**Chapter 39**

**Blood of the West**

*On the third moon of the year one hundred and thirty-eight after the Conquest, the self-proclaimed King of the West and his allies had lost the War of Lions.*

*This much wasn’t worth debating about. With King Daeron the First alive, the cause of the Red Lion was doomed. The rebellion gathering rebel Westerner Lords and Essossi pirates had to win decisively before Tessarion’s rider arrived to put an end to this massive betrayal. In other words, they had to take Lannisport and Casterly Rock within six months, while at least managing to contain the northern Noble Houses on their way to besiege and storm Castamere.*

*And in the unlikely case they achieved this series of exploits and great victories, it was likely it still wouldn’t be enough. King Daeron was not his eldest brothers, but the King on the Iron Throne was not the kind of ruler who forgave assassination on his person.*

*In these conditions, that the rebellion didn’t collapse within the first reverses could be tentatively reasoned on two basic facts. The first, obviously, was the sheer scale of the oath-breaking committed. If there was one ‘law of chivalry’ ‘King’ Reyne and his allies had not broken, one oath they had not defiled and trampled in loyal blood, no one had any idea which principle it could possibly be. The banners of the Red Lion were marked for death now, something Regent Johanna Lannister and her commanders would be all too happy to remind them. Like with the Dance several years ago, there would be almost no ransoming or prisoner exchanges. This war was to the death. The blades had been drawn; the ‘Reds’ would conquer the Westerlands or die trying.*

*The second fact was that the survival of King Daeron wasn’t a very thoroughly spread information by the third moon. Casterly Rock had been at last informed of the injuries suffered by the Green King, and Walder Reyne had certainly the failure of his assassins relayed to his ears, but the latter had no intention to disseminate these news, and the former couldn’t demoralise their troops by telling them they had six moons to wait before seeing a dragon arrive to reinforce them.*

*There were other dragons, however, and they weren’t sworn to the Greens. In the Riverlands, a council of war could have turned the tide for House Reyne...assuming of course the Lords present could forget the disgust inspired by ‘King’ Walder’s methods.*

*And as the Black bannersmen debated, the war continued, with the atrocities of yesterday ensuring the bloodshed soon reached Dance-levels acts of brutality...*

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

**Queen Baela Targaryen**

Her arrival into the Council chambers was met by loud applause. This was always pleasing to hear, and for several turns of hourglasses, the real business of governing her realm waited.

She could very well leave her Lords praise her daughter and she, even if Laena was not there – given how powerful the young Targaryen baby could cry when there was too much noise nearby, Baela had left with Addam and her handmaidens, along with the small white-silver baby dragon recently hatched.

“Thank you, my Lords. It is satisfying to see you all happy,” the Black Queen smiled before giving a more serious expression. “Unfortunately, this Council was not only gathered for the celebration of the birth of an Heiress to my Throne. We have another issue to speak of.”

“The War of Lions,” Alyn was the first to speak, making Baela frown.

“The War of what?”

“It’s how the smallfolk of Seagard began to call it when I received the raven message of Lady Sabitha.” Her cousin and Master of Ships told her with his usual roguish smile. “Red Lion against Gold Lion, you know...I think it’s a rather good name.”

Baela huffed, and she wasn’t the only one.

“I would have rather chosen ‘The War of Reyne’s betrayal’,” Lord Eon Grafton grumbled. “This oath-breaking scum has tried his best to topple every tradition and every oath he ever swore, and went very close to success. The map if you would Lady Sabitha?”

The piece of parchment which was presented to Lady Sabitha was a detailed map of the Westerlands, though compared to the ones ordered last year for the Vale and the Riverlands, it remained of low quality and the lack of secondary paths and lesser holdfasts and villages was very noticeable.

“Here is the situation as we speak,” Addam’s mother began. “The rebels of the Red Lion’s banners have convinced Crakehall, Cornfield, Silverhill, Deep Den and Sarsfield to rally to Castamere. Given that they took Hornvale by treachery, it gives them uncontested domination of the whole southern Westerlands.”

Baela had no need for further explanation to see that it cut the loyalist Houses from any hope of reinforcement by land – at least none which wasn’t a dragon. Given how few warships were armed in peace time and the number of pirates the Reynes had brought to Westeros, sea travel was going to take months to be a viable tactic.

“Ashemark was also taken by treachery, and it gives the Red rebels a shield of stone and defences to keep House Banefort and House Westerling among others contained in the north. While those Lannister-loyal forces are blocked, House Sarsfield and many other rebel Houses are besieging the Golden Tooth. This is the part of the war where we have the most information, since it is in full view of our sentinels.”

“And the result is?” Baela asked.

This was the moment Nettles spoke for the first time, aside from her congratulations, she hadn’t uttered a word yet. But then she was also the sole and only member not to be part of the Black Council.

“This is a very lax siege,” the rider of Sheepstealer replied. “The attackers have blocked the pass, fortified a camp on a large hill, brought up a few old onagers and trebuchets, and they are now trying to throw as many rocks as they can until they break the walls of the Golden Tooth.” The black-haired woman shrugged. “So far, they don’t appear to have much success in that.”

“The Leffords haven’t tried to sally out and crush them?” Cregan Stark asked with a puzzled expression.

“The terrain is too uneven for a cavalry charge and the rebels have taken their precautions,” Lady Sabitha answered, “and House Lefford was taken by surprise. Most of their forces are still dispersed, and have to decide what to do without a formal call for arms. Others were slaughtered by the rebels before the war began. Walder Reyne planned this treachery for moons, maybe years.”

“And yet they were unable to take the fortress,” Benjicot grinned. “There is some justice in this world.”

“With or without the Golden Tooth, the rebellion is likely going to be defeated anyway.” Cregan said thoughtfully after passing a hand in his beard. His grey eyes were fixing each detail of the army symbols and the red and gold objects informing who owned what in the Westerlands. “Castamere is a strong fortress, but it is not Casterly Rock. Sooner or later, it will fall, and then more than six thousand fresh men will be able to assault the rebels. Two more months, and the current harvest time will be over for the lands of House Lannister. Let’s be generous. In three to four moons, whatever happens, House Lannister will be able to muster a new army of ten thousand, if they happen to lose those forces they have in the field.”

