

“Stannis! Stannis! Stannis! Stannis!”

“Baratheon! Baratheon! Baratheon!”

It was amidst the loud chorus of his name and that of his house from the men of the royal camp that he rode in atop his horse. For whatever reason, Robert had decided to camp at Old Oak instead of moving up the Ocean Road and launching the invasion of the Westerlands.

He was not unhappy with the decision of his kingly brother. It'd mean he had a chance to lead the attack against the lions. There was also the strategic significance of scouting ahead and allowing the Lannisters to lose allies in this war as the forces of the North, Riverlands, and the Vale invaded the Westerlands.

“Tarly! Tarly! Tarly!”

The men switched to another name to call out in a chorus as the men saw the red huntsman painted on a green banner in the camp. Stannis eyed the Tarly men filling the camp as he disembarked from his horse.

‘At least the man did something to earn praise.’ he thought, looking at the many golden rose banners fluttering in the camp.

Stannis scowled at the rose banners in the camp. He could already imagine what those good-for-nothing Tyrells were doing in the camp. No doubt, they were singing praises to his brother and showering him with wine and whores to gain his brother's favour.

“Prince Stannis, Welcome to Old Oak.”

Stannis looked at the Lord of Old Oak, who came to welcome him with an assortment of knights.

“Lord Oakheart.” Stannis nodded at the brown-haired man.

He didn't know much about the Oakhearts except that they were the lords of Old Oak, and Arys Oakheart served as a knight of the Kingsguard. According to Ser Barristan, the young Oakheart knight was someone of character deserving of the white cloak. He also remembered that Ser Barristan had high praises for the knight for his skill with the sword. He supposed the Oakhearts were of a different breed from the usual Reachmen he had come to know.

‘Perhaps, that's why Old Oak managed to stand strong before the Lannisters and repel their attempts to claim the castle.’ Stannis thought.

“Please accept the bread and salt, my lord. With the Seven as witnesses, I welcome you to Old Oak.” Lord Patrice Oakheart offered him a plate of bread and salt.

After observing the necessary customs that granted him the guest rights, Stannis followed Lord Oakheart into the halls of Old Oak accompanied by the Crownland lords, the Narrow Sea lords and some Reachlords. The scene he saw in the feast hall of Old Oak was not out of the ordinary. It was everything he expected and more. He saw his kingly brother sitting at the head of the high table with a fat jug of wine in one hand while the other was occupied by groping the ass of a serving wench

with no shame. Stannis felt shame and anger as his older brother brought more shame to House Baratheon.

'If only I were the eldest of Lord Steffon Baratheon's sons.' Stannis thought morosely.

Undoubtedly, his brother was a well-accomplished warrior on the field of battle. But there was no end to the depravities and vices displayed by his brother out in the open, bringing nothing but shame to House Baratheon. Even now, his brother had no sense of propriety or mind to where he was or what he was doing in front of the lords of Westeros. His brother was further demeaning the Iron Throne and the House of Baratheon.

'Unfortunately, I'll have to bear these insults, for I'm the younger while the elder inherits all the power. This has been the way of the world.' Stannis thought with gritted teeth.

"Your grace." Stannis knelt on one knee a few feet away from the table.

"Ah, welcome, brother. I heard you won a great victory against those blonde cunts." Robert bellowed out from his seat, his tongue slurring towards the end because of the wine.

"We did, your grace. Lord Tarly held the lines dissuading the Lannister army from manoeuvring as I led the Crown's army to put an end to the Lannister army. I'm also happy to report that Bitterbridge and Tumbleton have been liberated from the Lannister garrison."

"Great news. Great news, indeed. In no time, we'll have Tywin Lannister and his whorish daughter kneel at my feet. I'll have their heads crushed with Godsgrief." Robert shouted gleefully, slurping down a mouthful of wine in one swig.

"There is also something else, your grace. While we won a great victory at Appleton, we have also taken prisoners from the defeated Lannister army." said Stannis, keeping his fury contained as he watched his elder brother dip his hand under a serving girl's skirt.

"Then bring them forth. Let me see these blond cunts whom you've taken as prisoners." Robert gritted out, pulling the serving wench into his lap and hands now becoming far more pervasive.

Stannis could only grit his teeth at the disrespect shown in full display at the court. Nonetheless, he signalled his men to bring the prisoners. It didn't take long for the men to escort the enemy prisoners tied in chains to be escorted into the court. But Stannis felt like each second was a day as he watched his elder brother shamelessly indulge in the pleasures of the flesh before the eyes of the assembled lords. He could feel the countless eyes watching his brother with disgust.

