**Chapter 40**

**The Art of Sieges**

*The fourth moon of the year one hundred and thirty-eight after the Conquest was marked by a succession of sieges which would decide how long the War of Lions would last.*

*This was, needless to say, a revelation of how much trouble the Red Lion’s rebellion was into. As written information captured later in the year would make clear, the only true siege the supporters of the self-proclaimed King Walder Reyne had ever planned extensively was for Casterly Rock, and this action had been supposed to come when the rest of the Westerlands had been forcefully convinced in rejecting Lannister rule.*

*But Lannisport had not fallen. As a result, the siege of Casterly Rock had become ever more unlikely as the days passed. Any Lord having a basic military knowledge knew the golden city of the West had to fall first, a complicated affair for the defenders of the Rock would not stay idle at the same time. And of course, the Red Lion’s banners had been decisively crushed at sea, with the rare survivors rapidly returning to an existence of pirates. This had the unfortunate consequence of the Loyalist convoys sailing from Oldtown and the Arbor could rapidly transport grain and meat to help the heart of the Westerlands, along with several companies of soldiers.*

*Against a true force of invasion like the ones mustered during the Dance, it wouldn’t have been sufficient. The great majority of the fleets of House Redwyne and Hightower were disarmed. Few holdfasts had hundreds of veteran blades to send to crush House Reyne.*

*But for the very limited resources the insurrection against House Lannister had, this was an inexorable tide which would drown them in steel and fire. It didn’t take a single day or even a fortnight, but the captains of King Daeron went to war. Deep Den was besieged from the east, and though the Crownlands Army doing it was far from huge, House Lydden had too few men to even think about sallying out.*

*This siege was only one of many, however. Rowan and Tyrell forces moved against Silverhill from the south. On the ocean road, Lord Oakheart was trying to break the defences of Crakehall, supported by thousands of cavalry, infantry, and siege engines arriving day after day. Should these castle-shields break, the rebellion was as good as over...but the Red rebels knew it, and had prepared for it. The men pledged to Houses Crakehall, Swyft, and Serrett believed possible to bleed their enemies for several moons, giving the time to their new master the opportunity of defeating House Lannister once for all.*

*These souls were surely extremely disappointed when they found out that Walder Reyne and his host were baited in besieging Sarsfield, at a moment Lord Banefort and his army were raining rocks and fires over the walls of Castamere. Much as it was in the Southern Marches, the sieges were the locations where the outcome of the war would be decided. And one couldn’t forget the Golden Tooth, where the Red Sarsfield host was unable to do more than watch powerlessly as carriages filled with food were paid by the besieged.*

*Never had it been more evident than now that time was playing against House Reyne and its allies.*

*This was undoubtedly why the attainted Lord Walder Reyne took the decisions he did...*

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

**King Walder Reyne**

“Something needs to be done about this bastard of Tyland...your Grace.”

“Yes,” Walder gritted his teeth, ignoring how long it had taken his Captain to add the last two words. “Yes, you are absolutely right. Sadly, he has declined my generous invitation to cut his own throat and let us raise his severed head on a pike.”

The Lord of Castamere gave a last glance at the burning farm and the score of corpses bearing his colours. It was a rapid glance, for while he wasn’t squeamish, even he had his limits and the ghastly mutilations his men had suffered being finally killed was enough to turn off the stomach.

“The good news is, if he’s sufficiently desperate to strike a mere foraging party with an army, surely this means we have sufficiently bled his men and taught them they have no hope of striking our rear wherever we maintain the siege of Sarsfield.”

His Captain, needless to say, didn’t smile. And in a way, Walder expected what was going to be said.

“Maybe...your Grace. But if they have stopped raiding our rear or falling upon our flanks, burning farms like this one is the first step of trying to starve us.”

Walder was forced to shake his head in agreement. It would be extremely difficult to find a counter to this point, anyway. When it was obvious the harvest of the fields he could see had been torched, the small barn half-destroyed, the fruit trees cut down savagely, and the well poisoned – no one had dared drinking, but there were corpses in the water – your enemy was trying to deny you supplies to feed your army.

“One farm burned and destroyed is one thing...doing the same to the western Sarsfield is another.” The leader of the Red Lion’s rebellion remarked. “And the lands west of here are some of the most fertile of all the Westerlands. Would Tyland dare devastating these lands knowing half of these harvests go to the Rock or Lannisport every year?”

“I think,” his Captain replied slowly, “that if it’s a choice between starving us and allowing your army to take Sarsfield, this Lannister bastard will choose the former every time. I don’t deny it will cost him both support and harvests for several years...but it is a choice he will regret much later.”

The silent implication that House Reyne couldn’t say the same was not lost in Walder’s mind.

“Very well,” the crowned King of the West said aloud. “Then the obvious course is to push him westwards. That way if he wants to torch fields, it will be those of his House...and the Rock may look at the smoke and the fires of their harvests from above.”

It might create riots and trouble in the streets of Lannisport too. This city was a pit of bottomless hunger, for all the golden sheets the Lannisters of Lannisport pretended to drape themselves into. This imbecile of Rogare may have failed to take the city and lost his entire force in the process, but there was more than one solution to flay a cat. Walder had wanted to take Lannisport reasonably intact, but now he was willing to settle for a crowd baying for blood turning against their highborn masters.

