**Chapter 16**

**The Feast of Blood**

**Lord Leo Lefford 1**

Leo would never dare to say it where unfriendly hears could hear him, but whoever thought campaigning in the Riverlands when autumn came was a brilliant idea deserved to be drowned in the nearest river.

And under this grim rainy weather, there were a lot of rivers.

The Lord of House Lefford had visited many times the lands of the Riverlands in his youth – hard to not to when your castle was on the very border with it – and he had never seen the domains of the Lord of Trident like this.

Old levees had broken, transforming the fields into swamps and seas of mud, when it wasn’t true lakes after four or five days of flooding. Small streams unable to satisfy the thirst of more than a few sheep had left their river beds and tripled in size. The already existing rivers, be they small or great, were now tempestuous torrents, and finding fords to cross was an exercise of futility.

The river in front of him was an excellent sample of what was happening everywhere. The Grey Fork, a ridiculously tiny meeting of three small streams ten days north-east of Riverrun, was flooding half of the valley, and since the rains showed no sign to abate, it was probably going to get worse.

“It is at times like this,” the blonde-haired highborn said sourly, “that I wonder why the Tullys didn’t consider the effort to build a small river navy. The Red, Blue, and Green Forks are navigable for many leagues during every season.”

“It would require for several Lords of the Riverlands to agree unanimously on something for a few fortnights,” Ser Addam Marbrand smirked before returning to a serious expression. “And from what I’ve seen so far, they would have to be a true kingdom in the first place, not a loose union of feuding castles.”

Leo Lefford found himself in agreement with the two points brought by the Heir of Ashemark. For all their supposed authority, the Tullys were nothing more than the voice of the Targaryens in the Riverlands, unable to truly impose their will upon their unruly bannersmen.

The trout banners had no royal claim to place itself above the crowd of dissenters, and while their castle was large and fortified to be considered in the league of those owned by the other Lords Paramount, it was also in an off-centre position to defend and rule over the fertile lands of the Trident. It had been too far to exert more than a whisper of control over Sentinel’s Stand, the Twins, and Seagard. It was not prestigious enough to stop for a year the infamous quarrels of the Blackwoods and the Brackens. It couldn’t produce more grain than House Darry or House Vance of Atranta.

No wonder that the heretics had attacked and used their divisions to crush the Riverlanders one by one at the Battle of the Red Tears.

“Yes, they certainly prefer staying weak rather than see their rivals prosper,” with hope, Lord Tywin would be able to convince the new King this was something to change. If in every war to be fought in the Trident the loyalists lost a third of it because the Tullys couldn’t control their bannersmen, it was going to get uglier and uglier.

Leo sighed.

“But that can wait another day. Our outriders and scouts can’t. You say Lorch and Clegane have failed to report of send back a messenger for the second day in a row?”

“Yes,” Ser Addam curtly replied, “and while I can’t dismiss the chance of them having met something they couldn’t handle...well, you have seen and heard them.”

“Yes, I have,” the Lord of the Golden Tooth replied bitterly.

Leo was loyal to Lord Tywin and considered his liege lord far superior to him in many aspects of war-making. Wasn’t it the Great Lion who had correctly anticipated the horrible weather and ordered them to bring an excess of tents to compensate for the damaged and lost shelters? Wasn’t it the smiths and the forges of Casterly Rock which had succeeded in arming tens of thousands of crusaders with excellent armours and weapons?

Over fifty thousand men gathered under the banners of House Lannister had moved into the Riverlands and crushed the Ironborn warbands stupid enough to risk themselves south of the Red Fork, and this was only the first wave of the mighty forces Casterly Rock was preparing to unleash against the heretics of the North and the Iron Islands.

But honestly, the Master of House Lefford couldn’t pretend to understand the point of unleashing the outriders that the Great Lion had found in some dark vault or on the other side of the Narrow Sea. Rapists, brutes, sellswords willing to smother babies in their cribs for the laugh of it, pillagers, bandits and other hired killers: the four thousand outriders preceding his vanguard were undisciplined beasts, and he had already ordered to hang three scores least they failed to heed their orders.

And while he didn’t want to think about it too much, Leo was quite sure they were the reason why the village of Grey Haven had refused to open its gates to his troops, and the council of elders in charge of it had to be reminded...forcibly...that they were subjects of the Iron Throne and his Grace King Rhaegar the First of His Name.

“I thought hanging half of the Iron Shields’ Company would have impressed Lorch,” the senior highborn spoke. Why these sellswords had called themselves like this was a mystery: they did not carry a lot of shields, and their four hundred complement was anything but brave. “Evidently, it didn’t. We may have to hang more of the Manticore’s men when they return to our camp.”

If they returned, he didn’t say.

“Lord Plumm sent two messengers last night to Lord Tywin saying this situation was a consequence of your total mishandling of this force.”

“I had heard,” Leo Lefford gritted his teeth.

He may have been the Lord commanding the six thousand-strong vanguard – outriders not included – but he had two great subordinates. Addam Marbrand was competent and useful. Lord Philip Plumm, accompanied by his brood, was not.

“But then given how many villages his men have pillaged so far, I am not surprised he and his sons are feeling some kinship with the Attack Dog.” When Clegane had arrived to join the Westerlands army several moons ago, there had been many nicknames to describe his formidable size. After seeing its handiwork several times, all but the most unflattering had been forgotten.

