**Chapter 12**

**Hold the Riverlands**

**Lord Edmure Tully 5**

Edmure was glad he had been given the time to improve his appearance before answering the summons of Lord Elbert and Lord Robert.

After the long days of retreat south, trying to keep the magnificence a Lord was supposed to present to his bannersmen had somewhat been in a very, very low position on his list of priorities. But if the Lord Paramount of the Riverlands had somehow believed differently, it would have nevertheless been impossible.

The camp and a lot of the objects he had ordered to be transported in his chests northwards had been lost in the disaster of the Red Tears. Tunics, pants, golden cups, forks, knives and presents his men had offered to commemorate his ascension on the seat of his Lord Father...and it had been abandoned, without a thought.

To be honest, not that he particularly wanted to be, Edmure knew the loss of the baubles was not going to hurt. The loss of the ten thousand-plus gold dragons which had been guarded by the army paymaster, alas, were definitely something the Riverlands were going to need very badly in the days to come.

But there was nothing he could do to take them back. Whatever the treacherous heretics were going to do with the coins and the treasures they had pillaged from his army’s camp, Edmure could only hope that they would quarrel and tear each other apart with it.

At the same time, he had a Lord of the Vale and a Lord of the Storm to meet in person. And he didn’t look like anymore like a brigand who had somehow stolen the armour of a knight. He had managed to find clothes in the colour of his House among the chariots which had been waiting for them at the crossroad, his beard had been cut, and boiled water had been used generously to remove most of the mud and substances which had covered his skin.

Of course, as he entered the tent guarded by several men armed in the unmistakeable falcon helmets of House Arryn, the Lord of Riverrun knew all his efforts were not going to be enough to awe the two men in front of him.

Lord Elbert Arryn, Lord of the Gates of the Moon, Heir to the Vale, and commander of the Vale Army in the name of his Lord Paramount, had far more presence and majestic aura than him. His hairs were a perfect blond and his eyes were a stunning blue. His armour was white with hundreds of golden scripts from the Faith of the Seven. The sword by his side had its handle shaped like a rising falcon and the silver-coloured protections next to him were sharing the same sky decorations. The Falcon Knight could not have mistaken this man as anyone but one of his descendants. Elbert Arryn was a man of the Eyrie, a ruler of the mountains and the sky.

The man sitting next to him with a cup of red in his hand was even more imposing and dangerous. Unlike the Vale Lord, most of his appearance was dishevelled, unkempt, almost barbarian really. Fortunately, the expensive plate armour and the white-black House colours identified him as a member of House Baratheon. Lord Robert Baratheon, Heir to the Stormlands, son of the Hand of the King, knight of Storm’s End and winner of countless tourney melees. The warhammer abandoned next to his seat was of a prodigious size, and if Edmure hadn’t seen him use it, he would not have believed someone could lift and wild it for anything than taking a pose. Warhammers like those could strike devastating blows against heavily-armoured opponents, and the monstrous parodies of knights the heretics had unleashed on the field would be no exception. But few men could raise a warhammer like this one, and as a result few would try.

And as the silence continued and their cold stares fixed him, it was more than obvious the two Lords had not summoned him today to give him praises and congratulations. At least there were only two of them, not a full war council.

“Your screw-up cost us the Northern Marches,” the Stormlord began, and by his slightly altered voice, Edmure understood this was not the first or second wine that the son of Steffon Baratheon had drank before his arrival. And yet, there was something...powerful in this voice. It was something which forced him to keep his eyes on the black-yellow clothed warrior. “And you destroyed your entire army in a single battle.”

“With due respect, Ser Baratheon,” Edmure had to make his point known before more aspersions were made. “It wasn’t only *my* army. The Frey continuously refused to obey my orders, and the Faith accepted my plans when they felt it did not go against their religious imperatives. And the sellswords fought on their own. When we fought the heretics, it was with four armies, not one. And while our forces have been defeated, they are not entirely destroyed. I have twelve thousand men alone here, and Ser Stevron has rallied hundreds at the Twins-“

“SEVEN HELLS!” barked the giant of a man, so loudly, it made Edmure jump. The Baratheon continued in a lower tone of voice. “Do you hear yourself talk? I hear only apologies, apologies and apologies. You were sent north to defend the Small Wall and protect your lands from the ravages of the heretics! You failed! Now shut up and let your betters talk!”

Edmure felt anger pouring in his heart and his veins. Was Robert Baratheon a better warrior than him? Yes, obviously. The man had been gallivanting from tourney to tourney and from bandit hunting to other exploits since he had been a squire. Was he a better army commander? Impossible to say, the Stag had never fought in a true war. And was he his better in the nobility? No. Edmure was Lord Paramount of the Riverlands and Lord of Riverrun, while Robert Baratheon was merely the Heir to the Stormlands, and if the rumours before the Crusade began were true, not in the favour of his father and his family.

“We faced *demons* in battle, *Ser*. We faced sorcerers and a legion of heretics. We faced betrayal. The assurance came from the Iron Throne itself that House Blackwood was to be trusted once they renounced their heretical gods for the Seven-Who-Are-One. We marched to war immediately when the royal horns asked it of us.”

