**Chapter 11**

**After the Red Tears**

**Jory Cassel 4**

One night and one day, and the battlefield had already a name. His warriors were calling it the Field of the Red Tears.

This was unusually poetic for Northerners. Had tears been shed on this battlefield? Yes, absolutely. But the tears were far outnumbered by the rivers of blood and the thousands of corpses.

Speaking of corpses, the leader of the Black Spears had six feet in front of him which was being eaten piece by piece by a band of ravenous crows. These carrion birds were not servants of Tzeentch, coming from the vast and bountiful lands of the South, but their predatory habits made sure there wasn’t much difference between them and their Northern counterparts save the ‘messenger of the God of Change’ part.

“A glorious battle,” one of the marauders waiting on a Riverlands-captured stallion spoke.

“A glorious failure,” Jory Cassel replied like he was speaking about the weather, but in his heart the anger boiled with dark fury.

“Black Spear, we killed thousands of the weak unbelievers...”

“And for each of the weaklings we killed how many managed to flee southwards?” He let a moment and not receiving an answer gave it himself. “Thousands of Riverlanders escaped. This battle is a failure.”

“We must have killed nine thousand of their men between the night assault and the day battle,” Lord Flint said in a low voice. There was no disagreement in his voice. “We took between three thousand and four thousand prisoners, mostly wounded. But the Tullys and their bannersmen had more than thirty thousand levies, half-trained peasants, men-at-arms and knights at the beginning of this campaign. And their servants and other camp followers weren’t included in these numbers. I’m sure plenty of corpses in their ‘fortified’ camp,” the disgust at the word fortified was unmistakeable, “are some of the smiths, pages, young squires, cup bearers, whores and chariot owners.”

“So you see,” the leader of the Northern vanguard host said, “we have not done that much damage to the Riverlands army. They ran away too quickly and our cavalry had the *brilliant* idea to loot their camp instead of continuing the pursuit.”

By the time he had massacred the last delusional priests of the powerless Seven and managed to enforce his authority over the four Hosts, it had been too late. Most of the Tully, Frey, and Darry horses were fleeing for their lives, and good luck catching them up when what meagre cavalry he had was exhausted by many hours of killing and slaughter.

Jonelle Cerwyn and Bog Boggs had slain hundreds of lightly-armed smallfolk and several sellsword companies had plunged into the Green Fork rather than to be taken prisoner. But these were the stupid and the untrained, young men who had never held a spear before this autumn. The Lords of the Riverlands could replace them after every lost battle, and not notice the difference.

“We have killed several of their Lords.” It was logical it was the servant of Tzeentch who was trying to find the motives of hope in this unsatisfactory situation.

“Yes,” he gritted his teeth. “But Lord Jonos Bracken’s head is a poor substitute for the skull of Edmure Tully. The young trout dead, his captains and his bannersmen would have collapsed and dispersed into a hundred groups.”

One of his warriors scoffed loudly.

“The trout does not understand war!”

“And I want him stupid and dead before he does.” Jory commanded. “This defeat will make him prudent. He won’t fall in the same trap twice, and the Riverlands still have plenty of knights and infantrymen to send against us.”

Denial was a waste of time, and the truth was that the Riverlands alone had a larger population of men of fighting age to gather armies from than the North. Obviously most of them didn’t hold a candle to a true warrior in consecrated plate armour, and there were less of them after this battle. But the Riverlands weren’t the only kingdom they fought against, and every day they lost battling Riverlanders were one day the armies of the West and the Reach had to march in their direction.

“I think you are too pessimistic,” Tytos Blackwood smirked. “Lords Bracken has fallen to my blade. Terrick and Shawney are feeding the crowds too, and Ser Erenford is our prisoner.”

“Ignoring the fact you had orders to take Bracken prisoner...”the Lord of Raventree Hall was smart enough to take an apologetic expression, “these are minor players at best in the Riverlands. If we lost time waiting for the Tully army, it was to kill and capture the great names. Tully, Vance, Piper, Whent, Mallister, Darry...and we haven’t killed one of them on the Field of Red Tears. Lord Stark does not care about unwashed farmers and journeymen who don’t know how to don armour and strike a blow with a sword.”

Jory had not trusted the Blackwood Lord before his Stark liege had told him of the secret commands to pass through the aether. Only an imbecile trusted a servant of Tzeentch unconditionally, and Lord Tytos had done nothing during the battle to justify putting him in his confidence. His ridiculous vendetta against House Bracken had permitted most of the Riverlands and Faith hosts to realise the danger posed by the Blackwood betrayal and to flee before they were encircled and destroyed.

No, Tytos Blackwood could not be relied upon. He was a Southerner, had played the part of a Seven-worshipping fool for decades and there was no rune on his new plate armour. The man could be trusted to hate and kill the Brackens, but little else.

 “What are your orders Black Spear?”

