**Chapter 23**

**Uncharted Paths**

**Magister Lysandro Rogare**

“It is not the end of the world, father,” like her mother, Lysandro thought, Larra was quick to see the benefits and not the losses in the great web of trade and exchange.

“The great disasters for a House rarely stop the existence of a city, never mind a continent, Larra,” Lysandro told her as he observed the blue sky. “And yes, I agree the information brought back by the *Intrepid* is not immediately a disaster for us. But I do not think it is going to have pleasant effects if it comes true.”

“This...how did Captain Berovoso call it? The Haijin?”

“Yes, it was the word he employed. It apparently means something like ‘sea ban’ in the common Yi-Tish language.”

“Yes...” Larra emptied her glass of wine before continuing. “From an economic perspective, this ‘sea ban’ makes no sense at all. The great aristocrats of Yi Ti have immense properties where thousands of serfs are creating the goods we pay in gold and silver for considerable sums. It is a monopoly which has no equivalent in the Narrow and the Sunset Seas. And it isn’t like we are sending them hundreds of ships year after year. Most ships only manage to go to Qarth before beginning the long return home. The Jade Sea is not tender with the light captains.”

“I am afraid that the new God-Emperor does not care very much about trade opinions but more about what suits his narrow-minded head.” Lysandro declared before seating himself on the most comfortable chair of the room. “What is annoying is that, due to the distances, we will have no idea how efficiently this official ban will be enforced. There always will be some smugglers and unscrupulous men willing to close their eyes on a deal, especially if their profits are at stake, but the thousands of leagues separating us from Yi Ti forbid us to have an accurate tapestry of the real situation. It is possible our next ship to return from beyond the Jade Gates will have its hull filled with silk, porcelain, spices, pearl and jade...”

“And it is also possible it will be empty and the Rogare Bank will have to pay for the futile years-long adventure.”

“Indeed,” it was really at times like this Lysandro regretted Larra had not been his firstborn son. The family’s intelligence seemed to have bypassed Lysaro entirely to focus on his younger sister. “And though our Bank is wealthier than ever, gold and goods can rapidly cause the fall of a generation of efforts. This is why I think we must take very seriously this sea ban, idiotic as it may sounds.”

In his opinion, it was more than idiotic, it was anathema. The lifeblood of every civilised kingdom and city came from trade, whether its rulers admitted or not. Even the proud Andals recognised that truth, else they would not try to tax so much the merchant ships of the daughter-cities of Valyria.

“I want you to think about some goods we may be able to propose to the Yi-Tish, Larra.” His daughter raised an eyebrow in surprise and Lysandro chuckled. “I do not intend to send a fleet east in the next two days, but the profits we and our associates win from the Yi-Tish trade is worth a few preparations from our side. Alas, I do not know what kind of goods the Golden Empire might need apart from our gold and our silver.”

Yi Ti was seemingly abundant of everything, according to the reports from the captains who managed to return from the exhausting and years-long expedition. They had silk, spices, ivory, porcelain, bronze ornaments, wool and plenty of exotic vegetables and fruits no merchant prince found at his table. The courtesans had several times paid assassins to eliminate their rivals before one managed to seize the last perfume from the Jade East. They even had wine the sailors preferred to drink themselves to death with!

“We may try to convince the officials with some Myrish carpets and tapestries,” Larra proposed after thirty or so heartbeats. “The Yi-Tish are not impressed by bells or any creation involving the Myrish clockworks, but the carpets should be fine.”

“It could work,” the Lysene Magister recognised, “but if the goods are bought at Myr, there is the delightful possibility Volantis and our neighbours could ally to close us this market. Besides, the sale of Myrish carpets is not going to be cheap, and will certainly attract plenty of attention if done in large numbers.”

“I understand, father,” Larra replied dutifully and patiently, “but it’s not like our captains can grab swords and force them to accept a trade of silk and jade in exchange of nothing...”