“The Red rebels have no way to field similar numbers,” Grand Maester Borlor said quietly, no trace of the current schism affecting him emotionally. “Assuming they can pay the troops they armed in the first place, the Iron Fever has hit hard the lands of the southern Westerlands. I am no knight or sellsword, but there isn’t that many men of fighting age in these Lordships.”

“But if they can take Tarbeck Hall, they will be able to ravage Lannisport southern flank at will,” Ser Gyles Royce remarked.

“The situation is a bit unclear south of Tarbeck Hall,” Lady Sabitha admitted, “but the report I received two days ago by messenger pigeon affirmed Tarbeck Hall still stood.”

“The Lannisters are going to win,” Benjicot commented, “though they will need Reach and Crown support to finish the last sieges once the rebel armies will be broken on the field. What do we do, my Queen?”

That was the real question, wasn’t it? Baela turned towards her mother-in-law.

“How sure are you my cousin is still alive, Lady Sabitha?”

“Absolutely confident, your Grace,” the Mistress of Whisperers spoke. “He has not climbed up to sit on the Iron Throne – in his state, it would be idiocy itself to – but he regularly showed himself to several Lords and knights. I’m unsure of the severity of his wounds and how many bones were broken, however.”

“His leg has to be broken,” her young Master of Arms sniffed. “Unless you are blessed by the Gods, your leg can’t beat a horse falling upon it.”

“But he is alive.”

“Alive and unable to ride,” Gyles Royce added the last words slowly. “Your Grace, much as I am not fond of saying this, this is an opportunity to-“

“Ride to King’s Landing and settle this feud once for all?” Baela grimaced. “The little fact that I am only going to ride Moondancer for the first time in moons aside, Daeron may still be able to rise on Tessarion to engage us in battle. And the Blue Queen is perfectly healthy.”

If a serious draconic battle broke out, it would be Sheepstealer against Tessarion. Throwing herself in this battle would likely be as dangerous for her as it was for Daeron. And as the death of Jacaerys or Lucerys among others had proved, dragonriders were very vulnerable when dragons danced to the death.

“We also have to consider what to do if the Green King doesn’t come out to fight us,” Nettles’ face was very unhappy. “Will we unleash dragonfire on King’s Landing?”

A cold shiver spread across the Council room. Every person present had seen at least once what dragonfire did to human flesh. Doing it against an army was already bad, but one could argue rightfully these men had chosen to march against you knowing they opposed the legitimate claim of Queen Rhaenyra – and then hers.

Doing it to a city, a large city which despite its losses, still had to have more than three hundred thousand men, women, and children inside it...

“The Greens are living in Maegor’s Citadel, no?” Alyn asked before paling before Nettles’ glare.

“I don’t want to have my reign marked by...by destroying King’s Landing.” Baela didn’t care much about it being the location where the Conqueror landed and was crowned, but the killing of hundreds of thousands whose only crime was to live next to her Green cousins...it would be an atrocity on part with those of the Kinslayer. “Should we move against the city again, it would be with an army at our back, that way the defenders will have truly no honest reason not to lay down their arms.”

“If we don’t strike at King’s Landing here and now,” Cregan Stark declared in his usual ‘Stark voice’. “We must avoid any move which will be considered an intolerable provocation by the Green loyalists. Taking the Golden Tooth, for example, is out of the question.”

“I was thinking about mentioning the vulnerability of Deep Den,” Benjicot countered the far older and powerful Lord of Winterfell. “Unlike the fortress of the Leffords, it is in rebel hands as we speak.”

“Don’t be ridiculous,” her Hand rejected the proposal immediately. “If the dragons of Her Grace can take Deep Den – and it won’t be easy given the nature of the defences – the Greens will declare war the moment they have mobilised their troops. They can’t allow this castle to fall into our hands.”

“I agree.” Baela opened her mouth to support the Lord Paramount of the North. “If we take Deep Den, we render the second major western-eastern pass irrelevant. Taking the Golden Tooth would be like placing a dagger to the throat of House Lannisters. Conquering Deep Den is placing the dagger and beginning to strike.”

“I would not say no to the gold either way,” Eon Grafton joked before returning to a serious expression. “But I admit taking Deep Den would destroy the utility of the Golden Road, worse than if we pushed the frontier of your Riverlands further south. At least if we did that, the Greens would still be able to build a new road like they began for certain sections. If Deep Den is in our hands, the pass is under our control, and that leaves only the Ocean Road to access the Green markets.”

House Tyrell would likely not be sorry about this state of affairs, Baela knew. The Lannisters and King’s Landing might not share this enthusiasm.

“This doesn’t leave us a lot of locations where to act decisively.”

Indeed, it left almost none. Advancing into the Crownlands would lead to war; the lands north of the Blackwater were the first granary of King’s Landing, there was no way any Green monarch worth his crown would be able to keep it without moving decisively against them. Dragonstone was the fortress guarding Blackwater Bay; the Greens lost it, they lost their Free Cities’ trade. The passes of the Golden Tooth and Deep Den were vital for the West’s protection, as said before. Pushing south in the Riverlands threatened the northern Reach and the Golden Road. The castles of the northern Westerlands were all loyal to House Lannister, if something disastrous was to happen to House Banefort or House Estren, there would be war within the year.

When it came to it, the only theatre where the Greens might not care to respond to any annexations or losses were the islands formerly inhabited by the Ironborn. But she had already taken everything which might be worth something there. She said as much to her advisors.

“It might be time to...give more advantageous trade treaties to the Lord of Great Wyk, your Grace.” Eon Grafton proposed cautiously.

“He is an Ironborn,” Cregan warned.

The Valeman rolled his eyes.

“I intend to trade his iron and the other ores of Great Wyk for things they can’t use as weapons, my Lord Hand. I have not forgotten the ravages of the Red Kraken. No, since all reports confirm they try to farm these back-breaking lands, I thought you would incite them to pursue this path. There are seeds and livestock thriving in such conditions.”

“Write a proposal,” the Black Queen commanded. “We will examine it at the next Council, in ten days’ time. Any other proposal?”

“In fact, yes,” Benjicot charged again – figuratively – into the fray. “I understand why we can move against Deep Den, but there is another fortress in rebel hands we might be able to take and the Greens won’t go to war to recover it. Hornvale.”