“No one will question your loyalty, Lord Edmure,” Elbert Arryn intervened. The Heir to the Vale didn’t speak of his skill or courage, however. “And I agree that the words of Robert are too harsh. But you have to admit, your army showed no signs of counterattacking or protecting the villages and hamlets of this part of the Riverlands when we met your column.”

“This is because the villages we fought over were emptied beforehand and our rear-guard ambushed several parties of the heretics day and night. Every time we didn’t proceed like this, the enemy learned of our presence and things...the skirmishes didn’t go well. The enemy has many, many traitors hidden in the Riverlands.”

Robert Baratheon scoffed. At least Elbert had the good sense not to listen in silence what he had to say.

“We acted for decades like if every traitor or demon worshipper had to hide in his cellar forbidden texts and was unable to pass through the doors of a sept,” the Lord of Riverrun continued to explain. “But it doesn’t work like that. Many of the cultists my men found and executed during our retreat were men and women who had lived in the Riverlands for the entirety of their lives and turned to the worshipping of abominations for more power, gold and petty reasons. Whether it was a Blackwood or another heretical faction who convinced them, I am unable to tell, but we have far, far more traitors hiding behind loyal banners than I would have believed possible before the Crusade.”

“This is not-“

“Lord Baratheon, Lord Edmure is right.” The Vale Lord stated, giving a disapproving expression to his Stormlands counterpart. “The heretical cults have grown bolder and bolder in the last moon. Even in the Vale, some of my bannersmen reported sabotage and poisoning attempts of our supplies. And since we have entered the Riverlands, all our Gifted priests have been very clear there’s a sickness in the air and the earth which wasn’t there before. Something unnatural is at work, and the traitors are emboldened. They strike wherever they think we’re vulnerable.”

“And there’s worse,” the only son of the defunct Lord Hoster Tully confessed. “I will admit we underestimated the viciousness and the sheer savagery the heretics brought with them from Winterfell and other cursed places, but even with twice the number of foot and horse that I had, I would have had no counter for their sorcerers and their *demons*. I can only thank the Merciful Mother for the heretic worshippers’ seemingly inability to send them southwards. If they could...”

Edmure shivered. Maybe it was the cowardly part of his mind which was speaking, but there were things no mortal man could be asked to face in combat, and the things which had butchered thousands of his men were horrors which weren’t stopped by good Riverlands steel.

“The most important location of the Crusade is the Twins now,” Robert Baratheon growled, his fury somewhat diminished but not extinct. “If the Starks and their pet demon worshippers can take it, we will have to fight a long campaign to retake its ruins from the heretics. The damage to our supplies and the marches’ granaries will set us back for many moons. Can Walder Frey and his brood can hold?”

Edmure knew the answer to this before the question was asked. The monsters had their demonic ‘cannons’, quantities of horrible beasts, sorcery, and more troops were pouring into the Riverlands. The Freys...were the Freys. Their twin fortresses were rather formidable to be sure, well-fortified and with food and water abundant to survive a long siege. What was left of their army would hold the ramparts side-by-side with entire companies of sellswords and levies which had been too late to join the main muster.

Could they hold again the tide of demonic fury and sorcerous heresy which had risen against the Champions of the Faith?

“I don’t know.”

**Lothar Frey 3**

Contrary to what was said from Casterly Rock to Gulltown, the scions of House Frey had imagined more than once seeing a hostile force present itself before its walls in the last decades. The enmity between their Lord Father and this old trout of Hoster Tully was not a secret, and more than once Lothar was ready to admit things had gone a bit too far. Accusations had been made. Tax collectors had been robbed by ‘bandits’. Lands’ delimitations had been questioned.

But presenting itself before the walls was all they had imagined this imaginary Tully host would do. And even that would mean things had gone spectacularly wrong, for the trout would not ask so brazenly for homage if he hadn’t the full support of King Aerys.

Unfortunately, the old reptile was now dead, the old trout was dead too, a Crusade had been ordered, the Small Wall had been broken in so many places he didn’t think there was a lengthy section still standing, and the Twins were now under siege.

And it was a true siege. Lothar was ashamed to admit he had not thought it would ever come, but enemy forces had encircled his home on both the western and the eastern banks. The latter had been unavoidable, with their defeat in front of the desecrated castle of Sentinel’s Stand. The former had not been anticipated at all.

For three hundred years, every man and woman residing in the Twins and near the Green Fork had breathed with the knowledge that Seagard was there to repel the murderous reavers of the Ironborn. As long as the Mallisters stood, House Greyjoy and their hordes of pirates and sea scum would not dare invading the Riverlands.

Judging by the fact Lothar was seeing over two thousand Ironborn preparing ladders, rams and other siege engines from his post of observation, House Mallister’s survival was very much in doubt now, and Seagard was not the shield of the Riverlands anymore.

“I wonder,” Stevron said as he watched the kraken banners float in the north-western wind, “if father will decide to go back to the eastern castle now that there are enemies on this bank as well.”