“To push the pale lions westwards, we need more horses and good fighters, your Grace.” The lowborn man reminded him, an unsubtle form of saying he had refused until now to do exactly that.

On the other hand, where has his current methods led to? It was going to take at least a few more days before any siege engine managed to break the walls, much to his growing anger. And the probing assaults had so far left a lot of his men pierced by scores of arrows for little result. The ‘secret tunnel’ had been collapsed by the Lannisters right after they had taken the castle, and creating their own with sappers would take moons.

Walder and his forces had not a year to besiege Sarsfield. Daeron had survived, and while he had not been stupid to claim to be behind the assassination – Walder had burned every paper which could tie him to it – by this point the evidence didn’t really matter. The Green King would feed him to Tessarion if he was stupid enough to lay down his arms. Unless Johanna Lannister caught him first. The crucifixions near the Rock had not been missed by his spies...and he was sure this was only a single part of the message for him.

“You will have them,” Walder spoke at last. “I am going to send Lord Joffrey Lydden and our heavy horse your way. Don’t let them go too far away from the siege. I will need them once the defiance of the Lannister defenders is over.”

Once Sarsfield was dealt with – he already knew it was naive to retake it intact – Walder’s choices were not that complicated. He had to annihilate the two armies loyal to the Lannisters, one after the other. He didn’t expect it to be easy, but he still a significant numerical advantage over Tyland’s army, and north of Castamere, only the Banefort ranks were filled with men worthy of respect.

“Yes, Lord Lydden will prove his worth.” And it would immediately silence the whispers that some of the camp followers had begun to spread about new Green armies arriving by the Gold Road. Not that Walder was very worried: Deep Den could resist dragons, what would a few Crown levies do except sit and wait this conflict was over? “And if you manage to surprise the Lannister’s foraging parties, don’t hesitate to return the favour.”

**Captain-General Makaerys Belicho**

Unlike the land which had seen him take his first breath, Westeros had no shortage of castles.

Privately, Makaerys thought it was not just an excuse to protect the frontiers: if that was true, Cider Hall and many other Reacher fortifications should have been demolished several centuries ago.

No, the reason why these Lords – and sometimes Ladies – had such big castles was a consequence of the general distrust they held for their liege lords. In Volantis, every noble of the Blood had at least a property inside the Black Wall, even if he didn’t live there all year. It was a confirmation of an implicit pact that, for all the antagonism between the Elephants and the Tigers, the Blood would try to debate politics amicably and live peacefully together.

Westerosi nobles, by contrast – Green or Black was not very relevant in this case – were sometimes holding court, but most often spent six out of seven days in their castles, behind tall walls, confident that if their liege didn’t like their ruling methods, a long, long siege would be necessary to breach the walls and change this state of affairs.

The advisor in him could cheer at this method of defending one family’s interests. The Captain-General part of him thought Westeros was a military nightmare waiting for happen. When it could take moons, sometimes over a year to properly besiege and starve a castle into submission, the last thing you really needed was to have thousands of them spread all over the ‘kingdoms’.

Yet this was exactly the inheritance the Conqueror had left his successors. No castle had been razed under his reign – even the ghost-haunted Harrenhal had continued to be used, and its demolition had finally been ordered by the Blacks.

Perhaps the Volantene-born officer was unfair with the first of the Targaryen Dynasty. The Gods knew creating a realm from ill-adjusted pieces was a never-ending task. But those who had followed him upon the Iron Throne should have found incentives in gold and titles to get rid of the fortresses Westeros was so famous and infamous for. Otherwise wherever rebellion happened, the loyalist armies could be unable to intervene...like today.

“We are going to continue the siege and improve the pace our trebuchets are launching rocks, of course,” Makaerys told the Lord who had just ceded him command as he lowered his Myrish spyglass.

“But?” He was very glad Randyll Oakheart did not gloat.

“But as long as the enemy is not sleeping at the summit of Garth’s Folly, I don’t really see a way our army can take the heights and properly besiege Crakehall.”

“My ancestors must have said the same,” the grey-haired Reacher approved. Despite his nickname of ‘Sleeping Oak’, there was nothing tired or particularly ‘sleepy’ about him; a day with him was long enough to acknowledge that if the Oakheart forces had not marched during the Dance, it was because their Lord believed participating in the bloodbath was not in his interests. “I have already summoned several transports from Oldtown under my own authority to send several companies to Lannisport. At this point, the fastest way to properly besiege these traitors is to threaten them with an army descending by Tarbeck Hall. My agents tell me they can’t have more than seven thousand swords waiting for us, and half of them are ready to break if we can get them on the open.”

“Maybe,” the former sellsword ennobled by King Daeron replied, “but we have only seven thousand men right now too.”

To ensure none of the ‘border fortresses’ which had broken their oaths and declared for ‘King Walder Reyne’ could reinforce one another, King’s Landing had ordered the loyal armies had to besiege all of them, no exception made.

It was all very nice on a map, Makaerys had to give it to the King’s Council, and it used the formidable numerical superiority of the loyal Lords outside the Westerlands to do something useful and keep the supply lines separated.

But the fact was, if the situation was the same on the other fortresses, all it meant was a lot of men sitting there and doing nothing useful with their hands and spending too much time drinking and whoring.

