

"I'm impressed." Harry said, looking appreciatively at his younger sisters, whose eyes lit up at the praise.

He reached out with his hands and patted them on their heads. His sisters were geniuses when it came to runes. He was almost sure that his sisters must have inherited some long-asleep talent in their blood for them to easily grasp the runic language's core concepts at such young age and apply it to create a runestone all on their own. That said, he was not at all happy that they violated his warning not to attempt to carve a runestone all on their own.

Still, his sisters managed to create a functional runestone all on their own.

"So, can we get a ring like yours then?" Sansa asked excitedly.

Harry looked at her sharply, making Sansa's shoulders drop.

"When you turn eleven, I'll give make you the power rings." said Harry.

He watched amusedly as his sisters glared at him and stomped the floor indignantly. Letting out a huff, they ran away, most likely to complain about him to their mother.

Harry chuckled at their antics before eyeing the innocent little runestone in his hand. Pressing his power ring against the power rune, he let a sliver of magical energy seep into the runestone. The runes on the runestone glowed eerily a bright yellow as it became enriched with his magical energy. When he pulled his ring back, the runes dimmed down.

"Why were Sansa and Arya running away from your room with looks that could melt the snow in the North?" Jon asked amusedly from the doorway.

"They are just annoyed I didn't give them a power ring." said Harry. "But their work is exemplary."

He pressed on the side of the activation rune, and the runes stone lit up with moderate white light. It was a simple runestone that worked on the principle of the Lumos spell. He had to give it to Sansa for thinking up the idea to use a rune bases light source to replace the candles and oil lamps of Winterfell.

"I see. So, it's a rune lamp, " said Jon, fascinated by the white light from the runestone.

"Rune lamp? That's a nice name. Think of what it means if we can make more of these runestones."

"We can have better light in Winterfell during the dark hours...?" Jon hesitantly answered, looking between the light-giving stone and Harry.

"We can also reduce the expenses of buying oil and candles. Not to mention, we get smokeless lamps in the castle invulnerable to wind and rain." said Harry.

"You are right." Jon agreed after looking thoughtful for a moment. "I hadn't thought of that."

"Speaking of which, when are you going to start training with the power ring?" Harry asked, steepling his fingers and looking at Jon seriously.

"The rings you made for me didn't work as well as they do for you. I think swordplay suits me better than sorcery."

"That's because I didn't consider certain factors when I made those rings for you. I think I now know what was lacking..." Harry smirked, taking out a small wooden box from his drawer.

Placing the wooden box on the table across from Jon, he opened it. Inside the box were several rings made of Valyrian steel sitting comfortably on a piece of red silk. But unlike all the rings he created, he had learned to imbue his will powered by his soul into the rings, giving them unique properties. He knew that neat trick from assimilating what he learned from the imprisoned warlocks and some snippets of knowledge he gleaned from Ighnotus Peverell.

“What the...?” Jon’s mouth dropped open in surprise as the rings turned into small metallic dragons and flew out of the box.

The air sang as the dragons flapped their steel wings and settled before Jon in a straight row with varying colours of stones for eyes.

“The emerald gemstones signify the connection to nature.” Harry said, making Jon look up at his brother and then at the small dragon with green stones for his eyes.

“The red ruby gemstones show affinity to fire. The pearl stones signify affinity to water. The white stones signify the affinity to air.”

Jon looked at all the dragons as Harry continued to explain the rings to him. Jon blinked and took notice as one lone dragon stepped forward with eyes of red and bale blue gemstones for eyes.

“But for you, Jon Stark, gemstones of ice and fire shall serve you well.” said Harry.

Harry reached out and took Jon’s hand, bringing it closer to the assembled dragons. The dragon of ice and fire jumped and flapped its wings to settle on Jon’s left hand before coiling around a finger. The dragon shifted around, wrapping its tail and wings around Jon’s finger as it became a ring. The dragonhead proudly poked out of the ring with a red and pale blue eye on each side.

“I...Harry...I...” Jon was suddenly choked up by emotions as he looked at his brother, who gave him so much.

“And Jon. Your mother loved you more than you can ever imagine. She gave her life to safely bring you into this world, and it was her last wish for Lord Stark to protect you. This is why our father has never spoken a word about her to anyone, including you. If our enemies know her identity, war will come to the shores of the North.”

Jon looked at him with a mix of horror and curiosity.

“My mother... You know who my mother is?” Jon asked anxiously, his grey eyes wide, pleading for any information.

