

I watched from high above as the change-over of the watchtower between Rakakz's two remaining ports took place. Normally, such a thing would be done through Rian's eyes, but as I needed to take out the tower without alerting the men in either port as to what I was doing, I was instead in the mind of one of the gulls I'd brought from Dustspear. Or more specifically, the four I'd taken when I'd sailed north along the eastern coast of Redwater.

Seeing the world through four sets of eyes, each being so much sharper and capable of seeing at greater distance than my own was a challenge, and I knew that as soon as I slipped back into my body, I was going to suffer the mother of all hangovers. However, outside of taking over the mind of one of the men at the tower, and using him to kill the other man and then himself, there was no way I could take out the watchtower before my ships were spotted by the eastern port.

The two men walking toward the port inside Redwater Bay moved off slowly, the pair talking animatedly as they moved. The men who'd replaced them moved inside the tower, or at least the small cabin that was under the raised platform that allowed sight of the two ports. The tower wasn't large, perhaps five metres square, but that was enough to provide cover from the elements along with, I had to assume, some basic comforts for the men on watch.

The gulls I was controlled circled overhead, staying silent to not draw the attention of the men below as I waited for them to emerge. As the seconds turned into minutes, I could feel my control of the gulls slowly slipping. Their minds might have been shattered before I caged them back on Dustspear, but it was straining my magical reserves - as limited as they were by whatever was fucking with magic on this world - to maintain control of the foursome.

Eventually, one of the men stepped back outside, and I had one of the birds circle lower. As the man climbed the short ladder to the platform, I angled the gull down. Wings were pulled back, narrowing the body and turning, for all intent and purpose, the gull into a giant, weighted bolt being accelerated downward by gravity.

The man had barely taken two steps onto the platform before I saw his eyes widen. His hands reached frantically for the weapon at his hip. He didn't manage to draw the blade in time, and just before the gull's beak slammed into his chest, I broke the connection between myself and that gull.

Through the eyes of the other three gulls, I saw the man knocked back, falling off the platform and crashing to the ground below, the gull's broken body stuck in his chest. The commotion drew the other pirate out, blade in-hand. As he came around the platform, frozen in shock in seeing his comrade dead because of a bird-strike, two of my remaining gulls rushed toward him.

Breaking from his shock, the pirate moved closer, checking on his comrade. As he knelt down, the first of the two gulls I was using in this attack, closed. Weak movement from the downed pirate, had his comrade turn. A hint of steel was the only warning I had to slip from the first gull's mind before the blade came around.

Through the eyes of the other gull, that was diving from another angle, I saw the bird whose mind I'd just abandoned crash into the pirate. The man's blade had caught the gull, however the sheer speed of the attack ensured the gull still struck the pirate, knocking him to the ground and causing his axe to tumble away.

As he groaned, trying to recover from the unexpected assault, the second gull I was attacking with darted closer. The pirate barely had time to turn before the gull was upon him. He brought his hands up, trying to protect himself, but as I pulled out that gull's mind, I knew it was in vain.

That thought was confirmed through the eyes of the fourth gull, as he showed the third bird had stuck the downed pirate in the face. Even the beak hadn't pierced the face, the concussive force would've place the pirate commission. At least long enough that he'd not be able to relay anything from the port my forces were about to attack to Rakakz.

With the assault on the tower done, I pulled my mind back to my body. As I did so, the room spun and I slipped from my chair, one armoured hand barely getting down to the deck before I face-planted into the wood.

Someone was tugging at my side, yet my focus was on dominated by the sensation of my mind struggling to realign itself being back in my body as everything spun around me as I was caught within a tornado. The contents of my stomach soon found their way onto the deck, the only saving grace being that I'd not eaten a full meal before taking flight with four gulls under my command.

“er...gan.....u...al...ht.”

I fought my body to turn my head to where the sound was coming from. through eyes that refused my need to focus, I saw a blurred purple figure there. Part of the figure was touching my arm, while behind it, something in orange shifted around.

"..." I opened my mouth to speak, only for another round of vomiting to occur. Thankfully, there was nothing expelled this time even as the orange thing moved closer.

Something was placed near my face: dark like the colour of the floor. As my mind slowly readjusted, I understood it was cup, and with a shaky hand - the one not keeping me from crashing into my vomit, I reached for the cup. Placing it against my lips, I placed it against my lips and as carefully as I could tilted it.

A coughing fit came as wine flooded my mouth, the tang of the grapes mixing horribly with the remains of my stomach that lingered in around my tongue. I barely managed to keep hold of the cup as the wine was expelled, splashing into the vomit on the ground. The smell made me cough again, wanting to retch another time, but I knew I had to stop.

Pushing back with the hand from the floor, I sat up, resting on my knees.

"Are you well?"

I blinked and turned to the speaker, Edric's words coming through clearer now my mind was recovering.

Not willing to risk speaking, I nodded and, with the free hand, patted his arm. After managing to take a sip from the cup without then spitting it out, I closed my eyes and pushed the last remains of the ordeal I'd just endured away. "Y-yes. E-d-ric," I said slowly, still needing time to recover physically. "T-ell, M-en. At-ack."

