**Chapter 44**

**Fire and Slaughter**

*As Crakehall and Silverhill fell, the situation for the last army of House Reyne was untenable, no matter how many days one was speaking about.*

*The Green Kingdom could at last exploit its enormous numerical advantage without using long and indirect methods such as transporting thousands of men to Lannisport before redeploying them on other fronts.*

*Furthermore, the long retreat after the Second Butcher’s Ball and the fall of Ashemark guaranteed no threat against the northern Westerlands existed anymore, allowing Casterly Rock to send southwards many companies which had been immobilised by the very real raiders Lord Walder Reyne had sent against the lands of those who opposed him.*

*The Red-held lands as a consequence diminished at an unprecedented pace. Many knights who had refused to answer the call to the banners begged for the mercy of House Lannister and sent everything they had to the frontlines in the hope it would be enough to avoid the punishment they deserved.*

*Those local companies and knights, of course, were not strong enough to storm castles or fight battles against the last enemy army. That would be the role of the main Green hosts, including the thousands of men mustered by Highgarden and other Houses of the Reach.*

*Yet this was at this moment arrogance resurfaced in many commanders’ thoughts. The Red Army had never stopped retreating since Castamere, and while the surrender of Silverhill prevented a bloodbath, it also convinced many Lords and knights that the rebels and traitors they were facing would easily break once the sound of their horses and their men was heard.*

*And to say the truth, it could have been true if Lord Walder Reyne was dead. But the self-proclaimed ‘Red King’ wasn’t. While the circumstances of his near-miraculous healing are doomed to remain mysterious, given that no witnesses of the event were captured alive, it was not greatly stretching the truth to say many highborn commanders sold the lion’s pelt before the animal was dead.*

*It couldn’t save House Reyne and its allies. The soldiers who had not deserted or succumbed to their wounds after the Second Butcher’s Ball were too few to kill the countless columns mustered for the final act.*

*But salvation and defensive measures weren’t what the Red Lion’s banners had in mind anymore.*

*Walder Reyne was not going to prostrate himself in front of any man or woman, be it a Lord directly sworn to Casterly Rock, Highgarden, or King’s Landing.*

*The War of Lions had begun in treachery and blood. It would end in fire and slaughter.*

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

**Ser Bonifer Fell**

“Ser Bonifer, with due respect...we should slow down. The rest of the army is half a day behind us.”

“Slow down?” Bonifer Fell, fourth in line to the Lordship of House Fell of the Stormlands, sniffed disdainfully. “And why would we do something so stupid?”

“Well,” the Reacher he was forced to tolerate as a second replied, “there’s an army somewhere north, and our column has only three hundred men, one in three mounted on a horse. If we encounter them-“

“If we encounter them, we will crush them and claim all the glory for ourselves,” Bonifer completed the unfinished sentence, all the while knowing this wasn’t what the other knight had wanted to say.

“Ser Bonifer...I haven’t heard of any battle where three hundred men defeated four or five thousand if they weren’t waiting on a wall.”

“Ah, but those aren’t loyal warriors like you and I! Those four or five thousand are the vermin of the West! They are exhausted, broken! The messengers assured us Lord Grimm put down the chief traitor, and without him, their last Lords bicker and talk of defeat!”

And as they were all beaten and the Seven cursed the oath-breakers for their crimes, there was opportunity for men like Ser Bonifer Fell.

Many, many traitors who had followed this bastard of Walder Reyne had been powerful highborn. If they all fled like this cowardly bitch of Red Queen or died under the executioner’s blades, their lands, their castles, and their gold chests would be offered to those who had distinguished themselves.

Bonifer wanted to be one of those men. Silverhill, Cornfield, and Deep Den; just the three most prestigious names out of a list followed by a hundred villages and hamlets which were now masterless. Some whispered he wanted to climb too high and too fast, but the Stormlands’ knight left to these men lacking ambitious the pleasure to follow the path of Kingsguard like his cousin Willis had.