The clinking of chains filled the court, only to be drowned out by the throaty moans of the serving wench who was now sitting on his brother's lap. Stannis fisted his fingers, his hands shaking with anger as his brother's hands were now openly groping the woman, without any shame, with lords and knights across the realm as witnesses. He could only avert his eyes as Robert continued to shame their house. For a brief moment, he could understand why a woman like Cersei Lannister would cuckold his brother. He could almost sympathise with the woman if she was not the queen or Robert was not his brother.

Stannis eyed the chained prisoners escorted into the hall, and the men forced them to their knees before the king.

“Your grace, I present Ser Kevan Lannister and Ser Addam Marbrand to you. They led the attack on the Reach in Lord Tywin’s name.” said Stannis, pushing the two men forward.

Robert grunted but otherwise remained disinterested. Instead, Robert was focused on the poor lass sitting on his lap.

“We’ve also taken several knights as prisoners like Ser Jason Lanette, Ser Forley Prester, Ser Desmon Doggett and Ser Denys Lydden.” Stannis continued to say, only to earn another lusty moan from his elder sibling, who was now tearing away the serving wench’s clothes.

“Robert!” Stannis snarled, unable to take any more of this insult to the good name of his house.

“Wha...?” Robert looked a tad startled, looking at Stannis with sleepy wine-addled eyes.

“These are the prisoners we took of some import from the Lannister army that invaded the Reach. What do you want to do with them?”

“They are traitors to the crown. Do with them as you like, Stannis. Now, leave me be. I need to enjoy this one.” Robert muttered, letting out a dark chuckle, picking up the serving wench by her thighs as if she weighed nothing and carried her away, possibly to his chambers.

Stannis growled in frustration as he watched his whoremonger brother waddle away with the serving girl in his arms.

“Pffft! Ha ha ha ha ha... So, this is the famed Demon of the Trident. A whoremonger and a dullard!” Ser Addam Marbrand mocked, smirking at the retreating back of Robert Baratheon.

Stannis glared at the back of the knight’s head coldly.

“Lord Oakheart.” Stannis called to the Reachman.

“Yes, my prince.”

“Are the ropes in the Reach sturdy enough for a bootlicker of Lord Tywin?” Stannis asked, stopping Marbrand’s mocking laughter.

The knight of Ashemark turned to look at Stannis with fear shining in his eyes.

“Yes, my prince. More than strong enough.” Lord Patrice said slowly.

“Ser Addam Marbrand. In the name of Robert of House Baratheon, the first of his name, the king of Andals, the Rhoynar and the First Men, I find you guilty of treason against the Crown. With the powers vested in me as the Prince of Dragonstone, I sentence you to die for raising your sword in rebellion against your king and murdering countless loyal subjects of the crown in your failed invasion of the Reach.” Stannis declared loud and clear, making sure everyone in the hall could hear him.

“Hang him.” said Stannis, nodding at Lord Oakheart.

“No, wait! You cannot do that!” Ser Addam screamed as the Oakheart men dragged him away through the floor.

“On the contrary, you’ll find that I can.” Stannis glared coldly at the struggling knight.

“No! I demand a trial by combat! Let the gods decide my fate.” Ser Addam Marbrabd shouted, forcing the men to stop dragging the westerman knight.

“Demand? Traitors do not get to make demands.” Stannis thundered.

In one swoop, Stannis unsheathed his sword from the scabbard.

“I... khaauuuuuk!”

Whatever Ser Addam Marbrand was about to say was lost in a bloody gurgle as Stannis stabbed his castle-forged steel straight through the open mouth of the knight of the Ashemark, cutting through teeth and the roof of the knight’s mouth.

Stannis could see his sword had gone all the way through the mouth to the other side, spilling the knight's blood on the feast hall's floor. He swiftly dragged back his sword with one clean tug spilling more blood, which pooled around the dead knight. The silence in the hall was deafening.

“Your crimes were not against the gods for them to judge you. It was against the people of the Reach and your King. And for that, my judgement is more than enough.” Stannis declared.

Stannis flicked the blood away from his sword and called for his squire, Daven Seaworth. Handing over his bloodied sword, Stannis addressed the lords and knights assembled in the hall, watching the spectacle that unfolded before their eyes.

