**Chapter 10**

**Tears and Slaughter**

**Lord Jonos Bracken 1**

The word gritted between the brown teeth of his sworn sword had the merit to sum-up accurately the problem.

Jonos Bracken, Lord of Stone Hedge and commander of the Riverlands vanguard, feigned not to have heard it. The words used by men of low birth, accurate or not, were not exactly to be spoken in presence of Ladies and persons of high birth.

Still, he could not say his men had not a good point. As a matter of fact, they had several good ones...or bad, depending on the point of view.

“All right, I see the heretics have been built plenty of defences while we waited around the Twins. But with their damn fumes and the dark clouds, I can’t see very well all they’ve prepared to stop us. Tell me what I can’t see from there.”

“Yes, Lord,” one of his archers half-grunted, a man who by all accounts wore a sort of green-brown long cloak and was certainly a step or two above the outlaws hunting deer and boars in the forests east of the Green Fork. “Three sets of wood pikes. One water pit after the first. Can’t take the horses that way, no Lord. Fumes and some nasty things out there. Rat-beasts quick and screaming...”

Jonos sighed and sent two of his Captains with the scout to make a proper map. The scout was certainly good to scurry around and escape enemy patrols, but his butchery of the Common Tongue made him a liability when it came to explain what they had to face.

Yet Jonos wasn’t blind and coupled with some recognisable words in his scout’s report, he could hazard one or two guesses what they were going to find when the word to attack was finally given. Dozens of obstacles in wood, mud and metal had undoubtedly been prepared to prevent heavy and light horse from charging and dispersing the marauders. Palisades and stone redoubts had been raised to provide excellent shooting ranges for archers and crossbowmen. Trebuchets, catapults and ballista were nowhere to be seen for the present, but there had to be some. The heretics had evidently thrown around enough earthworks and new defences to make Sentinel’s Stand something to resist an army coming from the south, and if they had the time to build that, then they had the time to build a few engines.

“This is going to be infantry work, Sers,” he was forced to admit to the knights surrounding him.

“I’m afraid you’re right, my Lord,” Ser Irvin answered on his great black stallion. “Our horse is good, but not good enough to charge in...*that*.”

That, of course, was the ugly fortifications, walls and pits prepared by the traitors. Once his astonishment was gone, Jonos had to admit it was no Bloody Gate or Golden Tooth and it certainly could be taken, though certainly not cheaply.

“How did they build this so fast?” A knight of House Mallister asked out loud. “They stormed the fortress and unless they used every warrior they have to dig in, they shouldn’t have the hands and the backs to repair the fortress, never mind throw more defences!”

“I think the wild rumours the heretics use rat-beasts as a servant work force have some merits, my Lord,” Jonos changed his posture on his horse to look at the blue-eyed knight who had spoken. “I’m not saying I believe they have tens of thousands of these abominations, I do not, but if they have three or four thousand and they use a few hundreds of their men as overseers...they had Sentinel’s Stand for more than a fortnight in their claws. The Seven only know what sort of horrors and monsters we will find once we will open the dark pits to the torch.”

“Plus all the faithful smallfolk they dragged in chains to satisfy their unnatural cravings,” half of the assembly shuddered at the thought of being taken prisoner by the heretics. The more they learned about the fall of Sentinel’s Stand and the skirmishes and raids over the Northern Marches, the more Jonos and his vanguard realised the ‘wild rumours’ and the ‘unspeakable heresies’ were not as ridiculous as they had sounded moons ago when the sun of summer shone over their heads and the era of peace was continuing like it had for the last decade.

The Northerners were really controlling monsters and abominations of the darkest nightmares. If there was any justice in this world, Jonos and his fellow Lords of the Rivers and the Trident would see to it that in a few years they would only be bad memories in a strong and united Westeros.

“We will prepare the camp for today,” the Lord of Stone Hedge commanded at last. “There is no point testing these wooden spikes and their monsters with the light cavalry we have.”

Maybe if they had three or four thousand infantry...but they didn’t have them for now. Jonos Bracken and his vanguard were able to see Sentinel’s Stand, but the armies following them were not. Between the Twins and their destination, the only good road was the Kingsroad, and it was far from the artwork of stone and earth mortal hands had built next to the Red Fork or the Trident. The Freys had tightened their purses as long as this old weasel of Walder was alive, and overseeing the roads which were the responsibility of poor or indebted bannersmen was too much to ask for.