Oh yes, if you donned a white cloak, your name would be remembered as a protector of the Crown...and it stopped there. You would sire no children, and in a few generations, everyone save a couple of old crones would have forgotten your House’s name.

But if you founded your own House, a true Noble House, then everything would be different. Look at the so-called ‘upstart’ Freys! Assuredly they had chosen the wrong side during the Dance, and in time their precious ‘Twins’ would be stormed and given to more deserving hands. But they had come from merchant stock, and now their members were rutting with dragons!

If he played his cards right, Bonifer was sure he could give a foundation greater than what some weasels achieved-

“SER! THE REBELS ARE COMING!” The rider was one of the many scouts he had sent ahead, and Bonifer was unpleasantly surprised how afraid and panicked the man was sounding.

“Be calm. How many and in what strength?”

War horns and music instruments roared.

And on every hill, hundreds of traitors advanced, their red banners revealing their allegiance.

“Oh by the Warrior’s legendary axe...it is...it is their entire damned army...”

And from the ruined village ahead he had intended to use as a camp for the evening, a mass of infantry was revealing itself.

“FORM RANKS! FORM RANKS! IT IS THE TIME TO KILL THE TRAITORS!”

“Have you completely lost your senses?” the Reacher knight hissed. “They have us nearly encircled and trapped between these hills! Their archers alone can slaughter us-“

“They don’t have-“

Hundreds of arrows went into the air, and Bonifer grimaced as evidently, the oath-breakers still had plenty of archers and the projectiles to make them useful.

“We must break-out from where we came!”

“NO! WE WILL CHARGE! THEY WILL BREAK!”

“DEATH TO THE LANNISTERS! DEATH TO THE FALSE LIONS! DEATH!”

“DEATH!”

There were only two more waves of arrows hitting his column.

And then the thousands of traitor scum charged.

**Lord Merlon Sarsfield**

“My Lord, we lost only seven men!”

“Outstanding!” Merlon cheered as he opened a jug of wine just taken from the enemy’s carts. “Outstanding! For victory!”

“FOR VICTORY!”

“FOR THE RED LION!”

“PRAISE THE KING!”

Merlon let his men celebrate and raise jugs and barrels in triumph. There would be a lot of liquid wasted no doubt, but the river was less than a league away; they could refill everything with water.

And a good Lord knew when he could tell his warriors that something was forbidden and when he couldn’t. Right now, happy faces were everywhere, but if he began to shout orders, it would go to the Seven Hells in less time it took to shout a war cry.

Honestly, they had come close, too close, from starving. And the less said about their water supplies, the better. Thank the Gods there were only three hundred enemies to kill in this ambush. It had been nothing but a few arrows delivered on stupid heads and a charge, but when you watched the exhausted visages of highborn and men-at-arms, Merlon was almost ready to believe they had fought from dawn to dusk.

“Make sure the carts aren’t damaged, at least,” he told several young hot-blooded men of his own House who were busy devouring a lot of salted meat. “We will need them tomorrow.”

“Yes, my Lord!”

Merlon smiled and then left the last loyal men he had to their boisterous celebration. He had to be careful as he progressed towards the location where he had left his horse and most of his possessions: the warriors were too busy feasting and doing whatever victorious men did once all enemies were dead.

All in all, it took far longer to return to the location where the royal banner was flying.

“My King, we only lost seven men and our outriders are formal: there is no other force supporting the column we just destroyed.”

“Good!” Walder Reyne answered, as his fist struck his armour in salute. “Good.” And then he coughed...and it wasn’t a pleasant sound.

“Your Grace?”

“Have no fear, Lord Merlon. The...Red Priest told me such coughing was normal after what I’ve been through.”

“If you say so, your Grace.” The man who had ruled the castle of Sarsfield nodded, trying to show a convinced expression. Obviously, the heretic had done the impossible, so he should know better what the consequences for the King’s health were. And yet, Merlon couldn’t suppress his doubts. “Barrels and all sort of containers will be very useful in the coming days. The food, on the other hand...”

