**Chapter 8**

**Release the Kraken**

**Lord Triston Sunderland 1**

Triston Sunderland was angry. He loathed the Northerners and their heretical ways. He hated the sorcerers of White Harbor and their abominations.

But above all, he was utterly mad when he thought about the Lord Paramount he had sworn his allegiance to.

House Sunderland and its Knights were loyal bannersmen of House Arryn. They paid their taxes in time, travelled to the Eyrie to bend the knee and renew their oaths every time it was asked for them. They had even raided the trade between the North and Braavos when it was asked for them. They protected the northern approaches of the Vale for the last century without complaining.

But when he asked for reinforcements against an imminent Northern invasion, suddenly he was told to hold as long as possible and given a couple of hundred men-at-arms from the south who didn’t know how to wield a spear.

This was just one insult in a sea of ignorance and humiliation. It had been nearly ten days after the heretics started to unleash their sorcery-fuelled storms that the ravens had finally been sent to him, giving him his orders for the mustering Crusade. House Sunderland, House Borrell, House Longthorpe and House Torrent had to provide four thousand men and seventy warships for this new war. When the Eastern Fleet would sail into the Bite and wipe out the heretics’ naval forces, the Sunderland-led fleet would join this fleet and assault White Harbor.

Triston wondered the name of the imbecile who had imagined this plan, if only to remove his head from his shoulders.

Yes, the Three Sisters had these forces on hand. If they placed spears and swords on the hands of the entire male population, from the youngsters to the grey beards. If his coffers were sufficiently full to pay for the expenses of forging and supplying such a large force. If they didn’t suffer any losses in the storms – and since they had already five of his small galleys damaged by the waves and the winds, he wasn’t holding much hope for this point.

And all of this assumed he could muster the warships and the soldiers of the Three Sisters in a single place.

Triston Sunderland couldn’t.

Oh, he could have ordered his bannersmen Longthorpe and Torrent to come at Sisterton. They wouldn’t have obeyed, though.

When heretical sorcery was seen intermittently north, storms raged and the Manderly fleet was days away from sailing, the Lords of the Three Sisters were not going to leave their homes undefended. Not when the Arryn and Royal Fleets were likely fortnights or moons away, unable to save them. Not when the terrible weather forbid them to evacuate their families, the women and the children of the smallfolk and every non-fighter to the Vale.

It didn’t make any sense. By all rights, all the Crusade preparations save the ones concerning the Small Wall of the Riverlands should have been focused on holding the Three Sisters well before the storm came. As long as the Bite was in loyal hands, the Northern trade was disrupted, the Iron Throne had a sword pushed against the throats of the eastern heretic warlords and the traitors wouldn’t be able to supply their armies if they attacked the Freys and the Sentinels.

It didn’t make any sense, and yet he was, with twenty small galleys and fourteen hastily converted merchant ships, barely two thousand men and whatever sellswords could be hired on such short notice. The greatest blow of the heretics in untold generations was coming to Sisterton, and he could do nothing but wait, complete some of the last fortifications done during the last decade and pray the Seven it was enough.

“We will be forced to concede the outer defences quickly, if they come in large numbers,” he said grimly to his sons, his eyes fixed on the large and detailed map showing the details of the Bay of Sisterton. “The scorpions we have on the two watchtowers defending the entrance are old and can’t shoot their bolts to stop a small squadron.”

“But Father, if we stay in the Bay and the heretics land their forces in huge numbers, we won’t be able to repulse them and they will sack the town,” said in a worried tone his third son Jasper.

“If they land, sacking the town is the least they will do,” commented Uthor, the eldest of the seven sons he had been lucky to sire with his wife. “The Northerners respect nothing. They love their demonic masters and will pillage septs and sacred places before setting fire to their roofs and altars.”

His eldest son had a very good point. But he didn’t see how to prevent it. The only really two defensible locations of Sisterton were his own castle, Wave’s Redoubt, and the holdfast of House Borrell, Breakwater. They were also, by strange happenstance, the only structures completely built in stone. Sisterton was a small town by Vale standards, and even the Long Summer had not been enough to transform the former smuggler’s den in a nice and proper city. Houses were in straw and mud, roofs were leaking during the big rains and his smallfolk were a turbulent sort.

As much as the idea gave him pain in his throat and his belly, he had to hold the castles and let the surplus men crew the warships and the water front. If the heretics attacked in strength, he could hold his castle and since House Borrell had one too, the invaders would be forced to make a double encirclement, stretching their forces.

As autumn was here and no harvest could be done anymore, the Northerners would be forced to win fast, starve, or withdraw. The latter was the favourite outcome, in his eyes.

“We will pray the Warrior, and if one opportunity to strike part of the Manderly fleet is granted to us by the Seven, we will strike. If they don’t, I see no other recourse than taking refuge in this castle and enduring what will be a long and unpleasant siege.”

Uthor, Oswell, Jasper, Dywen and Jacar nodded with faces varying between grim acceptance and relief. Hugo and Jon, being the youngest, looked at him with betrayed expressions.

And indeed it was Hugo who voiced the first objection.

“Ah Father, Breakwater and Wave’s Redoubt Castles can’t welcome the population of Sisterton inside our hall and our towers...

“You’re right. They don’t. It is why we will not let them enter our home.” It wasn’t filling him with joy. But his House food reserves were terribly small, even after the Long Summer. His desires to build a larger granary and preparing new basements for the storage of food had not met the approval of the smallfolk, who had demanded he sold the armours, the steeds and the weapons of his children first. It was absolutely preposterous, but without money and strong arms, nothing had been done. He was not going to sacrifice his ability to endure a siege for those ungrateful vagrants.

