**Chapter 43**

**A Rebellion’s Last Fire**

*A particularly fierce supporter of the Red Lion’s claims could still have entertained delusions before the Second Butcher’s Ball as to whether or not his King still had a tiny chance of victory.*

*But after the terribly bloody and useless victory won by the banners of House Reyne, it was evident that Lord Walder and his allies had been devoured by the flames of war and emerged burnt and critically wounded from the experience.*

*All in all, as the sixth moon of the year one hundred and thirty-eight was about to begin, the Red Lords could not field more than ten thousand men, and this was a number which included the deserters, the besieged fortresses which couldn’t be relieved, and the great number of sworn swords and many hastily-gathered levies who were quite sick of the bloodbath.*

*House Lannister alone had paid for twice that amount of warriors to rally to their banners, and there were more than twenty thousand bannersmen sent by House Tyrell, the Crown vassals of King Daeron, and several Stormlander companies attacking the Red-held fortresses of Crakehall, Silverhill, and Deep Den.*

*Where coins were concerned, the power disparity was even worse than that for Walder Reyne. With Castamere captured and the Golden Tooth obviously in no risk of falling, the gold reserves of the self-proclaimed Red Lion’s Kingdom had taken a series of ugly blows, and while the gold resources remained considerable from the point of view of anyone who wasn’t a Lannister, they couldn’t convince tens of thousands of men who didn’t exist from joining up a doomed rebellion.*

*The trade difficulties didn’t end there. With the ships of the Red Navy sunk, captured, or in their way back to the Free Cities’ corsair lairs, all the silver and the gold of the world might as well be in a vault in Yi-Ti for all the good it was going to House Reyne.*

*A disaster never happening alone, as the Red banners decreased in numbers, the families which had decided to honour their vows to House Lannister came out of the woods, followed by many lesser highborn knights who had preferred to stay on the sidelines until now. Victory was in the winds for the Gold Lion, and with the imminent triumph came opportunities. The rewards House Banefort would receive from Lord Grimm’s heroic acts at the Second Butcher’s Ball would not be forgotten anytime soon. Moreover, Casterly Rock may have attainted Lord Walder Reyne of all his titles, privileges, and dignities, but Lady Johanna Lannister had proclaimed a king’s ransom would be given to the loyal soul who would present his head to House Lannister.*

*Yet the War of Lions was not over.*

*The Red Lion was still alive, and if many men deserted in the hope their Lannister pursuers would forget their crimes eventually, there were many souls who had sworn their spears and axes to Lord Walder Reyne, and a lot of them had made sure by their cruel deeds there would be no pardon and no mercy when they were dragged in chains in front of their former liege.*

*The war wasn’t over, and many highborn and smallfolk were going to learn it in sorrow and grief...*

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

**Lord Carlos Crakehall**

“Here you are Ser...what in the name of the Seven Hells are you doing? The enemy is arriving from the north!”

“I know, my Lord,” Ser Burton Swyft replied after giving him a small nod. “That’s why my men and I will use the Granite Road to return to Cornfield.”

For several heartbeats, Carlos just couldn’t believe what he heard. But at no point after speaking the man in front of him began to laugh and assured him his words had been playful and not said seriously.

“You’re abandoning us,” the Lord of Crakehall growled threateningly.

“We’re saving what we can before this castle falls.”

“We aren’t even under siege, and you’re abandoning us!”

“Father gives me strength,” Burton muttered between his teeth before speaking louder. “The only reason it wasn’t a real siege so far is because of Garth’s Folly. As long as we could keep the Oakheart army on the plains below us, victory was still possible. But now that there are Lannister reinforcements coming from the north, it’s all over. We can’t hold Garth’s Folly. We can’t prevent them from storming Crakehall’s walls and opening the Ocean Road again. And I’m not going to try.”

“This is true cowardice!”

Burton looked at him with a very disappointed expression.

“The Red Lion lost. It’s better-“

“The Red Lion won! He is undefeated!”

“And one more victory like this one, we will all end up in the Seven Hells.” Burton finished. “I am returning to Cornfield with my men.”

“Where you will promptly send messages to the bitch of Casterly Rock, saying you are ready to kiss her shoes as long as she doesn’t remove your family’s Lordship?”

“Well...yes...you are cleverer than my cousin thought.”

“That was sarcasm, shit-eater!”

“Oh.” Burton grinned. “My apologies then, my Lord. If I had more time, I would ask you how do you intent to stop the coming armies from extinguishing your House and your line, but I alas don’t have the time for this. Goodbye, Lord Carlos Crakehall.”

