

Fires raged across the battlefield as men fought, shedding blood and tears—the dead pile up on either side of the curtain wall of Old Oak.

Patrice Oakheart looked on at the grim reality of war. No matter the preparations or resolve, war has always had the effect of breaking even the hardest of men. Even the most honourable lot turn to depravity when war knocks on their doorstep. Therefore, he was not surprised to see the finest knights of the Reach, the most chivalrous of knights in the seven kingdoms, turn to wanton cruelty. He watched coldly as the men under his command dragged the captured Lannister soldiers from the siege, getting pulled through the paved ground, beaten, and bruised. He didn't put a stop to his men when Lannister men cried for mercy, nor did he stop the brutality when Lannister men were hung, beheaded or even when their limbs got chopped off by overzealous men consumed by their bloodlust.

“Shall I intervene and put a stop to it, my lord?” Ser Alester asked him as the men down below began cheering and shouting obscenities at the new prisoners they captured in the evening after they beat back the Lannisters for the fifth time.

“No. The men have lost friends and family in this siege and the invasion. Let them be for now. We'll need them filled with bloodlust on the morrow.” Patrice muttered before turning his eyes to the Lannister camp in the distance.

“My lord. Let me take the watch tonight. You're tired. Please take rest.” Ser Alester insisted.

Even if Patrice wanted to protest, he knew he was tired in body and soul. He was in no condition to keep watch for the whole night. The strain of the command was creeping in, especially after the gruelling siege Old Oak was facing in the last few days.

“All right.” Patrice muttered as he relieved himself from his post and charged his trusted captain of the guards to take command of the defences.

As he climbed down from his post at the tower, he was greeted by his men warmly. He exchanged some pleasantries with them before retiring to his quarters. After having a warm bath, he sent for dinner and invited Lord Alekyne Florent and his eldest son Desmond to attend. He even sent for the lesser lords like Ball, Cockshaw and Graceford as they were loyal bannermen. It wouldn't be wise to slight the lords supporting him while the Lannister army was at his gates. The Old Lion was a wily foe and knew he had to be careful, as Lord Tywin's gold tended to have the power to make enemies into friends.

“Welcome, my lords. I'm afraid the spread is not as rich as one would expect.” Patrice said.

Indeed, the dinner table was sparsely filled with delicacies that'd attract the refined tastes of the nobility of the Reach. There was bread, pork, tomato sauce, beef and very little apple pie. There was wine, however. He had to take his oldest cask of Arbor Gold for the occasion. But he ensured the wine was watered down as he didn't want the lords or his son inebriated on the morrow.

“On the contrary, this is a fine spread considering the Lannister army is sieging us, my lord.” said Lord Alekyne.

“Lord Florent speaks true. This is a fine spread, my lord.” said Lord Owen Ball.

“Aye.” said Lord Harys Graceford.

“You needn't have bothered, my lord. With the passing of brave Gwayne and all....” Lord Alan Cockshaw said, trailing off with a pained look.

Patrice was reminded that his son had served as a squire under Lord Cockshaw. He supposed he was not the only one who grieved for his son. It was a nice sentiment. While his son's body did not remain, Gwayne lived in the hearts of those who knew and loved him.

"Gwayne would not wish for his family to grieve for him for days without end. He lived his life to the fullest and died an honourable death while discharging his duties as a knight of the Reach." said Desmond.

Patrice was surprised to see that level of firmness from his eldest son. None grieved as hard as Desmond when word of Gwayne's passing reached them. He supposed the ravages of the war hardened his son.

"Aye. Ser Gwayne was a fine knight. He died as a warrior with a sword in hand. Brave till his last breath." Lord Alekyne took to his feet, raising his wine cup. "To Ser Gwayne. May he be welcomed by the Warrior in the heavens, for he had died for the noblest of causes."

"To Gwayne!"

