

“You were right, Lord Tarly. The Lannister army has nowhere to go without confronting us.” said Ser Leo Constayne, his eyes trained on the horizon from where the sound of hooves and marching men could be heard as if it was a distant thunder.

“A lion is more dangerous when it is cornered.” Ser Andrew Ashford commented.

“Ser Ashford speaks true. Let’s make sure we put an end to the lions today.” Randyll said firmly.

“Return to your posts and wait for my command.”

The two knights nodded at him before riding off into his army’s left and right flanks.

“Are you sure we need to expose our men outside the walls of Appleton, my lord? We still have time to pull back the men behind our walls.” Lord Weymar Appleton anxiously suggested, his brown eyes darting across the fields, looking increasingly nervous with each passing minute.

Randyll looked at the young lord of Appleton out of the corner of his eyes. The man’s father was a brave man who lost his life at the battle of Ashford during the Rebellion.

‘Unfortunately, the son was not as brave as the father.’ Randyll thought, letting out a sigh.

But that didn’t bother him as much as the continued existence of Garth Tyrell. He didn’t know why the Seven were testing him with Garth Tyrell’s continued existence. He had at least managed to keep the portly Tyrell away by keeping the man drunk out of his stupor. If everything went according to plan, Garth Tyrell would be sleeping soundly inside the safety of Appleton’s walls by the time the battle was finished. It was a shame that Garth Tyrell did not meet his end while leading an attack on the Lannister camp. The men who had ridden with Garth Tyrell claimed the man had turned tail and rode away on his horse before the battle even began. At least, the sworn knights of House Tyrell had the presence of mind to follow his instructions and pull back their men after a quick engagement with the enemy camp. When Garth Tyrell returned to Appleton, his men called the man a coward in the open. This had upset Garth the Gross, and the man spent the rest of his days drinking wine which made things easier for Randyll.

“My lord. Lion banners in the distance!” Lord Appleton pointed to the east, where the Roseroad stretched into the horizon.

Randyll grinned upon seeing the red and gold banners of the Lannister army. The long wait was coming to an end which made him happy.

“Lord Weymar. You should go and take charge of the archers on the wall.” Randyll said to the young lord, who promptly ran back into the safety of the castle walls.

Randyll trotted his horse forward and slowly moved between the lines of men, ensuring everything was in order. When he was satisfied, he returned to his post and signalled for the horns to be blown. Randyll immediately looked at Ser Hyle Hunt as the war horns blew two times, who understood what he needed to do.

As the Lannister army was moving, Randyll could see the Lannisters meant to attack his left flank just as he wanted. He intentionally kept his left flank loosely consolidated to tempt his enemies. He watched as Ser Hyle gathered a group of men with pikes and sent them off to the left flank while a substantial portion of the Lannister cavalry had ridden off to engage his left flank.

“It’s done, my lord.” Ser Hyle reported, returning to stand by his side.

Randyll just nodded and waited for the enemy to crash into his left flank. He was sure the lions would be accommodated properly by his men. The ground trembled under the sturdy horses of the west, and the ears of men were filled with the thundering sound of the horses riding across the plain. But the Reachmen stood their ground as they were confident of their victory as their commander was the only man who led them to defeat Robert Baratheon in the field during the Rebellion.

“Sound the signal for the archers.” Randyll shouted as he watched the Lannister army coming inside the range of his archers.

The criers blew the horns, and the archers on the walls of Appleton nocked their arrows and let them fly in quick order. The arrows began claiming the lives of Lannister soldiers trying to attack his left flank. The archers were ordered to concentrate there and leave the centre of his army unguarded from the cover of archers. As the Lannister army drew ever closer to his centre, Randyll ordered his men to move. The centre of his army ever so slightly bulged inwards, and then the Lannister army crashed into his centre with a thunderous sound.

Then the killing began. Men screamed, and horses cried in pain as the two sides slaughtered each other with steel in their hands.

“My lord. The centre... We need the archers.” Ser Hyle said, looking rather pale as the knight watched the slaughter.

“Not yet.” Randyll whispered coldly, keeping his eye on the Lannister army as it was still in a position to manoeuvre away.

On the other hand, his left flank was becoming the death kennel for the Lannister knights. The pikemen he employed were quite efficient in blunting out the surviving Lannister horses as they charged the lines. Most of them even fell into a most painful death thanks to the deep trenches he had the men dug out on the left flank and hidden away as a friendly greeting for the horses of the Lannister army. The left flank of his army was not only standing strong under the command of Ser Andrew Ashford, but it was also cutting down the size of the Lannister army at a fast pace. He could see Lannister knights trying their best to break through his centre, but his numerically superior army held firm. The battle was not dissolving into a melee of sorts, with even mounted knights taking to the ground in a bid to kill as many as they could while freely moving around.