“Our forces are sufficiently light to allow us some aggressive raiding as long as we do not meet any sizeable enemy army.” Counting the dead and the wounded no sorcerer could heal in a single session, over five hundred warriors, mainly marauders, were no longer available. This had been somewhat compensated by the Blackwood reinforcements, of course. “The Hosts of the Goddess and the Grandfather will stay here for now and wait Lord Stark’s arrival. I will take my warriors, the Khornate Host, one of your covens Lord Flint and Lord Blackwood’s men. Let see if we finish the Riverlanders before the Arryns arrive in strength.”

“The winds of the aether will be extremely weak if you go more than five leagues south.” Robin Flint warned him. “Something...changing the aetheric balance is more difficult than we thought. We will take many days to change this. You will not have the children of the Gods to participate in any battle near the Twins.”

Jory acknowledged the sorcerer’s point, but his list of choices was not that long. The Riverlands armies was for the moment routed, but even with food, water and other supplies lost, it would recover from this beating. Not pursuing would see the broken army return and it would be a far more dangerous opponent. It could hardly be a weaker one, at any rate!

“We will be prudent. But one must take risks at war, and provoking the final defeat of House Tully and all their bannersmen may give us the Trident before the other kingdoms’ armies hear the screams of these weaklings...”

**Lord Edmure Tully 3**

The worst of all was the taste of defeat.

Edmure was hungry and thirsty. He was dirty with mud and dried black blood on his armour, but the worse was the feeling of defeat. It was shame, disgust and helplessness all at once, and it made him sick to know it was his fault.

He, Edmure Tully, had been in command of the army mustered to take back Sentinel’s Stand. His had been the duty, the honour and the responsibility to punish the traitors and smite down the heretics who had dared challenge the wise governance of the Iron Throne over the Seven Kingdoms.

And he had completely, utterly failed.

His army had been beaten. No, no not beaten. It had been utterly routed. The moment the demons had come for them and the Blackwoods had betrayed them, his foot and his horse had broken apart, and they had broken *hard*.

Edmure had shouted. He had screamed, oh yes he had screamed. He had begged, asked for his bannersmen to turn around, to protect the camp...he might have well shouted at the sea or the wind for all the good it did.

The men were running away, too often throwing down good spears and swords, removing their armours in order to run faster.

It had been worse as he understood for the Erenford-Charlton holding the extreme edge of the left wing on the eastern bank of the Green Fork. A large charge of heretic cavalry had killed many knights there, and suddenly the young levies had been quickly cornered with their backs to the Green Fork. Many had chosen to flee swimming, before realising the Green Fork this far north was a powerful and violent river, and that removing the armour was no guarantee of living whether you were able to swim or not.

Hundreds of men lost that way, and the Frey, Charlton, Vypren and many forces who had fled successfully on the other bank could be now at King’s Landing for all the utility they had.

Just as the Lord of Riverrun shook his head, the rain poured once more over their heads. Throwing a look behind, Edmure grimaced as the column he commanded continued to present the appearance of a very slow and cumbersome snake on the Kingsroad.

Or at least the sad excuse of the road they had once called the Kingsroad. It was one more failure to be thrown at his feet when he would be judged for this catastrophic defeat by his peers. So far north, it should have been the responsibility of the Master of the Twins to maintain and repair the paved works, but evidently Walder Frey had shirked on his duties. And no one during the Long Summer had bothered verifying, because...well what would have been the point? North of the Twins, there wasn’t much trade and most of it existed because the Small Wall was there.

This neglect was now hurting in abundance under the heavy and frequent autumn rains. There were already problems because the army had been too large when it marched north; no single road could take thirty thousand men and all their supplies without being lengthened in a three days-long procession. As such, the left and the right of the Kingsroad had already been mud paths before they fled the battlefield...and now that they rode back in shame and defeat, it was worse.

“Thank the Father Above we had plenty of chariots unable to reach our camp in time,” Marq said while under their eyes a score of knights with the banner of Atranta rode west-south of the column in disarray, searching only to put the greatest distance between them and the heretics.

“We should have had the time to take more with us if only...” Edmure didn’t finish the sentence. It wouldn’t do any good thing to the already shattered morale of the troops to say it aloud. *If* the Freys had attacked with the rest of the army instead of launching timid assaults in this disastrous morning. *If* the Faithful had not disintegrated at the first hammer blow. *If* the Blackwoods had not betrayed them despite all the knights and septons in their ranks to warn of any potential treachery. *If* they had been more alert and posted more sentinels to prevent the night raid. If, if, if. Too many things his bannersmen had told him would turn out fine, and Edmure had accepted it, because...because they were his trusted captains, and he wasn’t going to doubt the word of a Seven-blessed Crusader, wasn’t he?

“What is done is done.” The Lord of Riverrun said once he had regained his composure. All he could do was check over and over what remained his army and trust the Seven that the Seven Kingdoms could withstand the horrors they had seen unleashed by the monsters and the heretics. “Did our rear-guard see anything?”

“No, but we aren’t able to cover more than the three columns we have in sight...”

Marq grimaced and Edmure was internally shaken by the despair of his friend. The Heir of Pinkmaiden had always been a person full of smiles and cheerfulness. Seeing him gaunt and eyes dark like in a perpetual nightmare there was no awakening from was not a boon in these dark days.

