**Chapter 41**

**The Lion of Castamere**

*By the time the rebel army of the self-proclaimed King Walder Reyne began to besiege Sarsfield, it could be argued the situation was not completely desperate for the ‘Red Lion’s cause’.*

*On the other hand, when Sarsfield was stormed and sacked by the enraged soldiery of House Reyne and its rebel allies, it was difficult to argue the Lords having risen against House Lannister had a chance to emerge the victors, even for a few moons.*

*Sufficient reinforcements had arrived at Lannisport to ensure attacking the greatest city of the Westerlands would not fall by anything but a long siege. At the time the towers of Sarsfield were set afire, a column of Lannister-Reacher infantry was marching southwards, under orders to invade the Crakehall lands from the north. The plan was hardly the kind of cleverness praised in knightly tales, but between the hammer coming from Lannisport and the anvil played by the thousands of men waiting on the Ocean Road, the Crakehall army had no good choices left.*

*A good strategy for the rebels should have been to send on the battlefield their reserves of men, as pitiful and inadequate as they were. Unfortunately, this was where the fall of Hornvale to the Black dragons proved a considerable blow to the rebel ‘Red King’. With the Gold Road in permanent danger of being cut off, the last companies of Cornfield and Deep Den stayed inside their castles and didn’t move.*

*Doing the exact opposite wouldn’t have saved the ‘Red Rebellion’ anyway, but in these dangerous times, it only ensured the Lords bound by House Reyne into treason and usurpation of the laws of the realm began to look at each other with suspicion and distrust.*

*And of course while the bickering became noticeable, the sieges of Deep Den, Crakehall, and Silverhill continued, with the armies of the Red Lion unable to do a single thing about them. Nor were those the only issues plaguing Walder Reyne and his bannersmen. The siege of the Golden Tooth had turned into a joke, with the besieged eating better than the besiegers. After the first wave of rebellions having struck the Westerlands, knights and their men-at-arms were fighting back everywhere, the loyal Westerners not liking at all the presence of foreign sellswords and bandits plaguing the countryside near their homes.*

*The War of the Lions was far from over...but the Red towers were shaking. The storming of Sarsfield won a few more days of respite to King Walder. That is, until the Lord of Castamere learned of Ser Tyland Lannister’s intentions.*

*What good was Sarsfield for if your ancient castle, the source of your House’s prestige, fell while you were away? What good did it make to open the road to Lannisport if in your back, another door from which could pour the Lannister armies was broken?*

*These questions weren’t answered on a parchment...but in blood and on a battlefield.*

Extract from The War of Lions by Second Historian-Librarian Jonos Underhill, original written at Fairmarket, 160AC.

**Ser Selmond Blackmane**

So far, the siege of Castamere was a showing of martial might and not much else.

At least, Selmond thought, Lord Grimm ‘the Grim’ Banefort was not a Reacher flower and had not pushed the bad taste to organise tourneys and feasts while his men waited on the curtain walls.

Banefort men had poor taste, but it wasn’t that poor...usually.

Still, it was always worrying to see eight thousand men march before your walls and stand there, silent, threatening, while their catapults and trebuchets tried to hammer the northern wall blocking the pass.

Fortunately, the effect was rapidly broken, as always, by the implacable wrath of the sun. It was summer, after all, and grimness and determination might carry you a long way, but the men of House Banefort would be cooked inside their black armours if they stayed too long in front of House Reyne’s walls. During the first days where they had tried for too long, there had been plenty of heavily armoured pikemen who had to be dragged unconscious to the forested area where the Banefort camp had been built.

Then again, his men had the same problem. They could play the role of prideful sentinels at dawn, but once the sun was beginning to pass over the Misty Mountains up east, everyone was trying to find a good corner of shadow to spend the time between the watches. Summer at Castamere was hardly bringing the kind of warmth southern valleys received, but this year, it was really an exhausting thing. Selmond slept naked and with his quarters fully opened, and he knew the majority of his men did the same.

Thank the Seven, Castamere was known for its massive wells and controlling no less than two small rivers in its inner domain. And there was one more in the deepest basements of the mine, though it was hardly used these days, since walking to it and coming back took most of the day.

Still, the fact remained, the defenders of Castamere didn’t lack for water...fortunately because under this terrible sun able to cook eggs and meat on its own, they would have died of thirst in three or four days.