“It would go against the principles of our House, yes,” and really, what could a crew of two or three hundred Lysene sailors really do against an Empire of millions? There would be no war. Lys and Yi Ti were too far away for that to be a real possibility. But trade would become extremely difficult if the harbours were filled with hostile inspectors and enemy captains.

“And if we were selling them the swords, instead?”

The suggestion was so out of his trade experience Lysandro stared with his mouth wide open for an instant.

“You mean selling them the steel...” Larra’s lips twitched in amusement before returning to a serene stance.

“We never see their soldiers fighting, so I could be wrong, but unlike Volantis there never was a rumour they tried to sell a sword or an axe to one of our captains. Yet they must have seen our blades. Why didn’t they try to increase their profits even more?”

It made a lot of sense. Yet there was just a tiny problem with this.

“We have not enough smiths between us and our allies to divert from ship anchors and the other naval supplies, Larra.”

“Yes,” his daughter convened, “but there are realms towards the sunset which have plenty of them and they must be eager to use their forges in the middle of winter. By pure luck, we are now at peace with them...”

This was not an uninteresting proposition. The Westerosi had refused a ransom for the Prince-King House Rogare had, but maybe a more advantageous bargain calling for their war-like nature would be more appealing to them...

**Lady Jeyne Arryn**

From the first years of her childhood, the Mountains of the Moon had always been there. Tall, their peaks always white save during the longest summers, they were both a source of marvel and headaches. The Mountains of the Moon were both a shield against the direst storms coming from the Shivering Sea and elsewhere, but also the lair of the Mountain clans, the old enemies of the Vale.

The mountains were both a blessing and a curse of the Gods, the majority of the septons agreed on that at least. The same mountains which protected the Vale from Ironborn before the Conquest were also isolating the lands as soon as the weather turned cold and the first snows came. They were impassable. They were a realm of cold, whiteness and danger. The few Valemen who dared venturing away from the valleys past autumn were watched with the looks one reserved to madmen. And it was fully justified, for plenty of them didn’t return from their travels. Bloodthirsty clansmen were sometimes at fault, but too often the killing block came from a blizzard or an avalanche.

All of this was true, and yet here she was, watching the immense unexplored wastes of the mountains from the half-buried walls of one of the summer forts her knights used once spring had melted the greatest part of the ice and snow in the high passes.

It was a spectacle worth its price in gold. The sky was clear today, and exceptionally for winter, the sun had decided to grant them warmth and light for the first time in moons. Thus Jeyne could see everything on hundreds of leagues no matter the direction her eyes watched.

Deep north, there was Sunken Bay, the large and dangerous reefs almost separating the Vale in half, a pure blue cut in the endless mountain range. East and west, peaks and rocks that were rarely named and explored, even when winter failed to maintain its grasp on this kingdom of Westeros. And in the south-east, of course, the Eyrie were there, snow and marble, shining like a diamond under the sun, so beautiful and yet so inaccessible.

“A pity I can’t loan your dragon every fortnight, your Grace,” The Lady Paramount of the Vale said as she tried to imagine what her lands could have been if the Mountains of the Moon were half the length and the height they were. The Vale would be more akin to the Westerlands...

“I think Moondancer would object,” Baela Targaryen, her cousin, chuckled. “I try my best to force him outside the lair every day, but I fear the dragons and the cold have become bitter feuding enemies in the last couple of years.”

Said dragon, when he became the attention of his mistress and she, sniffed in disdain and generated more smoke from its nostrils. Unfortunately for the royal dragon, being curled around a fire and having most of its body being covered by two blankets was not the best counter-argument to pretend its displeasure at flying in winter conditions didn’t exist.

“I did not see every dragon your dynasty was able to hatch before the war,” and before most of them died in flames and massacres, she didn’t add. “But it seems to me Moondancer is...different from the other dragons.”

