

The sound of hurried footsteps reached his ears making Mathis Rowan look up from the latest raven he got from Highgarden. There was nothing new in the raven except urging him to abandon fields and smallfolk under his protection and march to Highgarden with due haste.

'As if I'm going to obey that stupid order.' Mathis thought with a scoff.

He was no coward to run away from the battlefield like the Fat Flower of Highgarden. He was a Rowan and that name means something in the Reach. His family was born from the seed of Garth Greenhand. For thousands of years, his ancestors had fought and bled for the Gardner kings to establish the borders of the Reach. His family had a long history of keeping the Kings of the Rock in check at the borders of the Reach. Many lions had thought themselves to set their greedy paws on the Gardner lands but House Rowan was there to give a proper beating to the lions.

"My lord!" Ser Rickard Rowan rushed into his solar unceremoniously.

He would have chastised if it was anyone else but Ser Rickard was his kin however distant the relation might be.

"Ser Rickard. You have something for me?"

"My lord. It's the Lannisters. They've crossed the border. Our border patrols were attacked and the survivors are just streaming in."

"Calm down, Ser. We knew they'd try something like this sooner or later." Mathis admonished his knightly kin for losing composure. "Did any of the men notice where the Lannister forces came from?"

"The Lannisters... they were east of the river my lord."

Mathis growled in frustration upon hearing that.

"That's no good, Ser. I want to know whether they rode down from Silverhill or crossed the Ocean Road and rode along the Red Lake to reach us?" said Mathis.

"We don't know my lord. The men say they saw lion banners and the banners of three dogs in the field. Entire villages along the border were burned to the ground. It was a slaughter."

"Three dogs?" Mathis frowned in thought.

"Aye, my lord. Three dogs in a yellow field. Tis the banner of House Clegane." said Maester Orm, walking into his solar. "A raven just came from Coldmoat, my lord. Lord Webber claims there is an army of Westerlanders two thousand strong riding down from Silverhill. Possibly more."

"Send a raven back to Lord Webber. Order him to stand down and hold Coldmoat at all costs until reinforcements arrive."

"You plan to ride out my lord?" Ser Rickard asked, his boyish face creasing with worry.

"Aye but not alone. Maester, send a raven to Old Oak. Tell Lord Oakheart that the Lannisters have ridden out from Silverhill and begun their assault. Ask him to spare any reinforcements if he can." said Mathis.

"My lord. There is a strong chance this could be a distraction. What if lord Tywin's true aim is Old Oak?" asked Maester Orm. "With the Ocean Road in his control, Lord Tywin could even threaten Oldtown."

"That's true but I don't think the Old Lion is aiming at Old Oak. Nonetheless, dispatch riders and ravens to Highgarden, Bitterbridge, Cider Hall, Longtable, Brightwater Keep and Oldtown."

"What'll you be doing my lord?" Ser Rickard asked.

"I'll be routing those Westerlanders from my land. Prepare the horses Ser Rickard. I'll not suffer any western lions in my lands."

Mathis rode out from Goldengrove with more than half of his mounted forces. The raven from Highgarden warning him to shore up the defences had worked to his advantage but he was still not prepared to arm all his men with steel in their hands. Therefore, he focused on his mounted forces. He had very little foot with him and not surprisingly they were lagging behind his mounted forces.

Instead of going straight to Coldmoat, he took a slight detour by travelling further west. There was a reason he chose to ride farther away from the seat of House Webber. Coldmoat was a strong castle surrounded by sturdy walls and a moat. The Lannisters, no matter their numbers, were not going to easily defeat the defences of Coldmoat. Therefore, he suspected the lions were targeting Standfast, the seat of House Osgrey. There was another reason he suspected the Lannisters were not sieging Coldmoat. While he did not doubt the loyalty of House Webber, he also did not forget Lord Tywin's grandmother was Rohanne Webber. If his memory served him right Lord Tywin spent some of his formative years in Coldmoat and had cultivated strong relations with House Webber. He wouldn't put it past the Old Lion to know the weaknesses of Coldmoat.

After bunking down a few miles from Standfast he sent out scouts to scout ahead and see whether his hunch was correct. A few minutes later the scouts returned and with them came the confirmation of his worst fears. The Lannisters were merely making the ruckus at Coldmoat as a distraction while the real fight was at Standfast.

"I should not have asked the Webbers to retreat into their castle." Mathis muttered after mounting his horse once more and leading his men against the Lannister forces attacking Standfast.

He shook his head and focused on the battle ahead.

"The scouts tell us Lord Osmund Osgrey has his back against Standfast and steadily retreating to the castle. If we can circle around the hill ahead, we can take the Lannisters by surprise." Ser Rickard suggested.

"No. There is a small stream ahead that connects to the moat of Coldmat. It'll slow us down too much if we cross the stream." Mathis disagreed.