“Father, we were made knights by the light of the Seven! It is our duty to protect the innocent against the evils of the demons, the traitors and the heretics! We have sworn vows to defend the just!”

“It is not a fairy tale, Jon!” Triston shouted back, annoyed by his youngest outburst. In hindsight, he should have seized ‘Ser Jon’ moons ago and spoken to him. These tales had no place on the battlefield, not when the enemy was going to be stronger than them. “The Manderly fleet has close to a hundred warships and thousands of monsters to ravage our shores and we will be lucky if they decide to divide their forces between all our castles...”

Like conjured by a curse, three knows were struck against the door, and once given the command, a messenger with an hirsute beard and a chainmail too big for his average body entered with a gloomy light in his eyes.

“My Lord, the storm is calming. There are a lot of sails on the horizon, according to the Port’s Master. The heretics are coming.”

**Marwyn the Mage 2**

In Marwyn’s opinion, the Three Sisters were tangible proof the Gods of this world were sadists.

The three islands sworn to house Arryn could have been anywhere else in the Shivering Sea, and they would certainly have been forgotten. Maybe Braavos or Lorath would have deigned building an outpost or two, a fishery or something like that. Most likely they would have explored said islands and returned home disappointed.

But since the Three Sisters were located in the Bite, said rocks had become the favourite battlefield the Direwolves and the Falcons fought over the moment they felt cheated by a treaty, had some large number of pesky cousins to get rid of or just because they wanted a good-old war.

In several centuries, no, millennia, the soil of the Three Sisters had swallowed seas of Vale and Northern blood.

Today was going to add more of the precious red liquid, of this he had absolutely no doubt.

“I profess I am curious, Admiral. What sort of trickery do you have in mind to defeat the Sistermen’s fleet?” The former Archmaester asked.

“I’m not sure these hulls can qualify as a fleet,” replied jovially Wendel Manderly, Admiral of the White Harbor Fleet, Sea Champion of the Goddess Slaanesh and Defiler of the Waves. “Yes, House Sunderland says they have more than thirty galleys, but really, those are just fisherman’s ships. Putting forty oars on their sides and a scorpion on their deck will not make them in one day become the rulers of the waves.”

The Northern commander for several heartbeats fixed the distant island and the sails of the Sisterton fleet with a frightening gaze which almost made him forget the sheer width of Lord Manderly’s second son. The moment didn’t last, however, and soon enough a new pastry was swallowed by the massive mouth, reminding him this man may very well have the corpulence of an elephant before the next decade was over.

“But to answer your question Mage, I thought long and hard of the dreadful fate I wanted to curse the Three Sisters with. My Father ordered me to avoid provoking a cataclysm, thus sinking the archipelago under the waves with a mass sacrifice of beastmen was out. We could have manifested poison clouds over their lands and waited as they slowly suffocated and their population murdered each other in panic, but we are in a hurry and besides, this is absolutely boring. Most of our sorcerers are recruited for the Wall or the Riverlands and so I can’t conjure a hundred thousand soldiers of the Goddess and teach them their gods are empty shells.

In the end, I decided to take inspiration from the tactics of our new ‘allies’ the Ironborn. Please follow me.”

Marwyn frowned as he followed the fat Northerner towards a ritual circle several minor sorcerers had been busy preparing. No, he amended, they hadn’t been preparing it; they had just activated it; the thing had evidently been painted in blood on the scales of a massive fish-like creature he had never seen before in his life several days ago and it had been brought under the sky right now.

But what had this complex set of runes in common with the Ironborn? The Drowned Priests sometimes Gifted practitioners in their ranks, but their abilities to command wave and wind were really minor compared to his skills or those the Manderly sorcerers had shown him day and night. Aside from that, there was not much to take inspiration from in this degenerate culture. Ironborn despised weakness, they wanted to pay the iron price at all costs, never mind that it destroyed most of their merchant trade and branded them forever as outcasts. The Greyjoys and their bannersmen were reavers – pirates in everything but name – and when they didn’t try to rebel, they pillaged, raped, and drank themselves to death in the worst taverns of Essos and the Stepstones.

“Read this script,” he was commanded while handed a massive roll of parchment. Marwyn obeyed, and after reading the first lines winced.

“These are powerful words, Admiral. The structure and the glyphs you want to use are efficient for necromancy but lack flexibility for any other ritual.”

He didn’t say more, but he was wondering what the Northerners had intended to animate from the grave. To his knowledge, there were no corpses on the deck or in the depths of the hull. To make things stranger, the eight ships of the vanguard – including the one he was currently on – gained more and more speed and distanced the rest of the Northern fleet, keeping a very loose formation.

Marwyn wasn’t going to pretend he had the skills of a sellsword officer, but this appeared to be a very dangerous formation to fight a battle, especially as the Sisterton fleet was sallying out of its base, trying to seize the opportunity of crushing them separately before the rest of the Manderly forces intervened.

“Yes, they are. Now prepare to pour your strength in the structure, the ritual needs to be completed before the Sistermen are upon us.”

Wendel Manderly had taken a stern expression, and all aboard the Pride of White Harbor heeded his commands without discussion anymore. One by one the eight ships of the vanguard stopped and the sorcerers commenced their incantations. Pulsing runes rose above the warships and heartbeat by heartbeat, a ritual circle was created by the Gift-users, bringing the powers of Gods in this world.

Some energy was lost in the process, of course. Rituals were complicated things on land, and being at sea augmented the difficulty. Energy was lost. Power which was not meant for simple mortals to wield was unleashed upon the sea. Several sailors covered themselves in scales, feathers or fur before succumbing to insanity or imploding in flesh and dark blood.

Sure enough, the fleet of Sisterton tried to come upon them faster, realising their only hope of victory was to strike them before the ritual was completed. Oars struck the dark waves with desperation, the great blue-grey sails were trimmed to a degree it was imprudent in the Bite’s waters and Marwyn could see men running on the converted fishermen and occasional smugglers.