The massive beast Jacaerys Targaryen had called Vermax had been terrifying when Jeyne and her bannersmen had welcomed the then-Crown Prince at the Eyrie. But as her best falcon-masters had told her once Prince Jacaerys and his escort had departed her home, the young dragon had not been exactly elegant and gracious in flight. The maesters and the other knowledgeable parties available to her had been unable to tell her the reason of these disparities. In the end, it had been a particularly troublesome squire which had proposed the reason making the most sense. Dragons, had argued the young loud-mouthed knight-in-being, were more and more often chained in the Dragonpit. Yet if dragons were like horses, they needed training before being ready for war. And horses took a lot of training before any knight worth the name considered them a steed worthy to carry them to the battlefield and beyond.

Moondancer was not bulky, one glance was enough to tell that much. The dragon was far more massive than a couple of years ago, but remained far more nimble than Vermax ever was. The flame-breathing reptile that had allowed them to travel in the middle of the mountains without incident was built in length and was capable of agility manoeuvres few birds would dare imitating.

“You mean I did not spend my time throwing criminals into a dark pit for my bonded to feast on,” her cousin - everyone had begun to nickname her the Black Queen – affirmed with a thin smile.

“Well, yes,” Jeyne coughed before continuing. “Though I must assume your cousins didn’t feed men and women to their dragons before the war.”

Aegon and Aemond had not been good commanders, but if they had tried to show their power that way before the Old King died, there wouldn’t have been so many Lords to declare for the Green Dragon.

“Perhaps not,” Baela Targaryen acknowledged grimacing. “This war created a lot of monsters, and I don’t think the dragons were responsible for half of it.”

“Some of them still live.”

“And the price to remove them is a new Dance. And the Seven Kingdoms will not survive a new Dance, Lady Arryn.”

“Of course, your Grace,” Jeyne wasn’t offended by the minor admonishment. “I suppose you had a reason, aside from the mountains, to bring me here?”

“I did,” her cousin opened up a pouch and grabbed a scroll, which by all evidence looked extremely recent. “If you want to read this...”

Jeyne, unfortunately, rapidly realised she couldn’t.

“I’m afraid I am not skilled enough to read this dialect of High Valyrian,” the maester supposed to tutor her in her youth had abandoned the lessons after a particular stormy session and the death of the man one year before her sixteenth name day had ensured the lessons stopped there.

“Ah, regrettable,” the Black Queen shrugged, her violet eyes momentarily watching her dragon before returning to fix her. “It is, in a way, a sort of...construction magic used in the Free Cities. It explains how to replicate the greatest wonder of the Freehold of Valyria.”

“I assume, your Grace, you’re not speaking of the dragons or the Doom...”

Baela laughed and Jeyne immediately followed.

“No, rest assured I have no intention to birth a volcano in the middle of the Mountains of the Moon. One Doom is one too much for this world. No, I am speaking of the Valyrian roads.”

Jeyne Arryn blinked. Of all the things she had expected hearing today, the roads left by the dragonlords were not at the forefront of her thoughts. She had heard them, of course. They were the fourth man-made wonder out of the nine described by Lomas Longstrider.

“Is it possible?” The Lady of the Eyrie could not disguise her pessimism. “Most maesters and merchants who have seen them with their own eye insist the methods to build the roads are something the ancients took with them to their fiery grave.”

“It is...assuming you have dragons, I suppose.” Baela Targaryen’s last comment almost made her roll her eyes. Most of the known world had no chance to achieve this, then.

Still, someone was troubling her.

“Assuming it is possible to do this with dragons...why didn’t the Conqueror or the Conciliator tried this feat?” Because no matter the era, having roads which never needed to be repaired or improved was not something anybody would have protested in front of the Iron Throne.

“I...I am not sure. The Conqueror, I think, wanted to avoid reminding his new subjects he was a Valyrian and a master of war. As the roads were built to tie the colonies of the Freehold between each other, it would not have been that popular. Aenys, Maegor or Uncle Viserys never had the foresight...and the Conciliator, I think, preferred using Westerosi hands to tie the kingdoms in labour instead of searching for some clues how the ancient arts had been done.”