“They also feel we have stayed here too long,” Addam said in a reasonable voice.

“I know, but it isn’t like we have a lot of good choices before us.” Leo answered, contemplating the new map he had paid five stags to one of the few Riverrun men making maps. “With the Grey Valley flooded, we can’t directly march towards Fairmarket without opening the door to Ironborn boats. I know Lord Tywin isn’t far behind us, but if we abandon this camp and march northwards, the reavers will be able to pour into the Grey Wood and then the Whispering Wood.”

And from there, they would be able to attack Riverrun itself from the north. The Lord of the Golden Tooth doubted the heretics would be able to take the walls; the garrison was powerful, and the seat of House Tully was a nightmare to storm if you had no siege engines. But it would leave all surrounding villages the unpleasant choice of finding refuge behind Riverrun’s walls or enjoy the nonexistent mercy of the traitor Balon Greyjoy’s reavers.

“Besides, I want at least one report of what we really have in front of us. I don’t trust our outriders’ reports.”

“For good reason, I’m afraid,” Addam approved. “We still have five hundred light cavalry, though. Allow me to lead them northwards, my Lord. With a two days’ ride, I can around the flooded valleys and scout around the hills west of Fairmarket. I don’t care what sorcery the heretics have, they can’t plunge everything around the Blue Fork into an eternal fog, and we will see what is coming for us.”

Not charitably, Leo thought it had more to do with the fact Addam remained young and his sword had tasted too little blood. Many men around him in the vanguard had sworn oaths they would avenge the Sack of Lannisport, and crushing several small Ironborn reaving parties had not dampened their enthusiasm in the least.

However, it didn’t mean his proposal was idiotic or badly thought.

And if Clegane, Lorch, and other sellswords, refused to do their damned duty, then Leo had no choice but to find someone who did.

“Very well,” the vanguard commander growled. “Take the light horse, and-“

The horns began to sound.

“It seems that talking about our outriders-“

But there was immediately something wrong as more and more horns answered the call. And it wasn’t a small sound to announce the returned of lost scouts. It was the pressing, deep rumble of the enemy being in sight.

“Rally your troops!” Leo Lefford bellowed to Addam Marbrand as they ran out of his tent only to see ghost-like boats rush out of the rain to assault the Plump camp north of them. “TO ARMS! TO ARMS!”

**Lord Captain Victarion Greyjoy 1**

Victarion laughed as his axe bit into a greenlander’s neck, and the weakling fell still trying to unsheathe his sword.

The sellswords of the Lannisters’ dogs had betrayed their own location down to the last patrol, and now the occasion was right open for his reavers to kill them all! Outstanding!

“WHAT IS DEAD MAY NEVER DIE!” The Lord Captain roared.

“BUT RISE AGAIN HARDER AND STRONGER!” answered his crew and hundreds of proud reavers who had accompanied them.

“SEND THEM ALL IN THEIR SEVEN GREEN HELLS!”

His warriors laughed. Victarion repeated the old battle-cry a second time.

And the Ironborn went to war.

The Lord Captain of the Iron Fleet broke through the small gap in the palisade, using his large shield to strike at the unprotected face of an astonished greenlander. The next enemy screamed and cursed before the steel of his axe plunged in his face.

“THE DROWNED GOD IS WITH US! GIVE THEM THE IRON PRICE!”

Praise their God for having sent them so many imbeciles directly on their path. Victarion had believed it was a trap at first, after all what kind of fool would order his troops to ravage the villages they were supposed to protect?

But no, the sellswords hired by the greenlanders were trying to plunder and loot everything they could put their hands upon, allies or not, servants of Tywin Lannister or not. And when they had told him a vanguard force of greenlanders was separated from the main Lannister host...

Victarion smiled as strike after strike, he decimated the stunned sheep of the West. This was war. This was where he truly shone. It didn’t truly matter whose House he was slaughtering on the battlefield; three purple on a round field were truly a meek banner to be proud of, and anyway he had never bothered learning the sigils of anyone who wasn’t important.

These weren’t Lannisters to be sure. They hadn’t the leonine helmets, by the cruelty of the Storm God, and they didn’t even have helmets sometimes! That was how flat-footed they were by his men and him storming their camp!

“THE IRON KING! THE IRON KING AND THE DROWNED GOD!”

For the first part of the battle, the greenlanders were more rallying than panicking. But as the boats appeared, many of the Lannister bootlickers threw down their weapons and ran.

Victarion laughed harder. They believed one of their Gods was a Warrior, and they dared shaming him that badly? How ridiculous!

Still, it was a problem. Victarion continued to open throats and smashing faces, but he couldn’t miss that the southern part of the camp, far from rushing to their fellow greenlanders’ help, was forming a shield wall and there were a lot of arrows beginning to fall.

The colours were different too. The golden mountain and the sun had to be House Lefford, and the burning tree was House Marbrand.

“Lord Captain!”

“I see them,” Victarion grunted, finishing two more enemies in quick succession, evading another blow, and letting three arrows fall harmlessly after hitting his good old shield. “Advance faster! I want the head of whoever commands here!”

Victarion didn’t fear any problem with this battle, oh no. With most of his army having finally entered the enemy camp, he had over eleven thousand men, and the greenlanders had less than six thousand at the beginning...now they had a lot less, as green boy after green boy was added to his tally of kills.

No, the biggest problem these men could cause him was withdrawing in good order and go to their masters, explain to him how and where they were caught with their breeches down.