The battle raged on for hours, and Randyll carefully manoeuvred the centre of his army to draw the Lannister men further in making sure to stretch the enemy.

“Sound the signal for Ser Leo Costayne. The time for our right flank to move has come.” Randyll ordered.

He also sent the signal for archers to thin out the enemy at the centre, and then his army’s right flank extended outwards, bustling with knights. Ser Constayne led the charge atop his horse leading a company of knights and infantrymen to smash into the Lannister lines. Randyll watched with some satisfaction as Ser Constayne’s company began to take down the banners of burning orange trees one by one.

‘The banners of House Marbrand. I hope there are enough of them to take hostages when this battle is done. They’d be useful in tightening the noose around the Old Lion’s throat.’ Randyll thought.

Suddenly, two horns were heard blowing from further east, making Randyll look to the Roseroad with some trepidation. But his fears of another Lannister army were unfounded; instead, the

banners he saw in the distance made him smile. Flying high in the air was the crowned golden stag in a black field.

“Baratheon banners! How did the royal army at the back of the Lannister army without our knowledge?” Ser Hyle asked in wonder and some excitement.

“I suspect that is not King Robert’s army.” Randyll muttered, unsheathing his sword that was secured on his belt. “Come, men. Let’s make sure these lions get a proper ending. Let’s not give all the glory to House Baratheon. For the Reach!”

“For the Reach!” the men roared, filled with vigour and ready to kill those who were invading their lands.

Randyll raised his sword high, gathering some cavalry to his side and rode into the panicking centre of the Lannister army. With a fresh army on their back and a superior army on their front, the Lannister army disintegrated. The men tried to flee, but there was nowhere to flee because the Reachmen had manoeuvred themselves in a way that trapped much of the Lannister army within their lines. Those that managed to escape the army formation designed by Randyll Tarly fell prey to the Crownland army led by Prince Stannis Baratheon.

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Stannis Baratheon felt like he could fight a hundred wars and win them all after routing the Lannister army. It was not the first time he had tasted victory on a battlefield, but this one was special. While he considered holding Storm’s End for a year without yielding the castle to the Tyrells and the slew of victories he won against the Ironborn were noteworthy, beating House Lannister in the field would hold a special place in his heart. He felt like this victory was an omen of sorts. It felt like he was only going to soar from here on out, which was a sentiment he could appreciate as he could feel he was getting closer to ascending the Iron Throne.

His sense of victory only became more pronounced when he walked outside the walls of Appleton, where the battle had been fought. The ground was drenched with the blood of his enemies. Dismembered bodies of his enemies were strewn around the field while the Silent Sisters worked diligently to remove the dead from the field.

Stannis walked, observing the battlefield and the bodies drenched in mud and blood. Along his path, Stannis came across a muddy banner of House Lannister stained with blood, fluttering on a wooden pole.

‘The golden lions of the west.’ Stannis snorted derisively.

He caught the lone fluttering banner with his hand and pulled it down. Stannis watched the piece of cloth sink into the ground, weighed down by the blood and mud.

“My Prince.”

Stannis found Lord Weymar Appleton and Ser Axell Florent approaching him with a grin on their faces.

“Lord Appleton.”

“My Prince. Ser Ashford has returned with prisoners. We’ve captured Ser Kevan.” Lord Weymar reported merrily.

“Finally.” Stannis muttered, his shoulders relaxing at the news of Ser Kevan’s capture.

Lord Tywin’s brother had escaped the field riding north at a fast pace. They had sent men after Kevan Lannister when it became certain Tywin’s brother had managed to escape the encirclement. Their greatest fear was Ser Kevan somehow managing to cross the Mander and safely retreat into the Westerlands. Stannis was quite relieved that did not happen as he had a feeling Robert would blame him for Ser Kevan’s escape. After all, he had yet to see any sort of reprieve from his brother when it came to the last Targaryens escaping Dragonstone, even though it was not his fault. To this day, Robert holds him responsible for their escape, and he doesn’t fancy adding Lord Tywin’s brother to that list.

Fortunately, the gods were on his side.

Stannis walked into the tent of Randyll Tarly with Ser Axell Florent and Lord Weymar Appleton closely following him.

“Prince Stannis.” Randyll Tarly dipped his head.