Baela had not thought about this fortress. By the looks of it, no one had around the table.

“Lord Cregan?”

“A dragon will face no problems to take it,” the Lord of Winterfell answered. “And it is true it has a good position to easily close the Golden Road and threaten Deep Den should we desire it. The major issue is that there are no major passes for our forces to supply or reinforce this fortress if we have to.”

“There are many goat paths and a small road the merchants used before the Dance.”

“A *very* small road which is more goat path than honest road,” Lady Sabitha said. “I’ve sent a few agents this way, and I can tell you the storms of the last winter and autumn have broken the terrain, and most of the smallfolk which lived of the trade with the Riverlands have fled. We aren’t going to be able to take an army or even a significant column of men by these goat paths.”

“But it would see us striking against rebels and oath-breakers!”

“Yes,” Cregan said sardonically, “but if the Greens decide to take offence, the troops we will send won’t have much protection against the hosts of the West...”

And in the current circumstances, Baela was not ready to sacrifice any of her subjects, especially not in the Riverlands, for such a slim gain.

But as her Master of Coin opened a new map, of the Vale, Baela reminded herself there was a kingdom where there were discontents unhappy with the order of succession in the Eyrie. Unhappy men who had loudly manifested the desire to claim new lands for their lines – and the glory of House Arryn.

“Thinking twice about it, there is perhaps some merit about Lord Benjicot’s proposal...”

**Lysaro Rogare**

When he had told his men they would soon dine in the halls of Casterly Rock, Lysaro had imagined himself being on a throne, severed by a few half-naked slave girls he would have taken for himself.

He hadn’t imagined being thrown something black and disgusting right in his face.

But it was what had just happened.

He couldn’t even strangle the guard who had done that. The ‘cell’ he had been thrown into was more a well than a normal prison. No, this wasn’t even true. At least with a well, you could climb up the walls. Here...here there were no true stones you could use to get out. Only raw, polished stones. Not that it would have done him any good, seeing that there were bars of steel feet above his head.

In his dreams, he imagined being able to reach them and tear them away to achieve his escape.

When he was awake – and he was awake a lot, hunger and thirst kept him from sleeping soundly, he didn’t manage to reach the bars. He had learned to climb up a mast like every man of House Rogare, but the polished stone was impossible to climb, and even if it wasn’t, the vast cavern he was imprisoned into had nothing close to the hole closed by steel and other things he couldn’t see from there.

He only knew this was the only exit of this damned prison. It also was the only source of light.

When they came to take him away, he almost thought it was a dream. Proof of weak he had become, they had to drag him up, as Lysaro was only able to hold on the rope like his life depended upon it.

“This is the Lord of the pirates who tried to attack Lannisport?” A guard laughed, bringing his torch too close, so close it hurt his eyes. “Bastard doesn’t look the part.”

“I am not a pirate, I am-

Lysaro received a feet in the teeth, and another in the gut. It hurt. Compared to the old familiar pain of hunger and thirst, it hurt worse.

“Next up he’s going to tell us he didn’t even come to Lannisport to raid us, just to purchase some goods.” The same guard spat on him. “Slimy pirates. Take him to the outside, he’s awaited.”

The travel was a torture by itself. He often stumbled, be it because between of stone stairs he didn’t see or because of exhaustion, and after a while they simply dragged him, taking ‘great care’ to slam him against different objects as soon as they could.

The air became colder. He began to shiver; what was left of his clothes wasn’t up to protect him from cold weather. But where were they going? They were in the middle of summer, unless they had kept him in his cell for years and he had lost all notions of time?

A hundred torments later, he had his answer as the guards stopped dragging him and they arrived under the sun.

It hurt. After days, maybe moons of obscurity, his eyes went blind, and it took him dozens of heartbeats before his vision returned...somewhat.

By then, his chains were tied to a sort of anvil, and he was made to kneel between a golden-haired woman. The luxurious red robe and the golden diadem were sufficient hints to guess her identity. Despite himself, Lysaro had to admit the rumours of Lady Johanna Lannister being the most beautiful woman of the Westerlands appeared to be justified.

“Lady Johanna, I am-

“Lysaro Rogare, I know.” The Westerosi Lady didn’t even look at him; instead she caressed the head of a green parrot, no, wasn’t it the parrot of Silverbeard? “House Rogare of Lys spread the word across its merchants and allies of your...disinheritance.”

Despair filled his heart. Lysaro had hoped the promise of a ransom would be enough to save his skin the time he escaped. But if the Lannisters knew, this was a forlorn hope.

“They offered gold to any man or woman who would send back your head,” his interlocutor told him, “but I am not in the mood to give them satisfaction. What use do I have for more gold? You tried to sack Lannisport, Essossi, and despite everything we could do to prepare, many good and loyal men are dead because of you.”

“We pledged our swords and our honour to King-“

The slap was violent. And when he touched his cheek, he realised the bitch had used her nails to claw him deeply.

“Walder Reyne is an oath-breaker, a traitor, and a bandit of the worst sort.” The Regent of Casterly Rock said. “If I had known what perfidy waited behind his mask of loyalty, I would have beheaded him myself.”

Lysaro knew she was going to kill him staring in her blue eyes, and as such had no urge to hold his tongue.

“A pity you never will have the chance.”

“It rather seems unlikely,” the blonde-haired beauty agreed. With breasts and a figure like that, she would have made a splendid pillow slave at Lys... “I will have to settle for his death in battle, I fear. Like I settled for the crucifixion of your band of pirates on the road between Lannisport and Casterly Rock.”

“YOUR CRUCIFIED THEM?” He roared, or at least he tried to.

“Ah, I’m glad you are...outraged by the message I’m sending.”

Lysaro tried to rein in his temper. It was hard, though the evil joy the bitch was enjoying at his expense helped. She knew! She knew the Free Cities limited crucifixion as a death sentence for rebellious slaves. To enforce it on citizens of Lys, Myr, and Tyrosh was a monumental insult which would be remembered for generations!

“This will be remembered. Nobody will forget.”

“I certainly hope so.” Johanna Lannister bared her teeth. “It is certainly not every day two thousand pirates were crucified by House Lannister.”

Pirates. The word stung.