Consequently the army of Lord Edmure - now the army of a Lord Paramount, for the raven informing them of the death of Lord Hoster from his long disease had finally reached them - was not progressing fast. The difficulties of supply in a heavily raided region aside, there were only able to put together three large columns of soldiers, and the chariots and the camp followers had to stay on the road, for the food, the water and everything transported in the crates and the barrels was best left undamaged. And the rain had slowed them down further. The solid and hard ground which should have been under their feet was a drenched mud and after several thousands of soldiers walking in them, it was a long muddy trail anyone save the blind could see from leagues away. Horses were tiring faster; the mood of the levies and the inexperienced young knights was getting more violent.

They had to fight a battle soon, or the tempers were only going to get worse.

“How large a camp are we speaking about, my Lord?” asked an arrogant boy from Harrenhal who probably thought the knightly accolade was making him the equal of a Kingsguard.

“I want one able to contain our entire army.” Jonos Bracken answered after trying in vain to see if the damn sorcery of the heretics was going to disperse and allow a good view of whatever they were doing to corrupt Sentinel’s Stand.

“My Lord, the heretics are not likely to attack us in the open...” the young brown-haired blue-eyed knight of the Riverlands had not laughed, but he was not far from it.

“No, they aren’t. But as you can yourself see, we are not going to use Sentinel’s Stand as a fortress for this Crusade. Not with the kind of atrocities and unspeakable acts the heretics are committing at this very moment inside it walls.” Jonos let them several heartbeats to think about it. “The army coming behind us needs a solid camp before the battle and the next campaign, and we are going to build it.”

Thank the Smith and the Crone it was the camp followers, the smallfolk and the levies which were going to use their hands to raise the palisades and the ditches. The young knights looked already furious they needed something as mundane as a camp before going to war.

“I see your point, my Lord, but surely while the smallfolk build the camp, we will be able to lead several patrols eastwards to see if it’s possible to encircle these Northern beasts...”

Jonos blinked and thought for a moment he had misunderstood the gist of the knight’s message. But no, the knight of House Shawney was looking at him with a bright smile.

“By all means,” Lord Jonos Bracken returned with an expression that anyone having something between his ears should have understood as ‘you are an idiot, now stop and shut your mouth’.

“Thank you my Lord! Philip and Jae, with me!” And half a score of young knights rode away like they were the Warrior’s Sons reincarnated on their way to slay some mythical beasts.

“My Lord, they are...”

“I know, I know.” Sentinel’s Stand couldn’t be flanked. Half of its walls and defences were facing the Neck, and not knowing how many bog-devils, monsters and beast-warriors were hiding behind these putrid wastes, Janos wasn’t going to patrol in these treacherous swamps with a mere thousand men, especially when the majority was cavalry.

But if these...these knights who had never known autumn or winter before today wanted to die before the greatest battle of the decade, Jonos wasn’t going to stop them, not unless they were men of Stone Hedge. Obviously, more losses in the other Houses’ ranks were going to increase his prestige when the moment came to divide the spoils...

“What now, my Lord?”

“Now we turn back, Sers. We have a camp to build and more preparations to finish before Lord Edmure arrives.”

**Lord Edmure Tully 2**

Edmure gave a last glance at the raven when the maester put the black bird in the cage before leaving his tent. He had never liked ravens before, with their croaking and the manner they looked at humans. He liked them even less now that six days ago, he had received the news of his father’s death from them.

He hated the ravens now. But compared to the loathing he felt for the heretics, his anger for the black birds was a small thing. It was the fault of these monsters and demons his eldest sister was a prisoner at Winterfell...if of course she still was alive in the middle of these corruption-filled cold pits.

It was the fault of these demon-worshippers he was here, in the Northern Marches and in his tent as the autumn rains poured over the camps. He should have been by his father’s side. He wanted to hear his father’s last words, see him smile a last time and benefit from his guidance before he took the Lordship of Riverrun.

It wasn’t going to happen. In fact it was all likely he wasn’t even going to be there to set aflame the funeral boat of his father as it descended a last time the Red Fork. Not unless he wanted to abandon the army here and there, and as Heir of Riverrun he couldn’t do that.

Damn it. The casualties were supposed to be on the battlefield. They were supposed to happen with sword and axe blows, now that the first great battle of the Crusade was going to be fought at Sentinel’s Stand. By the Seven, it was hard to tolerate in his head and his heart. Why couldn’t his father have been granted half a decade of life in return for his lengthy service to the Riverlands when an old sack of bones like Walder Frey was still alive?

The messages were coming with dark wings and dark rains now. While the Vale, Crown and Storm armies were assembling on the Kingsroad behind them, Edmure was still waiting for the first message announcing him the first Lannister army was camping leagues east of the Riverrun’s walls. Lord Tywin Lannister may be a lion, but he was certainly not an early riser.

“We must attack,” the judgement had come from Septon Crusader Meryl, one of the two army commanders to honour his tent of his presence.