“I don’t understand.” Marq continued. “Why aren’t they pursuing? They had the opportunity to raid our columns, disperse our best troops and end our unity as an army...”

Edmure had thought long and hard about that, but he didn’t have certainties where the issue was debated.

“Their discipline broke too and the leash the heretic commanders had upon their beasts and monsters must have slipped when they destroyed our first lines. They also concentrated a lot on raiding and looting our camps.”

Edmure had seen with his own eyes beings which shouldn’t exist under the sun commit unspeakable atrocities, and he had rapidly fled southwards like every survivor. In fact, that was one of the reasons his army was fragmented in scores of columns, horse detachments and errant companies; those who had been able to flee had done so in a hurry. The wounded, the maesters and the healers had used all the chariots and wheel-driven objects they could find and when there had been no more they had joined their legs to the torrent of routing levies and men-at-arms.

“Who is holding the rear-guard for now?”

“The Mallister and Darry knights, but they will soon need reinforcements else they’re going to die of exhaustion before we see the first ally in this damn rain.”

Edmure seized his last water jug and drank along gulp before making his decision.

“Take two hundred of your own men and thirty of Riverrun, Marq. And if Ser Goodbrook refuses again to release some of his knights for the rear-guard, remind him which rations he took during the last meal.”

“I will gladly do so,” the ghost of a smile lightened for an instant his friends’ traits before vanishing again. “How long do you think until we see the troops of our second echelon and the Arryn vanguard?”

“I don’t know.” Edmure admitted. “If the weather was fine, I would say two days, but these autumn rains are slowing everything down and we’re crawling in a sea of mud.”

Holy Crusade or not, it was a miserable terrain to fight and move around. And Edmure knew for sure the worst was yet to come.

CRACK!

The wheel of a chariot not fifty feet away had broken, and the effect was immediate on the Kingsroad column: everything stopped. Fortunately, apart one barrel ejected from the chariot, there was no big damage and the cries of wounded was not heard, just a furious amount of insults and protests.

“Let’s go help them Marq.” Edmure said as he dismounted.

“The sooner this damn retreat is over, the better,” the heir of Pinkmaiden muttered darkly between his teeth.

**Ser Stevron Frey 3**

“Maybe we should have tried to stay with Lord Edmure,” his brother Aenys said after the soldier who had just galloped to reach them had delivered his awful message.

“Yes,” Stevron replied, biting back the ‘I told you so’ he had on his tongue. “But we will never know for sure, and surely we can agree discussing our failures can wait until we are protected by the walls and the scorpions of the Twins.”

His brother caressed his black horse and tightened his fists in anger.

“We are still a day away from the Twins.”

“We are in no shape to fight a battle,” their half-brother Colmar Frey intervened, clearly shaking in fear despite – or rather because – his poor attempts to hide it. The boy had been promised to the Faith, and in Stevron’s opinion, it was exactly where he should have gone instead of playing like he was the warrior. But no, the call for the crusade had been heard, and every Frey able to ride a horse and draw a sword without impaling oneself upon it had donned armour and swore the oaths of knighthood.

Naturally, it took more than an oath and five turn of hourglasses in sword-fighting to transform a boy into a knight, especially one who had never squired for anyone.

That his Lord Father had allowed it to happen nonetheless was a grave mistake. Looking back at the last string of disastrous decisions, Stevron now knew their judgement had been greatly flawed: the Army of the Riverlands and the Faithful should have garrisoned the Twins and the surrounding villages, protecting the northern Riverlands now that the Small Wall and Sentinel’s Stand were in the hands of the Enemy.

“Yes, yes how kind of you to deliver us one of your great truths, Colmar,” Hosteen remarked in a voice full of contempt. “Have you seen the state of our army?”

Stevron raised an eyebrow and gave Hosteen a disapproving look, but his half-brother did not show much contrition.

Internally, he wondered how much of a mess he was going to inherit assuming the Twins emerged unscathed from this Crusade, which was not a given after the one-sided defeat the Lords of the Trident and the Rivers, including himself, had received. Like the old proverbs said, a knight could choose his friends, but a Lord couldn’t choose his relatives.

“Hosteen, I think your term of ‘army’ is very generous,” Stevron made a gesture in the direction of the mass of camp followers, terrorised smallfolk, knights, chariot-merchants, sellswords and itinerant folk covering the road and the pastures leading to their home. “An army implies discipline, warriors with weapons and armours, and of course the willingness to fight our enemies. Do you see anything like defiance and willingness to fight demons on the faces of our men?”

Hosteen grumbled but didn’t challenge his point. Saying the contrary would have been a huge lie and everyone among their half-brothers would have noticed it.

The reality was painful, but there was no Frey army anymore. Hundreds of their men had abandoned their weapons and swam across the Green Fork before promptly vanishing. Raymund had managed to rally a portion of these deserters, but with the Green Fork between them they wouldn’t be able to intervene no matter what happened. And Stevron knew his brother well enough to acknowledge there would be no help even if Raymund’s horses were miraculously able to run on water.