The column of horses and men departed eastwards, exactly as Ser Burton had said. And Carlos was forced to let them go. How would he have stopped them without attacking them? They were a thousand of them, and he had not four thousand spears, swords, halberds and axes to defend Crakehall.

“Form ranks! Form ranks!” He shouted as he rode to rally his men. To his dismay, he saw many terrified faces and doubting expressions. “The so-called ‘army of the North’ is just a bare-footed line of starved smallfolk who have not fought a true battle in their entire lives!”

Carlos swore many things, many of them he believed into. He encouraged his soldiers, flattered them.

But as the Oakheart forces climbed Garth’s folly and the northern forces chased his men from the incomplete defensive positions, his archers gave ground far too fast without killing anyone of note.

“Stand true! STAND TRUE! We are of House Crakehall! We were victorious long before these Lannister bastards stole the Rock from its legitimate rulers!”

The arms clashed, the enemy lines pressed upon, and there were so many thousands he couldn’t see their rear-lines.

A huge grey animal advanced, decorated they were going at some sort of tourney, and his troops panicked.

“COME BACK! It’s just an elephant, cowards! It is-“

The elephant trumpeted in anger, and Carlos’ horse went from docile to completely terrified, and before the Lord of Crakehall knew it, he was on the ground, his head ringing like he had been struck by the Warrior Himself.

“This...” the loyal servant of the Red Lion tasted his blood in his mouth, and before he could say anything, the pain flared up everywhere in his body. “I am...Lord of Crakehall, the Crakehall of Crakehall, it can’t end like that...”

He tried to seize his sword, to stand up, and to fight. But somehow he wasn’t finding the strength inside his body.

“I can’t...curse you, Ser Burton, it is all your fault! Curse all the Cornfield, treacherous motherless bastards!”

The brilliant sun of Western summer disappeared and something huge appeared above him. Something grey. Something huge. Something...no!

“CURSE YOU!”

The elephant trampled Lord Carlos Crakehall, and by this act, ended permanently his participation in the War of Lions.

**Lady Johanna Lannister**

“If Lord Carlos wanted to die a failure, then he truly achieved his goal.”

“In all fairness to him,” Ser Cedric pointed out, “I doubt even he planned for all the horses he had left to suddenly panic at the sight of Belicho’s elephants.”

Johanna clapped her hands.

“The Essossi beasts didn’t appear like the Reach and the rest of our allies conjured them by some sort of mysterious sorcery, Cedric. It seems far more likely to me that the attainted Lord of Crakehall utterly failed preparing his animals to the elephant’s smell and trumpeting, something that could have been done if he had aggressively scouted the movements of the armies on the Ocean Road.”

“Personally, I’m very happy he didn’t.” Jaime grinned. “I wish I could have been there, seeing the proud Lord of Crakehall be thrown to the ground by horse, before being trampled by an elephant. An elephant, which, I will remind you, proceeded to shit upon his warm corpse.”

Laughter resonated in the halls of Casterly Rock. Johanna placed her hand above her mouth. A Lady of the Rock had to maintain some dignity, after all.

“What are the immediate consequences of this victory?”

“You mean, apart from having a new song called the Mighty Elephant for the winter nights?”

Unavoidably, dozens of men and women chose this remark to giggle or chuckle like they were the animals of a farmyard.

“Apart from that, yes,” she said trying to sound severe.

“The Ocean Road is wide open to us, and the Captain-General and Lord Oakheart should be on their way to Cornfield by now. Our forces are garrisoning the castle of Crakehall...what’s left of it anyway. With the death of Carlos Crakehall, the confusion was total and...”

“And Crakehall was sacked, my Lady.” Cedric said softly. “Lord Randyll tried his best to control the troops, but reading between the lines of his message, most of the atrocities were done by our Lannisport recruits.”

“Atrocities such as?”

“There were five traitors who could boast about having Crakehall blood running in their veins. Now there is only one...and the surviving bastard is with the chief traitor’s army. We don’t know if he survived the Butcher’s Ball at Castamere.”

“It doesn’t matter,” Johanna shook her head. “House Crakehall has betrayed every oath they swore to House Lannister, and this treachery deserved a harsh punishment. Since ‘Lord Crakehall’,” she did her best not to snarl at the title, “did us a favour and destroyed his line instead of trying to save his skin, House Crakehall is therefore declared extinct. We will give the Lordship to a new House, one which will have proved its loyalty to House Lannister.”

“A pity Lord Grimm didn’t have any surviving children,” Cedric mused, “we could have given the Lordship and met only acclamations from our smallfolk and our bannersmen.”