“We must attack...as soon as this damn rain ends,” Ser Stevron Frey corrected. With his old visage and his distinguished tone, Edmure was once more cursing the fact it was Lord Walder ruling the Twins and not his eldest son.

“Yes, yes,” Meryl dismissed Stevron like one spoke to a small child. The Faith had not been happy to learn House Frey had refused to reinforce House Sentinel before the first heretic army broke out of the Neck. There had been plenty of fistfights, insults and lost teeth in the improvised duels between the tents of the two armies, and in the end in the final camp Edmure and his main bannersmen present had to put the Freys on the left wing and the Faithful on the right. “We will wait to fight until we can see we are marching in the direction we want. What I want to know, Lord Tully is the shape of the formations we will take once it’s time to sound the horns and slaughter the traitors.”

The tone was not the one filled of respect a Lord Paramount was supposed to hear when confronted by a smallfolk, but Edmure let it go. The position of the Faith was today unassailable and bashing heads with the handpicked representative of the High Septon was unlikely to be appreciated by King Rhaegar once the hosts of the Seven Kingdoms coalesced in a grand army.

“The formations have been decided,” Edmure answered, placing the parchment which had taken hours of his attention in the last days. “Obviously, we can’t use our cavalry unless the Northern heretics leave their fortress to fight us on open ground. I thus have decided several rectangular interlocked formations like the treaties of King Maekar advocate in these conditions. The first line will be our heavy infantry with shields, and Houses Frey, Pemford, Keath, Bracken, Shawney, and Blackwood will be disposed from left to right, with the Faithful supporting the Blackwoods on the extreme right.”

The grin of the Septon-Crusader told the new Lord of Riverrun his strategy would meet no opposition there. House Blackwood was going to prove its loyalty to the Iron Throne and the Crusade...or the Faithful would teach them the meaning of the word before removing their heads.

“The second line will be the siege engines, the ladders and the archers, with one thousand light cavalry protecting them against any enemy sally. The third line will be seven other infantry contingents, those of House Charlton, Vance, Piper, Tully, Whent, Ryger and the rest of the Faithful foot. The fourth line will be the levies of the other Noble Houses and our heavy horse. The fifth line will be the men-at-arms of our Knightly Houses, our skirmishers, sellswords, and freeriders.”

“I commend your battle-plan,” Stevron took great care to articulate slowly every word, “but my Lord...isn’t the cavalry a bit too far from the action? There are several of my youngest brothers wondering what sort of war this is, when the knights are on the rear lines...”

“I recognise this is not the formation the pious call with their prayers,” Edmure replied patiently. “But if I send our mounted troops against these traps and the walls, at best they’re going to be useless, at worse their horses are going to panic and trample the foot and our formations will fight without caring for the rest of the armies in the chaos of battle. We have to maintain several lines until a large breach is opened in the enemy’s defences.”

“Your knights always can the foot and fight without their coursers, Ser Stevron,” Meryl proposed while caressing his beard in a voice that fooled no one in the tent. “There is only the mud and the grass to fear...these proud knights have large shields my warriors would use with great devotion.”

“Enough,” Edmure Tully intervened before Stevron tried to unsheathe his sword from his scabbard. “The knights will do their duty, and many have already volunteered to be the first men atop the walls. They will not mount stallions on the palisades and in the ditches our enemies have dug, but their charge will nonetheless give us the victory we want.”

“Agreed,” the Heir of the Twins whispered after giving a dark look to the Septon-Crusader. “If everything goes well, the fourteen thousand men of our first line will overwhelm the outer defences in short order. Even if the first attack is repelled however, the third and fourth lines can continue the effort and when it comes down to it, the heretics will soon exhaust themselves against our fresh troops. We can give a few hours to our horse and foot before sending them again into the fray; they can’t. The simple reality of battle, whether it is a siege or not, is that the first side which breaks lose the battle. And we have a lot of men and weapons to do the breaking, my Lord.”

“It’s indeed why I have chosen this formation, Ser Stevron,” Edmure thanked him with a silent nod, “we will be able to give more troops the chance to gain battle-experience and redden their blades in monster’s blood...”

It was the moment a war horn sounded in the distance.

“I think it’s one of these bloody Erenford knights, my Lord,” Stevron commented with a wince. “I will duly chastise him when I go back to my camp. I’ve no doubt the man has drunk a bottle or two while I had my back turned...”

Like to mock the Frey’s affirmation, a second horn echoed in the camp. And then a third. A fourth. A fifth. A sixth. In a score of heartbeats, horns were playing and thousands of voices outside began to shout orders and urge the soldiers to leave their tents and confront the cold rain.

“This is not possible...”

The heretics were not waiting in their fortress. They were attacking the Riverlander camp.