Morale was good, Makaerys wouldn’t deny that, but the discipline of the army was not exactly equal to the Tiger’s Cloaks thousands of leagues and a sea away.

“It always comes to Garth’s Folly,” Lord Randyll told him after shrugging.

Garth’s Folly. The first major hill rising above the flat terrain of the Reach’s Northern Marches, and the reason why the Gardener Kings, in spite of their formidable cavalry had never been able to conquer the Westerlands.

As far as slopes existed, it was not the cliffs of Casterly Rock, but horses weren’t able to climb it without using the Ocean Road, which for several leagues stopped being a straight line to appear as a series of twisted ribbons. Obviously, the moment House Crakehall had rebelled, they had lit several fires on the slope, burning all grass – and sending columns of smoke southwards which had alerted the Oakheart smallfolk something was very wrong with their neighbours – thus ensuring no man could hide in the middle of that black and ugly desolation.

Crakehall was anything but a strong castle, but with the wall waiting at the summit of its hill – supposedly in disrepair, but Makaerys did not trust the spies on this – and large boulders waiting to fall upon the first company of warriors which would try to assault Crakehall from the south, the traitors didn’t really need one. Archers, scorpions, and a good supply of rocks could keep the might of the Reach away for several moons.

There was a reason it was named Garth’s Folly, after all, for the King of the Reach who had led his House on this slope and lost most of his men in a single day.

“My first attempts confirmed they have enough archers and arrows to massacre us...and likely take back their arrows upon our corpses afterwards.”

“House Crakehall shouldn’t have that many of them.” It was a reputation, naturally, but in Westerosi Houses, fame and ideals weren’t vain words. And the ‘boars’ weren’t reputed to keep many archers in their household...nor to have the gold to pay for them.

“You can’t see them from here, but we saw several times the rooster of House Swyft.”

Makaerys grimaced. Two Houses instead of a weakened one, more likely supported by the scum of Myr, Lys, and Tyrosh. It was anything but good news.

“It is not good. And it begs the question: how many Houses of the Westerlands have betrayed the King?”

**Ser Rolland Lefford**

Rolland repeated to himself for the twentieth time today that what he was doing was not treason, since it was approved by his King.

It wasn’t exactly a balm for his soul.

Finally after much resignation, he dismounted slowly and let his squire take care of his horse. If he had any choice, the Regent of the Golden Tooth wouldn’t have allowed this situation to happen.

Yet that was exactly the problem. Rolland’s ‘choice’ was no choice at all. He could embrace his principles and let the castle’s garrison and the thousands of refugees protected by the formidable walls of his House devour everything edible until starvation, or he accepted the terms from the Blacks.

After a few days of debates with his men, they had concluded it was better to infuriate the traitors by feasting than allowing these honourless oath-breakers to watch the decline of their strength and hear the pain in their empty stomachs.

As the Regent of the fortress, he didn’t have to like it...and he didn’t.

And so he walked the last steps which would place him out of range of the defence towers where his men waited, trying not to feel too nervous about being so close to a dragon.

Rolland knew there were many Lords near the Mander or Oldtown who had taken to spread...many uncomplimentary things about the Black Queen’s dragon. ‘Ugly green rat’, ‘a woman’s carrion-eater’, ‘twice the size of the cat and a poisoned bite’ were often coming back in the Lannisport streets and guildhalls.

The skilled knight wondered if these people would say the same thing in presence of Moondancer and his – or was it her? – rider. The dragon’s colour wasn’t martial at all: from tail to snout, it was a gentle pale green, with the wingbones, crest, and horns being iridescent white. But it had stopped being small years ago; now it was certainly the size Tessarion had reached during the Dance, and unlike the Blue Queen it seemed to be lighter stone for stone. It certainly looked like it had a less impressive physical built than his King’s dragon, but Rolland wasn’t fooled. Given how easily it twisted its neck and its body, this just meant the agility would be on Moondancer’s side should a dragon fight another dragon again.

“Lady Baela,” he saluted. The pale green dragon emitted a moan of protestation as his mistress stopped caressing his head and walked to meet him.

“Ser Rolland,” the silver-haired beauty saluted him back. Rolland was glad he was happy in his marriage and firm in his convictions, for the Black Queen was certainly not a dunghill. In fact, if their agents had not confirmed beyond doubt Baela Targaryen had given birth to a daughter, Rolland wouldn’t have believed it. Tall and slim, Dark Sister in a scabbard by her side, the temporary ruler of the Riverlands looked like a Warrior-Queen, the way Maegor-With-Tits never did. “Since you are here, may I assume my conditions were accepted?”

“They were,” the Regent of the Golden Tooth said. “No matter how much...extortion the exchange represents for our coffers, my duty to King Daeron and Lady Johanna Lannister is to avoid starvation amongst my people. We will pay for your food.”

This was more for posturing than anything else, obviously. The chests filled with gold were transported on mules behind him, and behind the uncaring dragons, a large food convoy was waiting, guarded by a mere score of men-at-arms.

“Extortion?” The purple-eyed claimant of the Blacks raised an amused eyebrow. “I have no idea what you’re talking about.”

Rolland wasn’t tolerating liars and the kind of bootlickers too many Lords tolerated near them, but this time the appearances were so thin no one having an honest soul could really protest.

