**Chapter 45**

**The Last Red Banner**

*To call Cornfield the middle of nowhere would be a gross exaggeration.*

*At the time of the War of Lions, it had grown even more valuable for its bountiful harvests, the smallfolk population having been largely spared the devastating number of deaths caused by the Iron Fever, the Ironborn raids, and the Dance of Dragons which came before.*

*On the other hand, there was no contesting the fact the lands of House Swyft were hardly mentioned by the maesters in their most important books. The Lords of Cornfield and their household guard had almost never turned the tide of a battle against a foreign enemy, and the last decades had not done anything to change the minds and hearts. This part of the Southern Westerlands was enough valuable for a competent Lord to know its advantages and its weaknesses, but no Lord or King of Casterly Rock had ever wedded a Swyft, and the same could be said about the Reynes and many pre-War of the Lions’ Rebel Houses.*

*Truly, many voices agreed in the aftermath of the bloodbath, if Deep Den, Silverhill, and Crakehall had not all raised their banners for Walder Reyne and thus encircled the domains of Cornfield, it was entirely possible House Swyft would have been one of those ‘late loyalists’ who proved their allegiance by summoning their forces when the Second Butcher’s Ball had broken the Reyne host beyond any chance of recovery.*

*Pondering on the events which could have happened differently however did not help the rooster banners. They went on to support the self-proclaimed Red King and his Red Lion’s banners, if unenthusiastically, before abandoning the losing side when it became obvious the rebellion was doomed.*

*For this less-than-honourable course of action, no one would congratulate them. The Houses which had stayed loyal to House Lannister were already spitting at the very mention of the name when forced to utter it. And as for their former allies still serving under the Red Lion, treachery was one of the kindest words for their behaviour.*

*By their very actions and several improbable decisions, the final battle of the War of Lions would be fought before Cornfield.*

*It was a red day of fire and ruin.*

*It was a day no doubt all members of House Swyft would have preferred avoiding, the cost of anonymity being far lighter to the fame of being a battleground between armies which had no reason to be fond of them.*

*It was the day of the Battle of the Lions.*

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

**Lord Merlon Sarsfield**

The war horns shouted their defiance, and Melon Sarsfield snarled.

“How can the Seven-forsaken bastards be here? We led them on false trails! We set their supply columns aflame! They can’t be here!”

“They are, my Lord.” One of his Captains answered, pointing towards an ever-growing mass of men emerging from the northern hills. “This must be the army we fought at Castamere. They’ve done countless forced marches to catch us!”

“DEATH TO THE LANNISTERS!”

“REFORM THE LINES! DEATH TO THE LANNISTERS!”

Merlon heard the war cry of his King and all the knights surrounding him, and his heart fought against despair.

“You heard the King! We reform the lines!”

“What? My Lord, surely we aren’t going to fight them!”

“And what we wouldn’t do that?”

“Because we are completely exhausted by our own forced march and this battle, Lord! And because our men are dispersed all over the cursed corn fields!”

“Yes!” One of his men, not even a Ser, shouted to make himself heard. “We must take refuge inside Cornfield!”

“Idiot! Cornfield isn’t ours! And we haven’t the time to storm its walls and gates!”

“I have no time for this nonsense!” Merlon shouted. “We reform the lines and-“

Unfortunately, far from convincing everyone to shut up and obey, it had the opposite effect. Of the couple of hundred men around, everyone soon wanted to shout profanities and ill-conceived moves.

“We must attack by the west!”

“No! The east!”

“This is stupid! We can make ladders, I say! Storm Cornfield!”

“I think it’s obvious what we must do! Our Lord has failed us! We must capture him and give him to the Lannisters! That way-“

The exiled Lord of the Sarsfield had enough and plunged his sword in the neck of the knight who had dared speaking of this betrayal. As the oath-breaker fell in a satisfying river of blood, Merlon noticed it was one of the many ‘Hornvale’ fighters which had gone with them northwards. Good, no one would miss him.

“Did I say my orders were up to negotiation and talks of betrayal? REFORM THE LINES! GATHER THE MEN AGAIN! THE LANNISTERS WILL DIE BY OUR BLADES TODAY!”

But to his displeasure, doing as the King had ordered took far too long.

The Lannister host descended from the hills, destroying every small group of Reyne armsmen and riders who had been hunting the Cornfield guards in its way.

Now remnants of what had been proud companies were caught in the open, between fields of carrots and wheat, and most died shamefully when horses trampled them or masses smashed their skulls open.