They all raised their cups to toast the dearly departed Gwayne Oakheart. The rest of the dinner passed without much fanfare as their topic of discussion turned to the defences of the castle and the word that recently filtered in from further north about House Crane of the Red Lake. Some refugees spoke of a great battle being fought on the shores of the Red Lake between House Crane and the Lannister army. It was still being determined who won, but they hoped House Crane would not easily surrender to the lions. As one of the principal houses of the Northmarch, House Crane guards some of the most fertile farmlands in the Reach, and most importantly, they hold the channels that drew water from the lower Mander into the fields close to Old Oak. The canals continued to spill water into the farmlands east of Old Oak, muddying the fields and roads and making it harder for the Lannister army to go around his castle. So, it should mean House Crane had not been beaten and stood firm against the Lannister assault.

Patrice hoped the Highgarden would send reinforcements as Old Oak was under a gruelling siege. He did not see the resolve of the Lannisters shifting despite their losses the last few days. From interrogating the prisoners, Patrice knew Tygett Lannister was commanding the Lannister army facing him. He also knew the Lannister army was not at full strength, but that could change any day. The prisoners he took indicated that a second host was marching down the Ocean Road from Lannisport under Stafford Lannister's command.

Therefore, it was with a heavy heart that Patrice went to bed that night. He prayed the second host never reaches Old Oak before the Royal host or even the reinforcements from Highgarden.

He was forced to wake up when he heard bells being tolled inside the castle. He was wide awake, threw open the door, and ran for the battlements as men ran around him hastily taking up their weapons and rushing to their posts. He ran straight for his overwatch tower. He climbed the flight of stairs inside the tower as fast as his legs could carry until he finally managed to reach the top. He was out of breath and sweating galleons, but the sheer urgency of the situation allowed him to overcome such simple snags.

Patrice immediately used his Myrish far eyes and searched the battlefield for enemy movements. In the distance, he could see some activity but could not confirm whether the Lannister army was making a move because of the darkness. The first light had yet to appear, and there was fog, making it nearly impossible to confirm. He didn't know why the guards would toll the bells if there were no apparent signs of the enemy attack. But it was better to be safe than sorry.

“Signal the men to arm the trebuchets.” Patrice ordered.

Using a combination of drums and horns, his tower conveyed the orders to the men in charge of the siege engines. He didn’t have to wait long as the men let loose two salvos of flaming stones into the enemy lines. The dark skies lit up as two bright balls of fire streaked across the battlefield and struck straight into enemy lines. Patrice observed the two sites where the fireballs hit the ground, but nothing moved behind the enemy lines.

“My lord!”

“Ser Alester!” Patrice was taken aback as the captain of the guards rushed into his watchtower.

“My lord. We are being attacked from the south.” Ser Alester reported after catching his breath.

“What! That’s impossible.” Patrice shook his head, refusing to believe the Lannister army somehow managed to slip past their notice around the castle.

“It’s true, my lord. I’ve already diverted the men to the wall-walk to the southern side of the curtain wall. But it’s only a temporary measure. We need you there, my lord.” said Ser Alester.

Patrice didn’t want to believe it, but Ser Alester was a knight he trusted. He couldn’t fathom how the Lannister army managed to circle his castle and attack from the south without alerting the scouts he had stationed along all the major passes. He was under no misconception that opening the canals and flooding the fields would stop the Lannister army’s advancement. But he was sure it’d delay many men from crossing to the other side. That delay was all he needed to send out his cavalry and ride them down into the muddy waters of the Reach and destroy them.

However, the Lannisters somehow thwarted him and gained a momentary advantage. This cannot be allowed to stand.

“Find my son and have him take command of this tower. The defences of the north wall are his responsibility, and you shall assist him.”

“As you wish, my lord.” Ser Alester nodded.

With that matter resolved, Patrice immediately set out to the southern wall. On the way, he collected additional troops from Lords Graceford and Ball. He left Lord Alekyne in charge of the defences in the north with his son, as the Florent heir was already familiar with the command structure and defences of the wall. The Florent knights were exceptionally gifted when it came to riding out from the secret entrance and breaking the Lannister siege or even riding down the fleeing Lannister army. Most prisoners they took from the Lannister army were thanks to Lord Alekyne and his knights. He did not see any reason to pull the man from his excellent work so far at the north wall without a cause. Besides, having Lord Alekyne with his son and Ser Alester at the north wall left him with less worry should the Lannister army attack the north wall while they distract him at the south wall.