Edric nodded and left my side in a hurry. As he raced toward the door of my cabin, Trystane came closer, a jug in his hands. I held up the cup, and while I was struggling to keep it steady, my squire was able to get most the wine he poured into it.

Nodding my thanks, I brought the cup to my lips and drank slow, but growing sips of the alcohol. By the time the cup was finished, I felt able to stand and, even though my legs were shaky, managed to do so.

"The. Watch. Tower. Is. Gone." I explained as I slipped back into the chair I'd fallen from however long ago it was. "Not. Fun."

Trystane nodded, choosing wisely to not say anything. While he was slowly unlocking Water Magic, neither he nor Edric knew anything about skinchanging, and no matter how much I explained it, they never would. Only, in theory, Alysanne and Beron could, but they were back in Sunspire and, at least when I'd last seen them, hadn't unlocked the ability granted to them from their Stark blood.

"How. Long."

"The sun is rising behind us," Trystane said, gesturing toward the small viewports in the cabin. Each of them was covered, as I didn't want the first rays of the morning sun to disrupt my concentration. "We should be in range soon."

I stood, placing a hand on a nearby table for support. "Good. I need to..." I took a step forward only to stop. The room wasn't spinning, but it the rocking of the war galley caused me to pause and take a deep breath.

"Should you not rest until the attack begins?"

Opening my eyes, I shook my head as I smirked. "No. While the men know I can wield magic, they don't understand how I do so. If I'm not there to lead the attack, then they might question my resolve. The last thing we need is those fresh under my banner to challenge my leadership so far from home."

"Yes, ser." Trystane moved toward one side of the room, where my weapons lay.

"Get my bow first," I said, pushing off the table and moving toward the cabin door. "Even if I can't hit anyone at the moment, loosing a few arrows as we approach will please the men, and keep me from being bothered while I continue to recover. "Once I'm at the bow, I want you and Edric to get into full armour. You don't have the strength to use a bow better than the men, and I won't have you working to set your armour before the assault begins."

The pair would, if I could manage it, stay close to me. While young, each of them had trained in the yard for years. Add in that they had good armour, superior to that worn by any of my men bar Daemon, myself and a handful of others, and they should be fine in battle. That didn't, however, mean I was going to let them get too far from me. I might be in the thick of the fighting, but with full plate, I stood a greater chance than any man under my command of wrecking the pirates in the base. Unless they were markedly different from every other pirate we'd fought, then none bar the base commander - if he hadn't sailed with the fleet that tried to attack my holdings - would even have chainmail or half-plate; never mind full plate.

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I looked forward, watching with an amused smirk as the arrow I'd just loosed from my bow struck true; embedding in the chest of one of the few pirates still trying to ready the scorpions on the two docked galleys in the port. Even as the man stumbled back, another arrow was nocked and away, seeking out the next target.

Around me, the four scorpions at the front of the **Red Kraken** were unloading their ordinance on the port. While they had targeted the docked galleys, as we'd moved closer and the men on those vessels thinned out, I'd had them shift fire to the port itself. I wanted those galleys in as decent condition as possible as even if Rakakz didn't chose to counter from his port on the bay, there was nothing stopping Allerion coming down from the north with a fleet, or the Lotus Prince trying to take advantage of the chaos I was unleashing along Redwater's eastern shore.

Another arrow was loosed, taking down the last man on either docked galley, and I turned my gaze to the port proper. There were few men on the docks, or at least that I could see from out location. In theory, there were a few places where stacked crates and the like could offer cover, but any men there would be quickly overrun.

On the shore, men were hastily setting up defences, while at the same time taking cover from the bolts the **Kraken** was launching. Around thirty men seemed to be armed with bows, but we weren't yet in range

of those. They, however, were in range of myself and even as the scorpions to my right launched two more bolts, I quickly loosed two arrows at a small group of archers.

Both arrows found their mark, though only one took down a pirate. The bolts my vessel had launched crashed into an overturned cart - or the remains of one - shattering it and scattering the men who'd been gathering behind it. Or at least those not taken out by the bolts and exploding cart.

As the men there pulled themselves to their feet, one fell back down, an arrow from my bow having pierced his neck. I hadn't been aiming there, but I was happy with the result.

I got off another dozen arrows, all but two finding flesh, before we entered range of the remaining archers on the shore. Knowing it would be less than a minute until we reached the docks, I turned and passed the weirwood bow to Trystane. As he rushed to carry it back to my quarters, Edric held out my shield.

Slipping on my gauntlets, I pushed my arm through the rope hoop at the back of the shield and I had grasped it properly. Edric quickly secured the straps to hold it tight against my arm, and as I lowered the mask of my helm, he turned to one of the men who helped him with his gauntlets and shield.

By the time Trystane returned, Edric and I had our swords drawn and shields up, a few early arrows bouncing harmlessly off their faces. As we got closer, it was possible they might be able to embed themselves in the shields of my men, but as I and my squires were using metal shields for this assault, we'd have to be a lot, lot closer before that would be an issue. At that range, the archers would have time for two, perhaps three shots before they'd be forced to either defend themselves or flee.

"Stay close," I called to the pair, "both to me and each other."