They were too late.

His forces and those of a hundred sorcerers were heavily taxed, but suddenly the magic was concentrated and sent to the bottom of the sea. Instantly, Marwyn felt the corpse of the being Wendel Manderly intended to animate and knew the Sunderland fleet had just thrown itself in the jaws of death.

The ritual was ending. The creature which had died would not be used for long before breaking apart – there were limits to everything, and using the strength of a hundred sorcerers continuously would be extremely wasteful – but it worked.

The Vale-sworn naval forces were nearly upon them now. A few minutes, and close to two scores warships would fall upon the dispersed eight Manderly ones.

“RELEASE THE KRAKEN!”

A tendril surged out of the waves and struck the leading galley like a human threw a candle at the other end of the room. The impact was monumental and the Sunderland sailors had no warning. Their warship flew for the first and last time, before crashing into another galley, generating more chaos.

It was just the first blow, and as more tendrils emerged from the dark waters, the Sistermen screamed in terror. Their shouts and prayers were so loud they were perfectly audible from his position.

“Where are the Seven now you need their protection, heathens?”

Wendel Manderly’s ritual had animated a dead kraken whose bones had been lying at the bottom of the sea. Yes, with hindsight, the Ironborn inspiration was amusing. Alas, it wasn’t very efficient. The bones had been dead for too long, the very magic of the animal had been sucked out when humanity was still young and the Valyrians mere shepherds. Already the fury given to the dead body was lessening, the bone-tentacles slowing down and abandoning their implacable strikes. In a hundred heartbeats, the corpse of the legendary creature would return to its dark cemetery and this time the oblivion would be permanent.

For this battle, it didn’t matter. The fleet of the Three Sisters had been methodically pulverised and now the air brought with it the agonising screams and the cries for help of the defeated. Not everything had gone right: two of the Northern warships which had been the closest from the Sisterton hulls were severely damaged and would need days of reparation.

Still, the enemy naval forces were gone and for an insignificant price.

“I think,” Wendel Manderly announced with a ferocious smile, “that our Goddess has manifested Her Will quite clearly. Put back our Host in a proper battle-formation, Captain! Sisterton awaits and our gluttony is going to be satisfied!”

**Lord Triston Sunderland 2**

“If I had known we would lose them without sinking a single enemy ship, I would never have sent them out of the Bay.”

It was a pitiful excuse, and the Lord of Sweetsister knew it. But he had to say it. His knights, sailors and all the men who had just perished deserved this apology. Oswell, the son he had sent to an inglorious and useless death, deserved it.

He hadn’t known the true depths of the madness and the corruption hiding in the Northerner’s hearts. What sort of madman thought rising a monstrous kraken was an acceptable strategy to win a small naval battle?

The Starks, the Manderlys and all their bannersmen were monstrous heretics, servants of abominations and creatures destined for the Seven Hells. Alas, unless he was granted a miracle by the Father Above or the Warrior, the depravity and the corruption of his enemies wasn’t going to change the fate of his House.

“Give a last meal to our men,” he ordered his third son Jasper as the dark clouds above his head poured a cold rain on the ramparts and the heads of the Sisterton defenders. “Then we will open all the armouries and light all the fires. Prepare the scorpions and the archers with fire arrows and bolts.”

If the enemy was pirates, slavers or corsairs from the Narrow Sea and the Free Cities, these would have been redoubtable weapons. But against a force which thought animating a monster of the Age of Heroes was a good idea, what was he supposed to do? Northerners were sinners and monsters, but he hadn’t the strength to kill them. Maybe the Vale fleet of Gulltown had the power to oppose these heretics, though he wasn’t as confident as he had been this morning. Great sailors or no, the courage and the sea skills were of little value when dead monsters rose back to wreck a last vengeance.

“They are coming,” reported Hugo, returning from the outer watchtower. “They have at least sixty warships, and most are filled with marauders and traitor sellswords. The veterans think there will be between six and seven thousand heretics for this assault.”

Hopefully, this would mean six thousand against two thousand. Six thousand traitors supported by sorcerers and whatever sort of monsters had been bought by demonic pacts and the promise of a grand carnage.

“House Sunderland will not flee.”

Not that they had been able to escape, with the stormy seas and the privateers of the Northern fleet ready to pounce on them.

“House Sunderland will hold and when dawn will return, our colours will fly high and defiant! The enemies will be dead or in full retreat, ready to crawl back in the darkness their kind sold their souls!”

A few soldiers cheered and struck their steel axes and swords against their shields, but many remained silent. The terrible appearance of the dead kraken had been a terrible blow to the moral blow of his men-at-arms, and he couldn’t honestly find anything to give them the idea victory was still possible. Rain was pouring now, and though fires were burning thanks to whale oil and coal, the flames were far smaller than they would have been on one of these sunny summer days.

The watchtowers began to fire at the incoming warships, followed heartbeats later by the other siege engines which had been ready in time for this Crusade. It was difficult to see so far in this rainy weather, but the fire bolts didn’t appear to cause a lot of casualties.

Less than a dozen breaths later, the heretics launched their first strike against the bastions of the Three Sisters. Purple clouds coalesced around the watchtowers and elements raged in a manner which was absolutely unnatural. A gigantic wave submerged the water front, drowning scores of honest men. In one instant the defence failed and as his men ran for their lives, the Northerners began to land their troops in the Bay. The initial numbers had probably been overestimated, he figured. There were large columns of raiders, but not more than three thousand heretics.

“Maybe we will be able to endure a siege if their sorcerers tired themselves...”