“Lord Osgrey can hold off the assault for a time can he not my lord?”

“Maybe he can or maybe he can’t. I know Standfast cannot properly defend itself as it has no walls.” said Mathis, but he also saw the wisdom in covering all grounds.

The Lannisters surely must have a camp close by if they were launching a full-scale attack on Standfast.

“Have a few of our men cross the stream and scout ahead for the Lannister camp.” he ordered in the end.

Some of his men split off from the main host to cross the stream while he led the bulk of his men towards Standfast as fast as his horses could run. When they finally reached Standfast it was evening and the sunlight was starting to dim.

“Blow the horns. Let House Osgrey know we are coming to their rescue.” Mathis ordered.

As the horns blew twice, he arranged his army. He pushed all the archers to the left flank under the command of one of his household knights. The horses on his right flank were under the command of Ser Rickard and Mathis took command of the centre. When the horns finished sounding out their arrival, he gave the order for the charge. Halfway through their charge Ser Rickard split off from the main host and charged straight into the Lannister lines giving the Osgrey men some much-needed breathing room. Mathis on the other hand moved the remaining men to reinforce the Osgreys. His archers rained arrows on the Lannister army while he led the charge breaking the centre of the Lannister army.

He cut through Westerland soldiers one after the other. Any peasant foolish enough to challenge him in the field was quickly sent into the Stranger’s grasp. Surrounded by some of the finest knights of the Reach, Mathis cut through the Lannister centre with his eye on the Lannister standard fluttering in the wind further ahead. Blood was everywhere and his blade was shining with the red liquid. But he was only more resolute in ending this battle in his favour.

Mathis swatted away a spear that came close to his shoulder with his shield and put his sword straight through the soldier’s skull. Pulling it back he was quickly engaged in a bout of steel with a knight on horseback. He parried the knight’s sword and tried to bury his sword through the neck of the knight but he missed as his sword only grazed the knight’s helmet. The knight didn’t remain idle and tried to smack him down from the horse with his shield. It was by luck he managed to keep his hold on the reins of his horse and moved away from the knight’s reach. Moving further away from the mystery knight he went back to cutting down Lannister men on the ground.

Slowly but surely, he could feel himself getting out of breath as the battle raged on.

‘I’m not as young as I’d like.’ Mathis thought with a bit of worry.

Suddenly, horns blared from the Lannister side. At first, he was a little confused but soon he realised the Lannister army was withdrawing.

“They’re breaking off! They’re retreating!” he heard someone shout in jubilation.

But the man was right. Mathis could see the Lannister soldiers were disengaging from the battle. He immediately turned his horse around and waded through the battlefield.

“Archers! Archers!” he shouted, as he finally managed to arrive behind the defensive lines.

Taking command of a company of archers he had them move forward and bleed the fleeing Lannister army as much as possible.

“My lord. Should we not give chase?” Ser Rickard asked.

Ser Rickard was drenched in blood and atop a new horse. Mathis looked at the knight with an appreciative look for showing his mettle in the first serious battle the knight had fought.

‘It’d seem I was not wrong to give command of the cavalry to Ser Rickard. But he has much to learn.’ he thought.

“No. We have the higher ground. We’ll hold our position and increase the defences of Standfast. We’ll make our move only when we know the number of our enemies and whom we are fighting.”

“Shall I arrange for the scouts my lord?” Ser Rickard asked.

“Aye. That’d be best. We need to find the lair of the lions as fast as possible.”

Still, Mathis was a little bit annoyed that he didn’t find a large Lannister army as he expected. This one was perhaps a thousand strong but that was no great number for assaulting the borders of the Reach.

In the following days, the Lannisters sent small token forces that served as a nuisance more than pose any threat to their position. He was quite baffled why the Lannisters were behaving so oddly but on the third day, he found out the crafty Old Lion had planned for them. But by then it was too late as the entire Northmarch was cut off by the wily Lannisters trapping his army inside an unfavourable position.

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Jon Arryn rubbed his head as he sat inside the small council chambers all on his own thinking about the dark future that was ahead of the seven kingdoms. The days ahead were not going to be easy and he knew more than anyone else that this war would weaken the Baratheon dynasty. Losing the Lannisters as allies would spell doom for Robert’s prospects of holding the Iron Throne. For now, the last Targaryens were unable to cross the Narrow Sea but if this war wages on for too long then it’d only take a few ambitious lords to ferry the Targaryen children to Westeros. When that happens, everything would fall apart.

It was for this reason he had tried all he could to avert war. He had been sending raven after raven to Robert and Lord Tywin asking them to exercise caution instead of plunging the realm into war. But both men were adamant to settle this matter on the battlefield soiling rivers of blood. Till now he had not made any moves to call the banners of the Vale but he’d soon have to follow as many Reachlords have declared for Robert. He was just waiting to see where Tywin Lannister would strike.