**Jory Cassel 3**

There was a name the Andals feared, whether they live in a tiny hamlet or behind the ten feet-high walls of one of their great citadels. This name was King Theon the Hungry Wolf, Champion of the True Gods. In him the power of the Four had been poured until he was a being of perfection. By his sword and his armies, the lands of Andalos had burned and its inhabitants were massacred, sold to slavers or seized to be offered on the Northern altars. By his voice the disunity of the North had been stopped, and the Champions of the Hosts were once again turned to a single goal: kill the unbelievers and cover the lands in so many Southern corpses even the septons had no choice but to admit defeat and return to their sunny cities where they could find excuses for their great failures.

Jory didn’t intend to make a pact with this most redoubtable Ascended Champion tonight.

While it would be incredibly satisfying to let the worst nightmare of the Andals walk the earth and slaughter the worshippers of the High Septon, the army under his command had not enough sacrifices available to make it worthwhile. And besides, the experience would be likely a final one for him personally. The Arch-Ascended was a formidable force on the battlefield, but one which tolerated no other peer save the Lord of Winterfell or his Heir.

No, on this rainy night another Ascended had been chosen to lead the attack. Another great King of Winter, though the Southerners remembered only his names in japes and mockeries, ignorant that they were.

The Ascended called as ninety-nine prisoners were killed on the drenched eight-pointed star was King Brandon the Burner. Considered one of the more powerful sorcerers of Tzeentch to have ever lived, the Champion had been on the defensive for most of his reign, as enemies encircled his lands. Finally, losing his patience, King Brandon had used his own fleet as bait and in a feat worthy of the Great Architect, burned the two fleets while there were fighting each other. For several decades there had been no western fleet worth of the name, but then the Ironborn reavings had ceased immediately. And the Burner had become one of Tzeentch’s Chosen on the battle-sized pyre he had created with his magic and his tormented mind.

“Is everything ready?”

“The men await your orders, Black Spear,” Lord Robin Flint answered. “The first patrols have been eliminated. They are few Southerners outside, in this light rain.”

Jory grinned before drawing his sword and raising it well over his head. It was not really necessary – a good half of his troops had natural night vision – but for the first battle, better to do it properly.

“For the True Gods, we attack!”

The ritual ended as the black columns of the Northern army marched out of Sentinel’s Stand. For an instant there was nothing but obscurity, rain, the growls of the skavens and the beasts they had used to build the walls. And then the Ascended was here. Jory was too far to see all the details, but from here the immortal servant of Tzeentch looked like a humanoid grey-black figure burning in mystical blue fire.

They raced ahead, in the mud and the rain. Orders had been given to forget the war cry and the intimidation shouts, but even then, the Hosts were doing a prodigious amount of noise and rapidly as they approached the first fires burning on the side of the plains, the first calls of alert were heard.

“They know we are here but it will not save them! ATTACK! FOR KHORNE AND TZEENTCH! FOR NURGLE AND SLAANESH! ATTACK!”

The Host of Slaughter, Jonelle Cerwyn in the lead, were the first to reach the Riverlander camp. Over one hundred soldiers in chainmail and swords tried to intercept them. As the Champions of Khorne leading the attack were in plate and had two-handed warhammers, halberd and axes, the fight was more butchery than a proper contest of strength.

“PUSH THEM INTO THEIR CAMP! KILL THE UNBELIEVERS! KILL THE WEAKLINGS! KILL THE SEPTONS!”

The cohort of Bog Boggs certainly fulfilled the spirit of the commands. The scythe-wielding men of the Neck cut down scores and scores of men who rushed from their tents with sometimes only half of their armour parts worn.

The Host of Domination and the Host of Destiny followed the Host of Disease into the breach, pulverising more palisades and gates to add more avenues of attack. There were screams of defiance on the other side, but this was the moment the Ascended Burner soared over the battlefield and over a hundred tents began to burn in blue fire.

And then they were all fighting in the River camp. Despite having had a taste of it at Sentinel’s Stand, Jory marvelled at the facility his enemies fell under his blows. His sword and his spear were red with blood in ten heartbeats, and wherever he gave a blow, one terrified face screamed and fell without a limb. It was not like in the lands of fortitude and danger where every step could be your last. It was easy and these men were weak...so weak, they were incapable of uniting despite their great numbers. In the first instants they were charging between the tents, they had easily killed as many men as his army had before beginning the long march southwards.

“Return to the darkness, servants of the demons!”

“The Seven Kingdoms and the Faith!”

“The Seven will it!”

“For King Rhaegar and the Crusade!”

But they were still more Riverlanders and other Southerners pouring it. They were poorly organised, and Jory was massacring them by the scores, parrying their weak attacks, shattering their weapons, forcing to their knees unworthy champions. But they were a lot of them.