The mass he had taken under his protection was no Frey army either. There were debris and broken companies of every army which had fought against the heretics. Faithful, sellswords, Tullys, Darrys, Vances, Smallbrooks, Whents and whatever levies and smallfolk had been armed for the Crusade. But these men had never fought together, and right now their faces were a tapestry of shock and despair, and many of his half-brothers were no better.

“We didn’t see many heretic scouts and raiders. Half a score isn’t an army, and in a day we will able to take refuge behind the walls of the Twins.”

“It’s a day of travel in summer when we have a nice road and well-fed troops or smallfolk, brother,” Aenys said in the tone of someone who dearly hoped to be wrong. “If we have to stop the seven-accursed Blackwoods, we will need more horse-mounted knights. Our infantry is too slow in all this mud.”

Stevron could see the point his brother was making. Cavalry could decide where and when it would attack in pursuit, and his demoralised and tired forces would break apart the moment they were under attack. Only their mounted knights had a chance to stop the heretics before they began their slaughter...except many, many horses had been lost in the rout, scores more had died in their haste to flee or from wounds caused by the demonic poisons, and those who survived transported wounded warriors.

“How many horses are not transporting the wounded?”

“Around sixty, I think.” Aenys’ smile focused on Hosteen and wasn’t a nice thing. “Over half are used by the valiant Ser Hosteen and his company...”

“My men have fought the demons and saved your lives, brothers!” Their big-boned half-brother snarled, only to meet dubitative looks. Hosteen and his men had been quicker than most to flee the battlefield, and they certainly hadn’t been slamming into the beasts and monsters the heretics considered pets.

“Volunteer yourself for the rear-guard, Hosteen, or give back your horses to transport the wounded.” The Heir of the Twins ordered. “Unless you intend to flee the moment a Blackwood banner is seen on the horizon?”

The narrowing of the eyes and the slight reddening of the dirty cheeks told quite clearly the thought had done more than pass into someone’s brains...

**Ser Patrek Mallister 6**

They heard them coming long before the first torches were seen. It was not that they were particularly loud compared to a company of Reach knights or the Crone forbid, a convoy led by a bard unable to sing true.

No, they were simply evil, and the very earth and its dwellers recognised this. The animals and the birds fled at their approach. The air seemed to be more unpleasant to breathe; the rain and the elements were wilder and more unpleasant to live in. And the darkness was blacker. The night was bringing no rest and no comfort; the moment the sun went down, it seemed to authorise the monsters and the evil beasts of legends to rise once more.

“At my signal,” he whispered to the men hiding throughout the streets of the village. “We will have no other chance to ambush them.”

All the men of the rear-guard had volunteered for this duty. While hundreds, no, thousands of men had succumbed to despair and wanted to nothing with the Crusade anymore, there were enough knights and lowborn warriors who wanted pay-back for the one-sided slaughter the heretics had done on the bloody battlefield.

This ambush would not erase the black mark of failure of every House which had been routed on that fateful day, but it would be a new start.

“Here they come,” whispered a grizzled soldier who looked like he had seen plenty of winters and summers.

And here they came indeed. The heretic scouts weren’t mounted; not with two horrible beasts looking like someone had combined the worst aspects of dog, lizard and demon in a single body, but they marched like mud didn’t inconvenience them in the least.

The presence of these beasts wasn’t a good sign...though with the rain and the violent northern wind, smelling an odour in these conditions was probably the next best thing to a miracle...and the Seven weren’t with these abominations.

They weren’t. These heretics stood for everything against humanity believed in. And while they had won the first battle by treachery, deceit and demonic rituals, the Seven Kingdoms weren’t beaten.

The torches stayed in the centre of the village. Clearly the pursuers had decided either they were going to stay in this village for what was left of night, or they were taking a long break before continuing their sinister and heretical actions.

At his command, his men began to take position around their unaware enemies. Fortunately, the loud wind and the screaming rain were causing a din to wake up a half-dead person and the heretics looked more concerned to take some time under the wooden roof protecting the forefront of the village’s inn from the rain.

They were eight of them. The more dangerous was obviously the warrior in dark plate holding the leash of the two beasts. Even under the rain, the red runes were impossible to miss and Patrek rapidly moved away his eyes. This was the work of demons and sorcerers, and something to burn at the earliest opportunity. Its three companions looked like Ironborn reavers with furs. They were savage-like in appearance, had great axes on their backs and profusions of smaller steel weapons and skulls tightened to their belts. Everything in them screamed bestiality, monster and evil. These were the infamous marauders of the North, the bane of every civilised nation...and now the pillagers and the scourge of the Northern Marches.

But if their presence was odious, it was nothing to the four remaining humans. These four humans, two men and two women unless he missed his guess, were no Northerners at all. No, they looked like religious worshippers and the shade of their skin was the same as his and his companions. But their devotion did not go to the gentle Maiden or the noble Father. Their robes were red and black, decorated with human skulls and other awful trophies, and on their backs pulsed malicious eightfold stars.