“True.” The moment the news of the Battle of the Second Butcher’s Ball had arrived, Johanna had paid a small army of Lannisport bards and other persons to sing the praise of Lord Grimm ‘the Grim’ Banefort. It had been rather successful; the Lannister armies and smallfolk were in dire need of a great hero to rally behind, and though Grimm had rarely been very charismatic at court, his fame on the battlefield would survive him by decades if she had something to say about it. “Unfortunately, he left only a nephew behind him.”

The line of House Banefort had to continue, whatever the outcome of this war. And if the Seven were good, it would. In addition to a tax exemption for the next couple of years, the young Lord Banefort would get many of the best Western teachers in the art of ruling and war, and Casterly Rock would pay the blood price for Grimm’s death, officially as a reward for ending so many betrayers and wounding the not-so-mighty Red Lion himself.

“A pity, yes. I suppose the search for a new Lord will have to be more...formal. I suppose King’s Landing will eventually endorse anyone we propose as long as the replacement-Lord stayed loyal during this deplorable insurrection, but it’s better to prepare the ground beforehand.”

“It’s fairly reasonable, I suppose. And your suggestions as to the war itself?”

“My Lady, now that the Reach armies have linked up with our forces, this rebellion is doomed. The traitors have lost their only access to the sea, not that they used it a lot with most of their ships sunk to the bottom of the Sunset Sea. Once Cornfield is under siege and Tyland demolishes what is left at Sarsfield and the towers nearby, we will besiege most of the strongholds which are supporting the chief traitor’s claims. Once that is done, they will starve and die, or they will beg for your mercy and they will die. As for the remnants of the Red Army, they are a spent force. Assuming the wounds he received from Grimm haven’t killed him, the Red Betrayer can only decide one thing: where to fight his last battle.”

“Let’s be not too confident.” One of her lesser advisors grimaced. “Deep Den is besieged yes, but only from the east. As long as it isn’t assaulted from the west too, the siege is useless.”

“Yes, yes,” Jaime nodded. “But even if Tyland moves slowly, he will be able to reach the Golden Road in less than one moon. And with our armies coming from every side...” the Lannister knight smiled in a very satisfied manner, “we will track him, and we will kill him very slowly for what he’s done.”

“Make also clear to our knights that the so-called Lord Walder Reyne isn’t to find refuge anywhere, be it a fortress of our disloyal bannersmen, or another Kingdom. I will be extremely unhappy with everyone who will give this oath-breaker anything delaying his meeting with *justice*.”

**Ser Tyland Lannister**

Before this ugly war, Sarsfield had not been the biggest castle in all the Westerlands, but it had been a stone structure which had earned the name ‘fortress’ the hard way.

Today it was a ruin.

The first siege had been destructive enough, but had left the walls and the gates remarkably intact. The second siege – where his men had perished giving him the time he needed to take Castamere and prepare for the Second Butcher’s Ball – had been far more bloody and destructive. The gates had been broken, trebuchets and siege engines had ravaged everything they could strike at, and incendiary arrows had been used. And of course there had been no truce, no parley, which meant Sarsfield had been sacked and most of the troops and the servants trapped inside had been killed in various horrible ways.

At least the Lannister knight hoped his soldiers had died quickly. He had seen the corpses of many prisoners once the Reynes fled their camp south of Castamere. Once you saw *that*, you realised there were things far worse than dying.

Tyland wanted to believe that the butchery was going to cease, and in a way, it was. But as the traitors fled southwards, his pursuit was leading him to devastated lands where the consequences of oath-breaking and odious betrayal were clearly visible to all.

And it was making him angry. After the Iron Fever and this never-damned-enough Dance, why did these bastards thought it was a good idea to return to this age of calamities and war?

“You stand accused of breaking your vows to your legitimate liege, the Lord of Casterly Rock,” the veteran commander began, only for one of the two hundred men who had been captured near or inside the ruins of Sarsfield to spit on the ground. “You disagree, I take it?”

“Some Lord he is, sucking his mother’s tits,” the Marbrand man hotly retorted, or at least he had a Marbrand armour. “We want a true Lord to rule the West, not the false lioness!”

Tyland stared in the eyes of this wastrel without saying one more word. The traitor was the first to turn his eyes away.

“As I was saying, you stand accused of breaking your vows. You also have murdered the tax collectors sent in the name of His Grace King Daeron the First-“

“Some King he is,” one of the oath-breaker knights laughed. “The Crippled King, we at least achieved that-“

“Ser,” Tyland said in a bored tone to one of his men, “please seize this man and remove his legs. Then move him where you see the greatest number of crows.”