They knew to do that, and I'd explained how like me, they'd be prime targets. Perhaps more so as both wore the colours of their house. For Edric it would need someone versed in the Lords of Dorne to recognize his sigil, but the Martell sigil was better known, meaning that Trystane would be the more likely to be targeted. As he was, rather amusingly, the weaker fighter of the pair, he'd be the one I'd be keeping more attention on.

Edric wasn't a great fighter compared to most of my men, but he was a few steps ahead of Trystane. However, the heir to Starfall didn't seem to hold any clear affinity toward magic. At least not to the point where he'd found a way to draw on an element. Trystane had some rudimentary water control, it wasn't something he could yet consider adding to his combat repertoire.

"Yes, Ser," the pair responded. While there didn't appear to be any nerves in their voices I suspected there would be. While they'd seen combat in the taking of Vaegon's ports, those battles hadn't seen me leading a main assault. This port would be that, and the first time where my men wouldn't have clear numerical advantage or the element of surprise.

The **Kraken** reached the edge of the dock, and I moved to the bow. There was still a gap between the hull and the dock, but it wasn't major. Stepping onto the railing that ran from the reinforced bow ram along the sides of the hull, an arrow bounced harmlessly off my armour.

After checking the planks to ensure they could take my weight, I leapt down. The wood creaked as I landed, but thankfully held. The water around me wasn't that deep, but I'd rather not spend the battle having to wade forward in full armour, nor risk falling over into the water. While I had the strength to pull myself upward, that would take me out of the battle, and I needed - because of my armour and a desire to fight - to lead from the front.

About halfway down the dock, with arrows now targeting my heavily - though unable to do any damage to me as the shield and armour did their jobs, the first pirates came at me. A flick of my wrist, and the blade of **Red Rain** was engulfed in flames. The lead pair of pirates slowed as they saw that, though the trio behind them didn't.

As two of the five stumbled and fell into the water, I moved forward, my blade thrusting at the first of what would be many kills for me this day.

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I walked into what had been the commander's building in the port. The battle was over, and the port taken, though not without cost. Of the near two hundred men I'd attacked with, forty had fallen in the

battle. Another twenty were wounded badly enough that they'd not survive long enough to make it back to the south of the island, never mind Dustspear.

The upsides of that loss of manpower was the fact firstly, the pirates in the port had surrendered quickly. The onslaught of bolts from my ships had shattered their resolve, and when the port's commander and the two men with him had fallen almost as one when I faced off against them, they'd started throwing down their weapons. That meant, after seeing who would bend the knee and who wouldn't, I ended the battle with more men than I'd started, even if most of those with me now were newer converts who I'd trust half as far as either of my squires could throw them.

The second upside of the battle being short was that both galleys had been secured with minor damage. I didn't expect to find much in the way of treasure and supplies here, as in Rakakz's case I'd keep most of that at the bay port as it was the most heavily defended. However, we'd discovered nearly a dozen slaves already in the port, none in what one could call good condition. As much as I wanted to get them out of here, I couldn't send a ship away just to transport them southward. Not when Rakakz remained alive in his final port and the threat posed by Allerion and the Lotus Prince lurked just out of sight.

"This way, mi'lord. The books you wanted are here." The man speaking, and the one who'd led me into this building - only after being carefully searched for any hidden weapons, gestured at a worn, unimpressive table that sat at one side of the room. There was large chair behind it, two more near a smaller table on one corner, while the other side of the room held a bed that was of higher quality, but smelt so badly that I'd have the whole thing burnt if possible and wouldn't be getting used ever.

As I moved toward the table, the pirate - who like almost all his brethren in this port had bent the knee quickly when given the choice - moved back. Behind me, my squires along with Horden and two others entered the room, the men moving to ensure the former pirate didn't attempt anything as I searched the table. Given I had the front of my helm up and my shield loose, something proven as I placed it against the edge of the table, the chances this pirate could do anything to me was minimal. Still, I wasn't going to take any chance of betrayal and as much fun as it would be to burn the fool alive with my magic, I'd rather not have to waste the time and effort to do that.

"These are the missives?" I asked as my free gauntlet-covered hands rummaged through the sheets of parchment on the table.

"Yes, mi'lord," the pirate replied, his accented Common making clear he came from one of the Free Cities. Tyrosh if I wasn't mistaken. Most of the men who'd sworn themselves to me on Redwater had

come originally from Essos, and as such the number that spoke Common at anything more than the most basic of levels was a rare find. I was fluent in Valyrian, including the variants of most of the Free cities, as where my squires, but I'd prefer to force the man to use my tongue as it was another way to assert dominance over him and the others. They needed to be more fearful of me than Rakakz for when I faced off against the Gilded Hand. Or at least they would be if the plan that I was quickly forming in my head failed.

"Good. Get out." The pirate stood there, confused at the dismissal as if he expected something for helping me find the office of the former commander of the office. "Are you deaf as well as dumb? Get the fuck out!" I snarled, one hand rising from the table as a small ball of fire formed in my palm.

The pirate stumbled back and dropped to his knees. "F-forgive me!"

"If you think of invoking R'hllor, I'll send you to meet him personally," I snapped, not wanting to deal with another of those damn fire-loving, people-burning cultists. There were already far too many in my ranks after taking Vaegon's ports and focusing his men to kneel before me. I didn't want more, nor them convincing others that I was their prophesied messiah come to defeat the Great Other. Well, I did have plans slowly forming for fighting, and hopefully defeating the Others, but it had fuck all to do with the deranged sect centred in Volantis.