“Lord Flint,” he was forced to call. “I need more pyres in the tents and to our east. The Ascended and your sorcerers aren’t killing enough enemies to make them rout.”

“Understood...they are going to feel our wrath...” the hundreds of blue lights which materialised and provoked thousands of screams were more than he expected to say the truth.

The effect didn’t last more than ten heartbeats before it was extinguished by a wind which was not coming from the Riverlands sky.

“They have their own wizards take the field, Cassel,” Jonelle Cerwyn barked as their advance forced his own Winterfell warriors and the berserkers of the Slaughter together. “We will not be able to hold them eternally.”

Jory did not say anything. The Khorne Lady was indeed right. Not only there were thousands of light now illuminating the camp where by all right sorcery and madness should be reigning, but even the rain was temporarily decreasing in intensity. And despite their horrible speed, there were thousands of men now fully armed and awake running in their direction. Thousands of reinforcements and the winds of magic were lessening once more, the increase in potency granted by the sacrifices coming to an end. The Ascended and the blue flames were fading away, and more and more magic was returning to the aether.

“We can withdraw,” Jory Cassel shouted. “Sorcerers, I want a fire barrage to cover our departure! Domination Host, take all the living prisoners you can! Boggs, unleash your plagues! Cerwyn, take the livestock and the metal we can move!”

Orders after orders were uttered, and thankfully the Champions of the Hosts obeyed and most of the troops immediately began to withdraw from the burning Tully camp. Thank Tzeentch he had insisted on the possibility of retreating the night before. While he would have loved crushing the enemies on these plains in a single surprise attack, the very size of the enemy army had made this something incredibly difficult to achieve.

No, he had been right to retreat. They had burned and killed thousands of Riverlanders and their allies for insignificant losses, and showed the meek commanders serving Riverrun and King’s Landing the power of the True Gods was against them. Many would desert before dawn, and even more would die of their wounds or doubt this war could be won at all.

“It was a splendid night raid, now we must give the killing blow to their Lords...” He announced to his escort.

**Ser Stevron Frey 1**

“I’m sorry, Lord Blanetree. We lost how many men?”

Stevron was old enough he had heard nearly every Lord of the Rivers and the Trident speak in past decades, and enough times he could guess what emotion was taking control of their heads when they opened their mouths. The former Lord of Riverrun, Lord Hoster, loved to take an emotionless voice harder than granite when he was displeased by an unwelcome missive or new tax imposed on the Riverlands. His son’s voice, alas, was far less dignified and clearly more panicky.

“My Lord, I realise this is bad...”

“We lost one men in six of this entire army!” Edmure Tully shouted.

Stevron winced as the noise only worsened his headache. The night had been atrocious, and he had not closed his eyes for a long turn of hourglass. At his age, the effect on his old bones was exhausting. Plenty of grey beards like him were even more tired.

Personally, Stevron thought the new Lord Tully was too pessimistic. The sun had not completely risen over the camp, and already it was evident most of the casualties were due to the huge rout which had seized the entire camp when sorcery had burned hundreds of tents. The demons from the Seven Hells which had breached the palisades had killed plenty of camp followers and foot soldiers like they were nothing but ants, but they were not many of them and he didn’t think more than a couple of thousand had fallen in battle.

No, forced out of their sleep to battle a terrifying foe, a lot of men had panicked. Stevron knew that over one in three of his men, including half a score of his half-brothers, had run away instead of charging the enemy. These men were now returning to the camp as the sun gave them some of their warmth and resolve back.

Still, there was no way to pretend they had not suffered a humiliating defeat. More than five thousand men dead, quantities of supplies destroyed or which had to be burned lest their corruption infected the survivors, and the heretics had not been repelled; they had just returned to their camp when it became obvious they would not manage to completely destroy the Crusaders before their army surrounded and massacred them.

“My Lord,” Lord Shawney interjected with the voice of a man who knew his arguments were not to be enjoyed by his liege. “While our losses were important, this night raid caused far more damage to our tents and our supplies than to our numbers. Successful or not, the heretics will need three or four more raids like this one to break on the field of battle the army. But if they torch and taint our camp once more, we will be forced to retreat. It is not raining this morning, but we are seeing more and more autumn rains...we can’t count on the sky to spare our camp for the next fortnight. Our men need proper tents to sleep at night, and the Twins are quite a few leagues away...”

“Our smiths, our workers...all our servants will repair the camp while we’re fighting.” At first, Stevron thought this had been a poor trait of humour, but there was no smile on the new Lord of Riverrun’s visage. Seven Above, Edmure Tully was serious. “Our watchers and our patrols were massacred, last night. I will not give them the opportunity to try a second raid.”