The enemy butcher cursed him violently, before beginning to cry once he realised Tyland wasn’t bluffing. The prisoners at last stayed silent when the limbs of the man who had insulted their King were not attached to the rest of his body.

“As I was saying, the list of your crimes is long and awful. Tax collectors, septons, market guards, merchants, innocent children...the list of persons you have murdered in the name of the Red Usurper is so long I rather doubt we will be able to count how many died by your blades. And to these crimes we must add the stealing of thousand of golden dragons, the destruction of many towers, farms, septs, and the breaking of the peace. You behave like bandits of the worst sort, all the while you proclaimed you were an army.”

Tyland let a short turn of hourglass pass before delivering his judgement.

“For these crimes, the sentence is death.” The Lannister knight informed them in an iron sentence. “But there’s a tradition more ancient than the disgusting habit of House Reyne to foment treachery and oath-breaking, and this tradition applies now. You are traitors, rapists, arsonists, and worse. But there’s still an organisation which can forgive these sins and crimes. I speak of course of the Night’s Watch. Agree to take the Black, and you will be delivered to the recruiters of the Wall which will be summoned to wait for you at the Golden Tooth.”

“Freezing our balls on the Wall while you’re feasting in your halls?” A Sarsfield archer – recognisable by the fact they had to cut one of his hands to ‘convince’ him to abandon his bow. “No, we won’t give you that pleasure!”

“Better die than serve the Black Queen!”

“This isn’t about serving the Black Queen,” Tyland corrected frostily. “It is about paying for your sins and serving the realm.”

“And where’s your realm?” an insolent men-at-arms who didn’t look like he had lived eighteen name days mocked him. “Nowhere near the Wall, I will tell you!”

“We won’t serve a false Queen!”

“And yet,” Tyland commented ironically, “you had no issue bending the knee to someone who hadn’t even the shadow of a claim to Casterly Rock.”

“It’s different! King Walder is the true King! He is the Warrior of the West!”

“I see. Then you don’t intend to take the Black?”

“We won’t make you this favour, Lannister!”

Tyland Lannister waited the time of a turn of hourglass before nodding twice, once for himself, the other for his men.

“You heard them. They aren’t interested in joining the noble institution of the Night’s Watch. Take up your axes, there are two hundred pikes which wait for traitor’s heads. Be quick about it, we must return to the pursuit of the other traitors.”

**Lord Merlon Sarsfield**

Merlon had never retreated before in his life, so he had nothing to measure this retreat against.

His heart and his head were convinced it was a catastrophe, though, and day after day, there was nothing on the horizon which convinced him he was wrong.

They had held the battlefield for a single evening, before being forced to flee at dawn as three thousand men were on their way from Lannisport to reinforce that bastard of Tyland Lannister.

To be sure the attempt of the two Lannister hosts to catch them between their damaged warhammer and their intact but weak anvil had missed, but it wasn’t the point. They had to flee. He had to abandon his home.

And they were dangerously close to completely routing. The warriors were tired and unhappy. The healing herbs and every maester’s substance which could serve to keep wounds clean and safe for travel were in short supply.

They were warriors. There should be three entire columns, guarded by numerous mounted patrols. Except they had only one, and only the vanguard was riding stallions in order to be sure they weren’t throwing themselves into an ambush.

There was only a single column instead, and the terrain they were riding or walking upon was worse now: this summer had been extremely dry, but the day before had been a day of hot, drenching rain. Stormy summer rains weren’t a rarity in the Westerlands, but usually they came with far more time to find a refuge...or maybe they had been too tired, too preoccupied by the war to notice the signs.

Anyway now the battered army of the Red Lion was trying to continue its progression among a morass of mud, while normally the worst problem was the clouds of dust.

His last men were tired and pessimistic. They had seen their homes burned by the Lannisters, their lands ravaged, and if they hadn’t known the bitch of Casterly Rock would crucify them for breaking their oaths, no doubt they would have deserted.

Like so many Lydden and Marbrand men did every night. The army had been left with five thousand warriors in front of the walls of Castamere; now they would be lucky if they had four thousand and five hundred.

Merlon grimaced before drinking what was left of his jug of red wine. Could he really accuse the troops fleeing in the middle of the night? They had followed their Lords, and their Lords were dead. As for the Red King himself, it would have been different if he was not wounded and able to ride and be visible to all, but King Walder rarely stayed conscious for long, and putting him on a horse would create far more headaches than it solved.

Damn the Grim Lord.