“It will be all too easily devoured, I agree.” Walder passed a hand in his unkempt beard. “The enemy column came from Silverhill.”

Neither Merlon nor Cerion had dared saying it aloud before the battle – the last thing they needed was to destroy the courage and the hearts of their warrior before a sword was drawn – but it was so obvious there was no use protesting for the sake of it.

“Yes, your Grace. Hopefully, the Castellan managed to kill hundreds while the fortress was stormed, and this column was the only vanguard they could afford to send north while the rest of the Reachers and their allies recovered from the slaughter.”

The Lord of House Sarsfield wished he was not well-versed in heraldries outside the Westerlands; since he was, he had recognised sigils of many Houses of the Stormlands dispersed across the Reacher foot. Sure enough those had been lesser knights and vainglorious fools, no one important, but this was nonetheless a vanguard host of the South.

“I suppose if the commander who took Silverhill is as competent as the one we killed here, we may be able to fall upon the Reachers by surprise and retake the castle.”

“We can’t rely upon the allies of our enemies having incompetent men everywhere. The imbeciles we all killed were green and untested. And if they managed to take Silverhill and kill my Queen, they must be thousands of them...between ten thousand and twenty thousand, I think. I don’t think we can rout an army that powerful given how tired we are.”

“Yes, your Grace.” He agreed before grimacing. “Maybe I should have given orders for the men to take a few prisoners. We are as blind as we were before our outriders found the column.”

“Maybe...or maybe, they would have lied or refused to talk. And we lack the time to properly discover what happened.” The Red Lion shrugged. “But for all their numbers, the enemy can make really big mistakes too.”

“They might have believed we continued to retreat towards Deep Den or Hornvale.” He answered. “If they believed we refused to fight-“

“Or they believed they had already won and I was dead,” anger was heard in the Kingly voice for the first time of the conversation, “but we showed the fools how fighting is done. And we’re going to prove it to them again and again.”

“Your Grace?”

“Don’t worry, Lord Merlon, I have not lost my mind. We have to fight like the feline predators we are now. We can strike terrible blows, but we don’t have enough supplies and strength for a great battle. But we have a great advantage the traitors and their allies of the South can’t deprive us of. We know those hills, those valleys, and everything growing and built on these lands.”

“And the enemy doesn’t.”

The dark thoughts which had depressed him after the realisation of how many enemies encircled them were banished.

The King was right. This wasn’t Castamere where the enemy had only to hold a fortified gullet and nothing else mattered.

These were the Southern Marches, and the enemy believed they had already won.

“Let’s teach the Lannister’s hounds,” the Red Lion spoke louder as more men coalesced around them, “that we are far from defeated!”

“FOR THE RED LION! DEATH TO THE LANNISTERS!”

**Captain-General Makaerys Belicho**

“We can pursue them, Captain-General!”

“Yes, you can,” the Volantene-born commander replied without taking his eyes off the last cavaliers disappearing the distance. “And if you do something so stupid, I will kill you personally...assuming you return alive.”

This was all he had the time to say before nausea hit him and Makaerys Belicho had to fight the urge to vomit in front of him.

“They know the land; we don’t. And though summer days are long, I don’t think we have long before sunset. No, pursuing them isn’t wise.”

He shook his head.

“Vengeance is a treacherous feeling which won’t do you any good when you’re lost in the darkness, about to be massacred by a thousand enemies.” Makaerys’ eyes watched the horrible spectacle all around him and he grimaced. “No matter how tempting it is at the moment.”

The village his three thousand-strong vanguard had hurried forwards must have been a relatively prosperous settlement once. It wasn’t sitting on one of the most prosperous and well-travelled roads of the Westerlands, but the trail was one of the biggest allowing you to travel between Crakehall and Cornfield. Built on both banks of a river overflowing in autumn and spring, the houses had been all built in good stone, and there were many fruit trees and small gardens lovingly tendered.