“We weren’t pirates. We supported Walder Reyne. You can deny the-“

The second time, she didn’t even slap him. Her nails were placed against his unwounded cheek, and then they clawed him until meeting blood.

It hurt far more than the first slap-clawing.

“But since you were their leader, I decided you deserved something far grander.” The bitch plunged her bloodied hands in a basin of water. “We are at the summit of the Rock, Lysaro Rogare, Pirate Admiral. Do you enjoy the honour? Only members of House Lannister and our protectors are invited there in summer.”

This was why the sky seemed so close and the air was so cold, the Lysene realised. The clouds...they were so close. Please, please, please. He didn’t want to be thrown from this height. It would take forever to hit the ground below...

“At first, I thought I would throw you myself from the Rock,” the bitch admitted, like she had the sorcery to read his thoughts. “But after your men sang like canaries, I realised this was the wrong punishment for you. You came here to steal the gold of House Lannister.”

A large...vat of metal was placed nearby. It had taken two red-cloaked guards to transport it. Using his chains for leverage, Lysaro saw it was a golden liquid which waited inside it.

A terrible sense of impending doom seized him.

“NO! NO!”

“You wanted the gold of the Westerlands, pirate. You will have it. You will drink this gold until your thirst has been quenched. Forever.”

Lysaro tried to fight, to plea, to escape. But there were too many guards...

He screamed.

Lysaro screamed as the gold was coming closer and closer.

**Ser Tyland Lannister**

“Our men are exhausted, Lord.”

“By the Warrior, I certainly hope so,” Tyland retorted. “Otherwise I would be furious they complain so much.”

“Err...yes, Lord.” The Captain in Prester colours nodded after a heartbeat of indecision. “We need more boots and equipment.”

“I don’t have them,” the commander of the main Lannister army told his subordinate. “Anything else?”

The tone of his voice should have indicated he wanted the other man to shut his mouth, since it was obvious even for a village’s idiot that he couldn’t wash his hands and resolve all the problems like the Seven handed miracles.

But the Prester swordsmen didn’t hear his warning, or he didn’t care.

“We must buy better weapons.” The black-haired warrior spoke. “Many of our men remarked the swords and axes we took from the Essossi were better forged than the stocks of Lannisport.”

“How kind of you to inform me,” Tyland said. “I wonder why I haven’t noticed *that*.”

The mockery at last arrived to the Prester’s brain.

“This is no laughing matter, Ser.”

Where had the ‘Lord’ gone, he wondered?

“Do you see me smiling, Captain?” the knight of Casterly Rock replied. “Listen to me, Captain. None of the things you have told me are a surprise for my ears. Unlike you, I didn’t ride at the vanguard of the columns forgetting my duties. I walked with my men, helping wounded and youngsters keep up the pace. I know exactly how tiring the walk from Tarbeck Hall and Castamere was for the men and our camp and our merchants. I know exactly how unprepared our army was for this long march. I know exactly how weak our supply convoys are. I know how bad our weapons and how little equipment we began this war with.”

Of the eight thousand men of his army, maybe one thousand looked like proper warriors, and these were the knights and the sworn swords of the Rock. The rest had to content with the old armours and blades of before the Dance, since everything which had gone with Lord Jason in the Riverlands had been lost. Disappeared the white coursers of the Casterly plains. Forgotten the ten thousand men in splendid red lamellar and chainmail. Most of the Westerlands’ hosts those days looked like they were worse than River levies.

“I know this war came too soon. It is one of the many sins of this traitor of Reyne, not mine.” The army commander bared his teeth and smiled. “And you know what? I don’t care. My Lord has given me the order to chastise these traitors, and that’s exactly what I am going to do.”

“It is sheer folly,” the Prester Captain answered weakly. “We can’t storm Sarsfield! We haven’t half of the ladders or the siege engines to break the gates or the walls.”

Tyland didn’t even look in his direction, rather he turned himself to face the herald he had just sent under a banner of truce to demand the surrender of Sarsfield.

“Do the bastards remember what a banner of truce is?” the blonde-haired spearman of Lannisport barked before spitting on the yellow-green grass. “They didn’t even allow me to say my piece before sending me one arrow and shouting Lord Reyne would be there soon to kill me.”

The younger Lantell grimaced before continuing.

“Given their joy, I don’t think they were lying.”

“Of course they aren’t lying.” The Lannister commander replied idly. “With their failure at Lannisport, their chances of victory dwindle day after day.”

The system of horse-mounted messengers and pigeons wasn’t perfect, but it had allowed the Rock to restore some communications with the isolated castles. And they made an easy tapestry to read. The castles of Ashemark and Castamere kept Banefort and all the northern forces trapped in the north while the Reynes tried to conquer the West.

One couldn’t insist enough on the ‘try’. His forced march south had thrown the Crakehall banners into disarray and allowed Tarbeck Hall – and lady Cyrelle – to call for the loyal banners of the South, protecting the unprotected flank of Lannisport. On the Golden Road, the traitors had been unable to go much further than Hornvale before being forced to tangle with loyalist castles.

Tyland was not the great commander Jason had been – not that it had done the deceased husband of Lady Johanna much good in the end – but even he could see ‘King of the Traitors’ Walder Reyne had to go north and regroup at Sarsfield now that his first attempts to seize the heart of the West had so monumentally failed.

The Golden Tooth hadn’t fallen, Castamere wouldn’t hold forever against the trebuchets of House Banefort, and as long as the Rock and the surrounding fields were secure, House Lannister could fund and fight this war for a couple of years.

“And it is why it is important we don’t waste any time. Give your men a night of rest, Captain. We will attack at next dawn.”

“Err...my Lord? You haven’t said what your orders are for the women and the smallfolk of Sarsfield?”

“I thought it was evident, Captain,” Tyland smiled, extending his palm and receiving one of the famous green arrows of House Sarsfield. “Spare the smallfolk who aren’t in arms, we have need of them. But House Sarsfield dies. I don’t care if there are seventy name days crones or babes in this castle, we will kill their whole line.”

“This is...this is monstrous!”

“More monstrous than the fate these traitors and oath-breakers had in mind for Lannisport and the Golden Tooth?” He asked rhetorically. “We haven’t begun this war.”

The arrow broke in his hands.

