**Chapter 38**

**The War of Lions**

*On the second moon of the year one hundred and thirty-eight after the Conquest, the treacherous Lord Walder Reyne broke the oaths he had sworn to the Iron Throne and Casterly Rock, and raised his banners in rebellion.*

*For any man versed in the art of war, it looked like the Lord of Castamere had lost what was left of his sanity. The lands of House Reyne and its allies were powerful, that much could not be denied, but against the might of House Lannister and the warriors who served them loyally, they were outnumbered. The Regent of the Rock, Lady Johanna Lannister, had also time and gold on her side. As long as Casterly Rock and Lannisport held, the heart and the lungs of the Westerlands belonged to House Lannister, and the knights of the Gold Lion would be fed and paid in time.*

*This didn’t even count the incredible advantage of having a dragon on their side: no one doubted that the moment the rebellion arrived to the ears of King Daeron, the Green King would mount his blue dragon and fly west to punish the traitors.*

*Alas for hundreds of innocent souls, Lord Walder Reyne was unquestionably a traitor, but he was not as insane as the bitter tongues of his opponents pretended. His first move, well before any raven message could carry word of his betrayal, was to pay multiple killers to shoot their crossbows at the Green King in the middle of his capital. While King Daeron I survived, he was in no shape to mount Tessarion and rain the fires of destruction unleashed on Old Wyk for the next moons.*

*The next moves of the Red Lion were to seize, by diplomacy or violence, most of the fortresses which would have allowed the loyal armies of the Reach, Crownlands, and Stormlands to march easily into the Westerlands. The Lord of Castamere knew these castles could not hold indefinitely, especially not the ones the bannersmen of House Tyrell could assail in a matter of fortnights, but they may delay reinforcements long enough for Lord Walder Reyne to seize Lannisport, and with it, the heart of the West.*

*It was an audacious strategy. Too audacious, many of his allies in rebellion remarked themselves. The forces which went to raise the banners of the Red Lion, despite having their numbers bolstered by thousands of sellswords and pirates of the Free Cities, weren’t limitless. To achieve victory, they had to strike fast, they had to fight every couple of days, and they had to suffer no defeats. One misstep, one battle turning badly for the men rebelling against House Lannister, and the grand plan could unravel.*

*As if it wasn’t bad enough, the methods employed from the very beginning, while tactically sound, were opposed to the very tenets of chivalry, and guaranteed King Daeron and his loyal commanders would never tolerate an independent kingdom ruled by a Reyne dynasty as long as it was in their power to contest it. Assassinations and treachery sometimes carried the day, but they fuelled hatred and loathing towards the followers of the Red Lion, with consequences which would give plenty of trouble for the Iron Throne in the coming years.*

*Did the rebel knights considered that before following their lieges into treachery? Most likely not.*

*In the end, as the first swords were drawn, all these oath-breaking warriors cared was to gain the glories and fame they had been denied for so long.*

*They would fight the War of Lions.*

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

**Ser Rolland Lefford**

Rolland had never liked the odours assailing his nose every time he passed through the lower doors of the western towers. Too often the courtyard smelled like horse shit, or something equally as unpleasant. Unlike the ramparts and the upper towers were the winds were always powerful and giving you the feeling it was autumn, not summer, the lower you get, the more unpleasant things arrived to your nose.

But today, the Regent of the Golden Tooth would have gladly accepted the usual smell of horse or dog shit for what had replaced it. The courtyard of the castle he had sworn to his life smelled like the Stranger Himself.

The scores of corpses his men were beginning to pile up on cart were one of the reasons the castle stank like it had never done in the last two decades.

But by the Warrior, it was a lesser problem today. What mattered was that the Golden Tooth had not fallen, despite the monumental treachery House Lefford had been the victim of.

“I saw two scores of men fleeing back westwards like the Stranger was behind them,” Rolland told his Master of Arms, who after today would have one more ugly scar on his jaw. “I don’t think they have the friends to come back and besiege us, but let’s be careful. Once our hill scouts are here, send at least two or three scores to patrol the pass.”

“We can’t afford being caught off guard again,” the loyal soul agreed, striking his fist on his armour.

“We weren’t caught off-guard by their coming,” Rolland sighed. “We were caught off-guard by their treachery. What sort of madness seized them?”

It was madness to attack the Golden Tooth, unless you had a dragon. The walls were tall and well-built, and would not break for something lighter than the repeated blows of large stones sent by trebuchet. Scorpions and Ballista waited any attacker.

And the moment the traitors had spilled blood, the men on the ramparts and the towers had rapidly understood what was happening, and began to punish the bastards for their murderous deeds.

It had cost House Lefford. They had opened the gates in good faith, truthfully believing this party of false-knights and sellsword killers was here to deliver urgent news...and more than two hundred had been able to enter the courtyard before the portcullis was lowered.

“Sixty dead, my Lord. We have twice that many wounded,” the Masters of Arms answered the unspoken question.

“And on their side?”

“Three hundred dead, one in three outside the castle,” the older man grunted, “fortunately for us, they weren’t that good swordsmen...they weren’t that good at fighting either.”

“House Sarsfield lost all its best fighters at the Battle-by-the-Lakeshore,” Rolland said absently.

“We lost our best fighters there too...my Lord.”