It was nothing compared to the endless agricultural effort they had left behind them in the Reach, of course, but it had to be enough to feed roughly two hundred mouths.

Then the butchers of House Reyne had come.

“Fortunately, they didn’t know we were coming, Captain-General. We were able to save many villagers...and to extinguish the fires. Sweet Mother, why kind of monsters have the Reynes hired under their banners?”

“The worst kind,” Makaerys Belicho spoke softly, remembering the massacres plenty of sellsword companies did in the Disputed Lands. “They were proud men, and now they realise they have lost the war.”

“My Lord...” one of the Stormlander veterans intervened. Makaerys hid a smile. Despite knowing he wasn’t going to marry the Lady of Storm’s End, many of the first reinforcements recruited after the Peace continued to call him that. “When we lose, there are ransom offers. There are raven letters to demand the mercy of your liege. There are...there is the black.”

“Joining the Night’s Watch, you mean,” the older man nodded. “It won’t work.”

“How so? I can’t profess I would be very happy freezing my balls on the Wall, Captain-General, but surely it beats being decapitated, hanging from the nearest tree, or some of the other unpleasant fates we’ve heard so far the Lannisters enforcing on the heads of the oath-breakers.”

“It does,” Makaerys approved, “except you and I haven’t lost a lot of family to the Blacks like the Western nobility did.”

Many of his men looked at him unconvinced. They had a point; many Reacher and Stormlander veterans had pledged their allegiance to him after Bosworth, and they hadn’t become frothing madmen.

“It is possible the Faith and the local Lords invested a lot of their gold in fierce anti-Black sermons.” He admitted after a couple of heartbeats. “I mean, several of the survivors we spoke to at the previous village were convinced it was the ‘Black Queen’s reavers’ burning their way across the Westerlands for some reason.”

“Maybe the fall of Hornvale spread more panic than we thought?”

“Now who is trying to sell some copper and pretend it is gold?” Makaerys chuckled without joy. “Many of those people are terrified by the Blacks, which would be normal on the frontier, but not so much here. And the way many of the villagers sold each other skin’s trying to convince the others they were in charge...”

It was just madness. In the name of a Lord which had no claims whatsoever to Casterly Rock, slaughter and devastation followed. It didn’t matter that Walder Reyne had not a chance in the Volantene Hells to triumph. It was irrelevant Castamere had been seized by Grimm the Grim and Tyland Lannister before the Second Butcher’s Ball. It was unimportant that day after day, more men arrived and encircled the last rebel army into a circle of steel and other metals.

“They aren’t going to bend the knee,” he whispered as he watched the fruit trees cut for no sake but feed the fires which were supposed to destroy utterly the village had they not arrived in time. Next to it one young woman and a man of the same age were lying, their faces bearing expressions of horror...which were far better than looking at the butchery their killers had made of the rest of their bodies.

“Captain-General?”

“Detach burial parties,” Makaerys ordered. “It will prevent disease and more from spreading, and we owe those poor souls that much, since we didn’t arrive in time.”

“And then, my Lord?”

“Then Jordan...we will find a way to catch those killers who think murdering the very people they were sworn to protect is amusing.”

He left a heartbeat of silence before finishing his speech.

“And then we will kill them all. Bring me the map we have of the Cornfield lordship, I want to see it again.”

**Lord Cerion Serrett**

They had won a new victory against a Reacher column.

It had tasted like triumph and the sweetest wine he’d ever drunk.

It had only taken a few words for everything to turn to ashes in his mouth.

“What did you say, your sorry excuse of a warrior?” The Lord of Silverhill growled while pressing his sword against the throat of the Rowan knight.

“I’m telling you,” much blood descended on the face of the man he had broken the arms and disarmed, “we didn’t storm your castle, oh Lord.”