“Lord Tarly. It seems your men caught a lion.” Stannis said, staring coldly at the blonde-haired man who had his hands chained to a pole of the tent.

“The credit rightly belongs to Lord Gulian Swann, my Prince. Lord Swann had sent patrols along the banks of the Mander to see whether any Lannister was trying to cross the river. My men chased Ser Kevan and his company straight into Lord Swann’s patrol.” Lord Tarly reported truthfully.

“I see. Where is Lord Swann?” Stannis asked, his eyes searching for Lord Gulian inside the tent.

“I’m afraid Lord Swann is not present in Appleton, your grace. I had thought it prudent to keep Lord Swann and his forces to guard the northside of Appleton and patrol the Mander to prevent the enemy from going around the castle.” said Lord Tarly.

Stannis couldn’t help but frown when he heard that. For a moment, he suspected Lord Tarly purposefully kept Lord Swann away from Appleton to hog all the glory for the Reachmen. However, the results spoke for themselves, and therefore he chose not to raise the issue.

“Nonetheless, your services to House Baratheon will not be forgotten, Lord Randyll.” Stannis tactfully said, knowing that it was important not to make unnecessary enemies if he was to enjoy the fruits of his ambition.

Lord Tarly bowed low in appreciation, and Stannis was back to stare at his captured nemesis in the form of Kevan Lannister.

“With Ser Kevan’s capture, surely Lord Tywin would surrender and end the war.” Lord Appleton said with hope.

Stannis couldn’t help but scoff.

“If Lord Tywin wanted to surrender, he’d have already done so when he learned that Jaime Lannister remains a prisoner in Storm’s End.” Stannis said.

He bent down on his knees so that he was level with Ser Kevan’s eyes.

“Tell me, Ser. Has Cersei Lannister and her bastard daughter arrived at Casterly Rock?” Stannis asked, but Ser Kevan remained tight-lipped.

“Answer the Prince’s query, Ser. Your cause is lost, as well as the war. There is no point in further defiance.” said Lord Tarly, frowning at the defiant Lannister knight.

“Our cause or the war is not lost so long as Tywin breaths. You may enjoy this momentary victory. But Tywin has overcome greater odds.” said Ser Kevan, his fiery green eyes holding strong faith in his brother’s capabilities.

After saying his piece, the Lannister knight refused to say anything else, leaving the gathered lords and knights frustrated. But Stannis was not as annoyed as the rest of his allies. Because he already knew Cersei Lannister had not reached Casterly Rock, as he had checked with Varys before he rode off from King’s Landing. There was a chance that the Master of Whispers was unaware of Cersei’s arrival at Casterly Rock. However, the chances of Cersei slipping past the Redwyne fleet was slim. Paxter Redwyne had assured Jon Arryn that no ship was getting past the patrolling ships of the Redwyne fleet.

Considering Varys’ assurance that Cersei never reached Casterly Rock and Paxter Redwyne assuring the crown all ships were prohibited from sailing around the Reach, he could only conclude that Cersei Lannister and Myrcella Waters never managed to reach their destination.

This raised the question; Where exactly was Cersei Lannister?

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Captain Rowello couldn’t help but curse his luck. He had thought he was committing to a job of delivering the Lannister Queen to Lannisport with none the wiser. The Lannisters being the great lords they are, would reward him and his crew with a mountain of gold in return for his services. That was the plan when he was offered the opportunity to help Cersei Lannister and her brat escape from Storm’s End. He wouldn’t have agreed to help Cersei Lannister escape if he wasn’t assured of safe passage into the massive castle of Storm’s End. He came to know about the job from a crew member of Salladhor Saan’s fleet.

When he heard learned that the Lysene pirate captain was considering doing the job and stood to make a fortune, he couldn’t help but jump in and seize the opportunity. Looking back, he realised he was too stupid and rash to wade into Westerosi politics. He hadn’t thought the Redwyne fleet would go on full alert and blockade the western seas from all shipping. And now, even the Dornish fleet was patrolling the Summer Sea, making it nigh impossible to sail into Lannisport. He had already tried to evade the Redwyne fleet thrice, but his ship was chased out of the Redwyne Straits each time. He’d have made a fourth attempt but got word that the Dornish fleet was being gathered. It spooked him to know that he’d get caught up between two large fleets, and he was not brave enough to test his luck against the Dornish and Redwyne fleets.