“My Lord, eight out of ten men have not slept last night!” Lord Blackwood protested! “They worked until dawn to repair and salvage whatever could be saved after the enemy retreated. Give them past noon to rest...”

“The enemy did not rest either, Lord Tytos,” their liege retorted with his fist striking the wooden table of the war council. “We are tired, they are tired, but they are not that many of them in the first place. We have reserves, they have none. The moment they will break, Sentinel’s Stand will be back in our hands.”

“Yes!” the Septon-Crusader confirmed enthusiastically. “They failed to crush us last night. The heretics tried their last desperate gamble to win the battle when the gaze of their demonic masters was upon them and they failed. We have nothing to fear as long as the sun is high in the sky.”

Shawney and several older Lords looked at him persistently, maybe urging him to speak, to discourage the Lord of Riverrun from this folly. Stevron didn’t open his mouth. He had recognised the light in the eyes of Edmure Tully, it was one of pure stubbornness like the one his Lord Father threw when he wanted a new girl in his bed. With the Septon-Crusader’s support, his voice was neither important nor wanted.

“I want every warrior, knight, archer and sellsword who can hold a sword or a spear to prepare for battle. I want the army to be able to march for battle before the sun is at its zenith.”

**Lord Jonos Bracken 2**

“This is taking too long.”

Jonos was glad he was nearly two scores of feet away from Lord Edmure Tully at this moment, because he couldn’t help but sigh and roll his eyes, and he had not his helmet upon his head to hide his exasperation.

Yes, it was taking a long time. The ‘it’ was the march and the battle-formation of the great army of the Riverlands, in case one was sleeping on his horse. Which, unfortunately, seemed to be a lot of knights. The night had been long, and only the dead had been able to enjoy a nice rest.

“The Blackwoods are lagging behind the Shawney. Tell them to march faster.” From his position on the hill, the Blackwoods seemed to advance at the same speed the Shawney heavy shields did, but he was not going to intervene to defend the honour of these half-heretic bastards. Lord Tytos deserved every reprimand he was going to receive today. The man had heretic’s blood in his veins, and threading around the path of treason had always been something the Blackwoods loved to do.

Today it ended. They were going to prove their loyalty, swords in arms.

“This is taking too long!”

Jonos wondered how many times Lord Hoster must have explained his son that moving thousands of men to a battlefield took a lot of time. Obviously, it had not been enough or the son had glossed over this aspect of warfare now that his father was not here anymore to watch over him.

Trying to convince himself impatience was a good trait to have in an army commander, the Lord of Stone Hedge watched as banners after banners flew in the wings and the long squares of infantry advanced on the plain to challenge the Northern monsters.

It was a sea of steel and banners. It was a great host worthy of a Crusade. The night raid had killed many, but they were still well over fifty thousand warriors from every Lordship in the Riverlands gathered here today to fight evil and sent it screaming with their backsides in fire to the Seven Hells.

Seven great blocks were in the lead, six for the Great Houses and one for the Faith. His own men, as befitted his rank, were going to be among the first to spill traitor’s blood.

“Our archers are too far from the foot. Tell them to advance further,” the Lord of Riverrun ordered.

“But my Lord,” Lord Keath remarked, “if they advance further, they will not be able to retreat behind our light horse if they take heavy casualties.”

“There are no signs of trebuchets or catapults, Lord Keath,” their liege replied with a sign of annoyance. “It will be a duel of archers against archers, and I have no doubt the bows of our households will be able to outrange whatever rat-thing the heretics have gathered to shoot their arrows for them.”

Edmure chuckled, quickly followed by the Piper, Vance and Ryger boys...and then the fumes which had covered so much of Sentinel’s Stand vanished.

Before anyone around the Lord Paramount of the Riverlands had the time to send a rider to his troops, hundreds of arrows were flying towards the ranks of the Crusaders. But it was nothing compared to the noise which came five heartbeats later. Long metallic tubes had been placed on the new palisades, and in thunderous shrieks they fired.

The entire line of fortifications didn’t shoot. It was all he had the opportunity to observe before incendiary projectiles, arrow and sorcery of damnation slammed into the loyal men of the Riverlands.

Jonos had thought it was going to be bloody. He was wrong. The incendiary balls these metal tubes had launched destroyed and killed in neat lines, deadly things which made the rocks of trebuchets look like toys of children. Legs and corpses were still standing ten feet before them, the bodies of the dead not yet realising their lives had just ended. Flames spread through the ranks. The ranks of House Pemford took the greater amount of casualties, and their advance stopped, as knights and captains tried to reorganise. But it was taking too long.

“What are they doing? They must continue the attack or our entire left wing is going to attack at different times...Lord Pemford! Go rally your men and take two thousand spearmen from the reserve!”