“Cerion,” the Lord who had once ruled Sarsfield greeted the other surviving Lord to survive the Butcher’s Ball. “What bad news do you have for me?”

“All the Cornfield men have disappeared.”

“For all the good they did in the first place...” Merlon grumbled. “They were what? Two or three scores of them *before* the battle?”

“Three, I think,” the Lord of Silverhill looked like a ghost with all this mud and the timid sun. Then again, he must look exactly the same. “The *very* bad news is I think it wasn’t their idea. There was this mounted messenger who found us two days ago, and they just waited one more day to make sure we didn’t look in their direction.”

“They were recalled home.”

“Yes, that is exactly what I’m thinking too.”

Merlon sighed as the headache returned, unless it was the bad wine.

“House Swyft is lost to us, then. We can only hope that their ‘we always turn our cloaks’ behaviour will not amuse the Rock more than it amuses us.”

“It certainly won’t,” agreed Cerion Serrett. “But there were hundreds of men at Crakehall, and if the same happened to them...”

Then Crakehall had likely fallen, and Cornfield was the last line of the true kingdom...except the roosters were likely going to crow a lot before selling their breeches in the markets of Lannisport.

“It will leave Silverhill dangerously exposed.”

“My men are loyal.” The man who was likely the most powerful Lord left to the cause of the Red Lion protested for the sake of it. “And Silverhill is not as vulnerable to an attack from the north as Crakehall is. My garrison can hold for moons. As long as the dragons don’t come to demand our surrender, Silverhill will stand.”

“Good. With our King wounded, your daughter the Queen may become the rallying figure we need to harden the hearts of our warriors.”

Deep inside, Merlon tried not to think about the reality many of the smallfolk-born had nothing left to live, and it applied to his knights too.

“We continue in direction of the Gold Road, then. We will rally our forces between Deep Den and Silverhill, and attack the weakest army of the yellow pretenders. Let’s hope your daughter is convincing enough to pour new courage and strength into the hearts of our men.”

“Don’t worry, my daughter can be a convincing Lady when she desires..and she is smart. She will know what to do to bolster the morale of our brave warriors.”

**Queen Rohanne Reyne**

“Your...your Grace, you can’t do that!”

Rohanne looked at the beardless ‘Grand Castellan’ her father had burdened her with, and tried to find a tiny spark of intelligence in the brown eyes. She found none.

“I am a Queen. Who are you Ser to tell me I can’t do something in my own home?”

“The kind of Ser who is loyal to Lord Serrett and King Walder Reyne!”

“Ah, yes...the one which is loyal to the end and doesn’t care how many people they killed in their wars,” Rohanne shook her head. “Kill him.”

The ‘Grand Castellan’ tried to draw his sword, but before he could do more than touch the hilt of his blade, a spear went through his throat from behind.

“Curse...curse...”

“I am the Mistress here, not you.” She told him as the upstart knight gurgled and died. “Seriously, for all the pretences of ‘claiming our rightful seat among the Westerlands’, my mighty husband flooded us with ambitious cockroaches eager to dirty our castles while our men were fighting.”

“That may be so...your Grace,” her cousin Elys, captain of her small ‘royal guard’, told her as the corpse was dragged away to be thrown into a pit. “But he wasn’t wrong on one point: it is treason against the Reynes.”

“Yes, cousin...and how long is the Reyne rule going to continue? I bet the army besieging us from the south is going to take five days before finally breaching our walls.”

“You’re too pessimistic. Seven days, maybe eight.”

“Eight or five days, what does it change?” the blonde-haired noblewoman sniffed derisively. “My father and my *dear husband* have led their army into a slaughter pen of their own making, and thus the forces to relieve this castle are long dead. And now with the Tyrell and Lannister bannersmen in control of Crakehall, we will soon see their riders coming from the west as well.”

“You maybe...no, you are right, Rohanne. But fleeing your home as evening arrives and ordering the loyal men you’re leaving behind to surrender one day later? This is-“

“What do you expect me to do?” the green-eyed Queen of the ‘Red kingdom’ said bitterly, reflecting one more time on the tight hunting clothes she had to wear. Unlike many highborn women, she had never liked horse-riding, and she was sure it was going to be worse than her previous lessons as her escort and she had to ride straight for the Black border.

“We could all try to negotiate...acceptable terms.”

“Excellent idea, cousin,” she replied with dark humour dripping from her tongue. “Let’s negotiate with people who have not the authority to protect us and the strength to enforce the terms. You know as well as I do that the kindest fate Lady Johanna Lannister will have for me is service in the Silent Sisterhood.”