“But as the Seven are my witness, I am going to end it. *Hear me Roar*.”

**Ser Kevan Sarsfield**

Kevan had known the Lannisters had lost their might years ago, but these buffoons managed to fall lower than his worse expectations.

“Six thousand men, not eight thousand,” the new Heir of House Sarsfield spoke loudly for everyone in the walls to hear. “And they have mustered all the rabble of Lannisport to reach that number.”

“Ser, I advise prudence.”

“Why? Because you think their leather armour will transform itself in good plate when we won’t look at it?”

“No, Ser. Because they won a great victory at Lannisport with this ‘rabble’.”

Kevan Sarsfield openly laughed.

“They didn’t win against true Westerners. They won against ‘warriors’ as pathetic as they are. I told the King it was a mistake to give the command to this imbecile of Rogare. It was his fault the plan failed.”

The sellswords and the upstart corsairs had asked for all the naval commands available when the time arrived to divide up the tasks. The Essossi had pushed for the commands of Fair Isle and Lannisport – at least by the naval side. And they had utterly failed.

If one had any doubt about it, the presence of a Lannister host – pathetic host, but still one with yellow banners – was all the convincing needed. The Lannisters were supposed to be on the defensive by now, reeling of multiple defeats, besieged in their gloriously uncomfortable Casterly Rock.

“They have failed,” he repeated, “and now it’s time for us to correct their mistakes.”

It wasn’t going to be really difficult, truly. King Walder Reyne was between three and four days away, coming to relieve them. The enemy had at best three or four catapults which looked like they had been built before the Conqueror left his mother’s teats. Their ladders were too short, their shields were of such bad quality he would almost feel sorry for them...if they weren’t Lannisters.

“All the archers are ready?”

“Yes, Ser, they are ready.” The old grey beard by his side told him before becoming more insolent. “They were already ready the last time you asked.”

Kevan abandoned momentarily his watching of the red-clad men advancing towards his castle to reprimand this impertinence.

“Careful now, old man. Now that Ilyn is dead, I am the Heir of House Sarsfield. Things are definitely going to change as our House’s standing rise in the King’s favour.”

Fortunately for their House and himself, Ilyn’s failure had not too many bad consequences. The Golden Tooth had not fallen, but the Leffords were encircled between the hammer of House Sarsfield and the hammer of the Blacks, leaving them no hole to escape.

No, House Sarsfield allegiance to the cause of House Reyne proved vital once more, and he, Kevan Reyne, was the defender of Sarsfield, the defender of the five hundred men who immobilised the Lannisters.

“The enemy is firing, Ser,” another of his father’s Captains said.

“So I see. I’m surprised they have rocks for their catapults, given how they ran to reach our humble castle.”

As the words left his mouth though, he saw his assumption had been in error. The projectile sent their way was not of stone. Unless the Lannisters had learned how to make stone burn.

“Prepare several fire-fighting teams,” he barked as one projectile slammed into the courtyard, killing one man and creating too many fires for close comfort. “Why are you reacting so slowly? Get to it! Archers, what are you waiting to shoot the Lannisport upstarts? An invitation?”

“KING DAERON AND HOUSE LANNISTER! FOR THE ROCK! FOR LANNISPORT!”

Kevan watched as scores of companies threw themselves against his walls. He knew their assault was futile, and yet at that moment, the fury of the men who were so lost they followed a female Regent was terrible.

Arrows found their mark, but the assault didn’t falter. Ladders were brought under the walls. A massive ram, covered by a small square of shields was transported towards the gates.

“THE RAM!” He shouted. “TARGET THE MEN CARRYING THE RAM! IT’S THEIR MOST DANGEROUS WEAPON! THE RAM!”

And then he saw the man next to him, a friend of his brother, fall screaming. He had one arrow in his leg and another in his back.

Kevan froze. It was impossible. The Lannisters had some archers, but they had showed few of them for now, and they couldn’t shoot someone on the ramparts from behind!

The Heir of House Sarsfield looked behind him, and as he did, the echoes of battle began to rage in the courtyard, where at least ten Lannister knights were fighting with his men.

Impossible! It was impossible! They had not taken the walls anywhere! They were-

Kevan saw where they were coming from. The false wall near the dungeon. They had used their own secret tunnel to sneak into the castle.

“WITH ME!” he screamed as he ran towards the stairs. “WITH ME, WE HAVE TO RETAKE THE SECRET TUNNEL!”

Kevan took an arrow into the eye the heartbeat later and all his projects and ambitions died with it.

**Ser Tyland Lannister**

“Sweet Maiden, please forgive us...”

These were the words which crossed the Lannister soldier’s lips before he vomited the contents of his stomach upon the corpses.

It wasn’t the most respectful thing to do with the bodies of your enemies, but Tyland didn’t blame him. Seven hells, he was already fighting to not do the same thing.

The odours...the smell...the sight of the butchery...

It was too much, too soon. As the fury of battle abated in his heart, the commander of the Lannister army suddenly felt weak like a kitten and horrified by the scale of the massacre.

These were fellow Westerners he had killed, and in the chaos of the battle, many defenceless smallfolk had been slain along with the Sarsfield traitors.

It was...disgusting. There were corpses everywhere, some of them...

“Tell them men to stop doing that,” Tyland told his second as he saw several Lannister spearmen engage in the mutilation of Sarsfield hands and heads. “I’m all for killing traitors, but most of them don’t deserve that. Open their throats and be done with it.”

“By your orders, Lord.” He received for answer, and after a brief series of shouts, the men finally stopped brutalising the living and the dead, and took into account what they were doing. “A brilliant victory to add to your name.”

“Yes.” The worst part was that it was the truth. But as his boots had taken a dirty black colour after plunging in the blood and the entrails of traitors, the Lannister knight had difficulties thinking how good it was to feel victorious. Maybe if it wasn’t former allies he slaughtered...but what was done was done. “How many did we lose?”

“Over two hundred men, with two more scores seriously wounded,” the answer was anything but comforting. “It would have been far, far worse if you hadn’t known this secret passage was there, my Lord.”

“Oh, I didn’t. It was our ancestors who discovered this little secret. When one Lannister daughter married a previous Lord Sarsfield, in fact.” It had not been that long ago from what Lady Johanna had told him; House Lannister had already been forced to kneel before Aegon the Conqueror by then. “I was informed of it as we camped near the Rock returning from Tarbeck Hall.”