This identified these traitors as cultists of the Demons of Chaos...traitors who had turned their backs to the Seven Kingdoms, broke their holy oaths to the Seven, and poisoned the minds of their families and their neighbours when fortitude was required of highborn and lowborn alike.

To see this vermin so brazenly joining forces with their damned masters in the Riverlands...it filled his heart with righteous fury.

The leader-heretic barked something in a cursed language, and Patrek didn’t know how, but he was sure the enemy had noticed them.

“ATTACK! ATTACK AND KILL THEM ALL!” He screamed.

Battle-cried echoed in the night and the unnatural torches provided more light to the heretics. No matter. It wouldn’t save them. The first cultist tried to stab him with a sword coated in a sickly violent substance, but he was slow, too slow. The Mallister knight avoided his assault with ease before decapitating him. The shocked expression on the traitor’s voice filled him with glee.

In mere instants, there was no one but the plate-armoured commander on his feet, still breathing, but surrounded by more than ten swords and axes.

“Recant and you will live...”

“BLOOD FOR THE BLOOD GOD!” The words hurt and something...something answered. It was far less powerful than at this nightmarish battlefield, but suddenly the blood was soaking their shoes and slowing them down. And the heretic was slaughtering them by one and two. Patrek went to neutralise the evil bastard...only to stop as a Darry knight thrust his large two-handed axe from behind in the skull.

“The Warrior protects its own!” The brave men-at-arms shouted.

“The Warrior! The Seven are with us!”

“The Seven will it!”

They had five dead and six wounded for eight heretics and two beasts dead. It was a modest beginning but it was a victorious ambush, the first of what Patrek hoped would be a long series of heretic punishments.

“Lit our own torches and burn these enemies the fastest we can.” He ordered, trying to not fall to the same unbridled enthusiasm as his ambush force. “These scouts aren’t the only ones to be out there in the night, and I must warn Lord Edmure about these dangers presented by these cultists...”

**Lothar Frey 2**

Lothar had a good memory. And yet he couldn’t remember seeing such a miserable gathering in all his life.

The effect was worse when you knew how these men had departed. He remembered how proudly and neatly the knights and their servants had marched on the stones of the Twins’ great bridge. The banners had flown high and defiantly on that day. From the poorest spearman to the highest Lord, the Army mustered under Frey banners had been a splendid column of steel and bravery, and it had added its considerable strength to the Army of the Riverlands and the Army of the Faithful.

Outside the bridge on the eastern bank, there had been as far as they had been able ascertain over thirty thousand warriors, maybe thirty-five thousand if the higher numbers his clerks had given him could be trusted. The sun had been bright despite the darkness coming from the north, and the maidens and the children had cheered loudly for each great captain passing next to them. There had been much grumbling from his Lord Father about how much this call to arms was going to cost them and how much they would have to raise the bridge’s tolls in the coming month, but on the whole the mood had been genuinely happy.

And now this spectacle of doom and broken men was arriving at their gates.

Lothar wished he could say he was surprised when he saw it was his nephew Ryman who arrived first to demand entrance, but he really wasn’t. Ryman was a coward, and the castellan didn’t require a report to know that the armour he wore and the lance he held martially in his right hand were as pristine as they had been the day they had been forged.

More likely the gluttonous imbecile had fled the moment battle got too violent for him.

“Captain.”

“Yes, lord?”

“I want Ser Ryman arrested and in a cell before the rest of Stevron’s army arrives. We need to avoid the riots which will erupt when they see him unharmed and first back home.”

In all likelihood, Stevron’s eldest was going to lose his knighthood for sure and maybe his head. That a farmer could run away when he was given the choice between trampled by a horse and fleeing could be ignored. The issue that a Knight of the Twins and the second in line for the succession of Lord Walder had abandoned the army and ran like the last of the cravens couldn’t.

“It will be done by your will,” the guard replied with a satisfied smirk.

Ryman alas wasn’t the only one he had ordered to arrest this morning from his observation outpost. Wendel and Whalen, Walder and Waltyr; for all their protestations they had been sent away by the orders of Stevron before all was lost, Lothar saw only the well-fed horses, the supply chariots stolen from merchants at the point of the sword, the absence of wounds, and the lack of the priceless smiths, servants and all camp followers he had taken fortnights to assemble with hundreds of silver coins and a lot of effort.

“How I am going to replace them?” Lothar muttered to himself.

There were always plenty of young fools eager to take a spear or a hammer and believe the lies of the recruiting captains. But you needed years to train a great stable-master or a valuable smith. They were ultimately far more valuable than Ryman’s large armour or the golden harnesses his half-brothers loved to impress the whores with.

Noon brought little good news. The rain fell for three turns of hourglasses, and the road, already nothing to boast, became a river of mud and everything became drearier and more miserable.

The men and the women began to arrive by little groups. Some were moving in tight formations, guarding chariots full of wounded and whatever supplies they had been able to save from the disaster. Unfortunately, there were the exceptions, not the rule.

Lothar could not remember being so angry. Many of his relatives were running to the fortress, ignoring all duties and obligations, leaving the wounded and their charges behind. And by some unfathomable coincidence, those who had broken ranks and arrived with banners raised did not look like there had come within two hundred feet of an arrow or a heretic’s weapon.