Victarion wasn’t going to let them escape, oh no.

“KRAKEN!”

The brother of King Balon turned his head and frowned, as numerous men in plate armour were emerging from the middle of the tents, killing right and left many of the Essossi outriders who had decided to change sides after being suitably convinced.

Of course, in conditions like those, screaming the name of the Greyjoy was sigil was an excellent way to attract all attention from many Ironborn crews. And there were many golden decorations on these plate armours, matching the banners of the three rounds and the gold field.

Victarion ran to meet them, and he was far from the only one. One hundred or more reavers and sailors of his force slammed into the greenlanders.

“Coward! I am Lord Philip Plumm! Do you fear our valour so much that you refuse fighting a duel against me? COME TRY ME!”

That was so funny Victarion almost missed a step in the dance of steel.

“It’s the contrary, dog of the Lannisters!” the Lord Captain told his pompous enemy as he killed his men one by one. “You are so weak I see no reason to duel you. I really hope there are better swordsmen and commanders in your armies, else we will be at the gates of the Rock next moon!”

“Fool!” the Westerner spat. “You think my men are an army? COME TRY ME! We are merely the vanguard of a force which will burn your miserable islands to-“

The sword of Ragnor Pyke took him in the back of the head, and the highborn greenlander stopped boring him with his words.

“Sorry, Lord Captain,” the bastard-born man said apologetically, “he was hurting my ears.”

“Don’t worry, Ragnor,” Victarion eyed the many corpses he had been responsible for, and the large groups of enemies on the brink of routing. “There still are plenty of them, and the day is young.”

The rain was going to make sure a lot of greenlanders were going to escape. But as the lines broke, and the lion banners were cut to be trampled into the mud, Victarion smiled.

This was his victory. This was glory. No sorcerer was there to darken it with their plots and unnatural things, no other commander had the idea to strike hard and fast this force of the Westerlands. He was Victarion Greyjoy, and he was victorious. And the Lord Captain of the Iron Fleet loved it.

**Ser Kevan Lannister 2**

Rarely had Kevan watched a council of war began in such dark atmosphere. But then, it wasn’t every time you learned the invincibility of the Westerlands banners had been utterly shattered.

In practise, it changed little to nothing for the situation the Crusade found itself into. No more than six thousand Western soldiers had fought in what was already called the Rout of the Grey Fork. Between the retreat in good order commanded by Lord Lefford, and the haste plenty of soldiers had fled the battlefield when they acknowledged how many heretics they were facing, more than half still probably lived, though only two thousand and some had ran towards the main Lannister camp.

As the Ironborn, the sellsword traitors and whatever Northern heretics had accompanied them had field over ten thousand reavers and associated betrayers, it wasn’t that bad a defeat. The main force currently surrounding this tent was more than fifty thousand strong, and there were thousands more recruits waiting near the Golden Tooth, Lannisport, and the training camps around Casterly Rock.

It wasn’t that bad a defeat, but it stung. Ser Daven Lannister had accumulated victory after victory destroying Ironborn raiding parties south of the Red Fork – the reason his counter-raiding force was not included in the fifty thousand today. Lannisport, while a serious defeat, would not have happened if House Lannister had known House Greyjoy were going to support the Northern heretics and the Crown spies hadn’t screwed up by the numbers.

It stung, because after an unending series of victories against the Blackfyre threat over the Stepstones, against the Reynes and the Tarbecks, against pretenders and bandits, against pirates...the myth of invincibility was gone.

And as Kevan watched his brother’s face, he knew which aspect of the battle stung the most.

“Lord Lefford and Ser Marbrand will regroup their forces and join Ser Daven in his patrols along the Red Fork!

“My Lord!” The sour Lord of the Golden Tooth protested. “My men and I-“

“You were defeated,” his brother interrupted in an icy tone Kevan knew very well, one which always made him wince internally. “You were humiliated by Ironborn, so much that as they assaulted your camp, your choices were limited between annihilation and running away.”

“This may be so but-“

Leo Lefford swallowed heavily.

Despite having never felt close to the man, Kevan felt a small tinge of sympathy for the guardian of one of the most powerful eastern fortresses of the West.

Yes, a major part of the defeat could be pushed onto the backs of the outriders House Lannister has saddled him with. Outriders, who, according to all evidence, had either disappeared into the floods of the Riverlands, deserted, or outright turned traitors in the case of several infamous companies like the Brave Companions and the Spears of the Disputed Lands.

No one knew where Ser Gregor Clegane had disappeared, but there was no doubt in anyone’s mind that the brute had utterly failed in his duties. When the Ironborn offensive had come, Lord Leo Lefford and his subordinates had been blind and deaf to their moves, while the enemy had known far too much about their positions.

“Lord Philip Plumm is dead, as his is Heir Ser Dennis. Ser Peter is still missing at this hour, and by your own words, more than one thousand men of House Plumm were killed as you fled for your lives. You will not be in this army for the next moons, Lord Lefford. You and Ser Addam Marbrand will go join Ser Daven, and place yourselves under his command.”

The face of the Master of House Lefford, already quite livid and presenting signs of anger, paled further and Kevan knew he was going to have to smooth things over in the next days.

“By your will,” Lord Leo bowed briskly, and left the tent, followed by two of his captains and Ser Addam.