“I’m sure there is more to it than that, your Grace,” she had not kept her Ladyship by not noticing the reluctance in her Queen’s voice.

“Many of the foundations of the Valyrian constructions are bathed in blood,” the young woman admitted after a short moment of silence. “I assume King Jaehaerys immediately assumed he would need to invoke blood magic and stopped his investigations on that front. It is a pity, because as far as my agents have been able to learn, the blood sacrifices were not a vital component of the roads’ creation.”

“How so?”

“Valyrian sorcerers were notoriously...not very regarding with the lives of their slaves. Killing slaves for many constructions allowed them to disregard the advices of the wall-builders and other great projects. By killing and spilling blood, the Freehold was able to complete everything faster, but with the drawback that should something...magical destabilise their marvellous creations, the result would be like a fortress with foundations built on sand.”

Jeyne tightened her lips at the image conjured in her mind. If this speculation – for it was what it was, as no survivor of Valyria had escaped to tell the tale – the Doom must have been like the very earth rebelling against masters.

“I understand, your Grace,” she replied. “You intend to build a...lesser version of the Valyrian roads, in the Westerosi style.”

“Yes, I do,” the young Queen marched on to go caress her Moondancer, who growled in content the moment she touched the scales under the blanket. “I have received a small mountain of complaints about the state of the roads, and I assume similar protests arrived to you.”

“Hundreds,” Jeyne confirmed. “Nobody was really interested maintaining the roads during the war, but to be fair their maintenance was...late in the last years before the Dance.”

“You mean it was long overdue,” the silver-haired beauty corrected her. “I appreciate your attempts to be polite, but my Council showed me the sums. The lack of efforts began in the last years of the Conciliator’s reign. The upkeep of the roads was costing too much...mainly because certain Lords had multiplied the costs of stone, wood and their valuable workforce by three or four times in gold.”

The Black Queen gave a light tap on her dragon’s belly.

“Valyrian roads the way I intend will not be exactly cheap, but once they are done, there will be no need to rebuild them season after season. I know they can resist Norvos winters, and after more than two hundred years of existence, the existing roads have not a single flaw. Even if my descendants have to rebuild the new roads fifty or sixty years, I will take this bargain.”

“No bloodbaths or any kind of ritual sacrifices. Of any kind,” If there was, the Faith would rise up in arms and Jeyne wouldn’t blame them.

“No blood sacrifices,” her Queen agreed. “I will use copiously dragonfire and the work of your best builders for this task, however.”

“It is...acceptable. I assume you want to test the first leagues of road here in the Vale, else you would not have decided to speak with me before winter’s end.”

“Yes, I do. If I want the North and the Riverlands to eagerly accept these new roads, the best solution is to have under their eyes the road in question. I was thinking about the first road to begin at Gulltown, stabilising the Ironoaks pass before building to the Gates of the Moon, the Bloody Gate and finally reaching Saltpans.”

“There are the clansmen to worry about,” Jeyne warned her cousin.

“Once this terrible winter is over, I think we will need to take measures against them, one way or another.” There was new determination burning in the eyes of the dragonlady. “For centuries they have been a plague on the Vale and the Riverlands, and I think it is time for it to cease. A war against the Greens is not in our interest, but a war against these land-faring cousins of the Ironborn...”

The Lady of the Eyrie knew this was the first opening for the negotiations that were sure to come in the next moons. But for once, she was interested. Baela Targaryen was not her rogue father, and thank the Seven for that.

**King Daeron Targaryen**

“I never thought I would ever have one day to thank an Alchemist because he and his Order saved King’s Landing,” Daeron said as the doors of the throne room closed and he found himself alone with his Hand, his Master of Whisperers, and a few trusted servants.