“There has been enough feasting and celebrations. Feasts and tourneys won’t win the war against House Lannister. I shall hold a war council to discuss our next moves. Lords Florent, Oakheart, Tarly, Ashford, Merryweather, Appleton, Fossoway, Bulwer, Tyrell and Peake. I shall expect you all within the hour.” said Stannis before taking his leave to gather the Crownland lords and Stormlords for the war council.

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Hoster repeatedly coughed into his hands, straining his lungs. When it was over, he was quite relieved to find no trace of blood in his mouth.

‘That’s a relief.’ Hoster thought, hauling himself out of his bed with some effort and settling into a chair nearby the window of his chambers overlooking the Red Fork that stretched out for miles to the east.

He could feel that his years amongst the living were numbered. If he looked closely enough, he could see a raft in the distance that was waiting for him. Hoster was sure it was his wife, patiently waiting for him to come to her side on a funeral raft of his own.

‘It won’t be long before I join you.’ Hoster thought, staring at the raft.

He blinked, and in the next moment, the raft disappeared from his sight. He searched for the raft up and down across the stream of the river, but he could not find any raft. He could only see the rocky cliffs, oak trees and chestnut trees that covered the northern shores of the Red Fork. Another bout of coughing overcame him, but it was not as painful as the last time. He forlornly looked at the chair where his precious daughter used to sit and read him stories.

‘Such a dutiful daughter.’ Hoster thought.

But the daughter he loved the most was nowhere to be seen. It was expected, of course. After all, his daughter was now the Lady of Winterfell and the mother of five healthy children. Oh, how proud he was of his daughter for birthing such strong children. There was even talk amongst the castle servants that the gods blessed his beloved Cat. The smallfolk now believed that the gods blessed his daughter to bring prosperity wherever she lived. Hoster would’ve dismissed it outright as superstitious nonsense made up by unthinking peasants and beggars.

But ever since his daughter stepped into Winterfell, House Stark had steadily grown more prosperous and powerful. The last rumours that had filtered in from the North suggested that his grandson had built a grand castle the likes of which that’d put Highgarden to shame in beauty, Casterly Rock in terms of its riches and Harrenhall in its grandeur. His grandson, Harrion Stark, was supposedly building a fleet at Sea Dragon Point as well, which means, the Ironborn would have a strong contender to wrest the seas from their control. There were other rumours that graced the halls of Riverrun that frankly left him at a loss for words. Tales of flying ships, flying carpets, and some magical tower that can see the vast secrets of the sky and the stars. Then there was the greatest of all rumours that he was so intimately familiar with, which turned out to be not so good for the interests of House Tully. His grandson was somehow blessed with the same legendary prowess as Garth Greenhand.

At first, he had not given much attention to such rumours, but when the North stopped buying grain and other essential crops, the merchants suffered, and in turn, his coffers suffered. As months went by, his coffers only showed more losses than the expected returns compared to other years. It confirmed the rumours that the North was now host to several bountiful farmlands thanks to his grandson. Not to mention, his grandson was already renowned for his mastery over steel as the lad had somehow, by the grace of gods old and new, managed to unearth the secrets of Valyrian steel.

Hoster couldn’t help but scowl at the reminder that his daughter refused to foster his grandson at Riverrun. Not that he thought Cat would ever send off a child from her side. He had known Cat would never willingly part with a child of her body. As a daughter who grew up feeling the absence of a mother and acted as a mother should with her younger siblings, Hoster was confident his daughter would not part with her children if she had a say in the matter. The scathing letter she wrote to him had only amused him. Although, he was hoping his daughter would travel the Kingsroad and come home to shout at him in his solar. He was rather disappointed he didn’t get to see his daughter.

‘Perhaps, I should be more forthcoming with my intentions, as Brynden often says.’ Hoster thought.

A knock on the door cut through his musings.

“My lord. Are you awake?”

Hoster could hear Maester Vyman’s voice filtering through the door.

“Come in, Maester.” he said, keeping his eyes on the door as it swung open.

A head of pearl-white hair poked into his room.

“My lord. Are you feeling any discomfort? I have with me a watered-down pint of the milk of the poppy.” Maester Vyman offered, the creases on Vyman’s face becoming pronounced in worry.

“I’m feeling better, but I’ll have the medicine within my reach should I need it.” said Hoster.

Maester Vyman slipped into his room and placed a small vial of liquid near his bedside table.

