

Victarian Greyjoy patiently waited on the bow of his ship as messengers from the scout ship he sent ahead returned with word of the raids. He considered this latest misadventure ordered by his brother a folly. He had said so to his brother's face but not because he thought the North was any different from the weak greenlanders, but because the Ironborn had yet to recover from the losses of their failed rebellion. They had fewer ships and fewer trained men to raid and fight the greenlanders. It was an unfortunate truth but the truth nonetheless. There was also the threat of the Redwyne fleet and the Royal fleet to consider, but the Lord Reaper of Pyke refused to heed not one whit of his concerns. To make matters worse, Aeron and his drowned man have predicted a great victory in the seas.

In the end, Victarian had to obey Balon's commands as he was the Lord Captain of the Iron Fleet. The lords of the Iron Islands all agreed there was a serious risk of incurring the wrath of the Iron Throne, but his brother was adamant about punishing the North. According to his brother, the Baratheons and Lannisters would fight to the bitter end, which was the chance to exact revenge against the North. While Victarian tactically agreed that the war between House Baratheon and Lannister was an excellent opportunity, the Iron Fleet desperately lacked ships. Without the proper number of ships, they could not effectively raid the vast coasts of the North.

Therefore, Victarian devised a plan to use the thirty ships under his command effectively. He sent ten longships under the command of Ralf Kenning to attack Deepwood Motte and the Bear Islands. The Mormonts and Glovers had few ships between them, but together they could be a threat to the Iron Fleet. Therefore, he wanted them dealt with, and should Ralf be lucky, the man could end up stealing the ships from Glovers and Mormonts.

"Lord Captain, mi' name be Ulf."

"I see. What does Andrik Drumm say?" Victarian asked, staring at the sailor with his cold black eyes.

"Milord says he be attacking the shores as you ordered, Lord Captain. Met with some greenlanders on horses while taking the timber in the raid." Ulf said, grinning a little with a few of his teeth missing.

"What banners did he see?" Victarian asked.

"Banners of a black wolf, milord." Ulf said.

"I see. Give the man some ale for his troubles." Victarian ordered his men on the ship.

"Thank you, milord." Ulf dipped his head before the men escorted him away.

Victarian let out the breath he was holding as he was overcome with relief. The first part of his plan had succeeded in drawing out Avalon's garrison to ride out of the safety of the castle. Now, it was his turn to act, and he didn't wait a moment to give orders to his steersman, Rumolf Stormdrunk.

“Lay aloft and loose topgallants! Clear away the jib! We sail straight ahead for Avalon.” Victarian ordered.

“All right, you maggots! All hands on the ropes and the oars.” Rumolf shouted, the Ironborn on the ship rushing to obey the orders.

Victarian moved to the starboard side and kept an eye on the other fourteen ships under his command. His men began signalling for the other ships to follow their course. He could only hope that his gamble would work. Fifteen ships were not a sufficient naval force to take on a castle's defences, but he hoped Avalon was not as highly defended as it was a newly built castle. With the garrison's attention elsewhere on the shores of Sea Dragon Point, he hoped the surprise attack would yield him the castle. If the Stark boy was in Avalon, then all the better. He could take the boy hostage and force Eddard Stark to return his nephew. Then there were also the great riches of Avalon to consider. He could even force the wolf-pup to make him a valyrian steel axe once the boy was under his custody.

‘Why stop at one weapon? I could force the boy to make many.’ Victarian mused, grinning at the prospect of owning a bunch of valyrian steel weapons.

It took them three days to reach the shores of Avalon. By the time they saw the massive towers and walls of the castle, they were nearly running out of supplies. So, the giant towers and walls of the castle gave a bad omen to Victarian. The seeds of doubt began to take root in his mind as he realised the castle was not some half-finished structure made of wood and stone but a massive fort capable of holding out against a long siege.

“All hands to the oars. Row, you lazy bastards! Row!” Victarian shouted, realising the element of surprise was now a major factor if he was to secure victory.