At least, he didn't have to worry about King's Landing. Stannis had sent his men from Dragonstone and took control of the city in Robert's name. Stannis' actions probably saved many lives as Lannister men in the capital wouldn't have surrendered that easily without prompt action from Stannis. But it was no relief for him when he was confronted with the fact that there was no way to safely dispose of the Wildfire caches that were unearthed from around the city. All of those Wildfire pots were buried outside the city far away from any settlements. It was a risk to leave the Wildfire pots anywhere but without the Alchemists, he didn't have men with the expertise to neutralize the substance. The Citadel had promised to dispatch some Maesters to tackle the Wildfire problem but the war would undoubtedly create a hindrance to that plan. With no other option, Jon had resorted to assigning men to guard the site where the Wildfire pots were buried. It was no ideal solution but there was no other option available in the current scenario.

The door to the council chamber opened and a familiar smell of perfume entered his nostrils.

"Lord Varys."

"Lord Hand. I've word from the Reach."

"Oh? Do go on." Jon waved his hand invitingly.

"The Lannister army has poured through the Reach borders. They attacked the Northmarch region, my lord."

Jon let out a disappointed sigh and leaned back into his chair.

"And? How is it looking?" he asked.

"Tis not good, my lord. The lords of Northmarch fought bravely but they were outmanoeuvred by Lord Tywin. Lord Tywin has trapped the bulk of forces from the houses Osgrey, Rowan and Webber in Northmarch by destroying the dam on Chequy Water. As a result, the lands of Osgrey and Webber are flooded."

"I believe Lord Tywin has also commanded Lord Serret to break all dams and canals in Silverhill thereby increasing the flow of the river passing through Northmarch. I believe we can expect the entire Northmarch region to stay out of any fights with the Westerlands until they can mitigate the flood somehow."

Jon could only gape at the Master of Whispers. But then, he remembered Lord Tywin was intimately familiar with the lands of Northmarch in the Reach thanks to his blood ties with House Webber.

"If the Northmarch is flooded then the Lannisters are also unable to march on Highgarden. Unless..." Jon trailed off as he realised what was being planned by the Old Lion.

"What about the Ocean Road? Has House Oakheart called their banners?" asked Jon.

"Lord Tywin commands the army marching through the Ocean Road Lord Hand. It'll take a week at least for Lord Lannister to reach Old Oak."

"Who was leading the attack on Northmarch?"

"It was Ser Tygett Lannister, my lord. Lord Mathis Rowan defeated Ser Tygett's host at Standfast but it was only a distraction." Varys said, a tittering smile on his face that made Jon seriously consider throwing something at the bald spymaster's head.

"What about Robert?" Jon instead asked.

"His grace has marched the Stormlords to Ashford. The Tyrells are marshalling all their men at Highgarden and Oldtown is on high alert."

"The Tyrells are not reinforcing their northern lords." Jon asked with a thoughtful frown.

"They are not my lord. I suspect Mace Tyrell wishes to march with his grace."

'All things considered, that's not a bad idea.' Jon thought.

"Has there been any word from Dorne?"

"I'm afraid not, my lord. Perhaps we can expect a raven from Sunspear. Prince Doran is a cautious man. I doubt he'd do anything that'd benefit Lord Tywin for obvious reasons." said Varys with a simpering smile.

"Let's hope that's the case." Jon muttered under his breath as he knew how unpredictable Dornishmen can become.

Nonetheless, he had sent out a raven to Sunspear explaining the circumstances behind the current animosity between House Lannister and Baratheon. He worded it in such a way that they might get the chance to exact vengeance on House Lannister.

A sudden knock on the door and it was revealed to be his young squire.

"Hugh. What is the matter?"

"My lord. Lord Stannis Baratheon has arrived at the city gates."

"He is no mere lord. I believe in the absence of any trueborn children his grace's heir is Prince Stannis Baratheon, the prince of Dragonstone." said Varys.

Jon eyed the spymaster at the interruption but he agreed with the Spider's assessment.

"Invite Prince Stannis to the small council chambers." Jon ordered.

By the time Stannis reached the small council chambers the remaining members of the small council were in attendance. There was Petyr Baelish, Grandmaester Pycelle and Varys sitting in the council with him. But Stannis didn't come alone into the Small Council chambers. The Prince of Dragonstone was accompanied by full-plated knights.

"Prince Stannis! What is the meaning of this?" Jon shouted in protest as the knights unsheathed their swords while they surrounded the small council.

"Ser Axell. Take the Grandmaester into custody. Throw him into the Black cells." Stannis commanded.

"Wha...? My lord? What is this? I'm but a loyal servant of King Robert..." Pycelle stuttered out protests as he was forced up by his grey robe by the Baratheon knights.