One of his men kicked the prisoner for the sarcasm, but if anything, the Reacher knight tried to laugh harder.

“Your ‘Red Queen’ must be dining at Hornvale and selling your House’s jewels in the hope she will be granted a new Lordship among the Black traitors, Serrett! You must be so proud!”

Cerion brutally lost his frayed self-control and punched hard the prisoner. Then he punched him again. And again.

“You’re lying. My daughter knows her duty...and even if she had been so feckless and cowardly as to do what you imply, she wasn’t in command of Silverhill. A Castellan was.”

“Yes...” the prisoner gave him a bloody grin. “The first thing we saw when we entered the castle was his head on a pike.”

Cerion screamed in hatred and drew his sword. The next instants were kind of blurry, but when his rage was temporarily sated, the insolent prisoner was just a slab of dead meat.

“It is going to be difficult to ask him questions...my Lord.”

“Yes...” Cerion Serrett admitted after making sure his anger wasn’t going to get the better of him. “But his...words....angered me.”

“Truth hurts,” Merlon Sarsfield commented and grimaced as he contemplated the bloody mess he had made.

Cerion gritted his teeth, feeling the hatred in his heart gaining strength again.

“Please don’t tell me what I think you are going to say.”

“Many of the outriders we sent east have just returned.” The last Lord beyond himself to serve the True King failed to obey his supplication. “They confirmed a large group of horse-mounted travellers fled from Silverhill and were seen riding to Hornvale. We were days late in noticing it, so they must have reached the Blacks by now.”

Cerion stabbed the dead one more time. It didn’t make him feel better.

“This ungrateful child!” He roared. “I gave her a royal husband and priceless robes! She received Lysene silk and rubies! And this is how she rewards me? I will kill her!”

And he stabbed the corpse again.

“You will do nothing of the sort, Cerion.”

Merlon endured unflinchingly his glare.

“Unless you fancy abandoning the war and challenging the Black Queen and her dragon?”

Cerion’s rage didn’t abate, but the former Lord of Silverhill was forced to concede – reluctantly – his fellow Lord had a point. He stood no chance against a mature dragon.

“Maybe one assassin or two...”

“Cerion!” Merlon’s tone was more one used to remind unruly squires of their station, and he glared fiercely in return. “She’s gone and out of our reach. I know you’re unhappy, but there’s nothing we can do. Silverhill has fallen and must be well-garrisoned as-“

“Because this bitch handed them the castle without a fight!” The Lord of House Serrett roared.

“Yes. Yes, she did.” Merlon sighed. “And it doesn’t matter. She’s beyond your vengeance now.”

“Nothing, do you hear me? Nothing is beyond my vengeance!”

The loyal Lord of Silverhill removed the bloody sword from the enemy flesh and drew it high.

“I swear it before the Seven, do you hear me? As long as there is life in my body, I will pursue the treacherous bitch I called daughter! I don’t care how many dragons and demons will stand in my way! I don’t care how many men I will have to kill! I don’t care what happens to my House and my soul until I die! But I will destroy utterly the woman I called the Red Queen if it is the last thing I ever do!”

Merlon Sarsfield sighed again.

“Clean your sword, you’re just ridiculous.” His fellow Lord turned away. “Come. The King has summoned us. The ones you want revenge against is out of your reach, but House Swyft isn’t.”

**Ser Tyland Lannister**

“You will die Lannister! The Red King has risen, stronger than he was before!”

Tyland felt his lips widen, for all his attempts to remain serious.

“Yes, I suppose being struck by Grimm must have made him stronger. Maybe it even gave him some intelligence...the Crone knows he needed it.”

Hundreds of his men chuckled or outright burst into laughter.

Needless to say, their Reyne prisoner, tied up to an old tree which had seen better days, didn’t enjoy at all the cheering.

“You think you have won? Our King is immortal! By the will of the Gods, he has claimed a sword of fire, which can cut through the best plate armour in a single strike!”