It was asking for a miracle, but surely the Seven would intervene to save their true worshippers? The Mother in its aspect of Guardian of the Seas was a Holy Patron of the Three Sisters...

“We must...” what had he been saying...he had almost the command on his tongue...strange he wasn’t seeing the waterfront there was so much pink smoke... “We must...”

“MORE! MORE!” The familiar clash of steel on the walls and the courtyard made him turn his head. Had the enemy somehow sent assassins before they began their attack? But as he watched his men fight each other, he saw no enemy. There was no enemy, just proud Sistermen fighting each other and giggling as they did it!

“Stop this madness! STOP THIS MADNESS!”

A warhammer struck him like thunder and Lord Triston Sunderland collapsed on the humid stones of his castle’s rampart. His world was now a realm of pain and screams. There were abominations crawling out of the smoke...no, NO, NO!

“For the Goddess, love and lust must reign eternally,” the words were whispered in his ears. And then the dagger slit his throat and the world was darkness.

**Lady Asha Stark 6**

When House Stark wanted to travel ‘fast’, the concept of ‘rapidity’ shown by its members put the rest of Westeros to shame.

As the daughter of Balon Greyjoy, Asha knew that should have her father organised large celebrations, the majority of Pyke would have been dead drunk for the next ten days and maybe more. Gathering the ships, the weapons and the men to go to war would take at least a moon. And in the last years she had sailed the Summer and the Narrow Sea, the rest of the Greenlanders were far worse than them. No doubt that when a Reach Lord called his banners, half of his levies would be unable to tell if they had a sword or a spear in their hands.

The North though? Two nights and one day after she and Torrhen had consumed ten times their union in a very soft and large bed, they were once again on the road. And by ‘they’, Asha included Torrhen, Arya, Cregan, Lord Eddard Stark and over ten thousand armoured Northerners, their war chariots, five giants, different types of animals which might well look like demons before they saluted you in the Common Tongue, food carts, water and ale barrels, sorcerers and their strange experiments and thousands of other things.

Whatever else could be said about the denizens of Winterfell, there was no denying they had mastered the art of supplying their troops. There were ranks after ranks of terrible cavaliers and heavy footmen in plate armour. Oh, there were other warriors in leather armour or lighter outfits, but it seemed a deliberate choice. An archer or an axe-thrower could hardly be mobile and efficient if he wasn’t able to shoot his arrows and evade the enemy moves.

She would regret not having the time to appreciate more Winterfell. The baths alone, warmed by the hot springs and some subtle magical artifices, were something you might sell one arm and one leg to enjoy every day. And they were only in early autumn.

That said, there had never been any question to stay in the capital of the North while the great conflict raged and her husband went to war. Asha wasn’t going to wait at home while her family, the old and the new, fought for the future of the Seven Kingdoms. The very morning after their wedding night, she had been granted access to the forges of Winterfell best rune-smiths, and in record time the Northerners had begun to work on the equipment she would be protected with on the battlefield. By the time they had left the Stark citadel – a feat she was ready to bet to be an exploit of magic and skill – she was clad in black armour with shining gold runes of the Four Gods. It was an armour similar to what Torrhen wore himself, in more ways than one.

The rest had been a rush southwards. Asha had wondered once or twice what her brothers would think watching her now: armoured in black and gold, mounted on a big female direwolf answering to the name of Howler, she was certainly not something the Ironborn captains wanted for their women.

The rest of the days and nights, she thought with satisfaction her Lord Father and all his bannersmen could go fuck themselves if they had the brains to do so. As the direwolves ran to war, her husband spoke lengthily on tactics and strategy, before giving her problems she had to solve. Asha had believed she knew the basics; she was an Ironborn captain after all, but it was evident what Torrhen considered ‘average’ and what the Ironborn considered ‘gifted’ were as far as removed as a shark was from a trout.

Three or four times per day, and when they did not eat, it was time for sparring. There too, she had felt frustrated in the beginning. She was good with an axe and a sword, but Northerners were just...demonic with their weapons, faster than her, and when they struck, they could fell mammoths with their blades. She was getting better, though. Stronger too. And at night, well...Torrhen and she had learned a lot from each other, and not just because they made love the moment they were retiring for the night. Yes, sex with her husband was extremely good and they had been experimenting a lot of new positions which would have made the septons die in a heart attack.

Today was unlike the others, though. The sky had turned a colour between black and green which was certainly not natural, and in the horizon a citadel was visible before noon.

“Moat Cailin,” declared Arya as she dismounted Valkia and went to seize some honey biscuits she and her furry companion loved to devour. “Father will be satisfied, we are in time.”

“It looks like we aren’t the first army to get here.”

“White Harbour, Barrowton, the Rills, Oldcastle...there are many hosts and castles which are closest to the Moat than us,” commented her husband, petting his tired direwolf. “For this war, it is as much our muster point than it is the Gate of Neck.”

“People in the South are whispering the whole place is a ruin, you know.”

Cregan scoffed not far from their improvised circle, never leaving his eyes from his book.

“Why would we leave the Moat fall into disrepair? The castle is the ideal place to bleed and destroy crusades from the south, and the foundations were built with a talent few of our builders have the skill to equal.”

“The place has changed owners several times in the past, however,” added Torrhen with an expression he reserved to serious subjects. “Between the bribery from trade tolls, welcoming Southern spies and the influence of the Neck, the Kings of Winter were forced several times to use harsh measures. The current masters of the Moat are the descendants of one of House Stark’s minor branches and were given the title only two hundred years ago.”

“Why did they take the name Sinister, in this case? Greenstark or Swampstark was a good name...”

“You will see when we are at the gates of the Moat Cailin...”