They had lost everything in this humiliating slaughter. His uncle, Lord Humfrey Lefford had perished, his previous wounds making him easy prey for the Black knights and free riders. The banners, their House’s treasury chest, the rolls of names of those who had distinguished themselves, and many expensive armours and equipment which had been in House Lefford for generations...all had been lost on that day of tragedy.

Normally he wouldn’t try to think about it, but today watching the small pools of blood, the men’s entrails on the ground, the dead animals, and the butchered smallfolk whose only wrong was to be present when the traitors attacked...it was difficult not to think about it.

“When it is going to end?” Rolland asked bitterly.

“With the destruction of the Blacks and the return to a just reign, my Lord.”

Rolland managed a cough or two, unable to truly laugh in front of the carnage.

“The Blacks are to the east and don’t fight like that,” if this was truly the Blacks’ silver which turned House Sarsfield against them, there would have been a dragon not far from the Golden Tooth ready to burn them alive. But no one had seen scales or tail of one of the beasts, and with the blue sky and almost no clouds, no flame-breathing reptiles would come unannounced in the middle of the day. “I want to see the prisoner.”

“Are you sure, my Lord?”

“I am not going to kill him, if that’s what you fear,” the urge to kill the traitor who had plunged his sword into the throat of several men he had trained and rode with for the last years was strong, but it would wait. Discovering why House Sarsfield had turned traitor was more important.

His Master of Arms gave him a look which was not exactly supportive.

“My Lord, hum...you can control yourself, but...Ser Ilyn Sarsfield is known for his venomous tongue, and, hum...”

Ser Rolland Lefford, Regent of the Golden Tooth, sighed.

“You have a point.” It was true, he had...vented his wrath on several men who had thrown down their swords and were begging for mercy as he cornered them between stone and steel. “I will leave him in your capable hands...but I want him to speak, before we send him screaming to the Seven Hells.”

Rolland had never liked very much the eldest son and Heir of Sarsfield. Ser Ilyn had been one of these ‘young peacocks’ of the Tourney of Lannisport, always eager to proclaim they were the best jousters and swordsmen of the known world, but failing to prove it lance and blade in hand.

“He will speak, my Lord,” his vassal promised, “but mark my words, it is certainly the work of the Blacks. Only them have the dragons to stop King Daeron from exacting fiery revenge on their heads if the treachery failed to open the gates of the Golden Tooth.”

“And the reason why no dragon intervened?” It was the big flaw the moment he had thought about it. Why had no dragon appeared to support the banners of the green arrow? The enemy blocked outside would have sold their souls for the destruction of his siege engines, and it wasn’t like Ser Ilyn and his band of false-knights hadn’t bled for their part of the bargain.

“The dragon was too sleepy to wake up in time?”

Rolland passed a hand on his cuirass, before remembering that it was coated in blood, and that the smell importunating him was coming from his armour too.

That said, it was really weak and not funny to use ‘the dragon was sleepy’ as an argument.

“Do it. In the mean time, I am going to...clean the courtyard...and remove the corpses.”

There would be no consecrated burials for the traitors, just a large unmarked pit where all the corpses would disappear.

By sunset, Ser Ilyn Sarsfield hadn’t spoken, despite the loss of several fingers and teeth.

Two days later, the bastard was still silent, finding somehow the strength to mock and insult the men questioning him. But by then, scouts loyal to House Lefford had galloped back to the castle. A sizeable army was marching eastwards. The remaining men of House Sarsfield they had not killed were there to take their revenge...and with them were the banners of the Red Lion.

It wasn’t the Blacks who had instigated this treachery. It was House Reyne.

**Lord Walder Reyne**

Walder had never been invited to Hornvale more than five times in his life, but one glance several years ago had been enough to acknowledge this wasn’t a castle you could afford to storm the gates of. The citadel was on top of a very tall hill, and given a few turn of hourglasses, the men of House Brax would push enormous rocks and masses of burning straw – copiously drenched in oil and other substances – and let the slope do the rest. By the time the ladders were in position to let his men climb up, he may have lost half of his men for no gain.

Some lesser Lords might have despaired, but not him. He was Lord Walder Reyne, and as long as his will stood strong, he knew there was a way. Feeble minds would proclaim his defeat was pre-ordered by divine powers and everything he did was going to break at some point, but those were the words of cowards and scribes who had never held a sword in their hands.

For today, Hornvale had fallen, and he had not lost one hundred men in the battle, assuming he desired to call it by such a haughty title.

“You have done well, Ser Rupert,” the Red Lion told the man who had attacked the foot of House Brax while they believed themselves safe. “Rise Lord Rupert Brax, Lord of Hornvale.”

“I am yours, King Walder.”

Of course the bastard was. The young Rupert Hill had burned all his ties by participating in the murder of his half-brother, the former Heir to Hornvale. And while it was Walder’s horse who had caught the old Lord in an ambush before he could reach his castle, the Lannisters and their servants would pin this murder on the new Lord Rupert Brax too. If the lions of pale yellow won, Rupert would be lucky to be authorised to don the black and depart for the Night’s Watch – apart from certain criminals at King’s Landing, no one bothered with sending the scum and the turncloaks northwards anymore.

If he wanted to stay the Lord of Hornvale and all the Brax lands, he would have to fight and prove his valour in many battles.