When he finally managed to make it to the southern part of the curtain wall, the whole castle shook with a huge booming sound echoing inside the castle walls.

“My lord, look!” Lord Harys Graceford pointed at the sky further north as an orange glow could be seen coming from outside the wall.

“Siege engines.” Lord Owen Ball muttered, a little bit of fear in his sound.

“Do not worry, my lord. Old Oak may not have multiple walls, but our one curtain wall is twenty feet thick. The lions are welcome to try their best to test my wall, but it’ll hold strong against their siege engines.” Patrice said, confident that his ancestral castle could withstand the siege engines.

Instead of worrying about what might happen at the north wall, he focused his efforts on the southern wall. He immediately ran over to a tower and climbed the flight of stairs until he reached the very top and set himself on the turret.

“Lord Graceford. I suggest you take up command of the siege engines and wait for my signal.” Patrice ordered.

The red-haired man nodded and immediately set off from the turret after one look into the distance, where little spots of light could be seen moving in the dark.

“Lord Ball. I hope you’re comfortable taking command of the reserve soldiers and waiting for my signal at the gates. I’ll need you and your men if we are to chase away the Lannister army after throwing them back from the wall.”

“As you wish, my lord. What’ll you do?”

“I’ll take command of the wall. Go, my lord. Should I need your assistance, I’ll call for you.”

Lord Owen Ball nodded and sprinted down the stairs as fast as possible.

Patrice walked the battlements, shouting orders and placing archers along the crenellated wall-walk. He also oversaw the movement of essential supplies for the archers and crossbowmen to throw back the enemy. The supply depots in the castle were taking time to divert crucial supplies like helmets and armour as they prioritised arming the men with bows, crossbows, arrows, and bolts. Patrice knew there would be a cost to pay for that shortcoming, but he could do nothing to pick up the pacing of arming his men. Even he had foregone armour and a helmet in his rush to take command of the southern wall.

There was no more time, and they had to defend the castle with what they had.

“Archers. Loose!” Patrice shouted.

The first volley they sent out were flaming arrows that not only had the intended effect of putting some fear in the enemy but also increased the visibility of his men. He ordered another fresh salvo of fire arrows to rain down on the enemy soldiers rushing towards his castle with screams in their throats. He saw Lannister men go down with painful screams as fiery arrows punched through their flesh and bones. Volley after volley rained down on the enemy, but their resolve held firm. The ground below was now littered with little spots of flames thanks to the flaming arrows, which had the added effect of visibility. It made the job of the archers much easier in targeting the enemy.

As the battlefield became more visible, Patrice saw the enemy trying their best to put ladders against the castle walls. But try as they might, he was determined to see not one Lannister soldier climb his wall.

When the first light shined down on the battlefield after hours from the renewed assault on Old Oak, the Lannister army was nowhere near its objective of setting its foot on the wall. Patrice looked down from his tower as Lannister soldiers bravely and foolishly tried their best to scale the wall, but it was fifty feet high. No matter the bravery of Lannister men, climbing a wall that high was no easy task. Without a siege tower, it was nigh impossible to scale the curtain wall of Old Oak.

Fortunately, Patrice saw no siege tower in the enemy's possession. This gave the advantage to his archers who masterfully hid behind merlons and fell many Lannister men in the field. When Lannister men tried to use the ram against his gates, they were swiftly felled by stones being dropped on their heads through brattices. As the southern gate of his castle was not protected by bronze plating like the northern gate, a fire could do more damage to the door even though the wood used was ironwood. Therefore, he forbade the use of pitcher oil and instead used boiling water to dislodge the enemy from the gatehouse.

"My lord, a message from Ser Alester. Lord Desmond and Alekyne managed to beat back the enemy. The siege engines destroyed the siege towers of the enemy. There were huge casualties on the Lannister side. He says the Lannister army is in full retreat. He seeks your permission to ride out and rout the enemy from their camp, my lord." the messenger managed to spill out in one breath.