Which, like the Wall, required an oath to abandon all claims on your birthright. And to be silent for the rest of your life, of course.

The woman who had been traded like a mule by her father shrugged.

“I’m not saying she is wrong, mind you. We are traitors, we tried to usurp her family’s seat, and I’m sure that if my dear husband had emerged victorious, neither House Lannister nor House Westerling would be left to their own devices in the aftermath.”

Still, Rohanne wasn’t going to admit the crucifixion of the Lysene pirates and so many men who had allied with House Reyne had not acted like multiple slaps in her face. And the leader of the assault on Lannisport had drunk molten gold until his ‘thirst’ was ‘satisfied’. The young noblewoman was honest enough to be terrified by such a fate.

“That’s...House Lannister will need to be careful with Houses of Western blood.”

“Why would she?” Rohanne asked as her fingers caressed a magnificent robe of red she had donned moons ago, regretting all the while she couldn’t take it with her. Alas, it was impossible. The ‘portable’ fortune of Silverhill was the priority, after her own survival.

“Well, you...you aren’t pregnant.”

“And I thank the Gods for that,” she said sincerely. Despite two ‘bedroom assaults’, the seed of her husband hadn’t managed to sire a child in her belly. “Because otherwise, the Lannisters’ blades would pursue us to the end of the world, and I don’t want to be jumping at shadows until I am in my death bed.”

“There’s such a thing at sparing pregnant women.”

“There’s such a thing at exterminating the line of an usurper, and House Lannister hasn’t survived several thousand years by being jovial and unwilling to cover their blades in blood. No, Elys, I’ve made my decision. The castle opening its gates one day after our escape will spare our servants the sack Crakehall and many fortresses endured.”

Rohanne was sure it would be very violent, filled with many deaths with no mercy for the women and the children...and it would completely destroy any chance of House Serrett and she to retake their ancestral home one day, as unlikely as the prospect was.

“I understand. Though I don’t think your Lord Father and your brother will see it that way.”

“No, they won’t understand.” Otherwise she would have already sent them a letter by a messenger she could trust to join her before Hornvale.

But Lord Cerion Serrett had been the one to sell her to Walder Reyne, with as much concern for her ideas as he would have for a cow. He wanted to die for King Reyne? Rohanne had zero objections against it.

But she was going to take the fortune of House Serrett with her. It wasn’t like the males of her House would need her once the Stranger greeted them and sent them wherever he wanted.

“You could let-“

“No, the chests are going with me, along with all unmarried young men I feel I can trust to at least escort me as far as Hornvale.” And truth to tell, the ‘Red Queen’ trusted half of them to accept her coins and turn around once they arrived at the Black-held fortress.

A good thing that with three large chests of silver, one chest of jewellery, and four chests of gold, she would have enough to reward new protectors and make sure the Black Queen didn’t immediately feed her to her dragon or sell her to King Daeron.

“You prepared this right after you married King Walder, didn’t you?”

“Now, my cousin...” Rohanne smiled innocently. “What could possibly give you that idea?”

**Queen Baela Targaryen**

“And so Ser Rolland said: ‘I am freed from your tyranny, Black Queen’.”

“The Regent of the Golden Tooth has assuredly a way with words, my Queen.” Lord Kermit Tully admitted.

“He does,” Baela agreed, looking at the Lefford citadel which was waiting at the other end of the pass. “A pity he doesn’t realise his supply problems have just begun. I’ve used the clouds of the last days to see what happened to his lands west of the Golden Tooth, and it is frankly worse than my Council predicted. The retreating forces of Walder Reyne looted everything they could find during the moons where they went on the offensive. And now they’re retreating, they burn everything they can’t take with them.”

The Targaryen Queen had not been able to tour every holdfast and farm of the Westerlands, evidently. But she had seen what the ‘War of Lions’ had done between Sarsfield and the Lefford defences, and the best thing that could be said about it was that the Riverlands had been worse after the Dance.

But then no one had used dragonfire on the Westerlands this time.

And when one considered it was the work of two to three moons, it was really scary how bad the treachery of Lord Walder Reyne had damaged the farms, the mines, and everything which made the domains of House Lannister so prosperous.

“I suppose he will buy his food and everything he needs from House Lannister.” The Lord of Riverrun commented.

“Yes, this is likely what is going to happen. But with hundreds of additional mouths to feed, the costs in grain and livestock are going to go up. Maybe not enough to equal the price of the supplies we gave them, but...”

“But it won’t be exactly cheaper from the point of view of the one who has to pay for all of that.” Kermit shrugged. “You tried to convince him to change his allegiance, my Queen. He preferred to stay on the Lannister’s side. His loyalty to his oaths is honourable, if misguided, but he will have to endure the consequences.”