“You have a holdfast to rule before our departure. I leave you to it.”

Walder feigned to appreciate the compliments of the boisterous bastard before turning around and descending the slopes of the hill. Truth to tell, he would have preferred to have the true Brax on his side; not only hundreds of the best armsmen had refused to rally to Rupert and had to be killed in their beds or in several ambushes, the former ‘Bastard of Hornvale’ was not well-loved and his men were poorly disciplined – despite his orders, Lady Brax and many of her female servants had been raped.

Now there were one or two young men who had gone to Casterly Rock for some ridiculous thing still alive, and they would swear vengeance for what had been done. And the servants and the smallfolk were already rebellious. They had not loved their Lord to the bottom of their pathetic hearts, but they had not disliked him either...and the young men Rupert asked of them to increase the size of the Red Lion’s army was not making more popular.

Still, Hornvale was his now. The danger of a fast campaign against Deep Den was no more.

With Houses Lydden, Crakehall, and Serrett rallied to his banners, the frontier of his new ‘Western Kingdom’ was relatively secure in the south. No raven had yet reached him of the result of his plan against the so-called ‘Lord of the Seven Kingdoms’, but it was certainly a success; else Tessarion would have already been seen by the men crewing the eastern watchtowers.

Now if the other plans worked, his forces would be able to unite and meet in a single grand fist at Lannisport...

This was the moment one of his guards chose to rush ahead and hand him a small ribbon of parchment.

“Bad news, your Grace. The assault on the Golden Tooth has failed. Ser Ilyn Sarsfield is dead or prisoner, and our forces have been unable to terrify the garrison into surrender.”

In the blink of an eye, most of the happiness Walder Reyne had felt since dawn vanished.

This was bad news, indeed. House Lefford’s ridiculous loyalty to their yellow masters had required them to be eliminated in the new kingdom he was going to build, but this wasn’t the main reason he had chosen to order it.

The truth was, they were going to fight a lot this summer. This was what happened when you tried to remove the Lannisters from their piles of gold. And to break the Lannisters, he needed a large army, ten thousand men at least. These men couldn’t fight and harvest the fields at the same time. The Reach wasn’t going to sell its crops to him, which left the Riverlands. Walder had felt reasonably sure the Blacks would happily give him cereals and apples, as long as he could buy them with Lefford gold.

Plus if his daggers had really killed ‘King Daeron’, the Greens had no more dragons, which meant the Black Queens and her servants had free way to conquer the South – the Crownlands were ripe for an invasion or two, their crippled forces unable to stand before column of horses and a dragon.

But if the Golden Tooth had not fallen, a part of his grand plan of conquest was no longer feasible. Worse, he had emptied Castamere beforehand, leaving the minimum of men to stop the forces of the Banefort and the other northern castles, while was rushing to secure the southern hills.

“I should have never listened to Lord Merlon.” The old fool had believed his son would cover himself in glory, novice or no novice. Well, the novice had failed in his mission.

“Prepare a new message for our forces in the north!” King Walder Reyne barked to one of the maesters bribed to sing the praises of his cause by raven. “I need to change the deployments of our columns and the siege engines we have.”

**Lysaro Rogare**

“Hey! Be careful about-“

The Lysene had not the time to say more before his mouth met Lysaro’s fist. This shut him up really fast.

“Silence,” the true Rogare whispered. “Is that too difficult to understand for your poor heads?”

Lysaro had repeated it again and again, but some people were just refusing to listening to.

Did they think his speeches were too boring or was he just speaking in a wrong language? Honestly, ‘the more noise we do, the more arrows and scorpions we will receive in return’ was not that difficult to understand!

The fact he received plenty of silent and approving nods told him that at least, hundreds of men weren’t making the same mistake as the idiot he had just smacked around.

Fortunately, it seemed the stupidity of one man hadn’t ruined the whole plan. To the north, the watchtowers of the Lannisters were not burning their piles of wood to warn the defenders an attack was coming. And ahead of them, Lannisport the Golden continued to gleam and shine in the darkness, as its lighthouses and its coastal houses were still the scenes of much work being done despite the nightly hour.

Lysaro felt his heart beat faster as the ships under his command grew closer and closer. The wind was continuing to be favourable too. They had been forced to wait one more day than ‘King’ Walder Reyne wanted, but the winds and the waves were only commanded by the Gods, and woe to the man who believed otherwise.

Besides, it wasn’t like it was going to make a difference. Really, the Ironborn had been able to sack this city several years ago. The Ironborn! If as several slaver captains joked, there was truly a species between the large monkeys of Sothoryos and the humans, the Ironborn were fit to take this ‘mantle’. The islanders had been good sailors and warriors as long as they stayed away from land warfare, but once on a land which didn’t move around, they were brutes the first series of walls could slaughter. How else explaining they had never been able to breach the defences of any significant Essossi harbour?

His force, however, was far, far more dangerous than any gathering of pirates unable to understand the tiniest concept of financial gain. A few bad apples set aside, Lysaro had twenty-five warships and six merchantmen with him, and he had filled all of them with excellent blades before leaving the shore next to Crakehall. Since all the ships would be beached to make the assault fast and unstoppable, it was seven thousand men which were going to fall upon the ‘Red Cloaks’. The Reyne guardsmen had been concerned about them, but since their only experience was fighting against the Ironborn and they couldn’t do that properly without a dragon burning everything too strong, Lysaro wasn’t worried at all.