“The pyromancers are...not without flaws,” Larys Strong managed to comment without grimacing or frowning heavily in disapproval. “But one can’t deny their...substances have powerful effects.”

“Powerful effects,” The Green King repeated distastefully. “Yes, I suppose it is true.”

The Alchemist Guild was infamously known for the green substance known as wildfire, after all. And there was only dragonfire to burn hotter than the awful stuff when it had been in contact with a torch or a fire arrow.

“The real question, of course,” Daeron affirmed as he descended the steps of this damned uncomfortable chair to avoid a ridiculous and painful death, “is if there is any truth in the bunch of lies I was forced to hear for over two turns of hourglass. Lord Merryweather?”

The Lord of the Reach coughed to clear his throat before answering.

“I think the only part where the Wisdom was speaking the truth was when he and his colleagues decided to name it their cure the Ironbreaker Elixir, your Grace.” Marq Merryweather muttered something inaudible between his teeth, words which were certainly not complimentary for the Alchemists or the Ironborn. “There were more concerned with saving their wildfire-sworn lives and fortunes than a true devotion for the realm, I fear.”

“But their ‘elixir’ worked.”

“To a degree, your Grace,” the Master of Whisperers intervened. “To a degree. In the first days of the epidemic, the Alchemists proposed a lot of these ‘miraculous cures’ to the smallfolk and those...desperate enough to drink their substances. My birds were caught in the panic storms like everyone was in the city, but my best guess is that until they learned to properly dose their elixirs, one in three people who drank their disgusting brew ended dead before you had the time to say a prayer to the Seven.”

“That’s monstrous!” The Hand of the King exclaimed.

Larys Strong winced, passing his tongue on his yellowy teeth.

“Unfortunately, Lord Marq, the persons drinking the Alchemist elixirs were all suffering from deadly cases of Iron Fever. Thus even those who didn’t die when they hoped the pyromancers had a miraculous situation that they proclaimed to be an ancient Valyrian cure perished in short order before the day was over.”

“If it hadn’t worked, I would have hanged them all and placed their heads on pikes above each Gate,” the head of the Targaryen Green branch admitted as they left the throne room by the passage leading to his royal quarters. “But their methods, as much as I don’t like them, worked.”

And thank the Father and the Mother they had. The first days when the Iron Fever had begun to spread in Fleabottom and the dirtiest quarters had been something he wanted to forget and never see again.

Goldcloaks and veterans of multiple battles had been torn apart by a crowd crying, begging for salvation. And Daeron had been forced to watch, knowing there was nothing he could do. Nothing except riding Tessarion and burning the streets and thousands of houses where the Fever had begun sending hundreds of souls to the Stranger.

It would have cost him everything and practically damned him in the eyes of the people like Rhaenyra had years ago. Nobody, not even Larys Strong, Marq Merryweather or his Kingsguards, knew how close he had been to utter this order.

Maybe it was cowardly of him, but he was thankful for the Alchemists to deny him dirtying his hands with the blood of his subjects. Still, the price had been high to stop this Seven-damned Fever in the capital and before it devoured the Stormlands.

“Give me the bad news, Larys. How many Kingslanders died this moon?”

“I have not precise numbers, your Grace,” the former Lord of Harrenhal did not flinch when Daeron glared at him for not answering the question. “I am not trying to dance around the question, my King. I simply don’t know. The Alchemists and the troops who drank the elixir have bathed thousands of corpses in wildfire outside the city, and nobody was trying to count when the task had to be done before more disease perils came to strike King’s Landing. I don’t think, alas, that we will have been lucky to lose less than forty-five thousand men, women and children from the Iron Fever.”

It was a shockingly small number compared to the tens of thousands more bodies the epidemic would have claimed if the Alchemists had not found their ‘Ironbreaker Elixir’. But it still gave him nausea. While more people had died during the war, no battle had managed to kill fifty thousand loyal men and women. The Iron Fever had, and Daeron was not naive to pretend the ghastly toll was going to stop there. Crakehall and the Northern Reach had suffered the full weight of the Fever without any cure arriving in time.