“Yes. And when you master the art of magic and warging, I shall share her identity with you. All I ask is that you wait for four years. Train hard in sword, warfare and magic. When you turn fifteen, I shall make you a competent sorcerer capable of defending yourself from your enemies.”

“Harry... You... But why? Why can’t I know now?” Jon asked pleadingly.

“Because she died to save you. You owe it to her to live your life to the fullest. When you have the power to defend yourself against your enemies, our father or I shall disclose her name. For now, honour her sacrifice and Lord Stark’s vow to your mother. You’ll know her in time, and all your questions shall be answered.”

“But... All right.” Jon took a deep breath and let it go. “I’ll do as you ask, brother.”

“Good. In time, you’ll understand why this is necessary. I...” Harry trailed off as he felt the gold dragon coin in his pocket start vibrating and slowly heating up, warning him of a message from one of his students in Avalon.

“What is it?” Jon asked in concern as he saw Harry’s eyes gain a sharpness while looking at a gold dragon coin.

“The Ironborn has attacked Sea Dragon Point. Tell Maester Luwin to call on the lords to assemble at court. It seems the Ironborn have yet to learn their lesson.”

The court of Winterfell was assembled in a speedy manner because of the seriousness of the matter. It was quite fortunate that most principal houses of the North were represented in Winterfell’s court thanks to the feast.

“I apologise for hastily calling you all here on such short notice, my lords. But I’ve received word from Avalon that Ironborn ships have been sighted. I do not know whether this is an isolated event, but I’d like to work under the assumption that it’s not the case. As of now, the western shores of the North are under threat of Ironborn raids. I welcome your opinions in the court if there are any.” Harry said, leaning back against the weirwood throne of the Kings of Winter after he said his piece.

“My brother begged Lord Stark to leave the matter of the south to the south. We Northfolk want to be left alone from their petty squabbles, and now those pirate scum are back for revenge.” Robett Glover claimed, taking to his feet and banging his fist on the table.

“Aye.” Leobald Tallhart, the Castellan of Torrhen’s Square, stood up to support Robett Glover. “The North has bled enough for the south. When have they ever fought for the North when we faced hordes of Wildlings from beyond the Wall or Ironborn raids on our shores.”

“The pirates of the Three Sisters are also taking advantage of us, and the Vale refuses to reel them in.”

“The pirates of the Three Sisters are also taking advantage of us, and the Vale refuses to reel them in.” Lord Wyman Manderly added.

Harry was a little surprised as many more grievances, both genuine and blown out of proportion, were aired in the hall.

“Silence!” Harry snapped, finally having enough of these constant complaints. “We are not here to belittle the southerners. We are here to discuss the Ironborn sighting at Sea Dragon Point and what it means for the western shores of our home. If you can’t contribute constructively, you may take your leave from this court.”

There was a brief silence in Winterfell’s court broken by the loud and dangerous growling from Fenris, who sauntered into the hall from the shadows and settled by Harry’s side at the foot of the weirwood throne.

“House Glover apologises to the Stark of Winterfell.” Robett Glover dipped his head.

“Aye. Apologies, my lord” Lord Manderly also followed the example of the castellan of Deepwood Motte and meekly sat back in his seat.

Perhaps, the Lord of White Harbour remembered not to annoy him right after House Manderly was given leave to negotiate with the shipbuilders of Braavos representing House Stark of Avalon.

“Enough. Let’s get back to the matter at hand. As Stark of Winterfell, I have a limited scope of authority to gather the forces of the North. That’s the only reason why I’ve yet to order the North to mobilise a second army to end the Ironborn menace.” said Harry, cutting across the inertia that gathered in the court.

“The North is at war, my lord. As Stark of Winterfell, you’ve all the authority to command us.” Leobald Tallhart said hesitantly.

Harry was a little embarrassed as he hadn’t thought of that little detail. When he was named the Stark of Winterfell by his father, he was explicitly told of all the duties that’d entail. His father was also clear that he was not supposed to order the Northern houses to do his bidding as he saw fit. He was also quite soundly ordered not to interfere in the matters of the Northern lords and their lands without their approval or request. His authority was limited to the Stark lands, and should there be any need for extrajudicial action outside the Stark-owned lands, he was to consult with the respective lords of the land.

But Maester Luwin had reminded him that he could exercise the authority of Winterfell if war somehow reached their shores. Harry looked at the Maester out of the corner of his eyes. The old maester might have seen that he was stunned and took up the responsibility to act before it became awkward.