He had the thralls handling oars whipped to increase their rowing speed. Victarian kept his eye on the shores with his far-eyes, but he could see no hasty movements. There was some movement where a budding shipyard was coming up. But the greenlanders were running away at the sight of Kraken banners. The anticipation kept building up in him as his ships neared the shores of Avalon. He could see several guards lining up on the crenellated walls of the castle with their bows. But he paid them no mind. Instead, his attention was on the gigantic Weirwood tree that grew out of the castle walls.

“Arm the siege engines. Aim at that tree. We'll burn the greenlanders out of their precious castle by burning their false gods.” Victarian ordered.

His orders were passed to all the other longships following him. The siege engines were quickly armed with stones dipped in whale oil.

“Make sure not to aim the weapon at the shipyard. We'll put those ships to good use.” he ordered.

When Victarian thought they were inside the proper range, he ordered the men to light the stones on fire, and the siege engines spat out globes of fiery stones towards the castle. The burning rocks left trails of fire and smoke as they streaked across the air against the castle. The Ironborn in his ships were ready to celebrate when all of a sudden, a dome of blueish colour appeared around the castle, which protected the castle from their attack. The burning stones smashed into this strange dome and promptly scattered into dust.

Victarian stared at the strange sight with his mouth wide open in surprise. He thought he was dreaming for a moment, but when he looked at his men, they were all in a similar state of shock.

“What kind of sorcery is this?” Victarian muttered to himself.

Shaking himself out of the stupor, he immediately ordered his men to unleash another salvo at the castle.

“Arm it quickly, you lazy maggots. I’ll throw you overboard to the watery halls of the Drowned god if you lazy idiots annoy me again.” Victarian snarled as he watched his men bumble with arming the siege engines.

Cajoled by the urgency in his voice and the threat of getting thrown overboard the ship, the men under his command speedily armed the siege engine and let the flaming stone loose on the castle. Other longships followed closely in using their siege engines. But once again, Victarian could only watch with fear as a pale blue dome of some kind stopped the flaming stones. The stones just smashed against this strange sorcery and vanished. He could see the fear on the men’s faces as they realised this campaign was not going to be as easy as they imagined.

Before he could take command of the situation, Victarian was forced to turn his attention to a longship sailing near his ship. The sound of something piercing through wood attracted his attention, and he found it was a scorpion bolt piercing into the bow of the longship. Thankfully, the bolt didn’t punch through the ship, but to his surprise, it was glowing with an eerie white light. The next moment, Victarian was blown off his feet as the longship exploded with a bang.

Victarian groaned as his back hit the wooden floor of his longship. His ears were ringing from the sound, which left him disoriented. It took him a moment to regain his bearings, and when he managed to climb to his feet, he saw the full scale of destruction wrought on one of his ships. The ship's bow had disintegrated entirely, with only a few splintered floorboards and half-torn beams hanging loosely. The ship was sinking as seawater rushed into the bowels of the longship, dragging it down to the bottom of the sea. But that was not all. He looked on in horror as some of the men on his ship were bleeding or outright dead, with splintered wood punching into their eyes and necks. He felt something wet on his face, and when he placed his hand against his forehead, it became drenched in blood.

“What the...?” Victarian muttered.

But he didn't get to search for any injuries as he heard another booming sound. Victarian looked around and found another one of his ships was now breaking in two from the middle. The screams of Ironborn sailors drowned out the waves and the wind, and Victarian could do nothing but helplessly watch the carnage unfold before his eyes. His ears picked up a whistling sound as more and more scorpion bolts began raining down on his ships.

Victarian couldn't help but flinch as another one of his ships was consumed by a raging fire, followed by the ship getting hit by a scorpion bolt. He could not help but look at the castle with dawning horror in his eyes. The heretic Stark boy was far more dangerous than he had ever imagined.

'That thing must be a demon sent forth by the vile Storm god to fight the Drowned god.' Victarian thought with fear.

His ship suddenly lurched sharply to the portside as the waters below exploded outwards. Victarian realised the scorpion bolts were drenched in some foul sorcery that even made the seawater of the Drowned god explode.

"Turn the ships around. Hard a-starboard! Hard over! Now!" Victarian barked out orders, immediately deciding to turn away from the fight.

"But Lord Captain. We have survivors in the sea." Rumolf protested.