“A good thing the Rock chose to reveal it, then, my Lord,” the other warrior said gravely, “if we had not known that, we could have easily lost a thousand men trying to storm the castle.”

“A thousand and five hundred men, I think,” Tyland whispered, trying not to look at the faces where the noses had been crushed or cut sadistically. “They weren’t short on arrows, these traitors.”

It was more proof Walder Reyne had prepared his rebellion for a long, long time, and sown the seeds of treason for years while the West tried to rebuild from the Dance and all the tragedies which had succeeded it.

“But the most important victory is that we captured the castle relatively intact and in a single day,” the word relatively being very bitter and ironic; the castle stood and the first fires his own catapults had created to keep the attention of the defenders had been extinguished. And he really didn’t want to think what certain of his men had done – or were still doing – with the women of the castle. “We won a castle and killed something like three hundred traitors, the young and the elderly of House Sarsfield, for the loss of two hundred of ours. The losses are in our favour.”

Even not counting the capture of the castle, they would have been. It was cruel to think in these terms, but given how populated the heart of the West was and the number of Lords still loyal to House Lannister, Tyland could likely lose two men for one dead traitor, and still consider it a good bargain, unless the chests of Castamere had hired thousands more sellswords no one had seen.

“Will it be enough, Lord?”

“Will it be enough to confront the main rebel army on an open field, you mean?” He asked for confirmation. “I don’t know,” Tyland confessed. “It all depends on how many days and nights we can rest before the traitors arrive. Two days or less, we will have to leave a garrison at Sarsfield and retreat west. The threat of our forces falling upon his rear and living off the Sarsfield granaries should force the chief traitor to divide his forces, or to make more mistakes.”

And maybe, just maybe, they would be able to end this damn war.

Because as the funeral songs arrived to his ears, the Lannister knight saw hundreds of crows beginning their descent onto the battlefield.

The loyalists had won, but today, the greatest victors were the carrion birds.

**King Walder Reyne**

Ambition and desire to overthrow the Lannisters were making for enthusiastic supporters, but obviously did not give a measure of intelligence and skill to those knights lacking these qualities.

Walder had allowed some of his new bannersmen to get away with it because he needed their swords for his plans.

Evidently, it had been a grave mistake.

“The promises made by House Sarsfield were...a bit optimistic, my King.” Lord Lydden had the good sense to not smile as he voiced his thoughts. It was good, because there was nothing really amusing about it.

“You can say it,” the Red Lion managed to say with a calm which achieved the feat of surprising his own head. “Lord Sarsfield and his two sons promised many things, none of which were fulfilled.”

The Golden Tooth? It had not fallen to the knights of Lord Merlon.

The castle of Sarsfield? Since the lion banners of House Lannister flew atop its towers, it had clearly not been a bastion of defiance against Casterly Rock for long.

The granaries who were prepared in advance to feed his army? Half of them had been found emptied or burned, and he had no doubt that the longer he continued west, the longer the ‘disappearances’ of grain, fruits, and livestock would increase.

“They can’t have lost more than one or two days storming the walls, your Grace.” The Master of Deep Den said with a large grimace. “How they did it while keeping the gates and the walls moderately intact, I don’t know-“

“I’m ready to bet they used the secret tunnel under the dungeon.” Walder declared darkly.

His bannersman scratched his head, before giving a bewildered look.

“If you know about it, my King, and the Lannisters knew about it...”

“Then it was not a very good secret,” the Lord of Castamere finished the sentence. “On the other hand, I thought that with a siege possible, whoever was left in charge of the castle would have the intelligence to close the tunnel. I think there were steel bars and a lot of other traps waiting to be emplaced there in the Sarsfield armoury.”

“Well,” Lord Lydden passed a hand in his beard, “whoever was in command evidently failed to prepare correctly. After the failure of the eldest son at the Golden Tooth, I’m ready to bet a few gold coins this was the second son...Kevan was it?...yes that it was Kevan Sarsfield’s brilliant defence who led to this disaster.”

“There is a good chance you are right.” Walder sighed before trying to regain a royal attitude. “Stupidity or incompetence lost us Sarsfield. Whether it is one or the other can be debated later, honestly. What is important is that we lost Sarsfield...and that it is a catastrophe for our army. We must have this castle back in our hands...whatever the cost.”

As long as the Lannisters held Sarsfield, it was like a dagger pointed at the throat of his forces, and the celerity the Lannister host had ran from Tarbeck Hall to beat him there proved beyond doubt that many souls at Casterly Rock were fully aware of how bad this defeat could cost him.

The banners of the yellow lion had fled west upon his arrival, but not before leaving two thousand men as garrison. If he ignored them and pursued to Lannisport, it would be a question of days before his rear was in flames, and the few granaries having escaped the attention of his enemies burned joyously. Assuming this garrison didn’t choose to go north and assault Ashemark from its most vulnerable side.

“This is going to cost us, my King. Even with the new siege engines we have brought to...breach the enemy walls. The correct course for a castle siege is to properly cut it from outside, create a fortified camp...”

“All things we have not the time to do.” The granaries of Sarsfield had been full; his army would starve far faster than the besieged, especially as with the number of heads on spikes presented to him as they approached. Say something about the Lannisters, but they weren’t shy on massacring their enemies if they decided it was time for a good day of butchery. Walder had no doubt Lord Merlon was a widower and without heirs of his blood now. “We must ensure Sarsfield is ours and that Tyland Lannister’s host faces no choice but to retreat towards Casterly Rock or face this army.”

In his plans, the latter should felt the Lannister commander with dread. The army hastily mustered by the Rock was barely eight thousand men, some of them very ill-equipped, when his was ten thousand-strong.

But that had been before Sarsfield. Before these imbeciles lost an important castle without bleeding the Lannisters in return. Now it was his army which had to storm the castle...and the Lannisters were free to bleed his irreplaceable knights and men-at-arms.

“I understand.” Lord Lydden didn’t say more; like him, the highborn understood that failing to retake Sarsfield was the beginning of the end for this rebellion. Every day they gave Lannisport and Casterly Rock the time to muster new companies while they were unable to march on other enemy castles was a victorious day for House Lannister. “We will need several days before mounting a proper assault, though. We can launch an attack faster, but it will certainly not be successful.”