The wind gained strength after he thought that, a good omen of the Gods. Not that he had been fearful of the result. With one day of delay on his part, there was no way the knights of Crakehall could not be in position south of the city. Add the scores of men Lord Reyne had convinced to open the southern gates to allow them in, this part of the fighting was already decided before the first sword was drawn.

“Prepare the arrows, we are going to need-“

And then a fire began to burn to the north. Then a second. And a third.

They weren’t two miles away from the shore, and the beacons of alarm of the coast were lighting up!

“Admiral, they know-“

“They have seen us, yes. It won’t do them any good. One hundred breaths, and we’re ashore. Kill the rowers if you must, but be we must go faster!”

“I was saying there are too many fires for the Lannisters to have noticed us right now, Admiral! They knew we were coming!”

“Ridiculous!” Lysaro replied as there were now six fires burning on the cliffs north-west of Lannisport and the sound of drums and trumpets was calling the Westerners to war. “They would have tried to oppose us with their own fleet if it was the case!”

The man shut up, having no answer to this truth. Because it was the entire point, wasn’t it? If the Lannisters saw them somehow coming, they would have dragged their sailors from their beds in the whorehouses, and put them back aboard their galleys. It wasn’t the case here; the few hulls the yellow lions had successfully rebuilt were lying there, with a few sailors on their decks trying to understand what was happening.

And the fleet, his fleet, was advancing upon them so fast they didn’t have time for anything more to gape before fleeing, their tails between their legs as their courage abandoned them.

They were so close now that Lysaro could read from the name of the ship painted in white from his position on his flagship: the *Golden Dream*.

“A fitting name for Westerners who bow to a woman and weak souls,” the Lysene commander laughed. “Don’t waste any fire arrows on it; since its crew is already fleeing, I think we will be able to take it and use it as a transport for our spoils.”

It would also decrease a bit the number of men per ships for the return journey, because as much as the Crakehall-Lannisport journey had been short, every part of the ship was so crowded it wasn’t exactly comfortable.

“Yes, Admiral! To the Age of War!”

“TO THE AGE OF WAR! VENGEANCE AND FIRE!” the surprise was no more, and by this point nothing was going to convince the Red Cloaks they were friends. Now he had to trust on the men of Lord Reyne to open him the gates while they killed their way through the shipyard and the sea quarters.

The *Golden Dream* began to burn as the battle-cries were shouted. It was too fast, too unanticipated to do more than shout in surprise. The *Spear of Sellsails* on their left tried to stop its manoeuvre, but it was too close, and several pots thrown by enemies before they threw themselves into the sea. The fire spread on, and two other galleys began to burn next to the doomed ships.

“They are...what are they doing?”

“They are burning their own ships! That way their archers and engines will have no trouble finding us in the night!”

But that would mean-

No, no. They couldn’t know they were coming. Everything had been done in secret, everything had been too well-planned. The plan was perfect and-

The first ballista bolt slammed into the *Rogare’s Claim* just behind the head of the prow’s statue. And flames were dancing upon it.

**Ser Stafford Lantell**

“Did they really think it was going to work after the Ironborn tried it less than a decade ago?”

For all his youth, the youngster of Lannisport who had opened his mouth had indeed described very aptly the situation.

“They weren’t thinking,” a veteran spat, one who unlike the blonde-haired youth, had been there when the Ironborn sacked Lannisport. “Otherwise they would have noticed our entire fleet wasn’t at anchor.”

Stafford knew it was a bit unfair for the scum of the Free Cities and other sellswords. After all the whole point of the plan had been to force them into attacking before they could smell the affair was smelling worse than a dead fish left two days under the sun.

When they had caught the traitors and forced them to reveal what they knew of the future naval attack – Ser Gerion Lanny should have really toned down his declarations of ‘loyalty’, they had attracted the attention of the Captains of Casterly Rock – it had given them two days to prepare.

An entire city could do a lot of things in two days. The shipyards had been prepared to sustain a battle as best as one could –often by disassembling them or putting a lot of wet things over the parts most likely to be burnt. Trenches had been dug, thousands of improvised fire-fighters had been recruited, and three of the oldest galleys – ships which hadn’t gone west into the Sunset Sea in the last five years - had been deliberately transformed into fire ships, though not having wildfire or another substance of the Alchemists, the result wasn’t as devastating as the Captains of Lannisport intended.

The result was still impressive as he watched the ‘battle’ from the Ocean Gate.

The Essossi fleet House Reyne had bought to kill and plunder Lannisport was burning. More than twenty ships had come out of the night in packed formation, believing they had the advantage of surprise; now eight were lost to the flames, and two or three crews were fighting against the furnaces to make sure their hulls didn’t go the same way.

Incidentally, all the bolts the ballista of the Ocean Gate were firing were placed into the braziers until they were red hot and only then were unleashed against the enemy ships. It should have been too dangerous into a proper siege – the fire could spread on your own side the same way it did for the enemy – but the men who had taken the Reyne promises and the gold Castamere weren’t firing back. They were too busy trying to save their ships and to decide what their next action must be.