This was stupid, but Jonos Bracken had not the intention to criticise his army commander. The more men they sent directly, the more...

The cannons fired again, and this time it was the infantry of House Shawney which suffered the most. Once again, Lord Edmure ordered more men to rebuild the squares of swords, axes and spears...just before the men of House Charlton ran into some green poisonous mist.

“We are losing daylight!” Edmure Tully vociferated, glancing at his Myrish spyglass before shouting more commands, some of which were the complete opposite he had voiced moments before.

They were also losing a lot of foot from the reserve, Jonos could not help but notice. As the ground was treacherous for the horses and their cavaliers, it was the role of dismounted knights and common warriors to break through the defences and each of these atrocious metallic things were ravaging the tightened formations of spearmen and swordsmen.

“**BLOOD FOR THE BLOOD GOD**!”

The heretic artillery, the sorcerers and the archers all shot their bolt at once. For an instant, the Lords of the Riverlands saw unnatural things of fire and smoke curling over the fortress...and then everything blew apart. The first lines were ravaged by evil flames. The second lines crumbled. The third lines shattered or died as projectiles cut their bodies in half or decapitated them. For the blink of an eye, there was only folly and madness...and then the men began to break and run.

Jonos and most of the Lords present on the hill stared with their mouths wide open. They had just nearly reached the base of the enemy pits and palisades, and their men were already flinching? It was a bad dream...

The Charlton and the Frey troops behind them were the first to throw down their weapons and run, and suddenly their willingness to flee was revealed as sinister figures appeared from the mud and the grass and began to massacre the men trying to stand the line with massive scythes.

“They are sallying?”

“They are sallying out of the fortress!”

“The heretics are charging our foot!”

Jonos didn’t wait to see what stratagem the other Lords had decided upon. He donned his helmet and rushed in the direction of the camp, to lead his horse in the melee. They should have placed more cavalry on the second line to protect the trebuchets, he realised.

“My Lord...” a knight in Piper colours screamed. “Betrayal! The Blackwoods have betrayed us!”

“What? Where?” When he had observed the battlefield, the Blackwoods had been obeying faithfully their orders. “These dogs...”

But the Piper knight instead tried to stab him and only a desperate charge from one of his own men saved his life. The head of the traitor soon rolled on the ground and a column of smoke came out of his armour.

“Sorcery...” Ser Irvin seethed.

“Sorcery,” Jonos agreed. “We need to send more men against the heretics. If they heavy cavalry charges, our infantry will be between us and them...”

It was going to be a slaughter. They had heavy infantry in the lead, but those men were surprised and weakened by the enemy unnatural siege engines.

“My Lord, I think it is raining blood...”

Jonos fixed incredulously his steel gauntlet, which should have stayed a pure grey, receive the first drops of blood.

The sky began to redden. The crows arrived on the battlefield, croaking and mocking the humans.

And the demons returned.

At first, it was like a stone had been thrown into a river or a large pool. The air shivered and cracked. The plains grew distorted and bloody. The horses suddenly refused to heed the orders of their masters. Wolves howled from nowhere and everywhere.

A pestilential odour attacked his nose and the grass for a moment lost its green colour to become half-pink half-red.

“What is happening?” He muttered in consternation. “What is happening?”

He was about to order to sound the charge when he saw them. Thousands of men, thousands of Riverlanders and Faithful, their visages grimacing in sheer terror, running away from the battlefield.

“CHARGE! CHARGE FOR KING RHAEGAR AND THE CRUSADE!”

The order was three score of feet on the left and Jonos didn’t know which group of knights had given the order. He just knew it was the wrong one. Thousands and thousands swordsmen and archers were trying to get away from the battlefield, and they couldn’t evade the three hundred or four hundred horse which charged directly at them.

“My Lord! We must go!”

Jonos shook himself. The panic, the butchery, the troops breaking...it wasn’t natural. But as he watched the bloody melee engulfing right, left and centre of the army, he knew they weren’t going to rally the men like last night.

“You are right. You are right. We must save what we can and make a fighting retreat to the Twins.”

“It’s a bit too late for that, Bracken.”

A black figure on a black horse waited eastwards, followed by a large column of cavalry, all clad in plate.

But their armours were not the work of the smiths of the loyal Lords, oh no. The steel and the other metals were embedded with old runes of evil and corruption, shining in a malevolent blue flame.

“Tytos Blackwood, treacherous son of a pox-ridden whore! I knew we couldn’t trust you! How much did the Starks gave you for your betrayal?”

“Betrayal?” The amusement was evident in the voice of the Lord of Raventree Hall. “My poor Jonos, I was never on your side. My service and my life have always been tied to those of the Great Wolf and our Lord Tzeentch. To betray you would imply we chose to honour our oaths at some point of our service...”