“Lord Harrion knows, but it’d be discourteous not to discuss with the lords of the North when you all are so close by.” Maester Luwin pointed out.

“Perhaps we should learn whether this is an isolated incident, my lord. I suggest a raven must be sent to Flint’s Finger. If the Ironborn had made any unsavoury moves in the sea, the Flints of Blazewater Bay could tell us. The Ironborn longships cannot move closer to the shores of the North without the people of Cape Kraken taking notice.” Lord Wyman reasoned.

“Aye. If there are only a few Ironborn ships, this might be some lone pirate scum out to reave taking advantage of the war.” Leobald Tallhart said.

“If that is not the case, and we are being attacked by more Ironborn ships? What do the lords of the North intend to do?” Harry asked.

“Then we gather all our levies and kill those pirates once they land on our shores.” Robett Glover shouted.

“Aye!”

There was a broad agreement from the lords of the North, allowing him to move unimpeded.

“Good. Maester Luwin...” Harry looked at the maester of Winterfell. “Send a raven to Flint’s Finger asking for any sightings of Ironborn longships near our shores. Send word to all coastal towns and castles to be on alert. The silence of House Mormont concerns me. Send a raven to Bear Islands as well.”

“As you wish, my lord.” Luwin nodded.

“Lord Glover. You and your men are welcome to my airship as I travel to Sea Dragon Point. You can reach Deepwood Motte faster this way.” Harry offered.

“Thank you, my lord. I shall ask my men to prepare.” Robett Glover happily said, bowing low.

“Good. We leave Winterfell tomorrow morning.”

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“Lord Stark, word for Oxcross.” Jory Cassel said, holding out a small piece of parchment.

Eddard accepted the parchment with a nod and read the message from Lord Cerwyn.

“Oxcross has fallen to Lord Meger. The town’s garrison was routed, with all surrendering Lannister men under chains and those who opposed put to the sword.” Eddard declared to the lords gathered around the table with a map of the Westerlands sprawled over it.

There was a cheer of approval from the gathered lords.

“He also reports a host of Lannister men are being gathered at Sarsfield under the command of Ser Stafford Lannister after interrogating the prisoners.”

“How many?” Brynden asked.

“It doesn’t say. We must assume it is a sizeable host. They were most likely sent by Lord Lannister to reinforce Golden Tooth. He must not have known Lord Leo stayed true to his vows to King Robert.” said Eddard.

“Oxcross must be strengthened. It’d be folly for Lord Cerwyn to hold that positing by himself.” Roose Bolton suggested.

“I agree. Lord Karstark and Lord Ryswell shall hold Oxcross and scout the enemy numbers. We must know more about our enemy before we make a move.” Eddard suggested, earning nods of agreement from the gathered lords.

“While Oxcross is held as our forward position, Ser Brynden shall take command of another host, move west of Oxcross, and camp here.” Eddard marked the spot on the map of a small region between Tarbeck Hall and Oxcross.

“Why there, my lord?” Lord Bracken asked curiously.

“If I were Lord Tywin, I’d gather a host in secret near Tarbeck Hall and use Oxcross as bait. I want to ensure Oxcross is facing the enemy we know, namely Ser Stafford Lannister.” Eddard explained.

“It’s a good strategy. If Ser Stafford attacks Oxcross, we can take them from behind.” Lord Blackwood said, nodding in approval of the plan.

“It also gives us good cover to send scouts to keep watch on the River Road for enemy movements.” Ser Brynden also approved the dispersion of troops.

“Lords Bolton, Umber, Glover shall accompany me as we sweep the coasts of Westerlands from Banefort to Feastfires. Hopefully, they’ll surrender rather than fight.” said Eddard, pointing at the two coastal castles on either side of the map along the length of the coast of the Westerlands.

He looked at his fellow lords and saw they were broadly in agreement with the plan so far.

“The rest of our forces shall stay at Golden Tooth, reinforcing the supply lines to Oxcross. If Ser Stafford’s host is defeated, Sarsfield is our next target, where we shall muster our full host. By then, the costs shall fly the Baratheon banners.” Eddard concluded his plan.

“I shall lend you some of my best knights and scouts to make sure you have a speedy campaign, Lord Stark.” Leo Lefford offered.

“That’ll be most appreciated, Lord Lefford.” Eddard nodded at the lord of Golden Tooth.

“Lord Stark, if you don’t mind. I’d like to join your campaign on the coasts with my men.” Lord Jonos Bracken requested.