And fortunately because he had no men to spare if one or two died from not drinking enough.

Eight thousand men were on the other side, proud banners of House Banefort, Westerling, and Estren among them. They had brought armoured and light infantry, archers, siege engines, ladders, heavy cavalry, light cavalry, and plenty of freeriders and men-at-arms with warhammers, pikes, and halberds.

He had barely five hundred men to defend the castle, and one in three of those were older than fifty or younger than sixteen name days.

Only the size of the walls allowed him to make this a siege. If it was any other castle than Casterly Rock or Castamere, this would have been already over fortnights ago. The enemy had ladders, and they could replace their men; Selmond couldn’t. As Castellan of Castamere, he had too few men left to properly man the walls, sun or no sun.

The Knight of the minor Knightly House of Blackmane didn’t begrudge his King for that. One had to make hard choices when fighting a rightful war, and King Walder Reyne had harder choices to make than most. And for the moment, it worked.

Despite the knights and the warriors of House Reyne being away from their home, five hundred men of lower extraction, commanded by ten knights, were forcing an army of eight thousand men to stand idle and play this mummery every morning. Their scorpions were ineffective, and their trebuchets accomplished nothing against the rocks of the mountains. Honestly, Selmond didn’t know why they bothered-

“HEAR US ROAR! HOUSE LANNISTER AND CASTERLY ROCK!”

The Blackmane knight jumped in fright, for this battle-cry had *not* come from the Banefort host, but from behind.

From behind.

From the southern pass, the access to Castamere he had been forced to leave more or less unguarded because he had not enough men to cover one wall, much less two.

“No, no, no, no...”

He ordered to his men to stay true to their vows and stay on the wall, taking only a score of archers with him southwards. Maybe it was an attempt to frighten them. Maybe it was some trickery of two or three scores of warriors who had somehow been across the mountains to spread panic.

The moment he stood on the southern wall, all these hopes were dashed. This was really a Lannister army he was seeing...a massive army. At least three thousand men, and certainly more.

There were three thousand men, and they were coming right at him, right at the southern wall which was completely unguarded – two grey-bearded sentinels hardly made a proper defence.

War horns sounded from the north, and the Lannister music answered.

“My Lord! They are attacking from the north too!”

The Castellan of Castamere shook his head in disbelief. No, this couldn’t be happening. A treacherous thought in his head told him it understandably could, since he was watching it.

And the few cut trees that had been placed as obstacles were proving no obstacle at all; they were dozens of axes cutting them in pieces, providing more breaches for a gigantic host to pour forwards.

This was the last defence he had. Past that, it was the southern wall...the unguarded and absolutely useless wall, since Selmond could see at least thirty ladders from here, and he had not thirty men to repel them.

“FOR LANNISPORT! FOR LORD LANNISTER! FOR THE TRUE LION!”

Could he bring enough men from the north to repel the assault?

Arrows begun to be shot by the Banefort archers, answering his question immediately. Another rock launched by a trebuchet provoked minor damage...but it was damage and undoubtedly it covered the approach of thousands of enemies.

No, no the battle was lost. He was already seeing five or six men leaving the northern defences, and more would undoubtedly flee if he tried to make them fight.

These were not five hundred knights he had; these were five hundred elderly beards and teenage boys who had seen too many battles or too few. The enemy had at least eleven thousand and were coming from two directions.

No way could he stand against such odds.

“RETREAT!” he shouted to his men. “RETREAT! WE RETREAT! RETREAT INTO CASTAMERE! THE CASTLE CAN WITHSTAND THIS ASSAULT BETTER THAN THE WALL!”

The former mines were impossible to conquer...it was where his men and he would take refuge and await the rescue of their King. Castamere’s outer walls had sometimes fallen, but never the true castle. Much like Casterly Rock, it was an invulnerable citadel...only one deep under the mountains rather in it.

“RETREAT! RETREAT AND SEND THE RAVEN TO THE KING! THE ARMY MUST BE WARNED THE FALSE LIONS ARE THERE!”

**Lord Grimm Banefort**

Grimm Banefort didn’t smile as he passed through the tunnels leading to the true castle of Castamere.

Some people might believe it was funny that your army had been out of the war for two months as it was blocked by nothing more than a band of bare-footed cripples, but Grimm believed otherwise.