Yes, Kevan was really going to have to deploy a lot of charm in the next days. They really couldn’t afford to lose House Lefford...well, theoretically, they could, House Lannister wasn’t so fragile as to rely on a single Noble House, but there were still two thousand and five hundred Lefford men in this very army, and if they didn’t act promptly these spears and swords were going to march south, not north with them.

“The Ironborn have struck a blow, but they are poorly disciplined and they tried to pursue our forces for much of the day,” Lord Brax spoke, “I am of the opinion we must not lose any more days and confront them immediately on the battlefield, my Lord. They are tired, we are not. They think us weak, we are not. And though they must have an idea of our numbers, they can’t equal them unless they unite the full hosts of Houses Greyjoy and Stark, which according to our vanguard, isn’t the case.”

Frankly, after such a disaster, Kevan wasn’t going to fully trust anything coming out from the mouths of the surviving scouts and sellswords. They really had given them no reason to.

“I agree,” Lord Lydden nodded vigorously, “we must force the choice of the battlefield. The rain has stopped earlier today, and for all the torrents of mud which have plagued us, we are fully supplied and well-prepared. The heretics, at least the ones our vanguard has seen, have no cavalry, few archers and crossbowmen and archers, and their infantry is ill-disciplined. On an open battlefield, we can use our strengths and remember them why they never risked themselves to raid the Westerlands during the last fifty years!”

The conversation continued for about a turn of hourglass, but it was clear the unanimous position among their bannersmen was to attack. The pride of Casterly Rock and their Houses had not been trampled into the rivers since they had not been present to fight the Greyjoys and their reavers, but everyone wanted repayment for Lannisport, and the Grey River was just another debt to be repaid in blood as soon as feasible.

“We will march.” His brother declared coldly after asking some questions about the arrows and the materials to build some new wooden bridges to replace those taken away by the massive rains.

“We will march and you will not give the heretics any quarter. By now, it is evident that on this side of the Green Fork, we have only heretics, beasts, traitors, and betrayers north of our army. Some were born evil. Others made their choices years, moons, days ago. I don’t care. They chose to dress themselves against Casterly Rock and *they will pay the price*.”

The *Rains of Castamere* were not played, but Kevan, like many other in this war council, could almost hear the melody playing in his ears.

“As for Ser Amory Lorch.”

Steel was too weak a metal to describe the fury burning in Tywin’s eyes.

“His incompetence, his crimes, his cowardice, and his attempts to blame other commanders for his numerous failures will get the reward they deserve,” Tywin turned to their cousin Stafford. “He wanted more gold than we paid him? His wishes will be fulfilled. Take several gold dragons, melt them, and let him drink the beverage he craves.”

All their bannersmen rushed out to take their leave after this execution order was uttered.

**Captain Will Humble 2**

The more Will spent time around Northerners, the more he thought he didn’t like these heretics at all.

Yes, heretics. For all their explanations the Drowned God was a water aspect of their own God of Life and Death, Will didn’t believe them.

They didn’t worship the Drowned God. The unnatural winds and lightning pyres their sorcerers loved to play around had more in common with the powers of the Storm God, the enemy of all Ironborn. The magic-dabblers looked friendly at first sight to be sure. They always had some ‘Captain’ or ‘my Lord’ on your lips, and added many compliments with each victory.

Will knew he wasn’t the only Captain of a longship to have doubts about this alliance. Not after rumours flew that House Reed and their allies worshipping the ‘Grandfather’ had transformed the Twins into a mountain of dangerous flowers and plants. Not after the demonic rumours were confirmed beyond any hope of doubt. Not after the Starks and their pet monsters proved their ability to convert hundreds of greenlanders to their dark rites with a few speeches when these people should have screamed ‘heretic!’ from dawn to dusk and vice-versa.

The Northerners were not worshipping the good Gods, but what was more frightening was how...instable they were. You could speak with a sorcerer one day and speak like you did with a reaver friend and end the conversation convinced you had spoken with a reasonable man, and return to the same location only to watch the man frothing like a madman and flaying a thrall because his soup had not been cooked the way he liked it.

“We should begin to move, Captain,” his second spoke as Will Humble kept his eyes upon the circle of sorcerers surrounding the gigantic figure chained next to their fire of black flames. “Word has spread the Lannister army is on the move. The lions are coming for us.”

“How many?”

“The Goodbrother swears there are at least fifty-two thousand, and one man in five is cavalry.”

While every other revelation has failed to broke the awful fascination provoked by Northern heresies, that information shocked him sufficiently to return his mind to the Iron Price and the war they were fighting.

“Fifty-two thousand? Where in the name of the Drowned Halls have they found so many men?”

The black-haired reaver only shrugged.

“They can’t have that many.”

“Well, House Codd’s messengers were prompt to whisper this might be exaggerated.”

Ah, good.

“They think the Lannisters have between forty-five and forty-eight thousand men, with nine thousand horses to trample us.”

Or perhaps not. If given the choice, Will would prefer fighting forty-five thousand, but he doubted the choice was his to decide.

“Where in the name of the Drowned Halls have they found so many men?” A horrible idea arrived in his mind. “Tell me at least the cavalry which pursued us when we were raiding is with this army.”

“Sorry, Captain. I asked the sorcerer, and they’re still south of the Red Fork.”

“Damn.”