“FORM UP THE LINES AGAIN! YOU!” The highborn loyal to the Red King screamed towards a Lydden man who was trying to run past them, pointing his sword straight at him so there would be no mistake. “YES, YOU! WHAT DO YOU THINK YOU’RE DOING? THE RED KING CALLS!”

For sole answer the man spat and threw his axe at him – it missed largely, but this act of treachery made Merlon’s blood boil.

“TRAITOR!” Since he was mounted and the miscreant was not, it was child’s game to catch him up and kill him. “WE WILL SUFFER NO TRAITOR TO LIVE! THE RED KING WILL BE VICTORIOUS, AND THE LOYAL SOULS WILL BE REWARDED!”

The northern wind pushed an enormous cloud of smoke on them, and for many breaths, Merlon coughed and coughed, his inside feeling coarse and tired.

When the grey veil was finally lifted, the battle was raging everywhere.

The legitimate Lord of Sarsfield saw nothing organised anymore. There were no neat lines, no glorious charges, and many red banners which had stood proud were missing.

There were thousands of Lannister men pouring into the battlefield like a river flood, and wherever they went, the hated battle-cry of ‘hear me roar’ followed them.

“CHARGE! WE CHARGE! SARSFIELD FOR THE RED KING! SARSFIELD FOR THE RED LION!

Arrows began to fall, but though one slammed into his arm, Merlon ignored it; with the plate armour he had donned, he did not fear those cowardly tools of the yellow false lions.

“IF THIS MUST END IN FIRE-“

Agony seized him, and as Merlon lowered his eyes, he saw an arrow planted in his armoured chest. No, this was-

It was the best plate armour-

No. The battle against the Cornfield men had created several weaknesses, and his haste...none of his squires and Captains had the time to find out there was a glaring weakness.

Merlon tried to fight the pain. He tried to ignore it. He tried to push his horse ahead, lead his men into the last glorious charge of his existence.

But his strength abandoned him.

“This was...”

This was not supposed to happen like that, he wanted to say.

But Merlon Sarsfield fell.

He fell and everything turned into darkness.

**Ser Tyland Lannister**

“DEATH TO THE REYNES!”

“DEATH TO THE RED CAT!”

“DEATH TO THE TRAITORS!”

Even if Tyland had wanted to control his men at this very moment, the Lannister knight was absolutely certain all his efforts would have been for nothing. The sight of the eternally cursed Reynes massacring and destroying their very allies in front of them was a sight no knight could stand for. Not when the bastardly oath-breakers had already done it on every lordship they had despoiled.

“DON’T LET THEM REGROUP THEIR ARMY! STRIKE LIKE LIONS! KILL ALL THE TRAITORS!”

“HEAR US ROAR!”

“CHARGE!”

“FOR THE ROCK!”

“FOR HOUSE LANNISTER!”

“DEATH TO THE REYNE BASTARDS!”

“DEATH TO THE USURPER!”

“I AM LORD GRIMM!”

“WE REMEMBER THE GRIM LORD!”

The next turn of hourglass was not what he would call a proper disciplined charge or anything close to it. His men had been refreshed by a good night of sleep, and they fell like wolves upon sheep when attacking the enemies they had sworn vengeance against. The Second Butcher’s Ball and the countless piles of corpses they had burned or ordered buried had made them promise thousands of oaths of vengeance and blood price, and on that red day, the retribution began.

All over the eastern fields of House Swyft, the Reyne army had divided into small companies, raping and killing the smallfolk, decapitating and torturing the men-at-arms which tried to protect the innocent.

Now his forces were pouncing upon them and teaching them a final time why it was the last mistake they would ever make.

“THE ROCK! HEAR ME ROAR!” His heart was screaming for blood with every woman and child they saw lying dead with expressions of horror, and as the crowds descended from the sky, Tyland wielded his sword like the Warrior Himself was giving him strength.

“FOR CASTERLY ROCK! FOR THE LIGHT OF THE WEST!”

When finally every traitor of a company they had charged was dead, the commander of the Western army asked for a jug of water and emptied it, before borrowing another from his men. Merciful Seven, the smoke and the fire were truly making this battlefield more exhausting than it had any right to be.

“My Lord! My Lord!” One of his best messengers rushed in. His face splashed with blood, it was difficult to see if it was a grin or grimace on his face.

“What it is?”

“Captain-General Makaerys Belicho is sending his respects, my Lord! His army is nearly there, arriving by the southern road!”

Tyland stared...and then grinned. This was likely the best news he had ever received the moment the rebellion of the Reynes began.

“By the Warrior and the Father Above...we have them.”