“A failure isn’t acceptable,” Walder Reyne warned him, “but we can’t wait here for the rest of the moon. The Lannister host isn’t that far from us, and we have other strongholds to reinforce and support.”

More than armies and granaries, it was time itself which was playing against them now.

And with the fall of Sarsfield, time was winning against the banners of the Red Lion.

**Lord Carlos Crakehall**

“I’m telling you, Ser Swyft, that if you give me two hundred of your men-“

“You will no doubt piss them away against the walls of Tarbeck Hall, like you did with the Myrish and your own men.”

The Lord of House Crakehall gritted his teeth and struggled to not punch this arrogant son of a whore.

“I did not ‘piss them away’,” the loyal sword of King Walder Reyne grumbled. “I was forced to try a new strategy once the Lannister whore seized Gareth Tarbeck by the balls and arrested our men inside the castle.”

“This strategy was wrong,” the knight of Cornfield told him with an incredible arrogance for someone who had not yet drawn his sword in anger. “You should have parleyed with the garrison. There were many Captains and knights sympathetic to our cause who would have listened to you. By attacking first, you made them close rank around Lady Tarbeck. If you had given them time to think, let them realise it was her fault Lord Tarbeck was indisposed...”

“Easy to say, for someone who wasn’t there.” Carlos didn’t bother keeping a tone of civility anymore. “The plan demanded to strike hard, strike fast, and take Tarbeck Hall at any cost before rushing to Lannisport. I obeyed my King. Can you say the same, Swyft?””

Unlike the other insinuations, this one managed to redden the face of the knight. For good reason, it had to be said.

Carlos had not taken Tarbeck Hall – the Lannister cavalry which had arrived had been too powerful to risk a proper battle while the defenders of Tarbeck Hall could sally at any moment – but at least he had fought and bled for King Walder Reyne. House Swyft? At first he had thought they had rallied the muster of Deep Den and Silverhill on the Golden Road, but it seemed only a small portion of their infantry had arrived, barely a thousand men and almost no knights in the lot.

It was only now, more than one month after the banners were raised in defiance, that Ser Burton was arriving at Crakehall with one thousand more men.

“I will do my duty,” the knight replied crisply.

“And this duty is to renew the offensive once more,” Carlos pressed on. “The Lannisport levies rushed north to confront our King, meaning the garrison of Tarbeck Hall has been barely reinforced given how many men departed with Tyland Lannister. This time, I will besiege properly the Tarbecks while your men launch raids to threaten the fields of Lannisport.”

It was going to be difficult work, maybe one moon or proper digging and building ballista and trebuchets, but Carlos had learned from his mistakes from the first siege, and besides the Essossi unable to follow orders had tried to desert and were slaughtered for their troubles. This time he would sack Tarbeck Hall, and this whore of Cyrelle Lannister would learn the price of opposing the Red Lion.

“So you say,” there were corpses which had to be more motivated than Ser Burton Swyft. “I have a question about your ‘infallible plan’. In this offensive of yours, what do you intend to do about the Reacher horse which will unavoidably come to besiege your castle?”

“The Reacher horse? Ha!” Carlos Crakehall snorted. “There are hundreds of leagues between my castle and any significant holdfast, and the first bannersman of the Tyrells is Lord Oakheart. You know his nickname, I suppose?”

“I admit I do not,” the knight of Cornfield frowned.

“He was called the ‘Sleeping Oak’ during the Dance,” the Western Lord explained to the man who by all rights, should be behaving like a perfect subordinate, “it took three years for him to finally realise there was a war going on, and the first score of men of his cause arrived to swear their swords *after* Bosworth Bridge! So you see, we are far more likely to get Tyrell troops on the horizon in two moons than Oakheart knights galloping towards us!”

Burton coughed.

“I thank you for the explanation, Lord Crakehall. But in that case, I would like to know the reason why there is such a large dust cloud south? Two leagues east of the Bronze Hills, I believe.”

Carlos Crakehall turned and the words ‘don’t be stupid’ were already in his mouth.

Unfortunately, Cornfield was right. There was a large amount of dust, one which always formed when a significant number of horse and men marched together on and near the Ocean Road when it hadn’t rained for fortnights.

It couldn’t be an army of ten or twenty thousand. There hadn’t been enough time, and the cloud of dust wasn’t that large.

But as the wind from the ocean dispersed it with a gust, the sight of banners and metal was unmistakeable for a few heartbeats.

Whatever the reason, the Lord of House Oakheart had not been found asleep for this war.

“I am going to go prepare the defences.” He wouldn’t grit his teeth. He wouldn’t strangle Ser Burton Cornfield. “I trust your men will take position in the towers and on the walls?”

“Of course,” the coward smiled. “we will keep the bannersmen of House Tyrell out of our King’s lands.”

**Lady Johanna Lannister**

“It is always good to know the Black Queen values our gold,” Johanna said after lowering the small roll of parchment on the map table.

Cedric chuckled after hearing her poor attempt at humour.

“I have a feeling that it’s the only thing smallfolk and highborn on the other side of the frontier will never refuse if we give it away for nothing.”

Johanna didn’t know if she should consider it depressing or funny that her cousin was most likely right.

“Assuredly. Now I suppose the real question is: do we accept these extortionate prices or not?”

Whoever had decided upon the price for the Riverlands’ grains and other goods to be sold to House Lefford and the Westerlands was either a usurer or had missed a lifetime career at being one.

“The more important question, I think,” Jaime declared quietly, “is can we afford not to? The farmers continue to work in the lands of House Kenning and Prester, if in fewer numbers than they used to. We also have a majority of our fields toiled and harvested. But given how many granaries Tyland reported burning to prevent their seizure by Reyne troops, the Banefort and the other infertile domains of the north are going to starve before the end of the year if we aren’t able to end this war quickly and decisively.”

“And we aren’t going to.” Cedric admitted. “Winning, yes, but not quickly. Not as long as the Reyne host hasn’t lost a decisive battle and been routed.”

The Regent of the West narrowed her eyes but said nothing. It was the naked truth, and it was the fault of no one around this map table. Mother and Crone, it wasn’t even the fault of Tyland.