The Ironborn reavers had recruited many sellswords and greenlanders willing to pay the Iron price these last days, and they had a few companies of Northerners protecting the big-named sorcerers. But all added together, the army of the Iron King didn’t have twenty-five thousand men.

And if they had two hundred horses to use as mounts, it would be a large number. Ironborn weren’t horsemen. The Sparr had grumbled they had lost plenty of good archers at Seagard.

A good reaver who had spent his life at sea was worth ten milk-blooded farmers of the green lands...but this time there may very well be more than three or four warriors for every Ironborn.

“This is going to be a red day tomorrow. If they try to bring us to battle on the plains...”

It had stopped raining, and the Riverlands may be known as ‘Mud Land’ in bawdy songs, but they were also very, very flat ground. And unlike a longship, this flat ground didn’t move and the greenlanders didn’t fear wearing plate armour far away from the sea.

“We will win. We have the Lord Captain. Word is he killed five hundred men with his axe at the Bloody Mist.”

“And I’m the Lord of Orkmont.”

Lord Victarion was able to kill five hundred men, Will was sure of it, but according to the tales of the reavers, the lion banners had fled so fast they hadn’t been able to kill so many.

“We have the Iron King.”

“That’s better,” Will agreed. “We are all going to face the Butcher of Castamere and Tarbeck Hall, and we need our King to lead us.”

The greenlanders were weak, most were useless in a fight unless they had numbers in the thousands to fight against their fears...but everyone knew you had no mercy and no piety to expect from Lord Tywin Lannister. Murmurs were that the man had ordered the rape and murder of every whore his Lord Father had invited to his bed, and they were murmurs because no one was stupid to let them be heard by Lannister executioners.

“What are the sorcerers doing?”

Will’s expression and thoughts became darker.

“They captured one of the pet butchers of Tywin. His attack dog, banner is three black dogs on yellow.”

“Big man.”

“Big monster.”

As the night swallowed everything and the black flames were the only source of light nearby, the huge greenlander was towering over the heretics like a mountain towers over an animal. His armour was mangled, and his helmet had been removed, but somehow, there was still a sense of dread and terror attached to him, like he was going to snap the chains and seize your throat to serve as an improvised hammer.

“**Rejoice**,” the leading sorcerer said in a low tone, which somehow spread in the camp and the night. “**Rejoice**, Gregor Clegane, for you are at last going to be free from your torments.”

Red sparks danced around the flames, before suddenly a circle of red began to form, despite no torch being thrown onto the piles of wood.

“For years you have been chained by a master feigning to understand your urges,” the sorcerer did not cackle, but from his position, Will could feel his evil joy. “For years you have been forced to hide what you are. No longer.”

Three spikes shining in malevolent red colours were brought by black-robed figures, and one by one, they stabbed the chained brute with it. One by one it bit into the flesh, and one time after another, the massive greenlander screamed in agony.

“We give you no lies, Gregor Clegane. Everything is allowed, provided you have the strength to seize in this world or the next.”

A gigantic red brand rose from the flames, and after it was thrown against the damaged armour, a symbol which seemed to be bleeding appeared on it.

“There are only two commands which import to the Lord of War. **Blood for the Blood God. Skulls for the Skull throne**!”

The man called Gregor Clegane screamed even louder, and Will’s fears about the ‘alliance’ were amplified by whatever the Northerners were doing to their prisoners...

**Ser Kevan Lannister 3**

It had taken three days to bring the Ironborn to battle, and Kevan wondered how stupid the enemy Ironborn commander was for choosing a battlefield so unfavourable when the region north of the Grey Fork was far hillier and thus more advantageous for heavy infantry.

First of all, it had allowed the Crakehall cavalry to catch two raiding parties in the open, killing over two hundred reavers, and freeing many terrified smallfolk from captivity at the cost of two knights and a score of wounded. Given that the army of Casterly Rock already enjoyed a comfortable numerical superiority, it made things worse for Balon Greyjoy and his treacherous brothers.

Second and most important from a campaign view, the blades of the Westerlands were now three days away from Fairmarket at worst. A crushing victory on the battlefield could allow the Lannister horse a superb pursuit all the way to the Blue Fork and ensure no Ironborn escaped their crimes.

The more he thought about it, the more the heretics’ decision to fight here didn’t make any sense at all.

The lands of the Riverlands were absolutely and completely flat. There wasn’t even a minor descending slope or a minor hill. It was the dream of every knight and highborn mounted on a steed.

And as the younger brother of the Lord Casterly Rock studied the lines of the enemy with his Myrish spyglass, he saw fewer than two hundred horses gathered by the Ironborn. And ‘gathered’ was the key word; most of them looked to be in the possession of messengers and banner-holders.

Kevan recognised with a thin smile it was likely the best use this horde of sailors and foul brutes could use horses they didn’t know how to ride.

“I count twelve thousand Ironborn in the centre,” the right hand of Tywin Lannister said as he lent his Myrish spyglass to Lord Lewys Lydden next to him. “They’re divided into six lines of heavy infantry and two lines of archers. I see little cavalry, and they can’t possibly have more than one hundred crossbowmen.”

“I don’t see any heretic sorcerers,” the Lord of Deep Den replied after placing his eye against the Essossi device. “And you have a point where their lack of cavalry is concerned. It might be a trap.”

Suspicious minds thought alike, good.

“Their right and left wings seem weaker from where we are. Unlike the centre, few appear to have equipped themselves in plate armour. All the Essossi scum and turncloaks have been placed there.” Kevan spoke as the other highborn returned him his possession.