House Lannister’s Captains had intended it to be that way, of course. The ‘cowardice’ of their men abandoning the first ships before any shot was fired would convince many of the sellswords and the pirates to push their ships into the harbour or the nearby beaches, where the ballista servants would earn their fame.

“What worries me, Captain, is that contrary to the traitors were saying, there is no assault against the Sun Gate and the southern walls. Nor have there been any sign of enemy cavalry east of the city. Were they lying in the hope that exaggerating the size of the enemy army would convince us to strike down our banners?”

“That’s a good question,” Stafford admitted, passing his hand in his beard of five days. With everything which had taken place, he didn’t have the time for a shave before the battle. “But while traitors can be really imaginative, Gerion Lanny and his friends didn’t exaggerate the size of this fleet. They didn’t predict they would be a day late, but given the way the winds turned yesterday, it’s not that surprising. No, I think they really believed an army should come from the south. Good news for us, bad news for them, I suppose.”

Mother and Maiden, Stafford really hoped Gerion Lanny had tried as the masters of the cells worked to untie his tongue. As a Captain, he was aware of how many noble names had been uttered. And not minor holdfasts, poor knights, or new money having inherited their seat from the Dance. Lydden. Serrett. Crakehall – this was certainly the ‘army’ supposed to attack from the south. And of course Reyne, the King of the traitors, assassins, and all evil-doers.

“Anyway we will take care of it tomorrow. For now, we have a battle to win. Give the signal.”

A red flag, a blue flag and a golden flag were raised in close succession over three towers, and new pyres were lighted.

And from the north where they had awaited, the thunder of hundreds of horses was heard. The chivalry of Kayce, Feastfires, and Casterly Rock did not seem to advance that fast, but then the sellswords and their allies of misfortune were trapped between burning ships and the walls of pikes guarding the Ocean Gate.

Since over two thousand knights and heavily-armoured mounted men were coming at them from the north, it left only the choice to form a pike wall, or to flee south.

It would have taken a great commander to achieve the former in the middle of the night, as archers and ballista servants ‘gifted’ them fire and steel. The invaders hadn’t a great commander, and the quality of their ‘proud warriors’ was horrible.

Before the first horse began to gallop, the formations were already broken, and it was every company for itself. Some fled south, where they would soon realise other men awaited them with steel and arrows. Some outright struck their banners and started to cry for mercy. Others roared loudly and tried to resist as best as they could, which was...not good at all.

“What will do if too many surrender?”

“The same thing we always do when someone tries to invade the Westerlands,” a knight of House Hamell chuckled. “Heads. Spikes. Walls.”

Another signal went out, and this time it was the turn of the Lannisport fleet to reveal itself, closing the trap.

“Everyone not needed to man the ballista or who isn’t an archer, with me,” the knight of the Western city smiled cruelly. “We have so many guests tonight, why don’t we explain to them the legendary hospitality of Lannisport?”

That was the problem with the last sack. People tended to forget, but most of the Ironborn who had done this heinous treachery were dead now. The Essossi would share the same fate, and in time so would the Reynes who had planned this battle.

It wouldn’t be said the West didn’t pay its debts.

**Lord Carlos Crakehall**

“You are incapables! I am surrounded by incapables!”

Lord Carlos Crakehall had rarely felt so much anger, and the fact it was his own men-at-arms and knights who were the reason of his wrath was intolerable.

“You were supposed to use the trebuchets on the whore’s men, Ser Tion! And you Hugor! What in the Seven Hells were you thinking using your ladders like that!”

His vassal had the good sense to lower his eyes, mumbling ‘it seemed like a good idea’ in his grey beard.

“All right. All right.” Carlos reined in his temper. “This last assault was a...disaster. And we have lost more time we didn’t have.”

The sun had long passed its zenith, and was slowly turning west. The noon bells had rang what felt an eternity ago, and the summer weather was so hot on the armours and the chainmail over five hundred of his men were on well duty, bring drinkable water from the wells to his army camp.

“But Tarbeck Hall must fall. King Walder ordered it, and as the Seven are my witness, we will break the walls and win this siege.”

Half of his Captains whispered a prayer to the Warrior in return. The other half smirked and said nothing. Damn these Essossi heretics.

“We are already three days late, and I have no doubt the whore and her servants managed to send a rider before we surrounded Tarbeck Hall.” He continued. The maester of the holdfasts had been one of theirs, and has released his ravens when Lord Tarbeck had decided staying the dog of the Lannisters was better than being a loyal sword of the Red Lion. Which was why his decapitated head was decorating the great gate of Tarbeck Hall, along with all the men of House Tarbeck that had been supposed convince Lord Gareth Tarbeck to join their cause. “We must break the Tarbeck here and now. I have no doubt these Lysene bastard of Rogare has already stormed Lannisport without our help, and he’s going to be insufferable when we march into the city.”

“Assuming he won in the first place...” one of the Myrish swordsmen whispered loud enough to not be discreet.

“Do you care to repeat that...Captain?” The tone employed by Carlos was threatening enough that the man should understand closing his mouth and staying quiet was the best thing he could do at his point. But the man had the gall to talk back to him!

“I’m saying out loud what everyone was thinking!” The disrespectful foreigner retorted. “First the Tarbeck were supposed to open their gates and join our cause, only they did the exact opposite!”