The Fortune of the Seven assuredly smiled upon them. His army had slammed into the traitor...he was going to call them lines, even if they were nothing of the sort. And with the Reach-Stormlands army rushing in from the south, all that remained to close the trap was to cut down the road the oath-breakers had used to invade the Cornfield lordship in the first place.

“Go back to the Garner rearguard. Tell them to ride hard to the east! The traitors must not be allowed to escape! Death to the Reynes!”

“Death to the Usurper!”

A new gust of wind blew the smoke on a different part of the battlefield, and suddenly Tyland saw.

He saw the great banner of the Red Lion, perhaps one of the last which still flew no matter how far he looked at.

And he saw an enemy commander rallying his forces. His armour was gleaming red plate sparkling like it was made of blood and rubies.

It was *him*.

“HE’S HERE! HEAR ME ROAR! HERE IS THE USURPER! TO ME! THIS REBELLION ENDS TODAY!”

**Lord Cerion Serrett**

Cerion saw like everyone in the main body when the centre of the yellow lion’s army noticed their presence.

The war horns were sounded again, and in a roar which was half-rage and half-bloodlust, the Lannister knights and their freeriders went straight for their throats.

“PROTECT THE KING! THE RED LION AND THE WEST!”

“DEATH TO THE LANNISTERS!”

Here they were at last. There was no time for superb manoeuvres and tourney feints.

Spears went against spears. Warhammers smashed into plate armours. Horses died by the scores, and on that day filled with death and smoke, the cavalry of the Red Lion met their enemies.

Everything was blood chaos. The clash of steel engulfed everything, and Cerion’s mind turned into vanquishing an enemy after another, be it a knight or one of the many footmen who joined them.

“DEATH TO THE LANNISTERS!” The Lord of Silverhill shouted as he killed a halberd-armed soldier with the colours of the yellow lion. “WE WILL HAVE OUR REVENGE FOR THE BUTCHER’S BALL!”

“I AM LORD GRIMM!”

“WE ARE GRIM!”

“REMEMBER LORD GRIMM!”

The Master of what was left of House Serrett almost guffawed.

“Calling a dead man’s name will not-“

“I AM GRIM! DEATH TO THE TRAITORS!”

Baying for blood and the name of the fallen Lord of House Banefort, hundreds of men threw themselves in the melee, completely oblivious to their own survival, and to Cerion’s horror, his men began to lose ground.

“DEATH TO THE RED LION! DEATH TO THE USURPER! DEATH TO THE REYNES!”

And then the world shook as their last scream exploded from every throat.

“LORD GRIMM AND CASTERLY ROCK! HEAR US ROAR!”

Lord Cerion Serrett felt the sheer determination of the enemy, and knew then that unless they killed those men to the last, they would not live one more day. Such conviction...what a pity it was completely misguided...

“WALDER REYNE IS OUR KING!” But his men were faltering. He could feel it. “DEATH TO THE LANNISTERS!”

There was an enormous victorious howl next, and Cerion Serrett turned his head fast enough to see the royal banner of the Red Lion fall, the knight holding it impaled upon many swords and spears.

And next to him...

“NO! PROTECT THE KING!”

Cerion Serrett charged. But as he and his men frayed themselves a path into this bloody chaos, they could watch only powerlessly as a ruffian killed the horse of the King.

**King Walder Reyne**

Near-miraculously, Walder managed to avoid being crushed by his dying horse and land on his two feet.

“A HORSE!” The Red King screamed as he killed with *Lightbringer* the treacherous scum who had dared dismounting him in such a perfidious way. “MEN! A HORSE!”

But as the Lord of Castamere fought for his very life against five Lannister armsmen screaming for his death, there were no horses coming.

No help was coming, and after a short respite after killing the closest enemies, Walder saw more of his armsmen, and though some of his loyal bannersmen tried to reach him, they were too far away.

“A HORSE! A HORSE FOR MY VICTORY!”

The Red Lion killed. He killed the swordsmen who harboured the yellow lion upon their breastplates and their helmets.

“A HORSE! MY KINGDOM FOR A HORSE!”

“You have no kingdom left to bargain, *usurper*.”

The Lannister enemies stopped attacking.

Breath after breath, they surrounded him, harrying him, testing their steel against *Lightbringer*.

He cut them down, one after another...and suddenly, *Lightbringer* broke.

Walder winced, and realised the claims of that damned Red Priest had way been too fantastic compared to the truth.

The light died out. The fire, so vibrant next to his House’s colours, was extinguished.

“GIVE ME A HORSE, BASTARDS!”

One of the horse-mounted knights removed his leonine helmet, and Walder recognised Tyland Lannister.

“Where you will go, traitor, you will have no need for a horse. The Seven Hells await your murderous army of oath-breakers!”