“Where is my brother Stevron?” Lothar asked to one of the captains he had sent to war as one of his supply overseers. “Don’t tell me...”

“He’s not dead my lord,” the exhaustion and the despair in the eyes of the soldier shocked him. “But the rear-guard has come under attack from the Seven-cursed Blackwoods, and few of the knights accepted to stand with him. Ser Stevron is delaying them, but I don’t know how long he can...”

The man coughed, and it was blood which was spat on the grey stone.

“Rest,” the twelfth son of Lord Walder said as gently as he could before sending new messengers to muster a few knights and freeriders.

It was not long before they saw and heard of the Enemy. In the horizon dark things flew like carrion birds. Unnatural clouds gathered again northwards.

“The heretics are there,” the whisper spread around faster than the bolt of a scorpion. “They have taken the Northern Marches. Where are our men?”

The answer to these gloomy interrogations arrived as the afternoon continued and the weak light began to fall. A great group of two score chariots was surrounded by over two hundred infantrymen seemed to have kept its discipline, but all around hundreds of men and women ran like hunted beasts.

There was no separation between the armies anymore. Banners of the southern, western, eastern and northern Riverlands mingled with Seven-pointed stars, the trout of Riverrun and the twin towers of House Frey.

It was terrible to see an army defeated. But this one had not been defeated: it had been broken, shattered and Lothar did not need to be a warrior to acknowledge it would take many, many victories to make these pitiful wretches capable warriors on the battlefield.

“Ser Stevron is here! Ser Stevron is alive! He has vanquished the heretics!”

The Heir of the Twins indeed arrived, in company of Hosteen and something like half a score of knights with horses about to die of exhaustion.

But contrary to what the cheering servants and knights on the ramparts said, Lothar saw his eldest half-brother had merely been able to save what he could from the long retreat. The Enemy was advancing in strength on the eastern bank, blocking those who had been too slow to reach the Twins and slaughtering them.

“Close the gates,” Lothar grumbled as Stevron was the last to pass the gates and it was quite obvious there would be no loyal warrior left to save when the heretics were so close.

A couple of breaths later, the Northerners and their traitorous allies – it was impossible to miss the great banner of House Blackwood in the middle of these dark idol-runes and chaotic pennants – stopped well out of siege engine or longbow’s range.

“BOW TO THE GODS! BOW TO THE GODS BEFORE IT IS TOO LATE! BOW OR SUFFER THE FATE OF THE BRACKENS!”

It didn’t take much of his imagination to guess one of the many skulls on top of the Blackwood’s banner had to be Lord Jonos’. And that the first great campaign of the Crusade ordered by King Rhaegar and blessed by the High Septon was an utter catastrophe, ending here at the Twins.

“We must prepare for a siege and pray the Arryn and Lannister reinforcements will arrive in time...”

**Lord Rodrik Harlaw 2**

Everything was Balon’s fault. Of that, Rodrik was totally convinced.

There had been three massive obstacles against a successful storming of Seagard.

The first, obviously, had been the dominant positions of the Mallister watch towers. Nobody but an imbecile would have mistaken a couple of hundred longships as anything but an invasion fleet.

The Northern sorcerers had provided a solution: a heavy, unnatural fog deafening the approach of thousands of Ironborn and making visibility inside Ironman’s Bay very limited. And they had delivered.

The second obstacle had been the walls and the indomitable gates and towers protecting the city from direct assault after storming the harbour.

For this too the sorcerers had provided solutions, providing filled with strange liquids acting like wood and stone-devourers. Rodrik didn’t want to know the ingredients which had been brewed to make these mixtures; his nose was giving him very bad sensations every time he had gotten near one of the casks or the jugs containing...containing ‘that’.

The third obstacle was the inner citadel. It was in many ways the only location House Mallister really needed to hold. It contained extremely large food supplies, its own source of water, the treasury and a weapon depot able to arm three or four thousand men. It was also heavily defended and the true seat of the Mallisters of Seagard. A siege of this citadel could last years and easily cost five or six thousand men without a certainty of breaking the resistance of the Riverlanders.

To this challenge, the sorcerers had nothing to propose magically. The substance casks which would not be used against the first gates and the towers could be used for the citadel, but the Stark-sworn demon-worshippers had bluntly affirmed they had not been able to produce enough of their mixtures to remove two obstacles. And between the fog and other artifices, they wouldn’t have much strength to add to the Ironborn assault.

Their advice, and it was a pertinent one, was to be swift and not waste time storming the city. Once the walls or the gates were breached, it was gone anyway; better to break through and seize the valuable seat before their strange and terrifying deities decided to remove their sorcery from the battlefield.

And of course, Balon had not followed the advice. Oh, his brother-in-law had made convincing nods and paid some lip-service, but the commands had not been passed to the mass of captains and reavers. The following actions of the sailors and corsair-pirates were thus completely predictable.

In an orgy of violence, rape and looting, the reavers of the Iron Island began to sack the city of Seagard, rape its women, murder the inhabitants who tried to stop them during their ‘Iron Price’ activities, and plunder as they wished.