“Because the Lannister whore married to Lord Tarbeck convinced him to refuse our offers and close his gates!”

“And no one thought he had a Lannister wife would be significant?” The Myrish man shook his head in disbelief. “Absolutely unbelievable. This whole affair-”

“Choose carefully your next words, Captain,” at his silent command, two of his men took position behind the insolent Essossi. “This is King Walder Reyne’s plan you are criticising.”

The man shut up, at last. Only for a Tyroshi to open his mouth of heretic within three heartbeats.

“Kingly plan or not, our assault against the curtain wall won’t succeed with the siege engines we have. Most of our ladders are too short or too shoddily built to handle the weight of our men. Our trebuchets were too hastily built, and the stones rarely hit the walls. We have already lost too many men, and the towers are intact. I suggest we leave one thousand men here and we march north to join Lysaro Rogare at Lannisport. If he took the city, he will have scorpions and ballista to give us, as well as servants trained in their use.”

“Out of the question!” The Lannister whore had mocked him from the safety of her husband’s castle. For this insult, she would die, and slowly. “House Tarbeck’s knights would charge our foot the moment our army would be on their way to Lannisport! Only my knights would stand a chance!”

“There can’t be more than two hundred of them inside the castle, Lord Crakehall. House Tarbeck didn’t have the days or the ravens to summon them here.”

Carlos didn’t like that one of his captains was judging good to disagree with him in public. He liked even less the reminder that sooner or later, House Tarbeck would receive reinforcements, while his were already on the field.

“We must break Tarbeck Hall!” The Master of House Crakehall insisted. He had been promised many lands if his part of the plan was successful, and he would not lose the favour of King Walder because the Tarbecks had a change of heart! “As long as it stands, it can be a rallying ground for the knights serving the false lions! This is why we will launch a new assault in the evening the moment the radiance of the sun becomes bearable!”

“My Lord, we have already attacked twice today, the men are tired-“

“Tired! Tired! You have only this word at the mouth! You promised me Essossi could run and fight for ten moons, but for three days of siege, and all I’m hearing is complaint after complaint.”

Horns of his troops began to sound in the distance. Once, then twice. And dozens of war horns answered. Always two notes. A familiar signal no son of the Westerlands could mistake.

*Enemy*.

A messenger in purple colours of one of the Tyroshi companies was the first to bear the bad news.

“Lord Crakehall! An immense army is descending the Ocean Road! I saw more than three thousand infantry and one thousand horse! The dominant banners are those of the yellow lion, my Lord!”

Lord Carlos felt like the Seven Hells were opening under his feet. If the Lannisters were rushing to Tarbeck Hall, it meant this Lysene idiot of Lysaro Rogare had utterly failed. Lannisport had not fallen.

But after thinking about it, the Crakehall highborn felt relief. Yes, Lysaro had failed...and since the Lannisters felt confident enough to send their knights here, it meant the ‘mighty fleet’ of the incompetent had certainly suffered massive losses. It also meant that the plan being in jeopardy wasn’t his fault. Yes, yes, the naval assault had been the principal arrow of the attack. House Crakehall was only the occupation force which would ultimately besiege Casterly Rock.

“Orders, my Lord?”

**Lady Johanna Lannister**

One moon ago, she had said one House turning traitor was one House too many.

Now? These very words were thrown in her face every time she looked at a map.

“I don’t know,” Johanna admitted, “how we will be able to rebuild the Westerlands from the betrayal of the Reynes.”

It was not something she would have told before her court, but the two men who were in the Room of Maps with her were trusted implicitly. Otherwise she wouldn’t have summoned them to assess point by point the scale of the treason which had just occurred.

“You managed to rebuild the Westerlands once,” her cousin Cedric said.

“Yes, when the two threats were the Riverlanders and the Ironborn.” The Regent of the West countered with heavy bitterness. “These were enemies we could rally against and everyone could hate. What just happened...”

She hadn’t the strength to finish the sentence.

“I agree with you,” Ser Jaime Lannister, her other advisor, answered before giving a loud sigh. “This rebellion is a catastrophe. Just speaking of our raven communications, this bastard of Reyne managed to use our harsh measures during the crisis of the Iron Fever to convince about one third of our maesters to turn traitor. Many holdfasts which stayed loyal to us were unable to contact Casterly Rock or their allies because of this. We have to return to pigeons and horse-mounted for everything.”

Johanna nodded. Ser Jaime was a pitiful jouster and warrior, and she would never give him the command of an army, but there was nothing wrong with his mind.

“We have already executed two grey robes at Lannisport, and I expect to sign many more execution orders before this moon is over.” The Regent said blandly. “Now that I have one more proof of the ‘loyalty’ of any maester who isn’t trained at Casterly Rock and with the education approved by House Lannister, there will be...changes by the end of this war.”

If they lost, Johanna would make sure there was no maester for the usurpers to take into their service. If House Lannister won, any grey robe or man having been put in charge of the ravenry duties and involved in this odious betrayal would pay it with their life, and the execution method would neither be the rope nor the axe.

“Let’s return to the military situation.”