Twenty thousand gold dragons were a large ransom in their own right, a sum which made possible to gather a determined army or do plenty of expensive things if one was clever enough. Watching the Black Queen, the Lefford knight had no doubt the niece of Maegor-With-Tits had that intelligence and cunning. Paying that gold for a single food convoy was thus a bargain not favourable either to the Iron Throne or to the Westerlands.

“Of course you don’t,” he scoffed.

“If these terms displease you so much, there are alternatives,” the rider of Moondancer smiled widely. “A few words on your side, and I assure you that the force besieging the Golden Tooth would cease to exist before the next sunset. It wouldn’t even cost you any gold.”

Rolland didn’t need to ask aloud what sort of words the silver-haired dragonlady had in mind. The previous correspondence had already made strong insinuations in that regard.

“No,” he declined politely, “I have sworn an oath to King Daeron...and unlike some oath-breakers serving the Reyne traitors, I take it seriously.”

The female dragonrider didn’t show any disappointment. She just smiled at him for a few heartbeats, female warrior in her black armour, the large ruby on her crown adding the crimson colour. Behind her, the flag of the Blacks, Arryn, Velaryon and Targaryen sigils on one banner, floated in the breeze.

“A pity, you would have made a fine bannersmen. If you change your mind...or require more food...your men know how to contact us.”

“You do not think the armies of His Grace will be able to lift this siege?” Rolland found it unlikely too, at least as long as the armies of the Red Lion weren’t broken on the field, but he had to pretend and proclaim his loyalty. “The forces of the traitors aren’t as strong as the content of the messages they no doubt sent to you affirm.”

That there were exchanges between the attainted Lord Walder Reyne and Stone Hedge was not a secret: his hill-runners had caught a couple of them. So far, it was more the ‘Red Lion’ begging and the Black Queen ignoring him.

But if it changed...

“Neither I nor my Council trust much of what came out of Lord Walder Reyne’s before this year,” Baela Targaryen said loudly before lowering her tone so that only he was able to hear. “We suspected he was involved in counterfeiting, weapon smuggling, and other crimes against both Crowns.”

This instant of revelation was immediately ended, and the black-armoured Targaryen turned her heels, returning to her dragon.

“The pass leading to the Golden Tooth is still in your enemies’ hands, this much I saw from above before landing here, Ser Rolland,” the purple-eyed mistress of Stone Hedge told him as she mounted Moondancer. “This war may well last until my cousin comes to your rescue.”

In which case, the Black Queen was clever enough to not gloat, they would need many, many more food supplies before the siege was broken. And undoubtedly, he would receive more offers to change side before this moment came.

“Then we shall wait.” His oaths weren’t offered to the first person to come, and he wouldn’t let House Lefford’s fame be darkened by becoming a turncloak of the worst sort. “We will continue to endure.”

**Queen Baela Targaryen**

Baela was in excellent mood as she let Moondancer practise a few aerial moves over the Red Fork.

Until Rolland Lefford, she had kept many doubts about the Greens paying twenty thousand golden dragons in exchange of food. Assuredly the thousands of mouths trapped by the raids and atrocities of the Red rebels inside the Golden Tooth guaranteed they would soon eat rats if nothing was done, and the supplies sold were not a tiny amount of fruits, grain, salted meat, and other edible things.

As the Lefford knight had justly remarked, it was indeed extortion under the pretence of diplomacy.

But they had paid. They had paid and with those coffers filled with gold, the mining of gold in the North could proceed at a less hurried pace, giving it time to grow steadily.

Still, twenty thousand gold dragons! It was the kind of ‘gifts’ which were rarely seen outside of ransoms demanded for prisoners. And Baela knew she would have to be fair dividing the – small – mountain of gold between the kingdoms she ruled. More likely than not the North, the Vale, and the Riverlands would receive five thousand dragons each, with the order to complete one major project and one long road with it. The Night’s Watch and the Gift region would be sent one to two thousand dragons, and the rest would be useful in replenishing the Treasury. Her Master of Coin complained far too much about the overabundance of silver to not temporarily remedy to his complaints.

Moondancer was making a new sharp turn – and Baela had to remind her bonded she had no wish to go swimming in the Red Fork – when a dragon roar was heard from the south. The tiny dot in the sky rapidly grew to reveal Sheepstealer.

It took several compliments to her pale green dragon before Moondancer accepted to return to the ground first. Her relations with Nettles were friendly, but those between the two dragons were...well, complicated. There were a few advantages with the situation, nonetheless. The danger of the dragons having an urge to rut before an important event happened was non-existent, it wasn’t difficult to keep them separated for months at a time, and last but not least, they didn’t fight each other for food. The last may more rely on Sheepstealer loving the taste of sheep and not eating much else, however.

More problematic was that Nettles had been supposed to join her at Stone Hedge, not search for her. And this undoubtedly meant something bad had happened during her scouting over the frontier. The first words to be uttered proved the Targaryen Queen how right she was.

“The new Lord Brax is crucifying smallfolk in front of Hornvale.”

Baela didn’t ask Nettles if she was sure; even on a dragon’s back, crucifying someone could hardly be mistaken for something else.

“Retribution for the executions ordered by Lady Johanna Lannister?”

The West was bleeding and its warriors slaughtered each other, but the news of what the Regent of the Rock had done to the Essossi sellswords captured during the failed conquest of Lannisport had spread far and wide. Why, it may have reached the Wall by now. And while Baela was a bit disappointed a few hundred men couldn’t be sent to the Night’s Watch, the Queen in her had to agree it was a message loyalists and rebels to the Green rule would understand in one heartbeat.