“FACE ME IN DUEL TYLAND! FACE ME LIKE I FACED GRIMM!”

“Grimm Banefort was a good and loyal man.” There was only loathing in the eyes and the voice of his enemy. “You aren’t even worthy to speak his name. Kill the Red Usurper, men. House Lannister will pay its debt.”

Walder seized one sword from the armsmen he had killed. It was immediately smashed aside as then axes and many spears and swords fell upon him.

The Lord of Castamere screamed in defiance.

A moment later, dozens of weapons carved him apart.

**Lord Cerion Serrett**

Cerion couldn’t remember what imprecations went through his throat, but there must have been many in fewer than ten heartbeats.

To his shame, he was unable to break through. There were too many enemies, with more coming from the north and the east to form a rampart of shields and bodies.

To his eternal shame, his oaths stood unfulfilled as his King was violently dismounted.

His sword drank Lannister blood, but why did it matter when *Lightbringer*, may all treacherous deities of Essos and false religions, broke with no warning whatsoever?

And the last true Lord of Silverhill roared in anguish as the bastards fell upon the Red Lion.

King Walder was an incomparable warrior, and did not beg the false lions for mercy.

But even the greatest lion couldn’t stand against a thousand jackals, and that was exactly how bad the odds were.

Cerion Serrett screamed, as his failure became all too evident and too horrible.

“My Lord! The King is gone! We must flee before all is lost!”

“All is lost, cretin! The King is dead and...” the words failed him. All they had done, everything they had given...it was gone.

“You are the last one, my Lord! If you fall too, the yellow lions will be able to finish our cause here and now! Do you want to give them this victory? Do you want to prove your traitor of a daughter right?”

The mere mention of his unworthy child managed what she should have thought impossible; resist the sorrow and the horror which had been slowly taking over his head and every part of his soul.

“No, Martyn, I don’t want to prove the traitors and the usurpers right.” His mind was beginning to clear, and now that he observed the battlefield, he saw the true loyal warriors of King Walder were breaking apart. “We must go through the north-eastern hills. It’s...it’s our only chance In their haste to trap us, they have left us an opening there.”

“That’s because they aren’t many easy trails and livestock’s paths there, my Lord.”

“Good, it means an army won’t be able to follow us...”

And the last survivors of House Serrett resumed the fight, in a last charge on that Seven-forsaken day.

**Captain-General Makaerys Belicho**

By the time Makaerys arrived on the battlefield, the battle had been fought and won.

The crows had already begun their stomach-turning feasting, and in his experience, there was nothing more that could prove the battle had ended.

And the number of carrion birds gathered was huge, for the number of corpses made by the battle was anything but small. Thank what merciful Gods listened to his prayers, they were fewer of them than at Bosworth Bridge. Unfortunately, many of them weren’t armoured or showed anything in common with soldiers.

“I see it’s not just in the villages of the Southern Marches that Reyne and his men behaved like beasts.”

“Yes, Captain-General. Will it change the King’s orders where Rebel Houses were concerned?”

The Volantene commander hesitated before nodding.

“It might.” Makaerys didn’t show his displeasure openly. There was no doubt in his mind – nor that there were in many of his officers and the Reachers who had joined him – that House Swyft was a lair of...what was this charming Westerosi term? Ah yes, they were turncloaks of the worst sort.

It wasn’t an exactly problematic behaviour for a sellsword, but when the one doing it was the Lord on Westeros, it wasn’t tolerated amicably.

To be sure, by rallying the winning side, you were going to survive while your accomplices weren’t.

But a great deal of your bargaining position depended on your military strength in the first place, and one had to be realistic: House Swyft couldn’t have more than one thousand men left right now. This hardly made them the terror of this continent.

“This massacre,” the Volantene Captain-General continued, “is going to make martyrs of the peasants they were unable to protect. Add to that the hundreds of infantrymen they have lost while our armies rushed to their rescue, and the villages and the towers nearby would be hotbeds of rebellion if we try to punish them severely like they deserve.”

That didn’t mean, of course, that House Swyft wasn’t going to be punished. But he had a feeling the men King Daeron was going to send to enforce the peace terms would have to be *very* prudent.

“What an unfair world we live into,” one of his Captains murmured.

“True,” Makaerys Belicho approved. “Spread out the men, and send at least five hundred make bucket chains. There are at least two large fires I don’t like the look of. They must be stopped and quickly.”

“Yes, Captain-General!”