As far as Rodrik’s eyes could see, there was nothing but destruction, killings, rapes and flames.

And of course, the gates of the Seagard Citadel were now closed, long before any Ironborn was able to block their shut-down. Those who had tried their chance a turn of hourglass after, old fools from Great Wyk, had received boiling tar for reward and promptly decided to go way in search of easier pickings. Those who were still alive after the ‘gift’, that is.

Rodrik wished he could say none of the Harlaw men participated in this debauchery of murders and violence, but this would be one of the greatest lies in his life.

“So much for the confidence our ‘allies’ placed on us,” the ageing Lord of Harlaw declared loudly.

“The Northerners need us,” Harras Harlaw disagreed. “They can’t stand against the armies of the greenlanders if they don’t have control of the seas. And they can’t hold the seas without us.”

Rodrik shook his head. Harras was a good swordsman, but sometimes he missed the water pool for the ocean.

“And we need the Northerners too now. Or do you think the Lannisters will forget the fact we torched Lannisport? We are traitors to the Iron Throne, and there’s no return possible. The bridges and the ships have been burned, the women raped and the coasts pillaged. I have only met Lord Tywin Lannister twice, but I can tell you he’s not the kind of man who will stop seeking vengeance for Balon’s attacks. This war will stop when the Lions or our islands are dead...and I don’t think our King and his family really understand what we’ve started.”

This would have been bad enough, but for all the decades of peace the Iron Islands hadn’t millions of reavers to throw into the mix. This assault on Seagard had fifteen-sixteen thousand men, and many were old grey beards or men too young to shave. There were even some women in the crews, despite House Greyjoy’s willingness to keep their women sequestered at home.

This was a powerful force...but it had already taken losses. Before the ramparts were overwhelmed and the towers broken, Rodrik had seen hundreds of corpses pierced with bolts and arrows, and the fighting in the streets of Seagard had cost more.

And this wasn’t the full sum of the bad news. The forces of Seagard had withdrawn in good order towards their Citadel, but other soldiers, sailors and smallfolk had broken through and were now as he stood fleeing eastwards. The surprise was dead, thrown overboard, and devoured by fishes. The Freys would be warned of the threat on their left flank and prepare the defences of their western bank’s citadel. The Riverlands and Lannister hosts were going to march from Riverrun knowing Seagard was surrounded by the reavers.

“The plan we agreed with the Starks was good. But Balon has changed ignored so many parts of it I fear we might as well not bother reading it.”

“We can still imitate the Hoare campaign.” The Knight of Grey Garden said. “I’m not saying it will be easy, but we can use our longships and our mobility to savage the greenlander armies.”

“These are not the Riverlands of three hundred years ago, Harras.” Rodrik watched Seagard and its accomplishments fall to the Ironborn captains and their crews. “And to use our longships, we have to use the Blue Fork. If several thousand heavy cavalrymen are between us and them, it will be a pain to dislodge them.”

And would likely result in hundreds more of dead and wounded. Storm God’s dark breath, he was really too old for these problems...and this was Balon’s fault.

**Lady Saara Greyjoy 4**

“Why I am not surprised?” Saara whispered to herself as she stopped using her powers and cut herself off from the visions imbued by the winds of magic.

She was not angry. The young Stark sorceress wished she was, but truthfully after meeting Balon Greyjoy for the first time she had not held much hope the plan dictated at Winterfell was going to be enforced by the Ironborn.

The Gods knew it would be already difficult to enforce it where the Northern hosts were playing their roles. Discipline was always hard to maintain among the Chosen sworn to Winterfell, and it got harder when the moment of slaughter and triumph was at hand.

But the North had leaders to bash skulls, enrapture disobedient warriors, eliminate outlaws and in general maintain discipline. The Ironborn had none. Or rather, they had over a thousand leaders. By their stupid laws, every captain was a King, and wasn’t it a formidable thing when the time came to decide your strategy?

Balon Greyjoy may be the ‘Iron King’ and by Slaanesh how apt the title was, since the oaf had nothing in his head but dreams of martial glory and seizing the ‘Iron Price’ with both hands.

There was no discipline in the Ironborn ranks. Once the walls of Seagard had no longer been an obstacle, the pirates had abandoned all prudence and charged to rape and murder. It was disgraceful for an army to behave like this before all resistance was eliminated. By her best count, over half of the two thousand casualties the Ironborn had taken storming Seagard had happened in the house-to-house fights in the middle of the burning city.

And it was wasteful. The harbour of Seagard was mostly ashes and cinders by now. Five Ironborn longships had been engulfed too. Warehouses full of sails, ropes, dried wood, metal for the anchors and Khorne only knew what else were unusable save maybe the metal.

Meagre consolation, House Greyjoy and the bunch of pirates and rapists they loftily called ‘bannersmen’ had pleased Slaanesh immensely. The temples of the unbelievers had been utterly desecrated and the land itself was coursing with the power of the Four. The True Gods had at last a real bastion south of Neck.