And indeed, as the citadel was revealed in its great majesty, it was not hard to see why the Starks of old had decided to take a new name. Moat Cailin walls were shining in a dreadful light, a dark shape of green and black echoing perfectly the putrid swamps to the south. The walls utterly dominated in a sinister fashion the road and the armies waiting for their turn.

Winterfell was absolutely massive and had the housing to welcome the population of the North, but Moat Cailin was impressive in its own way. Dark and illuminated with nefarious lights, the seventy feet-high walls, the troubled waters, the spikes and the gargoyles which could pour oil, acid and flame over invaders told quite clearly how this citadel had broken the Andal Crusades. There were ballista, scorpions and other siege engines which could be discerned if you watched long enough. And in the shadows, Asha could very well guess where the sorcerers and the archers were waiting to strike if any Southern army was stupid enough to attack in force.

“The moment the Targaryens lost their dragons, they couldn’t take Moat Cailin anymore...” She murmured.

“The Old Man certainly didn’t shed too many tears hearing of the dragonlords fighting their civil war...” the deep grey eyes she loved so much were brimming with good humour. “And we played little part in their downfall. The responsible parties for this disastrous civil war were birthed and fed by Targaryen men and women...”

Arya shook her head with a big smile.

“They weren’t a pack! Like when you and Torrhen are rutting when you believe no one else is...”

“By happenstance, has your father chosen husbands and wives for your younger siblings, husband?”

“Well now that you mention it...”

The horrified expressions on Arya and Cregan’s visages were pure gold and Asha would remember them for years to come.

The army of the North goes south to war and arrives to Moat Cailin

**Ser Patrek Mallister 4**

“Try something more believable, Marq!”

The Heir of House Piper glared at the Bracken knight who had just interrupted him.

“I am not lying, Martin! Lord Edmure has the messenger with him in his tent, sent by Lord Walder himself!”

“That’s ridiculous,” declared Karyl Vance. “For a messenger to be here and the information to be true, the fall of Sentinel’s Stand should have occurred in a day or two. Yes, I think you misunderstood the words or failed to hear the real content. Fortresses like these need a proper siege to be stormed, and House Sentinel is not incompetent or treacherous. They won’t open their gates to the first marauding warband which comes out of the swamps.”

“I know what I heard, and I stand by my words,” replied peevishly Marq Piper before marching out under jeers and mocking calls.

Patrek watched northwards and the clouds which were the very shade of darkness itself. Truth or not, the sky north of the Twins was lost in the sorcery the heretics sent in vanguard of their armies. The light contrast was deep: the field where the army was camping was enjoying a mild but bearable sunny day, while north of the twin castle of the Twins, it might as well be late evening.

“Do you think he was right?” asked Myles.

“I hope not, but if he is...”Patrek’s voice was unable to complete the sentence.

If Sentinel’s Stand had truly fallen, the slowness of the Riverlands muster had played a role in the destruction of a Noble House.

They wouldn’t be the only guilty parties, of course. By all rights, the entire Frey muster was camping on the eastern side of the Twins. One thousand-plus cavalry, over three thousand infantry and multiple forces like Erenford, Charlton and Vypren had already arrived to answer the commands of the Great Old Weasel.

This forest of tents, siege engines and weapons had nothing to do here. Lord Walder had received orders to reinforce the castles of the Small Wall. The hundreds of knights, heavy infantry, archers, freeriders and sellswords were not going to kill anything if they stood a league east of the Twins, ready to retreat in their ancestral fortress at the first sign of danger!

“We need to cross the Green Fork as fast possible. We will assume the worst and plan our moves like Sentinel’s Stand has truly fallen. I go to Edmure, prepare all the cavalry to cross the Bridge and send the skirmishers ahead. We need to know where the enemy is.”

“I will give the orders.”

“We should have enough men to take whatever fast army crawled out of the Neck, since the Faith and thousands of sellswords and Crownlands forces are one day away. With the Freys, we should have between thirty and thirty-five thousand men?”

“Up to forty thousand, if half of Edmure’s host is in position before the enemy arrives...”

“Don’t count on it.” Patrek grimaced at the remark, but there was no denying it was true. The Riverlands’ army was a long column of infantry and cavalry stretching from the Twins to Fairmarket. It was more than thirty thousand men strong as they spoke, but there was no denying that the principal road was a nightmare. Chariots, smells, disputes, camp followers searching their masters and hundreds of other issues no one had tried to regulate before the Crusade. The first autumn rains had made progression even more difficult: for instead of being plagued by dust, wheels, horses, cows and men were forced to march in a muddy terrain. And as thousands and thousands of warriors, smiths and smallfolk used four or five roads, the fields became long snakes of mud and the local farmers’ smiles turned to anger.

They had not drawn their swords save to train and train again, but the unpleasantness had already commenced, and to know all of this would have been avoided four moons ago as summer reigned was the cause of much consternation. The Seven only know how bad it was going to get when they arrived in the North proper and snow covered the battlefields...

Obeying the orders of his cousin was anything but simple, sadly. One might have thought that since there were no enemies on their western flank, dark clouds of bad omen were over their heads and the eastern protection of the Small Wall may not exist anymore, the weasels should have been happy to let the army cross their stone bridge as quickly as a man or a horse could.

If you believed that, you had never met a Frey.

“The toll for a foot soldier is one Star,” announced to an incredulous crow one middle-aged Frey. Patrek couldn’t honestly remember his name – there were too many of the weasels to memorise their whole family’s names – but he knew the man was going soon to gain a nickname like ‘Rapacious Walder’ or ‘Greedy Walder’ before the day was over. There so many ‘Walder’ it wasn’t going to offend these weasels greatly, right?

“This is unacceptable!” roared an anonymous knight in the crowd. “A Most Holy Crusade is beginning, and you want to collect tolls?”