Makaerys grimaced as the majority of his men rushed out. This battle was certainly a massive defeat for the rebellion, but the sight of the harvest burning was souring his mood. And the fire was not the only indignity the fields of House Swyft had suffered today. One could hope hundreds of farmers, shepherds, and plenty of families had taken refuge into Cornfield, but they were evidently plenty who had not.

Truly the only good news today was that the trap had closed with iron jaws around the throat of Walder Reyne and his butchers despite the minor fact no one had thought Cornfield would be his ultimate target.

Bah, Makaerys was sure the men who wrote the books would pretend this lucky move had been intended all along.

Finally, Makaerys and a far smaller column of men arrived before a respectable forest of pikes. Each of the long weapons had been ‘decorated’ with a traitor’s head.

And on a pike which had been so coated in blood it appeared an ugly red-black colour...

“Ser Tyland,” Makaerys saluted the allied Western commander. He had never met him, but received enough descriptions in his letters to recognise him. Whatever the Lannister had been before this war, there was enough certainty it hadn’t forged into someone happier. The Volantene had seen many times the kind of light which shone in the green eyes. The memories of this cruel rebellion weren’t going to be forgotten for a long, long time in the plains and the hills of the Westerlands. “This head...is it him?”

“It is, Captain-General.” If his intention had been to smile, it was not a success. “My men finished the work Lord Grimm had begun at Castamere.”

“Good,” and Makaerys’ tone was honesty itself; as far as his men had been able to discover in the ruins of Crakehall and many traitor’s holdfasts, this rebellion had been led and organised by Walder Reyne. His were the first dark thoughts which had led tens of thousands of men onto this road of carnage and violence. His death...it would bring some measure of peace. “Good. With his death and the utter destruction visited upon the last rebel army, the war is won.”

“It certainly seems so,” Tyland Lannister agreed with a dangerous expression. “Lord Sarsfield, one of the last Traitor Lords, perished with the Usurper. We have accounted for a score of the most dangerous sellsword commanders and Captains of Castamere. The only important noble who escaped us is Lord Cerion Serrett. House Garner’s forces tried their best, but the traitor of Silverhill was a bit too clever. More than half of the men he brought to this battlefield are staying here forever, fortunately.”

“And I promise large hunting parties will soon be sent to bring him to justice,” Makaerys doubted Lord Serrett represented a great danger right now, but the first thing a Volantene child learned was that you made peace with an opponent feuding with you, or you killed him; it was sheer folly to let him retreat in the shadows and grow in strength once more. That this Lord had survived where all others had not already marked him as a more dangerous foe than the others had been; there was no need to see if he could prove more dangerous now that his master was dead.

Even if with less than three hundred men alive, rebellion against Casterly Rock didn’t promise to be something more hindering than a band of bandits’ crimes.

“There is only Deep Den left.”

“Yes,” it was certainly one of the strongest citadels of Westeros, but Makaerys wasn’t too worried. Their Lord was dead, and as the ravages of Reyne’s army grew intolerable, there must have been plenty of refugees fleeing to hide behind this lair-castle. “I am going to need to send some ravens.”

“Yes, the realm...and the Lords on the other side of the frontier need to learn we are victorious...it will stop them from thinking they can intervene more than they already did.”

“It was not what I was referring to,” Makaerys replied politely, “but you definitely have a point, Ser.”

**Queen Rohanne Reyne**

This was not the same Hornvale she had visited once.

But it was not *that* Hornvale she had been introduced to, was it? When Rohanne had walked within its walls before, the castle had been the seat of House Brax, and the Westerlands had been celebrating the end of the countless deaths caused by the Iron Fever and the Long Winter.

The Westerlands had been at peace, Lord Brax ruled justly his lands, and the frontier with the Blacks, while not exactly far away, was out of sight.

None of those things remained true anymore.

There were no more Brax men and women living inside Hornvale, the bastard who had usurped the castle had made sure of that. Thanks to her Lord Father and her ‘Royal Husband’, the Westerlands were burning in the fires of war again.

And the silver-haired woman seated on a chair which was draped in red and black to give it the dignity of the throne had to be the Black Queen, which said a lot of things about where the frontier was these days.

“Lady Rohanne Serrett!” The Herald announced as she walked on a rather nice carpet of blue and purple. She was rather sure it was a Brax carpet, not a Targaryen one, though she had not seen the like before.

It was better than to ponder why the man had called her by her maiden name instead of her post-marriage titles.

“Your Grace,” the daughter of the attainted Lord of Silverhill bent the knee.

“Rise,” the Black Queen ordered. Her voice was soft, but one could easily hear the steel beneath it, and the purple eyes were playful, but had something dangerous. Maybe it was how the former reception hall of House Brax was illuminated, but Rohanne didn’t think so.