There was a roar of approval from his men at the wall who were fortunate enough to hear the good news.

"Keep your eyes on the enemy. We've not won yet." Patrice barked out sharply, forcing his men to go back to defending the castle, but word quickly spread regarding the victory, making men renew their efforts to throw out the invaders.

Turning back to the messenger, Patrice saw the eager look on the soldier's face.

"No. We cannot afford to attack the Lannister camp without knowing their strength and defences. Tell Ser Alester to stand down." Patrice ordered.

"But... but my lord! We have them on the run!" the young man sputtered indignantly.

"Do what you're told to do, boy. Tell the men to stand down. That's an order." Patrice snapped, making the messenger fling and nod fearfully.

A loud horn suddenly blared from the south, gaining Patrice's attention. At first, he thought the horn was being blown from the Lannister side, and they were making a retreat, but when he looked with his far eyes, he saw a black banner in the distance. His eyes widened when he saw many more banners; some were very familiar to his eyes. He saw the golden rose of House Tyrell, the lone tower of House Hightower, the red fox of House Florent and many more such banners. There were even banners of black and white swans of House Swann, three brass buckles of House Buckler, yellow wheat stalks of House Selmy and many more. He revisited the black banner, and there in the field – he saw the crowned stag fluttering proudly in the wind.

"You boy. Tell Ser Alester to gather anyone who wants to kill some Lannisters to come here. The King has come to our rescue. Spread the word, now!" he shouted.

The shouts of joy let out by his men as the Baratheon army pounced on the lions from their rear shook the sky. It was a bloodbath, and Patrice saw no reason not to bloody his sword. So, he opened the gates and led his men out in a charge crushing the trapped Lannister army with nowhere to go.

"No prisoners! Kill the bastards. Kill them all!" Patrice shouted as he charged ahead, eager to see justice done, for he could see the banner of three dogs near the Lannister lion.

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Robert Baratheon never felt as alive as in this moment. He was a drunkard and a whoremonger, but he was not born for that pointed chair. He knew that more than anyone else. The throne suited him ill. He had said so many times to Jon Arryn. He thrived most on a battlefield where he could care less, for all the pompousness and fakery of the court bothered him not. Only luck and skill mattered on the battlefield; that was where he truly thrived and lived. Nothing else could excite him as such in the world except for his precious Lyanna, but the dragons took her from him. He caved in the dragon prince's chest at the Trident for her, and he killed Rhaegar again a thousand times in his dreams. It'd never bring Lyanna back.

Therefore, it was the battlefield for him. He was wedded to it like a newly married groom. And like all newlyweds, he tried to please the battlefield.

Robert swung Godsgrief with full force. The hammer weighed little in his hand, but the blow crushed a Lannister man's head like a smashed egg. Blood and brain matter was everywhere, making Robert laugh. He moved on to the next victim and swung. This time his hammer struck the chest of a knight who tried to engage him. The knight coughed up blood and was blown away from his horse with armour punched in under the mighty power of Godsgrief.

"Ha! Ha ha ha ha!" Robert laughed maniacally as he was unstoppable on the battlefield.

He smashed and killed his way through the Lannister army, ignoring what was happening around him. With Godsgrief in his hand, he felt like a god. He spun the hammer around by the leather holder at the end of the handle and smacked away anyone that dared to challenge him. Shields splintered and swords shattered under his blows, and soon he was drenched in the blood of his enemies. He roared out in challenge, asking for the men to give him a good fight, but the wimps of the Lannister army turned tail and ran.

"Cowards! Come and fight me! Come and die by my hands!" Robert roared, his limbs filled with unholy strength, and he was most eager to bloody his hammer some more.

Only one man didn't run, and Robert laughed at seeing this. He recognised the giant rushing towards him with a massive sword in hand. Robert jumped down from his horse and went straight for Gregor Clegane, screaming eagerly despite the protests from Ser Barristan and Ser Arys Oakheart. Robert ducked under the swinging sword of Clegane and smacked the knight on his back with Godsgrief. A sickening crack was heard despite the screams and clash of steel all around Robert. Clegane fell forward with a pained cry, but Robert didn't take this opportunity to finish off the giant knight. Instead, he waited for Tywin's mad dog to climb back to his feet. He also noticed the men were forming a circle around the two of them as men watched this bout most eagerly.