“That sounds rather impressive,” the Lannister commander agreed soberly, “per chance, how tall is our good friend the Lord of House Reyne right now?”

“How...tall?” the prisoner repeated, obviously not understanding the point of his question.

“Well, you said he was becoming stronger,” Tyland added, “unless the cuckolding his Queen gave him while she fled Silverhill gave him bigger things between his legs...”

The chuckles turned into an explosion of laughter and mockeries, and those who were already cheering voiced their own explanations how ‘tall’ Lord Reyne was going to become.

“Traitors! You’re all traitors!” The Reyne-sworn ‘warrior’ shouted. Predictably, this had the effect of making everyone’s hilarity rise, not decrease. “Damn you! You will burn like you deserve, heretics!”

Tyland made a gesture, and one of his men slapped the sole survivor of the raid on their rearguard.

“Let’s try to keep religion out of this war, please. You and your friends have already made a big enough mess, don’t you think?”

“Spoken like a Lannister!”

“I see the chief traitor taught his butchers well,” the veteran of the Second Butcher’s Ball gave the oath-breaker an unamused stare. “Tell me, did you say the same thing while you torched the villages of these lands for the last days and nights? Did you think it was holy work slaying your own smallfolk when you have the swords and they can’t defend themselves?”

The man, at last, stopped defending his actions. Well, better late than never, Tyland supposed.

“I am a loyal soldier of His Grace King Walder, long may he reign.” The Reyne ‘knight’ spat as laughter returned to more reasonable levels. “Kill me, and be damned.”

“So eager to die, butcher of Castamere?” Tyland shook his head. “Unfortunately for you, new orders from the Rock have arrived. We intend to parade a few prisoners in front of the smallfolk so that we prove to all your rebellion is in the way of being defeated.”

“Ah, yes, the legendary Lannister ‘mercy’! You can take your offers and-“

“After the parade, we will return to an old tradition we renewed with the Ironborn we captured during the Dance,” Tyland continued, ignoring the prattle and the insults of his prisoner. “You and all your friends still alive will be dragged into the entrails of the Rock, where you will dig tunnels and mine our gold until your very last breath. This way the sights of Lannisport and Casterly Rock will be the very last things you will ever see under the sun.”

“Sometimes we check if they’re still alive,” one his Captains smiled mischievously. “Sometimes...is it once per year, my Lord?”

“Twice,” Tyland corrected in a mildly reproachful tone, “we have to make sure we don’t waste too much food feeding the Rock’s rodent population.”

“Apologies, Lord!”

“Apologies accepted,” he said before returning to the prisoner who had now a terrified expression on his face. Ah yes, it was one thing to learn one was going to die slowly and painfully in a few turns of hourglasses, but the ‘long punishment’ in the depths of the Rock was something else. Mining was seen as dangerous work for the smallfolk men who did it, and highborn families haughtily raised their noses wherever they went to close to the unwashed masses digging under the earth. But staying in the darkness and never seeing the sun again? It was another torment which could terrify – and for good reason – anyone. “It will remind me we have to check if a few of the Ironborn are still alive, it’s been a long time since-“

“Fine! Fine! I will take the black! I will take the black! I swear it on the Seven, I will take the black!”

Tyland nodded and waved to several guards.

“You heard him. Prepare an escort and a cage for the Golden Tooth.”

“Yes, my Lord.”

It was only as noon and a hastily prepared piece of bread and cheese was chewed in his mouth as they marched south that one of his men dared asking the important question.

“Err...Lord. Were you bluffing when you told the bastard what would await him after the prisoner’s parade?”

“Of course not,” Tyland grinned. “If he hadn’t decided the black was better than the Rock, House Lannister would have shown its legendary hospitality to this traitor.”

His sword hand tightened around the hilt of his sword.

“Lannisters aren’t bluffing, Captain. And we are going to teach it to House Reyne before they are exterminated as their kind of betrayers deserve.”