“Your arrival was...unexpected.” The purple-eyed beauty admitted. “When we took Hornvale from the traitors Lord Walder Reyne paid to overthrow House Brax, the so-called supporters of the Red Lion abruptly stopped their actions inciting us to enter the war against the Greens.”

They had tried to...how stupid her father and her husband had been? No, it made sense...at least a bit. The idiots must have thought they could push the Black Queen to invade the Crownlands again and seize King’s Landing. If that had happened, the tens of thousands of men which had besieged Crakehall, Deep Den, and of course Silverhill, would never have come in the first place, leaving the ‘Red Lion’ in control of a large part of the Westerlands and with the forces to attack Lannisport...maybe.

“I can’t say I am surprised, your Grace. Though you calling me by my maiden name is, a surprise I mean.”

“Well, your husband is dead,” Queen Baela Targaryen smirked. “One of our agents rode all night to deliver us the...not-so tragic revelation. He apparently got himself trapped and killed at Cornfield. According to the Lannisters, the head they put on the pike was pretty much the only part of his body was left recognisable after they were finished with him.”

Rohanne felt her eyes widen...but deep inside, she felt...well, a small amount of relief. Her husband was dead. She had never felt anything for him, and now thankfully she wouldn’t have to endure his presence again.

“Given the...enthusiasm the Lannisters share in eliminating all the known supporters of your deceased husband, I suppose you won’t be surprised to hear that the Regent of Casterly Rock has sent numerous ravens to my capital and across Westeros promising a lot of gold and knighthood to any loyal sword who would deliver highborn traitors in her custody. Your name wasn’t as important as your husband or your father, but it was mentioned.”

“I suppose,” her voice failed her momentarily, “that if it is the favour of Casterly Rock you seek, my head would indeed satisfy Lady Johanna Lannister.”

“It’s true,” the Black Queen nodded seriously, “but honestly, Lady Johanna never forgave my River Lords for the part they played in her husband’s death. And unfortunately for our legitimate ambition to reunify the Seven Kingdoms, the Regent of Casterly Rock has never faltered in her support of my cousin. When we made overtures of food against gold at the Golden Tooth, it was widely understood the price would decrease in exchange of some modest gains behind the scenes.”

Gains which would have slowly begin to position Casterly Rock as...soon-to-be bannersmen of the Black Kingdom. And in that case, Rohanne’s life would have been very unpleasant after coming here.

The silver-haired beauty smiled.

“But there is no use pondering what will never be. Lady Johanna Lannister isn’t my loyal subject, and she isn’t here. You, however, are. And you asked for my protection.”

The purple eyes stared unflinchingly at her. Rohanne stared back for a second before lowering her gaze.

“I did, your Grace.”

“Good. And you are certain you are not pregnant?”

“As certain as one can be,” Rohanne replied cautiously. “We only shared the same bed a couple of times, and then he went to war...and I never saw him again.”

The Black Queen nodded again.

“We will wait another moon to be certain, but provided it is confirmed, I will urge the marriage to be cancelled. The grounds of invalidity...I’m sure the septons will be able to think of something.”

“Thank you, your Grace,” her father had sold her like a mule to a man who had utterly failed in his grand rebellion, and generally saw her nothing as a breeding mare.

“I will protect you, provided you stay loyal to the vows I expect of my loyal Lords and Ladies,” Queen Baela Targaryen spoke decisively. “But a few things must be clear beforehand. This protection will come at a price. The portable fortune you managed to secure before Silverhill surrendered to the Green armies will not be taken from you, save to pay for a new title you will be given. Your rights to your ancestral lands in the West, unfortunately, are not such so easy to guarantee.”

Rohanne flinched, but deep inside she knew this was hardly surprising; her new liege had not invaded the Westerlands – save Hornvale – and saved Walder Reyne from being crushed, she wasn’t going to gather her armies to protect her rights to Silverhill.

“A lot obviously depends on whether my cousin Daeron intends to be reasonable or not when negotiations begin again. But I won’t deny that if he is indeed reasonable, renouncing your rights to Silverhill will be necessary.”

“I understand,” Elys was going to like it even less than she did, which was none at all, but Rohanne acknowledged the necessity. Being a Lady in the Black Kingdom beat constantly and mercilessly hunted by Lannister-paid assassins.

“The rebellion of Walder Reyne is over, but tensions remain high across the frontier. In order to avoid...regrettable incidents around Hornvale, I am going to insist you depart before dusk. I will arrange an escort for you. I think...yes, the Twins should be far away enough from the West until the tempers and the massacres have abated.”