“I see,” a pious lie, he had the feeling he didn’t see anything and the more he stayed the King, the more traps and problems appeared to complicate his reign. “Now I want the revelations I am absolutely going to loathe.”

“I am not sure...” Larys must have sensed it was not time to disagree with him, today, for the aged Master of Whisperers changed his tune. “First, and least important, is the fact this epidemic has caused a lot of damage to the Kingswood. The knights and the foresters we had tried their best, but we had to burn the corpses and remove the nests of contagion before it was too late, and there were thousands and thousands of sick outlaws and refugees in the Kingswood. And since only wildfire appeared to stop this ugly Fever for good...”

“Forests are filled with trees and we can replant some,” Daeron didn’t know how long it was going to take to give the Kingswood back its ancient splendour. Crone and Mother willing, he would live long enough to see it. “Next problem.”

“We must,” Marq Merryweather told in a pessimistic tone, “rebuild the City Watch. Again. They suffered too many dead and wounded in the last riots and Fever disorders.”

“Can our near-empty treasury afford it?” The grimace on his councillors’ visages gave a good hint the reply was not going to be positive. “I suppose there is no way to cut back on the costs, isn’t it?”

“We hired far too many unreliable swords last time your grace because we replaced the coins of your royal father by smaller ones, the like were used during the last...troubled periods.” The son of King Viserys I admired how his Hand managed to never utter the name of Maegor the Cruel. “I don’t pretend to be a merchant-prince of Tyrosh or Pentos, but it is a fact one good set of plate armour in the Street of Steel today is worth three times the master smiths sold it a decade ago.”

“How it is possible?” Daeron demanded in a tone more angry than he truly wanted. “We are the kingdom with all the gold mines. The Blacks have almost no gold left in their coffers! It should be them, not us, suffering from coinage problems!”

“The Master of Coin is trying to find explanations, but I think it’s our overabundance of gold which is creating the problem,” the Hand of the King replied unhappily. “During the last year, before the Fever struck, Lady Lannister was happy to send to us several convoys of bullion in return for artisans and farmers to rebuild the West. We have a lot of gold in the villages of the Crownlands but there is not a lot of food and goods to buy. The Blacks have not much to sell or buy either, but since their silver was worth far less...”

“May the Smith preserve us,” the young Green King whispered before trying to regain his composure.

“We must see the good points,” Lord Marq tried in a more cheerful tone. “While our coin problems won’t end next moon, I think they can be solved. Trade and harvests will have a purifying effect on the finances once this winter ends. The loans we demanded from Casterly Rock will be repaid eventually, and we will able to recover. Our situation is worse than Winterfell and the Eyrie at the moment, but we will be able to draw on far more wealth than them once the ice and the snow will disappear.”

“I don’t know if I share your assessment of the situation,” Daeron retorted. “Many harbours of this realm are ruined or severely damaged and the merchants from the other side of the Narrow Sea are not happy about the sellsails and pirates plaguing our coasts. We may be forced to push for more loans.”

And the bankers they borrowed money from were not the most benevolent humans to speak with. By the Stranger, sometimes Daeron thought selling your soul was the first imperative the great bankers imposed to their inexperienced subordinates.

“I don’t want to speak more about our gold dragons’ problems for today. Is there anything else?”

“I regret to inform you, your Grace, that the magical component at the heart of the Ironbreaker Elixir the Alchemists used is most likely dragon’s scales crushed into powder.”

Daeron thought himself not prone to violence, but this time he roared in anger and threw his own seat across the Council room.

**Ser William Erenford**

And to believe that, moons ago, he had believed Seagard could be a new home.