**Ser Burton Swyft**

“The Reynes! The Reyne Army is here!”

“What?”

Ser Burton Swyft was so surprised he let his fork fall on the hall’s floor. The sound was at least loud enough to fight against the sheer surprise which had surprised him.

“Why?” The knight blurted out before realising how stupid the question was. “No. How do you know?”

“They are setting fire to Lion’s Vigil and the coves surrounding it!”

“What?”

This was...this was just madness. Yes, the village of Lion’s Vigil was sworn to House Swyft, but apart from being the village one had to cross if one wanted to go quickly from his home to the Golden Road, it was really an unimportant location. They hadn’t five hundred smallfolk out there, by the Father Above!

“The...Ser, I fear...I fear the rumours the bastards were killing everything in their path isn’t a rumour at all. What they can’t loot and take, they kill. And what they can kill or torture, they burn.”

“Madness...”

The Iron Fever had struck hard the Southern Westerlands, what were these imbeciles thinking? The more smallfolk and highborn Westerners they killed, the more Reachers and Stormlanders the Crown would be able to ‘reward’ after the war with the lands and privileges of those exiled or made extinct! Why they couldn’t?

“No,” Burton realised horrified, “they just don’t care they are killing our traditions and our future. They want to die fighting and they don’t care how many thousands die for their ‘glory’.”

“Ser...what do we do? If you are right-”

“All smallfolk must find refuge inside Cornfield’s halls,” he finished. “There is no time to waste. You have sounded the alert, but it is not enough. Take twenty riders with you. Everyone must run to Cornfield with only what they can carry. I don’t know how you do it, but tell the smallfolk to move! We can’t afford to lose them!”

“Yes, Ser!”

“As for the forces we have left,” Burton said darkly, “we are going to try giving you enough time to do that. And if we fight hard enough, the men my cousin took with him to meet with Lord Oakheart may be able to return in time.”

“Ser,” the captain of the men-at-arms he had to relay his orders said cautiously, “we have not seen so far any sign of our Lord or any of the columns he went to meet. If he doesn’t come, Cornfield will-“

“It will hold!” Maybe it was panic speaking, maybe it was him trying to convince everyone hearing his orders that victory was possible. “I am taking our five hundred riders with me. Prepare the rest of the household on the ramparts and at the gates. The Reynes mustn’t have anything for a siege; they fled across half of the Westerlands, their siege engines or whatever they called by that name were certainly abandoned near Castamere and Sarsfield.”

“Yes, Ser! By your will!”

It took a long of time for his men to equip themselves. It took even longer to form a column, explain what he expected of them, and pass through the gates.

When he did, Burton flinched, for the eastern farms were burning.

The Seven damn them, it wasn’t enough for them to burn entire forests, they were setting the bountiful corn fields of His House too!

“Cousin,” the knight murmured, “what were you thinking allying us with such rabid beasts?”

Then he steeled himself and began to bark his commands.

He couldn’t save the soon-to-be-harvested fields. Hopefully with the granaries filled with one summer harvest, it wouldn’t mean starvation.

He would have to save the men, women, children of House Swyft, and pray it was enough.

At first organising the peasants fleeing for their very lives proved easy, but soon it grew beyond his capabilities. A single family added itself to one another. Scores of lives became hundreds. It was a host of innocent lives running to save themselves.

And behind them, came the Reyne butchers.

“VENGEANCE! VENGEANCE! DEATH TO THE TRAITORS! DEATH TO THE LANNISTERS!”

“HOUSE SWYFT AND JUSTICE!” Ser Burton bellowed, and his knights fell upon the marauders and the killers of the Red Lion.

His first spear broke as he dismounted his third opponent. His second one’s edge stayed in the throat of the tenth enemy he killed.

The fire was coming all around them, and the northern wind was bad for the horses...Burton didn’t know where most of his men had gone, only a score or so remained with him.