The sad reality was that to risk a battle against the combined heavy cavalry of Reyne, Lydden, Serrett supported by hundreds of plate-armoured sellswords, one needed a host of equal if not superior size to risk a frontal battle. Since the Reyne host was ten thousand strong and around four thousand horses – how they had managed to keep so many when the forces of the West had been destroyed a decade ago was one of those interesting questions indeed – House Lannister needed troops of this quality and quantity to oppose them.

At the moment, House Lannister didn’t have them. The quality was nowhere in sight, and the quantity was blocked at the siege of Castamere.

“We will have to consider how to feed our garrisons and the first settlers on the isles too,” Jaime added, though it was obvious he didn’t enjoy reminding them the mountain of problems assailing her regency. “Thank the Father Above, the first harvests of the last year were promising and those of this year should be better, but they were never intended to suffice to themselves so soon.”

“Formidable,” the Lady of House Lannister, born in House Westerling but a Lannister in everything which mattered now, commented to her councillors. “And I suppose that here there’s no alternative?”

Jaime gave her a disappointed expression.

“I suppose we can purchase a lot of food we need from the Reach,” the golden-haired advisor answered. “But since the roads are all cut for now, we already sent the messages begging for troops and all their equipment to be sent to Lannisport. And their fleet was mostly disarmed in the first place. We are going to see carracks and other merchantmen going this way, I do not doubt it. But it will already be good if the shipments are enough to feed the companies landing at Lannisport...”

Jaime paused for a moment before grimacing.

“And obviously, they won’t be able to supply the Golden Tooth.”

Not unless their ships grew wings and learned how to fly, indeed.

“How bad is it? How bad is it really, I want none of the bluster ‘we will defend this fortress even if we have to eat our boots.’”

“Well, I have to say House Lefford will do it nonetheless,” Cedric said darkly. “Given what ‘mercy’ and ‘justice’ Ser Rolland can expect from House Sarsfield after sending Ilyn to his father piece by piece, House Lefford will endure the siege until their strength fail. But in all honesty, while they have some grain and the larders have a lot of barrels filled, it’s not really good. They have a lot of men under arms there, plus a lot of wounded and smallfolk to care about. And at the risk of saying the obvious, while all may not be warriors, they’re eating like a small army. More than one moon of siege, and Rolland will have to make difficult choices.”

Johanna nodded grimly. She had not endured a siege in her life, but she had read enough books of men – or women – having lived through one to be aware of how bad it could possibly be.

“Then we will pay the Blacks, at least for the Golden Tooth supplies to begin with.” Johanna managed a smile. “Spread the word of this agreement, Jaime. We are going to pay them, if House Lefford doesn’t see the supplies coming, our people will know who to blame.”

“I will do it,” her advisor agreed. “Though I’m more interested in the effect it will have when our most illustrious traitor will learn of it. For the moment, the Blacks have not made any move to support or to oppose him.”

“And I pray they won’t,” Johanna replied, “aside from extorting us gold in outrageous bargains, of course.”

Cedric coughed.

“Does the message of the Black Queen...isn’t inciting us to...err...consider carefully where our loyalties are?”

“It does,” Jaime answered in her stead, “but it would have been more surprising if Stone Hedge didn’t even feign sympathy and told us how better the life of everyone is in their realm. Them not doing it would have been like expecting a Dornish to not poison your meal if you fail to use a food-taster.”

“Abominable.” Cedric sighed. “What sort of world are we living into?”

“One where our usage of diplomacy is a bit twisted and violent?”

**Captain-General Makaerys Belicho**

It was not the first time he had the pleasure to contemplate Highgarden, but it was the first time it was in summer.

Truth to tell, even after having travelled across thousands of leagues since he was a boy, Makaerys was impressed. The castle of House Tyrell looked like one of these fabulous constructions you ever thought to see in fairy tales. Wherever he watched, there were flowers. Tens of thousands of flowers were growing, shining, and welcoming the visitors of their martial column to the heart of the Reach. The flowers weren’t alone, of course. Superb white halls like in the old songs towered over labyrinths of greenness. Decorations which made Stormlander holdfasts look the lairs of barbarians were releasing a festive mood, and every hamlet and village on their way seemed to be celebrating something. The height of the corn and the cereals cultivated were proof the harvests were going to be prodigious this year. The water of the Mander a blue the like one would almost accuse painters to have thrown their art into the river in order to make it more beautiful. And the people, gods, the people. It was like more men, women, and children than the entire population of King’s Landing were here to dance, sell their harvests, or buy something in the city’s markets.

Blue sky, golden sun, greenness and flowers as far as eye could see; it was difficult to believe the realm was at war. By the fangs of Balerion, if he didn’t know better, he wouldn’t believe the Reach had ever been at war!

The Captain-General – King Daeron had allowed him to keep his title after entering permanently his service – kept his thoughts to himself, however. The ‘neutrality’ of House Tyrell in the last war had obvious effects on their prosperity, but it wasn’t something foreigners like him and his soldiers would remark easily.

“I see them on the western bank, Captain-General. At least five thousand men, maybe a bit more.”

Makaerys whistled in appreciation. He had thought the messages informing him the Reach could field two hosts of five thousand men – one to send against Crakehall, one against Silverhill – to be a tad optimistic. Apparently, it wasn’t, at least where Highgarden was concerned.

“Good.”

“Yes, very good! These bastards of Reynes are going to suffer!”

“Yes, yes,” the Volantene-born officer smiled. “But before we charge and remove a few treacherous heads from rebellious shoulders, we have a Regent to meet.”

Predictably, most of his men groaned.

“Yes, yes. And you have only to stay quiet and silent. Be glad you don’t have to play the Game of Thrones.”

**Author’s note**: Walder Reyne has always known the Reach would intervene. But he didn’t really plan for having troops already moving against Crakehall and Silverhill within two moons. In part, this due to the fact Daeron has survived; there is no regency for his eldest son, nor there are raids of Black riders to stop on the frontier.

But still, the Red Lion has underestimated how much the Reach – and Highgarden in particular – has recovered from the Dance compared to the Westerlands. It is a miscalculation which is going to have grave consequences for his rebellion...

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