“I don’t know, my Queen,” the dark-haired dragonrider shook her head before grimacing. “It’s possible. It’s not like the smallfolk had many weapons hidden under their bed to revolt. We know the Reynes and their sellswords confiscated every scrap of steel they could grab in the last moons.”

One of the reasons the traitors had tried counterfeiting operations and other crimes.

“How many crosses were raised?”

“Fifty. At least I counted fifty before they tried to shoot some scorpion bolts and I decided it was best to inform you.”

“Fifty,” that changed things. If the new Lord Brax was ready to kill so many smallfolk or highborn, then his rule was even more unpopular than the Council believed possible. “But we have no Arryn knights on hand to serve as our ‘ambitious adventurers’...”

“With due respect, my Queen,” Nettles didn’t dismount from Sheepstealer, knowing the elder dragon would try to take a long nap if she did, “the opponents to Lady Jeyne appear to have noticed the...rat cage below the generous gift of the Lordship. They certainly aren’t in a hurry to accept leaving the Vale. By this point, unless we take Hornvale ourselves, I am not sure they will bother presenting themselves at Stone Hedge. If we want to act, it will be with our dragons.”

“So aggressive. I don’t remind you being so war-hungry during last Council.”

“This was before watching bastards and usurpers crucify smallfolk and listening tales of rape and slaughters across the Westerlands. The end of the Dance was supposed to end crimes like those, not let them continue!”

The woman who had been her father’s lover was right, of course. War was a horrible affair, and not having dragons didn’t change it, it simply meant that no one had dragonfire to burn men, women, and children more quickly.

“You’re right. But if our two dragons can easily force Hornvale to bend the knee, we need soldiers to serve garrison it afterwards.” It wouldn’t do any good if one day after her departure, the Reds retook the ancestral home of House Brax without a sword being draw.

“Lord Benjicot has one thousand men west of Stony Sept. He swears he can reach and cross the frontier in three days.”

 Baela tried to think about things coldly. On the one hand, if things went bad and they were forced to abandon Hornvale, there would be...consequences. Both Nettles and the current Lord Blackwood’s position would be weakened. On the other hand, if the new ‘Lord Brax’ was as unpopular as the spies’ messages and the rumours suggested, there was an excellent chance to gain the full support of the smallfolk of an important Western Lordship.

“What else did my Masters of Arms have to say?” the silver-haired Queen asked.

**Lord Rupert Brax**

Rupert Brax, formerly Rupert Hill, chuckled as the last spy of his half-brother lost his head to the executioner. Warrior and Father Above, did the knight really think he was going to give him a trial by combat? This wasn’t a tale of honour and chivalry here!

“You should have not done that,” the Reyne ‘advisor’ King Walder had left him.

“Why?” the new Lord of Hornvale asked after laughing with his men. “I couldn’t exactly crucify him, we are beginning to be short of wood for them.”

This was the problem with crucifixion; given how long his enemies took to die on it, one needed a lot of crosses to execute everyone. Plus obviously, they stank so much afterwards it was better to burn corpse and cross alike to avoid spreading a new plague.

“Or is it a critic about using an executioner instead of doing it myself?” Rumour was this bitch of Johanna Lannister had poured the gold into Rogare’s mouth. There were similar rumours about the Black Queen in the North.

“I was thinking about not pouring more oil onto the fires,” the man wearing a cloak where the red lion was woven replied coldly, “your ascension to the Lordship was violent and broke many families. You need some support in your own lands.”

“It’s my Lord to you,” Rupert snapped back.

“You need to gain support among your smallfolk and knights, *my Lord*.” The older man resumed speaking in a tone Rupert despised. “Otherwise you are going to going to go to bed one night and never wake up.”

“The fate of every mortal man in these lands,” the Lord Brax mocked him. “I serve loyally King Walder Reyne, providing men and supplies to his armies. In return, he leaves me free hands to rule my Lordship. And I have decided my vassals need to understand I am their Lord and Master.”

His father had been a soft man, easily manipulated by the woman he married and the ‘brothers’ she gave him. But while they had forced Rupert to clean the stables in their stead and behave like a lesser squire most of the time, he had waited for his time. And now his time had come.

“A healthy dose of fear is good for them,” Rupert added. “All I was hearing at first is complaints and recriminations when I demanded the taxes to be paid, but now I send a messenger and they prostrate themselves!” Amazing what crucifying three whole families together did for obedience. “Even the dragons dare not attack Hornvale!”

Rupert had been worried at first by the moves of the brown dragon days ago, but one of his Captains had taken upon himself to shoot a couple of scorpion bolts, and the reptile had fled into the Riverlands evidently discouraged.

“Now, that we’ve dealt with our traitors,” seven dead traitors was a good way to begin the day, wasn’t it? “I think I need an inspection to one of our mills is in order.” This miller had really a daughter with big breasts and-

An enormous roar arrived to his ears.

“Oh look,” one of his men snorted. “The big bad sheep-stealer has returned. Shepherds, beware!”

Every man in his column minus the Reyne knight chuckled.

“Do you think it would allow us to ride it if we filled a stone altar with sheep?”

The envoy of the King seemed to be fuming.