“You swore yourselves to the Iron Throne!” Jonos Bracken roared.

“Oh yes, a Lord Blackwood three hundred years ago may have uttered some words,” Tytos Blackwood raised his sword in a mocking salute. “And as long as the Conqueror and his blood were strong, we were willing to obey their commands. But they have grown weak. They lost their dragons, their pride and everything important save their reptilian lives. It’s time for a Champion of the Gods to rise and conquer these lands!”

“Better to die than serve the monster you call Master,” he spat as his men raised the horse banners of his household in defiance.

“We will see if your daughters sing like you,” the black sword of the traitor began to burn in a malicious blue flame like the one which had burned so many men and tents last night. “Now, try to make things a bit interesting, Bracken. You are the last Lord of your House...”

“We will burn Raventree Hall to the ground and purify the earth on hundreds of leagues!” Jonos spurred his horse and charged, his favourite lance pointed at the heart of the traitor. “KING RHAEGAR AND THE SEVEN!”

“Tzeentch does not care about honour.” A blue orb of sorcery struck him directly into the chest and Jonos Bracken screamed in pain and the laughter of the demons echoed in his ears.

**Ser Stevron Frey 2**

When half of his foot supposed to protect the entire army’s left flank began to run, Stevron thought he had seen the worst in his life.

He was wrong.

The worst had come half a rout later when his own grandson, Black Walder had tried to plunge his sword in his throat as they entered the camp. Only the vigilance of his sworn swords had saved his life, and still Black Walder had managed to kill two of them.

“Why?” He had thought he would see some repentance, some regret. But there was nothing good in these dark eyes.

“Why, grandfather? I am not you! I want to be the Lord of the Twins before my ninetieth name day!” Maybe Walder would have said more insults after that, but the sword pressed again his throat discouraged him.

“This is no laughing matter! How many were supposed to die for you sick ambition? The Lord of our House? Your father? Your brother? Your niece?”

Stevron had uttered the name in this order to obtain a reaction, but all he received in return was some narrowing of the eyes and a predatory expression for a heartbeat or two. It was far enough to make him shiver in fear.

His grandson had betrayed them, completely and utterly, and had been ready to kill everyone and everything coming between him and the Lordship. Father and Mother, how could he have failed his family that badly?

“I will make sure your name will be known for the traitor you are, grandson. Yours is my greatest shame...”

“No!” Walder barked. “The shame is what your vaunted father has done to our House! Did you know how easy it was to recruit cultists and assassins on our lands? Everyone hates Lord Walder Frey! They hate our House! As long as I disguised myself and shouted ‘death to the Freys!’ the smallfolk were happy to embrace Chaos and demonic worshipping.”

“And so you betrayed us for something that was never yours to obtain in the first place.”

“I betrayed for far more,” the vicious expression was back, “there are pleasures and desires that must be explored, powers that you and your mediocre family have wilfully blinded themselves to...”

Stevron nodded once. The sword decapitated his grandson the instant after.

“Aenys, you have the greatest number of riders left. Send three of your best horsemen home immediately. We need to warn our liege about my grandson’s treachery. Hosteen, take whatever tents and supplies you can save and form the column.”

“Lord, there are still hundreds of our men on the field! And this camp is fortified!”

Stevron gave a glance to the north. The sky had turned a heretical blue-red and hundreds of unnatural fires were burning. The screams of agony were heard in the wind, in spite of his efforts to ignore them.

Looking around him, yes it was tempting to believe the camp would hold against a new assault. But as hundreds of men looted the camp and fled southwards, Stevron acknowledged the Riverlands army was in no state to fight again. Many soldiers were shaking of panic and exhaustion, and fleeing was all they were good for now, having thrown on the ground weapons and armour to run faster.

“The fortifications will not help much against demons. You!” He ordered a Captain with the familiar trout on his great shield. “Go find Lord Tully, and tell him I am trying to rally the left and the centre to the Twins.”

The man nodded...and when he thought the Heir of the Twins was not looking, abandoned his shield and joined a hundred-plus group of deserters pillaging the rest of a chariot transporting the army supplies.

“The Tullys are giving us the example, I see...” Jammos commented with a sneer.

“Our men ran before clashing with the enemy, Jammos,” Stevron reminded him soberly. “Take your men and all the supplies we can save before the heretics arrive and murder us all. It’s time to go back home.”

Assuming, of course, that the treachery of his grandson hadn’t already cost them everything...

**Author’s Note**: the northerners are going to be really disappointed by this battle...with how fast the Riverlanders are running, there are not going to be able to kill more than a few thousands on the battlefield.

If you want to support this story further:

P a treon: ww w. p a treon Antony444

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

The next story which will be updated will be The Dance is not Over.