"They'll be taken care of by the Drowned god. Obey my command, or we'll lose the whole fleet!" Victarian bellowed.

More and more scorpion bolts came their way from the castle. Victarian could only watch helplessly as more than half of his ships were torn asunder by the accursed sorcery of the Demon wolf of the North. Somehow, he managed to escape the claws of death with six ships. He was forced to abandon all the survivors for the sake of preserving the few intact ships. Those ships that violated his command were torn asunder by sorcery leaving many thralls and Ironborn alike to the mercy of the sea. They could do nothing for the Ironborn sailors in the ocean. Looking at the flailing sailors and thralls, he noticed that the sea was now painted red. He didn't know whether the setting sun was the cause or the blood of his men. Either way, he wasn't waiting to find out lest his ship join the others at the bottom of the sea.

"Maybe we could send rafts, Lord Captain." Rumolf suggested tentatively.

"No. Their fates are now in the hands of the Drowned god or the Demon wolf. If they are true Ironborn, they'll choose the halls of the Drowned god rather than the Demon wolf's mercy." Victarian muttered.

"Where to, Captain?" Rumolf asked after a long interval of silence.

“We’ll regroup with Andrik and Ralf. After that, I’ll make a decision. For now, sail west to the far-off shores of Sea Dragon Point.” Victarian ordered.

“Aye, Lord Captain.” Rumolf said dejectedly.

Victarian’s shoulders dropped in shame as he knew he was running away from the battle. But there was no other choice before him if he was to preserve the fleet. If he lost the meagre fleet the Iron Islands had managed to put together, their islands would be left undefended. It was either preserving the fleet or his honour, and Victarian would gladly sacrifice his honour again to save the Iron Fleet. He just hoped his brother would understand his decision.

Harry watched the action happen from the safety of Avalon’s walls. The garrison had performed their duties without fail. The moment they spotted the Ironborn ships, they blew the special horns he had built into the watch towers on the two layers of walls protecting Avalon. The horns were intertwined with the runestone, which activated the first line of defence of the castle. At first, Harry had only thought to activate the energy dome under his sole discretion. But then he thought better of it and tied the wards to a number of horns and had the horns installed in the watch towers. This way, the castle’s defences could be activated even if he was away from the castle by the guards on the towers if they encountered a threat.

“Your training worked. The aim of our tower guards has significantly improved.” Harry complimented the castellan of Avalon, who was also his archery trainer.

“The men have been practising rigorously as you ordered.” said Celos Poole.

“Good. You’ve trained them well, Celos.”

The cousin of Vayon Poole puffed up in pride as the man took great pride in his archery skills.

“We’ve also managed to make some significant additions to the original designs of the artillery. As per your suggestion, we’ve added a scope to guide the men better to train in on the target.” Maester Marwyn said, obviously eager to make sure his contributions were not left forgotten.

“Impressive. Please remind me to take a look at the scopes that you added, Marwyn. Maybe, I could add some spells to increase accuracy and perhaps even facilitate better guidance.” said Harry, looking at the Maester before turning his attention to Celos Poole. “Now, tell me about the status of our shores.”

“The scouts I sent have found two areas west of Avalon where the Ironborn have struck. I have sent some men to deal with one of the shores, which has a fishing village. The other one is far away and mostly deserted, but I believe the Ironborn are taking timber from this site.” Celos reported.

“I see. Are these two places the sole areas that the Ironborn attacked?” Harry asked.

“We can’t be sure, my lord. The scouts only found two areas.” Celos reported. “I’ve already sent a contingent of men with horses and a week’s provisions to deal with one area.”

“So, it’s possible the Ironborn might have struck other places along the coasts of Sea Dragon Point?”

“I’m afraid so, my lord.” Celos nodded.

Harry looked thoughtful for a moment before coming to a decision.

“Maester Marwyn. I’ll need you to inform me the moment a raven arrives from Deepwood Motte. We’ll make plans to have the Ironborn purged from our shores once word arrives from House Glover.”

“You suspect we are not the only ones being attacked by the Ironborn?” Maester Marwyn asked curiously.

“It’s a reasonable assumption to make.” Celos Poole commented.