There was nothing happy in this dark world. There was no joy to be found that wasn’t ephemeral and piercing your skin with sharp thorns.

Grimm Banefort had survived three brothers and five sisters to take the Lordship, and not a single death had been his fault. The luckiest had died from the Iron Fever. The unluckiest had been taken by the Ironborn and made to beg for death before it came for her.

The Lord of the Banefort really didn’t understand why people believed that praying in Gods – or praying at all – was going to solve anything or that it was going to matter once they held their last breath.

There was no reason to think the Seven Heavens were a choice, because they were already living in the Seven Hells. How could one believe otherwise? Harvests were ruined in fit of madness before strong winters struck. Dragons pretending to be infallible burned everything and left only ashes in their wake. Cursed pirates landed on their coasts and stole everything they owned because they thought it was the divine thing to do. Elders died on far-away battlefields while their homes were destroyed or burned. Then disease slaughtered half of the survivors. And when it was over, when at last summer returned, madmen once more plotted and lusted for power, preventing thousands from harvesting the fields and growing their food in peace.

They were trapped in a hellish cycle which always repeated itself, Grimm knew, as his horse and he left the tunnel and he could watch the massive curtain wall and the twin towers of the Castamere castle.

Year after year, there was only war, and the fewer men and women remained, the worse the madness grew. Were the Seven Kingdoms going to be lost in the midst of tales and legends a century from now? Would they be replaced by another civilisation and culture like the First Men had been replaced by the Andals?

These were dark questions, he admitted...and he didn’t know the answers, so better to abandon them and salute the other army commander coming to meet him.

“Lord Tyland,” Grimm bowed without dismounting.

“Lord Grimm,” the Lannister knight’s expression was rather polite, but behind the friendliness, he could tell the man was haunted like himself. Tyland had seen too much of what war truly was, and it would remain with him until his death. “Welcome to Castamere.”

Grimm sniffed, and deliberately threw a few unimpressed looks at the walls and the defences built by House Reyne.

“We will be able to use it as a supply base for our troops,” the Lord of the Banefort said after a moment of silence. “It will be better of course if we have the entire castle at our disposal.”

“My thoughts exactly,” the sword of Johanna Lannister replied before turning his head to watch south, where undoubtedly a certain Reyne army realised the folly of its plans. “Much as I loathe this treacherous scum of Walder Reyne, he isn’t going to stay blind for long. For all I know, he may have already realised my intentions. And the moment he realises our armies have united, he will come here.”

“A loyal Lord may think like you do,” Grimm warned, “but these traitors are hardly proper Lords and knights.” Whatever it truly meant in these dark ages, and it wasn’t exactly good. “The rebels and their sellswords may truly consider abandoning their roots and going after another target.”

“It is possible, I suppose, that the Red traitor could consider abandoning his lands and his claims here to replace them by something bigger,” Tyland acknowledged. “His men might have something different to say, however. For them to not even man the southern wall, they must have taken every man capable of wielding a weapon south, and the smallfolk they sent into the mines are their wives and children...or their grandfathers and grandmothers.”

The blonde-haired man shrugged.

“And in the case he wants to replace this castle with a bigger one, Casterly Rock and Lannisport must have been reinforced by now. I can’t deny he can hurt us if he burns the fields and poison the wells, but he won’t be able to seize them without a long siege. Hornvale? Rumours is the bastard of the Brax has lost it to the dragons. The Golden Tooth? We would have only to block the pass behind him to let him starve.”

“True.” Grimm conceded. “Your opinion he will come here may very well be correct. In this case, Castamere must have fallen before his arrival. I know a way to end quickly this defiance.”

The river feeding the pool nearby would not be complicated to divert into one of the mine openings, and once it was done, the entire underground fortress would be flooded in short order.

“No.”Tyland Lannister refused. “I need the smallfolk they have with them. The nobles could drown for all I care, but if I kill too many smallfolk, this Lordship might very well be torched, razed, and then salted until there’s nothing left, because we are hardly in position to send thousands of good arms working north of Sarsfield.”

Grimm conceded the point silently.

“In that case, it is going to take time. My men are already bringing their rams and the tools to break their defences, but it will take time if they want to protect Castamere to the last man.”

“Time I can deal with,” the Lannister knight answered. “First, I think I can offer them terms to inform the smallfolk they don’t need to die for their liege lords...”