“That seems...original,” judging by the slight moment of hesitation, Lord Lewys had wanted to use a far more negative word. “They only have four thousand in each wing, and little heavy infantry or anything useful to fight our sworn swords. Maybe there are more demon worshippers there.”

“I won’t say you are wrong,” Ser Kevan Lannister answered, “but it doesn’t fit the reports of Ser Elbert Arryn and Lord Edmure Tully as to the battles fought against the heretics. According to them, the demon-callers are...remarkable.”

The bannersman of the Lannister grunted again before passing his armoured helmet in his greying hair.

“I don’t doubt they are,” Lord Lydden said at last before ordering his squire to approach to give him his helmet. “I suppose sending our horses first to destroy their wings is a bit too audacious and begging for punishment?”

“It is,” in other circumstances, the order would have already been given; the Lannister host had nine thousand heavy and light cavalry. Divided in two spears of four thousand plus a reserve, they could trample the undisciplined rabble on each side and close the trap while the tens of thousands of men-at-arms bled the Greyjoy heavy foot.

Except that for the moment, every major battle of the Crusade had seen the hosts of the Riverlands, Vale, and Westerlands be single-handily defeated by the heretics.

One could have been blamed on incompetence and bad luck, but two or three? The traitors and their pet beasts always seemed to know where and when to strike perfectly, certainly the work of their sorcerers and other secrets whispered to them by the demons.

“Let’s force them to reveal what they have prepared before we are in the thick of it. Send half of our archers and crossbowmen against the right wing.”

If the traps were revealed, and there were deaths, nothing too important would have been lost. And if it worked...well, it would be a nice beginning to purge the Ironborn off Westeros and the rest of the world. For too long Ironborn had been allowed to pillage and bleed the coasts of the Westerlands.

It was time it ended. As the Targaryen words said so justly, the time of fire and blood had arrived.

“Best to begin the bloody work,” the Lord of Deep Den grinned before beginning to bark his orders. “Before it rains again and this plain becomes a sea of mud.”

Kevan nodded as he watched the sky. For the moment, it didn’t seem they had anything to fear on this front. The sky had many grey clouds over their head, but they were hardly the heralds of a long and unpleasant autumn rain, or worse, one of the thunderstorms which had slowed down their advance in the last fortnights.

Movement in the centre forced Kevan and the group of highborn waiting by his side to focus against their attention on the centre of the Ironborn army.

The lines of the Greyjoy were opening to let a group of one hundred, maybe one hundred and fifty warriors go through.

“Maybe they want us to exchange insults before they die,” one of the sons of Lord Brax jested.

Kevan didn’t laugh, as one of the tallest figures was strangely familiar.

Placing his spyglass against his right eye, his fears were confirmed.

“It’s Gregor Clegane leading them...” the words escaped his mouth as stupefaction took hold of him before he amended them as the details of the horrifying spectacle arrived in his head. “Or at least they used his body to bring some demonic horror from the hells.”

Kevan stopped watching. Clegane had never been a symbol of knighthood and flowery chivalry, but the red runes shining malevolently and the armour covered in spikes and skulls were not his style. And his face...his face was the one of the beast Kevan had always suspected was lurking beneath the visage of the man.

“Using this son of a whore and Lorch as commanders of our scouts was a mistake,” Lord Banefort murmured, perhaps believing Kevan was too old for his old ears to catch the criticism.

He might have ignored the whisper. It was true Clegane and Lorch should have been hanged long ago, their sub-par deeps in time of peace were costing a lot of good will, and as this campaign proved, the enemy was not exactly terrified by them.

But his brother didn’t, as he arrived in his golden armour and flamboyant red cloak.

“A mistake we are going to correct here and now,” Lord Tywin Lannister, Warden of the West and Lord Paramount of the Westerlands, promised in his usual implacable voice. “You know my will. Kill them all. Every man who opposes us on this battlefield must die. They are heretics. They have challenged the laws of God and men. They will pay the price of it, for House Lannister *always pay its debts*.”

It was an impressive declaration to put plenty of steel into the spines of their bannersmen...and half a battlefield away, Gregor Clegane ruined it.

“**BLOOD FOR THE BLOOD GOD**!” the demonic-tainted man screamed.

And ignoring all tactics and conventional wisdom, the monster charged towards the Lannister host.

**Lord Victarion Greyjoy 2**

“**BLOOD FOR THE BLOOD! SKULLS FOR THE SKULL THRONE**!”

Victarion immediately turned on his right and glared at the self-proclaimed ‘Blood Master’.

“What are they doing? It isn’t the plan we agreed upon!”

The insolent greenlander had the gall to cackle.

“Your plan sucked. I’m improving it!”

“By charging straight at the enemy without any support?” Victarion asked rhetorically. “They are going to kill themselves! They are only one hundred of your screaming creations, the enemy archers going to massacre them without trying!”

“No, they aren’t one hundred of them,” the Northerner bearing the emblem of House Flint grinned. “They are *eighty-eight*.”

“Eighty-eight or one hundred, what is the difference?” His nephew Maron intervened. “They are against fifty thousand swords and spears! I’m willing to admit a lot of greenlanders have no guts and will flee when facing true opponents, but they are going to slaughter your ‘peerless creations’ with arrows!”