When Clegane climbed to his feet and rushed at Robert, he swatted away the giant man's sword with a simple swing of Godsgrief, leaving Clegane wide open. He smashed the knight's knee, making the man scream to the heavens in pain. Clegane keeled over and fell to a knee clutching his ruined knee and screaming his throat out. Robert didn't wait around this time and smashed his hammer against the giant's sword arm. Another sickening crack could be heard, and Clegane screamed some more.

"I should've had you killed like Ned wanted. But tywin fuckin Lannister saved your hide back then. Now, you get what you deserve, you sick fuck!" Robert snarled, spinning Godsgrief in his hands.

With his two hands on Godsgrief, he swung hard. Clegane's head cracked open like a watermelon and sprayed its contents all over the ground. The giant knight fell to the ground with a thud, never to rise again. The men screamed and shouted, celebrating the death of Clegane and his victory.

“Robert! Robert! Robert! Robert!” the crowd chanted.

Robert basked in the glory and enjoyed the adoration of the crowd.

“Your grace! Welcome to Old Oak. You’ll find my castle most accommodating. What shall I prepare for your liking?” Lord Patrice Oakheart shouted over the celebrations.

“More Lannisters to kill would be to my liking, my lord.” Robert said, making his men laugh and celebrate all the rowdier.

“I can arrange for that, your grace. We have the Lannisters on the run on the northern side of the castle. Should your grace wish it, I’ll happily open the gates, and we could rout the Lannister army.” Lord Oakheart offered.

“Then lead the way, Lord Oakheart. Let’s hunt some lions!” Robert shouted, making his men respond in kind as they were most eager to fight some more.

Robert led the charge out of the northern gate of Old Oak, and the might of the Demon of the Trident swept away the Lannister army.

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“My prince. The men are ready.” Ser Davos reported.

Stannis need not look at his trusted knight’s face to see the former smuggler was having second thoughts.

“You disapprove of my decision.” Stannis observed.

“Taking the Crownland army to fight in the Reach would leave the capital undefended. You’re also his grace’s heir as the Prince of Dragonstone. Should something happen to you...” Ser Davos trailed off.

“Jon Arryn had the same concerns. Nothing will happen to me. And even if something were to happen, my son, Steffon, shall become the Prince of Dragonstone and Robert’s heir.” said Stannis, climbing his horse and making himself comfortable on the saddle.

“The defences of the capital....”

“I take only half of the Crownland forces. I’m sure you can defend the city with half the numbers. Besides. Lord Arryn’s efforts are best spent on rallying the Riverlords to our cause.” said Stannis.

“I shall convey your wishes, my prince.” Ser Davos said with a sigh.

“Good. Now keep the fleet at the ready. I doubt the Royal fleet will be challenged at the Gullet, but Tywin might hire sellsails for his cause.”

“I shall keep my ears open for any word of such from my old contacts, my prince.” said Davos.

“Good.” Stannis nodded, donning his helmet and riding ahead of the assembled army.

“Men! We ride today to put an end to the lions invading the Reach. Now, who’s with me?”

Excited yells and shouting were the answer he earned from the Crownland army.

“Then let’s go kill some lions!” Stannis punched his fist in the air and galloped away on his horse with the army closely following him.

While riding ahead into the Reach through the Roseroad, he turned his head and eyed the giant Weirwood tree that had sprung up in the Red Keep. The red leaves of the tree could be seen standing tall on Aegon’s Hill. He hoped the Old Gods were not wrong and he’d have everything he wanted towards the end of this war. The tree he planted, becoming a giant Weirwood tree over a few months, was a good omen in his eyes. He did not have any personal ambition for a crown, but now that he had a son, he was more than happy to accept the kingship of the seven kingdoms.

With the hope of sitting on the Iron Throne, Stannis rode ahead on his horse, picking up speed. He could feel it in his bones. His time had come to reign as king. He only needs to wait a little bit longer.