At least the Black Queen had not thought to send her north of the Neck. Rohanne hated the cold...not that she would have refused, if it had been ordered.

Her Queen had a dragon, and as she had thought more than a few times, being a Lady in the North was still preferable being a Silent Sister under vengeful Lannister rule.

“Yes, your Grace.”

**Queen Baela Targaryen**

It was a cloudy day of summer for the Westerlands. Baela didn’t know if it was going to rain, but it was frankly possible. Was it a sign this year of summer was going to end and be followed by autumn?

The young Queen sincerely hoped she saw false alarm fires where there were none to look at. Autumn could be terrible in the Riverlands; it brought heavy rain and winds, and the Forks and the multitude of rivers often flooded out of their beds. When it was really bad, it could really transform the heart of Westeros into a sea of mud and swallow everything that was not careful, much like the last spring did.

But as bad as a spring or an autumn could be in the Riverlands, it was nothing to what it would be in the lordships returned to Lannister and Green rule.

Reyne and his traitors had gone on a mad rampage before they died.

It was a sad to thing to say, but Hornvale, despite losing hundreds in the first moon to treachery and brutal reprisals, had been truly spared the worst part of the fighting thanks to her intervention.

Seven Hells, hundreds of smallfolk had come to Hornvale because it represented their best hope in those troubled times.

“This ‘War of Lions’ is an awful mess,” the silver-haired rider of Moondancer commented acidly.

“The Dance was worse,” Nettles replied before grimacing. “And now I realise how bad this is to jump directly to the last civil war to have a good comparison.”

The other dragonrider had truly a gift to go straight to the heart of the problem when she put her mind to it.

“Yes, the Dance was worse. Your opinion on the newest Western Lady to join our cause?”

“Arrogant,” Nettles answered. “*Very* arrogant and prideful. If she was a knight, I would already be hiring a few armsmen to teach her a lesson of humility in the courtyard.”

Baela chuckled. This was a blunt and undiplomatic description...and it also was completely accurate, as far as she could have observed.

“Yes. She’s all of that. The only point in her favour is her honesty. Rohanne Serrett didn’t pretend she did it because she was suddenly convinced by the rightfulness of my claim to the Iron Throne.”

The ‘Red Queen’ had done it because what the Lannisters and the Greens as a whole had a fate far worse than anything she would be willing to do to her.

“You could return her to the Lannisters and keep the treasury she brought with her.”

Baela rolled her eyes.

“I’m trying to convince everyone my predecessor, the ‘lovely’ Queen Rhaenyra, simply broke apart when she was betrayed too many times and that now, we, the Black Court, will behave more reasonably and nicely. If I begin to thread on this path, it won’t be long before Southern bards will call me the ‘Second Maegor-with-tits’ or something as bad.”

“Some imbeciles are already calling you that,” Nettles remarked. “In fact, I’m really surprised how many of the Mistress of Whispers’ spies reported you are a monster in the Faith’s sermons and the pamphlets of Lannisport and Oldtown.”

“Oldtown really doesn’t surprise me,” Baela calmly replied, “for all the death of the previous rulers and the fall in prestige and power, the Hightowers are not gone. And it is from that family that the poison came.”

Daeron was far nicer than his two eldest brothers, but Baela was not going to forget he was the son of *Alicent Hightower*, and the new Green King had been sent to Oldtown when he was young.

Daeron may be completely blameless in that affair. But it was clear there were still parties within the city of Oldtown who still wished the destruction of a Targaryen Dynasty which was not indebted to the oldest city of Westeros.

“As for Lannisport...well, the Tullys and their bannersmen made sure the Lannister army of the Dance would never return home. They can hold a grudge. Though frankly, I’m not very worried about the Westerlands. This new civil war has brought them to their knees.”

“The first ravens today are pretending the war is over.” Nettles pointed out.

“Let’s say they are saying the truth,” Baela replied as the wind lifted her hair and made them flow like a silver banner. “The West was already one of the kingdoms which suffered the most from the Iron Fever. They hadn’t finished rebuilding their homes correctly when Reyne decided to play this calamitous role of butcher-burner everywhere he struck.”

What she had seen from the back of Moondancer was bad enough. Once you landed, it was guaranteed to be way worse.

“And I know from bitter experience with the Riverlands we’re still trying to erase the damage of the Dance.”

Yes, the gold she had ‘acquired’ would accelerate the recovery, but money alone couldn’t do anything. There were plenty of abandoned villages in the Riverlands. In fact, her tax-collectors still found evidence of new destruction created by Vhagar away from the main navigable rivers and roads.