“Fools! It is a dragon! Do not mock it!”

“Why?” Rupert waved his hand at the large beast which would soon arrive above Hornvale. “Come on, Ser! If the Blacks had balls to intervene in the Westerlands, their armies would already have besieged Deep Den or the Golden Tooth! But the girl playing Queen won’t ever dare-“

His words died in his throat as the brown dragon descended vertically upon Hornvale and unleashed its cursed fire into the courtyard.

“By the Gods!”

The banner of the Red Lion and his House’s colours flying above his dungeon were slashed in the next heartbeats.

“This isn’t...they have no right to do that!”

“Why?” the Reyne knight darkly chuckled. “Because it is going to offend Casterly Rock?”

Fear spread in his body as Sheepstealer methodically demolished the scorpions and the ballista on the towers of Hornvale, and after mere seconds the gates opened to reveal men...raising their hands and acclaiming the dragonrider?

“Traitors!” the Lord of Hornvale gritted his teeth. “More traitors revealing themselves when-“

A different draconic roar arrived to his ears. And from behind the hills where it had stayed hidden, a green dragon became visible, flying so fast his eyes almost believed it was a falcon for a short moment.

“Men...err...we need to...” As he turned his head, many of his sworn swords were already fleeing northwards. “Wait for me! Wait for me!”

Rupert launched his horse into a full gallop, praying the Seven the symbols of Targaryen power would direct their wrath against Hornvale and not him, at least until he could find a place to hide.

But suddenly, despite the cloudless sky, a great shadow descended upon them.

The former Bastard of Hornvale looked up.

His last act before dying was screaming as a jet of dragonfire engulfed his vision.

**Lady Nettles Targaryen**

The road was rather unimpressive compared to the ‘new Valyrian roads’ Sheepstealer had helped building this year and before. At least it was in good state, unlike too many ‘roads’ of the Green Kingdom.

Still, Nettles was a bit disappointed that the Gold Road was very plain. One legend which proved untrue once more: contrary to what certain travellers who had never visited the Westerlands claimed, House Lannister wasn’t so rich as to pave its roads in gold...and to pay enough guards to make sure no one stole it, of course.

“We could be at Casterly Rock before sunset,” she said conversationally. The dragonrider was not as bellicose as the ‘Two Betrayers’ had been, but she could feel the rush of the terribly easy victory won by their dragons. Thanks to the smallfolk – who had dreamed for several fortnights of killing the bastard having murdered his way through the Lordship succession – her Queen and she had known exactly where Rupert Hill was and where his key supporters waited when the order to attack was given. Hornvale was theirs almost faster than one might say it. And now the Gold Road lay before them, utterly defenceless.

“Our dragons could be,” Queen Baela Targaryen corrected. “Somehow, I find it difficult to believe the Lannister don’t have a few fortresses to guard this road between here and Casterly Rock. Otherwise Walder Reyne would have succumbed to temptation and ordered a direct march in that direction, surprise or no surprise.”

The silver-haired monarch sighed, and at this moment, looked older than her true age.

“But I doubt there is truly one road which leads to a bloodless victory in the Westerlands. Reyne and his band of oath-breakers will think us taking Hornvale is supporting the Greens. The Lannisters and their loyalists won’t stop supporting Daeron because we crush this ‘Red Lion’s Rebellion’.”

“It’s true...” Nettles conceded. “To win many castles and lands, maybe attempt a true conquest of the Westerlands, we should have sided with the Reds.”

It would have lost them the love of the smallfolk of the region forever, however. The two of them were perfectly aware of that.

“Ignoring the behaviour of Rupert Hill and his sellsword executioners...no stable dynasty can accept these vipers and not expect to be betrayed in turn. There are moments where someone must see the oaths sworn have to be broken, if the other choice is to serve evil. This wasn’t the case here. Reyne and his bannersmen betrayed House Lannister in the name of greed, ambition, and power, not because they are ruled by a tyrant. Nothing good is going to come out from a Red victory.

“Should we not intervene to ensure the Green victory comes faster now...provided King’s Landing recognises the change of border where Hornvale is concerned?”

“It is possible...though honestly, I doubt Walder Reyne can win now. He could breach the walls of the Golden Tooth, ravage the best arable lands of the West, and destroy three or four armies, it won’t take him closer to victory. Not as long as Tessarion has a rider.”

The Black Queen narrowed her eyes, before shrugging.

“No, for now the priority is to...rectify the frontier. Two hundred men of our *enthusiastic* Lord Blackwood are going to prepare and emplace the pikes marking the divide between the hills joyously recognising my crown as the only legitimate authority on Westeros.”

“It is all very fine,” Nettles said hesitantly, “but how are you going to pay for all of that? According to our new supporters of Hornvale, the Reds emptied the coffers before marching north.”

“A loan to the Lordship, I think,” Baela Targaryen explained. “The time to send a few sellswords and other faithless men die in the mines formerly belonging to House Brax.”

“I wasn’t aware House Brax had gold mines.”

“They don’t.” Her Queen confirmed. “But they have several mines of copper south of their castle, and in several valleys, they regularly extract highly-valuable amethysts. I think there is a silver mine somewhere too.”

The more Nettles learned about the Westerlands, the more she was amazed by how much wealth was in the soil, and this was after mining it for centuries after centuries. Granted before the Conquest, First Men and Andal Houses had spent decades killing each other on these frontiers, which was not exactly conductive for good mining orders.