The Frey took some steps back as the anger and the indignation spread, before he remembered he was ten feet away from the gates of the Twins and that several siege engines and archers of his family were on the ramparts ready to stop dead any form of violence.

“Tolls must be collected! We can’t field and deliver food if...”

“You aren’t giving us food, we have our own supply lines!”

“You are trying to fill your coffers and ruin the Houses of the Riverlands!”

Each accusation was more insulting than the previous one, and the problem as far as Patrek could judge, was that no one thought it was out of character for Walder Frey to do so. The Old Weasel had insulted, vilified and disparaged every Lord from Highgarden to the Eyrie during his incredibly long life, and friends of the Twins were rare on the ground.

“The tolls have been lowered for the Crusade...”

“LIES! LIES!”

“This is the will of my grandfather, Lord Walder Frey...”

“You can take his instructions in your...”

“What price are you going to demand for a knight or a Lord? Ten dragons?”

Greedy Walder obviously hadn’t understood there were questions one toll-taker mustn’t answer.

“No, the toll for horse-mounted knights of noble birth is ten stags...”

The new shouts and insults which came from the mouths of the commanders gathered in the shadow of the Twins were powerful and not feigned at all.

“We will not pay! The Twins and Walder the Apostate can fight the Crusade on their own!”

The young Mallister knight thought the imprecation had come from the Blackwood ranks, but it could have been a lot of other Houses, as acclamations and cheers echoed to support the motion. It was the moment a dark cloud dimmed the sun’s light for a good turn of hourglass...except for the first time, it was no sorcery or heretic’s artifice.

It was a cloud of crows and carrion birds, arriving from every direction. Patrek had never seen so many, and where the black birds flew, war left thousands of corpses. The times of the crusading hosts had replaced the summer of peace.

**Lord Varys 2**

In the case he was arrested and did not manage to take his own life by poison or dagger, Varys would likely tell his captors everything.

‘Everything’ would probably include how frustrating he found the secret passages of King’s Landing. Undoubtedly, his noble captors would be surprised to hear him lambast the deceased architects of the capital.

Varys didn’t see why. Oh, he knew most of the ‘secrets’, secret passages, secret alcoves, secret exits, and secret weapon caches. It was his duty to know everything after all – a Master of Whisperers who forgot this fact often saw his head exposed on one of the seven gates at the end of a pike before the next fortnight was over. But what people often forgot was that he was a lone eunuch and that Maegor and his successors had made the entrails of their chief city an impenetrable maze.

Having a secret passage in case angry smallfolk suddenly had an urge to brandish pitchforks and torches was a legitimate and wise precaution. Having two was understandable, though you had to wonder if your rule if your rule was maybe getting a bit unpopular. Above four, either you were persuaded the world was against you, or the realm really wanted to piss on your mutilated corpse.

Maegor the Cruel had built over sixty linking the Red Keep to the city’s tunnels, and several hundred excavations had been made before the tyrant killed the builders and died, taking most of the secrets in his grave.

Varys was not able to watch over them. Gods and Demons, the fifty children he had assigned to sentinel duties during his first year as the Royal spymaster had not been able to do much. Lords may laugh he had a stake in every orphanage and dirty lair of King’s Landing, but Varys really needed them. Establishing spy rings on the surface was taxing in money, lives, favours and time. Doing it underground was not less risky.

Cut the throat of a Goldcloak or a merchant in a street, and his friends would likely find your name before the day was over, slit your throat, rape your wife and sell your children as slaves, no his apologies, they would be solved as indentured servants to work for sixty years in the Free Cities or some Westerosi Lord lacking strong arms for his harvests.

Cut the throat of someone underground, and no one would know where he had disappeared. The tunnels ordered by Maegor were full of old traps and every fortnight or so, bandits, smugglers, pirates, or any interested party found a secret passage. With so many of them, it was unavoidable...and ‘secrecy’, like many things at King’s Landing, had been a very cold corpse well before he accepted the office from the hands of the now-defunct King Aerys the Second.

There had been wars waged in the horrible sewers and the secret tunnels for the last decade, and not a single one of them would ever be written. The maesters believed themselves wise and learned, but a lot of battles were never written. There were some acts the powerful men reigning under the sun were happy to ignore. There were problems only a spider could solve.

“My birds are certain a good third of the heretics of the capital have taken refuge under Rhaenys Hill,” he told the sellsword commander who until recently had been taking the gold of Lord Tywin Lannister. Now the black-haired scoundrel was taking his; the Seven Kingdoms in all their splendour. The Essossi eunuch handed the mercenary a basic map of the great five tunnels running under the Dragonpit. “Order twenty of your men to guard the issues and take the rest into the tunnels. You are given a hundred men and two scores of my own agents. Kill everything you meet and try to find parchment and information.”

“My men will do the job, spider,” the sellsword growled more than he spoke.

“They’d better,” replied coldly Varys. “You and your sellswords have been chosen to maintain the peace of the capital while thousands go to the Crusade,” it was best not to mention they’d also been chosen because they could be counted to turn their cloaks in a heartbeat when the Blackfyre fleet landed in Blackwater Bay. “Accomplish this mission, and more gold and lands will be yours. Fail, and I assure you no one will mourn your passing.”

The sellsword saluted with his fist striking his breastplate, and a large column of hired killers stepped down the wooden stairs leading to one of the largest caverns he had explored under King’s Landing. Varys would have preferred using smugglers and bandits more familiar with underground fighting, but a lot of them had disappeared without a trace this last moon and with the Crusade ‘recruiting’ thousands of young men, replacing the agents he lost was getting more and more difficult. The Master of Whisperers had already demanded more Pentoshi servants and agents to Illyrio than in the last eight years added together.