Victarion grunted in agreement. What the...things in men shape were doing, they might as well jump in the nearest river and save them the trouble. There was no point doing this. It was a just a waste of flesh and men.

And yet they ran fast, trying to close the distance separating the two armies.

But they weren’t fast enough.

Lannister trumpets resonated in the air, and over two thousand archers stepped before the pikemen and the armoured foot of the West.

Bows shot first, soon followed by the crossbowmen.

In less time it took to say three prayers to the sea, more than two thousand projectiles went up in the air. Then another wave went in the air. And another after that.

In a respectable amount of time, the archers had sent what had to be six thousand arrows on...eighty-eight men.

There had been a lot of misses or inoffensive ricochets on the monster’s armours, but enough had reached their targets.

There was no one who had survived, and all of the eighty-eight men who had had the great misfortune to fall into the sorcerer’s hands were covered in so many arrows they looked like porcupines now.

“Any other...excellent ideas...oh, Blood Master?” Rodrik mocked.

“Yes. Watch.”

Victarion glanced at the centre of the battlefield...and believed at first there was some trick of the light. The dead...were standing up. One by one at first, but soon scores after scores, the ex-prisoners converted by red runes and ugly spikes were tearing the arrows from their flesh and resuming their advance.

“This...this isn’t possible,” Maron Greyjoy gasped, all traces of his previous amusement having deserted him. “They were dead! No living man can take these wounds and survive!”

“No living man, no,” the ‘Blood Master’ replied in a tone where smugness was supreme. “But my berserkers are far, far *better* than mere mortals! **Praise Khorne**!”

Several archers, who had advanced to recover their arrows as they believed the Ironborn were too far, were caught by surprise and immediately fled for the safety of their army. Others, more prudent, were already shooting more arrows to fell the monsters conjured by the demonic tricks of their ‘allies’.

One way or another, it didn’t work. Red shrouds began to surround the screaming beasts, and each time their blades or their fists killed one of the retreating archers, the crimson power was gaining in potency. The arrows falling upon them were doing less and less damage, and the not-dead warriors were gaining in speed and ferocity!

The greenlanders’ archers continued to send arrows after arrows at the enemy, but Victarion understood they weren’t going to stop the ‘berserkers’ that way. And judging by the change in the disposition of their enemies’ lines, Tywin Lannister had understood the same thing.

Hundreds of pikemen were brought forwards, and as their fellow archers retreated in all haste, the long weapons went to form the familiar wall of pikes no sane warrior wanted to impale himself onto.

But the berserkers weren’t sane or even true warriors. They didn’t show any prudence, and slammed into the steel wall with a fury which felt...wrong.

Scores of men were thrown away by the impact, most of them belonging to the Lannisters.

Victarion heard shrieks and laughter. He listened to sounds which were not human and should not begin on any battlefield.

And a red haze was falling onto the battlefield.

“If I may give you my humble advice,” the ‘Blood Master’ smirked. “You should really go support my berserkers. Else you are going to miss all the blessings of **Mighty Khorne**.”

**Ser Kevan Lannister 4**

Kevan had known this battle was likely going to be darkened by the fell powers of sorcery, but he hadn’t known the situation would unravel so quickly. After all, how in the Seven Hells were you supposed to predict men that refused to die? By all right, when you had three pikes in the chest and half a dozen arrows piercing your shoulders and the rest of your body, you weren’t going to live long.

But these things weren’t humans anymore. The bloody footprints they left as they ran on the green grass were evidence enough of that. Kevan could only thank the Warrior that there weren’t too many of them, and that for all their apparent inability to die, it was possible, if difficult, to hack them in a thousand pieces and thus render them unable to fight. Already more than half of their numbers had been put down, despite all the damage they had done to the first line of pikemen.

“Ser Forley,” his brother called the Heir of Feastfires, “I remember your men boasted of a great talent in the art of bull-handling.”

What did it have to do with-, ah yes, seeing the uncontrollable monsters attack everything which was close to them, it wasn’t hard to see the similarities with the animals.

“Yes, my Lord,” the son of Lord Garrison Prester nodded, “though we have never tested our skills against demonic bulls or what substitutes for them.”

“You will have the honour to try,” Kevan winced deep inside. ‘Honour’ was really not the way he would have described it. These things were shrouded in a cloak of blood and murder, and each of their blow killed one or two men, armour or no armour. The best the pikemen could do were to impale and hack the monsters. They were less successful with the demonic beast which had been once called Gregor Clegane. Warrior and Father Above, what had the heretics done to him?

“If they are as uncontrollable in fury, it won’t be too difficult directing them back to the Ironborn lines,” Forley said in a respectful tone after a long moment of hesitation, glancing at the incoming army of Ironborn heretics and their treacherous allies. “The centre is not going to hold with our loose formations, however...my Lord.”

“Lord Brax will be right behind you, ready to send our men into the melee once our demons aren’t a major problem anymore.” Tywin ordered before turning his head in his direction. “The original plan of battle isn’t going to work, Kevan.”

“We charge the right and left wings before tightening the noose on the Ironborn centre?”

“No,” the Lord of Casterly Rock shook his head, “we must avoid possible points of failure. I will take personal command of the right with one thousand horses. Take the rest and destroy their left flank. Make sure there isn’t anything to salvage. Do not stop under any pretext.”

Kevan struck his fist against his red armour before galloping to take command of the Lannister cavalry. There wasn’t any time to lose if they wanted to avoid a new bloody humiliation.