**Ser Selmond Blackmane**

Holding Castamere for several days was going to be more arduous than he had previously thought.

“I say let’s take the offer, boys.” A ‘swordsman’ – in reality nothing more than a glorified smallfolk who had been given a second-hand blade – said to a score of younger boys before Selmond placed a hand upon his right shoulder and squeezed.

The lowborn grey-beard hissed in pain and stopped his treasonous talk.

“There won’t be any talk of that under my command,” the knight sworn to the Red Lion talked calmly. “His Grace the King ordered me to hold this castle until he came to relieve me of this duty, and this is exactly what we are going to do.”

“The King is certainly dead! The Lannisters came from the south! They must have defeated him!”

Selmond slapped the idiot before explaining.

“The last horse-mounted messenger we received from the King was four days ago. If there had been a battle between the dogs of the Lannister and his army, this southern army wouldn’t have been there. No, the Lannisters used some trickery to escape the vigilance of our King and rush here before the banners of the Red Lion could pursue them.”

“Say you don’t lie,” a black-haired boy who mustn’t have seen ten season changes barked like an arrogant pup. “We’re still screwed whatever happens. The two armies are there. The King isn’t. And he won’t be able to force them out.”

If they were, some of the men in front of him were definitely guilty of that. His orders to set afire certain armouries and destroy what could be broken in short order had been utterly ignored. But throwing that kind of argument would be petty...and wouldn’t solve anything in the end.

“The King will be able to destroy these armies or force them to withdraw. Haven’t you noticed how so far the Lannister armies have always retreated before the great host flying the banner of the Red Lion?”

Of course until now the Lannisters had eight thousand men blocked on the wrong side of the pass, and a lot of it was heavy horse and pikemen. Now that it wasn’t any longer the case...

“And if they don’t? If the King doesn’t come? The man’s words are clear, the longer we wait before laying down our arms, the worst-“

Selmond scoffed.

“Oh, you’re not going to tell me you are falling for that stupidity?” He didn’t dither long after asking this question. “Whoever really wrote this declaration, it is empty wind. They aren’t going to give you new Lords whatever happens at the end of this war. There are going to be slaps on the wrists and many mills and villages will change hands, but do you really think the so-haughty House Lannister care about preserving the smallfolk while assassinating their highborn?”

“You’re saying this parchment is nothing but lies?”

“That’s exactly what I’m saying!” The Castellan declared. “Be it Tyland Lannister or the Grim Lord, they must have noticed you didn’t have the plate armours of knights and the spears of our best men-at-arms. So they’re trying to set us against each other, pretending they care about you since there are more of you here than they previously expected Look at that message! It was obviously written too quickly and with bad ink! They would have tried that with far better writing if they really intended to honour these terms!”

Knowing he was gaining more and more to his cause, Selmond knew it was time to strike the final blow.

“It is always the same with the Lannisters. They will promise something that is too good to be true...and it is too good to be true! Whether it is wealth, peace, easy victories, or justice, they never deliver. They wait at Casterly Rock for all souls to crawl to them, and they will do it again in a thousand years if they aren’t stopped!”

Just enough time to catch his breath, and he pushed his own proposal.

“I’m not promising you eternal glory, just the rewards you will be given for having defended the castle of your King loyally when enemies besieged it. And what do you have to do to claim them? Waiting. Merely waiting. Our food and water supplies can last years, and there is no way the Banefort warriors will be able to break the entrance gates with these tiny rams they have. Wait and do not worry about these ridiculous terms. The Red Lion’s army will be here soon, and it will break the Lannisters forever.”

It took some more haggling and bargaining, but the most stubborn heads finally bowed to the pressure and accepted he was right.

Selmond would remember the names of those who had been so willing to open the gates, though. Paid, fed, and clothed, and they wanted to turn their cloaks at the first sign of difficulty? Oh no, they weren’t going to get off easily! Not when so many had already been running when he had ordered the retreat. Not when half of the garrison had been good for nothing but sleeping next to the ramparts while they should stand vigilant.

Yes, once the King returned victorious, there would be huge changes...

**King Walder Reyne**

“The Lannister host is WHERE?”

The messenger flinched and took two steps back before speaking again.

“They are attacking Castamere from the south, my King. We’ve just received Ser Selmond’s raven!”