“Yes...it is going to be interesting to see how my cousin and his bannersmen deal with the problems they have.” The purple-eyed dragonrider frowned. “Unless we have grossly misjudged the situation, the Westerlands will soon have a massive of shortage of smallfolk, merchants, knights, and Lords. Finding ambitious people to replace all the oath-breakers which followed Walder Reyne will be easy. Finding the resources to rebuild castles, mills, and scores of villages won’t.”

“They have the Reach,” Kermit pointed out. “And if the Mistress of Whisperers’ reports are exact, it is in the process of regaining the strength it lost with the Dance. Oldtown and many Lordships are still badly weakened, but Highgarden is, like their words boast, growing strong.”

“Yes.”

In hindsight, abandoning the Black Lords of the Reach – because that was it was, she couldn’t exactly pretend the opposite – had solidified extraordinarily the support of House Tyrell, and with it the powerbase of one King Daeron.

She wasn’t going to thank Walder Reyne for the disastrous series of slaughters he had made, but the ‘Red Lion’ had doubtlessly stopped any talk of another war before the South grew too strong for her kingdom to change and resist it militarily.

Now either Highgarden would help the West recover, something which would take a few decades assuming they weren’t struck down by another horrible disease and another rebellion, or they would have always to look on their northern flank in fear the rule of Casterly Rock broke at the worst moment possible.

No matter what happened, it was a favourable turn of event for her...but by the Gods, this carnage was horrible. Had the oath-breakers truly learned nothing of the Dance? It had not been that long ago!

And yet at the first chance they had, they pressed on to make a new Butcher’s Ball...one which killed thousands on both sides, not just an imbecile like Criston Cole had been.

“Let’s go see your farmers, Lord Kermit.” The Black Queen chuckled. “Since Ser Rolland made it clear he doesn’t want our services anymore, I think it’s better the smallfolk hear from my mouth the bad news.”

“Bad news which will come with a large distribution of gold, I take it?”

“You wound me, my Lord,” the rider of Moondancer answered with an expression of sadness. “It is not a distribution, it is a large reward for services rendered to the Crown.”

She was getting very good at this sort of ‘Queenly speeches’, if she said so herself.

“And that you extorted it from the Green purses will make it very popular.”

“Why is everyone speaking of extortion these days?”

**Lord Merlon Sarsfield**

Reaching the Gold Road with about two days of advance on their pursuers should be something to celebrate, especially as after the desertion of the Swyft men, the number of deserters had slowly decreased.

It wasn’t.

The army was in a miserable state. They had eaten and drank most of their supplies at a properly hellish pace to arrive so close to Deep Den in so little time.

The main reason why there weren’t so many deserters was that they were barely four thousand men anymore in their long column, and men and the camp followers which remained were often dying of disease or infected wounds.

And their King was no exception in the middle of this nightmare.

“He’s getting worse, Cerion,” Merlon forced himself to speak as close to a whisper as he had the strength to, no matter how angry he felt. “The maester’s promises proved as empty as the last ones.”

“At least he’s sleeping now.” The Lord of Silverhill tried to be optimistic. “He’s not delirious in pain anymore.”

“And it has been two days he’s sleeping, and everything in him is...we’re losing him. The other healers know it too, they just are too afraid to say it. His heart is getting slower, and his face is so pale it isn’t natural.”

“I understand, but what do you expect me to do? As long as we’re on the move like we are, we can’t exactly receive ravens. And we can’t contact anymore our servants, this imbecile who ate the last raven made sure of that!”

Ah yes, that bastard. Fortunately for him, the food had been far more plentiful four days ago, and so they had merely found a rope and a tree to punish him. At times like this, when bellies were beginning to growl, the idea of the punishment fitting the crime was more and more appetising.

“And I’m not a maester or someone versed in healing lore,” the Lord of House Serrett finished. “We made sure the best we had were ready to help the King, and it isn’t enough. By the Crone and the Father Above, we don’t know how bad the blows of this bastard of Grimm hurt his flesh! It might be that even if we had the resources of Oldtown at our disposal, there wouldn’t be any solution. The Gods are the only ones capable of miracles.”

“Are they?”

The other Lord raised his eyebrows in alarm.

“I am going to...pretend you didn’t say that.”

“The septons have prayed, Cerion, and it hasn’t done any good.” He was tired, so tired to count the dead and watch the catastrophe unfold under his eyes. “We need to do something. We have reached the Gold Road, and our men are already divided about the next step of our journey. Some want to go hide inside Deep Den, others prefer striking a blow at Silverhill or Cornfield.”