Varys sighed and turned back to go back to the Red Keep, wearing the dark cloak and the general appearance of a gaoler which made sure no one was going to stop him to engage in a spirited debate or a religious sermon. Highborn and lowborn rarely wanted to deal with gaolers, especially with the gaoler of the Black Cells.

No, he was not going to wait the sellswords for long and unproductive hours. There was too much work to be done. The Master of Whisperers had always very long days nights, and the death of Aerys and the departure of the Royal Armies had created many holes which had to be filled one way or another.

The sun set down in a red corona and Varys used six full candles reading the reports of his agents on the moves of the corrupt Captains at the top of the Goldcloaks before throwing himself on his couch and taking a few hours of rest.

When he opened his eyes again, it was hearing the almost inaudible sounds of knocking against his door. After a brief moment to make himself presentable, he opened and saw one of the street urchins guarding one of Maegor’s tunnels several feet below the Iron Throne. A blood-soaked missive was handed to him and the message caused shivers in his neck.

Forced to retreat. Half of force gone. Fought heretic sorcerers. Bring reinforcements or the tunnels are lost.

Varys’ next words were a torrent of insults his colleagues of the Small Council would have not approved.

“Now I will have to recruit more sellswords to eradicate these pests...”

**Princess Rhaenys Targaryen 2**

“And the Captain of Buzzard Company told me to transport the Lysene silk for three dragons to this abandoned house in Fleabottom. Every two moons, we sold it to a merchant from Oldtown and the good Captain gave me six to eight stag for opening the barracks and keeping my mouth shut. This is all I know! I swear it on the Mother!”

The oath was sincere, Rhaenys was sure of it. Unfortunately, it was also an idiotic vow to say in presence of Visenya. Her sister had spent her morning listening a septon preach his nonsense in front of the entire court. Her tolerance for every aspect of the Faith worship was as such...a bit strained.

Swift and deadly, Visenya drew a dagger from one of the Goldcloaks which had already succumbed and stabbed the leg of the officer they were busy with.

“Your false gods and goddesses are powerless here, Kingslander!” violet sparkles of magic danced around her eyes and her fingers. Their current victim was too busy screaming to understand his mistake, though.

“Visenya, that’s enough,” the daughter of Elia Martell said, writing the revelation on a next scroll which was going to cause a lot of deaths by next dawn.

“The man is useless, sister,” sometimes her sibling almost frightened her. The ugly black robe she had chosen for the assignment was stained with blood and other fluids. Her silver hairs were dishevelled and a predatory expression was on her face.

“Are you sure?” The sheepish face she was given told her quite clearly that no, the youngest Targaryen had not questioned to their usual standards and had once more let her bloodthirst grow uncontrollable.

“My apologies, sister,” a purple cloud materialised and heartbeat by heartbeat the Goldcloak stopped screaming and begging for the pain to stop. “Let’s speak of your dealings with the smugglers again...”

The interrogation resumed, more calmly. Visenya had now a firm hold on her anger, and the Goldcloak had received so many spells he was extremely loose with his tongue and told them everything. It was extremely impressive, even for a worshipper of the Gods. The Kingslander had been a ‘model officer’ of the Goldcloaks: not a fortnight had passed in his life without him blackmailing a merchant, bribing one of his superiors, threatening some subordinates for things he participated in and many, many other crimes. By his own admissions, the man had killed forty-six men and raped twenty-eight women.

And the King and the Council had the gall to affirm the Goldcloaks were the only thing protecting the population from utter chaos and heresy in King’s Landing.

After this speech, it was extremely easy to conclude the foundations of the Seven Kingdoms were built on lies, blood and violence.

“This is everything I know, I swear...” Both Princesses exchanged a glance and in unity they drew their daggers from the leg and the arm. Visenya’s next strike slit his throat, while Rhaenys’ mark was the heart.

“For the True Gods of this world, Lord Khorne, Lord Tzeentch, Lord Nurgle and Lady Slaanesh,” Visenya whispered as runes of multiple colours lightened on the altar and the stone specifically brought from the Northern peaks drank the soul and the life-energy of the Goldcloak.

“The unbelievers and invaders will be punished, the unfaithful will rot in disgrace, the fate of battle will turn against the cowards and sorcery will rise once more,” finished Rhaenys.

This was not the first Goldcloak they killed today. It was not the last. One word of command, and two servants came to take the corpses and bring two sellsword captured in yesterday’s battles to their ritual chamber deep behind Maegor’s Citadel.

“We underestimated Varys badly,” Rhaenys said in a falsely-idle tone as the next prisoner was bound to the altar in blood-soaked chains.

“Yes, the legion of agents, children and hired killers he is paying with his purse has been an unpleasant surprise,” agreed her little sister. “I’m not saying he could take the capital alone, even with most of the Crownlands armies and fleets away, but he could certainly cause a lot of destruction and kill the senior officers or convince them to turn their cloaks before we realise what’s wrong.”

“And with a traitor like this on the Small Council, neither King’s Landing nor the Red Keep can mount a skilled defence, may the Lord of War damn his soul of eunuch.”

It had been only in the last days the cults and their loyal servants had understood the massive problem caused by Varys. But by now, the problem was too big to collapse in one or two murders and a lust ritual. The Heirs of House Blackfyre – the same pretenders most people believed extinct for the last fifty years – were mustering a new army at Pentos, and thanks to their minion the Master of Whisperers, they must have everything from the existence of the tunnels to the sums a Goldcloak Captain would accept to change his allegiance.

A lot of Lord Stark’s plans had been wilfully made to send the levies and men-at-arms of the realm in the Riverlands while the eastern coast was exposed to the black dragons, but with Varys implication, these new invaders may take the entire Crownlands and more before they were stopped. Worse, they may capture her, her sister and her mother before they had a chance to flee the capital or propose advantageous conditions for their surrender.