“It is a catastrophe, my Lady.” Jaime began. “We knew the Reyne would try to contain our allies in the north by using Castamere as a wall, but we didn’t expect the barbaric methods they employed to massacre most of House Marbrand and Brax. And the reports from Tarbeck Hall and the Golden Tooth tells us this is no coincidence: first the Reyne bastards tried to convince the Lords to side with them, then dissatisfied sons, nephews or...bastards, and when it didn’t work, they used assassinations in the middle of the night, ‘bandits’, or outright slaughters of smallfolk to lure us into killing grounds.”

And when it didn’t work, they weren’t reluctant as flying banners of peace and trying to kill their way into a fortress, breaking every tradition and rule like the Ironborn had done in their time.

“With Ashemark and Castamere blocking our way, House Banefort, Westerling and Estren along with all their bannersmen are unable to give us succour. And House Lefford is under siege by House Sarsfield and the rest of the Reyne host.”

“Which is why I didn’t authorise Ser Tyland to go southwards after relieving Tarbeck Hall,” the woman who had been born Westerling acknowledged. “We need to break these castles which keep more than eight thousand of our men away from the south where the critical battles are going to be fought. And that means using the troops we have to take Sarsfield.”

“It is risky,” her cousin Cedric said after biting his lip. “If the Reyne traitor reacts fast enough...”

“We may be caught between the force who controls the pass leading to the Golden the Tooth and the army which helped the Brax bastard take Hornvale, yes. The risk is worth it in my opinion, however.”

If Tyland and his eight thousand men – many of them enraged young men who had taken up arms in the wake of the great betrayal’s revelation – were able to storm Sarsfield, not only they would be able to completely isolate Castamere and Ashemark, but the traitor forces would be deprived of the Sarsfield granaries and lands, which were some of the most fertile after those ruled by House Lannister.

“Should we try to inform House Lefford is to go on the offensive while the siege is lifted?” Jaime asked.

“No,” Johanna refused. “Not before they have been able to gather knights and bannersmen again in sufficient strength, at least. It is absolutely vital we hold the Golden Tooth.”

“The Reynes certainly threw a lot of forces into trying to seize it for their own gains,” the Lannister advisor remarked, evidently not understanding the issue. “Did they want to use it as a base to invite Black armies into the Westerlands?”

“No,” sometimes Jaime inability to understand a military situation was...annoying. “Or at least once more, not until the war is undeniably lost for them. For the coming moons, I think they hoped to use the Golden Tooth as a marketplace to buy as much of the Riverlands’ summer harvests as they could.”

“The Lord of Riverrun and his Mistress the Black Queen would want to be paid in gold and gems to give their agreement to such a bargain.” Cedric pointed out.

“And isn’t House Lefford famed for being one of the wealthiest Houses below House Lannister where gold is concerned?”

For once, the words failed her cousin. Johanna was utterly disgusted by the scheme too, assuming she had guessed correctly the intentions of the backstabber.

“I see,” Jaime nodded. “But if it was their intention, it appears it has failed. The Golden Tooth hasn’t fallen, and unless they find a way to cut the eastern pass I am not aware of, Ser Rolland will be able to buy enough food from Pinkmaiden – always assuming the Blacks approve – to feed his garrison and the forces he has. In fact, I would say that a lot of his plans for a quick and overwhelming assault have been serious failures.”

“The failure at Lannisport and Fair Isle certainly cost them a lot,” Cedric agreed. “We destroyed their entire fleet for minor losses of our own at the former, and at the latter, Silverbeard and his pirates were forced to withdraw when faced with crippling defeat. They must have lost roughly ten thousand men, dead or prisoners, seven thousand of them at Lannisport. This leaves them three sizeable forces we are aware of: the one besieging the Golden Tooth, which is four thousand strong, the Crakehall host retreating from the Tarbeck lands, five thousand strong, and the entire southern coalition which rallied to the seventh-accursed traitor.”

Unfortunately, this latter force was certainly the strongest army in the Westerlands right now. A lot of House Brax survivors had preferred to die or flee rather than serve a bastard, but Houses Lydden and Serrett had gone over root and branch to the banners of the red lion.

Thank the Mother her cousin Cyrelle had been able to poison her husband – officially it was an illness - and take command of the forces of Tarbeck Hall before this imbecile could join his forces with House Crakehall. Yes, they had been aware of the attack on Lannisport in advance, but there was no way it would have gone so easily with enemies coming from the sea *and* the south. In addition, she would have had to order Tyland to storm Tarbeck Hall afterwards to secure their southern flank. Assuming they had won the Battle of Lannisport.

“This is a lot of sellswords and war butchers which should never have been allowed into the Westerlands.” The southern hills of the kingdom of the West had been decimated by the Iron Fever; Johanna was still unpleasantly surprised Carlos Crakehall and his partners-in-crimes had managed to convinced their households to march when they were near-bankrupt and couldn’t have half of the levies they did before the Dance. “And a lot of traitors we will have to kill to make an emphatic point you don’t rebel against House Lannister.”

Castamere’s walls were most likely going to be razed if she won, and House Reyne asked to drink molten gold until their ambition thirst was fully quenched. House Westerling, Banefort, and Estren would share the gold and silver mines between themselves. A second son of House Prester married with a daughter of House Lefford to rule over Sarsfield, perhaps?

Johanna banished momentarily these political considerations. The war wasn’t going so well she could play the Game like that.