“That I have no problem to understand,” the survivor of the Second Butcher’s Ball bared his teeth. “It was your words about miracles which...worried me.”

The former Lord of the castle of Sarsfield cleared his throat.

“You know that despite our losses, we still have around three hundred of Essossi...sellswords among our ranks.”

“Yes Merlon, I haven’t missed *that*. Or do you think I take pleasure in sharing the company of these goat-faced miscreants?”

“This was just...oh, forget it. Yes, they are that and more. But among them is one man who is a healer, or at least pretends himself to be. He says he’s a Priest of some stupid religious cult on the other side of the Narrow Sea, but I’ve seen several men in the last days stop being carried in stretched while they were badly hurt. In fact, many of our men which had such ugly wounds are dining with the Stranger now.”

“I don’t like it.” Cerion replied. “I suppose it was he who came to you?” Merlon nodded, and the unhappiness was evident on the other Lord’s face. “I really don’t like it.”

“Do you think I do?” Legends insisted heroes shone at moments like that, but the last Sarsfield knew now the bards’ tales were wrong about nearly everything. “But we need to do something. Even if the supplies of Deep Den and Silverhill reach us in time, we will likely have a battle to fight soon. Not tomorrow, not the day after...but surely before the end of the moon, and maybe sooner. And if in seven days the King is still sleeping, the men are going to break at the enemy’s first charge.”

“If they desert, they won’t find any refuge in our towers and our castles.”

“Yes, but Hornvale isn’t far.” Merlon retorted grimly.

The two highborn warriors exchanged a long, silent, stare which was worth a thousand words for warriors. So far, no one had spoken about Hornvale being their salvation, not when the Blacks had been the ones to take it from the Red cause and stab them in the back.

But if the situation truly became hopeless – and Merlon knew they quickly approached that point – even the most loyal of their sword swords was going to be tempted to abandon the field. And once it did, the war would be over.

“We would be beggars.” The last Lord of the Southern Marches coughed, and it was a loud, awful sound. “And if the Black Queen doesn’t feel like helping us, we will be dragged in chains to the Rock. I don’t want to be crucified like Rogare’s men were.”

And Merlon didn’t want to verify in person how long the Essossi scoundrel had taken to die when molten gold was poured into his mouth.

“What sort of deity does this...pagan priest serve?”

“Some sort of fire deity from Volantis,” he answered. “Rallor, I think the Essossi call it.”

**King Walder Reyne**

Walder opened his eyes.

It was strange, because he didn’t remember falling asleep.

He stood. Somehow, he was relieved because there was no pain this time. His mind was confused. Why did he think there should have been pain?

“My King, you are healed...by the Grace of the Gods.”

“Yes...yes, I am...” it is difficult to remember who is kneeling. He knew the name. What was it again? “Lord Sarsfield. Where are we? How long have I been unconscious?”

“You were grievously wounded more than a fortnight ago, your Grace. Since the Battle fought before Castamere, we have retreated and now we stand a league south of the Gold Road. The false lions’ armies are trying to encircle us before striking the death blow.”

What? No, they were victorious! All the memories he had were of enemies routed, of Lannister dying on the fields of the Westerlands!

“Then it was time I awoke, for the time of retreats and ceding lands to the enemy ends today!”

Something different burned in him now. It was something...something fiery. Yes, it was a flame.

And as Walder grabbed the sword a squire presented to him, his blade caught fire.

“I will not abandon my kingdom!” the last Lord of House Reyne proclaimed. “DO YOU HEAR IT, LANNISTERS? YOU WILL NEVER FORCE ME TO KNEEL AGAIN!”

Hundreds of his men heard him. The loyal, the true, the brave warriors who had waited for him surrounded him and raised their blades in defiance.

“I WILL LEAD YOU! I WILL LEAD YOU AND THE WEST WILL BE CONQUERRED...OR IT WILL BURN!”

The answer was roared like the lions they were.

“DEATH TO THE LANNISTERS!”

**Author’s note**: The end of the rebellion is near...but the optimist Westerners and Reachers who bet the final collapse of the ‘Red kingdom’ was a question of days are going to be very disappointed.

Walder Reyne is still alive. And there’s still one army in the field.

Obviously, it is insanity. It’s four thousand men at best against more than thirty thousand, and each day the odds are getting worse. But reason has deserted one side, and numbers don’t matter anymore.

The War of Lions must be fought to the bitter end. It is the will of the Gods...or should I say *one* God?

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