“I think we need to readjust our next actions...and prepare a tragic accident for our bald and fat Master of Whisperers.”

“I would love to see the Spider fly from the ramparts of the Red Keep,” said thoughtfully the other Princess.

“I think the Priestesses will want something more sordid and believable.”

“Too bad we can’t involve the eunuch with a scandal of whorehouses...” then Visenya turned to the sellswords which had awaited the end of their discussions with wide eyes. By the sheer stupefaction on their visages, they had recognised them...not that it was hard for there weren’t many silver-haired, purple-eyed women inside the walls of King’s Landing. “In a turn of hourglass, I will remove this gag and ask you a few questions. If you value your life, will renounce your Southerner Gods and embrace ours. If not, you will scream...”

**Jory Cassel 2**

“The Southerners have bred like vermin during these last summers.”

Lord Bog Boggs was ugly in green armour, but there was no denying he had a point. The Southerners had always been more numerous than the men from North of the Neck, but the moment the Conqueror and his dragons had united the realm, the numerical disadvantage had grown larger and larger, though certain wars like the Dance had slowed down the process.

“Give me the latest reports, Lady Cerwyn,” said Jory as he turned his head towards the Champion of Khorne.

The armoured woman mumbled something under her breath before speaking in a brutal and cold manner.

“The mass of unbelievers and Southrons coming at us is including four different hosts, if you don’t count the army of camp followers, whores, children, smugglers and parasites following them.”

Lord Fyron Amber chuckled, but his smile disappeared instantly as the Slaaneshi saw the glare the Cerwyn commander sent him.

“The First army, and the strongest, is the one of Lord Edmure Tully. He still has many thousand warriors travelling between Riverrun and the Twins, but over five thousand cavalry are under his command. The scouts I’ve sent think he will have close to thirty thousand men in four days, and the majority is armoured and enthusiast for a good bloodbath. They are short on halberds, but they have a lot of pikes and swords. They have also three or four thousand crossbowmen and archers.”

There was no amusement anymore among the commanders of the Northern vanguards. Before the victory at Sentinel’s Stand, their entire force had been of five thousand and three hundred men and women. Yes, they could pierce the aether and bring reinforcements thanks to the Gods, but twenty thousand was more than six times the size of the first host, and they had lost warriors in the last days, whether in battle or for rear guard-garrison duties. And it was just the first part of the Southern Army.

“The Second army is the one of the Freys and their allies,” continued Jonelle. “By all rights, they should have been absorbed in the Tully army, but for stupid reasons of tolls and prise, Lord Walder is dragging his feet and chasing the Tully messengers. There’s no love lost between Riverrun and the Twins.”

“When we win, we will have to raise a toast in memory of the Old Weasel, praise his incompetence and his idiocy,” added Robin Flint.

“Yes, yes,” said impatiently the Champion of Khorne. “Between them and their allies, they have gathered nearly six thousand men. They must have one thousand and five hundred cavalry, two thousand archers and the rest is light or heavy infantry.”

“The third ‘army’ is the fanatics of the Faith,” rasped Boggs. “They are fresh meat the septons have filled the heads with glory and promises they will go to the Seven Heavens after we butchered them.”

“I don’t think they sold it that way...” remarked Lord Amber.

“But it’s the truth,” Jonelle Cerwyn spoke as she drew her axe and examined the reddish metal. “The Tullys and the Freys have at least commanders and proper training, though their ranks are full of green horns who have never tasted blood once in their lives. The ‘Faithful’ are badly equipped, badly led, badly supplied and they have no idea save the sermons what war truly entails. They are the young and the old of the Riverlands, the Vale and the northern Crownlands.”

“But they are a lot of them,” Jory decided to stop the diatribe there.

“Yes, Black Spear. Septon-Militant Grover of the White Star has between eighteen and twenty-two thousand men with him...” the Lady of the Cerwyn lands grimaced. “My men have problems telling who is a warrior and who is a servant in this army...”

“And the fourth host?”

“Sellsword companies, knights, freeriders, errant swords and lone households which have decided to heed the call for arms of the Crusade instead of waiting their liege lords. They are about three thousand of them and they have a score of commanders to give contrary orders.”

Jory Cassel nodded.

“Sixty thousand men then, and more are arriving each day.” This was at moments like these Jory was glad the Riverlanders and the rest of the Southrons were weak and decadent. Sixty thousand was close to the vast forces the North had mustered to fight for the Black Crusade and the Wall. They had garrisons and fighters staying at home, of course, but they sure by Khorne couldn’t afford to muster a second army of this size...not when winter was mere moons away. The Ironborn added twenty or thirty thousand on their side, but it wouldn’t change anything in the end. The South was far more populous, and their ‘War of Faith’, their ‘White Crusade’, could bury the North under tens of thousands levies and fanatic imbeciles.

How sad for them they weren’t going to get the opportunity to conquer.

“Let’s harass them a bit, Lord Stark is coming and I want these untrained youngsters to swallow the bait when we present it...”

“Their corpses,” finished Jonelle Cerwyn, “are going to feed the crows for uncountable days...”

**Author’s note**: Release the kraken and let the Black Crusade begin! The crows are getting hungry, and next chapter the forces of the North and the Riverlands are going to be fighting to the death the first great battles, because the Three Sisters and Sentinel’s Stand were just the beginning.

More armies are mustered, more fanatics are ready to die for their Gods, and the laughter of the demons is getting louder and louder...

Summer is now truly over and autumn promises to be a blood-soaked one.

If you want to support this story further: ww w. p a treon Antony444

I will try to update the Weaver Option next, though it’s entirely possible given how far we are in the month the next chapter will be a Harry Potter AU.