to sink me before I can do anything to stake my claims.”

Gerion didn’t like the sound of that.

“And what are you going to do about it?”

“For now, I am going to wait a few days,” Euron reluctantly admitted, “the Yellow Emperor is inside these walls, and while he knows of my existence, I don’t want to give him reasons to think I am his enemy. Although a little duel between him and me would certainly wake up the South to the threat *true* sorcerers are for their game of thrones...”

**Lady Saara Greyjoy 5**

The image of the High Tower faded from the water Saara had used for her sorcery, and the young sorceress maintained a stony expression before dismissing her servants and donning one of her red dresses.

Then she cursed violently for an entire turn of hourglass.

It took an immense effort of will on her part to rein in her frustration and her anger, but she did it. As satisfying as it was to unleash her temper and mutilate a few inferior lifeforms, there was nothing to gain from it, and everything to lose.

Saara left her ritual room at the top of the Pyke dungeon. As she descended the cold hard stairs, the young woman smirked as Ironborn and non-Ironborn bowed and kneeled before her, their armours and clothes all carrying a small direwolf sigil. Their eyes were filled with adoration, and each of her whims was obeyed without question.

The sorceress who was now technically a Greyjoy by marriage knew Balon Greyjoy and all his family – with the possible exception of the two younger members – would have an heart attack if they were able to see with their own eyes how easily she had subverted their rule for her own purposes.

But then, if the ‘Iron King’ thought the pathetic measures he had taken before departing for war were all it took to watch a sorceress of her power, the ‘Lord Reaper’ – or was it ‘Lord Reaver’? – deserved everything he was going to receive in the coming fortnights.

At last, Saara arrived in the hall where the cursed mirrors created by her command were safeguarded. She uttered nine dark words of the Gods, and the images of the sorcerers working across the Iron Islands flashed into existence before her.

“I have just stopped my observations on the muster of the Reach,” the red-haired sorceress informed her subordinates. “The situation is direr than we thought. Despite our best efforts, the construction efforts in the ports of the Arbor and Oldtown continue apace. They will be able to launch their counter-attack against us before winter arrives.”

Let unsaid was that while sea travel in Northern waters was already incredibly dangerous if you didn’t have sorcerers to help you, the Iron Islands didn’t enjoy this kind of natural protection for the time being, leaving them a chief target for a sea-based assault.

“Has the Crow’s Eye played a part in the rapidity of this muster?” asked the servant of Tzeentch in charge of converting the population of Great Wyk.

“No,” Saara shook her head. “He and his crew have just arrived in the city. While I won’t deny there’s a high chance he may try to infiltrate the Southerner’s ranks to participate in the coming battles, the military spending of House Hightower and their allies is entirely a Reach-funded effort. Assuming they continue their preparations at their current pace, they will be able to send close to three hundred warships and scores of heavy troop transports against us before the end of this year.”

“Can they really do this?” the Khornate envoy to Blacktyde spoke with a hint of incredulity in his voice. “I don’t doubt your skills, Lady Saara, but we know an immense host of Reachers is mustering under Lord Mace Tyrell at Bitterbridge.”

“Exact,” the daughter of Lord Eddard Stark nodded, “over seventy thousand infantry and cavalry, by our most recent estimates.”

And this was far from the only contribution Highgarden and the Tyrell’s bannersmen had begun to give the Iron Throne and the rest of their allies. One thousand men had already taken to help garrisoning the capital of King’s Landing. Several hundreds of freeriders and sellswords had rushed ahead of the earliest vanguards to join the armies of the Vale and the Riverlands, as well as the Crownlanders and Stormlanders’ forces. Septons and septas, merchants transporting the grain and the fruits of the fertile plains of the Mander, ignorant magicians believing in false Gods, and a thousand and one other boons were making sure the Crusade of the South was not collapsing under its own weight.

“And yes, apparently, they can field both this army and a massive fleet armed to the teeth with knights and experienced sailors. The decades of peace have been very good for the prosperity and the population of the Reach, it seems.”

“This is a grave threat,” the Great Wyk sorcerer recognised openly before grimacing. “The magical defences prepared are far from complete, and even if they were, we will be massively outnumbered since all the men of fighting age are away fighting in the Riverlands. If the Hightowers and the Redwynes land twenty thousand men on these shores, we lose. We may be able to bleed them far worse than they will bleed us, but we will lose.”

“You are completely right,” all of the men and women hearing words were true servants of the Gods, and there was no sense accusing them of cowardice or defeatism. Being unwilling to face the truth would not change the outcome of the monumental clash about to occur. “Therefore we must accelerate our own preparations and convert the ‘thralls’ our Ironborn allies are so eagerly putting at our disposal. If we can smash the enemy fleet at sea, it won’t matter how many warriors wait inside their hulls...except how large the dinner will be for the sharks and the carrion fishes, of course.”

Her subordinates bowed, and one by one the powerful lights inside the mirror flickered out, returning the artefacts to their appearance of normal mirrors, though Saara pitied in advance those who would try to peer into their depths for the sake of curiosity.

It was something to think about, perhaps. If she managed to put one into contact with an important Lord or Lady, this might give her one servant answering to her and her only into the enemy councils of war...