“We can truly hope peace is going to return.” Baela sighed. “I’m returning to the capital. I must warn my mother-in-law she is going to have a new ‘guest’ to host at the Twins for the next moons.”

“The Greens are certainly going to scream we return Hornvale to them since...the whole ‘War of Lions’ issue is over.”

“They can scream,” the Black Queen raised one eyebrow. “But Lady Sabitha has confirmed all the men and women who could prove they were of Brax blood and of legitimate birth are dead or missing. This leaves them without a ‘Lord of Hornvale’ to give their claims so legitimacy. At the same time, we have two survivors of House Serrett...”

“It still supposes the Lannisters and many of the bloodthirsty knights are going to hear reason.”

“Yes,” Baela agreed before smiling innocently. “Fortunately, I think presenting them Sheepstealer is going to do wonders for their intelligence and prudence.”

**Ser Richard Lydden**

Richard drank his wine.

Sweet Maiden, what else was he supposed to do?

Oh, yes, he was the Castellan of Deep Den. But it was a title, absolutely devoid of privileges and duties.

His cousins and his wife had made sure of it.

The lands of House Lydden had been emptied of its best fighters, which had gone with the so-righteous Lord Joffrey Lydden, Sentinel of the Gold Road, the Badger Shield, and a myriad of other titles he wasn’t able to remember.

It hadn’t done his uncle much good. According the rumours which had managed to reach him, Grimm Banefort had pulverised his liege lord in the Second Butcher’s Ball.

Richard would have said the name was underserved, but when five men whose last name was ‘Lydden’ perished in the same battle, maybe there was some truth the battle had lived up to its name.

Richard drank more of the tormented red liquid some called the most delicious wine in creation...personally he called it ‘Western piss’.

But if you wanted to drink something by the barrel, it was the only thing his purse could afford.

How long this would stay true was a question Richard wasn’t going to ask himself.

Lord Joffrey, this incomparable paragon of knighthood, had gotten himself killed following the ‘invincible’ Red Lion.

Normally, this should have barely raised an eyebrow; by the laws of succession or not, he was so far down the line of the millennia-old proud Lydden line that the chances of him inheriting were somewhere between the Black Queen asking the Green King to be his second wife and the Others returning to turn Westeros into eternal winter.

Lord Joffrey had sired a lot of sons with each of the two wives he had taken during his absolutely glorious and chivalric life.

But with each battle announcement, more cousins had departed. They had taken more men of fighting age too.

Richard emptied another glass of wine.

He wasn’t drunk enough to think about that.

Some knights, he knew, would have begun celebrating as their rivals for the Lordly seat were eliminated one by one.

Richard was terrified by it. Unless there was some Seven-blessed miracle when you gained the title, he hadn’t the faintest clue of what a Lord should do.

And his viper of a wife...fine, it was a gross insult against vipers, Dornish women, and even snakes in general.

The idea of what his wife would do if the war ended and left her the Lady of Deep Den...

Richard emptied another glass. Damn. He wasn’t drunk enough. Where was the God of Wine today? He needed to be taken away to the dream lands of drunkenness!

“Another bottle!” Richard Lydden said in a voice which was not slurred at all, no Ser. Of course, his squire gave him a dark expression. The drunkest knight of Deep Den – not there was much of a contest those days with the fortress emptied and re-emptied of its men-at-arms, knights, and any child able to lift a sword – was tempted to throw the bottle in his face. The Father Above knew the little wastrel deserved it, being one of the many lovers his wife cuckolded him with. “Are you blind, boy? I said another bottle!”

“Ser Richard....you are drunk.”

RRRRRROOOOOOOOOOOAAAAAAAAAAAAARRRRRRRRRR!

The sound brought something Richard had thought impossible: deathly silence in the dinner hall where he was tranquilly waiting for the God of Wine to answer his prayers.

Richard Lydden had not heard many beastly roars challenging an opponent to a fight, but he recognised this was one effortlessly.

“I am not drunk enough for *that*.” So it was going to end like that, eh? “Boy, do your job, and bring me another bottle. The only one of Dornish Red we have. The good stuff. If I am going to get out and parley with a dragonlord, I want to be *royally drunk*.”

“Ser...you...you...you are insane.” The boy blurted out.

“It is this world which is insane.” Richard threw the emptied bottle against the wall. “Me? I am just a drunken knight. Now bring me this bottle, or I will feed you to the dragon before the parley begins!”

**Author’s note**: The Battle of Cornfield is over. And with it, as you can see, the War of Lions is over. Well, I suppose the Lord of Silverhill has escaped...though for how long is an interesting question. But the legendary defences of Deep Den do not mean much when a dragon has come calling...

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