Walder took a moment to congratulate himself at having arranged a tower east of Sarsfield for these messages beforehand. If Sarsfield had been chosen for this duty, he wouldn’t have been able to receive any bird in time to do any good.

“Numbers? Situation?”

“Your Grace...this was a message written in anticipation of something like this, with just the date written in haste before the bird was sent our way.”

And as the small parchment was given to him, the Red King could see this news was four days old.

Four days. It didn’t seem a large amount of time...except his Castellan would have to face the army of Tyland Lannister alone, and from a direction opposite to the threat he was keeping at bay. If the Banefort-Westerling forces had assaulted Castamere from the north as soon as they realised what was happening...

The Lord of House Reyne dismissed the messenger before grimacing and screaming a few curses. It didn’t solve anything, but it allowed him to release some of the fury he was feeling.

“Well,” Lord Joffrey Lydden commented coldly, “now we know why the Lannisters have failed to jump into my traps. They had one of their own.”

The look Walder sent to his great bannersman was more a scowl than a smile, and deep inside, his fury rose up again. It had been his strategy, his traps...but if the Lord of Deep Den wanted to take responsibility for what had been a major failure, the Red King was content to let him.

“Yes,” Walder finally acknowledged after making sure his self-control was back. It wouldn’t do at all to strangle whoever was around, since he couldn’t afford losing a Noble House of his army now. “And now Castamere is lost.”

“You have no faith Ser Selmond can resist?”

This was such a stupid question Walder gave her an irate expression and the Lord had the good sense to present an apologetic face.

“I have utmost confidence Selmond can and will resist.” The architect of the rebellion launched against House Lannister declared. “Alas, save taking refuge in the underground castle and fortifying himself, there isn’t much he can do. I left him five hundred men to defend my ancestral home, not five thousand...and five thousand is exactly what he would have needed to defend the passes, especially from the south.”

The north was extremely defendable, the road there being very similar to the Ocean Road near Crakehall where you had only to throw rocks at the enemy if they dared climb up the slopes. But the south was far less so; the terrain was hardly flat, but you could deploy at least six hundred men in a single line no matter where you fought, and the walls weren’t that high. Good ladders would allow a determined attacker to reach the top of the curtain wall seven times out of seven.

“What I don’t understand is how he was able to silence our sentinels before they gave the alert. I ordered several companies to take position north of here to prevent exactly that.”

And yet there hadn’t been a whisper of warning. For the sake of these ‘sentinels’, Walder hoped they were dead, because if they were still alive, if they had really been so useless in obeying their oaths that an army of several thousand men had managed to come their way and they failed to notice it...

“Ser Tyland is more competent than the normal Lannister commander,” the Lord Lydden said. “What are we going to do, your Grace?”

“The true Castamere undoubtedly holds, but the yellow armies must have united by now.” Walder at first didn’t answer the question. “Their first orders will make sure Ser Selmond can’t sally out, and if possible that he surrenders to them, though I don’t think they will succeed.”

Walder certainly prayed so, because camped north of what remained of Sarsfield castle, he couldn’t do anything one way or another.

Was this how ignominious defeat felt like? It was...unpleasant. More unpleasant than learning how all his ‘allies’ had failed him in the attack of Lannisport.

What to do now?

Obviously, staying here and doing nothing was impossible. The hourglass of the Crone had never been on his side, and with this defeat, it was even less so. If he did nothing, his warriors would abandon his cause in short order. Before a fortnight ended, desertion would destroy his army faster than starvation and disease.

The Red Army could march towards Lannisport, burn the Lannister harvests, and besiege the city. But if Lord Crakehall didn’t come from the south, a proper siege would be nearly impossible, and since Tarbeck Hall wasn’t on his side...and it didn’t even count the problem of the Lannister-Banefort host in his back. They would burn his supplies behind him and leave him nothing but dust and tears to feed his men. No, marching west was too risky, too full of uncertainties.

Walder could order the army to march southwards. Only his House’s soldiers would not be very happy with that, of course. With Castamere besieged, they would likely grumble and maybe even desert to return fight for their families. That they would likely die against Lannister blades or be executed on their own wouldn’t prevent them from doing it all the same. But assuming they didn’t, where to go? He couldn’t storm Hornvale. Not against two dragons, not even if there was only one. His men wouldn’t run into the flames for his cause. The words ‘Field of Fire’ were still carved in ashes and corpses over a century later.