Saara meditated on the topic for a few more heartbeats, before shaking her head and leaving the mirror hall. There were more orders to give, and plenty of holy deeds to perform if she wanted her new powerbase to hold against the coming storm.

**Lord Varys 3**

“I think that for all their pacts with the demonic, the heretics’ offensive has reached its highest point. Lord Tywin is about to begin his counter-attack in the Riverlands and the danger posed by the North and the Iron Islands extinguished for several generations.”

There were many things Varys hated about his fellow members of the Council. The condescending tone used by Pycelle when the Grand Maester was caressing his white beard affecting to be a wise and benevolent figure was near the top his private list.

“I don’t share your optimistic view of the situation,” the bald Master of Whisperers feigned to maintain his genial and humble facade.

“Are you trying to tell me you believe Balon Greyjoy is a match for Lord Tywin and the might of Casterly Rock? You really believe a few thousand crazy raiders and looters will stand against more than forty thousand Westerners, including five thousand of the noblest knights of Westeros?”

Varys grinned deep inside his thoughts, though of course he showed none of it outwardly. If he had had any doubts Pycelle was Tywin’s chief bootlicker inside the walls of the Red Keep, this tirade would have finished convincing him.

Honestly, it was quite lamentable the Grand Maester fancied himself a capable spy. Varys and scores of other men and women were running past him and exploiting his blatant partiality for their own agenda. And Pycelle never noticed.

“Your words, not mine,” the foreign-born eunuch commented soberly. “But no, I just wanted to remark that for now, no battle has been fought and it is hasty to declare the outcome of an army confrontation when we do not know for sure the Westerner companies have managed to find the core strength of the enemy.”

Varys didn’t add that while Tywin had a better martial reputation than Balon Greyjoy, the Ironborn and Westerner had not fought each other apart from the raid on Lannisport these last decades, and the confrontation had been a Greyjoy victory: there was one fleet which was destroyed, and it wasn’t the one hoisting the banners of the kraken.

Furthermore, it had escaped Pycelle that with the torrential rains flooding the Riverlands these last fortnights – the Crownlands had seen some but not to the same degree – the Lannister cavalry was losing bit by bit its mobility and its devastating charges. Varys wasn’t a knight, but he knew how bad horse riding could get when the landscape turned into mud and water.

In conditions like this, the infantry was always fighting better than the cavalry. But let Pycelle believe he understood nothing to the ‘art of waging war’.

“The Ironborn are many things, but they’re not cowards,” the Grand Maester didn’t stop talking like he was a young child or a complete imbecile. “The moment the traitor Balon Greyjoy is informed of Lord Tywin’s presence, he will try to strike at him with all his forces.”

That much was true...assuming Balon Greyjoy behaved exactly like he was supposed to. Which would be a nice change, truthfully. So far, this war had not proceeded according to the Council’s or Varys’ own plans.

“Let’s just pray that this time, demonic help won’t be dominant on the other side to turn the tide,” Varys had already loathed sorcery before this war started, but now the Essossi spymaster loathed it with raw passion. “We can’t afford to lose any more ground.”

“You are too pessimistic, Varys. The heresy has been unable to go through our defences at the Red Fork or the Trident.”

“I’m not referring to the war problems,” the Master of Whisperers retorted, “though the heretics don’t need to reach the Trident to cut all land roads between the Crownlands and the Vale. I’m referring to the fact every granary north of the Blue Fork is lost to us, on the eve of what is going to be the most terrible winter in decades. How are we going to feed the hundreds of thousands of soldiers marching towards the Trident when the farmers have been dragged in chains north and everything from apple to duck meat is worth its weight in gold? How are we going to keep these armies fighting in winter too? We don’t have the resources in furs and warm clothes to give to the Crusaders! And above all, how is the treasury going to pay for these expenses?”

Really, every Lord Paramount should have asked this kind of question before agreeing to call his banners to war. The fact they didn’t say really bad things about how improvised and stupid the entire affair was.

“I want the defeat of the heretics as much as you,” it was not completely a lie...viewed from a certain perspective, and depending on whom you considered a ‘heretic’. “But we can’t continue this series of improvisations and errors. The King must take charge and give firm and detailed instructions to his great bannersmen. We must avoid another disaster like the Battle of the Red Tears.”

“There won’t be one,” Pycelle declared confidently. “Lord Tywin is going to smash the Ironborn and inflict upon them such a defeat they will have no choice but to flee back to their ships and abandon the Riverlands. And then Western help will be fully available to rebuild the Northern Marches.”

“Let’s pray the Seven it will be as you say,” these useless deities hadn’t really given any help in the first calamitous defeats, and Varys wondered how long you could justify fighting for a sacred religious cause when the enemy had demons and your holy protectors stayed silent...

**Author’s note**: Winter is coming...the fact I’m writing this in December is a complete coincidence, of course.

The war continues in the Riverlands, and unfortunately it’s going to turn uglier as Chaos unleashes new horrors to counter the enormous Southern superiority. And as previously hinted, the armies of the Westerlands are on the march again, with the Ironborn on a direct collision path...

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