Eddard looked into the brown eyes of the lord of Stone Hedge. He briefly thought of the Blackwood-Bracken enmity and thought having the two lords in separate campaigns would only work to the advantage of their army.

“All right, Lord Jonos. Having the Bracken cavalry by our side will undoubtedly be a boon in the campaign.” Eddard nodded at the brown-haired man.

Eddard allowed the lords to take their leave from the meeting, leaving him and Ser Brynden in the room.

“Are you hoping to entice Ser Stafford Lannister to chase after you?” Ser Brynden asked.

“One can only hope they’d commit such folly. If they chase after us to the coasts, it will open up the River Road for our forces.” Eddard muttered.

“Most likely, Ser Stafford would bunker down at Sarsfield once he learns the Leffords turned their cloaks. We’ll most likely be looking at a gruelling siege that’d last months.”

Eddard frowned as he looked at Ser Brynden curiously.

“You are skirting around the matter you want to say, Ser Brynden. I’d hear what’s on your mind Ser.” said Eddard.

“Loot the castles, villages and towns. Strip them bare of anything valuable food, cattle, gold, silver, steel, bronze, even clay pots if you must. The Westermen are few, and they don’t have the most fertile lands in the Seven Kingdoms. But what they have is their mines, and from the mines comes, all their wealth. Take their mines and wealth away from them, and you’ll win the Westerlands from the chokehold of Tywin Lannister.”

“You want our armies to steal from the smallfolk and lords alike?” Eddard asked incredulously. “I can understand foraging food for the army but stealing away their wealth...”

“Your first target is Ashenmark, is it not? It’s the seat of House Marbrand, one of the most loyal supporters of House Lannister. Strip the castle bare of its wealth and take control of its mines. When the lords of the Westerlands hear of what happened to House Marbrand, I assure you the castles of Nunn’s Deep, Crag, Banefort, and others will surrender rather than put up a fight. There’ll be less bloodshed this way.” said Ser Brynden.

“And what shall be done with the loot taken?” Eddard asked sceptically.

“Do with it as you wish.” Ser Brynden shrugged. “Take it with you to the North. Send it to King’s Landing as a gift to the Crown. Or just return it to the rightful owners after the war.”

Eddard became thoughtful at the advice provided by the uncle of his lady wife. There was strategic value in what Ser Brynden was suggesting, and yet he found it distasteful to behave like the Ironborn. He was aware that men often did partake in thievery and all sorts of unscrupulous behaviour in war. But it sat ill with him to command his army to forcibly take someone else's rightful property to win the war.

Then again, he could rest easy if there was less bloodshed on both sides.

'Honour is so hard to find in war.' Eddard thought morosely.

Dorna Swyft lived in fear of what lay in wait for her family in the near future. Her husband, Kevan Lannister, was now a prisoner of Robert Baratheon. She worried for her husband as she knew her husband was now considered a rebel by the Iron Throne. Not a day goes by where she doesn't pray for his safety. Seven times, she would pray to each of the Seven for the safe return of her husband. She cared not for the pride of House Lannister or Lord Tywin's children.

But first, the war had to end for even a chance of seeing her husband again. By the looks of it, the war would not end so easily.

Dorna looked to the west, where a bright yellow glow illuminated the night sky of Lannisport. Screams could be heard in the city as the harbour burned with yellow flames. She felt her sons Willem and Martyn flinch as the city walls endured the bombardment from the siege engines.

"The walls will protect us, won't they, mother?" Martyn asked, his eyes wide with fright.

"Of course, the walls will protect us, my sweet. The Dornishmen shall leave soon." Dorna kissed her son's golden brow lovingly.

"When will father come?" Willem asked, his pale green eyes looking pleadingly at her.

Dorna barely held back her tears as she looked at her twin sons. Gathering them in a tight hug, she pressed kisses to their brows as ships of the Dornish fleet sent out streaks of fiery stones into the city. The night sky was filled with trails of fire and smoke, making her confidence wane. Still, she had to appear strong for her children.

"Your father serves Lord Tywin as is his duty. When his duty is completed, he'll return." Dorna assured them.

She felt her twins flinch again as they heard more assault on the city from the siege engines. So, she sang a song for her little lions.

*There lived a lion whose name spoken only in fear
with claws as sharp as steel.
When he roars, the jungle is shaken to its core
for it's a warning to those of lesser grit!*

*So, they ran, as fast as they can
to hide from a lion of the west.*

*Green are his eyes and gold is his mane,
only courage could be seen in his eyes if you dare!*