“There is one other matter, my lord.”

“Oh. Go on.”

“Ser Brynden sent a messenger. The lad arrived last night. I didn’t bother you with the messenger because you felt ill last night.”

Hoster just nodded. “What did my brother’s message say?”

“Edmure and Ser Brynden has safely reached Lord Stark’s camp. He also writes that Lord Stark managed to negotiate passage for his army with Lord Leo Lefford.”

“Did he now?” Hoster asked, a touch impressed that his goodson managed to woo Lord Lefford to stand against Lord Tywin.

“Yes, my lord. He also says Lord Stark arranged a betrothal between Edmure and Alysanne Lefford.” Maester Vyman said hesitantly.

Hoster could only stare incomprehensively at Maester Vyman for a moment.

“I think I misheard you, Vyman. Did you just say my son is now betrothed to Lord Lefford’s daughter?” Hoster asked incredulously.

“I’m afraid so, my lord. According to Ser Brynden’s message, Lord Stark had to promise Lady Alysanne’s protection and claim on Golden Tooth to secure the passage through the River Road.”

Hoster opened his mouth to say something but paused and became thoughtful momentarily. He had been trying to get his son betrothed to a good lady of proper standing for some time. But the boy had stubbornly refused to entertain any of his suggestions. Edmure had remained unwed all these years because of his ill health. He could not properly enforce his will on his headstrong son.

But now, Edmure somehow ended up betrothed to Alysanne Lefford. He barely held back a grin at the news.

“So, Lord Stark promised Edmure would marry Lord Lefford’s daughter. Did Edmure accept this proposal?” he asked tentatively.

“I believe so, my lord. Ser Brynden’s message alluded to Edmure’s acquiescence on the matter.” Maester Vyman reported.

“Hmm. I need to know for sure. Send a messenger to my brother. Meanwhile, open a correspondence with Lord Lefford.” Hoster said, considering taking advantage of this boon that conveniently fell into his lap.

While he’d have preferred Edmure to have taken a wife from the Riverlands, he was not unhappy with a Lefford becoming the Lady of Riverrun. The Leffords were rich thanks to their gold mines and an ancient house of good repute. It was also to his advantage that Alysanne Lefford was Lord Leo Lefford’s sole heir. It’d mean that his son would, in effect, gain the lordship of two powerful seats.

‘I’ll have to ensure the Lannisters won’t survive this war to see another sunrise. If they survive this war, they’ll focus on Golden Tooth and work to remove Alysanne Lefford from claiming that seat.’ Hoster thought.

“Vyman.”

“My lord?” Vyman looked at him with his pale green eyes full of curiosity.

“A raven must be sent to King’s Landing addressing Lord Arryn. House Lannister must not be allowed to hold Casterly Rock after this rebellion is put down.”

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Harry had been preparing for this day since the Resurrection Stone was restored to his possession. He had been putting it off because he was waiting to turn eleven to construct proper Occlumency shields around his mind and for his magic to strengthen. The appearance of the Invisibility Cloak after his body reached eleven years of age was the last indicator that he should go ahead with his plan. Some of the most potent wards were protecting his room in Winterfell which should be powerful enough to keep unwanted attention from beings that live beyond the mortal plane.

Harry looked at the black stone sitting comfortably on his power ring. Nowadays, the ring and the stone were acting as magical foci, and with his magical strength restored to a greater height, he found it easier to shape wandless magic with the ring.

‘All right. It’s time’ Harry thought.

Closing his eyes, he visualised a ghostly form and whispered the name Ignotus Peverell while turning the stone three times in his hand. He could feel the air shift in the room as another powerful presence materialised near Harry.

“I never imagined someone would ever manage to travel to this world with all three Hallows in their possession. I suppose those gifted with magic in their souls are born to break the bounds of destiny and even death. Isn’t that right, Harry Potter, Master of Death?”

Harry opened his eyes to see a far more solid form of an old man with a bald head, white eyebrows and pitch-black eyes.

"Ignotus Peverell, the First King." Harry breathed out, looking at his ancestor with some awe.

"Indeed. Well met Harry Potter. Or is it Harrion Stark?"

"Either name would suffice." said Harry.

"Hmm. Names tend to have little meaning when death eludes you, isn't it? You have my deepest sympathies, my child." Ignotus Peverell looked at him with deep anguish, which only set Harry on edge.

He felt the answers he would get to his questions would not be to his liking.