Lothar grimaced. Of all the shameful actions of the last moon, this one was certainly going to live in infamy for centuries. The castellan of the Twins had known his father was not a very courageous man, but his behaviour after the defeat of their army had been...rather cowardly. And most of his brothers and his sisters ignored that before the Ironborn had shown themselves yesterday, their Lord Father had been determined to set their great bridge on fire should the heretics managed to get a foothold on top of the walls.

Father Above, their House had a lot to expiate for. Granted, the betrayal of House Blackwood had hurt the Riverlands far more than anything Black Walder ever did, but his grand-nephew had been present at all the war councils. Lothar had never thought to send a raven to the lair of demons that was Winterfell, but thanks to this black traitor, the end result had been the same.

“I pray he won’t,” the man many nicknamed ‘the Lame’ answered. “The last time he did it, it involved over one hundred guards and servants, and I am not counting his bed warmers in the lot. And unless our enemies have suddenly lost their heads, I think they will be able to add one plus one and arrive to two.”

And in this instance the heretical vermin would focus first on taking the bridge and ensuring their Lord Father would not escape them.

“You can tell me the bad news, Lothar. Unlike Father, I am not going to insult you because you speak the truth.”

The twelfth son of the master of Twins sighed. If only Stevron had been allowed to claim the lordship of the twin castle a decade ago...but it was useless to ponder on ‘ifs’ right now.

“The situation as it stands does not look incredibly perilous,” he began. “At first sight, one might even say the situation is quite advantageous for our House. We are assailed on both banks of the Green Fork, true, but our bridge allows us to reinforce easily against the most dangerous enemy. We have over six thousand men able to wield sword, axe, spear, bow and our scorpions and ballista. The Ironborn, on the other hand, have merely their vanguard here. And of the ten thousand the Starks have brought here, more than half are nothing more than unnatural beasts.”

Lothar narrowed his eyes as some Ironborn paused somewhat from their siege efforts to taunt them with rude gestures and insults that were the bread and butter of these ruffians.

“Our supplies will allow us to handle six months of siege.”

“Even after all the mouths we’ve left pass through our gates?”

“Even after that,” the younger son replied. “But honestly, since all the loyal armies of Westeros are on their way to relieve us, I am not worried about this. The siege will be decided long before this, one way or the other. No Stevron, what we must be wary of does not include food and water.”

Although in both cases, he had begun storing and rationing before the disorganised columns of his brother returned to the Twins. With their enemy worshipping demons out of the Seven Hells, Lothar would not disregard the possibility of them poisoning the Green Fork or some other ‘impossible’ feat.

“I suppose the heretic ‘apocalypse cannons’ are the first, then.”

“Yes,” he agreed. “I don’t know how the Starks built these things, but the moment they manage to bring one in range of our walls, we are going to fight for our lives and souls.”

Thankfully, these heretical contraptions were extremely to move; none of them had yet reached the siege. He couldn’t count on their constant absence.

“The second threat, naturally, come from the Ironborn longships.” The Northern heretics and the Ironborn heretics...the worst part was that it made sense and no one had thought to find a way to prevent it until it was too late. As if one bad news had to be followed by another, ravens had come from the West to inform them the pride of the Lannisport fleet had been sunk, burned or taken away at anchor by the pirates. “If they’re able to transport them between Seagard and the Twins, they will have a river fleet able to take the bridge from us. From there it won’t be a single siege, it will be two and our ability to reinforce the most threatened castle will disappear.”

The bridge was nearly impossible to take if the enemy had small boats, but Ironborn longships were an entirely different tale.

“They still will have to storm our walls, and we can always bring down the bridge if it comes to this.”

Sometimes, Lothar really wished he was an optimist. Life would be much easier that way.

“I think you dismiss too fast the cost and our ability of collapsing the bridge...and our power to convince Father to do it. But forgetting it for a moment, there are other two threats. Sorcery and treason waiting within our ranks.”

This time all traces of amusement and kindness disappeared from Stevron’s white-bearded face.

“Sorcery I can understand; after the defeat these demon worshippers have handed us, nobody knows what they’re capable of. But surely you have managed to find all the people Black Walder had involved in his schemes?”

“I am not the bloody Spider,” Lothar retorted. “I am not a eunuch, and I don’t have access to the royal coffers to hire blades and whisperers like the Master of Whisperers is doing at King’s Landing.”

Not to mention there had been thousands, Seven Hells tens of thousands of Riverlanders and foreigners crossing the bridge and using the Twins or one of the inns nearby to rest. With this mass of men, everything was possible...including the betrayal of one of your grand-nephews.

So...do you want me to command the western or the eastern castle?”

**Lord Elbert Arryn 1**

For a moment, silence reigned in the tent as Lord Edmure Tully left without a glance back.

Deep inside, Elbert controlled himself not to curse, sigh or show of a sign of contrariety.

“Robert,” the Heir to the Eyrie at last spoke when it was clear there was no chance of the Lord of Riverrun or anyone else to hear their conversation. “We had agreed to play the good and the bad knight for Lord Edmure. Not to antagonise beyond reason one of the Lords Paramount of the realm!”

His friend swallowed another cup of red, and the Vale Lord could not help but think the eldest son of Lord Steffon drank far too much. This was what his seventh or eighth cup? And the day was still young.