The pirate scampered, initially on hands and knees, to get away from me. The men who'd entered the room with me turned as the pirate scrambled passed, following after him after Horden gave a nod. The man's eyes flicked to the fireball floating above my palm, but he said nothing. Some of the men were unnerved by my ability to control flames, but none were brave or stupid enough to act against me because of it.

Much of that came from the fact that, bar the ambush in The Whores which more of a draw than anything, I'd not lost a battle. It also helped that I was paying them more than when most would earn as simple pirates, even if their skill and loyalty didn't deserve it. In time, I hoped that loyalty would form, hopefully turning into servitude, but for now coin and fear would do.

"Come closer," I said to my squires, and the pair did so. Trystane moved gingerly, the result of one of the pirates striking him with a hammer. His armour had held, though there was a dent in it that would make it a tight fit for the rest of the campaign, but otherwise he was uninjured. "First, Edric, well done in protecting Trystane." The heir to Starfall had driven back the hammer-wielding pirate for long enough that I'd been able to get to them and gut the bastard from cock to mouth.

Putting aside the fact all three of us had plate armour, Valyrian steel was a game-changer. Even when facing a half-dozen pirates, **Red Rain** - the flames seeming darker because of the colour of the blade - had made quick work of any who faced me. The only ones who required much consideration were the handful with shields capable of catching my blade in the wood.

"How are you feeling?" I asked Trystane as he and Edric carried the chairs from the corner toward the main table.

"I... I'm well, My Lord," he replied as I started searching the desk, wanting to find some blank paper and a quill and ink.

"We've been over the honorifics, Trystane, especially when we're alone," I said with a smirk. The boys had been raised to be perfect little nobles, and even though I was but an officially unlanded knight, they still referred to be as My Lord from time to time. "But regardless, if anything hurts in the next few hours, you will tell me instantly." My tone left no room for negotiation. Trystane understood this and offered a nod. "Good. Now, with the port taken, what should be our next step?"

Perhaps this wasn't the best moment to teach the pair, but learning on the job was how Oberyn had prepared me for becoming a knight. The ability to think on your feet and shift directions suddenly - both in battle and a throne room - were skills he felt all knights should have. As I agreed, I was applying the same logic with his nephew and Edric.

"We need to fortify the port," Edric offered confidently. "The Gilded Hand will know of you taking it before nightfall, and is likely to move to retake his territory."

I nodded at Edric's words and then turned to Trystane, wanting to hear his opinion.

"Edric is right, My... Ser Cregan. However, we can't expect the men who bent the knee to stand with us against their former lord. We'd be wise to keep our men on or near the galleys so we can slip away if things turn against us. It will also make it easier to meet up with Jaeronos provided his ships are moving to support us."

"They are. Rian is currently holding station above us, and through his eyes I've seen the *Howl* and one galley have moved on from the southern port. The others remain there to, I expect, loot what they can and either take prisoners of any left to defend the port or put them to the sword. Since he didn't need to sail wide and avoid sight, Jaeronos should be here by midday tomorrow."

The pair took in my words before Edric leaned forward. "Then what are we to do? Fortify the port, or remain near the ships on the chance the newest men prove disloyal?"

"Both," I said cryptically, finally finding a blank sheet of paper. "However, there is a path we can take that might avoid battle with Rakakz. Which is why I need these."

The pair frowned as I dipped the quill in the ink and moved to begin writing.

"You... you intend to inform him you have the port?" Trystane asked slowly, his mind likely turning over my actions.

"Yes, but I want you to tell me why?"

"You hope to force him to attack tomorrow, just as Jaeronos and the men with him arrive?" Edric offered, to which I shrugged.

"Perhaps."

"What if he chooses to fortify his position in response? Won't that make taking his final port more difficult?"

"It would, and that is a risk of sending a letter. However, there is something you have both forgotten about our opponents." The frowns they wore grew deeper, making me chuckle. "They are pirates. When faced with overwhelming odds, they had two preferred options. Run or yield. They cannot run, not without sailing past ports controlled by myself or Allerion, and with only longboats at his disposal, sailing across open sea isn't a wise course. Therefore, the safer course for them to take is to yield."

"You expect a Pirate Lord to bend the knee?"

I shrugged at Edric's question, ignoring the look of disgust on his face at the idea of Rakakz joining my forces. "I don't know. I do, however, think that when his men learn that his attack on Vaegon failed, those men and ships, along with the two other ports have been taken, and now they have the choice to survive, they'll bend the knee."

"What about Rakakz?"

"Either he'll see which way the wind blows, and bend the knee. In that case, I won't trust him half as far as your children can throw them..."

"We don't have children."

"Exactly!" I pointed my quill at Trystane to drive home the point. "Or, he'll have a mutiny on his hands. In that case, either he wins and thus loses time and men sorting it out, or he dies and those left bend the knee."

"If they betrayed their lord, they can't be trusted."

"No, Edric, they can't," I agreed, the quill dipping into the ink. "However, the same is sadly true for most of the men under my command. In time, they will either earn some trust, or die fighting for coin in my name. Both of which I'm fine with."