“Is it, though? Lord Stannis smashed the Iron Fleet at Fair Isle the last time they rebelled. I doubt the Ironborn have many ships to raid the entire coasts of the North after their failed rebellion?” Maester Marwyn expressed his doubts.

“In either case, we’ll only move once we get clarity on the foe we face. I need to know whether this is a random raid or an attack on the North as a whole.”

“If it is the latter, what would be your response, my lord?” Celos Poole inquired cautiously.

“I’ve already spoken with the lords at Winterfell. It’ll be war.” Harry said coldly, looking into the sea where he could see the Ironborn longships burning while his ships were sailing into the sea to take the survivors as prisoners. “I suppose we might get a better understanding upon questioning the prisoners.”

Harry’s intuition about the prisoners didn’t pan out so well, and he now understood why Maester Marwyn expressed his doubts about getting any valuable information from the survivors. It turns out that all the Ironborn sailors had chosen to drown instead of being taken as prisoners. Chosen might be a strong word as the Ironborn sailors most likely didn’t get the chance to save themselves as their plate armour most likely dragged them down to the bottom of the sea. Not even one Ironborn sailor survived the wreckage.

“Still, couldn’t they have saved themselves by holding on to a wooden plank or something?” Harry wondered aloud, letting out a frustrated groan.

“I told you, my lord. The Ironborn are reckless and fanatic in their faith in their god. It’s a dangerous combination.” Maester Marwyn commented, seated in the Lord’s chamber of Avalon while Harry walked back and forth in irritation at the loss of valuable intelligence.

“Stupid little buggers.” Harry growled. “And the survivors we rescued from the wreckage. They have nothing worthwhile to say?”

“I’m afraid they were just thralls made to handle the oars inside the hull of the ships. They have no knowledge of the plans of the Ironborn, but from them, we know the Iron Fleet sailed from Pyke with thirty ships under Victarian Greyjoy.” said Maester Marwyn.

“We saw fifteen ships on our shores. So that means we have fifteen unaccounted ships sailing who knows where. We have two confirmed sightings of Ironborn ships on Sea Dragon Point. But our scouts never saw more than two or three ships in either of those locations.”

“They’re most likely raiding another location, my lord. Besides, if Victarian Greyjoy leads this raid, I’m afraid Castellan Celos was right to assume the Ironborn declared war on the North.” Maester Marwyn said grimly.

Harry came to a stop at the window overlooking the pool where the sculpture of a black wolf was providing warm water for the inhabitants of the castle. He could see many children running around the pool playing games. They remained ignorant of what was happening outside the walls of the castle. But not all places in the North could claim their children were far away from the depravities of war. Most places in the North or Westeros would see children live in crushing poverty. Most children would be lucky to get full bellies a day in Westeros. While he couldn’t change the entire continent, Harry was adamant that he could create a far better North with his knowledge. And in time, his disciples would spread the knowledge of magic, sustaining the growth of the North long after he was out of the picture. Perhaps, magic would even spread to the rest of the Seven Kingdoms in time.

But, for all that to happen, the North and his work could not be threatened again by war. If all his work could be undone because some lazy pirate scum decided to reave the shores of the North, then Harry would have to make an example out of such idiots to serve as a reminder to all his enemies out there. Harry closed his eyes, and he came to a decision.

“Send ravens to all the castles of the North. Tell them the Stark of Winterfell asks them to raise another host and command them to march to Avalon. Tell them the North is at war with the Ironborn.” Harry ordered.

“As you wish, my lord.” Marwyn bowed before turning to leave the chamber.

“Oh, and one more thing Maester Marwyn.”

“My lord?” Marwyn paused, looking at Harry curiously.

“Send one raven to Pyke. Tell the Lord Reaper of Pyke that Winter is Coming for House Greyjoy.” Harry said coldly.

Stannis stared at the barren wasteland that sprawled out before him. He could see nothing but ashes and half-burnt villages and fields for miles.

‘And to think these fields were producing grain enough to feed half of the Stormlands for a decade or two.’ Stannis thought.