“He may not be a Lord Paramount for much longer,” Robert pointed out before finishing the emptying of his cup. “I had never seen someone made such a mess of things. I think the boys I have as squires would have done twice better than him.”

Now that was completely unfair. Elbert was far from convinced the young Tully Lord was a competent commander, but the situation the Iron Throne and most of the other Lords Paramount had left him to struggle with was definitely unpleasant. As Edmure had said himself, the lost battle in front of Sentinel’s Stand had been fought – and lost – with four armies, a fact which wouldn’t have happened if the King and the Royal Council had supported him against the manipulations of the Freys and the cries of independence of the Faithful.

“Let’s say you are right,” the Vale commander said in a tone which made obvious he really didn’t think so. “Let’s say we replace him as this Crusade has just begun. Riverrun and its most important vassals will show no enthusiasm to return to the battlefield and gather a new army. We will have angered a young Lord which is going to remind this insult for decades. And we have right now no one to replace him. Bracken is dead. Mallister is trapped in the dungeon of Seagard. Blackwood has betrayed us. Walder Frey is also trapped inside the Twins and the weasel is completely unsuitable in the first place.”

Father and Warrior, the entire Riverlands would revolt within the fortnight if Walder Frey was named Lord Paramount!

“The Whents and House Mooton are too weak. Darry may have been a better choice, but the forces they sent to the battlefield broke faster than the levies of Riverrun.”

“Fine,” Robert replied. “Fine, Elbert. If you tell me removing the trout will hurt us, I will not open my mouth to push for a replacement.”

The blonde-haired leader knew this was the best he was going to receive for the time being.

“But there’s no denying this war is a long series of defeats for our cause,” the Stormlander warrior added as he stood from his seat and began to unfurl the maps. “The Small Wall is gone, and we won’t be able to retake any time soon. The Lords of the Riverlands are under attack on both sides of the Green Fork, and if the Twins fall, it’s going to be far, far worse. And for all Lord Tully’s words about mustering new forces, the fact remain his army was beaten and broken at the Battle of the Red Tears.”

Elbert nodded slowly. Robert was right about the last point...and the worst part was that the heretics weren’t responsible for this destruction.

It was extremely difficult to evaluate the number of men who had perished when demons and sorcery struck them done, but Elbert thought it was something under ten thousand. When the combined host had around fifty thousand, this should have given the Riverlands a strong army to contest the advance of the enemy.

Except that when it had stood united and defiant, the army of the Riverlands had broken in dozens of columns, most of them which had not reunited since. Edmure Tully had fled southwards with twelve thousand. As far as they knew, Stevron Frey had saved between four and five thousand. As for the rest of the warriors, freeriders, levies, Faithful and sellswords? Some had turned their cloaks. Some had been captured. And many, many more had deserted and were now plaguing the lands north of his army, pillaging villages and causing more damage than their initial cowardice had done.

“And they lost most of their camp supplies and equipment during their retreat. They need a couple of months to find new armours, weapons and new chariots and horses. And they can’t take on the heretics before we have given them a defeat and proved they aren’t invincible.”

Edmure Tully was a pleasant exception in this regard. He was still willing to fight. More than half of his army’s remnant didn’t agree with him at all. Elbert had not been able to walk much in their ranks – it had been less than three days, since they had stopped the retreat of the first broken companies fleeing south – but the dead eyes and the looks of despair had impressed men. No doubt a few of these men could be accused of cowardice, but hundreds or thousands? No, there was something more frightening at work. This army had fought for less than one night and one day. And yet there was something in the way dozens of men met around the camp fires in the evening, how they jumped and walked...these men had faced the enemy, and it was obvious their faith and their minds had not survived unscarred by the experience.

“I will ask our...gifted septons to search through the ranks and see if they can bolster their ranks. We need all the benedictions and blessings, if only to reassure the souls of our warriors for the battles ahead.”

“You really think it is worthwhile to lose time on this?” Robert’s expression was not convinced at all. “As far as we know, these sorcerers die like every other abomination. A few inches of good steel in their throats...”

“Robert. We are speaking of true sorcery. The kind of heretical practises which allows our enemies to summon demons of the Seven Hells, conjure things of plague and poison, and set horse and knights aflame. You may think you will stand and fight when they begin unleashing the same horrors against you, and maybe you’re right. But unless we do have something to fight them one-on-one, the initial blow which will hammer our army will be all the heretics need to break us. Our armies will break as panic spreads. It’s not cowardice or lack of faith in the Seven; the men the septons-militant went with north were pious and willing to fight. And yet they were broken.”

“Yes, but we can’t delay our march,” Robert said. “I wasn’t joking when I say the fall of the Twins would be a bloody disaster, Elbert. With Seagard pillaged by the Ironborn as we speak, we have already one of the strongholds we needed to invade quickly the North and the Iron Islands.”

The maps were placed before them, and it was hard not to wince at the magnitude of the terrain lost. Oh, compared to the entire size of Westeros, it was almost nothing. But strategically, it was very, very bad.

The Three Sisters had sent panicked messages before a heavy silence had fallen upon them. So when the Vale and Royal Fleets would sail north, they would be unable to strike White Harbor directly as the Bite was in the claws and whatever appendages the enemy held it.