If I'd said that in my former life, such callous thinking might've seen me sent to a shrink, even if it was aligned with what many operators would think. In this new life, that sort of thinking was, bar fools high on honour, the way you survived and lived either a long, full life, or a short but enjoyable one.

"But how will you ensure his men know of your offer?"

I smiled even as I kept writing my demand of surrender. "Because, young squire, the men taking this letter will state what it says openly when they reach the port. They will be five of the men who bent the knee outside, and before they leave, I'll show them the approaching ships bringing more men to support my position."

"Will they accept what you're saying?"

I shrugged again. "Maybe, maybe not. Either way this offer will cause a reaction in Rakakz, and thanks to Rian and the gulls, which I have to prepare a few more, I'll have an idea of his response before he's at our gate."

If I was being honest, I didn't expect Rakakz to bend the knee. He'd ruled as a, using the term loosely, Lord for some time on Redwater. He'd fought with Vaegon and Allerion to avoid losing control of his holdings, and wouldn't like the idea of an outside coming in and just taking over. However, regardless of what he, or the men under his command chose to do, the offer would buy me time to prepare in case he chose to attack and get Jaeronos and reinforcements here. And that, with the majority of the men in the port mere minutes into their loyalty toward me, was something I needed.

I'd taken a chance attacking this port first, and while that had worked beautifully, I now needed to hold my position. Ideally without the loss of more men than I afford if I wanted to take out Allerion as well.

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I stood on the docks of my newest port, watching the approach of the *Corral Howl* and the galley that had sailed with it. The sun had yet to rise fully on the first full day of my control of the port, and while I was still waiting for a response from Rakakz, it seemed reinforcements would arrive for me before the pirate lord made his move.

A group of six men, all those who'd bent the knee to me in this port, were sent to Rakakz with my letter demanding his surrender. Before they'd left, I'd explained the contents of the letter to them, and the others in the port, so that even if Rakakz tried to contain his men from learning of the letter's contents, the six would, in theory, spread word of not only the port falling to me, but my terms.

Those six had arrived before sunset yesterday, and I'd watched carefully through Rian's eyes as Rakakz - he was easy to spot due to the solid metal gauntlet-like item he wore on his left forearm and hand - had the men brought into his port. After perhaps an hour in the central building of the port, during which time I'd made note of the exact layout of the port with a focus on land-based defences, which were primarily aimed toward the north, the six men had exited the building.

Instead of being placed in irons or killed, they were allowed back into the general ranks of the port. That meant, even if Rakakz destroyed my letter, the men should've passed along my terms to the rest of the pirates. As those six were aware of Jaeronos' impending arrival - they'd been spottable through a Myrish Eye even before the group had left my port - then Rakakz would know that even if he pulled every man he had in his last port, he couldn't take back this one without suffering massive casualties. That, if it happened, would leave him weak and ripe for attack from Allerion.

After the men had been released from Rakakz's briefing, I'd left Rian's mind and entered that of my remaining gull. With a letter attached to its leg, I'd flown it to Daemon's location with the bird arriving not long before sunset.

The letter for him confirmed that I'd taken both eastern ports. From there Daemon was to move all but a handful of men to the bay port formerly controlled by Vaegon. The ships in the southern port were to sail around Redwater's coast. The *Pride* along with one galley were to head back to Dustspear - a little later than I'd expected, but still according to plan - while the rest to the bay port. That would see my forces there have nine galleys and four longboats which was more than enough to take control of Redwater Bay.

However, they wouldn't move to attack Rakakz or Allerion yet. I wanted to see how the Gilded Hand responded to my letter, but by the end of today, another gull - one of five new gulls I'd broken this morning - would head with orders to sail into the bay. They were to gather near the small island there, though not land upon it. According to the men who'd bent the knee on Redwater, the island was supposedly cursed. I wasn't sure how true that was, but I wasn't tempting fate.

Sometime tomorrow, either as I moved on Rakakz's final port to attack it, or to be accepted as its new overlord, another gull would head to Daemon with updated orders. Either the fleet under his command would join the attack on Rakakz, or the longboats from there would sail out to meet him, and the larger force would strike at Allerion's bay port.

If Rakakz, or more likely his men after they overthrew him, bent the knee, then Daemon's enlarged forces would split in two. Six of the galleys would go south around the island in the bay and then head north. They'd be charged - probably under Bronn's control - with attacking the most westerly of Allerion's four ports along Redwater's northern coast. The remaining galleys, along with all the captured longboats would sail in force toward Allerion's bay port. they'd be seen coming, but even if Allerion pulled most of the men from the northern port that was linked by a path to the bay port, Daemon would have the numbers to overwhelm the port. the question would simply be how viciously Allerion - if he was there - and his men fought to defend the port.

At the same time, I'd take the two war galleys and six galleys on the eastern coast north, intent on attacking Allerion's most easter of the northern ports. I already knew the fleet numbers on either side for this, and while Allerion had a slight advantage - not least as the ports at the extreme end of the norther shore each had what appeared to be a war galley - but they were spread out and designed, like the fleets of Vaegon and Rakakz, to work independently of each other in targeting passing trading vessels and other pirates. As I was concentrating my fleets, then I should be able to take the three targeted ports before the remaining ports could send the majority of their forces to help. Even if the battles were harder than I was hoping for, all three ports would fall, and with them would come the majority of Allerion's men and ships. Ideally, the pirate lord would join Vaegon in death during one of those assaults.