**Lord Victarion Greyjoy 3**

For what felt like days ago, there was a plan. It was in reality a far shorter duration that that, but to Victarion’s mind, it felt definitely far, far longer.

The berserkers had been the first scar, or a bleeding wound if one preferred it, in this feast of nonsense and sorcery. But at least it had been to the Ironborn advantage: the famous pike lines of the Westerlands were totally in disarray by the time the archers of Great Wyk and Pyke were in range to pour hundreds of arrows at them. The monsters the Northern heretics had called ‘berserkers’ were tough, but they were destroyed one by one, with only the gigantic beast some of his reavers had nicknamed ‘the Bloody Dog’ managing to hold its own.

And then everything had gone wrong. The surviving monsters were angered and uncontrollable, and light-armoured dancers with banners of red bulls danced around them, enraging them further, and leading them away from the enemy.

The Lannister centre, far from trying to come to close-quarters, was beginning to fall back several hundreds of steps.

Worse, this was a centre which had lost more than ten thousand men, as greenlander knights and red-cloaked infantry poured to reinforce their left and their rights. They were weakening severely their centre of course, but the Ironborn army, which had begun charging to massacre the pikemen not butchered by the demons, was forced to stop and bring its – rare – long spears to push back the ‘Bloody Dog’ and the ten or so surviving abominations.

“Brother!” He shouted to his King. “We have to divert our heavy lines to our left. Otherwise our entire right is going to-“

Victarion grimaced as an immense tide of plate-armoured knights and lion banners slammed into the Codd and Ironmaker warriors. It was like a scythe separating the head of a man from his shoulders.

“The right will hold! The left will hold!” Balon bellowed back. “They are Ironborn! They are born to be the equals of ten greenlanders!”

But as the fighting raged everywhere and the centre of the two armies began at sword and axe range at last, Victarion was unable to lead the opening clash himself.

The right wing wasn’t going to be defeated; it was *broken*. More than seven thousand mounted warriors had entered the fray, and they were slaughtering Ironborn and sellswords alike. The sorcerers supposed to defend them weren’t even slightly useful, they had discarded their garments and were hacking allies and enemies with horrible demonic weapons.

“Brother! We must-“

But his call went unheard. Balon had left his place by his side, and along Maron and Rodrik, had plunged into the thick of the fighting with the banners of boars, laurels, and lions.

As far as Victarion could see, they were winning in the centre, but it was because they were fewer and fewer greenlanders there!

The enemy commanders had adopted a technique similar to the flow of a river: if the Ironborn and the monsters were too strong in their path, then they were going around it before blocking their retreat.

“Sigfry,” he ordered to the Stonetree leading the rearguard. “Move your men to help the Ironmaker crews. You have to help our right flank.”

“I’m not sure there is anyone we can help,” the usually cheerful reaver replied, “but I will do my best.”

Victarion winced, because as much as he wanted to say the situation could be turned around...Victarion didn’t see a way. It would take a miracle of the Drowned God. Their right was busy being decimated, more men having died in moments than the entire butcher bill of Seagard, the Twins, and the raids on Southron farms. The left was fully engaged and not winning, as some new ‘matchsticks’ were in the hands of the Lannisters and the rest of their infantry was enough to handle Goodbrother huscarls and Saltcliffe reapers. The centre was intact, but for how long?

More desperate orders were barked, but they acknowledged only the evidence: the sorcerers weren’t under his control – if they had ever been at first, and the Lord Captain had his doubts on *that*. And the Lannister army was simply too big to be beaten on land with the force they had. The initial assault had to cost them three or four thousand men, and the Ironborn had bled their pikemen a lot, but they had thousands upon thousands to throw at them.

Someone was going to run out of soldiers at one point, and it wouldn’t be the Lannisters. Tom Codd, Thormor Ironmaker, Balder Netley, and Donnor Goodbrother...their deaths would have been bad alone, but they were delivered right one after the other.

Victarion knew the battle was lost. He began to shout to his own crew to relay the order to retreat.

And then the horns began to blare in the distance. Once, twice. Loud horns announcing an army was arriving on their left.

“You see, uncle?” Rodrik, maybe sent by Balon when his King realised he wasn’t covering his axe in blood, “our allies are here! Everything is going according to the plan!”

Victarion didn’t smile. These weren’t the sounds the Northern demonic music was making, and somehow he doubted the sorcerers would have failed to mention him the main army of Winterfell had crossed swamps, rivers and hundreds of leagues, breaking all marching speeds, to arrive here today.

No, this couldn’t be the Starks or any Northern host...a feeling of dread gave him a shiver, one which took growth as the first masses of men could be seen despite the red clouds covering the battlefield.

The captain of the *Iron Victory* used the spyglass seized on one of the greenlanders a few days ago, and saw these reinforcements were flying dragon banners, not wolf or lion ones.

Worse, several banners had crowns upon them, and this meant either a Prince or the King was in command.

And wherever Targaryen royals rode, they never went with small armies.

“Go back to the King,” the Lord Captain snarled to his stunned nephew. “Go back to the King and tell him we must withdraw now, or everything is lost!”

**Author’s note**: Next chapter will see the battle between Ironborn and Westerners...which for now is definitely not happening like the former were dreaming.

Of course with Khorne’s influence on the battlefield, the only certainty is that there’s going to be blood...

More links for the End of Times:

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