“FOR CORNFIELD! KILL THE FIRE BUTCHERS!” He shouted.

The fighting became even more vicious and monstrous. Every time he found enemies, the killers were busy laughing as they raped, mutilated, and tortured men and women.

Burton killed them. He killed them as his arms began to tire and the blade forged in the armouries of the Rock for his sixteenth name day was drenched with human blood.

Enemy riders came out of the smoke as he finished men in Serrett armours.

And the new enemies had an enormous red leonine banner, which was impossible to miss despite all the smoke and the fires.

Their leader was familiar...though the sword covered in flames wasn’t.

Burton saw his last men stand by his side. They were barely ten, and the enemy...they were too many.

But if they killed him...if he was the one to kill the Red Lion...

“So you can fight, Burton Swyft. My knights didn’t think you had it in you.”

“So you can slaughter innocent smallfolk, *butcher*,” the laughter of several Reyne spearmen ceased instantly. “Did you find killing real soldiers too hard to your taste, usurper?”

“You broke your oaths to me,” Walder Reyne proclaimed. “By your own cowardice and treachery, your lives are forfeit! I am the rightful King, and I will punish you as I see fit!”

“You are not a King, you are just a mad beast like your brother! It is a pity someone didn’t kill you before you rebelled!”

“Then you have chosen...DEATH!”

Burton pushed his horse towards the enemy, but where he had intended to give a last charge, the poor animal was unable to do more than a slow walk...and Walder Reyne was already striking, faster than anyone should be able to wield a massive sword of this size.

The knight of House Swyft parried the blows. The smoke didn’t help, damn the smoke, blow, parry...and the world exploded in pain.

Burton tried to move...but his left arm, his legs...they weren’t moving. As for his right arm...he blinked...where was his right arm? And pain...oh by the Gods, the pain...

And then there was a violent gust on his wind.

The smoke dissipated. He saw the fire sword-bearer dismount and walk towards him.

“Pledge yourself as my King once more, and I will spare them.”

“Only...the usurper...an untrue King...would say that.” He coughed and gritted his teeth to keep the pain from making him scream.

“You will die an oath-breaker and a failure, then.”

Another gust of wind came.

Burton heard them a heartbeat later. And for all the pain he suffered, for all the certainty he was going to die, he laughed.

For coming from the north, the knight of House Swyft heard hundreds of war horns clamour the defiance of the West.

“HEAR US ROAR!”

Burton laughed and he continued to do so until the fire sword killed him.

**King Walder Reyne**

No. No, why were they here?

Walder had sent raider columns against their supply convoys. He had burned hamlets, villages, and other useless settlements to blind them, forcing the dogs of the Rock to disperse their forces.

But the war horns were echoing loudly in the northern wind, and there was no mistaking the red lion on gold.

And the other banners...he remembered and hated them.

It was their fault Walder had lost Castamere.

It was their fault that despite his stronger army, House Reyne had abandoned its ancestral home.

“My King! Enemy columns are coming from every northern trail! If we stay here-”

*If you stay here, you can crush them in detail. Flee, and they will hunt you one by one.*

“Reform the lines! REFORM THE LINES!” the Red King shouted as lines of horses and banners appeared over the northern hills in ever-rising numbers. “They have come here to die! The Warrior is with us today! We will destroy the traitors of House Swyft and the arch-fiends of House Lannister in a single blow! WE WILL BRING DOWN THE ROCK!”

Grimm Banefort was dead and beyond his vengeance, but the head of Tyland Lannister would be a fitting substitute.

Walder made several feints with *Firebringer* before pointing it at the enemy.

“THE SKY IS RED AND WE STILL ARE THE MASTERS OF WAR!”

Thousands of men roared with him the next words.

“DEATH TO THE LANNISTERS!”

**Author’s note**: The last battle of the War of the Lions is about to begin. And those who survive it will definitely understand the meaning of fire and blood...