As the first mooring line for the *Coral Howl* landed on the dock, I pushed my battleplans to one side. As soon as the landing ramp clattered against the dock, I moved forward and clasped arms with Jaeronos as he stepped from the war galley.

"About time you got here," I challenged jovially.

The large Essosi laughed heartily. "Unlike some, we had to stay and mop up Rakakz's fleet after they sailed into your ambush. Which, if you didn't already know, went as close to perfectly as any plan ever could."

As we broke our clasp, I turned and gestured from him to walk down the dock with me. "While I saw much of what happened, details were lacking."

"All six galleys were taken. One suffered damage to its sails from an errant bolt, while two more need some repair to their hulls after beaching themselves during their assault. The rest are seaworthy, and I expect by now those damaged have been repaired, along with Vaegon's former galleys, and can sail on your orders."

"I've already dispatched some to Daemon and Bronn," I commented. There was a moment where Jaeronos looked at me, confused by how I'd done that before he chuckled and shook his head.

"Right. You and your beasts," he remarked jovially. "An unusual ability, but one that none of our men can question given how it helped all this," he gestured with an arm to the port as we reached the end of the dock, "come under our control."

I nodded in agreement only to sigh when four of my men bowed deeply. "I could do without that," I muttered as we passed the group. "The Lord of Light can kiss my fucking arse."

"That, my friend, is something I'd pay to see. Just for how the High Priest would react to you taking command of their flames."

"I suspect that, just as I can wield such things, so can their more important leaders." Most of the men in the port were moving around, the loot from the place along with the near two-dozen slaves were being gathered for transport. While I'd prefer to leave them behind when I sailed against Allerion, I couldn't risk leaving them and having some scavenger, or even a recon from Lotus Shores or Stormwatch arriving and walking off with my spoils of war. "What I can do isn't something that everyone can do, but its not as rare as you and others might think."

"I'm aware. I saw pyromancers in Volantis who could do parlour tricks like your little bird. However, them and the Priests and Priestesses who guide flames need to chant to do that. You, my friend, have no such need."

"They likely don't have to do that. It's just been drilled into them that it is needed. Helps to ensure their faith and loyalty." I grimaced as the darker elements of the followers of R'hllor came to mind. "and make it easier to burn others in offerings to their god."

"Yes, that." Jaeronos sighed and shook his head. "Abhorrent practice, but one the ruling families of Volantis allow. Not because they worship the Lord of Light, but because we know that the followers and slaves of R'hllor outnumber us by more than five to one. With many serving in noble households, including as guards, the leaders of the city have to step carefully around the priests."

"Shame there's no dragons around to show them the error of their ways."

Jaeronos laughed so loudly that several of those nearby stopped to see what the commotion was about. "That I would pay good coin to see." He came down from the high quickly. "Hells, I'd offer all my sisters to you to see dragons rule the skies again. As would, I suspect, my father and other nobles."

"I like you Jae, but not that much," I said clapping him on the back. "Besides, I don't think I could juggle any more companions between my sheets."

"Very true. And as each of my sisters, the last I heard, were married, you'd have to fight their husbands for that right." He snorted as we neared the building that I'd taken over as my post. "Of course, for a few of them, I'd stand at your side in such a fight."

"Good to know. Now come. While there's little in the way of quality, it seems the commander here had a decent supply of rum."

"Thank the gods, and your gifts, for that."

As we stepped inside, my squires both present and meditating on drawing forth their magic, I smirked. Of my captains, Jaeronos was the one who best accepted magic, though like the others he was concerned about my ability to take over the mind of another man. Even in Essos that was considered some of the darkest of magic.

While I poured us a mug of rum, I looked forward to hearing more details on how the battle to the south had gone, and what the state of the southern port he'd taken was. Additionally, having another head to go over my plans would be useful as while I felt they were sound, I wasn't foolish enough to believe I could predict everything that might happen, or spot all the flaws in them.

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As the door to my office-cum-bedroom was smashed open, my hand grasped *Red Rain's* hilt. The sheathed blade lay on the table, slightly to the side of the documents I was still going over on the second morning that I'd held the port. Only the fact it was Edric rushing in stopped me from drawing the blade fully, and readying myself for an attack.

"My Lord! Men coming from the west!"

I moved quickly, knowing that this had to be Rakakz responding to my letter, grasping the sheath of my blade, along with my shield and helm. Once outside, I turned and looked around. "Make sure the war galleys are ready to sail!" It was unlikely that this was anyone but Rakakz, but there was a chance that it was Allerion making a move against Rakakz having discovered he'd committed to attacking Vaegon. The war galleys wouldn't depart the port, mainly as that would take most of my men away, but having them ready would mean if this was a two-pronged attack, or just sheer fucking bad luck of two different enemies attacking at the same time, then we were at least partially prepared.