Seagard had fallen, no matter what Lord Mallister and his brother tried to persuade themselves. Sorcery was right now coursing through the lands, remodelling the plains and the forests, for the Northern plans had succeeded and the worshippers of the Andal false-deities had had their beliefs revealed for the lies they truly were.

Slaanesh, Tzeentch, Nurgle and Khorne had showed their power to help their servants, and the Andal descendants had prayed for their Gods to come and save them. How delightful it had been to see the looks of despair in the Battle of the Red Tears....

Saara giggled. The Southron unbelievers prayed and prayed things that stood against sorcery and the practise of the Art. Was it really surprising to see no miracle come their way? If you wanted to save your lives, you had to begin to save yourself, otherwise beings more powerful than you would judge you unworthy.

“If only the rest of the war was as successful...”

The first Northern plans to destroy the armies of the Riverlands had been scrapped. For once in his miserable life, the Heir of Riverrun had done the correct thing and ran southwards rather than risk a second – and final – defeat against Jory.

Several Khornate and Tzeentchian troops had killed plenty of wounded and deserters, but the core of the Riverrun-Faithful host, more than seven thousand strong, had escaped destruction and capture and was now about to unite with the Vale-Riverlands-Crownlands-Stormlands vanguard.

They would hurt morale, these beaten Riverlanders, but they would also tell their friends what they had faced and it was unlikely Houses like Corbray, Redfort, Arryn, Egen or Hersy would dismiss the danger out of hand. And their entire force was already more than sixty thousand strong.

And of course this was just one of the armies sent by the Targaryens. On the western bank there were more than twenty thousand Westerners, Riverlanders and Reachers at Fairmarket. And the true Lannister army had not arrived...yet.

“Too many enemies and they mustered faster than we wanted...”

Her father had at last left the swamps of the Neck, but since the Greyjoys had failed to close the trap from the west on the Twins, the coordinated pincer wasn’t there to execute.

“We have to take the Twins and soon, or we will spend the rest of this Crusade on the defensive...”

**Lord Edmure Tully 4**

Edmure had seen great hounds before, and what the heretics used to tear apart innocents and wounded warriors were not dogs or any breed of animals, but demons. The things were a dark red and had damned horns, may the Father Above protect them!

Unfortunately, unlike the dogs a Lord used to hunt a boar or a stag, the ‘hounds’ of the demon-worshippers were dangerous for his men, whether they carried a spear or no. This may have something to do with their monstrous side, and their gigantic fangs, which made them closer to ponies in size than the most common breed of dogs.

Edmure believed the bowmen he had called since he had seen the first sight of their presence would have killed one or two with ease. Alas, the heretics had evidently learned of their past attempts, and send close to four scores of these things on his right flank, no doubt betting that the absence of pursuit for the last couple of days would make them lower their guard.

They had only been partially right, but the hell-spawned monsters had managed to hide in a hole somewhere and evade the scouts flanking the main columns and they were now free to charge the disorganised and exhausted Riverlanders.

It left him with one thing to do. He couldn’t even mount a horse: two of his own guard had tried and the loyal mounts had refused to go anywhere near these ‘hounds’.

“FORM THE LINE! SPEARS IN THE FIRST RANK! FAMILY, DUTY, HONOUR!”

Their battle-cries had no effect on the progeny of the demons, but mere instants later war horns thundered and the unmistakable noise of horses was heard.

“HOLD RANKS! HOLD FOR THE KING AND THE RIVERLANDS!”

The demonic hounds hesitated, and then interrupted their charge before turning to meet the unexpected reinforcements.

For many of the beasts, it was their last mistake. Scores of cavalrymen surged over a hill and their long lances impaled the monsters long before they had the ability to bite the legs or the throat of the horses. But more impressive than the Vale banners and the terrible lances and horse mastery of the knights massacring the hounds, was their leader.

The man was like a tower in the middle of the battlefield. He was wielding a magnificent warhammer and his helm was decorated with golden antlers. His armour and his sigil were the stag of Storm’s End, and with each blow, a monster died.

“OURS IS THE FURY! OURS IS THE FURY! DEATH TO THE DEMONS AND THE HERETICS!”

“THE SEVEN WILL IT!”

“STORM’S END AND THE SEVEN KINGDOMS!”

And Edmure knew at this moment not all hope had died before Sentinel’s Stand. The servants of the demons tried to flee, but their saviours weren’t going to let them retreat so easily. A new pursuit began, and it ended rapidly due to the death of every hunted beast.

Like everyone else in his column, he acclaimed the newcomer.

“BARATHEON! ROBERT BARATHEON AND THE RIVERLANDS!”

**Author’s note**: Here is the new chapter of the End of Times. I realise it’s been a while since I updated this story, but between the other timelines and my own lack of motivation, the moment never seemed right to return to it. We will see how far it goes from here. I’m going to return to some Harry Potter writing by Tuesday and then it will be in all likelihood Le the Galaxy Burn.

More links for the End of Times:

P a treon: ww w. p a treon Antony444

Alternate history page: www. alternate / forum/ threads/ the-end-of-time s.417451 /