Lannisport and the minor Western ports had been ravaged, and with the treachery of Balon Greyjoy, the long and vulnerable Sunset coast was no longer so vulnerable. And of course, a long campaign would be needed to crush the Ironborn first.

And of course there were the defeats in the Riverlands. Castles and villages razed, the Small Wall a thing of the past, Seagard was burning and the Twins were under siege. Ironborn reavers and abominations were unleashed in the northern Riverlands.

The direwolves and the krakens had not been caught by surprise at all by the declaration of the Crusade. And now they were building a shield of damnation and corruption in the very Riverlands.

“We have to stop them at the Twins. We can always replace Lord Walder by a more competent son the moment we will have saved his ungrateful head. But if we want to save them, we will have to march now.”

“You realise, of course, that the besieging horde of monsters on the eastern bank of the Green Fork are the bait.” Elbert was not as old as Tywin Lannister or other veterans of the Ninepenny Kings’ War, but he really didn’t need to be to see the trap. “There will be an army waiting for us on the Kingsroad.”

“Two or three days south of the Twins, I think,” the son of the Hand of the King approved. “Close enough to help the siege, and let us hear the siege, but far enough to be unable to press on if we happen to win. But we should have sixty thousand to deal with them, no?”

“Fifty-five thousand,” Elbert corrected, knowing thirty out of these fifty-five were his Valemen, led by knights in sorcery-repelling runic armours. “I am preparing five thousand to march against Raventree Hall. House Blackwood has showed its true colours, and their lands will burn for this.”

Loyalty would be repaid with loyalty in this Crusade. And treason would be rewarded with immolation and annihilation.

“Fifty-five thousand,” the Baratheon warrior muttered. “Since the bastards need to leave some forces to encircle the Twins, we should have the numerical advantage if we can smash them before they start their damned demon summoning.”

“As long as the Twins stand,” If the Frey fortress fell, the monsters would have no need to be wary about exposing their backs.

“Yes, as long as the Freys can hold their high towers...”

**Ser Stevron Frey 4**

The first three mornings of the siege, nothing had happened of note, beyond the heretics throwing at them sorcery attacks and pestilent things with some unnatural siege engines that by all rights shouldn’t function.

Stevron didn’t know how, but the moment he woke up he was convinced this day was going to be different. When he reached the top of the eastern dungeon after eating a slice of bread and a small apple, the eldest son of the Master of the Twins saw his fears were very much justified: a opaque green fog was covering everything, but most particularly the Green Fork.

“Is it poison again?” He shouted to the guards waiting several feet below.

“No, Lord!” the men clamoured back. Stevron frowned before grimacing in understanding. It was only a subterfuge of the enemy to prepare attacks without the sentinels seeing anything.

“They are coming,” he said for the benefit of the men surrounding him. “Warn all the garrisons to prepare for an imminent attack, but be discreet. Use our messengers, no drums and no war horns.”

How much good it would do, the Heir to the Twins didn’t know. The days of the disastrous retreat had proved the heretics had been given by the demonic things they worshipped the ability to see in the dark, and they had beasts which could track bleeding soldiers for scores of leagues.

“Send a messenger to my grandson Edwyn. I think the Water Tower will be the first to be assaulted.”

Stevron had not required the help of Lothar to see the danger coming from this direction. Since channels had been dug to surround each castle of the Twins in a Riverrun fashion, the Twins at this moment were more like two islands linked by the Water Tower and the Great Bridge. This was something that promised a slaughter for any attacker, for the enemy would have to begin two very violent offensives on the western and eastern shores, otherwise he would come to the rescue of Lothar in the west or he would be rescued by him if the heretics focused on the eastern defences.

No, the heretics had known of the Water Tower and the bridge defences with their disgusting insect probes. They would strike soon. Each day they spent waiting was one the entire armies of the South marched in their direction to relieve them.

How the beasts and demon worshippers were going to attack, on the other hand, was a mystery. Lothar had spoken of transporting longships from Seagard, but Stevron had disagreed. The enemy had proven it had produced many horrors to tear apart the faithful and the loyal...

Nevertheless, they weren’t going to take them by surprise. Spearmen and archers were marching on the bridge to take their positions as he watched the military preparations. The Water Tower had many scorpions, archers and torches, and following the first betrayals and murders, Lothar had interrogated all the men-at-arms and hanged a couple of them.

And as unpleasant as the possibility was, his brothers and he had planned for the worst possibility. Should the Water Tower be at risk to be demolished by the enemy, several small catapults would begin delivering large stones against it. The bridge also could be broken with time, but alas this decision belonged to his Father and his Father alone. No one had been able to change his mind on this point. Fortunately, this was time they would have. Many things had been said about the heretics, but even people walking naked in the middle of winter with direwolves by their side could understand the value of the bridge!

“Let’s go downstairs. The heretics, I fear, are going to reveal themselves soon.”

As if to mock his words, an atrocious sound shrieked through the fog and Stevron like everyone else placed his hands on his feet.

The source of this horrible ruckus was not difficult to find. A heretical ball of fire, a projectile of these hellish ‘apocalypse cannons’ had been fired on an oblique course in their direction, though it managed to miss the castle and splash in the water north of the bridge.