As men moved to ready the ships, I headed to the main gate of the port. The walls were, even compared to what Vaegon's ports had used, lacking. Gaps existed in the walls every few metres, but given the chances of a land attack were slim - Rakakz controlled the land to the west and south while Allerion's lands were blocked by a range of small mountains/high hills. Those were covered in thick vegetation making movement of anything bar a small group of men extremely difficult at the best of times.

Once near the gate, I paused. "Report!" I called out even as Edric caught up with me and helped me secure the shield to my arm. I'd not had time to get my gauntlets on, but so long as I careful, that shouldn't be an issue.

"Good group of men coming down the track, mi'lord." The report came from Horden, who, if I remembered correctly, was meant to have been at the tower between this port and Rakakz' remaining one.

"How far?"

"Just coming over the crest of the path."

I nodded, knowing how far away that was. By now, the group would've reached the tower where the bodies of the men I'd killed would still be. After taking the port, I'd sent ten men there with orders to hold the tower until a force emerged from the bay port. It seemed that, after near two days since my message had been sent, Rakakz was responding.

Horden had followed orders and, when it was confirmed that more than a simply party was coming from the bay port, they were to fall back here. It did have me giving up the tower, but I wasn't going to throw away there lives of men to hold a position of no importance. Not when I had a far better way to monitor what was happening.

Once my helm was on, I moved to my left, and rested a hand against a wall for support. Closing my eyes, my mind slipped comfortably into Rian's, and had him turn south toward my location. He had been flying freely to the north with me intending to scout Allerion's ports later today, but it seemed plans had changed.

As he swept south, passing over the crests of the mountains between myself and Allerion, I noted that there were no ships moving down the coast toward us. There were three others, baring the green sails of the Lotus Prince, far out to sea, but they wouldn't be an issue. Not with the two galleys from the southern port I'd bypassed having arrived here this morning.

Looking through Rian's eyes, I noted around fifty men moving along the path. That was far too many to attack with, which meant that either most had stayed in the bay port, or there were men moving through the woods that my men had missed. What did catch my attention was that Rakakz led the group, along with three of the five men I'd seen around him the most during recon flights over his port.

Circling lower, though still so far above anyone that no arrow or bolt could threaten him, Rian gazed under my orders into the forest on either side of my port. The foliage was thick, but there were gaps in places. Through those, we couldn't see any movement. As much as I wanted to stay here and keep checking for flanking forces, I couldn't do so, and I slipped from Rian's mind into my body.

After blinking to help regain my focus, I pushed off the wall. "Fifty men on the path. Forest appears clear but can't be sure." The men around me had looks ranging to confusion to bewilderment. "To your stations!" I called out, wanting them to push past their confusion.

The fact I had magic wasn't a secret, though most believed it had to do with some form of far-sight of ability to see glimpses of the future. Since none here were from the North - Hells, I didn't think any were from north of King's Landing - they knew nothing of skinchanging. That was something I intended to keep hidden, along with how I controlled fire.

To help obfuscate the truth, I'd started wearing a necklace around my wrist. It was one I'd taken on Dustspear, and I made sure to always wear it, even if under my armour, whenever I planned to use **Fire Magic**. The hope was that the men, or those more likely to try something against me because of magic, would attempt to take the necklace. When someone did, I'd enjoy showing them the depths of their mistakes, but until then, it was a small deception that I'd use to divert attention of the common men serving me.

"Send orders to stand down the galleys!" I added, countermanding my earlier orders as the men move to their positions. The men there shouldn't be needed on the walls, but overwhelming force could help make this party decide that attacking was suicide; something the average pirate would never commit to.

I waited near the gates, time slowing as Rakakz's party neared. There was no way he was intending to attack with so few men, yet the idea he might be here for any other reason seemed improbable.

"Oi! You so-called, Bloody Wolf! Get your arse out here!" The man spoke in reasonably clear Valyrian. There was no clear accent to suggest where on Esso he came from, but he clearly wasn't a Westerosi.

"What a nice invitation," I said loudly, replying in the same tongue. Many of the men around me, at least those who understood the language, laughed. "Who am I talking to?"

"I am Rakakz, the Gilded Hand of Redwater! Scourge of the Stepstones, and Lord of Redwater!"

I bit back a comment on how he became the 'Gilded Hand', along with the many, many suggestions from Bronn and others over that. While some had been tame, a few had been so outlandish that a faint chuckle slipped from me even as I listened to Rakakz finish his spiel. "Lord of Redwater? Before I arrived, you weren't even the most powerful pirate here, never mind a Lord!"

"Allerion and Vaegon are false lords! Only Rakakz can rule Redwater."

"Funny, Vaegon said something similar before one of my men removed his head!" I gestured toward the gate, indicating for the men there to prepare to open it. Rakakz was here for a reason, and whether that was to bend the knee, demand a duel to the death, or offer terms thinking he held some advantage he didn't, I figured I'd see that reason face to face.

"Vaegon is dead?"

"Yes. If you want proof, I can send you to meet him." I turned and looked Horden. "Honestly, based on the sound of his voice, I'd prefer that." Horden chuckled even as Rakakz spoke again.

"Shame. I had hoped to send him to hell myself. Still, saves me the bounty I placed on his head. Unless your man would be willing to fight for me."

"That's about as likely as Allerion sucking your cock!"