Forcing the Green troops of the Crownlands and the Reach to abandon the siege of the frontier fortresses? That was doable. Except that if he did this, his cause was going to die quickly. Everything north of Hornvale would be lost in short order, the siege of the Golden Tooth would be abandoned one way or another, and Sarsfield was not a fortress which could be defended for fortnights anymore. And the Lannister host would pursue him, though more slowly than they would do than on a Lannisport adventure. The Southern Marches weren’t theirs, and their supply convoys would need time to be organised.

No, if he went south, the war was going to meet a slow death. He may be able to survive as long as Daeron and his dragon didn’t fly past Deep Den – the damned Black reptiles seemed satisfied with Hornvale for now – but this would be death nonetheless. It may take several moons and many long sieges, but the banners of the Red Lion would be lowered one by one.

If he went south, he would die like a wild beast cornered in a cavern drowned in smoke, fighting to exist, breath after breath, unable to strike at his enemies.

Walder wouldn’t give this pleasure to the Lannister bitch. He was a Lion, the Red Lion. He would rule over the reborn Kingdom of the West, or fall in battle like a leonine warrior.

“We march north to break the Lannister hosts. They will either flee back to their coastal castles, or they will meet us in battle at Castamere. And the fate of the West will be decided here.”

Judging by Lord Joffrey’s expression, the Lord of Deep Den was not happy about it...but it was evident he had no other choice to propose.

“Summon the Lords and the Grand Captains. I want to explain to them my plans.”

**Ser Tyland Lannister**

Several days ago, Tyland had realised they were a moon past his name day and he had completely forgotten.

The thought had been more troubling than he would properly admit in public. Yes, there was a war going on, yes there weren’t the cooks or the supplies to waste on frivolities like a proper name day celebration, but it was still...unnerving.

He wasn’t going to begin to wear only black and transform into a second ‘Grim Lord’ – at least he prayed he wouldn’t – but it was distressing to realise how much the war changed their day-to-day life, and not for the better.

As the towers and the walls of Castamere had fallen with an incredible facility, the Lannister commander had felt his spirits rise again. The two main armies loyal to Casterly Rock were properly united, and now that everything was in order, they were able to march south and properly ravage the lands supporting the traitors and the rebels.

And then this morning, formally the seventh day of the ‘siege of Castamere’, the gates of the former mines had opened, and after a brief exchange of words, the garrison had marched out.

Now two men threw a haggard figure in chains to his feet. The mutineers – likely old lumberjacks given how large their arms and legs were – bowed and then moved out, his men letting them leave as the agreed terms had promised.

Today was maybe not his name day, but it was really a very good name day’s present...if a bit late. But who was going to complain? Tyland certainly didn’t.

“Ser Selmond Blackmane, Castellan of Castamere,” the blonde-haired knight saluted his bound prisoner. “How kind of you to join me on this fine morning of summer.”

The older knight, quite predictably, tried to spit in his direction. He missed, and by a lot. One of his sworn swords arrived behind him and delivered a not-so-gentle slap, which given that his steel gauntlets were fully donned, was enough to shed blood.

“You have turned my men against me, you trample honour with every breath you make, and you still have the gall to mock me? Damn you, spawn of the dragon-kneelers! Damn you, *Lannister*!”

“Honour?” Tyland raised an eyebrow. “What does a Reyne servant knows about honour? Your master is guilty of at least three score assassinations we have evidence of, including one on King Daeron himself.”

“Lies!”

“Lies? Yes, I’m sure it’s a coincidence that the assassins tried to kill our King in the streets of King’s Landing mere days after the treacherous Walder Reyne broke his oaths and plunged the Westerlands into another conflict we neither desired nor prayed for. And let’s not speak about the thousands of sellswords and sellsails which fought under a Red Lion’s banner at Lannisport.”

Tyland took a lion-carved cup from his squire and drank the cold water. Ah, it was a delight and refreshing under this warmth.

“Let’s face it, Ser Blackmane, your liege is the worst traitor the Westerlands have ever known this century...and maybe the century before that, now that I think about it.”

“Lies! You killed King Walder’s brother!”

“I? I wasn’t even fighting in the melee of the tourney!”

“Your whore of a-“

A second slap cut off the injurious sentence before it arrived to its end.