Many men on the curtain walls laughed.

“I think, my Lord, their siege engines are a tad imprecise...”

“This was a signal,” Stevron didn’t join the general hilarity. “And if one of these damn ‘cannons’ is here, then the others are certainly in position too.”

No need to be pessimistic like Lothar to say this. And unfortunately, the creatures hidden behind the fog had indeed prepared their other heretical weapons. Before he had the time to utter more than two orders, three fire balls mounted in the sky before going down. One struck the outer wall, two others the towers. Instantly the laughs stopped and the screams of agony resonated. Worse, the demonic fire instantly began to spread around.

The next moments proved this first attack wasn’t a fluke. The heretics were firing high, impossibly high, trying – successfully – to ignore the walls and bring untold horror and many deaths to the garrison hiding behind them.

The men learned rapidly to hide behind cover, but after the third volley, one of these infernal siege engines began to send its fire balls against the bridge, and there, there was no overhead protection or barrier to prevent the enemy from using their invention like a great scorpion. The first hit had missed the bridge by a large distance. The second did too, but narrowly. The third found its mark, and slaughtered five men, spreading flames and blood as it burned and tore flesh apart.

In mere moments, the defence of the Twins was forced to face different threats, all more heretical in nature than another. Gigantic birds emerged from the fog to bite hands and heads. They were bigger than ravens, and far uglier. Other siege engines, more like trebuchets, judging by the red and green flashes they produced, were hammering the high towers and the inner defences. Thousands of beasts were mounting to the assault, swimming in the water barrier separating the eastern castle from the land, and colouring it red as the rain of arrows delivered by his archers killed them.

“**The Grandfather bids you welcome. The Champions of Nurgle claim this bridge for the glory of life and death**.”

The voice seemed to be everywhere and nowhere at once. It was vibrant and yet the first words give him the urge to vomit.

The waters of the Green Fork erupted to reveal the enemy and Stevron blanched as he recognised the monsters.

Lizard-lions. These were lizard-lions, one of the deadliest species in Westeros and certainly the apex predators of the Neck though the absence of people returning from their expeditions had never given House Frey more than rumours and crushed bones.

But here the reptiles they weren’t a rumour. They were hundreds of them...and tied up by the battle, neither Stevron nor Edwyn had remarked that the water had risen unnaturally in the last turn of hourglass, enough for the beasts transporting dozens of heretics to finish climbing the bridge without difficulty.

Spears were thrown or thrust to repel the animals. Bows delivered their arrows. But the scales of the lizard-lions, infamous for their toughness, proved their reputation once more. Spears broke without causing more than superficial wounds. Some of the beasts were soon covered entirely in arrows and yet they didn’t even slow down, the projectiles being considered as a half-annoyance.

The green fog grew more powerful and nauseating. And then hundreds more of lizard-lions revealed themselves, led by a gigantic lizard-lion.

Stevron had been horrified to see that the rumours about the direwolves being greater than some war horses were absolutely exact during the Battle of the Red Tears.

But the beasts the vassals of the Starks rode could have been swallowed by the swamp abomination without effort.

“THE GRANDFATHER LOVES OUR BITE! PRAISE LIFE!” The woman riding the elder lizard-lion shouted and despite the distance and the carnage, her words were heard by every defender.

“PRAISE DEATH!”

Snakes and other dangerous species of the Neck rose to assault the Great Bridge of House Frey. But this was the lizard-lions and the hundreds of crannogmen and heretics who rode them which were the real danger.

Stevron didn’t know the real numbers, but this side of the Water Tower, there had likely been more than four hundred Riverlanders, between the archers, the spearmen and the servants. And as their great tool to extract tolls from the powerful and poor became a nightmare of claws, sorcery and blood, he knew there was only a single to give.

“Order our men to retreat from the bridge and close the River Gate.”

They would have to withstand the storm on their own. The fire on one side and the lizard-lions on the other...it was too much. He had not enough men to protect the bridge from the ‘pets’ of House Reed.

“Abandon the bridge before all is lost.”

**Ser Lyle Crakehall 1**

The taste of victory had never felt so sour in his mouth.

Lyle and his men had fought hard to see the twin castles of House Frey in the distance. Three times they had been ambushed before the Golden Tooth and Riverrun by bandit-cultists.

It had not grown easier from this point onwards.

Every cove, every turn of the minor roads and mud paths seemed to hide monsters, animals turned mad by the fell powers of the heretics. Traitor cultists and sorcerers seemed to be in every village, announcing the doom of the Seven Kingdoms was at hand and only by worshipping demons could salvation be gained.

The Strongboar had executed many of them by rope and blade, but urgency had forced him to rush north and the Crone only knew how many of the vermin was still hiding in the shadows when his column left in the morning?

The Riverlands were in grave danger, and so they had pushed their horses faster. And the next battles had proven they had been quite right to do so. At Fairmarket, the Crakehall men had destroyed a murder band trying to set aflame the wooden bridge and the ferries allowing the locals and the troops to cross the flooding Blue Fork. On a windy field, they had decimated a group of Ironborn reavers and freed the enslaved men and women these pirates had taken. In many hamlets and farm towns, the taint of chaos and heresy had been burned out.