Rakakz laughed loudly, a deep booming sound that I suspected carried to the docks. "Now that I would pay handsomely to see."

"What do you want Rakakz?"

"To talk."

"About?"

"Just open the fucking gate!" Rakakz spat. "You know we've not got the men to talk your port."

"Or so you claim," I shot back. Rian hadn't alerted me to any movement in the forest around the port, but I wasn't taking any chances.

"For fuck's sake! There!" I heard something metallic strike a stone. "I've dropped my weapons! Now open the gate so we can fucking talk you bastard!"

I looked up toward a man on the wall. After gesturing for him to check, and then having to growl and point my blade at him, he popped up and looked over the wall. I half-expected him to take an arrow to the face, so when that didn't happen, and he instead turned to me and nodded, I was genuinely surprised. "Open it!"

Horden's head snapped around to me. "Milord?"

"Look, he seems sincere, and if he does try anything," I flicked my blade summoning flames along it before dismissing them with another gesture.

"Open the gate!" Horden ordered without shouting.

The wood gates creaked back as they opened, and I took a central position, shield held up and helm down expecting an attack. However, the men I saw, while armed, weren't readying themselves to charge. Some looked furious, and it was clear they wanted to fight, but the man leading them, which given the gauntlet he wore on his left lower arm and hand had to be Rakakz wasn't one of those. Indeed, a blade lay at his feet, a sign he truly had dropped his weapon.

"So you're the fuck that's taken my ports and killed Vaegon?" Rakakz said, walking toward me. at my side, I sensed my men and squires tensing, but I held out my sword, stopping them from advancing.

"Yes to the first, no to the second. That honour," I stressed the word to make clear it was anything but, "went to my second who commands from Vaegon's territory now."

"Eh, I'll meet him soon enough," Rakakz said, continuing to move closer. Behind him, his men held their ground, their eyes tracking any movement from my men, even those up along what passed for a wall of this port. "But it was you, the Bloody Wolf I came to treat with."

"And why do you wish to do that?" I asked, holding my position and expecting some form of trickery.

Rakakz sighed and shook his head. "Gods, you're not the trusting type, are ya?" He asked, his hands coming to rest on his hips.

"Trusting a pirate is a good way to end up dead or in chains."

Rakakz threw his head back and laughed. "Yes. That's true. However, I'm not your average pirate. Nor are you it seems." His eyes scanned my armour, focusing on the sigil on my shield. "Never seen that crest before. Looks Westerosi, which fits as your fucking accent could only come from that land of heathens."

"Says the man from a land with literal goatfuckers and Gods knows what else."

"Ha!" Rakakz laughed loudly. "Don't think the Qohorik would like to hear that."

"Probably not," I agreed slowly growing tired with whatever was going. "Now, I'm a busy man, ports to take, pirates to kill, so why are you here?"

"Aye, I know you've been busy. What? Five days and four ports on Redwater? Fucking impressive."

"Seven days, but who's counting? But again, what the fuck do you want?"

Rakakz's oddly jovial mood seemed to slip as I snapped back, fed up with his humour. "I'm here, you dumb fuck, because I've lost two ports, all my galleys, and most of my men to you. And because of this!" He pulled out a sheet of paper and started waving it in the air. "You've got some balls demanding my surrender!"

"I know. As do the girls who've shared my bed."

Rakakz barked out a laugh again. "Ha! You're a funny fucker. An annoying one, but funny." He shook his head and began pacing from side to side. "Now, what am I going to do about this?" He asked, waving the letter around.

"The choice was simple. Do the smart thing and bend the knee and live, or don't and die." I took a step forward, shield raised and sword ready. "your choice." A flick of my wrist, and flames danced down **Red Rain**.

That drew his attention, along with that of his men. Some braced, some took a step back, and a few, perhaps worryingly, seemed in awe of my action. My focus, however, remained on Rakakz, awaiting his response.

"Nice parlour trick," he said dismissing the flames that engulfed my blade but didn't touch my hand. "Seen that in a few places. Didn't expect it from a Westerosi though."

"Your choice."

Rakakz glared at me, my lack of interest in playing along with him any longer starting to show. "You're young lad. Too eager to rush into things. Means you miss out on moments you should savour like this one."

I tensed, expecting him to attack. He sighed and shook his head at my action. "As I said, young and brash. But fuck, has it worked for you so far." As one knee fell to the ground, I remained stationary, expecting some form of trickery. "I yield. My men, my ports, ships, and myself, are yours to command."

All I ask is to hold a position of power in your ranks, and that past actions aren't used to judge me going forward."

I stayed where I was, still expecting some form of deception. Rakakz appeared genuine, but I wasn't taking anything for granted. This man had held his ports for years, perhaps even a decade, so to see him so easily kneel before me felt far too fucking easy.

"Well, do you accept my fidelity?"

"I'm thinking about it," I replied honestly even as I kept myself ready. While this was an option for him to take, I'd not expected it to come. Certainly not without me first attacking his port and forcing his hand.

Now, with him kneeling before me, and his men slowly copying the gesture, I had to figure out how to handle this. Either I accepted his offer, and risked being seen as foolish, or stuck him down and become seen as a tyrant. What a great fucking choice.

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