“I am going to ignore what you tried to say, and as a confidence, I can say to you neither Lady Johanna nor any member of House Lannister, to my best knowledge, have been involved in the death of Lord Reyne’s brother. Unlike some treacherous highborn, we only act when we have the proof of high treason...and we do not execute them by something as chancy as a *tourney*.”

The mystery of who had done the deed was thickening, however. At first, Tyland had believed Lord Walder Reyne had been cold-hearted enough to arrange the assassination of Tywald to bolster the ranks of his rebellion, but every traitor they were able to interrogate made clear the outrage of the ‘Red Lion’ seemed genuine.

It wasn’t totally convincing, given how many horrible things the chief oath-breaker had done while no one was looking. But it raised an interesting issue. If really this wasn’t another manipulation of House Reyne bleeding for House Reyne, who had paid the assassin? The Blacks? Lord Strong, the sinister Clubfoot? Dorne?

“Fine words, for someone who intends to kill me before sunset.”

The scion of Casterly Rock chuckled.

“I spared most of your garrison, minus your knights, and all your smallfolk are going home. But you prevented loyal armies from crushing your liege’s treachery for a couple of moons, and that I can’t forgive. You willingly betrayed your oaths to Casterly Rock, and you continued long past the point one could say you feared for your life if House Reyne won.”

“Bring your executioner, and stop preaching your disgusting words dripping with satisfaction!”

“I have no executioner,” Tyland looked in the eyes of the traitor, and what he saw comforted him in his decision. The man wasn’t sorry at all to have betrayed, Selmond was just sorry to have lost. “You will have to die from an eager novice’s blade. You better pray the Warrior he won’t take too long removing your head from your shoulders.”

**King Walder Reyne**

Walder wouldn’t deny he had left a weak garrison behind to guard Castamere, but he had really thought his home was safe when he left for war.

When House Reyne had decided to transform the former mines into a proper castle, they had built a series of gates which were incredibly durable. Some of them had to be pushed by several men to open, no matter whether you had the keys or not. The steel and the iron which had been used for the main defences were unmatched. Even the infamous Lion Gate of House Lannister could not boast about such massive and impressive protection.

Castamere was impregnable. End of the story.

Seeing the ten heads planted on the spikes at the entrance of the pass, one each for every knight he had left behind, was a dreadful reminder how wrong Walder had been.

“How?” asked Lord Garth Marbrand, new Lord of House Marbrand after Ashemark had finally rallied to his banners.

“Treachery,” Lord Joffrey replied. “They were all executed, some of them horribly, but still executed. They did not fall in battle.”

“Yes,” Walder agreed, “my knights were betrayed.”

And with the lifeless head of Ser Selmond Blackmane among these heads, this was all the confirmation the Red Lion needed of the failure of his plans.

Right now, Walder wanted to scream, to shout at the mountains in the distance, ask them why his smallfolk had betrayed him. The siege until the Lannister southern attack had been entirely bloodless. The granaries and the water supplies were abundant. The men and the women had been paid with good silver. No one could argue seriously this was a hard life or that he had not been taking care of his lands!

And yet he had been betrayed by them.

Smallfolk, they called them, but after today it was obvious ‘lowborn scum’ or ‘rat gutter’ were far more appropriate for these families who pretended to serve him loyally.

“Your Grace, the Banefort and Lannister forces are waiting for us before the southern wall,” the Master of Deep Den informed him. “I think we should find a better ground to fight this battle. They will have the higher ground, and if the castle has completely fallen, there is no chance to starve them out.”

“Starving them out was never part of the plan,” letting hunger slay the enemy meant spending days doing nothing. The food reserves, be they in salted pork, bread, or fruits, were too low in his army for that. But even if they weren’t, it wouldn’t work now.

King Daeron was alive, and when the dragonrider would be able to stand upon his blue monster, the war would be nearly over. Walder and his army couldn’t waste days sitting idle and playing games. The Reach, the Stormlands, and the Crownlands weren’t tearing themselves apart. The Green Kingdom wasn’t dying, and the Black dragons weren’t trying to claim back the South, may they dance in the Seven Hells forever for that.

“If we fight here, we won’t be able to use our numbers,” Lord Cerion Serrett intervened darkly.