But now, looking at the terrible flames covering the ruin of the Twins’ stone bridge, Lyle knew all this urgency, all these efforts, all these days riding like the Seven Hells were in pursuit had not been enough. They had arrived too late, and in too little strength to change anything.

Lyle had been ordered by the Old Lion himself to lead the vanguard of the Western armies in the Riverlands. He had been given three hundred light cavalry and two hundred knights in plate to rescue the trout and the other fish banners of the Trident, but he had barely three hundred left now, by the faults of the cultists, the ambushes, and leaving two scores of his best men to guard the bridge of Fairmarket.

He had three hundred horses and three hundred men against the unnatural demonic powers wielded by the heretics and a horde of Ironborn camping on the banks of the Green Fork.

Lyle and his men were good and always willing to attack, but this time it was a bit too much.

“We could try to use this hill there to cover our advance,” one of his men murmured, the accent of Lannisport thick on his tongue.

“No,” refused the second son of Lord Crakehall.

“We would hurt them,” protested the younger blonde-haired man, confirming he was more in this expedition to satisfy his revenge than anything else.

“And then we would die and we would accomplish nothing,” Lyle retorted. By any military strategy, the camps and the defensive measures of the Ironborn forces assembled near the Twins were extremely lax. Lyle had seen two or three huge flaws, and he was sure that given some proper sunlight, he would notice more.

But three hundred men could kill three or four times that number, and still fail. There were at least ten thousand Ironborn here assembled for the slaughter, and many were armed with these gigantic axes and halberds that could kill a courser or a stallion in one blow.

“They are too many, and our numbers are too few.”

To be honest, this wasn’t what worried him so much. To muster so many in a single location, the Ironborn had to have emptied the whole Iron Islands of every man able to raise a blade. They had come from Seagard, so whether the dungeon of House Mallister had been stormed or not, these pirates and oath-breakers must have left hundreds of men to protect their ships and transport their prisoners and gold prizes to their homes.

The numbers of Riverlanders who had decided to sell their souls to the demons was truly a fearful thing, on the other hand. There were thousands of them all over the heretical army, like the cultists they had killed to open themselves a bloody path to the Twins. All had the eightfold star of the abominations carved on their foreheads or their bare skulls. Moons ago, they had been farmers and artisans, smiths and village elders, house-builders and woodcutters, bakers and butchers, sheep masters and cheese-makers.

And now they all served the Enemy, donning long robes and holding daggers of bone and ready to stab their neighbours if it satisfied the horrors they called Gods.

“At least the Twins are still holding.”

“Yes,” the great stone bridge over the Green Fork had been broken in three distinct places, and the Water Tower supposed to prevent that was now a spectacle of ruin and desolation, with plenty of its debris seen floating down the Great Fork with hundreds of corpses and the lizard-lions feasting on them. “They hold.”

But Lyle was not at all confident they could continue to do so for long. On the western bank, the Ironborn muster had built many trebuchets, and seemed to employ some sort of water sorcery against the base of the walls.

On the eastern bank, some demonic engines were delivering a rain of fire upon the towers and the walls. If the Twins had not so much water nearby, their castle would have already been lost to the flames. In the middle, the broken bridge was covered in sickly green substances and thousands of gigantic beasts flowed in the middle of the ruination.

“As far as I can tell, if these pirates and traitors are still there when Lord Tywin Lannister will arrive, the Red Cloaks of Casterly Rock and the Noble Houses of the West will destroy them on the battlefield,” Lyle whispered, meeting bloodthirsty smiles and satisfied expressions. “But our army is still far away from here, and these heretics don’t seem to be very interested in taking the Twins intact.”

This was something his liege had told him wouldn’t happen. Except the Starks and the other heretics had made sure it happened. Lyle didn’t fancy himself a great army commander, his thing was more attacking first and wondering later if he was outnumbered or not, but even to his eyes, the Frey bridge had been something extremely important to capture.

How could it not be when this was the only major bridge between here and the Trident?

There were boats, rafts and merchant hulls to cross the Green Fork near the Vypren holdfasts, that much was true, but nowhere near enough to allow a great army to cross the river.

“They aren’t interested at all in the bridge,” the Strongboar tried to think about a strategy which made sense, and failed to do so. Surely the heretics couldn’t be so stupid to believe they could descend in direction of the Trident and fight all the armies of the Stormlands, the Vale, the Crownlands and more? Even with the terrible dark clouds and the smoke created by the unnatural fires, the army on the eastern bank wasn’t that large. They had maybe twenty thousand, but certainly far less than that, fourteen or fifteen thousand at best. This wasn’t enough to fight the armies of the Westerlands, and if these idiots of reavers died, Lyle would not cry when they were thrown in very large graves.

“Let’s withdraw and prepare a raven. Lord Tywin must be warned.”

**Lord Rodrik Harlaw 4**

The Ironborn were changing, and not for the better.