There was a major issue against the plans of the crown she was pledged to, alas.

“We are certainly going to need a new road between Hornvale and Pinkmaiden, if we want to feed the smallfolk of Hornvale and move silver and more metal into the Riverlands.”

“All in good time,” the younger woman murmured. “First we must need my cousin to recognise this frontier rectification. Because if we build a road and are forced to surrender Hornvale afterwards, we will have made sure the Greens have a new large invasion path in addition to the ones they already possess...and one we haven’t fortified.”

“And how do you intend to convince him?” Nettles was ready to agree the man who sat the Iron Throne wasn’t his brothers – for once the Hightower influence was a good thing. But King Daeron Targaryen was hardly going to thank Queen Baela and she for removing a major castle from his kingdom, no matter how dreadful the situation.

“Oh, I am sure I will think of something...and waiting for that day, it will be your duty to assume the duties and privileges of Lady of Hornvale until I find someone else...or I confirm you to the title.”

“This is revenge for Sheepstealer’s poor behaviour with sheep, isn’t it?”

“I could name you my Warden of the West too, if you insist...”

The dark-haired dragonrider had not heard a ‘no’ anywhere...

**Lord Marq Merryweather**

Staying in a bed all day always made young men a bit...irritable.

And his King was no exception.

In his opinion, Marq thought his King received the news of the fall of Hornvale as best as humanly possible...which was still very badly.

“Damn them!” The legitimate of the Lord of the Seven Kingdoms shouted.

“The Blacks, your Grace?” The Hand of King asked for the sake of clarity.

“The Blacks, Walder Reyne, the traitors, the Essossi, everyone!” Well...he had asked.

“There is some good news among the bad, your Grace. The Black dragons have not been seen outside the villages and towers sworn to Hornvale. The Gold Road is still...in rebel hands. House Lannister and our Crownlands’ army can still make their junction at Deep Den once we are in position to make an offensive in the southern marches of the Westerlands?”

“And how much time it is going to take?” his sovereign grumbled.

“If the Reach commanders don’t succeed in taking either Silverhill or Crakehall...moons.” The Lord of Longtable conceded. “With Lord Tyland Lannister fighting the main army of Walder Reyne himself and Lord Banefort unable to come south, we have a shortage of armies where they are really needed.”

If the Westerlands could afford missing a harvest, thousands of young men could have been mustered and trained for a short campaign. But that was the key word: ‘if’. As it stood, the West couldn’t afford missing a harvest, not with so many Noble Houses gone traitor and internal trade severely disrupted. And reading the subtle hints between the lines, the Hand believed the armouries of Lannisport and the Rock also had difficulties finding armours and weapons for replacement purposes in the main armies.

“The traitor deserves a long and painful death for that alone.” On that, Marq had definitely no objections. “They have taken the lands of Hornvale. What can we do to retake them?”

“Militarily, we can’t do anything,” the Hand of the King admitted bluntly. “Even counting a certain dose of...exaggeration in the tales, your cousin showed once more that two dragons are more or less near-miraculous weapons when they have local support serving as their eyes and ears. My best hope right now is to defend diplomatically the rights of the legitimate Lord Brax. After all, Rupert Hill was a non-legitimised bastard, a traitor, and one more dark stain on Walder Reyne’s inexistent honour. The castle and the surrounding lands belong to House Brax, and given how dedicated Rupert Hill was in hunting members of his lineage, I’m rather confident there are no more Brax boys available for the Blacks.”

“It is a good solution...if he is popular among the smallfolk of his lands.” Marq didn’t say a word. “And you are telling me he isn’t.”

“I have asked for more knowledge about him, your Grace,” the Lord of Longtable said prudently. “I have reasons to suspect it was deliberately he was sent to Casterly Rock...’teach the boy the error of his ways’, I think were the words. As it is, I don’t believe he would be hated by the survivors of the Reyne’s treachery.”

“I’m not sure,” Daeron spoke slowly, “that indifference is much better.”

The Green King grumbled again before clearing his throat.

“But I suppose diplomatically is the only way we have. As long as I’m stuck here, there’s no hope of dislodging another dragon, be it Moondancer or Sheepstealer, or both, from the castle of House Brax. Not counting the frontier changes they are no doubt preparing as we’re speaking, what is the main danger?”

“Certainly that it gives them the ability to enter the Westerlands as they want now,” Marq said with the seriousness the situation deserves. “It is not exactly ideal for them. Access to Hornvale on their side is difficult, and can be easily intercepted by a dragon. On our side, we can raise several towers to stop raids. But spying and smuggling will be rife if the Blacks are allowed to keep Hornvale, mark my words.”

“And we can’t retaliate in any fashion.”

“No, your Grace...not unless the siege of the Golden Tooth is lifted and we can be sure thousands will not starve.”

**King Walder Reyne**

A loud clamour engulfed everything when the trebuchets at last created a breach in the walls of Sarsfield.

Walder did not scream in joy like so many knights with him, but he grinned widely. At last. At last these two thousand men of House Lannister were going to stop being a headache. At last he would be free to leave this siege and go in pursuit of Tyland and his Lannisport forces. At last the wait was over.