Therefore, he sailed his boat, the Blue Maiden, out of the Summer Sea into the safety of the Stepstones. But there was one problem. He had wasted months on the sea hoping to gain a mountain of Lannister gold. Yet, all he had to show for was a four-namesday old child and an uppity headache of a woman who was now the former queen of the Seven Kingdoms. If the present situation continues, it won’t be long before his crew turn on him. He’d be a useless pirate if there

were nothing to share with his men. Sooner or later, word would spread of the former queen in his custody, and the Iron Throne would be after his hide.

Rowello drank deep from his cup and drained the last drops of ale in a single pass. He knew there was only one way he could salvage the situation. If he could not claim Lannister gold by delivering Cersei Lannister and her brat to Lannisport, he might as well sell the woman off at a fancy brothel in Lys. He knew there were some special brothels that served only the richest Magisters of the Free Cities. They'd spend a lot of silver to buy a woman like Cersei Lannister, as she was a unique specimen in the trade. He supposed Magisters and wealthy merchants would be lining up in Lys to get a taste of the Westerosi queen.

Rowello suddenly sat up straight with excitement as the idea gained more traction in his mind. He salivated at the profits he could gain by selling off a voluptuous woman like Cersei Lannister to a brothel in Lys. Obviously, it'd not amount to the gold he'd have gotten from House Lannister, but he was in a desperate situation. He was in desperate need of a refit of the Blue Maiden. Should fortune favoured him, he was also hoping to add another ship to his name.

However, he couldn't jump head-first into another bad position. He would keep the child Myrcella in his custody as a shield should the Lannisters somehow crawl back to prominence. By all accounts he heard so far, the Westerosi king was winning the war against House Lannister. Should King Robert Baratheon win, House Lannister would get destroyed or diminished in power. If the latter were to happen, he'd have to keep the girl Myrcella as a hostage to shield himself from any hostile action from the Lannisters. Maybe, he could even sell the child to House Lannister for a small fortune.

Rowello thought over the plan in his mind and found it sound. Now, he just had to present his plan in a way that'd not spook the Westerosi queen of his true intentions.

"Dale." he shouted at the door.

"Captain."

The door suddenly swung open with his trusted servant dipping his pea-sized head into his cabin.

"Bring mi' that Westerosi woman into mi' cabin."

"Aye, Captain." Dale nodded, immediately leaving after closing his cabin door.

Rowello didn't have to wait long as the Lannister woman gracefully walked into his cabin after a few minutes. He had to admit that Cersei Lannister was a beauty unlike any he had ever seen. He'd say the Lannister Queen was the most beautiful woman on either side of the Narrow Sea. The woman was dressed in fine green silk with gold trimmings. His eyes immediately went to the full round breasts of the Lannister woman. The gold and green dress was not hiding those round orbs' size or beauty. Then the full red lips always beckoned any red-blooded man to claim it with no mind to the price that had to be paid. The green striking eyes always made any man or woman lose themselves as they were more beautiful than even the famed emerald gems of Norvos. Then finally, the Lannister queen was blessed with a long golden mane gleaming bright yellow as if it was woven out of the gold mined out of Casterly Rock itself.

Shaking himself out of his stupor, he couldn't help but wonder what the woman was thinking, prancing around his ship dressed in these fine silks. It was a small wonder that his men hadn't forced themselves on the Lannister queen on this long voyage. Even he had been tempted to visit the woman's cabin and enjoy the woman from dusk till dawn. Only the promise of gold made him lock

up the temptation bubbling within and even keep the men of his crew to behave respectfully with the threat of his sword.

'I don't have to care about that now, do I?' Rowello thought to himself as he enjoyed the beauty of the woman standing before him.

He eyed the barrel of wine that was safely stored in his private trunk. It was one of the stronger versions of the Dornish red he had liberated from a merchant ship a few years back. He had kept it stowed away for an occasion of great importance. He supposed having the Queen of Westeros warm his bed was a great occasion as any.

"Please sit, your grace. I believe I've some news to share about our destination. But first, shall I serve you wine?" Rowello offered, knowing full well that the wine was strong enough to lower the inhibitions of the Lannister queen if she managed to consume enough quantities.

"I doubt you've anything that fits my tastes, Captain Rowello." Cersei scrunched up her nose in distaste. "But after months of suffering the stale food and ale, I suppose even the lowest of wines you peasants drink might compare better."

"Your grace will find that you'd enjoy what I've to offer." Rowello said, keeping a smile on his face even though he was tempted just to smack the woman for her uppity attitude.

However, he disregarded such thoughts as he knew he'd be the one laughing in the end. He decided to give a befitting answer to the Lannister woman in his bed. He was not going to let her leave his bed anytime soon. After all, he had a few months' worth of abuse and vitriol to pay back.