“What especially worries me,” Cedric said, “is that as long as either we or the Reachers aren’t able to pulverise the Crakehall host and castle, this war is not going to be ended in one or two moons. The Reyne traitors have gained too many allies in the south, and we lost too much ground due to murder and surprise.”

“King Daeron’s arrival could end this war in a fortnight.”

“Yes,” Johanna murmured. “But our King isn’t here.”

And the absence of replies to her pleas was seriously beginning to make her afraid. Surely House Lydden and the other traitors had not killed all the ravens she sent eastwards...

**King Daeron Targaryen**

Now that he was seriously wounded and stuck to his royal bed, Daeron had thought about the issue of health, and arrived to the conclusion non-injured men and women didn’t truly realise how lucky they were to have every part of their body functioning painlessly.

“How bad it is?” He asked, trying to find a comfortable position...or at least a stance which would hurt less, not more.

“It would be far better if you stopped gesticulating and moving every time I have my back turned!” Maester Samuel told him severely.

Daeron had an urge to lash out at the man and send him to a cell for a couple of moons. But the man himself had warned him he would tell exactly what he wanted before beginning to administer his disgusting ‘herbal treatments’ and immobilising his wounded leg.

And for the worse, the man who had chosen to name himself “Samuel of the White Chain”, annoying some of his conservative brethren at Oldtown, was certainly the best healer in his service. The best one money could buy who was also present at King’s Landing, to be accurate.

“I’m following your recommendations!”

“Poorly,” the fifty name days-old maester commented before storming out of the royal bedroom.

The door did not stay long closed; less than a turn of hourglass later, Marq Merryweather made his entrance, followed by two of his Kingsguards.

“Samuel was his usual rude-self, I suppose?”

“You suppose correctly,” Daeron made a gesture of impatience to his Hand. “Did he tell you the bad news?”

“No,” the Lord of Longtable shook his head. “He was too busy grumbling about irresponsible patients.”

“Six moons,” Daeron said simply. Lord Marq Merryweather grimaced for a long, long time. “In his opinion, the bones broken can only be mended with time. Pain can be appeased, substances can be found to remove some problems...but no ‘miracle of lore and science’ can return bones to what they are before injury.”

“Six moons,” his Hand repeated glumly. “Do we have that much time before the Black dragons are unleashed?”

Daeron had thought and re-thought the question, and he honestly didn’t know the answer.

“I don’t know. Given how...indiscreet the assassination attempt was, I think the rumours must have reached Stone Hedge by now, if not the exact gravity of my injuries.”

“Your Grace...my King...it won’t take them long to know Tessarion doesn’t have a rider to defend the realm. The Westerlands are breaking apart and the betrayer Walder Reyne, to our best knowledge, has convinced at least six other Noble Houses to raise the banners of usurpation with him. If after this moon the Blue Queen isn’t seen punishing the traitors in the Westerlands, the Blacks will know we have no dragonrider available.”

“Unless our loyal armies destroy the rebels on the battlefield.”

And he received in turn a new grimace from his Hand.

“I have sent orders to Makaerys Belicho to ride with his men as fast as he can to Highgarden and gather as many good swords and spears as he can. But he is not at Highgarden yet, and no one thought a call to arms was necessary in the Reach or the Stormlands.”

“And we need to keep thousands of men in the Marches.” Because while the threat of Tessarion would have normally ensured the Princess of Sunspear didn’t encourage her men to raid the Stormlander lands, without a dragon heavy garrisons were needed. “The Crownlands?”

“We should have between six and eight thousand men ready to send in a fortnight,” the Reacher Lord told in a more martial tone before wincing, “and with Deep Den in enemy hands, we will have to choose between ‘besiege’ House Lydden on one side of the hills, or make them walk the long way to Silverhill.”

The latter was the fortress of House Serrett, which was also in treacherous hands. Damn it.

Daeron was not going to give compliments to a traitor, but it looked like Walder Reyne had not been as stupid as his proclamations of forging an ‘independent Kingdom of the Golden West’ as it had sounded the first time he heard it.

“You’d better come with a map tomorrow to show me all the troop movements, you intend.”

“Of course, my King. What sort of answer must I give to the Regent of the Golden Tooth?”

Daeron closed his eyes, and it wasn’t because the pain in his leg increased once more. In a less complicated world, forces loyal to the Iron Throne would have already rushed to this citadel and routed the bastards of Castamere and Sarsfield. But this wasn’t the world he was living in. The second access to the Golden Tooth demanded to walk by the River Road and Wayfarer’s Rest, inside the Black-controller territories. And the price the Black Queen would demand for one of his armies being allowed to march across her lands...Daeron knew it would be far too expensive, not to mention the political humiliation to have to ask in the first place.

“Tell them for the moment they can buy food from the Blacks. The Iron Throne will approve the measures they enforce to avoid starvation.” Daeron sighed. “As for the rest...I prefer to wait until we know more of what was happening in the Westerlands.”

His ribs chose this moment to remind him they weren’t in the best state either, and Daeron returned to his search of the best position in his royal bed, less and less convinced it was possible to find it.

**Author’s note**: So begins the War of the Lions. And unlike the Dance, the dragons have not opened the ball of slaughter...treachery and knives in the dark did.

More links on the Dance is not Over:

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