The Reach was truly blessed to have such fields with high yields. Such fields had undoubtedly made the Reachmen richer but also made them weak. In Stannis’ eyes, the Reachmen, except for the Marcher lords, had become complacent and too enamoured with their feasts and wine. The wealth they accumulated over decades of peace in their lands had sapped their martial powers, if there were any. That was why the Lannisters had such an easy time destroying everywhere they marched in the Reach.

“This is where we depart, brother.” Robert’s booming voice reached his ears, making Stannis frown.

‘Even now, Robert is so eager to send me away.’ Stannis thought. ‘I was the fool for thinking Robert would change.’

Perhaps, if Robert had said one nice thing to him in the camp, he’d have dissuaded his brother from going further. He’d have told him about the dreams and the whispers of the Old Gods. But even now, Robert was adamant in keeping him at a distance. Instead, Robert preferred the company of these weak, useless Reachlings that preyed on the idiocies and vices of his older brother.

Even now, reduced as they were in wealth by Lord Tywin’s army, the Reachmen pampered his brother with the finest wines, food, and whores. Some had even started sending their daughters into his brother’s bed in hopes of making them the new queen.

“Don’t you have anything to say, Stannis? After all, I’m giving you a great responsibility.” said Robert.

Stannis reigned in the urge to scoff openly at his older brother. Whatever else his brother might be, Robert was his king. He’d not show open defiance or insult to his King before the assembled royal army.

“I’m honoured to lead the troops in your name against Cornfield and Silverhill, your grace. I’ll have your banners fly on the seats of House Swift and House Serrett.” Stannis managed to say that with a straight face.

In truth, he was being sent away to attack two unimportant seats in the Westerlands while his older brother would lead the invasion into proper Westerlands by attacking Crakehall. From Crakehall, Lannisport was only a few leagues away. Stannis realised he was being deliberately kept from fighting some of the most critical battles. The hilly terrain that lay waiting for him would ensure he’d be left fighting a long, drawn-out campaign in the hilly borders of the Westerlands and the Reach. His only chance of quickly concluding the campaign would be if House Swift and House Serrett surrendered without long, drawn-out sieges.

Undoubtedly, the lack of supplies would also contribute to his woes. The Lannisters had meticulously burned down anything that’d be useful. Therefore, his army would be forced to rely on the provisions they could take and the supplies they’d get from the Reach. Foraging was no longer an option in this war. It was an interesting tactic employed by Lord Tywin. Only time would tell whether the Old Lion’s tactics were effective.

“The lords of Northmarch would help you take Silverhill. Lord Rowan sent a raven that their troops were gathering at Goldengrove. They’ve managed to drain the fields and avoid water logging in most flood-affected lands. Once you take Cornfield, you are to march to Goldengrove. From there, the entire Northmarch will join you as you march along the banks of the Lesser Mander towards Silverhill. Take the seat of House Serrett, and from there, I hope you find a way to take Deep Den from the west. The knights of the Vale should be placing Deep Den under siege from the east.”

“I shall make sure Lord Lewis Lydden pay the price of rebelling against the Iron Throne.” Stannis said, nodding at his brother.

“Good. I’m handing you an important task of taking Deep Den and allowing the Vale army to cross into the Westerlands. Do not fuck this up like Dragonstone.” Robert growled towards the end, his blue eyes darkening at the mere thought of the escaped Targaryens.

Stannis could only grit his teeth at the insult. But he held his tongue and merely nodded as was his duty.

“Good. Now go, brother. I have my own battles to fight.” said Robert before riding away.

Stannis watched his brother ride off on his black horse. He shook his head and turned his horse around to face the host of Crownlands and Stormlands troops under his command.

“The scouts have returned, my lord. There is a small village to the northeast a few leagues away. It’s burnt down, but we can set our camp there and send more scouts looking for enemy troops.” said Lord Gulian Swann.

“Then, let’s not dally any longer.” said Stannis, leading a column of Baratheon soldiers with some of the knights from his wife’s family with him.

Despite his current situation, he was most eager to crush the lions of the west. On that sentiment, he was fully supportive of his brother. The time had come for the Westerlands to learn what real war looks like. Stannis was all too happy to show the westermen waging war with the sturdy men of the Stormlands was a bit different than waging war against defenceless women and babes.