Before this war, Rodrik could have searched Lordsport high and low, and it was likely he wouldn’t have found ten men drinking in human skulls – and that was in case there were very stupid bet playing around. Goodbrother warriors wouldn’t have begun branding their skin with crimson runes. The reavers of House Volmark had a mean streak, but they would not have raped women in the middle of a fight, and what they did after the rest of the fighting was just...*wrong*.

The Lord of House Harlaw hated it. It was one thing to go to war for the wrong reasons and hate the guts of your allies; it was quite another to see your vassals and your men fall one by one to the madness filling the air and the water. Drowned Priests had begun to wield real water-controlling powers when moons before all they had been able to do were their baptisms of cold water. Some youngsters were starting to speak in gibberish tongues and not even notice they were doing so. Veteran and inexperienced warriors were suddenly losing all their wits and charging with demented battle-cries in direction of the nearest enemy.

And this was less than a fortnight since they had landed in the Riverlands. What was going to be left of them in a couple of moons – assuming they were still breathing?

The Lord of Harlaw didn’t know, and the worst part was that he couldn’t even speak about his fears to anyone. A miasma of madness and treachery was everywhere as the assault against the western castle of the Twins was going to enter its third day. What had been merely tolerated before at Pyke would be mortally dangerous now. They were fighting a crusade, per Balon’s wishes...though the ageing Master of Ten Towers had heard many warriors converted to the Old Gods of the North laugh about the ‘Black Crusade’.

Step by step, Rodrik drew near the location of another bloodbath. At least this one looked like it had been a proper battlefield before the lizard-lions began their feasting.

The Ironborn elder stopped well before any of the monstrous reptiles was in range to attack him. The Reed crannogmen had sworn their beasts were perfectly tame and answering to their commands, but given their size and the ferocity they had shown against the Frey’s stone bridge, he was not going to test the veracity of these boasts.

“Those were Crakehall riders, led by the Strongboar himself,” a young woman with hairs the colour of autumn leaves approached, trident in one hand. “Lord Tywin began to be wary after Lannisport, it seems.”

“Lady Meera,” Rodrik offered a polite curt of the head. No one had explained to him exactly where the young woman was in the hierarchy of the Northern armies, but since everyone on the eastern bank deferred to her, the Lord of Harlaw had judged prudent to imitate them. “Do many of them escape your trap?”

“Regrettably, more than half did,” for someone who had failed to destroy a fast scouting force, the leader of the crannogmen and lizard-lion forces was regrettably unconcerned. “But it doesn’t matter.”

“Oh?” Such certainty was either arrogant overconfidence, or trust in something he ignored.

“The Blackwood archers who crossed the Green Fork were south of them. They killed all the ravens these poor lion’s servants had freed from their cages. If they want to inform their liege and master, they will have to do it in person. And the roads leading back to Riverrun may be far more dangerous than they think.”

The trust in something he ignored it was, then. Of course, it was just delaying the flow of information and reports. Sooner or later, Tywin Lannister would come north.

And for all the power shown by the sorcerers and the armies of the North, Rodrik didn’t believe the alliance of two realms could stand against the rest of Westeros. The reports were that the West had armed more than eighty thousand men, and though many would stay defend the Sunset coast, over half were sure to come to participate in the next battles in the Riverlands. The levies and the knights of the Vale were also on their way, accompanied by Stormlanders, followed by tens of thousands of Crownlanders. And this was not counting the endless companies of the Reach, which were rumoured to be above one hundred thousand.

Together, the Ironborn and the Northerners around the Twins may manage thirty thousand, but plenty of creatures were arrow-fodder and little better than war-slaves. And discipline was...Rodrik was going to settle for ‘poor’.

Lord Eddard Stark, eldest surviving son of the Lord of Winterfell, had not yet arrived, and his absence, the things and the Northern champions who were commanding each part of the host were not exactly the most reliable subordinates.

“Have faith, Lord Harlaw. The Twins will fall long before any reinforcement army will manage to come here to save the Freys.”

If anything, this made Rodrik even more suspicious. And he was not exactly inclined to trust the swamp warlord in the first place.

Like many women of the North Rodrik had seen until now, Lady Meera was fairly enticing to look at. She had long brown-orange hairs, a small nose, and some scaly armour which did very little to hide the curves of her body. But Rodrik had long learned to go past the first appearances. And the sickly green lights in her eyes, the odour of death surrounding her and the pointed teeth in her mouth told quite clearly his interlocutor had already sold her soul to something not of this reality.

“An admirable thought, assuredly, but-“

There was a new horrid sound, and Rodrik turned his head rapidly enough to see a part of the western castle be drenched in a green explosion promising nothing but death and poison.

“The Plague Cannons have arrived,” the lizard-lion mistress laughed. “The Twins fall today. Go find your King and tell him to bring his kraken-rams. It is time for the weasels to learn the meaning of fear. Then Grandfather will forgive their sins...he will forgive everything once they are in his embrace.”

And Rodrik shivered at the absolutely delighted expression blooming on his interlocutor’s face.

**Author’s note**: Next chapter will conclude the battle of the Twins which promises to be...very heretical. Will Elbert Arryn and Robert Baratheon arrive in time to save the day? Or will Lord Walder be dragged in chains before the Northern and Ironborn commanders? Answer next chapter, with more chaos unleashed...

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