William watched the silent streets of Seagard, trying to find a reason to stay at his post now that the quarantine measures were lifted one by one. He didn’t find one. Every alley he remembered patrolling in the first fortnight of his service was now tarnished by the endless burnings and ghastly discoveries. Every market he and the rest of the guards in his company had enjoyed buying their meals were now closed or missing two out of three merchants. Not that it was that bad for the city watch, for three out of four men who had stood with William were dead too.

William Erenford didn’t know why the Iron Fever had spared him. And this disease of the Seven Hells had spared him, saying the contrary was stupid. He had eaten the same bread, breathed the same air, patrolled the same alleys...and yet when the fever at last abated, he had not suffered anything more dangerous than a cold while the bodies of an entire company burned in the pyres.

Sometimes he wondered if the men had not been the lucky ones. The Fever was not a pleasant manner to die, but like every man who had done his duty in the lower city, William knew his visage was haunted by the things they had seen. Between the diseases, the looting and the pillages of the abandoned quarters, the last moons had showed him men and women were able to do really stomach-turning crimes if they thought the Lords were not able to stop them.

When he was still a squire, he had believed wars would stop after the great battle of good against evil. The days after the Dance, the kingdom divided in two, had proven this for the falsehood it was. When the grain chariots from the east had arrived, William the new Knight had prayed with his new companions for a short winter and that this lovely merchant’s daughter by King Aegon’s square found him good-looking. So many prayers unanswered. The hopes were broken on the frozen ground. The winter was continuing, despite being five moons after the announcement of the year one hundred and thirty-four after the Conquest. The pretty girls were dead or hidden behind stone walls where the Fever had proven unwilling to thread. And Seagard, which had so awed him when he saw it for the first time at dawn’s light, was now giving him nightmares where there was no escape. As much as he wanted to forget, William remembered the smell of burned flesh, the oil and the vinegar, the putrid torrents of smoke burning under the grey sky.

Maybe a few years away from the Mallister lands would allow him to forget. Yes, maybe that was what he needed. There were calls for many veteran guards to escort the merchants riding east to Saltpans.

“Where has Maester Call gone, Ser?” A young face asked. William though the boy couldn’t possibly have sixteen name days.

“No one knows, boy,” Bale gruffly replied. Like him, the soldier had survived the Fever, but it had cost him two ugly scars on his left cheek when a sergeant who had seen his family burning in the fires lost his mind and drew his sword on them. “The day the Fever was over and the gates opened, he went missing.”

“Too bad,” someone on the right grumbled, “I wanted to give him one or two daggers in the chest for his crimes...”

“I had my cousin hide the torches and the spears to get rid of him...”

“Blasted grey robe, honour and mercy are useless to him...”

“We will demand an audience to our liege for a ransom on his head...”

The rest of the patrol was spent hurling insults of varying degrees against the missing maester. Cal’s rude manners had made him no friends at Seagard, either among the Lords, the guards or the smallfolk. The merchants were angry at him he had torched what they pretended to be untainted granaries and larders. The apothecaries were furious he had grabbed their spices and herbs supplies for a few copper coins when they were worth their weight in gold. The guards had no respect for him because...because the maester had no respect for their sacrifices and the courage of what he asked for them. Had Lord Mallister given the order, they would have hunted him to the gates and beyond for his arrogance and crimes.

Still, William was willing to recognise the Riverlands could have suffered far, far worse without the crazy maester to organise the counterattack against the Fever. But in this kind of war, the Erenford knight was not naive enough to pretend the heroes were going to be thanked with nice words, a large purse of gold and a lordship...too many nightmares, too many dead for festivities to be organised.

“Err...do someone remember how the bastard looked like?”

The good question stopped nearly every conversation, and even William realised with a small shiver he had no good answer for this query.

“He wore so much his damned ‘Stranger-attire’ that we forgot his face...”

**Author’s note**:

Magic to the rescue of Westeros! Or not. The Iron Fever is progressively getting extinguished, but the price to fight it has not been cheap at all. And of course, the winds of winter continue to rage, with about one year and a half of cold and hardship...

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