“Shouldn’t we...” one of the Serrett knights asked nervously. “Shouldn’t we demand they lay down their arms and surrender? It is tradition-”

“They won’t accept.” One of the many Sarsfield who had been moved out of the siege of the Golden Tooth to retake their home spat. “And neither will we. These bastards must die for what they’ve done.”

“You are right, Ser. There can’t be any parley or negotiations anymore.” It would make his army fight all the harder in the next battles, of that the Red Lion was convinced. Many knights and warriors in his army had yet to see blood on their weapons, and participating in this storming was a guarantee they wouldn’t try to speak with the Lannisters while he had his back turned. They were his, and no apology to their enemies could change that. “Besides, after the fate of Lysaro Rogare, do you trust any Lannister not to use the opportunity to torture a messenger horribly?”

“No.”

“NO!”

There were a few days where the King of the West thought this bitch of Johanna Lannister had done him a great service by crucifying the prisoners she took at Lannisport. It had justified his tales of ‘Lannister cruelty’. It had terrified many levies. It had angered a lot of proud warriors and all those born elsewhere than Westeros.

What little trust existed after House Lannister had killed his brother had disappeared in mere moons.

“AT THEM!” The commander of the banners of the Red Lion roared. “AND NO QUARTER!”

“FOR THE RED LION! NO QUARTER!”

Thousands of men stopped hiding behind palisades and trenches, and raced as fast as they could towards the breach created in the stone wall.

“HEAR US ROAR!”

“FOR KING WALDER AND VENGEANCE!”

Red and gold swords shed blood violently and mercilessly. From its point of observation, it was a chaotic melee...and it was no doubt worse when you were at the heart of it. It was like two rivers, one of red, one of gold, were colliding with each other.

“Turn the trebuchets towards the next section of ramparts,” Walder ordered. “One breach is good, but a second is better. Any signs of Tyland’s bastard outriders?”

“No, your Grace. Perhaps Lord Lydden truly chased them away?”

“You believe that as much as I do,” the crowned Red Lion scoffed. The Lydden cavalry had destroyed a few groups of horsemen busy destroying food warehouses and sentinels of House Serrett, but all in all, it was less than two hundred men dead for the Lannisters. “No, he’s going to try to come to the rescue to his men. I know it.”

Just as the words left his mouth, a messenger on a visibly exhausted courser dismounted to meet him.

“Have you seen the main Lannister host?” The Lord of Castamere questioned the man. The he realised his mistake. Between all the smoke of the fires raging inside Sarsfield, the early hour, and the lamentable state of the messenger’s armour, Walder had not noticed this was a messenger of House Brax.

“Your Grace...I have seen no host. But I’ve seen the dragons.” The younger man swallowed nervously. “Hornvale is lost to us.”

**Ser Tyland Lannister**

The decision had not been easy. According to the last raven which had survived long enough to reach the Rock and then be relayed to him, the scores of catapults and trebuchets were demolishing the castle where he had ordered two thousand of his men to hold.

At the time, Tyland had really thought he would be able to come back and relieve the castle leading so many men that the traitors would have no choice to flee.

But while men had come, this was a trickle of hundreds, not the thousands he wanted. And as his men walked and fought across the Sarsfield lands, the rebels had dug up trenches, raised wooden palisades, and prepared more defences that would place his army at a large disadvantage.

The messages of the Lady Regent had only confirmed what he knew already. The Reach armies had not yet been able to take Crakehall or Silverhill, and the Lannister knight had not wasted his voice on wondering about Deep Den.

Honour imposed him to try to break the siege of Sarsfield and save as much as his men as possible.

Oaths and reason told him to disregard honour. Assuming he could take the Reyne army by surprise – and he was far from convinced he could do it – the garrison of Sarsfield being able to sally out and reach his lines would require so many things going right that the Warrior was more likely to intervene next morning than that to happen.

It was more probable these men would die in the attempt...and then his army would take crippling losses and be forced to retreat in all haste in the direction of the Rock, with Walder Reyne and his Lydden dogs in hot pursuit behind.

In which case Tyland may have lost House Lannister the war in the West, until King Daeron arrived to save the day.

And that was utterly unacceptable.

“Why?” He whispered, eyes directed at the blue sky and the beings who no doubt watched his torments from Above. “Why are you letting these oath-breakers and assassin-masters live when so many good men don’t?”

The Gods didn’t answer. They never did.

“Lord, the army is awaiting only your orders.”

“Good.”

The blame and the remorse would have to wait for another day. In the mean time...he could take some measure of vengeance.

“Do not stop under any pretext!” He roared. “We have only one chance to clear the pass and break the walls before they realise what’s going on and take refuge in their underground fortress! We can’t fail today! We won’t fail! HEAR US ROAR!”

“HEAR US ROAR! HOUSE LANNISTER AND CASTERLY ROCK!”

And over five thousand men ran out of their camp in the cove to assault the southern wall of Castamere.

**Author’s note**: Walder Reyne is not going to happy at all next chapter. You have three guesses as for why, and the first two don’t count.

More seriously, the rebellion of the Red Lion has reached its high tide now. People know Daeron is alive, and have a good idea who to blame for all the assassinations and treason. It is incredibly unlikely anyone will rally Reyne’s side...even with a sword against his throat. Add to that his forces have committed too many atrocities to really think they will be pardoned, and things are going to get uglier...

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