“We haven’t the numbers,” Merlon Sarsfield, bloodthirsty after losing his two sons, replied. “Banefort had eight thousand, the Lannisters had five. We have twelve thousand after your Sarsfield band reinforced us. What we have are the best warriors. Our men have stormed many forts and castles to be here.”

“This is still a bad ground to fight a battle,” Joffrey Lydden said again. “I know proud warriors fight better for their homes, but with this pass playing the role of a gullet, we won’t be able to manoeuvre worth a damn here.”

“Yes, but the Lannister bastards know it,” Garth Marbrand retorted. “And so long we don’t cripple them, they will stay here and force us to wait. Wait until they bring one more army from Lannisport, or until we are forced to withdraw.”

“We will starve faster than them,” the Lord of Silverhill admitted. “But...”

Everyone head the unspoken words. Courageous or not, this was going to be a furious melee, where two waves of men struck wildly at each other. It was going to be fury which would carry the day. Fury and wrath, sword against warhammer, and plenty of pointed weapons drinking the blood and the life of thousands of men.

And yet there was simply no choice. As he had known days ago, if they turned around today, they would be hounded day and night on their journey back to the Southern marches, and the desertion toll would be awful.

Besides, there was a small chance everything could be turned around. If he really won a total victory, the Red Lion’s triumphant would be glorious and impossible to deny. The West could...the doubters and the hesitant Lords would rise for him. The Lannister armies would be no more and the military claims of his banners would never be forgotten.

“We have a battle to win,” Walder announced in his best assured voice. “The circumstances are not the best, but we have brought the flower of the West’s chivalry, thousands of archers, and siege engines which can open us a path to victory. We must win this battle, and we will! FOR THE KINGDOM OF THE WESTERLANDS!”

“FOR THE KINGDOM OF THE WESTERLANDS! FOR THE RED LION!”

**Ser Tyland Lannister**

“They spat upon their oaths, but they had enough courage to fight this battle.”

Tyland smiled at the Lord of the Banefort’s words.

“For all his fondness of assassins, daggers and crossbows, the traitor believes himself a Lord worthy of the name. And what sort of Lord abandons his lands without a fight?”

No, the large army marching towards his troops wasn’t a host of cowards. It was too bad. A single charge would have been enough to scatter them, and they would have been able to make a ferocious pursuit for the rest of the day. The elders always said this was when you could kill the enemy in absurd numbers, when they broke and abandoned their weapons, when they were thinking about nothing else but saving their life.

They could still break the rebel army on the battlefield.

But it wasn’t going to be easy.

Two lines of seven hundred archers were in the vanguard, the very recognisable green arrow of House Sarsfield being prominent among them. These oath-breakers wanted blood, no mistake about that. After that it was the heavy infantry of House Serrett and behind them came the red cloaks and red armours of the great traitor himself.

It was not a small army, lines of seven hundred men or not. The pass was filled with the armoured fist they represented. Little cavalry, of course, for there was no plain to gallop, and he had taken the precaution to dig so many holes it would be death for any horse to charge up the slopes.

But looking at the multitude of red banners, it didn’t seem to be a massive advantage in his favour. If the freeriders had guessed right, it was thirteen against twelve thousand, but from his position, it looked more or less equal strenght.

“This is going to be a second Butcher’s Ball,” the Grim Lord declared. “Damn the Red Lion to the Seven Hells for forcing us to do that!”

“Damn him,” Tyland agreed before drawing his sword, “and let’s make sure he is conversing with the Stranger before this battle is over. You want to do the honours?”

“With pleasure,” the dark-clad Lord grunted. “THE CROWS ARE WAITING FOR THEIR FEAST! GIVE THEM THE TRAITORS’ HEARTS!”

“DEATH TO THE REYNES!”

“HEAR US ROAR!”

“DEATH TO THE LANNISTERS!”

“FOR THE RED LION!”

“FOR CASTAMERE!”

**Author’s note**: The first battle of Castamere has ended. The second...well, it will be next chapter. There are going to be a lot more deaths than during the first, not that it’s a big exploit to accomplish.

This is going to be the greatest land battle of the War of the Lions...and it is going to be fought without dragons, that much I can promise. Now the actors and the crows are ready, the bloodbath can begin...

More links on the Dance is not Over:

P a treon: www. p a treon Antony444

Alternate History: www .alternatehistory forum /threads /asoiaf-the-dance-is-not-over.391415