"Shut up you old cretin. You serve no one except the Old Lion. This council does not need Tywin's chief spy in it." Stannis growled.

The knights manhandled the old maester out of the council chambers despite Jon's protests.

"What is the meaning of this Stannis? You cannot just imprison the Grandmaester on a whim." Jon protested.

"I've not acted on whim Lord Arryn. I've been authorised by his grace to take command of the Crownland forces and ensure the safety of his capital in his absence by any means necessary."

"Still...to act so brazenly against Grandmaester Pycelle..."

"My lord Hand. We must consider the possibility that the Grandmaester might have been the one to warn Lord Tywin of what transpired in Storm's End. I'd say Prince Stannis' actions are prudent considering the situation of the city." Varys jumped in unexpectedly announcing his support for Stannis.

"I...I suppose...it is necessary to be cautious." Jon said, looking unsure where this was going.

"Lord Arryn. Have you called your banners?"

"No."

"Then do so my lord. I suspect the Riverlands would undoubtedly get embroiled in the war at some point. I shall focus on gathering the lords of the Crownlands and guard the Gold Road against any Lannister aggression. I hope I can depend on the knights of the Vale to defend the Riverlands."

"I suppose it cannot be helped. I'll send the raven to the Vale lords." Jon muttered, his shoulders slumping in defeat as he thought of all the young ones who'd soon be robbed of their lives in this unnecessary war just like his kin in the last war.

"What about the North? As I understand it, we are in this war thanks to Lord Stark's son." Baelish piqued up.

"Eddard has called his banners. It takes time for the Northerners to gather and I'm told they are in midst of a harvest. It might take a while for the Northern army to cross the Neck." said Jon.

"Are we not going to discuss the matter of Lord Stark's son my lords? His grace is waging this war on the premise that his magical hammer refuses to budge despite Prince Joffrey's efforts. Shouldn't we discuss the matter of magic deciding someone's ancestry before anything else?" said Varys.

"I concur with Lord Varys. How can we know for sure the magic in the hammer was not set in that specific way to deny access to Prince Joffrey?"

"Are you accusing the Starks Lord Baelish?" Jon asked incredulously.

“No, my lord. But I find it odd that everyone is perfectly happy to let a hammer judge the ancestry of Prince Joffrey. If we are to fight a war against Queen Cersei’s family and accuse her of cuckolding the king then I think it is reasonable to inquire for more proof. Perhaps, the Citadel could investigate the matter more thoroughly.” Baelish proposed.

“There is no need, Lord Baelish. Maester Cressen of Dragonstone has already supplied by brother with other pieces of evidence to prove Cersei Lannister’s crime. **The Lineages and Histories of the Great Houses of the Seven Kingdoms, With Descriptions of Many High Lords and Noble Ladies and Their Children** is a book written by Maester Malleon. It contains the traits of those possessing Baratheon blood. All Baratheons that followed Orys Baratheon had blue eyes and black hair. Not once this trait skipped the children in any marriages including past marriages between a Baratheon and Lannister. If that’s not proof enough the appearance of Mya Stone, Edric Storm as well as the many bastards sired by my brother the king are living proof.”

Jon looked at Petyr Baelish and Varys to see whether they had anything to say after that long-winded explanation from the King’s brother. Both men were silent as a grave.

“If this council seeks the veracity of my claims, I’m sure a copy of the book is available in the library of the Red Keep. It was by using this book as evidence, my brother, the king declared the children Joffrey and Myrcella as bastards of Cersei Lannister. It is henceforth my brother’s wish that Joffrey and Myrcella are henceforth be called Joffrey Waters and Myrcella Waters.” said Stannis, taking a sealed parchment with the king’s seal and handing it over to Jon Arryn. “We are questioning the former Queen’s retinue and the Kingslayer to see whether we can find who fathered Cersei’s bastards.”

Jon broke the seal and saw the declaration written by Robert and the royal seal at the bottom of the parchment.

“I shall make copies of the declaration and send it to all the major lords of the seven kingdoms.” Said Jon letting out a sigh.

He supposed there was no coming back from this act now that Robert had officially voided the legitimacy of Joffrey and Myrcella.

“I suppose we ought to discuss the steps we must take to secure the city. Please take your seat, Prince Stannis. This ought to be a long meeting.” Jon said tiredly, thinking for once whether it was a better idea to retire after this war.

Jon was just about ready to give up after trying his best to keep the city together after the wildfire fiasco and the devastation that wrecked the city after a series of unfortunate events. Perhaps, he ought to have a talk with Robert to bring Northerners and Rivermen into the small council. Without Lannister support, Robert needed his natural allies more than ever to dissuade Targaryen loyalists from threatening the king’s peace.

